

# Soft Belarusianisation, economic forum, reformists disappointed – digest of Belarusian analytics

Arciom Šrajbman explains why Lukashenka did not attend EaP summit in Brussels. Grigory Ioffe: The regime in Minsk has taken over some of the most important slogans and refrains of the opposition. Joerg Forbrig: I am not an “Architect of Revolutions” in Belarus.

Jaühien Prejhierman sees modest progress in US-Belarus relations. Piotr Rudkoŭski: through soft Belarusianisation, the regime is looking for new ways to arrange relationships with its own society and with the West. Belarus in Focus: reformists in the government and the National Bank are somewhat disappointed with the pace and prospects for economic reforms in Belarus.

IPM Research Centre fresh infographics on education: 5,7% Belarusian high school graduates can freely speak a foreign language. CET study: Belarusians’ self-identification “with the Soviet people” remains the same as in the early 2000s.

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

## Foreign policy

[Nothing to Talk About. Why Lukashenka Did Not Accept the Long-Awaited Invitation to Brussels](#) – [Arciom Šrajbman](#), at Carnegie Moscow Centre, analyses the reasons why Alexander Lukashenka did [not accept](#) the invitation to the Eastern Partnership [summit](#) – in brief, the EaP was devalued even in

the eyes of its participants. This is cold realism, a field for the routine work of professional diplomats, where the leaders do not yet see the point of investing their political capital.

[Modest Advances in US-Belarus Relations](#) – [Jaŭhien Prejhierman](#) pays attention to some modest progress in US-Belarus relations, which have been in a downgraded state for almost ten years now. However, there is a fundamental problem Belarus has in relations with the US – unlike some other post-Soviet states, the country has no lobby in DC.

[Belarus, Russia and the “Ukrainian Scenario”](#) – Grigory Ioffe analyses fresh publications pertaining to the possibility of “the Ukrainian scenario” in Belarus. The author acknowledges that Belarus and Russia have common majority religion and language, and suggests that “Western influence is hardly the root cause of a potentially comparable Belarusian estrangement from Russia”. A functioning state is the main difference that Europe sees in Belarus compared to Ukraine.

## Domestic politics

[Belarus: Generational Change and Nation-Building](#) – Grigory Ioffe notices that the “regime” in Minsk has taken over some of the most important slogans and refrains of the opposition. And today, Belarusian language is no longer a clear marker of patriotism and identity. Such evolving nuances are easy to miss. Nevertheless, they are important to grasp for anyone aspiring to understand modern-day Belarus.

[E-participation as an instrument of inclusive public administration](#) The authors of the document discuss the creation of special electronic services in Belarus for public discussion of draft laws as well as an electronic platform that allows citizens to collect signatures for certain legislative initiatives.

[Joerg Forbrig: I am Not an “Architect of Revolutions” in Belarus](#) – Joerg Forbrig, The German Marshall Fund, visited Belarus for the first time in the last 7 years and gave an interview to the Reformation Belarusian website. Dr Forbrig shares his understanding of Belarusian civil society and Belarus-EU relations.

[Belarus and the 1917 Revolution](#) – Grigory Ioffe notices that Belarus is the only successor state of the Soviet Union where 7 November is still a day off. The simplest interpretation of such continued veneration of Soviet symbols is that the current political regime of Belarus is a direct successor of the Soviet one. However, the expert believes that this is an intricate and complex theme, hardly conducive to the propaganda of any strand whatsoever.

[Soft Belarusianisation. The Ideology of Belarus in the Era of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict](#) – [Piotr Rudkoŭski](#) notes that over the past three years, the government of Belarus is strengthening national identity, emphasising the divergence of Belarus’s interests from those of Russia. This modification probably means that the regime is looking for new ways to arrange its relationships, both with its own society and with the countries of the West.

## Economy

[Reforms: The society behind brackets](#). Yevgeni Moskvich, at *Nashe Mnenie*, refers to the results of the Kastryčnicki Economic Forum, [KEF 2017](#) and notes that enthusiasm in relation to economic reforms diminished compared to previous years. However, this does not negate the relevance of reforms. “If consensus on this issue is impossible with the authorities, it is logical to find it with the society at least.”

[The Belarusian leadership restrains economic reforms](#). According to Belarus in Focus, reformists in the government

and the National Bank are somewhat disappointed with the pace and prospects for economic reforms in Belarus in the coming years. Hence, they are less willing to put pressure on the country's top leadership and most ambitious of them leave the public sector.

[Soft Belarusianisation. The ideology of Belarus in the era of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict](#) To an increasing degree, the state ideology is focusing on strengthening national identity, emphasizing the divergence of Belarus's interests from those of Russia, and re-examining the historical narration

[How Mistrust And Lack of Reforms Ruin Everything](#) – TUT.by portal summarises the results of the Kastryčnicki Economic Forum, KEF 2017. Top-level international and Belarusian participants traditionally attended the Forum. While the first four forums raised the reform as the main issue, this year event shifted to humanitarian issues, raising a number of actual internal items both at the formal panels and backstage discussions.

[Why Doesn't Belarus Move Towards Market Economy?](#) Five Important Thoughts Following the Results Of the Main Economic Forum Of the Year – Nasha Niva journalist formulates five theses according to his conversations with officials and businessmen at the KEF 2017. A shock transition to the market will turn into a disaster even with the absolute political will of Alexander Lukashenka, as soon as the majority of the population will find themselves uncompetitive in the market conditions. However, authorities need to understand that there are reforms that don't "kill" economic growth, including reforms in education, judicial system, legislative drafting etc.

## Society

[IPM Research Centre presents infographics on school education.](#) Respondents of 17-21 years old from all types of settlements

participated in the survey. Thus, the Russian language tops the rating of school subjects the knowledge of which was useful after school (53,7%); the Belarusian language took the second place (16.1%). Only 1.5% of Belarusian graduates speak several foreign languages.

[“New Soviet” Belarusians](#) – Centre for European Transformation, CET publishes the results of a national survey conducted in August 2016. The study shows that the identification “with the Soviet people” remains at the same level as at the early 2000s: a quarter (25,6%) of the Belarusians “often” feels closeness “with the Soviet people”, 18,5% – “sometimes”, and only 22,8% “almost never” feel this closeness.

[All possibilities of extensive development exhausted.](#) Zautra.by figures out what prevents Belarus from growing in the [Doing Business](#) rating. One of the reasons is connected with the fact that other countries have been more active in reforming their economies.

*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.*

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## **Belarusian schools: modernisation or stagnation?**

On 12 May, Alexander Lukašenka suddenly announced that starting in September, school children would start class at 9:00 am rather than 8:00. This reform would give children an extra hour of sleep which now they enjoy more thanks to the

new [Exhale Wellness](#) gummies. However, many maintain that the change would be just another formality, without actually improving the condition of school education.

Meanwhile, the increasing ideologisation of schools, the lack of funding, and low wages for teachers remain much more serious obstacles to Belarusian education.

The legacy of the Soviet Union is still obvious in Belarusian schools, and this factor hinders the development of general education. Instead of changing pupils' schedules, the authorities should focus on developing study programmes, guaranteeing more freedom for teachers, and opening schools up for civil society activism.

## Preserving the Soviet Model

Belarusian schools still preserve many features of the Soviet education model. Textbooks on history focus on Belarus's Soviet past, devoting an inordinate amount of attention to the [Great Patriotic War](#). Old-fashioned schoolbooks in other subjects need to be completely overhauled, as do testing and monitoring, believes Tamara Matskevich, Deputy Chairwoman of the Francišak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society.



What's more, the workload of pupils at Belarusians schools remains very high: This contrasts to many systems in other European countries.

Teacher status and salary is another post-communist remnant of the Belarusian school system. Since 2010, the wages of school teachers have declined from \$341 per month in 2010 to \$258 in 2017, reports Belstat, the Belarusian government's statistical agency. This number is much lower than in neighbouring Russia, where the average salary is \$526 (Rosstat). What's more, the

average salary of teachers in Belarus is still far from the \$500 routinely [promised by Lukašenka](#).

Another tradition the Belarusian school system has inherited from the USSR is the tradition of giving 'gifts' to teachers. As a member of a parents' association of a Minsk school reported to *Naviny.by*:

*We collect money for classroom needs twice a year for about 50 rubles (around \$26 – BD) per year. I can name some of the expenses that we paid for: these are gifts for teachers for the holidays, matinees for children, and symbolic gifts for children's birthdays. Last year, we bought blinds.*

As in Soviet times, when Russian was the main language of education, the status of the Belarusian language remains [unequal](#). In the 2016-2017 academic year, only 13.3% of all pupils studied in Belarusian-medium programmes, compared to 86.6% who studied in Russian, according to a recent report by Belstat. Additionally, in some regions [Polish schools regularly encounter obstacles](#) created by the authorities.

This Soviet heritage, however, also has some advantages: nine years of schooling are universally obligatory. The literacy rate of adults in Belarus is 100% according to UNESCO.

## **Ideologisation of School Education**

Ideologisation remains another problematic feature of Belarusian general education. To this day, pupils are required to join the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM): this is the successor of Soviet communist organisations such as the Young Pioneers or Komsomol . Members of BRSM receive [academic and social benefits](#), including discounts at discos, certain stores, and hairdressing salons, reports the official web page

of the organisation.

In December 2016, a representative of the communist party and former ideologist of the Minsk executive committee, [Ihar Karpienka](#), was appointed head of the Ministry of Education. Sviatlana Matskevich, a pedagogy Ph.D., remarked to *Belsat* that this new leadership for the Ministry bodes ill for Belarusian education. However, according to Matskevich, the only silver lining might be that this could lead to such a complete stagnation of school education that modernisation would be inevitable.

Teachers also serve as tools for falsifying elections: school and university teachers often act as members of the election committees which count votes. The OSCE, PACE, and many independent international observers have refused [to recognise Belarusian](#) elections, pointing to the closed procedure of vote counting at polling stations.

## A new reform and Mikalai Lukašenka

In a comment on the new reforms regarding changing the time school starts, Lukašenka mentioned that his son had expressed dissatisfaction with the idea. The name of Mikalai Lukašenka often appears in the Belarusian media, as he follows his father [to many official meetings](#), including international ones.

✘ However, due to the frequent absences of Mikalai at lessons, the media often doubt whether the younger Lukašenka visits school at all. Many believe that the president is preparing Mikalai as his future successor. During his last 'official' visit, which occurred during school time, Chinese journalists took a photo of Mikalai Lukašenka allegedly drinking champagne at the International Forum in

Beijing.

According to Alexander Lukašenka, Mikalai studies in a small school with only 500 pupils. Observing his son's studies, the Belarusian president has many times expressed the need to simplify the school curriculum for children and shorten studying hours. In April, Lukašenka told Parliament: 'When we complicate the studying process' and introduce 'complicated textbooks at school, we discourage children from getting knowledge. Children start to fear'.

## **Modernisation of School Education**

Low wages discourage people from becoming teachers. However, as they have been unable to improve working conditions, the authorities are suggesting two reforms. Starting next year future teachers will no longer sit a state examination (Centralised Testing), which is obligatory for all other disciplines. Moreover, on 31 May, the Ministry of Education announced the cancellation of mandatory reexamination of teachers which used to take place every five years.

Belarusian schools have already experienced certain reforms. In 2002, the Ministry of Education replaced the 5-point assessment scale with a 10-point one. In 2004, Belarusian schools changed the term of studies from 11 to 12 years. Later, after only four years, Lukašenka rescinded this reform, causing inconveniences for schools and pupils.

However, all these reforms, including the recent change of start time, seem to be little more than formalities. In order to enact real change, the state must seriously commit to tackling several problematic aspects of the system.

☒ Rather than mobilising pupils to become members of official

youth organisations, authorities could open more space for non-governmental and non-political initiatives. Cooperation with NGOs would develop international exchanges and local initiatives in which schoolchildren have the possibility to be proactive.

Belarusian schools would benefit significantly from improving working conditions for teachers. Paying them more and providing them more autonomy would help to modernise the Soviet-style education system in Belarus.

As Liavon Barscheuski, an activist and former chairman of the BNF party, told the publication *Belarus Partisan*: 'the educational sphere – , first and foremost, consists of human beings' and no reform can be effective as long as teachers struggle with paperwork and receive low wages.