

Belarus neutrality, border with Russia, visa-free zones, Belarus-Poland relations – Ostrogorski Centre digest

In November the Ostrogorski Centre released the first major publication on neutrality in Belarusian foreign and national security policy.

In their articles, analysts from The Centre discussed unresolved issues in Polish-Belarusian relations, border control policies and institutions, and the authorities' new policies on visa-free zones.

The Ostrogorski Centre commented extensively in the Belarusian and Polish media on many issues including the causes of the November protests in Minsk, Belarus's vote on the Crimean resolution at the UN General Assembly, and the reluctant revival of the Belarusian language in the education system.

Analytics

[Igar Gubarevich](#) analyses recent encouraging trends in relations between Belarus and Poland, as well as [several unresolved issues](#) that hamper their full normalisation: local border traffic, the Pole's card, and the divided Union of Poles in Belarus.

Poland's conservative government has recently shown greater independence from Brussels on many policy issues. They have also visibly reduced their support for the Belarusian opposition, to the latter's great chagrin. This has led to tacit approbation from Lukashenka's government. However, the

primary sources of conflict in the two countries' relations remain of a purely bilateral nature.

[Siarhei Bohdan](#) argues that Belarus still struggles [with the development of adequate border control agencies](#), as their dependence on foreign aid, as well as allegations of corruption, reveal. If Belarus succeeds in sealing off its border with Ukraine, its Russian border will be the only one to remain open.

However, despite decades of integration, the status of this border remains precarious. In mid-September, the Kremlin closed its border with Belarus for third-nation nationals without any prior notice – thus ruining Minsk's plans of becoming a transit country.

[Vadzim Smok](#) discusses a [recently introduced visa-free area in the Hrodna region](#) on the border with Poland and Lithuania. It became the second visa-free zone in Belarus after the national park Bielaviežskaja Pušča opened up in 2015.

New analytic paper: 'Elements of neutrality in Belarusian foreign policy and national security policy'



The Ostrogorski Centre releases the first major publication on [neutrality in Belarusian foreign and national security policy](#). Its authors are Siarhei Bohdan and Gumer Isaev.

Belarus has moved closer towards authentic neutrality over the past decade. For a long time, Minsk's position has been misinterpreted as opportunism with regards to Moscow and the West. Yet by the mid-2010s, signs of neutrality coalesced into a reliable element of Belarusian foreign and national security policy.

This naturally leads one to question whether neutrality is a viable option for the Belarusian state. So far, Moscow has accepted this, but other countries are refusing to take it seriously. However, this may be the only way for Belarus to survive as a state under the current circumstances.

Conference on education as a human right

On 13 December the Ostrogorski Centre organises the conference: 'Education as a human right: modernising higher education to meet the challenges of the 21st century' in cooperation with the newly opened Embassy Office of the

Kingdom of the Netherlands in Belarus.

This event will provide an opportunity to constructively discuss different approaches to the challenge of transforming education systems in a specialist round table format. It will also highlight specific solutions which could be applied successfully in other countries. The conference will include three panels:

- Panel 1. Belarus's accession to the European Higher Education Area: challenges to entering the European educational space
- Panel 2. Business education in Belarus: enhancing market transition and economic reforms
- Panel 3. Distance education in Belarus: towards an inclusive educational environment

Comments in the media

Siarhei Bohdan discusses the [causes of the November protests in Pakistan](#) on the news portal *TUT.by*. According to Siarhei, the protests were caused not so much by the recently-exposed offshore companies of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, as by a whole range of problems in the country. Moreover, the army seems to stand behind the protests, as it opposes Sharif's policy towards the radical groups it controls.

Ryhor Astapenia appears on the 'Hot Comment' programme on Belsat TV to discuss [developments in Belarusian-Russian relations](#). Despite constant energy and trade wars, Belarus does not intend to abandon Russian integration projects completely. However, the expert argues that the two countries will gradually begin to drift further apart.

Igar Gubarevich comments on the [normalisation of relations between Minsk and Warsaw](#) for Polish radio. The dialogue between the parties is now taking place at a high level, which has not been the case for years. However, a number of bilateral issues of a political nature, as well as the position of Russia and the EU, will constrain further development of the dialogue, according to the expert.



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‘Tell the Truth’ campaign [refers to Siarhei Bogdan’s analytical paper](#): ‘Elements of neutrality in Belarusian foreign policy and national security policy’. According to campaign leader [Andrej Dzmitryjeŭ](#), ‘Tell the Truth’ sees this study as a theoretical basis for the campaign’s foreign policy vision.

Igar Gubarevich comments on [Belarus voting for the Crimean resolution at the UN General Assembly](#) for Radio Racyja. Igar explains that Belarus has long opposed the consideration of country resolutions at the UN General Assembly and proposes to address these issues in the Human Rights Committee. Belarus used this approach in order to avoid voting against the Crimean resolution as such.

On Polish radio, Ryhor Astapenia discusses the [‘reluctant’ revival of the Belarusian language in the education system](#). After the Ukrainian conflict, the government realised the need to for patriotism to unite various parts of the population and strengthen the sovereignty of the country. Moreover, the Belarusian language has ceased to be the political issue that it had been for Aliaksandr Lukashenka in the 1990s.

Belsat TV publishes a video interview with Siarhei Bohdan on

[the model of Belarusian of neutrality](#). According to Siarhei, Belarus can learn from the example of Finland: first of all, Belarus needs to make clear to Moscow that it will not diverge from the path of neutrality, even in return for cheap oil and gas; second, Belarus should declare non-alignment and guarantee Russia that NATO aircraft will not fly over Belarus.

Belaruspolicy

□The Ostrogorski Centre continues to update its database of policy papers on BelarusPolicy.com. The papers of partner institutions added this month include:

- Ihar Pielipaś. [Performance evaluation of the National Business Platform – 2015](#). IPM Research Centre, 2016.
- Hleb Šymanovič. [Trends in the development of small and medium business in Belarus](#). IPM Research Centre, 2016.
- Siarhei Bohdan. [Elements of neutrality in Belarusian foreign policy and national security policy](#). Ostrogorski Centre, 2016.
- Kaciaryna Barnukova, Alieh Mazoĺ. [Indexes of efficiency of government spending](#). BEROC, 2016.
- Kaciaryna Barnukova, Kaciaryna Lisiankova. [Effects of population ageing on the pension system in Belarus](#). BEROC, 2016.

Think tanks in Belarus are encouraged to submit their research for inclusion into the database by completing this [form](#).

The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its projects include Belarus Digest, [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), [BelarusPolicy.com](#), [BelarusProfile.com](#) and [Ostro.by](#).