

Lukashenka's Rating on the Rise, Counting Political Prisoners – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

IISEPS published the latest national opinion poll results. Alexander Lukashenka's rating is on the rise. The Liberal Club takes a closer look at the public administration reforms. Jana Kobzova notes that the discrepancy in a number of political prisoners in Belarus might be a practical problem for EU policymakers.

[Results of the National Opinion Poll. June, 2013](#) – A national survey conducted in June 2013 by Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), shows that the image of the state as the chief spokesman of the people's interests becomes more and more "dim". However, these sentiments are not directly transferred to the president. Increasing the "economic well-being" in the second quarter of the year has had a positive impact on the attitude to the president – his electoral rating continues to gradually rise: in December 2012, 31.5% respondents were ready to vote for him, in March – 33.4%; now, in June – 37.3%.

[What Eastern Europeans Think about the Democratic Transition: Understanding Values and Attitudes](#) – The paper describes current trends based on available public opinion polls in four Eastern European countries (Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) in order to provide deeper analysis of the transition process taking place in these countries. It argues that democratic transition in post-Soviet countries should not be viewed only in terms of changes in the political elite, but also in terms of changes in the attitudes of its citizens.

[Belarus and the Eurasian Union: Incremental Integration](#) – In a policy brief by Balázs Jarábik, Alexei Pikulik and Andrei Yeliseyeu examines the new integration process which reflects Moscow's efforts to create a supranational regulatory framework inspired by the EU. However, many obstacles prevail. Belarus, for example, has no interest in pressing for a full-fledged Eurasian Union unless it is on its own terms. While Central Europe and the Baltic states were willing to pay the price of hard reforms to achieve their European dream, Belarus wishes to get paid for Eurasian integration.

[Counting Belarus' Political Prisoners](#) – Jana Kobzova gives some attention to the difference in numbers of political prisoners: 9 such people on EEAS' list; 11 – in Human Rights Centre *Viasna* list; 5 prisoners of conscience are named in the recent Amnesty International annual report; and 13 political are mentioned by Belarusian news portal Charter97. The expert notes that such a difference in numbers is not just confusing – it might also become a practical problem for European policymakers.

[How to Arrange Belarus. A Square with Love](#) – Ina Romashevskaya of research project in public administration BIPART comments on the meeting of Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich with the Minsk authorities on the issue of improvement of the capital. The expert believes that the state – in this case, the city authorities – should and can transform its urban space, making it attractive, safe and fun for everyone. Respectively, the government should ask the citizens' opinion in order to understand what a “cosy” and “attractive” urban space means for them.

[Public Administration Reform: Policy Documents vs. Presidential Decree](#) – Nikita Belyaev, of the Liberal Club, presented a policy brief on the analysis of the Program of Social and Economic development of Belarus for 2011-2015 and the relevant presidential decrees. One of the findings of the research claims that some decisions taken in the framework of

public administration contradict the objectives set out in the policy documents; at the same the presidential decrees have much greater practical force.

[Belarusian Mobilization as an External Factor](#) – Alexei Gajdukevich, the project “Cytadel”, talks about the purposes and methods of mobilization of Belarusian society. He believes that integration into global processes with positive internal consolidation and protection of the physical, moral and spiritual dangers can become a significant factor for the Belarusian state in foreign policy. In contrast to the decline of Western civilization, the expert sees some positive processes in Belarus, which may lead to more opportunities for Belarusian expansion in the world.

[Economy on the Fingers](#) – a regular program of TV TUT.by discusses the strike of entrepreneurs, the introduction of “platinum action” and the legal side of unloading warehouses. The experts of the program – the economist Sergei Chaly and the lawyer Maxim Znak – come to ambiguous conclusions, in particular, that individual entrepreneurs are at a dead end in the evolution of corporate law. Also, [Gazeta.ru](#) identifies the main feature of the current protests, namely, for the first time Belarusian entrepreneurs have put forward political demands and starting to collect signatures for the exit of Belarus from the Customs Union.

[The State Needs Young Experts. But Why?](#) – this week TV TUT.by program “Amplituda” is dedicated to young people’s participation in analytics and the state demand for young intellectuals. The invited experts – Alexei Matsevilov, Information Analysis Centre under the Administration of President; Yauheni Preiherman, of the Liberal Club NGO; and Alexander Shpakovsky, of project “Cytadel” – discuss the challenges and guarantees that the project would not become analytical support to add to the legitimacy of government decisions already made.

[LGBT Topic in Belarusian Media](#) – Mediakritika.by analyses the results of the annual Report on coverage of LGBT issues in Belarusian media. In particular, monthly Belarusian media publishes about 1.6 related articles; about 61% of the materials contain a neutral evaluation, about 26% – positive, and 12% – negative. It is noteworthy that the state-run media are showing a more aggressive approach in covering the LGBT topic while independent editions demonstrate neutral or positive modality.

[Victor Martinovich: Belarusians are an Absolutely Tolerant, but Cowardly People](#) – What is exactly is Belarusian tolerance and is it objective? Whom and why do Belarusians like or not like ? Is it possible to love others if you do not love yourself? What is more healthy, “give a face” or to keep yourself? Why is the issue of homophobia relevant? Journalist and writer Victor Martinovich answers these questions under the campaign “Budzma!” project “Culture Improves Life!”

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.

Why Belarus Keeps Capital Punishment

On 27 June 2013, at the session of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Belarusian authorities stated that Belarus would not abolish the death penalty and will continue to shoot convicts. Western demands to impose a moratorium seem to follow a certain ritual without any realistic expectations.

Belarus remains the only country in Europe and on the territory of the former Soviet Union which still uses the death penalty. The data provided by the Interior Ministry states that Belarusian courts sentenced 102 people to death between 1998 and 2010. The death penalty procedure remains so secret that the authorities do not even return the bodies of the executed. Several years ago two death convicts hung themselves in their cells in order to avoid being shot, so that the authorities would give their bodies to their families.

It should be noted that the idea of death penalty as a fair punishment remains quite popular in Belarus. On the other hand, the position of religious institutions and human rights defenders has become more noticeable in society. The recent speech of head of the [Belarusian Orthodox Christians Filaret](#) for the abolishment of the death penalty has become a considerable event in Belarus.

How Does Death Penalty Look Like

Execution by shooting remains the form of death penalty execution in Belarus. Most of the executed are criminals that committed crimes with aggravating circumstances. The aggravating circumstances usually mean the homicide of children or elderly people, pregnant women or homicides with rape. The authorities shoot from two to nine people annually – much less than in 1990s.

Capital Punishment in Belarus (1990-2010)																
Number	20	24	24	29	47	13	4	7	4	4	2	9	4	2	2	3
Year	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs																

The decision whether to sentence someone to capital punishment depends on a concrete judge. Andrei Zhuk, executed for a cruel homicide, wrote to his mother that the court sentenced one person for the similar crime to 25 years of imprisonment,

another one – to life in prison, and him – to death.

Very often, about a year passes between the verdict until the actual execution. Aleh Alkayeu, former head of Minsk pre-trial detention centre and death sentences executor, describes the procedure of shootings in Belarus in details in his book “The Shooting Team”.

The Commission consisting of a Public Prosecutor, a Head of a detention centre and an Interior Ministry’s representative calls the deathrow convict to the office. In the office, the Commission informs about the rejection of the convict’s pardon appeal, then policemen put a black bandage on his eyes and lead him to the next office. There, the executioner brings the convict to his knees and shoots him in the back of the head. The whole procedure takes about two minutes.

The authorities never give the bodies of the executed to their relatives or inform them of the place of burial. Often, the relatives of the executed go around Minsk cemeteries in order to find fresh graves there, after having received written notification with information that the convict was dead. It gives no results. Relatives of one of the executed buried his personal belongings instead of the body and put a tomb stone just to have a place to commemorate the dead.

The UN Human Rights Committee demanded that the Belarusian authorities should give the bodies of the executed convicts to their families several times. However, the authorities continue to ignore these demands.

The Attitude of the Society

The death penalty has remained an issue of little importance for Belarusian society for many years. The problem of execution by shooting in Belarus proceeded to the national level only once, after the execution of Dzmitry Kanavalau and Uladzislau Kavalyou. The court sentenced them both to death for [the blast in Minsk metro](#) on 11 April 2011, which took the

lives of 15 people.

According to the data provided by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, 37% of Belarusian population did not believe in [the convicts' guilt](#). This caused a wave of moods for abolition of death penalty in the society. According to IISEPS, since September 2012, 40.7% Belarusians stand up for the abolition of the death penalty, while 49.1% want to preserve it.

Human rights defenders and intellectuals stand for the death penalty's abolition rather prominently in Belarus. The Catholic Church and the Belarusian Orthodox Church raise their voices against the authorities' policy very rarely, however, as for this issue, both denominations pursue the death penalty's abolition.

However, Belarusian society still holds to the idea that the death penalty should remain. Moreover, the Belarusian authorities have some instruments of the informational influence over the people. When the state media systematically show the pictures of cruel murders, it raises the pro-death penalty mood amongst the populace almost automatically.

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When Belarusian TV-viewers see Anders Breivik sitting in a leather arm-chair smiling, they think that it is not that Belarus should abolish the death penalty – rather it is Europe that should introduce it. In such situations, Belarusian society sees the attempts of human rights defenders to stop the death penalty as a step of solidarity with murderers, not as an act of humanity.

Will Belarus Abolish the Death Penalty?

The European Union has been trying to convince Belarus to abolish the death penalty for a long time. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe set up the introduction of a Moratorium as the only condition for returning the status of specially invited to Belarus. Belarus lost this status in 1996, when the referendum made the death penalty legal. The West did not recognise the results of that referendum.

Belarus has shown no reaction to the demands of the European structures so far. The officials often say privately that “Let the EU and the Council of Europe teach the U.S. some humanity, and then demand something from Belarus”.

Although as the chart above shows, the number of executions has dropped significantly since 1990s, Alexander Lukashenka personally often said he would not go for the introduction of a moratorium as most Belarusians would object. Also, the Belarusian leader has no plans to become a member of the Council of Europe, as it would bring no major benefits for his regime. If Lukashenka wants to mend the relations with the West, he would release political prisoners and it would be enough.

Neither the Belarusian authorities nor society seems to be ready for the death penalty's abolition yet. It may take a while before Belarus will stop being the only country in Europe using death penalty.

Lukashenka to Cut A Quater of Belarusian Bureaucrats

On 12 April Alexander Lukashenka made his final decision on the public administration reform that he declared last year.

He signed Decree No. 168 that aims to optimise the state apparatus and reduce the number of civil servants.

The reform did not any further than sacking 25% of government officials. The reductions should allow the government to raise the salaries for the remaining bureaucrats.

Lukashenka is particularly worried about the potential public reaction to this. He reiterated many times that he does not want to see an income gap between the average Belarusian and a civil servant grow as a result of the reform.

General wisdom suggests that the president has reason to worry. Belarusians perceive bureaucrats quite negatively and the growing income disparity between civil servants and the rest of society can be a trigger that will anger them even more. It stands to be noted that salaries in the governmental sector remain rather modest and opinion polls reveal that the people are aware of bureaucrats nominal salaries.

Reform that Does Not Reform

Lukashenka has finally finished the long and drawn out thinking process on public administration reform that he [proclaimed](#) in mid-2012. As a result, Belarusians have not seen a full-fledged reform. The grand initiative has been reduced to simply sacking 25% of civil servants. At least, at the moment Decree No. 168 foresees only this and some other minor changes.

Thus, it looks like the popular [hypothesis](#) about the intentions behind the proclaimed reform have indeed materialised. The decree simply aims to raise the salaries of bureaucrats in order to slow, or even stop, the draining pool of public officials moving over to the commercial sector in Belarus or abroad. The efficiency of public administration system itself, however, remains at the bottom of the agenda.

The logic is simple. The salaries of the fired civil servants should be redistributed among those who remain. According to a study by the Liberal Club, a Minsk-based think tank, the savings will amount to about BYR 900 billion or roughly \$100 million. The Ministry of Finance estimates the savings to be slightly higher than this.

How Much Do Civil Servants Earn Today?

If all this money goes to the pockets of the civil servants who are keeping their jobs, the average pay raise will amount to about \$200-220 per person. This looks quite substantial, all things considered.

In February 2013 the average salary in the governmental sector remained as low as \$560.

Presumably, the extra money to be drawn out of the “reform” will not be spread out evenly amongst all civil servants and the results of these pay raises will, for a majority, bring them to essentially the existing salary rates. High-ranking officials will most likely enjoy larger increases than their middle- and low-ranking colleagues.

Today junior civil servants earn not more than \$250-350, while the average official salary of a minister exceeds \$1,600; and a deputy minister – \$1,450. Additionally, high-ranking civil servants can regularly enjoy considerable monthly bonuses.

Belarusians Think that Public Servants Have Low Wages

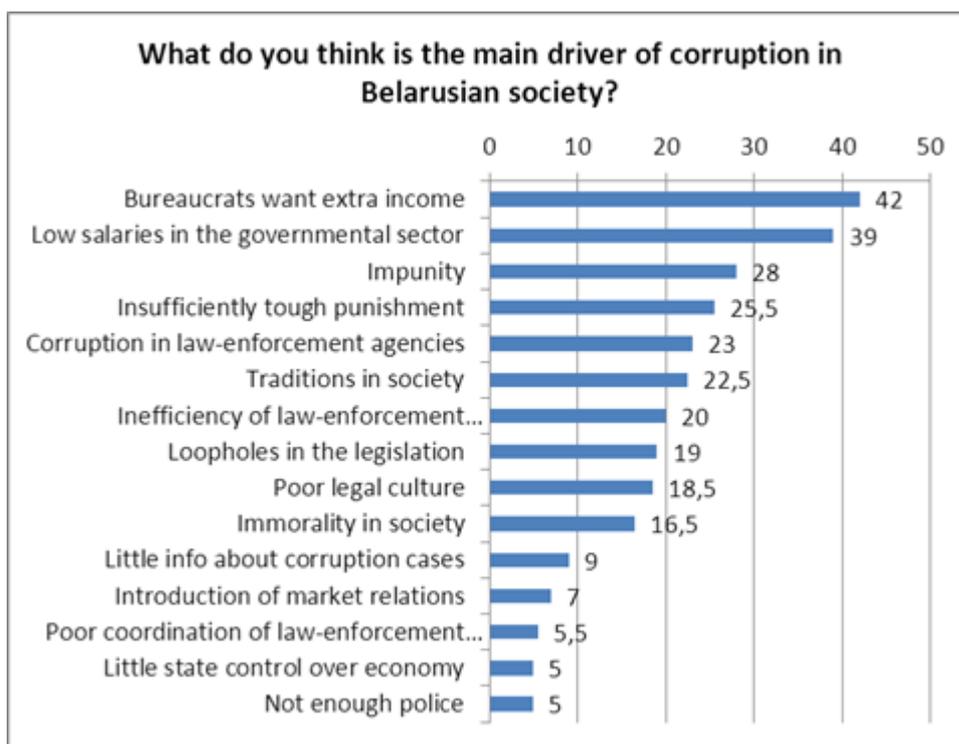
The Liberal Club did a thorough content-analysis of Lukashenka’s speeches in the context of the public administration reform. The analysis reveals that he was primarily concerned with the potential public reaction to the planned increase of bureaucrats' salaries.

In his 2012 address to the nation Lukashenka underlined his intention to make sure that the reform would not bring about

social stratification. He warned the government against a situation developing in which people would feel that bureaucrats have become better-off, while the rest of society has the same income.

Interestingly, various opinion polls demonstrate that Belarusians generally admit that civil servants' salaries remain low. Sometimes even too low.

In a 2010 survey of the Information and Analytical Centre of the Presidential Administration 39% of the respondents named low salaries in the governmental sector as the main driver of corruption in society. This was only slightly less than the most popular answer: bureaucrats' desire to secure extra income causes corruption (42%).



Even though the data of state pollsters usually lacks credibility, this survey does not appear to be politicised. Moreover, it dates back to the year of 2010, when the issue of public administration reform did not come up in Lukashenka's speeches. Therefore, the data looks close to reality.

Public Attitudes towards Bureaucrats

Even though Belarusian citizens realise the problem of low salaries in the governmental sector, they might still negatively perceive the prospects of raising bureaucrats' salaries.

Sociologist Vasily Korf of the Liberal Club argues that generally Belarusians do not like government officials. In his opinion, a number of factors play a role here.

First of all, ordinary people often have to go through tiring bureaucratic procedures in their daily lives (in healthcare, education, housing, etc.). Obviously, this does not make them the biggest fan of bureaucrats.

Secondly, people regularly hear about corrupt civil servants and managers of state enterprises in the news. This is part of President Lukashenka's PR strategy. He basically came to power as a desperate warrior against corruption at the highest levels of the state machinery. For his part, he is trying to do his best to [sustain](#) this image. As a result, the public is constantly bombarded with the image of corrupt officials at all levels of state power except, naturally, the highest one.

Finally, personal encounters with officials often leaves people unsatisfied. Vasily Korf points to the Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies (IISEPS) polling data that demonstrates, for example, a growing number of those who say they were offended by a policeman, prosecutor or judge. People naturally become hostile to any idea of making the life of civil servants better after repeated negative encounters with bureaucrats.

In the end, public feelings about Decree No 168 appear to be rather mixed. Even taking into account their critical attitudes towards the bureaucracy, Belarusians realise the standing issue of low salaries in the governmental sector. They also realise that this problem leads to more corruption in society. Therefore, the population will not necessarily

take too critical a stance on the issue of higher salaries for bureaucrats. Especially since this is accompanied by a 25 % layoff in the ranks of civil servants.

The public reaction will also depend on the overall economic situation in the country. In a stable financial situation the population will not worry about salary increases. But if another economic crisis develops, it can easily become a target of the public's anger.

Do Belarusians Want to Join the EU?

On 2 March, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies presented a report on geopolitical preferences of Belarusians. The media paid little attention to the document presented by an influential Belarusian think-tank, although the conclusions of this report could be important for Belarus.

Despite the crisis in Europe, the regime's anti-European propaganda and the EU's weak informational policy inside Belarus, the number of Belarusian euro-enthusiasts continues to grow, slowly, but still. At present moment, 17 % Belarusians consistently support the idea of European integration. Moreover, if we held a referendum on Belarus' joining the EU tomorrow, 38,2% Belarusians would have said "yes".

The new thing about the research is that the biggest group of respondents – 30,9% – does not want to see Belarus involved in

any integration processes at all. 23,3 % Belarusians stand for integration with Russia. This is more than for joining the EU.

But despite state propaganda the level of pro-Russian orientation keeps going down. Primarily because the Russian integration supporters are the people who lived most of their lives in the Soviet Union, and their number in the society is gradually decreasing in a natural way. 20,0 % want integration with both Russia and the EU and see Belarus as a sort of a bridge between the East and the West.

Europe's Casus

The European Union has an unbelievable Soft Power in Belarus, it stands steadily even under the influence of the external conditions.

On the one hand, the regime has been promoting the anti-European propaganda in the state media for many years, focusing on the crisis in the eurozone or economic problems of the "new Europe" countries. After the election-2010, Lukashenka [accused the West](#) in attempt at the state turnover in Belarus.

On the other hand, the European Union has a very weak communication strategy inside Belarus. The EU remains a key donor of Belarus. It has provided € 510 million of technical assistance during the years of independence. But according to BISS analysts only 4,6% Belarusians have any idea of the ["European dialogue for modernization of Belarus"](#). The Belarusian authorities keep silence about the European projects while Brussels put little effort into conveying this information directly to Belarusians.

Despite all this, European integration has become the most stable geopolitical choice. Moreover, there appeared a trend of growth of the pro-European moods in Belarus. The data presented by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies in September 2003 shows that 23,4 %

Belarusians are ready to vote for joining the EU in case of a referendum. This number increased by 15% in 10 years regardless of the unfavourable conditions. The trends when Belarusians should choose between joining the EU and integration with Russia look even more interesting.

	06`06	12`07	12`08	12`09	12`10	03`11	12`11	03`12	09`12	03`13
Joining the EU	29,3	33,3	30,1	42,1	38	50,5	42	37,3	44,1	42,1
Integration with Russia	56,5	47,5	46	42,3	38,1	31,5	41,5	47	36,2	37,2

Data provided by the IISEPS

The data shows that the pro-European vector of the Belarusians' preferences increases every year with regard to the integration with Russia. There are several factors that facilitate growth of the pro-European moods in Belarus.

In Belarus, European goods, European living standards, the social model, and culture have high respect. Even Lukashenka, ordering to improve the functioning of a certain enterprise, says "make it work like in Europe".

Success of the former Soviet block members – the new EU members – also plays a significant role in the pro-European moods of Belarusians. After independence resume, Poland and Belarus started from identical positions, but Poland had become an example of the economic development. The BISS research shows that residents of the Western Belarus, the region that has intensive connections with Poland, have more pro-European moods than others.

Belarusians [often visit the European Union](#) and notice the positive sides of the European life model. The more Belarusians have an opportunity to go to the EU, the more students study in the EU, the quicker the pro-European moods will grow inside the Belarusian society.

Other Geopolitical Choices of Belarusians

Despite the stable trend of pro-EU moods in Belarus, other geopolitical options presented in the BISS studies stay on the table.

There appeared a trend that no one noticed before – pro-independence moods in the Belarusian society. 30,9% Belarusians want neither European integration, nor integration with Russia. 20 years ago, in 1993, 55,1% Belarusians stood for the revival of the Soviet Union, so the views supporting total sovereignty surprise.

Russia is gradually losing its “Western Outpost”. Only 23,3% want to unite with Russia. Given that Kremlin used to see Belarus as a natural part of its empire, today’s results may seriously upset the Russian leaders.

The peculiarity of Belarus lies in the fact that 20,0% Belarusians want to be in a union with both the EU and Russia. On the one hand, it shows poor understanding of the integration processes by ordinary Belarusians. On the other hand, this confirms the Belarusian idea of a country as a bridge between the East and the West.

So Where?

The pro-European orientation of Belarusians has become a noticeable trend, but we cannot claim its stability.

The people of Belarus have few means of influence the authorities. The regime did not ask the people’s opinions when it took the decision to join the Customs Union. It looks highly possible that Belarusians become just passive observers of the process of further integration with Russia. Kremlin desires to adjoin Belarus to Russia more than the European Union wants to accept it as a EU member. Moreover, Russia has much more finance and means of influence inside Belarus.

The European choice of Belarusians will always be jeopardised by the opportunistic policy of the regime and Kremlin’s

imperialistic approach. The only way to turn the pro-European orientation into reality is to let Belarusians vote in free and fair elections. This may take a long time but it appears Belarusians remain pro-European despite years of propaganda and authoritarian rule.

What Do Belarusians Think? + Video

On Friday, 12 April from 13:00 until 15:00 GMT, Belarus Digest will be broadcasting live a discussion panel “What Do Belarusians Think?” which focuses on the latest results of a national public opinion poll carried out by Belarus’ leading pollsters and analysts.

The event is organised by the Eastern European Studies Center (Lithuania) and the Belarus Research Council.

It will be possible to follow the event, comment and ask questions on Twitter using the hashtag [#Whatbelarusiansthink](#) (for English speakers) and [#Чтодумаютбелорусы](#) (for Russian speakers). A video capturing the most interesting moments of the discussion will be available on Belarus Digest one week after the event.

Speakers’ Bio Notes

Valeria Kostyugova is co-editor of the website “Nashe Mnenie” and head of the Agency of Political Expertise of BISS (Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies). She is also the

editor of the "Belarusian Yearbook" 2008-2010.

Prof. Oleg Manaev is a founder of the IISEPS, founding Professor of the Department of Social Communication at Belarus State University (1999-2012), Professor of the Department of Media and Communications at EHU (since October 2012), and former Chairman of the Belarus Soros Foundation (1992-1995). He has published 200 scholarly articles and edited/authored 20 books on issues in the media, public opinion, the political process and civil society development in Belarus.

Dzianis Melyantsov had been with the BISS since August 2007. A graduate of the History Department at the Mahilou State University, he pursued Masters' studies at the European Humanities University and the International Relations department at the Belarusian State University. After the forced closure of EHU in Minsk, Dzianis Melyantsou studied at the Institute for International Relations and Political Sciences in Vilnius (Lithuania), where he defended his M.A. thesis in 2006. He currently is working on his PhD dissertation on Belarus-NATO relations. Until October 2009, Dzianis lectured at the European Humanities University in Vilnius. Mr. Melyantsou is a co-founder of the Institute of Political Studies "Political Sphere".

Paulyuk Bykouski is a journalist working for the weekly newspaper "Belorusy i Rynok" where he heads the policy division. He also writes a column Bynet on dw.de. During his 20 years of experience in journalism and has worked with Belarusian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian, German and Croatian media outlets. Pavel consults private businesses and NGOs on how to work with the media and other information sources as well as conducts seminars on journalism.

Belarus Research Council (BRC) is a loose network of Belarusian polling agencies, think tanks and study centers established in order to increase stakeholder

coordination as well as ensure the quality and availability of research results.

BRC stakeholders gather twice a year to discuss their achievements, share their research findings and future research plans. So far this has resulted in the most comprehensive and inclusive collection of all research currently contacted by Belarusian independent researchers. BRC also serves as a platform to organize discussions, trainings and seminars for Belarusian analysts and researchers in order to strengthen the public policy capacity in Belarus. BRC is still in the developmental stage and is seeking to expand its activities in the field of research communication, donor coordination and capacity development.

Belarus Human Development Better Than in Two EU Countries – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

March was a busy month for Belarusian analysts and international organisations studying Belarus.

The United Nations Development Programme reports on the development of countries and Belarus ranks 50th in terms of social and economic progress.

BISS challenges the belief that Belarusians are strongly for independence with fresh survey results. What are the geopolitical preferences of Belarusians? – their report gives

an answer.

Viasna reviews the situation of the human rights in Belarus. The Kalinowski programme celebrates its 7th anniversary and Generation.by takes a closer look on the project and sums up some interesting facts about it.

Belarus in International Context

[Belarus in 2013 UNDP Human Development Report](#). According to this regular UN study, Belarus is ranked 50th out of 186 nations in terms of economic and social progress. It is classified as having high human development and scored higher than Russia (56th), Romania (57th), Bulgaria (58th) and Ukraine (78th). The report is based on a composite statistic of education, life expectancy and income indices to rank countries into four tiers of human development – very high, high, medium and low.

[Belarus is not included in the top five Internet enemies](#). On 12 March, the World Day Against Censorship in the Internet, Reporters Without Borders, an international advocate for press freedom, labelled Syria, China, Iran, Bahrain and Vietnam as "enemies of the Internet" in a new report for their alleged increased online surveillance. Belarus is not mentioned in the report.

[How much people spend on food in different countries?](#) The discovery by European food shoppers shows that spending on food as a share of total income has declined markedly, but at the expense, some say, of quality: people in poor countries are forced to devote a far higher share of income to buying food. Belarus is in the top in the list where households have to spend significant sums on food, alcohol and tobacco.

[Improving the Situation in the World. What is Important for Belarusian Women?](#) – In January, the United Nations launched a global survey "My World", where everyone can choose

what she/he thinks the most important for a better world. Six priorities of Belarusian women looks like as follows: better health care, honest and effective government, protection from crime and violence, affordable and quality education, protection of forests, rivers and oceans, non-discrimination and harassment. The first four priorities coincide with the global one.

Politics and Human Rights

[Geopolitical Preferences of Belarusians: Too Pragmatic Nation?](#) – BISS presents its new research which studies the attitude of the Belarusians towards the main integration centres – Russia and the EU. The comparison of the data [obtained in 2010](#) and 2013 made it possible to explore changes in some of the crucial trends. As a result, some of the popular stereotypes about the geopolitical choice of the Belarusians were debunked, specifically, the stereotype about the predominantly value-based choice of ‘Euro-enthusiasts’ and integrity of ‘Russophiles,’ as well as the myth about the brotherhood with Russia.

[Amplituda. Belarus Authorities Phenomenally Lucky with the People](#) – analyst Alexander Klaskousky, a guest of TUT.by program *Amplituda*, discusses the characteristics of street protests in the recent history of Belarus, slogans and speeches of the opposition, the authorities' response and relocation of protests to the Internet. The expert believes that Belarus needs street protest but both the authorities and the opposition should learn them.

[The Conservative Revolution: Breakthrough to the Past](#) – Alexander Adamyants, Centre for European Studies, continues to debate between liberals and conservatives. In his article, the author presents the dispute as a competition of ideas about the present and future of Belarus. The expert believes that the current conservative futurism is a breakthrough in the past, in a bygone era which has only of historical-

philosophical sense, but nothing more.

[ABC. Political Review # 1, 2013](#) – Analytical Belarusian Centre presents its first Political Review in 2013. The paper examines proposals on changes in the electoral law; the process of coalition building of the opposition forces; and the readiness of the official Minsk to start another cycle of the Belarusian-European relations.

[What Should Institution of the Ombudsman be?](#) – Legal Transformation Centre gives its response to the [draft Concept of National Institution on Human Rights in Belarus](#). The experts consider the proposed concept as quite liberal; namely the document provides that an Ombudsman can have a meeting with any official, including the president, at his/her first request. However, experts strongly protest against the position that the ombudsman should be appointed by the president, as it is limited a lot freedom to criticise.

[Situation of Human Rights in Belarus in 2012. Review-chronicle](#) – Human Right Centre *Viasna* presents the analytical review on the basis of the monthly reviews of the situation of human rights in Belarus in 2012. Each of the monthly reviews includes the analysis of the most important events which influenced the observation of human rights for the given period, as well as the most evident and characteristic features of the abuses registered at that time.

Society

[Nationwide public opinion poll of March 2013](#) – in March 2013, Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) conducted a public opinion poll covering the most topical aspects of life in Belarus. Namely, for the last three months "economic well-being" of Belarusians has worsened. However, this mood is not directly transferred to the president whose electoral rating rose slightly compared to December, from 31.5% to 33.4%. Ratings of opposition have been

declined: only 13.1% of respondents trust in opposition political parties, while 60.9% do not trust.

[Generation.by Examines the Kalinowski Program](#) – Online edition Generation.by identifies 13 interesting facts of the largest Kalinowski programme which celebrates its seventh anniversary. The programme supports the repressed Belarusian students by enabling them to continue education at Polish universities. In particular, it is noted that, in general from 2006 to 2012, about 685 people took part at the Program, 100 of them completed the full cycle of education (bachelorship and Master's degree). Each year, the Polish government spends for the Program about 1.25 million euro.

[Social Nihilism of Liberal Junta](#) – Victoria Kharkevich, conservative centre NOMOS, makes a contribution to the debate between conservatives and liberals. The author strongly criticises the main statements of [the recent Alexander Adamyants' article](#), ranking him as a representative of "nihilistic reservation of liberalism". She invites all intellectuals of any direction to overcome their stamps and scheme and come to a new vision of themselves, the world and the future, what she calls a "conservative futurism".

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.

Recent Polls: Belarusians

Blame Lukashenka for Their Problems (+ Video)

On 18 January the Eastern European Studies Centre and Belarus Research Council organised a panel "What Belarusians Think?". The participants discussed the results of the December social survey conducted by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies.

Professor Oleg Manaev, director of the IISEPS, presented and analysed the polls. He underlined the importance of presentation of the results abroad since deteriorating situation for freedom of speech in Belarus.

Other panellists Alexei Pikulik, an analyst of the Belarus Institute for Strategic Studies, and Sergey Nikoluk from IISEPS, continued on commenting the survey outcomes. Valery Karbalevich, a journalist of Radio Free Europe/Radio Svoboda, moderated the discussion.

The discussants focused on the reasons for stabilisation of Lukashenka's rating although the polls proved dissatisfaction with the deteriorating economy. They also took a closer look into low social trust for the opposition. Below is a summary of the main issues discussed.

Lukashenka: a Source of Crisis and Solace

The December poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) shows that the personal rating of Lukashenka is actually "frozen". In December, 39.1% respondents trusted him, while 49.1% did not trust (in September – 38.5% vs.51.9%). Also, the president is considered as the main culprit of the current economic crisis (41%), followed by the government (39.1%), the opposition

(11.5%), Europe (10.9%), Russia (7.5%).

The polls also showed that the year 2012 appeared to be very difficult for Belarusians. Despite the salary growth, 57 per cent of respondents claimed that their material situation has not changed (vs. 27% of those who claimed that it deteriorated). 88 per cent of respondents think that Belarusian economy is in crisis. Almost half of Belarusians blamed the president for the current economic crisis (41%). However, it is less than in the previous survey (almost 50 per cent). 39 per cent of Belarusians put responsibility on the authorities.

Whereas respondents remained critical toward Aleksandr Lukashenka, many of them have expected him to overcome the economic crisis. Number of Belarusians who understand that the socio-economic model in Belarus is no longer viable has increased (33 per cent now). Almost 30% of respondents claimed that its 'success' depended upon substantial financial aid from Russia.

Is That Really so Simple: Russia Closer, the EU Further?

Cultural closeness of Belarusians and Russians remains one of the key factors of the Euro scepticism in the society. Moreover, the idea of similar mindset determines often the geopolitical identity of Belarusians. For example, it encourages to integration with their Eastern neighbours, even at the level of daily life situations, such as at work, entering into mixed marriages. Changes are possible but only as long-term process.

As the data showed, the number of proponents for the integration with Russia remains rather stable (38 per cent). Similarly, there are no dynamics in the attitude toward the idea of joining the European Union (43%). However, 25 per cent of Belarusians have heard about the European Dialogue on Modernisation. Almost a half of respondents think that the

initiative is important for Belarus. It means that the society is obtaining information on that project and expresses its interest in it.

Belarusians expressed positive attitude toward small cross-border movement (50% in favour of it). In particular, people living in the borderland regions remained positive for that initiative (for example, 72 per cent of Grodna's respondents). Asked for the reasons of problems with implementation of the agreement with Poland and Lithuania, 28 per cent respondents argued that it was due to the Belarusian side.

Only 13% Belarusians put responsibility on Poles and Lithuanians. It can mean that the society understands the political motives staying behind the Lukashenka's strategy. According to the discussants, it is the civic initiatives that could take more active part in the process.

The Opposition: Frozen in Inability

The rating of Lukashenka remains stable (31.5%), but with a slight decrease from 34.5 per cent in September 2012. Interestingly, over 40 per cent of respondents did not express support to any of the listed politicians. It means that still a substantial part of society remains undecided.

The panellists disagree on how Belarusians perceived the opposition. One of the speakers suggested that the society does not understand the idea of the political party and its formalised structure. It is thus unsatisfied with the opposition activity. On the other hand, many Belarusians associate the opposition with the concrete political force. Moreover, support for a certain political party means affiliation to it. Therefore, they remain sceptic about expressing their positive attitude.

The low support for the opposition has also other reasons. According to one speaker, the opposition has already showed

its weakness and inability to exist in the state system. It is also due to the quality of the regime which efficiently hinders its functioning. For example, the opposition is not present in the information space.

Another key issue is that the Lukashenka's socio-economic project worked out for many years in Belarus. Thus, the opposition claiming the transformation to the market economy have not yet obtained substantial social trust and acceptance for its vision.

It appears that for the Belarusian public opinion the opposition appears as eccentric and focusing on abstract disputes. On the other hand, as he noticed, the opposition weakness is also due to the regime. Different opposition would meant different regime.

No Wind of Change?

Panellists also paid attention to the role of Belarusian language in the public sphere. Many among the opposition claim that presence of the language is necessary for development the Belarusian national project. According to some opinions, the wider usage of Belarusian could foster the national awareness and as a result, it would also have impact on the regime. Such attitude failed to obtaine much support among the discussants. Indeed, it is the Russian language which prevails in the daily life usage (around 55-60 per cent of respondents in the last 18 years).

The survey results proved that Belarusians recognised that the country's economic and their private material situation deteriorated. Although many of them still hold Lukashenka's responsible for that, at the same time they perceive him as the one who can manage to improve it.

The December polls showed that Belarusians remain sceptical about the state institutions. The leader among the organisations of the highest social trust is the Orthodox

Church (over 70 per cent). The respondents put their trust respectively in the army (53%) and advocacy (48%). 20% of people trust the oppositional political parties which is almost twice less as number of those who indicated the president (39 per cent). With lack of the social trust, the opposition stacks in its position.

VIDEO

Part 1

Part 2

Part 3

“What do Belarusians Think?” – Broadcast of Belarus Research Council Discussion

On Friday 18 January, Belarus Digest will broadcast a panel titled “What do Belarusians Think?”. The discussion is organised by the Eastern European Studies Centre and the Belarus Research Council and will take place in Vilnius, Lithuania.

The event will give leading pollsters and analysts an opportunity to analyse the latest results of national public opinion polls carried out by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS).

Moderator:

Valery Karbalevich, Radio Free Europe/Radio Svaboda

Presenter:

Professor Oleg Manaev, Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies

Discussants:

Alexei Pikulik, Belarus Institute for Strategic Studies

Elena Korestelva, University of Kent

Sergey Nikoluk, Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies

Bio Notes

Valeriy Karbalevich is a journalist and political scientist in Belarus. He is an expert at the Strategy centre and works for Radio Free Europe/Radio Svaboda. He is the author of the book *Alexander Lukashenka: Political Portrait* (2010).

Prof. Oleg Manaev is a founder of IISEPS, Founding Professor of the Department of Social Communication at the Belarus State University (1999-2012), Professor of the Department of Media and Communication at EHU (since October 2012), and a Chairman of the Belarus Soros Foundation (1992-1995). He has published 200 scholarly articles and edited/authored 20 books on problems of the media, public opinion, the political process and civil society development in Belarus.

Dr. Elena Korosteleva is a Professor of International Politics at the University of Kent. Until August 2012 she was Jean Monnet Chair and Director of the Centre for European Studies at Aberystwyth University. Elena Korosteleva is an academic researcher and expert focusing on the politics of Belarus and

Europe, democratisation, the European Neighbourhood Policy, European Neighbourhood and Partnership Initiative and Eastern Partnership.

Dr. Alexei Pikulik is the academic director of BISS. He received a Ph.D in Political and Social Science from the European University Institute, Florence. His research interests include political economy of reforms, political economy of oil, economic regulation. Since 2006 he has been teaching at the European Humanities University in Vilnius and since 2010 at the European University in Saint-Petersburg.

Sergey Nikolyyuk is a pollster at IISEPS. With a background in science he became more and more involved in political science after 2000. Mr. Nikolyyuk is an adherent of the Russian school of sociology and political science.

*The event is supported by the **Belarus Reform and Media Assistance Project (BRAMA)** implemented by Pact with the kind support of USAID. The Belarus Research Council (BRC) is a loose network of polling agencies, think tanks, donors and other stakeholders interested in improving quality, interpretation and utilization of available researches and data. Currently BRC focuses on: a) taking stock of existing research; b) create links between the researchers, analysts, stakeholders and public; c) improve research presentation and data visualization; d) increase sustainability, transparency and consistency of research activities in Belarus.*

Belarus Top Civic Actions in 2012

With the New Year celebration just around the corner, it is time to think about the list of top civic actions in 2012. As a disclaimer, the goal of the list is to highlight achievement and recap success, often overlooked in the repressive

environment.

Event of the Year: Educators and Researchers

We could not choose between significant events organised by educators, capacity builders and researchers in 2012. Our choice would be the educators, as they managed to conduct both of their national events in Belarus. Nevertheless, researchers gained both in quality and quantity, being at a core of modernization attempt of the Belarus government (at least part of it), as well as of the EU's modernization policy.

On October 12, [the First Capacity Building Fair](#) took place in Minsk. The Fair was organised under the Marketplace project which promotes a market model of consulting services for CSOs in Belarus. The Fair was attended by more than 150 providers and CSOs-customers of capacity building services. On December 7-9, [the 4th Festival of Non-Formal Education](#) took place in Minsk. The Festival was attended by about 250 participants – teachers, trainers and other people sharing the values of life-long learning and non-formal education.

On September 28-30, [The Second International Congress of Belarusian Studies](#) took place in Kaunas, Lithuania. The event was attended by about 300 scholars from around the world involved in studying Belarus and East-Central Europe. The final agenda includes 20 sections in different fields like regional development issues, Belarus relations with other countries, etc.

On May 25-26, Vilnius hosted an international conference "[The Future of Belarus](#)" dedicated to the 20th anniversary of independent studies in Belarus and the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS). The conference was attended by about 100 well-known Belarusian and international researchers, experts, civil society leaders. Following the conference, a book was published titled "The

future of Belarus. Opinion of independent experts".

Evidence of the Year: Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS)

The September-October public opinion poll of [Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies](#) (IISEPS) showed the real results of September parliamentary elections – regardless of numerous declarations and evidence of the opposition representatives, they were valid: 17.4% of respondents had voted early, and 49% – on September 23.

Only 9.6% answered they had boycotted the elections, and another 24% said they had not participated in voting due to other reasons. Some Belarusian politicians [expressed distrust in results of the poll](#). In his turn [Oleg Manaev responded](#) that there is a very little difference between both authorities and opposition who manipulate the truth to the same extent.

Watchdog of the Year: Mediakritika

A new analytical media project was launched – [Mediakritika.by](#). Created by a team of Belarusian journalists, it is aimed at comprehensive critical analysis of the media in Belarus. The new project has a slogan “Truth Loves Criticism” and sets the task to improve the quality of the Belarusian journalism by monitoring the quality of news as it is presented in all Belarusian media.

Cross-Sectoral Cooperation of the Year: Mark Chagall Open Air Exhibition

During the summer season, [an open air exhibition of reproductions of works by Mark Chagall](#) worked at the Yakub Kolas Square in Minsk. The exhibition was dedicated to the 125th anniversary of the artist. The project was implemented by the “Fond of Ideas” paid for by Belarus business and opened by the Minister of Culture.

Advocacy of the Year: Social Contracting by ACT

During the year, the law "[On Social Services](#)" passed all levels of approvals and was adopted on July 13, 2012. One of the most important parts of the bill is introduction of the mechanism of social contracting that allows nonprofit organizations to get funding from the state budget. The main advocate for this change was [NGO "ACT"](#).

Political Project of the Year: Election Monitoring

Political parties managed to agree and deliver partisan poll-watching – [For Fair Elections](#) – of the 2012 parliamentary elections in a coordinated fashion and with a clear methodology based on the local conditions. Two additional project were operating in a coordinated fashion. [The interactive platform of monitoring](#) elections resumed its work before the parliamentary elections in Belarus of September 2012. It is an open platform where anybody can share their experience and observations of the election campaign. Electby.org is powered by the platform Ushahidi (which means "evidence" in Swahili).

[The "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections"](#) campaign is an independent and non-partisan joint initiative of the Human Rights Center "Viasna" and Belarusian Helsinki Committee. From the very first day of the election 95 long-term observers began their work, covering 106 out of 110 election districts. They prepared weekly reports on the course of the election process which were processed, presented and spread as the campaign's weekly and preliminary reports on all stages of the election.

Belarusian Language Promo of the Year: AD.NAK! by Budzma

[Festival of Belarusian-language advertising and communication AD.NAK!](#) is a platform that unites the most active professionals in advertising and communications field and aims to interest others to do advertising and create communications

in Belarusian. This year the event was held for the third time and attracted over 300 applications from more than a hundred participants. The Festival is organized annually by [Budzma!](#) civic campaign.

Branding of the Year: Tsmoki-Minsk

At the beginning of 2012 [Budzma! launched](#) a pilot addition to their campaign – Searching for Tsmok – which aimed to provoke wide public discussion of ‘cool’ Belarusian cultural heritage and the country’s brand. Tsmok is a mythical Belarusian dragon, friendly to people, who represents richness in every sense of the word. As a result, the most popular Belarusian professional basketball club Minsk-2006 was [renamed to Tsmoki-Minsk](#) (Цмокі-Мінск).

Local Fundraising of the Year: MaeSen project

In December 2012, [the project MaeSens](#) transferred 40 million BYR to charity, and this means that the mutual assistance to children has increased \$100,000. One-year-old MaeSens project raises funds for the treatment of seriously ill children and orphanages by organizing the online auction of meetings, where anyone has the opportunity to set a meeting with him/her or to buy a meeting with a person he/she liked. In 2012, the project was awarded as a "Best Startup of the Year" by [Bynet users](#).

Pro Bono of the Year: Minsk United Branding Team

Self-organized Minsk United Branding Team offers to design alternative brands for Minsk. Minsk United Branding Team, a voluntary mixed group of creative professionals and civic activists with a [dedicated page on Facebook](#), starts designing city brand, alternative to INSTID proposal. [The team is open for anyone interested](#) and declared its three main principles as: Professionalism; Inclusivity; and Love to city/country and self-respect.

New Topic of the Year: Working with the Elderly

The issues dealing with intergeneration interaction and non-formal education accessibility for older people became the main topic of Festival of Non-Formal Education of 2012 “[Non-formal education for all generations](#)”. The Grodno-based NGO “Third sector” for 3rd year implements a project “[Golden Age University](#)” for Grodno residents of pension age; this year the University is attended by 140 people.

Effective Cooperation with State Authorities of the Year: RAIK

Due to the RAIK’s initiative, the National Airport Minsk approved a policy to adopt the quality standard of service for persons with reduced mobility. In addition, from January 26, “Kind Button” was launched in Belarusbank ATMs all over Belarus. The initiative of [Republican Association of Wheelchair Users](#) (RAIK) provides an opportunity for users of plastic cards transfer the money to the charity for the Association. From April 14, RAIK launched a charity project “Kind Call”. Every resident has the opportunity to make a paid call from local phone and donate for the rehabilitation of disabled persons in wheelchairs. Also,

Last but not least...

Rural citizen of the Year: “Village Girl”

Kseniya Degelko’s ‘I am from the village’ song [gathers over one million views on youtube](#) in a few weeks period and spark heated debate. Produced by a GONGO, it is characterizing what kind of (civil) society our partners are operating in and trying to influence.

This overview has been prepared by Pact and published by Belarus Digest. It 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.

ARCHE under Threat, Sannikau in London – Digest of Belarusian Politics

The Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies sparked angry opposition reactions with its fresh opinion polls covering recent parliamentary elections. □Former presidential candidate Andrej Sannikov was granted political asylum in the UK. Mediakritika published top 10 Belarusian hits on youtube, and Budzma's animation is among the top. Activists have tried to preserve the integrity of Kurapaty from a new shopping mall.

IISEPS September-October poll. In September-October 2012, the [Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies](#) (IISEPS) conducted a public opinion poll covering topical aspects of life in Belarus. The most discussed topic turned out to be the real results of the September parliamentary elections. According to IISEPS 17.4 per cent of respondents had voted early, and 49 per cent on 23 September.

Only 9.6 per cent answered that they had boycotted the elections, and another 24 per cent said they had not participated in voting for other reasons. Some Belarusian politicians [expressed distrust in the results of the poll](#). In their turn [IISEPS responded](#) that Belarusian politicians – both opposition and government – see only the figures that favour them.

ARCHE under threat. On 23 October, the evening [programme Zona X](#), broadcast on a Belarusian state TV channel, dedicated a slot to the magazine ARCHE and its editor Valery Bulhakau.

Bulhakau was called "the boss of the magazine" and the confiscated books were characterised as "the literature, which smells bad." "The recent events show the commitment to deal with another independent edition," the BAJ Chairwoman [Zhanna Litvina commented](#) on the situation.

The economic court of Hrodna region fined [Valery Bulhakau](#) for five base amounts (almost 50 euros). The court also confiscated all profits from sales of the ARCHE magazine which amounted to BYR 875,000 rubles (almost 80 euros). The editor was found guilty of illegal business activities. Further, on 2 October, the authorities [confiscated more than 5000 books](#) that may be subject to criminal charges. Now Valery Bulhakau has [resigned as editor of ARCHE](#) to [save the magazine from closing](#).

Andrei Sannikau granted political asylum in Britain. The leader of European Belarus civic campaign, former presidential candidate and political prisoner Sannikau claimed there was a threat of a rearrest. "[It was not an easy decision for me](#). But believe me I did not have any other choice", – Andrei Sannikau said.

Database on Polish aid to Belarusian opposition leaked to internet. The internal-use database of [the Polish foreign ministry](#) which describes the cooperation and funding of the Belarusian opposition appeared on an American website. The database reveals the information on aid to several countries in 2007–2011, including descriptions of the project and funding with NGOs. Now the data has already been removed from free access.

The People's Program of Belarus in Warsaw. The presentation was organised in the framework of the project "European Dialogue for Modernization of Belarus." At the Belarusian House in Warsaw, [Yuri Gubarevich and Sergei Chaly](#) presented the People's program of Belarus, a document aimed to develop a new positive vision for the future of Belarus through expert and

public discussion of actual issues of the country's development.

Brussels Declaration of Belarusian oppositionists. On 17 October, [twelve Belarusian political groups](#) adopted a joint appeal to the European Union and called upon the EU institutions to engage as much as possible with the cause of democratisation in Belarus. The joint appeal was signed by representatives of European Belarus, the For Freedom movement, Young Front, the Tell the Truth! campaign, Fair World party, For Modernization union, etc.

Petition to protect Kurapaty. A group of activists launched [a petition through Change.org](#) website to stop the construction of an entertainment complex "Bulbash hall" in Kurapaty where during the years of Stalinist repression tens of thousands of people were shot and buried. The petition has already been signed by about 1200 people and is being directed to relevant government agencies.

Activists discuss possibility of dialogue with authorities. On 16 October, [Belarusian human rights activists](#) held a meeting in Minsk to decide whether they should start a dialogue with the authorities on the need to establish a national human rights ombudsman. The initiator of the meeting is the Minsk-based Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend). The activists noted that Belarusian human rights defenders have always been in favour of establishing an ombudsman's office in the country.

Gomel think tank is under threat. According to the founders of the Gomel independent institute [Strategic Thought](#), the tax services have started checking in relation to the institution because it does not bring revenue, which impedes the profit indicators of the region. Strategic Thought is the first regional community of independent experts, established in 2010 in Gomel.

Activists sentenced to 5 days of arrest. The leader of the Alternative youth initiative [Aleh Korban and activist Uladzimir Siarheyev](#) were detained for activity against propaganda on Belarusian TV. They held a flash-mob putting a TV set with the logo of the first National TV channel and noodles atop and around it. "To put noodles on somebody's ears" in Slavonic languages is an idiom meaning "to tell bold lies".

Top 10 youtube videos for Belarusians. Mediakritika.by analyses a [list of 10 videos](#), which have "entered Belarusian history". Among the top videos are the famous "I am from a village" music video, an historical animation by Budzma! and Russian-produced series Krestnyi Batka (God Father), dedicated to Lukashenko.

Elections in the media monitoring – Final Report. The Monitoring group of Belarusian Association of Journalists [summed up the results of the parliamentary elections coverage](#). According to the report, unlike all the previous elections monitored by BAJ, both state-owned and independent media lost interest in election related subjects pretty soon after the polling.

Ales Bialiatski, the imprisoned leader of the Human Rights Center Viasna was bestowed Honorary Freedom (Citoyen d'honneur) [of the City of Paris](#).

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Why Belarusian Authorities Fear Public Opinion

On 29 June the lower chamber of the Belarusian parliament – the House of Representatives – approved in a first reading amendments which introduce harsher administrative liability for non-licensed public opinion surveys.

The bill further restricts possibilities for independent research of the social and political processes in Belarusian society. As a result, the quality of such research will suffer a new blow. And it is the government itself that is the biggest loser in this situation.

The Belarusian authorities began their struggle against independent pollsters in the early 2000s. In 2002 the Council of Ministers adopted a decree that established a special order for surveying public opinion in Belarus.

To conduct research related to elections, referenda and the overall social and political situation in the country an organisation had to register with the newly founded Commission for Public Opinion Surveys under the National Academy of Sciences. The decree established that the Commission would ensure the high quality of all surveys and make sure that their results were objective and correct.

The Commission got the mandate to issue licenses for pollsters and double-check the results of their surveys. If, in the opinion of the Commission, a surveying organisation published incorrect sociological data, the Commission could withdraw its license.

According to sociologist Vasily Korf of the Liberal Club in Minsk, in 2002 the state decided to do away with independent researchers whose work the authorities deemed suspicious and

unreliable. What the Belarusian authorities fear is any public information that contradicts their own propaganda. And independent surveys make it far more difficult to manipulate public opinion.

Take the example of the presidential elections in 2010. Officially, Alexander Lukashenka received 79,65% of the total vote. But the several independent exit-polls and surveys produced significantly less overwhelming figures – from 35% to 58%. The authorities, of course, did not want the public to hear all those "alternative" figures.

What do the Latest Amendments Add?

The amendments that the House of Representatives passed on 29 June make the punishment for unlicensed surveys more severe. Previously, the violators of the law would get either an official notice or a fine of up to 15 base rates (about \$190). The newly introduced amendments make the law harsher on unlicensed pollsters. Individual pollsters will now have to pay up to 20 base rates (about \$240) if they break the law. And legal entities without a proper incense for conducting public opinion surveys will pay a fine of up to 100 base rates (about \$1,200).

If the same person or organisation infringes the law for a second time during a year the fine will grow even bigger. An individual recidivist will have to pay between 10 and 50 base rates (about \$125 – \$625). And a legal unity will be charged a sum between 20 and 200 base rates (about \$240 – \$2,400).

These sums, of course, are not lethal. But for small independent research groups they are unbearable.

Few Want to Survey in Belarus

As a result of such repressive measures against individual and organisational pollsters, the number of independent institutions that conduct public opinion surveys related to

elections, referenda and the overall sociopolitical situation are very few in Belarus. Actually, only one research group does it on a regular basis – the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS).

Since its foundation in 1992 the IISEPS has had numerous problems with the Belarusian authorities. In 2005 the Supreme Court of Belarus liquidated IISEPS for not abiding by the law on public opinion surveys. The Institute then moved to Lithuania where it got an official registration under the same name and continued its research. But its problems in Belarus did not cease there.

In October 2011 the police detained the founder of the IISEPS Professor Oleg Manaev in the centre of Minsk. Manaev was on his way to present the results of the latest nationwide survey that revealed that the popularity of Alexander Lukashenka was at its historical minimum. While the official propaganda claimed that about 70-80% of the Belarusians supported the president at that time, according to the IISEPS, Lukashenka's electoral rating equalled 20.5%. Oleg Manaev was released several hours later but the presentation of the survey results had to be postponed.

Other independent or commercial institutions conduct politics-oriented surveys of public opinion in Belarus only sporadically. Interestingly, even in the so-called “pro-government camp” surveying organisations that deal with political issues are very few. The Information and Analytical Centre under the Administration of the President is the only institution there that carries out regular surveys.

Impact on the Quality of Research

The unfavourable attitude of the state towards independent surveying of public opinion has a clear negative impact on the quality of sociological research in Belarus.

First, researchers have to work almost underground. Needless

to say that under such circumstances it is often too problematic to strictly adhere to academic research methodologies and standards.

Second, it is very difficult for researchers to stay politically impartial when the authorities permanently treat them as an oppositional "fifth column" and even crack down on them from time to time.

Third, as there are only few institutions that survey public opinion on political issues there is hardly any competition between these few institutions. And, as we know, competition is generally the best mechanism to ensure quality.

Finally, because of the authoritarian realities in the country the majority of the Belarusian population fear to answer political questions in public. As a consequence, many respondents who agree to talk to pollsters either abstain from giving definite answers or tend to say presumably safe things like "I support the president".

The Government Itself is the Biggest Loser

Ironically, in this whole situation the government is the biggest loser. Restricting the work of research groups that survey public opinion the authorities deprive themselves of credible sources of information about the real sociopolitical processes in Belarus.

The state institutions that are supposed to provide such information (like the Information and Analytical Centre under the Administration of the President) are part of the state machine and cannot be independent. As numerous examples have shown, survey findings of such institutions often reflect bureaucratic rationale rather than impartial research standards.

Thus, the state and the whole of society would definitely benefit if Belarus had a well-functioning network of

independent organisations to survey public opinion. Unfortunately, there is little hope that the understanding of this simple fact will prevail in the heads of the incumbent political leadership over fears of truth.

International Conference “Future of Belarus” kicks off in Vilnius

The international conference debating the “Future of Belarus” dedicated to the 20th Anniversary of Independent Research of Belarus and the Establishment of IISEPS kicks off in Vilnius. The full program of the conference can be viewed [here](#).

Today at 12:00 Eastern European Time (EET) Belarus Digest will start live broadcast of the conference. The [live broadcast stream](#) will be available on Belarus Digest all afternoon today and all day tomorrow in accordance with the conference program.

“We are grateful for the hospitality of Lithuania although feel sorry that we could not manage to organize this conference in Belarus” shared his feelings Prof. Oleg Manaev before the opening.

“To make sure that anyone in Belarus can have access to what is happening during the conference there will be [live streaming available](#)” informed the head of Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS).

The “Future of Belarus” will make an attempt to look at the

roots of Belarus`s symptoms, not only repeating the same problems. With the help of evidence based research and public opinion polls the conference is set to provide a reality check through the mirror of Belarusians thinking. There are over a hundred guests from Belarus and international community joining the conference.

The conference concludes on Saturday (May 26) afternoon. It is organized with kind support of USAID through Pact, the Eastern Europe Studies Center (EESC, Lithuania) as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania.

Drift Towards Russia, Legal Environment for NGOs and Journalists – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

Belarusian analysts discuss the country's drift towards Russia, recent public opinion polls and which human rights are more important – social or political. New reports were published on the state of media in Belarus and environment for NGO activities.

[Who Is Losing Belarus?](#) – Grigory Ioffe responds to Zbigniew Brzezinski's thesis that “with the decline of America’s global preeminence, weaker countries will be more susceptible to the assertive influence of major regional powers”. Ioffe thinks that Russia is winning the tug of war for Belarus due to its businesslike Belarus policy. This is why, and not because of

the decline in the overall America's power, Belarus is on the "geopolitically endangered species" list. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Former National Security Adviser of the United States and the author of the concept of NATO expansion to the East, included Belarus into a list of eight geopolitically endangered countries in the event of slower foreign policy activity of the United States.

Book presentation: "Europe – the choice of free Belarusians". On January 26, in Minsk, the office of the Movement "For Freedom" presented a book with the participation of the authors: Andrey Yahorau, Eduard Melnikau, Sergey Alfer, Dina Shevtsova, and others. The book consists of road maps for rapprochement Belarus and the EU in selected thematic areas: media; government cooperation with civil society; local government; freedom of conscience and religion; culture, etc.

What Eurasian integration holds for Belarus – Yauheni Preiherman analyzes the prospects of the new phase of the post-Soviet integration. The expert thinks that the Eurasian integration process alone does not make Belarus' dependence on Russia total and inescapable. At the same Belarus' dependence on Russia is gradually growing stronger, which directly constrains any space for Belarus' geopolitical maneuvering.

BISS December 2011 Polling Memo – Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies presented the fourth issue of the polling memorandum series based on the public opinion poll data of the Independent Institute for Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS). In particular, the authors consider that December's polling results support the trend of the year – the formation of a new majority of Belarusians politically staying "in the middle", being represented neither by the incumbent, nor by the opposition.

Reform, but not radical – Vadim Gigin, the editor of the

state-owned magazine "Belaruskaya Dumka" comments on Lukashenka's statement about the intention to modernize the political system. Political scientist says that modernization means no revolution and its purpose is to overcome the political split in society and creating conditions for national consolidation. Gigin notes that the split is along the line of the civil majority (dominant) and the political opposition (underground).

Violations of Journalists' and Mass Media Rights in 2011. The Belarusian Association of Journalists has released an annual review . In particular, BAJ identifies the following blatant violations: criminal prosecution of journalists; numerous detentions of journalists at protest actions throughout 2011; the introduction of claims against "Narodnaya Vola" and "Nasha Niva" by the Ministry of Information; restrictions on the free use of the internet, etc.

Monitoring of the legal environment for NGOs-2011. The Assembly of democratic NGOs and Legal Transformation Center released a full text of a monitoring of the NGOs' legal status and freedom of association in Belarus in 2011. The authors name the following significant events and trends: the change in legislation, enacting new restrictions on the financing of NGOs and political parties; the verdict against the Head of the Human Rights Center "Viasna" Ales Byalyatski; the prosecutor's warnings under Article 193-1, etc.

Non-governmental organizations in exile: the Belarusian phenomenon – political analyst Yury Chavusau draws attention to the fact that not all NGOs wishing to obtain legal status can be registered in Belarus. In these circumstances, many of them get legal status in neighboring countries. Considering Ales Byalyatski's case, the expert recommends to register an official legal entity abroad for donations and grants that may be an important tool to prevent allegations of tax violations.

Tonkacheva and Gigin on the transformation of the political

[system](#) – on January 24, on the air of TV-TUT.BY a human rights activist Elena Tonkacheva and chief editor of "Belarusian Thought" Vadim Gigin, discussed the situation of human rights in Belarus. According to Tonkacheva, the critical areas are civil and political rights, while for Gigin economic rights were more important. Vadim Gigin emphasized that Belarusian authorities did not close down any media last year and that Belarusian human rights activists work only with certain groups of population rather with all segments of the society because thematic directions are given to them by donors.

[Election-2012. Possible scenarios](#) – activist of the Movement "For Freedom" Yuras Hubarevich describes three scenarios for the possible participation of the opposition in parliamentary elections in September: active boycott, participation with demands to authorities, and participation to the end. The politician does not give any solutions as to which scenario is the best.

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.

The People's Assembly and Attacks Against Opposition

Activists – Politics and Civil Society Digest

Last Saturday's Narodny Skhod (the People's Assembly) had been long planned as a major protest event in Belarus. Authorities warned and intimidated its organizers and prospective participants in all regions of the country well in advance. As a result of this pressure and adverse weather conditions, only around one thousand people appeared in Minsk and several hundred in other regions of Belarus. Other instances of pressure against opposition included attacks and in one instance a robbery of activists by plain clothed individuals.

Masked men attack opposition politician Ukhnaleu on his way to Minsk from Lithuania. On 1 October, masked men [attacked](#) Valery Ukhnyalyow on a road shortly after midnight as the deputy chair of the “Spravedlivy Mir” (Just World) Belarusian Party of the Left was returning to Minsk from Lithuania by car with his daughter and associate Vatslaw Areshka. Masked men [stole](#) \$12,000, bags, mobile phones, two laptop computers and the keys to Ukhnyalyow’s home and car. Police appeared to be committed to undertake a thorough investigation.

Attempt to capture Anatol Liabedzka by plain-clothed men. The leader of United Civil Party was also attacked by people dressed in civilian clothing on 1 October. Several people twisted his arms and tried to push him into the car in the courtyard of the house where he lives. Intervention by his wife and neighbors allowed him not to be captured. Police were not interested in investigating the incident and instead questioned Liabedzka about his old passport, which allowed him to freely travel abroad.

Oleg Manaev detained by the police to keep out a briefing for diplomats. On 6 October, a founder of the Independent Institute of Socio-

Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) Oleg Manaev was [detained](#) in Minsk by police officers. He was held by the police for about three hours. His detention, Oleg Manaev explains, was due to the desire of the authorities to disrupt his speech at a briefing to diplomats.

Fines and Arrests for preparation to the People's Assembly. On 4 October, Liavontsi Chypurnykh from Brest was [sentenced](#) to 5 days of arrest for handing out invitations to the People's Assembly. On 6 October, Yan Melnikau from Minsk was [sentenced](#) to 5 days for handing out leaflets with invitations to the People's Assembly at the check-point of the Minsk Automobile Plant.

Uladzimir Neklaev and Nasta Palazhanka officially warned. Former presidential candidate Neklaev was officially [warned](#) for making a foreign trip last week despite being banned from leaving Belarus. Along with several other opposition politicians, Nyaklyayew stayed in Warsaw between September 27 and 30 to take part in a series of meetings with high-ranking foreign officials on the sidelines of the Eastern Partnership Summit. Palazhanka was [warned](#) about her activity in Belarus.

Court Fined Picket Participants in Central Minsk. On 3 October, the central district court of Minsk [fined](#) detainees participating in a picket at Peramoha Square in the amount of 10-30 base units (Br350 thousand – Br1.05 million). They were accused of administrative violations under Art. 23.34 of the Administrative Code of Belarus (violation of order or organization of mass action or picketing). Lawyer Tamara Sergei got the maximum penalty.

Utility Services Going up in Price in Belarus. In Belarus, housing and communal services [rise](#) in price from 1 October. For example, tariffs for electricity go 15% up, tariffs for thermal energy for heating and hot water – 3.2%, maintenance of residential buildings – 3%. The corresponding decree № 1300 was adopted by the Council of Ministers of Belarus on September 28.

Petrol Goes up in Price for Eighth Time this Year in Belarus. On 1 October, fuel retail prices [go up](#) by 5% in Belarus. It's

going to be the eighth price increase since the beginning of the year. The scheduled protest actions were [not held](#).

Belarus Still Participating in Eastern Partnership. On 3 October, Foreign Minister of Belarus Syarhei Martynau [said](#) that Belarus will retain its part in the EU program Eastern Partnership: "We've not participated in the summit in Warsaw, but Belarus will continue participating in the Eastern Partnership."

CIVIL SOCIETY

Committee to Honor 4 Journalists for Courage. On 5 October the Committee to Protect Journalists said it has chosen four journalists for its 2011 International Press Freedom Awards in New York, an annual recognition of courageous journalism. Awarded journalists [included](#) Natalya Radina, of Charter 97 website in Belarus. The awards will be presented at the committee's annual awards ceremony in New York on 22 November.

Call for positions of coordinator and local consultants. The Office for Democratic Belarus (Brussels) [announces](#) a call for coordinator and local consultants to work in a joint initiative of the European Union and Belarus *Clearing House*. The initiative was established by the Office for Democratic Belarus (Brussels), in partnership with EuroBelarus, Forum Syd (Sweden) and Pact. It aims at strengthening the capacity of Belarusian NGOs, promoting their cooperation with the EU and its Member States, as well as improving communication and cooperation between the Belarusian CSOs, the EU, donors and international implementers.

Gay Pride in Minsk. Minsk Gay Pride-2011 will [take place](#) from 11- 23 October. The organizer is a human rights project "GayBelarus" and its chairman Sergei Androsenka.

Alexei Pikulik Elected BISS Academic Director. BISS completes

its search for a new academic director. BISS's new Academic Director [is](#) Alexei Pikulik, who previously worked for BISS as a senior analyst.

New project for youth. Youth Education Centre *Fialta* launched a project '[Catch the present](#)'. Over nine months 25 young people will participate in trainings, master classes, as well as implementing their own ideas in various areas of life (culture, sports, literature, science, IT, entertainment, education, etc.).

Survey about people with disabilities. Under the survey conducted by IISEPS in September 2011, the Office of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has [initiated](#) a series of issues concerning people with disabilities, as well as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In particular, the data shows that there is no noticeable improvement in the attitude towards people with disabilities in Belarusian society.

The fourth call for proposals under the program "Meeting Place is a Dialogue." International NGO "Understanding" ("Ponimaniye") together with the Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" (Germany) [announced](#) a call for proposals. The program provides funds to organizations and institutions that create the conditions for realizing the potential of older people and establishing a productive dialogue between the generations.

Child Fund International calls for proposals [aimed](#) at preventing child abandonment and institutionalization of children. The competition is held under the program direction "Development of services targeted at the prevention of institutionalization of orphans in the community." The maximum amount of funding per project is \$ 10 000.

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