

Belarus in Focus winners, cycling festival, Europe Week in Minsk – Belarus civil society digest

Belarus in Focus 2016 journalistic contest awards winners. Viva Rovar! cycling carnival takes place in Minsk. BAJ announces Free Word winners on Press Freedom Day.

Europe Week is held in Minsk. First episode of the City urban activism reality show is released. School of Managers will train new managers for CSOs. People detained and convicted during the May Day protests across Belarus.

Integration Forum announced in Viciebsk under the 5th Accessibility Week. This and more in the new edition of Belarus civil society digest.

Journalism and media

[Awards ceremony of the winners of Belarus in Focus 2016 held on 12 May](#). This is an international [competition](#) for journalists writing about Belarus in international media. This year the contest took place for the sixth time and organised by the Belarus in Focus Information Office in partnership with Press Club Belarus and the International Visegrad Fund.

[Free Word winners announced on Press Freedom Day](#). On 3 May, Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) traditionally announced the winners of the BAJ professional contest for journalists *Volnaje Slova* (Free Word – in English). On the same day, the exhibition of the winners of the [World Press Photo](#) was launched at the gallery of CECH.

[Belarus Internet Governance Forum](#) will take place on 17 May in Minsk. It is a unique platform for multistakeholder dialogue aiming at finding the best ideas for the progression of Internet in Belarus. The forum attracts representatives from government, business, civil society, network service providers, etc. One of the forum's organisers is Human Constanta CSO.

[Europe Week in Minsk](#). The *Dzieja* initiative, *Students For Liberty Belarus* and *Belarusian Students Association* organise a series of events to mark the anniversary of the proclamation of the Schuman Declaration (9 May 1950), which is considered the beginning of European integration. The organisers promise an intense program aimed at increasing the values of a united Europe in Belarus.

Regional and grassroots activism

[The online platform Zvarot.by launches the 3rd Advocacy School](#). The School aims to train civic activists to independently plan and conduct advocacy campaigns at the local and national level using proper tools and methods. The organisers pay a particular attention to the practical focus on human rights activities. Deadline for applications is 17 May.

[School of Managers](#). The Association for Life Long Education (ALLE) invites to the School of Managers educational course. The School aims to improve the competencies of 20 managers of regional CSOs in developing and promoting civil and non-formal education programmes, using modern communication and advocacy channels. Deadline for applications is 14 May.

[The first episode of the City show released](#). The City is a [project](#) that teaches the activists to improve the cities and

shoots all the process as popular series. During 8 episodes, 20 participants from 13 Belarusian cities fight for the prize fund and the Grand Prix of a study tour to Brazil. The participants meet various challenges and implement their urban projects. New episodes are scheduled every Thursday.

[Pool of Youth Work educational programme](#). Organised by [Fialta](#) Youth Centre, the programme provides an opportunity for young activists to learn professionally conducting trainings, workshops, international exchanges and coaching youth initiatives. The programme is based on the best international practices of non-formal education. The course will be held from 6 May to 30 July in Minsk.

Rights of the people with special needs

[Integration Forum in Viciebsk](#). On 17-18 May, Viciebsk will host the Republican Integration Forum *Accessible Job and Employment for People with Disabilities*. The forum is organised by CSOs, including the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, under the [Fifth Accessibility Week](#).

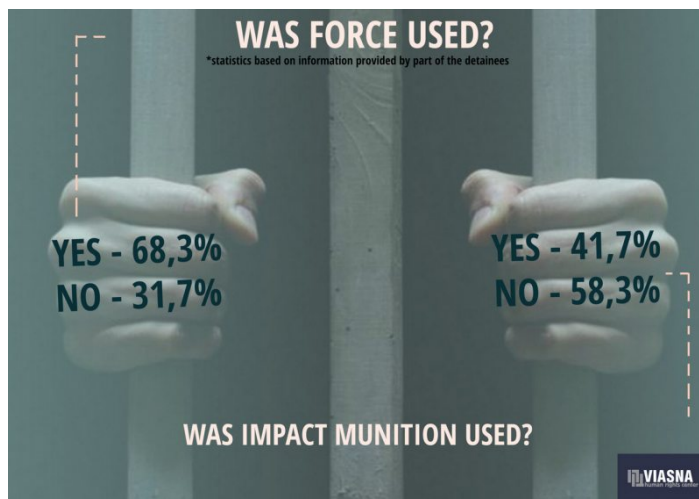
[Belarusian Children's Hospice NGO calls for local initiatives projects](#). The call aims to support the rights and needs of children with serious illnesses and disabilities, as well as their families. Two initiatives will be selected with a maximum budget with EUR 5K per initiative. Deadline is 25 May.

Mass protests

People detained and convicted in May Day protests across Belarus.

At least 15 people were detained by the police before and after May 1's protests held across Belarus, including journalists and opposition leaders Mikalaj Statkievič

and Paviel Sieviaryniec. The demonstration in Minsk was banned by the city authorities but attended by several hundred people.



Analytical review of detentions in Minsk in March 2017

(infographics). In March-April, the Human Rights Centre *Viasna* processed 130 questionnaires from individuals whose rights were violated for exercising freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. In particular, 80 detainees claimed the use of physical force by police officers, 68 – special munitions without a cause on the part of a detainee.

Other

47 contracts were signed with CSOs for the first three months of 2017 to provide services under the state social contracting. Over 1,000 people received the social services from CSOs supported from the state budget. State social contracting is an innovative form of interaction between local authorities and CSOs, developing in Belarus since 2014.

Imena opens a unique art exhibition about Belarusians. From May 11, the Minsk space *Korpus* hosts an exhibition that presents 10 installations made by Belarusian artists together with the characters of the online magazine *Imena*. It writes about Belarusians and social projects that need help. During the year, *Imena* launched 22 social projects and collected

\$150K to support them and its own activity.

[Cycling carnival Viva Rovar!](#) takes place in Minsk on 13 May: thousands of bicyclists will drive along the Pieramožcaŭ Avenue, and then enjoy a festival in Victory Park. On 12 May, for the first time Minsk hosts an International [conference](#) on the development of cycling in cities. Coordinators of the event are the Cycling Club Minsk and the Minsk Cycling Society.

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.

Social parasites' protests, high-tech park – digest of Belarus analytics

Aliena Arciomienka, BISS, analyses the impact of the crisis on the potential of street protest in Belarus. Thomas De Waal, Carnegie Europe, suggests Lukashenka's balancing act is made easier by the confusion coming from the White House as to what constitutes current U.S. foreign policy.

High basic civic knowledge, low trust in influencing government – Pact presents key results of the Civic Literacy Test survey in Belarus. Aliaksandr Klaskoŭski reflects on a meeting between Lukashenka and chief editor of Narodnaja Volia independent newspaper.

The new papers added to Belaruspolicy.com database include a study of the Belarusian High Technology Park, joint stock companies, and the 8th issue of the Macroeconomic Review of Belarus.

This and more in the new edition of digest of Belarus analytics.

Social protests in Belarus

[New Quality of Protest. Why Belarusians Began to Take Streets](#)

– Artiom Shraibman, for the Carnegie Moscow Center, writes about the protests against the “social parasite tax.” People were brought to the streets due to a mixture of two emotions – they feel that they have nothing to lose and nothing to fear. This is a new quality of protest for Belarus when the passive majority is sympathetic not to the president but the protesters.

[What Do the Protests in Belarus Mean?](#)

– Yauheni Preiherman, for the Jamestown Foundation, analyzes a series of protests in Minsk and regional cities in recent weeks that made headlines both inside Belarus and abroad. The fact that they gathered the largest number of protesters in almost seven years sparked active discussions as to whether the protests can become a game-changer for Belarusian domestic politics and the country’s role in regional affairs.

[Impact Of the Crisis On Protest Potential of Unemployed](#)

– [Aliena Arciomienka](#), BISS, analyzing the recent [protests](#) against the decree №3, draws attention to the polls on the Belarusians' attitude to reforms. From 2014 to 2015, the number of unemployed Belarusian ready to participate in rallies raised from 4% to 23%. Such protest potential is growing not constrained by any fear of job loss or deterioration of labour conditions or the lack of support from

the state.

[Why Belarusian Business Supports Social Projects](#) – Aliaksandr Skraboŭski, head of the National contest [Social Weekend](#), explains who and why social projects. One of the answers is that Belarusian business wants to reflect the degree of their maturity, their owners, employees, and thank the environment for the opportunity to run the business. Soon such intangible assets will remain almost the only competitive advantage on the market.



[Will Lukashenka follow Jaruzelski's steps?](#) – [Aliaksandr Klaskoŭski](#) follows up on a recent meeting between Lukashenka and [Iosif Siaredzič](#), chief editor of Narodnaja Volia independent newspaper. The author concludes that the crisis in Belarus is not as acute as it was in Poland in late 1980s to make Belarusian leadership hurry up with the national dialogue, while Belarusian opposition and civil society should get out of the political ghetto to make the roundtable meaningful.

Foreign Policy and Security

[A Belarusian Balancing Act](#) – Thomas De Waal, Carnegie Europe, notes that unprecedented series of street [protests](#) in several towns over the weekend of February 18–19, inspired by socioeconomic grievances, suggests that Alexander Lukashenka

knows his regime needs to keep adapting if it is not to crumble. Lukashenka tries to keep his options open with the EU while not allowing Russia to take him for granted.

[Situation In the Field of National Security and Defense of Belarus. January 2017](#) – According to Belarus Security Blog monthly monitoring, a new reality in the field of border security Belarus is the fact that starting from August 2016 Russia de facto withdrew from the regime of freedom of movement across the border with Belarus. The depth of the contradictions between the two countries makes real the prospect of a full-fledged return of border controls on the Belarusian-Russian border.

[Civic Literacy Test in Belarus: High Basic Knowledge, Low Trust in Influencing Government](#) – According to the Civic Literacy Test, the first national survey of the kind in Belarus, 75% of Belarusians have high knowledge of basic civil rights and responsibilities; at the same time, 99% believe they cannot influence state policies and decisions. The national survey was conducted by SATIO and commissioned by Pact in June 2016. The presentation will take place on March 15 in Minsk.

[P.S. Zhadan. Catching poet-"terrorist"](#) – [Maksim Žbankoŭ](#), Belarusian Journal, reflects on a [case](#) of the detention in Minsk, the deportation decision and its cancellation of the famous Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan. The analyst sees a clear message in that – the authorities have no logic, only emotions and instincts. One more conclusion is that a person in Belarus is totally unprotected before the authorities.

Business environment and

economy

[Work of the High Technology Park: a threefold increase in exports of IT services and what would happen if the park is closed](#) The creation of the park led to a threefold increase in exports of IT services in Belarus during 2006-2013.

[Work of the High Technology Park: a threefold increase in exports of IT services and what would happen if the park is closed.](#) The results of statistical modeling that involves the method of synthetic monitoring for assessing the impact of High Technology Park on the growth of IT sector show that the creation of the park led to a threefold increase in exports of IT services in Belarus during 2006-2013. However, top managers of Belarusian companies are afraid of changes in the Park's legal environments and predict migration of IT companies in other countries, spread of semi-legal schemes of work and an overall reduction in the rates of IT sector development.

[The anatomy of Belarusian joint stock companies.](#) Little is known about how effective the Belarusian enterprises are, what share of the economy belongs to the state, how state-owned enterprises differ from private ones, how labour, capital and materials are distributed between the companies, and how emergence, evolution and exit of enterprises from the market impacts the economy. This work is an attempt to find answers to these questions by analysing the activities of the Belarusian joint stock companies.

[8th issue of the Macroeconomic Review of Belarus \(IV quarter 2016\).](#) Quarterly issues of the Macroeconomic Review of Belarus represent the unique panorama in over 100 graphs and tables of the key economic indicators covering all sectors of Belarusian economy: real sector, fiscal sector, monetary sector, and external sector. There are less words, more data. Macroeconomic Review can be helpful for a wide range of local and external stakeholders interested in Belarus economy in

general: from academia and public authorities to representatives of international organisations.

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Tax on “social parasites” stirs up public angst in Belarus

On April 2, 2015, President Alexander Lukashenka signed Decree No. 3 “on preventing social dependency”, otherwise known as the “idleness decree” or the “social parasite tax.”

The new law requires nearly half a million jobless Belarusians who did not pay taxes for more than six months, to pay an annual fee of approximately \$245 (as of January 1, 2017).

This fee is quite high, particularly for a jobless person, considering the average monthly salary in Belarus is roughly \$380. Those listed as officially unemployed are exempt from the decree, as they must do work on behalf of the state to receive their benefits (such as street cleaning).

The [presidential press service](#) of Belarus describes the tax as targeting those who “do not live within their means and use all amenities such as free education and healthcare services.”

This resistance appears genuinely broad based and domestic in nature.

Over the past two months, as the tax has come due, resistance to the decree has grown from small critiques and online chatter, to public discussions organised by the democratic political opposition and the authorities, to public protests in Minsk and the regions. This resistance appears genuinely broad based and domestic in nature. As of the end of February, at least ten protests have occurred across the country with total participation estimated at nearly 9,000. Some of these protests have been organised by the democratic opposition, while others have been self-organised by citizens.

Frustration with the parasite tax has served to awaken public interest in political life. It also creates a rare opportunity for democratic parties and movements to connect with ordinary people on a large scale. Elements of the democratic opposition have long been opposed to the decree. Their efforts to connect with and organise citizens frustrated with Decree No. 3 demonstrates the opposition's growing capacity to look beyond a protest only approach.

Instead, opposition parties and movements have sought opportunities to facilitate public conversations, demonstrate their responsiveness and relevance to citizens affected by the decree, and to engage authorities on behalf of the citizenry at public meetings.

The authorities have thus far pursued a public relations strategy to defend the decree and emphasise that the Presidential administration will implement it fairly.

In the short term, it seems organised efforts to oppose the decree, public frustration, and opportunities to engage people in civic-political action will grow. The Belarusian authorities have taken note of the dissatisfaction. While unlikely to overtly abandon the decree in the face of

opposition, they have begun efforts to mitigate negative perceptions through nuanced public engagement efforts of their own.

The authorities have thus far pursued a public relations strategy to defend the decree and emphasise that the Presidential administration will implement it fairly. This public relations defence on state media and at “citizen receptions” organised by the presidential administration has been coupled with targeted pressure against local activists, largely in the form of hefty fines for participating in unsanctioned rallies. The number of activists facing charges still remains low, but these kinds of stifling measures may grow if protests continue.

Opposition to decree No. 3 activates the public

President Lukashenka’s Decree No. 3 was criticised by democratic parties, human rights organisations, independent unions and the [International Labor Organisation \(ILO\)](#) immediately after it was signed in 2015. The decree and its critics were largely ignored by the broader public until recently.

Ultimately, over 470,000 people (approximately 10 percent of the working age population) were told they are subject to the parasite tax.

Public interest in the decree began to increase in late 2016 and early 2017 as citizens began receiving notices that they were subject to the social parasite tax. Ultimately, over [470,000 people](#) (approximately 10 percent of the working age population) were told they are subject to the parasite tax. As of February 2017, [54,000 people have paid](#) the fee amounting to a total of 16.3 million rubles (approx. 8.69 million US

dollars).

As the number of Belarusians receiving parasite tax notices increased and the payment deadline of February 20, 2017, approached, popular interest and outrage regarding the decree grew. Increasing dissatisfaction with the decree has also been fuelled by a sharp decline in Belarusian income over the past two years ([-7.3](#) percent in 2016, [-5.9](#) percent in 2015). As frustrations have grown, long time advocates against the decree found new audiences for their critiques and ordinary citizens took to social networks and video blogs to express their opposition to the idleness decree.

In the beginning of 2017, organised efforts to oppose Decree No. 3 took the form of petition drives, public or legal hearings, [appeals](#) to the government and street protests. Online action stimulating discussion has largely taken the form of memes and video blogs. For example, “Belsat” TV gained over [180,000 likes](#) through its meme on Odnoklassniki against the Decree. The highest level of video blog attention was achieved by Maxim Filipovič, who accumulated over [3,000,000](#) views (mostly on Odnoklassniki) of his videos discussing the “idleness tax.”

Anti-decree petitions were the first form of organised opposition. In January and February 2017, activists from the Belarusian Radio and Electronics Workers’ Union (REP), United Civil Party (UCP), Belarusian Christian Democracy (BCD), and the For Freedom Movement (FFM) collected [75,000 signatures](#) against the parasite tax. Over 25,000 of the signatures were collected via the online petition platform [Zvarot.by](#).

Public hearings and discussions on the decree were organised in Minsk and a variety of Belarusian regions by FFM, REP, Belarus Social Democratic Party Hramada (BSDP-H), and Tell the Truth (TTT). During some of the hearings, legal assistance was offered to those subjected to the parasite tax. For example, during [TTT hearings](#), activists helped affected citizens to

file individual appeals to parliament and the President. Legal tutorials were also organised online by several organisations and individuals.

Significantly, the majority of those in attendance were not part of the opposition movements

In late January, several opposition organisations called for protests to advocate for repealing the idleness decree. The first protest, the "[March of Angry Belarusians](#)," was organised in Minsk by REP and [Mikalaj Statkievič's](#) Belarusian National Congress on 17 February. The unsanctioned rally attracted over 2,000 people, exceeding most expectations. Significantly, the majority of those in attendance were not part of the opposition movements, but ordinary citizens attracted to the event because of their personal antipathy to the idleness decree.

The divide between the event's organisers and audience was evident by the audiences muted response to speeches and chants that veered away from the idleness decree and towards political and personal critiques of the president. The protest was covered by the Belarusian independent media, foreign media, and, surprisingly, Belarusian state media. Live broadcasts of Belarusian independent media gained approximately [1,000,000 views](#) within a day of the rally.

Two days later, on 19 February, UCP, BCD and other political forces organised a series of protests against the decree in [Homiel](#), [Mahilioŭ](#), [Viciebsk](#), [Brest](#), and [Hrodna](#). Over three thousand people are estimated to have participated in these regional events. A week later, on February 26, protests continued as four more rallies against the decree were organised in [Viciebsk](#), [Babrujsk](#), [Baranavičy](#), and [Brest](#).

It is noteworthy that protests in Viciebsk and Brest were mostly self-organised through social network groups (e.g. [Typical Viciebsk](#) or [Parasites of Brest](#) on V Kontakte). At the

same time, Babrujsk and Baranavičy rallies were headed by BCD and UCP leaders correspondingly. Over three thousand people are estimated to have participated in 26 February protests.

Topics discussed at regional gatherings often morphed from idleness to broader socio-economic frustrations

Regional rallies have been notable because of their scale and scope. Public participation appears to be broader than traditional opposition circles, and the majority of participants will not be directly affected by the parasite tax themselves. Topics discussed at regional gatherings often morphed from idleness to broader socio-economic frustrations. For example, a 22 year old man who had just returned from working in Russia [said](#) he couldn't find a job in Belarus and added that "Lukashenka has made us [Belarusians] regular guest workers."

In Babrujsk, another young man [demanded](#) that a local road repair project should be supervised and accepted not by officials but city residents. Another young man blamed members of parliament for "not lobbying the interests of Baranavičy and its citizens to attract foreign investments to the city." Public speeches at the events are as likely to include frustrated citizens as they are opposition activists.

In Viciebsk, for instance, one of the social media stars of the event was a 38 year old janitor of a local kindergarten nick-named the "[Viciebsk Joan of Arc](#)" by the independent media. This was her first time at a protest and in her remarks she [said](#) the people are tired of living as they do now and that the authorities enjoy luxurious life while people suffer injustice.

Regional rallies will continue between now and the end of March in [Brest](#), [Pinsk](#), [Babrujsk](#), Mahilioŭ, [Viciebsk](#), [Hrodna](#), [Orša](#), [Maladechna](#), [Homiel](#), and other regional cities. On 15 March, UCP, BCD, BSDP-H, the Green Party, Fair World, FFM and

others are planning to hold a protest in Minsk, which will coincide with Constitution Day. Opposition organisations are also poised to continue promoting the abolishment of the idleness decree by organising public meetings and, legal consultations, as well as through an ongoing dialogue on social media.

Government responds to public discontent

The Belarusian government has positioned the decree as an effort to punish those who are hiding their money and failing to contribute to society. Given the wide array of people impacted by the decree and the deteriorating economic situation, these arguments have not been received well.

As public dissatisfaction over the idleness decree increased, the President made the unprecedented move of ordering senior members of the Presidential Administration to hold citizen receptions

In late 2016 and early 2017, when discontent was largely online, the Belarusian authorities rejected the idea of abolishing the decree, but did amend the list of those affected. For example, members of national sports teams, men completing alternative military service, and people living in difficult circumstances were [excluded from the decree](#). The vague concept of difficult circumstances gives the government great flexibility when interpreting the law, thus allowing them to show and promote their clemency in individual cases.

As public dissatisfaction over the idleness decree increased, the President made the unprecedented move of ordering senior members of the Presidential Administration to hold [citizen receptions](#). Such events have been held [over the course of the past week](#) and are likely to continue in the coming weeks. The

public greeted these citizen receptions with interest.

Opposition political activists attended some of the receptions, and a number of them used to [broadcast the meeting live](#), or their gave their [impressions afterwards](#). The receptions were covered on state TV and utilised by the authorities to demonstrate the presidential administration's closeness to the people, and their willingness to listen and solve problems. State media covered the February 17 protest against the decree.

The [state TV coverage](#) was critical of the protesters and presented Decree No. 3 as a positive law to prevent tax evasion and fight the shadow economy, rather than to hurt the poor or unemployed. The TV coverage emphasised the importance of paying taxes to fund infrastructure and social services. A [similar narrative](#) emerged from comments made the following week by Valer Kavalkoŭ, the Deputy Minister of the Department of Labour and Social Protection, who described social justice as "when all able citizens of working age pay taxes."

He also stressed those with "difficult living situations" would be exempted from the tax. The Presidential Administration [highlighted](#) that the purpose of the decree is to incentivise citizens to secure legal employment. On February 28, [Lukashenko weighed into the discussion](#) deemphasising popular frustrations and attributing the protests to external ([Russian](#)) forces seeking to destroy Belarus:

"Some people are trying to shake this boat under the guise of 'freeloading' or something else. They are trying to prove that these are not our lands. Therefore, it is very important for us. 'Freeloaders' should know that they are used for someone else's benefit, they are used to destroy what we have, to ruin the things that we have restored, to impede our development."

The authorities are simultaneously defending the law, demonstrating flexibility in its implementation, and presenting the presidential administration as responsive to citizen concerns

The authorities' citizen receptions, comments of government officials, and active state news coverage of events surrounding the idleness decree point to a three-pronged public relations strategy. The authorities are simultaneously defending the law, demonstrating flexibility in its implementation, and presenting the presidential administration as responsive to citizen concerns.

This public campaign also credits the president's representatives with reining in overzealous local officials. For example, the coverage [on "Belarus 1"](#) highlighted situations in which fines were rescinded after the presiding official of the presidential administration determined the tax had been applied "unfairly" by local officials.

The governmental response to public protests has also included targeted pressure against activists. None of the previously scheduled rallies or upcoming events have been officially authorised. Some events were held without requesting permission and others were held despite official denial. The police did not disrupt events. Following the rallies, however, local police [opened investigations](#) on at least two opposition leaders from BCD and a number of democratic activists from [Mahilioŭ](#), [Viciebsk](#), Hrodna and Homiel.

What is most notable about the public receptions, official commentary, and TV coverage is that the authorities felt the need to actively engage with citizens and take an assertive media posture to defend themselves and the decree. The implementation of this decree seems to have hit a nerve in society that the authorities recognise and hope to calm.

If the presidential administration sees its "citizen receptions" as useful, perhaps such events will become a

regular part of the authorities' tension reduction tool box. This would create a new opportunity for citizens and social-political activists to engage and pressure the authorities to increase their responsiveness.

Between a rock and hard place. Potential paths forward

To cancel the decree in the face of public opposition could be interpreted as a sign of weakness and a victory for civil society and the political opposition

Given that the authorities, including Lukashenka, have stood behind the decree for the past two years it is unlikely that they will fully abandon it regardless of how unpopular it is. Whatever the original purpose behind the decree or its actual value, at this stage to cancel the decree in the face of public opposition could be interpreted as a sign of weakness and a victory for civil society and the political opposition.

In the short term, it is likely the authorities will continue to defend the decree as a means of fighting tax evasion, along with promoting the fairness of the appeals process for those who believe they are exempt. They may continue to use citizen receptions and other outreach to improve public perception of the law. This communications approach drives a public perception wedge between "bad" parasites who remain subject to the decree and the "good" victims subjected to this through the failure of the local authorities, but saved by the long arm of the president.

Outside of the public eye, the authorities are likely to continue to demand payment of fees, but may do so carefully and with an eye toward avoiding controversy or protest. It is

worth noting that the authorities have limited capacity to punish or persuade over 400,000 people. Should this approach work, the protest mood in the general public may dissipate if the population begins to perceive the president as a fair arbiter of the situation.

Should public discontent grow, however, and manifest itself in increasing street activism, it is likely the authorities would further increase the risk of public participation by expanding their targeted repressive measures. Based on the government's response to protests against the idleness decree thus far, and their approach to unauthorised gatherings over the past two years, the most likely form of pressure would be levying of fines on individuals participating in protests.

A fine of a few hundred dollars, often exceeding the average monthly salary in Belarus, can significantly reduce an individual's interest in public participation, while also bypassing significant international media attention.

While a violent crackdown on protesters is always an option, it is unlikely the authorities would take this route, except as a last resort

If further escalation is required, past precedent suggests certain activists and their families will be targeted and threatened with loss of employment or other very personal and impactful consequences. While a violent crackdown on protesters is always an option, it is unlikely the authorities would take this route, except as a last resort in the face of a truly unanticipated level of protest. A violent crackdown would undermine the authorities' efforts to engage with western nations, and it would isolate Belarus at a time of a major dispute with Russia.

The widespread disapproval of this decree is bridging a long-standing gap between broad public concerns and what is perceived to be the agenda of the organised opposition.

Regardless the actions of the Belarusian authorities, opposition to the decree is unlikely to stop in the short term (at least not before the March 15 rally in Minsk, and potentially beyond). There will be continued efforts, including by established opposition forces and politically unaffiliated activists, to collect signatures, hold public hearings, and mobilise people for new organised protests in Minsk and in the regions.

Within the next six months a new batch of parasite notices are scheduled to be sent out and this whole process may start again

The challenge for the authorities is that the idleness decree is a long term issue. While the strategies described above may be help to weather the current wave of discontent, within the next six months a new batch of parasite notices are scheduled to be sent out and this whole process may start again. Abandoning the decree in the face of protest seems unlikely, but perhaps once things have settled down the long term approach could be to quietly cancel, or simply stop implementing the decree. This would save short term face and remove a potential long term public irritant.

Only time will reveal the government's strategy related to the idleness decree or the long term implications of the movement against it. For the moment, we can say that the engagement and activism of society and opposition against the parasite tax shows political life yet lives in Belarus, and the president has taken notice.

Michael P Murphy – Resident Director, NDI Belarus Program