

Sieviaryniec and Generational Shift in Belarusian Opposition

On 14 April, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies published [a new issue](#) of its Political Mediabarometer. Pavel Sieviaryniec, co-chairman of the Belarusian Christian Democrats, is now the new leader in terms of media presence in Belarus.

Sieviaryniec's success demonstrates emergence of a new generation of Belarusian opposition. Zmicier Dashkevich of the Young Front and Aliaksei Yanukevich of the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front also fared well in the study.

Preparations for local elections attracted little attention in the media, while the number of references to the opposition discussing bread and butter issues decreased from 10% to 8%.

The opposition remains reactionary, not proactive, with their messages to the public. Mainly they spread information related to releasing political prisoners, celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Belarusian Popular Front or their own organisation congresses. Despite this trend, the volume of proactive communication that opposition politicians themselves have initiated has increased.

New Media Leader

BISS's research shows that [Paviel Sieviaryniec](#) has become the most prominent member of the opposition in the Belarusian media. His release and rapid ascent into the political arena has, in large part, contributed to this phenomenon.

[Uladzimir Niakliajeu](#) slipped to second in the rankings, although he remains the most popular opposition politician in

Belarus. According to the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) his rating is holding steady at 7.1%. Niakliajeu, [Alexander Milinkevich](#) and their deputies will primarily decide who will challenge [Lukashenka](#) in the coming presidential elections in 2015.



During the period studied, [Anatol Liabiedzka](#) from the United Civic Party published a book. The 25th anniversary of the Belarusian Popular Front helped [Aliaksei Yanukevich](#), the party's leader, to stick around the top of the rankings. [Zmicier Dashkevich](#), leader of the Young Front, took fourth place largely thanks to his organisation's active congress.

The number of references of females politicians declined from 16% to 9%. Maryna Adamovich, wife of [Mikalai Statkevich](#), remains popular in the media, but this is largely due to the fact that acts a conduit who transmits news about her husband (who remains in prison). The number of references to Anastasia Dashkevich after her husband's release has declined, although she remains a prominent member of the Tell the Truth campaign.



The ratings for political organisations in the media is very similar to the ranking of individual politicians. For the first ranking, the study assessed the media presence of coalitions. According to their research, Narodny Referendum (People's Referendum) had much better results than Talaka.

This happened because of the growth of its offline activity, proactive communication and the variety of politicians that represent the coalition. The focus of each coalition differs. Narodny referendum focuses on bread and butter issues and Talaka on the demand to hold free elections.

The Opposition's Issues

Over the period of this study, researchers noticed a rapid growth in the number of Belarusian opposition references in the media – from 3,217 in July-September 2013 to 5,998 during October-December. While these references do not indicate that the opposition is gaining ground politically, it does appear to indicate that the opposition is intensifying its efforts.

However, this activity rarely deals with the lives of ordinary people. The 11% growth in the sheer number of mentions of ordinary opposition organisations members is evidence that there is an awakening occurring amongst democratic forces.

BISS analysts have defined the four catalysts of political communication during this period as: the release of Sieviaryniec, the 25th anniversary of the Belarusian Popular Front, the anniversary of the 2010 presidential elections and the events in Ukraine.

59% of the references found were from online resources, with 31% of those references having retained party information within their content. The significance of Facebook has also grown, according to the study, although the study did not cover vk.com – a Russian-language social network and perhaps the most popular social network and overall web site in Belarus.

Preparations for local elections was all but invisible in the media. Objectively, the opposition did little in the way of making this issue front page news. Public issues like prison releases, deaths or religious holidays were the most popular topics of the opposition.



The topic of repression will likely remain at the top of these rankings as long as they exist. International relations' relevance spiked upwards due to the [events in Ukraine](#). The economy has slid to eighth place, though this might be in part due to the fact that the opposition raises these issues

primarily as coalitions.

Despite the stereotypes, the opposition's media presence in almost half of the cases analysed were associated with more practical work. The study's authors wrote that public events, policy implementation or meetings with foreign politicians were the opposition's principal activity.

BISS also divides up the types of references into different categories. One third of the references discovered were related to a more general pool of information, while in 31.7% of the references discovered, Belarusian politicians were mentioned as participants in an event – this is in reference primarily to [Yury Hubarevich](#) and Aliaksei Yanukievich, who visited Maidan in Kyiv.

Opposition Awakening Before the Presidential Elections?

Reports such as these would seem to suggest that the opposition has awakened after a period of slumber. While their actions do not usually go beyond the "opposition ghetto", as people say in Belarus, the growth in the number of references and the appearance of a new popular leader in the media appear to indicate a period of intense political activity.

Seviarynec will continue to occupy to the upper end in the rankings. He will likely try to play the role of an opposition coalition builder as well as a coordinator of the process for selecting candidates for the presidential elections. Seviarynec himself cannot stand as a candidate due to his recent imprisonment and his party has no viable alternative.

His colleague from the Belarusian Christian Democrats, [Vital Rymasheuski](#), lacks credibility in the eyes of other opposition politicians which means that Seviarynec's party does not have a contender in the upcoming elections.

A growing number of young politicians are coming into their own. Unlike their older colleagues, individuals like Sieviaryniec, Dashkievich, Hubarevich, [Dzmitryjeu](#), [Lahviniec](#), Yanukevich rose to prominence 10 or even 15 years ago, after Lukashenka came to power. A generational overturn is gradually unfolding in Belarus.

Mediabarometer: Belarusian Opposition Needs to Do its Homework

At the end of October the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) published a [new issue](#) of its Political Mediabarometer. It shows that many in the Belarus opposition seem to focus more on international activities and less on work inside the country.

The Political Mediabarometer reflects public communications of Belarusian political parties and movements and their presence in Belarusian media and covers April-June 2013. According to the BISS' findings, the public campaign Tell the Truth, United Civic Party and the Party of the Belarusian People's Front appeared the most frequently in Belarusian media.

This media presence, however, does not lead to any serious level of public support even for the biggest parties or the most well-known politicians. The Belarusian opposition needs to fight for any publicity just to be recognised by the common people. Some of the new political forces – for example, the campaign Tell the Truth – manage to do it better.

Who is the Opposition?

Many opposition activists may become upset after reading the new BISS study done by Aliaksei Pikulik and Alena Artsiomenka. The number of politicians' mentions according to the BISS – dropped from 3,900 in January-March to 3,084 in April-June. This means that as a whole, the opponents of the current government became less visible in the public sphere.

Essentially, oppositional political forces often have to focus on, in the least, publicity before looking for new supporters. Moreover, according to Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS)□, the level of trust in oppositional parties among Belarusians in March stood at 13.1%, while the level of distrust reached 60.1%.

The media paid more attention to those politicians who demonstrated more offline activities and communicated proactively, not only reacting to what others have done or said but taking the initiative themselves.



Anatol Liabedzka of the United Civic Party still leads the ranking of media presence, while the tendency towards a growing media presence for both Yanukevich and Milinkevich continues (at the end of 2012 the former was in 12th place and the latter 7th place).

In 2012, Liabedzka and a former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau replaced each other at first place in the BISS ranking. In the first quarter of 2013, Sannikau found himself already at third place. And according to the study in April-June 2013 he fell even lower – to sixth place. In October 2012, he received political asylum in the UK, and as is often the case, physical absence rarely makes a politician more popular at home.



Tell the Truth traditionally leads the ranking of political forces which more or less corresponded with the ranking of their leaders. Absolute media presence rankings for the top-5 parties and movements remain higher than those of their individual representatives and it proves that they are more than “one-man-parties”.

Party Equals Leader?

They, however, remain very much concentrated on Minsk. The proportion of regional activists, according to the BISS study, had declined. The share of provincial party leaders and members anyway never reached a tangible level. Only Tell the Truth has a tangible share of alternative representatives who articulated political messages in the period screened by the BISS. In all cases, when the media mentioned the United Civic Party, PBNF, Christian Democrats, and For the Freedom, their reporting was related only to their leader (or leaders).

Only Young Front had a considerable share of coverage linked to their regional leaders, and the Conservative-Christian Party of the Belarusian People's Front – to a regional party member.

This means that politics involved the same circle of well-known faces. Unfortunately, the old politicians of the Belarusian opposition have limited popularity among the broader public. According to the IISEPS opinion survey conducted in March, support for Niakliaeu reached 5.1% and Milinkevich and Sannikau got only 2.8% each.

Along with regional activists, the share of women also declined. In the first quarter of 2013 four women, namely Iryna Khalip, Maryna Adamovich, Natallia Radzina and Nasta Dashkevich (Palazhanka) made it into the top-12 of the ranking. But later in the year only Maryna Adamovich, the wife of the incarcerated presidential candidate Mikola Statkevich, was still at the top.

The Opposition Prefers International Activities

Politicians and political forces over this period of time actively discussed a more balanced and diverse set of issues. In particular they focused more upon issues of international relations, domestic politics and social matters. Since April 2012, when BISS started this study, Belarusian politicians rather frequently talked about economics. The share of such statements doubled: previously it never exceeded 6-7 per cent, now it reached 15 per cent of all communications. It made the discourse of the opposition more interesting to common people.

The BISS experts named the events related to the communications of Belarusian political forces from April-June, although they did not study them per se. The study suggests that the Belarusian opposition pays more attention to international activities than to domestic problems, which are more important to common people.

Domestic events included [Chernobyl Way](#), a traditional rally dedicated to the anniversary of Chernobyl catastrophe; and formation of political coalition People's Referendum (Narodny Referendum). Inside this coalition, Tell the Truth, For Freedom, the PBNF and BSDP declared that they would work together as strategic partners during the forthcoming local, presidential and parliamentary elections.

The international activities of opposition, on the other hand, were more impressive. In the second quarter of this year, its representatives participated in a conference on Belarus in Brussels held by the European People's Party, urged the EU to ease visa regime, hold a series of meeting in Lithuanian Seimas and addressed the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry about the conditions under which the EU could normalise relations with Belarus.

Tell the Truth Grows Stronger

Yet international advocacy cannot substitute active political

work inside the country. The study suggests that politicians proposed fewer new initiatives between April and June. Only Andrei Dzmitryeu (Tell the Truth) and Dzmitry Vus in this time span put forth any proposals. In general, the share of proactive communication – those when the politicians addressed publicity out of their own initiative – declined, while share of reactive communication responding to somebody else's actions or statements, grew to 85 per cent.

The structure of opposition and its activities are changing very slowly. An obvious maverick, the movement Tell the Truth demonstrate steady and vibrant activity. In less than five years it made it from zero to probably the most promising political force in an otherwise conservative Belarusian opposition. The political agenda of the movement looks rather flexible. So far, it simply takes on every local initiative it can find.

The Belarusian opposition has faced harsh suppression for years, and yet it still exists and is functioning. The new BISS study suggests that to become more visible in the domestic media and more popular among Belarusians, the opposition should spend less time doing international activities and work more inside Belarus, with its potential electorate.

Political Activists in Belarus: a Portrait

Last week, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) released a new ranking of Belarusian political activists based on media coverage in January-March 2013.

The BISS [study](#) suggests an undersupply of political initiative

among Belarusian political figures. According to BISS, the quantity and quality of political communication by Belarusian opposition figures do not necessarily go together – possibly a symptom of the uneven playing field in authoritarian regimes such as Belarus.

This article uses the BISS list as a representative sample of Belarusian political opposition figures to learn about these people's paths into politics. Belarusian political activists are highly educated, are likely to be affiliated with political parties and have suffered arrests and imprisonment. Strikingly, one fifth of the political figures on the BISS list are in exile. Even so, for many political repression has become a right of passage into political visibility.

Measuring Political Communication: Media Barometer BISS

The BISS study examined both qualitative and quantitative characteristics of media communication. The study went beyond being academic and aimed at contributing to the improvement of political communication in Belarus. The quantitative index measured the number of media references and the size of audience covered by the online and print media as well as personal communications. The qualitative index takes into account the content of media references and consists of indices of expertise, initiative, and political action.

The figures on the BISS list are political actors broadly defined; many of them are civil society activists rather than politicians. According to BISS, among the top-12 political figures include distinct groups: a group with a high quantity of communication but average quality; a group with the most balanced quality communication, a group of women politicians with a high quantity of communication but “a complete absence of political initiative”.

Analtoly Liabedzka leads as far as the quantity of political communication goes, with 197 references in the media and the

largest audience. Uladzimir Niakliaeu, at 244 references in the media occupies the second place, and Andrey Sannikau finds himself in the third place. Notably, these politicians feature in the media due to their political activity rather than personal life events or the bad luck of being imprisoned.

The only politicians according to BISS to have voiced new economic initiatives, Andrei Dzmitryeu and Aleksei Yanukevich, have high marks on the qualitative index but much less impressive quantitative results. Aliaksandr Milinkevich, Aliaksei Yanukevich, Andrei Dzimtyieu, and Vital Rymasheusky have the most “balanced” communications, in terms of both quantitative and qualitative media presence.

This indicates the absence of political debate over important issues in Belarusian media. In fact, many political figures resemble citizen bloggers, expressing opinions but not engaging in constructive discussions over solutions of the day-to-day problems facing Belarusian citizens.

Some opposition politicians prefer to pose as victims and freedom fighters rather than address the mundane issues that interest the average Belarusian citizen. Of course, the dependence of Belarusian political activists on foreign donors may explain such behaviour. In the end, this limits the opposition’s appeal in Belarus.

How well do Belarusians know the figures on the BISS list? In June 2013 the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) published a [study](#), which indicated that only about a quarter of respondents came up with names of politicians who represent an alternative to the current president of Belarus.

When offered a list with names of politicians, however, the IISEPS respondents produced rankings slightly different from

the ordering of the BISS study. One reason for this discrepancy could be that the BISS study took place at the time of relatively low political activity, with no elections on the horizon. A few names included in the IISEPS were missing completely from the BISS list, however.

Who Becomes a Political Activist in Belarus?

The provisional character of the BISS rankings notwithstanding, the biographies of the political actors mentioned by BISS allow learning more about the careers of people who become visible in Belarusian politics. Although each actor has his own background, the basic features that many of them share common characteristics.

First of all, six out of thirty on the list live in exile in Western Europe or the United States. Political asylum undoubtedly limits these people's influence in Belarus, so their visibility in Belarusian media may appear surprising.

The average age of a political activist in Belarus is 50, with Stanislau Shushkevich, aged 78, being the oldest and Anastasia Palazhanka, aged 22, – the youngest representative. More than half of the people on the BISS list come from Minsk.

Only two out of thirty people on the list are independent from any political party or movement. Given the underdevelopment of the Belarusian political sphere and the wariness of political parties as such after the decades of Communist dominance, this strikes as a remarkably high number. After all, in June 2013 IISEPS study, only 15.3% of respondents said that they trusted the opposition parties. Even so, the Belarusian parties remain far from being truly programmatic, and the popularity of the people in the BISS list focuses to a large extent on personalities.

Two paths to political opposition stand out from the biographies of people in the BISS list. One was followed by the political figures well-known already in the 1990s. These

people have some political experience, having served in the Supreme Soviet of Belarus, regional representative bodies, or diplomatic service. Some even initially cooperated with the Lukashenka regime. For nearly all of them, the constitutional referendum of 1996 became a turning point, marking the start of their careers in political opposition.

Another group came into politics from other paths of life, with their political experience starting in the Belarusian Popular Front, Charter97, or as citizen journalists. These people first came into the spotlight after their arrests. The very real repercussions of their political activities have made their names familiar to the general public in Belarus as well as to the international organisations and probably strengthened their motivation to stay in politics.

These two possible paths to opposition suggest that while repression may discourage political involvement by some and increase the number of politicians in exile, in the longer run repressive measures only increase visibility of the political opposition and can possibly turn even politically neutral people into the regime opponents. Oppression in Belarus also draws the attention of foreign donors, increasing international visibility.