

# Belarus in Global Ratings 2014: Low on Freedom, Higher on Prosperity

The iconographic prepared by Pact compares Belarus to its neighbours in various international ratings.

Compared to Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, Belarus scores very low on various freedoms, including press and Internet freedoms.

When it comes to human development and prosperity, however, Belarus outperforms Ukraine and Russia but lags behind its EU neighbours.

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## The Chernobyl Way 2013

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

The Belarusian opposition also gathered around one thousand of its supporters in Minsk under antinuclear energy slogans, protesting against the new nuclear station erected close to the border with Lithuania. Since 1989 it is a tradition for many Belarusians to commemorate the event in the form of

street manifestation on the 26 of April called the Chernobyl Way (Čarnobyłski šliach in Belarusian).

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

### **What Is the Chernobyl Way?**

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

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

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

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

*Video: The Chernobyl Way-2013 opposition demonstration.*

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

### **'Invisible Catastrophe'**

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

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

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

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

### **Chernobyl through the Prism of Belarusian Politics**

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

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

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

But as most other opposition events yesterday the Chernobyl Way ended with detentions, mostly made by people in plain clothes. Several people were released while others, including journalists were charged with disobeying police and are now awaiting their trials.

*Paula Borowska*

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## **A death in Minsk should sound**

# the alarm bells

Mike Harris from Index on Censorship went to Minsk in the beginning of September to meet Belarusian civil society activists including journalist Aleh Byabenin. It had never happened. One of the founders and a leader of charter97.org website had been found hanged in



his summer cottage. In his article for The Independent [\\*](#) Mike Harris reflects on the death of his colleague and the political climate of Lukashenka's Belarus.

## Europe's shame: the dictatorship of Belarus

A death in Minsk should sound the alarm bells

By Mike Harris  
The Independent

*Wednesday, 8 September 2010*

I landed in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, last Friday to meet the journalist Oleg Bebenin and other civil society activists. On Monday I attended Oleg's funeral.

One of Belarus's leading journalists, he had been found hanged in his country home earlier on Friday. His beloved 5 year old son's hammock was around his neck, hung so low that his feet touched the ground. Andrei Sannikov, of the human rights group Charter97, the organisation Bebenin co-founded, was one of the first at the scene. He has grave doubts about the coroner's suicide verdict. "No suicide note was found, and his last SMS to friends showed they planned to go to the cinema."

Bebenin's associates suspect foul play and talk through tears

about a man who devoted 15 years to fighting President Aleksander Lukashenko's dictatorship, and was in no mood to quit. In hushed tones everyone fears a return to the period between 1997–99 when activists, business and journalists suddenly “disappeared” without trace.

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