

A Final Blow to Independent Sociology in Belarus?

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

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

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

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

Between a rock and a hard place

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

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

contrast to a mere 25 in 1992.

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

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

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

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

Securing stage-managed elections?

By spring 2016, Belarusian state-run media started targeting IISEPS in an organised fashion, aiming to discredit the

activities of its independent social researchers. Major Belarusian official media, including Belarus Segodnia and Belta, lamented that IISEPS research was biased and unreliable.

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

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



In response, Aleh Manaevŭ issued a statement denying all accusations against IISEPS in the media. He connected the attack on his Institute with the upcoming parliamentary elections and the fact that Belarusian authorities need to ensure they go off smoothly.

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

The end of independent opinion polls in Belarus?

On 9 August 2016, Aleh Manaevŭ declared that IISEPS would cease conducting sociological surveys in Belarus due to the

heightened risk involved for its employees. Apparently, the media attacked the entire network of interviewers, forcing some of them to give public statements under threat of criminal charges.

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

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

The attack on IISEPS coincided not only with parliamentary elections and an economic crisis in Belarus, but also with decreasing levels of support for Lukashenka. Spring public opinion polls reflect that by March 2016, Lukashenka's popularity had dropped to 27.3 per cent, in contrast to 45.7 per cent in September 2015.

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

As of now, it is clear that Belarusian authorities have

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

Belarusian opposition prepares for the 2016 parliamentary elections

Belarusian parliamentary elections may take place on 11 September 2016, according to a recent statement by the Chairperson of the Belarusian Central Election Commission.

These elections will take place against the backdrop of President Alexander Lukashenka's approval rating moving towards a historic low, and people's incomes falling rapidly.

This creates an opportunity for the Belarusian opposition, which has become more active in recent months. If the pro-democratic forces focus on social issues rather than on their internal horse race and maintain at least camouflage unity, the opposition has a chance to become stronger during the campaign.

Bad times for Lukashenka,

good for the Belarusian opposition?

In late March, the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) published data showing how Belarusians assess the state of the country. According to the pollster, 60 per cent of people think that Belarus is developing in the wrong direction and say that their economic condition has worsened since the beginning of the year. Moreover, less than 15 per cent of people think that the situation will improve.

it is no surprise that the popularity of the authorities and [Lukashenka keeps falling](#). 47 per cent of Belarusians blame the country's leader for the crisis, and his mistrust rating exceeded the trust one. IISEPS conducted the survey before the government announced that it was raising the retirement age, so Lukashenka's approval rating and his whole system will fall further.

If presidential elections took place tomorrow in Belarus, who would you vote for?



The Belarusian economy continues [its](#) downward trajectory. According to official figures, the economy declined by 3.6 per cent in the first quarter of 2016, and the average salary is now about \$300.

But average salary data can be misleading, as the majority of Belarusians do not earn as much as the mean figure – as everywhere in the world, the richest people push up the figures. Moreover, these statistics fail to take into account not-working people such as pensioners, children or people with disabilities, who have much lower income or no income. The income per Belarusian could be two times lower than the

official average salary.

In such circumstances, the opposition has a real opportunity to get the support of the majority of Belarusians during the elections in 2016. Disappointment in the authorities may result in ordinary people selecting alternative candidate on their ballots, for example someone who holds no responsibility for the current crisis. But there is still a problem: the Belarusian authorities [falsify elections](#), which remain neither free nor fair, as a recent [report by Freedom House](#) shows.

How the Belarusian opposition is preparing for the campaign

It seems that some opposition politicians have become aware of this opportunity. They are holding rallies in Minsk, travelling around the country and discussing possible unification of the pro-democratic forces. On 15 April, almost all of the opposition groups, except the Tell the Truth campaign, created the Council of Democratic Organisations whose main objective became discussing the future political campaign and cooperation on constituencies, as Belarus has a majority electoral system.

In addition, [some groups](#) are uniting in coalitions and generating common lists of candidates for parliamentary elections. So far, the centre-right coalition, composed of the Movement for Freedom, the Belarusian Christian Democracy and the United Civil Party, has had the greatest success in building a unity image. Coalition leaders drive across regions together and have, according to their statements, 93 potential candidates. The Belarusian parliament has 110 deputies, so the coalition plans to put forward candidates in around 80 per cent of the electoral districts.

Another coalition which will put forward a common list of

candidates consists of former presidential candidate Viktor Ciashchanka, leader of the *Nash Dom* (Our House) association [Volha Karach](#) and former political prisoner Siarhei Skrabiec. So far, prospects for their campaign seem doubtful, especially taking into the account Skrabiec's negative image. Many insiders see him as a confidence trickster.

[Mikalai Statkevich](#), a Social Democrat and a former political prisoner, is preparing a congress of democratic forces for May 14-15. However, it remains unlikely that the congress will gather the majority of the opposition. Nominally, almost all members of the opposition want unification, but each of them has their own vision of how a union should work. For instance, the centre-right coalition refused to join the organising committee of the congress.

It seems that the only organisation that remains reluctant to discuss any coalition-building is the Tell the Truth campaign under the leadership of former presidential candidate [Tacciana Karatkevich](#). She and her colleague [Andrej Dzmitryjeu](#) are trying to position themselves between the authorities and the opposition. Currently Karatkevich has the highest rating among opposition politicians – 6.9 per cent, according to IISEPS.

Unification makes sense, but what is more vital?

Although the opposition has become more active in recent months, few people in Belarus believe that it can use the current weaknesses of Lukashenka's regime to its advantage. Despite that, one significant improvement stands out. Belarusian opposition groups have significantly reduced the amount of public criticism they make of each other.

Moreover, unlike the previous parliamentary election campaign in 2012, all opposition groups seem now to have the same

election strategy. In contrast, four years ago some parties boycotted the elections, some withdraw their candidates before election day and others participated in the whole campaign.

Now it seems that everyone in the opposition thinks that participation is the best idea, as ignoring the elections will fail to bring new followers. Even [Andrei Sannikau](#), leader of the European Belarus campaign which became known as a strongly pro-boycott group, recently stated that his movement is considering participating.

Some opposition figures are pushing for more. As Mikalai Statkevich puts it, "the opposition is stealing the victory from herself by rejecting the nomination of a single list of candidates". Such words make some sense, as people dislike fragmentation of the opposition, so even a formal union at the national level and coordination of the electoral districts will strengthen the image of the opposition.

The bad thing about unification is that the process can overshadow more important issues. So far, Belarusian independent media write more often about political topics like unification of the democratic forces or Western policy towards Belarus than about the opposition raising bread-and-butter issues.

It seems that democratic forces devote too much time to themselves, at the expense of mastering a message for society. However, if the opposition speaks up about things that matter to Belarusians , it can become more popular during this campaign.

For the opposition, these elections are about ensuring its own survival until the presidential campaign of 2020, as fewer and fewer people are joining the pro-democratic structures. If the opposition fails this year, it will become even more difficult for it to attract human and financial resources in the future.

Civil Society Potential, Media Barometer – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

To be successful, reforms need a strong political leader. A Belief in Wide Discussions and Consensus is a Myth – says Ivan Mikloš, a Slovak politician "father of the Slovak reforms", who will participate in the upcoming Kastychnicky Economic Forum, Minsk.

The potential for solidarity in the Belarusian society is vanishing – according to the results of the research conducted by the Centre for European Transformation and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.

The awareness of civil society organisations in Belarus has risen over the last years – Pact releases findings from a national survey conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies.

Belarusian Civil Society

[Polling Memo: Stable Society? CSO Awareness has Risen, Participation Remains Low](#) – For the second consecutive year, Pact releases findings from a national survey conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS). According to survey results, the number of Belarusians who are aware of CSOs has stabilised at around 50% in 2014-2015, which is almost 20% more than in 2013. At the same time, the level of Belarusians' trust in CSOs dropped from 37.7% last year to 32.2% in 2015. The level of citizen

participation in public activities remain low – around 20%. Explore [the full text of the polling memo in English](#). Russian-language version [is also available](#).

[**Potential of Solidarity of the Belarusian society is vanishing**](#)

– This is a key finding of the fresh study conducted by the Centre for European Transformation (CET) and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS). The study is a continuation and development of the 2014 research on the [potential for solidarity among CSOs](#). Belarusian society turned out to be even more amorphous, divided and atomised than the civil society.

[**Amplituda TUT.BY: Belarusian Society has Outgrown the Politicians who Represent it?**](#)

– The Belarusian society has outgrown the politicians, so the society and politicians are not interested to each other. In the next five years economic challenges require responses from everybody. Such opinions were articulated in a regular issue of the *Amplituda* program by Valery Kalinousky (Radio Svaboda), Elena Artemenko (BISS) and Nikita Belyaev (Liberal Club).

[**Human Rights are Much Better Respected Here, in Belarus**](#)

– New analytical resource IMHOClub.by posts an interview with a political refugee who returned to Belarus after 15-year living in the Czech Republic. The former publisher of the Belarusian opposition newspaper *For Will*, anarchist Yuri Puzikov tells "idleness in the EU simply killed him". As a result, he realised he wanted to be useful for his country and returned to Belarus to his girlfriend.

[**BISS Political Media Barometer \(April-June 2015\): The Media, But Not Politicians Set the Tone in the Coverage of Elections**](#)

– Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) presents basic findings on media representation of political forces. Namely, elections much more influence on the communication of individual politicians than political forces. Leaders among politicians become Mikalai Statkevich, Tatiana Karatkevich

(first presented in the ranking) and Anatoly Lebedko.

The 2015 Presidential Elections

[Belarus 2015 elections: A cautious rapprochement with the West](#)

– Alena Kudzko, the Central European Policy Institute (CEPI), considers that the instability in Ukraine, Russia's increasing pressure to permit it to station its military airbase in Belarus, and the drastic worsening of the economic situation in the country are all factors that may motivate the Belarusian government to seek geopolitical and policy alternatives and new partners. The time is ripe for Europe to anchor a more pragmatic and realistic long-term approach to its notorious Eastern neighbour.

[Same Old, Same Old? Belarus Votes](#) – BISS senior analyst Dzianis Melyantsou together with a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment and project director at Pact Balazs Jarabik prepared an article that analyses the presidential elections in Belarus. The authors believe that Belarus's domestic situation and external environment have changed since the last elections in 2010. The 2015 electoral process, warts and all, shows how the Belarusian regime is attempting to adapt to these changes, while trying to keep the Soviet-style state machinery going.

[Elections-2015: An illusion of unity before reforms start?](#) –

In its analysis of post-election situation, BISS warns that one should not expect the newly reelected president to implement large-scale structural reforms, contrary to what the West would like to see in Belarus. Only sporadic point transformations will be a lot likelier in the areas, which cannot do without changes, and where such modifications will have no political impact on the authorities. These conclusions are supported by Alexander Lukashenka's [recent statement](#)

against radical reforms.

Upcoming Events

[Support for Reform is Important Not Only for Democracy, It is Not Accidental that Authoritarian Systems are Populist](#) – Why developing countries are so vulnerable to a global financial crisis, why reforms need a "guillotine" and what errors are made by reformers – these issues are raised by Marek Dąbrowski, one of the speakers of the [Kastryčnický Economic Forum](#), KEF (3-4 November, Minsk), in his interview to TUT.BY. Marek Dąbrowski, a senior fellow of the Centre for Social and Economic Research CASE, worked in the Polish reformatory government of Leszek Balcerowicz.

[To be Successful, Reforms Need a Strong Political Leader. A Belief in Wide Discussions and Consensus is a Myth](#) – Ivan Mikloš, a Slovak politician and the former Minister of Finance of Slovakia, is known as "father of the Slovak reforms". Ivan Mikloš goes to Minsk for the first time to participate in the [Kastryčnický Economic Forum](#), KEF, and tells in his interview for TUT.BY, what determines the success of the reforms, if there is a risk of political suicide for the main reformer and why this issue is not necessary to consult with the people.

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.

What Makes the 2015 Belarus Presidential Campaign So Different?

Each and every election in Belarus follows a straightforward pattern: limit the rights of the opposition, control the vote-counting process and, later, announce the [predetermined winner](#).

However, the 2015 campaign will differ from previous ones in a number of ways.

The war in Ukraine has altered Belarusians societal outlook: people are leaning more towards Russia and reject outright the idea of political protests. This has notably changed the rhetoric of [the opposition](#) and the government, both of whom now have to operate with miniscule amounts of financing.

The recent nomination of a [young woman](#) as a moderate oppositional candidate indicates that at least part of the opposition has given up its regime change ambitions and is refocusing their efforts on a long-run image making campaign.

Ukraine Alters the Agenda

The Ukrainian crisis has had a deep effect on Belarusians' mindset. The Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), in its June 2015 poll, found that 90% of Belarusians "regularly" or "sometimes" watch Russian state TV. Approximately a 60% majority support Russia's actions in Ukraine and the pro-European minority has shrunk from 40-45% (before 2014) to 25-30% (currently).

the authorities resorted to this pro-independence rhetoric,

largely because they fear growing popular sympathy towards Russia

Under these conditions the traditionally pro-European opposition has had to focus less on foreign policy and to adjust its agenda to supporting national independence, as the public now sees any drifting towards the West as a threat to the country's future.

The authorities have also resorted to this pro-independence rhetoric, largely because they fear growing popular sympathy towards Russia. It is no accident that pro-Lukashenka pickets during this presidential campaign use the slogan: "For the Future of Independent Belarus". On the other hand, the government exploits the notion that the chaos they see in Ukraine could arrive at their doorstep if they support change over 'stability'.

First Reelection without Economic Safety Net

The recession in Russia has had a dual effect on Belarus: its exports to Russian market have seen a significant decline, while Moscow is unwilling to subsidise its ally's economy as it traditionally has. In 2015 Minsk received only \$870m in Russian loans, which hardly enough to keep it afloat given the current [state of Belarusian economy](#).

Lukashenka has always managed to raise voter incomes leading up to any elections, something which may even be considered a time-honoured tradition in Belarus at this point. Leading up to the previous presidential elections, average salaries climbed to \$100 by 2001, \$250 – in 2006 and \$500 – in 2010, all of which are respectable figures regionally.

As the Belarusian ruble has devaluated fivefold, unemployment has grown and wages growth got frozen (the average salary in June 2015 was only \$450) and the economy itself has

unsurprisingly [fallen into a recession](#).

Although this crisis has failed to increase the readiness of people to take to the streets in protest (see below), it has contributed to shifting the agenda of all parties with regards to the elections. Three key potential opposition candidates – [Anatol' Liabedz'ka](#), [Tatsiana Karatkevich](#) and [Siarhei Kalyakin](#) – have built campaigns mainly around socio-economic problems. The authorities, on the other hand, are playing the "stability and peace" card, accusing foreign powers of creating these "temporary economic problems".

Forget About A Maidan

11 October 2015 may become the first election day without a traditional Ploshcha (the Belarusian equivalent of a Maidan protest) where thousands of people gather in Minsk's city squares and demand either a full ballot recount or Lukashenka's resignation.

Belarusian society's readiness to protest is not growing, but decreases as the economy slides

As IISEPS' June poll has indicated, less than 10% of Belarusians consider protests "realistic and desirable". In March 2015 only 15.4% said they [would consider protesting](#) about the declining economic situation in the country, whereas 73% flat out reject engaging in protests. In March 2014 these figures were 23% and 68%, respectively, which means Belarusian society's [readiness to protest](#) is not growing, but decreases as the economy slides. The [Ukrainian syndrome](#) in the public's mind appears to be more powerful than any economic discontent that may be lingering about.

With the current situation being what it is, even the opposition candidates have rejected a return to the Ploshcha strategy. Two of them, Kaliakin and Karatkevich, put their

opposition rather bluntly: they will not call people to the streets whatsoever. Liabedz'ka was more evasive in stating that he will not call for demonstrations but people have the right to them and he will not oppose protests if they should occur.

The Opposition's Empty Piggy Bank

Not only has the incumbent had to run this campaign with a shortage of financing, but the opposition has been hurting for money as well. The amendments introduced into the Electoral Code in 2013 deprived candidates of receiving the budgetary minimum (\$28,000 in 2010) that they had previously received for campaigning. This money was substituted with an "electoral fund" (with a \$100,000 ceiling) for which a candidate is permitted to open an account at a state-owned bank. Every Belarusian citizen or entity can donate to these candidates as they please.

anonymous donations for political campaigns are forbidden in Belarus

The system itself looks quite liberal and even capitalistic in a way, but given Belarus' reality, it has one profound defect – anonymous donations are forbidden. In other words, the government can track every citizen or company who decides to support the opposition financially. In addition to political apathy and a general malaise with any election, this new mechanism of governmental screening will hardly motivate many individuals, especially the wealthy, to donate to the opposition.

It has always been an open secret that the opposition in Belarus heavily relies on foreign funding, but this year even this brook ran dry. Opposition leaders complain in private that this year much of the Western money they are accustomed to seeing has been diverted to Ukraine-related projects.

According to unofficial data, some European foundations were ready to support Belarusian opposition this time only if it managed to unite behind a single candidate – something which never happened.

First Woman Candidate Running for President

Tatsiana Karatkevich, 38, is the first female politician to  have a shot at running as a presidential candidate. She has received the support of the largest opposition coalition in Belarus, the People's Referendum (comprised of Belarus People's Front, Social-Democratic Party, the For Freedom movement and Tell the Truth campaign).

Karatkevich has adopted a decidedly mild political approach, using the slogan "For Peaceful Change" (in contrast to what happened in Ukraine), she travels around the country a lot where she spends more time listening to people's problems than proposing them some kind of political programme or manifesto (unlike the leftist Siarhei Kalyakin or liberal-conservative Anatol' Liabedz'ka).

However, Belarusian society remains rather patriarchal, with only 16% believe nominating woman as the head of state to be a good idea (IISEPS, March 2015). More people would prefer a politically mature male candidate with some experience in management to a relatively young woman with a background in psychology and social activism.

Karatkevich's head of staff Andrey Dmitriou openly admits that this campaign is not about winning the election, but about training and re-branding the opposition. In other words, the political forces behind Karatkevich have given up on their long-held regime change ambitions at the moment and view this campaign as a kind of training course and, more broadly, a PR campaign.

All in all, the 2015 campaign will most likely proceed in an atmosphere of total apathy and passivity. With essentially everyone – be it government, society or the opposition – fearing a potential Ukrainian scenario unfolding, and having to work with little money, they are trying not to stir up any social unrest while achieving either their tactical goals or simply surviving.

Pro-Russian Maidan, IISEPS National Poll, Media Barometer – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

Is “pro-Russian Maidan” in Belarus possible? Grigory Ioffe agrees with an assumption about such a scenario in Minsk if Lukashenka spoils his relations with Moscow or reneges on some of his promises.

BISS Political Media Barometer suggests that the United Civic Party and Belarusian Popular Front appear more frequently than other parties in Belarusian media.

Daria Chumakova, vice-executive of Centre of Ecological Solutions, explains how to create a green office and why Belarusian private businesses are interested in ecological corporate social responsibility projects.

Politics and Governance

[Elections, Identity and Economic Decline in Belarus](#) – Grigory Ioffe shares a journalist Sviatlana Kalinkina's assumption about the possibility of a “pro-Russian Maidan” in Minsk if Lukashenka spoils his relations with Moscow or reneges on some of his promises. Indeed, Belarus is integral to the Russia-controlled information space, and on Ukrainian issues there seems to be a noticeable rift between many Belarusians and their president. Apparently Kalinkina sees this rift as a resource that some Moscow-based malefactors could leverage to foment a pro-Russian rally in Minsk on election day.

[Government officials lay like a rock on the way of Belarus' development](#) – Ina Ramasheuskaya of BIPART discusses bureaucracy, its role in Belarusian society and its attitude towards and impact on possible reforms. She concludes that although many Belarusian officials understand the need for reforms in practice they constitute an obstacle to development of Belarus.

[BISS Political Media Barometer №12 \(January – March 2015\): Elections Affect the Structure of Communication, but the Amount of Is not Growing](#) – BISS presents basic findings of the BISS Political Media Barometer for January-March 2015. The research analyses quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the independent political forces' communications field. In the first quarter of 2015 a leadership position in amount of political communications belongs to the United Civic Party and Belarusian Popular Front parties and individual politicians Anatol Liabedzka and Mikola Statkevich.□

[Eurasian Review №5](#) – BISS presents the fifth issue of the Eurasian Review, which analyses the processes of Eurasian integration. Since the launch of the Eurasian Economic Union six months passed. From an economic point of view, the period was not easy: indicators of the Russian economy worsened;

economic situation in other EEU countries, linked to the Russian market of goods and services has also been considerably complicated.

[Andrei Yeliseyeu: State Can't Do Without Civil Society on the Way to the Visa-Free Regime with EU](#) – Only if the Belarusian authorities want to see such regime feasible at some point. Signing of the Agreement on simplification of visa regime with the EU and Belarus was expected at the Eastern Partnership Summit this May. In other EaP countries civil society has been seriously involved in the preparation process. Belarusian state cannot avoid it either, Andrei Yeliseyeu, BISS analyst, assumes.

Civil Society

[Civil Society: Away From Politics Towards Cooperation With the Authorities](#) – Yuri Chavusau's article in *Belarusian Yearbook 2014* describes the key trends of Belarus civil society of last year. Namely, the expert notes that the state keeps its tight legal framework for the registration and activity of non-profit organisations. In the process of adaptation to the existing conditions, an increasing number of organisations are trying to distance themselves from formal politics (elections, parties) and thus to take a stand convenient for a dialogue with the authorities.

[IISEPS National Poll. June 2015](#) – Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) released the results of a June national survey. At the presidential elections 37.4% would vote for Lukashenka, 20.6% – for the candidate of the democratic opposition, 27% – for none of them (in March the numbers were 37%, 23.2% and 21% respectively). The idea of the "Russian world" of Russian president Vladimir Putin, is [treated positively](#) by almost 39% of Belarusians, indifferently – 39.4% and negatively – 15.2%.

[Belarusian Yearbook 2014](#) – Published since 2003, Belarusian

Yearbook is a complex analysis of the situation in the most important segments of the Belarusian state and society for the year. The book is presented under the aegis of the Agency for Social and Political Expert Appraisal and the expert community of Belarus *Nashe Mnenie* ('Our opinion'). Namely, in 2014, there was an external push – the Ukrainian Maidan, followed by Russian annexation of the Crimea and the military operations in the eastern Ukraine, had a significant impact on many processes in Belarus, before flowing mostly in the inertial mode.

Economy

[Being environmentally-friendly is a must of the modern market](#)

– Daria Chumakova, vice-executive of Centre of Ecological Solutions explains according to which criteria international companies choose Belarusian partners, what is 'green washing' and how one can define advertisement technologies from real projects of social corporative responsibility. Reading expert's interview one will know how to create a green office and why Belarusian private businesses are interested in ecological corporate social responsibility projects.

[Belarusian business 2025: experts name 10 trends that will change the country](#)

– Growth of taxes is one of factors that will change Belarus greatly during next 10 years. Efficiency of state-run companies will be lowering, as well as the quantity of working class, so the Belarusian business will face the increase in taxes. The event was held under celebration of the 10th anniversary of the business portal Bel.biz.

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.

Threats to Belarus, Eurasian Union, Political Prisoners – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

Belarusian analysts discuss the threat to Belarusian statehood from Russia, the pros and cons of the Eurasian Economic Union as well as protest potential and intensified contacts of Belarus with the West.

Foreign Policy

[Karbalevich on Belarus: Hybrid Ally](#) – Valery Karbalevich believes that both the opposition and the authorities are aware of the threat of Belarus' independence from Russia, which arose after the accession of Crimea. According to the expert, to confront Russia, Belarus should become truly independent, ie, to create a viable economic system able to exist without Russian privileges. But Lukashenka cannot go for reforms, "because the transformation of Belarus is a bigger threat to his rule than the hybrid potential war with Russia."

[Russian Media: Belarus Should Join Russia or It will Be Liquidated](#) – The Russian business newspaper *Vzglyad* published an article calling for Alexander Lukashenka to hold a referendum in the autumn of 2015 on the accession of Belarus to Russia. The journalist notes that Lukashenka needs to decide whether he is with Russia or the West. Otherwise, Belarus could suffer the fate of Ukraine.

[The Eurasian Economic Union: Analyses and Perspectives from](#)

[Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia](#) – In the present publication, four perspectives from three member states of the EEU have been drawn together, which together sharpen the vision on the emerging trends of the Eurasian integration process – and its numerous contradictions. Arseniy Sivickiy (Minsk) perspective on the EEU hinges on clear differences of interest in the design of the EEU contract and its implementation.

Politics

[Opinion. Devaluation of Political Prisoners](#) – Artiom Shraibman, [TUT.BY](#), analyses recent developments in the warming relations between Belarus and the West: "The Europeans and the Americans themselves knocking at the door, saying that economic cooperation is no longer linked to political differences, does not contradict them." Accordingly, the political prisoners are not the most important obstacles anymore between Belarus and the West. This greatly increases the possibility that they will stay behind bars until the end of their terms.

[Warming on the Western Front Can Help Belarus to Slip Into the Bologna Process](#) – Representatives of the Council of Europe and the Monitoring Group of the Bologna Process have arrived in Minsk to ask questions about the readiness of Belarusian officials of higher education to join the European educational space. According to the Head of the Council of Europe's Education Department, Sjur Bergan, now "the political situation in the country is more favorable than in 2012, when Belarus was denied entry into the Bologna Process."

[Belarusians' Protest Capacity Does Not Exclude New Ploscha](#) – On the eve of the presidential elections 2015 and on the background of the Ukrainian events protest activity has increased in Belarus. These findings are contained in the annual monitoring, prepared by the [Political Sphere Institute](#). In 2014, researchers recorded 127 protests. In comparison with 2013, the number of public actions increased by 26%, social

conflicts – by 18%. The leader in the number of protest action of 2014 was Minsk.

Third Sector

[Overview of Youth Policy and Youth Participation](#) – Key barriers to youth participation at the policy level in Belarus are formalism, structural constraints, the lack of will of the authorities and personal factors. This is the conclusion of Belarusian National Youth Council RADA under its study conducted together with the Center for Legal Transformation. Currently [the first two chapters](#) are available: youth policy and youth participation in public and political life of the country. Chapters on youth labor and education are being prepared for publishing.

[Legal Regulation of Economic Activities of NGOs](#) – European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL) present an overview of the legal regulation of economic activities of civil society organizations in Europe. The research was done at the request of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs of Belarus and Legal Transformation Center. The research paper aims to indicate the options how civil society can independently earn money for their activities.

[In Belarus there are 2,596 registered NGOs](#). In 2014, the Ministry of Justice registered 86 newly-established non-governmental organisations (1 international, 13 republican, 72 local), 3 unions (associations) of non-governmental organisations, 11 local foundations. In comparison to 2013, the total number of registered NGOs increased by 2.9% and to the moment reaches 2,596 NGOs. The most frequent activity among registered NGOs is sports and physical training (684 NGOs). □

[Freedom of Association and Legal Conditions for Non-profit Organizations in Belarus. Review Period: January-March 2015](#) – NGO Assembly and LawTrend prepared the document covers the

most important issues in the sphere of freedom of association for the period of the last 3 months. The Monitoring includes the list of non-commercial organisations registered during the review period: namely, 23 public associations, 3 foundations and 15 non-governmental institutions were registered.

[Lessons Learnt of State Social Contracting in 2014 in Belarus](#)

– ACT NGO releases key findings of the first practices of state social contracting, implemented in Belarus. In 2014, 26 regions used the mechanism of state social contracting and subsidized the NGOs from local budgets for the total amount of more than 1.8 billion rubles (about \$125 thsd). The study was carried out with the support of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection.

Business, Opinion Polls, Human Rights

[Top 5 Pro-Belarusian Business](#) – Vadzim Mazheyka composes the top 5 business companies engaged in pro-Belarusian projects. The list includes, for example, Belgazprombank that made a loud exhibition project "Ten Centuries of Belarus Art", or network of gas stations A-100, which serve customers in Belarusian. The expert notes that the Belarusian business notices the popularity of Belarusian culture, and that means the latter is going beyond historical and political ghetto, and becoming a true social trend.

[IISEPS National Survey in March 2015](#) – According to recent survey of Independent Institute of Socio-Political and Economic Studies (IISEPS), almost 40% of Belarusians believe that Belarus needs serious reforms (structural and system changes), and more than 42% agree for gradual reforms that would retain the current system. Alexander Lukashenka's electoral rating has dropped to 34.2% (almost by six percentage points compared with December 2014), [due to the deteriorating economic situation](#).

[Amnesty International Report 2014/15](#). The Amnesty

International has released its regular report 2014/15 that documents the state of human rights in 160 countries and territories during 2014. Namely, the report states that Belarus remained the only country in Europe to carry out executions; the right to freedom of expression was severely restricted and journalists faced harassment; NGOs continued to be arbitrarily denied registration.

[Five Years of Belarusian Web](#) – Michail Darashevich, manager of Gemius in Belarus, analyses 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.

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.

Economy Finally Troubling Belarusians More Than Ukraine

Belarusians are really beginning to worry about their domestic state of economic affairs more than Ukraine as of late.

This is the main result of a December 2014 poll from the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) published in early January.

The number of people favouring a pro-European orientation for the country and supporting Ukraine in its conflict with Russia has increased after almost a year of falling. The same was the case with the approval rating of [Alexander Lukashenka](#): it fell after nine months of growing.

The tough economic situation in Belarus that followed the economic crisis in Russia partially explains these developments. A relative calm in fighting in Ukraine also contributed to this shift in public opinion.

However, the public's dissatisfaction, leading up to the 2015-presidential campaign, will hardly shake the foundations of the political regime. And yet, Alexander Lukashenka's nerves in the wake of the elections and his potential clumsy measures to manually fix the economy may destabilise the situation even further.

Belarusians Turn to West Again

The first set of the December IISEPS poll results, indicating this important shift in Belarusian public opinion, included views on foreign policy and the [Ukrainian crisis](#).

Following the annexation of Crimea, the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine and a new wave of pro-Kremlin propaganda, between 55% to 70% of Belarusians (depending on the question) have supported the official Russian stance on the Ukrainian crisis.

Moreover, in March, July and September 2014 IISEPS polls showed a [serious decline in pro-European sentiments](#) among Belarusians. Society was disappointed by the West's policy towards Ukraine as they saw it from how [Russian media portrayed it](#). Two thirds claimed their attitude to the European Union worsened during 2014.

December was the first month in a year when the popularity of

the "pro-Russian replies" such as the justness of Crimea's annexation, support for Russian-backed separatists, a desire to unite with Russia, and a refusal to join the EU if it were proposed all went down by 3-6% on average.

Accordingly, support for Ukrainian territorial integrity, viewing the Crimean events as an illegal annexation, a preference for European integration over a union with Russia – went up by the same 3-6% margin. Belarusians holding these views still constitute a minority, but now it is a growing one.

Several factors explain this new trend. First of all, Belarusians have recovered from the psycho-informational shock after a war burst out in their neighbourhood. People have become more rational in analysing the events in Ukraine. The truce in Eastern Ukraine and, hence, the less aggressive TV coverage of the conflict also contributed to this "cooling off" in society.

The economic crisis in Russia, especially when it [started to spread to](#) the Belarusian economy, has also made some Belarusians reconsider their geopolitical views. It is one thing to support Russia's swift and "cordial" takeover of Crimea, and another thing altogether to pay the price for aggression committed by your neighbour.

Refrigerator Beats the TV-set

After Vladimir's Putin soaring approval rate started to go down in Russia from 87% some joked that, at long last, the refrigerator has started to win the battle against the TV-set in Russian minds. In other words, Russians have begun to value their well-being and shrinking incomes more than abstract geopolitical achievements promoted by TV propaganda. The December IISEPS poll revealed the same trend in Belarus in relation to Lukashenka's rating.



On the graph above are Lukashenka's first climbs in popularity from around 20% as the country recovered from the devastating financial crisis of 2011. It rises to 42.7% in September of 2013. Then the GDP and salaries stop growing and his support level starts to decline once more, but then suddenly – a sharp climb upwards back to 45% unfolds, despite the fact that incomes have not increased.

Sociologists from IISEPS explained this anomaly as a result of the Ukrainian factor. Namely, Belarusians compared their own lives with those of Ukrainians and started to value stability and peace more than economic prosperity and, naturally, supported the head of state who has managed to protect them from these and other unpleasantries.

However, seeing as Ukraine has fallen out of many people daily concerns, their concern for their own economic well-being has taken over. In other words, Lukashenka has exhausted his ability to gain popularity from the Ukrainian conflict.

It is important to note that IISEPS carried out its poll in the beginning of December – before panic on the Belarusian currency market and nearly [a 40% devaluation](#) of the Belarusian currency took place. This means that by now, the middle of January 2015, Lukashenka's ratings have almost certainly dropped even lower.

Generally, the ups and downs of popular support of a leader have been commonplace in Belarus. But today, roughly ten months before the next presidential election is set to take place, a decline in popularity is only beginning. Considering the state of Belarus' and its main donor's (Russia) economy, some experts, including Radio Free Europe analyst [Valer Karbalevich](#), believe political stability in the country is clearly under threat

A country arrives at election year in a state of socio-economic turbulence. Intrigue returns to the presidential

election. Welcome instability!

Prospects for Political Turbulence

However, the foreseeable public disappointment in the economy has few chances of leading to a serious political or protest movement.

First of all, to challenge the authoritarian regime one needs a viable political alternative to it. The Belarusian opposition that is showing for the 2015 elections probably in the worst shape it has ever been. According to IISEPS data, the public's trust towards all oppositional parties combined remains stable, but low – 16%. The most popular opposition leaders enjoy only 2-3.5% electoral support.

[The political unification talks](#) among seven of the most viable opposition organisations failed in November 2014. Figures who are considering making a run at the presidency in 2015 ([Anatol Liabedzka](#), [Uladzimir Niakliaeu](#) and others) have found themselves in a very difficult conceptual gridlock. Having no resources to obtain free and fair elections they have to count on street protests as a last resort. But Belarusian society has taken a strong anti-revolution vaccine as a result of the Ukrainian revolution and how it was reflected in both Russian and Belarusian state-controlled media.

[The economic crisis](#) that Belarus has been undergoing since December 2014 has become an additional obstacle for Lukashenka's opponents, though it might sound illogical at first glance.

With limited possibilities of getting substantial Russian economic support, the Belarusian authorities are expected to bet not on political carrots (raising salaries in an election year) as is their custom, but on sticks – more repression and preventive actions to deter possible protests.

The atmosphere of the [2015 presidential elections](#) will most likely differ from that of 2010, when nine alternative candidates [could freely campaign](#), meet with the voters and debate in a live show on state TV.

In December, Belarus' parliament swiftly adopted amendments to the laws on media that complicate the work of online media. A recent [wave of blocking](#) independent web sites was another sign of this tightening-the-screws trend.

Still, it appears to be too early to bury all intrigue. Psychologically, coming to the elections without traditional big bag of bailout cash, is an issue of much concern for Alexander Lukashenka. Faced these new conditions, he may resort to some radical economic measures to bring everything back under control. This may well have its own unpredictable political ramifications.

Belarusians and Civil Society Organisations Finding Common Language

According to a recently published report by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), Belarusians have become increasingly aware of the presence of civil society organisations.

IISEPS published findings based on polls, dating back to 2012, which focused at four categories: citizens' awareness of civil society organisations; the level of citizens' involvement in civil society activity; and the level of citizens overall public/social activism.

The results of the study show that Belarusians became more keen on the presence of civil society organisations in Belarus, with awareness jumping from 30% in 2012 to 52% in 2014. However, these figures are not as straightforward as they may initially appear. For one, rising awareness has not necessarily meant rising involvement.

Civil society organisations, by and large, have seen the most success coming from advocacy campaigns that utilise the Internet and social media networks. Despite their best efforts, their visibility still remains very low, as does the level of trust the Belarusian public affords them.

A More Aware Society

The study produced a number of interesting findings that indicate that Belarusians' civic consciousness is gradually evolving. Between 2012 and 2014, the number of Belarusians who are aware of civil society organisations (CSO), whether through participation in their activities or as recipients of their services, grew 27% – from 25% in 2012 to 52% in 2014.



The possible reasons for the hike in awareness listed by the study included a higher level of interaction and CSOs greater presence on both the streets and on social networks, and better communication and advocacy from civil society organisations.

Among the most popular of organisations are traditional state-run CSOs, like official trade unions. Gains in other areas were seen as well, though, with organisations on the local level witnessing a near doubling of awareness from only 15% to 29% since 2013. Awareness, however, does not mean that they are more trusted. Overall only around 40% of those polled trust civil society representatives, with political parties fairsing the worst.

According to the IISEPS study, despite their gains, CSOs in Belarus have failed to get more Belarusians directly involved in their activities. Participation in events has flat-lined over the past few years and most improvement has been seen in the overall percentage of citizens receiving services from CSOs.

Civil Society's New Approach

CSOs may be struggling to bring in more citizens to participate in their activities or utilise their services, but many of them are trying out new means of attracting citizens to their work. According to the report, the increased awareness about CSO activities may be partially attributed to a growing number of individuals who took part in charity-related activities, including online and crowd-funding platforms.

Some of their success can be attributed to the inclusive nature of their projects online which call for open public voting on what initiative a organisation should proceed with. Crowd-funding's growing popularity has allowed citizens to vote with their pocketbooks as well, with over 200 plus projects reportedly supported in the past year alone using this convenient mechanism.

While CSOs' web sites still reportedly lag behind in terms of their accessibility, the more accessible material they put out on popular social networks has raised the profile of their work. The growing number of Internet users have helped to make several advocacy campaigns, usually related to Belarusian culture and language, increase in popularity. Some of the more successful examples are the Budzma Belarusians! campaign, the open-air Jazz Festival and the Accessibility Campaign.



Other successful examples include Perspektiva, a public business association, who back in 2013 was able to get the

Customs Union to delay the implementation of a prohibitively difficult and expensive quality assurance certification procedure.

Possible Paths Forward

The IISEPS also notes that other CSOs like think tanks and research organisations have been moving away from conducting analysis and surveys on abstract problems and moving towards bread and butter issues that communities can relate to. In particular, they have been focusing on local issues that affect specific regions in Belarus.

By utilising popular social media outlets and focusing on issues that the public feels directly affects them, there is a lot of potential for successful advocacy campaigns and projects to be implemented. In December 2013, for example, streams of drivers arrived in Minsk to protest a new vehicle tax that would be levied against both private individuals and businesses. The protest and a subsequent petition (which gathered around 80,000) was organised on social networks.

According to the study, CSOs will continue to need to avoid politically-oriented activities if they want to gather more citizens to their cause. Among the least popular CSO activities were public political protests, while the most popular form of civic engagement was involvement in charity events.

One of the other least popular CSO-driven activities was fundraising. The study by IISEPS states that a majority of their funding came from donors and, given the unpopularity of fundraising, there appears to be few alternatives for many civil society organisations at the moment.

Work To be Done

Despite the gains CSOs have made in terms of public awareness of their activities, their ability to attract funding and

citizens to support their work remains rather poor. The study concludes that CSOs will need to improve how they communicate their values and become more transparent and accountable in order to gain the trust of the public. They will indeed need to use the public's increased awareness about their activities to simultaneously push for Belarusian society to place more trust in them.

The positive feedback surrounding their shift towards dealing with local issues has given them some indication of where they might be most effective in the future. Their ability to reach the public via social networks, especially CSOs not overseen by the state, is also very promising, but does have its limitations due to the gap in Internet usage between different demographics.

While the scope of their activities will likely remain decidedly unpolitical in nature, due as much to political pressure from above as adverse attitudes from the public, there is plenty of other important gaps that CSOs can fill in society. Both donors and CSOs alike should look at the areas where there has been notable success and model the projects they support to meet the actual needs of Belarusians.

This overview was prepared by Devin Ackles on the basis of [polling memo](#) written by Pact. For further questions please contact Balazs Jarabik <BJarabik@pactworld.org> or Vasili Kukharchyk <vkukharchyk@pactworld.org>.

Mova Nanova for Kids, Age

Friendly City Campaign, TechMinsk – Belarus Civil Society Digest

Now Mova Nanova invites Belarusian children for free Belarusian languages courses. Golden Age University announced an Age Friendly City campaign in Hrodna to improve the quality of life of older people.

Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) releases fresh data of a September national poll. It turns out that the Belarusians are ready for changes, but it is less associated with the opposition.

Belarus in the international focus

[EaP Media Freedom Watch: Belarus is again at the bottom.](#)

Georgia remains the leader of the Eastern Partnership Media Freedom Index for the first half of 2014. Azerbaijan and Belarus are at the end of the ranking. The EaP Media Freedom Index is compiled quarterly and calculated by summing up the points obtained by participant countries in four sections – Politics, Practise, Broadcasting and Internet and new media.

[Program to support grassroots in Belarus.](#) [Civic Belarus Czech NGO](#) invites to cooperation and offers a program of long-term support for the groups of local activists. The mission of the program is not only the financial support of grassroots; the priority is capacity development of initiatives and improving the quality of their work. Applications are accepted until 17 November 2014.

Education

[Mova Nanova launches Belarusian courses for kids.](#) Free Belarusian courses *Mova Nanova for Kids* started on 5 October

at the Minsk Gallery Ÿ. Children of 4-7 years old (preschool age) are invited to participation. According to the organisers, the first class has about 100 small students enrolled. It appears that one more Belarusian courses *Mova ci Kava / Language or Coffee* also start a new season as soon as on 1 October they had [a casting of comperes](#).

[TECHMINSK Fall Batch 2014](#). On 1-31 October TechMinsk, the first International Entrepreneurship School in Belarus, has started its work. TechMinsk prepares the next generation of global entrepreneurs and change makers from Eastern Europe and help them build rapid high growth companies and go global. A 5-week program is a combination of educational, mentoring and networking tools. 80% of all courses are taught in English.

Civil society activities

[Human rights activists announce week against the death penalty in Belarus](#). Various human rights activities will be held from on 5-10 October under the slogan 'The death Penalty is Murder'. The events will be attended by honorary foreign visitors, ambassadors, famous creative people, relatives of executed convicts shot and sentenced to death, advocates and activists of the abolitionist movement in Belarus. The Human Rights Centre 'Viasna' invites everyone to join the activities of the Week.

[Age Friendly City Campaign to be developed in Hrodna](#). On 1 October on the International Day of Older Persons, at a media breakfast, Hrodna Golden Age University announced the start of developing an Age Friendly City campaign in Hrodna. The campaign's goal is to engage representatives of public, government, academic and profit organisations in the development of specific actions aimed at improving the quality of life of older people and using their potential for the benefit of society. The organisers also presented for journalists the latest results of [the Global AgeWatch Index 2014](#).

Analysis

[Voice of the People is for the People](#) – Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) releases fresh data of a September national poll. According to the survey, the Belarusians are ready for changes, but it is less associated with the opposition. Namely, 17.5% of the respondents consider themselves involved in civil activities, almost 40% participated in various charity events, and 18% signed a petition. The level of trust to the president continues to rise: 45.9% in March, 49.6% in June, and 53.5% in September.

[Presentation of a research on a potential for solidarity in Belarusian civil society](#) is to take place on 7 October in the Minsk business club IMAGURU. The research was conducted by the Centre for European Transformation (CET) and Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) and notes a decrease in the ability of citizens for joint effective political and social action, despite the growing number of petitions, public statements, and collecting signatures.

[Belarus' Public Sector: Values, Expectations and Perceptions of Reforms](#) – Belarus in Focus Information Office (aka SBI0, Solidarity with Belarus) releases its policy paper – a comprehensive overview of Belarusian public sector employees held in Minsk and regions in 2014. The differences in values, attitudes to life, risk tolerance and attitude towards labour mobility of the public sector employees revealed in the study were among its main results. These differences depend on the size of the community in which the public sector employees live, and on their age.

Interaction between state and civil society

[Zmicier Vajciushkevich officially excluded from the 'black list'](#). The musician is preparing for his first legal solo concert after a three-year break. Minsk city executive

committee issued a certificate for Zmicier Vajciushkevich's concert, which is planned on 29 October in Minsk. [Black list](#) appeared in 2011 and includes well-known musicians, writers, actors from Belarus, Russia, Europe and Hollywood who anyway protest against repression after the presidential elections of 2010.

[Human rights defender Alena Tankachova may be stripped of her residence permit](#). Alena Tankachova, leader of the Minsk-based Centre for Legal Transformation, also known as *Lawtrend*, told that Belarusian authorities were seeking to annul her residence permit. Although she is a citizen of Russia, she has lived in Belarus for nearly 30 years and is not going to leave.

[Supreme Court upholds registration denial to human rights NGO](#). The Supreme Court on 30 September upheld the legality of the position of the Ministry of Justice, which refused to register the national human rights NGO 'Movement for the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' (Pact/Covenant).

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Belarusians Want Reforms, Entrepreneurs Protest, New

Education Initiatives – Belarus Civil Society Digest

New polls suggest that in the current environment Aliaksandr Lukashenka remains the most trusted politician in Belarus but Belarusians want reforms, in the first place of its political system.

The recently released political prisoner Ales Bialiatski is meeting with top European politicians.

Education initiatives and debates keep civil society activists busy in Belarus this summer. Entrepreneurs protest against new regulations adopted in accordance with new Customs Union rules.

Polls

[BISS Poll: Attitude to Reforms](#). The Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) has released the data of a public poll under the REFORUM project.

The research reveals the general attitude of [ordinary citizens](#) as well as representatives of [civil society and political opposition](#) to reforms and identifying high-priority areas. Thus, 75.6% of Belarusians consider reforms necessary and wants reforms in health sector above all. According to representatives of civil society the main area of reform should be a political system.

[Trust to Lukashenka continues to rise](#). The Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) has released the results of a national survey conducted in June 2014. According to the poll, the level of trust to the president continues to rise: in December he was trusted by 37.7% Belarusians, in March – 45.9%, and in June – 49.6%. At

the same time, popularity [ratings of all potential opposition](#) presidential candidates combined do not exceed 20%.

Education

['Learning Region' Adukatar](#). Association for Life Long Education (ALLE) has released a regular issue of its thematic magazine *Adukatar*. The issue is devoted to the 'learning region' concept that is defined as any regional competitiveness in the modern world by its ability to learn. The 'learning region' is shown to readers as a theoretical construct as well as its implementation on the European continent and in Belarus.

[Distance learning for Human Rights advocates](#). The International Human Rights House Network announces a call for applications to participate in distance learning program for lawyers and experts from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. 125 participants – 25 fellows from each country – will pass theoretical and practical training in applying the concept of human rights and international legal standards in the national and international legal protection. The course is certified by European Humanities University (Vilnius, Lithuania).

[Golden Age University invites to a methodological Summer School](#) on education for the elderly. The School is to be held on 6-10 August in the Grodno region; it aims to share Belarusian and foreign experience on the methodology of social enhancing of the elderly. The organisers are welcome representatives of community and government organisations that already have or plan to start educational and outreach programs for the elderly. The University works at the Third Sector Centre NGO in Grodno from 2010.

Debates and projects

[What young Belarusians want](#). On 1 July in Minsk, the Liberal Club held a roundtable discussion titled as *Youth Policy*

Concept in Belarus: What Young People Really Want? At the meeting, the experts presented an updated concept of youth policy and launched a debate on how to satisfy the real needs and interests of the youth. Thus, organisers hope to contribute to the country's national security and to meet the challenge of a high level of dissatisfaction of young Belarusians and their strong desire to leave the country.

[Ales Bialiatski visits Brussels and Strasbourg.](#) Ales Bialiatski, head of the Human Rights Centre *Viasna* meets with European diplomats and journalists such as the newly elected President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz, EU Commissioner Stefan Fule, Secretary General of the Council of Europe Thorbjørn Jagland, etc. Remind that on June 21, Ales Bialiatski was released from prison under an amnesty having served almost three years for tax evasion. On 27 June in Vilnius, Ales Bialiatski gave a press conference for the Lithuanian media ([full video](#)).

[First city-game "Skhvatka" in Belarusian language would take place under the slogan "Let the Glory of Orsha be eternal!"](#). For the first time the city-game "Skhvatka" will be held in Belarusian language. It will be devoted to 500th Anniversary of Orsha battle. The game will have a format of bicycle ride with a team contribution of 30 US dollars. One can become a part of the game joining [its website](#) or official public account at social networks.

[Festival of Belarusian Advertisement and communication Ad.nak! celebrates its fifth anniversary](#) (picture at the top). Traditionally organised by civil cultural campaign Budzma and web-portal Marketing.by Festival is steadily increasing in numbers. This year the Festival has collected more than 400 works from almost 200 participants. 6 Grand Prix (2 – last year), 17 first places (6 – last year), 33 second and 41 third places given. The fifth edition was the first one to bring collaboration with general partner on business side which was

the oldest mobile operator Velcom.

Projects on social inclusion

[Accessibility Week summarizes results](#). Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities summarises the results of the Accessibility Week that held in Belarus for the second time. The Week lasted from 1 to 15 June and took place not only in Minsk, but also in other cities of Belarus: Hrodna, Kobryn, Zhytkavichy, Lida, Smarhon, Baran', Babruisk. The Week included 14 events attended by more than 400 people.

[UNDP initiative "Inclusiveness after 2015: social collaboration of disabled in Belarus" has started](#). The program has started in May 2014 and its aim is to improve the life and deepen involvement of people with disabilities into community life.

The communicational core of the action is [an internet platform](#), where everyone willing can write down his own story or the story he witnessed. When the pull of the stories is collected it will be analysed by special program, working out a new approach to further development of disabled involvement. The approach would be used for further spreading among civil, business, governmental and international organisations.

Interaction between state and civil society

[Entrepreneurs try to defend their interest through Forum and strike](#). On 30 June in the Minsk hotel Belarus, 235 entrepreneurs from across the country gathered at their regular forum, organised by the republican public association *Perspectiva*.

Entrepreneurs urged not to sign the decree that requires that from 1 July light industry goods should be imported to Belarus only with documents on compliance with special technical regulations of the Customs Union. The next day, on 1 July entrepreneurs from different cities of Belarus [went on strike](#).

[Campaign of Belarusian language defense at Constitutional court has started](#). Friends of civil initiative "Rada of Belarusian intelligence" have signed a petition in defence of Belarusian language to Constitutional court. The example of the petition was worked out by Belarusian Helsinki Committee chairperson Harry Paganajla. One can simple [cache and sign the example](#) and read [methodical recommendations](#).

[New public hearings are announced on Kurapaty building project](#). Minsk municipality has decided to run another round of hearings on city development project of detailed planning of territories near Kurapaty. This information is coming out of the list of head of architecture branch of municipality. During first hearings many remarks were made and were supported by expert board on situation around Kurapaty and second round has to fix misunderstanding between authorities and activists.

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New Polls: Belarusians Support Lukashenka and Do Not Want an Euromaidan

At the end of April, the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies published the results of two polls.

The polls demonstrate that the crisis in Ukraine became an informational tidal wave that has been sweeping over Belarus, with 90% of Belarusians following the events. Belarusian society has become strongly politicised for the first time in many years.

However, most Belarusians consider the ousting of Yanukovych a coup and do not want to host a similar revolution in Belarus. Moreover, Belarusians prove reluctant to participate in mass protests and enjoy the current stability provided to them under the Lukashenka regime, which the growth of his approval rating proves.

For Lukashenka, the crisis has been a challenge and a gift at the same time. Relations with Russia have deteriorated and Belarus may yet lose its valued Ukrainian markets. Yet Lukashenka still now has the chance to become a true national leader and consolidate the nation as the protector of sovereignty of Belarus.

Mass opinion on Euromaidan

Broader Belarusian public opinion on the events in Ukraine remains largely unstudied, since very few polls are held in Belarus. Those made by the government usually remain confidential. Perhaps the only publication on their public opinion recently appeared in a study done by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, the oldest independent polling institute of Belarus currently registered in Vilnius.

The IISEPS conducted the poll in March, therefore it did not include the events surrounding Crimea or the current conflict in Eastern Ukraine. However, it provides a good picture of attitudes of Belarusians towards mass protests and coups, as well as shows the level of their attention to Ukraine events.

Did you follow political conflict in Ukraine, which ended in the ousting of president

Yanukovich?



The poll shows that the crisis in Ukraine has been hugely influential in Belarusian media space. Almost 90% of Belarusians followed the crisis' developments. Moreover, a third of Belarusians reported that they followed the Ukrainian crisis every day. In Belarus, where real political struggle has not existed for quite some time, and most people are interested only in routine and private issues, these figures look like a populace awakening after a long political winter.

People were discussing Ukraine in the streets and in public places, which is the first such instance perhaps since the beginning of the 2000s. Every media outlet had Ukraine headlining, and these stories garnered a virtually unfathomable number of comments. Heated discussions were unfolding, dividing people into pro and against Maidan camps.

Many Belarusians were able to articulate for themselves their values on the matters of freedom, material wellbeing, national identity and violence. The events in Ukraine have had a significant on the minds of Belarusians, making them consider their own position and future choices.

President Yanukovich was ousted in Ukraine. What do you think of these developments?



A question on their personal perception of Euromaidan showed that a majority of Belarusians (55%) consider the ousting of Yanukovich a coup and not a democratic revolution or fair retribution. However, almost a third seems to support Euromaidan.

Would you like events similar to Ukrainian happen in Belarus?



In this question Belarusians demonstrated their famous love for stability. They would rather not have a similar revolution even provided that it is peaceful. 23% of respondents would accept a non-violent revolution in Belarus, while only 3.6% are ready to shed blood in the fight against Lukashenka regime. This means Belarus will hardly ever experience a revolution, at least until people have a minimum level of wellbeing and sense of security.

Although economically Belarusians feel that they are only slightly better off than Ukrainians in terms of corruption and security. For them, Belarus looks to be in a considerably position overall and people appreciate it. Ukraine has indeed become a fine example of poor government, associated, in public opinion, with scuffles in parliament, oligarchs and omnipresent corruption.

If events similar to Ukraine happen in Belarus, would you take part in them?



This diagram supports the previous one, and still sheds light on some interesting details. While most Belarusians state they are reluctant to participate in any kind of mass protests, only 11% are ready to defend the current political regime. This means the majority would simply observe the developments without interfering with them.

Perhaps some of them would change their mind and take one side or another, but the general trend seems to be relatively clear. And importantly, 15% are ready to struggle against the regime via a Belarusian Mайдan, which is more than the number of its active defenders.

In the end, however, a majority Belarusians would accept any developments of potential conflict and largely prefer not to

interfere – a strategy they have typically employed throughout their history.

A Present for Lukashenka before Elections

The same institution, IISEPS, also measured Lukashenka's approval rating in March 2014. Since December 2013 it has grown from 35% to 40%. Lukashenka surely remains far behind Putin, who currently enjoys an 82% approval rating according to Russian Levada-Centre estimates, and who has capitalised pretty well on the intervention in Ukraine under the “protection of Russian civilisation” mask.

Dynamics of Lukashenka's Approval Rating



But despite a much lower rating compared to Putin, Lukashenka has shown himself to be a true national leader in the Ukrainian conflict. Despite Belarus' heavy economic dependence on Russia and political and military union, he [refused to recognise the annexation of Crimea](#) and Belarus' official position remains in favour of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. He also spoke out against the federalisation of Ukraine, a point that Russia is strongly advocating for in negotiations with the west.

He is also continuously accusing Yanukovich of outrageous levels of corruption in Ukraine and named it the root of Ukraine's current malaise. Moreover, Lukashenka quickly recognised the new government of Ukraine, personally met with Turchynov and later discussed with him some developments in Ukraine over the phone – a move Vladimir Putin would hardly approve of.

[In his address to the nation and parliament on 22 April](#), Lukashenka for the first time spoke about protecting the Belarusian language and ordered the KGB to identify pro-Russian "diversionists". He also criticised the position of

Russia on the Eurasian Union, the main geopolitical project of Vladimir Putin.

The moves of Lukashenka appealed not only to his traditional electorate, but also to many of his opponents who agreed with him on at least some of his points. Ahead of the 2015 presidential elections, Lukashenka may appear to be a true national leader and protector of Belarus against Russian aggression. Meanwhile, his opponents remain in the shadows and are largely unknown to the majority of Belarusians.

Although economically [quite damaging for Belarus](#), Lukashenka received an invaluable present before the next elections – the chance of becoming a truly popular leader and consolidate the nation. At this point it looks like Lukashenka can already be called the next president of Belarus, and maybe this time around he will not even need to use fraud to do it.

Is Belarus a European North Korea? – Top Three Myths about Belarus in Western Media

Describing Belarus as the "last European dictatorship" in Western media has become a tradition. In many cases it is justified by real human rights abuses and the absence of any real democracy in the country.

However, often authors and journalists go far beyond objective analysis or describing the true situation in Belarus. They prefer to portray the country as a big concentration camp in

the middle of Europe.

Typical myths about Belarus include the complete absence of free expression in the country, total governmental control and repressive terror for disobedience, and people being unable to leave the country or, occasionally, they turn to reports of Belarusians' readiness to rebel.

Belarus Digest presents an overview of the most popular myths about Belarus in Western media and a short guide on how to avoid taking up this mythology when covering it.

Myth No 1: European North Korea

The image of Belarus as a totalitarian [dictatorship](#) in the centre of Europe occasionally circulates some Western media.

"Mr. [Lukashenko](#) has steadily turned Belarus into something akin to a prison colony", – writes a journalist from The New York Times. The title of the French Le Figaro speaks for itself: "In Belarus it is better to be silent in order to stay alive."

These and other numerous exaggerated assessments certainly contribute a lot to general misunderstanding of the Belarusian political reality in the West.

In fact Belarus lives under an authoritarian personality-cult style political regime. According to human rights organisations, eleven political prisoners are serving time in jail. No elections since 1994 have been recognised as fair or transparent by Western observers.

The political opposition remains completely marginalised and has no legal instruments for influencing governmental policy. Police and the secret service keep track of [political activists](#) and prevent or disrupt almost every and any public political event.

However, the killings or indefinite imprisonment of political opponents is not a practice common to the Belarusian regime. Several cases of mysterious disappearances of notable politicians and a journalist in the late 1990s did take place, however nothing similar has happened since.

Administrative arrest (up to 15 days) or fines for "hooliganism" remain the usual punishment for "political offenders." The authorities resort to real criminal imprisonment very seldomly, especially in comparison to other post-Soviet states. Russia – about 65 political prisoners (according to Memorial NGO) or [Azerbaijan](#) – about 140 political prisoners (according to local human rights NGOs). As mentioned above, Belarus currently has eleven political prisoners.

Expressing one's critical opinion of the government, membership in an oppositional political party or movement alone is almost never used as grounds for persecution. Only persistent political activism can get people in trouble.

Freedom of speech is restricted but has been not abolished.

Freedom of speech is restricted but has been not abolished. Many reporters from unregistered media outlets indeed are subjected to serious pressure. However, several independent newspapers (Narodnaya Volia, Nasha Niva, BelGazeta, Belorusy i Rynok etc.), news agency BelaPAN, and other numerous oppositional and independent web-sites legally work within the country. Journalists from these media outlets get invitations to most public events including Lukashenka's regularly held press conferences.

Therefore, the widely used nickname for Belarus – "the last European dictatorship" – seems quite dubious. The Belarusian political regime may be the toughest in Europe in many ways, but it is sufficiently softer than nearly any other regime in the world that has received the "dictatorship" label: North

Korea, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Myanmar, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Syria etc.

Myth No 2: Belarusians Cannot [Travel Freely](#)

"The youth in this country, closed off from most of the world, cannot speak their minds freely and in the open", – states the EUobserver, promoting one of the most ludicrous myths about Belarus, namely, the existence of an [iron curtain](#) at the Belarus-EU border.

Belarusians can not only travel to Western countries, indeed they are some of the most active travellers. Since 2010 Belarus has held 1st place in the world for the number of Schengen visas issued per capita. In 2012 this number exceeded 700,000 (or more than 7.3% of the population). Some soon-to-be published data from 2013 will show even higher figures.

Belarusians can not only travel to Western countries, indeed they are some of the most active travellers

Nearly 1,400 students of EHU (a Belarusian [university in exile](#) in Vilnius) are Belarusian citizens, which means frequent crossing of the border for many of them as well as for many lecturers from Belarus.

Even key oppositional figures can (with [extremely rare exceptions](#)), freely travel to Europe and meet with Western politicians. [Some experts](#) even say that they spend too much time abroad while being passive inside the country.

Shopping-tourism to neighbouring countries has become so widespread that Alexander Lukashenka had to propose a rather unpopular and, yet not adopted measure, of a [\\$100 exit-fee](#), in order to stop the vast currency outflow.

Myth No 3: Belarusians Strive For Freedom and Ready to Rebel

In a recent article to Washington Post one ex-candidate for

Belarusian presidency argued that in Belarus "it is not a question of if but when Belarusians will rid themselves of Europe's last dictatorship".

This waiting for a soon-to-come and unavoidable [revolution in Belarus](#) means, once again, ignoring the political reality on the ground.

The December 2012 IISEPS (Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies) poll showed that only 3% of Belarusians support the idea of a revolution.

A survey done by the NOVAK Laboratory in January 2010 indicated that 62% consider themselves free, while 57% say they live in a free country. Even after the latest 2012 parliamentary elections 47.5% of Belarusians called them "free and fair" and only 25.5% disagreed with this statement (IISEPS).

In a June 2013 poll IISEPS that asked respondents what would they prefer: to sacrifice a certain amount of freedom for economic well-being or to sacrifice their well-being to be free, 46% appeared to prefer well-being over freedom, while only 38% value freedom more.

in reality the majority of Belarusians still prefer stability and prosperity to democracy

Finally, in a September 2013 IISEPS poll 28% said that Belarusians "sometimes (e.g. now) need a firm hand to rule them" and 26% believe "Belarusians always need a firm hand rule" (54% combined). Only 38% said it dangerous to concentrate all power in one individuals' hands.

Although the latest polls show that Belarusian society is [slowly maturing](#), in reality the majority of Belarusians still prefer stability and prosperity to democracy. "Liberals" compose about 30-40% of the population, and the idea of any

sort of revolution remains [highly unpopular](#).

How to Avoid Mythology When Covering Belarus?

The author of this article, himself a journalist, completely understands his colleagues' desire to come up with sharp titles and shocking descriptions of a poorly-covered, politically odd and almost exotic country, such as Belarus.

At the same time, the audience of serious periodicals expects facts and decent analysis rather than fantasies.

Here are several tips on how to properly cover Belarus from the outside:

Rely more on news agencies that have their own reporters in Belarus (Bloomberg, Reuters, AP).

Avoid portraying politics as something important to Belarusians. Most of them have little interest in them and are not facing the "dictatorship" in their everyday lives.

The Belarusian opposition is seriously [divided](#), never trust anyone who claims to be "the leader of Belarusian democratic forces".

Double check all the information from [political exiles](#) with the help of activists based in Belarus.

Understand your responsibility. Belarus has little proper coverage abroad. By propagating catchy myths you disorient decision-makers who fail to work out effective policies and thus contribute to strengthening of authoritarian rule in Belarus.

Recent IISEPS Polls: Belarusian Society Slowly Matures

In early January 2014 the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) published its December 2013 poll results for various domains of public opinion.

Though some people, including opposition politicians and activists, doubt this institute's ability to handle a proper social survey in an unfree society, most Belarusian experts and analysts trust their data.

The results of the latest poll suggest that Belarusians show certain signs of a gradual "maturing" as a society.

In the economic realm respondents tend to be pessimists, blame the government and the country's ruler for its failures and show high demand for market reforms. When speaking of foreign policy, more and more people prefer the EU to Russia and support the authorities when they clash with their eastern neighbour.

At the same time, the support rate of Alexander Lukashenka have fallen, but the opposition did not manage to gain any points from it.

Economic Pessimism and Blaming Lukashenka for Crisis

The IISEPS poll indicated a further deepening of people's pessimism with the state of the economy and the prospects of their own welfare. Almost 69% of the respondents agreed that the Belarusian economy is going through a [crisis](#). The numbers have worsened since the previous IISEPS survey, which was conducted in September 2013 (57% that time).

A considerable 12% pessimistic shift in the numbers can be explained by salary growth freezing at the end of the year, the authorities' plan to cut budget spending, several rather doubtful governmental fiscal initiatives that were recently announced (like auto-owners tax, \$100 [exit-fee](#) and "sponger-tax"), a gradual devaluation of the national currency etc.

The number of people awaiting the situation to [worsen further](#) has become nearly three times higher than the number of economic optimists (36% vs. 12.5%).

When asked who is responsible for the crisis and whom they rely on to resolve it, Belarusians came up with the following responses.

Whose fault is the current crisis in Belarus?

Rank	Subject	%
1	President	45
2	Government	42
3	Parliament	19.6
4	People	16.3
5	The USA	15.5

On whom do you rely in overcoming the crisis?

Rank	Subject	%
1	President	36.8
2	Russia	27.8
3	Entrepreneurs	25.7
4	West	22.7
5	Government	21.3

Blaming the head of state and government for the crisis represents the majority's immunity to the state propaganda,

however, combined with a certain amount of paternalism – they maintain hope that Lukashenka and foreign countries will play a key role in overcoming the crisis.

Of all the results of the survey, what appears to be most surprising in a generally paternalistic Belarusian society is the number of market reforms supporters has reached 60% (46% among those who trust Lukashenka). These figures, meanwhile, can deceive because the history of market transitions in other post-soviet states shows that the reforms' support falls after people feel the first painful consequences which inevitably accompany any economic liberalisation policy.

All in all, the ongoing failures of the Belarusian "socially-orientated" economy has people disappointed with the government and has them beginning to recognise the need for changes and market reforms in particular.

Pro-Russian Moods Gradually Fade Away

The poll also confirmed another trend continuing: more people prefer EU to Russia if asked about with whom it would be better to integrate. 45% have chosen EU, while only 37% – Russia.

What would you prefer: Uniting with Russia or entering the EU?



At the same time, 45% agreed that Belarus should change its policy to become closer with the EU, with only 22% disagreeing with this position.

One further result that can be derived from this issue seems quite surprising: 39% claimed they do want to see more Russians coming to live in Belarus (only 24% held the opposite view and 33% held no position one way or the other). Analysing

this data, one must take into account that Belarusians are generally known as a tolerant nation, most of them speak Russian. Moreover, full freedom of movement became one of the most notable, if not the only achievement of so-called Union State of Belarus and Russia.

Belarusian authorities enjoy rather high approval rate with regards to their stance in the latest conflict with Russia (known as the ["potash war"](#)). Only 13.6% blamed Belarus for starting the conflict and only 25% disapproved of the [arrest](#) of the Russian potash giant "Uralkali" CEO Vladislav Baumgartner.

As the years go by, the number of pro-European Belarusians gradually increases, while the number of pro-Russian ones continues to decline. This remains true despite all the anti-Western propaganda in the state media, the officially announced course towards [Eurasian integration](#) and the vast annual economic benefits being reaped in from Russia. So, one could only guess what the situation will be given these factors cease to exist in the future.

Opposition Cannot Catch the Points Lukashenka Loses

The decline in support and trust in the Belarusian ruler was another unexpected result of the December poll. Both figures have shown relatively stable growth for the last two years (after the 2011 economic crisis).

Do you trust current president?



What concerns the electoral support rate, less than 35% of Belarusians would have voted for Lukashenka in December 2013 (after 37,3% in June and 42,6% in September). The primary reason for this decline is, naturally, the government's economic failures. As was demonstrated in the first paragraph – people tend to blame the country's leader for the crisis.

The swift increase in the figures from September occurred right after a particularly active phase of the above mentioned potash war. Insofar as public opinion was generally positive with the Belarusian government's actions in this conflict, Lukashenka, praised by state TV as a fighter for sovereignty and national dignity against insidious Russian oligarchs, gained some points. With three months having already passed, the "nation's defender" image has faded.

All of Lukashenka's problems with public support contribute little to the [opposition's own popularity](#). Support rates for opposition leaders do not go any higher than 3% except for two ex-candidates for the presidency: the head of civil campaign "European Belarus" [Andrei Sannikau](#) (3.2%) and a poet [Uladzimir Niakliaeu](#), leader of "Tell the truth" campaign (7.1%).

[Aleh Manaev](#), the head of IISEPS, in one of his latest interviews explained Niakliaeu's relative success by the "Tell the truth" strategy to concentrate their activity on pertinent social issues. Many other opposition structures choose to promote a purely political and human rights agenda, which remains unpopular among most of Belarusians.

Thus, even the aggregate rate of all the opposition leaders remains far behind Lukashenka's own declining figures. Moreover, trust in the opposition parties in general (16%) appeared to be lower than the level of trust to KGB (34%), courts (35%), police (35%), the Central Election Committee (32%) and even to the utterly passive pro-government political parties (20%).

As always, the IISEPS poll reveals a wide range of public opinion trends, which seem difficult to summarise in a single unified conclusion. In general, Belarusians, against all the existing odds, show signs of slow maturing as a society: appreciating their sovereignty more, detecting the government's fault in the economic crisis, striving more for

European integration and market reforms.

Unfortunately for the opposition, its leaders fail to be in tune with people, often proposing them an agenda too divorced from their actual needs and ideals.

Video of Belarus Research Council's Debate 'What Belarusians Think'

The Eastern Europe Studies Centre and the Belarus Research Council are organising the third live panel discussion What Do Belarusians Think: Results of Research on Social Contract.

'Social Contract' is a research focusing on relations between different social groups in Belarus and the state from the viewpoint of social and political stability. During the first such a research in 2009, analysts of the Belarus Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) have shown that social stability was based on a rational and pragmatic exchange of goods for loyalty. How the dramatic political development and economic have influenced the social contract since?

The research will be presented by **Alena Artsiomenka** from the Belarus Institute for Strategic Studies and discussed by **Aleksandr Sosnov** from the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) and **Irina Tochitskaya** from the Institute for Privatization and Management (IPM RC). The discussion will be moderated by journalist **Maria Sadovskaya-Komlach**.

Belarus Digest organised online streaming of the discussion.

Viewers are also welcome to follow the event, comment and ask questions on Twitter using the hashtag #Whatbelarusiansthink (for English speakers) and #Чтодумаютбелорусы (for Russian speakers).

Political Activists in Belarus: a Portrait

Last week, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) released a new ranking of Belarusian political activists based on media coverage in January-March 2013.

The BISS [study](#) suggests an undersupply of political initiative among Belarusian political figures. According to BISS, the quantity and quality of political communication by Belarusian opposition figures do not necessarily go together – possibly a symptom of the uneven playing field in authoritarian regimes such as Belarus.

This article uses the BISS list as a representative sample of Belarusian political opposition figures to learn about these people's paths into politics. Belarusian political activists are highly educated, are likely to be affiliated with political parties and have suffered arrests and imprisonment. Strikingly, one fifth of the political figures on the BISS list are in exile. Even so, for many political repression has become a right of passage into political visibility.

Measuring Political Communication: Media Barometer BISS

The BISS study examined both qualitative and quantitative characteristics of media communication. The study went beyond being academic and aimed at contributing to the improvement of

political communication in Belarus. The quantitative index measured the number of media references and the size of audience covered by the online and print media as well as personal communications. The qualitative index takes into account the content of media references and consists of indices of expertise, initiative, and political action.

The figures on the BISS list are political actors broadly defined; many of them are civil society activists rather than politicians. According to BISS, among the top-12 political figures include distinct groups: a group with a high quantity of communication but average quality; a group with the most balanced quality communication, a group of women politicians with a high quantity of communication but “a complete absence of political initiative”.

Analtoly Liabedzka leads as far as the quantity of political communication goes, with 197 references in the media and the largest audience. Uladzimir Niakliaeu, at 244 references in the media occupies the second place, and Andrey Sannikau finds himself in the third place. Notably, these politicians feature in the media due to their political activity rather than personal life events or the bad luck of being imprisoned.

The only politicians according to BISS to have voiced new economic initiatives, Andrei Dzmitryeu and Aleksei Yanukevich, have high marks on the qualitative index but much less impressive quantitative results. Aliaksandr Milinkevich, Aliaksei Yanukevich, Andrei Dzimtyieu, and Vital Rymasheusky have the most “balanced” communications, in terms of both quantitative and qualitative media presence.

This indicates the absence of political debate over  important issues in Belarusian media. In fact, many political figures resemble citizen bloggers, expressing opinions but not engaging in constructive discussions over solutions of the day-to-day problems facing Belarusian

citizens.

Some opposition politicians prefer to pose as victims and freedom fighters rather than address the mundane issues that interest the average Belarusian citizen. Of course, the dependence of Belarusian political activists on foreign donors may explain such behaviour. In the end, this limits the opposition's appeal in Belarus.

How well do Belarusians know the figures on the BISS list? In June 2013 the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) published a [study](#), which indicated that only about a quarter of respondents came up with names of politicians who represent an alternative to the current president of Belarus.

When offered a list with names of politicians, however, the IISEPS respondents produced rankings slightly different from the ordering of the BISS study. One reason for this discrepancy could be that the BISS study took place at the time of relatively low political activity, with no elections on the horizon. A few names included in the IISEPS were missing completely from the BISS list, however.

Who Becomes a Political Activist in Belarus?

The provisional character of the BISS rankings notwithstanding, the biographies of the political actors mentioned by BISS allow learning more about the careers of people who become visible in Belarusian politics. Although each actor has his own background, the basic features that many of them share common characteristics.

First of all, six out of thirty on the list live in exile in Western Europe or the United States. Political asylum undoubtedly limits these people's influence in Belarus, so their visibility in Belarusian media may appear surprising.

The average age of a political activist in Belarus is 50, with

Stanislau Shushkevich, aged 78, being the oldest and Anastasia Palazhanka, aged 22, – the youngest representative. More than half of the people on the BISS list come from Minsk.

Only two out of thirty people on the list are independent from any political party or movement. Given the underdevelopment of the Belarusian political sphere and the wariness of political parties as such after the decades of Communist dominance, this strikes as a remarkably high number. After all, in June 2013 IISEPS study, only 15.3% of respondents said that they trusted the opposition parties. Even so, the Belarusian parties remain far from being truly programmatic, and the popularity of the people in the BISS list focuses to a large extent on personalities.

Two paths to political opposition stand out from the biographies of people in the BISS list. One was followed by the political figures well-known already in the 1990s. These people have some political experience, having served in the Supreme Soviet of Belarus, regional representative bodies, or diplomatic service. Some even initially cooperated with the Lukashenka regime. For nearly all of them, the constitutional referendum of 1996 became a turning point, marking the start of their careers in political opposition.

Another group came into politics from other paths of life, with their political experience starting in the Belarusian Popular Front, Charter97, or as citizen journalists. These people first came into the spotlight after their arrests. The very real repercussions of their political activities have made their names familiar to the general public in Belarus as well as to the international organisations and probably strengthened their motivation to stay in politics.

These two possible paths to opposition suggest that while repression may discourage political involvement by some and increase the number of politicians in exile, in the longer run repressive measures only increase visibility of the political

opposition and can possibly turn even politically neutral people into the regime opponents. Oppression in Belarus also draws the attention of foreign donors, increasing international visibility.