

Belaya Rus: Lukashenka's "Ruling Party"?

Head of the Belarusian Central Electoral Commission Lydzia Yarmoshina on 20 April instructed activists of the Belaya Rus public association on the novelties of the upcoming parliamentary campaign.

When asked why she picked this particular organisation for a briefing, Yarmoshina recalled that most local officials are members of Belaya Rus, so it gathers the actual managers of the electoral process.

Indeed, Belaya Rus, established in 2007, now unites the majority of Belarusian officials, some famous sportsmen, artists and even the management of state companies and banks. Not being formally a party allows this organisation to act under the legal framework of civil society, while at the same time exploiting the full capacity of the state's administrative resources.

A future political transformation may imply different scenarios for Belaya Rus. It could either become a core element of a controlled power transition or sink into history after President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) leaves his post.

Why not make a formal ruling party?

Belaya Rus was established in late 2007 in preparation for the 2008 parliamentary elections. Officials throughout the country "suddenly" decided to unite local associations of Belaya Rus, subsequently transforming them into a nation-wide movement. Minister of education, Lukashenka's university mate [Alexander](#)

[Radzkou](#), chaired the association. The absolute support of the president remains Belaya Rus' sole ideological tenet.

The association currently has more than 160,000 members. This exceeds even the overall number of civil servants in the country. Top- and mid-level managers of state companies and banks were also asked to join.

At the time some said Lukashenka was creating a ruling party to safeguard the transition of power to his older [son Viktor](#), or to another successor. The Belarusian ruler denied having any connection to the Belaya Rus' establishment.

Lukashenka opposes the idea of a ruling party primarily because the current personality-based system fully satisfies him

Since then, the leaders of Belaya Rus have regularly announced that they are ready to become a party. Lukashenka has neither firmly opposed the idea nor supported it. He has just made evasive comments like: "Well, if they are ready – let them be party, I am not against it. On the contrary, I will support it because they are patriots. But I wouldn't advise them to hurry", as he said in 2012.

Lukashenka opposes the idea of a ruling party primarily because the current personality-based system fully satisfies him. Inserting a ruling party into an authoritarian regime (like in Russia or Kazakhstan) requires establishment of sparring-partner parties to make the system look competitive. Lukashenka is not a fan of such sophisticated political games.

He also exploits the image of the people's president. Lukashenka strives to be the "political Robin Hood", protecting the weakest from the occasional abuses of officials. Such a leader does not need intermediates between him and the people.

Finally, Lukashenka made his own political career by opposing

the defectiveness of the Communist Party nomenclature during *perestroika*. When the economy stagnates, the ruling party and its bureaucracy canalises people's anger onto itself. The seemingly unshakeable 20 million strong Communist Party crumbled like a house of cards then.

Useful tool for the elections

Formally, Belaya Rus is an NGO. Having most national and local officials as members, it possesses huge administrative resources and helps the government in its ideological activities. For instance, it can mobilise participants for rallies, cultural and sport events, state holidays or parades.

One of the most recent examples was the series of folk concerts titled To Love Belarus that took place in all regions of the country, co-organised by Belaya Rus and state TV. The concerts finished the day before the presidential election of 2015 and had an obvious pro-Lukashenka branding.



Obviously, an employee of a state-owned factory or a teacher can hardly refuse the "recommendation" from his or her boss to attend such an event.

Like the Federation of Labour-unions of Belarus (FPB), the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM) and unions of women or veterans, Belaya Rus is a classic "government organised NGO" (GONGO). All of these mobilise people for state-organised events.

However, the major function of Belaya Rus is election campaigning. First of all, it can provide thousands of "volunteers" to collect signatures for Lukashenka or pro-governmental MP candidates. The usual tactic is to use administrative resources to collect ten to 15 times more signatures than the law requires. This is a way of showing how

overwhelming public support remains.



Then, Belaya Rus, again as an NGO, is entitled to receive donations. Naturally, big state-owned companies cannot refuse to donate money to this association when they are “kindly asked” to. Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers criticised this practice in their [2015 elections](#) report, claiming it to be an indirect way of financing Lukashenka's campaign from state funds.

Thirdly, Belarusian electoral law requires at least 30 per cent of [precinct electoral commissions](#) to represent NGOs or political parties. To avoid including opposition parties and activists through this quota, local authorities rely on [pro-governmental parties](#) and associations. Belaya Rus remains beyond any competition.

Can it become something bigger?

In the current political system, Belaya Rus fulfils its functions relatively well by just being a public association.

However, growing [economic problems](#) are likely to [challenge the political construction](#) of the regime. At the same time, Lukashenka is becoming older. In the mid-term perspective, Belarus is approaching some form of political transformation.

The role of Belaya Rus in any upcoming power transition to a large degree will depend on the pace and the economic context of this process.

If things get chaotic and Lukashenka is either overthrown by protests or betrayed by subordinates, Belaya Rus is unlikely to find any significant place in the next political

configuration. When you have no ideology, besides supporting one leader, you often sink into history with him.

Exactly this happened to the Party of Regions in Ukraine after President Victor Yanukovich was overthrown in 2014 and to the Union of Citizens of Georgia after the forced resignation of President Eduard Shevardnadze in 2003.

However, if the transformation in Belarus goes more smoothly, Belaya Rus may have a place in it. For example, an ageing Lukashenka could use it to legitimise his successor within the state apparatus and in the eyes of people.

In any case, Belaya Rus seem to have more promising political perspectives in comparison to other GONGOs. Unlike BRSM or official trade-unions, this association has broader membership criteria, includes many high-ranking officials, exploits the full potential of state administrative resources and positions itself as a force with political objectives.

Opposition Reshaping: Where Will it Lead?

Following the full-scale fragmentation after the 2015 presidential election campaign, the Belarusian opposition is starting to unite.

Tatsiana Karatkevich, currently quite popular in polls, is rounding up her supporters to enter the 2016 parliamentary elections. Centre-right parties have formed a coalition. Street protests leader Mikola Statkevich is trying to gather other opposition groups around the idea of a new congress that is supposed to lay down a new united strategy.

However, mistrust among leaders, a lack of human resources, political apathy among the population and the evident strength of the Belarusian authoritarian regime still undermine the prospect of success for the opposition in the foreseeable future.

Karatkevich: most popular, yet ostracised by the opposition

The Tell the Truth campaign represents the "moderate" camp of the opposition. It is headed by two young politicians – [Tatsiana Karatkevich](#), a presidential candidate in the [October 2015-elections](#), and political strategist [Andrey Dmitriou](#).



Karatkevich, through the use of a mild political style, gained considerable support during the elections. A poll by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) conducted in October after the presidential elections placed her second after Lukashenka in terms of popularity, with 22% of votes. Among all Belarusians (including those who abstained from voting in the elections) she enjoyed a 16% approval rating. The deeper IISEPS analysis showed that Karatkevich attracts the support of many people from moderate groups of society who had refrained from supporting the opposition beforehand.

Immediately after the elections Karatkevich and Dmitriou announced that they were preparing for the 2016 parliamentary elections campaign. They called upon all like-minded people to sign up to their candidate nomination list titled "TaK. For Peaceful Changes" ("tak" – is the Belarusian word for "yes",

and is also the acronym of the first letters of **Tatsiana Karatkevich's** name).

Their political activity so far has included a series of meetings with the heads of Belarusian parliamentary committees, where Dmitriou and Karatkevich discussed and lobbied their "peaceful changes" plan. They also took a number of trips to the regions, evidently, to mobilise their local activists. They have become more and more active in the media, publishing statements on urgent topics like the ruble devaluation and showing up at various public fora (like those of entrepreneurs or economists) to announce their reform agenda.

Other opposition leaders have distanced themselves from this movement. Many view Karatkevich and Dmitriou as loyal to the regime, or sometimes as a KGB project.

Centre-right coalition

For long enough the Belarusian opposition has failed to unite on an ideological basis. In December 2015 leaders of the United Civil Party, Belarusian Christian Democracy and the For Freedom movement established a centre-right coalition. A fourth party, the Belarusian People's Front, has said it is ready to coordinate its actions with the coalition but does not want to fully join it.

It is worth noting that the unification was supervised by European Parliament bloc the European People's Party (EPP). The EPP had earlier recognised these opposition structures as partners. At first glance, such foreign backing gives the coalition a dubious image of an artificially created Brussels' project. On the other hand, having an influential curator in the European Parliament implies a certain degree of trust in the West. This may serve as a stabiliser for the coalition, because failure to stay united may irritate important Western

partners.

The coalition has announced that it will take part in the parliamentary campaign, launch a united election observation programme, promote a European trajectory and market reforms and fight for free elections. So far, the leaders of the coalition have visited several regions of Belarus to introduce their ideas to local officials and private entrepreneurs at markets.

A street leader summons the opposition congress

Former No1 political prisoner [Mikola Statkevich](#), known for his uncompromising stand and bravery during [four and a half years in custody](#), became an icon for certain opposition fractions. This background together with his personal charisma has made him a leader for those activists and movements who view street protests as, ultimately, the only feasible regime change tactic.

Statkevich organised six unauthorised rallies in the centre of Minsk before and after last year's presidential elections. Currently he is organising an opposition congress. The idea is to gather activists from all over Belarus to determine a united strategy for the opposition and to put forward democratisation requirements to the authorities. When they are ignored, as anticipated, Statkevich proposes to prepare street protests.



In 2005 the congress format enabled the opposition to field united presidential candidate [Aliaksandr Milinkevich](#). Since then all attempts to use the congress as a uniting strategy have failed. That is why this time the Statkevich proposal was

met with very limited enthusiasm.

Statkevich has managed to get support from some well-known figures: two former presidential candidates – poet [Uladzimir Nekliaeu](#) and political exile [Andrei Sannikau](#), trade-union leader Henadz' Fedynich, co-chair of the right-wing Young Front [Zmicier Daschkevich](#) and several other activists. However, except for Sannikau who controls popular opposition website Charter'97, the others lack serious structures behind them.

Statkevich reached out to the rest of the opposition for support of his idea, with the exception of Tell the Truth and the leftist Just World party, whom he has called "KGBists" and "communists" respectively. The others, including the centre-right coalition, are still considering Statkevich's proposal and have promised to respond soon.

Still no window to succeed

The ad hoc coordination of efforts between the Statkevich camp and the centre-right coalition seems possible: they share a common agenda, electorate and, to a certain degree, political tactics. However, personal mistrust among the leaders will most likely stand in the way of a considerable unification.

As for the Tell the Truth campaign, it seem neither able nor willing to cooperate with the rest of the opposition. It is trying to gain the support of a so-called "new majority", median electorate that supports neither the government nor the traditional opposition. Affiliation with the latter can only be a problem in this regard.

The moderate Tell the Truth campaign can hope to be granted some seats in parliament on the wave of the Belarusian-European [thaw in relations](#), but this scenario also remains unlikely. Lukashenka will choose other concessions, like

cosmetic changes in election or media law, rather than sacrificing the political sterility of his parliament.

Successful Foreign Policy, EEU Decline, Cross-Border Projects – State Press Digest

According to Belarusian state-controlled press, 2015 was a successful year for Belarusian foreign policy, as the country strengthened its position in international affairs and relations with key western actors.

The national budget for 2016 reflects the impact of the ongoing economic crisis and will see the government support only the most vulnerable categories of society, *siloviki* in particular.

Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) trade continues to fall because of the regional economic crisis and protectionist policies of the bloc's members. Belarus is gradually abolishing subsidies in the energy sector as part of market reforms.

The regions of Belarus are actively engaging in cross-border cooperation projects financed by the EU. All of this and more is discussed in the latest edition of State Press Digest.

Government considers 2015

foreign policy a success

[In 2015 Belarus led a successful foreign policy.](#) *Belarus Segodnya* presents the annual Review of the Foreign Policy Outcomes and Activities of the Foreign Ministry. During presidential elections, which the Ministry sees as the main event, it managed to organise constructive cooperation with international observers. These observers' reports had a significant impact on further positive development of relations with foreign, and especially western, partners.

In 2015 Belarus made a significant contribution to de-escalation of the Ukraine conflict and maintenance of stability in the region. Belarus also continues to promote the concept of “integration of integration” – convergence of the European and Eurasian integration programmes. However, the review regrets that the key problem within the EEU – trade exemptions and protectionism – has not been overcome.

Eurasian Economic Union demonstrates trade decline

[The new budget will prioritise financial support for police and army personnel.](#) *Narodnaja Hazieta* publishes an interview with MP and member of the standing committee on budget and finance of the Belarusian parliament Valier Baradzienia. According to the official, the fast economic growth of previous years is over, Belarus is losing markets and its GDP is falling, leading to a budget deficit.

The authorities will cut expenses, but this will not apply to social commitments such as education and healthcare. Salary growth can be expected in the public sector, but it will vary according to each sphere. Teachers may receive additional income from private tutoring and healthcare workers can offer

paid services to citizens, while such possibilities are not open to police and army personnel. The state is therefore obliged to protect them, the MP said.

Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) demonstrates decline in mutual trade. In 2015 trade within the EEU decreased by 25 per cent, writes *Sielskaya Gazieta*. However, trade within the union has in fact been falling ever since the launch of its predecessor, the Customs Union, in 2011. Stumbling oil prices and sanctions against Russia are only part of the problem. Members of the union continue to put national economic interest above the integration ideal and retain protectionist policies.

In the last year bans on imports of certain categories of goods became standard practice for EEU members. For Belarus this concerns primarily food products, which Russia constantly claims do not meet EEU standards. Moreover, Kazakhstan's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) further limits Belarus' export possibilities to the EEU.

Belarus plans to completely abolish cross-subsidies to the energy sector by 2018. Today enterprises in fact pay for a large part of the population's energy consumption, *Zviazda* newspaper reports. Belarusians pay 72 per cent of electricity costs, 55 per cent of gas costs and only 17 per cent of heating costs. These subsidies have been a part of the state's social policy throughout independence and received much criticism from Belarus' international creditors who promote market reforms.

✘ **The estates of noblemen of Hrodna region are sold off to investors.** The 18th century estate of the Umiastoŭskija noble family located in Iŭje district has been sold at auction to a Jordan businessman for \$55,000, *Respublika* newspaper reports. According to the auction conditions, the investor has promised to restore the buildings to their original form and turn them into a hotel and a restaurant.

The estate until the auction belonged to a local collective farm and is in a dire state. The authorities have no funds for restoration of architectural heritage, and many similar estates are slowly crumble as a result. Twelve estates in Hrodna region acquired new owners in recent years, but some of them are in no hurry to carry out restoration works and the government even plans to take some of the estates back.

Belarus engages in cross-border projects with the EU

[Hrodna region actively participates in EU cross-border cooperation projects.](#) The local authorities of Hrodna region have prepared around 50 projects for EU-financed cross border cooperation programmes with Poland-Belarus-Ukraine and Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus, *Hrodzienskaja Praŭda* reports. The projects mostly concern healthcare, education and culture.

The programmes require partnership from both sides of the border, and half of the projects already have foreign partners. To present the other half for potential partners, the authorities plan to organise a forum in Bialystok. The Poland-Belarus-Ukraine programme for 2016-2020 will allocate about €180m for cross-border cooperation projects.

[Belarusians will not have to take Russian language exams to receive work permits for Russia.](#) As *Soyuz* newspaper reports, the Russian State Duma passed a law exempting Belarusians from the obligation to confirm their command of the Russian language and knowledge of Russian history and law as a requirement for obtaining a residence or work permit. The norm became effective in Russia on 1 January 2015 and concerned all foreign citizens, including Belarusians.

The regulation caused much opposition in Belarus, where Russian is one of the two official languages and in fact

dominates all spheres of life. The problem was widely discussed, and Lukashenka personally lobbied on it during his visit to Russia in December, ultimately receiving approval from Putin.

The State Digest Digest is based on review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.

Belarus – US Relations: Lukashenka No Longer Viewed as a Russian Puppet

Following “peaceful” elections in Belarus, the United States sent two medium-level diplomats to Minsk on 4-5 November. Bridget Brink and Robert Berschinski came to reiterate America’s willingness to uphold the “virtuous cycle” in bilateral relations when one’s positive steps are responded to in kind.

Continuing this trend, the two countries may agree on expanding their embassies’ staff and increasing US economic assistance in exchange for some symbolic liberalisation steps by the Belarusian authorities. However, a major breakthrough is nowhere to be seen.

The Ukraine Crisis Jump-

starts a Thaw in Relations

The US and Belarus communicated at a working level even during the most difficult times of their bilateral relationship. However, after the brutal crackdown on the opposition in the aftermath of the 2010 presidential elections, the contacts were reduced to once-a-year visits by minor State Department officials.

Minsk's position on Ukraine helps dialogue with the US

Things [began to change](#) in mid-2014. Minsk then asserted its displeasure with Moscow's new 'Russian world' policy, crafting a carefully expressed solidarity with Ukraine. Washington responded by an increased frequency of contacts. Nevertheless, the intensity of the dialogue with America remained far inferior to the one Belarus began to maintain with Europe.

Among the frequent bilateral consultations, one stood out. An [interagency US team](#), which included officials from the State Department, the Agency for International Development and the Department of Defence, visited Minsk on 8-10 September 2014.

During this meeting Belarus and the United States reviewed the potential for cooperation if and when bilateral relations begin to normalise. A US official even described the visit as a "restoration of bilateral relations".

The next decisive event for US–Belarus ties happened on 27  February 2015. Belarusian President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) received Eric Rubin, a medium-ranking US diplomat. Lukashenka may have desired to keep up to date on the ongoing negotiations. This may explain the [baffling disregard for protocol](#).

Two other important US appearances in Belarus took place on the eve of the presidential elections. On 2–4 August, a three-

person [US congressional delegation](#) led by Dana Rohrabacher, the chairman of the subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and emerging threats met with Alexander Lukashenka and the heads of several government agencies. On 11 September, [Under Secretary of State](#) for Management Patrick Kennedy became the highest-ranking State Department official to visit Belarus during Lukashenka's era.

Release of Political Prisoners Provides Major Impetus

The Under Secretary of State's visit became possible only after Lukashenka pardoned all remaining [political prisoners](#) in Belarus on 22 August. Patrick Kennedy, whose primary sphere of responsibility includes human resources, budget and foreign missions, came to Minsk to discuss the modalities of the gradual resumption of the US embassy in Minsk's normal functions.

As the two countries agreed in their bilateral step-by-step  understanding, the United States waited until after the 11 October presidential elections to respond to Belarus' releasing of political prisoners. While, according to the State Department, "the elections fell significantly short of Belarus' international obligations and commitments for free and fair elections", the Belarusian regime managed to abstain from a violent backlash against rare street protesters.

The US: "Suspension of sanctions is focused on supporting the Belarusian economy"

On 29 October, the US suspended [sanctions](#) on nine Belarusian companies for six months. Announcing this decision at a meeting with leaders of the Belarusian opposition, a US

embassy official Monica Bland pointed out that the sanctions reprieve failed to include Belarusian officials.

Indeed, sixteen Belarusians have remained on the US assets freeze list. The United States refused to go as far as their [European partners did](#), even if they insisted that they coordinated their decisions on sanctions.

In her media statement made a week later, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Bridget Brink stressed that the suspension of sanctions was “limited, and future-oriented, and focused on supporting the Belarusian economy”. Indeed, all companies concerned are petrochemical enterprises. They represent the [backbone of Belarusian industry](#) and are a steady source of hard-currency revenue for the Belarusian economy.

“Complex Issues” Discussed, Not Cushioned

Bridget Brink and her colleague, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Robert Berschinski, visited Minsk on 4–5 November. There, they met with Belarusian officials as well as members of the opposition, civil society, human rights activists, and the business community.

Unlike Brink’s predecessor Eric Rubin, the diplomats failed to get the privilege of a personal audience with Alexander Lukashenka. However, Bridget Brink and Robert Berschinski discussed “complex issues and ways to address them” at a meeting with foreign minister [Vladimir Makei](#).

At their meeting with leaders of all [opposition parties and movements](#), the US diplomats confined themselves to short introductory statements and preferred to listen to opposition

activists rather than divulge information about their plans towards the Belarusian regime.

The US no longer regards Lukashenka as a Russian puppet

Some participants in the meeting noted ongoing changes in the US approach towards the Belarusian authorities. They described the American diplomats' mood as "cautiously optimistic" about future positive developments. At the same time, the US officials reassured the opposition that the United States had no intention in reducing their contacts with civil society despite the authorities' attitude towards such contacts.

A participant in the meeting told Belarus Digest that the United States no longer regarded Lukashenka as a Russian puppet but rather as a leader who is heavily dependent on Moscow but makes his own decisions.

In order to contain Russia's growing assertiveness in the region and beyond, the United States is willing to exploit Lukashenka's [aversion to the "Russian world"](#) doctrine. To do so, it may help him reduce the economic dependence on Russia by assisting with securing an IMF loan and facilitating trade and investments.

As payback, Belarus offers its self-appointed role as a "donor of stability" in the region. The regime proposes cooperation on a wide range of issues affecting global and regional security, including the [non-proliferation of WMDs](#), export controls and disarmament.

For the moment, the United States appears to be unwilling to satisfy itself with this offer. If Belarus seeks further improvement of its relations with the world's superpower, a gradual political liberalisation should be in order.

Vote Counting and Election Assessment by Observers – Belarus Presidential Election Digest

Belarus held presidential election between 6 and 11 October 2015. Almost seven million voters were eligible to cast ballots at 6,129 polling stations during the five day early voting period and election day on 11 October. This update summarises important events that occurred following the close of polls on 11 October and through 16 October, when the official results were announced.

The main voting day, as well as the early voting period, was observed by local independent observer groups Right to Choose-2015 (R2C), Human Rights Defenders for Free and Fair Elections (HRD), and the youth initiative Election Observation Theory and Practice (EOTP). R2C deployed observers at 672 polling stations during the early vote period, and monitored 642 polling stations during election day.

HRD conducted observations at 400 polling stations during the early voting and election day period. Journalists and citizens also monitored and reported their observations on social networks, via the mobile phone observation app Vochy and the Ushahidi based crowdsourcing observation site Electby.org.

Key Points

- The [HRD](#) and [R2C](#) election observation missions challenged the validity of the election results. They [described](#) the election as ‘non-transparent, not free and non-democratic’, citing evidence of both turnout and vote count manipulations. Over the course of early voting and election day, R2C observers [filed 900 complaints](#) and reported 1,573 incidents, many of them available for review on the crowdsourcing platform [Electby.org](#). Amongst the most pressing election day problems noted by [R2C](#) and [HRD](#) observers was a lack of transparency and verifiability of the vote count process and final results.
- In a joint statement the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) [stated](#) that problems with the vote counting and tabulation “undermined the integrity of the election.”
- The Central Election Commission (CEC) of Belarus announced the official presidential [election results](#): Alexander Lukashenko – 83.47 percent, Tatsiana Karatkevich – 4.44, Sergey Gaidukevich – 3.30, Nikolay Ulakhovich – 1.67, and Against All – 6.32 percent. Turnout announced by the authorities was 87.22 percent, of which [36.05 percent](#) were attributed to the early vote period.
- Tatsiana [Karatkevich’s team announced](#) she and her team would “fight for their votes” and [appealed](#) the election results to the CEC using R2C and HRD findings as evidence. Karatkevich [claimed](#) her campaign received between 20 and 35 percent of the vote. Karatkevich’s appeal was [rejected by the CEC](#) on 16 October.

Karatkevich also [announced](#) her plans to continue building on her recent success. She and her team plan to organise a Nationwide Development Forum “For Peaceful Changes,” and began forming of a list of candidates for parliamentary elections.

- Around 200 people [attended a peaceful protest](#) against the conduct of the election. [Human rights defenders reported](#) that five anarchists were detained near where the protest occurred.
- United Civil Party Chair Anatoly Lebedko, former presidential candidates Nikolay Statkevich and Vladimir Neklyaev held a press conference in Minsk. They [demanded non-recognition](#) of the election results by the international community and announced the [launch of the “Power to People”](#) campaign, a new effort to fight for economic reforms, free elections and the preservation of the statehood and independence of Belarus.

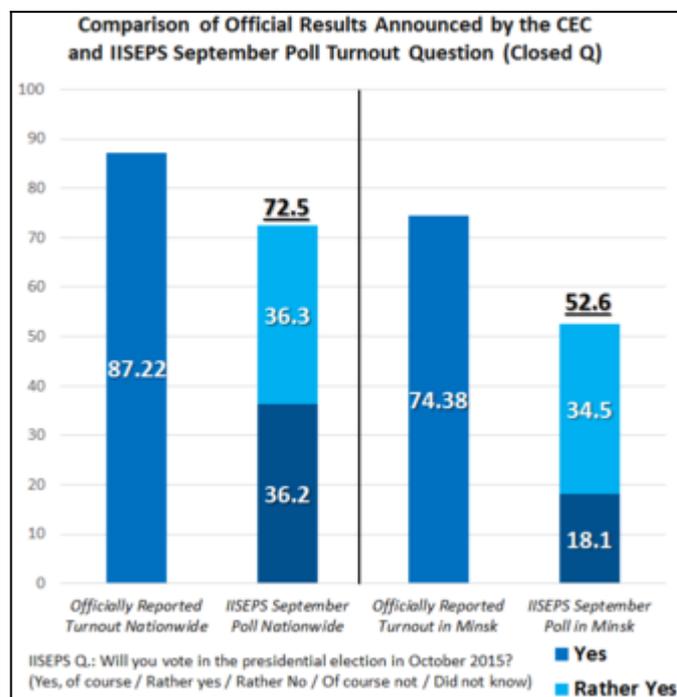
Election Results

On 16 October the CEC announced its official [presidential election results](#): Alexander Lukashenko – 83.47 percent, Tatsiana Karatkevich – 4.44 percent, Sergey Gaidukevich – 3.30 percent, Nikolay Ulakhovich – 1.67 percent, Against All – 6.32 percent.

According to official data, election turnout reached [87.22 percent](#), of which [36.05 percent](#) was attributed to early voting. Officially this was the highest early vote turnout in Belarusian history.

[HRD](#) and [R2C](#) election observation missions questioned the validity of results and called the election non-democratic, citing evidence of both turnout and vote count manipulations. [R2C stated](#) that the presidential election “was not free and

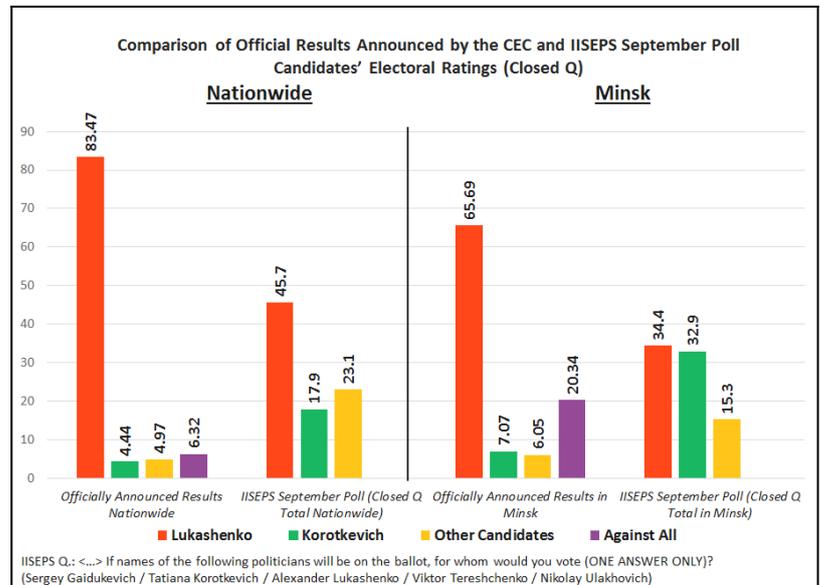
not fair, vote counting was conducted in a non-transparent manner”. [HRD concluded](#), “the election process did not meet a number of key international standards for democratic and free elections.” [The combined statement](#) of OSCE/ODIHR, OSCE PA and PACE also raised questions as to the validity of the process, and particularly the vote count.



The official results provided by the CEC diverge significantly from the results of an independent poll conducted by the [Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies](#) (IISEPS) in mid-September regarding voter intention. As the charts illustrate, the election turnout and results nationwide and, particularly in Minsk where both expected turnout and Lukashenko's support are lowest, and are considerably different than the public sentiment a month before the election.

It should be noted, the most likely voters are strongly pro-Lukashenko, and thus the final vote percentage for Lukashenko would be expected to rise somewhat as a result of non-Lukashenko voters avoiding the polls. [IISEPS noted](#) that when extrapolating these results to the turnout of 80 percent, for Lukashenko would vote 56 percent, and for Karatkevich 22

percent.



Prior to announcement of the official election results, three exit polls [were released](#). The exit polls were conducted by the [Youth Laboratory of Sociological Studies](#), the [National Academy of Sciences](#), and [Evraziyskiy Barometr](#). All focus groups were either contracted or conducted by [structures tied to the authorities](#), thus making their independence and stated results suspect. Each of these polls forecast Lukashenko would receive more than 80 percent.

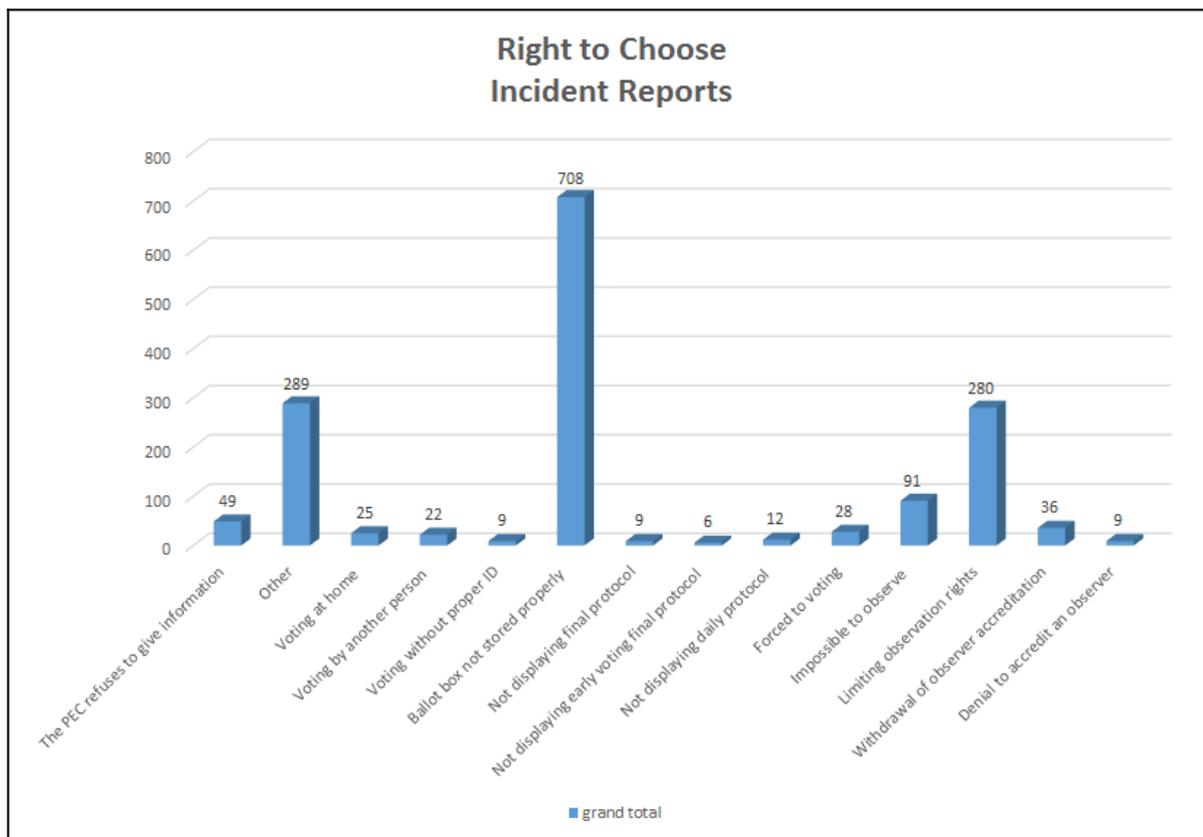
Election Observation and Reports on Non-Transparent Vote Count

Domestic independent observers negatively assessed the election. [R2C stated](#) that the presidential election “(was) not free and not fair, vote counting was conducted in a non-transparent manner, and the results announced by the CEC are not trustworthy. All negatives practises that previously were criticised by national and international observers were continued this campaign.”

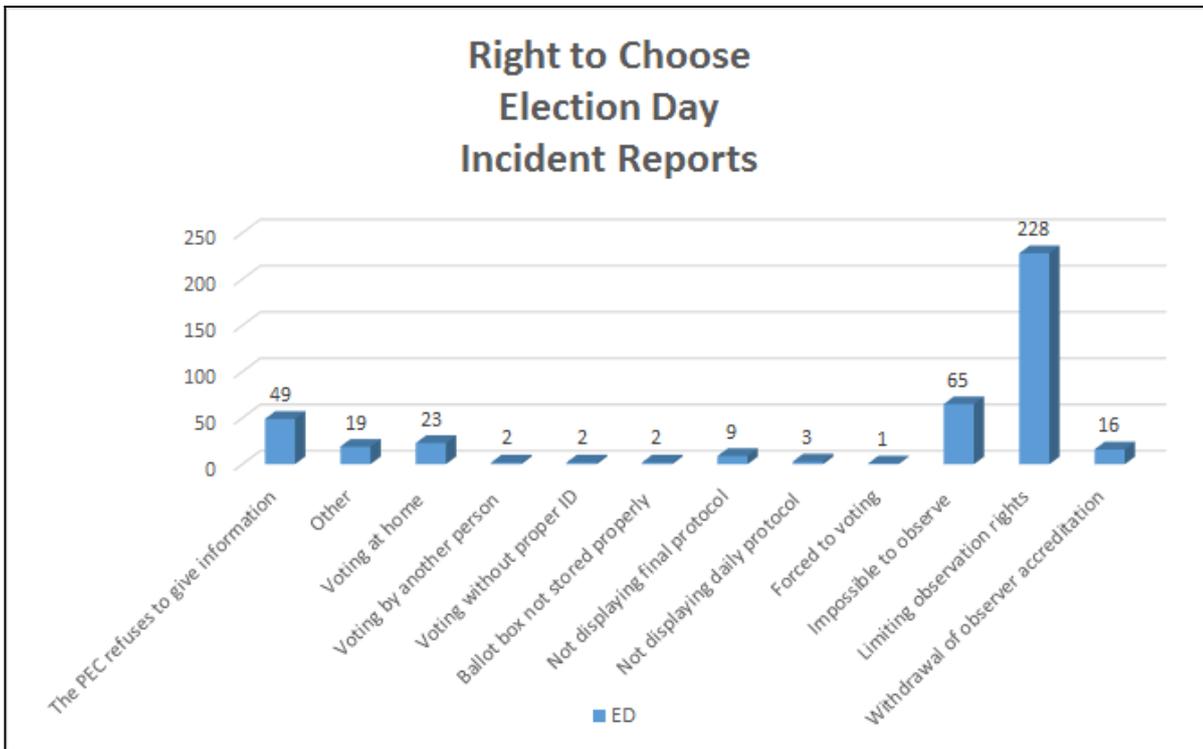
[HRD observers concluded](#), “the election process did not meet a

number of key international standards for democratic and free elections. This was due to the lack of equal access to the media for all candidates, the lack of impartiality of election commissions, use of administrative resources in favour of the incumbent, numerous facts of coercion of voters to participate in early voting, and the closure of some election procedures for observers. The most important reason for criticism is the lack of transparency of the vote count, which does not allow to consider the election results as a reflection of the will of voters.” In addition, both [R2C](#) and [HRD](#) campaigns developed recommendations to increase elections transparency.

During the main election day, [R2C](#) observed 643 polling stations. During the entire voting period [R2C](#) observers reported 1,573 incidents and filed 900 official complaints.



On the main election day R2C reported 419 incidents and filed 509 complaints.



In patterns similar to those noted during the early vote period, R2C observed artificially inflated turnout during the main election day. On 11 October [R2C](#) was able to conduct a parallel turnout count at 485 polling stations. At these polling stations R2C counted 374,809 people who voted, while official data indicated 395,863 voters, a discrepancy of 21,054.

In addition to inflated turnout, R2C observers [identified several categories of incidents](#) that took place on the main election day including: withdrawal of accreditation of observers, non-transparent vote count, refusal by commissions to provide voter list information and [expulsion from polling places](#) when observers asked commissioners to conduct an open vote count.



Issues in Vote Counting

[R2C observers](#) were present during ballot counting in 633 polling stations. R2C concluded the vote count was not open, and not transparent, and observers were unable to verify vote totals announced by commissions. At 141 polling stations vote counting was conducted without the required separation of ballot boxes by type of vote (early voting, mobile voting and main day voting).

According to [HRD observers](#), more than half of their observers were put in positions that made it uncomfortable to observe the vote count. Seventy six point nine percent could not see what was written on the ballots. For instance, at the Centralny district polling station #25 in Minsk, domestic and international observers [could not observe the vote count](#) because of the distance between the ballots and the observers. R2C published [a video](#) demonstrating similar problems occurring in another polling station, as well as [a series](#) of pictures illustrating such difficult observation conditions.



At polling station #6 of Pervomayskiy district, Minsk, the commission built '[chair barricades](#)' so observers could not monitor the count. Even at Minsk polling station #1, where Lukashenko cast his vote, a [Naviny.by journalist](#) reported the "vote counting procedure does not differ much" and observers did not see anything.

An anonymous commissioner from Vitebsk shared his vote counting experience with [Euroradio](#). According to him, commission members signed a final report without actually seeing numbers. He witnessed Karatkevich being assigned 80 votes instead of the 581 counted. When the commissioner complained, his job was threatened. On social media, people posted pictures of protocols from polling stations, where observers were allowed to conduct observation.

A Naviny.by reporter, referring to his experience at polling station #63 in Minsk, [noted](#) "They have sorted all correctly, but wrote the report 'as needed'." In the final report Lukashenko [got 11 times more votes](#) than Karatkevich, although the ballot stacks looked similar (please see the picture at left).

An HRD observer from Gomel Soviet district polling station #25 [noted](#) the suspicious efficiency of an election commission which counted 2,500 votes in 20 minutes.



Ballot stacks at polling station #63 of Sovetskiy district, Minsk (Gaidukevich, Karatkevich, Lukashenko, Against All, Ulakhovich)

Election Assessment by International Observers

International observers from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) [held a press conference](#) on 12 October in which they [released a statement](#) drawing preliminary conclusions. The statement reads, “The 11 October election once again indicated that Belarus still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections...” there are “significant problems, particularly during the counting and tabulation, undermined the integrity of the election.”

Nevertheless, the Belarus [CEC expressed satisfaction](#) with the preliminary report noting some positive assessments. The [European Union noted](#) the “peaceful environment” in which the election was held. The EU also offered Belarus assistance “in its efforts to bring its election process in line with OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections.” The United States [expressed disappointment](#) “that the elections fell significantly short of Belarus’ international obligations and commitments for free and fair elections”.

Sergei Lebedev, the head of the [Commonwealth of Independent States \(CIS\)](#) observation mission stated, “The election met democratic principles and were transparent, open and competitive.” The [Shanghai Cooperation Organization \(SCO\)](#) did not detect “a single violation of the national election laws.”

The Candidates and Other Political Forces on the Presidential Election Results

Tatsiana Karatkevich [thanked](#) voters for their support: “To all those, who believe changes in Belarus are possible and are ready to act. Do not believe in deceitful numbers. This is our victory! We are moving forward!”

On 12 October she [held a press conference](#) concluding her campaign, during which Karatkevich listed five major achievements of her campaign:

(1) she claims to have actually received 20-35 percent support from society, which will be proven with independent polls in October; (2) her team reached people “who for the last 20 years have not heard what alternative politicians are saying”; (3) the authorities became aware that people cast their votes for changes in Belarus; (4) their team drew attention to Russian plans to build an airbase in Belarus; (5) the campaign brought new faces to Belarusian politics. Karatkevich believes by announcing fraudulent figures “the authorities do not show respect to the people.”

Karatkevich’s team announced they would [“fight for votes”](#) and [appealed](#) the election results. Evidence of electoral malfeasance collected by R2C and HRD observers provided the basis for Karatkevich’s appeal. Lidia [Yermoshina](#) noted that the CEC has final decision on the appeal on the recognition of election results. An appeal can be made to the Supreme Court only if the CEC finds the results invalid.

The CEC rejected the appeal on October 16. CEC Chair Lidia [Yermoshina claimed](#), “It is wrong to claim that acts of observers – are sacred cows and that commissions cannot justify themselves After examining the complaint, it is

possible to say that the CEC has no grounds to recognize election results as void”.

[Karatkevich also announced](#) plans to organise a Nationwide Development Forum “For Peaceful Changes,” to give everybody an opportunity to voice problems and become a part of the movement for peaceful changes. The recruitment of parliamentary candidates for next year’s election will coincide with the forum.

Sergey Gaidukevich [congratulated Lukashenko](#). He [said](#) all presidential candidates enjoyed equal conditions during the election campaign. Gaidukevich also [announced](#) his party would be headed by a new person in the near future, because he has led too long and there are too few youth in the party.

Nikolay Ulakhovich [recognised the election results](#). He believes Lukashenko deserved victory, “We perfectly understand that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is one of the greatest patriots of our country. He once again proved his capabilities and showed that today he is irreplaceable on our Belarusian land,” said Ulakhovich.

On 12 October Alexander Lukashenko [began receiving congratulations](#) on his re-election. According to his press service, the President of the People’s Republic of China Xi Jinping was the first to congratulate him. Lukashenko also received greetings from Russia President Vladimir Putin as well as the presidents of Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Venezuela among others.



Despite the fact that neither the only democratic candidate Tatsiana Karatkevich, nor other opposition leaders called people to protest, around 200 people [came to the street](#) on election eve. Former presidential candidate Andrey Sannikov [called participants of the march](#) heroes and thanked them for their dignity and bravery. [Human rights defenders](#) reported that five protesters from anarchist movement were detained, and two of them spent a night in a detention centre. In addition, a complaint against 17-year old Egor Skarbnevskiy was compiled by the authorities.

United Civil Party (UCP) Chair Anatoly Lebedko, former presidential candidates Nikolay Statkevich and Vladimir Neklyaev held a press-conference in Minsk. They [demanded non-recognition](#) of the election results by the international community. They jointly announced the start of a new campaign "[Power to People](#)." Lebedko explained the campaign will have three directions of work: 1) Statehood and Sovereignty; 2) Free and Fair Elections; 3) Positive Economic Alternative. According to Statkevich, the first street action under the campaign took place on 10 October and the next one is planned for November to coincide with the anniversary of the day 1996 Referendum.

Michael Murphy & Juljan Jachovic

□ *National Democratic Institute*

Peaceful Elections as a Foreign Policy Tool

In October, the Belarusian foreign ministry worked hard to use the presidential elections as a tool to strengthen the positive trend in relations between Belarus and the West. Foreign minister Vladimir Makei managed not to miss this second chance, after the failure of a similar attempt in 2010.

Belarusian diplomats contacted the domestic opposition through different channels to dissuade it from possible street protests. They also used hand-picked “independent” observers to create a positive image of the elections.

The peaceful elections allowed Europe to decide on the suspension of sanctions against the regime. However, the EU can reimpose them at any moment should Lukashenka abandon his rapprochement policy.

Talking to the Opposition and Hand-Picking Observers

Belarusian diplomats focused on securing a positive image of the elections in the international media and public opinion. They also sought to prevent any incidents that would jeopardise the progress already achieved in Belarus’ relations with Europe.

Domestically, [Vladimir Makei](#) and other high-ranked diplomats worked to convey a message to opposition leaders in Belarus that Russia might use eventual street protests to stage

provocation aimed at sabotaging the positive trends in Belarus' relations with the West. They did it mostly through Western envoys in Minsk.

Internationally, the Belarusian embassies worked with the usual sympathisers of the Belarusian regime to engage them as "independent" observers or members of the European observation missions at the presidential elections. These are people who are ready to support the regime with positive testimonies, either out of their sincere sympathy for Belarus or in pursuit of lucrative business opportunities in the country.

“Nothing Abnormal” at Polling Stations

The Belarusian government has often sponsored, fully or partially, the trips of many hand-picked “observers” to Minsk. Many of them, like Mikhail Morgulis, President of the Spiritual Diplomacy Foundation (US), are regulars at presidential elections in Belarus. Unlike the European observation missions, Morgulis and his collaborators tend to praise the elections as “free and fair” .

✘ Thierry Mariani, a French MP, came to Minsk as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) delegation. This former minister, known for his pro-Russian stance, visited fourteen polling stations in Minsk and found “good organisation” and “nothing abnormal” there. However, he took no apparent interest in the vote counting process and [early voting](#), which drew the most criticism from others.

Belarusian diplomats also remained in good working contact with the observation missions of the European institutions. Despite the [critical conclusions of their joint report](#), the ministry refrained this time from criticising them as biased and even avoided commenting on them altogether. [Lidia](#)

[Yermoshina](#), head of the central election commission, went as far as thanking the mission for its objectivity.

Getting the Sanctions Suspended

[Rumours](#) about the imminent recall of the sanctions against high-ranking officials and companies circulated well before the elections. They became almost a certainty after Lukashenka [released](#) all the political prisoners in September.

The EU will first renew the sanctions and then suspend them

The European Union virtually confirmed the veracity of these rumours on 12 October, when the European observation missions made public their preliminary conclusions. Harlem Désir, France's minister for European affairs, announced the decision to suspend the sanctions for the next four months. He made this announcement when answering a question from a reporter after an EU meeting in Luxembourg.

The format of the announcement mattered in this case. Belarus was not on this meeting's official agenda. The EU intends to formally review and action upon the issue of sanctions before they expire on 31 October. In such circumstances, the news could have come from an "anonymous source" or even been postponed altogether under the premise that the observers' final conclusions needed to be studied first.

However, Belarus needed a prompt quasi-official confirmation that the EU would stick to its part of the step-by-step arrangement. In its turn, Brussels wanted to reassure Minsk on the eve of Lukashenka's meeting with Vladimir Putin. Thus, they chose as a messenger the French minister who met with deputy foreign minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) in May 2015 and is familiar with the situation in Belarus.

Low-Key but Positive Reaction

On 15 October, Dmitri Mironchik, the foreign ministry's spokesman, refused to comment on this announcement but reiterated Belarus' position on the "inefficiency and futility" of anti-Belarus sanctions. He pointed out that the ministry expected their "complete abolition... as soon as possible".

Lukashenka: "The sanctions have been lifted. Get moving!"

Four days later, his boss Vladimir Makei was more outspoken in his reaction. In an interview with a Belarusian TV station, he labelled as "positive" the emergence of such statements. The foreign minister also expressed his understanding of the fact that the sanctions would not be lifted immediately, blaming it on the EU bureaucratic mechanism.

Belarusian president [Alexander Lukashenka](#) sees the repeal of sanctions as a *fait accompli*. "The sanctions have been lifted. Get moving!", he told his ministers at a meeting on 20 October in Minsk, prompting them to expand Belarusian exports.

Announcing the suspension of sanctions, the French minister stressed that they "can be reimposed immediately if this is justified". In fact, the EU will first renew the sanctions and then immediately suspend them.

The definitive lifting of sanctions would mean that the reasons for their introduction no longer apply, which is untrue. Also, it would make their reimposition quite difficult if Belarus lapses into its old ways of serious human rights abuse. The suspension of sanctions will allow the European Union to have Belarus on the ropes, stimulating the government into taking further steps towards the political liberalisation.

Belarus and Europe are now at the very beginning of a complex diplomatic play, trying to squeeze as many concessions from each other without giving ground on matters of principle.

Europe will demand more democratic reforms culminating in free and fair parliamentary elections next year and will be ready to provide economic assistance in return. Belarus will seek economic benefits as a payment for its role as a "donor of security" in the region and try to avoid meaningful political liberalisation.

Starting with the release of political prisoners, Belarus added the "peaceful elections" and minor electoral improvements to the package to obtain a serious concession from the EU. This is a culmination of the rapprochement, which began after the Russian annexation of Crimea.

The next big test for the step-by-step strategy will be in early 2016 when the EU and Belarus will negotiate the full abrogation, or at least further suspension, of the sanctions.

Be a Man, not a Sheep! – Belarus Civil Society Digest

Thanks to recently launched applications Belarusians can now complain to the authorities in a less formalised way. One of them, Comfortable City, helps creating appeals and petitions to the state bodies.

Be a Man, not a Sheep! – a new project Studwatch.org encourages students to protect their rights.

Pact launches a series of memos based on community polls in

Belarus. It can help to better understand the needs and challenges of local communities.

Initiatives and campaigns

[New online platforms for appeals to state bodies.](#) Minsk web programmer Valery Koldachev launched the web site [One-Window-Online](#), which allows to send information about problems in Minsk to the state body that can fix it. This week one more online platform has been launched – [Comfortable City](#) that helps creating appeals/petitions to the state bodies and collect signatures under them. In both cases appeals have a legal force so officials should respond them. The similar online projects already work in Belarus for some years –e-appeals to state bodies [Zvarot.by](#) and complaints on roads [Belyama.by](#).

[Pact releases first in series of Belarus community polls.](#) This week, Pact begins to release a series of memos based on community polls in Belarus. The first memo is dedicated to the village of Komarovo, and will be followed by five additional memos released before the end of 2015. Pact's goal for the community polls is to provide easy-to-use feedback directly from a local community in order to better understand community development (supply) needs and challenges. A local research company, SATIO, carried out the first community polls. The Russian-language version of the analysis [is available](#) at the web site of Pact's Community Development Fund.

[Charitable auction of meetings MajeSens celebrated 4 years of its activity in October.](#) To the moment, the platform has collected about 320 thousand dollars for charity issues. MajeSens allows everybody to put up a meeting with him/her or to win meeting with other person. The money obtained is transferred to a charitable project, available at the web site.

[New manual on capacity building for Civil Society Organisations](#). New Eurasia Establishment presents the first edition of its manual "Diagnosis and Planning of CSO Capacity Building", developed in the framework of Strengthening the Capacity of Joint Initiatives project. The manual is designed specifically for Belarusian CSOs and intended for managers and leaders of organisations and consultants.

[New project Studwatch.by encourages students not to be afraid to protect their rights](#). Among the tools the organisers suggest to become election observers, report on violations to human rights defenders in the elections, disseminate information, etc. The slogan of the new project: Be a man, not a Sheep.

[Week against the Death Penalty in Belarus](#). On 5-10 October the Week against the Death Penalty to place in Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. On 7 October the discussion [Murder on Verdict](#) was held in Vilnius with the participation of the Belarusian human rights defenders, journalists and representatives of the Foreign Ministry of Lithuania. The event presented the film [Six Arguments against the Death Penalty](#) telling about the disproportionate character and cruelty of the death penalty.

Presidential elections

[European Parliament held a discussion on relations between the EU and Belarus after the presidential elections](#). On 14 October discussion was organised by the EaP Civil Society Forum and the European Parliament delegation for relations with Belarus. The Belarusian side was represented by Anna Herasimova (the Belarusian Human Rights House), Vladimir Dunayev (Public Bologna Committee) and Andrei Yegorov (Centre for European Transformation).

[Independent observers developed a mobile device for easy](#)

[collection of information from voters through smartphones.](#)

Application named as Vochy/Eyes informs on voting rights and creates a mobile platform for the transmission of information on violations of the election independent observers. The collected information is published on the web site of the national monitoring of the election campaign electby.org, known in Belarus since 2010.

Interaction between state and civil society

[Minsk development plan draws attention.](#) On 14 October Minsk municipality presented to media a new General Plan of Minsk 2030. The presentation also sparked the interest of more than a hundred citizens that joined the meeting. And as a follow-up, several civic initiatives [join forces to protect](#) their communities from Minsk City Council.

[Supreme Court denies BCD's complaint.](#) The Supreme Court has denied the complaint about the Ministry of Justice lodged by the steering committee for the creation of the Belarusian Christian Democracy party. The BCD steering committee wanted to appeal the refusal to register the party. It is the fifth time the BCD has been refused registration as a party. The BCD has also tried registering as a civil organisation 19 times.

[Blogger Anton Matolka wrote a letter to Minister of Internal Affairs Ihar Shunevich.](#) He is asking to explain the legal grounds of arresting citizens with national symbols (the white-red-white flag and the emblem Pahonia). 5 people were [detained in Barysau Arena](#) on 12 October and a man who had a white-red-white flag in his car was stopped by driving inspectors the day before.

[Beltelecom proposes the independent websites an additional protection from DDoS-attack on the Election Day.](#) Namely, the

state-run telecommunications operator has made the relevant oral proposition to Nasha Niva, Onliner.by and TUT.by. The service is free. Thus Beltelecom wants to be saved on charges of blocking and DDoS-attack.

[Russian air base protesters summoned to court](#). The participants of the unauthorised action [For Peaceful, Neutral Belarus](#) gathered about 400 people in the centre of Minsk on October 4 stand trial in Minsk's Central District Court on 9 October. Leader of the UCP Anatol Liabedzka, ex-presidential candidate Uladzimir Niakliayeu, former political prisoner Mikola Statkevich and several more activists have been summoned to court.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

Belarus Presidential Elections 2015 – Live Updates from Minsk

On 9 – 12 October, Belarus Digest provided live online coverage of the presidential elections in Belarus and international and domestic reactions to it.

Below, we feature a collection of stories from international and Belarusian media, videos, pictures, and comments from experts, which we have posted online during these days.

We thank our readers for your kind attention and valuable feedback we have received from you. Should you have any questions for our experts or further comments on our coverage please send us a message [@BelarusDigest](#).

[Read continuous coverage](#)

[[View the story “Belarus Presidential Elections 2015 – Live” on Storify](#)]

Early Voting: the Secret to a Successful Authoritarian Election?

The official date for Belarus’s presidential election is 11 October. But if past elections are any guide, every third Belarusian will vote during the so-called “early voting” period, between 6 and 10 October.

In fact, 30 percent of Belarusians cast their ballots by the evening of 9 October, according to the Central Election Commission of Belarus.

It is a well-known secret that early ballots facilitate electoral fraud. Unsurprisingly, districts with higher prevalence of early voting in the 2010 presidential election demonstrated not only greater turnout, but also greater support for President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. But we know little about the parts of Belarus where citizens turn out to vote early. Examining the distribution of the early vote in the 2010 presidential election reveals some interesting patterns.

The media frequently cites students, “herded” to the ballot boxes by university administrators, as the main victims of early voting pressures. Yet in the 2010 election remote agricultural districts with larger elderly population and with lower education levels demonstrated the greatest incidence of early voting. Such remote rural locations fall under the radar of international election observers.

Who votes early?

Only a small percentage of Belarusian voters who reside or permanently stay abroad cast absentee ballots in Belarusian elections. Voters inside Belarus cast many more early ballots.



Indeed, any citizen can vote early – no proof of being unable to vote on the official election day is required. This may explain why Belarusian pensioners, who would appear to have fewer time constraints than the working-age population, constitute an important group of early voters.

Students vote early under the pressure of university administrators. This week, Poland-based Belarusian language TV channel Belsat reported that at polling station number 52 in Minsk, located in one of the Belarusian State University dorms, every third student voted on the very first day of early voting. Early voting is also widespread among the police, military, and government officials, urged to vote by their employers.

Getting out the Early Vote

Interpreting the official electoral results based on early voting cannot reveal the true levels of support for the incumbent president or the opposition candidates. Nonetheless, district-level figures on early voting in the 2010 election,

published by the Central Electoral Committee, do tell an interesting story about the regional dynamics of elections.

In the 2010 election, 32 percent of Belarusians voted early. The share of early ballots was largest in provincial areas. In Minsk, a city with over 30 institutions of higher education and a student population of nearly 200 thousand, only 22 percent of votes were cast early, which is below the national average.

At the district level, early ballots represented anywhere between 13 percent in Baranovichy district in southwest Belarus and 50 percent in Krasnapolle in southeast Belarus.



Krasnapolle is a remote agricultural district in eastern Belarus. Its centre, a sleepy town of six thousand, lies 52 kilometres away from the nearest railway station and 120 km away from the nearest regional centre, Mahileu.

According to the official electoral results, 89 percent of Krasnapolle voters supported Lukashenka in 2010. As the elections commenced, local authorities organised numerous festivals and celebrations to encourage participation.

Nine other districts where nearly half of all ballots were cast early in 2010 are Byeshankovichy, Bykhaw, Dubrowna, Kas'tsyukovichy, Ms'tsislaw, Pastavy, Shchuchyn, Shumilina, and Voranava. Like Krasnapolle, these districts lie far away from Minsk and specialise in agriculture.

All districts with high incidence of early voting have higher shares of pensioners. Lukashenka's most devout supporters; the elderly need no pressure to vote early. In the 2010 data, 10 percent increase in the share of the population above working age is associated with 7 percent increase in the share of early ballots from the total number of ballots cast.

The share of the early vote also correlates with the share of

the population with secondary education at the district level. Areas with just ten percent more people with university diplomas have a 5 percent lower share of the early vote.



What explains the negative relationship between education level and early voting? One possibility is that people with lower education have fewer outside employment options and face greater risks for disobeying employer orders. Another possibility is that people with college degrees are less likely to support Lukashenka and therefore do not turn out to vote early, or at all.

Why vote early?

The state goes to great lengths to encourage early voting. In Minsk, Belarusians are reminded that they can perform their civic duty any day even while riding the metro to work.

This year's notable early voters included the head of the Presidential Staff [Marianna Schetkina](#) and the head of the Central Electoral Commission [Lidzia Yarmoshyna](#). Surrounded by a crowd of journalists as she cast her ballot, Yarmoshyna said that while some observers and journalists frown upon early voting, the Belarusian people "come to vote early with pleasure."

At polling station number 48 in Minsk, where Yarmoshyna was casting her ballot on 7 October, first-time voters as well as voters with children received presents, including watches and crystal bowls and ornaments sponsored by Minsk-Arena.

It is no secret that Belarus encourages early voting because it facilitates the manipulation of the electoral outcome. The Belarusian legislation requires nothing more than the presence of at least two members of the precinct election commission for the early ballots to be valid.

As of 5 October, Belarusian Electoral Commission accredited 910 international observers to monitor the 2015 presidential election. Of these, 382 observers represent the Commonwealth of Independent States and 344 observers represent the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Pro-Lukashenka political parties and organisations within Belarus supplied another 28,578 observers.

An observer was sent home on the pretext that her accreditation documents mentioned only the official Election Day 11 October

The international observers have started trickling into the country as the election began, but most will arrive to monitor on the official election day. Few will reach remote rural areas such as Krasnopolle, especially within the early voting period.

Domestic observers who do arrive at the polling stations during the early voting period encounter unexpected obstacles. Volha Katsiankova, an accredited observer from Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian People's Front, visited the polling station located in Minsk's School No. 7 on 8 October. She was sent home on the pretext that her accreditation documents mentioned only the [official Election Day](#), 11 October.

The few observers who manage to penetrate register numerous irregularities. Just a day into early voting this year, observers from the "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" campaign, organised by the Human Right Center "Viasna," along with the RHRPA "Belarusian Helsinki Committee," have pointed out that their turnout estimates differed by 5.5 per cent from those provided by the authorities.

Many more violations will be revealed as the election continues. But whatever the final tally of votes, Lukashenka

seems to have won the remote agricultural districts with elderly uneducated population well before the official election day.

Opinion: Polls and the Belarusian Reality

□ On 11 October, Belarusians go to the polls in the fourth election in Belarus since Aliaksandr Lukashenka was voted president in 1994. The current campaign shares many of the features of its predecessors. As earlier, Western observers have focused on opinion polls, but in Belarus few are reliable. Thus NISEPI's publications take on special significance.

Yet during and after every election, opposition leaders have criticised and raised doubts about its conclusions. A typical example was in an article of 6 October on the Naviny.by web site, where Vitali Rymasheuski, a 2010 presidential candidate, maintained that Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research □ (NISEPI) surveys serve to legitimise Lukashenka.

Are such critiques valid? How should one evaluate the current campaign?

The Rules of the Game

As with his relations with the European Union, Lukashenka has mastered the rules of the game. Just as his [release of remaining political prisoners](#) appears to respond sufficiently to EU demands for withdrawal of sanctions, so every five years

the appearance of the façade of a democratic election rather than the reality, replete with Electoral Commission and requisite candidates (few or multiple) implies that there is the possibility of change.

Siarhei Haidukevich reappears at five-year intervals to lose elections “elegantly”

This time there are [four candidates](#), only one of which, [Tatsiana Karatkevich](#) of the People’s Referendum, opposes the president, albeit in a relatively mild and polite manner compared, say, to the ebullient TV performance of [Uladzimir Kazulin](#) in 2006 or the eloquent denunciations of [Uladzimir Niakliaev](#) in 2010.

The others are closet if not overt supporters of Lukashenka: [Siarhei Haidukevich](#), who reappears at five-year intervals to lose elections “elegantly” and Mikalai Ulakhovich of the Patriotic Party, which is so obscure that its web site rarely functions.

The opposition remains weak and divided, with the key question whether to boycott the elections or take part. As for the election issues, the two major ones are the economy and national security. Since he has failed in the former, the president emphasises the latter, namely that only he can ensure stability and peace. As formerly, he plays no part in election debates on television and has hardly campaigned, the underlying assumption being that he remains preoccupied with pressing affairs of the state.

NISEPI’s September Poll

After the 2010 election, NISEPI researchers concluded that Lukashenka received at least 50% plus one of the overall vote. The statement prompted some critics to comment that in this way it provided legitimacy to the Lukashenka presidency. The

September poll suggests that his rating is 45.7% (those who are “prepared to vote” for him) but given the likely turn out of 72.5%, the actual vote would be 64%. Karatkevich’s support, respectively is 17.9% on paper and 25% at the polls.

NISEPI adds that these figures mask the fact that support for Lukashenka is solid, comprised of committed voters, whereas that for Karatkevich includes voters who may ignore the elections altogether. Thus 64% represents a minimal figure for Lukashenka—in fact the authorities would perceive such a low figure as demeaning.

Yet elsewhere the poll elucidates a population concerned about falling living standards, a collapsing ruble, and a drop in both the GDP and real wages. As Leanid Zlotnikau points out in Belarusian Analytical Workshop 19, rather than the anticipated wage of \$1,000 monthly, the average for Belarusian workers in September was \$420, or almost \$100 less than in 2010. Significantly, Zlotnikau attributes the current decline less to world recession than to a decline in export prices and the fall in competitiveness of Belarusian manufacturing.

Most voters, however, do not acquire their information from such sources; they rely on television and to a lesser extent social media. The overriding feature of any election campaign is the demeaning of opposition candidates on national TV.

The authorities choose to tolerate Karatkevich, however, suggesting the threat is minor

Interestingly, NISEPI posed the question in its September poll: if you knew of someone who could run successfully against Lukashenka in the presidential elections, would you vote for this candidate or Lukashenka? The response was 38.7% for the unknown candidate and 32% for Lukashenka (with 28.1% undecided).

Should one conclude that the current opponent, Karatkevich,

then, is simply unconvincing to voters? In 2010, official media denounced more vocal opponents such as Sannikau and Niakliaiev as “enemies of the people.” Their subsequent arrests and incarceration amid accusations of an armed putsch likely solidified that perception.

In general, the frenzied attacks on those who dare to oppose the “people’s president” render candidates opponents of the regime, even a security risk to the future of the state. The authorities choose to tolerate Karatkevich, however, suggesting the threat is minor.

Explaining the Inexplicable

Elections for most Belarusians are less about democratic process than safety, job security and the future of families

Opinion polls generally are not about consciousness and motives; they employ carefully formulated questions with yes or no answers. In this respect they conceal a myriad of factors that are difficult to express: not least voters’ insecurities, possible fear of repercussions (KGB repressions peaked in 2011 but few have forgotten them), and general passivity.

Elections for most Belarusians are less about democratic process than safety, job security and the future of families. Polls rarely emphasise—nor could they—the highly authoritarian nature of Belarus and its dependence on state-run industries that achieved past growth simply by borrowing or relying on Russian subsidies (Zlotnikau’s conclusion).

Yet Lukashenka, whose victory is assured, fiercely declares his independence from Moscow and poses as a maverick free agent standing up for his people. In this way polls can appear misleading. NISEPI seeks to elucidate what people think, not why they think how they do. Such surveys have value and NISEPI

is an honest broker, but its simply constructed questions should not define our analysis. The regime, based on such criteria, succeeds. Yet by all the indices used to measure progress, it is failing.

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Presidential Elections in Belarus: Why the West Should Not Hold Its Breath

On 1 September the Central Elections Committee of Belarus announced that four presidential candidates had submitted enough signatures to run in elections scheduled for 11 October this year.

Although few question the outcome of this elections and the official victory of the incumbent President Alexander Lukashenka, the elections take place in a very different geopolitical context.

In the 2010 presidential elections, the authorities saw the Belarusian opposition as the main threat and crushed protests, putting several presidential candidates in jail. After the

recent events in Ukraine the authorities seem to view Russia as a more serious threat although they would not publicly admit it.

Elections as a Soviet Ritual

Belarus only had real elections during a brief period of competitive politics in the early 1990s, prior to the election of current President Alexander Lukashenka in 1994. This is why for many Belarusians, particularly older generations, elections are not an opportunity to change their leadership but something of an old ritual.

As in the Soviet times, on election day they would go to a local election polling station – usually located in a secondary school – to vote and enjoy heavily subsidised food, beer and vodka. In the 2014 local elections, one US dollar was enough to buy a shot of vodka and a sandwich with ham.

Another element of the tradition is that in Soviet times it did not matter how people voted because the authorities knew the result in advance.

it is hard to detect signs of an election campaign taking place in Belarus

Although plenty of billboards remind citizens of the election date, beyond this it is hard to detect signs of an election campaign taking place in Belarus. State-owned media dominates the media landscape with the opposition almost unseen on TV. Independent information is available on the Internet, but the vast majority of people receive their news on television where the opposition is not welcome.

This year the authorities seem to be willing to register only one opposition candidate Tatsiana Karatkevich and the interest in elections will be lower than in 2010, when there were

eight. However, the majority of Belarusians still seem willing to vote. According to a poll conducted in June 2015 by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, nearly 35 per cent of respondents said they would definitely participate in the elections and around 37 per cent said they would likely participate.

Independence Instead of Prosperity

In the 2010 presidential elections, Lukashenka's main concern was the opposition. Then the authorities highlighted the economic success of Belarus, explained largely by Russian subsidies. Billboards with the motto "For a prosperous and strong Belarus" were all over the country.



This time, however, the authorities have focused on the independence of Belarus with the billboards changed to "For the Future of Independent Belarus". Indeed, with the sharp decline in value of the Belarusian rouble and falling exports to Russia, independence despite economic hardship seems like a more attractive platform.

To show they are in control, the authorities have mobilised their resources from the early stages of the campaign. According to the Central Elections Committee, the incumbent President collected 1.7 million signatures over a one month period.

Belarus has around 7.4 million eligible voters, which officially means that nearly one quarter of voters supported Lukashenka even before the elections had started. Local authorities, managers of state enterprises, and directors of schools were obliged to collect signatures for Lukashenka to demonstrate their loyalty. This year the number of collected signatures exceeds the tally collected in 2010 by a third.

the authorities are firmly in control of the vote count

The authorities also decided to add [more than one pro-government candidates](#), beyond Lukashenka himself. They include a Cossack general, who is also a minor government official. Although none of the pro-government candidates even bothered to create a campaign website they curiously still managed to collect more than the 100 thousand signatures necessary for their registration. These candidates will use most of their airtime on Belarusian television to criticise the opposition rather than Lukashenka.

The election result will not bring any surprises because the authorities are firmly in control of the vote count. In 2010, Lukashenka got nearly 80% percent according to official figures. Giving a real number now may appear as a sign of weakness which the authorities cannot afford.

In 2010, the share of representatives of the opposition parties constituted only 0.25 per cent of the total number of election committees. Not surprisingly, this year the vast majority of the opposition's nominees to election committees were rejected on technicalities. None of the opposition parties are represented in the Central Elections Committee.

The Russian Elephant in the Room

This year the main preoccupation for the authorities is not the opposition. Although Lukashenka often brags about swift punishment to hypothetical forces threatening Belarusian sovereignty and territorial integrity, in reality Belarus remains highly vulnerable to the repeat of the Crimea scenario.



The economy is tightly linked to Russian markets, where Belarusian goods can compete, often with the help of [subsidies](#)

[via Russia energy resources](#).

More worrisome for the authorities is that to get information about politics most Belarusians watch better funded and more professional Russian TV channels.

Given the aggressive propaganda on Russian television, it is unsurprising that the majority think the Crimean annexation was justified and that many view the events in Ukraine as an American conspiracy. Belarusians know much more about Russian history and Putin's officials than about their own.

Ironically, Lukashenka [supplying military equipment to Ukraine](#), speaking in favour of its territorial integrity and [sending his foreign minister](#) to meetings with Petro Poroshenko and Mikheil Saakashvili in Ukraine looks more pro-Western than the majority of his electorate.

The security services have excelled in monitoring the opposition but may prove completely ineffective against less soft targets

The Belarusian army has been chronically underfunded, with Russia [refusing to supply modern military equipment for Belarus](#), desiring instead its [own bases in the country](#). The security services have excelled in monitoring the opposition and business people, but may prove completely ineffective against less soft targets.

More importantly, it is unclear with whom the loyalty of generals of the Belarusian army and security services lie. Many in the leadership were born and educated in Russia and since Soviet times have been used to taking orders from Moscow.

A Long-Term Strategy for Belarus

Falling energy prices and Russia's economic downturn will

inevitably result in less subsidies for the Belarusian authorities, who will be increasingly looking to the West for money and support. The [release](#) of political prisoners on 22 August is clearly a step in this direction.

However, western politicians should not hold their breath in hoping for a quick leadership change. Instead of just reacting to the actions of the country's authorities, the West needs a pro-active long-term strategy focused on [building links between the European Union and Belarus](#) at all levels, while strengthening Belarusian statehood and civic identity.

It is important to engage not only the country's civil society, but also the Belarusian bureaucracy, which in the absence of real elections remains the most powerful force in the country.

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What Stands behind Another “Liberalisation” in Belarus?

Just as before the 2010 presidential elections the Belarusian authorities show certain signs of liberalisation. They do not use aggressive hostile propaganda on TV and have allowed the opposition to campaign without interference.

In addition, Alexander Lukashenka held a press-conference for three independent journalists, where he hinted on the possible release of the main political prisoner [Mikalai Statkevich](#).

These and other steps reflect an attempt to normalise

relations with the West. Naturally, Lukashenka will preserve his authoritarian system of governance and the practise of holding elections. But he plans to carry them through [quietly](#) without notable repression, after which OSCE observers may prepare a relatively positive report.

The geopolitical context – conflict in Ukraine and Belarus' role in the peace process – can foster the unfreezing of contacts between Minsk and Brussels, both of whom seem ready for it.

Authorities Show Their Mild Face

First and foremost, the liberalisation trend concerns the presidential campaign. Lukashenka himself publicly invited everyone who wishes to monitor the election and ordered his power ministers “not to catch or drag anyone who stands in the wrong place”, which was interpreted as giving the opposition carte blanche to campaign.

Indeed, so far the authorities have allowed the [opposition to campaign](#) freely, travel across the country and even gather small rallies at markets, near plants and factories to collect 100,000 people's signatures required for a candidate's registration.

One opposition leader [Anatol' Liabedz'ka](#) went even further and transformed a couple of his pickets into fully fledged protests for releasing political prisoners and punishing those responsible for political kidnappings in 1999-2000. Formally speaking, this could be considered as violating the Electoral Code because pickets are supposed to serve merely for collecting signatures. However, no sanctions followed.



State TV and print media still praise the president, but, in general, speak more neutrally about the opposition. The most

popular state TV channel ONT airs a weekly political talk-show, inviting independent experts and even moderate opposition politicians.

In the meantime, Alexander Lukashenka for the first time since he came to power held a press-conference only for three journalists from the independent media: informational portal TUT.BY, Euroradio and Radio Free Europe. The event lasted 4.5 hours instead of the 90 minutes it originally planned. Lukashenka guaranteed no invasion of Ukraine from Belarusian territory, supported the promotion of the Belarusian language and promised that journalists will have full access to voting process and ballot counting.

More importantly, Lukashenka admitted he was considering the release of the No1 political prisoner Mikalai Statkevich before the elections. Prior to the press-conference the standard response from Lukashenka was: "Statkevich is a criminal, is he asks for pardon, I will think about it".

Reaching Out to the West Again

For those who have observed Belarusian politics for a while, this liberalisation trend may seem familiar. In 2010, after two years of improving ties between Belarus and the EU, the presidential campaign started in a surprisingly free atmosphere. However, this political honeymoon ended on election night, when 700 people were arrested after a brutal crackdown on a mass opposition rally in Minsk.

Since then Belarus-EU relations went through a deep crisis in 2011 followed by a very [cautious reengagement](#). Parties negotiated a visa facilitation agreement and Belarus joined the pan-European [Bologna process](#). The Ukrainian crisis also made its contribution: Minsk put on a hat of a reliable partner hosting peace talks and distancing itself from Russia.

The EU started curtailing sanctions: the latest revision took

place on 30 July when two dozen Belarusian officials were crossed off the visa ban list. However, the existence of [political prisoners](#) in Belarus stands in the way of normalising relations.

After Russia intervened in Ukraine and fell under Western sanctions going into economic recession, it became a far less reliable donor and safe partner for Belarus. In these circumstances Lukashenka tries to improve [ties with the West](#). He needs it to get some space for [geopolitical maneuvering](#) and maybe even assistance in receiving IMF loans or selling bonds on European stock markets. The unclear statement about Statkevich's future may be seen as a trial balloon, an attempt to ask Europeans what they can give in return.

How Realistic are Lukashenka's Plans?

It is rather obvious that Alexander Lukashenka cannot allow truly fair elections – it will bury the whole political system he depends on. The authorities will not let many opposition activists into electoral committees, or make the counting process more transparent. The state TV channels will not stop praising the president. Also, liberalisation will hardly cover areas Europeans pay less attention such as press freedom, freedom of associations or assembly. And for sure this liberalisation will end the moment its objectives are met or if it starts getting out of control.

However, overall [political apathy](#) in Belarusian society and the [fear of any revolution](#) after the Ukrainian crisis already caused lack of enthusiasm in traditional protests after the elections. The [absence of protests](#) in its turn will mean no need for government suppression.

As a result the OSCE may still call the elections unfair but notice some slight progress like more room for opposition

agitation or no political arrests. It would be a repetition of 2010 (when everybody emphasised the liberal spirit of campaign before election night) but without the cruel disruption of protests and new political prisoners.

After the elections Lukashenka hopes to approach the EU holding a moderately positive OSCE report in one hand and peacekeeper image in the other. If in addition he will release Statkevich and some other political prisoners (all in all, six people by human rights activists' assessments), the road to lifting European sanctions seems open. Elections come right on time – at the end of October the EU Council annually reviews its sanctions against Belarus.

On the other hand, according to diplomatic sources, the EU has prepared an internal document, some sort of a road map, providing certain concrete steps the EU can undertake in relations with Belarus, if major political obstacles are removed. The document includes trade and investment facilitation measures, technical support in various fields.

The 2015 presidential elections have fully predictable results in terms of the winner. However, their implications on the relations between Belarus and the EU can be crucial. Smooth elections without repression and the release of key political prisoners may finally unfreeze the comprehensive relations with the West. Geopolitics played its part, now it's time for Alexander Lukashenka to play his.

What Makes the 2015 Belarus

Presidential Campaign So Different?

Each and every election in Belarus follows a straightforward pattern: limit the rights of the opposition, control the vote-counting process and, later, announce the [predetermined winner](#).

However, the 2015 campaign will differ from previous ones in a number of ways.

The war in Ukraine has altered Belarusians societal outlook: people are leaning more towards Russia and reject outright the idea of political protests. This has notably changed the rhetoric of [the opposition](#) and the government, both of whom now have to operate with miniscule amounts of financing.

The recent nomination of a [young woman](#) as a moderate oppositional candidate indicates that at least part of the opposition has given up its regime change ambitions and is refocusing their efforts on a long-run image making campaign.

Ukraine Alters the Agenda

The Ukrainian crisis has had a deep effect on Belarusians' mindset. The Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), in its June 2015 poll, found that 90% of Belarusians "regularly" or "sometimes" watch Russian state TV. Approximately a 60% majority support Russia's actions in Ukraine and the pro-European minority has shrunken from 40-45% (before 2014) to 25-30% (currently).

the authorities resorted to this pro-independence rhetoric, largely because they fear growing popular sympathy towards Russia

Under these conditions the traditionally pro-European opposition has had to focus less on foreign policy and to adjust its agenda to supporting national independence, as the public now sees any drifting towards the West as a threat to the country's future.

The authorities have also resorted to this pro-independence rhetoric, largely because they fear growing popular sympathy towards Russia. It is no accident that pro-Lukashenka pickets during this presidential campaign use the slogan: "For the Future of Independent Belarus". On the other hand, the government exploits the notion that the chaos they see in Ukraine could arrive at their doorstep if they support change over 'stability'.

First Reelection without Economic Safety Net

The recession in Russia has had a dual effect on Belarus: its exports to Russian market have seen a significant decline, while Moscow is unwilling to subsidise its ally's economy as it traditionally has. In 2015 Minsk received only \$870m in Russian loans, which hardly enough to keep it afloat given the current [state of Belarusian economy](#).

Lukashenka has always managed to raise voter incomes leading up to any elections, something which may even be considered a time-honoured tradition in Belarus at this point. Leading up to the previous presidential elections, average salaries climbed to \$100 by 2001, \$250 – in 2006 and \$500 – in 2010, all of which are respectable figures regionally.

As the Belarusian ruble has devaluated fivefold, unemployment has grown and wages growth got frozen (the average salary in June 2015 was only \$450) and the economy itself has unsurprisingly [fallen into a recession](#).

Although this crisis has failed to increase the readiness of people to take to the streets in protest (see below), it has contributed to shifting the agenda of all parties with regards to the elections. Three key potential opposition candidates – [Anatol' Liabedz'ka](#), [Tatsiana Karatkevich](#) and [Siarhei Kalyakin](#) – have built campaigns mainly around socio-economic problems. The authorities, on the other hand, are playing the "stability and peace" card, accusing foreign powers of creating these "temporary economic problems".

Forget About A Maidan

11 October 2015 may become the first election day without a traditional Ploshcha (the Belarusian equivalent of a Maidan protest) where thousands of people gather in Minsk's city squares and demand either a full ballot recount or Lukashenka's resignation.

Belarusian society's readiness to protest is not growing, but decreases as the economy slides

As IISEPS' June poll has indicated, less than 10% of Belarusians consider protests "realistic and desirable". In March 2015 only 15.4% said they [would consider protesting](#) about the declining economic situation in the country, whereas 73% flat out reject engaging in protests. In March 2014 these figures were 23% and 68%, respectively, which means Belarusian society's [readiness to protest](#) is not growing, but decreases as the economy slides. The [Ukrainian syndrome](#) in the public's mind appears to be more powerful than any economic discontent that may be lingering about.

With the current situation being what it is, even the opposition candidates have rejected a return to the Ploshcha strategy. Two of them, Kaliakin and Karatkevich, put their opposition rather bluntly: they will not call people to the streets whatsoever. Liabedz'ka was more evasive in stating

that he will not call for demonstrations but people have the right to them and he will not oppose protests if they should occur.

The Opposition's Empty Piggy Bank

Not only has the incumbent had to run this campaign with a shortage of financing, but the opposition has been hurting for money as well. The amendments introduced into the Electoral Code in 2013 deprived candidates of receiving the budgetary minimum (\$28,000 in 2010) that they had previously received for campaigning. This money was substituted with an "electoral fund" (with a \$100,000 ceiling) for which a candidate is permitted to open an account at a state-owned bank. Every Belarusian citizen or entity can donate to these candidates as they please.

anonymous donations for political campaigns are forbidden in Belarus

The system itself looks quite liberal and even capitalistic in a way, but given Belarus' reality, it has one profound defect – anonymous donations are forbidden. In other words, the government can track every citizen or company who decides to support the opposition financially. In addition to political apathy and a general malaise with any election, this new mechanism of governmental screening will hardly motivate many individuals, especially the wealthy, to donate to the opposition.

It has always been an open secret that the opposition in Belarus heavily relies on foreign funding, but this year even this brook ran dry. Opposition leaders complain in private that this year much of the Western money they are accustomed to seeing has been diverted to Ukraine-related projects. According to unofficial data, some European foundations were ready to support Belarusian opposition this time only if it

managed to unite behind a single candidate – something which never happened.

First Woman Candidate Running for President

Tatsiana Karatkevich, 38, is the first female politician to have a shot at running as a presidential candidate. She has received the support of the largest opposition coalition in Belarus, the People's Referendum (comprised of Belarus People's Front, Social-Democratic Party, the For Freedom movement and Tell the Truth campaign).

Karatkevich has adopted a decidedly mild political approach, using the slogan "For Peaceful Change" (in contrast to what happened in Ukraine), she travels around the country a lot where she spends more time listening to people's problems than proposing them some kind of political programme or manifesto (unlike the leftist Siarhei Kalyakin or liberal-conservative Anatol' Liabedz'ka).

However, Belarusian society remains rather patriarchal, with only 16% believe nominating woman as the head of state to be a good idea (IISEPS, March 2015). More people would prefer a politically mature male candidate with some experience in management to a relatively young woman with a background in psychology and social activism.

Karatkevich's head of staff Andrey Dmitriou openly admits that this campaign is not about winning the election, but about training and re-branding the opposition. In other words, the political forces behind Karatkevich have given up on their long-held regime change ambitions at the moment and view this campaign as a kind of training course and, more broadly, a PR campaign.

All in all, the 2015 campaign will most likely proceed in an

atmosphere of total apathy and passivity. With essentially everyone – be it government, society or the opposition – fearing a potential Ukrainian scenario unfolding, and having to work with little money, they are trying not to stir up any social unrest while achieving either their tactical goals or simply surviving.

Belarusian Opposition: From Politics to Advocacy

In the coming days Taciaa Karatkevich, a political activist who was little-known until recently, is likely to officially become the main opposition coalition's candidate in the 2015 presidential election.

Her nomination coincided with the departure of Uladzimir Niakliajeu, one of the most popular pro-democracy politicians and a former presidential candidate from the ranks of the opposition. Niakliajeu explained his decision to leave as a result of the opposition's inability to decide on a single candidate.

Niakliajeu's departure alongside Karatkevich's lack of political skills and ambitions reflect the transformation of the opposition in Belarus into little more than an advocacy group. Karatkevich's nomination sends a signal to Lukashenka's regime and Belarusian society that the opposition has rejected a revolutionary path forward.

The Most Popular Pro-democratic Politician Leaves the Opposition

On 7 April, the Tell the Truth campaign, by most estimates the main oppositional structure in Belarus, voted for Taciana Karatkevich's nomination and on 8 April its leader Uladzimir Niakliajeu left the organisation and all the opposition altogether. He explained his departure as being a result of the opposition's inability to agree on holding the Congress of Democratic Forces to choose a single candidate to run.

Usually, no one would notice the withdrawal of an opposition politician, but Niakliajeu is another story. He has the highest supporting rating among all opposition politicians (7.6%), according to the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies. Thanks to his poetry, he has gained recognition even among Lukashenka's supporters, if only for his literary talents.

Niakliajeu announced his disappointment with the opposition, which was in talks for over two years in an effort to choose single candidate. That Niakliajeu lost control over his own Tell the Truth campaign is also telling. [Anatol Liabedzka](#), Chairman of the United Civic Party, stated that during a meeting of opposition leaders on 7 April, Niakliajeu's proposal to hold the Congress of Democratic Forces failed – after Niakliajeu's own organisation blocked it.

Taciana Karatkevich: the New Face of the Opposition

Taciana Karatkevich, age 37, rises as a new star of the Belarusian opposition. Her nomination as the candidate from the "People's Referendum", a mainstream opposition coalition that brings together the Tell the Truth campaign, the Movement for Freedom, the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front and

several smaller organisations, will be made in the near future. Many in the opposition believe that their candidate's gender will persuade the Belarusian authorities to perceive her as a lesser threat from opposition.

Like other ex-Soviet republics, Belarus is a rather [sexist country](#), and Lukashenka will have serious problems trying to repress Karatkevich. Should he beat a woman, he himself would be deprived of his masculinity, or so the thinking goes. Moreover, femininity is accorded a different role in society and is less associated with bloody revolutions like Maidan.

In any event, Karatkevich is the first woman candidate in the history of Belarus to ballot for presidential office, not despite her gender, but because of it. Karatkevich has some other advantages as well. She has worked as a psychologist and lecturer at the state institutions for eleven years. She is perceived as a team player.

However, Karatkevich's candidacy also has some marked weaknesses. First, she seems to lack any real leadership experience. Karatkevich is viewed by some as overly dependent on [Andrei Dzmitryjeu](#), the new leader of the Tell the Truth campaign, as she had previously worked under him. Dzmitryjeu pushed hard for her nomination, as many have said in private, precisely because of this relationship.

Secondly, she lacks charisma and has not demonstrated any real presence in front of crowds or cameras. When Belarusian journalist [Sviatlana Kalinkina](#) asked Karatkevich a year ago what she would do if she was offered to become the opposition's main presidential candidate, she said that she hoped not to receive such an offer.

Third, the perceived Karatkevich's dependence on Dzmitryjeu is unlikely to create the necessary grounds for the opposition to unify around her candidacy. Even the Movement for Freedom, a member of the People's Referendum coalition, announced on 2

April that it would not get involved in the election campaign this year, and would instead focus on election observations and civic activities.

From Opposition to Advocacy Group

Changes in the opposition reflect a paradigm shift. If in the past the opposition fought and struggled for power, and despite the fact that some felt it was an act, now Belarus's pro-democratic forces have been transformed into an advocacy group. This can be a reason (or a consequence) of the fact that Belarusians currently have no [appetite for revolution](#). The opposition simply wants to promote its interests and articulate its agenda, without provoking political repression from the authorities.

In this context, charismatic, ambitious and, in many ways, unpredictable leaders like Niakliajeu will more likely hurt the opposition rather than help. Or at least this is what some in the opposition think.

opposition activists see themselves as being closer to civil society than to opposition politics

But there are some who do not share this vision. The former presidential candidate [Mikalaj Statkevich](#), who remains in jail since the last presidential election, is trying to start his presidential campaign directly from his cell (although it is clear that the authorities [will not allow him to register](#).) In fact, Statkevich is about to have another trial in the near future. By all appearances, it looks as if the authorities are trying to force him to ask Lukashenka for a pardon.

The majority of opposition activists who are currently in exile view the upcoming election with contempt and call for a boycott. Their calls, however, do not affect the political dynamic in Belarus. More and more opposition activists see

themselves as being closer to civil society than to opposition politics. The Movement for Freedom, which was Milinkevich's political project, has failed to participate in any presidential campaign, but remains very active in the public domain.

Opposition groups have few people who are willing or able to campaign and fear that the remaining pro-democratic forces would not survive a repeat of [the 2010 post-election crackdown](#). One opposition leader told Belarus Digest that the opposition's offices have never been as empty as they are now. People are simply not joining the opposition anymore.

The same individual said that "the purpose of this presidential campaign is just not to go to prison, to keep the teams together and develop our political skills." It is for this reason that the opposition is hedging its bets on a technical candidate, not an ambitious one who would make a ruckus.

Isolated Academia, Capital Punishment, and Lukashenka Speaks Up – Western Press Digest

The Belarusian head of state continues to raise his profile in the West, most recently in an interview with a major western press outlet. In the interview Lukashenka snubs Putin and says that a repeat of the events in Ukraine are out of the question in Belarus.

Former partners Belaruskali and Uralkali are competing on the global potash market to secure business, and the Belarusian state-owned company appears to be willing to take financial losses to do so. In Minsk, the IMF says that Belarus needs to do much more if it wants financial support from the international financial institution.

Belarus' refusal to once more abolish capital punishment has surfaced again. While Minsk is being compared to the self-proclaimed separatist peoples republics in eastern Ukraine, an exiled Belarusian theatre troupe takes their play about the issue to the stage in the US. All of this and more in this edition of the Western Press Digest.

International Relations and Politics

[Lukashenka On the Rise?](#) – In an interview with Bloomberg Business, Aleksandr Lukashenka discusses the state of the Belarusian economy, what the United States' role in the conflict in Ukraine should be, and the domestic political scene. His recent rise in popularity in the international community has come as a result of his willingness to use Minsk as a forum for negotiation peace in eastern Ukraine. As one of Russia's closest allies, Lukashenka has seen the need to balance the interests of all his neighbours following the growing turmoil in the region.

Concerned with the economy, the Belarusian head of state bemoans the fact that his nation has not yet had enough time to put distance between itself and Russia, but is working on it. Both Lukashenka and some members of the opposition revealingly state that they are concerned that the upcoming presidential elections could be manipulated by Russia to create a conflict similar to that in Ukraine in Belarus. While joking that he was no longer Europe's last dictator, he cautioned that Russia would not take over the country.

[Belarus Unlikely to Join Bologna Area](#) – It is looking

increasingly unlikely that Belarus will be granted admission into the European Higher Education Area, more commonly known as the Bologna zone. Times Higher Education writes that while the ministers have no apparent issue with admitting other life-long rulers, such as Kazakhstan, Belarus is not a candidate due to its lack of progress on meeting the standards of the European higher education zone that has a unified set of standards.

Citing a lack of academic freedom and the dismissal of instructors and students who have opposed the official line, it is unlikely that Belarus' isolated higher education community will see a breakthrough this year, though thawing ties with the EU may give higher education integration some more impetus.

Economy

[Belarus-China Potash Deal Upsets Russia](#) – Bloomberg reports that Belarusian state-owned company Belaruskali, one of the leading potash producers in the world, has inked an important deal with China. With this new deal, Belaruskali will sell potash to China for what many believe to be under market price. The move is significant, as it is the first contract between Belarus and China for potash.

While the exact length of the contract is unknown, former Russian potash partner Uralkali and analysts say that it will lead to a negative reaction from the market. It also fits a trend in which Belaruskali has been selling potash cheap in other countries, likely to secure a market share and muscle out competitors. India is now seeking to get [a better deal](#) as well.

[Seeking IMF Deal, Better Monetary Policy Needed](#) – If Belarus hopes to secure financial support from the IMF, it will need to show that it is serious about reforming its monetary policy according to its chief envoy to Minsk. The Belarusian rouble

is struggling due to the overall economic climate in the region and the Central Bank has sought to shelter Belarusians from the impact by propping it up according to Reuters. In addition to switching over to a flexible currency exchange rate, Minsk needs to introduce a number of other structural reforms as well before the IMF will consider lending it money.

[Currency Union Between Customs Union Members](#) – In a recent meeting between the heads of state of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the time was right to consider creating a single currency for the three original Eurasian Economic Union members. The International Business Times reports that, despite the Russian rouble losing half its value over the past year, Putin feels that it would be better for everyone as it would help them negotiate with external markets and deal with common economic threats. No comment was offered by the heads of state of Kazakhstan or Belarus.

Civil Rights

[Capital Punishment Back in the Spotlight](#) – Euractiv reports that like the separatist peoples republics in eastern Ukraine, Belarus is among the only other European entities that supports capital punishment. If Belarus is serious about thawing relations with the EU, it would need to rid itself of the practise of executing individuals accused of crimes, a stance that is shared by all 47 members of the Council of Europe, including Russia.

[Banned Belarusian Theatre Troupe in NYC](#) – In their latest upcoming theatrical performance, the Belarus Free Theatre will perform 'Trash Cuisine', a play that addresses capital punishment through utilising 'a documentary style and food metaphors'. According to the New York Times' blog, the play was well received in both Edinbough and London, though its New York City performance will be the first time it is performed in English. Many of the troupe's players have lived in exile

in London since leaving Belarus, a status that has made it difficult for them to perform in the United States.

Minsk Clamps Down on Internet Freedom – In an apparent move to cut down on the illicit drug trade in Belarus, the authorities are demanding that all Internet service providers will need to keep records on users' complete browsing history. Global voices reports that the new law, which is set to take effect next year, are viewed by human rights groups and experts as a means to indiscriminately monitor Belarusian Internet users' activity.