

Closer EU Ties, Austerity Reforms, and A Cop Calendar – Western Press Digest

Belarus tries to improve its economy and sends signals to the West that it is ready to carry out reforms to attract investment and secure loans. Besides reforms, Minsk has been pushing state-owned potash producer Belaruskali to win more of the marketshare, even if it means losing money.

The EU views relations with Belarus pragmatically, making no guarantees. Despite the air of mistrust, Lukashenka has won the confidence of some policymakers in the EU that he is ready for reforms if the West is willing to support Belarus restore its image internationally with strategic issues.

A local police force in western Belarus has decided to put out a controversial calendar for the public. The calendar in question features pictures of real female members of the police force, a move that has led to a mixed public response. All of this and more in this edition of the Western Press Digest.

International Relations

[EU-Belarus Rapprochement Gaining Ground](#) – Following Minsk's constructive role as a host and mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the EU is seriously weighing how to improve ties with Lukashenka. The Wall Street Journal reports that these warming relations are still only in their initial stages, but there are serious discussions going on in Brussels about how to improve ties while not ignoring Minsk's past record.

Two issues under consideration, according to Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs, are easing visa restrictions for

Belarusian citizens and supporting Belarus as it makes its bid to gain entrance to the WTO. Rinkēvičs also said that improving ties between the EU and Belarus should not be seen as trying to pull Minsk into the EU's orbit of influence.

[Diplomatic Barbs Exchanged with Kyrgyzstan](#) – Following the murder of a prominent Kyrgyz mob boss in Minsk, ties between the two former Soviet republics are under strain. In their coverage of the diplomatic sparring match, RFE/RL reports that the conflict came about after a witness to the killing of Almambet Anapiyaev in Minsk said that members of ex-president of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiev's were involved. Belarusian authorities stated that an official investigation needed to be carried out and that the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty' made it impossible for it to hand over anyone to the Kyrgyzstani authorities until guilt was established.

Kurmanbek Bakiev and his brother Janysh (then head of the state's bodyguard service) fled Kyrgyzstan in 2010 following the massacre of dozens of civilians who protested the then president's administration for its corruption. Bakiev contacted Lukashenka to ask that his family be given refuge in Belarus, after which the Belarusian head of state provided sanctuary for Bakiev and his entire family. Kyrgyzstan has demanded that Belarus return Bakiev, who was sentenced to life in prison in absentia for his alleged crimes.

Economy

[Winning Over Confidence With Reforms](#) – A recent article by Euromoney says that the authorities in Minsk are doing their best to convince western policymakers and investors alike that they are embarking a series of reforms to improve the domestic economy's standing. Some of these reforms including freezing public sector wages at their current levels, slashing government support for state-owned enterprises and halting state sponsored projects that are not 80% or more complete. Like other countries in the region, Belarus' economy is

struggling in the face of the economic downturn due to the conflict in Ukraine.

According to Euromoney, the mantra in Minsk is that Belarus will make good on all of its debts this year, even if that means making cuts elsewhere. Still, most experts following the developments in Belarus are wary that any substantial change is underway – especially with the upcoming presidential election this fall. Major reforms, like the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, are still not on the table. Despite the sense that Minsk may not be serious about carrying out serious reforms, there is much optimism that rapprochement between Belarus and the EU is gaining traction and may open the door to stronger ties between the two parties.

[Belarus Pushing Potash Exports](#) – Bloomberg reports that Belarusian potash producer Belaruskali is working overtime to get a larger share of the lucrative global market. Following the messy split with its Russian partner Uralkali, the Belarusian potash exporter has struggled to gain better control over the market and maintain its relevance. It has done this by selling to countries like Brazil and China for a discounted rate and is suspected of flooding the latter's market to the point that it is not interested in buying more due to its large surplus. As currencies decline in value across the globe, potash producers are seeing export costs drop as well – a development that is driving more competition.

Civil Society

[Man Detained for Writing on Fence](#) – Based on an RFE/RL report, the BBC reports that a resident of Brest in eastern Belarus has been detained for keeping a public 'fence blog'. Mikhail Lukashevich has been writing on a city fence since the 1990s, but began regularly posting only around 10 years ago. His comments are typically confined to discussing current political issues and are critical of the authorities, according to the report. Lukashevich is under investigation by

the authorities for 'defaming Lukashenka' and says that he may have to undergo psychiatric evaluation. The article notes that during the Soviet era he spent time in a psychiatric hospital in the past.

Miscellaneous

[Not Your Average Calendar](#) – Female traffic police have made quite a stir in Belarus lately, but it is not their professional accolades that are drawing the public's attention writes the Daily Mail. The Mail's photo exposé, based on a report from Vocativ.com, has created some controversy, with some citizens calling it a 'desperate' move by the government, while others appear to be [rather fond of the idea](#). While not entirely uncommon in the West, this is the first documented calendar of its kind in Belarus.

[Unique Underground Medical Treatment](#) – An unconventional treatment for patients with lung ailments has taken foot in Belarus, reports the Daily Mail. According to the UK publication, children and adults alike are treated for issues like bronchial asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease by breathing in the unique mineral-rich air found in an abandoned salt mine found some 1,400 ft below the surface. Treatment lasts for 19 days and is often repeated over a period of 2.5 years. Less one fret, patients sent to the underground facility treat it more as a period of leisure than treatment, as the treatment centre is full of things for them to do, including sport and games.

Devin Ackles

Recent IISEPS Polls: Belarusian Society Slowly Matures

In early January 2014 the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) published its December 2013 poll results for various domains of public opinion.

Though some people, including opposition politicians and activists, doubt this institute's ability to handle a proper social survey in an unfree society, most Belarusian experts and analysts trust their data.

The results of the latest poll suggest that Belarusians show certain signs of a gradual "maturing" as a society.

In the economic realm respondents tend to be pessimists, blame the government and the country's ruler for its failures and show high demand for market reforms. When speaking of foreign policy, more and more people prefer the EU to Russia and support the authorities when they clash with their eastern neighbour.

At the same time, the support rate of Alexander Lukashenka have fallen, but the opposition did not manage to gain any points from it.

Economic Pessimism and Blaming Lukashenka for Crisis

The IISEPS poll indicated a further deepening of people's pessimism with the state of the economy and the prospects of their own welfare. Almost 69% of the respondents agreed that the Belarusian economy is going through a [crisis](#). The numbers have worsened since the previous IISEPS survey, which was conducted in September 2013 (57% that time).

A considerable 12% pessimistic shift in the numbers can be explained by salary growth freezing at the end of the year, the authorities' plan to cut budget spending, several rather doubtful governmental fiscal initiatives that were recently announced (like auto-owners tax, \$100 [exit-fee](#) and "sponger-tax"), a gradual devaluation of the national currency etc.

The number of people awaiting the situation to [worsen further](#) has become nearly three times higher than the number of economic optimists (36% vs. 12.5%).

When asked who is responsible for the crisis and whom they rely on to resolve it, Belarusians came up with the following responses.

Whose fault is the current crisis in Belarus?

Rank	Subject	%
1	President	45
2	Government	42
3	Parliament	19.6
4	People	16.3
5	The USA	15.5

On whom do you rely in overcoming the crisis?

Rank	Subject	%
1	President	36.8
2	Russia	27.8
3	Entrepreneurs	25.7
4	West	22.7
5	Government	21.3

Blaming the head of state and government for the crisis represents the majority's immunity to the state propaganda,

however, combined with a certain amount of paternalism – they maintain hope that Lukashenka and foreign countries will play a key role in overcoming the crisis.

Of all the results of the survey, what appears to be most surprising in a generally paternalistic Belarusian society is the number of market reforms supporters has reached 60% (46% among those who trust Lukashenka). These figures, meanwhile, can deceive because the history of market transitions in other post-soviet states shows that the reforms' support falls after people feel the first painful consequences which inevitably accompany any economic liberalisation policy.

All in all, the ongoing failures of the Belarusian "socially-orientated" economy has people disappointed with the government and has them beginning to recognise the need for changes and market reforms in particular.

Pro-Russian Moods Gradually Fade Away

The poll also confirmed another trend continuing: more people prefer EU to Russia if asked about with whom it would be better to integrate. 45% have chosen EU, while only 37% – Russia.

What would you prefer: Uniting with Russia or entering the EU?



At the same time, 45% agreed that Belarus should change its policy to become closer with the EU, with only 22% disagreeing with this position.

One further result that can be derived from this issue seems quite surprising: 39% claimed they do want to see more Russians coming to live in Belarus (only 24% held the opposite view and 33% held no position one way or the other). Analysing

this data, one must take into account that Belarusians are generally known as a tolerant nation, most of them speak Russian. Moreover, full freedom of movement became one of the most notable, if not the only achievement of so-called Union State of Belarus and Russia.

Belarusian authorities enjoy rather high approval rate with regards to their stance in the latest conflict with Russia (known as the ["potash war"](#)). Only 13.6% blamed Belarus for starting the conflict and only 25% disapproved of the [arrest](#) of the Russian potash giant "Uralkali" CEO Vladislav Baumgartner.

As the years go by, the number of pro-European Belarusians gradually increases, while the number of pro-Russian ones continues to decline. This remains true despite all the anti-Western propaganda in the state media, the officially announced course towards [Eurasian integration](#) and the vast annual economic benefits being reaped in from Russia. So, one could only guess what the situation will be given these factors cease to exist in the future.

Opposition Cannot Catch the Points Lukashenka Loses

The decline in support and trust in the Belarusian ruler was another unexpected result of the December poll. Both figures have shown relatively stable growth for the last two years (after the 2011 economic crisis).

Do you trust current president?



What concerns the electoral support rate, less than 35% of Belarusians would have voted for Lukashenka in December 2013 (after 37,3% in June and 42,6% in September). The primary reason for this decline is, naturally, the government's economic failures. As was demonstrated in the first paragraph – people tend to blame the country's leader for the crisis.

The swift increase in the figures from September occurred right after a particularly active phase of the above mentioned potash war. Insofar as public opinion was generally positive with the Belarusian government's actions in this conflict, Lukashenka, praised by state TV as a fighter for sovereignty and national dignity against insidious Russian oligarchs, gained some points. With three months having already passed, the "nation's defender" image has faded.

All of Lukashenka's problems with public support contribute little to the [opposition's own popularity](#). Support rates for opposition leaders do not go any higher than 3% except for two ex-candidates for the presidency: the head of civil campaign "European Belarus" [Andrei Sannikau](#) (3.2%) and a poet [Uladzimir Niakliaeu](#), leader of "Tell the truth" campaign (7.1%).

[Aleh Manaev](#), the head of IISEPS, in one of his latest interviews explained Niakliaeu's relative success by the "Tell the truth" strategy to concentrate their activity on pertinent social issues. Many other opposition structures choose to promote a purely political and human rights agenda, which remains unpopular among most of Belarusians.

Thus, even the aggregate rate of all the opposition leaders remains far behind Lukashenka's own declining figures. Moreover, trust in the opposition parties in general (16%) appeared to be lower than the level of trust to KGB (34%), courts (35%), police (35%), the Central Election Committee (32%) and even to the utterly passive pro-government political parties (20%).

As always, the IISEPS poll reveals a wide range of public opinion trends, which seem difficult to summarise in a single unified conclusion. In general, Belarusians, against all the existing odds, show signs of slow maturing as a society: appreciating their sovereignty more, detecting the government's fault in the economic crisis, striving more for

European integration and market reforms.

Unfortunately for the opposition, its leaders fail to be in tune with people, often proposing them an agenda too divorced from their actual needs and ideals.