

# European Cafe, Citizen Journalism, Green Mahiliou – Belarus Civil Society Digest

European Cafe hosted a public lecture in Minsk. Budzma organised a Day of the Belarusian Language for young people. “For Freedom” invites for the school where the current situation in Belarus and the existing potential of the Belarusian civil society will be discussed.

Ihar Pastnow, a paediatrician and psychiatrist in Vitsyebsk who openly criticized the head of the Regional Executive Committee, will have to attend a mental health hospital for compulsory psychiatric care. Two NGOs were denied registration.

[European Café goes on its meetings](#). On 7 September at the TUT.by gallery the project “European Café: open space in Europe” hosts a public lecture by Timm Beichelt “Germany and the EU: Face to Face with their Eastern Neighbours.” Timm Beichelt is a Professor of European Studies at the European University Viadrina Frankfurt. The meeting is a continuation of a series of meetings with prominent European figures, organised by the Centre for European Studies.

[“Budzma z movay!” for young intellectuals](#). The campaign “Budzma!” conducted a Day of Belarusian language at a camp for young participants who were playing intellectual games. The program included several games in Belarusian including “Media Alphabet” and “What-Where-When?” as well as a literary-musical event and a Belarusian dance.

[Presentation of 2012 Sustainability Index](#). On 29 August a presentation of the results of 2012 Sustainability Index of civil society organisations (USAID methodology) took place in

Minsk. The event was organised by the international NGO "ACT" with informational support from the Office of European Expertise and Communications. The invited experts discussed strategies to improve sustainability in the third sector, taking into account the results of the Index.

## **Seminars, grants**

**[School "Belarus Today: Challenges and Prospects for Development"](#)**. The school was organised by the movement "For Freedom" and will take place on 15-20 October in one of the neighboring European countries. The purpose of the school is to provide fellows with a comprehensive vision of the current situation in Belarus and discuss the existing potential of Belarusian civil society. Participation in the school is available for Belarusians of 18-30 years old who are active in social and political issues.

**[Citizen journalist 2013: Let's Make it Better!](#)** The contest "Citizen Journalist" continues and invites all to apply with articles, photos, videos, audio or blogs about local issues. Thus, the team supports the wave of local campaigns "Let's Make it Better!" initiated by the Assembly of Democratic NGOs. All works will appear on the website [narodny.by](http://narodny.by), the best will be offered to independent newspapers and TV media. The deadline for submissions is 10 September.

**[Eastern Partnership Youth Forum 2013](#)**. On 22-25 October Eastern Partnership Youth Forum will take place in Kaunas (Lithuania), under the Lithuania's Presidency of the EU Council and the Eastern Partnership Platform 4 "Contacts between people". The event will gather about 200 young people and aims to increase sustainable political/civic commitment to further support non-formal learning and recognition of the process of work by young people through cooperation with those working with youth.

**[Embassy Funds for Belarus 2013](#)**. MATRA/HRF for Belarus launched

a new call for proposals focused on the development of civil society in Belarus. The Embassy has two programme funds available for 2013: the Small Embassy Projects Programme (Matra Fund) and the Human Rights Fund. Date of closure for the round is 15 September 2013. The Embassy is empowered to extend grants in principle to a maximum of Euro 25,000.

[First billboard with a picture of the HIV-positive citizen](#) of Belarus opened in Minsk on 21 August. Eugeni Spevak, a member of the Belarusian community of people living with HIV and the face on the billboard, said that 20 similar billboards will be placed throughout the country. The event "Why am I living with HIV for a long time" was organized by the World Health Organisation, with the support of the Ministry of Health of Belarus, UNDP, etc.

### **Green events**

[Agro-Cultural-Festival in Minsk](#). Ecodom NGO and ecological entity "Agro-Eco-Culture" invite those interested to the Eco-Cultural Festival 2013, which is traditionally held at the Minsk Gallery "Ź" during the last days of summer. The Festival program includes presentations, master classes, tastings and concerts that can be attended by both adults and children.

[SILC invites for training on ideology](#). Swedish International Liberal Centre (SILC) is inviting interested parties to participate in the training "Political party ideology". Politically and socially active youth of 18-35 years old are welcome to submit applications till September 22. The main objective of the course is to improve the knowledge of young political activists to better understand political ideologies and explore their different aspects.

[Birdrace 2013](#). APB BirdLife Belarus NGO is welcoming participants to take part in the X Open Championship of Ornithology Racing. Competitions will be held on the first Saturday of autumn (on September 7) from 6 am to 6 pm.

According to regulations, the winner is the team that during the day of the tournament registers the largest number of species of wild birds naturally occurring in the territory of Belarus.

[“Green Map” in Mahiliou](#). The Internet project serves as a guide between authorities responsible for waste collection and disposal and those who want to properly get rid of their waste. At the moment, Mahiliou Green Map contains 68 points where one can drop secondary material resources, waste, as well as to give away unnecessary items. The project’s initiator is the Centre for Environmental Solutions.

### **Interaction between state and civil society**

[Monitoring of public councils](#). The Ministry of Economy of Belarus has monitored the activities of public advisory councils and working groups in the state bodies. Monitoring data indicate that 29 advisory councils and working groups which include representatives of the business community continue to act. The Ministry concluded that the councils are a real platform for dialogue between the government and business.

[Two NGOs registration were turned down](#). On 21 August the Supreme Court of Belarus upheld the denial of registration for the United Civic Party’s youth wing “[Young Democrats](#)”. A Department of Justice of Brest Regional Executive Committee refused to register the NGO “[Brest Christian Democrats](#).”

[Doctor in Vitebsk who openly criticized authorities sent to psychiatric hospital](#). On 21 August Ihar Pastnow, a paediatrician and psychiatrist in Vitsyebsk who openly criticized the head of the Regional Executive Committee has been sent to a mental health hospital for compulsory psychiatric care.

[Program director of Radio “Racyja” banned entrance to Belarus](#). The Program Director of the Belarusian Radio “Racyja” Yury

Leszczynski, planning his holiday, wanted to come to Belarus. Having visited the Consulate of Belarus in Bialystok, he received a visa denial a week after applying for a tourist visa.

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

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## **Belarusian Opposition in 2012 Parliamentary Election**

The Parliamentary election of 2012 never had the ingredients to be transformative, but it did offer the chance for the opposition to present a credible platform to the population – and to seek to create space for issues to be debated that matter to the wider population.

Ultimately there was a lot of focus within the opposition on discussions of boycott, and at election time on various election observation efforts, but less on credible campaigning and outreach.

Some highlights did emerge in the margins of the campaign. Individual opposition figures and groupings emerged with more credit and reputations boosted. However, the lack of an opposition campaign on substantive alternative policies means that the opposition continues to be at the periphery of political life by default.

## **Different Strategic Approaches**

Opposition political parties and groupings were split three-ways on their strategic approach towards the election – although there were nuances in the paths taken by the different groupings.

Firstly, Just World and the candidates representing Tell the Truth and For Freedom declared that they were determined to maximise the opportunity provided by the elections and run full campaigns until polling day. Belarusian Social Democrats (Hramada) also ended up running candidates to the end of the campaign.

A second group, headed by the United Civic Party, wished to use the legal opportunities to campaign, including access to TV and radio, by running candidates at the commencement of the process. However, they withdrew their candidate before early voting to protest against the unfair nature of the campaign. The Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), meanwhile kept one foot in this camp from the start, but only withdrew after seeing how restrictive the electoral environment was in practice.

Other groups argued for a full boycott of the poll, including the Christian Democrats (with their leader Paval Seviaryniets still imprisoned) and the European Belarus movement around former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov and Charter 97.

**United Civic Party (UCP)** leader Anatol Liabedzka for a long time had a clear vision of his party's strategy for the election: utilise the possibilities to campaign and then withdraw on the eve of early voting to protest against the unfair process and avoid "playing by Lukashenka's rules". With his strong conviction behind this approach, he was able to keep his party behind him throughout the process. Although he was unable to persuade the wider opposition to use this strategy, ultimately BPF did end up taking the same line.

UCP also benefited from the simpler party candidate nomination

process that had been introduced for this election, and were able to nominate 48 candidates, of whom ultimately 36 were registered. A certain game with the authorities then followed about whether the candidates would be able to use their legal campaign possibilities in the media with the authorities stating that calling for a boycott would not be allowed in TV debates or in their electoral platforms published in newspapers. In many cases – although far from all – compromise wording refraining from directly advocating a boycott but did however allow candidates manifestos to be published or broadcast.

UCP ran a relatively active campaign on the ground, engaging with voters to persuade them why the boycott might matter to citizens. Critics argued that much of their publicity was due to an active press service, while their focus on the boycott meant candidates were diverted away from discussing the merits of their party's platforms with voters and actively persuading people to support them.

The **Belarusian Popular Front** entered the election undecided as to whether they would stay in the race till the end – although there had been an earlier decision in principal to withdraw. The non-registration of many opposition candidates and the generally restrictive environment and limited number of representatives in the election commissions persuaded them ultimately that they didn't want to take part in what they perceive as a farce. As a result, in a special congress on 15 September their candidates voted 42 to 2 to withdraw their 31 candidates who had been registered.

Some candidates were more active than others, with in the regions Ivan Shega (Slonim 58) noted to have had a good campaign, and considered he had significant support in his district, but felt obliged to follow the party decision and withdraw. In the end, one of their candidates (Valery Koronkevich, Khotimsk 83) – decided to stay in the race as he was also supported by Tell the Truth, and chose to remain in

the race with other candidates on that platform.

**Just World** had entered the campaign with a determined focus to increase the name recognition of their party which remained low following its rebranding from the Party of Belarusian Communists in 2009. While they managed to register 29 candidates (of 34 nominated), they barely had any impact on the campaign (many candidates seemed to sink without trace). One of the main reasons for this was that the prime focus of the energy of party leader Sergei Kalyakin was on the For Fair Elections partisan observation project, and he himself was not running in the campaign.

Some observers argue that one problem they face is that it appears to be harder for Left parties to obtain support from the West – although this can also be explained by low levels of activism. As a result, it has proven easier in recent elections to focus the energy of key activists on a properly funded election observation project instead as a vehicle to keep its networks active. After the lack of a candidate in the presidential election, and ageing membership, the election can be seen as a missed opportunity.

While Kalyakin remains an attractive personality, he has once again been unable to build on this to reach out to the wider population and build a strong movement behind him.

One major area of cooperation for the opposition was the **For Free Elections 2012** partisan observation campaign in which 14 political parties and civic organisations participated. This was led by Viktor Karnienka and Siarhei Kalyakin (of Just World) and saw party activists coming together to run a credible observation effort which included the deployment of more observers than ever before in Belarus. This was perhaps the most positive note of intra-opposition cooperation during the electoral period – with the campaign run under a unified message about why elections matter.

This campaign included almost all of the major opposition groupings including Just World, Social Democrats (Hramada), Tell the Truth, Christian Democrats, BPF (officially but only worked in regions), UCP, Labour Party. Alongside European Belarus, For Freedom were the only major force to stay out of the campaign – ultimately focusing on their own Boycott 101 initiative – although some of their regional activists took part.

From a political campaign viewpoint, one weakness of the partisan observation campaign was that they struggled to connect political life and elections to everyday problems and engage voters about why they should care about election processes. All too often they disregarded communications with citizens in favour of what they found more comfortable: more technical communications targeted towards the political elite and media.

**Tell the Truth** ran a professional election, focusing on door-to-door outreach and building on previous civic campaigns, which had focused on local issues. They supported 25 candidates who, officially as independents, sought registration by collecting signatures. Some of their best candidates, for example Mikhail Pashkevich (Minsk 95) were denied registration on the grounds of invalid signatures.

Ultimately 13 candidates were registered and after an internal conference call discussion between candidates decided to stay in the race till the end. A number of these ran effective campaigns with professional campaign literature and sought to engage with voters on relevant issues. An example was Yaraslau Bernikovich (Novopolotsk 25), who had suspended his BPF membership prior to the campaign.

Highlights included handing out leaflets warning that basic food prices and utility rates were likely to follow the election, to support the candidacy of Tatiana Karatkevich (Minsk 97). Two party leaders Feduta and Dmitriev who were

ineligible to run due to their post-2010 election sentence still took part in TV debates as representatives of registered candidates.

Feduta in particular made a good impression, although Dmitriev did less well, being unable to answer questions about the major employers in the district he was campaigning on, and was criticised for focusing too much on the question of political prisoners.

Overall, Tell the Truth came out of the election with its status confirmed as the most dynamic political movement in Belarus today. Some questions remain over their future, though. A long-term leader to replace Neklyaeu remains to be found, while the grouping has yet to declare its ideological position on the political spectrum. However, with their high-level of grassroots activity they are likely to become a key component of the 2015 presidential election puzzle.

**For Freedom** – The proposed candidacy of Alexander Milinkevich in Minsk 109 suddenly and briefly returned him and his movement to the centre of the political stage. After deciding not to run in 2010 he appeared marginalised in the Belarusian opposition movement – but had done his homework and identified an electoral district where public opinion was fertile for an opposition candidate.

He seemed set to run a solid campaign with his candidacy set to provide the potential for media focus. However, the district authorities chose not to take the risk and denied him registration on the pretext of invalid signatures – although some critics wonder if his campaign could have paid more attention to ensuring ‘perfectly completed signature sheets’. Subsequently the prime focus of the For Freedom campaign was on the Boycott 101 campaign (see below).

Support for the **independent candidate** Andrei Yurkou (Gorki 82) was also provided by For Freedom, of which he is a member. His

team was made up of a coalition of party branches and NGOs – the same group of activists who managed to elect an independent to the municipal council in the last local elections.

He ran an active campaign and managed to gain significant awareness and name recognition in the electoral district. His official result was 20.5 per cent of the vote, a higher figure than opposition candidates had received in previous elections in the district. Meanwhile, the high early voting figures of 38.5 per cent indicate that the authorities paid particular attention to ensuring the 'right result' in this district.

Another independent candidate Vital Karatysh (Luninets 13/Brest region) was also noted for running an active campaign, and even in the official results obtained 58% of the vote in the polling station in his own village Kazhan-Garadok – and overall officially received 21%.

One interesting development during the campaign was the decision of opposition groupings For Freedom, Tell the Truth, BPF, Just World and the youth group Zmiena to come together for a boycott based on one specific electoral district (Minsk 101). This **Boycott 101** campaign was carried out in a district where a BPF candidate Artsiom Lava was registered, but who used his campaigning possibilities to advocate a boycott and withdrew before the election.

The objective was to carry out a specific awareness campaign in the district and carry out a combined comprehensive effort to monitor the turnout in all the 33 polling stations in the constituency. According to the figures from the campaign, the final turnout was 35.69 per cent while the official turnout was 58.8 per cent.

This was a slightly curious ad hoc grouping of parties, which included both those who were boycotting and running. While positively it did show collaboration across the 'tactical

divide', it also left parties open to criticism that they were providing mixed messages to the population.

With the **Christian Democrats'** (BCD) decision to boycott the election, their party was largely adrift from the process. Rymasheusky still felt the need to draw attention to himself by criticising fellow opposition figures for running in the polls. In particular he was critical of For Freedom, Tell the Truth and the Social Democrats (Hramada), who in a group of parties alongside BCD, had signed a joint statement in February 2012 declaring their intention to boycott if political prisoners had not been released before the election campaign.

On election weekend, the Christian Democrats played a role in the various observation efforts, and had a particular impact in highlighting the fraudulent increase in the turnout provided in the official figures, through a video that was taken by one of its observers in Polling station 594 in Minsk 107. This video showed the head of the election commission announcing turnout figures that were significantly lower than those in the final protocol.

The results of non-participation in elections for the medium term prospects of the party are not yet clear. BCD built themselves up as a party by running candidates in previous local and parliamentary elections, and there is a question as to whether by skipping these elections they have hurt the steady momentum built over the past few years. Additionally, their *de facto* leader Rymashevsky (while Seviaryniets is in jail) has emerged as the least disciplined and most contentious in the opposition, and is likely to hold back the party in the short-term.

As for **European Belarus**, with Andrei Sannikov quiet and seemingly in exile, Charter 97 based in Warsaw, and the Free Theatre in London, their combined movement played little active or constructive role in the election campaign. Indeed,

their presence was reduced almost entirely to on-line vociferous agitation for the boycott. Their sometimes collaborator Ivashkevich of the Belarusian Movement was also barely visible. This was perhaps a sign of their diminishing importance in the country, with their future strategy likely to be to call for a boycott of 'everything/the regime' – partly based on their exile situation where they are unable to really influence anything in the country.

Another party which came out of the election with some credit, albeit in a haphazard way, was the **Social Democrat Party (Hramada)** of Iryna Veshtard. As an example, one of their candidates Igor Maslovsky had the highest number of votes amongst opposition party affiliated candidates in the Brest region. The party had been indecisive about whether to stay in the race, and with their recent registration problems overcome, if more focused from the start they could have used the opportunity to promote themselves more publicly – drawing on their comparative advantages, especially with a female leader offering a refreshing alternative in the opposition ranks.

Another person who seemingly has eyes set on 2015 is Uladzimir Matskevich, the head of the **EuroBelarus** NGO consortium. He is recognised to have political ambitions and did not miss the opportunity on the eve of the elections to criticise his potential opposition rivals, arguing it was “high time to replace selfish and short-sighted opposition leaders” – clearly with himself in mind. Currently it is convenient for him to remain safely as a “civil society” leader and criticise the opposition, supposedly from the sidelines. However, if he wishes to enter opposition politics transparently, he will need to build bridges and take risks and open himself up for public criticism by running in elections.

Other smaller opposition groups also submitted candidates, but had little impact on the campaign. These included Vladimir Navasiad, leader of the Party of Freedom and Progress ran in

Minsk 94, the Labour Party of Alexander Bukhvostov had 5 candidates, while the Social Democrats (National Hramada) of Nikolai Statkevich had 4 candidates registered.

### **Pro-Government Groupings**

On the side of the authorities, the 63 seats for **Belaya Rus** in the parliament will only increase the clamour in the movement to create a political party for the *nomenklatura* – where they can come together to defend their position. A conference is planned for October 2012 when they will consider transforming into a political party – they already have a working title of the Belarusian Party of People's Unity.

However, this transformation to a party has been a consistent demand since the creation of Belaya Rus in November 2007, but has always been rejected by Lukashenka who sees no reason to even marginally change the political status quo. With so many linked to one pro-nomenklatura grouping, the question has been raised about the ultimate allegiance of new parliamentarians, with concern expressed that many are ‘agents of influence’ that will be lobbying Russia’s business interests in the future.

The election reinforced the role of the **Liberal Democrat Party** as jokers, allowed to run simply to make up the numbers and provide a partial illusion of competition. When in Gomel 36 their candidate ended up as the only contestant, the government was not prepared to let them win and they lost to “against all”. Indeed, the LDP leader Haydukevich even came out before the election effectively saying this – giving his party a clear signal not to seek victory.

### **Looking Ahead**

Unlike all other recent elections, there were no post-election protests to show the strength of the call for change in Belarus. Indeed, there were never any real plans for post-election protests; quite simply, the opposition had not

engaged the population enough to be able to seriously call for one.

The general consensus was that everyone wished to save their energy for another day. This view was based on the fear that any protest would have been a small scale, meaningless exercise resulting in arrests, more fear and ultimately unlikely to win more support for opposition.

Overall the low voter turnout seemed to confirm what experts have argued in recent times – that the mainstream population is disappointed with the authorities, but at the same time expect little from the opposition.

Signs of heightened political interest, which elections usually generate in the population, were missing. Certainly, it would be difficult to attribute the low turnout recorded by independent observers in many polling stations directly to parts of the opposition calling for a boycott.

Looking ahead, and in spite of the lack of major progress, the challenge for the opposition in the medium-term remains unchanged – to push for an increased space in Belarus free of the state. This would be a step in the direction of a more open Belarus, and would increase the momentum and movement towards change in the future.

*Dr Alastair Rabagliati*

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**Youth Internet TV, Vitali**

# **Silicki, Lukashenka on Political Prisoners – Belarus Civil Society Digest**

The most notable civil society events in Belarus include Avangard launching the first Youth Internet TV in Belarus. Ambassador of the Kingdom of Sweden to Belarus Stefan Eriksson became honorary chairman of the AD.NAK! jury. Tell the Truth and For Freedom joined the National Platform of EaP CS Forum. NGO Assembly are preparing for the VII Congress. A new think tank, the Belarusian Analytical Centre, was presented in Warsaw.

As far as political developments are concerned, Aleksandr Lukashenka warned against granting pardon to convicts during the coming amnesty campaign on politically motivated grounds. US President Obama extended sanctions against Belarusian officials for another year.

**Vital Silicki memorial evening held in Minsk.** Minsk's Ÿ Gallery hosted a memorial evening for [the first BISS Director Vital Silicki](#) on the day of the obit, June 11. Vital's friends and colleagues shared their memories of the globally renowned political researcher in a very warm atmosphere. The Silicki's intellectual heritage and the memorial event had significant media coverage.

**Minsk youth NGO "Avangard"** has launched the first youth Internet TV in Belarus. The creative team of [A-TV.by](#) shoots and posts on the website video blogs, reports, coverage of "Avangard" events, as well as live broadcasting of the most interesting events in Minsk.

**New think tank.** On June 14, [Belarusian Analytical Centre](#) was presented in Warsaw. The initiators of a new think tank are

sociologist Andrei Vardamatski, political scientist Pavel Usov, economist Leonid Zlotnikov. The Center presented its report on the geopolitical orientations of the Belarusians. The Centre plans to become self-sustaining through the sale of its products.

**NGO "Ponimanie" Endowment.** The Endowment of the International [NGO "Ponimanie"](#) made up \$17,000 due to donations of foreign partners. The NGO "Ponimanie"/"Understanding" sees its mission as professional and voluntary participation in the establishment of the humane world, suitable for all children to happily live in.

**New members joined the National Platform.** The civil campaign ["Tell the Truth" and the movement "For Freedom"](#) made the decision to sign a memorandum on cooperation under the National Platform of EaP Civil Society Forum, as well as to join the National Platform. The new members are going to coordinate their activities with other CSOs more closely.

**Oleg Gulak elected again.** On June 8, in Minsk, [the Belarusian Helsinki Committee](#) conducted a report-election meeting. Oleg Gulak was again elected the BHC Head.

**Stefan Eriksson became the honorary chairman of the jury AD.NAK!** [Ambassador of the Kingdom of Sweden to Belarus Stefan Eriksson](#) agreed to be jury head of the nomination "Social significant projects in the arts and culture" of the Third Festival of Belarusian-language advertising and communications AD.NAK! The jury also includes well-known experts in the field of advertising and communications, in particular, Andrei Ezerin, communication agency Ezerin'com; Zhanna Grinuk, Centre SATIO; Anna Chistoserdova, Art Gallery "Ź"; Nina Shidlovskaya, cultural campaign "Budzma Belarusians!"; Marina Zolotova, webportal TUT.by, etc.

**EHU celebrated 20th anniversary.** [The European Humanities University in Vilnius](#) conducted an activities-filled

International Week dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the founding of the University. In particular, EHU gathered more than 200 current and former faculty, alumni, students, staff, supporters, and friends of EHU gathered at historic Vilnius Town Hall for celebration.

**Training on video journalism.** [Online magazine "New Europe"](#) announces a set for the training on video journalism, which will be conducted by qualified Belarusian and foreign experts. The main focus of the training is the preparation of TV reports. The organizers invite to participation representatives of independent media, online media, working with video content.

**The Congress of the Assembly.** On June 16-17, VII Congress of the Assembly of pro-democratic NGOs will take place in Minsk. The organizers plan to gather the Assembly members to discuss the prospects of the development of [the largest umbrella network](#) which includes of about 300 CSOs.

## **International**

**Lukashenka: There should be no amnesty on politically motivated grounds.** On June 12, [Alyaksandr Lukashenka](#) warned against granting a pardon to convicts during the coming amnesty campaign on politically motivated grounds. Lukashenka described amnesty campaigns as real manifestations of humanity on the part of the state toward people who have erred. According to the interior ministry's press office, some 2,800 people may be freed from prison under the amnesty law this summer, while more than 7,000 more prisoners are to have their terms shortened by one year.

**ILO to discuss situation in Belarus at November meeting.** Violations of trade union rights in Belarus will be discussed by the Governing Body of the International Labor Organization (ILO) at its meeting in November, [Alyaksandr Yarashuk](#), chairman of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions

(BCDTU), told on June 14.

**EU delegation meets with opposition politicians.** On June 12, [a delegation of the European Union's European External Action Service](#) (EEAS) met with a group of opposition politicians in Minsk. EEAS representatives were interested to study prospects for the development of what the EU calls the European dialogue on modernization and the political situation in the country ahead of September's parliamentary elections. The meeting was attended by former presidential candidate Vital Rymashewski; Syarhey Kalyakin, leader of the "Spravedlivy Mir" (Just World); Andrey Dzmitryyew, a coordinator of the "Tell the Truth!"; Belarusian Popular Front leader Alyaksey Yanukevich, etc.

**Obama extends sanctions against Belarusian officials.** On June 14, [U.S. President Barack Obama](#) extended the sanctions, which were imposed against Belarusian officials on June 16, 2006, for another year. This was reported in the White House.

**Belarus ranks 109<sup>th</sup> in 2012 Global Peace Index.** [Belarus ranked 109th](#) in the 2012 Global Peace Index (GPI), a measure of global peacefulness produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace. The GPI gauges ongoing domestic and international conflict, safety and security in society, and militarization in 158 countries by taking into account 23 separate indicators.

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# Changes in Belarus: The Task for the Opposition, not Foreign Powers

The recent release of two opposition activists is an important event but hardly a turning point for the political situation in Belarus. More than a dozen political prisoners remain incarcerated. Even if Alexandr Lukashenka frees all political prisoners and welcomes EU ministers in Minsk, it will not be a turning point, either.

First, Lukashenka can very soon change his mind, take new prisoners and start the liberalisation game anew. Second, the release of opposition activists taken hostage by the regime may have humanitarian or personal significance but no political impact – as long as they do not undertake real work with people inside Belarus. The fundamental problem is that only three actors play this liberalisation game – the Belarusian regime, Russia and the EU. The Belarusian opposition's role is that of a ball with which they are playing.

## **Belarusian Opposition: Mission Possible**

The reasons for the latest friendly gestures towards West by top officials are the same as before. Worsening of Belarusian relations with EU has narrowed options of Belarusian ruler to a pitiful role of Moscow's vassal. After Putin became the Russian president, he declared his intent to intensify building of Eurasian Union which can be dangerous for Lukashenka's power and survival.

No wonder, the Belarusian leader looked westwards again to return to his older model of multi-vector foreign policy. He is gradually accepting some demands of the EU as in 2008, when

he also released political prisoners and began dialogue with the EU. The pressure on the opposition diminished – yet it did not result in strengthening opposition inside the country. Then came the 2010 elections, confrontation and suppression of the opposition within Belarus. The same happened in 2004 and 2006.

The opposition should become a visible player not only in Brussels and Washington

The vicious cycle will repeat again as the interests of stakeholders and power balance on the part of the EU, Russia and Belarusian regime remain the same. The situation can change only when the opposition inside Belarus emerge as an organised and self-conscious force. The opposition should become a visible player not only in Brussels and Washington.

True, Lukashenka's regime blocks many movement of his opponents but there are absolutely no grounds to compare it to Stalin or even Third World dictatorships. Working with the population in Belarus is possible.

Currently, many in the opposition are preoccupied with retaining their financial support without being able to produce any proof of their own efficiency and popularity inside the country.

### **Is Anyone Alive?**

The year 2011 demonstrated that the opposition could not organise any serious political campaigns despite widespread anger at government policy displayed by Belarusians because of economic and social problems. The silent protest actions remained spontaneous mob actions without content, and “People's Assemblies” simply failed to attract any considerable numbers of people.

Apparently little has changed in this regard in recent months.

The websites of oppositional parties – their main representation platforms given the current situation with media – demonstrate just that. The websites of three major oppositional parties – Belarusian People's Front Party, United Civic Party and Social Democratic Party – resemble internet news sites rather than outlets of political organisations.

Parties usually reprint various news already available elsewhere on Internet and may occasionally publish their own analytical pieces or statements

Parties usually reprint various news already available elsewhere on Internet and may occasionally publish their own analytical pieces or statements. Yet they give little indication of actual activities inside Belarus and work with people.

Of course, topics such as prospects of the Eastern Partnership, the role of the Belarusian People's Republic' government in exile and the Belarusian origins of Scarlett Johansson are very interesting. But they have little to do with the situation in Belarus or the parties' own activities.

The situation looks better with political movements. Both "Tell the Truth" of Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu and "For Freedom" of Alaksandr Milinkevich look more dynamic. Their sites demonstrate concrete examples of working with the Belarusians inside the country. "For Freedom" is organising public lectures and "Tell the Truth" is conducting a campaign on the newly proposed Chinese Industrial Park which seriously worries local residents. But their own reported activities still resemble the old parties.

What this means is that the problem of little work with the people have plagued all major oppositional political structures.

**Belarusian "Cargo Cult"**

That was a form of religious belief that salvation shall come from foreign land on a ship or aircraft

Anthropological insights help to understand activities of Belarusian opposition and society. Some South Pacific islanders, after seeing Western vessels with valuable items arriving to their lands, developed the so called "cargo cult". That was a form of religious belief that salvation shall come from foreign land on a ship or aircraft. That is a pattern to describe activities of Belarusian opposition in recent times.

Activity of most oppositional politicians concentrate on foreign governments and stakeholders. It is assumed that the opposition anyway cannot do anything within the country. That means that they need not undertake any efforts to improve their performance inside Belarus. Instead, the oppositional politicians put pressure on Lukashenka from abroad using the EU. But such behaviour is more likely to produce their further marginalisation inside the country rather than any real, albeit small, change.

The futility of such an approach is evident. The deputy head of the campaign "Tell the Truth" Andrei Dmitryeu speaking to Radio Liberty admitted, "The Belarusian opposition should stop looking for happiness in other capitals. It has to look for happiness here. [...] While Belarusian society is not willing to follow the Belarusian opposition, it does not matter what is happening around Belarus."

### **Need to Develop An Alternative**

Many radical activists call for Western sanctions but not for funding the deeply needed projects – like new media projects or the improvement of the existing ones

Tendencies to focus primarily on foreign advocacy lowered efficiency of opposition and their chances to achieve changes within the country. The gap between the opposition and reality in Belarus may end badly for all. Just one example.

Many radical activists call for Western sanctions but not for funding the deeply needed new initiatives – like new media projects or the improvement of the existing ones. Mass media in Belarus should become much more vigorous, provide society with independent information about what is going on in the country, and serve as a discussion platform.

For instance, the only Belarusian-language TV channel Belsat is broadcasting original content under extreme pressure put by Belarusian authorities on its journalists in the country. It has much better chances to help changing the situation in Belarus than dozens of websites. Nevertheless, Belsat is chronically underfunded even now.

And there is no such thing as too much funding for media, education, cultural and academic exchange projects. Of course, such a policy is more expensive than sanctions. Sanctions are an easy solution particularly when they are imposed against a relatively small country. They can nicely demonstrate how the EU can punish a dictator. But breaking the vicious circle requires not just sanctions but real work inside the country.

The opposition will have a hard time getting more money for this kind of projects. Finding money inside Belarus is virtually impossible. For foreign donors supporting real projects directed at Belarusian people could be more expensive and risky than supporting various exile opposition groups or yet another website.

But it is important to understand that only working with Belarusians rather than Brussels insiders can seriously increase respect for the Belarusian opposition. It should appear as a responsible and trustworthy political actor inside the country. Once the public opinion starts to change in the right direction, the question of changing the situation in Belarus will become a question of time.

Otherwise, the cycles of taking and releasing political hostages will be repeated again and again.

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## **Political Parties in Belarus Consider Elections Tactics**

Opposition political groupings in Belarus are stepping up preparations for the parliamentary elections, scheduled for 23 September 2012.

An IRI opinion poll figure from February shows that 43 per cent of people believe that in order to solve the economic situation in the country, new people are needed in government. 47 per cent believe that political reform is necessary to achieve this. Meanwhile, 32 per cent say they would vote for the "change candidate" or one not put forward by the state.

These figures underline the tremendous potential opportunity for outreach that the election presents for the opposition, particularly if they can communicate with voters the link between the painful economic situation in the country and the need for increased citizen control over the authorities. The wider public currently sees no alternative to the current regime and is not well informed or supportive of the opposition.

81 per cent of the Belarusian population opposes the idea of a boycott of elections, and 74 per cent plan to vote in the election. These polls have facilitated a small shift in approach from some opposition groupings, and a common recognition that the elections should be used to communicate with voters as the best way to build up support for the

future.

However, tensions, distrust, and in particular differences in electoral tactics, remain, with some groups set on boycotting or planning to withdraw candidates before election-day.

### **Coalition of the six**

Within the Coalition of the Six, politicians from six major political groupings have taken small steps to work together, including creating a common team for election observation, agreeing to develop common campaign messages for use by all groups, and understanding the need to avoid pointless mutual criticism.

Each of the political parties has different internal dynamics, with different electoral strategies and priorities based on the current focus of their membership and their ability to run innovative campaigns

**Just World** of Sergei Kalyakin is the only party currently committed to run throughout the parliamentary election campaign, rather than proposing to withdraw or boycott. They recognise that not running a candidate in the presidential elections and re-branding from their former Communist Party banner has reduced significantly their name recognition amongst the Belarusian population. As a result, they wish to avoid making the same mistake again. In coalition discussions, they have therefore argued against any common agreement that all opposition candidates would withdraw together at a designated time.

The **Tell the Truth** campaign is hindered as some key leaders (such as former presidential candidate Vladimir Neklyayev and movement coordinator Andrei Dmitriev) are currently ineligible to be candidates due to their post-detention status. While the movement appears to currently be the most dynamic and seemingly best funded opposition political force in the country, this limitation has contributed to the movement's

decision not to run candidates nationally under a Tell the Truth banner. In spite of this they plan to support candidates affiliated with the movement using a common Tell the Truth message. This is designed to reinforce the idea of citizen control over the authorities' decisions, and would be utilised by activists even in districts where candidates are not running.

This message would build on recent issue-based campaigns around a "citizens' control" theme. An example is their guiding support of the civic campaign to pressure the government into revising plans for the construction of a large Chinese industrial park in Minsk. This particular campaign has already had an impact, with regional authorities entering into a dialogue with the protestors on the construction plans. Critics suggest that while Tell the Truth is good at creating noise in the media by launching a new campaign almost every fortnight, the actual results of their campaigns are not as impressive as they claim.

The **Belarusian Popular Front** is planning to nominate as many members as possible for registration as candidates for the election, and is also working on a campaign to change the electoral code. Their election strategy is likely to include withdrawal in the last days of the campaign to protest against the unfair conditions.

**For Freedom** is planning to support parliamentary candidates who share their values. It is still undecided whether the organisation's leader Aliaksander Milinkevich will run in the election, but if he does, it will probably be in a Minsk district.

The **United Civic Party** have argued that all opposition candidates should withdraw before the beginning of the five-day early voting period. The party intends to follow a strategy where a candidate should pledge in writing that he or she will withdraw from the race five days before the end and

will not use state funds to finance the campaign. This strategy is led by Anatoly Lebedko who was re-elected as party chair in a tense meeting in March.

The **Belarusian Christian Democrats** (BCD) are taking the hardest line view amongst the coalition, following an internal vote for a boycott. With their co-chair Paval Seviarynets in jail alongside an angry and principled membership, they have launched a boycott campaign, as their earlier conditions of the release of political prisoners, amendments to the electoral law, and registration of the BCD were not fulfilled. The latest and fourth attempt to register the party was rejected by the Ministry of Justice in February 2012 on spurious and clearly politically motivated grounds.

While the BCD was the party which took the last local elections most seriously and also ran a party candidate in the presidential election, their internal vote means that they are not prepared to run on this occasion – even though some leaders recognise that this may stall the party's momentum. To mitigate this, they plan to recruit district coordinators to campaign about the elections not being genuine and also to promote their party.

Meanwhile, the opposition parties are united in a **For Fair Elections election observation campaign**. Led by Sergei Kalyakin and Viktor Karnienko, it aims to be a common effort involving all the active political parties and groupings, building on the achievements and experience of the 2010 presidential elections.

### **Other groups**

Formally outside the Coalition of the Six, the **Social Democrat Hramada** of Iryna Veshtard is also regaining activity as an opposition party with a number of more dynamic young members, especially women. They plan to submit candidates for the

election although it is unclear if they will remain in the race through to the end. They are having problems registering their current leadership with the authorities. A third party congress in the last two years was held in March, as the conclusions of the previous congresses that elected Veshtard as their leader were not recognised by the Ministry of Justice.

A boycott campaign was launched on 14 January by the unregistered **Belarusian Movement** of Viktor Ivashkevich, the organisers of the (generally unsuccessful) *Narodny Skhod* (People's Assembly) rallies held at the end of 2010. The boycott is primarily supported by Team Sannikov, such as the Charter 97 website and the civil initiative European Belarus, as well as the independent trade union of the radio-electronic industry workers. It is not directly linked to the BCD campaign.

They argue that the only way to express distrust in the system is to boycott the election (as there is no party of power as in Russia to vote against) and are set to take the position that anyone who has not voted, has voted against. No figures have been specified, though, about what level of turnout they would consider a successful boycott. Indeed the strategy is very similar to that of Sannikov and Charter 97 before the 2008 parliamentary elections. Critics of the boycott campaign, including from members of the Coalition of the Six, see it as a harmful attempt to divide the Belarusian democratic forces into supporters and opponents of the "election".

Other groupings include the opposition-minded **Party of Freedom and Progress** of Uladimir Navasiad (a member of parliament from 2000-04) which has indicated its intention to run. Meanwhile the pseudo-opposition **Liberal Democratic Party** of Siarhei Haidukevich declared in January that they will nominate 245 members as candidates, ensuring representation in all 110 electoral districts for the forthcoming elections.

Candidates supporting the authorities will likely run as independents as in previous elections. However, there remains strong pressure from public officials of various levels to create a party of power based on the **Belaya Rus** movement, to defend their interests. As a step towards this, its chairman, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Alexander Radkov, has said they will support 'like-minded' candidates along with candidates affiliated with the movement.

With over 100,000 members, Belaya Rus has plans to appoint members to election commissions, establish an election campaign HQ as well as carry out campaigning – although the scale of this will depend on a signal from Lukashenka. While support of these officials is vital to Lukashenka during election time, he has consistently rejected their proposals to create a political party, seeking to limit their influence.

### **Targets Achievable by the Opposition**

Ultimately the elected candidates – as on previous occasions – will almost certainly be drawn from a list prepared by the authorities. Given this reality and the hurdles that the opposition will inevitably face during the campaign, they should find other ways to measure success.

A positive outcome to the electoral campaign for the opposition would include higher levels of support for the democratic cause, a positive impression being registered in society by opposition candidates, higher levels of recognition of opposition leaders and parties, and also a demonstration that the opposition has the ability and capacity to plan and implement a successful campaign.

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