

Congress Of Belarusian Studies Scheduled for October in Kaunas

Organisers of the International Congress of Belarusian Studies officially published its list of sections and panels for the upcoming event.

This year's Congress will include a wide range topics such as culture, Belarusian language translations of the Bible and problems facing the modernisation of the Belarusian economy.

The Congress remains a rare opportunity for scholars from all over the world to gather with their colleagues from Belarus. This year it will take place the 3-5 October in Kaunas.

The Congress has already become a recognisable brand and an academic must for researchers and experts who professionally deal with Belarus.

Kaunas will be hosting a few hundred international participants for the event for the fourth time. During the Congress' gathering, this sleepy Lithuanian city becomes a vibrant meeting point for researchers of Belarus.

Belarus Digest spoke with Aliaksei Lastouski, Head of the Department of Modern History at the Belarusian Collegium and a senior analyst at the institute for political studies *Political Sphere*, which is the main organiser of the Congress, in order to understand what it is all about.

Who Comes to the Congress in Kaunas?

The Congress has already become a permanent fixture of autumn in Kaunas. The International Congress of Belarusian Studies took place there for the first time back in 2011 as an

initiative of Andrei Kazakevich, the Director of the institute for political studies *Political Sphere*.

Today the Congress remains the largest event fully devoted to research on Belarus. "We expect around 350-400 scholars this year", Aliaksei Lastouski told Belarus Digest.

Belarusian researchers constitute a majority of the participants of the Congress. Other scholars come primarily from neighbouring Poland, Lithuania, but also from more remote and less obvious places, like Japan. Last year nearly 400 scholars from 16 countries took part in the Congress.

Kaunas: Connecting Scholars from Belarus

The large number of participants from countries other than Belarus proves that there is indeed a niche for Belarus-oriented research. The event fills this gap and facilitates researchers coming together. The popularity of the Congress also demonstrates the demand from the Belarusian scholarly community to meet and communicate with their colleagues from other countries. Belarusian scholars continue to carry out their work in stifling isolation, Aliaksei Lastouski argues.

The organisers of the Congress aim to provide participants with an opportunity to meet up, present their research, as well as discuss their ideas and potential opportunities for future cooperation. Indeed, the organisers guarantee facilities, so the participants can busy themselves networking with other scholars.

Participants stay in the same hotels, have lunch in the same place, and have ample opportunity to talk during coffee breaks – apart from more practical purposes, it also helps to create a specific sense of solidarity, according to Lastouski.

The Congress also promotes researchers of Belarusian area studies, awarding them annually for the best Belarus-related publication in humanities and social sciences. What clearly

distinguishes this event from others, is its multidisciplinary nature. This year the list of sections to be covered is to include economics, politics and society.

The Congress: "a Zone of Freedom", but is not Politicised

According to Lastouski, the Congress remains a "zone of freedom", where academics can freely present and discuss their research without fear of being censored, unlike in Belarus. The organisers openly welcome scholars with various views.

But at the same time, the Congress is not a political platform. The event should be regarded as a platform for constructive dialogue where its participants can freely discuss differing views on the development of the country.

Although the Congress specifically brings together Belarus-oriented scholars, and a majority of the researchers who attend are Belarusian, it takes place in neighbouring Lithuania rather than in Belarus. The organisers decided to organise it outside of the country in order to minimise the risks associated with potential academic censorship.

This is an issue that a number of Belarusian-related events and organisations have faced and, as a result, have moved to Lithuania in search of more favourable conditions. For example, the Belarus Research Council holds its events in Vilnius and the institute for political studies *Political Sphere* is also registered in Lithuania.

Moving Back to Belarus

Belarus, naturally, would be the most ideal place to organise these events event. "Kaunas is just a temporary place for the Congress", Lastouski explains. Given the current circumstances, the city has simply several advantages over other places outside Belarus.

These include its high quality infrastructure and affordable

accommodation for the congress' participants, even for those coming from further abroad. Organisational support from the Kaunas-based Vytautas Magnus University is an additional argument supporting holding the congress there. "I hope that the situation in Belarus will improve, and there will no longer be any restrictions or barriers to organise it there one day", Aliaksei Lastouski explains – but for now, this is just wishful thinking.

Over the past couple of years Lithuania has become a hub for a number of Belarus-oriented events. Clearly, Belarus' neighbour offers something that is scarcely available in Belarus, as true in the case of academic events – a better environment for discussion of pressing political, economic and social issues.

Lithuanian cities, such as Kaunas and Vilnius, are well-known for hosting not only the International Congress of Belarusian Studies, but also the European Humanities University and other conferences and seminars devoted to Belarus. It seems that both Lithuania and Belarusian civil society derive benefits from this situation. Lithuanian receives financial benefits and provides support, while Belarusian scholars and activists can freely work on their projects.

The organisers of the Congress have already closed the call for submissions for individual applications. However, anyone interested in the event, can register to attend one or another section as a guest. The registration form is available [here](#).

How to Make the ESSYB

Scholarships More Effective? An OESS Alumnus Perspective

This autumn nearly 200 aspiring students will start their studies at different European universities with the support of the European Scholarship Scheme for Young Belarusians (ESSYB) managed by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

It provided them an excellent EU-funded opportunity to overcome the country's isolation and to build the network of highly qualified and motivated peers interested in democratic and prosperous development of Belarus.

However, growing concerns about effectiveness and transparency of the programme, such as granting scholarships based on the programme platform not available to the public, undermine the credibility of the ESSYB scheme. This article puts forward a few ideas on how to make the scheme a more effective and respected mechanism for promoting democratic changes in the country.

The recommendations include increasing public awareness about existence of the programme, ensuring its transparency and possibly reconsidering the eligibility and selection criteria to better target promising catalysts of positive change.

Critical Engagement to Support Belarusian Youth

After the 2010 presidential election in Belarus and [the crackdown on opposition activists and NGOs](#), the European Commission initiated the [Open Europe Scholarship Scheme](#) (OESS) under its policy of critical engagement.

The financial proposal ([action fiche](#)) for the programme focused on providing young Belarusians with an education at high-quality universities around Europe to prepare prominent

leaders who can significantly contribute to the modernisation and democratisation of Belarus.

The Belarusian government has not accommodated this need to date [despite the existing proposals](#), unlike Russia and Kazakhstan which understood the importance of preparing international specialists at top universities and introduced similar funding programmes such as [Bolashak](#).

The OESS Steering Committee selected 77 aspiring students out of more than 3,600 applicants for the first intake and provided them full scholarships in 2012. The donor agreed to expand funding following the implementation of the first phase and provided nearly \$11 million for the second intake of 2014.

The implementer of the programme also rebranded it as the European Scholarship Scheme for Young Belarusians. However, this time the fund received only 395 applications for the total 170 master's degree scholarships available in 2013, meaning that almost every second applicant for a master's degree got a full scholarship.

Recipe for Success: Rewarding Merit and Commitment to Belarus

While other scholarship programmes such as the UK's Chevening, Clarendon or Weidenfeld unite scholars on the basis of academic excellence, professional or leadership potential, the ESSYB scheme does not openly highlight the need to have outstanding achievements in specific fields.

Motivation serves as the main criterion for the selection of candidates, thus making it [easier to abuse the scheme by opportunistic applicants](#). In the absence of any specific requirement to prove a commitment to Belarus through past actions or work, it is not a difficult task to present oneself as a liberal freedom fighter with words alone.

A one-page letter of motivation with kind words about democracy and human rights, not substantiated by relevant

previous experience, provides an applicant with a fair chance to land a full scholarship for business or finance studies in Paris or London. This may happen even if the background of such applicants indicates that they are not particularly willing to engage in Belarus-related activities, scholarships aside.

While the commitment to allocate 200 scholarships in one year deserves praise, the potential influence and quality of the subsequent education of scholars can possibly play a more important role than sheer numbers. Degree programmes at the best European universities usually cost more than in the universities of countries neighbouring Belarus, but they also often provide better education, experience and networks.

increase awareness among Belarusian students about the scheme through advertising and public presentations

In addition, the management can make more efforts to increase awareness among Belarusian students about the scheme through advertising and public presentations. In 2013, the application season had a very small window for students to apply, as it opened on 15 November and closed on 8 December.

It effectively lasted less than a month and there was no extensive PR campaign neither in print media nor on the Internet. Many young people, especially outside Minsk, did not even know about this great scholarship opportunity. The number of submitted applications and the eligibility criteria demonstrate that the process could be more competitive and inclusive.

Transparency Issues Undermine Credibility

Currently the implementer bases scholarship decisions on criteria formulated in the programme platform that is not available to the public. In addition, the selection process relies on the pre-screening criteria some of which had been

formulated or announced after the application round was closed.

For example, this year selectors automatically rejected several holders of offers for admission to the Master of Public Policy degree at the University of Oxford. The reason lied in having a master's degree from another university, though the ESSYB website did not explicitly forbid such applications as ineligible.

The financial proposal published on the European Parliament's website stipulated that scholarships should be allocated regardless of previous academic experience to candidates in the age range of 18-26 years old for any level of study.

Nevertheless, the implementer excluded PhD candidates and master's degree holders from getting scholarships and distributed some of them among individuals with the age as high as 32 years old. Such inconsistencies in making scholarship decisions undermine the credibility of the scheme if they are not backed up by a set of arguments easily available to the public.

establishing clear and transparent eligibility and selection criteria in advance

Taking into consideration the large sums of EU taxpayers' money involved in funding the project, the implementer may consider establishing clear and transparent eligibility and selection criteria in advance. In addition, making a complete list of previous and current scholarship holders publicly available could help to ensure the transparency of the decisions for stakeholders and the broader Belarusian society.

Towards an Effective Mechanism for Democratic Change

The ESSYB scholarship scheme meets the needs of young Belarusians who are often deprived of an opportunity for

quality and unbiased higher education and experience isolation that comes about as a result of Belarus' exclusion from [the Bologna Process](#).

Therefore, it should continue as one of the most relevant and useful EU-funded programmes in Belarus. It provides its beneficiaries an unrivalled opportunity to acquire international experience and expand their knowledge to the benefit of their native country.

To increase the effectiveness of the scholarship scheme, the programme implementer should consider marketing it more extensively in Belarus. It should also consider reviewing its eligibility and selection criteria to support highly qualified young people for whom an additional master's degree or PhD would help to produce more value added for Belarusian society.

prioritise candidates with experience of working for positive change in Belarus and those with significant achievements or potential

The programme administration should also prioritise candidates with experience of working for positive change in Belarus and those with significant achievements or potential. This is where the greatest value of the programme may well lie.

Such requirements would increase the participation of youth in civil society and associated activities aimed at the promotion of reforms in Belarus, as candidates would know that they have to prove their commitment to obtain a scholarship.

In addition, the programme implementer should consider providing scholars with incentives to come back to the home country and publish statistics on how many scholars actually return to Belarus and how much involved they are in Belarus-related activities at home or abroad.

This would increase the level of respect for scholarship holders, largely because the public would see the fact of

having an ESSYB scholarship as indicating a set of positive character qualities and a track record of meaningful activities for Belarus. The network of scholars would be stronger, more motivated, professional and united by the common goal of making Belarus a better place to live.

Belarusian Science: Gerontocratic, Isolated, and Unproductive

At the end of March, Aleksander Lukashenka gathered the management of Belarus' scientific institutions and top government officials to discuss the problems of Belarusian science.

The meeting revealed that much of what the National Academy of Sciences brands as its cutting-edge achievements are simply revamped successful projects from Soviet times and have no breakthrough value today.

Two major factors that explain the low productivity of Belarusian science have to do with ageing researchers and their international isolation. These problems stem, among other things, from poor financing and restrictive bureaucratic rules.

Whereas the government cannot overcome its budget constraints quickly and increase expenditures on research-and-development dramatically, it could, at least, change the rules that hinder the internationalisation of Belarusian science.

Outdated Science

In Aleksander Lukashenka's opinion, Belarusian scientists fail to deliver world-class results. At the meeting in March, he named only a few noticeable achievements from recent years: the creation of a supercomputer, a Belarusian satellite, a medicine that fights cancer, transgenic goats, and the establishment of a centre for cellular technology.

Independent experts, however, criticise even these achievements. According to the former President of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) Alexander Vaitovich, the satellite that the authorities take pride in has only one Belarusian component and its creation dates back to the 1970s. And the widely advertised Belarusian supercomputer hardly breaks into a Top-30 list of similar technologies in a ranking of Commonwealth of Independent States, not to mention world rankings.

The statistics of the State Committee of Science and Technologies that demonstrate a 75% growth in the number of registered intellectual property patents in recent years were not very impressive for Lukashenka. He demanded real global-level breakthroughs that would expedite the economic development of the country.

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But the situation has failed to improve recently. And at least two factors account for the current state of things: a growing gerontocracy and international isolation of Belarusian scientists.

Growing Gerontocracy

Compared to 1985, the number of scientists in Belarus has decreased by 30% and their average age has risen considerably. According to a study by Andrei Laurukhin of the [European](#)

[Humanities University](#), today pensioners make up more than 60% of all the professors and more than 40% of the *kandidatskaya* degree (a PhD analogue) holders. In 1988 these numbers stood at 35.8% and 5.9% respectively.

Humanities, social and natural sciences have experienced the biggest damage. For example, the share of humanities representatives in the overall number of Belarusian scientists has faced a sevenfold decline since 1988.

Financial shortages appear to be the main culprit behind why many young Belarusians refuse to choose careers in research or look for academic opportunities abroad. In 2013, all scientific organisations combined in Belarus received about \$250 million in government funding, which equalled 0.46% of the GDP. Companies' investments in R&D, according to the State Committee of Science and Technologies, were even smaller.

Compared with developed countries, these figures look modest. The average level in the EU stays at 2-2.5% of the GDP. And the world's average is about 1.7% of a country's GDP.

In a regional context, Belarus also lags behind most of its neighbours. According to the Research and Development Expenditure study by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, in 2012 Belarus outperformed only Lithuania.



Such low numbers result, among other things, in poor salaries for Belarusian scientists. The average salary of a NAS associate is around \$450-550 a month. To put it into a regional perspective, the average salary at the Russian Academy of Sciences hovers around \$1,100. One can hardly expect the best Belarusian scientists to stay in research institutions at home considering such a striking imbalance.

Not surprisingly, therefore, an estimated 4,000-5,000 researchers have left Belarus since the mid-1990s. And fewer

and fewer young Belarusians aspire to become scientists in their native country.

Scientific Isolation

Another reason for the low productivity of Belarusian science – its international isolation – results from specific government policies in this field. Thus, one can even call it self-isolation.

In 2004, a presidential decree established a list of journals regarded as scientific in Belarus. The list contains no original English-language periodicals. In other words, the leading international academic journals with the highest impact factor indicators have no proper legal status in Belarus. Whether Belarusian researchers can refer to such “illegal” journals in their dissertations depends on the goodwill of the Highest Attestation Commission (VAK), a governmental body that oversees the awarding of advanced academic degrees.

Obviously, this does not stimulate Belarusian researchers to monitor world-leading journals and submit their papers to them. Instead, they have an incentive to keep track of Russian language journals, the majority of which do not enjoy real recognition by the international scientific community.

As a result, Belarusian scientists and research institutes remain chronic outsiders in the Hirsch index (h-index), which measures the productivity and impact of scientific publications in the world. Belarusian researchers’ impact is absolutely marginal in a global context, which also points to the isolation issue.

Last year, only three Belarusian academic institutes had a reasonably good h-index:

- The Scientific and Research Institute of Physics and Chemistry Problems at the Belarusian State University;

- The Physics Institute at the National Academy of Sciences;
- The Belarusian State University.

Others had a low or zero h-index, which means that the majority of Belarusian researchers make no contribution to global science at all. Their publications go unnoticed by colleagues across the globe and stay within the attention of very limited audience.

One may argue that the Belarusian authorities cannot resolve the issue of low budget allocations on sciences very quickly as the [economic situation](#) in the country grows more precarious by the quarter.

Within the existing economic model, they even have difficulty stimulating R&D expenditures by companies. Still, they could at least amend the restrictive rules that literally keep Belarusian science isolated from the rest of the world.

This would be a more effective measure than increasing the productivity of Belarusian science by means of multiple meetings in the presidential office.

Third International Congress of Belarusian Studies Kicks Off in Lithuania (Online Broadcast)

On 11 October, the Third International Congress of Belarusian Studies starts in Kaunas, a city in the west of Lithuania. The

Congress remains a unique event which brings together many scholars of Belarus.

Some call the event an academic supermarket, as it combines a great variety of topics and experts. In addition to panel and sanction discussions, the organisers will arrange presentations on various books and scholarly projects. This year, an international panel will also select the best scholarly works of the past year and reward their authors.

Though most of the participants are Belarusians, foreign researchers have become a significant part of the convention, and in some sections they may even constitute a majority. This conference displays researchers who focus on Belarus at an international level and breaks down the isolation of Belarusian academia.

Online Broadcast of the Congress

Belarus Digest will live broadcast selected sessions from the [congress programme](#) at the following times (UTC+02:00, Lithuanian time zone).

Friday, 11 October 10.00-11.20, 11.50-13.20

Saturday, 12 October 17.00-21.00

Sunday, 13 October 12.30-14.00

History of the Congress

The International Congress of Belarusian Studies will start its work for the third time. Since 2011 the congress takes place annually, bringing together a large range of researchers, journalists, civil society leaders and students. It remains the [largest event of scholars](#) and experts working on Belarus. This year, about 400 researchers will come to Kaunas from 16 countries.

Deutsche Welle compared the event with an academic

supermarket. This year, experts will cover a range of topics from the problems of transformation of the economy and the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and neighboring states, to politics and international relations, culture and historical heritage, gender rules and psychology. Multiple parallel sessions will take place simultaneously.

Among other events, Makoto Hayasaka, a professor from the Tokyo Institute of Technology, will present his book "History of a Borderland: Speculations on the Past of Belarus". The Centre for Transition Studies will present [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), the only English language peer-reviewed periodical of Belarusian studies.

This year, for the first time, the congress will recognize the best publications in the field of social sciences and the humanities with a special award. 28 nominees have a place on the short list, among them a contributing author to Belarus Digest, Vadzim Smok.

The Institute of Political Studies "Political Sphere" remains the main organiser of the Congress. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, the German Marshall Fund, the International Consortium "EuroBelarus"/Forum Syd, Nordic Council of Ministers are funding the event. Vytautas Magnus University and Institute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as well as the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies and an online magazine "New Europe" feature among the other organisers of the event. It is noteworthy that all these organisations are registered abroad.

Breaking Through The Isolation of Researchers

The Director of the Institute of Political Studies Andrej Kazakevich explained to Belarus Digest that "two-thirds of the participants will be Belarusians. In addition to Belarusians, neighbours of Belarus like Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania will also be well represented. Only a few people represent Western

Europe, USA or Asia." Although most participants are Belarusians, the presence of other researchers remains prominent. Last year, in the literary section there were more foreign researchers than Belarusians.

Though the event remains purely academic, the authorities of Belarus have not yet developed their own official line towards it. Last year, Siarhiej Tokc, a historian from Hrodna, could not visit the conference. The administration of the university where he teaches said that his speech was undesirable and prevented him from going. However, organiser Andrej Kazakevich said that such cases happen very rarely. On the other hand, last year, even the staff from the Information and Analytical Centre of the Presidential Administration and representatives from Belarus State University took part in the event.

In today's Belarus universities often face restrictions regarding certain participants or topics. The event in Lithuania is free from such constraints and provides a unique platform for debates and exchange of ideas. It also increases the quality of Belarusian studies and helps integrate Belarusians into the global research community.

Live Broadcast: 2nd International Congress of Belarusian Studies

Around 200 scholars from around the world involved in studying Belarus and East-Central Europe are taking part in the 2nd International Congress of Belarusian Studies which takes place on September 28-30, 2012 in Kaunas, Lithuania.

The Congress brought together researchers of social sciences and humanities, and offer the discussion of regional development issues, Belarus relations with other countries, and other topical problems.

Belarus Digest broadcasted the event on 28-30 September.

For further details on the program of the Congress, its organisers and partners, please visit [web-site of the Congress](#).

Rethinking Belarus After 20 Years of Independence

On 23 September 2011 the first annual congress of Belarusian social science scholars will begin in Lithuania. It will bring together a wide spectrum of political scientists, historians, sociologists and experts from other disciplines. Belarus Digest is the event's partner. We interviewed Andrei Kazakevich – who chairs the organizing committee of the first International Congress of Belarusian Studies.

BD: Why do you organise this Congress and why outside Belarus?

Initially, we planned to organize an annual event only for political scientists. But then we found out that there were no regular social science conferences for Belarusian social science scholars. In the past, there were similar conferences on Belarusian philology and linguistics. But political

scientists, sociologists, philosophers, historians and representatives of other disciplines do not have any regular congresses. We decided to broaden the congress concept and to offer space for public and professional communication to all scientists engaged in Belarusian studies. political science, history, sociology and history of ideas will constitute the core of the Congress.

The event will be held in Lithuania because it was impossible to find an academic institution in Belarus, which would be willing to host such event without considerable organisational and ideological obstacles. We did not want to have any restrictions of topics and participants. The only way was to look for partners abroad.

Vytautas Magnus University In Kaunas agreed to become the main academic partner of the congress. Kaunas is home to a number of scholars interested in Belarusian studies. In addition, the location is convenient for many participants.

BD: What were other challenges you faced?

Formulating the main idea of the congress was challenging. We wanted to bring together as broad community of specialists as possible. Last year we also tried to establish connections with the Belarusian National Academy of Science and other state-controlled academic institutions. Prior to 19 December we had promising discussions. But after the presidential elections it all stopped. As a result, we will not have a full-scale cooperation with state institutions, which could facilitate better communication between researchers. However, there will be researchers from state institutions in their individual capacity.

BD: Is there enough interest in the event?

Initially we wanted to attract around 100-130 scientists, experts and analysts. But following the announcement the

interest was much greater. Currently we have over 230 applications. The largest number of participants comes from the following countries – Belarus, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Lithuania and United Kingdom. Other countries also have representatives. We even have applicants from rather exotic countries for Belarusian studies such as Japan and Turkey.

BD: Would you be able to accommodate all interested to participate?

We have not decided what to do with such a high interest. Nearly all people are established researchers, almost no students. We have very limited financial resources and currently looking for additional support to accommodate all participants. Unfortunately, income of Belarusian scholars have doped dramatically as a result of economic crisis and it became much more difficult for them to cover travel and accommodation expenses.

BD: What do you expect as the main outcome of the event?

The main goal of the Congress is to create a platform for wide communication between social scientists and experts, to improve their regional and European engagement, to increase professional mobility. The target group is Belarusian research community in the wider sense – inside and outside of Belarus. People will be able to present their projects, to meet each other, to discuss new ideas and initiate joint projects.

The deadline to submit materials for presentation had already passed. Preliminary program of the Congress will be available on the Congress web [site](#) in late August. Those who want to participate in the congress without making a presentation should contact the organizers at icbs@palityka.org to register. We do not charge any fee on participants.

We hope to welcome many of Belarus Digest readers at the

Congress in September.