

BISS Political Media Barometer:

While the election influences the structure of political communications, it does not lead to a rise in their numbers

(January – March 2015)

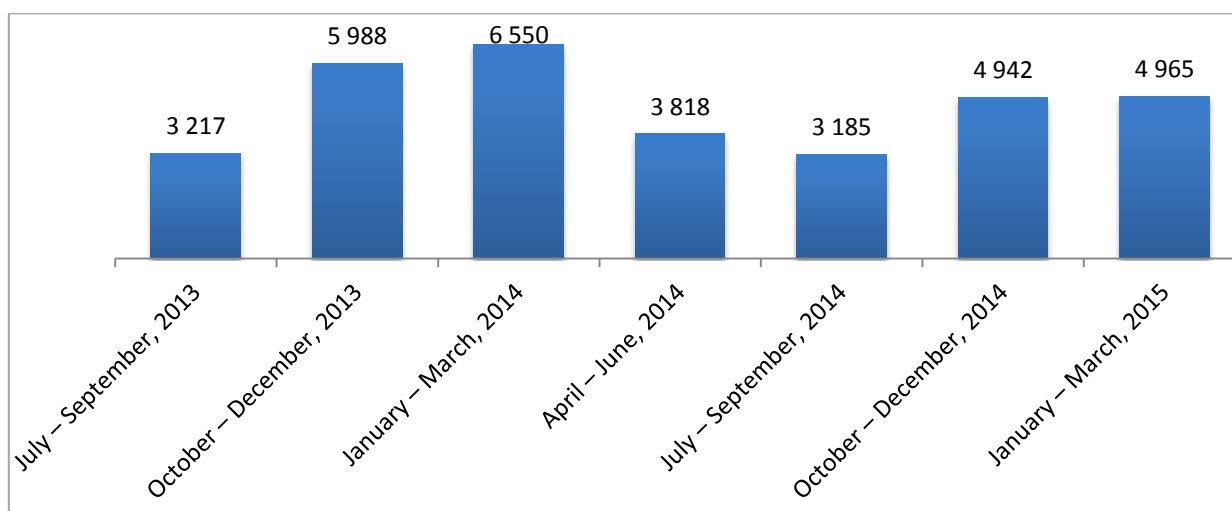
BISS presents major findings of the *BISS Political Media Barometer* for January – March 2015. The research traces quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the communications field of the independent political forces, which lead to certain conclusions as to the decisive factors that structured the communications field.

The key features of the political communications field in the first quarter of 2015 were as follows:

- The fact that the electoral campaign was under way became manifest in the structure rather than the number of political communications, as the rating dynamics were caused by the political actors' and forces' plans regarding their participation in the presidential election and there was an increase in the share of Belarusian politicians' contacts with their foreign counterparts.
- The qualitative characteristics of communications, such as their pro-activeness, the share of offline activities covered in the media and balance in the levels of covered events changed for the worse, even though the number of political communications did not go up.

In the previous issue of the *BISS Political Media Barometer* for October – December 2014 we concluded that the forthcoming election had come to be felt in the political communications field, leading to an upsurge in the number of communications and changes in their topics. Although a new electoral cycle began in the political communications field in late 2014, the first quarter of 2015 was not marked by any significant growth in terms of numbers. During the analysed time span we tracked 4,965 news items, while there had been only 23 fewer in the previous quarter.

Chart 1. Communications dynamics in figures (numbers of references to political actors and forces)



Although the number of political communications grew only insignificantly, the election was a major factor in the political forces' quantitative indices and rating positions. Thus, it began to play a decisive role in shaping the structure of the political communications field. The political forces fell into three groups depending on their quantitative indices.

The first one included the BPF Party and the United Civic Party, whose indices were notably higher than those of their closest pursuers. It was the UCP that led throughout the first quarter, the BPF Party overtaking it only in the last ten days of March due to its active involvement in the preparations for the Freedom Day. The UCP went up from the fourth to the second position. The reason was a heated debate around Mikola Statkievič's nomination as a 'symbolic' presidential candidate, as well as the UCP's endorsement of its leader Anatoł Liabiedźka's nomination.

The second group consisted of the Belarusian Christian Democracy, the movement 'For Freedom' and 'Tell the Truth!' campaign. In the first quarter of 2015 the BCD took a less active part in the debate around the election, which caused them to give up the third position in the rating to the movement 'For Freedom'. The discussion around the nominee endorsed by the 'National Referendum' campaign allowed the BPF Party to maintain its leading position and pushed the movement 'For Freedom' into the third. No matter what stance the political forces took on individual nominees, in references to the coalition all its members were listed, which contributed to their quantitative indices. Although there was a heated debate around Taćciana Karatkievič's nomination, 'Tell the Truth!' campaign failed to keep up its position in the rating as Uladzimir Niakliajeŭ decreased his activities.

The third group comprised all the other political forces, which traditionally do not take up leading positions or use election-related rhetoric to promote themselves in the media.

As for the movement 'For Freedom', it should be mentioned that a noticeable proportion of their communications dealt with Aliaksandr Milinkievič seeking to be appointed principal of the European Humanities University. It gave the movement 14 references and 55 index points, which nevertheless did not have a decisive impact on its standing in the rating. This could make the media profile of the movement blurred and less focused on the country's political life and social issues.

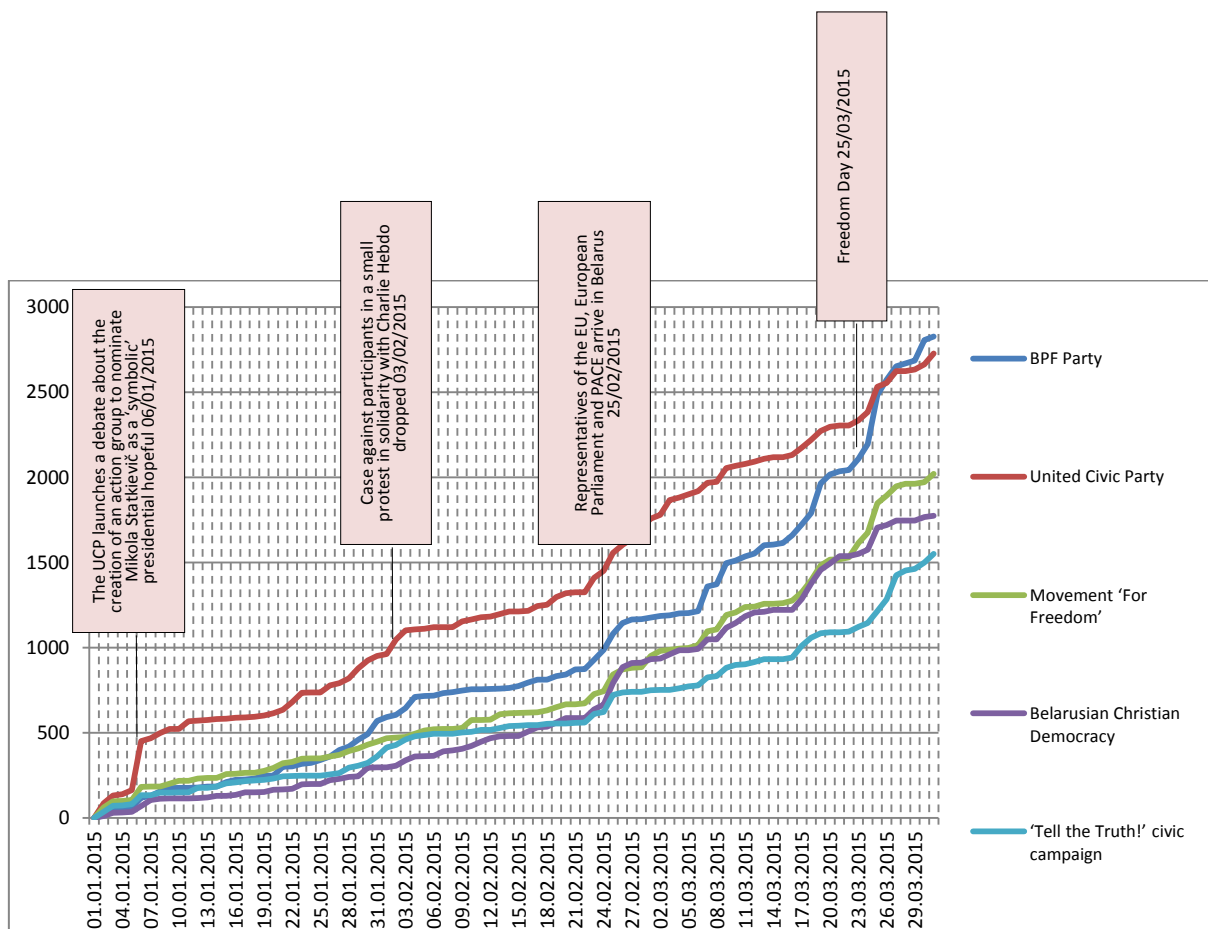
Table 1. Total presence of the political forces in the information field

Political forces	Total presence index	Position in the rating	Rating position in October – December 2014
BPF Party	2828	1	= (1)
United Civic Party	2728	2	↑(4)
Movement 'For Freedom'	2022	3	↑(5)
Belarusian Christian Democracy	1775	4	↓ (3)
'Tell the Truth!' civic campaign	1551	5	↓(2)
Belarusian Social Democratic Party (<i>Hramada</i>)	1127	6	=(6)
Belarusian Left Party 'A Just World'	448	7	=(7)
'A European Belarus' civic campaign	390	8	↑(10)
Liberal Democratic Party	303	9	↑(11)
BPF Conservative Christian Party	294	10	=(8)
'Our Home' civic campaign	233	11	↑(12)
Young Front	160	12	↓(9)
NGO 'For Fair Elections'	45	13	=(13)
'National Referendum' campaign	1156	(652 in October – December 2014)	
Civic Alliance <i>Talaka</i> for Just and Fair Elections for a Better Life	180	(142 in October – December 2014)	

When a debate around the creation of an action group to nominate Mikola Statkievič as a 'symbolic' presidential hopeful was sparked off on 6 January, it became a major factor in the dynamics of the UCP's total presence index accumulation. The second development that boosted its quantitative index dynamics was a judicial summons served on Anatoł Liabiedźka for a small protest in solidarity with Charlie Hebdo.

When the representatives of the EU, European Parliament and PACE arrived in Belarus on 25 February, it became a powerful quantitative index booster for all of the top political forces. In line with a long-standing tradition, the Freedom Day also contributed to the performance of many political forces, first and foremost of the BPF Party, as there was a spike in the quantitative index accumulation on 25 March.

Chart 2. Accumulation of the total presence index for political forces



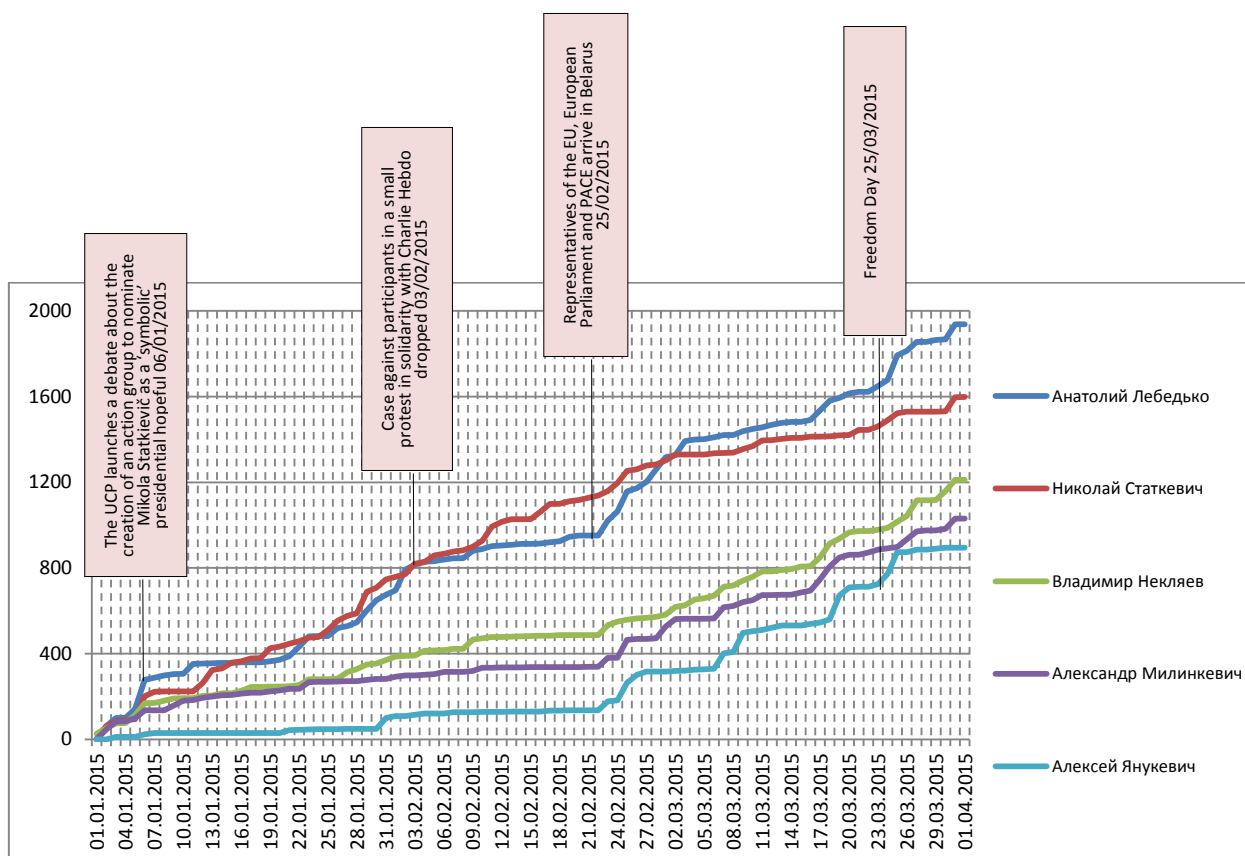
As the discussions about the forthcoming presidential election in many aspects shaped the political communications field, the individual politicians' quantitative index rating followed the same pattern as that of the political forces. Before the beginning of the electoral cycle the individual politicians' ratings had depended on situational factors, showing much more volatility as compared to the political forces. The political actors could be divided into two groups with a stark difference in their quantitative index rating. The first one consisted of two top political figures, Anatóľ Liabiedźka and Mikola Statkievič, both viewed as potential presidential candidates. They were followed by the representatives of 'The National Referendum' campaign, namely Uladzimir Niakliajeŭ, Aliaksandr Milinkievič and Aliaksiej Janukievič. In Aliaksandr Milinkievič's case his application for the position of EHU principal had a considerable impact on his quantitative rating, unlike that of the movement 'For Freedom'. The election of the EHU principal brought him 46 references and 230 index points. Without this procedure Aliaksandr Milinkievič would have been overtaken by Aliaksiej Janukievič and moved to the fifth position.

Table 2. Total presence in the information field for individual politicians

Politicians	Total presence index	Position in the rating	Rating position in October – December 2014
Anatol' Liabiedzka	1938	1	↑ (2)
Mikola Statkievič	1598	2	↑ (3)
Uladzimir Niakliajeŭ	1212	3	↓ (1)
Aliaksandr Milinkievič	1030	4	↑ (6)
Aliaksiej Janukievič	894	5	= (5)
Paval Sieviaryniec	556	6	↓ (4)
Ryhor Kastusioŭ	520	7	↑ (14)
Lieŭ Marholin	464	8	↑ (16)
Stanislaŭ Šuškievič	414	9	↑ (11)
Andrej Dźmitryjeŭ	384	10	↑ (9)
Vitał' Rymašeŭski	382	11	↑ (13)
Siarhiej Kaliakin	354	12	↓ (10)
Iryna Vieštard	332	13	↑ (17)
Juraś Hubarevič	330	14	↓ (7)
Andrej Sańnikaŭ	307	15	↓ (12)
Zianon Paźniak	269	16	↓ (15)
Žmicier Daškevič	269	17	↓ (8)
Ihar Masloŭski	225	19	= (19)
Siarhiej Hajdukievič	213	20	↓ (18)
Vołha Karač	172	21	↓ (20)
Viktar Karniajenka	154	22	↓ (21)
Alieh Hajdukievič	114	23	↓ (22)

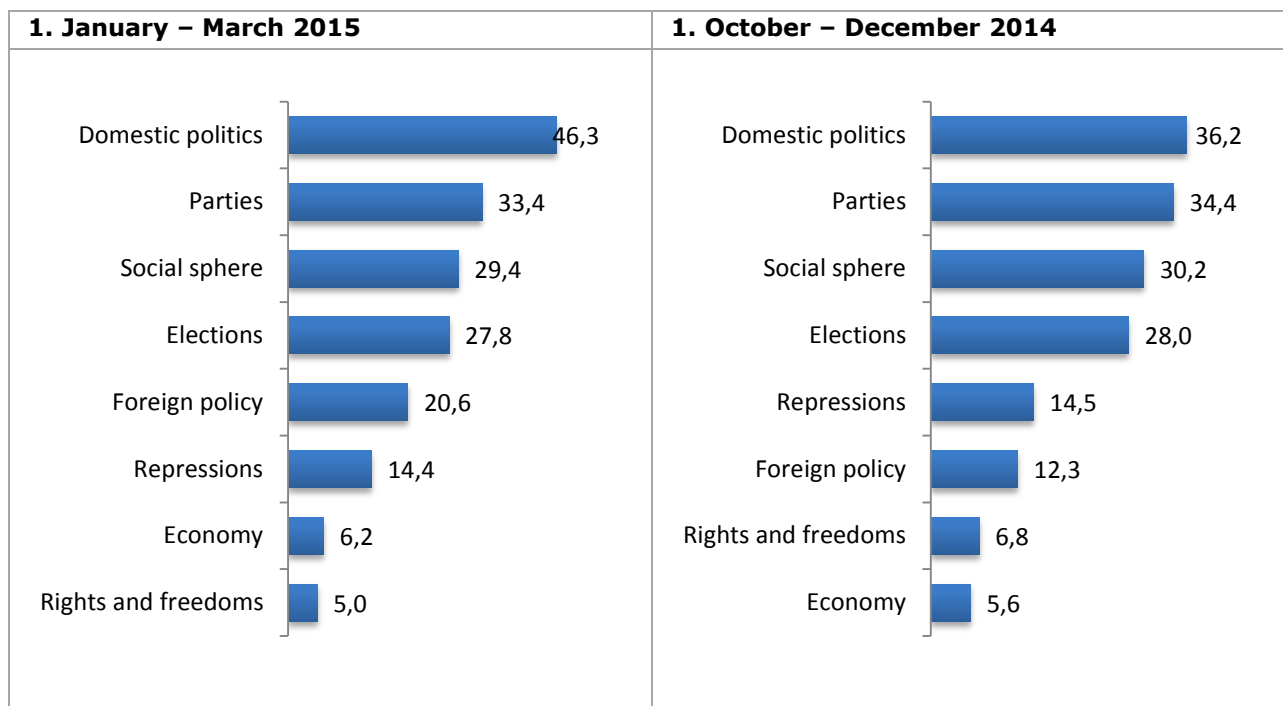
The dynamics of the quantitative index accumulation also showed that the political actors' communications were affected by the same events as those of the political forces, namely the initiative to nominate Mikola Statkievič and the small protest in solidarity with Charlie Hebdo for Anatoł Liabiedźka and the arrival of the European politicians and the Freedom Day for all the other leading politicians except Mikola Statkievič.

Chart 2. Accumulation of the total presence index for individual politicians



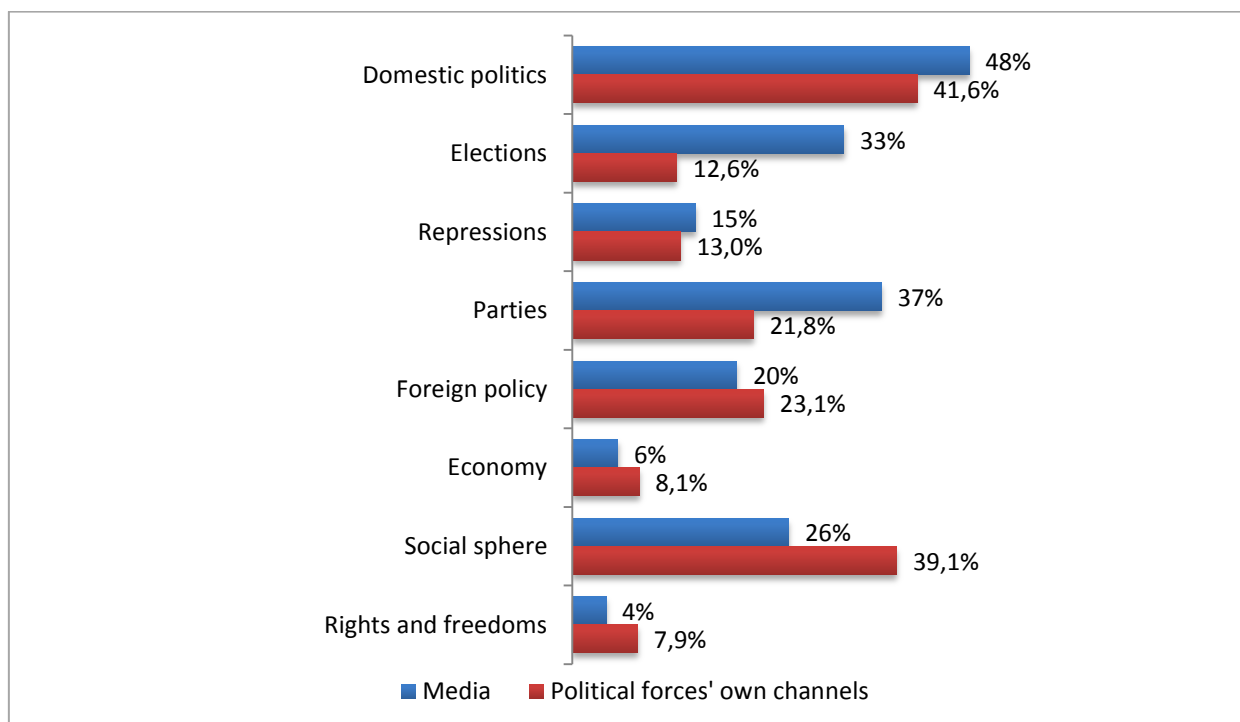
The structure of the topics of communications, set in late 2014 by the discussions around the forthcoming election, remained unchanged. The topics, related to politics, political parties, society and elections still had a priority. The first quarter of 2015 significantly differed from the previous one in that international relations were mentioned in 21% of references, while the figure for October – December 2014 was only 12%. More active contacts between Belarusian politicians and their foreign counterparts and institutions also indirectly attested to the electoral cycle gaining momentum. The share of economy-related communications showed a gradual growth, which was a positive tendency, as it is the topic that could matter most to the general public.

Chart 3. Topics of communications



The media put in the focus of their attention the election and the political parties' interactions. The political forces' communication channels more closely addressed the topics that mattered to the electorate, such as the society and the economy. In view of the forthcoming election the political forces have to be guided by the electorate's priorities in order to strengthen their support base, instead of their own dealings and nomination procedures.

Chart 4. Topics of communications by the channel



One of the consistent patterns observed in the political communications field is its worsened qualitative characteristics as the number of communications increases. The reason is that a growth in the number of political communications is normally caused by an increased media

attention to a certain issue. This, in turn, entails an upsurge of commentaries and general reasoning, leading to less diverse coverage of events and political actors. The first quarter of 2015 demonstrated a fall in the quality of political communications, even though their number hardly grew. This trend was mainly visible in less coverage given to offline activities. In the previous quarter its share had drifted between 36% and 29%, whereas in January – March 2015 it did not exceed 26%. Of all the types of offline activities, the share of meetings with foreign politicians went up from 12% to 22%. The traditional Freedom Day rally on 25 March accounted for the growth in the percentage of public events from 9% to 20%. However, the proportion of policy implementation dwindled from 13% to 8%, even though it is something that the electorate could find attractive. Besides the smaller share of coverage given to offline activities, the communications themselves showed lower levels of ‘activeness’, as the proportion of ‘proactive’ communications showed a downward trend, falling from 33% to 24%.

In line with an established trend, typical of presidential elections, the levels of the events became less balanced. Thus, the percentage of regional events dropped from 15% to 10%, while the share of international events grew from 6% to 10% because the political actors began to seek more contacts with foreign political figures in view of the forthcoming election.

Chart 4. Correlation between offline activities and political communications

