

Belarusian Authorities Step Up Pressure On Anarchists

While European and American officials are visiting Minsk and discussing easing sanctions on Belarusian officials, the KGB is preparing for this year's presidential election.

In recent months the police have stepped up pressure on civic activists and anarchists to avoid protests spilling out onto Minsk's pristine streets during the upcoming election campaign.

Over the first two months of 2015 the police imprisoned around 20 activists for short terms between 5-25 days. Following this, on 26 February the trial in Mahileŭ extended anarchist Mikalai Dzyadok's prison sentence for another year. This happened just a few days before his planned release.

Mikalai Dziadok is on a list of six Belarusian political prisoners that the Minsk-based human rights group "Viasna" have made public. Four of the six political prisoners, including Dziadok, have declared themselves to be anarchists. They were sentenced to prison in 2010 and 2011 after several attacks on the Russian embassy in Minsk and a KGB office in the city of Babruisk.

The Case of the Anarchists

The heavy-handed suppression of peaceful social and political activism in the 2000s pushed the next generation of anarchists to become much more radical in their tactics. This shift can be seen in the a handful of symbolic attacks on state institution buildings and a casino over 2009-2010 by local Minsk activists.

According to the web page of Revolutionary Action – an

Belarusian anarchist organisation – these attacks designed to avoid harming anyone, and were rather a part of a strategy to draw society's attention to social issues, such as military conscription, abuse of power by the police and other issues.

The KGB arrested a number of radical youngsters after an attack on the Russian Embassy in Minsk. On 31 August 2010 an unidentified individual threw a Molotov cocktail at the Russian diplomatic mission in the capital. A virtually unknown anarchist group "Friends of Freedom" claimed responsibility for the attack and declared that the attack was an act of solidarity with anarchists detained in Russia.

A fair share of commentators in the media have since expressed their doubts that the Minsk anarchists were really involved in the incident and regarded the attack as a provocation.

In autumn 2010 the police detained and interrogated around 50 activists as part of the so-called "Anarchist Case". Some of the activists fled abroad. Yet, on 28 November 2010, the secret police in Moscow captured and delivered to a KGB prison in Minsk one of the accused activists, Ihar Alinieвич.

The court sentenced Ihar Alinieвич to 8 years in a high-security prison colony, while another individual, Mikalai Dziadok, got 4.5 years and three more anarchists were sent to prison for 1.5 – 4 years. None of them confessed to the embassy attack.

During the investigation anarchists from all over the world demonstrated their solidarity through local protests. One of the most radical protests took place in Babruisk. On the night of 17 October local anarchists attacked a KGB office by setting fire to the entrance of the building. As a result three young activists were sentenced to 7 years in prison a piece.

On the Way to Magadan

These court rulings have completely dismantled the local anarchist movement. Still, their repression has attracted the attention of the Belarusian public. They have even classified these symbolic attacks on buildings as mere misdemeanours, not felonies.

Many people learned about the state's pressure on the activists from the book "[On the Way to Magadan](#)" – that anarchist Ihar Alinieovich wrote in a KGB prison. The book portrays everyday life in a KGB prison situated in the very centre of Minsk. It documents the torture of political activists that were detained following the 2010 president election:

The next morning the torture continued. They pulled me aside on the way back from the bathroom. This time the masked faces gathered together, four or five. They blocked my way and ordered me to bow my head. I refused. After a couple of blows, there was still no reaction. They make me spread out against the wall...

Latest Wave of Repression

Anarchist groups have been largely inactive over the past couple of years, limiting their public activism to graffiti and 5-10 minute long pickets of the police for the continued repression of the left. Over the first two month of 2015, the police imprisoned around 20 activists for span of between 5-25 days on various charges.

On 10 January in Minsk, riot police assaulted a local punk-concert. Several dozens youngsters were detained. Two of them were put in jail for 10 days for resisting arrest.

Officially, the riot police were on a narcotics raid. Later on, however, the police arrested and locked up several activists for a few days that came to the prison in order to pick up their peers who had been arrested at the concert.

Finally, on 26 February a Mahileŭ court extended the year prison term of Mikalai Dziadok by an entire year just several days before his planned release. According to the authorities, Dziadok systematically violated prison rules by wearing sweatpants instead of the official prison robe and for walking around his cell after lights out.

Commentators on social media and anarchist forums link this wave of repression with the upcoming president elections scheduled to take place this year. They assert that the authorities are afraid that the anarchists will organise protests in opposition to the elections. Despite the state's fears, anarchists clearly do not have the numbers or support to mobilise thousands people to take to the streets.

Tatsiana Chyzhova – a research fellow at Institute of Political Science “Political Sphere” based in Minsk and Vilnius claims that “despite the fact that the anarchists recently engaged in protest activities, the movement is in ruins. At best, they bring together around a hundred followers of anarchist subculture [at any given time]”.

By intimidating social activists and radical leftists, the secret police are looking to quell any protest during the election campaign. Moreover, by extending Mikalai Dziadok's prison term, the authorities are showing that they do not care how the EU will react, as they are concerned with more important issues than anarchists trapped in Belarusian prisons.

Belarus Welcomes Top EU

Leaders: A Rare Show

The leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine agreed to hold peace talks in Minsk on Wednesday, 11 February, in an effort to avert a full-scale war in Ukraine.

The last German and French leaders to visit Minsk were Adolph Hitler in 1941 and Georges Pompidou in 1973. In the twenty years of Alexander Lukashenka's reign in Belarus, only two European leaders (Silvio Berlusconi and Dalia Grybauskaitė) set their foot in Minsk.

As the international community eagerly awaits positive results of the peace talks in Minsk, the Belarusian public is also impatient to see whether Lukashenka will be able to charm his European guests in the year of the presidential election in Belarus.

Unexpected News?

During their phone conference on Sunday, 8 February, Angela Merkel, François Hollande, Vladimir Putin and Petro Poroshenko chose Minsk as a venue of their 'Normandy format' meeting.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko was the first to call his Belarusian counterpart in order to confirm Minsk's willingness to host the talks. A few minutes later, Alexander Lukashenka, on a short skiing holiday in Sochi, discussed the subject at a personal meeting with Vladimir Putin:

Do not worry and come. We will organise everything... We will do everything we can here in Belarus to find a way out of the situation [people in Ukraine] have faced.

The meeting in Minsk on 11 February can be canceled at the last moment if the parties' experts fail to agree on a basic framework of the peace deal. Three presidents and a chancellor

will not come to the Belarusian capital to inaugurate another failure. In fact, the 'Normandy Four' already abandoned their much-publicised decision to hold a similar meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan on 15 January.

Why Minsk?

Ironically, less than two weeks ago Alexander Lukashenka spoke strongly against the Normandy format. During his ['open dialogue' with the press](#), he blurted out:

I can't imagine yet any format for negotiations other than Minsk [format]... Most importantly, the proposed [Normandy] format... is to happen at the highest level... They will make general political statements; we heard enough of them.

At that time, Lukashenka was extremely jealous of the negotiating parties' decision to accept President Nazarbayev's invitation and meet in Astana. Evidently, he cannot care less about the format as long as Minsk remains the site and symbol of the peace talks on Ukraine.

Minsk's symbolic significance may have played a role in the decision of the 'Normandy Four'. The agreements based on the [Minsk Protocol](#) led to a real and relatively lasting reduction in violence in Eastern Ukraine. These agreements remain a reference point for further talks between the conflicting parties even if Kyiv, Donetsk and Moscow tend to disagree on their interpretation.

Merkel and Hollande understand that Lukashenka will reap the fruit of their visit to Minsk

The logistical and political convenience of Minsk may have mattered more. Minsk is much closer in flight time to Berlin, Kyiv, Moscow and Paris than Astana. [Lukashenka's neutrality in the Ukrainian crisis](#) and his genuine willingness to help achieve its speedy resolution also comfort Ukraine and Russia.

Merkel and Hollande may be less happy with Minsk's choice as a venue for talks. They understand that the regime in Belarus will reap the fruit of their visit to the country. However, it looks like that the West is willing to pay this price to reach a peace deal in Ukraine.

Is Lukashenka Happy to Have Guests?

The decision to hold the 'Normandy Four' summit in Minsk suits Lukashenka to perfection, both in his international and domestic agenda.

Domestically, it plays well into his hand on the eve of the presidential election. He is no longer a European pariah. World leaders come to Belarus in recognition of his peace-making efforts and the country's stability and security. Europe needs Minsk to settle conflicts on the continent.



Internationally, the visit of Merkel and Hollande extends the window of opportunity opened initially by [the meeting between the Eurasian "troika", Petro Poroshenko and three EU commissioners](#) held in Minsk on 26 August 2014. This time, the Belarusian president gets direct access to the true European decision-makers.

Alexander Lukashenka has always believed in his personal charisma and ability to make a good impression by his seemingly frank and outspoken nature during personal encounters. However, he rarely got an opportunity to test his "charms" on European leaders.

Any Experience with Visitors from Europe?

Indeed, the regime's disregard for human rights, rule of law and electoral standards has long prevented most European leaders from receiving the Belarusian president in their capitals or travelling to see him in Minsk.

Since 1994, only two EU leaders visited Belarus

Alexander Lukashenka, together with many other officials, are under US and [EU travel bans](#) imposed in response to brutal crackdown on the opposition. The only realistic opportunity for him to approach Western leaders has so far been restricted to chance encounters in meeting halls and corridors of the UN, OSCE or other international fora. However, he is a rare guest there as well.

Belarusian diplomats made it their priority to break this self-imposed wall of isolation, so far with very limited success. In twenty years of Lukashenka's reign in Belarus, only two leaders of EU countries made their way to Minsk.

What Brought Berlusconi and Grybauskaitė to Minsk?



On 30 November 2009, Silvio Berlusconi, the then Italian prime minister, came to Minsk on [a six-hour visit](#). The Italian leader and his Belarusian host signed a number of bilateral agreements and discussed trade relations and humanitarian cooperation. Alexander Lukashenka was not slack at publicly interpreting Berlusconi's visit as an "eloquent gesture of support to Belarus in the international arena".

Both Italian and Belarusian opposition groups criticised Silvio Berlusconi for his overtures towards the authoritarian regime. One cannot be sure of the criticism's effect on the eccentric Italian politician. Anyway, his promise to lead in person a group of Italian executives to Minsk remained unfulfilled.



A year later, on 20 October 2010, President of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė made a [one-day working trip to Minsk](#), shortly before the presidential election in Belarus. Her staff explained the visit by the desire to remind her Belarusian counterpart about the importance of free and democratic elections for future relations between Belarus and the EU.

Independent experts believed that two other motives were behind Grybauskaitė's travel to Minsk: promotion of Lithuania's trade and transit interests and an attempt to bring Belarus further away from Russia, as the visit happened in the midst of an information war between Moscow and Minsk.

Outsider in His Own Residence?

For Lukashenka, the meeting of the 'Normandy Four' in Minsk is an excellent opportunity to join in top-level international diplomacy. He can certainly expect having brief bilateral meetings with Merkel and Hollande. Lukashenka may want to use these meetings to strengthen the trend on his "acceptability" in Europe.

However, unlike during the August meeting between the European and Eurasian "troikas", the Belarusian ruler can hardly count on a seat at the negotiation table in his own residence when the 'Normandy Four' will meet. Diplomacy is not where Lukashenka scores. He will have to wait for the meeting's results behind the closed doors, like everybody else.

What to Expect from the 2015 Presidential Elections in Belarus?

The year 2015 will herald a new presidential election in Belarus, certainly by the fall, and perhaps as early as March. It will be the fifth presidential election since the introduction of a national Constitution in 1994, and will mark Alexander Lukashenka's 21st year in power.

Perceived Weaknesses of Lukashenka

Traditionally, elections are times when there are opportunities for the opposition to attract public attention, to use short spans on national TV and radio, and to make appearances at public venues. On paper at least for several reasons opposition leaders appear to have greater opportunities for support than in the past. They can be listed as follows, and not necessarily in order of significance.

First, as the president indicated in his meeting with journalists on 29 January, he is growing old—in fact he seems to have aged much faster physically than his equally seasoned counterparts such as Anatol Liabedzka of the United Civic Party or the still jailed Mikalai Statkevich of the Social Democrats. That fact seems to lead the president to talk about the possibility of retiring from office.

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Second, the country appears somewhat directionless. The president has no plan for the future, no clearly laid out scheme for economic reforms, or vision of where his state lies in the European and Eurasian geostrategic picture. The

question would seem critically important in view of the events taking place in neighbouring Ukraine, which have polarised much of the continent.

Third and related to the above is the increasingly gloomy economic picture brought about in part by the sharp decline of the currency and falling world oil prices. Though the president has not devalued the ruble officially, it has reached unprecedentedly low levels against the dollar and Euro. He has suggested refinancing the country's growing debt. But the usual escape route of foreign loans from Russia, or aid from the International Monetary Fund is no longer available, forcing the president to seek new partners who are unlikely to offer very favourable terms. China at the head.

Fourth, the opposition has had opportunities to learn from past mistakes. In 2001 campaigns to come up with a unified candidate took place too late to have a major impact (2001). In 2006, they were diluted by divisions that resulted in two competing candidates (Aleksandr Kazulin and Aleksandr Milinkevich in 2000). And, if one wishes to go back further, this also happened in 1994. In the 2010 campaign the plethora of candidates stymied any real possibilities of convincing the electorate that valid alternatives existed.

today the rift between President Vladimir Putin and Lukashenka seems even wider

Fifth, in 2010 at least three of the candidates made direct overtures for Russian support for their campaigns, and attained some success until a rapprochement between Lukashenka and President Dmitry Medvedev a little over a week before the vote took place in Belarus ended these hopes. Such moves presupposed that Russia was getting weary of Lukashenka. And today the rift between President Vladimir Putin and Lukashenka seems even wider. Some Russian leaders have expressed open frustration with the apparent lack of support from Minsk for

Russia's response to Ukraine's Euromaidan.

Despite these obstacles, which might daunt a president in a more democratic environment, Lukashenka is actually more popular today than he was in 2010. The ostensible dilemmas for the incumbent president are actually beneficial in terms of his reelection—admittedly, one is not speaking here of an open election on an equal platform. At the same time they weaken his rivals, who have struggled to find viable policies on which to mount a concerted and united campaign.

Lukashenka's Advantages

Let us take the five above "problems" in turn.

First, Lukashenka's age and time in office is translated in official parlance into valuable experience. Who else, he asks, could be entrusted with office at such a critical time in the state's short history? Of course, he might step aside, but only if he is critically ill or suffering from dementia? Besides, he adds, it is even necessary to raise the pensionable age because of the fall in numbers of the working age population. Moreover, to resign at a difficult time would lead, he states, to accusations of cowardice. Therefore Lukashenka must stay and fight on. What else could be expected?

Second, the directionlessness is actually advantageous. What could be more dangerous at the current time than a radical reform platform that would likely entail wage cuts, closure of unprofitable factories, and opening national industries to foreign control? Why must Belarus commit itself to the Eurasian Economic Union or European Union when it can remain on decent terms with both entities, its membership of the former merely token compliance to the wishes of Putin? Hasn't the policy of vacillation and flip-flops worked so far? Who can tell where Lukashenka will move next?

Lukashenka even suggests that Belarusians themselves are to blame for the crisis

Third, the country's economic plight can be blamed on world events and problems. It is simple to argue that they are external to Belarus. Though to some extent this attitude is partially offset by the recent firing of Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikov and other officials, it remains in place. Lukashenka evades responsibility. He even suggests that Belarusians themselves are to blame for the crisis by abandoning their own currency and attempting to purchase dollars, a cowardly action deserving of scorn and condemnation.

Fourth, the opposition is neither united nor rejuvenated, despite repeated attempts to come up with a formula for unity. One reason for this is the thoroughness with which the state repressed opposition leaders—less directly after the 2010 presidential elections, which solicited international attention, than in 2011 and 2012 when it took extreme steps to ensure the eradication of its “enemies,” particularly among the young.

Fifth, there is no Russian route available today for the opposition, a time when a state-fostered national sentiment has come to the fore. Belarusians are unclear whether in the Donbas conflict they support the Ukrainian side or the Russian, but they are much more certain when it comes to the survival of their own country. The 23 years of the Republic of Belarus have come to mean something, however national identity might be defined. And like Ukraine's Leonid Kravchuk in 1991, to some extent, the president has purloined the opposition's insistence on the national integrity of Belarus, albeit alongside nebulous statements about the “sacredness” of the Russian people and their “oneness” with Belarusians.

Another Five Years?

The claim that under Lukashenka, Belarus has attained a form

of national integrity is false, but it has had some impact. At its height it has persuaded even some western observers to identify the nation directly with Lukashenka. It is a tunnel vision that overlooks his failings and ignores other aspects of Belarusian political and cultural life. It also conveys the image that he alone is standing, defiant, against imperialist and predatory Russia while the EU dithers.

The people see what they are meant to see, however narrow and distorted that vision may be. And it is why we have not seen the last of Alexander□ Lukashenka.

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Economy Finally Troubling Belarusians More Than Ukraine

Belarusians are really beginning to worry about their domestic state of economic affairs more than Ukraine as of late.

This is the main result of a December 2014 poll from the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) published in early January.

The number of people favouring a pro-European orientation for the country and supporting Ukraine in its conflict with Russia has increased after almost a year of falling. The same was the case with the approval rating of [Alexander Lukashenka](#): it fell after nine months of growing.

The tough economic situation in Belarus that followed the economic crisis in Russia partially explains these developments. A relative calm in fighting in Ukraine also contributed to this shift in public opinion.

However, the public's dissatisfaction, leading up to the 2015-presidential campaign, will hardly shake the foundations of the political regime. And yet, Alexander Lukashenka's nerves in the wake of the elections and his potential clumsy measures to manually fix the economy may destabilise the situation even further.

Belarusians Turn to West Again

The first set of the December IISEPS poll results, indicating this important shift in Belarusian public opinion, included views on foreign policy and the [Ukrainian crisis](#).

Following the annexation of Crimea, the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine and a new wave of pro-Kremlin propaganda, between 55% to 70% of Belarusians (depending on the question) have supported the official Russian stance on the Ukrainian crisis.

Moreover, in March, July and September 2014 IISEPS polls showed a [serious decline in pro-European sentiments](#) among Belarusians. Society was disappointed by the West's policy towards Ukraine as they saw it from how [Russian media portrayed it](#). Two thirds claimed their attitude to the European Union worsened during 2014.

December was the first month in a year when the popularity of the "pro-Russian replies" such as the justness of Crimea's annexation, support for Russian-backed separatists, a desire to unite with Russia, and a refusal to join the EU if it were proposed all went down by 3-6% on average.

Accordingly, support for Ukrainian territorial integrity, viewing the Crimean events as an illegal annexation, a

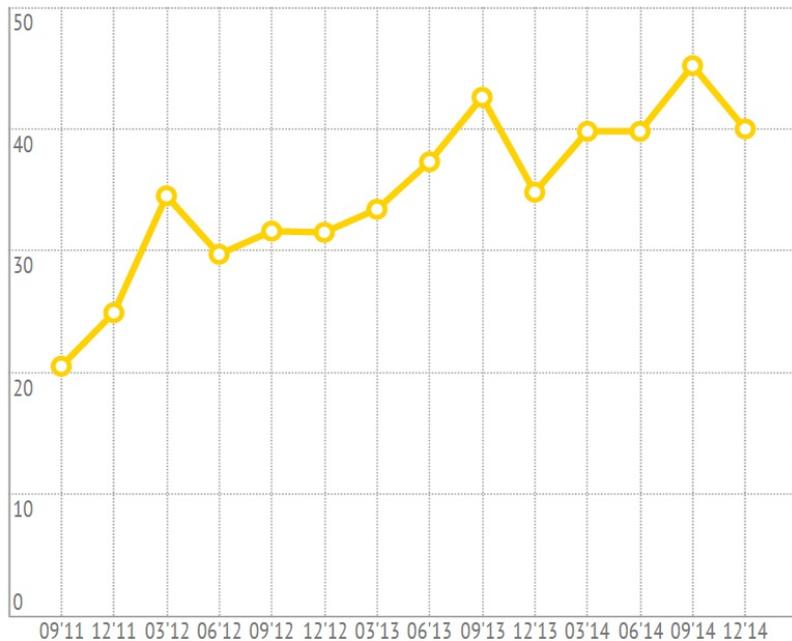
preference for European integration over a union with Russia – went up by the same 3-6% margin. Belarusians holding these views still constitute a minority, but now it is a growing one.

Several factors explain this new trend. First of all, Belarusians have recovered from the psycho-informational shock after a war burst out in their neighbourhood. People have become more rational in analysing the events in Ukraine. The truce in Eastern Ukraine and, hence, the less aggressive TV coverage of the conflict also contributed to this "cooling off" in society.

The economic crisis in Russia, especially when it [started to spread to](#) the Belarusian economy, has also made some Belarusians reconsider their geopolitical views. It is one thing to support Russia's swift and "cordial" takeover of Crimea, and another thing altogether to pay the price for aggression committed by your neighbour.

Refrigerator Beats the TV-set

After Vladimir's Putin soaring approval rate started to go down in Russia from 87% some joked that, at long last, the refrigerator has started to win the battle against the TV-set in Russian minds. In other words, Russians have begun to value their well-being and shrinking incomes more than abstract geopolitical achievements promoted by TV propaganda. The December IISEPS poll revealed the same trend in Belarus in relation to Lukashenka's rating.



On the graph above are Lukashenka's first climbs in popularity from around 20% as the country recovered from the devastating financial crisis of 2011. It rises to 42.7% in September of 2013. Then the GDP and salaries stop growing and his support level starts to decline once more, but then suddenly – a sharp climb upwards back to 45% unfolds, despite the fact that incomes have not increased.

Sociologists from IISEPS explained this anomaly as a result of the Ukrainian factor. Namely, Belarusians compared their own lives with those of Ukrainians and started to value stability and peace more than economic prosperity and, naturally, supported the head of state who has managed to protect them from these and other unpleasantries.

However, seeing as Ukraine has fallen out of many people daily concerns, their concern for their own economic well-being has taken over. In other words, Lukashenka has exhausted his ability to gain popularity from the Ukrainian conflict.

It is important to note that IISEPS carried out its poll in the beginning of December – before panic on the Belarusian currency market and nearly [a 40% devaluation](#) of the Belarusian currency took place. This means that by now, the middle of January 2015, Lukashenka's ratings have almost certainly

dropped even lower.

Generally, the ups and downs of popular support of a leader have been commonplace in Belarus. But today, roughly ten months before the next presidential election is set to take place, a decline in popularity is only beginning. Considering the state of Belarus' and its main donor's (Russia) economy, some experts, including Radio Free Europe analyst [Valer Karbalevich](#), believe political stability in the country is clearly under threat

A country arrives at election year in a state of socio-economic turbulence. Intrigue returns to the presidential election. Welcome instability!

Prospects for Political Turbulence

However, the foreseeable public disappointment in the economy has few chances of leading to a serious political or protest movement.

First of all, to challenge the authoritarian regime one needs a viable political alternative to it. The Belarusian opposition that is showing for the 2015 elections probably in the worst shape it has ever been. According to IISEPS data, the public's trust towards all oppositional parties combined remains stable, but low – 16%. The most popular opposition leaders enjoy only 2-3.5% electoral support.

[The political unification talks](#) among seven of the most viable opposition organisations failed in November 2014. Figures who are considering making a run at the presidency in 2015 ([Anatol Liabedzka](#), [Uładzimir Niakliaeu](#) and others) have found themselves in a very difficult conceptual gridlock. Having no resources to obtain free and fair elections they have to count on street protests as a last resort. But Belarusian society has taken a strong anti-revolution vaccine as a result of the Ukrainian revolution and how it was reflected in both Russian

and Belarusian state-controlled media.

[The economic crisis](#) that Belarus has been undergoing since December 2014 has become an additional obstacle for Lukashenka's opponents, though it might sound illogical at first glance.

With limited possibilities of getting substantial Russian economic support, the Belarusian authorities are expected to bet not on political carrots (raising salaries in an election year) as is their custom, but on sticks – more repression and preventive actions to deter possible protests.

The atmosphere of the [2015 presidential elections](#) will most likely differ from that of 2010, when nine alternative candidates [could freely campaign](#), meet with the voters and debate in a live show on state TV.

In December, Belarus' parliament swiftly adopted amendments to the laws on media that complicate the work of online media. A recent [wave of blocking](#) independent web sites was another sign of this tightening-the-screws trend.

Still, it appears to be too early to bury all intrigue. Psychologically, coming to the elections without traditional big bag of bailout cash, is an issue of much concern for Alexander Lukashenka. Faced these new conditions, he may resort to some radical economic measures to bring everything back under control. This may well have its own unpredictable political ramifications.

Pro-Russian Groups Become More Active in Belarus

On 9 November 2014 in Pastavy – a city in the Vitebsk Region of Belarus – members of the *Holy Rus' Movement* distributed flyers with a call for the unification of the 'Russian World'. Many similar events and military camps now taking place for Belarusian youth near Minsk and Vitebsk and exhibit a rather disturbing trend.

At camps organised by organisations such as *Kazachi Spas* or *The Orthodox Brotherhood*, soldiers and veterans instruct Belarusian youth and teenagers about the tactics employed by sabotage groups and how to handle weapons and survive. The Ukrainian 2014 revolution and subsequent events clearly triggered pro-Russian centres and groups to activate themselves.

Development of Ideological and Religious Centres

Kazachi Spas and *The Orthodox Brotherhood* promote themselves in Belarusian media as anti-globalisation, traditional and orthodox communities. They also pay a great deal of attention to religious and pro-Russian ideological aspects. In order to be able to work effectively, these radical organisations need support from the authorities in Belarus.

Opened in June 2014 *the Centre of Russian Culture and Science* in Brest became the first official regional pro-Russian headquarter in Belarus founded by *Rossotrudnichestvo*. According to the founders of the centre, institutions like theirs launched their projects around the world as a result of a personal order from none other than Vladimir Putin himself.

Trying to maintain Russia's influence in the CIS, Putin increased the budget of *Rossotrudnichestvo* nearly four times

in 2014 – up to \$300m. Rossotrudnichestvo is a federal agency in charge of maintaining Russia's influence abroad. Besides its new headquarters, Rossotrudnichestvo finances Rus Molodaya – an ultra-right movement with branch offices in Belarus. Closely linked to the ultra-nationalist paramilitary group Russian National Unity, Rus Molodaya also aims to establish a “New Russian World”.



Other Russian NGOs have become more visible too. Members of the *Russian Public Movement for the Spiritual Development of the People for the State and Spiritual Revival of Holy Rus' (Holy Rus')* also became active in Belarus in 2014. Registered in Russia, this NGO has basically transformed into a cult of pro-Russian ideology. It works on spiritual development and unity of citizens of all nationalities living in Russia and has several offices in Belarus.

The more recent activity of *Holy Rus'* in Belarus includes several other gatherings including, for example, in Maladzyechna near Minsk or a November 2014 meeting in Vitebsk. According to the *Holy Rus'*'s web site they are also distributing leaflets at holidays in several locales like Homel, Vitebsk and Postavy. According to these leaflets, Belarus and Ukraine should become part of an indivisible Holy Rus' and unite with Russia in the future.

...and Even More Radical Organisations

Some other radical organisations have sprung up in 2014 as well, including the *Military-Patriotic Orthodox Brotherhood*

named after the Holy Prince Boris and Gleb Tolochinsky (the Brotherhood) and paramilitary patriotic Cossack club *Kazachi Spas*. Oleg Plaksitsky, the Leader of the *Brotherhood*, is also an Orthodox priest in Belarusian town Drutsk. Members of the *Brotherhood* like to parade the symbols of the Ukrainian separatists. As Plaksitsky insists, as symbols that denote their anti-fascist principles.

On his web site Plaksitsky justifies young people participating in military training by saying they need to be ready to fight neo-fascism. He also states that Ukraine has become closely linked to fascism, and refers to the Ukrainians' participation in punitive operations on the territory of modern day Belarus during World War II as proof.

Since 2013, Plaksitsky has organised camps in cooperation with military base number 71325 of the Ministry of Defence of Belarus in the village of Zaslonava near Minsk. This year at the patriotic summer camps near Minsk instructors taught youth mountaineering, how to handle an automatic weapon and how to find your way in and survive in a forest. The priest also taught the youth about the values of the Orthodox Church and its role in Russian culture.

Open Passage Provided by the Belarusian Authorities

The much more developed and influential group *Kazachi Spas* has been working in Belarus since February 2010. From the beginning *Kazachi Spas* co-operated with the Belarusian Ministry of Defence, Cossack organisations from all over the former Soviet Union and with the 45th Detached Reconnaissance Regiment located in Russia. Interestingly, the 45th Detached Reconnaissance Regiment took part in the First and the Second Chechen wars, the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Cooperation with the Belarusian authorities is a clear indication about the real level of support for pro-Russian

paramilitary organisations inside the country. From time to time the Belarusian Ministry of Defence lets *Kazachi Spas* visit and train at Belarusian military bases. The 45th Detached Reconnaissance Regiment, the Russian Union of Veterans of the intelligence and security services provide instructors and training materials.

Teaching About Russia and The Orthodox Church

For its younger participants, *Kazachi Spas* organises trips to various camps in several countries of the former USSR. *Kazachi Spas* presents its work to parents as a kind of recreational summer camp. Similar Cossack organisations also thrive in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Moldova. Military training camps for youth were already functioning in Crimea back in 2004. After the annexation of Crimea, the camp has continued its work but now with Russian instructors.

According to the *Spas* web site nearly 150 youth between 8 and 17 years old participated in its camps in 2014. The youth read about Soviet and Russian history and the role of the Orthodox Church in Belarus. Ideological work in the camps includes making presentations on Belarus and Ukraine as historical parts of the 'Russian World'.

According to the web site of *Kazachi Spas* "youth should actively train and know how to handle weapons in order to defend Belarus and prevent a Ukrainian scenario in the future". Without further details about whom the youth should defend Belarus from, such statement are controversial.

In the past only a few organisations like the ultra-nationalist paramilitary group Russian National Unity carried out any kind of openly pro-Russian activity in Belarus. Nowadays organisations also lean heavily on religious and ideological indoctrination. Cossack movements have proven their efficacy in Ukraine. Their members were among the first separatists in Crimea, Lugansk and Donetsk.

A Real Threat to Belarusian Independence?

The 2015 Presidential Elections in Belarus and the Ukrainian Maidan revolution in 2014 launched a new wave activity by pro-Russian organisations. And it seems that the Belarusian authorities are not doing much to prevent these groups from carrying out their work. Perhaps the authorities hope that the paramilitary groups inside the country will prove to be an additional force against the opposition for the Belarusian regime. However, a more important question is whether or not Lukashenka can actually control them.

Lukashenka tries to reduce his dependency on Russia to maintain his post. But he cannot openly confront Russia due to Russia's economic and political support. At the moment, both Belarusian civil society and the authorities are in the same boat and should think about how they might be able to prevent Ukraine-style destabilisation efforts by pro-Russian paramilitary groups in Belarus.

Strengthening Belarusian national and civic identity as well as carrying out information campaigns about the threat of full dependency on Russia can play an important role in preventing a similarly violent scenario from taking place in Belarus.

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The Belarusian Opposition:

Recovering from 2010, Preparing for 2015

Everyone knows that the Belarusian opposition has had little chance of being elected since the late 1990s. Repression against the opposition continues to turn up more frequently in the news than their own actions, particularly given the Western public's palate for news from the "last dictatorship of Europe". So what, then, is the opposition actually doing?

At present, Belarusian civil society is still recovering after the wave of repression it faced following the 2010 presidential elections, all while preparing for the 2015 presidential elections. There are some signs of life, however. The Belarusian intelligentsia recently announced its intention to hold a congress for Independence before the end of the year. The opposition may hold its own convention shortly thereafter.

Across the country, the 'People's Referendum' coalition is holding public hearings and meetings with the members of parliament, and their representatives handed to the Belarusian Parliament 50 thousand signatures they collected. Representatives from 'Talaka', another opposition alliance, are opening centres to involve common people in the political process.

What Is the Opposition Up To?

The 'People's referendum' coalition is an amalgamation of several civil society and political organisations has remain fairly active. The coalition mainly focuses on [speaking to voters](#) about bread-and-butter issues, collects signatures for various initiatives and holds public meetings to discuss pressing issues. In August-September, the political bloc held public meetings on how to improve Belarusian education and

healthcare in eight cities.

On 2 October, the coalition's politicians handed over to Belarusian parliament a petition with 50 thousand signatures in support of their proposed reforms. Moreover, their political leaders now and again secure meetings with members of the House of Representatives.

People's Referendum	For Free and Fair Elections for a Better Life "Talaka"
Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, Tell the Truth campaign, Movement for Freedom, Belarusian Liberal Party of Freedom and Progress, Belarus Social Democratic Party (Hramada)	Belarusian Labour Party, Belarusian Left Party "A Just World", United Civic Party, Belarusian Women's Party "Nadzeya, Belarusian Movement, For Free Elections public association, Young Belarus

The 'Talaka' coalition has a different breed of politics. It emphasises political problems over social issues and regularly opens coordinating centres that seek to involve common people in the political process. Recently the alliance opened three of these centres with the support of several prominent figures, including an appearance by the former head of the National Bank [Stanislaŭ Bahdankievič](#), a book presentations by [Pavel Seviaryniec](#) and [Anatol' Liabiedzka](#). The word 'centre', however, should be taken with a grain of salt as they are being run in the opposition parties' offices that existed prior to their opening.

Other political players are already preparing for the 2015 presidential elections. [Valiery Fralouŭ](#), a retired General and a deputy chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada), will run for the presidency independently. On 28 August, a number of NGOs supported his candidacy to participate in the presidential elections, though on the very same day his own party's congress refused to acknowledge their nomination, perhaps a symptom of the internal politics of the Belarusian opposition's greater malaise.

In terms of [media presence](#), the Belarusian opposition

continues to primarily be active on independent outlets. By far the most popular Belarusian web-site, TUT.by, often writes about pro-democratic forces and many political figures and activists have blogs on Naviny.by, another famous Belarusian web-site. However, journalists privately say that articles from the opposition attract few readers, as they typically just criticise Lukashenka's regime, while not offering any positive proposals of their own.

The Belarusian opposition's low level of activity and visibility has made them less interesting for international partners or the media. Typically, following the elections, pro-democratic forces will see surge in international visitors or making their own trips abroad. The opposition, of course, has had a high profile in the past. [Aliaksandr Milinkievich](#) even received the Sakharov Prize back in 2006. Yet nowadays few Western politicians remain interested in Belarus. Moreover, decision-makers, who understand the region, are concentrating on Ukraine right now.

Congress Timing

In early December, the Belarusian intelligentsia intends to hold a congress for independence. They believe that the accession of Belarus to the Eurasian Economic Union threatens the independence of the country.

Several prominent intellectuals are among the organisers and Elena Anisim, deputy head of the Belarusian Language Society, is the congress' coordinator. According to some rumours floating about, she may even receive the congress' nomination to participate in [the presidential election](#). Anisim has already gave several interviews in which she declared her readiness to run.

The traditional (i.e. political) opposition is preparing to its own congress as well. The Belarusian Popular Front, Belarusian Christian Democrats, the United Civil Party, the

Belarusian United Left Party Fair World, the Movement for Freedom, the Tell the Truth campaign and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) are organising a convention together. At the moment it looks like it will place at the beginning of next year.

Currently, the opposition is in the process of nominating its delegates to the congress – this procedure actually will determine the results of the congress. Currently the parties are discussing several options: nominations from the regional conventions, primaries or via a collection of signatures. Organisers will also guarantee several places for VIPs to be chosen from among leading intellectuals.

Not everyone is in agreement on the congress. Parties from the 'Talaka' coalition remain in the minority, but can still block the process and foil their plans. Privately politicians say that 'People's referendum' can hold a congress on its own if 'Talaka' continue to procrastinate with its nominations.

What are the Chances for Success?

The 'People's referendum' coalition remains the most active segment of the opposition. Although they work directly with people, collecting a mere 50,000 signatures in the span of a year is not all that impressive. After events in Ukraine, Belarusians have shown a distaste for revolution and politicians should pay more attention to public gatherings and meetings with representatives of the regime as it shows that the opposition wants dialogue, not revolution.

The nomination of a single opposition candidate remains problematic. The ideological differences in the Belarusian opposition have little intrinsic value and is rather a war of personalities, not politics. Therefore, the congress may result not in a union, but in the opposition becoming even further divided.

The congress of intellectuals, although a significant event,

remains minor in terms of its potential impact. The organisers have always been close to the opposition, as well as participated in the previous congresses of Belarus's democratic forces.

For a future campaign, honing the skills of party activists remains vital, as local politicians are still not very professional. There is no point in blaming pro-democracy activists though, as it is difficult to become a politician in a country which has no real politics. The real problem is that the opposition is full of old faces. Even various Western-funded seminars attract basically the same crowd.

Therefore, this latest awakening of the Belarusian opposition would appear to be minor and belated, but the good news is that the opposition still exists.

Will there Be a Single Opposition Candidate in 2015 Elections?

Last week [Mikalai Statkievich](#), a former presidential candidate, stated from prison that the Belarusian opposition needs to choose a single candidate for the presidential election from a pool of people with serious politically-motivated convictions. His comments come ahead of Belarus's next presidential election in autumn 2015.

Statkevich has *de facto* suggested boycotting the elections and organising protests before the election day. Other politicians have heard about the prisoner's proposal, but are not giving his words much consideration.

Already seven opposition figures have announced that they may participate in the upcoming election and are now working on the details a Congress that will choose a single candidate.

However, the opposition may return to Statkievich's idea if they fail to work out a way to nominate delegates to the congress. Such a strategy from the opposition will help it exhibit its moral stance, but may further marginalise it.

A Proposal from Prison

On 19 August, Statkevich's web-site published the former presidential candidate's vision for the 2015 election season. The political prisoner insists on the need to select a single candidate to run for office. He says that an opposition leader should have serious political commitments and may even be someone who is currently in prison.

However, because the Belarusian Constitution prohibits candidates with a criminal record from participating in the presidential elections, the authorities will refuse to register a candidate with a prison record. According to Statkevich, if this will be the case, the opposition can simply just begin to protest and boycott the elections.

The former presidential candidate believes that the Belarusian opposition should firstly obtain a moral victory and then inflict political, international and moral damage to Lukashenka's regime.

Other Candidates

Although some publicly supported Statkevich's proposal, few actually share his views on the issue. The majority feel that Statkievich's own nomination should be considered only if the Belarusian opposition is unable to agree on the nomination of another single candidate.

Currently, several opposition leaders have already expressed

their desire to challenge [Lukashenka](#) next year.



[Uladzimir Niakliaeu](#) announced his presidential ambitions back in 2013. Belarusians know the leader of the Tell the Truth campaign as a poet, pro-democracy activists respect him, but many opposition politicians think that he is too pro-

Russian. □



[Anatol Liabiedzka](#), leader of the United Civil Party, remains one of the old-timers of the Belarusian opposition. The congress of his party choose him as a potential presidential candidate on 31 May 2014. He seems to be the best opposition speaker, but he has been in politics □throughout the life – something which may turn out to be his weak spot.



[Valery Fralou](#), a retired General and deputy chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada), has a solid resume, but lacks a team that would promote his candidacy. He announced that we would like to participate in the presidential elections in June 2014.

Several other people have also stated that they do not exclude the possibility of their participation in the presidential

campaign.



[Aliaksandr Milinkevich](#), leader of the Movement for Freedom and a single opposition candidate during the 2006 presidential election, has an impressive biography and ties to the West. He stated 18 August 2014 that if Congress of democratic forces will choose him as a single candidate, he will run. However, he also said that new people participating in the election would be the best path forward for the opposition.□



[Aliaksandr Lahviniec](#)□ is Milinkevich's deputy and perhaps the younger generation Milinkevich is speaking about. Lahviniec has taught for a long time in Europe and the United States, and worked in the European Parliament. On 4 August he said that he may become a candidate, but his nomination should be based on a decision reached together between several political forces.



[Volha □ Karach](#), head of the Our House initiative, has become one of the most outstanding personalities in the Belarusian politics in recent years. She said to the Narodnaja Volia newspaper that she will run "if Belarusians will support her". Karach has tense relations with other members of the opposition, so she is unlikely to unite Belarusian pro-democracy forces.



Elena Anisim, deputy head of the Belarusian Language Society, has announced her presidential ambitions recently. She works for a state TV station and at the Academy of Sciences. She is an outsider in the Belarusian politics – something which may prove to be both her strongest and weakest point.□

Can Statkievich's Idea Work?

Statkievich's strategy is rooted in a desire to change the rules of the game in Belarusian politics. For a long time, the opposition has been unable to win any meaningful elections, elections that were plagued by government orchestrated falsifications and fraud. One of its biggest challenges lies in getting its message out, since they do not have access to large media outlets to spread their message.

Representatives of civil society and the political opposition often say that they live in a ghetto. To get out of the ghetto, the political prisoner offers to appeal to society's moral conscience, but does not direct their efforts towards society's actual needs.

In pursuing Statkievich's proposal, the Belarusian oppositions risks becoming even more marginalised in society. If opposition candidates lose the ability to use state media for campaigning during the elections, pro-democracy forces will fail to reach most of Belarusians.

Counting on large scale protests may also be a recipe for disaster since most Belarusians, like a majority of opposition politicians, remain intimidated, and law enforcement agencies are more than ready to violently suppress any protests. Thus, rather than achieving a moral victory, the opposition may become more even less visible.

The Battle Over Procedures

It is no secret that by running a single candidate, groups have significantly improved chances of running a successful campaign. A single candidate can gain the support of all of the pro-democracy electorate and the West. Through them, all of the institutional and financial resources of the opposition can be used towards their campaign.

When Milinkevich ran as a single candidate in 2006 he became the most popular opposition politician in the country in just six months. In 2010, the opposition fielded eight candidates, and thus demonstrated to Belarusians that pro-democracy forces in the country cannot find common ground even among themselves.

Although the Belarusian opposition has started discussing the 2015 presidential election last year, their progress remains modest at best. So far, the main opposition figures have reached an agreement on the conduct of the Congress, but the mechanism for electing delegates to the Congress remains obscure.

The result of the vote will depend on the mechanism for nominating delegates, so the opposition will certainly spend a few months working out the details before anything is established.

It remains possible that the opposition will fail to resolve the issue at all. Therefore, many in the opposition say that it may be better for pro-democracy forces to devote their time to society, not to congresses. Then again, a union may naturally be formed as no political movement in Belarus is self-sufficient and will be forced to look for allies in order to thrive.

Right now it would be better for the Belarusian opposition to discuss their ideas in public. Privately, all politicians complain about each other missing deadlines, pushing poorly conceived proposals, or saying one thing in media while doing

another in real life. If the talks were held in public, the public would be able to determine for themselves who fails to keep their word.

Otherwise, Belarus' pro-democracy forces should heed Statkievich's suggestion. If the opposition is not ready to be politicians, then maybe the time to be dissidents has come.

Will Lukashenka Shoot Himself in the Foot by Reducing Bureaucracy?

On 11-12 August the Belarusian authorities announced three upcoming legislative initiatives – all intended to complicate the life of state officials.

They include a new anti-corruption law, an abrupt reduction in the number of civil servants and a presidential decree, limiting career prospects for state managers who fail to comply with the government's economic plans.

These three measures appear to be setting a new trend: Aliaksandr Lukashenka, disappointed with his administrative vertical power structure, decided not to punish his subordinates, but instead to shake up the ranks. He also needs popular anti-bureaucracy reforms to raise support before the 2015 presidential campaign season begins.

But it is precisely because of these upcoming elections that the Belarusian ruler will stray from becoming too radical in putting pressure on officials. He needs them to retain his post.

Full-Scale Pressure on State Apparatus

The first reform, announced on 11 August, suggests that there will be job cuts among Belarusian bureaucrats. Lukashenka said he wanted to curtail the unnecessary functions of the officials and thus dismiss half (!) of them and raise salaries for those remaining. Such an ambitious plan looks particularly odd if one recalls that in 2013 a quarter of civil servants [were cut](#) under a reform with an identical goal.

The following day a draft anti-corruption law was published for public debate – an extremely [rare practise](#) in Belarus. In July 2014 Lukashenka himself requested this bill introduction after a number of high-ranking officials came under fire from [corruption charges](#).

Among them – the heads of state holdings "Belnaftahim" and "Bellkaapsaiuz" Ihar Zhilin and Siarhei Sidzko, deputy prosecutor-general Alyaksandr Arkhipau, ex-mayor of Homiel, Belarus' second largest city, Viktor Pilipets and several others.

Lukashenka even convened two unscheduled sessions of the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament, the Council of the Republic, to deprive its members – Hanna Shareika and Vitali Kastagorau – of their immunity, when courts needed to arrest them, allegedly, for charges of corruption.

The draft law introduces certain additional restrictions for civil servants, such as making it illegal to possess shares in a company. Corrupt officials will permanently lose the right to hold public office and the state will deprive them of receiving a higher-tier pension. Additionally, all bureaucrats and their family members will have to declare their incomes and cost of assets.

The very same day Lukashenka announced his third, closely related, novel legislative initiative in his battle with Belarus' bureaucracy. He ordered his administration to draft a

presidential decree to ban any bureaucrat or senior-level manager of state enterprises who had failed to fulfil their pre-established targets, outlined in the government's economic plan, from holding any managerial position both in state-owned and in private companies.

This latter norm seem to contradict the Constitution of Belarus (private firms are supposed to be free to hire whom they please), though this has [rarely prevented](#) Alexander Lukashenka from adopting new, less than legal, regulations whenever the need arised.

All three measures, announced almost simultaneously, mean that the Belarusian ruler has once more decided, as he called it in 1990s, "to shake up the bureaucracy".

Another Doomed Reform?

In fact, all the three of the aforementioned upcoming "reforms" appear to be a response to the their predecessors' failures.

In 1994 Lukashenka came to power by exploiting an image of himself as being a relentless fighter against corruption. As an MP he headed the anti-corruption commission in parliament and he became extremely popular by exposing bribery in the Belarusian government's ranks.

But Lukashenka has never generally succeeded in carrying out a real anti-corruption campaign. In 2013 Transparency International ranked Belarus 123rd in its annual Corruption Perception Index alongside the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Togo. This latest series of high-profile corruption scandals only further supports their findings. Corruption remains a serious issue in Belarus.

2013 Corruption Perception Index

Rank	Country
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38	Poland
43	Lithuania
49	Latvia
123	Belarus
127	Russia
144	Ukraine

As for the sheer number of civil servants employed by the state, the Minsk-based think-tank "Liberal club", in a review of the outcomes of the previous culling of the bureaucracy in 2013, concluded that the [reforms also failed to bring about any real change](#).

Authorities often simply just voided new vacancies instead of firing members of their staff. This phenomenon has led to many local administrations not having the requisite specialists in many areas and an overall decline in the quality of governmental agencies' work.

With regards to the potential ban on hiring delinquent state managers to public or private managerial posts, this seems to be a response to the government's [failed attempt at modernising](#) Belarusian industry, a fact that became all too apparent in 2013.

In fact Lukashenka's strategy of clamping down on officials by itself cannot resolve any of these problems.

Having too many civil servants, who appear to fail to comply with official governmental plans, owes much to the absence of an established market economy in Belarus. Overregulation by scores of poorly qualified bureaucrats cannot even theoretically be more effective than private management.

[To combat corruption](#), the government has also to lessen its role in the economy. Currently state-owned enterprises produce about 70% of Belarus' GDP (according to IMF reports) and the regulatory bodies control the rest of privately owned

business.

This naturally creates numerous incentives for officials to use their vast powers improperly. A thorough anti-corruption policy should include strengthening democratic institutions and public oversight over the government. Such a policy would include bolstering several important pillars of a democratic society: a free media, independent courts, influential political opposition.

None of the above, however, are acceptable components of society to the Belarusian [authoritarian regime](#) because its political future depends on maintaining complete control over the nation's politics and economy.

Pre-Election Image Making

Many Belarusian analysts tend to explain Lukashenka's efforts to shake up his state apparatus not only by its failures, but also in terms of the upcoming presidential elections in 2015.

In previous election years (2001, 2006 and 2010) the Belarusian head of state has managed to guarantee the majority with an appreciable, stable growth in their personal incomes in the months leading up to the elections.

These days, however, the situation [has changed](#). The GDP grew less than 1% in 2013, the same is being forecasted for 2014 by the IMF and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Contrary to Lukashenka's promises (dating back to 2010) to raise the nation's average salary to \$1,000 by 2015, it has just reached \$600 as of August 2014. The National Bank predicts [Inflation](#) remains in the double-digit and will be about 16-17% by the end of the year.

In the absence of economic resources to fuel public support Aliaksandr Lukashenka has deferred to other available ideological levers of gaining the public's backing.

For one, he has focused on the peace and stability existing today in Belarus, as compared to the post-revolution chaos and war seen in Ukraine. Independent polls showed it has worked: Lukashenka's [level of support](#) has grown throughout the Ukrainian conflict. But the instability in Ukraine will someday subside and, at the same time, Belarusians are slowly becoming accustomed to the conflict south of their borders.

Now, then, is the time for a whole new energising campaign. A serious fight against corruption and the bureaucracy in general has always been, and will always be, popular among voters. Thus, a ruler can redirect people's dissatisfaction with the nation's economic failures that have been aimed at him personally to his subordinates and regain public support through this misdirection.

However, Lukashenka depends on a loyal bureaucracy to retain his position. It is ironic, but the very event that caused this latest anti-bureaucracy push – the 2015 presidential elections – is the best guarantee that any reform in this direction will be neither intense nor radical.

New Polls: Belarusians Support Lukashenka and Do Not Want an Euromaidan

At the end of April, the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies published the results of two polls.

The polls demonstrate that the crisis in Ukraine became an informational tidal wave that has been sweeping over Belarus,

with 90% of Belarusians following the events. Belarusian society has become strongly politicised for the first time in many years.

However, most Belarusians consider the ousting of Yanukovich a coup and do not want to host a similar revolution in Belarus. Moreover, Belarusians prove reluctant to participate in mass protests and enjoy the current stability provided to them under the Lukashenka regime, which the growth of his approval rating proves.

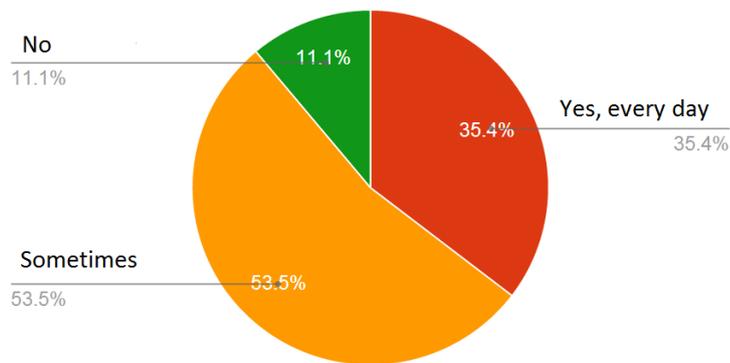
For Lukashenka, the crisis has been a challenge and a gift at the same time. Relations with Russia have deteriorated and Belarus may yet lose its valued Ukrainian markets. Yet Lukashenka still now has the chance to become a true national leader and consolidate the nation as the protector of sovereignty of Belarus.

Mass opinion on Euromaidan

Broader Belarusian public opinion on the events in Ukraine remains largely unstudied, since very few polls are held in Belarus. Those made by the government usually remain confidential. Perhaps the only publication on their public opinion recently appeared in a study done by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, the oldest independent polling institute of Belarus currently registered in Vilnius.

The IISEPS conducted the poll in March, therefore it did not include the events surrounding Crimea or the current conflict in Eastern Ukraine. However, it provides a good picture of attitudes of Belarusians towards mass protests and coups, as well as shows the level of their attention to Ukraine events.

Did you follow political conflict in Ukraine, which ended in the ousting of president Yanukovich?

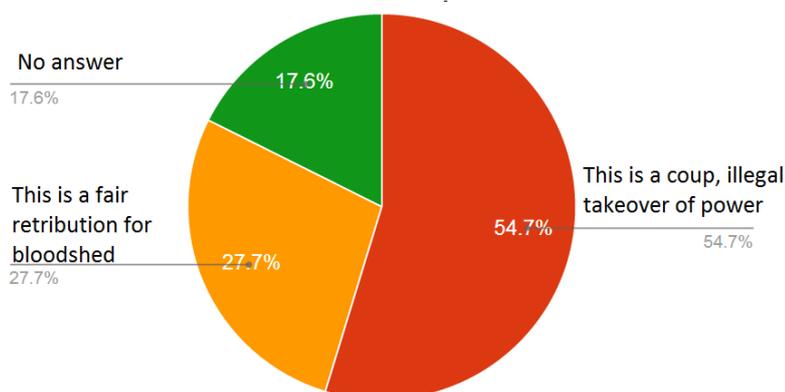


The poll shows that the crisis in Ukraine has been hugely influential in Belarusian media space. Almost 90% of Belarusians followed the crisis' developments. Moreover, a third of Belarusians reported that they followed the Ukrainian crisis every day. In Belarus, where real political struggle has not existed for quite some time, and most people are interested only in routine and private issues, these figures look like a populace awakening after a long political winter.

People were discussing Ukraine in the streets and in public places, which is the first such instance perhaps since the beginning of the 2000s. Every media outlet had Ukraine headlining, and these stories garnered a virtually unfathomable number of comments. Heated discussions were unfolding, dividing people into pro and against Maidan camps.

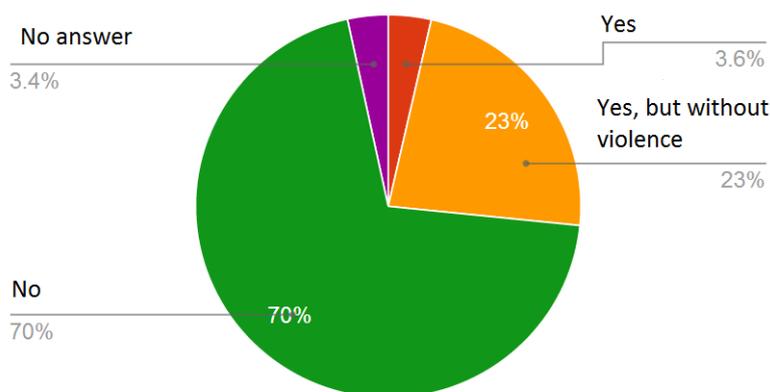
Many Belarusians were able to articulate for themselves their values on the matters of freedom, material wellbeing, national identity and violence. The events in Ukraine have had a significant on the minds of Belarusians, making them consider their own position and future choices.

President Yanukovich was ousted in Ukraine. What do you think of these developments?



A question on their personal perception of Euromaidan showed that a majority of Belarusians (55%) consider the ousting of Yanukovich a coup and not a democratic revolution or fair retribution. However, almost a third seems to support Euromaidan.

Would you like events similar to Ukrainian happen in Belarus?

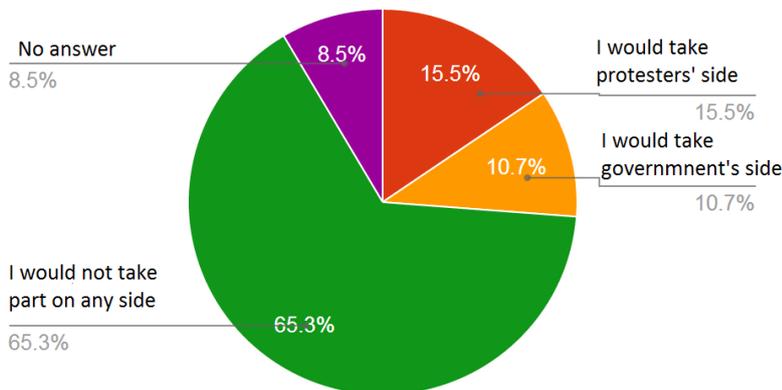


In this question Belarusians demonstrated their famous love for stability. They would rather not have a similar revolution even provided that it is peaceful. 23% of respondents would accept a non-violent revolution in Belarus, while only 3.6% are ready to shed blood in the fight against Lukashenka regime. This means Belarus will hardly ever experience a revolution, at least until people have a minimum level of wellbeing and sense of security.

Although economically Belarusians feel that they are only slightly better off than Ukrainians in terms of corruption and security. For them, Belarus looks to be in a considerably

position overall and people appreciate it. Ukraine has indeed become a fine example of poor government, associated, in public opinion, with scuffles in parliament, oligarchs and omnipresent corruption.

If events similar to Ukraine happen in Belarus, would you take part in them?



This diagram supports the previous one, and still sheds light on some interesting details. While most Belarusians state they are reluctant to participate in any kind of mass protests, only 11% are ready to defend the current political regime. This means the majority would simply observe the developments without interfering with them.

Perhaps some of them would change their mind and take one side or another, but the general trend seems to be relatively clear. And importantly, 15% are ready to struggle against the regime via a Belarusian Maidan, which is more than the number of its active defenders.

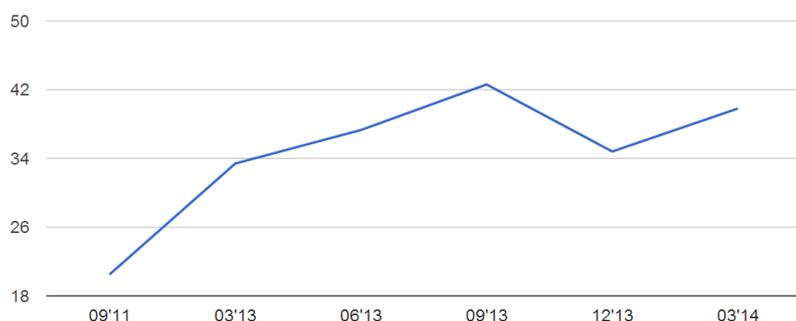
In the end, however, a majority Belarusians would accept any developments of potential conflict and largely prefer not to interfere – a strategy they have typically employed throughout their history.

A Present for Lukashenka before Elections

The same institution, IISEPS, also measured Lukashenka's approval rating in March 2014. Since December 2013 it has

grown from 35% to 40%. Lukashenka surely remains far behind Putin, who currently enjoys an 82% approval rating according to Russian Levada-Centre estimates, and who has capitalised pretty well on the intervention in Ukraine under the “protection of Russian civilisation” mask.

Dynamics of Lukashenka's Approval Rating



But despite a much lower rating compared to Putin, Lukashenka has shown himself to be a true national leader in the Ukrainian conflict. Despite Belarus' heavy economic dependence on Russia and political and military union, he [refused to recognise the annexation of Crimea](#) and Belarus' official position remains in favour of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. He also spoke out against the federalisation of Ukraine, a point that Russia is strongly advocating for in negotiations with the west.

He is also continuously accusing Yanukovich of outrageous levels of corruption in Ukraine and named it the root of Ukraine's current malaise. Moreover, Lukashenka quickly recognised the new government of Ukraine, personally met with Turchynov and later discussed with him some developments in Ukraine over the phone – a move Vladimir Putin would hardly approve of.

[In his address to the nation and parliament on 22 April](#), Lukashenka for the first time spoke about protecting the Belarusian language and ordered the KGB to identify pro-Russian "diversionists". He also criticised the position of Russia on the Eurasian Union, the main geopolitical project of

Vladimir Putin.

The moves of Lukashenka appealed not only to his traditional electorate, but also to many of his opponents who agreed with him on at least some of his points. Ahead of the 2015 presidential elections, Lukashenka may appear to be a true national leader and protector of Belarus against Russian aggression. Meanwhile, his opponents remain in the shadows and are largely unknown to the majority of Belarusians.

Although economically [quite damaging for Belarus](#), Lukashenka received an invaluable present before the next elections – the chance of becoming a truly popular leader and consolidate the nation. At this point it looks like Lukashenka can already be called the next president of Belarus, and maybe this time around he will not even need to use fraud to do it.

Belarusian Domestic Politics in 2013: Cautious Authorities and Divided Opposition

Belarus did not have a major political campaign – an election or referendum – in 2013. Therefore, the political actors focused on preparations for the upcoming elections in 2014 and 2015. The authorities introduced a number of amendments to the Election Code and the opposition dealt with the issues of electing a single candidate and developing a winning strategy.

Also, Belarusian domestic politics last year became remarkable for the political implications of the state modernization program, cautious attempts to reform the public administration system and societal struggle against unpopular government

initiatives.

The Politics of Modernization

In 2013, Belarus lived under the slogan of [modernization](#). The word came to every house and almost every state-run enterprise through prolific media propaganda and immense government funding. During his annual address to the nation, President Lukashenka [explained](#) what stood behind the modernization rhetoric: after Russia's WTO accession Belarusian producers faced harsher competition on the domestic and international markets. Modernization should, therefore, improve their competitiveness.

Lukashenka also [spelt out](#) the political modus operandi of the proclaimed modernization: he would personally preside over the process and hold all controlling strings in his hands. He even hinted that the modernization would target the overblown social state by gradually departing from state paternalism.

Further developments of the year demonstrated that much of the modernization effort turned into real [institutional waste](#), which, among other things, raised questions about the political prospects of the campaign. Especially, in the face of the 2015 presidential election.

Reform That Does Not Reform

Another grand project of the Belarusian authorities took place in the realm of public administration. After long [internal discussions](#), on 12 April 2013 the president signed [Decree No.168](#) that aimed to optimise the state apparatus by cutting a quarter of the bureaucrats.

The official justification went that the reductions would allow the government to raise salaries for the remaining officials, thus, motivating them to work more efficiently. Besides, the authorities aimed to [stop the drain](#) of civil

servants into private sector (in Belarus and Russia) by improving their work conditions.

Importantly, Decree No. 168 was publicised under the name of a public administration reform. However, it failed to go beyond mere reductions and failed to actually reform the existing [system of public administration](#). In particular, it failed to tackle its most [fundamental problems](#): excessive and overlapping functions, non-transparent decision-making and untamable corruption. Also, the decree ignored another [emerging weakness](#) of the Belarusian “power vertical” – slow generation change and growing gerontocracy.

At the end of the year the problems of ineffective public administration and officials drain became so obvious that Alexander Lukashenka even had to resort to quite [extraordinary measures](#) in an attempt to breathe in new life into his governance model.

Strange Government Initiatives and Societal Resistance

The worsening state of the economy in 2013 pushed the authorities to design new tools to top up the budget. At times, they exhibited uncanny creativity.

One idea came from Lukashenka himself. He suggested introducing a new tax – [an exit fee](#). According the idea, those Belarusians who wanted to go abroad and do the shopping there had to pay a \$100 fee when crossing the border, because “you can buy stuff in Belarus”.

Another striking idea originated in the ministries of finance and labour and social protection – [a tax on the unemployed](#). The intention was to collect about \$280 from each Belarusian citizen employed in the shadow economy or working abroad.

The media and civil society quickly demonstrated massive disapproval of the two initiatives. For instance, dissatisfied citizens launched an Internet petition against the exit fee

that received almost 27,000 signatures.

Like the [Stop Gasoline](#) campaign in 2011, these became the brightest examples of civic action in the Belarusian authoritarian realities in 2013. As a result, the government had to [back away](#) from their plans. Lukashenka even publicly repudiated the idea of an exit fee and mocked the government's activities to put it into practice.

Yet, another unpopular innovation – an automobile tax that makes all car-owners pay \$15-100 a year – was passed by the parliament at the end of December 2013. A series of protests followed but failed to grow into something big. With all probability, President Lukashenka will sign it into a law already in 2014.

Eternally Internally Divided Opposition

The Belarusian opposition spent another year in intensive discussions about ways to unite and to find more popular support. The year of 2013 saw the formation of two [opposition coalitions](#) – the People's Referendum and the For Free and Fair Elections for a Better Life "Talaka".

Unlike in previous years, the two opposition blocks united on the grounds of different strategies on how to change the incumbent regime rather than on ideological affinity. While the People's Referendum declared that it would focus on the bread and butter issues to raise its electoral ratings, "Talaka" decided that the only way to transforming the political system was through free and fair elections.

In 2013, the opposition again devoted much of their time to debating ways to unite and elect a single presidential candidate for the 2015 elections. The differences of approaches also went along the dividing lines of the two alliances. The People's Referendum prefers to hold a congress to elect a single candidate and Talaka argues in favour of primaries.

Remarkably, even on this background opposition leaders in general remained more engaged [in the international arena](#) rather than at home. And their political communication with the domestic electorate [looked unsatisfactory](#).

Authorities Prepare for Future Elections

And the authorities used the last year, which had no electoral campaign, to prepare for future battles – in particular, the 2014 local elections and the 2015 presidential race. Based on the lessons of the 2012 parliamentary elections, they introduced [new amendments](#) to the Election Code.

The amendments prohibit campaigning for a boycott, establish a new level of election committees and change the way candidates can fund their campaigns. Another novelty specifically affects parliamentary elections: they will now run according to the first-past-the-post model when a simple majority wins the election.

The opposition and independent observers quickly concluded that the amendments would make it even easier for the authorities to [falsify](#) the upcoming elections.

Will Christian Values Unite the Belarusian Opposition?

In recent months, two political prisoners, Zmicier Daškievič and Paval Seviaryniec, completed their incarceration and compulsory labour terms. Both promote Christian politics and are going to keep on struggling with the regime in the upcoming 2014 and 2015 elections.

Belarus remains the least religious country of the former Soviet Union, with only 33% of its population reporting religion as important for them. Moreover, as Belarus remains a sovietized society in many aspects, the law on religious freedom remains quite restrictive.

In such conditions, building a political campaign on purely idealist values may be a challenging task. However, coupled with good social and economic program and smart usage of modern technology, such a campaign can prove successful.

Paval Seviaryniec: Time for a Moral Revolution

Paval Seviaryniec is perhaps the most prominent activist of the younger generation of the Belarusian national movement. Born in 1976, he joined the Belarusian Popular Front in 1995 and in 1997 co-chaired the newly created oppositional youth organisation Malady Front. In 1997-2004 he served as one of the main organisers of mass street protests against Lukashenka's politics, and took part in numerous political and cultural projects. He was detained around 40 times.

In 2005, the authorities accused him for organising protests against the results of the 2004 referendum which allowed Lukashenka to serve more than two terms in office. Paval received three years of compulsory labour, which means living in a settlement in a remote areas of Belarus and working with restricted travel rights. In 2010 he was arrested after a mass protest against the presidential elections results and sentenced to another three-year term of compulsory labour.

In an interview after his release, Seviarynets proclaimed the total defeat of the opposition and its marginal role in current politics. He thinks that today's leaders should prepare a moral revolution. Lukashenka will be gone sooner or later, and the opposition's leaders should prevent the persistence of norms which exist under Lukashenka regime – theft, lie, fear and threats. The opposition, in Paval's view,

also does not fully stick to a moral way of life.

“We need thousands of people who set moral principles above all else. We should respond to hatred with love, to fear with belief, to lies with truth”, Paval said. He regards the church as the most important and crucial center for a moral revolution today, as it has the largest moral potential. The lawyers, economists and engineers who visit churches today can replace the hundred thousand Lukashenka bureaucrats.

Žmicier Daškievič: God, Family, Fatherland

Žmicier Daškievič became another leader of the nation's youth in the 2010s. He served as co-chair of Malady Front in 2005 and took over its leadership in 2008. He took an active part in the 2006 presidential elections and supported the candidacy of Aliaksandr Milinkievič. After the elections he was one of the main organisers of the tent camp which was set up to protest against the election results.



In November 2006, the court found him guilty of acting on behalf of an unregistered organisation and sentenced him to a year and a half in prison. In 2010, before the notorious crackdown following presidential elections, security services provoked a fight with him in the street and soon he received two years in prison for “hooliganism”.

Zmicier Daškievič, after his release, stated that he was not going to keep the position of Malady Front leader, although he would continue to support it. Zmicier, who married his girlfriend while in prison, now believes he has a responsibility to his family and therefore puts the values of God, family and fatherland above all else. He has to abandon his former revolutionary passion and fight using the word of God. “The day of regime change will come, because God has

already decided upon it”, Zmicier says.

Religion and State in Belarus

According to a 2009 Gallup poll, Belarus occupies 15th place in the list of least religious countries, with 57% reporting that religion is not important in their lives. Hence, Belarus presents the least religious country of the former Soviet Union. Indeed, the role of the church in modern Belarusian politics has been small in comparison to such religious neighbours of Belarus as Poland.

As Belarus remains a sovietized society in many aspects, the law on religious freedom appears quite restrictive here. All religious communities must obtain state registration, and all public expressions of belief must receive official permission



from the state. After the restrictive 2002 law came into force, Belarusian authorities faced a resistance to some religious communities, especially protestant, who are considered “not a traditional church” and are often met with more restrictions.

The Catholic Church in Belarus, having up to 1.5 million believers according to some estimates, also regularly experiences problems with the state. As representatives of the west and potential “agents of influence”, catholic priests from abroad sometimes do not receive permission to work in Belarus and some of them already working in Belarus are forced out of the country. As evidence of such official policy, recently the Belarusian KGB detained catholic priest Uladzislaŭ Lazar and accused him of assisting a spy suspect.

The problems with restrictions on religious freedom in Belarus have even appeared in European Parliament resolution of 17 December 2009, where it urged Belarusian authorities to safeguard freedom of religion for religious denominations

other than the Orthodox Church.

Will Christian Democracy Unite the Opposition?

With only a third of citizens considering themselves believers and such restrictive politics towards religion, it would be hard for politicians like Paval Seviaryniec to mobilise society and build a new government based on Christian values. However, that very third of the population seems to be an active participant in Belarusian society, especially among Catholics and Protestants. The 2010 presidential elections showed that the candidate from the Christian Democrats Vital Rymašeŭski drew substantial attention from Christian voters.



Christian Democracy as a political subject emerged in Belarus in the late 2000s. In 2009, the founding congress of Belarusian Christian Democracy took place in Minsk. Unsurprisingly, the Ministry of Justice declined the application for the party's registration. Despite this, the party continues with its activities with its unofficial status. Its activists have faced constant pressure in carrying out their work, especially in the regions. However, today the party looks more viable than its colleagues among the “old” opposition, who became “professional oppositionists”.

Currently, the Belarusian opposition has formed two coalitions ahead of the 2014 local elections and 2015 presidential elections. While Źmicier Daškevič expresses skepticism to them and sees no way to challenge the regime at the moment, Paval Seviaryniec appears more optimistic. He suggests that Belarusian Christian Democracy become the link that unites the two coalitions to lead a joint campaign with a single candidate in 2015.

As a pragmatic nation with mostly materialistic interests and views, Belarusians will hardly follow a purely idealist

political platform. However, coupled with a good social and economic program and a smart campaign, it can indeed yield successful results for Lukashenka's opponents.