

Watch Live: International Election Observers Press Conference in Minsk

The international observers monitoring the parliamentary elections in Belarus present their preliminary post-election statement at a news conference in Minsk.

The international observation is a common endeavour involving the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Parliamentary Assembly. This common endeavour comprises some 330 accredited observers from 37 countries, including 48 long-term observers and experts, some 200 short-term observers, as well as more than 70 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

The live broadcast is now over.

Download the election observers' [Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions](#) released on 24 September 2012.

Belarusian Elections: The Art of Falsification

Today's parliamentary elections are the simplest for Belarusian election committees. Because the majority of the opposition has boycotted the elections, the election

committees have almost no need to rig the votes. In any event, when neither the observers nor even individual members of election committees have access the final count – it is difficult to have unexpected results.

The elections in Belarus last paradoxically long – for 6 days – for two main reasons. First, the authorities get time to increase the turnout under threats of dismissal, problems at educational institutions or eviction from dormitories. Second, such a prolonged snap poll gives them enough time to falsify the results. The author has been working as an observer for these elections over the last six days, based at one of the polling stations outside Minsk and trying to figure out what is hidden behind the red curtain.

A typical polling station in Belarus is an ordinary school classroom. A policeman is standing nearby, “on the watch for the process”. From time to time they sit directly at the polling station for the whole day and which constitutes a violation of Belarusian law. Police explain that they should watch the threat posed by independent observers.

In Belarus, standard ballot boxes are made of wood, thus, they are non-transparent. The commission chairman agreed during the first meeting with the author that it is rather easy to add extra ballots because of large holes in ballot boxes. The author together with the chairman solved the problem by glueing it up with plasticine.

Election Committee vs. Independent Observers

The election committee consists approximately of 10 members. Employees of various organisations, political parties, public organisations nominate them. It is also possible to do so by collecting signatures. Then the Central Election Committee lead by Lidia Yarmoshyna declines unreliable candidates. Naturally enough, opposition representatives are among them.

This time there are only 48 opposition representatives who managed to be part of the local election committees, which constitutes just 3.3% of the total number. It is interesting that members of the committees remain almost the same from election to election. Only ideologically reliable people can stay there for so long.

As opposition-minded people are not likely to appear in the election committees, the opposition has to "advance the troops of observers." Despite the small amount of members, they act quite efficiently. Even Secretary of the Central Election Committee Mikalai Lazavik admitted that he begins his day from browsing the human rights web-sites for Belarusian election news.

The relations between the election committee and independent observers are tense for an obvious reason: if falsifications are revealed, members of the election committee may (at least in theory) face criminal charges. In accordance with their dislike of democratic institutions, their hostile attitude becomes clear. The election committees sometimes ask for the removal of observers when the latter notice irregularities.

Dealing with the Low Turnout

Parliamentary elections in Belarus are far from being popular. The parliament does not play any role other than ceremonial in Belarusian politics. Just look at the figures: the House of Representatives has prepared only three bills in the last four years. The rest came from the presidential administration to be rubber-stamped. The opposition boycott also contributed to the low turnout.

After a four day poll in Belarus, 20% of the electorate had already voted. These figures are two time lower at stations with independent observers where it is more difficult for election committees to allow voting on behalf of a whole family.

Which is, by the way, a widespread practice in Belarus, to relieve them of their obligation. When observers cannot see it, committees may allow them to vote for their relatives. Otherwise they say it is illegal. It looks most ridiculous when voters ask why it was permitted during the presidential election in 2010 but not this time.

Many state enterprise directors make their workers vote in advance, giving them permit for early leave in order to "do their civil duty." One woman, who came to vote at the author's polling station, even asked to give her a special confirmation document to show her boss.

The less popular, but more effective governmental method is "carousel". This means the situation when people are gathered in groups, put into the bus and driven to the polling station. On Wednesday one such "carousel" was uncovered at a polling station in Minsk. According to independent observer Aliaksandr Marchanka, around 100 people came to the polling station by buses and refused to show their passports to observers to prove that they are entitled to vote at that particular station.

The Administrations of Belarusian universities also made their students vote in advance. In these cases they often provide students with additional days off. If students live in a subsidised dormitory, the dorm administration makes them vote in advance under the threat that next year they will not get a place in the dormitory. In the Belarusian student town Gorki, 883 of 1600 people voted at one polling station during Tuesday, the first election day. Most of them were students.

The Ultimate Counting Magic

Counting votes is the most stressful moment in any election. It is even more stressful in case of falsifications in Belarus.

When the polling station closes for voters, each member of an

election committee gets several hundreds ballots to count. Afterwards, he or she writes down the voting result on a sheet of paper and passes it to the committee chairperson in silence. All other members of the election committee do the same. Thus, nobody announces their results. Members of an election committee do not even know the results of their colleagues' counting.

Finally the chairperson announces the overall result. At the same time, the observers have no way to verify the figures. Belarusian democratic activists often call chairperson officers magicians for such tricks. The only difference is that magicians pull rabbits out of their hats, while commission chairperson pull election results.

Ryhor Astapenia

Third Sector Expanding Despite Difficulties – Belarus Civil Society Digest

CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia. The U.S. Agency for International Development CSO Sustainability Index to measure the progress of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia region. [The report on Belarus](#) suggests that despite the difficult environment in which it operates after the December 2011 presidential elections, the third sector is expanding its capacities. CSOs generate analytical products for use both within the sector, internationally, and in some cases even by the government.

The Belarusian Role Model. [Youth magazine 34mag](#) composed the portrait of an ideal Belarusian. The "researchers" found 50 ideal features relying on their own ideas. In particular, an ideal Belarusian is free, not nagging, speaks good Belarusian, knows the history of Belarus, open minded, ignores state propaganda, travels a lot and has a multiple entry Schengen visa.

Civil Initiatives

Platforma presented the monitoring report. On June 21, CSO "Platforma" held a press conference devoted to the completion of monitoring of Belarusian prisons. The results were presented in the "[Monitoring report on the issues of prison conditions in the prisons of Belarus.](#)" The report highlights that the major reason of the penitentiary system of Belarus is its absolute secrecy for civil society and human rights that provides the possibility of uncontrolled actions for prison staff.

Corporate volunteering in Belarus. On July 5, in the Minsk hotel "Europe", roundtable "Corporate volunteering in Belarus" will present [the survey conducted by the Center for European Studies](#). The survey identifies trends and incentives for the development of corporate volunteering in the country.

Internet against drugs. The initiative "[Antimak](#)" has proposed to the Minsk police department to more actively use the Internet to combat the spread of poppy seeds which contain opium. Activists believe that the dissemination of the proper information through the Internet and media, including the police online resources, will enhance the atmosphere of intolerance for drugs and drug retailers.

Press conference on parking issues. On June 19, a press conference "[Addressing the issues of parking on market principles](#)" took place in Minsk. The event was organized by the Center for Environmental Solutions, Fund "Ecological

Transport” and Minsk Cycling Community. The press conference presented a Program aimed at addressing the shortage of parking places in Minsk and based on three points: the zonal charge for parking, the formation of a new structure of parking services and the owner's responsibility for car parking.

Elections

Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections campaign. The human rights defenders have launched [a nation-wide election observation campaign](#) ahead of the September parliamentary election at a press-conference held in Viasna's office on June 21. The Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections campaign is going to involve some 400 observers in 106 constituencies.

Electby started countdown. [The interactive platform of monitoring](#) elections has resumed its work before the parliamentary elections in Belarus, scheduled for September 2012. It is an open platform where anybody can share their experience and observations of the election campaign. Electby.org is powered by the platform Ushahidi (which means “evidence” in Swahili). It was created by a group of enthusiasts in 2010, before the presidential elections.

Civic Campaign "Nash Dom" (Our House) has launched [the project to the parliamentary elections](#). The activists plan to continue their campaign 'Deputies – to the Answer!' that gathers and publishes information on all candidates, regardless of their political orientation.

Summer schools

Dzedzich invites to summer camp "Zalessie 2012." Brest NGO "Dzedzich" invites young people from all regions to participate in [the volunteer camp](#), which will be held in the village Zalessie (Kamenets district, Brest region) on July 23-29. The volunteers will help in the reconstruction works of

the house which will become a community center for young people. The camp will also provide cultural entertainment for the volunteers.

Volunteer historic camps 2012. [Belarusian Committee of ICOMOS](#) (International Council on Monuments and Sites) posted on its website a list of volunteer camps in 2012. The proposal is designed for amateurs of historical heritage, who are willing to spend the summer arranging the archaeological sites in the territory of Belarus. The list also contains the camps, held by NGOs – "Historyka", UNESCO, etc.

Summer School for experts and analysts. Analytical Center "Strategy" and the Research Centre "Mises" invite to their traditional [Summer School](#) for experts and opinion-makers from Belarus and other countries. The topic of this year is "Property and Justice. Belarus and the world at the threshold of the third industrial revolution." The School will be held on July 27-31 in Belarus.

Awards and Contests

"Belarus in Focus". On June 20, the presentation of the book ["Belarus in Focus: through the eyes of foreign journalists"](#) took place in PEN-Center in Minsk. The book is a compilation of articles from an international competition for professional and citizen journalists writing about Belarus, held by Solidarity with Belarus Information Office in cooperation with Press Club Polska in 2011.

Essay contest. "Liberal Club" together with the CASE Belarus announces an essay contest ["How to conduct market reform in Belarus: economic theory, the experience of foreign countries and the Belarusian specifics."](#) The aim of the competition is to form a community of professionals in the field of market reforms. Two winners will pass a week-long internship in the Warsaw-based CASE office.

Award "For Freedom of Thought". On June 19, [the traditional](#)

[awarding ceremony](#) "For Freedom of Thought" name of Vasil Bykau took place at Bykau's homeland, in the village Bychki, Vitebsk oblast. This year bronze statuettes went to local historian Alexander Belokoz and rock musician Lyavon Volsky. The award was established by the leader of the Movement "For Freedom" Alyaksandr Milinkevich in 2008.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

A Test of Opportunity for Ukraine and Belarus: Elections in 2012

The two largest states on the EU's eastern borders, Ukraine and Belarus, will be holding parliamentary elections this autumn. They are being held at a particularly low point in relations with the EU.

Few are optimistic about the outcome. Nonetheless, the elections present an opportunity for governments, opposition groups and EU actors to re-engage positively. EU policymakers have long puzzled over how best to deal with these eastern neighbours. Policy has been constrained by not wanting to upset Russia and the inability to offer the incentive of EU membership that transformed Central Europe. The countries in question have themselves often proven unreliable partners and unable to adhere to basic democratic standards.

Just two years ago, however, there seemed reason to be cautiously optimistic.

In Belarus, Alexander Lukashenka softened his isolationism with a period of reengagement with the EU, leading to a more open election campaign (by Belarusian standards) in 2010. That same year, the new Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, was cautiously welcomed as a more pragmatic and stable partner. He made Brussels his first international visit, suggesting a commitment to a European path of development.

Both presidents then went out of their way to prove their critics right. In Belarus, opposition candidates were detained and allegedly tortured, demonstrations forcefully dispersed and activists jailed. The EU responded with visa bans on over 100 officials.

The Ukrainian authorities, meanwhile, have been jailing opposition leaders, attacking independent media and making unilateral constitutional changes in their favour. As a result, the long-negotiated Association Agreement with the EU remains unsigned. The clampdowns seem irrational in countries where the opposition was already weak and it is hard to see what benefits have been gained.

The EU has been alienated while Russia has increased its economic dominance, particularly over energy assets. In the process, the delicate balance that Minsk and Kiev have tried to maintain between East and West since independence has been upset.

This autumn, Belarusians and Ukrainians will vote in parliamentary elections. They will be the first elections in either countries since the Arab Spring and last autumn's return of real political activity to Russia.

Recent Belarusian and Ukrainian elections have traditionally had the ability to mobilise voters to campaign, debate and

demonstrate on the streets. For the EU, elections are concrete measurables of the democratic reforms and norms it seeks to promote in its neighbourhood and it is expected to monitor both closely. There is good cause to be sceptical about this year's polls.

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The opposition groups appear weak and parliamentary elections in any case do not receive the same amount of attention as the presidentials: the Belarusian parliament has little say on policy; in Ukraine many MPs have taken bribes to change positions, in both power really lies with the president. And new confidence in their economies make the governments less likely to want to seek compromise.

Following a catastrophic year in 2011 for Belarus, economists now predict slight growth and few problems in discharging liabilities for servicing external debt (thanks to Russian support). In Ukraine there are government plans to increase pensions, even though the IMF has frozen its assistance package. If there was a reason to worry, it seems to have passed these presidents by.

Nonetheless, despite the difficulties imposed on them, the elections present a real opportunity for opposition groups to present themselves as credible alternatives to the wider population. In Belarus, independent polling has found Lukashenka's support to be half what it was a year ago.

This has not, however, translated into support for the opposition. Similarly, Ukrainian support for Yanukovich and his party has plummeted since his inauguration, but again without a corresponding increase in support for the main opposition.

The opposition must end its internal squabbles and widen its focus from the issue of political persecution so as also to address the issues that matter most to the wider population

There is clearly a need for a political alternative which the current opposition is failing to meet. The opposition must end its internal squabbles and widen its focus from the issue of political persecution so as to also address the issues that matter most to the wider population. Political prisoners cannot and must not be forgotten, of course. But their release will not improve falling living standards or increasing corruption.

More substantial debate on domestic policy is the only way to make opposition groups credible. Engaging in every outreach opportunity the election campaigns will provide is the only option: a threatened boycott in Belarus can achieve nothing but invisibility, and opposition leaders need to be seen to be believed.

Although many forecast Belarus and Ukraine defaulting to Russian dominance, among their populations there is clear popular support for closer ties with the EU. In Belarus, as many support integration with the EU as with Russia (39-41 per cent). In Ukraine, considerably more now favour integration with the EU over integration with Russia.

However, for all the debate on the effectiveness of Europe's response to the political tension in Belarus and Ukraine, there remains a need for a clearer, more proactive and more consistent approach. It is often misunderstood what the EU can offer as well as what changes it actually requires: both messages must be better prepared by the EU and better conveyed to all groups in society.

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Although at present unable to offer a membership perspective, the EU can offer many tangible benefits, be it the eventual introduction of visa-free travel or far greater trade and business opportunities. Meanwhile many do not understand the reasons for appearing on a visa ban list, which in any case is hardly consistent in its implementation, or why the Association Agreement has been effectively shelved for now, for what Ukrainian Prime Minister Azarov called "far-fetched reasons".

EU foreign ministers have called the Ukrainian elections a 'litmus test' that will determine the future of association with the EU. For the test to be effective in either country the EU must be unambiguous in its message, and pro-active in getting it across.

Governments in Minsk and Kiev remain acutely aware of the ultimate need for better relations with the rest of Europe so they may yet come to see this as their opportunity; meanwhile, opposition groups could yet benefit by taking advantage of the political space to begin looking like an alternative. This autumn's parliamentary elections are an opportunity not to be wasted, like so many before.

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Belarusian Election As An Opportunity For Change

The September 2012 Parliamentary elections offer a chance for the opposition to reconnect with the wider Belarusian population rather than retain the [current status quo](#). Even though some economic pressure on the regime has been lifted by the latest deals with the Russians, the population is increasingly looking for alternative sources of information and for different visions of how Belarus could develop.

Against the background of the recent Russian protests, the upcoming election campaign is a major window of opportunity – if exploited to the full – for the opposition. Elections provide a time of heightened interest for the population in the political situation of the country, and are therefore the perfect time to re-build party structures comprising activists willing to carry out political activity today.

In spite of this, the opposition remain divided about how they should approach this campaign. Alternative strategies include a boycott, an “active boycott” involving submitting candidates and withdrawing before election day, and running fully committed candidates through the entire electoral process.

Why Boycotting is Likely to Fail

More radical opposition activists argue that it would be immoral to run given that political leaders and former presidential candidates remain in jail.

Groups considering an “active boycott” have identified three main conditions to be addressed. These are the release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners detained following December 19 2010 events; amendment of the election law to include changes proposed by opposition; and full

representation of opposition candidates onto the electoral commissions at all levels.

While it is theoretically possible that these conditions could be met, they would all require significant political will from the side of the authorities, which is clearly missing at present. Arguing for strict implementation of these commitments before running is thus virtually synonymous with arguing for a boycott.

A boycott of the election would simply remove the opportunity for legal campaigning that the election time presents. It would also take away a chance for the opposition to reach out on issues that the “political middle” in society cares about, such as the economy and health care. The boycott would condemn the opposition to continue to be sidelined from mainstream Belarus. For an opposition without widespread support in society, as is the case today in Belarus, such a strategy is therefore a privilege that they cannot afford.

It is also very unlikely a boycott would have any major impact amongst the population – as pressure from the regime to vote will be high. With it proving impossible to build a united coalition of democratic forces around a boycott, it is unrealistic to expect the wider public to be convinced. No attempts have been made, even by its proponents, to quantify what would be a successful boycott.

In this environment, even if a boycott could in theory be run successfully, the the opposition’s current lack of effective coordination, inability to communicate a consistent message, constant internal gamesmanship and distrust between them would mean any effort at a credible “boycott campaign” would almost certainly fail.

Harmful Uncertainty

The lack of clarity of strategy is already impeding the opposition's preparations for the elections – indeed it seems

the preparation for partisan election observation is more advanced than for the campaign the observers should be safeguarding – an example perhaps of the perverse situation (and incentives) operating in Belarus now.

The opposition will risk repeating one of the main mistakes of 2008 parliamentary elections – letting the campaign be dominated by whether and when they are going to boycott or pull out of the campaign. Worse – by proposing the condition of the release of the political prisoners – they are putting this decision in the hands of the authorities.

This level of uncertainty as to whether pull out or not – which may not be clarified until the last minute – is likely to seriously undermine the opposition. Neither are candidates likely to take their campaign seriously, nor will the population take the candidates seriously as they are planning to withdraw.

Indeed it is this uncertainty and division in the opposition about whether to take the election seriously that has so undermined the opposition in the past. Some observers see this as a successful implementation of a “divide and rule” strategy implemented by the authorities.

In this regard, some politicians have warned the regime may seek to improve relations with the West through allowing a pseudo-opposition “KGB group” into Parliament, who would be handpicked by the security services based on their likelihood for collaboration. Opposition politicians should avoid being distracted by such red herrings – and the desire to protect their own status quo – and focus instead on becoming the most credible and popular candidates in their electoral district.

Commitment to Run Serious Campaigns

The window offered by the recent decline in support for Lukashenka should be maximised to the full during the election period through prospective parliamentary candidates from the

opposition seeking to run credible election campaigns.

Developing credible candidates takes time. Efforts should be made already to build up election support teams, message development and efforts to increase name recognition and popularity with voters ahead of the elections. The focus should be on developing personalities in each constituency through direct dialogue with the voters on local issues that matter to them.

To enhance their credibility in the eyes of voters, candidates should commit to run to the end of the electoral process. They should maximise opportunities to engage with the electorate, including using all public meeting opportunities and possibilities for canvassing, such as door to door. Above all, candidates should focus on clear coordinated messages of relevance that make the case for political change and include credible alternatives proposals, to the wider population.

Parties and candidates should also attempt to work more closely with trade unions, which have been more active in recent time, albeit mostly on individual factory based issues.

Elections to Motivate Demand for Change rather than the idea of Revolution

Transformations in the region over the last 15 years show clearly that election time has provided the prime focus for expressing discontent.

In Belarus too, election nights have seen the largest protests in the last 10 years. Against the backdrop of the post-parliamentary election protests in Russia, there may also be a window of opportunity for similar events in Belarus – if the opposition was able to campaign solidly, including a message of “vote and defend your vote”.

However, the population will only take such events seriously if the opposition takes the whole campaign seriously – which

it did in 2004 (Parliamentary Elections), 2006 and 2010 (Presidential) but did not in the 2008 Parliamentary elections.

Protesters are liable to pay a high price for participation including possible loss of employment or detention. Therefore, the opposition must ensure people are sufficiently motivated to demand change through a campaign focused on issues that matter to them, rather than on any idea of revolution. If people are won over in what they see as a serious campaign they will naturally seek to defend their vote. If not, as seems likely, they will simply avoid any risk and stay at home.

Indeed, the prevailing view in both the opposition and wider society is that the Parliament is a toothless institution not worth fighting for. In spite of this, the parliamentary elections provide a rare opportunity to turn the silent majority into active seekers of change. Failure to use it will set the opposition on track for three years of stagnation and eliminate any chance of election related change until the Presidential elections due in 2015.

Dr Alastair Rabagliati

EU Policy Towards Belarus Questioned – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

Western and Belarusian analysts discuss Europe's policy towards Belarus, the forthcoming parliamentary elections, transformation from the populism relying on the masses

safeguarding the interests of the narrow interests of the Belarusian ruling elite.

[Anais Marin: I am Shocked by the Cynicism of the EU Towards Belarus](#) – Why ordinary Belarusians are getting nothing from the European Union, and whether there is a common position of European officials on the "partnership"? Anais Marin, an expert of the Finnish Institute of International Relations working on Eastern Partnership gives her answers. She points that the EU only thinks about its own interests and that the European External Action Service are rather cynical about Belarus. The EU only keeps insisting on the political prisoners release without offering anything to the population of Belarus.

[Controversy Over the Use and Effectiveness of EU Sanctions Towards Belarus](#) – Giselle Bosse of Maastricht University briefly addresses the issue of the effectiveness of EU sanctions towards Belarus and raises a concern that controversy over their use may further split Belarusian opposition. She notes that if the EU changes its policy at this point in time towards more engagement, it would most likely be criticised for being inconsistent (again), which it is determined to avoid. However, she urges to engage with Belarusians at the multilateral level through technical cooperation, and also in cross-border cooperation projects.

[Mechanism of Revolutions through Social Networks](#) – web portal Generation.by publishes the findings of an international research group, which revealed certain mechanisms of joining of social networks' users to mass protests. In particular, locomotive of protests is a living offline community with a common goal. The success of online protests (and further preservation of protest moods) could take place only in cases where dissatisfaction had an offline format and real people came out to the streets.

[Heritage of Vitaly Silitski: Elections in authoritarian regimes – a farce or a chance for change?](#) – "Tell the Truth" website reprints an article by Vitaly Silitski, written in 2001 before the Parliamentary elections. In particular, Vitaly Silitski wrote that "it is possible to win an authoritarian regime playing by its rules... though ... this possibility is extremely limited by the circumstances." If the opposition is unable to impose on the regime its own rules of the game, it may be the only option for change, although the possibility of its implementation is extremely limited circumstances. He concluded that brushing away the elections (in whatever circumstances they may be carried out) as a possible variant of the struggle for democratic change is just unwise.

[Elections or boycott as a zugzwang for the opposition](#) – BISS analysts Alexei Pikulik and Denis Melyantsou talk about the format of participation or non-participation of the opposition in parliamentary elections in September. Experts believe that both a boycott and participation in elections are not winning scenarios. They suggest that to the opposition to unite, develop a common strategy for the development of the country, and get support from civil society and independent media.

[Belarusian Political Science Review](#) – the first issue of English-language journal "Belarusian Political Science Review" attempts to present to the reader outside of Belarus the most important academic studies in Belarusian politics and related areas. The Institute of Political Studies "Political Sphere" established the journal. The first issue contains the texts on various concepts of political and national development of Belarus in different historical periods (Oleg Dernovich, Andrei Kazakevich, Alexei Lastousky, Siarhei Bohdan, Mikhail Nyadvetski, Denis Melyantsou, Andrei Yegorov, etc.).

[Belarusian Authoritarianism: Between Populism and Modernization](#) – political analyst Dmitry Kukhlej notes that in recent years the Belarusian regime is showing more signs of a qualitative transformation of the populism relying on the

masses, to a bureaucracy that safeguards the interests of the narrow interests of the Belarusian elite. The expert believes that Lukashenka to maintain his personal power will continue to seek alternate vectors and foreign policy manoeuvre between East and West.

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Social Initiatives Inside Belarus and Political Conferences Outside – Civil Society Digest

Despite unfavourable environment, Belarusian NGOs continue to launch various initiatives and campaigns in Belarus. Most of initiatives relate to education, human rights and social issues. However, conferences on political issues have to take place outside of the country – in Vilnius and Brussels because often authorities prevent them from taking place in Belarus.

International Events

US Secretary of State meets with Belarusian civil society delegation. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [met](#) with a delegation of Belarusian civil society in Vilnius on December 06, on the sidelines of a meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Ms

Clinton said that the United States and the European Union would fight Lukashenka's regime through sanctions and travel bans.

In attendance there were Natalya Radzina, editor of charter97.org; human rights defenders Valyantsin Stefanovich and Tatsyana Ravyaka; Aleh Hulak, BHC Chairman; Syarhey Matskevich, leader of the Assembly of NGOs; Zhanna Litvina, BAJ leader; and Hanna Herasimava, director of the Vilnius-based Belarusian Human Rights House. ([Photos](#))

Civil Society Conference in Vilnius. On December 04-05, Vilnius hosted the Civil Society Conference held in parallel with the 18th session of the OSCE Ministerial Council. The OSCE Civil Society Parallel Conference [adopted](#) a Resolution "On Reaction of the OSCE and the International Community to Human Rights Crisis in the Republic of Belarus".

In particular, the resolution urges the international community to stop all cooperation with the authorities of Belarus that provides for the transfer of funds to the Belarusian authorities either directly or through companies their control. The document also suggests discussing the prospects of suspending the voting rights of the representatives of Belarus authorities and even suspending the membership of Belarus in the OSCE.

'Transforming Belarus: Ways Ahead' in Brussels. On December 07, Carnegie Europe, BISS, and the Office for a Democratic Belarus with the support of Pact [hosted](#) in Brussels an expert forum "Transforming Belarus: Ways Ahead". The forum discussed the European Union's policies on Belarus in the context of the latest developments in the country and provided recommendations from Belarusian experts on how to change the existing status quo in Belarus according to the will of the country's citizens. ([Photos](#))

In particular, EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle underlined that the EU's 'multi-dimensional' approach to Belarus had two strands, namely "a tough line towards the current repressive regime" complemented by the policy of engagement "with all those in Belarus who support reform and modernisation."

Initiatives and Campaigns in Belarus

Public Bologna Committee established. The expert community and a number of NGOs have decided to establish a Public Bologna Committee on the basis of National Platform of Eastern Partnership CSF. The Committee's aim is to develop "road map" of integration of the Belarusian higher education in the Bologna process. On December 13, the Committee's founders will hold a press conference on the integration of the Belarusian higher education in the Bologna process.

Video and Talk Show about Social Contracting. Promoting the mechanism of state funding of NGOs, ACT has released a video about the state social contracting and a talk-show "Social Partnership" produced by Gomel TV. Activities are supported by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

BRCS Initiates a Law on Volunteering. Belarusian Red Cross Society (BRCS) which conducts a significant work with volunteers initiates the development of a draft law on volunteering. Earlier a bill on volunteering was prepared and introduced to the Parliament, but it wasn't adopted. A new attempt to draft a bill is scheduled for 2012.

New Campaign "1%". International foundation "Idea" is launching a public campaign "Project "1%". The campaign aims to enact a law on charity and making changes and additions to the Tax Code of Belarus, namely to develop a "rule of one percent."

Manual on New Media. The new [manual](#) is the result of the 2-year Belarusian-German project, in which 10 Belarusian NGOs took part. They learned to shoot video, work with Google program resources, use social networks in order to increase NGOs' capacity.

"Human rights activists against the death penalty". It was announced at a joint press conference of human rights activists on December 9 in Minsk that more than 165,000 petitions for the abolition of the death penalty in Belarus were [sent](#) to the Presidential Administration by mail.

Winners in the field of human rights. On December 13, human rights NGOs will [announce](#) the names of a journalist, a human rights activist and a lawyer, which have gained exceptional achievements in the field of human rights in 2011. The competition was established by Human Rights Alliance.

The fourth BCD attempt to register. On December 17, in Minsk party "Belarusian Christian Democracy" will [hold](#) the fourth founding congress. Since 2009, for three times BCD held the founding congress and filed registration documents to the Ministry of Justice, but so far the state registration has not been received yet.

Coalition of "Six". Belarusian Popular Front, United Civic Party, "Fair World" Party, Belarusian Christian Democracy, the Movement "For Freedom" and the campaign "Tell the Truth" – Coalition of the "Six" – will [participate](#) in the Parliamentary elections in 2012, but they have not yet defined the format of participation.

BISS vacancies. Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies [announces](#) new vacancies of an analyst and a public relations specialist. The deadline for applications is December 20.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a

richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

German Marshall Fund of the United States Blogs on Belarus

Appeasement in our time – Berlusconi goes to Belarus

by Joerg Forbrig

BERLIN – This year has been full of celebrations of the peaceful revolutions of 1989, arguably the most important advance of freedom, democracy, and human rights in history. But this year has also seen rapid European rapprochement with (and some might say appeasement of) one of the world's worst autocrats: Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus. Europe's embrace reached a new level Monday when Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi paid an official visit to Minsk, the first by a Western head of government in over a decade.

Belarus, Europe's immediate neighbor to the East, has been ruled by Lukashenko since 1994. For one-and-a-half decades, a fully fledged dictatorship replaced whatever modest democratization had taken place in the early 1990s. An omnipotent presidential administration controls all aspects of life in the country, from mass media that are almost completely under state control to an economy that remains centrally steered and nationalized. A vast police apparatus, including a KGB, instills Belarusians with fear and apathy,

while dissidents and civic activists face harassment, beatings, fines, and prison sentences. Several prominent opposition leaders have disappeared without a trace. Elections are rigged, as the OSCE has repeatedly declared. Lukashenko, meanwhile, has abolished presidential term limits and can effectively rule for life.

Last year, the regime in Minsk suddenly appeared to change track. The release of several political prisoners, a slightly freer parliamentary election, permits for a few independent newspapers, and government hints about possible liberalizations of the media and the electoral laws seemed to indicate that democratic change was in the air.

Yet autocrats rarely make such concessions voluntarily. In reality, these moves were prompted by growing geopolitical and economic pressures from the East. Russia's military campaign against Georgia was read correctly in Minsk as a potential threat to Belarusian independence. Moscow, long a major funder of Lukashenko's rule, also changed economic gears, demanding stakes in strategic Belarusian businesses, increasing oil and gas prices, and threatening to close its market to Belarusian produce. Add to that the fact that Russia's ambitious designs for gas pipelines to Europe will, within years, diminish Belarus' importance as a transit country for deliveries to the European Union – and it was only logical for Lukashenko to begin making overtures to the West.

For European leaders, the writing was on the wall: engage with Belarus and other former Soviet satellites now, or risk that these Eastern neighbors fall back into Russia's orbit for good.

Cue a veritable race for the attention and goodwill of the once-despised outcast Lukashenko. Travel restrictions against the Belarusian leadership were suspended in October 2008. Europe's foreign policy community descended upon Minsk, followed by a flurry of business delegations and investment

forums; meanwhile, Belarusian officials swarmed westward. Lukashenko himself was received by the Vatican in April (and insisted on introducing the Pontiff to his illegitimate son). In May, Belarus was asked to join the EU's new Eastern Partnership initiative; in September, Lukashenko received an official invitation to neighboring Lithuania.

It was left to Berlusconi, however, to become the first European leader to board a plane to Minsk.

European leaders have been at pains over the last year to justify all this outreach, arguing that a decade-plus policy of isolation had arrived at a dead end. Not quite. It is true that Europe avoided any political contacts or cooperation with the Belarusian leadership; yet at the same time, trade with the country was thriving and last year the EU surpassed Russia as an importer of Belarusian goods. By filling the coffers of the Lukashenko regime, EU economic engagement effectively neutralized political isolation and helped to sustain the status quo in Belarus.

European diplomats also like to argue that, barring closer ties with Europe, Belarus would buckle under Russian pressure. But Lukashenko has long resisted a series of aggressive Russian moves, from offers to join the Russian Federation to peremptory demands that Minsk acknowledge Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Russian takeover attempts in the Belarusian economy. Minsk knows well that its independence, and with it the survival of the current regime, hinges on diversified international relationships. To this end, it has reached out to partners as far away and varied as China, Venezuela, Iran, and the Gulf states. But to be successful, Belarus' strategy also needs the EU. This, in fact, provides Europe with considerable leverage – leverage which it is currently not using.

Unsurprisingly, liberalization in the country has reversed. There are accounts of new political prisoners and trials,

police have brutally dispersed several protests over the last months, and the independent media as well as civil society remain under threat. If anything, Europe's unconditional engagement encourages Lukashenko, who recently (interviewed in Italy's La Stampa) asserted: "Belarus is not a beggar in European relations."

Absent tangible results or even prospects for change, Europe's rapprochement indeed begins to look a lot like appeasement. Yet that would send a fatal signal to Belarus and the world. To Lukashenko and his ilk, it would be tantamount to admitting that, for the EU, state sovereignty, geopolitics, and economic gain trump universal values, democracy, and human rights. But the EU can still choose to do otherwise. That would truly honor the legacy of 1989.

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The article originally appeared on the website of the [German Marshal Fund Blog](#).

New York Times: Electoral Rot Nearby? The Russians Don't See It



ZHODINO, Belarus – The voting monitor began his rounds on election day here at Polling Place No. 7. "Issues? Violations?" he asked the poll workers, glancing around like a casual sightseer. They said no, so he left.

The monitor, Kholnazar Makhmadaliyev, breezed from one polling site (“What’s up? Things O.K.?”) to another (“Everything fine here?”), shaking a lot of hands, offering abundant compliments and drinking brandy with this city’s mayor.

Such went Mr. Makhmadaliyev’s stint on a large observer mission led by the Kremlin that concluded that Belarus, a former Soviet republic and an ally of Russia, had conducted a “free, open and democratic” parliamentary election in late September.

The Kremlin monitors’ version of reality, though, clashed with the one described by a European security group, whose own monitors dismissed the election as a sham tainted by numerous shortcomings, not the least of which was vote rigging. The monitors dispatched by the Kremlin did not report anything like that. Nor did they raise concerns about Belarus’s security service, still called the K.G.B., which had exerted harsh pressure on the opposition, imprisoning several of its leaders over the last year and thwarting their campaigns. Or about state-controlled television broadcasts repeatedly branding opposition leaders as traitors.

Or, for that matter, about the final results: a sweep of every seat in the 110-member Parliament by supporters of President Alexander Lukashenko, often described as Europe’s last dictator.

The Kremlin under Vladimir Putin has sought to bolster authoritarian governments in the region that remain loyal, and these election monitoring teams – 400 strong in Belarus alone – are one of its newer innovations. They demonstrate the lengths to which the Kremlin will go to create the illusion of political freedom in Russia and other former Soviet republics, even though their structures of democracy have been hollowed out..

Read the [full text](#) of this article in New York Times.