

Human Rights Award 2017, information security, Women and Elections – Belarus civil society digest

Documentary Film Festival on Human Rights Watch Docs goes to Minsk cinemas. Good Neighbor master class tells how to make a playground. MAKEOUT announce a contest for anti-discrimination stickers. Human rights community delivers its award.

Blakit online project visualises data on public procurement. SYMPA invites to masterclasses on effective local governance by a Polish mayor in Brest and Minsk. Journalistic conference in Minsk: pressure on freelance journalists in Belarus is unprecedented. The first KEF School of Economics is open for students of regional universities.

Onliner and Talaka announce a competition for projects to make life in Belarus better. Teplitsa School of Urban Initiatives opens enrollment for its third season in Mahilioŭ. PraRovar Forum takes place in Minsk to discuss cycling development in Belarus.

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

Human rights

[Documentary Film Festival on Human Rights Watch Docs Belarus](#) will be held in Minsk, on 14-17 December. The festival is held in Belarus for the third time, and for the first time, it comes to one of the Minsk central cinemas. The festival is initiated by *Zviano* CSO and gathers support via crowdfunding. The festival aims to draw attention to the most actual events

and create a space for discussion. Admission is free.

[National Human Rights Award 2017](#). On 8 December, in Minsk, the 9th National Award of the Belarusian human rights defenders was delivered in three nominations. Human rights defender of the year became the head of the Belarusian Documentation Centre Raisa Michajloŭskaja, Journalist of the year – journalist Radio Liberty Halina Abakunčyk, and Campaign of the year – campaign to assist to repressed By_Help.

[Contest of anti-discrimination stickers](#) is announced by MAKEOUT project. The contest raises the topic of gender-neutral toilets and experience of gender-non-binary and transgender people. The best stickers will be printed and available to stick in the cultural spaces of cities, like toilet doors with traditional “Male” and “Female” to make visible Other experience.

Media

[Presentation of the report on information security of Belarus](#). On 14 December, in Press Club, Research Centre EAST will present the results of the study *Information Security in Belarus: How Serious the Issue And What To Do?* The researchers analysed the Belarusian media landscape to assess the availability of disinformation sources, calculated vulnerability and resistance indices related to foreign information attacks, and prepared recommendations.



Conference “Prospects and Challenges for Freelance Journalism in Europe. A special focus on Belarus” in Minsk. Photo: baj.by

[Prospects and Challenges for Freelance Journalism in Europe Conference](#) took place in Minsk. The conference organised by Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) and International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) highlighted that the pressure on freelance journalists in Belarus is unprecedented. Thus, in 2017, freelance journalists in Belarus suffered interference from the authorities over 180 times. The conference adopted a [Resolution](#).

Governance

[Blakit visualises data on public procurement](#). The new online platform will allow journalists and stakeholders to analyse what state companies are buying and to inform representatives of civil society about suspicious transactions. Thus, the project will help accelerate the reform of public procurement

in Belarus. *The Blakit* project team plans to release the project by the end of 2017.

[Women and Elections gender conference](#) was held in Minsk. The event presented a study on the participation of women in democratic politics in Belarus. The 12 parties and political organisations participated in the poll and noted that the activity of Belarusian women increased in three circumstances: due to the economic crisis, the shock after the events of 2010 and the spring protests of 2017.

[How to make an effective local government](#). On 2 and 3 December, the SYMPA Research Centre for Public Management and *Budźma!* campaign invite to master classes on effective local self-government with Krzysztof Zacharzewski, a philosopher, civic activist, and the current mayor of Złocieniec town in Poland. The speaker will talk about the citizens' participation in decision-making processes, tools to improve the transparency of government etc.

[Study: Self-regulation of Business in Belarus](#). On 29 November, the Liberal Club invites to the presentation of its fresh study on the prospects of business self-regulation on the example of advertising activities. The presentation and the subsequent discussion will raise a point whether business, the state, and consumers are actually ready for self-regulation.

Local and urban activism

[Good Neighbor: how to make a playground and find resources for it](#). On 18 December, in Minsk, the Office for European Expertise and Communications invites to a master class, where activists will share their experience on establishing playgrounds in their yards, as well as architects and engineers will present new creative ideas.

[Teplitsa School of Urban Initiatives invites for the third](#)

[season](#). The *Teplitsa/Greenhouse* School in Mahilioŭ includes a series of meetings and lectures that will help the participants to become more proactive and active in improving life in the city. Based on the results of the training, students develop and implement urban projects. The School is traditionally organised by the Mahilioŭ-based Urban Initiatives Centre.

[PraRovar Forum](#) takes place on 24-26 November, in Minsk. *PraRovar/ Pro-Bike* Forum is dedicated to the development of cycling at the city and national levels and aims to acquaint Belarusian cyclist activists from different cities and synchronise their activities for the development of urban cycling in Belarus. The event is held within the framework of the EU-supported project *Urban Cycling in Belarus*.

✘ [Rating of Belarus' protest cities for the recent two years](#) is composed by Sxod.by site. Minsk heads the list – in 2016-2017, Belarus observed 124 street protests and 64 of them run in the Belarusian capital. The 2nd place is taken by Baranavičy city, Brest region, with 10 protest actions.

[#Paskarenne national interactive competition of projects](#) is launched by Onliner.by together with [Talaka.by](#) non-profit platform. #Paskarenne/ #Acceleration competition aims to support any Belarusian projects – from social and urban to entrepreneurial and technological. The prize fund is \$2K. The projects' development will be covered in the format of a reality show. The winner will be announced in February 2018.

Other

[School of Economics KEF 2018](#). The first round of the KEF School of Economics is open for students of regional universities. The School aims to improve the knowledge of students on economics and create regional communities of

students interested in economics. The school is organised by the Centre for Economic Research BEROC and the IPM Research Centre. The deadline is 5 January 2018.

[Overview of CSOs dealing with children and young people with disabilities](#) is presented in an analytical report of the ENCON project – Enhancing CSOs Contribution to Evidence-Based Policy Making for Vulnerable Groups. The project is implemented by CASE Belarus in concert with the ACT NGO and international partners.

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.

Towards a new agenda for the West and Belarus

The results of the parliamentary elections on 11 September surprised many in Belarus. Few believed that Lukashenka's regime would allow independent deputies in parliament, but these elections have shown that the Belarusian authorities are at least willing to appear to change.

Although this does provide optimism, Belarus and the West still need to create a new agenda to ensure that Belarus remains on a positive trajectory. In other words, the EU and US should not make demands that are completely unacceptable to the regime.

The West's main requirement, free elections, is not an unreasonable one. However, increasing democratic space within the country should be a greater priority. This could be accomplished, for example, by moving Western foundations to Belarus and pushing for a greater number of opposition politicians in local councils.

Parliamentary surprise

The idea that Lukashenka's regime cannot change has existed for a long time, but the parliamentary elections on September 11 have showed [a slightly different side](#) to the Belarusian authorities. The author, [an observer](#) at the elections, personally witnessed the election commissions inflating turnout, while the process of vote counting remained opaque. In the end however, the Belarusian authorities surprised many by letting [Hanna Kanapatskaja](#) and [Alena Anisim](#), two women with democratic views, into the parliament.

This shows that Lukashenka's regime appears able to at least implement token reforms to appease the West. A year ago, the Belarusian government released a number of political prisoners to this end and now seeks to similarly utilise the democratic MPs. This is a huge step, despite the circumstances.



The Belarusian authorities have in fact made concessions before, such as during dialogues of 2008-2010. At this time the regime returned certain independent newspapers to the public distribution system, such as *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaya Volya*, and registered the Movement for Freedom, an opposition group led by [Alexander Milinkevich](#).

But today's concessions are of a different nature. Two people with democratic views received official status and a salary of \$800 a month and influence, which has not happened in Belarus

for 12 years. This legitimises democratic politicians even for those who are not sympathetic to the Belarusian opposition.

The need for a positive trajectory

Pro-regime experts often argue that Belarus is not yet ready for democracy, but the authorities are wisely taking baby steps in this direction. This is not the case. In fact, Lukashenka's regime would like to avoid democracy, as it would threaten many figures of authority or wealth: certain Belarusian officials have made their fortunes thanks to the authoritarian nature of Belarus. One example is [Mikhail Miasnikovich](#), the head of the Upper Chamber of the Belarusian Parliament, whose watch reportedly cost \$30,000.

Nevertheless, as the parliamentary elections show, the Belarusian government is capable of some concessions. Changes have become possible largely due to the desire of Belarus and the West to continue normalising relations. As Lukashenka told Scott Rauland, then charge d'affaires a.i. of the U.S. on July 6, Belarus will not have a full-fledged foreign policy without first normalising its relations with Washington. Today, Belarus needs the EU and the US for a variety of reasons – from economic support to a desire to distance itself from Russia.

However, the Belarusian regime remains reluctant to cede power by holding free elections and the West needs to understand this. If the EU and the US require only free elections, it will not encourage the regime to make any concessions. On the other hand, it is vital that the West not give up its ideals, otherwise Lukashenka will lack incentive to reform.

Both sides now need a positive trajectory, in which Western requirements do not exceed Lukashenka's ability to change. It

is no surprise that the regime will require carrots, and the West should continue to provide them conditionally. For example, now that the Belarusian parliament has two opposition members, the level of cooperation with the Belarusian parliament ought to be increased.



What should be done

The story of Anna Kanapatskaja and Alena Anisim shows what the West should focus on: gradual institutionalisation of democratic groups and civil society in Belarus.

The European Union and the United States may require Belarus to clear the Augean stables. Some people, like Eduard Palchys, still [remain in prison](#), while accusations against him appear at least partly politically-motivated. Belarus also retains [article 193.1 in criminal law](#), under which a member of an unregistered organisation can receive two years in prison.

The West must take a stand in these matters, but this should not be the focus of its energy, as these issues do not have long-term value. Lukashenka's regime can repeal the law, but nevertheless send people to prison under a different article in the event of a change in the political climate. For example, [Ales Bialiatski](#), leader of the unregistered human rights organisation "Viasna", was sentenced for allegedly avoiding taxes in 2011.

More important is to contribute to longer-term changes – to increase Western presence and to help civil society and democratic groups to do the same.

For example, the Belarusian authorities could allow Western political and civil foundations to open their representative offices in Belarus. Their activities may be monitored, but the

presence of organisations such as the American National Democratic Institute or the Swedish Forum Syd will be more effective if they are conducted in Belarus. The funds will be able to reach a greater range of Belarusians and support more grassroots initiatives; they remain invisible while working from Vilnius and Warsaw.

Moreover, a physical presence in Minsk will bring the West and democracy greater legitimacy in the Belarusian public space. Belarusian officials, experts or politicians can build long term relationships with the West and stop seeing the European Union or the United States as enemies.

Thus, the West may require more opportunities for democratic groups from the authorities in the local elections in 2018. Representatives of the opposition do not yet have access to all local councils. Moreover, the value of such councils in the Belarusian system seems marginal. Therefore, the election of several dozen opposition politicians will not threaten Lukashenka's regime, although it will strengthen the germs of Belarusian democracy.

Vitali Silitski, the most well-known Belarusian political analyst, who died in 2011, often emphasised that change needs to come from inside the country, not outside. It seems that today a window of opportunity for active change has appeared.

**Belarusian parliamentary
elections: does everybody**

win?

On 11 September 2016 Belarus [held elections](#) to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly. In spite of the relatively insignificant role of the parliament in the Belarusian political system, these elections seem particularly important given the international situation and current economic crisis in Belarus.

Many experts expected deeper democratisation during the electoral campaign, such as introducing the OSCE's recommendations into legislation, as well as including several representatives from the opposition into the parliament. According to experts' views, such steps would demonstrate the authorities' willingness to continue their dialogue with the West and would guarantee further loans from the IMF.

However, the actual results appeared to be much more moderate than experts had expected.

Authorities Sing the Same Old Song

One needs to be a very attentive analyst in order to find any significant difference between the current elections and previous electoral campaigns. The authorities have certainly introduced a few of minor changes into the legislation to demonstrate their willingness to cooperate with the OSCE and the West in general. Simultaneously, they have launched an information campaign to demonstrate their inability at a constitutional level to implement the OSCE's main recommendations.

As a result, all the flaws of the Belarusian electoral system, such as [abuses during early voting](#), strong administrative

support for certain candidates, and a lack of control during votes counting have remained untouched.

96% of the candidates from 'Nasha Niva's list became MPs

Naturally, both international and domestic independent observers have called the results of the elections into question. Two month ago 'Nasha Niva', an opposition newspaper, published a forecast of the future members of parliament. The journalists based their assumption not on the candidates' programmes or on sociological surveys but on the candidates' relations with the authorities. As a result, 96% of the candidates from 'Nasha Niva's list became MPs.

Many experts consider early voting to be one of the main indicators of fraud during electoral campaigns in Belarus. The 2016 campaign has not been an exception – according to official data, early voting amounted for 31,29% of votes compared to 26% during the previous parliamentary elections in 2012 and to 36,05% during the presidential elections in 2015.

Since in 2006 early voting amounted to 31,3% of the vote, one one would need to be quite an optimist to find any liberalisation in this practise during the current parliament elections. Only wide use of administrative resources could guarantee such high results.

When the Results Become More Interesting than the Process

Nevertheless, there has been one surprise during these elections. Two apparently non-establishment candidates won a place in the parliament – a member of the oppositional United Civil Party (UCP), Hanna Kanapatskaya, and Aliona Anisim, a deputy head of the Belarusian Language Society. In this context, Dr. Andrey Kazakievich, one of the leading

researchers of Belarusian elections, has stated that for the first time since 2000 the results of the current elections appear to be more interesting than the campaign itself.

□Some experts consider the two non-governmental MPs to be a sensational result of these elections

Some experts consider the two non-governmental MPs to [be a sensational result](#) of these elections and speculate on the possible changes in the parliament's future activities. Anyone acquainted with Aliaksandr Lukashenka's personal attitude to the very idea of non pro-governmental MPs understands the importance of this result.

During the previous electoral campaign numerous high-level officials in Belarus, including secretary of the Central Commission on Elections Mikalai Lazavik, made statements about the possibility of a few opposition MPs in the parliament. Such non-public discussion continued in the Presidential Administration.

Those officials and agencies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who supported this idea, pointed out the inability of such a small group (up to 10 MPs) to have any influence on the decision-making process. At the same time, their mere presence in the parliament would send positive signals to the West. However, the president rejected all such proposals.

Games with the West

One can doubt whether these two MPs are even truly members of the opposition as such. Aliona Anisim has publicly rejected the "opposition" label. Her activities promoting the Belarusian language correspond to the authorities' latest trend of [soft belarusization](#).

Moreover, her presence could help Lukashenka in his negotiations with Moscow – the weak economic situation strengthens nationalistic forces, which could be potentially dangerous for Russia. The head of the Belarusian Language Society – the very well-known member of the opposition Aleh Trusau – was not elected.

The situation with Hanna Kanapatskaya is even more ambiguous. Her victory could force the UCP to recognise the results of the elections, which would mean internal legitimisation of Lukashenka's parliament. This makes conflicts inside the UCP, as well as among other opposition organisations, even more possible.

two MPs can do almost nothing within the strictly authoritarian Belarusian political system

Despite the expectations of certain experts, two MPs can do almost nothing within the strictly authoritarian Belarusian political system. Moreover, serious doubts exist about Kanapatskaya's and Anisim's intent to truly represent the opposition in parliament, let alone disturb the authorities with non-approved initiatives.

Almost no one doubts that the [West remains the main audience](#) for these elections' results. The OSCE, EU, and USA have already expressed doubts regarding the fairness of the Belarusian elections and have called for further reforms of electoral legislation. The artificial character of the campaign, as well as copious fraud remain an open secret. However, given the continuing conflict with Russia and the balancing position of Belarus nobody wants to antagonise Lukashenka.

Rumours exist that such 'liberalisation' should become a precondition for a new loan from the IMF, as well as to improve relations with the EU and particularly the USA. However, even if these rumours have nothing in common with the

reality, the authorities lose nothing.

Does Everybody Win?

Thus, it seems that everybody wins as a result of these elections. The president maintains a completely loyal parliament which has no actual influence on the decision-making process in the country.

The West achieves 'apparent' steps towards democratisation and liberalisation in Belarus. The opposition had its 'minute of glory' and once again demonstrated to everybody, including foreign partners, its inability to propose any serious political alternative. The intensive cleansing of the political field in the country since 2010 has born fruit for the authorities.

Thus, in terms of economic and social development of the country, the new Belarusian parliament is shaping up to become as efficient as the previous one, which initiated only three laws during its four year term. Its main function this time around will be reintegrating and legitimising the current Belarusian government to the world.

Editorial: Lukashenka's election message to the West

Two representatives of the opposition and civil society will end up in the newly-appointed Belarusian Parliament.

This reflects not the true level of support of the opposition, but rather Aleksander Lukashenka's willingness to demonstrate

good will to the European Union. The West, however, should not get too excited about this progress.

Belarusian authorities have made clear that changes in the electoral process happen not because of domestic pressure but to please the West. Indeed, the prospect of massive domestic protest is almost non-existent, largely [because of events in Ukraine](#). However, the economic crisis in Belarus is pressuring the authorities tired of being outcasts in Europe to diversify their partners.

So what messages are the authorities trying to convey to the West?

1. The authorities will not fundamentally change the election process – it will remain entirely controlled.
2. They are making slow progress towards liberalisation and greater transparency of elections and support for the opposition is low.
3. It is now time to recognise the Parliament of Belarus and accept the leadership of Belarus at a higher level.

Each of these messages should be taken with more than a grain of salt.

It is true that the authorities remain entirely in control of the election process. The number of opposition representatives in the election commissions [remains minimal](#); [early voting](#) and non-transparent ballot counting procedures allow the authorities to appoint anyone they want to Parliament while bypassing the election process. They have no serious intention of giving up control of election results and even the possible departure of [Lidia Jarmoshyna](#) will not change this.



Election results fixed in the vast majority of polling

stations fail to reflect the real preferences of Belarusians. With independent sociology on political issues [virtually non-existent](#), it is hard to judge the true level of support for the opposition.

However, allowing two pro-democracy MPs means that alternative opinions will finally enter the Parliament. It will also improve the morale of the opposition.

However, the Parliament plays a merely [decorative role](#) in the current political system. In practise it initiated no laws, rubber-stamped all decisions of the executive and its members never seriously criticised the authorities. Moreover, the president can overrule any law with a personal decree.

Should allowing two pro-democracy members lead to [recognition of the Parliament in the West](#)? The parliament should be treated as a decorative rather than a decision-making institution – as a symbolic organ which plays no real role in the political decision-making process.

In other words, it makes little sense to have serious negotiations with the Parliament not only because it is far from being representative but also because it plays no serious role in politics. Any deputy minister probably plays a more influential role than the speaker of the lower chamber of the Belarusian Parliament.

At the current pace of liberalisation it would take Belarus hundreds of years to attain transparent elections

The authorities allowed two non-regime MPs out of 110 future MPs. At the current pace of liberalisation it would take Belarus hundreds of years to attain free and fair elections of all MPs.

However, the West needs an excuse to cooperate with Belarus for geopolitical reasons. Belarus matters as a part of the

European security puzzle, as a country which transits energy, migrants and goods.

Normalising relations with the Belarusian authorities should not be an aim on its own. Not only security and geopolitical goals should drive cooperation but also concrete projects to improve the lives of Belarusians. These should include anything from visa liberalisation and improving the business climate to cooperation in education, exchange of know-how, and institutional and rule of law reforms.

The West will persist with its demands of liberalisation in Belarus. But the modest improvement seen during these elections will make it easier for Belarusian society and the international community to accept the greater degree of pragmatism in the West's attitude towards the Belarusian authorities.

Early vote period – digest of the 2016 parliament elections

The five-day early voting period of the 2016 Belarusian parliamentary elections took place from September 6 to 10. The main Election Day is Sunday, September 11. Polls are open from 8 AM to 8 PM. In these elections nearly seven million Belarusians are eligible to cast their ballots for one of the 484 parliamentary candidates running for 110 seats.

This report on early vote trends was compiled based on information published by governmental bodies, media, and social network users and information received directly from Belarusian parties, and observer groups.

According to official Central Election Commission (CEC) reports, 31.29 percent of Belarusians cast early ballots. Independent observer groups challenged official statistics citing major turnout discrepancies between observers and commissions. The early vote in Belarus is often [described](#) as the “most convenient time for falsifications.”

Major problems [identified](#) by observer groups include increasing turnout through forced and incentivized voting of students and workers, as well as artificially inflating turnout through protocol or voter list manipulations. Parliamentary elections in Belarus can be [declared](#) valid if more than 50 percent of eligible district voters cast their ballots. The security of ballot boxes and overall transparency of the early vote were major concerns of observer groups as well.

Domestic Early Vote Observation Efforts

The early vote was primarily monitored by two independent Belarusian election observation initiatives: “[Right to Choose-2016](#)” (R2C), a coalition of eight political forces (“Belarusian Christian Democracy”, Belarusian Social-Democratic Party Gramada, BPF party, United Civil Party, “For Freedom”, “Greens”, Party of Freedom and Progress, REP Labor Union), and “[Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections](#)” (HRD), an initiative of “Viasna” and “Belarusian Helsinki Committee”. In addition, “Tell the Truth” (TtT) campaign [ran](#) early vote observation in some parliamentary districts of their candidates. Incident reports from all of these groups were published on election monitoring crowdsourcing website [Electby.org](#) during the early vote.

[Electby.org](#) in partnership with HRD and R2C launched a mobile

application “[Vochy](#)” to allow citizens timely and anonymously report violations. Citizens may also report violations directly on the websites of R2C, HRD, or [Electby.org](#). [Electby.org](#) also acts as an observer aggregator publishing violations reported by citizens and the above mentioned election groups.

✘ R2C [deployed](#) 764 observers to monitor 100 percent of 382 polling places in ten parliamentary districts during early vote. These districts will also have full monitoring coverage on the main election day. Monitored districts were selected based on where prominent democratic candidates from R2C member organizations are running (see R2C [candidate page](#) to find violations and turnout for a particular candidate’s district). HRD [deployed](#) 364 observers at 182 polling stations throughout the country. According to TtT they deployed 180 observers at 90 polling stations in three districts.

R2C reported 332 incidents and filed [225](#) official complaints regarding the Electoral Code violations in five days of early voting. Below is the R2C infographic reflecting the major types of violations recorded by independent campaign observers during the whole five-day early vote period.

✘

Observers Identify Several Methods Used to Artificially Inflate Turnout

R2C conducted a parallel turnout count in the ten parliamentary districts where they had 100 percent observer coverage. During a parallel turnout count, observers at each polling station record each person casting a ballot continuously and without intermission.

As a result of their parallel turnout count, R2C found that official and observer turnout [overlapped](#) only in 69 of 382 observed polling stations, highlighting significant levels of artificial turnout inflation. The turnout discrepancies per fully observed parliamentary districts are noted in the table below.

HRD's 364 observers [recorded](#) a 14 percent turnout discrepancy at the 182 polling stations where they observed.

✘ Discrepancies at the individual polling station level are best reflected on the [Electby.org](#) website, which used R2C data to construct detailed infographics. As shown in the following Electby.org chart of parliamentary district #92 (Avtozavodskoy in Minsk), a number of polling stations inflated turnout, some of them significantly, like polling station #70, where on September 9 the official turnout was 187 voters higher than R2C observed.

HRD [reported](#) that in electoral district #14 in Bobruisk, an observer challenged 157 votes written in September 8 protocol, because she calculated only 37 voters that day. As a result, the protocol was edited. PEC staff recorded it as a "technical mistake". The new vote total, however, still did not match the observer's. A similar incident was reported by R2C at the polling station #32.

✘ According to R2C reports, election commission efforts to boost their turnout percentage sometimes are a result of reducing the size of voter lists. At polling station #422 in district #103, observers [noted](#) a "voter list manipulation" on September 7, when the total number of voters was decreased without explanation by 879 people. At polling station #71 of district #18 in Vitebsk, the voter list was shortened by 191 people. These cuts resulted in an increase in the turnout percentage.

'Carousel voting' was reported as another mechanism used to increase turnout. Yuri Gubarevich, a parliamentary candidate from movement "For Freedom", a R2C coalition member, [informed](#) observers about 'carousel voting' in his Kalinovskiy electoral district #108 in Minsk. He claimed a blue minivan brought the same group of people to vote at different polling stations.



Observers confirmed 'carousel voting' incidents at polling stations #631, #635 and #618. Some observers [managed](#) to take pictures of 'carousel voters' and confirm the same people voted at polling stations #616, 617, 618, 619, 631, and 632. An HRD observer at polling station #367 claimed to have [spotted](#) the same people voting on two different early vote days. She said her video documentation of this was seized by a police officer who took her camera.

Numerous Reports of Forced or Incentivised Early Voting

Certain social groups, such as students or workers of state-owned enterprises are most vulnerable to forced or incentivised voting during the early vote period. They tend to cast their ballot several days before the E-Day. Prior to the early vote, HRD [appealed](#) to the administrations of higher education institutions noting that "any form of forcing students to vote in elections is an unacceptable violation of the constitutional rights."

The CEC Chair Lidia Yermoshina [stated](#) there is no forced voting, that school administration's encouragement to vote early or vote for a particular candidate does [not violate](#) the law. However, observers often recorded that school administrations did not limit themselves to just voter encouragement. For instance, at polling station #42, Mogilev

State University students [had to sign](#) in the dormitory administration's list to confirm they voted early (the list was captured on video).

HRD [reported](#) cases of forced voting in Slutsk district #67 and Soligorskiy district #68.

An anonymous "Vochy" user [reported](#) that "Belaruskaliy" workers had two hours free from work to vote early. RFE/RL reported [forced](#) voting of convicts. In this case a policeman left a number of passports with the head of the local commission and returned later to pick them up. Some cases of organized voting were reported on [Electby.org](#), including a photo of military conscripts heading towards the polling station.



At polling station #6 in Baranovichi, R2C observers [reported](#) that an ineligible 17-year old student of Baranovichi State University was brought by an elder of the student group to vote early on September 7.


Another effort to ensure a high turnout was the [organization](#) of parental meetings at schools during the early vote period. For instance, in Bobruisk gymnasium #2, where polling station #4 is located, parents were asked to attend meetings on the second and third day of early voting. The parental meeting was attended by a Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM) representative who is also a proxy of a pro-governmental candidate. The proxy promoted her candidate and encouraged parents to vote.



Unsecured Ballot Boxes


R2C observers [reported](#) 185 incidents related to unsecured ballot boxes. According to reports, either the ballot boxes were not sealed properly or the room they were stored was not sealed. In some reports observers claimed police officers stayed overnight in the room with the ballot boxes.

A notable example of ballot stuffing was reported at polling station #625 of parliamentary district #108 (Kalinovskiy) in Minsk. An R2C observer [took a picture](#) of “tightly packed ballots” put inside the transparent ballot box. The existence of a “tight pack of ballots” raised his suspicion because ballots cast one at a time should be loose.

The Observer also emphasized that he counted 42 voters on Friday, while a PEC claimed 228. Later, the chief commissioner of the polling station [rejected the](#) ballot stuffing claim as a “provocation”. The chief commissioner also claimed the turnout discrepancy was the result of mistake by the commission secretary who wrote down the cumulative turnout instead of the daily vote total. Yermoshina [said](#) the “truth will be found  after the vote count.”

Independent Observers Face Obstacles

R2C observers reported five incidents in which they were not able to properly conduct observation. In 19 cases local commissions refused to provide requested by observers information. On the left you can see a picture taken by an HRD observer titled “the place for observer in Belarus.” The image shows the observer was placed outside of the voting room.

 R2C reported 23 of their observers were deprived

accreditation. For instance, in Minsk, at the polling station #188 of the district #96, members of the election commission [refused](#) to accredit observers due to the absence of the commission chair. BCD candidate Olga Kovalkova reported that at polling stations #429 and #430 observers were [denied](#) the use of bathrooms.

Some independent observers could not begin the observation due to pressure. For instance, R2C [reported](#) that the administration of the Gomel State Technical University forbade students from observing elections on behalf of the R2C campaign.

According to campaign representatives, students were threatened with the expulsion from the university. In Grodno, R2C observer refrained from election observation claiming his wife was [threatened](#) with a job loss by the ideology department in a state hospital.

Authorities Get Ready for the Election Day

The Ministry of Antimonopoly Regulation and Trade of Belarus [sent](#) local authorities instructions how to please voters with food and other treats during the election day. The instructions were leaked to R2C and re-published by independent [media](#). The same day, state media [highlighted](#) what food and entertainment will be available to voters at the polls.

Michael P. Murphy & Juljan Jachovic
National Democratic Institute (NDI)

Parliamentary campaigning period – digest of the 2016 parliament elections

This report covers campaign developments that occur during the Belarusian parliamentary ‘campaigning period,’ which lasts from the end of candidate registration on August 11 until Election Day, September 11. It focuses on candidate campaigning, particularly TV appeals and debates, candidate pickets, and meetings with voters.

During the campaigning period, democratic candidates emphasised the “absence of free and fair elections,” as well as their approaches to socio-economic problems. Candidates presented party programmes like “[One Million New Jobs](#)” or “[People’s Program](#)” as possible solutions to political and economic problems.

A portion of the opposition candidates put traditional opposition white-red-white flags on their speaking tribunes during speeches and debates. The call to action differed among democratic candidates. Some [called](#) on people to join their parties or participate in election observation.

Others [emphasised](#) the importance of voter participation, discouraged indifference, and urged voters to cast ballots on Election Day. There were [attempts](#) by officials to limit communications of certain democratic candidates by refusing to broadcast TV appeals, rejecting programs, or forbidding the re-publishing of TV appeals on the Internet.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) has observed that a notable aspect of parliamentary election campaigning in 2016 in comparison with recent elections is the shift of most opposition forces’ communications away from internal conflicts

and towards voter outreach based on socio-economic issues. The bitter accusations and fierce public infighting that dominated the independent media and enhanced perceptions of a dysfunctional opposition have largely vanished from the 2016 political discourse.

Instead of caustic rhetoric against each other, the majority of opposition forces are focused on communicating with voters based on key socio-economic issues and offering critiques of the authorities' management, and in some cases articulating alternative visions to solve the country's problems.

Democratic candidates continued to criticise the incumbent authorities, some quite harshly

Democratic candidates continued to criticise the incumbent authorities, some quite harshly, in what can be considered traditional opposition rhetoric aimed at a traditional opposition electorate, but these attacks and other traditional opposition issues, like calls for free and fair elections, were often grounded in themes that are relevant to a broader audience, such as the creating jobs, improving roads or developing rural regions.

The shift away from internal fights and towards building public support might be attributed to the decision of most major political forces to actively participate in the elections. With many pursuing a similar approach, there is little need to focus on divisions. The busy work of running campaigns and talking with voters might also be leaving little room for playing political games on the side. The change might also reflect the recognition that past squabbles significantly damaged public credibility and that the path to a successful future depends on breaking out of the existing mold to build the trust and support of the public.

The final week of campaigning, September 6-10, overlaps with the start of the early vote period. Nearly [seven million](#)

eligible Belarusian voters are able to begin casting ballots for one of nearly 500 candidates running in 110 districts. Election Day itself is Sunday, September 11. In the last presidential election government reports [showed](#) that more than one-third of voters voted early. Election observers [criticise](#) the early vote period as being prone to government abuses, including forced voting, artificially inflating turnout through protocol manipulation and vote count.

Campaigning Opportunities and Limitations

Each registered candidate was entitled to one five-minute television and radio speech and the publication of their program in the newspaper; additionally, brief debates (five minutes of airtime for each candidate) on state TV were held if at least two candidates agreed to participate. Speeches were broadcast on state-owned channels between August 15 and September 2. Additionally, nearly 30 candidates [participated](#) in debates on “Belsat” TV channel. Topics included culture, regional development, economy, foreign affairs, domestic politics, and social policy. Copies of all debate programs can be found on ePramova.org/debate.

Officials found means to restrict the public discussion of issues raised in TV appeals or candidate programmes. Newspapers declined the publication of some programmes, claiming the programmes violated the Electoral Code. The state TV channels did not broadcast some of filmed candidate appeals. For instance, two regional newspapers [rejected](#) the program of the United Civil Party (UCP) candidate Nikolay Ulasevich, a “persistent opponent” of Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) construction. His TV appeal was [not broadcast](#) either.

Pavel Stefanovich, who advocates for “marijuana legalisation,” was deprived of publication of his program

UCP candidate Pavel Stefanovich, who advocates for “marijuana legalisation,” was deprived of publication of his program and the broadcast of his speech. The program of UCP contender Yuriy Hashevatskiy, which mentioned “twenty years of authoritarian regime,” was [rejected](#) by “Vecherniy Minsk” newspaper.

The “Vecherniy Brest” newspaper initially [rejected](#) the program of Igor Maslovskiy, Belarusian Social-Democratic Party Gramada (BSDP-G) candidate, as it included the call “not to support pro-governmental candidates.” An additional problem noted by Maslovskiy was unequal circulation of issues with candidate programs. Maslovskiy, who succeeded in getting his program published after appeals, [noted](#) that the “Vecherniy Brest” newspaper gave his program a circulation of 4,300 copies. Meanwhile, the issue including his opponent’s (Vladimir Bazanov, incumbent member of parliament) program had 10,000 copies in circulation.

Hashevatskiy’s TV appeal was broadcast on state television, but after [it was re-published](#) on YouTube and became viral on non-state media outlets, “Beltelecom” [requested](#) its removal, and warned other candidates not to republish their speeches due to copyright infringement. In 2015, however, state TV broadcast the speeches of presidential candidates on their website. Nevertheless, the restriction seemed to invigorate re-publishing speeches and debates on [YouTube](#) and other websites.

General Trends in Candidate

TV Appeals and Debates

Some Belarus Popular Front (BPF) candidates focused on foreign affairs and international economic issues, emphasizing the value of the country's independence. For instance, BPF Chair Alexey Yanukevich [proposed](#) changing the direction of Belarusian exports from Russia to the West. In addition, he suggested "open borders" with the European Union and the U.S. and establishing "controls" over the Belarus-Russia border to counter illegal migration and prevent the inflow of criminals and drugs.

Other BPF candidates primarily focused on domestic issues. For instance, former presidential candidate Ales Mikhalevich [raised](#) the problem of Belarus' unfavourable business environment. Yuri Meleshkevich [focused](#) on economic issues, particularly on the need build a market economy in Belarus. Dmitriy Kasperovich in his speech, [challenged](#) the parliamentary elections, stating in Belarus "parliamentarians are appointed by the presidential administration."

Podgol delivered his speech dressed in a bulletproof vest

One of the most media-referenced candidate appeals was delivered by BPF's Vladimir Podgol. He delivered his speech dressed in a bulletproof vest. Other props included a brick, tanker helmet, decorative shells, and his book "Bullet to Lukashenka." The same title was written on his vest. Podgol [explained](#) he wanted be unusual and catch people's attention. Analysts from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty [described](#) the appeal as "post-modern." Considering the number of references, he received in the media, and the 43,000 views on [YouTube](#), it would seem Podgol succeeded in attracting attention.

In the majority of "Tell the Truth" (TtT) appeals reviewed, candidates were communicating a common theme to become a "voice of the people" in parliament and bring about "peaceful

changes.” These themes were introduced during the 2015 presidential campaign of Tatsiana Karatkevich. Some TtT candidates went further and delivered a similarly structured explanation as to what “peaceful changes” [mean](#): “the authorities who respect citizens and consult with them,” “economy which creates opportunities to work and earn decently,” and “government which ensures social protection for each.”

TtT candidates tended to raise socio-economic issues, such as the need for pension system reform, high unemployment and jobs, and an improved business environment and the crisis in the industrial sector. They also touched on the housing affordability issues, underdevelopment of regions, and infrastructure problems.

“It is possible to steal the vote, but nobody will steal your support from me”

TtT campaign Co-Chair Karatkevich [emphasised](#) the government’s implementation of ideas she advocated for in her presidential program, such as refraining from building new foreign military bases, improving relations with neighboring countries, and increasing unemployment benefits. TtT emphasised the importance of voting in elections and not being indifferent. Addressing possible election fraud, TtT Co-Chair Andrey Dmitriev [stated](#), “It is possible to steal the vote, but nobody will steal your support from me.”

“Belarusian Christian Democracy” (BCD) candidates were consistently critical of the authorities’ policies and their lack of accountability. BCD candidates tend to [challenge](#) the transparency of public spending and accountability of the authorities, claiming they are accountable “only to President and officials.” Commonly repeated phrases included: “there is no state money; there is only people’s money,” and “government for the people, not people for the government.”


BCD's Co-Chair Vitaliy Rymashevskiy, participating in state TV debates as a proxy, [proposed](#) that newly elected MPs initiate Lukashenka's impeachment. This was [reiterated](#) by BCD youth leader Marina Homich in her speech. BCD speakers raised a range of issues, such as the problem of low salaries and high prices, administrative reforms, economic development, healthcare, and anti-alcohol policies. Tatiana Severinets [addressed](#) unpopular laws approved by the parliament, such as the imposition of a tax on unemployed people.

BCD speakers [emphasized](#) their party's social values and called for the return of kindheartedness, justice, solidarity, hope for change, and strong families in Belarus. "Electoral fraud" was highlighted by BCD candidates and proxies, some of whom urged voters to join BCD or participate as observers (BCD is a part of "Right to Choose-2016" joint observation initiative).

During their speeches, "For Freedom" (FF) candidates addressed issues related to the pension system, unemployment and low salaries, parliamentary accountability poor governance and affordable housing. "Reforms, Wellbeing, and Peace" was a [slogan](#) voiced by the movement's Deputy Chair Yuri Gubarevich. Additionally, FF candidates often referenced their "Narodnaya Programa" (People's Program), a program of political and economic reforms that could solve the problems in the country.

Some of the FF candidates addressed personal and local-level problems. For instance, Viktor Yanchurevich (who presented himself as an independent candidate) [stressed](#) Minsk issues: excessive construction and the destruction of green zones. Student candidate Alina Nagornaya [emphasised](#) problems in education. Maksim Tikhonov [began](#) his speech by challenging the transparency of elections held in Belarus and giving examples of electoral fraud. According to him, "free elections" is the starting point of all reforms in the country.

United Civil Party (UCP) candidates often criticised the authorities and raised issues such as the economic crisis and

the inability of the authorities, particularly of parliament, to solve problems. Many UCP candidates held up a printed copy of the “One Million New Jobs” program, which was described as a solution to both the political and economic issues in the country. UCP Chair Anatoly Lebedko [participated](#) in debates as a proxy of party candidates. Lebedko focused on political processes and tended to emphasize the lack of rotation among  the authorities and electoral fraud.

UCP candidate Olga Mayorova [focused](#) on local issues and connected them to national problems. For example, she discussed the destruction of a local forest to highlight the lack of “independent courts, transparent budget, fair elections, and local governance.”

The previously mentioned Haschevatskiy [focused](#) his appeal on criticism of Lukashenka, the parliament, and electoral fraud. He claimed that the opposition is not weak, but people are weak because they do not support each other.

Haschevatskiy called for the return of “stolen free and fair elections.” UCP candidate Pavel Stefanovich, who was not allowed to publish his program and whose TV appeal was not broadcast due to his open advocacy for “marijuana legalization,” [took part](#) in state TV debates. There Stefanovich said he wants to implement “different drug policy,” fight for gender equality, and solve the problem of domestic violence.

Belarusian Social-Democratic Party Gramada (BSDP-G) candidate appeals addressed social justice issues corresponding to their party ideology. Anna Kanyus used her TV appeal [to urge](#) citizens not to support pro-government candidates, who failed to oppose the pension age increase or the tax on the unemployed. Additionally, she advocated for establishing a legal basis to ensure secure future for investors, business, and citizens in order to develop the new economic policy.

The BSDP-G candidate in Slutsk, Anatoly Yurevich, [emphasised](#) the need to improve Belarus' "image abroad," abolition of the [contractual system](#), and increased public control over local and central budgets in order to increase investments and ensure decent wages. Additionally, Yurevich called upon PEC commissioners to count votes fairly. Natalya Shkadun, BSDP-G candidate from Magilev, [began](#) her speech by claiming that "parliamentarians are appointed" and they do not perform their duties. As a doctor, she dedicated a large share of her speech to problems in healthcare.

One candidate raised concerns about the safety and economic reasonability of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant

"Belarusian Party – The Greens" (or Green Party) ran five candidates. They focused on sustainable development in the country, particularly ecology issues, renewable energy and a green economy. For instance, Dmitriy Kuchuk [focused](#) on the construction of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant (NPP). He raised concerns about the safety and economic reasonability of the plant. In the end of the appeal, Kuchuk [put](#) on a gas mask. Later, Kuchuk explained to [TUT.BY](#) that he intended to attract people's attention as most of the people in his Ostrovets constituency do not watch "Belarus 3" TV channel. According to Kuchuk, this small performance helped him to get views on [YouTube](#) (over 8,000) and coverage on a number of mass media outlets.

"Fair World" (FW) candidate Mikhail Korotkevich [emphasised](#) their party's program to "ensure the sustainable development of the country and increase people's well-being." The proposals are intended to optimize public expenses, increase investments, abolish paid education, subsidize pharmaceuticals and grow wages and pensions.

Candidates loyal to the authorities (whether independent or in a political party) tended to support the direction of the

country's development. The chair of the "Belarusian Patriotic Party," former presidential candidate, Nikolay Ulakhovich [addressed](#) patriotism and the importance of peace.

The leader of the Republican Party of Labor and Justice (RPLJ) Vasiliy Senitskiy [outlined](#) the need for reforms, in the economy and social field. He also suggested introducing a mixed parliamentary election system but refrained from emphasising any of existing problems in the country. One of 28 incumbent MPs running for reelection Valeriy Baradzenya [said](#) in his introductory statement during the debates there should be "fewer laws, they should become more understandable, and we should be proud of our achievements."

Democratic Candidates Aim to Reach Voters Through Campaigning Pickets and Meetings

On September 5, the CEC announced that candidates for parliament informed them of their plans to organize [180,355](#) pickets and [3,459](#) meetings with voters (obviously, not all declared events were really held). Most were traditional events, but a few were covered more in the media because of issues raised or how they were organized.

Recently, the Center-Right coalition (BCD, UCP, and FF) candidates and activists [marched](#) to the "Beltelecomcompany" building in Minsk, where they criticised the state television and delivered an appeal demanding opposition receive a regular access to airtime on state TV. They also called for the establishment of the independent public television station. On August 25, Center-Right coalition forces [organized](#) a picket to mark the anniversary of the State Sovereignty Declaration.

UCP held several pickets to engage the public. In mid-August, Lebedko and his deputy Nikolay Kozlov together with registered candidate Denis Tihonenko [held](#) pickets in front of Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ) and Minsk Automobile Works (MAZ) to distribute literature which covered their “One Million New Jobs” program. Lebedko and Kozlov also [held](#) rallies for “Police Against Falsifications” in front of Minsk police departments to distribute “Narodnaya Volya” newspaper, which included an article “on falsifications during elections,” to police officers.

BPF also [organised](#) a Minsk picket on August 25, “Independence Day.” BPF’s candidates Vladimir Podgol and Ales Talstyko [organised](#) several public artistic performances that satirically criticize the authorities and their [policies](#). The media widely [covered](#) a picket of the BPF candidate Vadim Saranchukov, who campaigns in Hrodna for eliminating cross-border restrictions for people living on the border of Belarus and neighbouring Poland or Lithuania.

On August 16, several TtT candidates and the campaign leadership [held](#) a joint picket in Minsk to mark the beginning of the campaigning period. The picket was held under the slogan “Peaceful Changes – Wellbeing in Every Home.” On September 4, three TtT candidates on the occasion of “Minsk Marathon” [organised](#) a picket called “Marathon for Peaceful Changes.”

“Green” party candidates [raised](#) ecology issues. “Green” candidates were seen campaigning in Svetlogorsk [against](#) construction of a chemical enterprise, urging people to vote for their candidate. On August 25, in a joint picket with UCP and BSDP-G in Grodno, “Green” candidate Tatyana Novikova addressed safety concerns related to the construction of Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Ostrovets. Another picket against the Belarusian NPP construction, Novikova and Kuchuk [held](#) in Ostrovets.

The pickets by BSDP-G candidates, which were covered by media, suggest that the party candidates focused on social problems. On August 23 and 28, in Brest, Igor Maslovskiy and Anna Kanyus [organised](#) pickets called “For Construction of Kindergartens and Schools in the Region.” In Mogilev, BSDP-G together with UCP, BPF, and BCD [held](#) a joint campaigning picket for “restoring the social justice.”

Domestic observers, “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections” ([HRD](#)) and “Right to Choose-2016” ([R2C](#)), reported a number of incidents related to violations of equal conditions for all candidates, such as restriction on mass meetings or attempts of officials to disrupt candidate pickets or meetings with voters, and violations by non-democratic candidates related to production of campaigning materials.

“pro-government candidates actively participate in socially-significant events” and “use administrative resources”

In addition, HRD [noted](#) in their recent report that “pro-government candidates actively participate in socially-significant events” and “use administrative resources.” R2C, in their [report](#) on the campaigning period, stressed “censorship” of democratic candidates, some of which are referenced above and condemned the Electoral Code changes made in 2013, which deprived candidates of state funding.

Election Observation Efforts

Domestic observers are trying to engage as many citizens as possible to monitor the campaign period and elections. [ElectBy.org](#), in partnership with the HRD, R2C, and Election Observation Theory and Practice (EOTP), has been collecting reports of electoral violations through the mobile application “[Vochy](#).” In addition, HRD [announced](#) they are opening a hotline to report electoral violations.

As of September 5, 32,015 domestic observers have been [accredited](#) by election commissions. The majority of accredited observers are from pro-government public associations – 23,619, including “Belaya Rus’” (4,261), Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM) (6,170), Federation of Labor Unions of Belarus (5,040).

The CEC has [accredited](#) 821 foreign observers as of September 2. Three hundred and thirty-one are from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), 341 from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), 19 from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), 39 from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), 65 from diplomatic corps, three from the Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB), nine from Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and 14 from election bodies of foreign countries.

Not all international observation groups could come to observe the Belarusian elections

Not all international observation groups could come to observe the Belarusian elections. The European Network of Election Monitoring Organisations (ENEMO) mission, which sent request for observation in June, [has not yet received](#) “any reply” from the Belarusian authorities (as of the end of August). ENEMO observers [did not](#) receive an invitation to observe the 2015 election either.

The OSCE/ODIHR and CIS election missions published interim observation reports. OSCE/ODIHR [noted](#) that a “significant number of prior OSCE/ODIHR recommendations are yet to be addressed.” Meanwhile, the CIS mission [concluded](#) that “in general, the electoral campaign is held in a calm atmosphere, in the spirit of open competition and at the high organizational level.”

Recently Alexander Lukashenka had a [meeting](#) with Kent

Harstedt, Coordinator of the short-term OSCE observation mission and Cayetana De Zulueta Owtram, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR mission. During the meeting, Lukashenka stated that he would like to see “true professionals,” regardless of their political views, in a new parliament.

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National Democratic Institute (NDI)

A Final Blow to Independent Sociology in Belarus?

On 31 July 2016, Belarusian TV broadcast a “special report,” accusing the IISEPS (Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies) of fraud and fabrication of results.

Soon thereafter, the founder of IISEPS, Aleh Manaev, stated that his organisation would cease conducting sociological surveys in Belarus.

On the eve of the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Belarusian authorities decided to tighten control over opinion polls to secure a smooth electoral campaign. IISEPS, known as one of the few independent pollsters in Belarus, was an easy target, as it had already been struggling for existence for years.

The termination of IISEPS' activities impacts the availability of independently-collected quantitative data on Belarusian society. Experts fear that this attack on IISEPS marks an end to independent sociology in Belarus.

Between a rock and a hard place

Established in 1992 by a group of academics and public figures, the IISEPS had been regularly providing public opinion polls and surveys of the socio-political situation in Belarus.

It has remained one of the few independent sources of information for social scientists on Belarus both within the country and abroad. According to IISEPS, by 2015, the number of media references to the Institute had reached 3,200, in contrast to a mere 25 in 1992.

Ironically, independent opinion polls presented an inconvenience both for the authorities and the opposition.

Ironically, independent opinion polls presented an inconvenience both for the authorities and the opposition. The latter was often unhappy with their results, which did not always conform with the wishful thinking of some of the regime's opponents. For instance, during the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, IISEPS polls reflected [growth in Lukashenka's approval ratings](#) and unwillingness of Belarusians to support possible scenarios of violent power takeover.

During the 2015 presidential elections, IISEPS confirmed Lukashenka's victory, albeit by a much smaller margin than the Central Election Commission reported. IISEPS estimated that Lukashenka had won with 50.8 per cent of votes, while his closest contender, [Tatsiana Karatkevich](#), received 22.3 per cent of votes. By contrast, official statistics assigned 83.5 per cent of votes to Lukashenka, and only 4.4 per cent to Karatkevich.

However, IISEPS still represents a much larger nuisance to the

ruling regime than to the opposition. In 2005, persecution forced it out of the country, as the Supreme Court denied the Institute an official registration, thus making its activities in Belarus illegal. IISEPS relocated to Lithuania and has been operating from Vilnius. It will continue its work until August 2016, marking an end to independent opinion polls in Belarus.

Securing stage-managed elections?

By spring 2016, Belarusian state-run media started targeting IISEPS in an organised fashion, aiming to discredit the activities of its independent social researchers. Major Belarusian official media, including Belarus Segodnia and Belta, lamented that IISEPS research was biased and unreliable.

Other media allegations centred around the legal aspects of IISEPS activities, since it conducted surveys and disseminated their results without official approval. On 31 July 2016, the leading Belarusian TV channel delivered the final strike to IISEPS by broadcasting an entire film discrediting IISEPS activities and methodologies.

Based on information from anonymous informants, journalists claimed that IISEPS did not conduct real surveys and falsified its data. Moreover, the film deliberately disclosed a number of names and the personal information of IISEPS employees, thus placing them at risk of criminal charges for working without registration.



In response, Aleh Manaevŭ issued a statement denying all accusations against IISEPS in the media. He connected the attack on his Institute with the upcoming parliamentary

elections and the fact that Belarusian authorities need to ensure they go off smoothly.

In his opinion, the regime needed an uncomplicated picture of elections in order to justify more dialogue and cooperation with the West, especially in light of the deteriorating social, economic, and geopolitical situation.

The end of independent opinion polls in Belarus?

On 9 August 2016, Aleh Manaevŭ declared that IISEPS would cease conducting sociological surveys in Belarus due to the heightened risk involved for its employees. Apparently, the media attacked the entire network of interviewers, forcing some of them to give public statements under threat of criminal charges.

Experts fear that the attack on IISEPS will complicate analysis of the parliamentary elections in Belarus this fall. [Aliaksandr Klaskoŭski](#) has noted that in the past IISEPS numbers often reflected electoral fraud. Thus, the elimination of IISEPS will serve to ensure that elections appear honest while depriving Western observers of an alternative sources of information.

According to the political scientist [Siarhej Nikaliuk](#), the upcoming parliamentary elections might not be the only reason for the attack against the IISEPS. It could also have fallen prey to the Belarusian regime's need to secure control over the country in times of deepening economic crisis. Independent opinion polls and data thus turned into a liability, whereas elections just represented a tipping point.

The attack on IISEPS coincided not only with parliamentary elections and an economic crisis in Belarus, but also with

decreasing levels of support for Lukashenka. Spring public opinion polls reflect that by March 2016, Lukashenka's popularity had dropped to 27.3 per cent, in contrast to 45.7 per cent in September 2015.

[Valer Karbalevich](#) has also suggested that the attack on IISEPS might be part of Lukashenka's usual tactic to gain leverage against the West. In this case, the Belarusian regime would traditionally start a “hostage trade” in exchange for recognition of the elections. Or, alternatively, it sensed that the West chose geopolitics over democracy promotion in Belarus and therefore would not interfere much in internal affairs.

As of now, it is clear that Belarusian authorities have successfully deprived its opponents, independent analysts, and election observers of alternative sources of information. It is likely that in the future it will ensure its monopoly over sociology and opinion polls in order to showcase an acceptable version of Belarusian reality to the world.

Freedom House: Belarus Shows Minor Improvements in Transition

This month Freedom House [published](#) Nations in Transitions report on Belarus authored by the Editor-in-Chief of Belarus Digest — Yaraslau Kryvoi.

According to methodology, country experts prepare reports while Freedom House has a final say on the ratings. Most of Belarus' ratings remained the same except for Civil Society

and Election Process which have slightly improved.

The Electoral Process rating improved because of a reduction in political violence and persecution of opposition figures, and the relative openness of criticism of the government in the October presidential election. The Civil Society rating improved due to the release of civic activists from prison and an increase in political space for advocacy campaigns and fund-raising during the year.

Background

July 2015 marked the 25th anniversary of Belarus's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union. After a brief period of democratic transition in the early 1990s, the country gradually developed into a consolidated authoritarian regime under President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

In October 2015, Lukashenka secured a fifth term in an election that observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) [did not recognise](#) as free and fair. However, unlike the December 2010 presidential election, the 2015 voting was not followed by violence or imprisonment of major opposition figures.

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent conflict in eastern Ukraine had an important psychological impact on Belarusian authorities. The government is increasingly concerned by Russian actions in Ukraine and is trying [to distance itself](#) from its eastern neighbour.

Belarus [is also suffering](#) from the effects of Russia's economic downturn. In an attempt to improve relations with the West and offset the influence of an increasingly assertive Russia, the Belarusian administration released all political prisoners in August 2015.

Political Environment

The release of prisoners and decreased state persecution of the political opposition contributed to a modest improvement in the country's political environment. However, the executive remained firmly in control of all branches of power, with very little public oversight of its activities.

[From Sanctions To Summits: Belarus After the Ukraine Crisis](#)

Belarus is returning to the international spotlight, but for once, not just as the "last dictatorship in Europe". The two summits that Minsk hosted in the past year on the conflict in east Ukraine indicate a tentative shift in Belarus's political alignment.

The conflict in Ukraine [persuaded both the authorities](#) and a significant part of the population that political changes could undermine stability in the country, and this was used as a justification to stifle dissent and to preserve the existing political regime.

In October 2015, following the prisoner release and peaceful election, the European Union (EU) [suspended restrictive measures](#) against hundreds of Belarusian officials and other individuals seen as linked to human rights violations. Similarly, the United States temporarily lifted sanctions against several major Belarusian companies.

After hosting important negotiations on the resolution of the Ukraine crisis, which culminated in a [February 2015 summit](#) attended by the leaders of Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine, Belarus had worked to intensify its contacts with Western Europe and the United States. It had also softened its anti-Western rhetoric, attempting to pursue a more balanced foreign policy and cautious economic reforms.

After the presidential election, most international observers praised the nonviolent treatment of political opponents, minor

improvements in the election legislation, and opportunities for the opposition to campaign. However, nothing changed at the fundamental level.

The authorities continued to abuse their monopoly on television during the campaign period; used administrative resources to increase the turnout of voters, particularly by [coercing people to participate](#) in early voting; and failed to conduct a transparent vote count, among other election irregularities.

Civil Society

The situation for civil society improved slightly in 2015, with more opportunities for advocacy campaigns, local fund-raising, and [attempts by high-level officials](#) to engage with civil society groups, especially on economic reforms.

The release of all political prisoners in August also helped to open space for civil society activities. Separately, Belarusian authorities joined the Bologna Process on European standards for higher education, and began to encourage participation in pan-European research projects and networks, such as Horizon 2020.

However, civil society organisations still face significant challenges, including obstacles to registration as legal entities and the threat of criminal sanctions for operating without registration. Although new domestic fund-raising mechanisms [are gaining popularity](#), the government maintains restrictions on funding for civil society organisations, particularly from foreign sources.

Independent Media

The authorities continued to suppress independent broadcast and print media in 2015, marginalising the voices of those who disagree with the regime. Although state television has started to invite prominent opposition figures to prime-time talk shows more frequently, this has not changed the nature of public debate in Belarus.



Foreign media outlets struggle to obtain official accreditation in the country. Internet-based media generally remain available to most users, but the government continued its policy of [restricting access](#) to some opposition websites at state-controlled institutions.

Corruption

The authorities took a number of steps to address corruption in 2015, including adoption of a new anticorruption law, after a public consultation, and the implementation of a national program to combat crime and corruption.

According to various enterprise surveys, Belarus is often regarded as one of the least corrupt countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States, but implementation of anticorruption measures [remains selective](#) in practice and lacks transparency.

Outlook for the future

The authoritarian nature of the political regime in Belarus will not change in 2016. The executive branch, with President Lukashenka at the top, will avoid implementation of

significant reforms, though economic modernization is likely to continue without much fanfare.

That would be in part a result of the gradual replacement of Soviet-minded conservatives with a new generation of officials, but also a response to major problems in Russia, the country's main financial supporter.

Economic and political pressures from an increasingly assertive Kremlin will lead to more attempts by Belarus to improve its relations with the West. The authorities can be expected to continue treating the political opposition and media without unnecessary brutality, while denying them the freedom necessary to change the political status quo.

- [Read full report in pdf \(15 pages\)](#).

Criticism of Russia, Alexievich, Belarusians in Antarctica – State Press Digest

Belarus Digest launches a regular series of publications reviewing Belarusian state newspapers.

In the first publication of the series, Belarus has taken further steps to confirm its independence vis-a-vis Russia. Pro-government experts in Minsk have criticised the Russian elite for increased nationalism.

This rhetoric sees Belarus as an integral part of the Russian space. At the same time, a pro-Russian journalist stated that

Svetlana Alexievich got her Nobel prize due to the support of the West for her anti-Putin rhetoric.

Belarus has expanded its presence globally. Minsk hosts a high level meeting of the International Electrotechnical Commission. This organisation gathers leading businesses and experts in this sphere. The first Belarusian station in Antarctica will be constructed by 2016 and provided Belarus with access to this Continent. It will allow Belarus to engage in scientific research.

At Lake Baikal there remains a Belarusian village, which while thousands of kilometres from Belarus still retains Belarus's unique culture. All of this and more in this edition of State Press Digest.

[Pro-government experts criticise Russia.](#) *Belarus Segodnya*, the largest national newspaper, analyses pro-government experts' comments on the development of Belarus after the 2015 presidential elections and how the international political and economic situation impacts Belarus.

Director of the Centre for European Integration Jury Šaŭcoŭ argues that because of the new geopolitical situation the West stopped supporting 'radical nationalists' in Belarus. The EU realised that a strong authoritative regime in Belarus curbs radical and destructive forces. He thinks that the Ukrainian scenario is impossible under these circumstances, and moreover, Belarus is a bridge between the two poles of Europe and Russia.

The West rejected colour revolutions as a means of regime change, but still wants Belarus to establish western standards of political and social order


The analyst at the pro-government Cytadel think-tank Aliaksandr Špakoŭski also says that the West has changed its strategy in Belarus. The West rejected colour revolutions as

a means of regime change, but still wants Belarus to establish western standards of political and social order. The West will seek to achieve this through engagement with Belarusian society and the political leadership. It will try to integrate Belarus into its sphere of influence. However, Špakoŭski also accuses Russia of a growing nationalist hostility towards Belarus and its position on Ukraine. He argues that Belarus should preserve armed neutrality towards both conflicting neighbours.

According to Ihar Marzaliuk, MP and a famous historian, Belarus will never be a satellite of Russia, although Russia was and currently remains a strategic partner of Belarus. "We are interested in integration with Russia economically, socially and militarily, but this should be a union of equal sovereign states," the expert says.

Authorities organise youth debates. The newspaper *Žyccio Prydźvinnia* reports on the youth project Open Debates. This was organised by the Ideology Department of Viciebsk district executive, the Belaja Ruś and BRSM GoNGOs and government-controlled trade unions before the elections. Schoolchildren, students and soldiers were divided into teams to debate political issues.

The organisers say they want to develop political and civil culture among Belarusian youth. They want to teach them to promote their views and see elections as a mechanism of influencing the government. The main reason behind it was perhaps to secure a high turnout among the young, but the authorities apparently started to understand the importance of civil discussion.

Nobel prize for Russophobia? In the article "Was the Nobel  prize awarded to the right person?" *Soyuznoe Veche*, the newspaper of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Belarus-Russia Union, takes a critical stance towards Svetlana Alexievich's Nobel prize. According to the article's author, the West wants

to hurt Russia.

By awarding the prize before the presidential elections it aimed to help the Belarusian opposition. These are the opponents of Belarus-Russia Union State and so it was an attack on Russia too. The author concludes that the politicisation of the award will hang over the writer for the rest of her life despite the fine quality of her work. Meanwhile, [Vecherniy Brest](#) (Evening Brest) reports that Alexievich's books are practically absent in Brest's bookstores. However, after the news on the award people immediately rushed to buy her books.

[Belarusians in Antarctica.](#) *Soyuznoe Veche* continues with a piece about the construction of the first Belarusian station in the Antarctic. The station is due to be constructed at the start of 2016. It will be transported to the South Pole on a Russian ship and will be placed on the spot called Hara Viačerniaja (Evening Mountain). The Head of the National Centre for Polar Studies, Alieh Snycin, says that building Belarus's own station is a matter of national prestige.

Importantly, to receive the status of a participant of the international agreement on the Antarctic, Belarus has to fulfil a number of conditions. One of them is the building of a station. Antarctica contains huge reserves of hydrocarbons and other treasures, which Belarus hopes to get a piece of.

[High Level Meeting of Electronic Experts in Minsk.](#) On 5-16 October Minsk hosted the 79th General Meeting of the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) in Minsk with 1,500 delegates. This was reported by *Zviazda* daily. The IEC is a worldwide noncommercial organisation which produces international standards for the free movement of electronic goods.

The meeting also serves as a major business forum in the field, which gathers representatives of leading companies in

electronics, IT, and energy. For Belarus it became a rare opportunity to demonstrate its potential for investments, improve its image abroad and promote Belarusian production.

✘ [Belarusian traditions in Eastern Siberia.](#) *Holas Radzimy* newspaper writes about the Dažynki harvest festival in the village Turheneŭka located in the Irkutsk region of Russian Siberia, near Lake Baikal. Although the region is largely inhabited by ethnic Buryats, this Belarusian vilage, which was founded in 1909, is similar to other settlements near Lake Baikal, which exist even today.

Local Belarusians preserve their traditions and rites. The villagers perform traditional folk songs and dances. A group of producers for the Belarusian ONT TV channel visited the festival to as a part of a series filming people who retain their identity far away from Bealrus. According to the 2010 Russian census, currently about 8,000 Belarusians live in the Irkutsk region.

[Alternative cinema comes to Minsk.](#) *Zviazda* newspaper is advertising the film festival Bulbamovie ('Potato-movie'), which will be held in Warsaw, Cracow and for the first time in Minsk. The fact that the festival is advertised in the state press and will be held in Minsk looks at the vert least unusual.

The festival has long been working as a free site for alternative Belarusian cinema with movies often critical to Belarus's political reality. The state has a monopoly on film production and during Lukashenka's rule the state cinema has largely made films based on Soviet patriotism and World War II episodes.

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

Belarus Presidential Elections 2015 – Live Updates from Minsk

On 9 – 12 October, Belarus Digest provided live online coverage of the presidential elections in Belarus and international and domestic reactions to it.

Below, we feature a collection of stories from international and Belarusian media, videos, pictures, and comments from experts, which we have posted online during these days.

We thank our readers for your kind attention and valuable feedback we have received from you. Should you have any questions for our experts or further comments on our coverage please send us a message [@BelarusDigest](#).

[Read continuous coverage](#)

[\[View the story “Belarus Presidential Elections 2015 – Live” on Storify\]](#)

Early Voting: the Secret to a Successful Authoritarian

Election?

The official date for Belarus's presidential election is 11 October. But if past elections are any guide, every third Belarusian will vote during the so-called "early voting" period, between 6 and 10 October.

In fact, 30 percent of Belarusians cast their ballots by the evening of 9 October, according to the Central Election Commission of Belarus.

It is a well-known secret that early ballots facilitate electoral fraud. Unsurprisingly, districts with higher prevalence of early voting in the 2010 presidential election demonstrated not only greater turnout, but also greater support for President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. But we know little about the parts of Belarus where citizens turn out to vote early. Examining the distribution of the early vote in the 2010 presidential election reveals some interesting patterns.

The media frequently cites students, "herded" to the ballot boxes by university administrators, as the main victims of early voting pressures. Yet in the 2010 election remote agricultural districts with larger elderly population and with lower education levels demonstrated the greatest incidence of early voting. Such remote rural locations fall under the radar of international election observers.

Who votes early?

Only a small percentage of Belarusian voters who reside or permanently stay abroad cast absentee ballots in Belarusian elections. Voters inside Belarus cast many more early ballots.



Indeed, any citizen can vote early – no proof of being unable to vote on the official election day is required. This may explain why Belarusian pensioners, who would appear to have fewer time constraints than the working-age population, constitute an important group of early voters.

Students vote early under the pressure of university administrators. This week, Poland-based Belarusian language TV channel Belsat reported that at polling station number 52 in Minsk, located in one of the Belarusian State University dorms, every third student voted on the very first day of early voting. Early voting is also widespread among the police, military, and government officials, urged to vote by their employers.

Getting out the Early Vote

Interpreting the official electoral results based on early voting cannot reveal the true levels of support for the incumbent president or the opposition candidates. Nonetheless, district-level figures on early voting in the 2010 election, published by the Central Electoral Committee, do tell an interesting story about the regional dynamics of elections.

In the 2010 election, 32 percent of Belarusians voted early. The share of early ballots was largest in provincial areas. In Minsk, a city with over 30 institutions of higher education and a student population of nearly 200 thousand, only 22 percent of votes were cast early, which is below the national average.

At the district level, early ballots represented anywhere between 13 percent in Baranovichi district in southwest Belarus and 50 percent in Krasnapolle in southeast Belarus.



Krasnapolle is a remote agricultural district in eastern

Belarus. Its centre, a sleepy town of six thousand, lies 52 kilometres away from the nearest railway station and 120 km away from the nearest regional centre, Mahileu.

According to the official electoral results, 89 percent of Krasnapolle voters supported Lukashenka in 2010. As the elections commenced, local authorities organised numerous festivals and celebrations to encourage participation.

Nine other districts where nearly half of all ballots were cast early in 2010 are Byeshankovichy, Bykhaw, Dubrowna, Kas'tsyukovichy, Ms'tsislaw, Pastavy, Shchuchyn, Shumilina, and Voranava. Like Krasnopole, these districts lie far away from Minsk and specialise in agriculture.

All districts with high incidence of early voting have higher shares of pensioners. Lukashenka's most devout supporters; the elderly need no pressure to vote early. In the 2010 data, 10 percent increase in the share of the population above working age is associated with 7 percent increase in the share of early ballots from the total number of ballots cast.

The share of the early vote also correlates with the share of the population with secondary education at the district level. Areas with just ten percent more people with university diplomas have a 5 percent lower share of the early vote.



What explains the negative relationship between education level and early voting? One possibility is that people with lower education have fewer outside employment options and face greater risks for disobeying employer orders. Another possibility is that people with college degrees are less likely to support Lukashenka and therefore do not turn out to vote early, or at all.

Why vote early?

The state goes to great lengths to encourage early voting. In Minsk, Belarusians are reminded that they can perform their civic duty any day even while riding the metro to work.

This year's notable early voters included the head of the Presidential Staff [Marianna Schetkina](#) and the head of the Central Electoral Commission [Lidzia Yarmoshyna](#). Surrounded by a crowd of journalists as she cast her ballot, Yarmoshyna said that while some observers and journalists frown upon early voting, the Belarusian people "come to vote early with pleasure."

At polling station number 48 in Minsk, where Yarmoshyna was casting her ballot on 7 October, first-time voters as well as voters with children received presents, including watches and crystal bowls and ornaments sponsored by Minsk-Arena.

It is no secret that Belarus encourages early voting because it facilitates the manipulation of the electoral outcome. The Belarusian legislation requires nothing more than the presence of at least two members of the precinct election commission for the early ballots to be valid.

As of 5 October, Belarusian Electoral Commission accredited 910 international observers to monitor the 2015 presidential election. Of these, 382 observers represent the Commonwealth of Independent States and 344 observers represent the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Pro-Lukashenka political parties and organisations within Belarus supplied another 28,578 observers.

An observer was sent home on the pretext that her accreditation documents mentioned only the official Election Day 11 October

The international observers have started trickling into the country as the election began, but most will arrive to monitor on the official election day. Few will reach remote rural areas such as Krasnopolle, especially within the early voting period.

Domestic observers who do arrive at the polling stations during the early voting period encounter unexpected obstacles. Volha Katsiankova, an accredited observer from Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian People's Front, visited the polling station located in Minsk's School No. 7 on 8 October. She was sent home on the pretext that her accreditation documents mentioned only the [official Election Day](#), 11 October.

The few observers who manage to penetrate register numerous irregularities. Just a day into early voting this year, observers from the "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" campaign, organised by the Human Right Center "Viasna," along with the RHRPA "Belarusian Helsinki Committee," have pointed out that their turnout estimates differed by 5.5 per cent from those provided by the authorities.

Many more violations will be revealed as the election continues. But whatever the final tally of votes, Lukashenka seems to have won the remote agricultural districts with elderly uneducated population well before the official election day.

Opinion: Polls and the

Belarusian Reality

□ On 11 October, Belarusians go to the polls in the fourth election in Belarus since Aliaksandr Lukashenka was voted president in 1994. The current campaign shares many of the features of its predecessors. As earlier, Western observers have focused on opinion polls, but in Belarus few are reliable. Thus NISEPI's publications take on special significance.

Yet during and after every election, opposition leaders have criticised and raised doubts about its conclusions. A typical example was in an article of 6 October on the Naviny.by web site, where Vitali Rymasheuski, a 2010 presidential candidate, maintained that Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research □ (NISEPI) surveys serve to legitimise Lukashenka.

Are such critiques valid? How should one evaluate the current campaign?

The Rules of the Game

As with his relations with the European Union, Lukashenka has mastered the rules of the game. Just as his [release of remaining political prisoners](#) appears to respond sufficiently to EU demands for withdrawal of sanctions, so every five years the appearance of the façade of a democratic election rather than the reality, replete with Electoral Commission and requisite candidates (few or multiple) implies that there is the possibility of change.

Siarhei Haidukevich reappears at five-year intervals to lose elections “elegantly”

This time there are [four candidates](#), only one of which,

[Tatsiana Karatkevich](#) of the People's Referendum, opposes the president, albeit in a relatively mild and polite manner compared, say, to the ebullient TV performance of [Uladzimir Kazulin](#) in 2006 or the eloquent denunciations of [Uladzimir Niakliaev](#) in 2010.

The others are closet if not overt supporters of Lukashenka: [Siarhei Haidukevich](#), who reappears at five-year intervals to lose elections “elegantly” and Mikalai Ulakhovich of the Patriotic Party, which is so obscure that its web site rarely functions.

The opposition remains weak and divided, with the key question whether to boycott the elections or take part. As for the election issues, the two major ones are the economy and national security. Since he has failed in the former, the president emphasises the latter, namely that only he can ensure stability and peace. As formerly, he plays no part in election debates on television and has hardly campaigned, the underlying assumption being that he remains preoccupied with pressing affairs of the state.

NISEPI's September Poll

After the 2010 election, NISEPI researchers concluded that Lukashenka received at least 50% plus one of the overall vote. The statement prompted some critics to comment that in this way it provided legitimacy to the Lukashenka presidency. The September poll suggests that his rating is 45.7% (those who are “prepared to vote” for him) but given the likely turn out of 72.5%, the actual vote would be 64%. Karatkevich's support, respectively is 17.9% on paper and 25% at the polls.

NISEPI adds that these figures mask the fact that support for Lukashenka is solid, comprised of committed voters, whereas that for Karatkevich includes voters who may ignore the elections altogether. Thus 64% represents a minimal figure for Lukashenka—in fact the authorities would perceive such a low

figure as demeaning.

Yet elsewhere the poll elucidates a population concerned about falling living standards, a collapsing ruble, and a drop in both the GDP and real wages. As Leanid Zlotnikau points out in Belarusian Analytical Workshop 19, rather than the anticipated wage of \$1,000 monthly, the average for Belarusian workers in September was \$420, or almost \$100 less than in 2010. Significantly, Zlotnikau attributes the current decline less to world recession than to a decline in export prices and the fall in competitiveness of Belarusian manufacturing.

Most voters, however, do not acquire their information from such sources; they rely on television and to a lesser extent social media. The overriding feature of any election campaign is the demeaning of opposition candidates on national TV.

The authorities choose to tolerate Karatkevich, however, suggesting the threat is minor

Interestingly, NISEPI posed the question in its September poll: if you knew of someone who could run successfully against Lukashenka in the presidential elections, would you vote for this candidate or Lukashenka? The response was 38.7% for the unknown candidate and 32% for Lukashenka (with 28.1% undecided).

Should one conclude that the current opponent, Karatkevich, then, is simply unconvincing to voters? In 2010, official media denounced more vocal opponents such as Sannikau and Niakliaiev as “enemies of the people.” Their subsequent arrests and incarceration amid accusations of an armed putsch likely solidified that perception.

In general, the frenzied attacks on those who dare to oppose the “people’s president” render candidates opponents of the regime, even a security risk to the future of the state. The authorities choose to tolerate Karatkevich, however,

suggesting the threat is minor.

Explaining the Inexplicable

Elections for most Belarusians are less about democratic process than safety, job security and the future of families

Opinion polls generally are not about consciousness and motives; they employ carefully formulated questions with yes or no answers. In this respect they conceal a myriad of factors that are difficult to express: not least voters' insecurities, possible fear of repercussions (KGB repressions peaked in 2011 but few have forgotten them), and general passivity.

Elections for most Belarusians are less about democratic process than safety, job security and the future of families. Polls rarely emphasise—nor could they—the highly authoritarian nature of Belarus and its dependence on state-run industries that achieved past growth simply by borrowing or relying on Russian subsidies (Zlotnikau's conclusion).

Yet Lukashenka, whose victory is assured, fiercely declares his independence from Moscow and poses as a maverick free agent standing up for his people. In this way polls can appear misleading. NISEPI seeks to elucidate what people think, not why they think how they do. Such surveys have value and NISEPI is an honest broker, but its simply constructed questions should not define our analysis. The regime, based on such criteria, succeeds. Yet by all the indices used to measure progress, it is failing.

David Marples and Uladzimir Padhol

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journalist, editor and publisher of Narodnyi televisor. Tsitaty i baiki A.G. Lukashenko [People's Television: Citations and Stories of A.G. Lukashenko], which is now in its thirtieth edition.

Belarus and the OSCE: Peacekeeping and Elections Critisism

By the end of August, 40 long-term observers of the Organisation on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) will arrive in Belarus to keep an eye on the Presidential elections.

Since 1991 Belarus has been a member of this organisation and a constant target of criticism. This year the observers will probably not call the elections free and fair, but the Belarusian authorities hope that at least they will admit to improvements in the election campaign.

The Belarusian authorities also want to reform the organisation and call for moving its focus from elections and human rights to security.

From Love to Hate

Since Belarus is the only country in Europe [outside of the Council of Europe](#), it has no choice but to take the OSCE seriously as it remains the largest European forum where Belarus can advance its own international initiatives and cooperate with the West without gaining Russia's jealousy.

The Vienna-based organisation includes 57 participating countries from Europe as well as Asia and Northern America. The Belarusian authorities appreciate that the decision-making process is based on the consensus of all states.

OSCE Minsk Group that facilitated negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan to end the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh

In early the 1990s, the relationship between Belarus and the OSCE developed well. Belarus quickly reduced its military capacity that remained in the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union, including nuclear weapons.

In 1992, Belarus initiated the creation of the OSCE Minsk Group that facilitated negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan to end the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Like in the case of the negotiations with Ukraine, Belarus received respect from the international community for the peace initiative and contribution to European security.

The relationship between Belarus and the OSCE deteriorated with [Aliaksandr Lukashenka](#)'s 1996 referendum and the dissolution of the Belarusian Parliament. Belarus, depending on the West's willingness to have a dialogue prevaricated on keeping open or closing the OSCE Office in Belarus. The biggest scandal related to the activities of [Hans-Georg Wieck](#), who headed the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Minsk from 1998 to 2001.

Wieck worked closely with the Belarusian opposition and five days before the Presidential elections in 2001 published an article in which he accused the authorities of involvement in the disappearances of Belarusian politicians. Then Lukashenka promised "to hurl out" Wieck from Belarus after the election and actually did it.

What Belarus Wants From the OSCE

Belarusian authorities traditionally intensify relations with the OSCE on the eve of the election, although Belarus remains one of the biggest critics of the organisation. On 21 July, Lukashenka received in Minsk OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Serbia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dacic. The next day, Belarus' MFA [Uladzimir Makiej](#) stated that "Unfortunately, today the main principle of the organisation is to lodge claims and lay mutual accusations at each other".

According to the website of the Belarusian MFA, Belarus "positions itself as one of the most active and consistent supporters of a comprehensive reform of the OSCE". In short, the Belarusian authorities want two things. Firstly, they want the OSCE to reduce election observation, as according to Lukashenka, "the OSCE is sometimes like a stick in someone's hands in the run-up to the elections". On the background of the [war in Ukraine](#), Belarus's authorities emphasise the need for the OSCE to engage in security, not democracy and human rights.

Secondly, the authorities want western members of the organisation to stop using sanctions against eastern ones. In 2013, Uladzimir Makiej stated that the OSCE has a crisis of confidence because of "the excessive politicisation of human rights issues, exaggerated attention to some issues to the detriment of others, continued geographical bias with respect to the countries to the east".

Why Belarus Welcomes OSCE Observes This Year

By late August 40 OSCE long-term observers will come to Belarus and another 400 will arrive just before the election in October. Approximately the same number of observers came to

Belarus during the presidential elections of 2010 and 2006. This shows that the number of observers does not depend on the political context. It rather reflects the willingness of the authorities [to show their own people](#) that Belarusian elections are open for the international community.

Also, the authorities expect that the OSCE will note improvements. During the presidential elections in 2006 and 2010, the government conducted itself brutally in the post-election period. On 19 December 2010, according to the OSCE, "just before midnight, hundreds of OMON personnel (police) violently dispersed the demonstration." As it remains unlikely, that the opposition will hold mass protests this year, the authorities will not need to repress them.

This year, the government will use more transparent ballot boxes at polling stations and for the first time PACE observers will arrive in Belarus. So far, the collection of signatures has taken place without major obstacles from the authorities. *Belarus Today*, Lukashenka's main propaganda newspaper, even positively writes about the collection of signatures of [Tacciana Karatkievich](#), who is an opposition candidate.

If the authorities free Statkievich, the only major problems will be the transparency of vote counting and access by the opposition to television

This can be perceived as steps to meet the OSCE Commitments on elections and the 1990 Copenhagen Document that outlines commitments in the field of elections and human rights. According to these commitments the OSCE actually assesses "the extent to which elections respect fundamental freedoms".

Still, these steps are not enough. For instance, the authorities retain several political prisoners, recognised by the West, including [Mikalaj Statkievich](#), the presidential candidate for the 2010 elections. However, on 4 August, Lukashenka admitted that "question of Statkievich's liberation

can be solved in the near future”.

If the authorities free Statkievich, the only major problems will be the transparency of vote counting and access by the opposition to television. According to the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report from 2010, “the vote count was flawed and lacked transparency, which raised serious doubts on whether votes were counted and reported honestly”.

It seems unlikely that Belarusian authorities will change the procedure and that the whole election campaign will meet the OSCE Commitments for free elections. But even with lack of transparency the authorities will may hear what they want – that the OSCE has seen some improvements, and noted that gradual changes are taking place in Belarus. That may change relations not only with the OSCE, but the West as a whole.

Political Parties in Belarus – Do They Really Matter?

On 9 June, the Chairman of Central Election Commission, Lidzia Yarmoshyna, declared that the 2015 presidential election in Belarus would take place on 11 October, pushing it ahead of the previously declared 15 November date, the latest possible date permitted by law. The House of Representatives will likely make the final decision on the matter by June 30 before their summer recess.

However, for the outcome of elections the date does not really matter. Despite the official figure of around 98,000 members of political parties, many of pro-government parties have only maintained a nominal existence while the freedom to operate for opposition forces has been severely constrained.

Parties as a Representative Force

The decision of Central Council of the Belarusian "Green" Party to support an unemployed Yury Shulgan exposes the farce of the election and the lack of influence of political parties within the Belarusian political system. Shulgan has expressed his willingness to become the President as a symbol of protest against the tax on the unemployed signed on 2 April by the incumbent president.

Political parties in Belarus are struggling to fulfil what would be considered their most basic principle functions, nor the activities of the state apparatus or supporting the implementation of the domestic and foreign policy of the state. While the Presidential Administration has proven to be much [more powerful than the Parliament](#), both the parties, whether they oppose or support the government, have been denied a significant presence, if any presence at all, in the Parliament.

The Communist Party of Belarus gained six seats in the 110-seat House of Representatives in the previous elections, by far the most seats any registered party was able to obtain in the 2012 parliamentary elections.

As in Western democracies, the Belarusian Constitution identifies political parties as entities responsible for contributing to, and the expression of, the political will of its citizens. Lukashenka, however, has repeatedly declared that Belarusians are the source of his legitimacy. In reality, the people's is not represented by any legislative authorities.

Party Membership: By the Numbers – on Paper and in Reality

Joining a political party presupposes that one wants to significantly influence the governance of their country. A modest membership base of Belarusian parties hardly justifies such claim. While the Ministry of Justice does not have the

most current numbers on party membership, the total number of members of political parties, as reported by the parties, amounts to 98,000 people in a country with a population of about 9,5 million.



It is hard to determine the real number or the number of active members. As Yauhien Valoshyn of Euroradio suggests, after contacting the Liberal Democratic Party, claiming to have the largest membership base, two different party representatives reported 45,000 and 51,000 members respectively. The total number of members on the party web site, however, was determined to be around to 36,849 members.

The mass media, for its part, report that the leader of the Belarusian Patriotic Party Mikalai Ulahovich has forced Cossacks to join his party. Anatol Liabedzka of the United Civil Party recognises that the number of active members of his party adds up to less than the reported total of 3,668 members.

Unlike other countries, Belarusian parties do not provide social opportunities, personal status or business contacts. In addition, the majority of Belarusians do not believe that party membership will have an effect on whether or not a party will achieve its goals.

According to IISEPS, 59.8 per cent of respondents do not believe in the possibility of radical changes in domestic or foreign politics of Belarus, and 79.2 per cent will not participate in mass protests should election outcomes are falsified.

Party Leaders

Most of the leadership of the political parties have been in the opposition for a decade and often much longer. One-third of the leaders of Belarusian political parties of all

registered parties in Belarus have been ruling for the same amount of time or longer as the incumbent president.

The average time of opposition leaders in office now has been inflated to 13.6 years. In a research survey published on Arche portal, Yury Chavusau reports that the absence of opposition sub-parties in the majority of opposition parties. According to the author, no one is fighting for power within the parties because of the hardship and danger of the party leaders' work.

The average time of opposition leaders in office now has been inflated to 13.6 years.

The existence of multiple potential presidential candidates does not increase the chances for success. According to Gene Sharp, a renowned political scientist advancing the study of nonviolent action, resistance leaders need to formulate a comprehensive plan of action capable of strengthening the people. The reality leaves much to be desired. IISEPS reports that 33.1 per cent of their respondents do not believe in the opposition's success, regardless whether it has a single candidate or not.

In April, Siarhei Haidukevich, one of the potential presidential candidates and a known supporter of Lukashenka, tried to downplay the opposition leaders for their inability to consolidate by offering several of them the posts as deputy ministers if they would offer their support to his presidential candidacy. According to him, the opposition needs a new generation to take over. Ironically, he himself has been the leader of Liberal-Democratic Party for 21 years.

The existence of a multiparty system in Belarus provides an opportunity for the government to display a bit of [window dressing](#) as evidence that it is not authoritarian. In reality, many of the parties supporting the government have only maintained a nominal existence while the freedom to operate

for opposition parties has been severely blocked.

The government has used the tools of state coercion to demobilise, marginalise, or criminalise the opposition's activities. Although opposition leaders still have three months to step up their game, it is important not to place unrealistic expectations on their ability to change the status quo in Belarus in 2015.

EHU Rector Selection: Time to Fix Mistakes and Improve Credibility

The “Rector Selection Saga” at the European Humanities University (EHU) in Vilnius, the Belarusian university in exile, has been going on for more than half a year. It enters its third season with the Governing Board's Rector Selection Committee making every mistake in the book – again.

It appears that the current Selection Committee (with no Belarusians on it) has no capacity to legitimise any candidate it would raise, especially after many criticised the process of pushing a hand-picked candidate, Dr. Garry David Pollick.

By 1 March 2015 the Governing Board was expected to recommend a final candidate for the rectorship position to the General Assembly of the Part-Owners (GAPO). This, however, has not happened.

Postponing the process further significantly increases the damage to EHU's credibility just as prime time for student recruitment descends upon the institution. This decision also

pushes GAPO to take the initiative into its own hands and act without consent of the Board, for first time in the history of EHU.

Laying Eggs, Executive Style

The current acting rector Dr. Garry David Pollick has incomprehensibly made his way through on to the final rounds of the selection process. He was introduced as a provost and COO of the European Humanities University slightly over a year ago and became EHU Acting Rector in October 2014.

Pollick's engagement at EHU has been marked by an astonishing rise to the top. But what did this candidate achieve in the year that he has lead EHU? And why does the Selection Committee keep pushing him to the top with such sustained vigour?

The critical point in this whole discussion is how the [Belarusian focus of the institution](#) has lately become somewhat of a marginal idea. This problem – probably for the first time in the last 10 years – has finally engaged Belarusian civil society in a discussion of what the role of EHU is in developing the national project for democratic Belarus. Three months ago, 40 leading minds from Belarus and abroad signed in January 2015 [an open letter calling to keep the 'Belarusian heart'](#) of EHU and not abandon its legacy.

Under Pollick's leadership, EHU has suffered from the disastrous losses of reputation as well as increased financial losses

Under Pollick's leadership, EHU has suffered from the disastrous losses of reputation which, among other things, include unnecessary legal disputes over dismissals of former employees and breaches of the EHU Statute by particular administrative bodies of the university.

Dr. Pollick oversaw a hiring process that gave rise to a

budget deficit of nearly €1 million (there was no comparable budget deficit before). This caused major donors like the European Commission and Norway to suspend funding, pending a plan to reduce this deficit to a manageable size – a plan they have been waiting to receive from Pollick since last summer.

One of his few accomplishments – a rather [self-serving redraft of EHU's Statute](#), created a University Council that Dr. Pollick boasted would help make EHU more democratic. According to the Statute, it is supposed to meet every two months. Dr. Pollick has not called a meeting of the Council in months. This is, very likely due to the fact that he decided that he can no longer work there with EHU's CFO, who was asking uncomfortable questions about a number of financial matters that involve Dr. Pollick.

Lithuania's Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education gave EHU poor marks for strategic management

Not surprisingly, a report released by Lithuania's Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education in early February gives EHU [poor marks for strategic management](#) – the area that Dr. Pollick, probably the most expensive education consultant in the whole region, currently supervises. The university spent well over a hundred thousand euros on his compensation rather than on the development of academic programmes or campus renovations over the span of a single year.

Losing the Battle, saving Face

Presumably, the Board will no longer support Pollick, since few Board members are willing to take personal responsibility for choosing a candidate who has almost no support outside the Selection Committee. Unfortunately for EHU, a small group of influential and desperate Board members continue to push Pollick further along the selection process for the university's top post.

According to some sources, last month, in an almost comically desperate effort to shore up their candidate, two individuals from the current EHU governance structures made their way to New York in the hopes of enlisting George Soros in their dubious adventure. Since George Soros is the founder and chairman of Open Society Foundation (one of three Part-Owners of EHU), his opinion on who becomes rector is of crucial importance. No surprise, however, that George Soros refused to support the legitimisation of a shady candidate and insisted on a fair selection process before it is too late.

What else could select members of the Governing Board do further to discredit the current selection process? Arrange a “members only” Board meeting without the presence of student representatives and the EHU Trust Fund Manager (who are usually invited as observers) at Frankfurt Airport to further delay the final decision and keep Pollick on board as the most highly-compensated temporary rector in the history of Lithuania and Belarus for another month or two for the sake of an “exchange of opinions”? Fantastical as it may sound, this is precisely what they did. The airport meeting will take place at the end of March.

The Rule of Law, the Rule of GAPO

If the EHU Board is so misguided as to nominate a candidate who has failed to perform the work for which he was hired, and GAPO to approve this, it will most likely mean a terminal loss of credibility for the European Humanities University as a whole. However, the current degree of dissatisfaction with the selection process may well warrant a negative decision by GAPO, should the Board decide to nominate Pollick.

GAPO, not the Board, officially appoints and dismisses EHU's Rector and can even dismiss the existing Governing Board

According to the EHU Statute, it is GAPO, not the Board, which officially appoints and dismisses EHU's Rector and makes all

fundamental decisions in the life of the university. GAPO could even dismiss the existing Governing Board, if it so chooses. If they were to reject a Board nominee or fully reboot the selection process, a new page of democratic governance would be opened in the history of EHU. GAPO has never voted against a Board decision before and is likely to act independently for the time in its history.

Such a scenario would become a clear signal to alumni, students, faculty, donors and other stakeholders that GAPO takes seriously their obligation to properly govern and manage a Belarusian academic institution. If GAPO starts anew the search for a rector and dissolves the existing Selection Committee, Belarusians will achieve their first institutional success on the way to real engagement for change and this, in turn, will restore hope for a European future for Belarusian higher education, starting with EHU.

That said, no matter who becomes a finalist at this point, given the existing selection process, without a new, reliable procedure, his or her legitimacy would be very low in many people's eyes. So now the question is not just who and how will actually become the next rector, but also whether the current Governing Board will continue to exist in its present form.

Serge Kharytonau

President of the Alumni Association of the European Humanities University