

# Political Overview of 2012: Diplomatic Wars, Sanctions and Elections

Belarus started the year 2012 in a rather bad shape.

Alexander Lukashenka has been occupying his post for almost 18 years. A dozen political prisoners remained behind the bars. Relations with the West were worse than ever before. The opposition was suppressed and the economy went through a painful recovery from the economic crisis of 2011. That year the inflation reached 108% and the national currency went through a threefold devaluation.

The 2012 in Belarusian politics promised to be tough. And tough it was for everybody.

## Winter Froze the Foreign Policy

The events shaping the political landscape of the winter took place at the very end of the season. On 27 February the Council of the EU decided to extend its "black list" of Belarusian citizens prohibited to travel to the countries of the Union.

21 new persons were included into the list. The Belarusian response did not take long. On the next morning two diplomats: the Head of EU Delegation to Belarus Maira Mora and the Polish ambassador Leszek Szarepka were asked "to leave for their capitals for consultations". Simultaneously, two Belarusian ambassadors were recalled from Brussels and Warsaw.

Benjamin Franklin once sharply noted: "Whatever is begun in anger, ends in shame". On 28 February the European Union has decided to [withdraw](#) all its member-states' ambassadors from Minsk.

The decisive, swift and surprisingly coherent actions of the EU took Belarusian authorities aback. Later they begged Russia for diplomatic and moral support, did their best to explain that the EU ambassadors can return to their workplaces, but nothing really helped. The time has come to perform some due and proper political steps towards Europe.

### **Slight Changes Came with the Spring**

Notwithstanding the subtitle, the spring began with another governmental action isolating Belarus from the West. On 15 March 2012 two young men: Vladislav Kovalev and Dmitry Konovalov were executed for the terrorist act in Minsk subway that had taken place in April a year before.

Death penalty has always been a sticking point in Belarusian-European relations. Moreover, some experts and observers asserted that the investigation had been [done improperly](#), with many procedural violations while others regarded it as normal.

European officials and domestic civil activists criticised the Belarusian authorities for the undertaken act. Some raised their voices in [support](#) of new portion of sanctions against the regime. Others [doubted](#) their effectiveness.

On 23 March these sanctions were adopted. Not only Belarusian officials were included into the new "black list", but also businessmen who were considered to be the regime's sponsors. The message was pretty plain. The EU switched to hard line towards Belarus.

After the presidential elections of 2010 several tens of political activists got in prison. During the 2011 many of them were released with or without signing the plea for presidential pardon. Experts believe that was done in order to get some concessions from the EU. Spring of 2012 became the new "time to bargain".

On 14 and 15 April two political prisoners were [released](#):

Andrey Sannikov, ex-candidate for presidency, runner-up on the elections of 2010 and Dmitry Bondarenko, coordinator of the "European Belarus" campaign.

Soon after this event European ambassadors returned to Minsk. There was no doubt: their freedom was beholden to the European firmness and solidarity. Spring didn't resolve all the problems in Minsk-Brussels relations, but the degree of tension was surely mitigated.

In May the news came from the East. Vladimir Putin, aspiring to reunite former satellites within the new integration project – [Eurasian Union](#), came back to full power in Russia. He chose Belarus as a first country to visit, which seemed more like a landlord travelling across his provinces and reminding who was still in charge there.

### **Swedes Warmed the Summer Up**

Usually, summer is a time of low political activity. So was it in Belarus until 4 July. On that day an airplane, chartered by the Swedish advertising agency "Studio Total", illegally entered the Belarusian airspace and [parachuted](#) several hundred teddy bears with notes carrying pro-democracy messages. The event was immediately called "the teddy bear airdrop".

In the best soviet traditions the first official reaction was the denial. Only by the end of July Belarusian government had officially recognised the fact of illegal intrusion in sovereign air-space.

Soon after that Lukashenka sacked two top generals, the heads of Belarus' border guards and of air defence, for failing to intercept the plane. Belarusian-speaking Swedish ambassador Stefan Eriksson was expelled from the country.

Then the cannons of state propaganda fired their volley. Eriksson was convicted of supporting the Belarusian opposition and assisting the trespassers. That time Europeans decided not

to escalate the tensions and other ambassadors remained in Minsk.

Inside the country the summer passed in preparations for the September parliamentary elections. The opposition [divided](#) into three camps: those who fully partake in the elections, those who utterly [boycott](#) them and those who register their candidates with further exit from the race.

### **Gloomy End of the Year: No Gleams of Democracy**

Parliamentary campaign was, by all estimates, very passive. Political apathy and people's distrust to both governmental and oppositional candidates were the prevailing trends before and during the elections.

Besides, the government resorted to its traditional tools. Some oppositional candidates were not registered. Their representatives had almost no chance to get into electoral committees. Even their legally guaranteed TV-speeches were censored.

In such an atmosphere nobody really hoped for the elections to be fair or democratic. On 23 September 109 pro-governmental [candidates](#) were ["elected"](#) into the House of Representatives – the lower chamber of Belarusian parliament.

No mass oppositional rallies followed the elections. OSCE observers traditionally didn't recognize the elections as free and democratic, while observers from post-soviet states did. European leaders refused to deal with newly formed Belarusian parliament.

On 15 October European Union prolonged sanctions against Belarusian regime for one year, which caused relatively moderate verbal response of Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Meanwhile, Andrey Sannikov, ex-candidate for presidency that

had been released from prison half a year before got political asylum in the United Kingdom and moved there with his supporters' team.

At the end of the year Belarusian president astounded the whole country by the now infamous Decree No9. According to this decree, if you are an employee of a certain "modernizing" enterprise you can't leave the job without special permission from your boss. His decision, in its turn, can be appealed to the head of the local administration. If you refuse to work you will be fined with a gross sum of money or subjected to forced labour at the same plant. The decree has already been characterised as introducing the [new serfdom in Belarus](#).

All in all the year of 2012 in terms of political development has been just another wasted twelve months. There are still several political prisoners in jails. Parliamentary elections passed unnoticed. Relations with the West are cold and strained, while economic misunderstandings with Russia tend to transform into political tensions.

Paraphrasing one famous Israeli politician of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Belarusian authorities never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. And the outgoing year is the best example.

*Artyom Shraibman*