

2019 Parliamentary Elections and New Constitution

In spite of the reduced oil donations from Russia's side and imposed limitations on Belarusian agricultural exports, Lukashenka will not concede to steps of real integration (unification of currencies, creating common customs, creating supranational institutions within the union state etc.).

Currently, the statements of the Belarusian side on diversification of oil supplies is an attempt to blackmail Russia. In reality, the Lukashenka team do not take any measures aimed to diversify oil supplies. It is highly unlikely that in response to increasing US military contingent in Poland Lukashenka would agree to deploy Russian military contingent or Russian military bases.

Lukashenka will bid for the presidency at the presidential elections that are to take place in 2020, after the parliamentary elections. In the next presidential term, he will be thinking of a successor. Lukashenka speaks of a new Constitution, meaning the forthcoming hand over of the authority to a successor.

Despite the growing disagreements in the issues of the integration within the union state, the Kremlin and Lukashenka will not announce the end to the project.

Belarus-Russia Relations: disagreements on integration

On December 13, 2018, the Vice Premier of Russia Dmitriy Medvedev claimed: "Russia is ready to keep moving on the way of building up the union state, including the creation of the single currency emission centre, the unified customs, courts,

auditing chamber.” Since then, practically every month the sides have been exchanging statements of strongly different variants of developments in the relations within the union state.

The Russian side suggests discussing its initiatives on deepening integration. On December 14, Lukashenka claimed: “If someone wants to pop us into Russia – that will never happen... Under the pretext of the deep integration, Moscow wants to incorporate Belarus into Russia. I understand these hints: get the oil, but go ahead, ruin the state and enter Russia.”

Lukashenka claimed that it is through Russia’s fault the union state has not yet been created. The union implies equal rights, equal conditions for economic subjects. And these conditions are getting more and more uneven. According to Lukashenka, currently, the Belarusian enterprises pay 200 USD for a thousand cubic metres of gas, whereas Russian enterprises pay 60 USD.

Commenting on the statements from Medvedev regarding the unified emission centre and unified customs, Lukashenka claimed that Russia offered “to create the union from the roof, and not from the basement”. Such basement, in his opinion, is the creation of equal conditions for economy subjects, i.e. supplies of oil and gas at home Russian prices and absence of barriers for Belarusian exports to Russia.

The problem is not about the logic or sequence of integration (basement-roof), but that Lukashenka does not want to integrate at Russian terms. He wants to be an absolute sovereign in Belarus and, in the meantime, get Russian donations.

In 2002-2003, there used to be the “basement” (as Lukashenka means it) of the union state: Belarus was receiving Russian gas at home market Russian prices; the Russian market was open for Belarusian export, there were no trade wars (dairy or meat) between Belarus and Russia.

The Russian leaders in 2002 suggested building the “roof” of the union state: unification of currency, with the Russian ruble as the currency in the territory of Belarus; adopting a Constitutional act of the union state that would envisage setting up supranational bodies with the prevalence of Russian representatives.

Lukashenka in return offered to keep building the “basement”. He offered the variant of unifying the currency systems in which the National Bank of Belarus would have the right to emit Russian rubles. And to stipulate in the Constitutional Act of the union state the obligations of Russia to supply energy carriers to Belarus at Russian home market prices. And now, every time when commenting or criticizing the initiatives of Russia to deepen the integration, Lukashenka claims that the Belarusian side supports the real integration within the union state. He expresses hope that the union state will be created.

Despite the growing disagreements, it is unlikely that the Kremlin and Lukashenka will stop speaking of the integration within the union state and give up the project. In the Kremlin, they hope that if not Lukashenka, then his successor will take steps towards the real integration, as the Russian side implies it, which would tight securely Belarus to Russia forever.

For Lukashenka, the special relations with Russia in connection with the formal existence of the union state – it is a convenient excuse for getting oil and gas donations from Russia in the past.⁶ And, what is more important, a justification to make bids for donations in future. The statements of diversification of oil supplies are nothing but attempts to blackmail Russia

Earlier, in the spans of deteriorations in relations with Russia, official representatives of Belarus were talking of the necessity to diversify oil supplies. At the background of

negotiations with Russia concerning compensation of losses from the tax manoeuvre, again some statements were voiced about the intentions to get oil via ports of the Baltic states.

On May 23, meeting the Ambassador of Kazakhstan Yermukhamet Yertysbayev, Lukashenka said that he was conducting negotiations over oil supplies from Kazakhstan. "We've now been busy with the diversification of supplies. We are negotiating supplies of oil to Belarus from various sources."⁷

If the Belarusian side had really applied to Kazakhstan, this address had been badly meditated and calculated. The Ambassador of Kazakhstan remarked that the prices of Kazakh oil for Belarus would be higher than of the Russian one. Since, it is to be delivered by railroad, whereas Russian oil gets to Belarus by oil pipeline.⁸

And it is unlikely that Russia will provide opportunities for such deliveries. Y.Yertysbayev remarked that for Russia it was unprofitable that Belarus got oil from Kazakhstan.⁹

According to information of the Russian newspaper Kommersant, Kazakhstan does not have spare volumes of oil to supply to Belarus: there is an increasing demand for Kazakh oil from the Chinese side.¹⁰

Just like the declarations over the intentions to get oil via ports of the Baltic states, to build an oil terminal in a Baltic port, the Lukashenka's statements of the intention to get Kazakh oil will not bring practical results. The main goal of such statements – to show to Russia that Belarus has alternatives to get oil, to strengthen its standpoint in negotiations over the compensation of the losses resulting from the tax manoeuvre.

It is highly unlikely that in response to increasing US military contingent in Poland, enhancing the military capacity of Poland, Lukashenka would agree, under Russian pressure, to

deploy Russian military base(s), as well as to deploy Russian military troops in Belarus. Most probably, as a responsive measure, Russia will enhance even more its contingent in the Kaliningrad enclave.

Russia does not have economic levers to induce Belarus to station here Russian military bases and troops.

Russia cannot cease oil and gas supplies to Belarus, as it is interested to have reliable and cheap transit of oil and gas and other cargoes via Belarus. The Russians buy Belarusian goods, including equipment (tractors, automobiles etc.) not out of personal favours, but because these goods have a good ratio of price and quality, they are competitive at the Russian market.

Russia has been reducing oil donations: Belarus is earning less on refinery of Russian oil. Among all, due to import phase-out and food self-provisioning, Russia is imposing restrictions on Belarusian food export. This has resulted in a slowdown in the rate of growth of the Belarusian GDP. But these measures have not led to worsening social and economic situation in Belarus.

A New Constitution for Belarus?

The statements of Lukashenka concerning amendments to the Constitution: in the next presidential term, he will be thinking of a successor. At the press conference on March 1, Lukashenka said he would bid for presidency for the sixth time. "Out of my current situation and of the country and the attitude to me, I can't help seeking candidacy for the post of the president".

Lukashenka claimed that he could not help running for the presidency due to the attitude (of the citizens of Belarus) to him... One cannot doubt that, just as before, the elections will be held according to the scenario of total falsification of

the results. In the first run of the elections, Lukashenka will declare his victory with an overwhelming majority with around 80 per cent of voters have cast their votes for him. Such level of support Lukashenka declared on the outcome of the previous "elections".

A certain sensation has been the statement of Lukashenka that within a period fewer than five years, a new Constitution would be adopted in Belarus. In his opinion, "it is necessary to strengthen the executive and the legislative branches of power".

In April and in May, Lukashenka made several more statements about the necessity to work out a new Constitution. Lukashenka gave very few details. According to his words, the amendments would also touch upon the role of the president: "It is not the business of the head of state to drive across fields and factories".

Every time, when speaking about a new Constitution, Lukashenka used the term "the head of state", which is typical of authoritarian political systems. This means that, according to the new Constitution, the president (head of state) will have significantly larger powers than the head of the executive branch of power. He will control the legislative and judicial branches. Either directly, or through his assignees (there will be no elections) in parliament, the president will be assigned other top officials; among all, he will be assigning and controlling, and will have a possibility to change the Prime Minister and Ministers.

Obviously, Lukashenka wants to shift responsibility for the social and economic development of the country on the Prime Minister, so that the latter "drive across the fields and factories". In case of necessity, the head of state could use him as the boy to beat. For years in power, Lukashenka has staged the performance in front of Belarusian citizens: "a good president – bad officials". He counts that the head of

state with the new Constitution will do this as well.

On March 1, Lukashenka said that the presidential elections would take place in 2020. When he is "elected" for the sixth presidential term, he will be 65, almost 66 years old.

Now Lukashenka is healthy. His press conference on March 1 lasted around seven hours.

However, he might have health issues. He suffered two microstrokes (in 1999 and in 2006). After the presidential elections on March 19, 2006, the chairperson of the Central Executive Commission Lidiya Yermoshina said that the inauguration of the president would take place on March 31. According to the official information, she mentioned the date "without complying it with the work schedule of the head of state". The inauguration took place on April 8. It was the shortest official speech of Lukashenka. Many people paid attention that he was gasping and unhealthy. Lukashenka was supported by pills. In April – May 2006, Lukashenka did not turn up in public for more than a month and did not receive official representatives. In Belarus, rumours were spreading that he had died... By the end of the sixth presidential term, he would be 70 years old.

Probably, the statements of Lukashenka about a new Constitution were caused by the fact that he realizes: during the sixth term, he will have to define who his successor will be. Who guarantees him a calm and safe old age. The cost of a mistake might be very high. Lukashenka might spend the rest of his life behind bars, charged with abuse of power and official position, corruption, abductions-murders of the leaders of the opposition in 1999.

The political system of Belarus, defined by a new Constitution, has to be the most convenient for his successor, allow him keeping power.

The Constitution of Belarus of 1996 was written for

Lukashenka. A new Constitution will be written upon Lukashenka's order for his successor.

Editorial: Lukashenka's election message to the West

Two representatives of the opposition and civil society will end up in the newly-appointed Belarusian Parliament.

This reflects not the true level of support of the opposition, but rather Aleksander Lukashenka's willingness to demonstrate good will to the European Union. The West, however, should not get too excited about this progress.

Belarusian authorities have made clear that changes in the electoral process happen not because of domestic pressure but to please the West. Indeed, the prospect of massive domestic protest is almost non-existent, largely [because of events in Ukraine](#). However, the economic crisis in Belarus is pressuring the authorities tired of being outcasts in Europe to diversify their partners.

So what messages are the authorities trying to convey to the West?

1. The authorities will not fundamentally change the election process – it will remain entirely controlled.
2. They are making slow progress towards liberalisation and greater transparency of elections and support for the opposition is low.
3. It is now time to recognise the Parliament of Belarus and accept the leadership of Belarus at a higher level.

Each of these messages should be taken with more than a grain of salt.

It is true that the authorities remain entirely in control of the election process. The number of opposition representatives in the election commissions [remains minimal](#); [early voting](#) and non-transparent ballot counting procedures allow the authorities to appoint anyone they want to Parliament while bypassing the election process. They have no serious intention of giving up control of election results and even the possible departure of [Lidia Jarmoshyna](#) will not change this.



Election results fixed in the vast majority of polling stations fail to reflect the real preferences of Belarusians. With independent sociology on political issues [virtually non-existent](#), it is hard to judge the true level of support for the opposition.

However, allowing two pro-democracy MPs means that alternative opinions will finally enter the Parliament. It will also improve the morale of the opposition.

However, the Parliament plays a merely [decorative role](#) in the current political system. In practise it initiated no laws, rubber-stamped all decisions of the executive and its members never seriously criticised the authorities. Moreover, the president can overrule any law with a personal decree.

Should allowing two pro-democracy members lead to [recognition of the Parliament in the West](#)? The parliament should be treated as a decorative rather than a decision-making institution – as a symbolic organ which plays no real role in the political decision-making process.

In other words, it makes little sense to have serious negotiations with the Parliament not only because it is far

from being representative but also because it plays no serious role in politics. Any deputy minister probably plays a more influential role than the speaker of the lower chamber of the Belarusian Parliament.

At the current pace of liberalisation it would take Belarus hundreds of years to attain transparent elections

The authorities allowed two non-regime MPs out of 110 future MPs. At the current pace of liberalisation it would take Belarus hundreds of years to attain free and fair elections of all MPs.

However, the West needs an excuse to cooperate with Belarus for geopolitical reasons. Belarus matters as a part of the European security puzzle, as a country which transits energy, migrants and goods.

Normalising relations with the Belarusian authorities should not be an aim on its own. Not only security and geopolitical goals should drive cooperation but also concrete projects to improve the lives of Belarusians. These should include anything from visa liberalisation and improving the business climate to cooperation in education, exchange of know-how, and institutional and rule of law reforms.

The West will persist with its demands of liberalisation in Belarus. But the modest improvement seen during these elections will make it easier for Belarusian society and the international community to accept the greater degree of pragmatism in the West's attitude towards the Belarusian authorities.

Why Does Europe Engage with Belarus's Rubber Stamp Parliament?

On 2 – 4 August, Ryszard Terlecki, vice-speaker of the Polish Sejm, led the highest-level parliamentary delegation of an EU country to Minsk in twenty years.

This visit is emblematic of the increasingly common nature of inter-parliamentary contacts between Belarus and Europe. The marginalised Belarusian parliament has been slowly gaining international recognition.

Will this trend help to promote democracy in Belarus and foster bilateral ties with the West?

Belarus's parliament ostracised and ignored

The programme of the Polish members of parliament included meetings with government officials, members of the opposition, activists from the Polish minority, and business executives.

✘ However, two meetings stood out especially. On the first day of the visit, the delegation met with [Uladzimir Andrejchanka](#) and [Mikhail Miasnikovich](#), the speakers of the lower and upper chambers of the Belarusian parliament.

Belarusian members of parliament can hardly boast extensive international contacts. Since November 1996, when [Alexander Lukashenka](#) hand-picked members of the national assembly for a reformatted legislature following a questionable constitutional reform, the Belarusian parliament has lost its

international recognition.

Initially, Western democracies refused to recognise this newly formed entity.

In 1997, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA OSCE) reaffirmed the status of the last democratically elected parliament as the only legitimate parliament of Belarus. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe suspended Belarus's [special guest status](#).

Things began to ease up in 2000, after most opposition groups boycotted elections to the lower chamber of the parliament. The OSCE's mission concluded that the elections had failed to meet international standards.

However, the fact that the parliament was (at least, formally) elected and not appointed allowed the National Assembly to reclaim its representation in the PA OSCE. It may also have helped that a few figures critical of the authorities secured seats in the new legislature.

The executive branch remedied this omission after the following elections in 2004. Since then, not a single Belarusian parliamentarian has ever opposed Lukashenka's policies. Belarus remains the only country in Europe with no opposition represented in parliament.

Over the last twenty years, the international contacts of Belarusian MPs remained limited mostly to their colleagues in Russia, the CIS and developing countries. Belarusian legislators had reason to speak with their European counterparts mainly on the sidelines of inter-parliamentary events.

The National Assembly has not signed an agreement on inter-parliamentary cooperation with a parliament of any European country outside the CIS. It has established working groups on cooperation with fourteen EU countries but they have mostly

remained inactive.

During the first nine months of 2015, the Belarusian parliament exchanged visits with their colleagues in Slovakia (in May and September) and received a delegation from Spain (in September).

An end to isolation

Things began to change rapidly in October 2015, when the EU decided to suspend its sanctions against Belarus following the [peaceful presidential elections](#) and release of political prisoners.

Formally, the sanctions never prohibited inter-parliamentarian contacts. Only two members of parliament were on the sanctions list due to their activities under previous positions. However, several national parliaments apparently perceived the [removal of the sanctions](#) as an encouragement to reengage with Belarus in all areas, including inter-parliamentary relations.

In October 2015 – July 2016, the lower chamber of the Belarusian parliament received parliamentary delegations from seven EU countries (Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia (twice), Hungary, and Romania) and Japan.

Most of the delegations were headed by chairpersons of groups advocating friendship with Belarus in their respective parliaments, the others were headed by heads of foreign relations committees.

☒ Austria sent Karlheinz Kopf, the second president of the national parliament's lower chamber, to engage the Belarusian parliament. Eager to promote Austria's business interests in Belarus, Kopf discussed inter-parliamentary cooperation with Andrejchanka and congratulated Lukashenka on a "convincing victory" two days after the flawed presidential elections.

Deputy speaker [Viktar Huminski](#) led Belarusian parliamentarians during visits to Prague in March and [Warsaw in April](#). A lower-level team went to Riga in May to discuss cooperation on security matters.

Former Soviet satellites from Eastern and Central Europe (along with business-minded Austria) may have fewer compunctions about dealing with Belarus's rubber stamp parliament. "Old Europe," on the other hand, has so far displayed greater reticence in engaging with the Belarusian legislature.

However, there are always footloose parliamentarians who pursue their own agenda. A good example of such a maverick is Thierry Mariani, a French MP who found "[nothing abnormal](#)" as an observer at the October 2015 presidential elections in Belarus.

On 7 – 8 July, Mariani brought his pro-Russian colleague, Nicolas Dhuicq, the new head of the France – Belarus parliamentary friendship group, to Minsk. The parliamentarians were received in both chambers of the Belarusian parliament and the Belarusian foreign ministry.

Why is Europe legitimising an impotent parliament?

The eagerness of several European national legislatures to re-establish contacts with the Belarusian parliament seems to lack a logical explanation, and no convincing attempt to provide one has been made so far.

Europe's recent tactics of greater engagement with Belarusian officials by encouraging dialogue and cooperation with their Western colleagues may indeed be effective in certain situations. They may help those involved in different levels

of government to better understand the modus operandi of democratic societies, thus encouraging them to apply certain best practises to their daily work.

However, the same can hardly be said of the Belarusian legislature. Even if one puts aside the question of its legitimacy (which one should not), the real role of the current Belarusian parliament in society should not be ignored.

Legislators appointed by Lukashenka have no say in either domestic or foreign policy. Their true purpose is to [rubber-stamp the decisions](#) drafted by the executive branch.

Not a single parliamentarian has criticised Lukashenka

Belarusian MPs have initiated only a handful of laws over the last twenty years. In recent years, the parliament has not blocked a single draft law submitted by the government. Members of parliament have always been eager to approve any initiative or appointment coming from the president.

Not a single member of parliament has ever publicly criticised Lukashenka. Some mild criticism of the government or local authorities has been tolerated, but only if it fits with Lukashenka's position.

The government's appointees in the parliament also lack any serious lobbying power in the country. Most of them are political [has-beens at the end of their carriers](#) or mid-level local officials who have few prospects of taking positions of responsibility in the executive branch.

The increased contacts of European parliamentarians with their Belarusian "counterparts" have no positive impact on development of democracy in Belarus or promoting the national interests of the EU countries concerned. Meanwhile, such collaboration helps strengthen the international position of

the Belarusian government.

Political Overview of 2012: Diplomatic Wars, Sanctions and Elections

Belarus started the year 2012 in a rather bad shape.

Alexander Lukashenka has been occupying his post for almost 18 years. A dozen political prisoners remained behind the bars. Relations with the West were worse than ever before. The opposition was suppressed and the economy went through a painful recovery from the economic crisis of 2011. That year the inflation reached 108% and the national currency went through a threefold devaluation.

The 2012 in Belarusian politics promised to be tough. And tough it was for everybody.

Winter Froze the Foreign Policy

The events shaping the political landscape of the winter took place at the very end of the season. On 27 February the Council of the EU decided to extend its "black list" of Belarusian citizens prohibited to travel to the countries of the Union.

21 new persons were included into the list. The Belarusian response did not take long. On the next morning two diplomats: the Head of EU Delegation to Belarus Maira Mora and the Polish ambassador Leszek Szarepka were asked "to leave for their capitals for consultations". Simultaneously, two Belarusian

ambassadors were recalled from Brussels and Warsaw.

Benjamin Franklin once sharply noted: "Whatever is begun in anger, ends in shame". On 28 February the European Union has decided to [withdraw](#) all its member-states' ambassadors from Minsk.

The decisive, swift and surprisingly coherent actions of the EU took Belarusian authorities aback. Later they begged Russia for diplomatic and moral support, did their best to explain that the EU ambassadors can return to their workplaces, but nothing really helped. The time has come to perform some due and proper political steps towards Europe.

Slight Changes Came with the Spring

Notwithstanding the subtitle, the spring began with another governmental action isolating Belarus from the West. On 15 March 2012 two young men: Vladislav Kovalev and Dmitry Konovalov were executed for the terrorist act in Minsk subway that had taken place in April a year before.

Death penalty has always been a sticking point in Belarusian-European relations. Moreover, some experts and observers asserted that the investigation had been [done improperly](#), with many procedural violations while others regarded it as normal.

European officials and domestic civil activists criticised the Belarusian authorities for the undertaken act. Some raised their voices in [support](#) of new portion of sanctions against the regime. Others [doubted](#) their effectiveness.

On 23 March these sanctions were adopted. Not only Belarusian officials were included into the new "black list", but also businessmen who were considered to be the regime's sponsors. The message was pretty plain. The EU switched to hard line towards Belarus.

After the presidential elections of 2010 several tens of

political activists got in prison. During the 2011 many of them were released with or without signing the plea for presidential pardon. Experts believe that was done in order to get some concessions from the EU. Spring of 2012 became the new "time to bargain".

On 14 and 15 April two political prisoners were [released](#): Andrey Sannikov, ex-candidate for presidency, runner-up on the elections of 2010 and Dmitry Bondarenko, coordinator of the "European Belarus" campaign.

Soon after this event European ambassadors returned to Minsk. There was no doubt: their freedom was beholden to the European firmness and solidarity. Spring didn't resolve all the problems in Minsk-Brussels relations, but the degree of tension was surely mitigated.

In May the news came from the East. Vladimir Putin, aspiring to reunite former satellites within the new integration project – [Eurasian Union](#), came back to full power in Russia. He chose Belarus as a first country to visit, which seemed more like a landlord travelling across his provinces and reminding who was still in charge there.

Swedes Warmed the Summer Up

Usually, summer is a time of low political activity. So was it in Belarus until 4 July. On that day an airplane, chartered by the Swedish advertising agency "Studio Total", illegally entered the Belarusian airspace and [parachuted](#) several hundred teddy bears with notes carrying pro-democracy messages. The event was immediately called "the teddy bear airdrop".

In the best soviet traditions the first official reaction was the denial. Only by the end of July Belarusian government had officially recognised the fact of illegal intrusion in sovereign air-space.

Soon after that Lukashenka sacked two top generals, the heads

of Belarus' border guards and of air defence, for failing to intercept the plane. Belarusian-speaking Swedish ambassador Stefan Eriksson was expelled from the country.

Then the cannons of state propaganda fired their volley. Eriksson was convicted of supporting the Belarusian opposition and assisting the trespassers. That time Europeans decided not to escalate the tensions and other ambassadors remained in Minsk.

Inside the country the summer passed in preparations for the September parliamentary elections. The opposition [divided](#) into three camps: those who fully partake in the elections, those who utterly [boycott](#) them and those who register their candidates with further exit from the race.

Gloomy End of the Year: No Gleams of Democracy

Parliamentary campaign was, by all estimates, very passive. Political apathy and people's distrust to both governmental and oppositional candidates were the prevailing trends before and during the elections.

Besides, the government resorted to its traditional tools. Some oppositional candidates were not registered. Their representatives had almost no chance to get into electoral committees. Even their legally guaranteed TV-speeches were censored.

In such an atmosphere nobody really hoped for the elections to be fair or democratic. On 23 September 109 pro-governmental [candidates](#) were ["elected"](#) into the House of Representatives – the lower chamber of Belarusian parliament.

No mass oppositional rallies followed the elections. OSCE observers traditionally didn't recognize the elections as free and democratic, while observers from post-soviet states did. European leaders refused to deal with newly formed Belarusian parliament.

On 15 October European Union prolonged sanctions against Belarusian regime for one year, which caused relatively moderate verbal response of Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Meanwhile, Andrey Sannikov, ex-candidate for presidency that had been released from prison half a year before got political asylum in the United Kingdom and moved there with his supporters' team.

At the end of the year Belarusian president astounded the whole country by the now infamous Decree No9. According to this decree, if you are an employee of a certain "modernizing" enterprise you can't leave the job without special permission from your boss. His decision, in its turn, can be appealed to the head of the local administration. If you refuse to work you will be fined with a gross sum of money or subjected to forced labour at the same plant. The decree has already been characterised as introducing the [new serfdom in Belarus](#).

All in all the year of 2012 in terms of political development has been just another wasted twelve months. There are still several political prisoners in jails. Parliamentary elections passed unnoticed. Relations with the West are cold and strained, while economic misunderstandings with Russia tend to transform into political tensions.

Paraphrasing one famous Israeli politician of the 20th century, Belarusian authorities never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. And the outgoing year is the best example.

Artyom Shraibman

Belarus After Elections: Three Years of Stability?

On 23 October the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Anglo-Belarusian Society in London organised an event titled 'Belarus After Elections: Three Years of Stability?'

The main speakers were Katia Glad from Chatham House and Yauheni Preiherman of the Liberal Club in Minsk who is also a regular contributor to Belarus Digest. Andrew Wilson, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, moderated the discussion.

The participants focused primarily on the post-election situation of Belarus. They also considered possible scenarios for future developments in the country and the role of the Belarusian opposition. Other topics covered were the current trends in politics and the economy as well as the possible role of the pro-government organisation *Belaya Rus* which officially won a majority in the recent elections.

'Stable Instability' of the Regime?

The participants noted that the opposition is not united and that there is a lack of a strong protest mood, and discussed recent trends in the economy. Other factors were alluded to, such as the high level of repression in Belarus, Moscow's financial support, as well as the West's unsuccessful policies which help official Minsk to remain in good shape. It is largely due to these factors that the Belarusian regime appears to many as a solid system with confident authorities.

Thus, the possibility for any major changes within the regime remains rather low, unless a shift within the elites takes place or there is some impulsive action from Moscow. One such scenario could be a sudden drop in oil prices which would make

Moscow unable to continue supporting the Belarusian regime. Clearly, Russia remains the most important supporter of Minsk. While it is a member of the Customs Union of Belarus, something which helps to preserve the stability of the Belarusian regime, it is well known that this is an organization that also receives significant financial support from and is directed by Moscow.

On the other hand, Belarusian society is clearly suffering from fatigue. People remained indifferent to the recent parliamentary elections because of widespread knowledge of the Parliament's puppet role, but also unfairness when it comes to counting of the vote. But as both domestic and international political actors started to put more pressure on Minsk, the regime's stability can be endangered. Some participants believed that the boycott campaign of the September elections proved that the electorate at large is unhappy about the Belarusian regime.

Economy against the Regime

The recent negative trends in the economy also play against Minsk and put its stability at risk. Russia's entry into the WTO brought about some negative consequences for Belarus and will make Minsk seek further financial support from Moscow. The consequences include a high level of competitiveness from other countries' goods and services which can inevitably become a threat to Belarusian companies.

Nonetheless, significant destabilisation of Minsk-Moscow relations seems highly unlikely. Moreover, due to Lukashenka's aversion to any changes in the system he has built, the scenario of serious modernization also appears unlikely.

The Opposition: a Single Candidate or a Better Strategy?

The participants agreed on the opposition's weakness and inability to achieve its political goals. One of the speakers suggested that only a strong leader and well-organised

structure could help the opposition to effectively communicate with Belarusian society. However, so far the opposition presents rather short-term thinking strategy and thus it cannot achieve its political goals.

A scenario of a single candidate is also difficult to implement because the regime is consolidated and will try to fragment the opposition. Others thought that because the elections are neither free nor transparent, the opposition's single candidate would not change the final result anyway.

Despite serious internal difficulties within the opposition, the recommendation for it was to work on preparation of the Belarusian people for one credible candidate in the future. The work at grassroots level should also play a significant role.

Moreover, one of the speakers argued that if the opposition won't change its behaviour and work with common people and elites, then it will not be relevant to the transformation process in Belarus. At the same time, the opposition and civil society should focus more on closer co-operation with the EU and reach a wider audience in Belarus.

E-voting for a Single Candidate in Belarus?

The idea of e-voting to select a single opposition candidate in Belarus failed to spark much optimism among the participants at the event. Firstly, that would require significant financial resources to establish such a voting system, which makes it impossible to work over the next couple of years. Moreover, the regime's repression and control of the electoral process technically disables the possibility for application of e-voting in the near-term future.

The Russian opposition still operates in a much more liberal environment compared to Belarus. They were even able to have voting for their opposition leadership not only on the Internet, but also in a number of places offline. That would

be difficult to imagine in Belarus.

The Need for Change

One of the arguments raised was related to the social contract in Belarus. In reality it means guaranteed stability in exchange for society's passivity.

Because of the economic crisis, the domestic and unprecedented international pressure imposed on Lukashenka, protest moods may yet still grow in Belarus. In addition to traditional pressure, the ruling elites and the Belarusian electorate at large also demonstrate a demand for reforms of the system.

Since all the political actors stress the necessity of macroeconomic changes, these changes would mean a transformation of the system. The current regime remains very reluctant to make any changes. Time will show for how it will be able to oppose changes.

The discussants analysed the phenomenon of *Belaya Rus*, a pro-government association which officially won the recent Parliamentary elections with 57% of all seats. According to some participants, transformation of *Belaya Rus* into a new political party could mean the end of the old politics because elites will be able to consolidate and better articulate their agenda.

Others were sceptical and thought that *Belaya Rus* was just window dressing and will be not more important in the current parliament. Whatever role *Belaya Rus* will have, it is unlikely to contribute to the end of "stable instability" in Belarus.

Election Campaign, Opposition and the Struggling Economy – Digest of Polish Analytics

Polish analysts focus on the results of the recent parliamentary elections and their consequences for Belarus. Experts also take a closer look at the opposition and its performance before and during the elections.

Since the economic indicators provide some worrisome trends, analysts also examine Belarus's economic position in the aftermath of Russia's entry into the WTO.

In *New Eastern Europe* Kamil Klysinski describes negative tendencies that appeared recently in the Belarusian financial market. At the same time, the analyst argues that Minsk does not respond to these increasing difficulties with adequate reforms. He indicates an increase in the amount of money in the market turnover of 21 per cent.

Another factor relates to a significant increase in demand for foreign currency when compared to supply. According to the analyst, the increasing rates of income in the state sector explains the present tendencies. The analyst notes that it is related to the September parliamentary elections. Moreover, the possible dissatisfaction of the state-owned company workers might lead to protests.

In another text for the [Centre for Eastern Studies](#) Kamil Klysinski elaborates on the current economic situation of Belarus. He comments on the loss of an important source of income from exports. This is caused by Moscow, which decided to block the re-export of Russian oil products to the EU countries without export duties. The author argues that because of such practices Minsk could have earned \$2.5bn.

The expert notes that Russia has tolerated these duty free exports since the beginning of 2011. However, due to the lack of proper concessions for the privatisation of strategic Belarusian companies, Moscow decided to sharpen its stance and cut Minsk practises. In conclusion, Klysinski suggests that the economic situation of Belarus is going to deteriorate within the next few months. The Belarusian authorities can decide to devaluate the Belarusian ruble and at the same time, seek more subsidies from Moscow.

Failed Elections Campaigning?

In a [Bulletin](#) issued by the Polish Institute of International Affairs Anna Maria Dyner analyses the pre-election situation in Belarus. According to her, the whole campaign had only marginal importance. She notes that because of the repressive regime imposed by the state, a dialogue between the authorities and society did not happen. Thus, the limited airtime given to the candidates, but also lack of interest in the issue among the state media, determined the pre-election mood in the society. Moreover, the analyst argues that no serious discussion concerning the situation of Belarus was carried out in public.

Dyner takes a closer look at the opposition's problems. Among the most burning issues she raises is a lack of united action, but also limited financial resources to run a campaign. The analyst critically evaluates internal divisions within the opposition and their inability to reach out to the Belarusian electorate. At the same time, the opposition parties did not manage to prepare a comprehensive political programme.

She recommends that Poland and the EU prepare a consistent and long-term programme of support for Belarus. So far temporary and short-term actions undertaken by Brussels have failed to bring about any changes. At the same time, she underlines that support for Belarusian society should remain on the EU's agenda.

The opposition's performance in the elections often appears in other comments. In a commentary prepared for the [Centre for Eastern Studies](#) Kamil Klysinski argues that the elections proved not the opposition's only weakness, but also its inability to work out a unified position had a detrimental effect as well. Moreover, the analyst concludes that since the election results have not been recognized internationally, it might lead to further isolation of Belarus and its closer cooperation with Russia.

Fragmented Opposition

In the [Korespondent Wschodni](#) Wojciech Borodzicz-Smolinski analyses the Belarusian opposition. He notes that one of the factors that helps Lukashenka stay in power is the lack of a political alternatives for society. According to him, the divisions within the opposition have two sides.

First of all, they are due to ideological factors. Nonetheless, more important are the apparent private animosities which hinder the integration process of the opposition. Borodzicz-Smolinski highlights the particular moments when the Belarusian opposition attempted to unite. One of the most crucial moments was before the December 2010 presidential elections. The analyst notes that the EU and the West still have to wait for a serious partner from those among the opposition with whom to discuss the future of Belarus.

WTO, Russia and Belarus

Kamil Klysinski also discusses, for the [Centre for Eastern Studies](#), the consequences of Russia's entry into the WTO in August 2012. Minsk will have to decrease the level of import tariffs which in consequence may require a larger opening for foreign goods. At the same time, the Russian market will have to be more open for imports from the WTO member states. Thus it will become more competitive for the Belarusian companies. The analyst notes that all of that does not make Belarus an

attractive country for investment and may delay Belarus's entry into the WTO.

The author concludes that Lukashenka argues that there have been high costs from Russia's entry into the WTO for the Belarusian economy, in order to gain more financial aid from Moscow. Minsk can also aim to export more to non-European markets, which appears as the short-term and temporary solution. Klysinki emphasises that the Belarusian regime has to urgently implement economic reforms.

Ideological Restrictions on Employment in Belarus – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

Belarusian experts analyse discrimination in the workplace based on political convictions, social networks preferences of Belarusians, the effect of income increase on political loyalty and media coverage of parliamentary elections among other topics.

[Idiologial Emloyment Restrictionsin Belarus](#) - Tatiana Vodolazhskaya Andrei Shutov (Centre for European Transformation) present an analysis of politically motivated employment restrictions in Belarus. The experts consider employment ban as any barriers to employment based on ideological and political reasons. One of the main ways to implement employment discrimination is a fixed term contract system which is a cornerstone of employment relations in Belarus.

Using "the profession ban" the regime punishes for unauthorized social and political activities, gets rid of ideologically disloyal citizens of areas in which we are working with education, formulation of policies and ideas, fights emergence and activities of influential public figures who manifest disloyalty.

[What social networks](#)

[like Belarusians?](#) – Andrei Dubanevich based on the research of the Ignite Social Media concludes that the Belarusians, as before, are conservative in their choice of social networking and related online resources. In particular, the Belarusians love free content, including music, for example, portal Last.fm. Belarus occupies 3rd place in the list of Livejournal; Belarus takes a prize-winning 3rd place in the top of the region's most educated Web users – 36.5% of them have higher education.

[Belarusian Security Brief](#) – Belarusian Security Blog has released its monthly review of national security of Belarus. The experts note a new conflict between Belarus and the West in August increased by a new "front", this time with Sweden. Political crisis is complicated by the doubtful ability of a regime to ensure the development of the country as well as growing lack of people to work in government positions

[Are "Bobruisk Anarchists" victims of "the patriot games"?](#)

Anatoliy Sanotenko writes for Mediakritika.by recalling the two-year-old case of three youngsters sentenced to 7 years in prison for an alleged attempt to set the KGB building on fire. Given the different backgrounds of the three young men, and leaked to the internet examples of KGB-assigned straw-men attempting to recruit young activists to commit unlawful actions, the author makes an assumption that the whole story might have been set up and staged by the KGB.

[Draft bill on the political parties and NGOs](#). On July 31, 2012, the Council of Ministers introduced it in the

Parliament, but the development of the bill was not discussed in public, it had been published only in the end of August on the National Legal Portal. The analysis showed that the bill provides some positive changes compared with the existing legislation, but generally not focused on the improvement of the situation with freedom of association and the introduction of regulations to promote their development.

Elections

[The Coverage of the 2012 Parliamentary Elections in the Belarusian Media](#). The Belarusian Association of Journalists concludes that electoral campaign and its coverage demonstrate political stagnation, which the authorities try to depict as political stability. Candidates' presentations are announced in printed TV programs as "Elections-2012" – without naming the candidates or the parties. There is a noticeable depersonalisation of the main participants of the electoral process is taking place. Communication as exchange of opinions is absent – it is rather an exchange of pre-defined messages, but not a free exchange of thoughts.

[Weekly Report of Election Observation Results](#), September 3-9. Human rights defenders for free elections campaign in its weekly report notes that election campaigning takes place in the climate of pressure on democratic candidates and civic activists from the state bodies. TV-presentations of the opposition candidates and their platforms continue to undergo censorship in the state press. Observers note massive use of administrative resources in support of pro-government candidates.

Foreign Policy

[Why Belarus Ignores "Eastern European Davos"?](#) – Yuri Zisser ([TUT.BY](#)) visited XXII Economic Forum in Poland, and shares his impressions. In particular, the author wonders at the lack of Belarusian officials on such a large and prestigious event:

"Our state finds millions on ice palaces and control teenagers in social networks, but did not want to find a penny to forward experts to participate in the Belarusian section on "Eastern European Davos".

[Belarus Aims to Rebuild Its Ties with the West](#) – Grigory Ioffe analyses two top personnel changes – the Belarusian foreign minister, Sergei Martynov was replaced by Vladimir Makei, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's now ex-chief of staff, whose position was assigned to Andrei Kobiakov, until recently Belarus's ambassador to Russia. The analyst concludes that despite the years of Western sanctions leveled on Belarus following the December 2010 post-election crackdown, efforts continue by both sides to maintain and resurrect withering ties between Minsk and the West.

Economy

[Political Business Cycle in Belarus, or the Political Economy of Confidence to the President](#) – Alexander Avtushko-Sikorski (BISS) investigated why many Belarusians' support the political status quo. The expert notes that the growth rate of real wages directly affect the level of confidence in the president: an increase in the rate of growth increases the level of trust, and their reduction – to reduce the number of citizens supporting Lukashenka.

The growth rate of real wages affect the "market" orientation of the Belarusians with slowing growth increases the number of supporters of the economy with little government regulation. With the acceleration of the growth rate of real wages opposite trend: people want to see in the economy there is a "strong hand" of the state. Income growth does not affect the dynamics of the geopolitical orientations Belarusians.

[Belarusian Monthly Economic Review, #9, September 2012](#) – IPM Research Centre has released the September review

of Belarusian economy. In particular, the experts note that GDP growth on the demand side still relies on external factors – the increase in exports and a reduction in non-energy imports – but the trend of recovery in domestic demand and a proportional restore of imports is traced quite clearly. The report highlights the decreasing share of high-tech production and vulnerability of Belarusian economy caused by its dependence on Russian oil imports.

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.

Internet Activism Under Siege in Belarus

Until recently, Internet has been the only oasis of freedom in Belarus' political sphere.

But as Belarusian authorities realise that Internet is a powerful means of communication and mobilisation, more and more effort is being put into suppressing online opposition activities. The events related to the upcoming parliamentary elections prove this trend.

On the 30 August, several moderators of Internet community *Nadoyel nam etot Lukashenka* (We are sick of Lukashenka) were detained. The community exists in the largest Russian-speaking social network V Kontakte and has around 37,000 members. The aim of the Belarusian security services was to get access to the community's administrators and delete its content as well

as intimidate activists.

Two of the group's administrators, Paval Yeutsikhiyeu and Andrey Tkachou, were sentenced to seven and five days in jail for a misdemeanor charge of hooliganism, which is a typical way to isolate activists in Belarus. Another activist, Raman Pratasevich, was shortly released as a juvenile, but reports of him being physically abused while interrogated have surfaced. Meanwhile, Siarhej Biaspaly and Aleh Shramuk fled abroad. Eventually, KGB got access to community's administrative controls and deleted its members and content.

Persecution of Internet activists garnered a negative reaction within the Belarusian sector of the web and were condemned by the international community. On 4 September the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, expressed her deep concern with the detentions and arrests of administrators of political social media groups in Belarus, which she described as a crackdown on online dissent.

Preventive Actions on Parliamentary Elections' Eve

A new crackdown on Internet activists looks like a response to pre-election Internet activity, and more precisely to calls to boycott the coming parliamentary elections, which are traditionally regarded as sham in authoritarian Belarus. Internet communities decided to join boycott campaign, started by other political opponents of the regime, and launched it on the web. A closer look at the current foreign policy of Belarus as well as domestic political situation suggests that a mass boycott is not the best scenario for Lukashenka.

The last two years saw a sharp decline in Belarus' relations with western democracies. This caused an imbalance, where Russia became by far the most important and influential partner. Despite numerous public claims of strategic

partnership between the two countries, a fear of being seized by Russia is widespread among the Belarusian elite. This makes a need to normalise relations with the West an important foreign policy objective, though not openly proclaimed.

However, if we set aside the foreign agenda and turn to domestic affairs, a boycott is the least desirable outcome for the regime too. In Belarus' case, where no party politics exists and the parliament has lost its political power long ago, many view elections more as a sign of support to the personalist regime. A mass boycott would openly indicate a lack of trust in authorities and their social contract with Belarusians, which has been eroding due to global crisis and economic model effects. To put in a nutshell, public support is badly needed for both internal and external reasons, and anti-electoral propaganda is clearly a challenge to the regime of Lukashenka.

The Echo of “Silent Protests”

As former administrator of the community Maxim Charniauski says, the prosecution of Internet activists began last year during famous “[silent protests](#)”. His online community was one of the online platforms which supported the protests. Such communities sprung up on the Belarusian Internet and were inspired by the Arab Spring. The initiative was named “Revolution through Social Networks” and occurred in a form of weekly peaceful street actions. Social networks, such as V Kontakte, Twitter and Facebook, played a major role in mobilisation of protests.

Although they failed to gain true mass support, the protests brought a lot of disturbance to the regime. They also revealed its repressive nature to citizens not actively engaged in opposition activity. During these events, community administrators were summoned and interrogated by KGB officers, who wanted to know passwords, logins and other relevant information. However, their efforts were not successful. Maxim

himself managed to escape and currently lives in Poland.

This time the KGB had more success, but fortunately for the community, the Vkontakte social network is a Russian legal entity. This means that Belarusian authorities can hardly exert administrative pressure on its owners and managers. As a result, the community was fully restored on the 3 September at the request of administrators. The supervisory administrative rights were, as an exception, transferred to a person who did not create the community and who lives abroad.

Social Networks: a New Target for Lukashenka Regime

Until recently, the Internet was believed to be the only space for political oppositional activity and media freedom, not controlled by the Belarusian government. In fact, most of activity on the part of regime's opponents has occurred online. The Belarusian government did not take any serious steps against such online activity, for it apparently did not perceive it as a threat to regime's stability. However, in recent years some trends have made Lukashenka regime take the Internet more seriously.

The number of Internet users reached roughly half of the population in 2012, and without a doubt the younger and more active half portion of the population. Recent studies on Internet usage in Belarus shows that it is poorly integrated into the global network and remains oriented towards regional Russian-speaking .ru and .by domains. Hence, Vkontakte is the most popular social network, while such services as Facebook, Twitter and Google+ are still underrepresented in Belarus. It is no wonder Vkontakte has the biggest politically engaged communities, and becomes the primary object of pressure on the part of the regime.

Furthermore, the Belarusian authorities seem to be very "impressed" by events of the Arab Spring, where online media played a significant role. Subsequent "silent protests" only

proved these fears. The regime started to introduce some regulative measures towards the Internet before the mentioned events, but after them it seems to pay even more attention to its Internet security. As a result, a policy trend of restrictive regulation of the Internet as well as pressure on active users has taken shape, especially social network activists. The last haven of political freedom is under siege.

Vadzim Smok

Dashkevich Sentenced to Another Year, Arrests of Activists – Belarus Politics Digest

Belarus authorities arrested a number of young activists and sentenced the leader of Young Front [Zmicier Dashkevich](#) to one additional year in prison. Other developments relate to parliamentary election campaign, foreign travel bans and court cases involving opposition activists.

[The Young Front leader sentenced to another year in prison](#). On August 28, after a closed hearing of, the local court Gluboksky district has sentenced Dmitry Dashkevich, the leader of an international organisation “The Youth Front”, to another year of imprisonment for “malicious violation of the requirements of the penal establishment’s administration”.

According to his fiancé, Dashkevich does not plan to appeal

against this court decision, because it would not be of any use. The human right defenders see this precedent as an attempt by the authorities to apply pressure on the young activist movement.

Arrests

[Dzianis Sadouski sentenced to 10 days in prison](#). On August 28, a [message](#) appeared on Belarus Partisan about the disappearance of Dzianis Sadovsky, the Executive secretary of the Belarusian Christian Democratic Party. As it turned out, he was detained and taken to a court in Minsk, where he was convicted for “disorderly conduct”. Vitali Rymashevsky, a board member of the party, claims the precedent was boldly unlawful: the court was held without a lawyer, and the information on the case was not even presented during the hearing.

[Mass arrests of opposition social network moderators](#). On August 30, administrators of opposition communities in social networks have been arrested in Minsk and Vitebsk. One of them, Pavel Yevtikhiev, was convicted of petty crime and sentenced to 5 days in jail. Another one, Roman Protasevich, after four hours of beating and interrogation, was let go due to his young age. Human rights defenders say that these arrests represent the authorities’ sharp reaction to opposition’s calls to ignore the elections.

Elections

[A parliamentary candidate arrested and searched in Vitebsk](#). Aleksei Gavrutikov, running in parliamentary elections in Vitebsk region, has filed a complaint to the public prosecution office, based on his groundless detention by the road police in Vitebsk and unauthorised search of his daughter’s personal belongings (which were claimed by the police officer to be stolen) and his friend’s car. Gavrutikov hopes to bring the police officer to justice.

[A BNF party candidate plans to quit the elections.](#) Aleksandr Romanovich, a BNF party candidate in Pinsk, during his speech for the Belarus-2 TV-channel, pronounced that the upcoming parliamentary elections are organized unfairly and in fact are a mere formality. He promised that, unless the regime changes his authoritarian policy and releases all political prisoners, he will withdraw his candidature from the election lists.

Travel ban

[Lawyer Oleg Volchek has lost the court case, but is not on travel ban anymore.](#) On August 22, the Central District court in Minsk has denied sustaining the claim of lawyer Oleg Volchek on illegal conduct of MIA and the Ministry of Justice, due to which his name appeared in the list of persons restricted to travel abroad. Volchek claims he filed a lawsuit on July 11, because he had run out of means to resolve the issue via communicating with different bodies of authorities. He maintains that his appearance in the list of people restricted to leave the territory of RB is an attempt by the authorities to apply pressure on a human right activist. After the court, however, he was informed that his name was put off the travel banned list.

As of the end of the last week, the Belarusian following civic and political activists were removed from GOB's travel ban list: [Oleg Volchek](#); [Andrei Bondarenko](#); [Valentin Stefanovich](#); [ZhannaLitvina](#); [Garry Pogonyailo](#); [Anatoly Lebedko](#); [Oleg Gulak](#); [Viktor Korneenko](#); [Valeriy Ukhnaiev](#); [MikhailcYanchuk](#); and [Lev Margolin](#).

Other

[An activist from Baranovichy has won 500,000 BYR in court against his ex-employer.](#) Grigoriy Grik, who claims he was fired from his workplace due to his active involvement in an opposition party, was appointed to receive a 500,000 Ruble compensation from his employer. However, the activist was not reinstated at his workplace and now has to look for a new job.

[A disabled wheelchair user won the case in a non-barrier](#)

[environment](#). It is the first time that the court has proclaimed a municipal company liable for disregarding the non-barrier environment norms. Bobruisk municipal road-construction company was obligated to pay the compensation for the moral harm to Sergei Matskevich, a wheelchair user with the first group of disability.

[Public hearings regarding proposed construction of cellulose plant in Svetlagorsk](#). On August 17, a public hearing regarding the assessment of potential environmental threat of the cellulose plant planned to be built in town took place. Despite the massive disagreement of local people, they were not given an opportunity to speak during the hearing or merely put questions to the officials personally. People claim that the hearing was played by the authorities' scenario.

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Does the European Union Need Belarus? – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

[Does the European Union Need Belarus?](#) journalist Nikolai Slutski examines whether the European Union could consider Belarus as an equal or an associate member of the European community, should Belarus decide to choose a pro-Western

foreign policy vector. The journalist comes to a conclusion that beyond the politics, the EU has a weak economic motivation to have Belarus as a part of the EU.

He observes that although Belarusian exports to the European Union today exceed exports to the Russia, most of it consists of processed commodities from Russia itself supported by cheap prices on Russian natural gas. He concludes that without cheap raw materials and energy supplies from Russia there will be almost no exports from Belarus to Europe.

[10th Issue of the BISS Trends](#) – Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) presents a new issue of the BISS Trends series of quarterly reports. The report concludes that in the second quarter of 2012, Belarus continued its efforts to integrate with Russia against a somewhat warmer backdrop of relations with the West and intensification of relations with developing nations.

The return to the old subsidies scheme for Belarusian-Russian relations enables Minsk to defy the conditions that the EU lays down to improve the mutual relations. Despite a certain thaw in Belarus' relations with the European Union, the degree of repression and limitations on the freedoms of association and assembly never went down. On the economics front, the authorities have given up on the old approach to privatisation processes, sliding back to a less transparent and much slower method.

[Belarus' Foreign Policy Index #8](#) – BISS presents a new issue of the Belarus' Foreign Policy Index, covering the developments of May and June 2012. The experts have concluded that the country has resumed its efforts to restore the true multi-vector character of its foreign policy endeavour (for the first time in many months, all of the combined indices are in the positive zone) and sharply intensify the relations with “developing countries” amid the previously outlined trend

towards a deeper integration with Russia and “frozen” relations with the European Union.

[How to Increase the Efficiency of the EU Technical Assistance to Belarus?](#) – Alexei Pikulik and Elena Artemenko (BISS), based on the results of special research, believe that Belarus can significantly improve the quality of technical assistance from the EU. In particular, the experts consider that it is necessary to develop the collection and dissemination of information about the tools and technical assistance requirements through the efforts of state and non-profit institutions.

[The West Lost the Last Round of the Battle for Belarus](#) – American analyst Grigory Ioffe tells *Deutsche Welle* about the resources of the stability of the Lukashenka 18-year regime and how the relations between Minsk and the West will further develop. The expert believes that one of the secrets of the stability of the regime is vague Belarusian national identity, implying weakness of societal horizontal connections. The strengthening of vertical power structure has become a replacing factor in such circumstances.

[Election monitoring reports.](#) Human rights defenders for free elections campaign issued Monitoring Report on the Formation of the District Election Commissions. One of their conclusions is that "election legislation fails to ensure the transparency of the process of forming the district election commissions... Civil society structures are unable to influence the activity of these bodies." Another [observation](#) is that creation of initiative groups for collection of signatures in support of candidates' nomination does not show any significant difference in intensity of preelection activities compared to regular level for parliamentary elections in Belarus.

[BISS Polling Memo](#) – BISS released a polling memo analyzing the results of national public opinion poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies

in June 2012. While more Belarusians feel better about the country's economy, the majority of population think the country is moving in a wrong direction. Lukashenko's electoral rating dropped to 29.7%, but he continues to be the only real political player in Belarus.

[Belarusian Monthly Economic Review, July 2012](#) – the IPM Research Center has released its monthly bulletin which reviews recent developments in political and economic life of the country. The issue in July covers such topics as New contradictions in relations with the EU; Challenges at the labor market remain; Growth of exports to non-CIS countries increased; Increased standards for compulsory reserving.

[Belarus in NGO Law Monitor](#). International Center for Non-profit Law included Belarus in its NGO Law Monitor. Now the Belarusian NGOs will be subject to regular legal review and analysis, along with other NGOs in more than 30 countries. The report notes that legislation of the Republic of Belarus and current law enforcement practices are not conducive to the development of not-for-profit organisations; in contrast to the country's Constitution and international obligations, they significantly restrict the freedom of association.

[Michael Scanlan Leaves Belarus](#) – Before his departure from Minsk, after a three-year tenure as U.S. Charge d'Affaires in Belarus, Michael Scanlan gave an interview for TUT.BY-TV. He told about major issues in diplomatic relations between U.S. and Belarus; described the steps which should be taken in Belarus to get the benefits of the WTO and enter into the Bologna system. The diplomat also shared his opinion about the 2010 elections, the closure of U.S. programs, the Belarusian national character and his favourite Minsk bars.

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Why the Young Do Not Join the Opposition – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

Belarusian analysts focus on the role and strategy of the Belarusian opposition, the balance of powers before the parliamentary elections, sources of legitimacy of Alexander Lukashenka and Schengen visas for Belarusians.

[Lukashenka and his Opponents Preserved in a Crystal Vessel](#) – Alexander Klaskovsky analyses the age structure of the Belarusian opposition and identifies the lack of the influx of young forces there. As a result almost 18 years of continuous pressure the opposition in Belarus is now assigned a role of whipping boys. Most of the opposition leadership is old and has been there since early 1990s.

The costs of being in the opposition are significant – beatings, arrests, prison sentences, constant pressure by security services and difficulties with earning a living. The benefits of being an opposition activist are very limited because the opposition is not getting any political appointments and is generally excluded from political decision-making in the country. As a result, young people are not interested in joining the opposition which makes it an even less attractive and less competitive force in Belarusian society. The journalist concludes that the opposition naturally degrades along with the formal political system: “Under these conditions, the country simply is rolling down to

the level of third world countries and is becoming a de facto colony of the Kremlin”.

[The Balance of Power inside the Opposition Before Parliamentary Elections 2012](#) – Analytical Belarusian Centre published its review dedicated to the upcoming parliamentary elections. The experts address issues such as the formation of the Belarusian opposition in several streams with a different vision for the transformation of the Belarusian regime and collaboration with existing elites, as well as the participation of the opposition in the last parliamentary campaigns and the issue of the Eastern vector of foreign policy of Belarus.

[The Unity of the Opposition is a Myth, Fetish, Created by Analysts and Journalists](#) – political experts Alexander Feduta, Denis Melyantsou and Yevgeniy Preygerman answer the questions of the ERB and explain what will be the end of the September parliamentary elections, why there is no unity, and how much the boycott costs. The participants generally agree that the opposition should take the opportunity of elections to strengthen their membership base and conduct an effective information campaign. This is one of very few opportunities to do it legally in Belarus.

[How Stable are the Belarusian CSOs?](#) – Vladimir Korzh, chief executive of NGO "ACT" and one of the authors of the annual CSO Sustainability Index in Belarus, speaks in his interview to AMPby.org about the Index's methodology and the results of the assessment of the stability of Belarusian CSOs in 2011. In particular, the expert states that there is some stability and even trends towards improvement in the Belarusian third sector – the last three years consistently Belarus receives 5.9 out of 7 points.

["Third Way" for Belarus](#) – Alexander Avtushko-Sikorski (BISS) analyzes Alexander Lukashenka appeal at the ceremony to celebrate Belarus' Independence Day. The expert notes that the

speech keeps a set of "classical" semantic blocks. The main difference of this year is changing in the foreign policy rhetoric, which practically does not affect relations with the West and Russia, and includes a new topic of integration as a special path of development for Belarus.

[The Dilemma of the Fourth Term](#) – Alexei Medvetsky (Agency for Political Studies) discusses the sources of legitimacy of the fourth term of president Lukashenka. Based on the recent events, the expert concludes that the Belarusian president is inclined to opt for the familiar popular support. However, the nomenclature and the power elite are definitely not interested in letting him go "to the people", so they will continue their passive and active fight to the detriment of his credibility.

[Weekly election monitoring report: June 18 – 24](#). The campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" released the #1 issue of the weekly analytical report on monitoring results. In particular, the authors note that "the election campaign begins in unfavourable environment, on the background of political repression, in conditions of the pressure on the opposition forces and the civic society."

[Review-Chronicle of Human Rights Violations in Belarus in June 2012](#) (in English) – Human Rights Centre *Viasna* released its monthly review of human rights violations. In particular, the experts see that events in June clearly demonstrated that the Belarusian authorities consider human rights issues only in the dimension of political relations with the EU and other countries of Europe. The focus of these relations was still on the problem of political prisoners.

[Belarusian Yearbook-2011](#). BISS and website of the Belarusian expert community «Nashe Mnenie» ("Our Opinion") published the Belarusian 2011 Yearbook. The book was presented in Minsk's "Ź" Gallery on June 26. Each edition of Belarusian Yearbook (this year has seen its eighth version) is more than just a collection of analytics – it is a chronicle of the

country's contemporary history written by impartial unbiased researchers and analysts.

[Analysis of consular statistics of the Schengen countries in 2007-2011](#) – Andrei Eliseev (BISS) explores the dynamics of the Schengen visa issuing in 2007-2011. The expert concludes that Schengen countries are more open to citizens of Belarus, than for residents of other countries of the Eastern Partnership (EP). In comparison with the countries of EP and Russia, Belarus leads on the following parameters in the ratio of per capita: the total amount of short-term Schengen visas; multiple Schengen visas, and the number of national long-term visas (Category D).

[Recommendations for Privatisation in Belarus](#) – the recommendation report is based on discussion and presentations delivered at the conference "privatisation and private entrepreneurship in Belarus – scope for international assistance" on April 16-17, 2012 in Warsaw. The conference was a part of a new initiative of the European Union towards Belarus "The European dialogue on modernization with Belarusian Society".

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Political Parties in Belarus

Consider Elections Tactics

Opposition political groupings in Belarus are stepping up preparations for the parliamentary elections, scheduled for 23 September 2012.

An IRI opinion poll figure from February shows that 43 per cent of people believe that in order to solve the economic situation in the country, new people are needed in government. 47 per cent believe that political reform is necessary to achieve this. Meanwhile, 32 per cent say they would vote for the "change candidate" or one not put forward by the state.

These figures underline the tremendous potential opportunity for outreach that the election presents for the opposition, particularly if they can communicate with voters the link between the painful economic situation in the country and the need for increased citizen control over the authorities. The wider public currently sees no alternative to the current regime and is not well informed or supportive of the opposition.

81 per cent of the Belarusian population opposes the idea of a boycott of elections, and 74 per cent plan to vote in the election. These polls have facilitated a small shift in approach from some opposition groupings, and a common recognition that the elections should be used to communicate with voters as the best way to build up support for the future.

However, tensions, distrust, and in particular differences in electoral tactics, remain, with some groups set on boycotting or planning to withdraw candidates before election-day.

Coalition of the six

Within the Coalition of the Six, politicians from six major

political groupings have taken small steps to work together, including creating a common team for election observation, agreeing to develop common campaign messages for use by all groups, and understanding the need to avoid pointless mutual criticism.

Each of the political parties has different internal dynamics, with different electoral strategies and priorities based on the current focus of their membership and their ability to run innovative campaigns

Just World of Sergei Kalyakin is the only party currently committed to run throughout the parliamentary election campaign, rather than proposing to withdraw or boycott. They recognise that not running a candidate in the presidential elections and re-branding from their former Communist Party banner has reduced significantly their name recognition amongst the Belarusian population. As a result, they wish to avoid making the same mistake again. In coalition discussions, they have therefore argued against any common agreement that all opposition candidates would withdraw together at a designated time.

The **Tell the Truth** campaign is hindered as some key leaders (such as former presidential candidate Vladimir Neklyayev and movement coordinator Andrei Dmitriev) are currently ineligible to be candidates due to their post-detention status. While the movement appears to currently be the most dynamic and seemingly best funded opposition political force in the country, this limitation has contributed to the movement's decision not to run candidates nationally under a Tell the Truth banner. In spite of this they plan to support candidates affiliated with the movement using a common Tell the Truth message. This is designed to reinforce the idea of citizen control over the authorities' decisions, and would be utilised by activists even in districts where candidates are not running.

This message would build on recent issue-based campaigns around a "citizens' control" theme. An example is their guiding support of the civic campaign to pressure the government into revising plans for the construction of a large Chinese industrial park in Minsk. This particular campaign has already had an impact, with regional authorities entering into a dialogue with the protestors on the construction plans. Critics suggest that while Tell the Truth is good at creating noise in the media by launching a new campaign almost every fortnight, the actual results of their campaigns are not as impressive as they claim.

The **Belarusian Popular Front** is planning to nominate as many members as possible for registration as candidates for the election, and is also working on a campaign to change the electoral code. Their election strategy is likely to include withdrawal in the last days of the campaign to protest against the unfair conditions.

For Freedom is planning to support parliamentary candidates who share their values. It is still undecided whether the organisation's leader Aliaksander Milinkevich will run in the election, but if he does, it will probably be in a Minsk district.

The **United Civic Party** have argued that all opposition candidates should withdraw before the beginning of the five-day early voting period. The party intends to follow a strategy where a candidate should pledge in writing that he or she will withdraw from the race five days before the end and will not use state funds to finance the campaign. This strategy is led by Anatoly Lebedko who was re-elected as party chair in a tense meeting in March.

The **Belarusian Christian Democrats** (BCD) are taking the hardest line view amongst the coalition, following an internal vote for a boycott. With their co-chair Paval Seviarynets in jail alongside an angry and

principled membership, they have launched a boycott campaign, as their earlier conditions of the release of political prisoners, amendments to the electoral law, and registration of the BCD were not fulfilled. The latest and fourth attempt to register the party was rejected by the Ministry of Justice in February 2012 on spurious and clearly politically motivated grounds.

While the BCD was the party which took the last local elections most seriously and also ran a party candidate in the presidential election, their internal vote means that they are not prepared to run on this occasion – even though some leaders recognise that this may stall the party's momentum. To mitigate this, they plan to recruit district coordinators to campaign about the elections not being genuine and also to promote their party.

Meanwhile, the opposition parties are united in a **For Fair Elections election observation campaign**. Led by Sergei Kalyakin and Viktor Karnienko, it aims to be a common effort involving all the active political parties and groupings, building on the achievements and experience of the 2010 presidential elections.

Other groups

Formally outside the Coalition of the Six, the **Social Democrat Hramada** of Iryna Veshtard is also regaining activity as an opposition party with a number of more dynamic young members, especially women. They plan to submit candidates for the election although it is unclear if they will remain in the race through to the end. They are having problems registering their current leadership with the authorities. A third party congress in the last two years was held in March, as the conclusions of the previous congresses that elected Veshtard as their leader were not recognised by the Ministry of Justice.

A boycott campaign was launched on 14 January by the unregistered **Belarusian Movement** of Viktor Ivashkevich, the organisers of the (generally unsuccessful) *Narodny Skhod* (People's Assembly) rallies held at the end of 2010. The boycott is primarily supported by Team Sannikov, such as the Charter 97 website and the civil initiative European Belarus, as well as the independent trade union of the radio-electronic industry workers. It is not directly linked to the BCD campaign.

They argue that the only way to express distrust in the system is to boycott the election (as there is no party of power as in Russia to vote against) and are set to take the position that anyone who has not voted, has voted against. No figures have been specified, though, about what level of turnout they would consider a successful boycott. Indeed the strategy is very similar to that of Sannikov and Charter 97 before the 2008 parliamentary elections. Critics of the boycott campaign, including from members of the Coalition of the Six, see it as a harmful attempt to divide the Belarusian democratic forces into supporters and opponents of the "election".

Other groupings include the opposition-minded **Party of Freedom and Progress** of Uladimir Navasiad (a member of parliament from 2000-04) which has indicated its intention to run. Meanwhile the pseudo-opposition **Liberal Democratic Party** of Siarhei Haidukevich declared in January that they will nominate 245 members as candidates, ensuring representation in all 110 electoral districts for the forthcoming elections.

Candidates supporting the authorities will likely run as independents as in previous elections. However, there remains strong pressure from public officials of various levels to create a party of power based on the **Belaya Rus** movement, to defend their interests. As a step towards this, its chairman, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Alexander Radkov, has said they will support 'like-minded' candidates along with candidates affiliated with the movement.

With over 100,000 members, Belaya Rus has plans to appoint members to election commissions, establish an election campaign HQ as well as carry out campaigning – although the scale of this will depend on a signal from Lukashenka. While support of these officials is vital to Lukashenka during election time, he has consistently rejected their proposals to create a political party, seeking to limit their influence.

Targets Achievable by the Opposition

Ultimately the elected candidates – as on previous occasions – will almost certainly be drawn from a list prepared by the authorities. Given this reality and the hurdles that the opposition will inevitably face during the campaign, they should find other ways to measure success.

A positive outcome to the electoral campaign for the opposition would include higher levels of support for the democratic cause, a positive impression being registered in society by opposition candidates, higher levels of recognition of opposition leaders and parties, and also a demonstration that the opposition has the ability and capacity to plan and implement a successful campaign.

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