

Strengthening Border with Ukraine, Chinese Paratroopers – Belarus Security Digest

The situation in Ukraine continues to be a major concern for the Belarusian authorities, while the prospects of Russia's air base is still uncertain as Minsk maintains its low-profile cooperation with NATO.

Belarus is set to receive additional second-hand Russian S-300 missile systems but is unlikely to be the recipient of more modern systems anytime in the foreseeable future. In addition to the S-300s, Belarus is set to receive some additional transport helicopters from Russia.

Belarus revealed that it is cooperating with China to design a multiple rocket launcher system and Belarusian special operations forces held a third set of military exercises with their Chinese colleagues.

Increased Border Security with Ukraine

The authorities in Minsk are taking seriously the potential risk of the situation further destabilising in neighbouring Ukraine. In June, the Belarusian Army and Border Guard Committee spent several weeks testing a system of strengthening border control with Ukraine and the territorial defence system located in the Homel Province. The Belarusian Security Council emphasised that this exercise was routine, pointing to the fact that there was a similar exercise in 2014. The Chief Commander of the Special Operations Forces Vadzim Dzyanisenka also noted that the training they carried out had been planned long beforehand.

Belarus formed an additional border guard unit to guard its border with Ukraine

The Security Council, however, conceded that Belarus had taken additional measures to guard its side of the Ukrainian border and formed an additional Mozyr Border Guard Unit last year. In addition, the scenario for the most training session included a battle with an armed band that invaded Belarus with the support of some local residents who underwent military training in a neighbouring country. This all suggest that Minsk had potential developments in Ukraine in mind when they drew up plans for the exercise.

On 19 June, the Chairman of Belarusian Customs Committee Yury Syanko expressed his concerns about attempts to bring weapons and ammunition into the country from Ukraine. This only four days after Alyaksandr Lukashenka discussed with Defence Minister Andrei Raukou measures for ensuring an “adequate response to developments on the southern [Ukrainian] border.”

How Can Belarus Upgrade its Weaponry?

Lukashenka and Raukou also raised questions about how to go about modernising Belarus's armed forces. Lukashenka stated that the army is already undergoing a third wave of adapting to new challenges through modernising it – the previous wave of 'adapting' apparently was apparently the result of the Arab Spring in 2011. Raukou also took time during the public discussion to discuss the testing of new rocket systems and other arms.

The following day, on 16 June, the Chairman of Military Technical Committee Siarhei Hurulyou reported to Lukashenka on the positive results of a Belarusian multiple launcher rocket system in China. Lukashenka critically remarked that, “Our ally, Russia, is as active in supporting our aspirations [as China is].” The new system is believed to be being designed together with the Chinese and contains elements of the Chinese

Norinco AR3 multiple launcher rocket system.

Russia remains, of course, the main source of military equipment and related services for the Belarusian armed forces. On 17 June, the Belarusian Defence Ministry signed a contract with Russian *Vertolyoty Rossii* for 12 military transport helicopter Mi-8MTV-5. Belarus will get them in 2016-2017 and the helicopters will have the exact same specifications as those provided to Russia's armed forces.

In July, one of the world's largest defence holdings, Russian *KRET*, started overhauling and modernising Belarus' land-based electronic countermeasures stations. Four stations revamped and updated by 2017. Back in June, Belarusian defence firm *Agat-Sistemy Upravleniya* founded a joint venture with the Russian firm *NPO Kvant*, which is a subsidiary of *KRET*. The new joint venture *REB-Technology* will modernise Belarusian and Russian armies' radio-electronic equipment.

Raukou also announced that Belarus would receive four batteries of the S-300 surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems from Russia this year. These systems were previously deployed by Russian army who is now upgrading to the next generation of SAM systems, the S-400. Moscow and Minsk are in talks about Belarus potentially getting some S-400s as well, though at the moment it is unclear if it will.

According to Raukou, in 2014-2015 Belarus signed "some 50 contracts [with Russia] for the supply, repair and modernization of anti-aircraft missile systems, communications, electronic warfare technology, small arms and artillery weapons, ammunition, aviation equipment for the needs of the Belarusian army", on very favourable terms. He said that a majority of the contracts have been fulfilled.

Russian Airbase Still on Hold

On 17 June Defence Minister Raukou told the TASS news agency that Minsk believed the deployment of additional NATO forces and heavy weapons close to Belarus' borders created additional potential risks for Belarus. A day earlier, Lithuanian Defence Minister Juozas Olekas confirmed that the US was planning to store heavy weapons for up to 5,000 US troops in the Baltic countries and Poland.

In the same interview, Raukou said that the issue of Russia's airbase in Belarus was on hold until a clear political decision could be made. This statement undermined previous public announcements by Russian officials to the effect that a Russian base would be established in Babruysk in 2016. Minsk has never been interested in having this airbase open up and least of all now when it could be used to provoke NATO and Ukraine. As a result of these heightened regional tensions, it is unlikely that a Russian airbase will be opened in Belarus anytime in the near future.

In July, Belarusian delegation chaired by the head of the Belarus' General Staff Major General Aleh Belakoneu visited the regions where this year's joint military exercises with Russia will be conducted. The "Shchyt Sayuza" is held every other year, and this time around will take place from the 10-16 September in Russia.

From NATO to Qatar

Minsk continues with its drive to diversify its international contacts in the military arena. On 31 May – 5 June NATO experts conducted a seminar in Belarus for men of the peacekeeping company of the Belarusian 103rd Mobile Brigade of Special Operations. In June, Raukou said, "The interaction of our country with NATO has a practical orientation and corresponds with our national interests, though does not

affect our alliance with Russia."

On 16 June, Defence Minister Raikou met the Secretary General of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Lamberto Zannier in Minsk. They discussed military and political issues and signed a Memorandum of Understanding on a joint project concerning the utilisation of liquid rocket fuel.

Besides trying to develop its ties with Western countries, the authorities are working hard to improve relations with China. From 15-27 June, Chinese paratroopers participated in a joint anti-terror training exercise with a company of the Belarusian 38th Mobile Brigade of Special Operations on a site close to Brest. This was the third such Belarus-Chinese training exercise conducted since 2011. On 14-17 July, a Chinese delegation, headed by the deputy head of the Propaganda Unit of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army, Major-General Zhang Chanin, visited Belarus.

Some military interaction occurred also with India and Qatar. In June, India gave Belarus 25 of its newest mine detectors, the Minelab X-Terra. Last year, India also gifted Belarus 60 radio sets and 30 GPS-navigation systems. On 2-5 July, Minister of State for Defence Affairs of Qatar, Hamad bin Ali Al Attiyah visited Belarus and met with President Lukashenka. Belarus has been cooperating with Qatar on security matters for years now, cooperation which has included Belarusian forces providing specialised military training to Qataris.

Why Belarus Struggles to Stop Subsidising Its Enterprises

This month, the Belarusian Ministry of Finance will issue bonds for \$425.8 million to bail out Gomselmash (abbreviation for Homiel Rural Machine Building), the most important industrial holding company of the second largest city in the country. The large cost of issue reflects the size of Gomselmash's problems.

The holding fails to sell its products, is reluctant to lay off people and cannot pay salaries to its employees. Many other Belarusian enterprises face similar problems. The state recently limited assistance to state-owned enterprises, which still dominate the Belarusian economy but has no choice but to provide even more help.

The Main Problem of Homiel

In May, Prime Minister of Belarus [Andrej Kabiakou](#) stated that the authorities should assist Gomelselmash because it remains a Belarusian national brand. In fact, the factory has a long history: it emerged in the late 1920s, during the Second World War it was evacuated, but was still producing mines. After the war it became one of the five largest manufacturers of agricultural machinery in the world.

Today Gomselmash is one of the main companies of the [Homiel region](#). It has around twenty thousand employees and offices not only in the post-Soviet region, but also in China and Argentina.

Now the plant is going through its worst times. Sales fell several times, and the plant shortened its employees working week to four or three days in winter, spring and summer. The

reduction in sales was primarily a result of the economic crisis in Russia and high prices. Salaries in the company fell by 3-4 times. Moreover, the number of staff members decreased by 10% in one year only

Holding Companies	The number of employees in 2014	The number of employees in 2015
OJSC "Gomselmash"	9492	8203
OJSC "Gomel Plant of Foundry and Fasteners"	4755	3810
OJSC "Research and Development Centre of Combine Harvester Engineering"	683	600
OJSC "Svetlogorsk Machine-Building Plant"	251	251
OJSC "Gomel Factory of Special Instruments and Technological Equipment"	no data available	no data available
OJSC "SP-Build"	no data available	no data available

Data: Ministry of Finance

The enterprise appeared at second place among the most unprofitable enterprises in Belarus in the first quarter of 2015. The newest data remains unavailable, but introduction of the bailout program means that the second-quarter results can bring no difference.

Gomselmash is no longer able to service its loans or cover the costs of electricity and gas necessary for production. Gomselmash cannot even issue its own bonds, so the Ministry of Finance would have to do it instead. Minsk Tractor Plant, who will also get help this month.

Unstoppable Belarus

Belarusian authorities believe that Gomselmash remains too big to let it fall. Belarus, however, no longer has the money for direct state subsidies, as the amount of [exchange reserves](#) does not allow to keep printing money. Therefore, the authorities came up with the idea of issuing bonds for \$425.8 mln that will be acquired by four banks.

Without this state aid Gomselmash would be unable to pay its debts and that would lead to serious problems in the banking sector

According to [Aliaksandr Chubrik](#), Director at IPM Research Center, "this measure does not contradict to stabilization efforts of the authorities and is in line with their general approach: not to allow further aggravation of problems in financial sector". Without this state aid, he told Belarus Digest, Gomselmash would be unable to pay its debts and that would lead to serious problems in the banking sector. Therefore, Belarus subsidises state companies to keep them afloat, even though these same enterprises led the economy to the current state in the first place.

The International Monetary Fund, that is currently negotiating a new program with the Belarusian authorities, could as well, according to Chubrik, understand the reasons behind the help to Gomselmash. Moreover, the Belarusian authorities never promised to stop enterprise bailouts and start economic reforms. And possible donors, like the IMF, know that things cannot change for the moment.

Keeping the Status Quo

Given the state of Gomselmash, it makes sense that the Belarusian authorities decided to help the holding. However, these tactics will probably not save it, but rather increase

its debt and worsen the economic situation of the whole country.

Today, Gomselmash's problems are associated with low levels of innovation, but the money it will receive will not go to research and development. The law signed by [Lukashenka](#) does not provide extra subsidies for Research and Development of the Centre of Combine Harvester Engineering, Gomselmash's R&D subsidiary. The poor quality of machinery does not appear to bother the authorities at all.

Most major enterprises in Belarus belong to the state and, according to the Ministry of Finance, a quarter are not profitable

According to Chubrik, the money will go to pay off previous debts and to ensure the basic functioning of Gomselmash. However, it remains unknown whether the holding will be able to upgrade its production or repay its debts. It also seems that this is not the last check picked up by the government for the company.

The bailout of Gomselmash would not be a topic for discussion if it did not open the gate for other enterprises to seek government money. Most major enterprises in Belarus belong to the state and, according to the Ministry of Finance, a quarter are not profitable. They certainly would like to have some financial help from the state.

According to a report released this month by the Ministry of Statistics production in machine building fell by 20%, while in rural machine building, as in case of Gomselmash, it fell even further.

The situation clearly shows the dilemma that Belarus faces: if it wants to keep the economy afloat, it has to continue to subsidise its enterprises. Other options, like privatising or discussing how to restructure dysfunctional enterprises with

the IMF's help, remain on the table, but the authorities remain reluctant to choose them.

Dranikfest, Superheroes in Minsk, Human Rights – Belarus Civil Society Digest

European Perspective launches a map of public hearings in 2015 to strengthen the participation of Belarusians in public affairs. Perspektiva holds an Entrepreneurs Forum.

Astravets becomes the 9th city reached by Mova Nanova language courses. Creative community from Brest launches regular sarcastic videos about everyday life of Belarusians.

Campaigns in Minsk

[Superheroes take the Minsk streets](#). Last year, the Centre for Cultural Management with [TUT.BY](#) support launched the project '[Superheroes School/ Creative City](#)'. The team of 42 volunteers is engaged in the development and implementation of urban socio-cultural projects with the involvement of the city administration, local communities and businesses. Currently 'superheroes' conduct field research in the Minsk areas. In February, the School organises [public lectures](#) on the development of urban communities.

[European Perspective initiative is launching a new map of public hearings in 2015](#). The map monitors the upcoming public hearings in all nine districts of Minsk and contains basic information on the place, date, organiser of public debate and other useful information. Thus, the European Perspective aims

to making urban development issues closer to the population and strengthen the participation of citizens in public affairs.

[New web project about Minsk city launched](#). [How to Live Here/Kaktutzhit](#) is a new web resource about Minsk. The project positions itself as a "site for people who want to spend in Minsk decent and interesting life." The project will focus on topics such as people, food, entertainment, clothes and, of course, city news.

[CSO female activists created the board game 'Stereotypes'](#). The game consists of 34 cards, which depict certain gender stereotypes. During the game the stereotypes need to be refuted by 170 facts. During the game, participants receive a variety of emotions, argue, and try to defend their point of view. The creators of the game are sure that board game can be considered as an alternative to traditional seminars and training in receiving information on gender equality.

[Internet platform Talaka.by launches a new service #TalakaNaviny](#). The service allows anyone to share the news about social projects, urban practices, events or activities beneficial to communities. The news should not affect politics or religion. After posting the news become available to more than 6.5 thousand subscribers in Talaka.by groups.

[Forum of Entrepreneurs 'Goals and objectives for small business in Belarus'](#) is to take place in Minsk, on 16 February. The organiser, *Perspectiva* NGO invites entrepreneurs and authorities to take an active part in discussing pressing issues. Organisers warn that the Forum has only an economic format and aims to unite sensible entrepreneurs under the *Perspectiva's* auspices.

Regional Campaigns

[Professional contest Brand of the Year rewards best Belarusian companies](#). The gold medal in the category 'Inclusive projects

and business models' went to Talaka.by project, a non-profit platform, which helps active people in Belarus to implement projects for their communities. Grand Prix in the category 'Social Responsible Business' was received by Game Stream company, a developer of the popular game World of Tanks.

[Green Alliance is to conduct a presentation of the Green Steps multimedia toolkit in Gomel](#), on 12 February. The Green Steps multimedia toolkit for Belarus has been developed to raise public awareness about sustainable lifestyles and the changes that individuals can make in their everyday lives. Its primary target groups are members of CSOs. [Green Steps](#) was developed by the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) in close cooperation with a number of Belarusian CSOs.

[Dranik-fest recognised an event of the year in Mogilev region](#). Mogilev initiative 'Public Magistrate' announced the person and the event of 2014 year. According to the results of the voting of journalists, social network users and the 'Public Magistrate' Council, the event of the year in Mogilev oblast was recognised as the October Festival of traditional Belarusian food 'Dranik-fest' that attracted over 4 thousand visitors. The person of the year became Yuri Stukalov, a leader of the Mogilev Center for Urban Initiatives, one of the organisers of Dranik-fest.

[Mova Nanova launches in Astravets](#). The first classes on February 4 gathered 35 residents of Astravets and the surrounding villages. Classes will be held once a week in the premises of the new school, which opened earlier this year. Astravets became the 9th city, where free courses of the Belarusian language Mova Nanova/*Language in a New Way* takes place with outreach of about 1,000 students across the country.

[Creative Brest residents launch comic video series](#). The first movie tells about a trip in a marshrutka/ municipal transport,

minibus. The video shooting took one day; the budget was \$100. Funny videos are to be issued every three weeks. An idea is borrowed from the French television series 'bref'.

Education

[Search for yourself and your profession using Adukacyja.info.](#)

Adukacyja.info team invites young people to participate in the project *Your Destiny*, designed to help youth in search of work and their own career path. The project consists of training modules, meetings and individual consultations. Entry fee to the program is 200,000 rubles (about \$12).

[Platform for children and their parents launches.](#) The platform 'Taranciny and Sons' identifies itself as the first independent educational project for children, pupils at the individual school plan (homeschooling) and their parents. The project goal is to study a new level of secondary education, the introduction of non-Soviet methods in teaching as well as the possibility for parents to obtain new knowledge in the field of education.

Interaction between state and civil society

[Trial cancelled after Lukashenka's press conference.](#) On 2 February the Supreme Court informed that there would be no court hearings into cases of four activists who had staged an action of solidarity Je Suis Charlie near the French Embassy in Minsk. A new development occurred on 29 January when at his press-conference Alexander Lukashenka declared that police shouldn't have arrested people supporting Charlie Hebdo.

[Human rights situation in 2014: Trends and evaluation](#) –

According to the Human Rights Centre *Viasna's* report, the situation of human rights during 2014 remained consistently poor with a tendency to deterioration at the end of the year. Basic civil and political rights were extremely restricted; there were no systemic changes in the field of human rights (at the legislative level and/or at the level of practices).

The only positive development during the year was the early release of Ales Bialiacki, Chairman of the Human Rights Centre *Viasna*.

[Belarusian human rights activists allowed to inspect eight colonies](#). From October 2014 to early February 2015, human rights defenders of the Platforma Innovation visited eight Belarusian colonies and detention centers, correctional facilities of the open type, etc. Platform Innovation director, Alena Krasouskaya-Kaspiarovich, says that the main trend in these colonies is positive. Everywhere new buildings are constructed, conditions gradually improve, although there are also problems.

[Human Rights Centre *Viasna* held a rally of solidarity with the arrested activists of the anarchist movement](#) on 5 February. Recently, six activists of anarchist movement were detained and sentenced to administrative arrest from 10 to 25 days. *Viasna* considers the arrests as a classic example of arbitrary detention.

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.

Half of Belarusians Earn Less than \$500 a Month – Belarus

Civil Society Digest

Why is a controversial ex-mayor of Kaunas considering Belarus seeking political asylum? The Centre of Legal Transformation appeals for a public hearing on the legislative project “On Alternative Military Service”.

The National Statistical Committee of Belarus (Belstat) has recently revealed that half of Belarusians earn less than US\$500 a month. For the first time Hrodna Medical University is offering its students to study in Belarusian. How many students will decide to use this opportunity? “Levada Centre” checks out how the attitudes of Russians towards Belarus have changed over the past years. It shows that 88% of Russians have a positive attitude towards Belarusians – the highest rating in 10 years.

[Ex-mayor of Kaunas is seeking asylum in Belarus](#): According to Lithuanian media, after being detained by the police on July 27 for disorderly conduct during a sex-minority parade in Vilnius, Vitautas Shustauksas is looking at ways to find asylum in Belarus to avoid being persecuted by the police “for minor misconduct”.

[Lawtrend addresses the Government of Belarus to hold a public hearing on the “Alternative military service” bill](#): The Centre of Legal Transformation has appealed to the chairman of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus Vladimir Andreychenko, as well as to the heads of the parliamentary committees with the requirement to “declassify” the legislative project “On Alternative Service”, which is to be introduced to the Parliament in October. According to Lawtrend, the bill is classified as “for internal use only”, which means it may not be discussed with any other interested parties.

[15 European Parliamentary deputies are demanding from Minsk to](#)

release political prisoners: Fifteen deputies from the European Parliament, Germany and Switzerland have addressed a collective request to GOB regarding the human rights situation in Belarus with a demand to “immediately and unconditionally release and rehabilitate all political prisoners, as well as to impose a moratorium on the death penalty in Belarus”.

Capacity Building Marketplace announces the second NGO Capacity Building Fair: The Fair is to take place on 1 November 2013 in Minsk. The event is aimed to represent the Belarusian market of organisational development services, as well as gather CSO’s from all regions of Belarus in one place. The deadline for the submission of applications from consultants is August 12, 2013.

Antimak on light drug abuse among youth: Aleksandr Shpakouski from the AntiMak campaign, along with other actors in the field, gave an interview to SB.by on the issues of “light” drug abuse among youth in Belarus. The experts discussed the level of popularity of smoking mixtures among students, the easiness of legalization of light drugs, the dealers’ business models, the values of youth today and measures to be taken to prevent and fight drug abuse in Belarus.

Gomel Democratic Forum has been officially been registered: The regional development centre “Gomel Democracy Forum” has obtained official state registration on August 1, 2013. The goals of the new organisation includes providing non-commercial informational and consulting services, support for citizens in the spheres of education, business, culture, civic activity, as well as the facilitation of economic and socio-cultural development of Belarusian regions.

“Green Schools” program has been included into extracurricular activities for Belarusian students: The program has been approved by the Ministries of Education and Natural Resources of Belarus as part of the Republican eco-educational project within the framework of a larger UN cooperation program. The

program is aimed at filling the gaps in children's knowledge about the nature and ecological problems of Belarus, as well as encouraging the proactive position of children, their parents and teachers in solving them.

Some Interesting Statistics

[Hrodna Medical University offered its students the chance to study in Belarusian.](#) So far, only 6 out of 440 first-year students have agreed to study in their native language. According to the university, whether there will be a Belarusian-language group or not, will only be known by the end of August. But as of now, most of the students and their parents have not taken up the proposal to study in Belarusian.

[Public opinion survey: Russians' attitudes towards Belarus have improved:](#) Russian independent research organisation "Levada Centre" has surveyed Russians on the subject of their attitudes towards different countries of the world. According to the survey results, 88% of Russians maintain a positive attitude towards Belarus (which is the highest rating it is had since 2003, when it was at 90%) against 7% who think of Belarus negatively. The "champion" of negative attitude of "the Northern neighbors" is the USA – 36% (as opposed to 43% positive), while the European Union is perceived negatively by 24% of Russians (against 64% of positive attitudes). The news gained nearly 2,000 comments on TUT.by.

[Most Belarusians are satisfied with the quality of their healthcare services.](#) The media has reported that Belstat published survey results, which suggest that 62.4% of Belarusians are more or less satisfied with the public healthcare services, while 88% are more or less satisfied with private healthcare. [Last year](#), 77.8% of Belarusians were satisfied with public healthcare. According to Belstat's findings, the number of dissatisfied citizens is close to the statistical error – 2.6%. Notably, private medicine is favoured more by lower-income citizens.

[Belstat: half of Belarusians earn less than \\$500: Official data](#) published by Belarus Statistics Committee reveals that 48% of Belarusians earn less than country's average salary of \$500. Notably, half of those who earn over \$500 monthly, live in Minsk.

[Where do Belarusian immigrants wend their way in Russia?](#) Internet-newspaper "Zautra.by" has analysed Russian Federal "Demographic yearbook 2012" and found out the most popular destinations for Belarusian immigrants in Russia. The largest increase in immigrants from Belarus was registered in the Smolensk and Tyumen regions. Moscow and St. Petersburg are in the top 5.

[The Institute of the Ministry of Economics suggests switching from directive planning to indicative targeting for government-owned enterprises.](#) This idea has been voiced by the vice-director of the Ministry of Economics Research Studies Institute Viktor Pinigin. According to Mr. Pinigin, the weak side of directive planning is its "lack of real economic mechanisms for stimulating enterprises to meet the directive targets". The Ministry representatives believe that indicative planning will provide for better performance of the manufacturers, since it will determine their income. In the meantime, economists note that this is not the first attempt to switch to indicative economic planning – the first attempt to adopt relevant draft law was failed in 2011.

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The Chernobyl Way 2013

On 26 April 2013 Belarusian authorities and the opposition marked the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster: each in its own way. Alexander Lukashenka went on a trip to the polluted areas as did opposition leaders Anatol Liabedzka and Vital Rymasheuski.

The Belarusian opposition also gathered around one thousand of its supporters in Minsk under antinuclear energy slogans, protesting against the new nuclear station erected close to the border with Lithuania. Since 1989 it is a tradition for many Belarusians to commemorate the event in the form of street manifestation on the 26 of April called the Chernobyl Way (Čarnobyłski šliach in Belarusian).

Lukashenka's visit resulted in an extensive coverage in all state media while the opposition event was covered by independent media, including detentions by plain clothed individuals which followed the opposition event.

What Is the Chernobyl Way?

The number of participants this year seems low compared to many previous rallies. Today it is hard to believe but in 1996 over 30 thousand Belarusians manifested in the Chernobyl Way. In 1996, the police forces brutally intervened in the rally and dispersed it arresting dozens of people.

The Chernobyl Way is no longer associated solely with the events that took place in 1986. Nowadays it has a much wider meaning. Political slogans always intertwine with the economic and social ones. For others the rally on 26 April is the only opportunity to express their disapproval for the erection of a nuclear power plant in Belarus.

Participants usually carry the white-red-white flags of

the pre-Lukashenka Belarus and banners mocking the president or raising up the current political issues. Almost all the previous rallies ended up with the police intervention and detention of a number of activists.

The organisers and participants learned their lessons how to deal with the city authorities to obtain permission. In 2011, after presidential election protests aftermath which a few oppositional leaders remained in prison, the Chernobyl Way took a form of a gathering only, without a procession. This year it was a rally from the centre of Minsk to a designated location equipped with loudspeakers.

Video: The Chernobyl Way-2013 opposition demonstration.

It seems that Minsk are prepared to tolerates this already traditional Chernobyl Way. Each year the organisers receive the required permission for a public gathering. The state, however, wishes to maintain a monopoly over the marking the anniversary. With the full support and loyalty from the state media, it is much easier to achieve it.

'Invisible Catastrophe'

Belarusian authorities refrain from initiating public discussion of the Chernobyl disaster consequences. The Chernobyl disaster still remains an 'invisible catastrophe' in Belarus with little information or discussion in the official public space.

The state media serves its role here. For example, the state TV channel reported only on the official memorable events that took place in Belarus. The journalists presented Lukashenka's visit to Homel and the official event in Minsk. The reporters did not mention a word about the Chernobyl Was as it did not take place at all.

Aleksandr Lukashenka marked the anniversary in his own way.

Traditionally, he decided to appear 'closer' to the ordinary people and visited the Khoininskii district in the Homel area. In accordance with the established tradition, Lukashenka met with the local people, publicly criticised officials and praised achievements of the state in the region. He also demanded production of only 'clean' products in the contaminated area. These 'spontaneous' meetings with people and officials are subsequently covered in detail on state TV channels.

Video: Belarusian State TV covers Lukashenka's visit to the contaminated area.

Chernobyl through the Prism of Belarusian Politics

The truth about the consequences of the radioactive explosion remained a top secret in the Soviet times. With the years and Lukashenka coming in power, the commemoration of the event became difficult, but possible.

During the Friday rally many people protested against the [construction of a nuclear plant](#) in the city of Astravets close to the Lithuanian and Polish border. It makes sense that people express their protest in the streets because the Belarusian authorities initiate no public debate on this issue. The Chernobyl Way remains a rare opportunities to express their 'no' to the state's plans.

Aleksandr Lukashenka clearly dislikes the idea of the Chernobyl Way and mocked it in public at some occasions. For example, in 2011 he said 'they want with this fascist-minded rally walk on the street, demonstrate. Go to demonstrate to the zone'. However, every year Belarusian authorities give permission the organisers to the opposition rally in the centre of Minsk.

But as most other opposition events yesterday the Chernobyl Way ended with detentions, mostly made by people in

plain clothes. Several people were released while others, including journalists were charged with disobeying police and are now awaiting their trials.

Paula Borowska

Socially Oriented Mobile Applications – Digest of Belarusian Civil Society

Belarusian civil society and NGOs engaged in a whole plethora of activities – from developing socially-oriented mobile phone applications to preparing books on organic farming.

[Socially oriented mobile applications](#): Mobile company Velcom under its contest of applications for Android gave the first two places to socially oriented projects. First place went to the application [GreenMap Belarus](#), which allows finding on the map places of collection of different species recycling. Second place went to the [mobile application in Belarusian](#), which allows identifying a user's location next to the object of historical architecture. The authors got respectively \$5,000 and \$4,000 awards.

Culture

[Interactive map of Kalinouski's rebellion](#): To the 150th anniversary of the rebellion led by Kastus Kalinouski, the initiative Belarusian national memory composed a map with illustrations and texts of Belarusian areas related to the rebellion, its leader and participants. The map is made using the service maps.google.com; it allows not only viewing information but also to complement and refine it.

[Budzma! events in regions](#): On January 18, in Gomel, Budzma! campaign conducted a talk show *Cultural climate in Gomel: Cold or Hot?* attended by 35-40 Gomel residents affiliated with cultural topic. The event was the last in a series of the similar events titled *Culture Improves Life!* held in all regional cities. On January 25, in Mogilev, Budzma! organizes [the Fair of projects](#) to find promising ideas for Mogilev as the cultural capital of Belarus and the CIS in 2013.

[Alternative brand concepts of Minsk](#): Belarusian designer Alexei Latinnik offered two brand concepts of Minsk and their visual solutions. To remind, at the end of 2012 [the official logo of Minsk](#) developed by Instid, received mixed public feedback and made many designers to think about creating an alternative brand of Minsk.

[Cultural lectures in Homel](#): Since February, **Homel** activists launch a series of cultural lectures on the local wooden architecture. Meetings are a part of the campaign to preserve **Homel** historical heritage and will take place at the **Vetka** Museum of Folk Art. The first out of six meetings is to be held on February 2; entry is 2,500 rubles (about \$0.3).

[Fair of Projects in Mahileu](#): On January 25, Fair of Projects was held in Mahileu. Initiated by the campaign Budzma! and supported by the Mogilev city executive committee, the event was to find interesting cultural ideas to enrich Mogilev as the Cultural Capital of CIS countries and Belarus in 2013. For the first time in the history of Belarus project ideas' discussion happened in the format of public debate.

Workshops and Conferences

[Study visits to Tallinn](#): E-Governance Academy and Pact, Inc start a new series of study visits for Belarusian activists to get to know with information communication technologies for civil society development. The first visit is to take place on February 24 – March 2, in Tallinn.

[BOSS teaches leadership](#): Brotherhood of Organizations of Student Self-Government (BOSS) conducts a series of trainings and workshops under the project *Golden Lessons of Leadership*. The closest session *Negotiations* is to be held on January 27; the cost of participation is 30 thousand rubles (about 3.5 USD).

[Training course on Mediation](#): Center for Effective

Communication Feedback in cooperation with Education Center POST invites to participate in the training course *Mediation as a method of effective conflict resolution*. The training course will be implemented in January-October 2013, and includes 10 thematic modules. The first workshop will be held on February 22-24, 2013; participation is for charge.

[Gender likbez](#): A brochure on the informal gender education *Gender Likbez* was published in Vilnius. The brochure is the outcome of the project *Development of gender sensitivity as a prerequisite for gender equality in Belarus*, implemented for two years by the Belarusian Human Rights House in Vilnius, EHU Center for Gender Studies, Legal Initiative, Belarusian Association of Journalists, Third Sector Centre, International Center for Gender initiatives Adliha.

[International conference on elderly issues in Grodno](#): Third Sector Centre invites to take part in the conference *Intellectual, physical and social revitalization of elderly*. The event is to be held on March 29-31, in Hrodna. The conference will be attended by experts, scientists, and practitioners from the public and governmental organizations of Belarus, Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Moldova and Ukraine. The event is held in the framework of the project *The Golden Age University*.

Other

[Achievements in political science will be awarded in memoriam of Vitali Silitski](#): Vitali Silitski Commemoration Committee launched the *Award For Contribution in Development of Political Science in Belarus* to maintain the memory of a Belarusian political scientist and the first director of BISS. The nomination lasts from January 15 till February 28. The Award Ceremony will take place at the beginning of April 2013.

[Conversation with Günter Verheugen](#): On January 24, Liberal Club together with the Minsk International Education Center, German Society for Foreign Affairs, Robert Bosch Foundation

held a meeting with the former Vice President of the European Commission, Günter Verheugen. Prof. Verheugen shared his vision of economic and foreign policy challenges currently facing the EU, and responded to questions from participants.

Meetup event GMOs – For and Against: On February 1, the Academy of Sciences hosts the first public meeting on the issues of actual genetics and biotechnology *GMOs – For and Against*. The meeting is held in an informal "meetup" format which enables live discussions on concern issues. The organizer is the community Meetup.by with the support of the Institute of Genetics and Cytology.

First scientific book on organic farming: Center for Environmental Solutions supported by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Ministry of Agriculture published a collection of scientific papers *Organic farming in Belarus: prospects for development*. The book provides practical recommendations how to start organic agriculture and how profitable this field is. The electronic version is available at the Center's website.

Monitoring of a barrier-free environment – presentation of results: The Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities invites to the presentation of results of the project *Monitoring of a barrier-free environment*. The speakers will present Guidelines for monitoring the availability of architectural sites and buildings for people with disabilities and a developed tool to survey the availability of objects for people with disabilities. The event is to take place on February 6, at the venue of the Office.

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.

Dazhynki Festival: Belarusian Tradition or Lukashenka's Propaganda?

Seventy years ago, on 4 October 1942 German authorities organised Dazhynki festival in Minsk. It was the first time the festival took place in Belarus with the highest level of state support.

On 21 September 2012 Aleksandr Lukashenka was opening a Dazhynki festival in Gorki, a small town in Eastern Belarus. Dazhynki is a traditional Eastern European celebration of completion of the harvest season. The Thanksgiving Day or Harvest festivals can be regarded as Western equivalents to Belarusian Dazhynki.

But today only Belarusian authorities celebrate it with such pomp. For Lukashenka, it is not just a holiday but also an important political show.

Lukashenko uses Dazhynki to demonstrate how much he supports agriculture. Belarusian towns compete for the right to host the holiday, as Dazhynki remains the best opportunity to improve their wellbeing.

Huge Costs for The Budget

State-level celebration of Dazhynki takes place in a new town every year. The state provides huge financial subsidies for urban reconstruction in the framework of the holiday. Comprehensive reparation works start a year before Dazhynki. The authorities build new roads, remove old and place new

tiles, renovate residential buildings. Thus, it is not just an honour for local officials and residents to host Dazhynki, but also an opportunity to improve the welfare of their area.

The 2012 host of the festival is Gorki. The town with the population of 34 thousand people received around \$110 mln for reconstruction. The money went mostly to refurbishment of roads and railway stations, construction of a 3D cinema and an amphitheatre.

Also, the local authorities refurbished Gotki Agricultural Academy, where Lukashenka used to study. They also built an Ice Hockey Palace, which has become an important element of Lukashenka's Belarus.

Of course, there was not enough money for a proper refurbishment for everyone. The authorities promised several town residents to repair their houses before Dazhynki. The houses looked as if they went through a war – there were holes in the floor and cracks in the walls.

The residents of the houses complained that there was an urgent need to change water pipes and sewers. The authorities really got down repairing, but they did not conduct the work they promised inside of the houses. Instead of that, the workers painted the houses from the outside, replaced the windows and cleaned the area. It was more important that the building looked nice from outside.

Struggle for the Right to Host Dazhynki

Belarusian towns compete for the right to host the holiday to receive additional funding. Each year a real “war” for the right to host the festival starts among the Belarusian officials class. Traditionally, the festival takes place in small towns, but now, after the financial crisis, big cities are also trying to get funding.

Previously, government appointed Rahachou as the host of the

festival in the upcoming year. Today Rahachou remains a rather neglected town even by modest Belarusian standards. However, the Homel Regional Executive Committee was able to negotiate with Lukashenka to ensure that the following Dazhynki would be held in Homel.

Rahachou civil society activists community collected 2,500 signatures for returning the right to be Dazhynki host town. The attempts were in vain, but the authorities promised that they would fix Rahachou the following year anyway.

How the Regime and the Opposition Perceive Dazhynki

Dazhynki in Belarus is not simply an agricultural festival, but also a political one. On the one hand, the Belarusian regime is trying to show how much it cares about the Belarusian village. On the other hand, independent media often mock the rural grandiosity of the event. Interestingly, both sides are right here.

Lukashenka really loves Belarusian village. As a former director of a state-owned agricultural farm, he believes that the Belarusian village can be successful and he helps it. However, Lukashenka appeared to be stuck in his own past and simply refuses to see a reform path in the agricultural sector.

Independent media notice that just pro-regime musicians sing at Dazhynki in Belarus and the main aim of the event is to promote Lukashenka. The festival itself looks more like a drunken orgy for ordinary people and has little in common with Western festivals.

This year's Dazhynki was held on September 21-23, during the parliamentary election. In order to settle the guests of the festival, the authorities decided to expel students from the dormitories for a few days.

University authorities "strongly encouraged" students to vote

on the first day of early voting and go home. The result looked amazing – 71% of voters in the area where dormitories were located voted 6 days before the primary election day.

The Untold Story of Failing Belarusian Agriculture

Certainly, it is good that the authorities reconstruct cities, care about the prestige of agriculture and keep Belarusian traditional holidays. However, the grand pomp of the festival amid backwardness and poverty of Belarusian village looks out of place.

During 2001-2011 the Belarusian authorities spent \$40 billion on agriculture. Despite massive subsidies, even the subsidised Belarusian export production often remains more expensive than in Western Europe. Weak material and technical base and high energy consumption do not allow Belarusian agricultural workers to make cheap products of high quality.

Although the state may provide [free housing](#), people in villages have to struggle surviving on low salaries and [suffering from alcoholism](#). A monthly salary lower than \$190 is not rarity in Belarusian villages.

The main problem of agriculture is the lack of reforms and nearly complete dominance of state management. Today the Belarusian village has not improved much in comparison with the village of the former Soviet Union. Private investor still remains a rarity in Belarusian villages.

Rather than seriously dealing with these problems Belarusian authorities prefer to organise expensive political shows to create an appearance of wellbeing.

Ryhor Astapenia

Politics & Civil Society Digest: 24 June – 1 July 2011

Over the last week Belarus authorities strengthened pressure on journalists and generally tried to limit the spread of uncensored information. Although the number of protesters remains relatively small, they are surprisingly persistent and attract more people in Minsk and elsewhere. Authorities began to rely more on plain-clothed agents for arrests and intimidation.

Independent public opinion polls show that Belarusians are increasingly unhappy about the deteriorating economic situation and tend to blame authorities for the crisis. On the positive side, the Second Festival of Belarusian-language advertising and communication *AD.NAK!* took place in Minsk.

POLITICS DIGEST

A sentence to Andrzej Poczobut will be announced on 5 July. The trial in the criminal case against the journalist of *Gazeta Wyborcza* Andrey Poczobut is going on in Hrodna. Poczobut is [charged](#) under two articles of the Criminal Code: 368 ("insulting the President") and 367 (slander against the president). The Prosecutor asks for Poczobut 3 years of the colony.

Penalty for posting in VKontakte. On 27 June a young Gomel democratic activists Peter Philon was [arrested](#) in his apartment after he posted in social network VKontakte an invitation to meet with his friends on Monday. The court fined Philon on Br105 thsd (\$20) for an "attempt to organize the unsanctioned mass event".

"Revolution through a social network". On 29 June the regular action "Revolution through a social network" was held. The

idea is to gather democratically oriented people weekly at a certain time (Wednesday, 7 pm) on the main square of the cities, without flags and other symbols. Throughout Belarus police undertook enhanced measures to prevent the action: almost all the central squares of major cities were occupied by official events, fenced with turnstiles and limited to access.

According to observers due to heavy rain and counter security forces only 1.5 thousand people participated in the action – less than a week ago. In Hrodna, Brest and Homel, compared with the previous weeks, much more participants gathered: around 1500, 600 and 800 people respectively. Because the the authorities blocked central squares of these cities people marched through the main streets. The distinctive feature of June 29 was that people were arrested by men in plain (sporting) clothing without distinctive insignia. Belarusian photographer Anton Motolko published a photo [essay](#) on this.

In various cities across the country 269 people were detained, including 13 journalists. Moreover, three journalists were beaten (including two foreign reporters), at least three pieces of professional equipment were damaged. 130 people were drawn up for disorderly conduct, disobeying to police, and participation in an unsanctioned action. According to data on July 01, participants of the "silent action" were fines ranging from Br105 thsd to Br875 thsd (total Br12.5 million of fines, or \$2500) and administrative arrests from 5 to 15 days (total 145 days in jail). Others trials have been moved to July 6 and 7.

The Belarusian opposition tries to unite once again. On 29 June at the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) office the opposition representatives [announced](#) the signing of a joint platform. Among the structures that have signed the document, there are the movement "For Freedom", the campaign "Tell the Truth", BPF, the Belarusian Party of the Left "Spravedlivyi Mir", United Civil Party, Belarusian Christian Democracy.

According to the signatories, now the main tasks of the Belarusian opposition are the release of all political prisoners and holding free elections.

A new public opinion poll. In June 2011 the Independent Institute for Sociological and Political Studies (IISEPS) conducted a [survey](#) on the most important issues of Belarusians' life. Deterioration of the "economic well-being" of Belarusians can be characterized as a true landslide. Thus, the number of respondents who said their financial situation over the past three months has worsened, increased from 26.9% to 73.4%. 81.5% believe that "the Belarusian economy is in crisis", and lay the blame primarily on the president (44.5%) and government (36.7%), but not to the world crisis (27%) or speculators (16.6%). The number of those who are ready to vote for Lukashenka again in the presidential election for the first time since March 2003 has fallen below 30% and amounted to 29.3% (December 2010 – 53%, March 2011 – 42.9%).

CIVIL SOCIETY DIGEST

AD.NAK! Advertising Festival. On 23 June the ceremony of awarding of the Second Festival of Belarusian-language advertising and communication More – [AD.NAK!](#) was held in Minsk. The Festival purpose is to pay attention to the advertising and other marketing communications tools, made in the Belarusian language. The idea of the Festival belongs to the campaign "Budzma!" In the category "Civil important projects in the arts and culture" the Grand Prix went to the animated movie "Budzma Belarusians!", in the "Media or Media Projects"- to 34 Multimedia Magazine, in the "Social Advertising"- to the BAJ animation "Specialty is journalism".

Office on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities starts working. On 28 June the presentation of a new human rights institution "Office on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" was [conducted](#) in Minsk. Its founder is Sergei Drozdovskiy, Deputy Head of the NGO *Invalids-wheelchairs*.

Partners are well-known Belarusian human rights activists and NGOs. The main task of Office is a legal and advocacy support for people with disabilities. In December, for the first time the Office will prepare an alternative report on implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Belarus.

Press Club of Belarus in Warsaw was [launched](#). The Club's purpose is to help the Belarusian journalists and other media in their work for the sake of democratic Belarus and media freedom. Among the Club's founders there are only Belarusians – prominent journalists, editors and publishers: Julia Slutskaya, Dmitry Novikov, Alexander Starikevich, Ales Lipai, Alexander Ulitenok, Alexey Dzikavitski, Piotr Martsev, Viktor Martinovich.

Conference of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership. On 5 July 2011 in Minsk Conference of the National Platform of Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership will be [held](#). The Conference is aimed at discussing current and future activities of the Civil Society Forum as one of the major institutional players of the Eastern Partnership program as well as at future ways of further developing and strengthening the Eastern Partnership program in Belarus as well as at European level.

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