

Table of contents:

1	Summary
2	Executive summary
3	Political liberalization/ political democratiza- tion
6	Economic liberalization
8	Good governance and rule of law
10	Geopolitical orientation
13	Cultural policy

Summary

This new issue of BISS-Trends is a semiannual monitoring review of the primary trends in the development of the Belarusian state and society in the first half of 2015.

This review focuses on the main trends in the following areas:

- political democratization/political liberalization;
- economic liberalization;
- good governance and rule of law;
- geopolitical orientation; and
- cultural policy.

Each of these five priority areas is described based upon the following pattern:

- general characteristic of the main tendencies;
- description of the main developments that determined the rating of the trend;
- description of additional developments;
- brief forecast for the next six months.

At the start of the report, we offer a brief summary of the main trends in the five target areas (Executive summary). This review also comprises a table that identifies the degree of progress or regress in each area. At the end of the report, we present a reference catalogue of the main events, developments, and changes that were recorded in the first half of 2015 in each of the five areas under analysis.

Executive summary

The *political democratization/political liberalization* sector stagnated in the first half of 2015 with a simultaneous — albeit insignificant — shift towards deterioration. Although there were fewer instances of repression against political and public activists in the first half of the year, some legislative acts and amendments limiting the freedom of speech were introduced, and the first websites were blocked “for the distribution of unreliable information that can harm state or public interests”.

The economic liberalization area was also characterized by continuing stagnation within the scope of the ongoing negative trends and accumulation of imbalances in the economy. Despite positive changes (money market liberalization), the key macroeconomic indicators markedly deteriorated in the first half of the year, whereas the economic authorities demonstrated their propensity for the use of “manual control” and unwillingness to put in place structural reforms.

In the sector referred to as *good governance and rule of law* amendments were introduced to ensure long-term improvements in the “rules of the game” and their unification. Nevertheless, some of the legislative initiatives ran counter to the intention of the authorities to unify and improve the legislative system, which characterizes the *good governance and rule of law* trend in the first six months of 2015 as “insignificant progress”.

In the *geopolitical orientation* section, the trend towards further improvement in Belarus’s relations with the West can be observed, alongside growing contradictions with Russia. Further, in the first half of 2015, Belarus started moving towards what is in fact a real, not simply declared, multi-vector foreign policy pattern.

The *cultural policy* sector is marked by progress with quality changes, which is primarily attributed to the official recognition of the Soft Belarusianization policy at the top level. However, the intensification and deepening of the Soft Belarusianization policy at the state level are contained by the lack of respective regulatory acts and inconsistent activities by officials. ■

Сфера мониторинга	Основная тенденция
Political liberalization	Stagnation, insignificant negative tendencies within the framework of previously outlined trends
Economic liberalization	Stagnation, accumulation of economic challenges and maintained “manual control” amid partial liberalization of the currency legislation
Good governance and rule of law	Shift of the trend towards slight progress
Geopolitical orientation	Contradictory relations with Russia, gradual normalization of relations with the West, search for alternative footholds internationally
Cultural policy	Progress with quality changes

Trend 1

Political liberalization/political democratization

Main tendency: stagnation, insignificant negative tendencies within the framework of previously outlined trends

General characteristic of the main tendencies

The main factor that determined the trend within the framework of the political liberalization/deliberation processes in the first half of 2015 was the run-up to the presidential election scheduled for 11 October. The upcoming election affects the liberalization indicators with respect to the freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly, possibilities for peaceful protest, as well as use of repression.

In the first half of 2015, the most negative manifestations of the previous trends were associated with the freedom of speech (with regard to both traditional media and websites). At the same time, in the first half of 2015, "Viasna" human rights center registered fewer instances of politically motivated administrative persecution (60 cases), including only 10 administrative arrests, which is a new record low since 2010. The reduction in the number of repressive activities against political opponents and protesters should be attributed not only to the degree of activism of the opposition that is comparatively low for this pre-election streak, but also the fact that the authorities deliberately refrain from large-scale application of administrative persecution, especially preventive measures.

At the same time, there were no tangible changes when it comes to the freedom of association, freedom of assembly, or situation with political prisoners, which could have otherwise brought about quality changes in the trend. On the contrary, minor negative changes were recorded instead.

Given the upcoming presidential election, we first and foremost gauge the democratization indications in 2015 as *modification of conditions* for holding the election. In this respect, no significant changes are observed: the proposals concerning the improvement of the election legislation submitted to the parliament and the Central Election Commission by the opposition coalition "The Right of Choice" were left unconsidered. Meanwhile, the authorities made statements, which can be interpreted as declarations about the possible nature of the future election campaign. They pertain to the absence of barriers to election observers, additional use of transparent ballot boxes, reluctance to include opposition members in election commissions, appeals to give up "brutal measures" in election campaigning, and inadmissibility of protests following the election

day. These declarations probably represent the tactics selected by the authorities and adequately characterize the future election campaign.

Unlike the liberalization indicators, changes in the democratization area in 2015 will be less dependent on the activism of the opposition — whatever activities the opposition forces choose, the election process will be run by the authorities in accordance with the tried controlled scenario that is customary for Belarus.

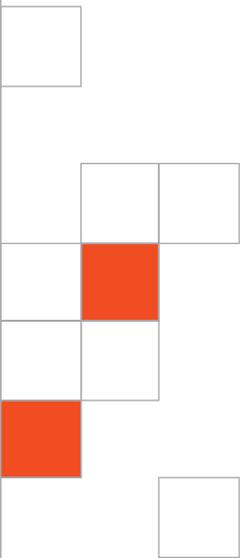
Interestingly, the country is apparently lacking positive significant dynamics of liberalization ahead of the presidential election, despite the active expansion in contacts between official Minsk and the West. In previous years, approximation efforts used to be accompanied by the mitigation of the policy of repression inside the country, or, at least, the relaxation of rhetoric with respect to political opponents of the incumbent authorities.

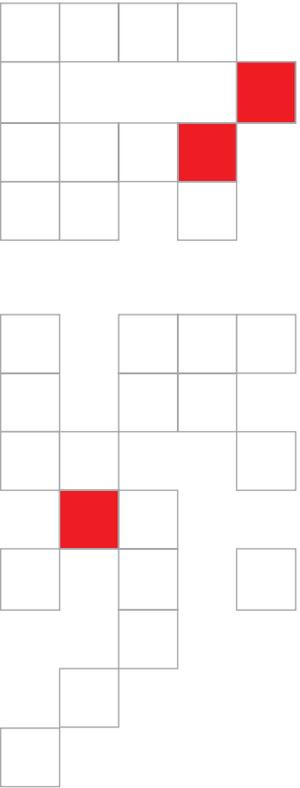
Description of the main developments that determined the trend

1) The main feature of the first half of 2015 that became a continuation of the earlier trend is the pressure on the media and especially curbs on the freedom of speech in the Internet.

On 1 January 2015, amendments to the law "On mass media", originally adopted in December 2014, came into effect. These amendments, in particular, apply liability prescribed by the law to online media and obligate them to monitor comments made by visitors to their websites. The Ministry of Information gained the right to block access to online resources (including foreign) on an extrajudicial basis.

The right to block websites was for the first time exercised during the six months under review, when kyky.org was blocked. Prior to that, kyky.org and some other websites (the "Tuzin Hitou" musical website, websites of the United Civil Party, Radio Racyja, Free Region, etc.) received so-called "queries about content owners" containing warnings about "*liability for the distribution of unreliable information that can harm state or public interests*" from the Ministry of Information. It was noted in the letters received from the Ministry of Information that access to resources could be limited for two and more warnings issued within 12 months, as well as failure to comply with instructions of the respective state authority to rectify the violations. Reasons for the warnings issued to the websites were not indicated.





2) Presidential Decree No.6 “On emergency measures to combat drug trafficking” came into effect on 1 January 2015. The document was originally signed on 28 December 2014. The decree, apart from other arrangements, affects the activity of “*information resources available in the Internet*” and, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, threatens the freedom of speech.

Specifically, owners of Internet resources were obligated to monitor the content that they post. Access to online resources can be limited at the initiative of the Ministry of the Interior. Further, the document introduces administrative liability of owners of Internet resources for their failure to comply with the requirement of the Ministry of Information to delete materials that violate the applicable legislation on illegal drug trafficking. Pursuant to Article 9 of the Decree, starting 1 January 2016, Internet providers will have to “*ensure the collection and storage of data about information resources visited by an Internet user*”.

3) On 19 February 2015, the Ministry of Communication and Informatization and the Operational and Analytical Center under the Aegis of the President approved the “Provision on the procedure for limiting access to information resources (and components thereof) that are located in the global computer network Internet”. The document provides for the possibility to block Internet resources, anonymity services (proxy servers, anonymous networks, such as Tor, etc.), which enable users of Internet services to gain access to other blocked Internet resources. The Provision does not stipulate the possibility of appealing against decisions by the Ministry of Information to block websites. Unlike the previous procedure, where access to blacklisted websites was only limited for state agencies and cultural and educational institutions, the new website-blocking procedure applies to all Belarusian users.

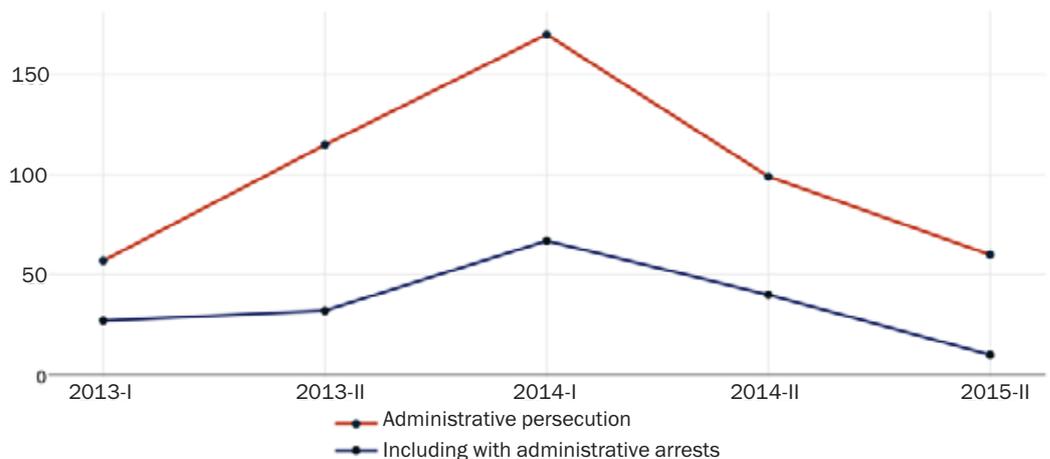
4) In early 2015, the regional newspapers Intex-Press (Baranavičy), Hancevičski Čas (Hancevičy), Borisovskie novosti (Barysaŭ), Reklamny Borjomi (Slonim) and the nationwide newspaper Novy čas were warned by the Ministry of Information for minor violations in the phrasing of their publisher’s imprint. In January–March 2015, the Ministry of Information issued 27 warnings to 26 media outlets, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

5) Another area, in which the freedom of speech was limited, is the persecution of journalists that cooperate with foreign media without being accredited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to the statistics of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, in the first quarter of 2015, seven journalists from Brest and Homiel were fined for such activities, and in April, eight more court rulings were issued on such cases (one journalist was punished three times in two months). The reason for applying sanctions to journalists remained unchanged: Article 22.9, Part 2 of the Administrative Offenses Code, meaning that they were punished for having their articles appear in foreign media, rather than for what exactly they wrote in their articles.

“Control” of citizens who photograph buildings of government agencies was added to the previous list of limitations. According to instructions issued by the Ministry of the Interior, law enforcement agents are authorized to “*conduct personal searches of such persons, interrogate them, check whether they are on the Interior Ministry’s databases, and make their fingerprint, photo, and video records for respective files*”.

Description of additional developments

1) Arbitrary detentions of public activists who voiced their opinions in public continued. In these cases, courts were making politically motivated decisions to hold activists liable. The solidarity



Source: Viasna human rights center.

action to commemorate the French Charlie Hebdo journalists, who were killed by adherents to radical Islam, became a characteristic example of the lack of independence of courts: although dates of court hearings were set for the administrative cases brought against its participants, as soon as President Lukashenka ordered, in the course of his press conference, the chief of the Presidential Executive Office to “sort out the situation”, court proceedings were canceled.

2) The court dismissed the appeal by the Russian citizen, chair of the board of the Center for Legal Transformation, Elena Tonkacheva, against the decision to deport her from Belarus for three years. On 21 February, the human rights activist had to leave the country. Furthermore, searches were conducted and equipment was seized in the office of the Mahilio human rights center and a new attempt was made to liquidate the center in a judicial procedure. A search was also conducted in the private apartment of the human rights activist Leanid Sudalienka in Homiel.

3) In the first half of 2015, possibilities for exercising the freedom of assembly were virtually nonexistent. The three peaceful meetings arranged

in March and April that were officially authorized by the administration became a rare exception. Those three meetings were the rally celebrating the anniversary of the Belarusian People’s Republic in Minsk on 25 March (applications for marches and pickets in other cities on the same day were turned down); the Chernobyl Path in Minsk on 26 April, and the picket against constitutional abuse in Kopyl. Viasna notes that despite the fact that the event in Minsk on 25 March had been sanctioned, the authorities did not refrain from traditional arbitrary detentions, which, however, did not result in court trials.

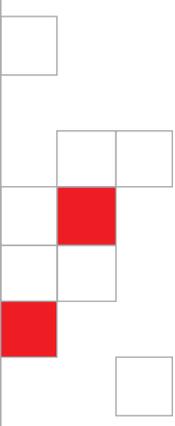
Throughout the six months under review, human rights activists registered numerous refusals by the local authorities to grant applications of the local community for organizing public events. At the same time, administrative action — including arrests — was taken against some citizens who participated in peaceful unsanctioned events. New instances of persecution of members of unregistered religious associations were recorded, and threats were made that measures would be taken under Article 193-1 of the Criminal Offenses Code. ■

Brief forecast for the next six months

The presidential election will become the determinant for the next six months. There are no prerequisites whatsoever for modification of democratization indicators ahead of the election: the controlled scenario of the election will remain unchanged and will not envisage any rotation in the authorities depending on the outcomes of the election. The initial application of the revised version of the Election Code during the local elections proved that the new version of the document does not modify the nature of the election process. Moreover, the abolition of the state financing of campaigning will make the election campaigns even less noticeable to voters.

One should expect additional pressures on independent media and websites. However, persecution of journalists working for foreign media outlets with no accreditation will likely be suspended as soon as the official election campaign starts. Repression against the opposition and civil society will grow more severe, but its degree will depend on the activism of the opposition and its willingness to stage protests. Traditional searches in editorial offices of independent media, apartments of activists of parties and movements, and offices of election observation organizations are also likely.

As of today, there are no prerequisite for mass protests following the election, although in any case, the practice of preventive arrests ahead of the polling day will probably resume.



Trend 2

Economic liberalization

Main tendency: stagnation, accumulation of economic challenges and maintained “manual control” amid partial liberalization of the currency legislation

General characteristic of the main tendencies

Belarus entered the year 2015 with a series of money market restraints caused by incomplete devaluation of the national currency and accumulated economic hardships resulting from the drop in prices of oil and oil products, as well as contractions in export to the Russian market. In the first half of 2015, the Belarusian authorities realized that the situation in foreign markets had markedly deteriorated and began tackling problems in the money and credit sector.

On 9 January, the National Bank abolished the commission imposed on purchases of foreign exchange and resumed the practice of setting the exchange rate based upon the results of trading sessions at the currency exchange. The high cost of ruble-denominated resources and stringent monetary policies in the first half of the year enabled the National Bank to keep the exchange rate of the Belarusian ruble at a level between 14,000 and 15,000 rubles to the U.S. dollar. The new exchange rate policy pegged to a basket of currencies facilitated the process.

However, the revaluation of the Belarusian ruble against the Russian ruble amid contractions in the demand for Belarusian-made products in the Russian market brought about a curtailment in export supplies to Russia. In the first quarter alone, Belarusian export deliveries to Russia in value terms dropped by USD1 billion year-on-year. In January–June 2015, export to the Russian market fell by USD2 billion, compared with the first half of 2014.

Seeking to curb the increasing trade imbalances, the National Bank in early April devaluated the Belarusian ruble against the Russian ruble, bringing it to the “acceptable” level of 280–290 Belarusian rubles to the Russian ruble. However, the introduction of the new exchange rate policy with the identification of the exchange rate based upon the value of a basket of currencies came with a price tag — the Belarusian ruble lost its value against not only the Russian ruble, but also against the euro and U.S. dollar. As a result, ruble-denominated revenues of the state budget fell because of the peg of the export duty rate to the exchange rate of the euro and the U.S. dollar.

The half-year consumer inflation target, at 7.3%, was met mostly owing to the use of administrative leverage and reduction in disposable incomes. However, this affected the GDP growth rate, which

dropped by 3 points in January–May 2015 year-on-year.

The only apparent economic success of the Belarusian authorities during the first half of 2015 was the prolongation of payments under Russian loan agreements (totaling approximately USD700 million) and, possibly, the loan agreement with the Anti-Crisis Fund (ACF) of the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB)¹ (another USD450 million). The broadly advertised Chinese loans boiled down to contracts worth a mere USD500 million.

Minsk’s new status of the negotiating platform to resolve the Ukrainian crisis did not result in any economic benefits. At the same time, given the high cost of sovereign loans, the Belarusian authorities had to speed up their negotiations with the IMF and the Eurasian Stabilization and Development Fund (ESDF). It is their lending requirements that stand behind the virtually complete liberalization of currency regulations and change to the continuous double auction pattern.

Domestic trade, which used to be the main locomotive of economic expansion, markedly dropped in the first half of the year because of the limitations on price hikes imposed following the devaluation move.

Description of the main developments that determined the trend

1) The main economic indicators markedly deteriorated in Belarus in the first half of 2015. Unsold inventories amounted to 82% of the average monthly production volume as of 1 June 2015, up from 75.8% as of 1 January 2015. Manufacturing output fell by 7.7% year-on-year in January–May 2015. In January–April 2015, 1,705 companies were officially recognized as loss-making.

2) Given the certain stabilization of the economic situation, the National Bank revoked the licenses of several banks and insurance companies, which failed to meet the requirement to increase their authorized funds.

3) Despite the compensation for the introduction of the tax maneuver in Russia’s oil exploration and production sector (in 2015, Belarus was entitled to keep export duties on oil products in its own

¹ Renamed the Eurasian Stabilization and Development Fund (ESDF).

budget), the profits of the Belarusian oil-processing sector dropped by approximately USD20 per ton of oil compared with the year 2014. Further, the period under review saw new conflicts between Belarus and Russia caused by the alleged re-export of goods from third countries subject to Russia's import sanctions via Belarus. The earlier limitations on supplies of Belarusian meat products to Russia were eventually lifted; however, considering the fact that concerned Russian authorities keep returning food batches back to Belarus, the transport corridor of the products, against which sanctions had been imposed, still remains.

Description of additional developments

1) In order to effectively curb price hikes following the devaluation move in December 2014, the Government issued Resolution No.1207 to de facto ban increases in prices for some products. Price caps were eventually removed; however, the

step enabled the authorities to meet the consumer inflation target for the first six months.

2) The National Bank took administrative measures to reduce rates by introducing a new bracket for loan and deposit rates. Combat against shadow economy continued, as presidential Ordinance No.49 "On regulated procedures for foreign exchange transactions" was adopted in order to introduce more severe punishments for violations of currency regulations; furthermore, limitations were introduced on settlements with individuals with the use of foreign exchange.

3) Currency regulations were liberalized, possibly, as a measure to comply with the lending requirements of the ESDF and the IMF: the monetary authorities lifted limitations on lending in foreign exchange, opened the over-the-counter market with the simultaneous introduction of continuous double auction, and canceled limitations on the number of currency accounts. ■

Brief forecast for the next six months

The upcoming presidential election will become the primary event to affect the country's key macroeconomic indicators in the second half of 2015. The fact that the election is so close makes it hard to believe that the Belarusian authorities will be putting in place measures to stabilize the macroeconomic situation.

The current volume of gold and foreign exchange reserves is not enough to boost the morale of market players, whereas specific agreements on new credit programs with the IMF and the ESDF have not been signed yet.

The rigid monetary and credit policy and limitations on preferential financing, which is now available only to promising future-oriented and paying projects, mean that the real sector will keep contracting and living standards will decline. Essentially, in the second half of the year, the government is already discussing the timeframe for the implementation of anti-crisis arrangements, not anti-crisis measures themselves.

Trend 3

Good governance and rule of law

Main tendency: shift of the trend towards slight progress

General characteristic of the main tendencies

Amid the calm internal political situation, the first half of 2015 turned out to be quite uneventful and was characterized by the absence of any landmark developments that could predetermine the trend in the area that we refer to as good governance and rule of law in Belarus. Nevertheless, the process aimed at improving the governance system and legal environment continued running “in the background”. All indications are that work is underway to show stakeholders inside the country and abroad — especially investors — that even at the time of political turbulence in the east of Europe, Belarus remains an “island” of stability and a safe haven for living and doing business. It is noteworthy that during the period under review, the authorities were making decisions with a view to introducing long-term rules of the game that would be fair and binding for all, rather than immediate decisions only valid for a short term. The existing system of state administration remained unchanged with some insignificant albeit positive cosmetic changes.

Despite the lack of any landmark events that would determine the trend, the six months under review can be characterized as “insignificant progress”.

Description of the main developments that determined the trend

1) In March, the president signed an ordinance to approve a new version of Directive No.2 “On arrangements to further de-bureaucratize the state administration”. The de-bureaucratization process that became structured as soon as the original Directive was passed in 2006, will now apply to not only the state administration, but also all institutions that interact with the population, such as utility, retail, transport, and medical organizations and institutions, etc.

The new version of the Directive is designed to enable citizens to spend less time and efforts when contacting not only administrative agencies, but also state organizations that provide technical, maintenance, and social services. Provisions are made for a complete transfer of the state authorities towards electronic document management for the implementation of state functions, as well as the introduction of a rating system for citizens to evaluate the effectiveness of service providers. Given the track record of the implementation of the Directive since 2006, there is every reason

to believe that the amendments to the document will bear fruit.

2) In April, Decree “On the prevention of freeloading practices”, better known as the “law on social parasites”, came into effect following lengthy discussions. Despite the declared objective to encourage employable citizens to be involved in work activities, the decree has a clear fiscal orientation and introduces an obligation for citizens who have been involved in the financing of state expenditures for less than 183 days during a calendar year to pay an annual “fee” of 20 base units. This fee is essentially a tax; however, it is not stipulated by the Tax Code. Measures of this kind, despite their possible productivity, put in question the declared inalterability of the tax legislation throughout the calendar year.

3) In fulfillment of the notorious 2014 Decree “On the strengthening of requirements for executive personnel and employees of organizations” the Government resolved that the appointment of persons previously dismissed “in discrediting circumstances” to executive positions is only possible if approved by chairpersons of district executive committees irrespective of the form of ownership of the organizations in question. Therefore, the state has been enabled to influence personnel decisions of private business owners.

4) The ordinance “On electronic document management in the drafting and adoption of legislative acts” envisages a complete transfer to electronic document flow between government agencies in their work on legislative acts starting 2016, whereas the application of electronic digital signatures will be mandatory starting 2017. This will significantly expedite the approval process and improve the control of document flows, which is a definite improvement in the quality of governance.

5) The Supreme Court of Belarus began developing the “Program for the informatization of general courts for 2016–2020”, which envisages, among others, the reduction in paper document workflow, use of information technologies in legal proceedings, as well as the compilation of an electronic database of court decisions that will be available in the Internet. The system of justice thus follows the suit of the other components of state administration that have been affected by the informatization campaign in recent years.

6) The chairman of the State Property Committee

announced that the Single Register of State Property would be completed soon. In the context of rhetoric about the improvement in the quality of the management of state assets, the creation of a comprehensive register of state property with information about more than 850,000 facilities, is an important landmark. As the committee chairman put it, *“without knowing what you have, you cannot manage it effectively”*.

7) The State Control Committee plans to begin using performance audit instruments in its work in the foreseeable future. According to the authority, the move will enable it to not only detect violations, but also check whether companies and government agencies use state funds effectively enough. Because the controlling functions of the State Control Committee are already quite extensive, the addition of new

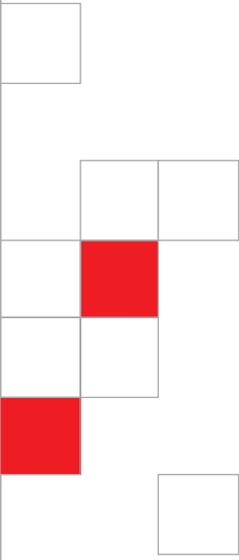
auditing functions looks like a reasonable initiative.

Description of additional developments

1) The ordinance concerning the social and economic development of southeastern areas in the Mahilioŭ Region provides for a series of preferences for citizens and entrepreneurs who reside and do business in seven districts of the region close to the Russian border. Although this is essentially an initiative to create a special economic zone, the introduction of the preferences is attributed to the need for a balanced development of regions and emphasizes the overall reasonable policy on the provision of equal and transparent legal framework on a nationwide scale. ■

Brief forecast for the next six months

During the next six-month period, which will be marked by the presidential election, the development of the system of governance will depend on the scenario of the political and economic situation. Under the best-case scenario, work will continue to improve the legal environment and governing bodies with a view to promoting Belarus’s competitive advantages compared to its neighbors. Under the worst-case scenario — in conditions of political and economic destabilization — “manual control” of the country will be reintroduced.



Trend 4

Geopolitical orientation

Main tendency: contradictory relations with Russia, gradual normalization of relations with the West, search for alternative footholds internationally

General characteristic of the main tendencies

In the first half of 2015, the trend towards further normalization of Belarus' relationship with the West continued. New rounds of consultations on visa facilitation and modernization were held with the European Union. Belarus participated in the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga at the level of the foreign minister. A series of events and mutual visits took place within the framework of the Belarus–U.S. relationship.

The relations between Belarus and Russia remained contradictory. Progress in the military and political sector was accompanied by tensions in the supplies of farm products and refined oil to the Russian market, as well as the absence of integration progress. The drop in export deliveries to the Russian Federation encouraged Belarus to intensify its contacts elsewhere in the world seeking alternatives to the Russian market.

In the first half of 2015, a new trend became conspicuous, as Belarus started looking for possibilities for applying a real, not purely demonstrative, multi-vector foreign policy pattern.

Description of the main developments that determined the trend

1) The depreciation of the Belarusian ruble, slower expansion in the Russian economy and uncertainty in the Russian money market resulted in a drop in Belarus's export to Russia and expansion in two-way trade deficit. At the same time, tensions remained around the supplies of food produced in Belarus or delivered via Belarus. Food supplies were repeatedly blocked by the Russian Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance (Rosselkhozadzor), which accused Belarusian companies of illegally supplying products subject to sanctions from third countries. On the back of these events, the need for diversifying export supplies became one of the priorities of the government's action plan for 2015, adopted on 25 February.

2) In the course of the meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State of Belarus and Russia on 3 March and the meeting in Astana in the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) on 19–20 March, the Russian side put forward plans to further deepen integration (including the common visa area and single

currency) which were immediately repudiated by the Belarusian side.

3) There was no progress in the implementation of previously announced five integration projects.¹ According to Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Arkady Dvorkovich, their implementation requires political will. Belarusian officials are still showing no political will in these issues.

4) Economic challenges and differences did not affect the military cooperation between the two countries, though. In April, Russia supplied four state-of-the-art combat and training aircraft Yak-130 to Belarus within the framework of a previous contract— they will form a separate wing with the 116th assault air base. However, official Minsk has delayed decision-making concerning the creation of a Russian airbase in Belarus.

5) Belarus's neutral position on the conflict in Ukraine and Minsk's efforts as a mediator to settle the crisis produced an apparent positive effect contributing to the long-term trend towards the improvement of the relations between Belarus and the West.

On 11 February, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande came to Minsk to participate in the "Normandy format" meeting seeking to resolve the Ukrainian crisis. Belarus once again acted as a neutral site offering a platform for negotiations, and formally did not take part in the talks. Anyway, whatever arguments there may be about the significance and role of Belarus as part of international efforts to broker a peaceful resolution in Ukraine, there are no doubts that the niche filled by official Minsk contributes to the normalization of Belarus's relationships with the West.

6) On 16–17 April, European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy Johannes Hahn came on a visit to Minsk. He was received by President Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej. The head of state spoke about Belarus's aspiration to closer cooperation with the European Union, especially in technology, economy, and security.

¹ The integration industrial projects referred to are as follows—Integral and Ruselectronics of Rostec, Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant (MZKT) and Rostec, Peleng and Federal Space Agency Roscosmos, Grodno Azot and EuroChem or Gazprom Investproject.

He suggested revising the Eastern Partnership program in order to better focus on these priorities and identifying several areas for cooperation between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union.

7) On 21–22 May, Riga played host to a summit of the Eastern Partnership initiative. Belarus was represented by Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej. Many experts and observers had expected the initialing of the visa facilitation agreement; however, this never happened. The final declaration of the summit contains appreciations of the dialogue between Belarus and the European Union, though. In the course of the summit, Belarus (and Armenia) refused to sign the text of the joint statement, which condemned the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, thus displaying its commitment to Russia, its ally. Further, Belarus had a chance to sign some more agreements at the summit (but never did sign them), and the Belarusian side voiced many “tranquilizing” assurances of friendship and loyalty specially for the Russian leadership. This conduct shows the unwillingness of the Belarusian authorities to provoke a harsh response by Moscow to Minsk’s attempts to avoid international isolation.

8) Another impressive example of the “maneuvering” policy is the organization of the state visit of President of China Xi Jinping to Belarus in early May. A series of bilateral agreements were signed in the course of the visit, designed to give a powerful impetus to the Belarus–China relationship. In June, a joint Belarusian–Chinese military exercise was held in the Brest Region. Those efforts were supposed to not only show the Belarusians the importance of their country on the world stage, but also make the Kremlin understand that Belarus can find support elsewhere.

Description of additional developments

1) In February, Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej paid a four-day working visit to Germany. On the first day of his stay, the minister made a speech at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in Berlin and held a meeting with representatives of the German business community, which was arranged by the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations. On 6–8 February, Makiej participated in the 51st Munich Security Conference. He had a series of bilateral meetings during the event, including with Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany, and Paolo Gentiloni, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy.

2) Further steps were taken within the framework of the previously outlined bilateral Belarusian–European agenda. On 9 March, a Belarusian delegation led by Aliena Kup yna participated in

the fifth round of consultations on modernization (“interim phase”) in Brussels. This time, human rights issues were included in the list of topics for consultations. In the course of her visit to Brussels, Kup yna held a series of meetings in the European Commission and the European External Action Service, specifically, with Johannes Hahn, the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, and Helga Schmidt, Deputy Secretary General for the External Action Service. On 12 March, Minsk played host to the third round of talks over the draft agreement on visa facilitation between Belarus and the European Union. Following the talks, and as a result of subsequent consultations in EU institutions, the positions of the negotiating parties were approximated to the maximum, according to available information.

3) On 29 June, Minsk played host to the fifth edition of informal EaP ministerial dialogue. In addition to representatives of the foreign services of the EaP member states, the dialogue was attended by Johannes Hahn, the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, and Alain Le Roy, the Secretary General of the European External Action Service. The meeting addressed the outcomes of the Riga summit, practical implementation of the principle of differentiation, and engagement in the priority sectors. Minsk hosted the event of such a format for the first time ever.

4) U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Eric Rubin visited Minsk on 26–28 February. He met with Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej and President Aliaksandr Lukashenka. According to the press service of the U.S. Embassy in Minsk, Rubin noted the positive role Belarus was playing in efforts to find a peaceful solution in Ukraine. The meetings also addressed possibilities for improved cooperation with Belarus in “areas of mutual concern”.

5) On 18 March, Belarus and the United States signed an intergovernmental agreement to implement the U.S. Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (FATCA). The agreement provides the necessary legal framework for Belarusian financial institutions to report information about U.S. account holders to the Belarusian Government, which will in turn relay that data to the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

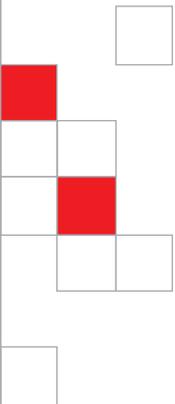
6) The United States Air Force in Europe Band visited Minsk on 6–10 May. In addition to participating in the May 9 Victory Day celebrations in Minsk (including in the military parade), the band performed at the Brest Fortress. That was a very symbolic visit, because that was the first time in the history of independent Belarus that U.S. military participated in a parade in Minsk. ■

Brief forecast for the next six months

Given the upcoming presidential election and economic predicament, Belarus will probably honor its ally commitments to Russia and very cautiously make progress towards normalization with the West in order to procure Moscow's support at the election.

At the same time, official Minsk is interested in looking for new sales outlets alternative to the traditional Russian market and improving its relationship with the EU and the U.S. Belarus will continue making steps in this direction, although the relationship between Belarus and Russia will remain the chief priority.

The upcoming election increases the degree of uncertainty in the country's foreign policy. If the Belarusian authorities manage to ensure a more transparent election campaign and refrain from repression against their opponents, the relations with the West will likely intensify at the end of 2015; otherwise, Belarus will see a new streak of isolation initiated by the EU and the U.S., as well as deterioration of the internal political situation.



Trend 5

Cultural policy

Main tendency: progress with quality changes

General characteristic of the main tendencies

In the first half of 2015, soft Belarusianization and measured liberalization of the country's cultural life became the main trends of both state cultural policy and public initiatives.

The main event of the period under review was the public recognition by President Aliaksandr Lukashenka of the state policy on soft Belarusianization that he voiced at a press conference for Belarusian and foreign media. At the same time, apparently, the Belarusian authorities are having difficulties with the implementation of this policy. In the first half of the year, officials at various levels quite often not only failed to comply with the nationwide soft Belarusianization policy, but also directly contradicted it.

To effectively address these challenges, the state needs to consistently promote the development of cultural policy at a new quality level. The adoption of the Culture Code could facilitate significant quality changes in this area. However, judging by the text of the draft Code submitted to the parliament on 7 May, the document will be unable to pull off.

Soft Belarusianization intensified within the framework of public initiatives, though — it acquired new forms and became markedly more substantive. The first half of 2015 saw not only a stronger demand from the population for nationally-oriented initiatives, but also more serious quality requirements, which indicates step changes in the cultural policy trend.

Description of the main developments that determined the trend

1) In the first half of 2015, the trend towards an expansion and deepening of the state policy of soft Belarusianization continued. It is the strengthening of this trend in the state sector that became a peculiar feature of the period, whereas during the previous half-year terms, the authorities were making first timid steps within the framework of their Soft Belarusianization campaign.

The press conference of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka for Belarusian and foreign journalists on 29 January stands out as a milestone event, because it was at that meeting with reporters that the head of state in effect for the first time admitted the state soft Belarusianization course:

"They have got used to the terms 'Russian

world' and 'soft power' in Russia. This notion has emerged: 'soft power'. And we have facilitated 'soft Belarusianization'. [...] I support the Belarusian language, because it is something that distinguishes us from, say, a Russian person, the Russians. It is an important national identity feature: if you have no peculiarities, no Belarusian language, but, say, only Russian, then [...] you are just like a Russian person, you are Russian. But we are Belarusians".

This statement de facto illustrates the understanding of the soft Belarusianization process at the state level. First, the Belarusian state is aware of the threat of the "Russian world" and soft power that is applied to promote it, and seeks instruments to respond according to its strengths. Second, the state believes it necessary to facilitate soft Belarusianization as an alternative to the expansion of the Russian world, perceiving it as a means to protect its national interests. Third, the key component of this policy, according to the state, is the Belarusian language, culture (art), and history.

Lukashenka's statement at the 42nd congress of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union on 20 January became a logical expansion of this idea:

"Culture is what makes one a Belarusian, in whatever corner of the world, not simply some 'local dweller'. Not only our invaluable legacy — literature, music, architecture — but also our language, which we must know, our history, which we must remember, and values, which we must cherish".

One of the challenges that soft Belarusianization faced back in 2014 was the passiveness of the system of state administration. Over the past two decades, the content of the soft Belarusianization policy as the state sees it now used to be a distinguishing characteristic of ideological constructs intrinsic in opponents of the incumbent authorities. As a result, it was hard for officials to make a 180-degree turn in their state cultural policy; moreover, they had no direct unambiguous and transparent instructions. Apparently, the authorities became aware of this problem in 2015 and are eager to address it.

In the first half of 2015, Belarusian officials made repeated statements in support of the popularization of the Belarusian language. On 21 January, new Education Minister Michail Žuraŭkoŭ called for teaching more disciplines in the Belarusian language at universities —

starting from history courses and eventually increasing the share of disciplines taught in Belarusian to more than 50%. Later, possibly, in response to the accusations of de-Russification of Belarusian schools by the Russian media, Lukashenka explained that there would be no forceful transition to the Belarusian language (which is quite logical for Soft Belarusianization as an example of “soft power”).

On 21 January, Chairman of the Constitutional Court of Belarus Piotr Miklaševič called for the publication of all laws in Russian and Belarusian, referring to Article 17 of the Constitution about the equal status of the two state languages.

2) As was mentioned above, in the first quarter of 2015, the implementation of the soft Belarusianization policy faced the challenge of the unpreparedness of the system of state administration to effectively implement the new cultural policy. The lack of the common official public benchmark, such as an approved regulatory act, also complicated the introduction of changes in the operation of the system. As a result, actions by some state officials frequently failed to fit in the general framework of the state soft Belarusianization policy, and sometimes directly contradicted it.

On 27 February, Minister of Culture Barys Sviatloŭ said that Minsk would not have monuments to Ryhor Baradulin, Vasil Bykaŭ, and Hiennadz Buraŭkin in the foreseeable future. The minister spoke about the shortage of financing as the main reason why there would be no monuments. However, also in February, the ministry invited bids for the creation of a monument to the cow as a “domestic animal that plays an important role in the welfare of the Belarusians”.

The closure of Ihar Lohvinaŭ’s bookstore also looked as something completely inappropriate amid Soft Belarusianization activities. The authorities de facto got themselves a high-profile scandal that reverberated in the European literary community, whereas Belarusian society became experienced in successfully raising money — USD67,000 — for the publisher to pay the fine. However, efforts that ran counter to the general trend proved to be vain, and the book trader and publisher Lohvinaŭ did not cease his operations.

Zmicier Vajciuškievič’s concert at the Pirates Club originally scheduled for 6 February was disrupted. The unofficial nature of such bans makes it hard to say how much the state influenced that decision by the club, and how much the club itself wanted to play safe. However, even this example shows obvious failures in the local implementation of the soft Belarusianization policy.

3) The first half of the year was also marked by important, yet feeble attempts by the authorities to step up their cultural policy activities. A concept for state cultural policy must be officially

adopted in order to systematize the promotion of soft Belarusianization and ensure an overall improvement in the quality of state efforts in the culture sector. In the context of the Belarusian legislation, the adoption of the Culture Code could become a crucial move — the document was submitted to the parliament by the president on 7 May following “painstaking work [...] since 2012”. The document itself is not associated with the policy of soft Belarusianization; however, it could become a leap towards its institutionalization.

Unfortunately, the parliament postponed the consideration of the Culture Code until its autumn session. It would be premature to speak about the final version of the document; however, in its current form it fails to address the challenges that the authorities need to rise to in the context of the implementation of soft Belarusianization. At the current stage, the draft Code includes 32 “main areas for state policy in the sphere of culture”, while the “determination of the common state policy in the sphere of culture” is included in presidential powers. It remains unclear when and how the president will determine this policy, whereas the sheer number of areas for cultural policy suggests that the current version of the Code has no priorities.

Description of additional developments

The trend towards the Belarusianization of public life in the first half of 2015 continued, and two fundamental changes from the year 2014 should be noted.

1) Intensive development of Belarusianization grew stronger, while previously, extensive growth tendencies prevailed. Initially people were interested in the basic possibilities for manifesting their Belarusianness (for example, they started taking Belarusian lessons), and the scope of such possibilities expanded mostly quantitatively (such as national clothing brands and first Belarusian club parties, which were very different in their quality). However, the demand for Belarusianness is growing deeper, as people tend to apply more stringent standards to nationally-oriented leisure and goods. This should be considered a positive trend, a natural logical evolution of the demand for Belarusianness.

2) New Belarusianization initiatives (public educational and recreational events, new brands of clothing and accessories, public actions, etc.) do not evoke any special response any more. The use of the Belarusian language is becoming habitual for business communication (advertising and PR), whereas new public events fail to draw the same response as Mova Cup or the first Vy yvanka Days. The main reason for this is not the drop in the popularity of these projects and the Belarusianization initiative as a whole, but the fact that society has got used to the idea that such nationally-oriented initiatives have found their niche and are nothing

extraordinary. Therefore, public initiatives within the Belarusianization track in the first half of 2015 can be categorized as additional events.

On 31 January, the Sniežan festival was organized in the vicinity of Baranavičy by local activists, supported by Art-Siadziba. The festival featured a performance by Vyraj, a Belarusian language video marathon and karaoke, exhibition fair of handmade goods, medieval reenactment and fire show. The red tape around the festival approval procedures drew public attention: the document authorizing the show required eight seals and signatures, of them two had to be put by the Baranavičy offices of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union. Nevertheless, the festival succeeded in having all of the necessary approvals.

The Feast of Native Language (Sviata Rodnaj Movy) organized by the Bielaruskaja Prastora cultural platform in association with Art-Siadziba on 22 February to celebrate the International Mother Language Day became an important

event. The busy daily program required all of the vacant premises of the Imaguru business club and in effect became a showcase of the fashionable Belarusianization initiatives accumulated over the previous 12 months: language classes, workshops, dozens of vendors of clothing and other national products, music bands, and even the first computer game in the Belarusian language.

3) An important characteristic of the period under review is the willingness of the authorities to contact public initiatives in the context of Belarusianization. Officials at the Minsk City Administration and Ministry of Culture supported the proposal of the public organization Alternative to mount plaques with historical names in twenty Minsk streets. According to Alieh Korban, the leader of the initiative, officials wrote that they “supported the idea in principle” and that it was a “timely and necessary” proposal, and now a special commission would develop the format of the plaques and find a contractor to manufacture them. ■

Brief forecast for the next six months

Soft Belarusianization and liberalization of cultural life will remain the dominating trend in the policy on culture — both at the state and public levels. While civil activists will continue stepping up their efforts, the authorities will be acting cautiously and discreetly for fear of having to deal with new internal (growing popularity of the non-state nationally-oriented alternative) and external (Russia’s irritation at the “vyšyvanization”¹ of Belarus) risks.

Efforts to promote soft Belarusianization and the state policy on culture will hardly become more systemic. The Culture Code will hardly be effectively finalized, and if the parliament passes it as it is during its autumn session, the state will not receive an effective instrument to address the existing challenges to its cultural policy, including difficulties in the implementation of soft Belarusianization by the local system of state administration.

1 The term applied by Regnum news service in its article about the possible transfer of 50% of school disciplines in Belarus to the Belarusian language.