

Grand media barometer, foreign investment forum, civil society trends in 2016 – digest of Belarusian analytics

BISS releases Grand Political Media Barometer and a fresh Foreign Policy Index. Belarusian economy continues to show a fragile stability, according to Belarus Security Blog. National Agency of Investment and Privatisation sums up the results of Belarus forum “Broadening the Horizons: Investment, Finance, Development”.

Viasna presents fresh monthly monitoring of the human rights situation in Belarus. Experts formulate eight key trends in Belarusian civil society in 2016. BAJ monitoring group presents final conclusions on the coverage of the Parliamentary election in the Belarusian media.

Joerg Forbrig: parliamentary elections were invisible, but not trivial. Artiom Shraibman analyses why Lukashenka allowed opposition to Parliament.

This and more in the new digest of Belarusian analytics.

Politics

[Grand political media barometer: report on communication of Belarus' independent political forces \(2012-2016\)](#) – BISS presents a report for 49-month monitoring (starting April 2012) on the media-appearances of the Belarusian opposition political forces. According to the Barometer, there is a clear

explosion of politics during the electoral campaigns and the presidential elections were characterised by the unprecedented growth of communication.


[Recommendations on the creation of foreign retraining programme for civil servants.](#) □ Organisation of foreign educational programmes would improve civil service and competitiveness of Belarusian economy

[Authority pulls opposition in delicate game](#) – Journalist [Paŭliuk Bykoŭski](#) believes that two oppositionists in the new parliament are an indirect signal of the situation in the ruling regime. He suggests that there are "doves" within the system that stand for cooperation with the West, with the expansion of freedom without any change in political realities. However, it is impossible to predict how long the "doves" are in favour.

[Belarus Foreign Policy Index № 33 \(July–August 2016\)](#) – BISS presents its regular issue of Belarus Foreign Policy Index, which explores Belarus's foreign policy. In particular, in July and August, Belarus-Russia relations were developed in difficult conditions due to the emergency on NPP construction in Astraviec and difficult negotiations on gas and oil. The main topic in relations with the EU was parliamentary election campaign.

Economy

[Belarus forum “Broadening the Horizons: Investment, Finance, Development” results](#) – One of the recent Belarusian forum's organisers, the National Agency of Investment and Privatisation sums up the forum results. The forum is called as one of the most important events in the economic life of the country that allowed discussing strategies to attract foreign investments in Belarus. BISS independent think tank was among the organisers.

[Moscow would not oppose. Will Minsk sign a new programme with the IMF?](#)  – Belarusian authorities started another round of negotiations with the International Monetary Fund. One of the questions is how Russia would react to Belarus' cooperation with the IMF. According to *BelaPAN*, Russia's official position is that the Belarusian authorities should carry out the IMF recommendations.

[Monitoring of the situation in the field of economic security of Belarus \(August 2016\)](#) – In its monthly monitoring Belarus Security Blog notes that the Belarusian economy continues to show a fragile stability. The most serious risk to financial stability is the deterioration of the external sector. At the same time, a successful resolution of oil and gas conflict with Russia can be a significant factor in improving the foreign trade balance.

Civil society

[Human rights situation in Belarus: September 2016](#) – According to Viasna's monthly monitoring, September was not marked by any significant changes of a systemic nature that could contribute to qualitative changes in the human rights situation. The key negative trend were new cases of arbitrary detention of political activists that had not been applied by the Belarusian authorities since August 2015.

[Foreign investment: only loans so far.](#) Foreign loans remain the main source of investment and are used to refinance current debt and thus only increase the total volume of debt rather than lead to reform and increase of economic efficiency

[Civil society organisations in Belarus: eight trends of 2016](#) – During a discussion organised by ACT NGO on 26 September, the civil society experts name the key events and developments happened to Belarusian CSOs in 2016. Namely, such trends appeared visible as a cautious warming in relations between

the state and civil society, increased activity of unaffiliated grassroots, crowdfunding boom, strengthening gender mainstreaming, etc.

[What happens to Minsk from the point of Urban Studies?](#) – Urbanist Dzmitry Bibikaŭ discusses new areas for evening entertainment that have emerged in Minsk and a process of gentrification, which is the core of the changes of deteriorated urban neighborhoods. In particular, the expert is sure that Minsk has a huge capacity in gentrification, and the future is for industrial zones.

Belaruspolicy

[Recommendations on the creation of foreign retraining programme for civil servants.](#) Improving the competitiveness of Belarusian economy is impossible without creation of professional civil service. Civil servants in national and local bodies should have the ability to generate and implement non-standard management tasks, have a comprehensive view of the modern public administration in the world, global economy and international cooperation organisations. An essential component of this new approach can be a more active use of foreign educational programmes. This paper provides recommendations on the organisation of such a programme in Belarus.

[Foreign investment: only loans so far.](#) Trends in 2015 did were similar to previous years. Low demand for state-owned assets, as well as lack of flexibility and interest in speeding up the privatisation process remains the main factor of zero dynamics of sales of state assets. Foreign loans are the main source of investment and are used to refinance current debt and thus only increase the total volume of debt rather than lead to reform and increase of economic efficiency.

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.

2016 Ostrogorski Forum: Can Belarus be Neutral in the Shadow of Russia?

On 29 June the Ostrogorski Centre held the first Ostrogorski Forum on foreign policy and security in Minsk.

The theme of this year's conference was 'Inertia, strengthening neutrality or changing the foreign policy orientation? Foreign policy in Belarus at the present stage'.

The [programme](#) featured prominent Belarusian experts, both pro-government and independent, as well as government officials and academics from state universities. Researchers from leading Belarusian think tanks presented their papers and were critiqued by experts with opposing political orientations. The research papers were supported by the grant from the Mott Foundation and jointly implemented by the Pontis Foundation and the Ostrogorski Centre.

The Ostrogorski Forum is expected to become an annual event to promote professional and respectful dialogue between experts with different political views. This article provides a summary of the key themes of the Forum in English as well as full-length videos of the event in Belarusian.

Key messages of the 2016 Ostrogorski Forum

A number of speakers spoke of the need to **view Belarusian foreign policy in a less binary way**: more attention should be paid to the real interests of Belarus rather than the confrontation between Russia and the West. A more pragmatic and less ideological approach may help foster better relations with all of Belarus's neighbours and live up to the principle of neutrality enshrined in the Constitution of Belarus.

At the same time both pro-opposition and pro-government experts agreed that **Russia would not permit Belarus to cross certain red lines**, the most important of which being leaving Moscow-promoted integration initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union. An obvious geopolitical re-orientation could trigger a reaction from Russia resembling its actions in Ukraine.

The **ability of Belarus to resist a Donbas-like scenario** caused significant debate. Some argued that compared to Ukraine Belarus is less corrupt, and its military and state administration remain in much better shape. On the other hand, the weak national identity of Belarusians, the large number of Russian-born and educated senior military commanders, and the pervasiveness of Russian media make Belarus look weaker.

Most participants agreed that **the domination of Russian media in Belarus** represents one of the greatest challenges to Belarusian statehood. The popularity of Russian media is explained not only by generous funding but also by the fact that Russia has strongly articulated messages on its foreign policy, internal politics, and security. Belarus, on the other hand, has very few issues where it articulates its position; Belarusian media do not have their own message. This explains why many Belarusians supported the invasion of Crimea in 2014.

The participants also disagreed as to **whether Moscow might soon become more assertive in Belarus** given its deployment of troops close to the Belarusian border. Some argued that Russia is signalling its readiness to intervene in Belarus on short notice, while others thought that Belarus has done nothing to provoke Russia and Russia's interest are already protected in the country.

Some experts argued that Russian **integration projects in the former Soviet Union will die a natural death**. With the prices of oil and gas remaining low and a lack of modernisation and foreign investments in the region, integration projects become increasingly unattractive, which may explain why Russia increasingly resorts to the use of force or threats of force abroad.

The main threat to Belarusian statehood comes from **a lack of pluralism in Belarusian political institutions**. With no representatives of the opposition allowed in the parliament, courts, or executive, the statehood of Belarus is fragile. Allowing more pluralism in Belarus's political institutions would help Belarusian society reach a consensus on issues of critical importance for Belarusian statehood and independence. Allowing moderate representatives of the opposition into parliament would be a small step in this direction.

Ostrogorski introduction

Forum:

Speaker: [Yaraslau Kryvoi](#), Director of the Ostrogorski Centre,
Editor in Chief of Belarus Digest

—

Soft power of Belarus in the region: assessment of potential impact

Speaker: [Dzianis Melyantsou](#), senior analyst of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.

Opponent: [Aliaksandr Shpakouski](#), director of informational and educational institution "Current Concept".

Moderator: [Artyom Shraibman](#), political observer of TUT.by and associate analyst of the Ostrogorski Centre.

–

Russian-Belarusian relations after the conflict in Ukraine

Speaker: [Ryhor Astapenia](#), development director and analyst of the Ostrogorski Centre.

Opponent: **Uladzimir Snapkouski**, professor of the Faculty of International Relations, Belarusian State University.

Moderator: [Andrei Dynko](#), chief editor of Nasha Niva newspaper.

–

Challenges to Belarusian

foreign policy and CIS countries after 2008

Speaker: **Andrei Valodzkin**, researcher at the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

Opponents: [Arsen Sivitski](#), director of the Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies; **Aliaksandr Filipau**, Dean of the Faculty of additional education of the Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts and analyst at the Liberal Club.

Moderator: [Yaraslau Kryvoi](#), director of the Ostrogorski Centre.

–

Neutrality: ideal or reality

Speaker: [Siarhei Bohdan](#), a doctoral student of the Free University of Berlin and associate analyst of the Ostrogorski Centre.

Opponent: [Valer Karbalevich](#), expert of the analytical centre "Strategy".

Moderator: [Vital Tsyhankou](#), journalist of Radio Liberty.

–

Geopolitical orientation of

Belarusians: sociological analysis and survey

Speaker: [Andrei Eliseyeu](#), analytical journalist of the portal BEL.BIZ

Opponent: [Alena Artsiomenka](#), analyst of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.

Moderator: **Andrei Aliaksandrau**, chief editor of the online resource Belarusian Journal.

Normalisation of Relations with the EU, Oil Negotiations with Russia – Belarus State TV Digest

Housing remains among a top priorities for ordinary Belarusians, as Belarusian state television noted. This topic became unquestionably the number one issue over the last week. The issue of housing attracted lots of attention from the state media after Aliaksandr Lukashenka's public sharp criticism of the authorities and demand for firmer control over the construction business.

Is Minsk sending a positive message to Brussels? At a meeting with foreign diplomats, the head of state stressed several times his desire to normalise relations with the European Union.

Belarusian state television reported the current events unfolding in Kiev, but without a deeper analysis. In its coverage, journalists rather critically assessed the protesters and portray them as causing a mass disturbance.

International Affairs

[The Ukrainian \(dis\)order](#). The Ukrainian police tried to dismantle barriers raised in the centre of Kiev. Journalist commented that in the aftermath of a visit of European politicians to the so-called Euromaidan, the protesters felt as they feel they would not be punished. State TV mentioned data from the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs showing that the protesters from Kiev sprayed tear gas on the police and threw smoke bombs at them. So far 11 persons were detained due to their activity in the demonstration.

[Lukashenka: "We are ready to stabilise relations with the European Union"](#). Belarusian state television widely covered an official presentation of credentials awarded to ten new diplomats to Belarus. Lukashenka a few times stated that Minsk was ready to discuss potential projects with other countries. In his words, Belarus is pursuing a peaceful foreign policy and is refraining from starting or joining any conflicts. He also emphasised how significantly the country has contributed to global and regional security and stability.

One of the priorities in the nation's foreign policy is, in the words of the head of state, the development of good-neighbourly relations with the EU, political dialogue with the Latin America and co-operation with Asian, African and Middle Eastern countries.

Referring to the EU, Lukashenka said, "We cannot escape one another. It is predestination [he indicated the above] coming from God, to live together, as neighbours. [...] we will take any steps to normalise our relations".

Economy

[A new state budget – socially oriented](#). Recently the Belarusian Parliament adopted a new budget for 2014 already during its second reading. Journalists reported that it would be a socially oriented budget. Half of the budget will go to the social sphere. Of equal importance, the Belarusian authorities will not be holding back on salaries or pensions. Education and medicine remain on the list of priorities of the state and thus, spending in these areas will continue to increase.

[Belarus-Russia negotiations](#). State TV reported a recent meeting of the Belarusian Prime Minister, [Mikhail Miasnikovich](#), with Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow. Both sides discussed a number of issues, including an agreement on how much Russian oil will be supplied to Belarus. Minsk proposed 23 million tonnes in 2014 against Moscow's proposed 21 tonnes. Both parties, it is expected, will come to a compromise by the end of 2013.

State TV noted that Belarus remained number one for Russia in terms of its mutual trade turnover among the Commonwealth of Independent States. Interestingly, Minsk is higher than the former leader of the ranking, Ukraine, who now is in second place.

[The Astraviec nuclear power plant openly discussed in Vilnius](#). Belarusian journalists proudly covered a meeting which gathered prominent Lithuanian officials, scientists and environmentalists. All learned about the results of the recent monitoring of the impact of Astraviec plant construction on the environment. Reporters underscored the fact that the Belarusian side provided exhaustive answers to all questions raised by the Lithuanians. It proves that in terms of safety, the power plant meets all the necessary criteria. However, Minsk proposed to Vilnius to carry out its own monitoring and system of control over the construction project, because "Belarus has nothing to hide".

Domestic Affairs

["Republican" meeting with the head of state.](#) Belarusian television took note of the meeting chaired by Lukashenka with over 250 representatives of regional authorities from the whole country. Beginning 1 January a new era in the construction sector will begin, state TV optimistically commented. This comment was made in reference to new principles and legislation that will regulate the sector soon. Their goal is to make the construction business more transparent. One state TV journalist emphasised that Lukashenka will personally control the situation in the sector. Curiously, at the end of the report she asks, "Could it be any other way?"

Reporter mentioned that housing remains one of the most consistent spheres of interest for ordinary Belarusians. Thus the head of state decided to pay special attention to this issue. In Lukashenka's words, the local authorities should deal with the housing problems more efficiently, because they have all the tools to do so.

The new changes include the former state control over the construction organisations and companies, but also an adequate punishment for breaching the norms and law. A state tv reporter concluded that the economic input of the construction sector to the GDP of Belarus has remained around 10 per cent.

[Minsk is vitally interested in co-operation with Ecuador.](#) The head of state met with the Vice President of Ecuador, Jorge Glas Espinel. The station noted that this visit was a continuation of the strategy of rapprochement between Minsk and Quito, in many different areas, from agriculture to technology.

Lukashenka mentioned that the economies of both countries are quite complimentary. "You need what we have, we need what you have", he was convincing and declared they would start

conducting joint projects soon.

[Belaya Rus wants to exchange experience with the Tajikistani political party.](#) The civil society organisation “Belaya Rus” signed an agreement with the People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan. Both sides aim at tightening ties and exchange experience in spheres such as energy, agriculture, but also the economy and protection of human rights and freedoms. [Aliaksandr Radzkou](#), a leader of the Belaya Rus, stated that together they could address a number of issues on the level of the civil society organisations and also as political parties. Importantly, both countries share a common history, “We come from the same state”, he said.

The agreement with the Tajik political party is not the first form of co-operation the Belaya Rus with foreign political organisations. Journalist noted that in February the organisation signed an agreement with a Polish party, “Samoobrona of the Republic of Poland” (“Self-defence of the Republic of Poland”) and in March with a Latvian social-democratic party “Sogliasie” (“Agreement”).

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials available on the web site of Belarusian State Television 1 (BT1). 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.