

# 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 unpleasanties.

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](#), [Uładzimir 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.

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## **Independent Pollsters Will be Prosecuted – Belarus Politics**

# Digest

**Fines for unsanctioned polls.** The House of Representatives approved in the first reading a bill of amendments, which would [establish administrative liability](#) for non-licensed public opinion surveys. The fine would in particular be established for "illegal" polls asking people about their opinion about political situation the country, a national referendum, or parliamentary and presidential elections. It would equal 20 base rates (about \$240) for individuals and up to 100 base rates (about \$1,200) for legal entities.

**New IISEPS survey.** In June, the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) conducted [a survey of public opinion on major issues of life of Belarusians](#). In particular, the experts observe stabilization of the "economic health" of Belarusians, but also an increasing number of people who believe that Belarus needs changes (77.3%). Also, Alexander Lukashenka's electoral rating has dropped to 29.7% compared to March (34.5%).

**Council of the Republic adopted the draft law on KGB.** On June 22, the upper house of Parliament adopted the draft law "[On the State Security Bodies of Belarus](#)". The law establishes the basic tasks, activities of state security, the responsibilities of the president and government in the field of the state security. The bill defines the conditions and limits of the security organs with regards to physical force, special equipment, weapons and military equipment.

**Art-Siadziba ousted.** Pavel Belavus, [the Art-siadziba](#) director, was summoned by the premises owner (the administration of the Horizon plant) that [they must leave the office](#) by July 23 and that their contract that had to expire at the end of October has been cancelled. The reason for it was the fact that they

violated fire safety and numerous other regulations.

**Amnesty International declares Pochobut prisoner of conscience but he is released shortly.** In a statement on June 26, Amnesty International has declared Belarusian journalist [Andrzej Poczobut](#) a prisoner of conscience detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression. On June 30, [Andrey Pochobut was released](#) from the Grodno prison under travel ban.

**Opinion of animal defenders taken into account.** The claims of CSOs involved in animal protection, as well as ordinary citizens were taken into account and the draft law "On the treatment of animals" was sent back for revision. It was reported by [the internet community "Right to Life."](#)

**Uruccha protesters dispersed by police.** Leanid Mazhalski, one of the leaders of a group of people protesting against a infill construction in Uruccha city district [was detained](#) in Minsk on July 5. The hearings in court are scheduled for July 17. It should be noted that inhabitants of Minsk protested against the construction of six blocks of flats for riot policemen in the district. The construction works are going on in spite of their protests.

**National Gender Policy Council's structure approved.** The Council of Ministers [approved internal regulations](#) of the National Council for Gender Policy. Along with numerous government officials, the Council will include representatives of at least three women CSOs: Gender Perspectives, Young Christian Women Association and Women's Independent Democratic Movement.

**The draft law on state social contracting adopted by the Parliament.** On June 27, the House of Representatives adopted the amendments to some laws on social service. 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.

**Deputy Minister participated in the CSO training.** On June 26-27, [NGO "ACT"](#) together with Mogilev oblast executive committee held a training on "Social contracting basics" for Mogilev officials. Among the speakers there were the deputy chairman of the Mogilev Regional Executive Committee Valery Malashko, as well as Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Alexander Rumak.

### *International*

**EU creates pro-democracy fund.** On June 25, EU member states agreed to create a European endowment for democracy aimed to encourage "deep and sustainable" change in societies struggling under oppressive regimes, [EU observer informs](#). The fund should become operational by next year and will primarily target EU neighbouring countries such as Belarus, where people are routinely jailed for showing opposition to President Alexander Lukashenka.

**PACE committee statement on Belarus.** The Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), in [a statement on June 26](#), urged the Belarusian authorities to "open up political space" ahead of September's parliamentary elections. The statement called on the Belarusian leadership to promote a democratic and fair parliamentary campaign and to ensure freedom of expression, association and assembly, as well as political rights for all opposition movements.

**Ashton calls on authorities to stop harassment of opponents.** [In a statement on June 29](#), EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton has called on the authorities in Belarus to stop the harassment of the opposition, media and civil society, expressing deep concern at a number of recent incidents.

**Worst of the Worst 2012.** A new Freedom House report "[Worst of the Worst 2012: The World's Most Repressive Societies](#)"

highlights those countries that earned the lowest possible scores (Worst of the Worst) or fell just short of the bottom scores (On the Threshold) in Freedom in the World 2012, Freedom House's annual global assessment of political rights and civil liberties. Belarus was deemed to be "On the Threshold" together with Burma, Chad, China, Cuba, Laos, and Libya.

**Linas Linkevicius appointed as Lithuanian new ambassador to Belarus.** [Linas Linkevicius](#), a former Lithuanian defense minister, has been appointed as the Baltic state's new ambassador to Belarus, said a spokesperson for the Lithuanian embassy in Minsk on July 5.

**UN appointed a special rapporteur on Belarus.** On July 5, the United Nations' Human Rights Council adopted a [resolution](#) and agreed to appoint a special rapporteur to monitor the situation of human rights in Belarus and to make recommendations for its improvement. The 47-nation council voted to create the post, as proposed by the European Union, by 22 votes to 5, with 20 abstentions. [Belarus does not recognize](#) the mandate of the UNHRC Special Rapporteur on Belarus and will not cooperate with him, the press service of the Foreign Ministry of Belarus said.

**Belarusian envoy speaks against the appointment of rapporteur on Belarus at UN Human Rights Council.** Mikhail Khvastov, [Belarus' permanent representative to the UN Office in Geneva](#), said on June 28 during a session of the UN Human Rights Council that there was no need for the appointment of a special rapporteur on Belarus.

*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.*