The potential ‘anschluss’ by Russia: will Belarus resist?

On 5 April 2019, the Russian Ambassador to Belarus Mikhail Babich informed that Alexander Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin agreed to conduct further consultations on the inter-state integration. However, both Belarusian and Russian media continue discussing the possibility of the Belarusian ‘anschluss’ by Russia.

Moscow believes that Belarusians do not want to lose its independence, but if an attempt is made to include Belarus into Russia by force, the Belarusian uniformed services will not offer resistance and there will be no strong opposition from Belarusian society. Indeed, the failure of the Belarusian authorities to conduct a proper ‘Belarusization’ has resulted in the generally passive attitude from the Belarusians toward the potential Russian threat.

Any grounds for the Belarusian ‘anschluss’?

The inclusion of Belarus into Russia, among other things, in order to enable Putin to run for president of Russia in 2024, is a scenario that strikes imagination. In early 2019, Russian media began discussing the subject of Putin remaining President of Russia after 2024. The Russian Constitution stipulates that “one and the same person may not be elected President of the Russian Federation for more than two consecutive terms”.

Putin could have taken the post of Russia’s prime minister in 2024, essentially appointing a president who was loyal to him, a controlled person, and then returning to the presidency in
2030. However, in 2030 he will be 78 years old. According to some Russian experts, Putin can solve the problem of 2024 by merging Belarus with Russia, which would allow him to run for president of the all-new Russian state.

Many in the Russian expert community believe that the Belarusian uniformed services will not resist the ‘anschluss’ attempt. There will be no resistance on the part of Belarusian society. The Belarusians do not want Belarus to be merged with Russia. However, there is a very big difference between not wanting it and fighting for independence, being ready to die for it and kill Russian soldiers.

In fact, Belarus has no army capable of rendering any resistance in the event of Russia’s aggression. The army is an organic part of society. Some of the Western experts note that the Belarusian nation and the Belarusian national self-consciousness have been being formed under Lukashenko. This is a disputable statement.

The authorities do not interfere with the activities of civil initiatives aimed at popularizing the Belarusian language and forming a cultural and historical identity. However, the authorities themselves have been making contradictory steps. A step forward, as a rule, is followed by a step in the opposite direction.

The ugly face of the pro-governmental ‘Belarusization’

Billboards with slogans such as “We are Belarusians!”, “For Belarus!” were placed in towns. In the streets and along roads, one can often see billboards with social advertisement where the Belarusian language is used.

However, in most schools, schoolchildren receive education in
Russian: all subjects, except for the Belarusian language, are taught in Russian. The Belarusian language is often taught as a foreign language: students are taught to understand it but do not to speak it.

In Homiel, the second largest city in Belarus with a population of over 0.5 million, there is one gymnasium in which several classes study in Belarusian. In Hrodna, thirteen students are taught in Belarusian. This training is provided in two secondary schools. In Vitsiebsk, there is no single class with the Belarusian as the language of instruction.

In Mahiliou, a city of over 380,000 people, only one schoolgirl is studying in Belarusian. In the provincial district towns (there are 118 of them), there are only two schools with the Belarusian language of instruction.

In higher education institutions, the Russian language is normally used. After graduating from school, a Belarusian citizen faces only one situation when he needs to fill out a document in the Belarusian language – when filling the passport application. In all other cases, a person can use the language he masters much better than the Belarusian – the

Source: family.by
Russian.

If a person does not have any Belarusian-speaking friends, then he hears the Belarusian language seldom – on television or radio. With age, his understanding of the language is worsening; he quickly forgets the rarely used words. The vast majority do not speak Belarusian. Belarusian society under Lukashenko is a Russian-speaking society in which Belarusian-speaking people are a minority.

**Russian media domination continues**

According to a study conducted by journalists of the web portal nn.by, programs of Russian production represent 80% of the content of the Belarusian state television channel ONT; the share of Belarusian production is 10%, and the Western production (American and European movies) is 10%. Apparently, the other state television channels have similar proportion.

The state censorship does not allow the broadcast of Russian TV shows which are critical towards the Belarusian authorities. However, a significant part of Belarusian society receives information about what is happening outside Belarus from the Russian TV channels’ shows and news bulletins. A significant part of Belarusian society looks at the world through the prism of Russian TV channels, and these people are more and more under the cultural influence of Russia.
Vladimir Soloviev, the host of a popular Russian propaganda TV-show. Source: teleprogramma.pro

In 2015, the Belarusian public was alarmed by the war in Ukraine. The opinion was widespread that destabilization of political situation would cause the appearance of Russian “green people”. Nevertheless, according to the results of a public opinion poll conducted by independent sociologists in October 2014, 67.8% of Belarusians supported the annexation of Crimea by Russia. About 20% spoke against it.

18% of the respondents said that they fully trusted the Russian media, 55.4% trusted them partially. Only 17.3% of respondents said that they did not trust the Russian media.

In conclusion, the importance of building a Belarusian cultural-historical identity cannot be underestimated. So far, the official discourse has not properly answered the question “Who are the Belarusians?”, only the President once remarked that “the Belarusians are the Russians with a quality mark.”

As a consequence, Belarusians have become extremely prone to the influence of Russian propaganda and the narratives of the
‘Russian world’. As Belarus-Russia relations get more complicated, the general weakness of national identity of Belarusians poses serious questions in the sphere of national security for the Belarusian state.

Information security, oiling Belarus-Russia relationship, Lukashenka’s sixth term – Digest of Belarusian analytics

While Belarus hedges carefully between East and West, Minsk and Brussels both claim they are eager to deepen ties. Lukashenka and Putin meet for the fourth time over the course of two months. Arguments about oil and gas prices have become a recurring feature of the Belarus-Russia relationship.

Experts see the major threats in 2019 in Russo-Belarusian security relations that are likely to remain the least prone to conflicts. EAST Research Center proposes implementing security measures to strengthen the information security of Belarus. Minsk’s muddled media clampdown could jeopardize the warming of relations with the West.

Lukashenka plans to run for the sixth term in 2020 and might change the constitution. Belarus’ bold attempt to attract foreign investors in IT sector gets restricted by the country’s autocratic regime. Since 1994, the proportion of Belarusian-language education has been shrinking at all levels.
How Close Can Belarus And EU Really Get? – This week senior EU official, the Commissioner for Budget and Human Resources Gunther Oettinger visited Minsk and met Alexander Lukashenka (as well as civic activists). Minsk and Brussels both claim they are eager to deepen ties, but the pace of rapprochement is slow. TUT.by political editor Artyom Shraibman analyzes what realistically can be achieved in Belarus-EU relations.

Belarus Finds its Foreign Policy Stride – Yauheni Preiherman, Minsk Dialogue, emphasizes that Belarus hedges carefully between East and West, like a hedgehog and a fox all at once. Over the next five years, the country must ensure that it becomes part and parcel of the mental (strategic) maps of both the West and Russia and specifically as a principal stakeholder in Eastern European stability.

Cautious Optimism in Belarus’s Growing Geopolitical Leverage – Grigory Ioffe continues to overview alarmist pronouncements regarding Belarus. In particular, he refers to an interview of NATO former secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen who predicted that unless Belarus launches “reforms leading to democracy and freedom” it would fall victim to war and annexation by Russia.

Belarus-Russia Relations

A Brotherly Takeover: Could Russia Annex Belarus? – Artyom Shraibman, writing for Carnegie Moscow Center, comments an opinion that the Kremlin’s recent demand to integrate with Belarus further would be an opportunity for Putin to remain in office after 2024. But the journalist believes that if Putin wishes to remain president after 2024, annexing Belarus is rife with unpredictable risks. A better option would simply be to amend the Russian Constitution.
Belarus’ Balancing Act – David A. Wemer, Atlantic Council, comments a speech of deputy minister of foreign affairs for Belarus, Oleg Kravchenko at the Atlantic Council on January 30. In brief, Belarus is attempting a delicate diplomatic dance as it attempts to thaw its relationship with the West while preserving its longstanding relationship with Russia.

State Secretary of the Belarusian Security Council Stanislav Zas (on the right) and Deputy State Secretary of the Security Council Vladimir Archakov discuss information security. Source: belta.by

Oiling the Wheels of Belarus-Russia Relations – Arguments about oil and gas prices have become a recurring feature of the Belarusian and Russian relationship. Paul Hansbury, at New Eastern Europe, explains whether this year’s discord is different from earlier bouts, and there is any merit to the speculation of potential changes to the Union State agreement between the two countries.

Alleviating Tensions Between Russia and Belarus: Two Paradigms – Grigory Ioffe analyzes debates on Russian-Belarusian tensions around the so-called oil tax manoeuvre and notes that they fall into two main categories: 1) ones carefully trying to examine the core of the issue and 2)
politici9zed speculators. And in the new year, this latter group has remained vocal.

Security

Review 2018: Security Situation In Belarus Remained Stable – Belarus Security Blog sums up the national security “results” of 2018. In particular, there was no qualitative change in the security situation in Belarus; it should be regarded as stable. The experts see the major threats in 2019 in Russo-Belarusian security relations that are likely to remain the least prone to conflicts.

Seven Specific Measures to Strengthen the Information Security of Belarus – EAST Research Center offers the following measures: increasing the diversity of media sources considering the predominance of Russian content; promoting the Belarusian national identity and culture; the creation of attractive conditions for private investors in the media market; the development of media literacy, etc.

Beyond Lies: A New Stage in the Belarus-Russia Information War – In February, Alexander Lukashenka and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, met for the fourth time over the course of two months. Grigory Ioffe believes that at least in one respect, the new stage of Russian-Belarusian tensions is qualitatively different from previous stages: Lukashenka markedly preoccupied with information security.

Civil Society

Is Lukashenka Preparing to Hand Over Power? – The political editor of TUT.BY Artyom Shraibman breaks down key political developments in and around Belarus to help make sense of them. During his recent Big Talk on March 1, Alexander Lukashenka said that he plans to run for the sixth term in 2020. What
Shhh! Belarus Wants You to Think It’s Turning Over a New Leaf – Amy Mackinnon, Foreign Policy, believes that Minsk’s muddled media clampdown could jeopardize warming of relations with the West. Thus, an ongoing criminal case against the editor in chief of the country’s most widely read news site [Maryna Zolotova, TUT.by] has called into question whether Minsk is committed to reforms that are more than just cosmetic.

Belarusian Language In 1918-2018. Education and the Press – Andrei Rasinski, BISS, releases a comprehensive study on the Belarusian language situation over a hundred years. Since 1994, the proportion of Belarusian-language education has been shrinking at all levels. From 1995 to 2018, the number of Belarusian urban preschoolers decreased from 68.9% to 2.3%, while the number of students studying in Belarusian in universities decreased by 103 times, and now this is 291 students.
Economy

Economic Values of Belarusians In 2018 – Daria Urban, IPM Research Center, releases a full report on the analysis of the economic values of the Belarusians, based on a national survey’s data. The report covers such issues as the attitude of the population to wealth, the level of state paternalism, the level of public expectations from the state, and others. The work was prepared in the framework of the Kastryčnicki Economic Forum (KEF).

Sixteen results of 2018 – Strategy analytical centre and Mises Center sum up the last year’s socio-economic development of Belarus in 16 nominations. In particular, 2018 was a year of intensifying talk about the problems in the economy, rather than taking adequate and professional measures to solve them. The country continued to work in the mode of Marxist-Leninist patterns and nomenclature Robin Hoods – at the expense of taxpayers.

Will Belarus’ IT Strategy Loosen Russia’s Tightening Grip? – Tatsiana Kulakevich, writing for The Globe Post, believes that Belarus’ bold attempt to attract foreign investors and loosening its dependence from Russia by experimenting with its IT sector is restricted by the country’s personalistic autocratic regime, where the state controls most of the economy, the courts, and the media.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.
Belarusization 2.0.: Will the Russian threat help Belarusization?

On 2 March 2019 Alexander Lukashenka held his annual conference with journalists. The so-called “Big Conversation” lasted seven hours. The marathon session both clarified and blurred official positions on issues of security, closer integration with Russia, and Russian propaganda in Belarus.

At the same time, in the context of recent discussions about the potential annexation of Belarus by Russia, Lukashenka’s public statements on the importance of preserving national heritage and language have grown more frequent. For example, Lukashenka asserted: “If you are the nation, you have to have your own language.” In recent months, he made a public speech in Belarusian, called on citizens to remember the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and declared that Belarusian sovereignty will not suffer from blackmail and gas disputes.

A policy of Belarusization may prove decisive in deterring the Russian world and protecting Belarusian sovereignty. However, a superficial Belarusization orchestrated by Lukashenka and directed at external actors could have a negative effect on Belarusian language and culture. Instead of genuine Belarusization and the development of the Belarusian language, such a policy only awakens Russian propaganda and leaves Russian language dominating education, the judiciary and the media.

Limited space for the development of the Belarusian language

The Belarusian population continues to Russify more and more.
According to a 2018 study by the IPM Research Centre, only 2.2% of Belarusians speak Belarusian at home, while 73.7% use Russian; 12.3% speak both and 11.6% use a mixture of the two languages. According to recently published data from the 2009 population census (not previously published), the state of the Belarusian language has declined. The recent data demonstrates that only 57.4% of Belarusians named the titular language as their native language. With further Russification, the numbers speaking Belarusian may significantly decrease when data from the 2019 census is collected.

What language do you speak at home? Data from 2009 population census. Data: belstat.gov.by

A rapid Russification of the Belarusian population primarily occurs through Russian-language media. Three of the nine TV-channels included in the standard TV package are Russian and the rest use Russian as the main language. Belarus buys the majority of its TV shows from Russia and broadcasts these even on the Belarusian-language channels.
Russian propaganda has a wide influence through the Russian TV channels that predominate Belarusian TV. Monitoring by the Belarusian Association of Journalists shows that promotion of the notion of a “Russian world” takes place through Russian TV shows of both political and non-political character and broadcast on the nine official TV channels in Belarus.

Although experts continue to talk about the so-called “soft” Belarusization in the cultural and entertainment sectors, the use of the Belarusian language in state and education institutions continues to fall. The festivals of Vyshyvanka (traditional embroidered shirts), cultural events and growing usage of Belarusian language by business show an interest in the language rather than its development.

Besides the Russification of the educational system, the growing interest of young people to the Belarusian language is competing with a brain-drain. 2018 marked a record year in so far as around 11,000 Belarusians emigrated to other countries for work, with a total of almost 95,000 Belarusians officially working abroad according to Mikhail Myasnikovich, the Chairman of the Council of the Republic, cited in Zviazda. In these conditions, English becomes even more popular than Belarusian for young professionals, as does Polish among workers moving to Poland.

**Soft Belarusization: External policy rather than an internal course**

On 25 March 2018 Minsk saw one of the biggest celebrations of Freedom Day, organised through crowd-funding. The peculiarity of the event was that the authorities approved the celebration – in contrast to many other events organised by oppositional leaders in the past. Last year’s Freedom Day BNR 100 (the centenary of the foundation of the Belarusian Republic)
appeared as yet another sign of soft Belarusisation and gave hope for some liberalisation in the country.

This year activists applied to hold Freedom Day celebrations at the Dynama Stadium, which the authorities are preparing for the **2019 European Games**. However, the authorities rejected this year’s application stating that the stadium is not yet ready for concerts. The Belarusian pop-singer Alexandr Saladuha subsequently received permission to perform in the stadium, which some oppositional activists see as a way of restricting their access to the stadium. During the “Big Conversation” Lukashenka also said that he sees no sense in celebrating Freedom Day 101 in the city centre.

![Celebration of Freedom Day BNR 100 in 2018, Minsk. Source: Euroradio.fm](image)

Although the pressure on the opposition and the initiatives referring to the Belarusian national idea continues, Lukashenka himself does not shy away from playing the language card. Thus, on 9 January Lukashenka delivered part of a speech in Belarusian. The Belarusian president has done this before, for example in 2014.
The speech in the Belarusian language, coupled with statements from Lukashenka during the ongoing Russian-Belarusian gas dispute, awoke Russia’s propaganda machine. Russian media spread information claiming that “Belarusian nationalists plan to ruin the country” and that “Lukashenka has betrayed Russia.”

During the “Big Conversation”, Lukashenka said he does not understand why Russia tries to spread its ideology of the Russian world in Belarus since Belarusians already think like Russians and speak the same language.

The Belarusian language card serves Lukashenka who wants to quieten supporters of the national idea by showing he is not trying to Russify Belarus. The same card is played when it comes to relations with Russia: here it demonstrates sovereignty and difference from Russia. However, in one or another way, Lukashenka uses this card only to benefit the regime and can barely have a relation to the policy of Belarusization anymore.

**Genuine Belarusization instead of imitation**

Lukashenka’s appeal for the importance of preserving the national language and culture appears as an attempt to strengthen his position by attracting the support of national and opposition forces in the event of Russian aggression. Additionally, he might aim to decrease negative rhetoric regarding his announcement to run again for the presidency (by presenting himself as an advocate of independence, language and culture). Lukashenka may believe that against the backdrop of Russian pressure he can attract more support from the part of the electorate that has never voted for him before.

Although positive rhetoric towards the Belarusian language became more visible, there exists a lack of investments into
the language popularisation in education and media. In fact, Belarusization turns into a political tool of foreign policy rather than a genuine movement. If the regime aims to deter the influence of Russian propaganda, Belarusization policy should first of all focus on real reform in all spheres and not mere symbolic steps.

10 most-read stories on Belarus Digest published in 2018

In 2018 Belarus Digest readers particularly interested in our articles on Belarus visa issues, security as well as the relations of Belarus and Russia.

Belarus Digest team wishes its readers a healthy, productive and happy new year!

Here we compiled our top 10 most read stories published in 2018.

1. 10 days visa-free: a new stage for Belarusian tourism by Alesia Rudnik

On 26 December, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka signed a new decree on a 10-days visa-free entry regime for foreigners. It expands upon last year’s decree on a 5-day visa-free entrance to the Augustow zone in the Hrodna region. The changes are in tandem with a February 2017 decree, which grants tourists a Belarus-wide, five-day visa provided they
fly into Minsk airport.

The new visa-free rules are valid from 2018 and allow citizens of 77 countries to spend 10 days without a visa in the Hrodna and Brest regions. No changes have been made for those who enter without a visa into Minsk airport, and as such can still only spend five days in Belarus, but are able to travel anywhere in the country.

The current visa-free regime appears to be a logical continuation of the process of visa liberalisation, which has been taking place within the country. However, the territorial and administrative restrictions on visa-free travel to Belarus still create inconveniences for tourists. Concerns of the KGB and the Internal Affairs Ministry create additional obstacles for the implementation for simpler and longer visa-free regimes.

2. “Sex-training” courses sweep across Belarus by Olga Hryniuk

On 26 February, Thai police arrested Belarusian model Nastya Rybka (Anastasiya Vashukevich) and her Belarus-born “sex coach” Alex Lesley (Alexander Kirillov) on charges of arranging “sex-training” courses in Thailand without work permits.
Prior to this, Rybka and Lesley sparked a major sex-scandal in Russia involving oligarch Oleg Deripaska and the Russian deputy prime minister Sergei Prikhodko. Rybka subsequently claimed to be in possession of secret recordings proving Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election and requested US asylum.

While Russians have paid between $600 to $1500 for Lesley’s seduction classes in Moscow, Belarusians eagerly splash similar amounts of money on “sex training” courses and consultations with parapsychologists.

Belarusian astrologers, bioenergy consultants, and “sex coaches” vigorously advertise themselves on the internet. The general decline in levels of education, as well as the demographic gender imbalance, have created a perfect breeding ground for the appearance of numerous occult practitioners and self-proclaimed “sex experts” in Belarus.

3. **Low-costs flights in Belarus: wishful thinking?** by **Alesia Rudnik**

In a speech to the Belarusian parliament, Alexander Lukashenka expressed dissatisfaction with Belarusian airlines. The president questioned the absence of low-cost flights in Belarus and Belarusians’ extensive use of Vilnius, Warsaw and Kiev airports. This issue – discussed by Belarusians for several years – has been problematised by Lukashenka for the first time.

Companies such as Ryanair and Wizzair find it unprofitable to fly to Minsk airport, and so Belarusians choose to travel to
airports in neighbouring countries.

According to the administration of Belavia, the Belarusian national carrier, it would be detrimental for their business to welcome cheap flights to the country. As a result, Belarusians choose between Lithuanian, Ukrainian or Polish airports – or seek out rare Belavia online sales.

4. **The average Belarusian: who is he? Actually, it’s she** by Olga Hryniuk

On 25th January 2018, top Belarusian media outlet TUT.BY compiled a portrait of the average Belarusian citizen. The media outlet used a combination of recent data from the National Statistical Committee of Belarus, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations. Apparently, the average Belarusian citizen is a 42-and-a-half-year old woman with higher education. She speaks Russian, votes for Lukashenka, and consumes 64 kg of potatoes per year.

At the same time, the recent statistical data on the Belarusian population raises a number of concerns. Belarus comprises an ageing nation with astonishing gender imbalances. While Belarusian women face difficulties in finding a marriage partner, Belarusian men fervently consume alcohol.

The diet of Belarusian citizens still lacks fruit and vegetables, and their salary ranks among the least competitive in the region. Permanent stress eventually take its toll in the form of heart disease.

5. **Belarusian language: declining in state education,**
strengthening in civil society by Alesia Rudnik

Only 13% of pupils in Belarus study in the Belarusian language. The authorities, therefore, aroused great public interest with a recent promise to establish Belarusian-language groups in kindergartens in each district in Minsk.

At present, the near impossibility of receiving pre-school education in the Belarusian language concerns some parents. Others cling on to even the slightest possibility of ensuring their children’s education in the Belarusian language. Yet others wonder why the question arises at all – thinking that it would be better to teach students English or Chinese.

The rapid disappearance of the Belarusian language from the education sector (from 19% in the 2010/2011 academic year to 13% in 2017/2018) paradoxically coincided with the increasing popularity of various kinds of Belarusian cultural initiatives and projects.

6. Russia provokes religious conflict in Belarus? by Dzmitry Mitskevich

On 20 March 2018, Metropolitan Pavel (also known as Georgy Ponomarev) – the Metropolitan of Minsk and Zaslaŭje, and Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus – stated his wish to organize the visit of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to Minsk. He scheduled the visit to follow on the heels of Pope Francis’s
Some see this as the latest in a series of efforts by Russia to provoke religious conflict in Belarus. Russia’s actions earlier this year can be seen in the same light.

7. **Belarus’s balancing between NATO and Russia: Squaring the circle?** by Siarhei Bohdan

Speaking in Brussels on 1 June, Belarusian foreign minister Uladzimir Makei warned that a proposed US military base in Poland would trigger a response in the region. Moreover, if tensions grow, as a result, the Belarusian government could soon play host to a Russian military base.

On the same day, while visiting border guards in the south of the country, Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka sounded a different note. He would prefer Ukraine to join NATO than see it taken over by nationalism and turn into “a bandit state” where a war of “everyone against everyone” rages.

The Belarusian government has held this ambiguous position for decades. As NATO enlarged towards Belarusian borders, Minsk constantly adjusted its rhetoric and engaged in cautious yet
increasing cooperation with the alliance. The “NATO ghost”, however, remained a major theme in Belarus’s relations with Russia.

8. **Skyrocketing economic growth and weak regional development – a digest of the Belarusian economy** by Aleh Mazol from Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC)

On 16 March 2018, the official statistical body of Belarus Belstat has announced that GDP growth in the first two months of the year has accelerated.

Meantime, the weak regional development cast doubt on the sustainability of Belarusian economic growth in the future. Decreasing population number, lack of investment, and depressed business climate accompanied by low average wages play here a crucial role.

Finally, on 20 March 2018, the President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenka has announced plans for the establishment of a new ministry – The Ministry of Digital Economy. The digital transformation of the economy needs authorized governance.

9. **Opinion: Cannabis Reform in Belarus?** by Michael Dorman

On 17 February 2018, a group of young Belarusians holding a banner reading ‘Legalize Belarus’ gathered on Independence Avenue in the heart of Minsk. The group was campaigning for the legalisation of marijuana in Belarus, a proposition that,
at least for now, seems unlikely to attract support from the public or government officials.

The perception of cannabis use in Belarus has been largely shaped by Soviet-era misinformation and anti-cannabis propaganda disseminated by the Lukashenka government. Adding to the stigma of cannabis use is the fact that Belarus has some of the harshest drug laws in Europe and its penal code makes no distinction between the categories of drugs.


On 6-8 April, Chinese defence minister Wei Fenghe will visit Belarus. Wei’s combined visit to Russia and Belarus, his first foreign trip since taking up the post, demonstrates recognition that Minsk gives the highest priority to its partnership with Beijing.

The Belarusian authorities have chosen orientation towards Beijing as a fundamental dogma in foreign policy. Belarus pursues this policy despite contradictory effects of the alliance with China. The Belarusian government hopes that it will get a better place in the sun in a future world shaped by China. For the time being it tries to reap some smaller benefits from Beijing to restructure its industry, find new loans and rearm.
Crackdown on media, online casinos and IT squad – Belarus civil society digest

Belarusian authorities initiated a new wave of journalists’ detentions. Blogger detained in Hrodna for cooperation with Belsat TV.

TBM called to list Belarusian as native language during the upcoming census. Expert communities released Belarusian Yearbook 2018.


Belarusian army recruits for IT squad. Belarus legalises online casinos.

This and more in the new edition of Belarus civil society digest.

Civil society

Media crackdown in Belarus. Last week, the police raided the newsrooms of several leading media outlets, including the Belarusian major independent media TUT.BY portal and BelaPAN news agency, and detained at least 18 journalists. An unprecedented wave of journalists’ detentions started on August 7 under a criminal investigation into alleged unauthorized access to paid services of the government-owned BelTA news agency. By 10th August, all the detained
Bloggers and journalists under pressure. A criminal case has been opened against Brest blogger Siarhey Pyatrukhin on the charge of “an insult inflicted in a public statement”. Blogger from a Homiel region Andrey Pavuk was detained for cooperation with Belsat TV. In Hrodna, the police seized equipment from journalists working with Belsat.

Belarus’ MFA is the most open state body of the country. The Ministry of Education is the most closed, according to a study by the Political Research Institute Political Sphere. The findings are based on 21 in-depth interviews with Belarusians CSO representatives.

Belarusian studies

TBM calls to list Belarusian as native language during the upcoming census. Head of the Belarusian Language Society (TBM) and MP Alena Anisim addressed to the Belarusians to recall that the next census would be held in 2019. She urged the citizens to claim the Belarusian language as native that contributes to strengthening the independence and national security of Belarus.

Belarusian Yearbook 2018 released. The annual edition presents a comprehensive analysis of the key developments and current status of the main sectors of the state and society in 2017. The book is published under the aegis of the Agency for Social and Political Expert Appraisal and Nashe Mnenie (Our Opinion in English) expert community.

International Congress of Belarusian Studies will not take place in 2018. The preparatory work has been conducted for the Congress to take place in Belarus since late 2017; however, the organizers met ‘technical and organizational obstacles’. Like all previous events, in 2019, the 8th Congress of
Belarusian Studies will be held outside of Belarus.

**Ecological activities**

**Project on monitoring of small rivers started in Polesse.** The participants will monitor a condition of rivers, lakes, and wells and conduct 20 campaigns on water examination and coasts cleaning in border regions of Belarus and Ukraine. The project is co-funded by the EU and implemented by Pinsk executive committee and Interakcia Foundation from Belarusian side.

![A landscape of Belarusian Polesse. Source: sputnik.by](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Alternative Energy Market environmental forum** was held on July 27, in Minsk. An event was dedicated to renewable energy sources in their most unexpected manifestations and organized by the cultural centre KORPUS and EcoDom CSO. The forum’s program includes a fair of eco-initiatives, a demonstration site, real stories of users of renewable energy sources, an environmental film festival, etc.

**Business Bicycle contest kicks off in Minsk.** The goal is to find and encourage companies that prefer to use environmentally friendly transport, a bicycle. From August 1
to August 31, the contest organizers will monitor the activities of companies in social networks and award the best. The contest is organized by the Minsk Bicycle Society and the Center for Environmental Solutions and supported by EU.

**Summer festivals**

**Sprava festival** took place on August 4-5. International community engagement festival *Sprava* (*Deal* in English) is meant to celebrate Belarus’ historical and natural landmarks, modern art and music. The organizers are a group of enthusiasts who together with local residents turn a peninsula near Lake Chereiskoye into a new cultural venue.

**CSOs presented themselves at FSP festival.** Freaky Summer Party (*FSP*) is one of the most popular festivals in Minsk that gather thousands of people. On July 28-29, a zone of public partners presented various civic initiatives: from a public campaign against homophobia to improvisational theatres. For example, at a Green Network spot, it was possible to sign and send a postcard about the climate change.

Source: belta.by

**Women’s Business Festival in Brest** was held on August 4. Women
who already had a business and would have liked to present it at the festival were invited to the participation. According to the organizer, Brest Regional Development Fund, one of the objectives of the event was the unity of values, thoughts, and ideas of the women’s business community.

Other

**Belarus is the best friend of Ukraine.** 74% of Ukrainians treat Belarusians positively – this is the best indicator among all countries in the world. Earlier, Russians similarly spoke about Belarus.

**Cyberwarfare IT squad to appear in Belarusian army.** Up to 60 people are to be recruited for the information technology company of the Belarusian army. The IT trend in Belarus is to be taken to another level. [Belarus Security Blog](#) welcomes the establishment of IT squad as a positive, albeit belated.

**Belarus climbs to 38th position in E-Government Development Index** (EDGI). The country has moved 11 positions up to make it to the top 40 countries in the Very-High-EGDI level group for the first time. The [UN E-Government Survey](#) is compiled for 193 countries every two years.

**Belarus legalizes online casinos.** The new presidential [decree](#) will help to minimize the capital outflow to other countries. It will limit the Belarusian citizens’ access to online games, which are organized outside the national segment of the Internet

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*
BNR centenary marked by an impressive assembly in Minsk and other cities of Belarus and abroad. New Ideas Center launches the Zombie Ideas project to “bury” outdated concepts. Dzeja offers lectures on EU integration.

Largest crowdfunding campaign in Belarus: over $105K raised from corporate and private contributors to publish Svetlana Alexievich’s 5-volume edition.

School of Inclusive Barista graduates first class. Volunteers translate Civil Law Code into the Belarusian language. Belarus Free Theatre wins Havel Prize.

II March Meetings – largest civic activism forum in Belarus – will take place in Minsk on April 20-21: feel free to register and spread the word.

This and more in the new edition of Belarus civil society digest.

Expert events and political leadership

New Ideas Centre launches Zombie Ideas project. The project consists of a series of meetings where the experts will examine and bury ideas, which Belarus inherited from the Soviet Union or the traditional society. The first debate is
devoted to Soviet education and will take place in Minsk, on 24 April.

**New Leadership for Eastern Europe project** aims to expand the Belarusian and Ukrainian network of leaders to support democratic changes in these countries. The project will select 30 participants who will take part in a conference and training for trainers. Deadline for applications is 20 April. Belarusian organiser is the Institute for Development and Social Market.

**IPM Research Centre is looking for KEF regional partners.** The call aims to increase the capacity of Belarusian CSOs in promoting responsible economic policy at the local level. Six CSOs will be selected to conduct researches, conferences, and seminars in the regions within the framework of Kastryčnicki Economic Forum with the budget of $10K euros. Deadline for applications is 16 April.

**Non-formal education**

**Public lectures on EU integration processes and institutions** are offered by Dzeja initiative. The lecturer is Alieś Lahviniec. The course is taught since 2006 and aims to provide a detailed picture of the EU integration processes and the basic policies. The programme includes debates and discussion of topical issues of European integration with the participation of Belarusian and foreign experts.

**National University registered in Belarus.** It is named in honour of the Belarusian national poet Nil Hilievič. Education will be delivered fully in Belarusian. The former head of the Belarusian Language Society Aliëh Trusaŭ is nominated for the rector position. $7-8 million is required for the university to start a full-fledged activity.
Belarusians donate 5 times more than needed for Alexievich’s edition. The crowdfunding campaign aimed at publishing Nobel laureate in Literature Svetlana Alexievich’s five-volume edition in Belarusian without censorship has raised over $105K instead of planned $20K. There are 7 days until the end of the campaign. The campaign has become the biggest crowdfunding action in Belarus.

BNR centenary marked by an impressive rally in Minsk. The centenary of the proclamation of the Belarusian People’s Republic (BNR) was marked on 25 March by a large-scale rally full of festive spirit in front of the Opera Theater in downtown Minsk. The rally was attended by a crowd estimated from 5,000 to 50,000. Organised by civil society and political parties and supported via crowdfunding, the festive events also took place in other cities of Belarus and abroad.

Belarusian-language Civil Code released. This became possible due to the efforts of 70 translators volunteers who for 1,5 months worked on the translation of 600 pages of the Civil Code. So far Belarus has had one of the basic laws only in Russian. Now the text of the Code will be submitted to the Ministry of Justice for approval as an official translation.

Belarus Free Theatre won Havel Prize. The prize celebrates those who, with bravery and ingenuity, unmask the lie of dictatorship by living in truth. “Belarus Free Theatre defies oppression in its proud celebration of free speech and the arts, bravely defending civil liberties in a Soviet-ruled state,” said Havel Prize Committee Chairman. The awarding ceremony will be held during the 2018 Oslo Freedom Forum on 30 May.
Inclusive activism

**First graduates of the School of Inclusive Barista.** In Lida town, five persons in wheelchairs passed an exam for the barista certificate. School of Inclusive Barista is organised in Belarus for the first time. During 2018, the classes will be held in four other cities of Hrodna region. The project is implemented under the *Learning to Act* program supported by the European Union and DVV International.

**A new stage of the information campaign on de-institutionalisation** is announced by the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The new stage aims to influence the opinion and knowledge of Belarusians on a way of a tolerant and positive attitude towards people with mental disabilities. The campaign includes such tools as a thematic video, a mini-grant competition, and a summing up conference in May.

**Camp for active rehabilitation** is organised by the Republican Association of Wheelchair Users on 14-26 July, in Minsk. The programme provides for sports, competitions, lectures on legislation, healthy lifestyle, history of the Paralympic movement, as well as intensive networking.

Other
II March Meetings Civil Society Forum to take place on 20-21 April, in Minsk. Sakavitskiya Sustrechy/ March Meetings is a civic activism fest and the largest platform for sharing experiences and establishing the dialogue between the active citizens. The Forum will be held for the second time and focus on the demonstration and celebration of civic activism diversity in Belarus. Registration is open until 15 April.

EaP Civil Society Hackathon will take place on 1-3 June, in Minsk and bring together about 60 civil society activists, IT professionals and web-designers from six Eastern Partnership countries. For three days, experts will work together on ICT tools and solutions that would enable CSOs and activists better serve the needs of their communities, and help citizens participate in decision-making. Registration is open.

#30 days of biking starts on 1 April in Minsk. On the same day, the action will start around the world and requires riding a bicycle only during all April. A Belarusian
organiser, Minsk Bicycle Society, believes that the action is an excellent motivation for those who want to quickly get in shape after the cold season. Participation is free. To date, over 800 participants have already registered to participate the action.

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London conference, Annual Report, Belarusian language trends, the longevity gap – Ostrogorski Centre digest

In March, the Ostrogorski Centre held its annual London conference on Belarusian studies and published its report covering the centre’s activities in 2017.

Analysts from the Ostrogorski Centre wrote about trends in Belarusian language use in public education and civil society, Belarus’s massive gender longevity gap and the ongoing quiet reform of the Belarusian army.

We also added five new research papers from the Belarusian think tanks to our BelarusPolicy database.
Recent analysis

Alesia Rudnik discusses trends in Belarusian language use in the state education system and civil society. At present, the near impossibility of receiving pre-school education in the Belarusian language concerns some parents. Others cling on to even the slightest possibility of ensuring their children’s education in the Belarusian language. Yet others wonder why the question arises at all – thinking that it would be better to teach students English or Chinese.

The rapid disappearance of the Belarusian language from the education sector (from 19% in the 2010-11 academic year to 13% in 2017-18) paradoxically coincided with the increasing popularity of various kinds of Belarusian cultural initiatives and projects.

Ryhor Astapenia analyses Belarus’s massive gender longevity gap. The Belarusian gender debate understandably focuses on women’s rights, but in reality, men deserve as much attention. Belarusian men have a far lower life expectancy than women; lower even than North Korean men. Both men themselves and state authorities bear responsibility for this. Belarus remains one of the most alcoholic nations in the world and Belarusian men generally treat their health with indifference.

This has painful consequences. Families lose a parent and a money-maker, while the state loses a taxpayer. Even before death, poor health among men leads to low productivity and hence holds significance for the economy. The Belarusian government undertakes some efforts to promote healthy lifestyles but it fails to do so systematically.
Siarhei Bohdan writes about the ongoing quiet reform of the Belarusian army. On 18 February, president Alexander Lukashenka offered to deploy a 10,000-strong Belarusian contingent as peacekeepers to eastern Ukraine. This represents a rather large commitment for the Belarusian army comprising in total 46,000 military personnel.

Minsk pays increasing attention to its military and has even raised spending on its armed forces by a fifth. But the Belarusian army still faces problems, which go beyond the acquisition of expensive weaponry. It also has fewer conscripts than it would like. Consequently, it employs additional professional soldiers and relies ever more on reservists. In this way, the army adjusts to the needs of the country.
3rd annual “Belarusian Studies in the 21st Century” conference

The 3rd annual conference, Belarusian Studies in the 21st Century, took place on 23 March in London. University College London’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies, the Ostrogorski Centre and the Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library and Museum together organised the event.

The conference featured speakers from the UK, the USA, Canada, Germany, Finland, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus. Panels covered history, social and political movements, foreign policy and art. The traditional Annual London Lecture on Belarusian Studies, delivered this year by Dr. Alena Markova, was called “Belarusian State- and Nation-Formation: From Polatsk Principality to Independent Belarus”.

The conference guests included Stanislaŭ Šuškievič, the first head of independent Belarus (in office 1991-1994), and the UK ambassador to Belarus, Fionna Gibb. The conference programme is available here. Podcasts of the conference will be made available online on the Ostrogorski Centre Soundcloud.

2017 Annual Report of the Ostrogorski Centre

In March, the Ostrogorski Centre published its annual report for 2017. The Centre has strengthened its team as well as the reach and impact of our work, particularly in the field of online education.

It published analytical papers on distance learning, the
challenges of Belarus joining the European Higher Education Area, and the reform of business education.

In June, the Ostrogorski Academy has been officially launched. Its ambition is to serve as the first entirely online educational platform in Belarus, which features video lectures, transcripts and tests presented in an engaging format.

As in previous years, we held three major annual conferences – the Ostrogorski Forum in Minsk dedicated to foreign policy and security issues, the annual London conference on Belarusian studies, and a conference on the reform of higher education in Minsk. The new 2017 issue of the Journal of Belarusian Studies features articles by researchers from Canada, the United States and Belarus, as well as several book reviews.

In 2017, the Ostrogorski Centre continued to provide daily analysis of events related to Belarus in English through the Belarus Digest website, and in the Russian/Belarusian languages on Ostro.by. We also kept the Belarus Policy and Belarus Profile databases up to date.

This year, Belarus Digest welcomed a new analyst on national
security and defence – Dzmitry Mitskevich from the Belarus Security Blog. Peter Braga, a PhD candidate at University College London’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London joined the editorial team of Belarus Digest. Siarhei Bohdan, a regular contributor to Belarus Digest, defended his PhD thesis at the Free University of Berlin.

Comments in the media

Siarhei Bohdan became the author of the Security Barometer section of the Minsk Barometer project – a regular monitoring of foreign policy and regional security. In the first issues, Siarhei writes that on the one hand, Belarus avoids being drawn into the confrontation of the current Russian leadership with the West and its eastern European allies. On the other hand, it is increasingly disappointed in the growing reluctance of the Kremlin to strengthen its allies militarily and economically.

The Belarusian leadership understands that the Russian media strongly influence mass opinion in Belarus and wage information attacks against official Minsk. At the same time, Minsk cannot go too far in countering it, for example by closing Russian channels which broadcast in Belarus, says Alesia Rudnik in a comment to Polish radio.

Belarus Policy

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


Think tanks in Belarus are encouraged to submit their research for inclusion in the database by emailing us.

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

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Belarusian language: declining in state education, strengthening in civil society

Only 13% of pupils in Belarus study in the Belarusian language. The authorities therefore roused great public interest with a recent promise to establish Belarusian-language groups in kindergartens in each district in Minsk.

At present, the near impossibility of receiving pre-school
education in the Belarusian language concerns some parents. Others cling on to even the slightest possibility of ensuring their children’s education in the Belarusian language. Yet others wonder why the question arises at all – thinking that it would be better to teach students English or Chinese.

The rapid disappearance of the Belarusian language from the education sector (from 19% in the 2010/2011 academic year to 13% in 2017/2018) paradoxically coincided with the increasing popularity of various kinds of Belarusian cultural initiatives and projects.

**Russian language dominates the education system**

The reduction in the number of pupils studying in Belarusian stands in tension with the growing interest in Belarusian language and culture in society. Founded several years ago, Belarusian language courses under the “Mova Nanova” initiative gather hundreds of people in Minsk and other Belarusian cities. Crowdfunding enables the publication of Belarusian-language books and the translation of movies into Belarusian. Inscriptions on the jerseys of Belarusian football players increasingly appear in Belarusian. The education system in Belarus, however, still shows signs of Russification rather than Belarusisation.

Fewer and fewer children today study in Belarusian. Of the six regional centres, Belarusian-language schools exist only in Minsk. In some of the regional cities schools do have small Belarusian-language forms. However, most of the Belarusian-language schools are located in villages. Totally only 13.3% of all pupils study in Belarusian according to the National Statistical Committee of Belarus.
The situation looks more problematic in pre-school and higher education. Belarusian-language kindergartens represent a minority among the preschools. In the biggest cities there exist only small groups with the Belarusian language. Until now, Belarus has no university providing a Belarusian-language education.

The problem of access to the Belarusian-language education grew in importance for Belarusian society. On 21 February, International Mother Language Day, a group of parents in Minsk visited the Ministry of Education to discuss pre-school education in the Belarusian language. During the meeting, parents proposed the introduction of more Belarusian-language groups in kindergartens and schools. Later, the Ministry of Education promised to open a Belarusian group in each Minsk region.

Parents struggle for more education in Belarusian

To date parents have to fight for the education of their children in the Belarusian language. Increasingly, parents collect signatures for the creation of Belarusian-language groups in kindergartens and schools. On 21 February, public activists of the Young Front collected 2,000 signatures in Minsk for creating a Belarusian-language university.
Occasionally, local authorities meet with parents to discuss the status of the Belarusian language in education, as happened on 21 February. One of the participants of the meeting, Volha Kavalchuk, told to Radyjo Svaboda that her child can not get into a group with Belarusian as the language of instruction. “Due to the shortage of Belarusian speakers, kindergartens take in Russian-speakers, who become a majority later,” and the group becomes a Russian-speaking one.

Parents at the meeting with the education ministry. Photo: svaboda.org

Belarusian-language parents worry that their children gradually shift into the Russian language from studying in a Russian-language system. At the meeting of pro-Belarusian parents with the Ministry of Education on 21 February, parents noted that groups exist only in certain areas of the city and that this is logistically inconvenient for many parents. Often, as is the case in the Pershamajsky district of Minsk, different age groups emerge. These factors influence the quality of teaching; many parents have to send their children to Russian-language kindergartens.
How has the status of the Belarusian language in education changed?

Since Alexander Lukashenka came to power, the Belarusian language began a gradual decline in the education system. In 1994-1995 more than 75% of pupils studied in Belarusian. After the referendum in 1995, when the Russian language received the same status as Belarusian, the latter started to disappear from education. From that moment on, many Belarusian schools and kindergartens began to teach partially in Russian.

In the years after the collapse of the USSR Belarus’s neighbours, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine, actively worked on the transition of schools into teaching in the national language. In contrast, from 1995 the Belarusian authorities embraced a Russification of education system. The titular language of Belarus appeared as a threat to the authorities. Lukashenka saw the main threat to his power in the Belarusian-speaking opposition and methodically narrowed the space for studying the language and culture. Whereas 22% of pupils studied in Belarusian in 1988, the comparable figure for 2017 was 13.3%.

In recent years, after events surrounding Ukraine’s Maidan, the Belarusian language situation within the education system started to improve in small steps. Observing Russian aggression in Ukraine, the authorities began to demonstrate more support to the Belarusian language and national history at different levels, so-called “soft Belarusisation”. However, until now, soft Belarusisation hardly affected schools, kindergartens and universities.
The fate of Belarusian language: in citizens’ hands

Social activists continue to do the most work promoting the Belarusian language. For example, recently created initiative, Perakladaton, has translated the civil code into Belarusian with the help of volunteers and plans to translate other laws (only 3% of legislative acts in the country are written in Belarusian).

Social activist Ihar Sluchak has long communicated with the Belarusian government and commercial organisations, trying to force them to speak Belarusian. Recently an online catalogue of Belarusian businesses and services, SVAJE, appeared. Regular updates include new businesses and places where the staff speak Belarusian.

This work of social activists partly compensates for the poor condition of the Belarusian language in the education system. However, some positive signals appear from the government. For the first time the authorities have allowed the holding of a celebratory concert on Alternative Independence Day in the centre of Minsk. If the concert does not bring police detentions, then it might give some hope that the “soft Belarusisation” will extend into Belarusian schools, kindergartens and universities.

Decommunisation or erasing historical memory: Will
Poland rename a street given to a Belarusian national hero?

Poland has entered a new stage of its decommunisation policy, which among other things aims to rename streets and avenues all over the country. Within the framework of this policy, some Polish historians have proposed renaming Branislau Taraškievič Street in the town of Bielsk Podlaski.

This may turn out to be an international scandal between Poland and Belarus, just like the one earlier this year around Tadeusz Kosciuszko, an influential Belarus-born military engineer during the 1776 American War of Independence and a rebel leader against Tsarist imperialism. Branislau Taraškievič is an undisputed hero in Belarusian history, especially for Belarusian minority in Poland.

Who is Mr Taraškievič?

Branislau Taraškievič (Bronisław Taraszkiewicz) is considered to be one of the “fathers of the Belarusian nation”. Born in 1892 in a small village 30 km from Vilnia (now Vilnius) he graduated from the Vilna Gymnasium, and then from the History and Philology Faculty at St. Petersburg University. In 1918, he wrote and published the first “Belarusian grammar for schools” in Vilnia. For a long time, this was the main textbook on the Belarusian language. His work withstood six reprints, and it was used even after the 1933 reform of Belarusian spelling—now this type of spelling is called “taraškievica”.

In the interwar period, Branislau Taraškievič headed the Belarusian grammar school in Vilnia (which was a part of the
Polish Republic at that time) and was elected a deputy to the Polish Sejm. In the first years of his work in the Polish parliament, he advocated a union for the Polish and Belarusian peoples. He hoped that the Belarusians would be able to gain autonomy in Poland.

After a couple of years, he became disillusioned with the idea of a Polish-Belarusian union. He made ties with Belarusian Communists and joined the ranks of the Communist Party of Western Belarus. This constitutes the reason for his persecution by the Polish authorities. At that time, the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (part of the USSR) was conducting a “Belarusisation” policy aimed at promoting Belarusian national culture and traditions. This attracted many Belarusians in Poland and became a reason for the popularity of communist views among them.

The Polish authorities arrested Branislaŭ Taraškievič in 1927 and then for a second time in 1931. In 1933 Poland exchanged him for Belarusian playwright Francišak Alachnovič within the framework of an exchange of political prisoners between Poland
and the USSR. In the USSR, Taraškievič worked as head of the department of the Baltic States and Poland at the International Agricultural Institute in Moscow. In 1937, the Bolsheviks arrested him in Stalin’s Great Purge. He was executed in 1938. The Soviet “court” accused him of counter-revolutionary activities and nationalism.

Extreme decommunisation in Poland

On 2 November 2017, the Polish media announced that Branislaŭ Taraškievič Street in Bielsk Podlaski comes within the purview of the decommunisation law and the city council should rename it. Curiously, the original list of places to be decommunised, published by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (PINR), did not include Taraškievič. His name only appeared on the list later at the insistence of the PINR Warsaw branch and some government officials. However, the PINR has yet to give any reason for Taraškievič’s inclusion on the “decommunisation list”.

According to unofficial sources, Governor of Podlaskie province in north-east Poland Bohdan Paszkowski played a big role in putting Taraškievič up for decommunisation. Paszkowski is a member of the ruling conservative Law and Justice Party, which takes a strong anti-communist position. For example, at present, they are discussing the demolition of the massive Palace of Science and Culture in the centre of Warsaw. The Palace is both the most well-known landmark in the city and the tallest building in Poland. The Law and Justice Party says the Palace represents the communist past, being a post-war “present” from the USSR to Warsaw.
Mayor Jarosław Borowski of Bielsk Podlaski.

At the same time, the Mayor of Bielsk Podlaski (the town where Branislau Taraškievič Street is located), Jarosław Borowski, is himself part of Poland’s Belarusian ethnic minority. He states the local population appreciates Branislau Taraškievič as a Belarusian educator and politician, and do not see him as a person propagating communism.

Indeed, located near the street in question, the Lyceum No. 2, a school that teaches Belarusian language in the town, is named after Branislau Taraškievič. So far, there has been little to no discussion surrounding the need to rename the street. But one can expect this issue will possibly arise in the near future.

It should also be noted that the PINR branch for Podlaskie province believes Taraškievič is not a person subject to the decommunisation policy. There is still a chance the street in Bielsk Podlaski will keep its name if historians at the highest level of PINR come to the same conclusion. In the meantime, Belarusian society wants the Belarusian Foreign Affairs Ministry to help in resolving the situation.
Belarusian, not communist

Branislaŭ Taraškievič also played a role in the history of Podlaskie province. The province happens to be the main settlement area for Poland’s Belarusian minority. Throughout history, these lands belonged to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Reč Paspalitaja (or Rzecz Pospolita, the Commonwealth of the Polish Crown and the Lithuanian Grand Duchy), the Russian Empire, and then the Republic of Poland. The Belarusian population in Podlaskie province is almost 100 percent indigenous. Belarusians represent 50 percent of the population in the town of Bielsk Podlaski and more than 60 percent in a couple other regions within Podlaskie province.

Belarusian historian and scientist Arsień Lis states that Taraškievič cooperated with communists in Poland for tactical reasons. It could have helped to defend the rights of the
Belarusian minority, which suffered forced assimilation attempts by the Polish state in the 20s and 30s.

For example, in 1938 officially sanctioned Belarusian schools ceased to exist in Poland, when in 1919 there were more than 400 of them. Moreover, in the 20s and early 30s communism had not compromised its image by mass murders and terror against populations in communist states, which further explains Taraškievič’s willingness to cooperate.

More to the point, Branislaŭ Taraškievič had nothing to do with the communist Polish People’s Republic, which formed only after WWII and after repressions against Polish civil society began. The Soviets killed him even before the start of WWII. But Branislaŭ Taraškievič Street in Bielsk Podlaski received its name in 1987, while Poland was still under communist rule.

After concern over the street renaming was covered in Belarusian and Polish media, as well as the negative reaction from Poland’s Belarusian minority, PINR issued an official statement. PINR Head Jarosław Szarek stated his readiness to organize a meeting of Polish and Belarusian historians dedicated to the issue of Branislaŭ Taraškievič’s legacy. “This discussion should be based on historical documents, and we are ready to listen to the opinion of Belarusians,” he said.

Such an approach to the issue, as well as the decision of the Podlaskie province PINR branch, give hope that a compromise on Branislaŭ Taraškievič Street will finally be found.
Belarusian experts Jaŭhien Prejhierman and Piotr Piatroŭski opine that a pause in Eurasian integration is necessary until the members resolve current controversies. The government announces the date and details of the 2018 local elections.

The Defence Ministry brings changes to the Piečy training centre after an outrageous hazing incident. The first Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant, Astraviec, successfully passes its stress test. Belarus improves its anti-corruption record. Officials and cultural figures discuss policies to raise the status of the Belarusian language.

This and more in the new edition of the Belarus state press digest.

Politics and foreign policy

The experts call for a pause in Eurasian integration. Narodnaja Hazieta, a newspaper, provides the opinions of Belarusian experts Jaŭhien Prejhierman and Piotr Piatroŭski on the state of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). In just a few years, the EEU overcame several development stages that took the EU several decades: a customs union, a single economic space and an economic union. However, the result is that none of these platforms operate properly. Each contains numerous barriers, exceptions and limitations. Member states do not fully implement agreements. Deadlines for eliminating exemptions from the single market are continually postponed,
including oil and gas prices, which are particularly sensitive for Belarus.

This simply contradicts the spirit of the alliance and violates the interests of the participating states. Instead of bringing member states together, it increases strategic uncertainty and vulnerability. Therefore, if the countries really want to build a strong mutually beneficial union, there must be a respite from further integration. It is for this reason that Belarus has proposed a moratorium on any new decisions in the EEU until the implementation of previously reached agreements.

Elections to local councils will be held on 18 February 2018. The state plans to allocate about $10.5m for election funding, but Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka has urged the authorities to save rubles anywhere possible, writes Belarus Segodnia, a daily newspaper. The Chairman of the Central Commission for Elections and Republican Referendums, Lidzija Jarmošyna, announced the government has no obligation to invite international observers to elections to local councils.

Nevertheless, the President underlines the special role of observation and offers a possibility for short-term observation to all foreign diplomats accredited in the Republic of Belarus. Organisations that interact with international structures in the field of local self-government are allowed to invite experts and observers from partner organisations, too. Jarmošyna also said that since business plays an essential role in the life of our country, it should be well represented within local councils.

Military

The Defence Ministry has instituted major changes at the Piečy training centre after a brutal hazing incident allegedly led
to the death of private Aliaksandr Koržyč. It ordered the replacement of the junior command staff and sent 20 sergeants from the 3rd and 307th schools to other military units.

Uladzimir Makaraŭ, the press secretary for the Defence Ministry’s Ideology Directorate, assured the public that the transfers will not spread hazing practices. Those who carried out and were involved in the hazing activities are already under investigation. After the death of the soldier, the Investigations Committee (equivalent to the FBI in the United States) opened 15 criminal cases against officers stationed at the Piečy training centre.

New (left) vs old (right) uniform. Photo: sb.by The Belarusian army changes its uniform. The reform aims to make the uniform
more lightweight and practical. Many servicemen will be able
don new winter garb in a month. The traditional Soviet hat
with ear-flaps known to many generations will be dismissed and
replaced with a crocheted hat.

The jacket collar will turn from fur to fleece, which is
cheaper and several times lighter. The costly black leather
belts will be replaced with protective colour textile belts.
In total, the new uniform is lighter by a third. Recent
research by the Defence Ministry has shown that lighter and
higher quality materials make soldiers more capable.

Public policy

The Belarusian Astraviec nuclear power plant (NPP) successfully passed its stress test. The Emergency Ministry’s Nuclear and Radiation Safety Department has published a national report on the results of a series of stress tests for Astraviec plant, reports Zviazda, a state-owned daily newspaper. The tests checked the resistance of the NPP to threatening phenomena that can hypothetically happen in Belarus: strong winds and squalls, tornadoes, large hail stones, dust storms, strong blizzards, ice, fog, drought, as well as combinations of these phenomena.

According to Department Head Volha Luhoŭskaja, the NPP at Astraviec is resistant to emergency situations similar to Fukushima. The NPP, which is constructed to the latest generation Russian ‘3+ design,” fully meets the highest international safety standards. Belarusian specialists have already submitted the report to the European Group for the Supervision of Nuclear Safety and the European Commission for international review.

Belarus improves its anti-corruption record. An
interdepartmental conference at the Academy of Public Administration discussed anti-corruption law application and
its further improvement in Belarus. Transparency International
states that in the corruption perception index, Belarus rose
from 107th place to 79th in 2016. A survey of Belarusian
economists conducted among small and medium-sized businesses
shows that the actual rating of the country is much higher and
is at the level of Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia.

One newspaper claimed that international experts regard
Belarusian anti-corruption legislation as some of the most
progressive and effective in the world. Prosecutor General
Aliaksandr Kaniuk pointed out that the country is currently
implementing policies that minimise corruption: limiting state
interference in business, easing firefighting, sanitary,
environmental and other requirements, abolishing
administrative checks, simplifying procedures for obtaining
certificates, approvals, and other permits.

Can the Belarusian language play a greater role in
society? On 11 November, Belarus Segodnia held a roundtable
on the Belarusian language, featuring both pro-governmental
figures dealing with the language policy (MP Ihar Marzaliuk, ideologist Vadjim Hihin, Iryna Bulaŭkina from the Ministry of Education) and nationalists from the opposition (artist Mikola Kupava and historian Lieanid Lyč). The participants agreed that the vast majority of Belarusians want to live in an independent country, and no Belarusian nation and statehood is possible without the Belarusian language, history and cultural heritage.

The opposition speakers claimed that the role of the Belarusian language can be improved only through its wider use at the highest levels of education. Officials responded that forced Belarusianisation will lead to its rejection by the citizens, and therefore soft methods should be used in this process.

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

Belarusian-Russian visa, oil industry failure, new national idea – Belarus state press digest

On 2 June, at a governmental meeting on oil industry problems, Alexander Lukashenka blamed managers and the government for lacking an adequate development strategy for the industry. The Belarusian oil industry showed negative results in 2016.

Belarus and Russia decided against the idea of a unified visa
in favour of mutual visa recognition. Belarus should fear the informational war between Russia and the West, not a hypothetical occupation during the West 2017 military drills.

According to former foreign minister Piotr Kraŭčanka, the national idea of Belarus should include shared values and identity, historical memory, language, consensus on domestic and foreign policy, and a market economy.

This and more in the new edition of the Belarus state press digest.

**Foreign policy and security**

Deputy State Secretary of the Union State of Belarus and Russia Alexei Kubrin reveals single visa plans. The Ministries of Foreign Affairs decided to shift from a common document to mutual visa recognition. Thus, a person who receives a Belarusian visa will be able to travel to Russia with the same document. The first draft of the bilateral agreement has already been prepared, writes Soyuznoe Veche.

The sides decided to abandon the idea of a ‘Union's Schengen’ because a single visa works better only when many countries are involved. Belarus and Russia deciding to introduce a single visa would be a bureaucratic nightmare for migration and border services. Moscow and Minsk now recognise that they both provide migration security at the necessary level.

Russia will not occupy Belarus during West 2017 military drills. The head of the official Union of Journalists of Belarus Anatol Liemiašonak criticises an article by Ukrainian military expert Alexei Arestovich's, in which he argues that by 2020, Russia will occupy Belarus and launch a second offensive on Ukraine. Russia and Belarus remain close allies, and military exercises such as West 2017, scheduled for September, take place regularly. Moreover, they always involve
foreign observers, writes *Respublica*.

Belarusian leadership has repeatedly stressed that the Russian military contingent will not remain on the territory of Belarus after the drills are over. The author also points out that the EU itself can be considered occupied, as a large number of US bases and military contingents are located on its territory. Instead, Russia and Belarus need to prepare for informational warfare, as the presidential elections in Russia are approaching and Putin's enemies will do their best to end his political career. This will also threaten Belarus, the author argues.

**Economy**

**Aliaksandr Lukashenka acknowledges the failure of the Belarusian oil industry in 2016.** Last year saw a negative trend in foreign trade in oil products. The government has invested a large amount of money in oil refinery modernisation, but without any result. Undoubtedly, global affairs played an important role, as oil prices fell two and a half times. Nevertheless, managers working in the sector failed to determine a development strategy for the industry. The government also failed to develop a clear course of action, reports *Zviazda*.

This question concerns the independence of Belarus, Lukashenka asserted. The country must do everything to ensure its energy independence and security, but the contribution of oil refinement to the economy of Belarus, unfortunately, is declining. For example, the contribution of the two refineries is now equal to that of the national telecommunications company Beltelecom. 'Once again, I want to stress that we have failed many
modernisation projects. I will not allow the President's decisions to be devaluated and neglected', the Belarusian leader said.

Belarusian industry cannot rely on foreign investments. Belarus Segodnia writes that in 2002-2016, Belarus received $76bn of foreign direct investment. More than half of it ($40bn) came from Russia, $16bn from the UK, $6bn from the US, and $4bn from Switzerland and Cyprus. However, much of the money that came through Cyprus was most likely Russian. Real western capital comes to Belarus very rarely. Even less of these funds reach the real sector of the economy, as they mostly invest in trade and services. Industry is modernised either by state funding or foreign loans.

The current plans for MAZ modernisation will hardly see any foreign financing either. Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Siamaška said that the government plans to invest about $500m in the development of the plant and is looking for sources of money. The article concludes that the proper work of national industry remains a purely domestic concern, and can be supported only by Belarusian taxpayers.

Social

Belarus needs a new national idea. Foreign Minister of Belarus from 1990 to 1994 dr. Piotr Kraŭčanka offered his vision for a national idea on the pages of Belarus Segodnia. According to him, the nation should be built on shared values and identity, market economy, historical memory, language, and consensus on domestic and foreign policy. He also brought up the possibility of introducing private land ownership.
Meanwhile, the revival of the Belarusian language remains crucially important for the formation of the nation. It should be equal to the Russian language in state policies not only formally, but in practise, he argues. Belarusians need to come to a national consensus regarding foreign policy and external economic orientation with the West and East. Kraŭčanka also suggested recognising and honouring national activists of the past, including those of the Belarusian People's Republic, whom the current Belarusian government neglects.

**The government gradually eliminates unemployment.** The level of registered unemployment today is 0.9%; a year ago the figure was 1.2%, reports Belarus Segodnia. The authorities achieved more than last year's goal of 50,000 new jobs, but this year's goal of 70,000 seems more challenging. However, the government may yet meet the targeted figure, as it created 15,742 jobs in the first quarter of 2017, while the plan required 15,000. The figures for each region vary, but the only region that failed to fulfil the plan was Minsk Region. Local officials explain that some new companies registered in the region have not yet managed to create production and employ staff. The other reason lies in the companies' migration to the capital.

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At the One Belt, One Road summit in Beijing, Lukashenka suggested that the project could be used not only as a trading route, but also as a basis for promoting ideas and creating joint innovations.

According to foreign minister Vladimir Makei, during its CSTO chairmanship Belarus will focus on positioning the organisation in the international arena and strengthening its interaction with both the UN and the OSCE.

Belarus seeks to diversify its oil supplies, but refuses to mention alternative sources as long as negotiations are underway.

Experts analyse the consequences of flights departing from Minsk being assigned to the international sectors of Russian airports. Moscow introduced this security measure claiming that Belarus's five-day visa-free regime threatens Russian security.

This and more in the new edition of the Belarus State Press Digest.

Foreign policy

Belarusian President takes part in the ‘One belt, one road' in Beijing. According to Alexander Lukashenka, this global initiative is not only reshaping the world's economic map and creating new growth points, it also represents a new type of international framework. This means integration designed to
harmonise all economic institutions and remove barriers to the free movement of goods, investment, and people.

At the forum, Lukashenka outlined his ideas for deepening and expanding cooperation on the Eurasian continent. In particular, Minsk suggested using the One Belt, One Road structure not only as a trading route, but also as a basis for promoting ideas and creating joint innovations. The Chinese-Belarusian Great Stone Industrial Park could serve as a model.

The Belarusian leader also held talks with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Chairman of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, and Chairman of the Board of the Chinese Corporation CITIC Group Chang Zhenming, reports Belarus Segodnia.

**High-level Chinese officials visit Belarus.** Over the past few weeks, Minsk hosted a number of high-ranking Chinese officials. Most notable was a parliamentary delegation headed by Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and the third most powerful man in the Chinese hierarchy. This level of political contact is evidence of the authenticity of the strategic partnership between the two countries, writes The Minsk Times.

Currently, Belarus is implementing over 30 investment projects financed by Chinese loans, worth circa $6bn. The Great Stone Industrial Park is the largest of them. Lukashenka insists that only high-tech companies with guaranteed sales markets should become residents of the park. Currently, eight residents are registered within the park, including China Merchants Group, Huawei, and ZTE. An imbalance in Belarusian-Chinese trade, however, is raising concern within the Belarusian government. In 2016 it exceeded $2.5bn.
Makei: Belarus will never abandon Russia or threaten neighbouring states. Soyuznoe Veche published quotes from Belarusian foreign minister Uladzimir Makei concerning Belarus-Russia integration. Makei is sure that integration will continue to deepen despite attempts by third parties to destroy them for profit. During its CSTO chairmanship, Belarus will attempt to strengthen the organisation's weight in the world in several areas.

The first is more precise coordination of foreign policy activity. The second is stronger positioning of the CSTO in the international arena and increased interaction with the UN and the OSCE. The minister also commented on concerns from western countries regarding the upcoming military drills West 2017. Some fear Russia is preparing an attack on neighbouring states. However, Belarus has never threatened anyone and will certainly not start now. The country contributes to the stability and security of the region.

Economy

Belarus seeks to diversify its oil supplies. Respublica interviewed the Chairman of the oil concern Belnaftachim, Ihar Liašenka. Over the past 20 years, the concern's production volume has tripled in dollar equivalent. The concern accounts for about 20 percent of industrial production and a third of Belarusian exports. Recently, it has experienced a difficult period due to supply shortage during the Belarus-Russia oil and gas dispute. However, it has also gained experience, which it is taking into account as it forms a long-term development strategy.
Recent disagreements forced the concern to look closely at the possibility of sourcing oil from other regions. The chairman underlines that diversification is conducted not against Russia's interest, but serves as an airbag for the economic sustainability of any industry. He refused to name any country or ways Belarus could receive the alternative oil, as negotiations are underway and their content remains a trade secret.

Experts analyse the consequences of flights originating from Minsk being assigned to the international sectors of Russian airports. Russians have been carrying out border control of aircraft and passengers arriving from and departing for Belarus since 15 May. Flights from Minsk have been transferred to the international sector of Russian airports. Previously they had been treated like domestic flights, writes Belarus Segodnia.

Passengers will now have to show their boarding pass and ID. The Minsk airport and Belavia have made clear that how passengers will be treated in Belarus has not changed, despite new rules in Russia.

Culture

Russification was the result of the industrialisation of Belarus, not Russian politics. Zviazda spoke with famous Belarusian historian and senator of the Council of the
Republic Ihar Marzaliuk about the reason why nationalism failed to take hold in Belarus. Belarus is a link between East and West with inherent national and confessional tolerance. Belarus was the only country in Europe where anti-Semitism did not emerge.

The Absolute Communist Supreme Council of the 11th Convocation elaborated a soft and very precise law on the revival of the Belarusian language. The entire ruling elite, understanding the delicacy and complexity of the problem, supported it. However, the nationalist faction in the council of the 12th convocation did immense harm to it, albeit in a Bolshevik manner.

Russification came to Belarus not from Russia, but as a result of the industrialisation of Belarus in the postwar period. Given the multinational nature of the USSR, the intelligentsia used Russian as the language of mass communication, which was also scientifically more advanced.

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**Soft Belarusisation in Hrodna**

On 20 January, the Belarusian jury and TV audiences selected the band Navi to represent Belarus at the Eurovision Song Contest. For the first time in the history of Eurovision, Belarus's performance will be in the Belarusian language.

This is just one of many small steps that Belarus has recently taken to promote tolerance and respect for the Belarusian
language. Following the Ukrainian conflict, Belarusian authorities are paying more attention to the role of Belarusian in society.

Today, many Belarusians see Hrodna as a cultural capital of the country, which actively popularises the Belarusian language through the service sector. One can find ample evidence of soft Belarusisation in Hrodna cafes, shops, and the sports sphere. However, use of Belarusian will remain superficial until the language becomes equal to Russian in government, media, and education.

Soft Belarusisation in Hrodna

In the 1990s, Hrodna was a hotspot for national awakening. The town had suffered from the country’s largest wave of russification; authorities closed schools, NGOs, and newspapers. Nevertheless, Hrodna managed to preserve many national traditions and institutions, including famous independent newspapers, national movements, and organisations aimed at promoting Belarusian culture, language, and history.

When Lukashenka came to power, the national reawakening came to a grinding halt. The official language policy led to discrimination of the Belarusian language in favour of Russian.

However, in the aftermath of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, language policy shifted to be more sympathetic towards Belarusian. This was first became evident in 2015, when Lukashenka mentioned the policy of soft Belarusisation in a public statement. Additionally, the position of the state towards history began to move away from Belarus's role as part of the Russian Empire and the USSR, focusing instead on its
As a result of the state's new openness towards Belarusisation, several campaigns and initiatives have emerged which aim to popularise the national language and culture.

Already well-known in Minsk, language courses such as Mova Nanova are now attracting more and more students in Hrodna. The courses have existed for several years and are completely free; a single session regularly attracts 30-40 people. Popular musicians and writers are frequent guests at Mova Nanova, and the courses take a flexible approach to studying Belarusian, involving culture and history.

Another recent campaign, initiated by Hrodna historian Andrej Vaškievič, actively affixes signs with historical names to various buildings in the city centre. The historian created a petition and submitted a proposal to the local toponymical commission, which soon approved the project. He was motivated by the need for preserving historical heritage and the Belarusian language in both Cyrillic and Latin scripts. Soon, in February or March, the historical names of 16 streets in Hrodna will be added to the buildings of Hrodna.

**Does the service sector speak Belarusian?**

In June 2016, Euroopt, one of the largest Belarusian supermarket chains, opened its first store with signs in Belarusian. The store in Hrodna is now the first large retailer in the entire country to carry on business in the Belarusian language. However, the staff can barely communicate in Belarusian, except for simple phrases.

Several shops and cafes in Hrodna are trying to promote the language by employing Belarusian-speaking personnel or
organising events. For example, the largest shoe store in Hrodna, as well as several underwear and sport brands, organise Belarusian culture days. One shop which particularly stands out and attracts many tourists with its hand-made souvenirs is Etnakrama, where the personnel speaks exclusively Belarusian.

However, some shops and cafes limit their understanding of national identity to aesthetics. For example, the jewelry store 'B'ucik' appeared after 2014 with a Belarusian name and signs. Nevertheless, addressing sellers in Belarusian leads to confusion. One of the oldest restaurants in Hrodna, Karchma, has a traditional Belarusian name and offers a variety of national dishes. Despite this fact, the menu is only available in Russian and English, and the staff speaks Russian.

When soft Belarusisation became popular for young people, several popular cafes partly switched to a Belarusian-language policy. Thus, one of the most popular cafes is now *Nasha Kava*; the menu is in Belarusian and staff can speak the language. This trend is also reflected by the appearance of Mova Boxes.

Mova Box (Language box) is a project of the Belarusian mobile operator Velcom. The idea consists of spreading Belarusian-language books by putting them in designated boxes. Although the boxes take up little space, only a few cafes in Hrodna are supporting the campaign. Moreover, cafes which do have such boxes tend to have a generally more Belarusian flavour.

**Sport teams as language**
2016 has also been a year for soft Belarusisation in the world of sport. In 2016, the Belarusian national football team changed its uniform; it now features the national ornament. Nevertheless, police are still detaining fans sporting non-official symbols, such as the oppositional white-red-white flag. One of the most successful basketball teams, Tsmoki, uploaded promo-video in Belarusian which quickly became popular. It seems that sports teams too are following the trend of soft Belarusisation.

Nioman, a local football team in Hrodna, has also recently begun promoting the Belarusian language. For several years now, the team's social media pages have been increasingly favouring Belarusian language. Many football fans are starting to carry Belarusian national symbols to the matches. Recently, the team shared a video in which a Cameroonian player wishes citizens of Hrodna a Happy Christmas in Belarusian, pointing to the team's commitment to Belarusian-language policy.

Even though Belarusian language and culture has made significant gains in recent years in Hrodna, the service sector could still do more to support the language. Cafes and shops have become the most active language promoters in the service sphere. Nevertheless, they mostly take only small steps towards Belarusisation, and their employees often have no more than a tenuous grasp of Belarusian.

In an authoritarian regime, the effect of Belarusisation strongly depends on the position of Lukashenka, who seems to
look more more favourably on the Belarusin cause at the moment. Further logical steps for the Belarusian cause could include introducing Belarusian education on different levels and popularising television and pop culture in Belarusian language. However, until official documents become translated into Belarusian and officials start to speak Belarusian as often as they speak Russian, the language will remain a formality.

Nevertheless, an increase of positive trends in language policy is cause for optimism that the language will not be forgotten by the nation. More and more initiatives are trying to popularise Belarusian in narrow niches, such as language courses or historical projects. Getting involved in such initiatives not only contributes to preserving the language but also engages citizens.

Law on parasitism, Eduard Paĺčys released, non-formal education council – civil society digest

Kastryčnický Ekanamičny Forum (KEF 2016) took place in Minsk with over 500 participants including high level stakeholders from government, international (financial) institutions, business and civil society. Minsk Dialogue holds a conference on pan-European integration.

Small vendors draft People's Law. Trade unions and human rights organisations discuss a strategy against the law on parasitism. DisRights Office presents an alternative report on
women rights with disabilities. Eduard Palčys is released in the courtroom with a 21 month restriction of freedom sentence.

Public Council for the development of informal education will be created in Belarus. Mova Nanova announces competition #-janiebajasiasprabavać.

This and more in the new edition of civil society digest.

Expert events

**Kastryčnicky Ekanamičny Forum took place in Minsk.** Kastryčnicki (October) Economic Forum, KEF is held for the 4th consecutive year and considered the most influential economic event of the year. Organised by independent think tanks, the conference on 3-4 November gathered over 500 local and international experts, including welcome speeches by Deputy Head of Belarus Presidential Administration, Head of the EU Delegation, etc.

**Minsk Dialogue expert initiative** held the conference on Pan-European Integration on 27 October. Deputy Minister of Belarus MFA, Minister of the Eurasian Economic Commission, Head of EU Delegation in Minsk attended the conference. This was the fifth conference in two years under the auspices of the Minsk Dialogue that gathers in Minsk representatives of the world expert community to discuss pressing issues in the region.
Public policy initiatives

**Small vendors draft People's Law.** The decree by and for entrepreneurs has been developed to show what entrepreneurs consider fair, including all the conditions to import goods to Belarus. People's Law was created as an alternative to the state laws, unfavourable for the entrepreneurs’ activity. The *Perspectiva* NGO that protects the small vendors’ rights leads the process.

**Strategy against the Law On Parasitism discussed.** The presidential decree #3 widely known as “the parasite law” violates a number of legal acts. The Trade Union for workers of the radio and electronics industry, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and other human rights organisations are going to present a strategy of how to stand up for your rights for people already affected by the decree or those who will experience it in the future.

Human rights

**Alternative report on women rights of the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.** The report was presented along with the official report of Belarus in late October, on the 65th session of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The alternative report offers a number of specific recommendations to improve the situation of women with disabilities in Belarus.
Gender Centre finally denied registration. The Belarus Supreme Court rejected the appeal of the Mahilioŭ Gender Centre Rose to get registration. Earlier the Mahilioŭ justice department refused to register the NGO on the basis of inconsistency of certain items of the Statute. Namely, the NGO objective to eradicate gender-based discrimination "does not comply with the right to equality of women and men fixed in the Belarus legislation."

Eduard Paĺčys sentenced to 21 months freedom restriction and released at the courtroom. On 28 October, Eduard Paĺčys, or pen name John Silver, recognised as a political prisoner was found guilty of inciting hatred and production or distribution of porn materials and sentenced to 1 year 9 months of freedom restriction, without transfer to a penal colony. Meanwhile, policemen compiled over 70 administrative reports against those activists who picketed near the court building during the hearing.

Upcoming events

MediaManagement Forum to be held on 17-19 November. This will be a three-day platform for publishers, editors, journalists and Belarusian CSOs to discuss the local media market, whether the Belarusian media and media projects fit into the global trends. The forum is organised by the IBB School of Journalism and Useful Competences Studio (Hrodna), in partnership with the Deutsche Welle Akademie (Berlin).

Global Entrepreneurship Week (GEW) to be held on 14-20 November. Belarus has joined the largest entrepreneurial initiative around the world since 2011. Coordinated by Bel.Biz
company, GEW activities take place in all Belarusian regions and include International Entrepreneurship Forum, BEL.BIZ Battle startup competition, Mentor of the Year contest, startup networking events, etc. More than 2,000 people take part in GEW Belarus.

**Belarusian language promotion**

**Master class of a people’s champion.** Free courses of Belarusian language *Mova Nanova/Language Anew* announces a competition #janiebajusiasprabavač (I am not afraid to try). All people who are ready to talk in Belarusian all the day and then describe their impressions are invited to participate. An author of the best story will receive a super prize – an exclusive 2-hour training in Thai boxing from Vitalė Hurkoŭ, multiple world champion.

**Belarusian weekends in cinema.** *Kinakong* non-profit initiative and the Minsk cinema Victory start a series of film screenings in Belarusian. The shows are scheduled on a monthly basis and will take place on the weekends. The first Belarusian weekend presented the *Amazing Grace* on 22-23 October. This is the first attempt to run on a regular basis films in Belarusian. The first two shows are free.

**Other**

**Public Council for the development of non-formal education to be created in Belarus.** On 14 October, representatives of 13 networks and CSOs gathered at the Association for Life Long Education's office to discuss the idea. Key areas, format and Statute of the Public Council are expected to agree on the first institutional meeting.

**Belarus in Focus 2016 announced** by Belarus in Focus Information Office in partnership with Press Club Belarus.
This is the 6th edition of an international competition for journalists writing about Belarus in international media. The contest accepts articles about Belarus published during 2016. The articles will be evaluated by an international jury consisting of top media professionals. Deadline is 22 January.

**Movement For Freedom elected a new chairperson.** The reporting and election conference was held on 16 October, in Minsk. Juraś Hubarevič got voices of 59 delegates and replaced Aliaksandr Milinkievič who led the organisation since its foundation in 2007.

**Sviatlana Karaliova re-elected as head of the BNP Coordinating Committee.** On 22 October in Minsk, the regular conference of the Belarusian National Platform (BNP) of the EaP CSF was attended by about 50 CSO representatives. The conference discussed the EU-Belarus relations in the post-electoral phase and elected a new Coordinating Committee with Sviatlana Karaliova as the head. Ulad Vialička, the EaP CSF co-chair believes that BNP may become a party of currently bilateral Belarus-EU talks.

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

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**The Belarusian language in education:** a reluctant
revival?

On 7 October, Alexander Lukashenka criticised education officials for the lack of Belarusian language instruction in schools. According to him, “because of amateurs in the Ministry of Education, it has come to the point where pupils have six English classes per week, but only two of Belarusian language”.

Such a statement may come as a surprise, given that Lukashenka is largely responsible for Belarus's longstanding policy of Russification. In 1994, when Lukashenka became president, three-quarters of Belarusian school children studied in Belarusian, compared to only 13.7% now. In universities, the number of students who study in Belarusian is a mere 0.1%.

The authorities are currently changing their policy towards the Belarusian language. The appointment of Alena Anisim of the Belarusian Language Society to the Parliament shows that the Belarusian authorities do favour gradual measures promoting Belarusian. However, these measures may not necessarily lead to a revival of the Belarusian language, but rather simply prevent it from disappearing from the Belarusian education system.

Lukashenka and Belarusian medium education

In the eyes of many, the person who contributed most to the decline of the Belarusian language over the past twenty years would be Alexander Lukashenka. After coming to power, the new head of state re-implemented the Russification policy of the late Soviet Union, put in place after World War II.

The Russian language's domination of the Belarusian linguistic
landscape would come as a surprise to those living in Belarus in the first half of the 20th century. In 1950, 85% of newspapers were published in Belarusian and in 1955 95% of schools operated in the language. Nevertheless, by 1969 one third of Belarusian pupils were not taught the Belarusian language at all. The role of the Belarusian language declined until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

When Lukashenka became president in 1994, three-quarters of Belarusian students studied in Belarusian. In 1990-1995 Belarus could boast four times as many publications in Belarusian than ever before in the past 400 years combined. However, after his election, the leader of Belarus asserted that "the Belarusian language is an impoverished one" and returned Belarus to a policy of Russification.

Lack of Belarusian language in the education system

Lukashenka’s policy resulted in only 10.5% of preschool children, 13.7% of pupils and 0.1% students studying in Belarusian medium schools in the 2015/16 academic year, according to official statistics.

None of the 52 universities in Belarus use Belarusian as the main language of instruction. It seems that the only students whose whole education programme is in Belarusian are those majoring in Belarusian language and literature.

Moreover, some teachers are no longer teaching classes in Belarusian due to the internationalisation of the Belarusian education system. As one professor from the Belarusian State University told the author, he no longer gives his lectures on Belarusian foreign policy in Belarusian because Turkmen students could not understand him.
The case of school children is also problematic, as it is often difficult to find Belarusian-language teaching materials, calling official figures into question. On 30 August, Radio Liberty published a video in which a journalist attended a huge Education Fair and found few publications in Belarusian on subjects such as geography or computer science. This means that although schools are supposedly holding some classes in Belarusian, they are in fact often conducted in Russian.

Many Belarusian cities, including Viciebsk, a large regional centre with 350 thousand inhabitants, have no Belarusian-language school groups at all. In nearby Mahiliou, another large regional centre, only one pupil is studying in Belarusian.

This is a contrast to Minsk, where several Belarusian medium schools remain, and they enjoy a prestigious reputation. In 2016, citizens of Minsk even took turns waiting in line in the evening to be the first in the morning to submit documents to apply for Belarusian medium School №23.

**Not letting the Belarusian language die**

After the start of the conflict in Ukraine, the Belarusian authorities have changed their approach to the Belarusian language, expanding its use in the public space. In July 2014, Lukashenka made his first speech in Belarusian in decades. However, official statements regarding expansion of the Belarusian language in education have so far proved to have more hype than substance.

Even if the government adds one more Belarusian language class per week to school programmes, it will not change the fact
that all other classes will remain in Russian. Moreover, Belarus lacks higher education institutions in Belarusian. Therefore, many people do not see the point of learning exclusively in Belarusian at the school level.

Analytical Paper: Belarusian Identity - The Impact of Lukashenka's Rule

The regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka rejected the ethno-national model of state suggested by his predecessors in the early 1990s. Instead, he restored a soviet style “statist nation” with a centralised bureaucratic machine at its core.

Lukashenka's words recall previous statements from the Minister of Education Mikhail Zhuraukou. After taking office in 2014, Zhuraukou stated that "geography and the history of Belarus should be studied in the Belarusian language." However, so far nothing has changed.

Nevertheless, it is possible that the authorities may be able to slightly increase the role of the Belarusian language in society. This may be the reason why the regime appointed Alena Anisim, vice-head of the Belarusian Language Society, as one of the two democratic leaning MPs to the Parliament. It seems that she lacks any political agenda other than promoting the Belarusian language.

Moreover, the Belarusian language is no longer a political issue for Lukashenka, as it was in the 1990s when his Russophile policy opposed the Belarus-centric vision of the Belarusian Popular Front. Having marginalised this opposition group, Lukashenka himself can afford to take a more pro-Belarusian stance. Moreover, he lost his chance of becoming president of Russia, so his new aim thus became strengthening Belarus.

The leader of Belarus is unlikely to want more Belarusian medium schools, but one more Belarusian language lesson in Russian medium schools seems possible. It seems that the
authorities remain reluctant to revive the Belarusian language, but also want to avoid its disappearance.