

Academics Debating Belarus in Philadelphia: Between Facts and Fictions

The 47th Annual Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), held on 19 – 22 November 2015 in Philadelphia, offered new interpretations of the contemporary situation in Belarus.

Reflecting on the presidential campaign of 2015 and a lack of genuine interest from the West in its outcome, discussions highlighted the impact of the unstable international situation in the region on the political attitudes of the Belarusian society.

Belarusian Topics in Philadelphia

ASEEES conventions rank among the most significant international conferences in the field of Slavic studies. Spanning over four days and 14 sessions, with over 40 panels running simultaneously during each session, this year's Convention represented a global platform for the exchange of ideas, networking, and dissemination of the newest research trends.



In 2015 the Belarusian theme surfaced at the Convention in various contexts. For instance, the prestigious Kulczycki Book Prize in Polish Studies has been awarded to Per Rudling's book *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906 – 1931*, published by the University of Pittsburgh press in 2014.

However, only one panel at this year's ASEES was dedicated entirely to Belarus.

The 2015 theme of the Convention was “Fact,” encouraging the participants to focus on accuracy, objectivity, and high-quality research. The emphasis on the need to keep distance from the ideological considerations appeared to be especially relevant for discussions in the field of Belarusian studies, which revealed two trends: first, the field remains underrepresented at academic events of this scale, and second, it is not always free from the influence of subjective approaches.

“Understanding Belarus”

Organised by Grigory Ioffe, professor of geography at Radford University (US), the panel “Understanding Belarus” fell into the interdisciplinary category. The panelists included Ioffe himself, Stephen White of the University of Glasgow (UK), and Oleg Manaev, affiliated with the University of Tennessee and the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS, Belarus). The panel dealt with the analysis of the 2015 presidential electoral campaign and the impact of the Ukrainian crisis on regional and international politics.

Drawing on the Convention's overarching theme of “Fact,” the presentations of Stephen White and Oleg Manaev relied heavily on numerical data and results of sociological polls and surveys. Seeking explanations of the reasons for the political stability of the Belarusian regime, White turned to the social aspect and the unique scheme employed by the Belarusian government in order to maintain its positive image.

White's presentation relied on the recent sociological surveys of the Belarusian society, conducted by David Rotman at the Centre for Sociological and Political Studies of the Belarusian State University. Regrettably, the methodologies

and reliability of these sources have not been addressed in a sufficient manner. The current regime's reliance on "market socialism," a rejection of austerity measures, and keeping social differences in check, along with the maintenance of social justice principles emerged as preconditions of its longevity.

At the same time, White noted that according to the recent survey data, Belarusians were becoming less egalitarian, compared to other post-Communist states, thus suggesting that the government's scheme on continued reliance on the "social state model" might not hold as strong as previously, especially in the conditions of growing economic problems.



Oleg Manaev offered his interpretation of Lukashenka's dominance on the Belarusian political scene. His analysis of the recent electoral campaign was based on the independent opinion polls conducted by the IISEPS.

Manaev tried to answer the question of whether elections of 2015 represented a so-called "point of bifurcation," or in other words, whether the Belarusian regime has reached a critical point beyond which it could turn unstable. Expectedly, conclusions were negative.

Despite continuing decrease of incomes during 2015 and considerable levels of anxiety amongst the Belarusians about the future, the foundations of the Belarusian political regime remained stable. According to the poll data, the majority of people tended to blame external actors, such as Europe and Russia, rather than seeing the faults of the Belarusian regime.

Manaev demonstrated a more critical approach to the sociological surveys in Belarus, addressing a problem of the post-Soviet mentality of the Belarusian people, which

influenced their perceptions of opinion poll questions. For instance, about one half of respondents expressed confidence that elections would be free and fair, yet obviously their understanding of “free and fair” could not conform to the the commonly accepted standards in the democratic states.

Facts or Fictions?

Grigory Ioffe's contribution, entitled “Belarus and its East Slavic Neighbourhood” appeared to have been more controversial and problematic. Ioffe attempted to offer highlights of the Belarusian regime's achievements in 2015, to the detriment of a more critical analysis. Noting the influence of the Ukrainian crisis and growing instability in the region, he suggested that Belarus managed to extract all possible benefits from this situation and that it had overcome its international isolation.

Unfortunately, Ioffe's argumentation did not offer a lot in terms of the Convention's theme of “Fact.” For instance, the provocative assertion that Belarus apparently is “more culturally Russian than Russia itself,” only paraphrased the notorious [words of Lukashenka](#), failing to provide a proper historical justification for such claims.

Even more surprising was the argument for a successful ongoing Belarusian rapprochement with the West, solely based on the examples of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel's and French President Francois Hollande's visits in Minsk in February 2015. Yet Ioffe chose to omit the circumstances of the visits, since the only purpose of the latter were negotiations to settle the Ukrainian crisis, while Belarus merely served as a host to the talks.

Finally, the optimistic comment on the end of Belarusian isolation did not specify that asset freeze and travel bans have not been lifted, but only temporarily suspended as a

reaction to the release of political prisoners in August. That serves as an encouragement of further progress in the human rights situation and not as a recognition of the Belarusian regime. In this context, Ioffe's optimistic belief that "Western funding would be resumed" appeared to lack a proper argument, leaving the audience pondering over the question, whether "understanding Belarus" could be that straightforward.

Despite the obvious trends towards generalisations, the panelists agreed that the current political regime, and to a lesser degree the majority of the population, continue to think in terms of internal stability and reluctance to venture out of the existent status quo, especially given the changing geopolitical situation in 2015.

Next Convention of ASEES is scheduled to take place in Washington, DC in November 2016. It will be centred on the theme of "Global Conversations." Online submissions of proposals, including individual papers, panels, and roundtables are due by 15 February 2016.

Green Men, Western Assistance, 5 Years of Belarusian Web – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

EU foreign policy towards Belarus, who pays for journalism, the new martial law and Western assistance to Belarus are among the topics which kept Belarusian analysts busy

recently.

Foreign Policy

Rethinking the EU Policies

Towards Belarus – Andrei Liakhovich, the Director of the Centre for Political Education in Minsk, believes that relations with Belarus are not a pressing issue of EU foreign policy. While the EU has leverage over Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime, it does not use it, as it fears pushing Belarus more towards Russia. Such fears are groundless. Lukashenka's regime will not cross the dangerous line of integration with Russia under any circumstances.

Belarus's Rising International Standing and Its

Implications – Grigory Ioffe believes that renewed high-level negotiations on the war in Ukraine, with an agreement signed in Minsk, on February 12, further raise the stature of Belarus in the eyes of the international community. In particular, the Belarusian president has sought to maintain close ties with both Russia and Ukraine while steadfastly appealing to Western leaders to abandon their increasingly contradictory policy of sanctions toward Belarus.

Russian Ruble's Hapless Little Brother

– The worst-performing currency in the world so far this year is called the ruble, but it's not Russian. It's the legal tender of Belarus, a country increasingly uncomfortable with its too-close alliance with Russia. The small nation's latest bout of economic difficulties shows Russian President's vision of a Eurasian Economic Union – a partial recreation of the Soviet Union as a tight, European Union-like economic alliance with Russia at its center – makes little sense for its members, according to the Bloomberg View.

Media Sphere

Andrei Aliaksandrau: Every Internet User Can Fund Journalism –

State media in Belarus are funded from the state budget, while independent media are supported from abroad. It appears that Belarusian society basically doesn't pay for the domestic journalism. 'Who is going to pay for high-quality journalism?' was the topic of the open lecture by Andrei Aliaksandrau, Belarusian journalist, that took place in December. The meeting happened within the frames of the 'Main question' cycle.

[Five Years of Belarusian Web](#) – Mikhail Darashevich, manager of Gemius in Belarus, analyzes figures of Internet development in Belarus for the last five years. Namely, from December 2009 to December 2014, the Belarus online audience has risen by 65.5% or from 3.023 million to 5.004 people. The retired people group has risen from 1.28% to 5.56%; however, this is extremely little as compared to the whole Belarusian society. The number of daily users has grown from 72.70% to 82.73% of the whole Internet audience.

[Environment in the Media Mirror](#) – the Center for European Transformation presents the results of research on covering environmental issues and activities of environmental organisations by Belarusian media. One of the recommendations of the study is the necessity for CSOs to establish their own news services, press secretaries, PR-manager, responsible for communication with the media. The lack of professionalism of CSOs (and the "greens" in particular) when dealing with the media was marked by almost all respondents from among journalists. The study was carried out on the initiative of the Green Alliance.

Human Rights and Security

[Monitoring of the Situation with Human Rights in Belarus: October-December 2014](#)– A group of Belarusian CSOs has released a regular monitoring aimed at highlighting short-term tendencies in the spheres of human rights, social, political and economic situation in Belarus. Namely, during 2014, 84

public associations, 12 funds and 40 private institutions were registered. Compared with 2013, the number of newly registered CSOs remains at the 2013 level but it is significantly lower than in 2010-2012, when over a hundred new public associations were registered annually.

[Martial Law. In Search of Green Men](#) – Dzianis Melyantsou, BISS, explains a new law 'On Martial Law', which became the subject of public discussions. Some media and experts consider the law as a trail of Ukrainian events and the desire of the Belarusian authorities to take into account this experience to prevent Russian aggression. Melyantsou argues that the new law is more adapted to the allied commitments of Belarus in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), rather than anticipate a conflict with Russia.

Other

[Ten Facts about Western Assistance to Belarus](#) – Hanna Sous', Radio Svaboda journalist, conducted an [investigation](#) on the foreign aid for Belarus. In particular, the Belarusian state is a major recipient of western aid; only 12-20% of the total amount directed to the development of civil society. The European Union is the largest donor; the EU institutions spend on the development of democracy in Belarus 13% of the total aid, while U.S. – 71%.

[Ioffe presents new book on Belarus.](#) Grigory Ioffe, professor at Redford University (Virginia, United States) [presented his second book about Belarus entitled Reassessing Lukashenka](#) at the National Library on Belarus. The work is based on a number of personal interviews with the Belarusian head of state. The supplement makes up a quarter of the book. Reading transcripts of the interviews one can make his/her own opinion of the Belarusian leader. According to the writer, the book is aimed at challenging the clichés in respect to Belarus and its leader.

Dates of the Fifth International Congress of Belarusian Studies are announced. The largest Belarusian academic event will be held on 2-4 October 2014. The Congress will gather around 400 scholars and experts from Belarus and abroad. Traditionally, the Congress will include discussions, presentations, and the ceremony of Award for the Best Academic Publication in 2013-2014. Proposals for organisation of Congress panels and sections can be submitted till 12 March.

From 2014 into 2015: an Attempt to Avoid the Regional Crisis via Administrative Measures – Belarus in Focus' Information Office presents the Belarus in Focus Annual Review 2014. The review covers the political and economic situation in Belarus in 2014, as well as forecasts for the coming year. Namely, the experts note that Belarus is entering 2015 with a major currency crisis and a significant turnover in government members.

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.