The unexpected rise of Belarusian universities in international rankings

According to recent QS World University Rankings, two Belarusian universities appeared on the list of the best 959 universities in the world. The Belarusian State University received a higher rating than all universities in Poland and Lithuania.

Nevertheless, despite the high position of two Belarusian universities, higher education in the country still faces serious issues, including restriction of academic freedom, dependence on the state, and plagiarism. According to QS, Belarusian universities score highly in student teacher ratio. However, this criteria appears unimportant when deeper flaws in Belarusian higher education are taken into account.

What does the QS ranking measure?

The Belarusian State University has appeared among the best 959 universities in the world for several years now. In 2016, The Times Higher Education World University Ranking placed BSU among the 601-800 best universities. Quacquarelli Symonds rated BSU as 36th among almost 500 universities in Emerging Europe & Central Asia.
In ranking universities, QS assesses six main criteria. The agency first looks at the academic reputation of an educational institution. Gathering responses from 40,643 employers, QS measures the reputation of a university as a source of new employees. The agency then counts citations of research papers per faculty.

The final score also depends on the ability of a university to attract international employers and students. 20% of the final calculation is based on the faculty/student ratio, which analyses the capacity of a university to provide enough teachers for a quality study process.

Nevertheless, the QS university ranking has received criticism for how they measure citations. Another cornerstone of their methodology is the high importance of academic reputation, which comprises 40% of the final score. Despite these criticisms, however, many believe that QS is one of the most reliable university rankings. *The Telegraph, The Guardian* and *Times* named the ranking as the most reliable.

**The top three advantages of Belarusian universities**
BSU's academic reputation remains lower than that of Polish and Lithuanian universities. At the same time, QS takes into account the number of teachers and students at a university. The Belarusian State University received 92.3 points out of 100 for its faculty/student ratio. In comparison, Vilnius University received 69.2 points and Warsaw University 29.1.

The Belarusian State University has around 55,000 students, much more than Warsaw University (44,000 students) or Vilnius University (20,200).

Despite restricted academic freedom and political pressure, Belarusian universities have several advantages. Higher education remains available for almost everyone able to pass a test after high school. Although Centralised Testing doesn't correspond very well to the school programme, many can pass it and enter university. Universities accept students even with 20 points out of 100.

An additional advantage of Belarusian Universities is the opportunity for students from low-income families to receive a scholarship. The scholarship money, roughly $30-$45 per month, barely covers living costs. However, almost every scholarship student can receive it providing he or she retains adequate grades every semester.

Belarusian Universities also provide students with cheap housing, which gives them the chance to live independently. Although the number of available places in student dorms and the quality of living accommodations remain low, international students and those coming from other cities or villages are guaranteed a place in the dormitories. The cost of rent for these dorms is extremely low, especially compared to renting
an apartment. In 2017, students could rent a dorm for only $5-$20 per month, depending on the area and quality.

**Improving Belarusian universities**

Both the Belarusian State University and the Belarusian National Technical University received the lowest scores in the 'academic reputation' section of the QS rankings. They could both improve their scores by addressing issues of academic freedom, independence from the state, and plagiarism. These factors directly influence the reputation of universities.

Universities still remain dependent on the state. Teachers and students have no influence on the election of provosts – these are assigned by the authorities. University and school teachers are part of electoral commissions which participate in election falsification. The loyalty of the educational system to the current political regime has become a hallmark of Belarusian universities.

Another urgent problem is plagiarism. According to the independent online magazine *Idea*, 74% of Belarusian students have downloaded ready-made essays, 63% have rephrased existing texts, and 30% have ordered papers for money. The Ministry of Education and Universities could easily introduce a system to check for plagiarism. However, this does not seem to be a priority for Belarusian authorities.

Although international rankings rate Belarusian universities higher every year, there are still many obstacles to development. Belarusian universities would benefit from granting students and teachers more economy – this would ensure the development of the Belarusian labour market and improve the quality of higher education. Independence from the
state and extension of student rights could also prevent brain-drain in Belarus.

Does the Rating Ignore Reality?

Despite the fact that BSU and BNTU appeared in the QS ranking, certain aspects of higher education in Belarus are problematic.

In May 2015, Belarus became a part of the Bologna process. Nevertheless, the Bologna Committee, an independent monitoring organisation, reported that the Belarusian system of higher education is failing to implement the norms of the Bologna process.

Uladzimir Dunajeŭ, the head of the Bologna Committee, noted in Bolognaby.org that besides the underdevelopment of higher education in Belarus, ‘Belarusian people fear reforms, thinking that they will only lead to deterioration. The history of educational reforms can explain this position.’

In 2010, many instances of political pressure on students occurred during post-election protests. Among the 700 people arrested after protests, many were students. In November 2015, the European Student Union called on the Belarusian authorities to put a stop to the increasing pressure placed on Belarusian students who participated in demonstrations, reports Belta.

In spring 2017, Belarusians protested against the social parasite tax, which obliges people to pay a tax for being unemployed. Students became active participants in the demonstrations, leading to yet more suppression from the
authorities. For example, a student named Aliena Kisiel was kicked out of a university in Mahilyow for taking part in protests.

In assessing universities, research agencies often ignore issues related to political pressure. However, this factor remains important in non-democratic countries, where students become actors in political or social protests. The absence of this factor in the rankings may make the position of Belarusian Universities higher than they should be.

Regarding the citation rate of research papers, one of the six criteria of the QS ranking, BSU does well. However, the abundance of plagiarism might influence the quality of cited research papers. Additionally, the high citation rate might be explained by the rare use of foreign languages in Belarusian academia.

It seems that the official ranking of a university depends on many valuable formal indicators (such as the number of students and teachers, etc.). However, they fail to take into account factors such as the degree of academic freedom.

Analytical Paper: the state of distance education in Belarus: problems and perspectives

The Ostrogorski Centre presents a new analytical paper analysing the current state and the perspectives of distance education in Belarus, written by Yarik Kryvoi.
In Soviet times, extramural education was extremely popular in Belarus – the Soviet Union took pride in having created a system for obtaining almost all educational degrees remotely. It was the first in the world to do so.

Extramural education still remains popular, although its utilisation is less wide-spread than in neighbouring countries. Promoting distance education in Belarus would make education more accessible to broader circles of society, including those who are constrained by physical or economic factors.

The established history of extramural education, good technical equipment at universities, and the wide-spread use of high-speed Internet mean that Belarus already possesses a good basis for the development of a high quality system of distance education.

In order to create a high-quality system of distance education in Belarus, it is necessary to create a corresponding legislative base, to organise additional trainings for specialists in the sphere of education, and to expand the cooperation between universities and the companies that work in the high tech sector.

**Development of distance education in Belarus**

After the October Revolution in 1917, Soviet authorities drastically improved the literacy rate in the USSR. Literacy grew from 56% in 1916 to 99% in the early 1970s. In addition to the compulsory eight years of education, extramural education enjoyed large-scale development, as this allowed the working masses to combine education with work.

This lofty aspiration to make higher education accessible has
been preserved in Belarus, which occupies a relatively high position on the Human Development Index in comparison with other CIS countries. Thus, according to data from 2014, about 90% of the population possesses secondary or higher education.

According to the Legatum Prosperity Index 2016, Belarus surpasses Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, and certain other European Union countries with regards to access to education, quality of education, and human potential. However, education in Belarus still suffers from a number of significant problems, as universities remain strictly regulated and insufficiently integrated into the common European space.

Moreover, the quality of available education often fails to meet the requirements of the labour market, especially when it comes to the humanities and social sciences. Belarus has retained a system of extramural education in which students attend classes once every few months to sit exams.

At present, 61% of Belarusian students are enrolled in extramural education, 39.1% of which are studying distantly.
However, the classic concept of distance education remains closely linked to active use of technology. Students enrolled in extramural education in Belarus do not use interactive methods of learning, nor do they have the benefit of a flexible schedule or opportunities to create an individual educational programme.

Due to these factors, extramural education in Belarus does not qualify as distance education. According to information from the International Council on Distance Education, 14% of students in the world obtain their education distantly. Most universities and other educational institutions around the world, including in countries which neighbour Belarus, offer distance learning which often does not require a prior educational background.

Conference panel on distance education in Belarus (December 2016, mostly in English)

Recommendations on development of distance education in Belarus

The analytical paper suggests that in order to develop a high-quality system of education in Belarus, it is necessary to take the following steps:

Develop a normative base

Despite nominal references in the Code on Education, the system of distance education in Belarus requires special regulation and stimulation. Legislation on education should include recommendations on better organising distance learning
in universities, and a description of a monitoring system. It is important that the legislation addresses the issue of financing distance education. Moreover, the structure of the distance education system (from vocational to higher education) should be delineated.

**Expert and knowledge exchange**

Belarus’s recent accession to the Bologna Process will lead to the growth of contacts and exchange experiences in the sphere of education. In order to fully realise implementation of distance education, Belarus needs to train specialists in developing a distance education strategy for universities. This should take the specific features of each educational establishment and region into account. It is possible to achieve this by promoting expert assistance in the form of educational visits, exchanges, and recommendations.

**Establish a centre for distance education**

The relevant authorities need to follow the best practices of other countries and establish a specially designated centre which would coordinate and facilitate the development of distance education in Belarus and offer trainings for education professionals.

**Rooting distance education**

It is necessary to stimulate investments in the sphere of education and secure broader participation of the private sector. For the distance education system to function effectively, preparedness and support from the administrations of higher education establishments is crucial. Administrations must be willing to reform and introduce new forms of learning. There is also a need for teachers and other employees of
higher education establishments to learn how to communicate and educate using technology.

- Read full paper: The state of distance education in Belarus: problems and perspectives
- Чытаць аналітычную паперу: Дыстанцыйная адукацыя ў Беларусі: стан, праблемы і перспектывы

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Second Annual London Conference, growing Belarus-Russia tension, Bologna process – Ostrogorski Centre digest

The Ostrogorski Centre co-organised the Second Annual London Conference on Belarusian Studies in cooperation with University College London and the Belarusian Francis Skaryna Library and Museum.

In February, analysts of the Ostrogorski Centre discussed Russia’s attempts to destabilise the region around Belarus, the possibility of Moscow toppling Lukashenka, and the outcomes of Belarusian foreign policy in 2016.

The Centre has also released an analytical paper entitled ‘Challenges to Belarus joining the European Higher Education Area’, which resulted from the Fourth Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference.
Second Annual London Conference on Belarusian Studies

On Saturday 25 February, the Second Annual London Conference on Belarusian Studies was organised by the Ostrogorski Centre in cooperation with University College London and the Belarusian Francis Skaryna Library and Museum.

Speakers from Belarus, the United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, the United States, and other countries presented and discussed Belarus-related research. The conference panels covered Francis Skaryna’s work and legacy, problems of Belarusian national identity, foreign policy of Belarus and comparative politics, social and political movements, and language and literature.

The main conference was followed by the Annual Lecture on Belarusian Studies, delivered by Dr Ales Susha, Deputy Director of the National Library of Belarus and Chairman of the International Association of Belarusian Language and Culture Specialists.

All conference presentations will be uploaded online in podcast form and selected papers from the conference will be published in the Journal of Belarusian Studies.

The conference programme is available here and pictures from the event are here.
Analytics

Siarhei Bohdan analyses Moscow’s actions to erect a border with Belarus and undermine its links with Ukraine and the Baltics. Russia accuses the West and its allies in the region of undermining links between Eastern European countries. However, its own policies pursue exactly the same aim. Minsk must fight hard to resist these efforts by the Kremlin.

Igar Gubarevich provides an overview of Belarusian diplomacy’s achievements and failures in 2016. In 2016, Belarusian diplomats succeeded in getting rid of most Western sanctions, improving the international legitimacy of the national parliament, regularising dialogue with Europe, and converting Poland from a strong critic into a reliable partner. Nevertheless, they failed to make Lukashenka fully presentable to his peers in Europe, alienated Ukraine’s political elite, botched export growth and diversification of the export market, and turned Lithuania from a supporter into a foe.

Ryhor Astapenia discusses whether scenarios in which the Kremlin attempts to topple Lukashenka are possible. Recently, rhetoric surrounding Russian-Belarusian relations has become so sharp that some journalists and analysts believe the Kremlin plans to overthrow Aliaksandr Lukashenka or occupy Belarus. However, off and on conflict remain a fixture of Belarusian-Russian relations. Despite belligerent grumbling, Lukashenka mostly upholds the Kremlin’s interests, promoting cooperation between the two countries.

Analytical paper: Challenges to Belarus joining the
European Higher Education Area

The Ostrogorski Centre releases an analytical paper which resulted from the Fourth Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference ‘Education as a Human Right: Modernising Higher Education to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century’.

In 2015, Belarus joined the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and committed to putting a Roadmap for higher education reform into effect by 2018. The implementation of the Roadmap is running behind schedule, which poses a threat to the fulfilment of Belarus’s obligations by the due date.

The paper released analyses of the main challenges to implementation of the Roadmap in Belarus; it also provides recommendations which could help to fulfil commitments on time and benefit a wider range of stakeholders.

- Read the full paper: Challenges to Belarus joining the European Higher Education Area

Comments in the media

On Polish radio, Siarhei Bohdan discusses the process of destabilisation around Belarus caused by Russian politics. Moscow has erected a border with Belarus where it never existed before, and tries to curtail Belarusian exports via Baltic ports. Russia accuses the EU of destabilising the region, but actively does so itself. Fragmentation of the region will lead to its impoverishment, Siarhei argues.
Alesia Rudnik discusses *the recent political graffiti cases* on Polish radio. Political graffiti can be seen as a new form of civic participation which attracts the attention of the public and the media, while the authorities see the phenomenon as a threat.

Ryhor Astapenia comments on the *latest developments in Belarusian-Russian relations* for the Polish news portal Wirtualna Polska. Contrary to the disinformation of some Russian media sources, Lukashenka does not intend to leave the Eurasian Economic Union and CSTO. However, this does not mean he wants to pursue further military or political integration. Instead, he focuses mostly on the economic aspect.

The website *The Conflict Comment* quotes Igar Gubarevich in an article about the *Russia-Belarus energy dispute*. According to Igar, both parties have leverage in this dispute and both are interested in finding an accommodating solution, as was the case on many other occasions. Belarus remains of strategic importance to Russia, both as a trading partner and as a demarcation line for NATO and the EU.

Vadzim Smok discusses *whether Belarus stands a chance in a new oil war with Russia* on Polish radio. Oil products remain Belarus’s No.1 export commodity, making up a third of Belarus’s export revenues. With no alternative options for hydrocarbon supplies and Minsk’s decreasing political and security leverage, the country will have to play by Moscow’s rules.

The British newspaper *The Independent* quotes Igar Gubarevich in an article about *the legacy of the Chernobyl disaster*. According to Igar, Belarus avoids drawing public attention to the legacy of Chernobyl for two main reasons. The image of a contaminated country might hamper its efforts to promote exports and attract foreign investment, and it may be at odds with the government’s newly adopted policy of pursuing nuclear energy by building the BelNPP.
Belarus profile

The BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following people: Vitaly Rudnik, Alesia Rudnik, Andrei Pauiliuchenka, Kaciaryna Siniuk, Anatoli Lappo, Dzmitry Kalieyc, Uladzimir Aushusinski, Aliaksandr Center, Andrei Bryshcielei, and Siarhiej Savicki.

We have also updated the profiles of Viktor Shynkievič, Siarhiej Pisaryk, Ihar Buzoŭski, Michail Żuraŭkoŭ, Liainid Malcaŭ, Vasili Žarko, Marat Afanaśjeŭ, Aliaksei Pikulik, Uladzimir Tracciakoŭ, Ivan Dziemidovič, Ivan Žarski, Ihar Vojtaŭ, Aliaksandr Zabarouski, and Dzmitry Kruty.

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:


Aliaksandr Autushka-Sikorski, Alena Artsiomenka. Work of the High Technology Park: a threefold increase in exports of IT services and what would happen if the park is closed. BISS, 2017.


Think tanks in Belarus are encouraged to submit their research
for inclusion into the database by completing this form.

The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to 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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Lukashenka appoints a top communist as the new Minister of Education

On 15 December President Aliaksandr Lukashenka appointed vice-mayor of Minsk Ihar Karpenka as Minister of Education. However, two important facts about the latter have caused serious discussion within the Belarusian expert community.

First, at the moment of his appointment, Ihar Karpenka was the Head of the Communist Party in Belarus. Second, the dismissal of the previous Minister, Dr. Mikhail Zhuraukou, contained an element of disgrace: he was sacked during his annual leave while he was outside the country. Moreover, after his dismissal, Zhuraukou was demoted and is now simply a head of department at the Belarusian State University.

These circumstances raise questions regarding the fate of Zhuraukou’s legacy, the most important aspect of which was Belarus’s participation in the Bologna Process.
Belarus’s *Via Dolorosa* and the Bologna process

Belarus joined the Bologna process in May 2015 as part of a phase of *soft political liberalisation* and rapprochement with the West. However, because the country’s educational system has remained far below the standards set by the Bologna Process, Belarus has committed to *implementing a road map of reforms by 2018*.

However, many experts have pointed out that the real intentions of the Belarusian authorities go far beyond the goals and principles of the Bologna Process. For example, Vadzim Mażejka has expressed the opinion that in committing to the Roadmap, Belarus aimed to lower the duration of study in order to reduce public spending on education.

Promoting diplomas from Belarusian institutions among foreign students as 'internationally recognised' would also help reduce public expenditure: *fees paid by foreign students* constitute a significant share of the incomes of Belarusian universities, sometimes exceeding 50 per cent of their budgets.

Imitation of a pro-reformist dialogue with the West has also contributed to the Belarusian authorities’ considerations.

**Predicted difficulties**

On 13 December 2016 the Ostrogorski Centre co-organised the 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference *Education as a Human Right: Modernising Higher Education to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century*. During the conference, two prominent speakers representing state and non-state positions on education, Dr. Ihar Tsitovich (a vice-rector of the
Republican Institute of Higher Education) and Dr. Uladzimir Dunaeu (a member of the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee), discussed achievements and difficulties in implementing the roadmap.

The two experts revealed the fundamental contradictions between the Belarusian authorities and independent analysts in their approaches to the Bologna Process. The authorities highlight primarily technical steps, such as introducing Diploma Supplements, developing modules and the credits system, and introducing changes in curricula.

Meanwhile, independent experts point to more fundamental principles such as academic freedom, mobility, close cooperation between the business and educational sectors, international cooperation, education based on students’ needs, co-existence between formal, informal, and non-formal education, etc. According to the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee, in 2015-2016 Belarus implemented only nine per cent of the roadmap. In many spheres, progress has been negligible.

**Dubious value**

While the fundamental contradictions between the intentions of the Belarusian authorities and the essence of the Bologna Process have become increasingly apparent, its value for the government appears dubious.

During the two years since Belarus joined the Bologna Process, growth in the number of foreign students has remained insignificant: less than 1,000 people, or about seven per cent. Moreover, the number of students from Turkmenistan and China – the largest consumers of Belarusian educational services – has decreased: from 801 to 759 students (China) and from 8,342 to 7,911 students (Turkmenistan).
One major problem lies in the values of the Bologna Process and academic freedoms. A test of the authorities' limits occurred in November-December 2015. A group of students at the Belarusian State University took a stand against the University’s plan to introduce fees for re-sitting examinations. In spite of the insignificance of the case and the wide range of opportunities for dialogue, the authorities nevertheless chose to rely on repression. The rector of the University even refused to meet with the protesting students.

Moreover, in January-February 2016 the Ministry of Education made an attempt to replace the deans of the most ‘oppositional’ faculties, but succeeded in replacing only the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy.

A second problem occurred during the Parliamentary elections in September 2016. In Belarus, no one can claim to really know the results of elections. However, some facts point to the growth of protest voting among students. For example, one opposition candidate and professor at the university, Aleh Trusau, claims to have counted the votes of his students. His figures significantly contradicted the official results.

It seems that Mikhail Zhuraukou’s inability to prevent dissent among students and the poor results of Belarus’s participation in the Bologna Process contributed to his dismissal significantly.

What tasks does the new minister face?

During the appointment of Karpenka, Aliaksandr Lukashenka made a clear statement on his vision for the new minister’s work. According to the president, Karpenka is well acquainted with the ideological pillars of the state. The Communist Party enjoys great support from the authorities, who claim that
Communist ideology remains relevant for Belarus. In November 2016, the government of Minsk unveiled a new monument to Lenin together with the Communist Party in Minsk.

Karpenka’s biography also raises questions. The new minister of education lacks experience in this sphere. In 2003-2004 he served as vice-rector at the Belarusian State Pedagogical University. He supervised ideological work and social issues, while activities related to education were not part of his responsibilities. In 2004 Karpenka started his public administration career (as a member of Parliament and then as vice-mayor of Minsk) and returned to the sphere of education only in 2016.

Karpenka is one of a number of critics of Belarus’s participation in the Bologna Process. He praises the Soviet educational system, the important role of ideology and forced labour in education, as well as obligatory work placements after graduating. Independent experts, such as Uladzimir Dunaev, consider Karpenka's appointment ‘a step back’ for education in Belarus.

However, the most important point concerns the authorities’ general attitude towards the Bologna process. In addition to disappointing results, the government has started to feel insecure about the amount of freedom, or even simply hints of freedom, in the academic sphere. The students protests are a clear example of this. It seems that the authorities would prefer stability over uncertain future economic benefits and a chance of protest.

Thus, it seems that the main tasks for the new minister are to increase control, strength ideology, and prevent the Bologna Process from resulting in any serious transformation.
Education as a Human Right: conference working papers and video

On 13 December 2016 Minsk hosts the 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference. The year the topic is 'Education as a Human Right: Modernising Higher Education to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century'.

The conference takes place three days after International Human Rights Day, which commemorates the adoption in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly.

The event focuses on three key topics: the challenges of Belarus accession to the European Higher Education Area, improving business education, and making education more accessible through distance education.

- Read working paper "Challenges to Belarus joining the European Higher Education Area"
- Read working paper "Belarusian business education: the way forward"
- Read working paper "The state of distance education in Belarus: problems and perspectives"

- Download the conference brochure
The 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference: Education as a Human Right

On 13 December 2016 Minsk will host the 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference. The year the topic is 'Education as a Human Right: Modernising Higher Education to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century'.

The conference will take place three days after International Human Rights Day, which commemorates the adoption in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations general assembly. Belarus, Poland, and the Netherlands – founding members of the United Nations – also observe this day.

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to education, which shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Improving higher education will be the main focus of the discussion-oriented conference. It will give experts from Belarus, the Netherlands, and Poland an opportunity to discuss what each country can learn from others.

As with other conferences co-organised by the Ostrogorski Centre, it will bring together people with different views and backgrounds to engage in respectful dialogue. The speakers will include representatives of educational institutions from the Netherlands, Poland, and Belarus, as well as Belarusian government agencies and NGOs.
the conference will bring together people with different views and backgrounds to engage in respectful dialogue

For each topic, the Ostrogorski Centre will prepare a short working paper to focus discussion on real practise. Belarus Digest, Ostro.by, and Ideaby.org will also provide a live broadcast of the event as well as archived videos following the conference.

The conference will focus on three key topics: the challenges of Belarus accession to the European Higher Education Area, improving business education, and making education more accessible through distance education.

Integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

Belarus occupies a relatively high position on the Human Development Index compared to other CIS countries; about 90% of the population possesses secondary or higher education. According to the Legatum Prosperity Index 2016, Belarus surpasses Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, and certain EU countries with regard to access to education, quality of education, and the human potential.

However, Belarus still needs to do more to integrate into pan-European education structures, as it is one of the last countries in the region to join the Bologna process. Its accession has been viewed as an opportunity for authorities to improve the situation.

At a conference of 47 EHEA ministers of education in 2015, Belarus committed to a roadmap for higher education reform as a prerequisite for joining the EHEA. The roadmap envisages modernisation of the professional qualifications framework, thus making it compatible with the European framework by introducing a three-cycle system of higher education.
Belarus has a long way to go to meet all the requirements of the European Higher Education Area.

Belarus has a long way to go to meet all the requirements of the EHEA. For example, students and staff face barriers to international mobility. Students and academics need to undergo lengthy procedures to be 'officially' allowed to attend education events abroad, although in many instances these requirements are not strictly enforced.

Advertisement for activities of foreign universities is strictly regulated by the anti-human trafficking law, developed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Self-governance and student organisations at universities face significant restrictions.

Business education for more dynamic economic growth

The Belarusian authorities have shown interest in the development of business education, as proved by the adoption of the corresponding Concept by the Belarusian government in 2015. Business education can help lift people out of poverty and improve their situation. However, the sector remains probably the most sensitive to the economic climate, which lately has not been ideal in Belarus. In neighbouring Poland and Russia, business education boomed in the early 1990s as the private sector grew.

Business educators often look more like training centres oriented towards small business than fully-fledged education institutions.

In Belarus, much of the economy is still state-owned and most Belarusian business educators lack wealthy clients. They often look more like training centres oriented towards small
business than fully-fledged education institutions.

These days, those seeking business education opportunities are demanding that training leads to practical skills. The business education sector in Belarus suffers from excessive state regulation, poor integration into the international educational space, and weak representation of business educators in the regions.

**Making education more accessible through distance education**

Despite the wide penetration of high speed Internet in Belarus and the significant number of higher education institutions in the country, distance education in Belarus is very underdeveloped. Its expansion in Belarus would offer new opportunities to people with disabilities, people who live far from urban centres, or people who work full-time to obtain education. A flexible schedule and the ability to create an individual distance learning plan would allow students to combine education and work.

Poland, Latvia, and Russia, unlike Belarus, have separate institutions for distance education. For instance, over 20,000 students graduated from the Polish Virtual University in Łódź. The Netherlands is one of the world's leaders in distance education, offering hundreds of courses at different levels. Belarus will need to create a favourable legislative regime for regulation of distance education. It will also need to train instructors and encourage cooperation with institutions which use distance education successfully.

Cooperation with more experienced distance educators could create opportunities to provide distance education to
entrepreneurs. Training on specific skills required on the labour market, along with creation of Belarus-focused massive open online courses (MOOCs), could also be provided.

These and other topics will be discussed in more detail in Minsk on 13 December at the 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference: 'Education as a Human Right: Modernising Higher Education to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century'.

- Download the conference programme

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**Defence industry, academic autonomy, parliament recognition – Ostrogorski Centre Digest**

Over the past month, analysts at the Ostrogorski Centre have discussed the rise of the Belarusian defence industry, the increase in dialogue between European and Belarusian parliamentarians, and prospects of real student self-government in Belarusian universities.

The analysts extensively commented in media on the challenges of Belarus’s strategy to balance between Russia and the EU, ripening changes in the Belarusian political and economic model, trends in the Belarusian arms trade and defence sector, Belarusian-Russian relations after Ukraine conflict, and other issues.
Siarhei Bohdan argues that the Belarusian national defence industry, which emerged in the 1990’s as a helpless fragment of Soviet arms industries, evolved to become a significant branch of the Belarusian economy. This happened also because of the rise of the private sector and diversification of its markets and partners.

These products, including anti-tank rockets, optics, electronics, and missiles, have not only found a market abroad, they have also contributed to national military capacities. Moreover, the development of this branch can set an example for other industries, especially with regard to the incremental development of the private sector and diversification of international ties.

Igar Gubarevich discusses why the marginalised Belarusian parliament has been slowly gaining international recognition. The eagerness of several European national legislatures to re-establish contacts with the Belarusian parliament seems to lack a logical explanation, and no convincing attempt to provide one has been made so far.

The increased contacts of European parliamentarians with their Belarusian “counterparts” have no positive impact on development of democracy in Belarus or promoting the national interests of the EU countries concerned. Meanwhile, such collaboration helps strengthen the international position of the Belarusian government.
Ryhor Astapenia analyses the preparation of a new Education Code, which the authorities are amending partly to demonstrate to the West that they are making changes. In 2015, Belarus joined the Bologna process and is now required to reform the education system accordingly. The new code should state directly that student government will be autonomous and free from guidance by university administration.

Moreover, unions should obtain legal status, as this will allow them to obtain funding from outside the university. However, even if the law changes, Belarusian authorities also need to change their behaviour towards student groups. They should stop the persecution of independent youth organisations and student unions with whom they collaborate.

Comments in the media

Igar Gubarevich met with Tana de Zulueta, the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission at the 2016 parliamentary elections in Belarus, and Stefan Szwed, the Mission’s political analyst. The international observers took interest in Igar’s expert opinion on the current political situation in Belarus in the context of the forthcoming parliamentary elections. The analyst shared his insights on eventual implications of this event for Belarus’s foreign policy and specifically the country’s relations with the European Union.

Siarhei Bohdan in the program “Prague accent” on Radio Liberty discusses whether the transformation of independent Belarus into an authoritarian state was inevitable. Despite all the negative aspects of Lukashenka’s authoritarian system, it allowed an independent Belarusian state to be built and maintained. However, in order to ensure a peaceful transfer of
power during the end of authoritarianism, Belarusian authorities need to gradually introduce a pluralist and democratic model.

Ryhor Astapenia discusses recent political developments on Polish Radio. Despite statements from Aliaksandr Lukashenka on growing cooperation with China and the successful Palanez rocket launcher project, **trade figures paint a different picture** — export to China in the first half of 2016 fell 5 times compared to 2015. Ryhor believes that the decision of authorities to grant oppositional candidates for MP air time on TV will not significantly influence public opinion.

Yaraslau Kryvoi elaborates on the challenges of Belarus’s strategy to balance between Russia and the EU on Polish radio. **Belarus tries to find a sustainable way to balance** its main economic partner Russia with its counterweight the EU. Belarus is deeply entangled in Russia’s economic, political and media sphere, so any radical divergence could cause Russia to use force against Belarus. The West should not fear Belarus as it rearms and modernises its army, because it does so only protect its own sovereignty.

Yaraslau Kryvoi also analyses the **ripening changes in the Belarusian political and economic model**. Many officials responsible for economic policy come from the new generation, some with western education and experience of work in the private sector. The security camp remains more conservative and loyal to Russia, but they also understand that security forces should care about the state’s real problems rather than combat imaginary NATO threats or persecute the Belarusian opposition.
Siarhei Bohdan discusses trends in the Belarusian arms trade and defence sector. Belarus is no longer on the list of the world’s top ten arms traders. It had previously got to the top simply by selling a large number of Soviet military jets at once. On the other hand, arms production is developing rapidly in Belarus, as it managed to produce its own finished arms manufacture. Surprisingly, the private sector has played a major role in this success.

Ryhor Astapenia discusses his recent paper “Belarusian-Russian relations after Ukraine conflict” on Polish radio. Although Belarus has been distancing itself from Russia since the Ukraine crisis, it cannot get out of the integration projects with Russia, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, CSTO and the Union State. Perhaps the distancing will continue, but Belarus will never cross the red line. Regarding relations with the EU, Belarus only normalises relations rather than build an alliance, and cooperation in the political and military sphere remains low.

Ryhor Astapenia comments on recent political developments in Belarus on the “Political mirror” programme on Polish Radio. Suspension of the work of IISEPS in Belarus is a black day for Belarusian analytics, as it was the only organisation conducting polls every three months. The fact that Alieś Lahviniec was denied registration shows that authorities do not want to lose control of the election campaign. The number of members of opposition parties in the election commissions indicates that the elections will take place without any surprises.
Belarus Profile

The BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following people: Paviel Bielavus, Ihar Tyškievič, Aliaksandr Žuk, Ihar Karpienka, Ivan Naskievič, Eduard Palčys, Andrej Jeūdačenka, Viktar Prakapienia, Uladzimir Vasiľka, Barys Chrustaliaŭ.

We have also updated the profiles of Valiancin Šajeŭ, Aliaksandr Michnievič, Uladzimir Niakliajeŭ, Paviel Šaramiet, Viktar Pierapialica, Siarhiej Parsiukievič, Kiryl Rudy, Siarhiej Navumčyk, Marjana Ščotkina, Aliaksandr Jakabson, Paviel Jakubovič, Aliaksiej Janukievič, Aliaksandr Jarašuk, Jaŭhien Baskin, Kanstancin Bandarenka.

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

Attracting Foreign Students to Belarus: Success or Failure?

On 1 September, around 20 thousand foreign students will start the academic year in Belarusian universities and technical schools.

This figure has almost doubled over the past four years, with Turkmens accounting for half of all foreign students in
Belarus.

The Belarusian authorities are trying to make a profit from the educational sector, hoping the relatively low price of living and learning will draw in foreign students. However, the poor quality and self-isolation of Belarusian universities may dissuade foreigners from studying in the country.

Belarus looks to attract foreign students

In early August, the Belarusian state-run Capital TV Channel proudly reported that 20 thousand foreign students will be studying in Belarus during the upcoming academic year. This figure also includes students at technical schools, although this is a much less popular option than universities.

Statistics from previous years show that Belarusian universities primarily attract students from Turkmenistan, Russia and China. International relations, economy and philology programmes at the Belarusian State University, the most popular university for foreign students, attract almost half of the international students in Belarus.

While IR and economy programmes are popular among Belarusians as well, philology programmes stay afloat partially thanks to foreigners. While such degrees may appeal to foreigners, Belarusians remain reluctant to major in Belarusian philology, seeing the discipline as useless in a Russian-speaking country.
Having understood how popular the education business can be, Belarus is rapidly looking to attract more foreign students. Moreover, during the economic crisis Belarus lacked additional funds for education, and foreign students' tuition fees supplemented university budgets. According to the Minister of Education Mikhail Zhuraukou, Belarus earned $73 mln from foreign students in 2014. The fees at the Belarusian State University amount to around $3 thousand per student per academic year.

For many international students this sounds like a good deal, as the price of tuition and accommodation in Belarus remains much lower than, for example, in Russia. As one Janapese student explained to Naviny.by, dormitories are 40 times...
cheaper than in his home country.

However, tuition fees do not seem so low compared with neighbouring Poland or Lithuania. Lazarski University in Warsaw, for example, where many Belarusians study, costs $2.5 thousand per academic year. Students also have the opportunity to study in an English language programme leading to a diploma much more respected in the West. The European Humanities University, a Lithuanian institute with Belarusian roots, also has tuition fees of around $3 thousand per year.

**Limits of possible**

Belarus can in fact attract more students, but two main obstacles remain in place. While Belarusian education may satisfy Turkmen students, may others perceive it to be sub-par. The ranking of the best university in the country, the Belarusian State University, is 421-430 according to the QS World University Rankings. Other universities in the country are rated much worse.

In order to attract foreign students, Belarusian universities need to internalise. National Academic Recognition Information Centres around Europe do not recognise all Belarusian diplomas, although adherence to the Bologna process should improve the situation. For this reason, after completion of a five-year programme in Belarus, alumni cannot apply directly to a PhD programme in a Western university, but need to apply for an MA programme first.

Moreover, there are not enough courses taught in English or teachers with overseas teaching experience in Belarus, thus almost all foreign students study in Russian. On the other hand, Russian language programmes remain one of the reasons students from Turkmenistan or China come to Belarus.

Secondly, unnecessary bureaucracy and low professionalism of
education agencies may deter some foreign students. In order to enter a Belarusian university, one needs to pay for registration, pass a paid medical examination, and translate and notarise documents. Moreover, according to Belarusian law, foreign students are not allowed to work during studies.

While it may excel at creating unnecessary bureaucracy, Belarus under-performs in other areas. The websites promoting education in Belarus, such as edu-belarus.com, remain misleading, to put it mildly. Among reasons to study in Belarus listed online, one can find “enrichment of learning experience through visiting professors from USA, Canada and the UK” or “good prospects of permanent residence and settlement in Europe following completion of the programme”.

Unfortunately, it remains difficult to find visiting professors from Western countries, and education in Belarus has nothing to do with getting the right to reside in the European Union.

Another problem is that Belarusian universities lack influential alumni organisations that can help attract new students. Several famous Vietnamese people, such as Nguyen Dang Quang or Fam The Long, who currently head universities or large companies in Vietnam, studied in Belarus. However, Belarus has few students from the country at present.
How many foreign students will arrive?

Currently, Belarus has two options – one of which seems much more desirable than the other.

On the one hand, the number of foreign students is still going to rise, as prices for housing and education will remain low for rich students no matter what. Moreover, Belarus attracts students with lower educational expectations. Many Belarusian lecturers and students complain that foreign students (especially from Turkmenistan) have shown little desire to learn. However, universities do not expel them, as they need their money. Therefore, the flow of such students will continue to grow.

On the other hand, Belarus faces difficulties attracting students with higher expectations (as well as those who have
more money). Education in sub-par universities not internationally recognised in a country stereotyped as the last dictatorship in Europe is not tempting to everyone.

So far, Belarus has already succeeded in bringing many foreign students, but it should improve its education system to attract more.

Time for Belarus to Implement Real Student Self-Governance?

Belarusian authorities are discreetly preparing a new Education Code, partly to demonstrate to the West that they are making changes. In 2015, Belarus joined the Bologna process and is now required to reform the education system accordingly.

So far, the Belarusian education law has completely ignored the issue of student self-governance. Authorities restrict activities of student unions by depriving them of autonomy, placing university staff into student unions, and limiting activities of independent youth organisations in universities.

As Belarus is adapting its education system to the Bologna process, its partners should make it clear that the law should become more student-friendly.
As in many other countries, Belarusian students historically played a major role in the democratic movement. In 1830-1831 and 1863-1864, students were among the initiators of uprisings against the Russian Empire.

Even during the Soviet era, Belarusian students created organisations and wrote appeals to increase the use of the Belarusian language and to expand academic freedoms. This usually resulted in expulsion for the instigators by Soviet authorities. In 1985, one of the expelled students even jumped from the sixth floor of the Belarusian State University in protest.

Since Belarus's independence, student organisations have become particularly close to the pro-democracy movement, comprising a significant part of opposition protests: in 2006, students organised a tent city to protest election fraud during the presidential campaign.

During this time, October Square, where the protests took place, received the unofficial name "Kastus Kalinouski," after the leader of the uprising of 1863-1864 in the Belarusian lands.
Although one can hardly call Belarusian students politicised, they still remain the most active part of society. They are also a huge group, consisting of about 460 thousand people, or 4.7 per cent of the population.

What's more, researches at the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, an authoritative Belarusian pollster, shows that the youth remain the group most exposed to the ideas of democratisation and Europeanisation in Belarusian society.

**Fake student government**

Many student unions actually do operate at Belarusian universities[]. In practise, however, they have very little influence over the university establishment and cannot defend student rights when they are broken. The current Education
Code, adopted in 2011, lacks even a single mention of student government. Therefore, internal university regulations subordinate activities of student unions and only one, the Student Union of the Belarusian State University, has an appropriate legal status.

Without legal status, student unions fail to attract money from outside sources, but depend on funding from universities. Belarusian authorities give financial support to only one youth organisation working at Belarusian universities and schools – the **Belarusian Republican Youth Union**.

This organisation is the successor of the Komsomol (the Communist Youth League) and has half a million members. However, the large number of members does not mean that all of them support the current regime. The majority of people are signed up for BRSM forcibly or because it helps them get a place in university accommodation during studies.

Most student unions are openly run by university authorities. At the Baranavichy State University, some members of the university administrative staff belong to the student union. Provisions of the Belarusian National Technical University or International Economic Institute state simply that the activities of student unions are under the leadership of universities’ vice-chancellors.

**Aliaksandr Krot**, Chairman of the Belarusian National Youth Council “RADA”, told Belarus Digest, that there are numerous cases in which universities interfered in student union elections.

Moreover, university authorities demand that student unions be wary of any cooperation with independent youth organisations. In February 2016, the administration of the Belarusian State Medical University sent a letter to class-leaders that they should conduct preventive conversations with fellow students explaining why they should not cooperate with independent
youth organisations.

In the letter, three independent organisations, the Centre for Development of Students’ Initiatives, the Brotherhood of Organisers of Student Self-government and the Students’ Council were called illegal. However, all of them are actually registered in Belarus.

The Belarusian authorities also create fake structures to replace independent youth organisations. As an example, in 2015 the authorities set up a Student Council under the Ministry of Education, which may seem solid, but in practice has no influence. The Council includes representatives of all universities in Belarus, but its purpose remains unclear.

Making student government more genuine

Now is the best time for Belarus's international partners to encourage reform in Belarusian higher education, not only
because of a thaw in relations between Belarus and the West but also because the authorities are working on a new code and want to show the European Union that they can introduce at least gradual changes. So far, the Belarusian government has tried to hide certain problems while continuing to restrict youth organisations and even expelling some students.

The new code should state directly that student government will be autonomous and free from guidance by university administration. Also, unions should obtain legal status, as this will allow them to obtain funding from outside the university.

However, even if the law changes, Belarusian authorities also need to change their behaviour towards student groups. Now that Belarus has become part of the Bologna Process, it should stop the persecution of independent youth organisations and student unions with whom they collaborate.

In 2015, the European Union invited Belarus to be part of the Bologna system, trusting that it would eventually implement reforms. Now it's time for Belarusian authorities to live up to their promises.

Mass Protests, Media Activism, Expert Club – Civil Society Digest

Stallholders gather outside Tax Ministry's to demand abolition of new rules – no breakthrough though. Authorities suspend criminal case against former presidential candidate Alieś Michalievič.
Press Club Belarus holds official opening ceremony in Minsk. Decree 98 will not affect calls inside Skype and Viber. BISS and Press Club launch Analytical Club governed by Chatham House rules. Liberal Club held a round table devoted to the reform of the pension system in Belarus.

Mass protests

**Freedom Day opposition action is held in Minsk on March 25.** Minsk authorities allowed to conduct the march. The Belarusian democratic community celebrates Freedom Day (March 25) every year. The independence of the Belarusian People’s Republic was announced on this day in 1918. This is considered to be the most important date in the modern Belarusian statehood.

**Court tried to convict Uladzimir Mackievič for participating in a rally, who, meanwhile was outside Belarus.** The philosopher Uladzimir Mackievič presented the plane tickets and a stamp in the passport, which confirm that on the day of the rally he was in Warsaw, though the riot police, who were testifying in court claimed to have seen Mackievič at the demonstration. The Central district court of Minsk sent the case for additional investigation.

**Minsk court considering 17 cases of protesters during one day.** On March 24, judges of Centralny district court of Minsk considered 17 administrative cases opened against a number of participants in unsanctioned protest rallies, which were held by Belarusian entrepreneurs in February and March. Almost all protesters were punished by fines up to 50 base units (around $520).

**Minsk Spring – 20 years. The history of street protests in Belarus.** The webportal TUT.by in its infographics traces the history of the Belarusian notable protests since the late 1980s. Minsk Spring 1996 took place on the eve of the signing
of the integration agreements with Russia and raised the largest protest activity in Belarus when the number of participants reached 30-60 thousand people.

**Criminal case against Michalievič suspended.** However, the case can be reopened any time. Alieś Michalievič, as well as other presidential candidates, was arrested on December 20, 2010, on charges of organising “mass disorders”. After 4-year political asylum in the Czech Republic, he returned to Belarus in September 2015.

**Media activism**

**Press Club Belarus opened up officially in Minsk.** The opening ceremony on March 15 was attended by more than 60 guests, including Jaroslaw Włodarczyk, General Secretary of the International Association of Press Clubs. Press Club Belarus’ headquarters are now located on Viery Charužaj str. 3/601. This week, the new space hosts a meeting and a master class of Tatsiana Repkova from Slovakia, founder of Media Managers Club.

**Calls inside Skype and Viber not affected by decree 98.** The Operational and Analytical Centre has published answers to questions about the effect of the new Decree 98 "On Improving the Transmission of Electronic Messages." It became clear that the calls between subscribers of programmes like Skype and Viber are not covered by the ban. The same is true about CLIR, anonymisers and VPN. The main purpose of the decree is to fight with the gray traffic.

**MediaBarCamp 2016.** On May 26-29, Lithuania will host MediaBarCamp, a unique international non-conference on New Media and media activism. The main purpose of the MediaBarCamp is to stimulate New Media projects development in Belarus. Organised by Swedish International Liberal Centre (SILC), the non-conference is conducted to arrange coordination between
existing projects and to establish new contacts. Participation is free of charge.

The first issue of the newsletter 55+News dedicated to the upcoming conference on ageing. The newsletter aims to exchange experience and best practices between organizations and enthusiasts on improving the quality of life of seniors in Belarus and other countries. The first issue is dedicated to the International conference that is to be held on April 8-9 by Practical Competences Studio (Golden Age University) and Vzaimoponimaniye NGO with the support of USAID, UNFPA, The Foundation «Remembrance, Responsibility and Future» and DVV International.

Expert meetings

Expert-analytical club launched in Minsk. The first meeting was devoted to the Belarusian-Russian relations and organised by BISS and Press Club Belarus. The Club is regulated by Chatham House rules – all information articulated at an event can be used without any personification. The meeting was attended by independent experts, journalists, representatives of state bodies and Embassies. It is planned that the Club's meetings will take place on a monthly basis.

Liberal Club held a round table devoted to the reform of the pension system in Belarus. The meeting on March 16 aimed to discuss the changes in the Belarusian pension system that anyway have to happen in the coming years. The experts were Anton Boltačka, Liberal Club, Kaciaryna Barnukova, BEROC, as well as economist Uladzimir Paplyka who presented his vision of the pension reform in the country.

Year in the Bologna Process: What do Belarusians think? The next debate in the series What Do Belarusians Think? will take place on March 28, in the Minsk Gallery TUT.BY. The discussion is organised by the Office for European Expertise and
Communications (OEEC) and dedicated to the quality of higher education in Belarus and the role of students in university governance. The live broadcast will be available.

Reforms Review

**Economic preferences of Belarusians under the economic crisis have changed slightly.** According to the IISEPS March national poll, the crisis in the country is recognized by 87.8% of Belarusians, but the collapse of the Belarusian model – only 24%. The crisis has not led to a reassessment of the economic ideas of Belarusians – In particular, they do not lose their trust in the effectiveness of state property.

**What reforms the Belarusian authorities will hold in exchange for a Eurasian credit.** On March 28, the Eurasian Fund for Stabilisation and Development (EFSD) approved the provision of a **new loan of $2 billion** to Belarus. Director of the EFSD Project Group on financial loans, Alisher Mirzoyev explains what reforms the loan is intended to support in Belarusian economy.

**IBRD loan agreement to improve public finance management in Belarus signed.** A $10 million loan agreement between Belarus and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) was signed in Minsk on April 1. The loan has been provided to increase the effectiveness and transparency of public finance management in Belarus in line with a government-approved strategy.

**Lukashenka: No need of reforms in education, we must improve what we have.** According to the Belarus' president, "we got good education system since the Soviet times. We transformed it, returned to it several times, to write new textbooks, etc."

**Strategy of reforming of state organizations will be ready by**
September 1. By an order of the Belarus’ Prime Minister, an inter-departmental coordination group on the reform of public administration and management of state assets has been established. The group should draft a related comprehensive strategy by September 1.

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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Minsk Students Protest Against Re-Examination Charges

Students of the Belarusian State University (BSU) plan to hold a demonstration near the university administration building on 2 December to protest against re-examination charges.

The university recently introduced these to incentivize students not to fail exams. The decision to protest was taken after a series of other initiatives which the administration ignored.

While BSU students have not faced any repression so far, the administration of another university, the Belarusian State Pedagogical University (BSPU), managed to stifle the same initiative by threatening students with punishment.

However, Belarus' commitment to the Bologna road map since 2015 may push the authorities to step back from harassment of
students which could provoke an increase in student activity. Earlier this year students succeeded in lifting restrictions on night time dormitory access rights.

**History of Student Protests in Belarus**

In the 1990s, students were one of the driving forces of anti-government opposition in Belarus. In the beginning of the 2000s, after a period of severe confrontation between the Lukashenka regime and the opposition, student activism virtually disappeared from Belarusian universities. All student organisations had until recently appeared to be under the control of the authorities which repressed any unsanctioned activity. However, 2015 has proved to be a turning point.

BSU students launched a media campaign against entrance restrictions into student dormitories between 11 pm and 6 am. At the beginning of the year, BSU students launched a media campaign against entrance restrictions into student dormitories between 11 pm and 6 am. The restriction existed as a Soviet hangover which survived in Belarus due to the lack of students willing and able to struggle for their rights. The activists organised a media campaign, gathered a group via a social network and held talks with the university administration. As a result, the restriction was abolished in most universities.

The current campaign against exam retake charges went even further, as it touches a more controversial issue. Moreover, the students look very determined and appear not to fear confronting university officials and even calling for mass action.
The Chairman of the Belarusian National Youth Council NGO Alieś Krot told BelarusDigest that the 2015 student campaigns are indeed unique, because previously students did not dare to do more than put a 'like' on a social network page dedicated to the cause. He also thinks this is partly the result of work of youth NGOs which assist students in advocating their rights.

Protest against Re-Examination Charges

On 2 November news agency BelTA reported that the BSU plans to introduce charges for retaking exams. From 1 January 2016 students will have to pay $2 to re-take a failed exam, $18-34 for a course paper and $156 for a graduate thesis defence. The charges are in place in most Belarusian universities, and BSU remains one of the few which does not have it.

The university administration said that the measure would discipline students and motivate them to be more responsible in studying. “In any case, most students will not notice it as they do not fail exams”, the BSU press secretary said.

All university associations – which are supposed to protect the rights of students – trade unions, student self-government bodies and the Belarusian National Youth Union supported the measure. This is no surprise since in Belarus these organisations are usually created top-down and implement decisions dictated by university administrations.

The activists say the initiative violates Belarus' education norms and seeks to fill the university coffers rather than stimulate studies.

The next day a group under the name #studentsagainst emerged on Vkontakte, the most popular social network in the post-
Soviet space. The group now has 2,200 members. Another group of activists started to gather signatures against the charge initiative and managed to collect 2,500 in just a week, which they passed to the university administration with a petition. Despite their efforts, on 12 November the rector's ordered that the charges be introduced.

The activists say the initiative violates Belarus' education norms and seeks to fill the university coffers rather than stimulate studies.

University Administration Pressure

Students of the BSPU, where re-examination charges exist already, decided to join the initiative and created their own group on Vkontakte. However, soon BSPU students faced serious pressure.

Only the day after the online activity started, on 12 November someone hacked into the group's account and deleted the information.

The ideology department officials, who operate in each university, invited students to discuss the matter and tried to persuade them to stop the activity. They said the students were engaging in political activity and had some political
forces behind them who were paying for these protests. Most students had to stop their involvement. Male students have additional reasons to worry about expulsion – they fear conscription to the army after being kicked out of university.

On 17 November, international students day, the BSU activists led an action of solidarity with their colleagues from BSPU and hung a banner with the #studentsagainst hashtag in the main university building.

In a recent publication the activists announced that they plan a mass rally under the slogan Love and Solidarity March near the university administration building on 2 December. “The university keeps ignoring us, and by this action we will demonstrate how many of us are there”, the student leaders say.

Does Belarus Have Student Self-Government?

In May 2015 Belarus joined the Bologna process, which experts interpreted as a sign of good will from the western side. Belarus is now obliged to implement the road map of higher school reform and comply with western academic freedoms and values. However, the Bologna committee, the NGO which monitors the implementation of the Bologna norms, indicates that violations of student rights remain. University administrations continue to order students to vote early and to participate in official events and political campaigns.
Some reforms that the Ministry of Education is trying to pursue look like façade changes only, particularly those concerning student self-government. In January 2015, Minister of Education Michail Žuraŭkoŭ at a student forum initiated the establishment of the National Civil Student Council under the Ministry of Education.

The Council is supposed to function as an advisory body of student self-government. It includes one representative of each Belarusian higher education institution.

Officials do not hide the fact that the Council was established in order to join the Bologna process. As Minister Žuraŭkoŭ said, “we applied for Bologna membership, but our opponents claim that Belarusian universities lack student self-government. I am convinced this is wrong.” Alieś Krot opined to BelarusDigest that the Council will become another state-controlled student associations with activity driven from the top.

Although the state attempts to control the processes inside universities, students' struggle for their rights seems to be reviving after more than a decade of inactivity. The warming of Belarus-EU relation and Bologna commitments creates an opportunity for activists to restructure relations between the state and academia.
The Way They Do Reforms in Belarus: Actions, Framework, and Foreign Partners

Before the elections, many publications dealt with the subject of reform in Belarus. The analysis revolved around the post-Soviet space analysing the explicit degradation of the era of a commodity economy. This means that all these states will have to change, including Belarus.

Minsk has already signalled by its actions its intention to change many things in its economy and politics. It is not only about its participation in the Ukrainian events. Belarus has taken seriously the optimisation of economic processes.

Specific Actions They Do Not Call Reforms in Belarus

Lukashenka said clearly during his inauguration ceremony that reforms were a “destruction of the foundations of the state system”.

In terms of the Belarusian ruling elite, the words “reforms” and “reformism” are almost identical to the word “evil”. For Lukashenka, a declaration about the need for “structural reforms” would be equal to a declaration “I have been wrong, and my policy is inefficient”. Instead of these “bad” words, Lukashenka uses “modernisation”, “development”, “improvement”, “transformation” and other similar words.

Thus, the “reforms” applicable to a Ukrainian scenario are hardly possible in Belarus. There will be no discussion or debate. Nor will the regime use the word “reform” (at least, in language most of the population understands). Whether any
The sanctions have been and remain the key problem for Belarus. This is not only an issue of trade. The imposition of sanctions limits investment opportunities and obtaining long-term cheap loans. Besides, what is most important, is the need for Belarus's to engage in scientific cooperation and technology exchange. For now this remains impossible. However the problem's resolution is near. The United States has actually lifted most restrictions it imposed, and the European Union has suspended sanctions.

Moreover, even prior to the formal lifting of sanctions, the restrictions on scientific cooperation were cancelled. As a result, during the spring and summer of 2015 Belarus entered into projects in the framework of the Horizon 2010 programme, it joined the Bologna Process unexpectedly and intensified cooperation with the European Research Council.

Belarus carries out an interesting policy towards Ukraine

Belarus carries out an interesting policy towards Ukraine in the unusual role of a donor. The Belarusian State Committee for Science and Technology, together with the Ukrainian Ministry for Education and Science, launched joint research programmes. The list of topics includes optics, new materials, bio-technologies, pharmaceuticals, computer science, energy and energy efficiency. Publications analysing “Belarusian reforms” called all of them a priority in the “new economy of the country”.

Money, Reforms, New and Old Partners

At the turn of 2005-2006, when Russia’s influence on the economy became extremely important, Belarus understood that
the commodity economy would not become successful. Since then, Belarus has started a gradual movement towards seeking a counterweight to Russia. The Belarusian authorities are trying to find new options and allies beyond the usual East – West axis. In particular, they are working on the development of ties from the Baltic to the Black Sea, along the North – South axis.

Besides, they are trying to work among the old members of the European Union. However, a number of problems remain. The traditional “power centres”, Germany and France, are rather strongly linked to Russia.

Here, a new partner of Belarus has emerged, the United Kingdom. By trade volume the UK has unexpectedly become Minsk’s second foreign trade partner. Besides, “friendship” with the United Kingdom is facilitating an intensification of cooperation with almost two dozen further countries which are members of the British Commonwealth. These countries are ready made money, technology, and sales markets. Significantly, exports to the Commonwealth countries grew by $2.431 billion during the first 8 months of 2015 in comparison to 2014.

Ukraine’s attempt at European integration opened a window of opportunities to Lukashenka. Further developments and Belarus’ own competent policy have extended it. These are the issues of sanctions and foreign trade. The dynamics of trade turnover between Belarus and the European Union appear much more promising than the path of "going to Europe" which Ukraine has embarked on.

In sum: Belarus understands that there will be less money and works on plans to get access to the funds. So far it has managed to achieve an increase in funding. In parallel, it is growing a network of political connections and the weight of its political lobby, and this is against a backdrop of a
collapse of its neighbours’ influence. There is one small thing, an efficient state.

It Is All about People

Now, let us talk about the managers. Indeed, the “quality” of most Belarusian managers remains poor. However, here we face some interesting facts taken from the practical activities of the country’s leadership.

Both presidential advisor on economic matters Kiryl Rudy and deputy head of the Presidential Administration Mikalaj Snapkoŭ made their statements at the October Economic Forum. Interestingly, independent research centres organised this event. The authorities see most of these centres as an “opposition”. Just a year ago, it was impossible to imagine even the very fact of this kind of forum being held in Minsk, let alone a statement by a top official of the Presidential Administration.

The Belarusian authorities gently engage clever “opposition activists” in a dialogue.

In Belarus, the MOST programme started unbeknown to many, the financing of 500 visits of stakeholders and managers in different spheres (NGOs, business, authorities, and research) to the European Union to establish partnership relations. The number of participants is 1,500 people. Such a scale in the framework of Belarus could entail important changes.

The Belarusian authorities gently engage clever “opposition activists” in a dialogue. The question is not about the participants in the presidential elections, rather there is silence there. The authorities invite those who generate ideas on the country’s development, as well good analysts, to participate in discussions and closed meetings.
Thus, the situation with personnel policy is also very interesting. A statement of fact is that there is a shortage of personnel. And there are signs of work in this area.

**Quick Solutions and the Slogan “No to Reforms”**

As Kiryl Rudy said at the October Economic Forum, “One can get an official answer whether the reforms will happen in 2016 only from the official documents and decision of the head of state”. Let us use this recipe. I will cite a few facts, which happened during the last few weeks.

In 2016, concessional financing and subsidies will be significantly reduced. Those who will still be able to raise funds will survive. The others will undergo restructuring through bankruptcy. The same will happen to agriculture.

The National Bank and the Ministry of Finance pursue a rather tough policy on the rehabilitation of the financial system.

The parliament is considering a draft law on transitioning from a planned economy to “indicative planning”. The National Bank and the Ministry of Finance pursue a rather tough policy on the rehabilitation of the financial system, as well as declarations (including those of Lukashenka) about the “inappropriateness” of getting “expensive” money on foreign markets.

The topic of “financing” should also include such an instrument as the public-private partnership, which is expected to be enacted in legislation in 2016.

Since 2016, Belarus will have new money in circulation. The redenomination will take place, which includes the introduction of Belarusian coins. Automatically, it means
giving up the opportunity to use inflation to control the economy.

Back to the Question: Will There Be Reforms in Belarus?

The point is simple, the regime will not change one iota politically. It will be the same authoritarianism. As for the economy, we are unlikely to hear loud statements about “Belarusian reforms”. How should we call what is happening today?.. Fundamentally, it does not matter.

On the other hand, people in Belarus will fail to feel a positive effect in the coming years. After all, if one proceeds from the thesis of economic reform, the quality-of-life forecast for an average Belarusian is negative for 3 to 5 years.

And even in Belarusian conditions, the reforms will not give a positive effect before 2020. Incidentally, this is a dig at populist reformers who say that a “people’s paradise” will happen soon in Ukraine. There has been not a single country in the world where structural reforms gave an instant result.

In any case, it will be interesting. One country is being publicly “reformed”, with beautiful slogans, TV shows and political battles. The other one seems to be against the reforms but it does something. It is an interesting question to what will be the result?

Ihar Tyshkievich
Sanctions, Peace Talks, Bologna Process: Is There Hope for Change?

After a second attempt, on 14 May Belarus joined the Bologna process and the group of 47 countries forming the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

While Belarus's acceptance into the Bologna process may open up prospects for long-term improvements in Belarusian education, there should not be any illusions about the full implementation of the Bologna principles or real political liberalisation in the country.

Minsk is utilising politically neutral spheres to improve his relationship with the West. EU officials should keep this in mind that after his 21 years in power, Lukashenka has continued to play off the EU and Russia for his own sake.

Between East and West

By all appearances, the situation looks as if it is a repeat of the scenario that unfolded before the presidential elections in 2010, when a brief period of warming up between Minsk and Brussels was later shattered by mass repression after the elections in December. Since that time, the relationship has deteriorated or been consistently poor, right up until the recent thaw that has gained traction following Minsk's hosting of peace talks.

Lukashenka did not hesitate to openly call Russian trade policies “brainless”

Taking sides for Lukashenka is not an easy task: too pro-West and he seems problematic for the Russian side. Too pro-Russian
and he appears as if he is ready to surrender Belarusian statehood to Russia. Nevertheless, Lukashenka has been playing the balancing game for a long time and is quite good at it.

Lukashenka did not hesitate to openly call Russian trade policies “brainless” and threatened to leave the Eurasian Union when Russia limited imports on certain Belarusian goods due to Russian sanctions against the EU. Lukashenka clearly understands the vulnerability of Belarusian economy due to its overwhelming dependence on the Russian market.

Lukashenka has shown his disdain for Russia's foreign policy by refusing to recognise Abkhazia and Ossetia or join in the Russian sanctions against Europe. However, this behaviour has resulted in gas, oil and food products problems for the Belarusian economy, a sign that Lukashenka's speeches can only go so far.

He is not willing to open up to Europe either. On February 16, he clearly declared in an interview with the state-run “Russia 1” TV channel: “If you think that’s the reason [for the peace talks], that I'm turning to someone – get that rot out of your head.”

**A Thaw between the West and Belarusian Head of State**

Belarusian media has called the Minsk peace talks over Ukraine a great diplomatic victory for Belarus and, personally, for Alexander Lukashenka. A visit by the French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel gave grounds for Belarusian authorities to say that Minsk is the capital of Eastern European diplomacy.

the EU has no intentions of battling with a dictatorship in the heart of Europe

It also demonstrated to the Belarusian opposition, in the wake of the presidential elections later this year, that the EU has
no intentions of battling with a dictatorship in the heart of Europe in the near future.

Hosting international talks aimed at resolving the conflict in Ukraine has won Lukashenka some acclaim and served as an indicator of a thaw between the West and the Belarusian leader. The United States has lifted sanctions against Belarusneft, a state-owned Belarusian energy company, imposed in 2011 for its involvement in the Iranian petroleum sector.

Among other symptoms of the dialogue between EU and Belarus are an increase in the number of official visits to Europe by the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makei and the rumoured plans that Belarus might participate in the Riga summit “Eastern Partnership” at the presidential level. Lukashenka's participation would allow him to improve his own standing overall, including breaking through the West's wall of isolation that it has erected against Belarus.

One ex-presidential candidate in Belarus, Vitaly Rimasheusky, views the Summit as “a reflection of a new European policy – the resumption of relations with the Lukashenka regime, despite previous statements about the impossibility of having relations before the release of all political prisoners.”

Reality: the Bologna Process and Hockey

While the West has been overlooking the flaws of the Belarusian regime in the wake of the weak signals of liberalisation, Belarus has continued to play a balancing act between Russia and the West.

Belarusian officials have been using politically neutral areas to diminish tensions in EU-Belarusian relations.

By focusing on geopolitical factors, Belarusian officials have been using politically neutral areas to diminish tensions in EU-Belarusian relations. Since the beginning of the Ukrainian
crisis, Belarus has taken a neutral stance and has improved relations with the West simply by providing a platform for negotiations. Belarusian officials continue to garner favour from the West by agreeing to implement minimal reforms in education.

The EU gave Belarus the go ahead to join the Bolonga Process even though the educational system is still a crude mix of the old Soviet system and some external, neoliberal influences. The discourse of Belarusian authorities has not changed much since their last application to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2012 when the application was rejected. The geopolitical situation, however, was much more favourable this time around.

On the other hand, Minsk continues to respect its Eastern neighbour. After beating the United States for the first time (5-2) at the ice hockey world championship, Russia defeated the Belarusian hockey team 7-0 as a symbolic gesture for the 70th anniversary of Allied victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. It should be noted that a few days before that Russia lost to the United States 4-2.

Lukashenka's fifth presidential election will unlikely bring any surprises. Even though, according to IISEPS, Lukashenka’s approval has been going down since September 2014, the Belarusian leader continues to enjoy more popular approval than any other potential political leader.

With the presidential election coming at the end of 2015,
Europe is counting on Lukashenka to deal with potential protests in a wiser manner. However, despite improving ties with the West, history has shown that the Belarusian leader will not hesitate to resort to severe measures to secure his position if it comes to it.

**Why Belarus Needs the Bologna Process**

Belarus remains the only European country excluded from the Bologna Process to date. This situation may finally change on 14-15 May 2015 when the ministerial meeting of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) will consider Belarus’s second attempt to join the 47-nation club.

Even though the Belarusian system of higher education has not seen any fundamental improvements in recent years, this time around it has a good chance of being brought into the fold. If it happens everyone, and especially Belarusian students and universities, will win. However, it will only be a single step in the right direction – as the real work will start afterwards.

**Will Belarus Be Accepted This Time?**

The EHEA ministerial meeting set to take place on 14-15 May in Yerevan will consider Belarus’s application to the Bologna group. The Belarusian Minister of Education Mikhail Zhuraukou has received an official invitation to attend the event. The Belarusian media have already read this as a sign that the country’s bid for membership has been successful.
Minister Zhuraukou also sounds optimistic. In his words, “Belarus observes almost every principle of the Bologna Declaration, there remain only some formalities [to be worked out].”

Unofficial sources point to a potential positive decision as well. According to Uladzimer Dunayeu, member of the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee, the Bologna Working Group, which reviewed the application, prepared a ‘yes’ recommendation for the ministerial meeting in May.

At the beginning of March, the Working Group visited Minsk and held a seminar at the Belarusian State University. The Head of the Education Department of the Council of Europe Sjur Bergan, who took part in the seminar, made quite an unequivocal statement: “The fact that we have come to Belarus proves that we are seriously considering your application. Otherwise we would not be here”.

Second Attempt in Four Years

The general mood appears to be quite different from the situation at the end of 2011, when Belarus applied to the Bologna Process for the first time. Even though the Belarusian application at that time caused similar discussions inside and outside the country, some things have changed this time around.

As with the current situation, the government then stressed the gradual progress of the educational system and its technical compatibility with the European Higher Education Area, the country's readiness to organise international exchange programmes and apply a unified educational credit system. Also similar to the present-day situation, the Independent Bologna Committee then argued that higher education in Belarus fell short of the Bologna standards and core values.

Yet, the 2011 review of Belarus’s application took place
against a very different political background. Only one year had passed since the Belarusian authorities cracked down on mass demonstrations during the presidential election night at the end of December 2010. Belarus-EU relations saw one of the worst periods ever: sanctions lists were growing, both sides exchanged harsh statements and mutual accusations, and EU ambassadors left Minsk several times to display their diplomatic protest.

As a result, in December 2011 the Bologna Working Group recommended a ministerial meeting (held in April 2012) to not accept Belarus – and at that time, the ministers agreed. According to their assessment, the Belarusian system of higher education did not respect the principles and values of the Bologna Process, such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy and student participation in the governance of universities.

Now that the relations with the EU have entered a phase of rapprochement, the overall political context for Belarus’s Bologna application has considerably improved. The growing bilateral agenda and Minsk’s efforts in mediating a de-escalation of the Ukraine crisis have played their own role.

**Has Anything Changed in Higher Education in Belarus?**

In December 2014 the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee prepared a new report on the country’s readiness to join the EHEA. According to this report, the system of higher education in Belarus has made significant progress but still failed to meet the necessary criteria with the issues that prevented its acceptance three years before. Representatives of some independent student organisations agree with this assessment.

Officials from the Ministry of Education and rectors of Belarusian universities have offered up different points of view on the degree to which things have changed over the past four years. Minister Zhuraukou argues that:
now we can say with confidence that Belarus has a two-stage system of education with bachelor programmes (from three to five years depending on one's specialisation) and master programmes. … We have introduced the possibility of getting PhD through defending a thesis. Moreover, now a PhD defence can be conducted in English. All Belarusian universities have started to have courses in English. … Of course, Belarus has its own issues, as does any other country, but in general we are in compliance with the guidelines of the Bologna convention.

The First Deputy Minister of Education Vadzim Bohush claims that in all Belarusian university students now have a direct vote on all issues facing their institutions. Students’ representatives sit on university councils and have the right of a binding, not advisory, vote.

However, according to the monitoring carried out by the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee and the youth trade union group Students Rada, the student quota (25%) in university councils is hardly respected.

Why Is Bologna Good for Belarus?

Thus, the state of play in the field of higher education in Belarus has not progressed a lot since 2011. Neither have the discussions about Belarus's potential Bologna membership: both supporters and opponents of the idea firmly adhere to the same arguments.

And this is no surprise.

The fundamental mistake of traditional Western policies towards Belarus is expecting too much too soon, even though the reality on the ground simply precludes a possibility of a quick change.

A realist needs to accept that the full implementation of the
Bologna principles contradicts the very nature of the present-
day political reality in the country and that there is no
external or internal power capable of changing it at present.
And the real question of the day has to do with the prospects
of long-term improvements.

Isolation, as Belarus has already demonstrated, hardly serves
anyone: whether it be the country in general, the government,
opposition, civil society, educational system or individual
citizens. Moreover, the prolonged isolation of higher
education institutions primarily harms those whom it claims to
protect – the young generation of Belarusians, who are
deprived of basic opportunities as a result of these policies.

Even a minor opening up of the Belarusian education system,
which the Bologna process can facilitate, will be a meaningful
step in the right direction. It will also help equip more
progressively minded individuals in government circles with
additional arguments against the Soviet-style retrogrades that
still dominate many academic and policy-making institutions in
Belarus.

In the light of this, the ministers of the Bologna group
should accept Belarus to the European Higher Education Area.
And it is important to use the membership not for political
sloganeering but for promoting the fundamental principles of
the Bologna process in practise, in a manner that is patient
but also consistent.

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

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

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

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

International Relations and Politics

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

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

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

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

Economy

Belarus-China Potash Deal Upsets Russia – Bloomberg reports that Belarusian state-owned company Belaruskali, one of the leading potash producers in the world, has inked an important deal with China. With this new deal, Belaruskali will sell potash to China for what many believe to be under market price. The move is significant, as it is the first contract between Belarus and China for potash.
While the exact length of the contract is unknown, former Russian potash partner Uralkali and analysts say that it will lead to a negative reaction from the market. It also fits a trend in which Belaruskali has been selling potash cheap in other countries, likely to secure a market share and muscle out competitors. India is now seeking to get a better deal as well.

**Seeking IMF Deal, Better Monetary Policy Needed** – If Belarus hopes to secure financial support from the IMF, it will need to show that it is serious about reforming its monetary policy according to its chief envoy to Minsk. The Belarusian rouble is struggling due to the overall economic climate in the region and the Central Bank has sought to shelter Belarusians from the impact by propping it up according to Reuters. In addition to switching over to a flexible currency exchange rate, Minsk needs to introduce a number of other structural reforms as well before the IMF will consider lending it money.

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

**Civil Rights**

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

**Banned Belarusian Theatre Troupe in NYC** – In their latest upcoming theatrical performance, the Belarus Free Theatre will perform 'Trash Cuisine', a play that addresses capital punishment through utilising 'a documentary style and food metaphors'. According to the New York Times' blog, the play was well received in both Edinburgh and London, though its New York City performance will be the first time it is performed in English. Many of the troupe's players have lived in exile in London since leaving Belarus, a status that has made it difficult for them to perform in the United States.

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