

Top 10 events of Belarus Civil Society in 2018 according to Pact

Traditionally Pact highlights some of the most prominent developments in and affecting Belarus civil society. Belarus Digest publishes the top ten list below.

Soft “Belarusization” of the Year: BNR#100

A large-scale celebration of [Freedom Day](#) dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People’s Republic (BNR) took place on March 25, in front of the Opera Theater in Minsk and gathered – according to various sources – up to 50,000 Belarusians. For the first time in many years, this day was held as a festival and for the first time sanctioned by authorities in the down-town of Minsk. Organized by civil society and opposition political parties, a crowdfunding campaign to conduct the event broke the national [record](#) by the number of donators: over 2,000 people contributed \$25,000 to cover event-related costs.

Engagement of the Year: Civil Society Gains Voice

The international forum [Eastern Europe: In Search of Security for All](#), organized by an unregistered Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative in May 2018 to discuss challenges to regional and global security, was addressed in person by Alexander Lukashenka. Belarus top-officials were in attendance of other flagship civil-society events. Few examples include: Prime Minister Siarhei Rumas opened the Global Entrepreneurship

Week, [GEW](#); First Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Turchin was a key-note speaker at the Kastryčnicki Economic Forum, [KEF](#).

Civic Action of the Year: Gender Initiatives

At least two noticeable gender-focused initiatives emerged in 2018 in response to actions of state officials. The sexist remark *Lady, Comfortable in Daily Life* in the state-run newspaper describing an independent female journalist became viral in social networks and gave birth to the eponymous [Art project](#). The campaign [March, Baby!](#) originated after Lukashenka rejected law criminalizing domestic violence as ‘Western nonsense’, prepares a public march to show that the issue is pertinent to the mainstream society in Belarus.

Grassroots of the Year: People Take Action



Kurapaty protests. Source: Radio Liberty

The growth of local activism continues in Belarus, especially in the field of protection of residents’ rights. In the village of [Kolodishchi](#), local residents resist the construction of a plant that threatens a green zone near their houses. In [Brest](#), regular rallies gather hundreds of people to protest against the construction of a battery plant with potential lead emissions.

Picketing in [Kurapaty](#) lasts for half a year: activists are seeking the closure of a restaurant built near the memorial to the victims of Stalin’s repressions.

Fundraising of the Year: Imena platform

Imena (*'Names'* in English) non-profit platform is known for its local fundraising success. Starting its work as an online magazine about people in need, Imena attracted over \$700,000 to support social projects and its own operations. In 2018, together with a commercial bank, Imena launched a [unique initiative](#): 0.5% of each bank customer's purchase goes for the Imena-sponsored projects. Now Imena is transforming into a fund that will help ad-hoc teams of activists develop from scratch into sustainable civic initiatives.

The inclusion of the Year: Sasha Avdevich and School of Inclusive Barista

Sasha Avdevich, a wheelchair user, is a bright example of how people with disabilities can live a full life. Sasha travels the world, runs his [blog](#) on YouTube and initiates projects for the "invisible" people to society. In 2018, Sasha created the first-ever [School of Inclusive Barista](#) that helps people in wheelchairs get a new profession. One more civic start-up is implemented jointly with a local sneaker factory: for each pair sold, part of the money goes to charity.

Repression of the Year: Independent Media



Searches in TUT.BY office.
Source: tut.by

In 2018, independent media became a focus of government persecution. During the year, over [100 fines](#) were imposed on reporters – an all-time record. In August, a wave of searches of Belarusian major independent media's newsrooms and detentions took place under the so-called [BelTA case](#) – a criminal investigation into alleged unauthorized access to paid services of the government-owned BelTA news agency.

While 14 of the 15 accused journalists have been cleared of criminal charges having paid at least \$35,000 in fines, the TUT.BY editor-in-chief is still under criminal investigation. Early in the year, an opposition website Charter97.org was blocked in Belarus.

'Never Before' of the Year: Belarus Government Reports before the UN Human Rights Committee

Belarusian authorities [presented](#) a country report at the 124th session of the UN Human Rights Committee in October, in Geneva. The government last reported over 20 years ago despite the fact that Belarus is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and is obliged to periodically submit reports on the implementation of the Covenant. Belarusian human rights coalition prepared an [alternative report](#).

Research of the Year: Supporters of Market Economy More Than Doubled Over 10 Years

Half of the Belarusian society stands for partial or full market economy, according to the [study](#) that examined the values of Belarusians in 2018. Belarusians believe that the main task of the state is “to give an opportunity to earn

money”. Thus, over the past 10 years, the number of people who share the principles of a market economy has doubled – a major shift in Belarusians’ mindset towards paternalistic society? The study was commissioned by the IPM Research Center on the eve of Kastryčnicki Economic Forum, KEF.

And Now For Something Completely Different of the Year: Stepping on the Same Rake?

[500,000 Belarusians](#) are in the “social parasites” database. This is a list of the “freeloaders” or those who are not employed in the Belarusian economy, composed in early December to correspond the president’s decree #1 On Employment. Recall that the previously cancelled decree #3, imposing a “social parasite tax”, caused [mass protests](#) in 2017 across the country when tax authorities delivered “happiness letters” to 470,000 adult Belarusians. Lesson not learned!

Top 10 of Belarus civil society in 2017 according to Pact

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Issue of the Year: “Social Parasite” Tax

In 2015, Lukashenko signed a decree imposing a “social parasite tax” on Belarusians without legitimate employment. The entrance of the decree into force resulted in the mass civic reaction in the form of peaceful public protest in February-March 2017. [Thousands of people](#) protested the new law, which resulted in mass detentions (described below) but also in the suspension of the decree until 2019.

Campaign of the Year: BY_Help

Having started in March 2017, the [BY_help](#) campaign (Yulia Darashkevich, Lyaksei Lyavonchyk and Andrey Stryzhak) raised \$55,000 from private and corporate sources inside and outside of Belarus to financially help Belarusians and their families who suffered as a result of the March public protests, the White Legion case and other.

Trend of the Year: Spirit of a Dialogue

Top government officials are becoming ordinary participants at civil society events few examples of which are Minsk Dialogue conferences, Kastrycnicki Economic Forum, Global Entrepreneurship Week. [Discussion](#) of Belarus’ Universal Periodic Review to the UN Human Rights Committee, [Civil Society Parallel Forum](#) on the foot of the 26 annual sessions of the OSCE PA in Minsk, and [expert consultations](#) on the national human rights plan are indicative of the dialogue spirit. Wishful thinking or reality?

Localization of the Year: Congress of Belarusian Studies

Having convened in Kaunas and Warsaw for the last seven years, the organizers of the [International Congress of Belarusian Studies](#) – Political Sphere – [announce](#) (tentatively) that the 8th congregation will take place in Minsk, Belarus. Preliminary dates are September 27-29, 2018. Main academic partner of the Congress is the National Academy of Science of Belarus. Pack your bags for Minsk!

Save of the Year: Kurapaty – Kotovka – Osmoľovka

2017 was marked by a number of victories by civic activists to protect landmark site in Minsk. Two-week defence of Kurapaty mass executions site has led to investor's [abandonment of construction works](#). A public park in the Kotovka district of Minsk was saved by local community activists [Tiananmane square's Tank Man-style](#). Local residents of Osmoľovka historical area of Minsk succeeded in the [freezing of city's demolition plans](#) for the area.

Consistency of the Year: Social Weekend

[Social Weekend](#) celebrated its 10th consecutive open national competition for social projects to get local funding from both individual philanthropists and corporations. The competition

is held consistently since 2013, since which time Social Weekend raised over \$150,000 to support over 150 projects from among more than 1,400 applicants.

Media Lifeline to Civil Society of the Year: 34Mag

34mag.net youth online magazine lead public communication to aid grassroots activism in 2017: simple-language articles helped local leaders break down [public communication](#), guided them through [how to organize](#) a public event or an [educational intervention](#), and showcased [successful](#) student initiatives in Belarus. Read up!

Civic Transport of the Year: Bicycle for Everyone!

Cycling activists were among most organized and visible civic actors in 2017, while the number of bicycles in Minsk [is approaching](#) the number of cars. [Viva Rovar! Carnival](#) gathered together over 15,000 bicycle enthusiasts, while the [II International Cycling Festival](#) and [PraRovar Forum](#) raised the cycling agenda to the public spotlight further. Belarusian regions were also active: more than 700 cyclists joined the [Susedzi 2017 bike marathon](#) in Grodno and Brest held its Vezdevelom international [bike festival](#). Get on a bike when in Belarus, even if it is [made of wood](#)!

Scare of the Year: Zapad-2017

Circumstances and media brought anxiety to Belarus ahead of the joint Russian-Belarus military exercise called Zapad-2017. Civil society played an important role in providing [civic](#)

[monitoring](#), alternative view points and analysis of [possible scenarios](#). Despite the scare, Belarus wasn't occupied.

And Now for Something Completely Different of the Year

The government of Belarus was the main – yet controversial – newsmaker of the year. Having opened up its borders and having [cancelled visas](#) for nationals of over 80 countries, GoB used force to disperse mass peaceful protests in the country detaining [over 900 people](#). Authorities eventually [closed](#) the notorious White Legion case, although [the trial](#) of three Regnum authors continues. Minsk hosted the [26th session](#) of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly while suspending reforms-related talks with the IMF. Lukashenko [legalized cryptocurrencies](#) and approved a decree to arguably further [ease doing business](#) in Belarus, while the social parasite tax legislation is still [on the table](#).

Pact Belarus Team

**Urban Forester, BY_Help
campaign, women advocacy
platform – Belarus civil**

society digest

Dramatic deterioration of human rights situation in March: over 900 people subjected to various forms of repression, according to Viasna. BY_Help initiative collects \$27K to help detainees of the March protests in Belarus.

Urban Forester's volunteers plant 20,000 trees. 34 Media Days project kicks off its first spring event. Imena magazine marks one-year anniversary: over \$100,000 raised for charity. The Dobra Fund is established in Belarus to unite the socially responsible business.

Five women's organizations set up new advocacy team in the field of domestic violence called Patform. Pact releases results of customer survey of its civil society project in Belarus.

This and more in the new edition of Belarus civil society digest.

Human rights

[Human Rights Situation in Belarus: March 2017](#). According to monthly monitoring of HRC *Viasna*, March was marked by a dramatic deterioration of the human rights situation in the country. Since 3 March, a total of [over 900 people](#) have been subjected to various forms of repression in connection with the mass demonstrations, with over 100 were sentenced to administrative detention.

[Belarusian human rights organisations recognise Viačaslaŭ Kasineraŭ political prisoner](#) and urge the Belarusian authorities to drop the criminal charges against him and immediately release the activist. Viačaslaŭ Kasineraŭ who was serving a 15-day administrative detention for his

participation in a demonstration on 17 February in Minsk, was charged in 'hooliganism' later.

[Prosecution of journalists](#). According to BAJ, this year the pressure has become the most intense since 2011. In March 2017, 120 incidents of violations of journalists' rights were registered, including 40 administrative cases, finished with 10 arrests and 7 fines. On 31 March, the police conducted searches in the Minsk offices of the independent [TV Belsat](#).

Support of the repressed activists

[BY_help collected 27K dollars to help detainees](#). A page BY_help in Facebook contains information how it's possible to donate money to help detainees during the recent protests. The collected funds are going to pay for the stay of custodians in temporary detention facilities and reimburse the fines, as well as to help the families of the arrestees in the criminal case on 'mass riots'.

[Free Theater launches all-Belarusian cultural challenge "Music Parcel"](#). The action aims to support the arrestees during the March protests in Belarus. On 30 March, Free Theatre actors performed songs near the Minsk prison Akrestsina, where one of the actors is kept for participation in the Freedom Day rally.

Green activism

[Urban Forester action gathered over 100 people](#). On 8 April, the volunteers planted 20,000 pines and birches near Minsk where trees were severely affected by the last year's summer hurricane. The action was initiated by the *Urban Forester* campaign and *Green Network* within an annual *Forest Week* that

attracts volunteers to plant trees and get acquainted with the forestry in Belarus.

[34 Media Days project launches its first spring event.](#) On 13 April, in Minsk, *Media and the Right to the City* event will discuss who influence changes in the city: media, activists, each of them or all of them together. 34 Media Days is a series of off-line talk shows dedicated to Belarusian online media and their relationship with civil society. Events will be held twice a month on Thursdays.

[Bicycle forum in Brest.](#) On 7-8 May, *For Bicycle Brest* NGO organises a Bicycle Forum for the Brest region. The forum aims to increase the capacity of the cycling initiatives and the development of cycling movement. The organisers see a forum participant as an active and responsible person, who will be interested in cooperating and organising her/his own events during next year.

Charity projects

[For a year Imena magazine collected over \\$100 thousand.](#) On 11 April, online magazine [Imena](#), one of the most popular Belarusian Internet projects, marks a year since its start. *Imena* aims to talk about the problems in the social sphere and to give people the opportunity to solve these problems. The magazine works fully for the readers' donations.

[The Dobra Fund is established in Belarus.](#) The Fund will adhere to the UN Global Compact and conduct its activities in accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. According to the head of the Social Weekend contest, Alexander Skrabovsky, the *Dobra* Fund/Good Fund will help to unite the socially responsible companies on a single platform and give a new impetus to the implementation of the CSR principles.

Grassroot activism

[ODB Brussels reflects on its social entrepreneurship program for youth](#). The business ideas of the schoolchildren from different cities of Belarus include web-based vocational guidance platform for students, height-adjustable mobile furniture, business recycling old things etc. Social Entrepreneurship Incubator program uses innovative international practices, as well as the experience of Belarusian diaspora.

[The City Show presents its participants](#). They are 20 grassroots activists from all over Belarus. During the next three months, the fellows will pass intensive crash courses and implement their community-based ideas on the ground. The whole process is video recorded and will be released in 10 episodes in a format of a professional reality show.

Other

[Pact releases the results of the third consecutive survey among stakeholders](#) of its civil society project in Belarus. The purpose of the annual survey is to assess the level of customers' satisfaction in respect to Pact development assistance in Belarus. All respondents are satisfied, to one or another degree, with their engagement with Pact and would recommend others to do business with Pact.

[Ministry of Education invited CSOs for discussion](#). On 12 April, Belarusian Language Society and Belarusian School Society attended a roundtable, organised by the Ministry of Education. The event aimed to discuss the creation of the Belarusian-language education system in the country.

[Women advocacy Platform presented in Minsk](#). On 31 March, five feminist Belarusian CSOs working in the field of preventing

domestic violence and violence against women presented the advocacy team called *The Platform* (*Ploschadka* in Russian). The main goal of the new initiative is the promotion of a law on the prevention of domestic violence and the accession of Belarus to the Istanbul Convention.

[7th International Congress of Belarusian Studies continues registration of participants](#). The Congress will take place on 15-17 September, 2017 in Warsaw. The Congress is the largest annual meeting of Belarusian and foreign scholars and experts involved in studying Belarus. This year, the Congress, European Humanities University, and Belarusian Collegium founded an [award](#) for the best student work.

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Be a Man, not a Sheep! – Belarus Civil Society Digest

Thanks to recently launched applications Belarusians can now complain to the authorities in a less formalised way. One of them, Comfortable City, helps creating appeals and petitions to the state bodies.

Be a Man, not a Sheep! – a new project Studwatch.org encourages students to protect their rights.

Pact launches a series of memos based on community polls in Belarus. It can help to better understand the needs and

challenges of local communities.

Initiatives and campaigns

[New online platforms for appeals to state bodies](#). Minsk web programmer Valery Koldachev launched the web site [One-Window-Online](#), which allows to send information about problems in Minsk to the state body that can fix it. This week one more online platform has been launched – [Comfortable City](#) that helps creating appeals/petitions to the state bodies and collect signatures under them. In both cases appeals have a legal force so officials should respond them. The similar online projects already work in Belarus for some years –e-appeals to state bodies [Zvarot.by](#) and complaints on roads [Belyama.by](#).

[Pact releases first in series of Belarus community polls](#). This week, Pact begins to release a series of memos based on community polls in Belarus. The first memo is dedicated to the village of Komarovo, and will be followed by five additional memos released before the end of 2015. Pact's goal for the community polls is to provide easy-to-use feedback directly from a local community in order to better understand community development (supply) needs and challenges. A local research company, SATIO, carried out the first community polls. The Russian-language version of the analysis [is available](#) at the web site of Pact's Community Development Fund.

[Charitable auction of meetings MajeSens celebrated 4 years of its activity in October](#). To the moment, the platform has collected about 320 thousand dollars for charity issues. MajeSens allows everybody to put up a meeting with him/her or to win meeting with other person. The money obtained is transferred to a charitable project, available at the web site.

[New manual on capacity building for Civil Society Organisations](#). New Eurasia Establishment presents the first edition of its manual "Diagnosis and Planning of CSO Capacity Building", developed in the framework of Strengthening the Capacity of Joint Initiatives project. The manual is designed specifically for Belarusian CSOs and intended for managers and leaders of organisations and consultants.

[New project Studwatch.by encourages students not to be afraid to protect their rights](#). Among the tools the organisers suggest to become election observers, report on violations to human rights defenders in the elections, disseminate information, etc. The slogan of the new project: Be a man, not a Sheep.

[Week against the Death Penalty in Belarus](#). On 5-10 October the Week against the Death Penalty to place in Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. On 7 October the discussion [Murder on Verdict](#) was held in Vilnius with the participation of the Belarusian human rights defenders, journalists and representatives of the Foreign Ministry of Lithuania. The event presented the film [Six Arguments against the Death Penalty](#) telling about the disproportionate character and cruelty of the death penalty.

Presidential elections

[European Parliament held a discussion on relations between the EU and Belarus after the presidential elections](#). On 14 October discussion was organised by the EaP Civil Society Forum and the European Parliament delegation for relations with Belarus. The Belarusian side was represented by Anna Herasimova (the Belarusian Human Rights House), Vladimir Dunayev (Public Bologna Committee) and Andrei Yegorov (Centre for European Transformation).

[Independent observers developed a mobile device for easy](#)

[collection of information from voters through smartphones.](#)

Application named as Vochy/Eyes informs on voting rights and creates a mobile platform for the transmission of information on violations of the election independent observers. The collected information is published on the web site of the national monitoring of the election campaign electby.org, known in Belarus since 2010.

Interaction between state and civil society

[Minsk development plan draws attention.](#) On 14 October Minsk municipality presented to media a new General Plan of Minsk 2030. The presentation also sparked the interest of more than a hundred citizens that joined the meeting. And as a follow-up, several civic initiatives [join forces to protect](#) their communities from Minsk City Council.

[Supreme Court denies BCD's complaint.](#) The Supreme Court has denied the complaint about the Ministry of Justice lodged by the steering committee for the creation of the Belarusian Christian Democracy party. The BCD steering committee wanted to appeal the refusal to register the party. It is the fifth time the BCD has been refused registration as a party. The BCD has also tried registering as a civil organisation 19 times.

[Blogger Anton Matolka wrote a letter to Minister of Internal Affairs Ihar Shunevich.](#) He is asking to explain the legal grounds of arresting citizens with national symbols (the white-red-white flag and the emblem Pahonia). 5 people were [detained in Barysau Arena](#) on 12 October and a man who had a white-red-white flag in his car was stopped by driving inspectors the day before.

[Beltelecom proposes the independent websites an additional protection from DDoS-attack on the Election Day.](#) Namely, the

state-run telecommunications operator has made the relevant oral proposition to Nasha Niva, Onliner.by and TUT.by. The service is free. Thus Beltelecom wants to be saved on charges of blocking and DDoS-attack.

[Russian air base protesters summoned to court.](#) The participants of the unauthorised action [For Peaceful, Neutral Belarus](#) gathered about 400 people in the centre of Minsk on October 4 stand trial in Minsk's Central District Court on 9 October. Leader of the UCP Anatol Liabedzka, ex-presidential candidate Uladzimir Niakliayeu, former political prisoner Mikola Statkevich and several more activists have been summoned to court.

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Successful Crowdfunding, Protestants Allowed to Gather For Prayer – Belarus Civil Society Digest

Mova Nanova website has reached 100,000 views per month. First success of Belarusian crowdfunding at Talaka.by – animated Peppa Pig collects 164% of the needed amount. Stakeholders continue discussion on establishment of the National University for Belarus.

First Mahiliou city picnic gathers more than 1,000 people. Minsk authorities for the first time allow the Protestants to gather for a mass prayer. Regional volunteers collect and deliver aid assistance for the wounded in the conflict zone in Ukraine.

Civil Society Initiatives

[Mova Nanova website reaches 100,000 views per month.](#) The traffic of an updated website of Mova Nanova, free Belarusian language courses, has reached 100,000 views in a month. The most popular section is Mediateka, where one can find several thousands of Belarusian videos, audio materials and books. Mova Nanova/ Language Anew was founded in early 2014 and work in 10 Belarusian cities; weekly the courses are attended by 650 people.

[Discussion on establishing the National University goes on.](#) EuroBelarus Information Service continues a series of interviews with different stakeholders on the initiative of establishing the National University. In her interview Dr. Tatsiana Sshytsova, the EHU professor, reasons whether Belarus needs such university and why: "Belarus strongly needs powerful constructive social initiatives. Retrograde Europe's import is a mistake. Belarus is European to a degree it develops institutes in common-European context, reflexively identifying its experience in plural field of European cultures."□

[First success of Belarusian crowdfunding at Talaka.by.](#) On 1 June the first successful crowdfunding campaign at Talakosht crowdfunding platform has finished. Project Peppa Peg that aimed at making a Belarusian language audio version of a known cartoon, has collected 61,85 million rubles (about \$4,300); that is 164% of the sum needed. For two months of the campaign, the project was financially supported by 135 people.

First Mahiliou city picnic collects more than 1,000 people.

Dranik Fest is next! On 30 May the first ever city picnic was held in Mahiliou. The organisers – City Initiatives Centre – tried to make it as different as possible: people could play Frisbee, twister, chess laser tag. The aim of the picnic was to inspire Mahiliou residents on collaborative actions. Now the City Initiatives Centre has an ambition to hold the second **Dranik Fest** that last year got a very positive feedback.

Regional Social Weekends identify winners. On May 22, Vitsebsk hosted finals of a regional Social Weekend, which brought together social ideas and business to support them. The competition presented eight projects of various topics; Grand Prix went to the Paralympic Fencing project. On May 30, the finals for regional projects is to be held in **Brest**. The Social Weekend is organised by MaeSens charity platform together with the Office for European Expertise and Communications (OEEC).

Humanitarian route Initiative Belarus-ATO helps Ukrainians in need. Homel volunteers collect and deliver aid assistance for the wounded in the conflict zone in Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. The money collected were enough to purchase a car for the medical service. The key principle of the initiative is not to arm any of the parties, but to help people who are left without protection – the wounded, the bereaved families, refugees.

Competition of public art objects at Brest. Agency of regional development *Dzedzich* opens a competition for creation of city installations and small architectural forms in Brest. The aim of the competition is forming of progressive cultural field in Brest and development steps in new forms of actual art. Everyone is welcome take part and make Brest more attractive.

Interaction between state and civil society

[Minsk authorities for the first time allowed the Protestants to gather for a collective prayer.](#) The day before Saint Easter evangelic Christians gathered to pray in the walls of Chyzouka Arena Ice place. As organisers explained, the place was supposed by Minsk city council. The collective pray was attended by about 800 people and the Christians are perceived that first ever approved mass-pray (after several rejections) is caused by their community social work.

[Political prisoner Yury Rubtsou sentenced to two years in penal colony.](#) On May 28, the Pružany District Court has sentenced a political prisoner Yury Rubtsou to two years of imprisonment in a minimum security penal colony on charges of evasion of serving his initial sentence. In the autumn of 2014, the Gomel activist Yury Rubtsou was sentenced to 1.5 years of special settlement on charges of insulting the judge. During the Charnobylski Shlyakh rally, Rubtsou was wearing a [T-shirt with the inscription](#) "Lukashenka, go away."

[Easier terms for setting up trade unions in Belarus.](#) The procedure of setting up trade unions has been simplified in Belarus in accordance with ordinance No.4 signed by Alexander Lukashenka on 2 June. The related amendments will create more favorable conditions for the operation of trade unions, enforcement and protection of social and labor rights and interests of employees.

[In 2015 Belarusian journalists fined for more than \\$5,000.](#) Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) tracks a chart of fines to journalists for violating article 22.9 of the Administrative Code (unlawful production and distribution of mass media products). In 2015, the whole amount of fines is 85 million rubles, or about \$5,600.

Other

[Delegation of European Parliament announces a 2-day visit to Belarus in June](#). Delegation of European Parliament headed by the chief of delegation on Belarus Bogdan Zdrojewski will have a two-day visit to Minsk on 18-19 June. The delegation plans to meet families of political prisoners, opposition and civil leaders and Belarus officials.

[Top 30 websites in Belarus in April](#). Marketing.by presents the top 30 resources that have the largest coverage in Belarus in April 2015. Now Bynet has 5 million followers. In April, the Belarusian portal [TUT.BY](#) beat [youtube.com](#) service and takes 5th place in the ranking. As before, the top 30 primarily consists of search services (Google.com – 1st place), social networks (Vkontakte – 2nd place), shopping sites, and entertainment services.

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Top 10 Civic Actions in Belarus in 2014 According to Pact

With the 2015 approaching fast, international NGO Pact identified the most notable items in Belarus' civil society life in 2014. For the second straight year Pact acknowledged

top 10 civic actions in Belarus.

Belarus` s civil society is [growing](#) and going somewhere, only we are not sure about the direction yet.

Trend of the Year: Belarusization

Belarusian language free courses have become a new hit in 2014. [Mova Nanova](#) (*Language in a New Way*) has spread to eight Belarusian cities with about 1,000 students and got state registration. The largest Belarus web portal [TUT.by](#) launched free Belarusian lessons.

The courses titled as [Movaveda](#) attracted a public attention due to their promotional videos based on the known movies. In September, Minsk hosted a first-ever Belarusian-language sports festival [Mova Cup](#) organized by stars of Belarusian sports.

Belarus' top leadership, including president [Alexander Lukashenka](#) and prime minister [Mikhail Myasnikovich](#) spoke Belarusian in public. In addition, "mass" enthusiasm was shown for national [embroidered shirt/vyshyvanka](#) in Belarus. Several companies offer both authentic costumes and modern fashionable clothes with elements of national ornament.

Two Vyshyvanka Days – on [October 5](#) and [December 13](#) – were held as a Festival of national culture and gathered up to 5 thousand people. This year the central October Square in Minsk is decorated with [New Year Tree in traditional style](#) with embroidery ornaments.

Event of the Year: [Kastryčnický Economic Forum \(KEF\)](#)

On November 5, 2014 KEF gathered about 160 Belarusian and international experts for professional dialogue on Belarus' private sector potential. The annual economic forum was [opened by the Minister of Economy](#) Mikalai Snapkou and attended by leadership of World Bank in Belarus, Moody's Investors

Service, IFC Belarus Office among others. KEF is organized for the second time by the Research Center of the Institute for Privatization and Management in association with the Belarus Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC) and CASE Belarus.

Local Fundraising of the Year: [MaeSens project](#)

Tree time in row Pact sees the MaeSens project as the most successful local fundraising initiative. The main reason is in its stability: launched in October 2011, a social Internet platform MaeSens.by has collected to the moment about \$320 thousand of private donations for charity. Moreover, MaeSens continues to organize a contest of grassroots ideas [Social Weekend](#). The recent Social Weekend-4 gathered more than 200 applications; nine of them received financial support from local business.

Lobbying of the Year: [Antimak campaign](#)

On January 15, 2014, president Alexander Lukashenka signed a decree 'On certain issues regarding state regulation of poppy seeds turnover'. According to [Alexander Shpakouski](#), the Aktualnaja Konseptsija non-profit institution leader, the decree "practically liquidates conditions for organization of drug business on poppy seeds materials in Belarus". After more than three year of the Antimak public campaign, adoption of the above decree is the major indicator of its success.

Award of the Year: [Via Bona CSR Award](#)

The first ever award in the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Belarus was established by Fond of Ideas. In March 2014, the best CSR projects of Belarusian business were awarded in seven categories, for example, the mobile company Velcom got the prize for the best cooperation with the local community (the project VELOCITY).

Community Initiative of the Year: [Local Hrushauka Festival](#)

In May 2014, the first ever local community Festival was organized in Hrushauka Minsk district. The event was initiated by a single activist, joined by some organized groups and gathered up to 1,000 local residents. Most notably, Hrushauka Fest was fully self-funded and inspired a number of similar initiatives in Minsk (similar Fests were planned in Uruchcha, Malinovka and Slepjanka city districts) and across the country.

Monitoring of the Year: [Barrier-free environment of IIHF World Championship](#)

Before the start of the IIHF World Championship in Minsk, the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities held an accessibility monitoring of facilities of IIHF World Championship 2014 in Minsk. The monitoring studied about 50 different facilities including railway stations, sports complexes, hotels, shops and other places of the service sector and concluded their unsatisfactory degree of accessibility.

Survey of the Year: [BISS poll on attitude to reforms](#)

The Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) public poll under the REFORUM project reveals the general attitude of [ordinary citizens](#) as well as representatives of [civil society and political opposition](#) to reforms and identifying high-priority areas. Thus, 75.6% of Belarusians consider reforms necessary and wants reforms in health sector while representatives of civil society believe the key area of reform a political system.

Education Program of the Year: [Golden Age University in Grodno](#)

Golden Age University was voted as such at the [5th Festival of Non-Formal Festival](#) in December 2014. According to the people's voting and professional jury decision, the Grodno-based Golden Age University (GAU) was recognized the best educational event. Starting from 2010, GAU is improving the

quality of life of Grodno elderly by increasing their participation in different fields of life and creating conditions for them to contribute to both civil society and local community.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT:

The phrase of the year: [Что-то не так!](#) ([something's wrong](#))

The film 'Abel' financed by the Ministry of Culture includes the reconstruction of political events of the presidential elections in Belarus in 2010. While filming the Ploscha events of December 2010, the actors of mass scenes shouted slogans 'We are not satisfied' and 'Something's wrong (in Russian – «[Что-то не так!](#)»)). Actually, there were no such slogans at the true Ploscha of December 19, 2010 which [anniversary](#) is marked these days.

Discussion "What Do Belarusians Think: People's Attitudes Towards Capital Punishment"

Belarus Digest broadcasted a discussion entitled "What do Belarusians think: people's attitudes towards capital punishment" which will take place in Minsk on 10 December 2014 – Human Rights Day. This is one discussion in the "What do Belarusians think" series, organised by the Office for European Expertise and Communication in Minsk.

The discussion focused on the findings of the recently

published opinion survey "Crime and Punishment: People's Perceptions, Assessments and Attitudes", conducted by the group of Satio companies along with the organisation Penal Reform International.

Yuliya Khlaschenkova (RHRPA Belarusian Helsinki Committee), **Sergey Shimovolos** (Penal Reform International, Russia), **Nikolai Matrunchik** (Interfaith Mission "Christian Service of the Society") participated in the discussion. **Alyona Sheremet-Andreeva**, editor of TUT.BY-TV, moderated.

The following topics discussed:

- Has the number of the opponents of capital punishment grown in Belarus in the last year?
- Why do over 15 per cent of Belarusians think that capital punishment has been long abolished in the country and has not been used for a long time?
- How do religious beliefs affect one's attitude towards the death penalty, and what is the Church's standpoint?
- In which region of Belarus do the most participants of the survey consider lifelong imprisonment an equal substitute for capital punishment?
- What arguments do Belarusians think hold weight in determining the punishment, and what affects their standpoint?

Since September 2014 the series of live discussions "What do Belarusians think?" is organised by the Office for European Expertise and Communications in partnership with the Belarus Research Council and international non-profit organisation Pact with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

"We want to make expert debates public and create a space for the discussion of topical issues regarding the development of the Belarusian society", says Sviatlana Zinkevich, Director of the Office for European Expertise and Communications,

commenting on the projects' objectives.

Belarusians and Civil Society Organisations Finding Common Language

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

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

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

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

A More Aware Society

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



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

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

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

Civil Society's New Approach

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

related activities, including online and crowd-funding platforms.

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

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



Other successful examples include Perspektiva, a public business association, who back in 2013 was able to get the Customs Union to delay the implementation of a prohibitively difficult and expensive quality assurance certification procedure.

Possible Paths Forward

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

By utilising popular social media outlets and focusing on issues that the public feels directly affects them, there is a

lot of potentially for successful advocacy campaigns and projects to be implemented. In December 2013, for example, streams of drivers arrived in Minsk to protest a new vehicle tax that would be levied against both private individuals and businesses. The protest and a subsequent petition (which gathered around 80,000) was organised on social networks.

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

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

Work To be Done

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

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

demographics.

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

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

Belarus Reality Check 2014

On 10 April 2014, the 3rd Belarus Reality Check meeting brought together in Brussels key international and Belarusian experts as well as donors and policy makers.

The Reality Check Policy Review held under Chatham House rules allows individuals to present different local and international perspectives with an emphasis on facts and evidence. Below is a short summary of the discussion.

Key Points

After the annexation of Crimea, Belarus is in an even more complicated situation due its dependency on Russia. The economy is slowing down to a dangerous level, while the government lacks a new economic vision. However, subsidies from Russia and a change in the government's social contract with its citizens may save the day for Lukashenka`s regime.

Despite Russia's similar dip into a recession, the hefty Crimea absorption costs, the needed \$4-5bn for the Belarusian budget it is still likely to be allocated to Belarus by Russia. After all, Belarus is Russia's only formal ally and the poster child of Eurasian integration. Lukashenka has also been manoeuvring successfully in the Ukrainian crisis: wavering between the position of Kyiv and Moscow, while maintaining high level working relationships with both.

Minsk's small, yet recognisable, steps towards moving away from an broad industrial economy towards a locally-based development and information/knowledge-based economy may lead to a subsequent change in the social contract. Already there are positive signs in this direction, including less bureaucracy and a higher number private business initiatives.

After Ukraine, a successful revolution may bring Russian troops to Belarus, so it is no wonder that Lukashenka's position has strengthened

But to continue on with these kinds of reforms, Belarus needs to ease its isolation: allow a qualified labour force to enter the country, adopt Western-style management and decrease state control over the economy. At the same time it needs to manage such reforms gradually by maintaining Russian subsidies to keep Belarusians employed in inefficient state factories.

The traditional opposition is in an identity crisis since the Ukraine conflict: according to the latest polls, only 3.6 % of Belarusians support a "revolutionary" scenario similar to Kyiv's example. The already low support for the opposition has dropped even further. After Ukraine, a successful revolution may bring Russian troops to Belarus, so it is no wonder that Lukashenka's position has strengthened.

Social contract: Less State, More Private

The gradual movement towards sustainable development as a reaction to global and regional changes has been gaining momentum in Belarus. Signals of this transition are becoming more and more pronounced from cuts in public administration expenditures and a growing number of private businesses.

Yet at the same time, the state is maintaining, or even increasing, Russian subsidies in order to keep Belarusians employed in its inefficient enterprises. The security sector's control over private business has yet to unabate. Debt and devaluation is not that important within this context as Belarus can still sell its companies or fixed assets. But the main challenge of keeping its educated work force at home remains a prominent issue: Russia continues to attract qualified Belarusians with higher salaries and better opportunities.

Although the general feeling in the West is that nothing is changing in Belarus, it is important to highlight that 25% of the government employees have been laid off recently, and other various additional criteria were met in order to position Belarus as recipients of targeted social support. One third of the obligatory pension system has been cut due to these changes.



As the graph above shows, despite the wide spread “social welfare myth”, the effectiveness of Belarus’ social protection system is low when compared to a majority of Western countries. Taking into account the measures undertaken to further decrease targeted social assistance, the effectiveness and scale of the welfare state in Belarus is likely to decline even further.

However, the over-arching issue that can be found here is tolerance toward these changes as well as the changing expectations of the society. Due to its effective control over

society, Belarus' government is in a much stronger position to carry out such reforms compared not only to Ukraine and Russia but also to the Baltic states. Patterns matter as well: Lukashenka cuts in the state administration apparatus positions him well with Belarusians, as it shows he plays no favourites.

Belarus' government is in a much stronger position to carry out such reforms compared not only to Ukraine and Russia but also to the Baltic States

Cutting social benefits, though, is not as painful as cutting subsidies to state enterprises – this would mean a real redrafting of the social contract that has been in place since Lukashenka came to power. Yet without such measures, international financial institutions will not be willing to provide loans or financing to the Belarusian economy and the question of Russian subsidies and their availability becomes a key question. For example, Belarus is requesting that in exchange for signing the Eurasian Economic Union, it would not have to pay Russia oil export duties in the future.

The duties Minsk paid to Russia amounted to \$38bn in 2012 and to \$33bn in 2013. Such funds would practically solve the problem of the 'cash gap' in the Belarusian budget as well as ostensibly give more freedom to Belarus to resist Russian pressure and its demands (such as privatisation). Therefore Moscow is unlikely to agree with such a requirement, though it should be noted that the other Eurasian Union partner, Kazakhstan, is also not supportive of these demands.

After Crimea: Eurasian Economic Union in the Making

The crisis in Ukraine has further decreased the trust between EEU partners but it is unlikely to undermine the integration process. Besides Russia, no country has any aims to make political gains from the EEU: economic benefits are

the key issue at stake, which means that Belarus' rationale for joining the EEU is its potential access to both its transit route to Asia and to the Russian market.

Russia reduced a number of external tariffs as a result of EEU negotiations – contrary to the commonly held opinion that Russia dictates the conditions of the Eurasian integration – the costs to its own economy for the integration project was even estimated to be some \$40 bn/year.

Belarus finds itself no longer between Russia and the West but between the Eurasian Economic Union and the “Russian World” policy

Lukashenka's de facto acceptance of the Crimean referendum was an act of reciprocity: Russia has always accepted the results of Belarus' dubious elections (and referendums). However, Lukashenka continues to maintain balance as he came out strongly against the federalisation of Ukraine. Yet this balancing act has changed: given the weakness of the Western response to the Ukraine crisis, Belarus finds itself no longer between Russia and the West but between the Eurasian Economic Union and the “Russian World” policy. In the latter, there is no independent Belarus.

The scale of penetration of Russian financial capital into the Belarusian market is a more powerful tool than all other agreements within the Eurasian integration. Currently, Russian capital controls seven out of 31 banks operating in Belarus. The influence of Russian capital will likely grow after signing the EEU treaty as a result of better entry conditions into the Belarusian banking sector.

It is important to note that Russian banks, besides playing an important commercial role, also serves as a tool for the Russian government to analyse and understand the economic, political and social developments in the country. In other words, they are not only performing a commercial, but also a

political function.

Lukashenka allowed Russian investors to invest in Belarusian enterprises without giving them access to their managerial functions

Until now Lukashenka was able to cunningly solve the problem of Russian investors: he allowed them to invest in Belarusian enterprises without giving them access to their managerial functions. The conflict within the potash cartel last summer – when Belarus placed the Uralkali CEO under arrest and detained him for months – was a very good indicator of how Lukashenka treats Russian businesses. Another example is his refusal to import oil through Rosneft: Russian oil companies continue to sell oil to firms identified by Minsk.

Minsk has been able to control its local economic elites by controlling their income: small scale corruption is possible but under the watchful eye of the state secret services. Frequent corruption cases ensure the loyalty of these elites as there is a “kompromat” for everyone. Lukashenka has also created his own business elite. Improving business conditions does not only serve to better Belarus’ rank in the Doing Business ratings (doing business is easier in Belarus than in Russia), but it creates an atmosphere where a businessman who is satisfied with the current establishment and infrastructure will not have aspirations to change the current leadership.

Belarus could be described as a positive counter-example to Russia with respect to its rather low level of corruption and absence of uncontrolled organised crime. In the eyes of the Belarusian population, Belarus is a positive counter-example to the entire region with its stability, particularly when bearing in mind the unrest in Ukraine.

Relations with the EU: Silent Dialogue

The annexation of Crimea has further reduced the Lukashenka regime's ability manoeuvre with the EU. Ukraine overshadows Belarus to a much larger extent than before, while Moscow is now more suspicious and aggressive. At the same time Belarus is the only country in the Eastern Partnership in control of all of its territorial integrity and its borders. Within this context the West's influence is likely to be balanced out with a more pragmatic policy than may be possible elsewhere in the region.

Belarus is the only country in the Eastern Partnership in control of its territorial integrity and its borders

The main question – how the EU can achieve its grand vision, the democratisation of Belarus – remains unanswered. No realistic strategy and clear steps towards achieving this goal have emerged. Moreover, the Ukrainian crisis raises the issue of destabilisation throughout the entire region via an out of control downward spiral of zero sum internal politics taken to the extreme.

As seen from Minsk, there is no offer on the table from the EU that is comparable to the EEU. As much as the issue of the release of political prisoners is crucial for widening the 'critical engagement' policy, the absence of political prisoners in Belarus is a 'weak' goal for the EU in Belarus. Under the current circumstances, Minsk has no rationale to provide the EU with any concessions, that is, to release political prisoners.

The challenge of the EU's policy towards Belarus is not so much the heralded "lack of unity" – it is the absence of serious interest and attention. Very few care about Belarus at the moment, with most of the issues at hand being stuck at a technical (working) level, without reaching any strategic depth (save, perhaps, the issue of whether Russia would use Belarus' territory to invade Ukraine).

The current critical engagement – basically a silent (mostly technical) dialogue – is likely to develop further. Brussels could deepen this dialogue through an assistance package to give a helping hand to Minsk where it is needed (see social contract changes) while maintaining its human rights stance along with support for the opposition as well as civil society.

- Download full version of the non-paper in [pdf format](#).

The Belarus Reality Check was organised with the support of and input from the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Germany), Pact (US), the European Endowment for Democracy (Brussels) and the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (Lithuania). This is a peer reviewed summary of the discussion and does not necessary reflect the opinion of the organisers.

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

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

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

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

Belarus Digest organised online streaming of the discussion. Viewers are also welcome to follow the event, comment and ask questions on Twitter using the hashtag #Whatbelarusiansthink (for English speakers) and #Чтодумаютбелорусы (for Russian speakers).

Belarus Reality Check 2013

Alexander Lukashenka's regime is approaching 20 years in power next year and there are no signs of major political change in the immediate future. The EU seems still to be struggling to define its own interest towards Belarus.

Therefore most of the EU actions – the policy, pressure, engagement and even the support – are largely symbolic. Sanctions are not strong enough, beyond “naming and shaming”, to make Minsk deliver what the EU demands (freedom of political prisoners). But the isolation from the EU has come when Belarus dependency on Russia is growing due to the Customs Union.

The West is in limbo: opposing Russia's expansion as well as the incumbent leadership of Belarus at the same time leading to losing on both fronts. Although EU policy does not isolate Belarus, it further decreased its own influence in the country. Today Russia is the only game in Minsk, what is the

only case in the Eastern Partnership.

Membership of the Customs Union was a pre-condition for receiving subsidies from Moscow. Neither Minsk nor Astana is committed to political integration. However the, so far, most comprehensive legal framework in the post Soviet space addressing trade, duties and external tariffs are increasing the pressure for structural reform as Belarus`s economy is losing its competitiveness in the common (Eurasian) markets.

The Belarus government is addressing the economic situation by laying off 25% of its bureaucrats as well as encouraging entrepreneurship. Narrow privatisation, related to select industries and not a massive overhaul of the governmental controlled economy, is also discussed as a possible government reform to improve the economic condition. But hard to imagine Alexander Lukashenka agreeing to selling the truly important flagship industries. Thus privatisation in Belarus as it discussed today seems little more than tinkering around the edges and reframing the discussion in a way that offers some hope to Russian and Western investors. Importantly, in the context of a growing private sector political liberalisation (i.e. loosening political control) is hardly conceivable.

Western fatigue vis-à-vis Belarus is further fuelled by Lukashenka`s abandonment of the political liberalisation policy pursued between 2008 and 2010 and the full scale efforts of the regime to close down political space and repress dissent, most clearly observed by the regime`s refusal to release remaining political prisoners. Realisation that regime limitations on political space, sustained pressure on activists and constant propaganda discouraging citizen participation in civil society and political life have succeeded in stunting the political opposition and civil society to the point that neither can be an immediate threat to the regime.

Essentially the West is left without a viable interlocutor, while the opposition often acts to isolate Western policymakers from the government in order to secure Western support.

Essentially the West is left without a viable interlocutor, while the opposition often acts to isolate Western policymakers from the government in order to secure Western support. The Belarusian authorities are unpalatable due to their behavior and the civic and political opposition is unable to have true influence, thus feeding the overall sense of stagnation in Western relations and the pursual of policy in Belarus.

Given that EU expectations are minimal (freedom and rehabilitation for political prisoners as well as independence for Belarus), it seems as if there is no real (geopolitical) interest toward Belarus. At the same time both the regime and the opposition are artificially increasing their own geopolitical importance. Their goal is to increase the external rent from two different sides, one from Russia, one from the West. This is the framework the EU needs to manoeuvre constantly, while neither side is seriously challenging the status quo.

The increased contacts between European diplomats and the GoB should neither interpreted as giving up on political prisoners nor abandon supporting the opposition – but as a way out of the current deadlock. Minsk seems aware that no dialogue will be possible as long as there are political prisoners, but the pressure on Lukashenka, including internal pressure, is not strong enough. Instead of constantly searching for a new “strategy”, the West should just stick to one. In the highly polarised scheme the West seems like a “victim” of its own rhetoric and it is taken as one sided by the government.

There was no consensus as to whether Belarusian statehood is seriously threatened by Russia. However, there was agreement that the West should increase its contacts with all segments

of society – including the government. The western agenda should factor in the large intercultural differences. The Belarusian elite is very isolated from the West and does not understand the western mentality and thinking, having no experience of it.

recommendations include improving the culture of political debate (based on realistic expectations instead of zero sum policies leads to mutual benefits and encouragement), civic education (efforts to build up European style citizenry)

Civil society could play a very important role here. Assisting the development of a wider number of viable interlocutors in Belarus should be of key importance, while support for the opposition should remain strong on the agenda. Other recommendations include improving the culture of political debate (based on realistic expectations instead of zero sum policies leads to mutual benefits and encouragement), civic education (efforts to build up European style citizenry), growing the number of diplomatic contacts and events in the country with particular focus on the regional elites. All these could lead to a rigid Belarusian society warming up to being European in terms of the old continent's values and standards.

Particularly important to maintain support for the opposition as this is a unique period when frustration with status quo is growing. There is a real opportunity for the opposition to talk to citizens and actually have a legitimate position to raise the necessary interest in the ideas they're promoting.

Domestic Stakeholders Review: Economy and Politics

Belarus's macroeconomic situation has been stabilised, the current account deficit is half what it was in the second half of 2012. The National Bank has remained an effective guardian of a strict monetary policy. There are serious issues at the micro level, though: reduced purchasing power for residents due to the currency devaluation despite a rapid increase in

real wages (25% in real terms). Production is increasingly losing competitiveness vis-à-vis Russian products. Inventories of finished goods amount to almost 80% of monthly output. Further growth is at risk and, despite the stable macroeconomic situation, may increase distrust in the government's capabilities. This worsens the country's ability to borrow; Belarusians expect a further devaluation.

The urgency of reform is coming from some significant changes in external trends and factors. Belarus in the Customs Union is under pressure to modernise from Russian competition and WTO rules. The global potash market is changing as the biggest markets (India, Brazil and China) make efforts to become more self-sustainable. The price of crude and refined oil is falling due to increased crude supplies as well as new supplies of refined oil (increased refinery capacity in Asia and the Middle East). These increase the pressure to sell some companies to Russia, as Russia may agree to buy Belarusian assets for greater (than market) price due to political considerations.

The chemical plants Azot in Grodno, Belaruskali as well as the two refineries may bring about \$25-30 billion in revenue, while Minsk in this case would opt to keep political control over these companies (as was the case with Beltransgas). Lukashenka could put an additional control in place by having bureaucrats sit on the boards of private companies. The latest scandals in state energy companies might be connected to positioning before privatisation. Nevertheless, even selling a smaller share of Belaruskali would yield the necessary \$4 billion to close the current account deficit.

Belarusian politics are a limiting factor though. What Minsk learned from the "perestroika" policy of the former Soviet Union is that liberalisation may lead to losing political control. Lukashenka's own "social contract" based on state-controlled productive economic capacity is obviously the most limiting factor toward privatisation. To extend the "social

contract” Minsk needs additional resources, which only seems possible through privatisation. But this may erode the very basis of the social contract Lukashenka is trying to restore.

An internal change is underway: 25% of civil servants are to be laid off from 1 July 2013 (Presidential Decree No. 168), while 56,000 new entrepreneurs and enterprises were registered in 2012. Today there is 1 business to every 160 Belarusians, and the share of the state in the economy is slowly decreasing (currently it stands at about 70% from 80% several years ago). The remaining bureaucrats will be paid higher salaries, will have access to a massive construction programme (key benefit) and will be allowed to sit on boards of companies, including those that are privately owned.

Thus, the “social contract” may work for a lesser number of state-employed citizens, while the private sector will be allowed a greater role. Given that political control and law enforcement remains the same, such a change is unlikely to bring a “revolution” overnight. To sum up, Minsk is likely to do its best to avoid privatisation, aiming instead for technological modernisation as well as continuing to extract subsidies from Moscow even though the price is likely to be greater integration.

Domestic Stakeholders Review: Political Opposition and Trends in Society

Concerning a possible alternative, the organised political opposition remains weak mostly due to restrictive government policies but it is also suffering from structural weakness. Government restrictions occur in redundancies while ending in imprisonment. Although there is not a high level of repressions (i.e. many cases), it covers a wide range of activities as a form of prevention. The growing private sector will not necessarily change things for the better as activists employed by a private company are also subject to repressions; law enforcement authorities give warnings to private

companies.

At the same time the opposition has an actual chance to attract attention, and even support, as Belarusians are hungry for alternatives. Opinion polls also suggest that the majority of respondents are not satisfied with the performance of the government at any level; 47% see bad performance by the president and only 41% see the election as free and fair, thus showing loyalty to the regime. Support for the opposition comes mainly from regional capitals and from people under 40 years of age. However, almost 40% of these say they would leave Belarus for economic reasons and are looking for short-term solutions. The authorities strongest support group consists mainly of residents in rural areas with a lower level of education and who are relatively older.

But opposition forces lack the structures necessary to increase visibility and improve contacts with society. Few opposition newspapers edition is limited. Political parties and movements do not have common positions and talking points on some of the crucial subjects, instead they focus on what is most evident.

Belarusian society understands concepts such as democracy, privatisation or political prisoners in line with the government's propaganda.

Public opinion polls suggest that 55% of respondents do not pay attention to what the opposition does. Belarusians do not have a clear picture of the opposition's position on the economy and social issues. Belarusian society understands concepts such as democracy, privatisation or political prisoners in line with the government's propaganda. As an example, less than 20% of Belarusians see privatisation as helpful for the country; they understand privatisation to be a corrupt process where a few can rob the nation. The number of those who believe that there are political prisoners has dropped from about 50% to 37% during one year.

Although the current polls give the opposition a mixed opportunity (for some time already) those dissatisfied with the government do not express support for the opposition. Potential voters for the opposition want to see clear proposals for the economy, social policy, foreign policy and other areas that would be real alternatives to current government policies. Opposition parties should consider constructive cooperation between each other if they want to prove they would act with responsibility in government. Constant disagreements only reduce confidence in the eyes of society; as many as 91% of Belarusians do not believe that political change would bring them a better life. Political developments in Georgia and Ukraine have also contributed to this factor.

External Stakeholders Review: Relations with the West

The policy of rapprochement with the West started when Minsk sent an official reply to the European Dialogue for Modernisation (EDM) in January 2013 proposing an upgrade to the European Partnership for Modernisation following the scheme the EU has with Russia. A confidential plan designed by the Uladzimir Makei led MFA and approved by Alexander Lukashenka is believed to guide this process. While EDM is understood by Minsk as “support for the fifth column”, the EU’s “de-recognition” approach can’t be accepted by the GoB, as no sovereign government would accept to be replaced by “civil society”. Given that the EDM was originally recommended as a third track to the current EU policy – restrictive measures and support to the opposition and civil society – it should not have started without GoB representatives.

While the UN human rights rapporteur Miklos Haraszti was refused permission to enter Belarus, Sweden managed to re-open its Embassy in Minsk. There have been a number of high-level meetings between Minsk and EU member states lately (PM Miasnikovich in Klaipeda, Uladzimir Makei’s meeting with Commissioner Füle in Tbilisi, Deputy FM Natalia Kupchyna in

Krakow). However, these steps can be seen as “maintenance”, as the EU is not willing to open a dialogue while political prisoners remain. For the sake of consistency, the EU should define whom it perceives as political prisoners and how they define their demand of “rehabilitation”.

Minsk’s main interest in the EU remains economic: loans and economic aid in order to modernise its economy. However, Minsk does not expect the EU to out-pay Russia. Modernisation has become not only a buzzword but also an actual policy through which Minsk is looking to refresh/advance its productive capacity. Minsk has been active even in the past in this regard; the very idea of the EaP Business Forum originates from Belarus.

Most of the EU actions – the policy, pressure, engagement or support for the opposition – are largely symbolic. The current EU expectations could be boiled down to the issue of political prisoners as well as making sure Belarus is not losing its independence. Despite growing economic dependence, Belarus’s independence is not at stake. The Western obligation to support democratisation of the country runs across the little social support of such a process in the country as well as a very limited engagement with Belarusians at home. As a reminder, conditionality worked in CEE countries when return on investment (i.e. democratic reform) was rewarded with “return to Europe” (EU membership). This is not the case of Belarus.

At the same time, the opposition has been the only interlocutor for the West for a long time. Due to the also long-time Western “entitlements” it naturally acts to isolate Western policymakers from the real powerbrokers in Belarus. Working constantly with “civil society” the number of Western experts who would (willingly) see Belarus through eyes other than those of the opposition are minimal.

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Belarus acts as a reliable partner for the US in military cooperation on supplies to Afghanistan from Klaipeda through the Northern Distribution Network which started in 2009. The volumes and nature of the transit – started with civilian and non-lethal military equipment and now lethal equipment with no ammunition. There are some small favours as well including cooperating in the UN – Belarus as Russia's only ally did not vote for the independence of Palestine.

Although cooperation with NATO is frozen, Minsk is interested in having a NATO training centre in order to have a Western military foothold against the growing Russian military presence. However, Belarus's participation is not a crucial factor in NDN. In Washington these issues cannot be compared to the (symbolic) importance of political prisoners, which would be the only breakthrough in its relations.

Instead of searching constantly for a new strategy, the West should focus on strengthening its foothold in the country.

Instead of searching constantly for a new strategy, the West should focus on strengthening its foothold in the country. The EU could and should think of new „entry points” to reach out to civil society, while at the same time not alienating the middle-level bureaucracy. Some „low policy” issues – energy efficiency, higher education (Bologna), cross-border cooperation (implementing local border traffic agreements), sustainable development of ecotourism – could be such cornerstones. There is social demand for them, and, on paper at least, some interest on the part of the GoB (notably regional-level authorities).

However, as long as Minsk thinks regime change is on the Western agenda, it will not be interested in engagement. The prospect of democracy in Belarus depends on the consolidation of a sovereign state but also on having democratically

operating institutions. What can the West do if Minsk feels constantly under attack?

To get over the initial trust-building stage the Western agenda could focus on the following issues: 1) strengthen institutional capacity – which Minsk is short of now; 2) intercultural differences – Belarus elite is highly isolated from the West and does not understand the Western way of thinking, having had no experience with it; 3) work to develop viable interlocutors in Belarus – credible ones who can help inform and influence the situation on the ground; 4) while support for the opposition and civil society should remain strong on the agenda.

External Stakeholders Review: Russia and the Customs Union

as long as Minsk thinks regime change is on the Western agenda, it will not be interested in engagement

Russia is the only serious actor in Minsk, what makes Belarus the only such country within the Eastern Partnership. The Customs Union is a deeper framework for integration in the post Soviet space, introducing not only a free trade area, but also a common import duties and external tariff mechanism, as well as plans to harmonise product quality and sanitary standards of all members.

Customs Union members lose independence in external trade policy, and joint trade regime with third countries is developed. Eurasian integration is attractive for Belarusian ruling elites, as it has prolonged Russian subsidies: cheap gas, oil revenues and open borders. Migration to Russia is seen as part of the solution to Belarus's unemployment, while there is preferential treatment of Belarusian products on the Russian market. The Customs Union does not guarantee energy supplies at Russian domestic market prices, exemptions from the Customs Union regime (for example, export duty) still apply to trade in energy. Elimination of export duties in the trade in energy resources can only be a discount offered by

Russia on a bilateral basis, not a direct consequence of the integration process.

Belarus is an example of “window dressing” for Eurasian integration. Moscow is willing to pay to attract others.

The veto right creates conditions for political “trading”. The decision-making system of the Customs Union makes it possible to “buy” and “sell” one’s support for one or other initiative in favour of deepening integration. Belarus has political leverage because Eurasian integration is seen as President Putin’s political pet. Belarus is an example of “window dressing” for Eurasian integration. Moscow is willing to pay to attract others.

At the same time Belarus faces Russia’s WTO accession commitments bringing (urging) a reduction in import duties. It would be beneficial to Belarusian consumers, but would further increase (global) competitive pressure and would bring serious economic difficulties to the country’s vital industries, production of trucks, tractors, other agricultural machinery, etc. (about 50 different products). Such a situation would facilitate further penetration of Russian state companies into the Belarusian economy.

Working at the Eurasian Economic Commission is one of the few career options for Belarusian officials creating opportunities for a meaningful exit. Minsk is not enthusiastic though about deepening the integration as this may undermine the current political regime. Neither Belarus nor Kazakhstan want supranational structures, but instead they want to keep the Union as an intergovernmental project. It is not only the West that is frustrated with the regime – Moscow is similarly frustrated. The rules of the game in Minsk–Moscow relations could be shifting if the influence of business and political groups who are experiencing a certain “Belarusian fatigue” increases. These groups in fact bear the cost of Russian subsidies to Belarus.

Last, but not least, the issue of the announced military base should be taken cautiously. There are already two Russian military objects (not bases) in Belarus, but these did not break the independence of the country. The real threats are not militant, but economical, cultural and societal. With the current processes Belarus is losing out in the longer run as dependency on Russia will grow in many areas: WTO, visa facilitation, even in its relationship with the EU. If Brussels would recognise the Eurasian Union as a legitimate partner to take over bilateral negotiations on trade and cooperation, Belarus would receive a backdoor entrance into negotiations with the EU but as part of the other Union.

- Download the [paper in pdf format](#).



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 Reality Check 2012

The *Reality Check* is a new initiative which aims to convene regularly a *Review Group* to contribute to the formulation of a more effective policy towards the EU’s Eastern neighborhood countries.

The Review Group includes domestic and international analysts, practitioners, diplomats and policy makers.

The first informal meeting on Belarus was held in Vilnius, Lithuania, on November 20, 2012 hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania. The Belarus Review Group focused on three major issues: a) review of domestic (Belarusian) stakeholders; b) external (geopolitical) context review; c) potential recommendations for the Western policy.

The event was held in a closed format in order to encourage honest exchange (i.e. the reality check), while the group comprised of top Western and Belarusian analysts. A particular emphasis was placed on the independent character of the group in order to lead to a more evidence based and balanced type of policy-advice.

The summary of findings and recommendations are released – coincidentally on the 2nd anniversary of the last presidential elections in Belarus – in order to contribute to the public debate in and out of Belarus.

Policy Recommendations

demand for the release of all political prisoners – should remain the key line towards Minsk even though this means relations will remain in freeze

The current position of the European Union – its demand for the release of all political prisoners – should remain the key line towards Minsk even though this means relations will remain in freeze. Communication of this position, however, should be upgraded.

Firstly, it needs to be explained that there are currently no “hardcore” economic sanctions in relations with Belarus. The EU applies restrictive measures against certain individuals and companies. Secondly, the EU should communicate better

inside Belarus why it does not see political prisoners as criminals, putting its position in the context of Belarus' international obligations

The EU should not take upon itself a role that should be played by local actors. Any such attempt may be seen by Belarusian citizens, and not just by the government, as interference in their country's domestic affairs. At the same time it can afford to be more transparent than the Belarus government while acting as a bigger partner that possesses strategic patience.

The definition of the "regime" should be universally understood. Contacts with the government should be encouraged if the political prisoners are released. However, there was no agreement within the group whether these contacts should be at the technical or at the ministerial level.

If the EU wants to be serious about sanctions (not the current restrictive measures), a study on the effect of potential tougher economic sanctions should be commissioned. Its purpose would be to find out what impact they have and whether it is worth expanding, diminishing the current list or abandoning it. Such a study should be made public: the EU should not try to compete with Belarus when it comes to the lack of transparency.

The potential negative implications of the sanctions should also be kept in mind: the regime is capable of retaliation by escalating repressions at home, however the direct connection between sanctions and repressions is questionable and was contested by several observers.

Everybody paying taxes could be "allied" with the regime

The list of private businesses under the current restrictive measures could be reviewed regularly. If the argument that businesses are "resources of the Lukashenka regime" is

accepted, then the next logical step is to consider all private business to be Lukashenka's allies since they pay taxes.

The advantage is that such a move might harm the government coffers, but on the other hand, there is arguably no limit to such a list. Everybody paying taxes could be "allied" with the regime. Furthermore, restrictive measures do make Belarus more dependent on Russia and it will be harder and harder to withstand Russia's pressure for privatization of Belarusian companies.

Strategic patience could be considered as a more viable policy option: in practice, the EU has applied it towards Minsk already. However, strategic patience without a strategy was identified as one of the key problems of the current Western policy.

The EU policy of modernization should proceed with civil society and political parties. In addition, the EU should also consider an engagement within the Eastern Partnership with the state authorities. That could focus on issues of mutual interest such as environment, law approximation, energy security, food security, border management, visa facilitation, etc. Re-branding the dialogue to "Partnership for Modernization" could serve that purpose. At the same time, the EU could continue communicating to the society what modernization means and what citizens will gain through it.

The perceived - albeit neither written nor ever agreed on - expectation that the only success is the fall of the regime is unlikely to be fulfilled anytime soon.

The EU should not focus on uniting the opposition but rather on encouraging it to stop criticizing each other – gentlemen agreement instead of interpersonal fights. It should encourage them to reach out to the local population and raise the issues that matter to them such as economy and other subjects.

Expectations of success should be put into a realistic context, though. The perceived – albeit neither written nor ever agreed on – expectation that the only success is the fall of the regime is unlikely to be fulfilled anytime soon. Western donors' primary focus should be at the local level, i.e. support for grassroots projects. In these cases success should be measured in terms of day-to-day relevance, realistic policy proposals, focus on local issues.

instead of merely expecting the public to follow them, the opposition has to take into account what the population really wants

Political research has to be encouraged and supported; political parties should formulate their communication and outreach strategies (e.g. How should the oppositional political forces talk about privatization, elections, etc.) based on political, economic and social research findings. In this way, the pro-democratic political forces can get rid of their image as human rights fighters.

In other words, instead of merely expecting the public to follow them, the opposition has to take into account what the population really wants. High standard of scholarly and analytical work can be – and should be – maintained even in an isolated policy-expert community as the one in Belarus.

Summary of Findings

Domestic Stakeholders Review

Given the lack of trust between the West and Belarus and taking into account Minsk's own view of the current situation, there is very little the EU can do to improve the mutual relations without losing its face and backtracking on its previous demands. But the same could be said about Minsk's position, too, considering its own domestic and Russian audience (this latter is important in terms of extracting

subsidies for Belarus).

the current restrictive measures don't really affect the regime

This situation has led to the sanctions vs. engagement debate, which is a logical yet counter-productive consequence for a number of reasons. First, the current restrictive measures don't really affect the regime – that is unlikely to happen without Russia's assistance. Second, the status quo is a rational choice for both sides of the political spectrum: while the regime has no incentives to change the status quo, the opposition lacks the capacity to do so. As a result, those who would like to see some kind of (actually undefined) change in Belarus (according to the polls a large part of the population would support such – again, undefined – change) have no representative institutions.

This surprising opposition-regime 'status quo consensus' has been an obstacle to change and is increasing the value of loyalty toward either of the two sides. Reacting to the demands of the opposition, the West has elevated the 'sanctions vs. engagement' debate from tactical to the strategy level.

Because the West has a limited ability to persuade opposition politicians to abandon this unproductive debate, it has also little hope of seriously influencing the official circles. These are, by any measure even less dependent on the Western engagement and more indifferent to it.

The EU policy does not appear to be strategic, be it in the short-term or long-term

The EU policy does not appear to be strategic, be it in the short-term or long-term. It is usually the case that either Belarus seems to be too small or irrelevant to current Western priorities, or Western policymakers look at Belarus through

the prism of their country's relations with Russia.

Therefore, the current three-track EU policy (restrictive measures; support for civil society and opposition; policy for modernization) is mostly seen as a reaction to Belarus' image as the “last dictatorship in Europe”, which is actively promoted at home by the regime and abroad by the opposition. But building an authoritarian state in Belarus required lower levels of repressions compared to other CIS countries. As a result, the long-term – unwritten and not agreed – expectations of the “regime change” remain unfulfilled which has led to a growing sense of frustration among those engaged in or on Belarus.

political parties should finally focus on re-branding their ideas by taking into account the concerns of the population

Change will be accelerated by Belarusians and should be encouraged from within the country rather than from abroad. In order to accelerate a change from within, political parties should finally focus on re-branding their ideas by taking into account the concerns of the population.

Even the very understanding of the “opposition” would be useful to re-brand because currently the majority of the population opposes both President Lukashenka and what is labeled as the “opposition”. This is achievable as usually campaigns by political parties resonate much more in the public opinion polls than the parties themselves or their leaders.

After the dramatic events following the December 19, 2010 elections and the subsequent crackdown, Belarus remains under the President's control. But his inner circle is shrinking as the regime transforms from an inclusive authoritarian regime (anchored in public support) to an exclusive crony state (relying on support of certain clans/personalities).

At the same time, to retain power, Lukashenka has no other option than to use his same old tactic of divide and rule as it is in his and the current regime's interest not to allow any clan/personality to strengthen their grip on power. But this tactics may backfire as it limits the foundations of the exclusive crony state that is emerging: in the future, there might be less money and, therefore, less stability than previously. For the moment, however, the existing social filter – i.e. anyone can leave and people do leave, especially to Russia – so far works in favor of the regime's elite consolidation.

Belarusian economy needs billions of dollars annually to guarantee the social contract between the regime and the population

The main question is how the current functioning of the system is financed. Depending on various GDP growth estimates as well as on the actual implementation of the promise to raise the average monthly salary up to \$500, Belarusian economy needs billions of dollars annually to guarantee the social contract between the regime and the population.

Minsk expects to “raise” most of these funds from Russia as it expects that the geopolitical situation is favorable thanks to the ongoing formal integration process towards the Eurasian Economic Union. External observers need to understand that what often looks like an erratic behavior either by the regime or the opposition is in fact backed by their partners: Russia in the case of the Minsk authorities and the West in the case of the political opposition.

When the Russian subsidies are drying off, the Belarus state attempts to siphon off the resources from the productive sectors

When the Russian subsidies are drying off, the Belarus state

attempts to siphon off the resources from the productive sectors. The expropriation of the confectionary companies Spartak and Kommunarka, the president's recent infamous decree about the forced labor in the wood processing industry are pointing toward such direction.

There are signals sent to the construction and shoe and industry as well as a new law what would allow to send state representatives into every company that was created through privatization, even if the direct stake of the state there is 0%. All these may herald the return to a similar 2001 policy. The Belarus bureaucracy creates mechanisms to keep businesses "fit" and stressed.

Geopolitical Review

Moscow may have the resources to overthrow the current regime but the possible unpredictability may come at a higher cost.

Minsk expects Russia to continue providing subsidies for Belarus since there is currently no alternative that would serve Russian interests better than Lukashenka. Moscow may have the resources to overthrow the current regime but the possible unpredictability may come at a higher cost. Therefore it is not really interested in (regime) change. Although there has been growing reluctance in Russia to meet Minsk's increasing demands for subsidies (some of) these are likely to be continued.

The bilateral conflicts and disputes are there because this is the way Belarus extracts concessions and makes Russia pay for its alliance; less extent because Russia enforces change. The question is, however, whether Belarus' growing financial requests to Moscow can simply be met without increasing Russia's expectations from the regime.

the West misses a "carrot" to exercise influence over

Lukashenka

Today, the EU does not have resources to compete with Russia's support, which leads to the current impasse. Those who should be potentially interested in change (i.e. opposition) have no capacities to alter the status quo while those having the capacity to do so (i.e. the government), have no incentives as long as Russia is footing the bill. Given Belarus is not attracted to what the EU offers, the West misses a "carrot" to exercise influence over Lukashenka.

The experience of the EU's policy on modernization has shown that a) the EU should not act as a local player; b) current opposition and civil society does not have the necessary capacity to assume the role of the only local player. At the same time, the EU's restrictive measures by the general population as a policy tool used to fulfill the demands of the political opposition. As a result, thanks also to the state propaganda machine, the EU is seen as a protector of the political opposition.

The Belarus Reality Check was organized with the support of and input from the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Germany), Pact (U.S.) and the Eastern Europe Studies Center (Lithuania). This is a peer reviewed summary of the discussion and does not necessary reflect the opinion of the organizers.

Download pdf version of [Belarus Reality Check 2012](#).

Politics & Civil Society

Digest: 24 June – 1 July 2011

Over the last week Belarus authorities strengthened pressure on journalists and generally tried to limit the spread of uncensored information. Although the number of protesters remains relatively small, they are surprisingly persistent and attract more people in Minsk and elsewhere. Authorities began to rely more on plain-clothed agents for arrests and intimidation.

Independent public opinion polls show that Belarusians are increasingly unhappy about the deteriorating economic situation and tend to blame authorities for the crisis. On the positive side, the Second Festival of Belarusian-language advertising and communication *AD.NAK!* took place in Minsk.

POLITICS DIGEST

A sentence to Andrzej Poczobut will be announced on 5 July. The trial in the criminal case against the journalist of *Gazeta Wyborcza* Andrey Poczobut is going on in Hrodna. Poczobut is [charged](#) under two articles of the Criminal Code: 368 ("insulting the President") and 367 (slander against the president). The Prosecutor asks for Poczobut 3 years of the colony.

Penalty for posting in VKontakte. On 27 June a young Gomel democratic activists Peter Philon was [arrested](#) in his apartment after he posted in social network VKontakte an invitation to meet with his friends on Monday. The court fined Philon on Br105 thsd (\$20) for an "attempt to organize the unsanctioned mass event".

"Revolution through a social network". On 29 June the regular action "Revolution through a social network" was held. The idea is to gather democratically oriented people weekly at a certain time (Wednesday, 7 pm) on the main square of the

cities, without flags and other symbols. Throughout Belarus police undertook enhanced measures to prevent the action: almost all the central squares of major cities were occupied by official events, fenced with turnstiles and limited to access.

According to observers due to heavy rain and counter security forces only 1.5 thousand people participated in the action – less than a week ago. In Hrodna, Brest and Homel, compared with the previous weeks, much more participants gathered: around 1500, 600 and 800 people respectively. Because the the authorities blocked central squares of these cities people marched through the main streets. The distinctive feature of June 29 was that people were arrested by men in plain (sporting) clothing without distinctive insignia. Belarusian photographer Anton Motolko published a photo [essay](#) on this.

In various cities across the country 269 people were detained, including 13 journalists. Moreover, three journalists were beaten (including two foreign reporters), at least three pieces of professional equipment were damaged. 130 people were drawn up for disorderly conduct, disobeying to police, and participation in an unsanctioned action. According to data on July 01, participants of the "silent action" were fines ranging from Br105 thsd to Br875 thsd (total Br12.5 million of fines, or \$2500) and administrative arrests from 5 to 15 days (total 145 days in jail). Others trials have been moved to July 6 and 7.

The Belarusian opposition tries to unite once again. On 29 June at the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) office the opposition representatives [announced](#) the signing of a joint platform. Among the structures that have signed the document, there are the movement "For Freedom", the campaign "Tell the Truth", BPF, the Belarusian Party of the Left "Spravedlivyi Mir", United Civil Party, Belarusian Christian Democracy. According to the signatories, now the main tasks of the Belarusian opposition are the release of all political

prisoners and holding free elections.

A new public opinion poll. In June 2011 the Independent Institute for Sociological and Political Studies (IISEPS) conducted a [survey](#) on the most important issues of Belarusians' life. Deterioration of the "economic well-being" of Belarusians can be characterized as a true landslide. Thus, the number of respondents who said their financial situation over the past three months has worsened, increased from 26.9% to 73.4%. 81.5% believe that "the Belarusian economy is in crisis", and lay the blame primarily on the president (44.5%) and government (36.7%), but not to the world crisis (27%) or speculators (16.6%). The number of those who are ready to vote for Lukashenka again in the presidential election for the first time since March 2003 has fallen below 30% and amounted to 29.3% (December 2010 – 53%, March 2011 – 42.9%).

CIVIL SOCIETY DIGEST

AD.NAK! Advertising Festival. On 23 June the ceremony of awarding of the Second Festival of Belarusian-language advertising and communication More – [AD.NAK!](#) was held in Minsk. The Festival purpose is to pay attention to the advertising and other marketing communications tools, made in the Belarusian language. The idea of the Festival belongs to the campaign "Budzma!" In the category "Civil important projects in the arts and culture" the Grand Prix went to the animated movie "Budzma Belarusians!", in the "Media or Media Projects"- to 34 Multimedia Magazine, in the "Social Advertising"- to the BAJ animation "Specialty is journalism".

Office on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities starts working. On 28 June the presentation of a new human rights institution "Office on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" was [conducted](#) in Minsk. Its founder is Sergei Drozdovskiy, Deputy Head of the NGO *Invalids-wheelchairs*. Partners are well-known Belarusian human rights activists and NGOs. The main task of Office is a legal and advocacy support

for people with disabilities. In December, for the first time the Office will prepare an alternative report on implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Belarus.

Press Club of Belarus in Warsaw was [launched](#). The Club's purpose is to help the Belarusian journalists and other media in their work for the sake of democratic Belarus and media freedom. Among the Club's founders there are only Belarusians – prominent journalists, editors and publishers: Julia Slutskaya, Dmitry Novikov, Alexander Starikovich, Ales Lipai, Alexander Ulitenok, Alexey Dzikavitski, Piotr Martsev, Viktor Martinovich.

Conference of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership. On 5 July 2011 in Minsk Conference of the National Platform of Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership will be [held](#). The Conference is aimed at discussing current and future activities of the Civil Society Forum as one of the major institutional players of the Eastern Partnership program as well as at future ways of further developing and strengthening the Eastern Partnership program in Belarus as well as at European level.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. Politics & Civil Society Digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. The digests often go beyond the hot stories already available in other English-language media.