

# Quality of Gender Equality in Belarus

Various publicly available indexes portray Belarus as a country with high gender equality.

Belarus carried the 6th highest UNDP's [Gender Development Index \(GDI\)](#) value and ranked 31st in the 2014 [Gender Inequality Index \(GII\)](#). In comparison, GII ranks for Russian Federation and the United States are 54 and 55 respectively.

At the same time, social and political life in Belarus lacks influential women. While promoting equal employment of women, state predominantly practises selective appointment of women to high posts in politics and state owned enterprises based on their loyalty to the regime.

In addition, patriarchal thinking dominates social system in which male remains the primary authority figure central to social organisation and the central role of political leadership.

## Declared Gender Equality

Measures to ensure equal opportunities for men and women have been an integral part of the social policy of the Belarusian state. Belarus ratified a number of international documents on gender equality and combating discrimination on grounds of sex.

Country	Gender Development Index (GDI)	Human Development Index (HDI)		Gender Inequality Index (GII)	
	2014 Value	2014 Female	2014 Male	2014 Value	2014 Rank
Belarus	1.021	0.806	0.789	0.151	31
Russian Federation	1.019	0.804	0.789	0.276	54
United States	0.995	0.911	0.916	0.280	55

The National Council on Gender Policy at the Council of Ministers currently implements its fourth national action plan for gender equality for 2011 – 2015. Priority in this document is given to the situation of women in the socioeconomic sphere, issues of reproductive health, development of gender education, prevention of [domestic violence](#) and others.

President Alexandr Lukashenka significantly increased the number of women in representative bodies using his almost complete control over the political system of Belarus. On 14 April 2014 Lukashenka in his address to the National Assembly and the Belarusian people said: "Women in parliament should represent no less than 30 – 40 per cent. This will make Parliament stable and calm." Today women indeed occupy 30.1 per cent of parliamentary seats. Parliament, however, has no real real authority in Belarus as it merely rubber-stamps decisions of the executive.

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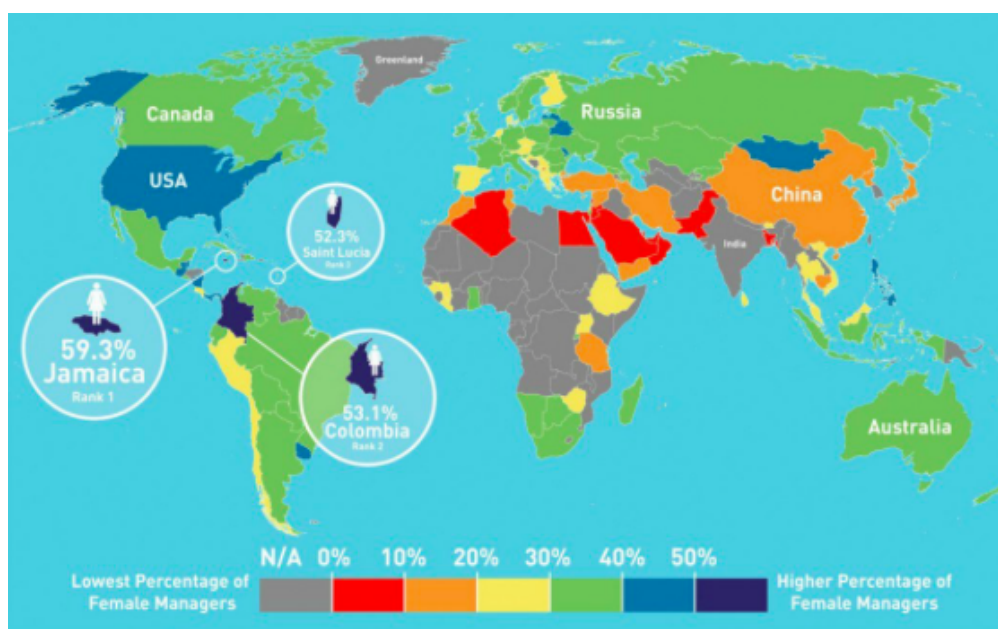
Women lack representation in the highest echelons of the [executive branch](#). While one of the deputy prime-ministers is a woman ([Natalia Kačanava](#)), out of 24 ministers, only two (8 per cent) represent females. The highest number of women ministers never exceeded three and occurred only once in the government of 2004 – 2005, when women held the posts of Minister of Labour and Social Protection, Minister of Healthcare, and Minister of Taxes and Duties.

In Belarus, a woman never served as a chair of regional executive committee, the highest executive position of one of the six administrative regions in the country.

# Women in Business

The situation with women in Belarusian business is rather mixed. According to U.S. research firm [Expert Market](#), which looked at data from the International Labour Organisation Statistical Office (ILO) 2014, Belarus ranks 6th in the world with 46.2 per cent among the countries that have a higher percentage of female CEOs than men.

Many first world countries including the U.S. are outside top 10 countries on that list. The U.S. for example ranks at number 15 with 42.7 per cent of women in managerial positions.



Women in Belarus can indeed become heads even at the higher managerial levels: [Aliena Kudravec](#), the present General Director of JSC [“Belarus Potash Company”](#), one of the world's largest suppliers and exporters of potash fertilisers, is a woman.

Currently replaced by males, females managed such Belarusian giants as “Kamunarka” and “Spartak”, confectionery factory “Slodych”, and garment factory “Elema”.

The high rating of the number of female CEOs Belarus, however,

only gives a general picture of who is who in business in Belarus. Belarusian National Statistical Committee does not keep records of the number of entrepreneurs by gender, but it shows that women compose around 53 per cent of population in the country. However, the list of top 300 Belarusian businessmen in 2014, annually composed by an online Belarusian newspaper *Ezhednevnik*, included only fourteen female names (less than 5 per cent).

Women's presence on the board of large companies does not surprise anyone. However, the majority of female entrepreneurship in Belarus mainly develops in the form of small companies in retail and wholesale trade, catering, educational, and professional services.

## Covert and Overt Interference with Gender Equality

One of the causes of selective business or political representation of women hides in patriarchal mentality of many Belarusians. The majority sticks to the installation that men should have the prerogative of making money, whereas women should adhere to household chores.

One can see a paradox in public remarks of the female Chair of the Central Election Commission of Belarus [Lidzija Jarmošina](#) about participation of women in [the post-election protests](#) on 19 December 2010. She said

*These women should sit at home and cook borsch [traditional beetroot soup – BD] instead of walking on the square. It's a shame for a woman to participate in such events. I can understand when a girl is young and foolish. But when a woman is aged, then, sorry, something is wrong with her intelligence.*

All women occupying high positions only perform purely structural function ensuring the reproduction of a model, in which the head of the state – "batska" or paternal leader – acts as a guarantor of stability. As a result of merging of politics and economics, the government of Belarus with all resources in its hands, has acted as a "father" providing for the livelihood of its "family" – the people of Belarus.

International rankings and organisations recognise that Belarus has made considerable progress in aligning social status of men and women. However, regardless that women in Belarus can occupy high business and political posts, such practise is not widespread. On the one hand, Belarusian society still remains full of gender stereotypes. On the other hand, state appoints only loyal females to high posts to ensure the functioning of the government vertical.

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## Humanism or Political Calculation: Why Did Lukashenka Pardon Political Prisoners?

On 22 August, the state-run news agency Belta reported that "based on the principle of humanism" the President of Belarus decided to pardon and release from prison former presidential candidate Mikalaj Statkevich and five other opposition figures.

Lukashenka is trying to enter the same river twice – to repeat the [manoeuvres of 2008-2010](#). It has worked so far: the European Union and the United States has already praised

Lukashenka for pardoning the opposition activists.

The past 21 years has shown that the release of political prisoners has very little if anything to do with the principle of humanism and will not lead to significant changes in Belarus. The Belarusian president hopes to secure financial support for the struggling Belarusian economy and become more legitimate in the West and at home.

## **Principle of Humanism: Is it really?**

Lukashenka, often labelled in the West as the last dictator of Europe, can hardly be characterised as a politician driven by the principles of humanism. For the past 21 years while in power, the country has consistently ranked low on all democracy scales including Freedom House, and Polity IV Individual Country Regime Trends.

On the suggested three part categorization of a widely used data series on the level of democracy The Polity IV Project scores of "autocracies", "anocracies", and "democracies", Belarus has consistently ranked as an autocracy since Lukashenka came to power. One can notice similar trends in Freedom House and The Index of Economic Freedom scores.

An Internet resource [palitviazni.info](http://palitviazni.info) reports the total of 186 political prisoners in Belarus since the incumbent president came to power. According to the website, Belarus had [political prisoners](#) every year for the past 20 years (see the graph).

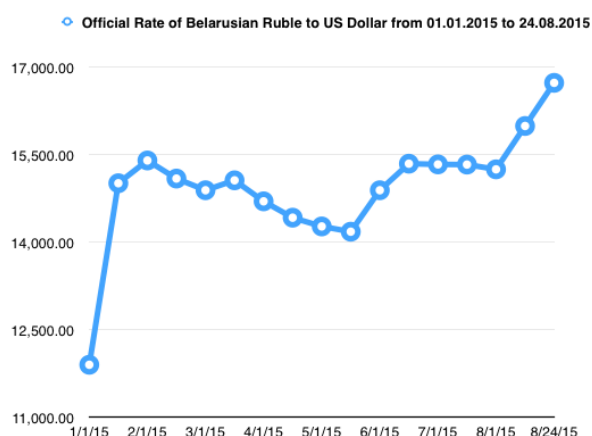
The release of political prisoners aims to change the focus from the absence of competition in the upcoming presidential election and gain western legitimation of Lukashenka. But political prisoners are unlikely to become history in Belarus.

Just recently on 11 August, Belarusian authorities arrested

three graffiti painters, Maksim Pyakarski, Vadzim Zharomski, and Viachaslau Kasinerau for the painted slogan 'Belarus must be Belarusian' painted on a billboard that used to have images of policemen. The number of political prisoners may rise again in case of protests against the results of the upcoming presidential election this October.

## Economic Crisis and Need for Money

Belarus has experienced a significant currency depreciation since the beginning of 2015. The national currency has lost 9.7 per cent of its value since 1 August and 40.6 per cent since 1 January 2015 (see the graph).



In July, Belarus asked the [Russian government for a loan of \\$3 billion](#), but only received a tranche of \$760 million. Since the Russian government lends in Russian rubles, due to the depreciation of the Russian ruble Belarus in reality only received about \$720 million.

While the loan kept the Belarusian ruble afloat even if shortly, in 2015 Belarus has to make foreign debt payments of over \$4 billion. The Belarusian ruble has been plunging every day within the past week. To avoid this financial turmoil Belarus needs more loans.

After debt repayments to the IMF and redemption of Eurobonds on 31 March 2015 the Russian government became the main creditor of Belarus in the structure of its external debt. Therefore, obtaining funding from the West, matters also in terms of economic security for diversification of external debt.

# Hopes for IMF Credit

Besides hoping for help from its Eastern neighbour, the Belarusian authorities are counting on a new loan from the IMF. From a political point of view, the release of political prisoners increases the chances for the Belarusian government to receive such a loan.

Belarus received the last IMF loan immediately after refusing to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following a military conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. In an interview with Charter97, Statkevich commented that he suspected his release after learning that Lukashenka was getting short of money and finding out that none of the opposition candidates managed to collect 100 thousand signatures.

From an economic point of view, the IMF has a reason to start new talks, as this year Belarus completed principal payments on the previous IMF loan extended in 2009-2010. According to the official news agency Belta "Now Belarus has fully discharged its obligation to the IMF".



From 8 to 15 July IMF experts worked in Belarus. They met with the Belarusian authorities. IMF representatives agreed with the Belarusian authorities to continue the dialogue "to ensure the preparation of the program." If the International Monetary Fund sees that Belarus made "sufficient progress," the mission



will arrive for formal negotiations on the program this year.

The release of political prisoners presents another strategic move of the Belarusian government in its game to stay in power. Such moves worked before and likely will work again. EADaily reports that the EU has called the release of Belarusian opposition figures as "significant progress in the efforts aimed at improving relations" between Minsk and Brussels.

It is doubtful, however, that the release of political prisoners will lead to more systemic changes in Belarus. The graph on political prisoners shows sharp increases in the number of political prisoners in 2006 and 2010, the years of presidential elections. Such sudden rises indicate that there are no guarantees that in November the list of political prisoners will not start to grow again.

In the midst of the economic crisis and close to presidential elections, it is important for the Belarusian government to create the appearance of political liberalisation to receive funding and praise from the West. At the same time, Belarus will not leave the orbit of Russian influence due to Belarus' huge [economic dependence on Russia](#).

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## **Belarus-EU Thaw: Will It Last This Time?**

On 13 July, the Council of the European Union once again removed restrictions against several Belarusian officials and entities subjected to an EU-wide travel ban and asset freeze.

That decision amended Belarus sanctions listings introduced

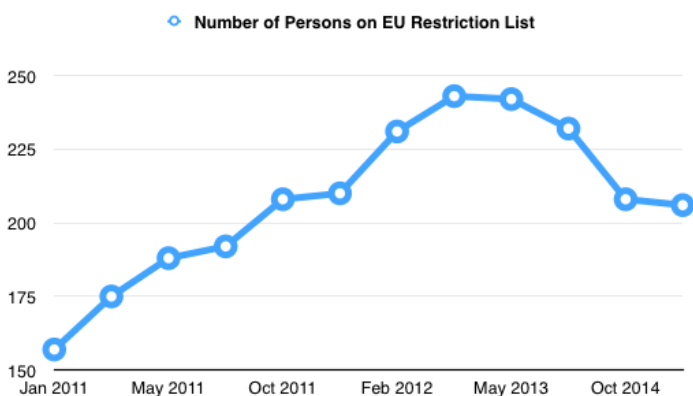
after the failure of Belarus authorities to meet OSCE commitments to democratic elections in 2006 and 2010.

EU foreign ministers have already eased sanctions against Belarusian regime more than a few times. The current change in the EU policy toward Belarus resembles the rapprochement between Minsk and Brussels ahead of the 2010 presidential election.

While the sanctions against the regime of Aleksander Lukashenka have failed to influence his policies, lifting them will not bring about positive change either. History has shown that the West's mixing of pragmatic and normative approaches in dealing with the authoritarian regime has neither fostered closer cooperation with Belarus nor protected the democratic opposition from persecution.

## A Deeper Look at the Current Thaw

The war in Ukraine has dramatically changed the geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe. Minsk was thrust into the international spotlight when it hosted the [cease-fire negotiations](#). Preoccupied with stability and predictability of domestic politics in the countries neighbouring the EU, Western politicians saw this as an opportunity for cooperation with the Belarusian president.

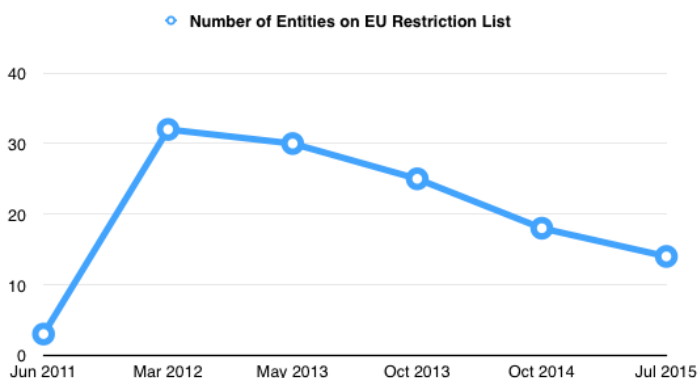


The EU's decision to extend its [sanctions](#) for another year until 31 October 2015 shortly after the Minsk Protocol on 5

September 2014 demonstrates its concern about the problematic human rights situation in Belarus. The reality of that ruling, however, is more complicated.

Together with the decision to extend the sanctions, the EU's foreign ministers also removed 24 persons and seven entities from the restrictions list. More than 200 persons and 14 entities have remained under sanctions, but among those removed are those regarded by many as key financial sponsors of the Lukashenka regime and Belarusian [oligarchs](#) – Uladzimir Peftijeu and Anatoly Ternavskiy. From the seven de-listed entities, in turn, three belong to Yury Chiz, another financial supporter of the Belarusian president, even though the owner's name remains in the restrictions list.

Since the post-election crackdown in 2010, the EU has de-listed more than 15 per cent of Lukashenka's supporters and more than half of all sanctioned entities, not having received any concessions from the Belarusian government.



Besides the lifting of restrictions against several persons and entities, the EU has removed sanctions against a state-owned Belarusian energy company Belarusneft, suspended the travel ban against Belarusian Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makiej](#), extended the invitation to the summit in Riga to Belarus and expanded visa services at the Embassy of the United States in Minsk. These clear signs of the EU's warming toward Belarus were motivated not by the improvement of the domestic situation in Belarus but by the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

# Befriending Belarus: Did It Work Last Time?

The EU's current rapprochement with Belarus resembles the EU-Belarus thaw of 2008-2010, when the war between Georgia and Russia in 2008 made Russia's neighbours, including Belarus, worry about the future of their own independence. The conflict fuelled the already ongoing disagreement between Russia and Belarus over energy prices. With the relationship between the EU and Russia strained and Lukashenka seeking better ties with the West, European foreign ministers decided to relax the restrictions on the Belarusian government in the hope of luring the country away from Moscow's sphere of influence.

The West was happy to reward President Lukashenka's behaviour and initiated a thaw in the relationship with Belarus after the Belarusian government released political prisoners, granted legal status to the political movement of the former presidential candidate Alexander Milinkevich, and lifted the restrictions on two opposition newspapers.

As a reward, the Belarusian president received invitation to a summit in Prague. At talks in Luxembourg in 2008, EU foreign ministers suspended a travel ban on Lukashenka and several his associates, introduced after the falsification of the 2006 election. In 2009, the EU's Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana paid a visit to Lukashenka to discuss bilateral relations and regional issues.

That thaw did not end well, however. Up to [700 opposition activists](#), including seven presidential candidates, were arrested in the post-election crackdown.

## Shouldn't We Learn From Our Past

# Mistakes?

Tough sanctions have always pushed Belarus to the east instead of changing Lukashenka's ruling style. In 2011, in an interview with BELTA, Lukashenka compared sanctions to flea bites, annoying but relatively minor and benefiting neither the West nor Belarus. In a situation when sanctions have not been an effective instrument of pressure on the president and the regime in Belarus, many Western policymakers seem to forget the lessons of the past and start daydreaming about the benefits of engagement with the incumbent regime.

Belarusian authorities cannot make a geopolitical turn to Europe. Russia remains Belarus' most important trading partner and absorbs almost half of Belarus' international trade. Economic dependency of Belarus from Russia and interest of its president in preserving his political power will not allow for meaningful cooperation with the West.

In fact, Moscow already declared its support for reelection of the incumbent president in the October presidential election. On 17 July, Russia approved \$760 million tranche to Belarus, in accordance with the previously agreed loan programme. The loan will contribute to the strengthening of Belarusian ruble before the election.

While Belarus appears more attractive than the engaged in turmoil Ukraine, trusting the words rather than the deeds of the Belarusian authorities and closing eyes to the human rights agenda ahead of the presidential election in Belarus would be a mistake.

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# Investment Climate in Belarus: Room for Growth

On 9 July General Motors and JV Unison signed an agreement to assemble Chevrolet Tahoe and Cadillac Eskaleyd automobiles in the Minsk region.

From the beginning of the year, several international fast food chains have announced a desire to open shop in Belarus. New businesses include major American brands such as Burger King, KFC, and Texas Chicken.

But despite official claims that Belarus presents an attractive environment for investment, the reality has shown quite the opposite. Most Western companies abstain from conducting business in Belarus due to the difficulties of doing business and enter Belarus mainly through franchises.

## **Investment Climate in Numbers**

According to the Belarusian National Statistics Committee, in 2014 the primary investors to Belarus came from Russia (41.6% of all total investment), the United Kingdom (18.6%), Netherlands (13%), Cyprus (6.2%), Austria (3.5%), and Germany (2.5%). In 2014, foreign direct investment in Belarus dropped 0.7% annually according to the World Bank's data on foreign direct investment net inflows.

Foreign Direct Investment, net inflows (% of GDP)



Source: worldbank.org

While the largest investment sums traditionally come from Russia, Western companies are finding their way into the market too, though prefer to profit from Belarus mainly through franchises. Two major examples are McDonald's and TGI Friday's. Both of these franchises opened restaurants, but they did so through their Russian franchises. The owner of TGI Friday's franchise, the Russian company "Rosinter Restaurants Holding", also owns the KFC franchise, which makes it the likely franchise owner for KFC's restaurants in Belarus as well.

The franchise of McDonald's competitor Burger King actually belongs to a Russian businessman Alexander Kolobov, who recently became the owner of Germany's largest Burger King franchise and has started to intensively push the expansion of his new business.

While its financial and fuel dependence on neighbouring [Russia](#) has helped it to secure its own investment interests in Belarus, the country's economic freedom has witnessed a decline in 2015. Belarus scored 0.3 points lower than the last year in the 2015 Index of Economic Freedom, setting it back to the "repressed" category. Belarus is ranked 42nd among the 43 countries in Europe, outperforming only Ukraine, a country in deep political and economic turmoil.



## Gains from the Ukrainian Crisis

While Belarus's ranking has been falling, there is hope that the country can improve its FDI. The Ukrainian crisis not only

allowed Belarus to rid itself of its renowned brand as “The Last Dictatorship of Eastern Europe”, it also ended the country's isolation, and created some potential to create gains in the Belarusian economy.

The armed conflict and lawlessness in Ukraine has made Belarus a much more reliable partner and transit country for China's “Silk Road” project. [Chinese President Xi Jinping](#) visited Belarus on 10-12 May for the first state visit in the past 14 years. In addition to improving infrastructure, the “Silk Road” project could bring much needed investment and develop industry. China's cooperation with Belarus suggests a solid package of investment may be on the horizon, as well as a package of industrial projects such as the cooperative industrial park in Belarus which is in the works.

The Ukrainian crisis also triggered Russia to freeze its [contracts](#) for the transit of gas through Ukraine by 2019 and redirect transit through the Turkish Stream pipeline. A similar situation has the potential to develop with the Ukrainian branch of the “Druzhba” oil pipeline, a key transit corridor for Russian oil exports. Belarus, which has two “branches”: the southern (“Gomeltransneft Friendship”) and northern (Novopolotsk oil transportation enterprise “Druzhba”) lines, has serious potential to grab a larger strategic share of the lucrative transit and refining of Russian oil.

### **Risks to Conduct Business in Belarus**

Belarusian Viktor Kisly, the head of the Wargaming company, which based one of the largest office buildings in Minsk, has overseen the creation of one the most popular war games in Russia and the former Soviet Union “World of Tanks” has seen the effects of the changing regional economic landscape. In an interview to Russian paper Vedomosti, he confirmed that the economic crisis in Russia has led to his audience shrinking and a loss of revenue. The successful businessman, whose company made more than \$500 million in 2014, says that the



business development in post-Soviet countries has enormous unrealised potential. According to him, however, Belarus should make many more steps to achieve favourable conditions for international business, something which it has yet to do.

The recent [thaw](#) in international political relations with Western countries cannot influence foreign investors' intentions all by itself. Their first priority is naturally concerned with being profitable. From their perspective Belarus continues to be one of the world's most state-managed economies, or in other words, a place where the state interferes and influences many aspects of the economy.

Presidential decrees are embedded in a hierarchical web of regulations and are often in direct competition with laws and codes, which regularly contradict one another. This kind of a high-risk environment is unsuitable for potential investors as it is not clear by which set of rules they should be playing. Macroeconomic instability, which manifests in the devaluation of the Belarusian ruble, increases the risk of inflation in the country. In an inflationary economy prices cease to provide accurate signals for investment and, in turn, create distortions and disorient potential investors.

To attract international companies, Belarus needs to ensure a predictable business environment and reduce the investment risks for international business. This can be done by creating a common, uniform and equal set of rules and regulations for investing in Belarus. In order to stabilise the macroeconomic situation in Belarus, the state needs to introduce a series of gradual reforms as the economy is not prepared for an immediate conversion to a strict market economy, one that could lead to a sharp rise in inflation and send the economy into a nosedive.

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# Political Parties in Belarus

## – Do They Really Matter?

On 9 June, the Chairman of Central Election Commission, Lidzia Yarmoshyna, declared that the 2015 presidential election in Belarus would take place on 11 October, pushing it ahead of the previously declared 15 November date, the latest possible date permitted by law. The House of Representatives will likely make the final decision on the matter by June 30 before their summer recess.

However, for the outcome of elections the date does not really matter. Despite the official figure of around 98,000 members of political parties, many of pro-government parties have only maintained a nominal existence while the freedom to operate for opposition forces has been severely constrained.

### **Parties as a Representative Force**

The decision of Central Council of the Belarusian "Green" Party to support an unemployed Yury Shulgan exposes the farce of the election and the lack of influence of political parties within the Belarusian political system. Shulgan has expressed his willingness to become the President as a symbol of protest against the tax on the unemployed signed on 2 April by the incumbent president.

Political parties in Belarus are struggling to fulfil what would be considered their most basic principle functions, nor the activities of the state apparatus or supporting the implementation of the domestic and foreign policy of the state. While the Presidential Administration has proven to be much [more powerful than the Parliament](#), both the parties,

whether they oppose or support the government, have been denied a significant presence, if any presence at all, in the Parliament.

The Communist Party of Belarus gained six seats in the 110-seat House of Representatives in the previous elections, by far the most seats any registered party was able to obtain in the 2012 parliamentary elections.

As in Western democracies, the Belarusian Constitution identifies political parties as entities responsible for contributing to, and the expression of, the political will of its citizens. Lukashenka, however, has repeatedly declared that Belarusians are the source of his legitimacy. In reality, the people's is not represented by any legislative authorities.

### **Party Membership: By the Numbers – on Paper and in Reality**

Joining a political party presupposes that one wants to significantly influence the governance of their country. A modest membership base of Belarusian parties hardly justifies such claim. While the Ministry of Justice does not have the most current numbers on party membership, the total number of members of political parties, as reported by the parties, amounts to 98,000 people in a country with a population of about 9,5 million.

Registered Party	House of Representatives	Membership in 2015
<b>supporting government</b>		
Liberal Democratic Party	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	51,000
Republican Party	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	10,000
Republican Party of Labor and Justice	0/110 (2008-2012) 1/110 (2012-2016)	9,830
Communist Party of Belarus	6/110 (2008-2012) 6/110 (2012-2016)	6,500
Belarusian Social-Sport Party	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	2,500
Belarusian Patriotic Party	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	1,500
Social-democratic party of People's Agreement	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	-
Belarusian Agrarian Party	1/110 (2008-2012) 1/110 (2012-2016)	-
<b>opposing government</b>		
Party Belarusian National Front	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	5,000
United Civic Party	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	3,668
Conservative-Christian Party - BPF	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	3,000
Belarusian Party of the left "Just World"	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	1,300
Belarusian Party "Green"	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	1,250
Party "Belarusian Social-Democratic Hramada"	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	1,200
Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (Hramada)	0/110 (2008-2012) 0/110 (2012-2016)	1,150

It is hard to determine the real number or the number of active members. As Yauhien Valoshyn of Euroradio suggests, after contacting the Liberal Democratic Party, claiming to have the largest membership base, two different party representatives reported 45,000 and 51,000 members respectively. The total number of members on the party web site, however, was determined to be around to 36,849 members.

The mass media, for its part, report that the leader of the Belarusian Patriotic Party Mikalai Ulahovich has forced Cossacks to join his party. Anatol Liabedzka of the United Civil Party recognises that the number of active members of his party adds up to less than the reported total of 3,668 members.

Unlike other countries, Belarusian parties do not provide social opportunities, personal status or business contacts. In addition, the majority of Belarusians do not believe that

party membership will have an effect on whether or not a party will achieve its goals.

According to IISEPS, 59.8 per cent of respondents do not believe in the possibility of radical changes in domestic or foreign politics of Belarus, and 79.2 per cent will not participate in mass protests should election outcomes are falsified.

## **Party Leaders**

Most of the leadership of the political parties have been in the opposition for a decade and often much longer. One-third of the leaders of Belarusian political parties of all registered parties in Belarus have been ruling for the same amount of time or longer as the incumbent president.

The average time of opposition leaders in office now has been inflated to 13.6 years. In a research survey published on Arche portal, Yury Chavusau reports that the absence of opposition sub-parties in the majority of opposition parties. According to the author, no one is fighting for power within the parties because of the hardship and danger of the party leaders' work.

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The existence of multiple potential presidential candidates does not increase the chances for success. According to Gene Sharp, a renowned political scientist advancing the study of nonviolent action, resistance leaders need to formulate a comprehensive plan of action capable of strengthening the people. The reality leaves much to be desired. IISEPS reports that 33.1 per cent of their respondents do not believe in the opposition's success, regardless whether it has a single candidate or not.

In April, Siarhei Haidukevich, one of the potential presidential candidates and a known supporter of Lukashenka, tried to downplay the opposition leaders for their inability to consolidate by offering several of them the posts as deputy ministers if they would offer their support to his presidential candidacy. According to him, the opposition needs a new generation to take over. Ironically, he himself has been the leader of Liberal-Democratic Party for 21 years.

The existence of a multiparty system in Belarus provides an opportunity for the government to display a bit of [window dressing](#) as evidence that it is not authoritarian. In reality, many of the parties supporting the government have only maintained a nominal existence while the freedom to operate for opposition parties has been severely blocked.

The government has used the tools of state coercion to demobilise, marginalise, or criminalise the opposition's activities. Although opposition leaders still have three months to step up their game, it is important not to place unrealistic expectations on their ability to change the status quo in Belarus in 2015.

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## [Sanctions, Peace Talks, Bologna Process: Is There Hope for Change?](#)

After a second attempt, on 14 May Belarus joined the [Bologna process](#) and the group of 47 countries forming the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

While Belarus's acceptance into the Bologna process may open

up prospects for long-term improvements in Belarusian education, there should not be any illusions about the full implementation of the Bologna principles or real political liberalisation in the country.

Minsk is utilising politically neutral spheres to improve his relationship with the West. EU officials should keep this in mind that after his 21 years in power, Lukashenka has continued to play off the EU and [Russia](#) for his own sake.

### **Between East and West**

By all appearances, the situation looks as if it is a repeat of the scenario that unfolded before the presidential elections in 2010, when a brief period of warming up between Minsk and Brussels was later shattered by mass repression after the elections in December. Since that time, the relationship has deteriorated or been consistently poor, right up until the recent thaw that has gained traction following Minsk's hosting of peace talks.

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Taking sides for Lukashenka is not an easy task: too pro-West and he seems problematic for the Russian side. Too pro-Russian and he appears as if he is ready to surrender Belarusian statehood to Russia. Nevertheless, Lukashenka has been playing the balancing game for a long time and is quite good at it.

Lukashenka did not hesitate to openly call Russian trade policies “brainless” and threatened to leave the Eurasian Union when Russia limited imports on certain Belarusian goods due to Russian sanctions against the EU. Lukashenka clearly understands the vulnerability of Belarusian economy due to its overwhelming dependence on the Russian market.

Lukashenka has shown his disdain for Russia's foreign policy

by refusing to recognise Abkhazia and Ossetia or join in the Russian sanctions against Europe. However, this behaviour has resulted in gas, oil and food products problems for the Belarusian economy, a sign that Lukashenka's speeches can only go so far.

He is not willing to open up to Europe either. On February 16, he clearly declared in an interview with the state-run "Russia 1" TV channel: "If you think that's the reason [for the peace talks], that I'm turning to someone – get that rot out of your head."

### **A Thaw between the West and Belarusian Head of State**

Belarusian media has called the Minsk peace talks over Ukraine a great diplomatic victory for Belarus and, personally, for Alexander Lukashenka. A visit by the French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel gave grounds for Belarusian authorities to say that Minsk is the capital of Eastern European diplomacy.

the EU has no intentions of battling with a dictatorship in the heart of Europe

It also demonstrated to the Belarusian opposition, in the wake of the presidential elections later this year, that the EU has no intentions of battling with a dictatorship in the heart of Europe in the near future.

[Hosting international talks](#) aimed at resolving the conflict in Ukraine has won Lukashenka some acclaim and served as an indicator of a thaw between the West and the Belarusian leader. The United States has lifted sanctions against Belarusneft, a state-owned Belarusian energy company, imposed in 2011 for its involvement in the Iranian petroleum sector.

Among other symptoms of the dialogue between EU and Belarus are an increase in the number of official visits to Europe by



the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makei and the rumoured plans that Belarus might participate in the Riga summit "Eastern Partnership" at the presidential level. Lukashenka's participation would allow him to improve his own standing overall, including breaking through the West's wall of isolation that it has erected against Belarus.

One ex-presidential candidate in Belarus, Vitaly Rimasheusky, views the Summit as "a reflection of a new European policy – the resumption of relations with the Lukashenka regime, despite previous statements about the impossibility of having relations before the release of all political prisoners."

### **Reality: the Bologna Process and Hockey**

While the West has been overlooking the flaws of the Belarusian regime in the wake of the weak signals of liberalisation, Belarus has continued to play a balancing act between Russia and the West.

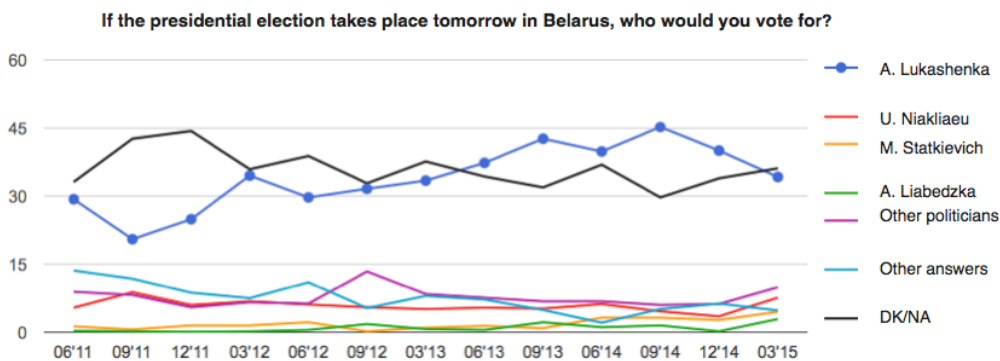
Belarusian officials have been using politically neutral areas to diminish tensions in EU-Belarusian relations

By focusing on geopolitical factors, Belarusian officials have been using politically neutral areas to diminish tensions in EU-Belarusian relations. Since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, Belarus has taken a neutral stance and has improved relations with the West simply by providing a platform for negotiations. Belarusian officials continue to garner favour from the West by agreeing to implement minimal reforms in education.

The EU gave Belarus the go ahead to join the Bologna Process even though the educational system is still a crude mix of the old Soviet system and some external, neoliberal influences. The discourse of Belarusian authorities has not changed much since their last application to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2012 when the application was rejected. The

geopolitical situation, however, was much more favourable this time around.

On the other hand, Minsk continues to respect its Eastern neighbour. After beating the United States for the first time (5-2) at the ice hockey world championship, Russia defeated the Belarusian hockey team 7-0 as a symbolic gesture for the 70th anniversary of Allied victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. It should be noted that a few days before that Russia lost to the United States 4-2.



Lukashenka's [fifth presidential election](#) will unlikely bring any surprises. Even though, according to IISEPS, Lukashenka's approval has been going down since September 2014, the Belarusian leader continues to enjoy more popular approval than any other potential political leader.

With the presidential election coming at the end of 2015, Europe is counting on Lukashenka to deal with potential protests in a wiser manner. However, despite improving ties with the West, history has shown that the Belarusian leader will not hesitate to resort to severe measures to secure his position if it comes to it.

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# The Ice World Hockey Championship as a Tool for Propaganda

The 2014 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship presented another opportunity for the government to influence its citizens in appreciating the stability that the country enjoys and believing in the choices the president has made over the years.

While Minsk was celebrating the 2014 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship, the United States and Canada were preoccupied with the 2014 Stanley Cup. The United States and Canada sent their second tier teams to the tournament.

Their lackluster play and average overall performance gave the Belarusian government a chance to portray them as weaker nations athletically and as teams with less prowess in the international arena.

## **What the Tournaments Mean**

The International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) organises the Ice Hockey World Championship and manages all international ice hockey tournaments. However, it has little control of the hockey in the United States and Canada. The National Hockey League (NHL), the most prominent and prestigious hockey organisation in these countries, hold the Stanley Cup.

As both championships take place during the same period of time, many of the best players from the United States and Canada simply do not participate in the Ice Hockey World Championship in Minsk. Unlike the Ice Hockey World Championship and the Stanley Cup tournaments, the Olympic Games represent a truly international tournament that attracts

all of the best players from all over the world.

Canada, a nine time Olympic gold medalist (including Sochi 2014), took only fifth place in the official IIHF final rankings. Similarly, the United States, the winner of the silver medals in the 2002 and the 2010 Winter Olympics, only managed to get sixth place. Russia's victory at the Ice Hockey World Championship after its Olympic failure, gave an opportunity for Minsk to improve the image of the Russian team and the region's overall hockey profile.

### **Manipulating People's Minds**

Image correction is a great term to help understand how the Belarusian government has been manipulating the actions and attitudes of the Belarusian masses to mobilise potential adherents or demobilise potential antagonists to the regime. Assurances of economic stability and the skillful control of culture and media are crucial components of the image correction tool kit employed by Minsk.

television have been praising Lukashenka as a "man of the people" and refers to him as "father", a figure who looks after the well-being of his people and country

Government-controlled newspapers and television have been praising Lukashenka as a "man of the people" and refers to him as "father", a figure who looks after the well-being of his people and country. Presidential statements set goals for Belarusian society and manipulate what it perceives as shared values, interests and priorities of the masses. By propagating the Belarusian national idea via official discourse, the regime exercises a subtle, yet effective, form of power.

At the time of the 2014 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship that unfolded between 9 and 25 May, the government created a pristine picture of how well the event was organised, not to mention its importance.

However, this happened without providing any historical background on the differences between the International Ice Hockey Federation and National Hockey League, the latter of which is considered to be the premier hockey league in the world. This is, of course, no coincidence as Minsk does not provide any space for constructive dialogue or alternative perspectives from the international community to be raised inside of its borders.

After quickly imprisoning a dozen political activists, Belarus welcomed tourists from all over the world, thus creating an illusion of an open, warm nation devoid of serious societal problem. Every day the entertainment program in Minsk lasted until midnight, save the opening and closing ceremonies which lasted until 3 a.m. Many Belarusians were religiously watching hockey and gobbling up hockey related advertisements on TV.

People could follow the hockey games live on big screens in designated fan zones located next to the main arenas of the championship, the Minsk and Chizhovka arenas. Everyone could see the image of the bison, the official mascot of the championship, plastered all over the capital's public spaces.

During the official opening ceremony the president assured the audience that “everything has been done to make the world championship in Minsk striking, memorable and the best in the world”.

### **United States' Loss Portrayed à la Lukashenka**

The poor performance of the United States at the [largest sports event](#) that Belarus has ever hosted was a welcome turn of events for the regime. To put it bluntly, it afforded the government a chance to contribute to the worsening of its image in the minds of the Belarusian public. It managed to portray the United States as a weaker team on the ice and, by extension, in the world in general.

Minsk used the turmoil in neighbouring Ukraine as an example of potential problems that could unfold if western funding

Their loss strengthened the public's perception of it as a foreign force trying to get involved in another countries' business. Minsk used the turmoil in neighbouring Ukraine as an example of potential problems that could unfold if western funding was allowed to have a hand in "assisting" democratic development in Belarus.

At the time of his visit to Smalyavitski region on 28 May 2014 Lukashenka asked the crowd: "Do you think the fighting in Ukraine is better than living in peace? Do you not understand"? He continued, "they are turning everything upside down there, and then this infection spread to us."

A handful of human rights organisations were virtually the only voices raised about the ongoing human rights violations and environment of harassment during the tournament. Primarily, they fought to draw attention to the imprisonment of various political activists for duration of the tournament in Minsk, a calculated move meant to silence the while the world was watching Belarus.

In taking an early exit after their success at the Olympic Games in Sochi in February, the weak showing by of the United States played into the hands of the Belarusian authorities who, used it to show that Belarus had made the right choice in siding with Russia.

Russia's victory, in its turn, presented it as a legitimately strong team, providing its people with an opportunity to feel proud of their national self-identification and, given their prowess, as the sole guarantor of stability in the region.

Even though Russia's victory did not play much of a role in the way of improving its image on the international arena after its involvement in Ukraine, it has worked well as a tool for effective propaganda for domestic consumption in Belarus.