



## CONTENTS

### EU-BELARUS: POLITICAL ADVENTURISM OR POLITICS AS THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE?

Elena Daneiko,  
Wider Europe

1

### POLITICAL ELECTIONS IN BELARUS: OLD TECHNIQUES IN NEW CONDITIONS

Pavel Usov,  
Belarusian Centre for  
European Studies

3

### BELARUS AFTER E-DAY

Yekaterina Glod, an  
independent political  
analyst and consultant

6

### PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS - 2010: CANDIDATES' PROGRAMMES ON THE BACKGROUND OF A UNIQUE ELECTORAL CONTEXT

Yauheni Preiherman  
Liberal Club, MA in  
European Politics

8

## BELARUS: THE E-DAY

Belarus, just like the rest of Eastern Europe, has been covered with a thick layer of snow, which slows down the traffic, but has no effect on the inevitable approach of the E-Day. On December 19, there will be only one event in Belarus – the presidential elections. On this occasion, the EESC presents a new issue of *Bell*. This issue is solely devoted to the forthcoming presidential elections in Belarus. As we aim to provide a wide range of analysis angles, the newsletter includes four articles instead of the traditional two.

In the first one, Elena Daneiko studies the approach of the West towards elections in Belarus. Never before could one have observed such a positive view of Lukashenka in the Western capitals. What does this new approach mean? Is it an acknowledgment that the previous “hard line” policy failed or is it a pragmatic move in the context of the changing geopolitical situation? Does the new approach mean anything to the actual state of democracy in Belarus?

The second contributor Pavel Usov studies how the regime has responded and adopted a “new” and “democratic” strategy. Geopolitical changes – the need to re-approach the EU – have forced Lukashenka to implement a series of measures to contributing to the

illusion of democracy, which amongst others include a certain level of political debates and registration of nine opposition candidates. However, the illusion quickly fades away once the question of remaining in power is touched upon.

Ekaterina Glod in the third article entitled “Belarus after E-Day” outlines plausible scenarios for the county after the elections. The author asserts, that even though both the West and Russia will recognise the newly elected president, the greatest challenge for Lukashenka still lays ahead in dealing with the country’s economic situation. To face this challenge Lukashenka will have to use all of his abilities of balancing and manoeuvring.

Lastly, our readers will find a short review of the electoral position of the candidates by Yauheni Preiherman. He describes how a unique electoral environment has forced Lukashenka to accept some of the ideas introduced by the opposition candidates. What is different in these elections as opposed to previous ones, is the fact that electoral campaigns of both the incumbent president and the opposition are strikingly similar.

*Justinas Pimpė, Editor*

## EU-BELARUS: POLITICAL ADVENTURISM OR POLITICS AS THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE?

*Elena Daneiko, Wider Europe*

What does the West expect from the elections in Belarus? Does it retract under Lukashenka’s pressure while accepting its powerlessness to influence the regime, or is it governed by the principle “politics is the art of the possible” and hence agrees to cooperate for pragmatic reasons?

### EU officials formulate conditions and wishes

For the last several months and in the course of increasingly frequent voyages by EU officials to Belarus, a number of these have been formulated as conditions for cooperation with Belarus. Two visits by tefan Füle, European Commissioner for

Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, in July and November this year, may be considered exemplar. Neither the Commissioner, nor heads of MFAs of Germany and Poland, Guido Westerwelle and Radoslaw Sikorski, tried to conceal the fact that their visits are related to the upcoming elections in Belarus.

At all meetings which took place in July tefan Füle brought up four statements for discussion. The EU representative spoke about the unused potential of the new Neighbourhood Policy “Eastern Partnership” and about the possibility to make more in the framework of the “policy of development of gradual interaction which was started in 2008”.

**According to the Commissioner, presence of this stamp would enable Belarus to prove its readiness for cooperation with the EU on the basis of common democratic values.**

The change in state of affairs may be stipulated by Belarus' advancement on its way to reforms at the basis of which are fundamental values including observation of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Besides, Füle reminded that Belarus is expected to abolish death penalty and informed about the document on the simplification of visa regime being under preparation.

Also in July tefan Füle pointed out that the presidential elections had to be a "democratic stamp in the international passport of the country". According to the Commissioner, presence of this stamp would enable Belarus to prove its readiness for cooperation with the EU on the basis of common democratic values.

It should be pointed out that, while in his July visit to Belarus, the Commissioner devoted a larger part of his attention to the conditions of normalizing Europe-Belarus relations; in autumn he spoke predominantly on the advantages of cooperation and the wish to expedite mutual movement.

The EU promise to provide practical and feasible aid to Belarus in its course of reforms to a certain extent was reflected in the readiness of the EU to begin a real discussion of the document regulating the simplification of visa regime. In November, during his visit to Minsk, tefan Füle declared that the European Commission had recommended that the EU Council of Ministers authorize the Commission to start a negotiations process with Belarus regarding the agreements on the simplification of short-term visa issuing procedures and readmission. Moreover, the Commissioner informed that simplification of visa regime would not be supplemented by any political conditions, while the intermediate joint action plan proposed by the EU could largely compensate the absence of signed legally relevant documents between the EU and Belarus.

What Füle said did not sound as a condition. According to the Commissioner, the EU "would be keen to see the progress" in six positions: registration of candidates; composition of election committees; the issue of early voting; vote count and processing the results of elections; access to mass media, and freedom of assembly.

However, the way Westerwelle and Sikorski urged Belarus to receive a bonus of 3 billion Euros did sound as a condition. This sum was promised by the Foreign Ministers of Germany and Poland on behalf of the entire EU in exchange for fair elections.

At the press-conference on the results of the November visit, which took place in Minsk, the journalists lost count of the number of the expression "fair and transparent elections", as it sounded in nearly every sentence.

**Who and why may be supported by the West during presidential elections?**

Interest and the present attitude of the EU towards Belarus are explained by two main circumstances. Firstly, it is a successful completion of a lengthy process passing the Lisbon Treaty, which required

concentration of efforts and attention of the European elite, and as a consequence, the opportunity to fill foreign initiatives of the EU, in particular, the "Eastern Partnership", with specific content. Secondly, it is Europe' apprehensions regarding the fate of the former Soviet republics, which Moscow traditionally views as spheres of its influence.

The last circumstance was voiced by Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaitė during her visit in Minsk in October. Some time after her meeting with Lukashenka, her opinion that the current Belarusian leader could be the guarantor of Belarus' independence and therefore may be supported at the elections, leaked to the mass media through the news agency *Reuters* and caused controversial response in Minsk and other European capitals.

Some politicians, for example, ex-president Valdas Adamkus, Lithuanian MP Mantas Adamenas, Head of the Rada of the Belarusian People's Republic Ivonka Survila, presidential candidate Yaroslav Romanchuk and others interpreted this as unacceptable invective in terms of European values. Among the numerous comments of the West on this reaction is a view that it is the issue of the preservation of sovereignty of Belarus rather than the degree of democratic character that matters.

Gribauskaite's critics, including both past and present representatives of the European and Belarusian political elite, do not put the equal sign between Lukashenka's power and the guarantee of Belarus' sovereignty. However the very fact of the opinion of the leader of the Lithuanian state, regardless that her meeting with diplomats had not been intended for coverage in mass media, suggests that the official Vilnius is not alone having this view.

This suggestion is supported by a series of Lukashenka's meetings with high-ranking European officials and top chief executives of European countries over the past year and a half. While in spring 2009, on the eve of the constitutive summit of the "Eastern Partnership" in Prague, Lukashenka was suggested to refrain from going to the Czech capital so as not to confuse his European colleagues, who might refuse to shake hands with Belarus' presidents in public, today the leader of the Belarusian state shakes hands with European commissioners and other high-ranking diplomats and officials in front of numerous cameras. Moreover, the conservative French newspaper *Le Figaro* asks Lukashenka questions on what actually is happening in today's Belarus and whether its permanent scandal with Russia is of critical importance.

**Arguments by Wikileaks**

A piece of information that appeared on the Wikileaks website on December 8 with a difference in just several hours may serve an indirect proof of the fact that the upcoming presidential elections will be acknowledged by the West, although with certain reservations. Below is an excerpt from the correspondence of American diplomats with the Department of State dated December 12, 2008, - ap-

Lukashenka seems to have realized that the politically correct West, constrained by the proprieties, is less dangerous than Russia, the policy of which more often than not reminds of ultimate fighting.

proximately the time when Lukashenka's inofficial pre-election campaign was launched.

8. (C) The Polish government -- lead by Sikorski -- pushed through the temporary repeal of almost all EU visa sanctions against Belarusian President Lukashenka's regime, despite USG calls for a more gradual easing of sanctions. Sikorski publicly suggested the U.S. was engaging in double standards because of our close relations with a "dictatorship in Saudi Arabia, but not in Belarus." Both Sikorski and Tusk acknowledge that the GoP risks being perceived as embracing a dictator; but they argue that engaging Belarus is particularly important after the Russian invasion of Georgia. The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister told U.S. officials in August that Poland is responding to Belarus' signals of interest in dialogue, and, like the U.S., to the release of political prisoners in Belarus.

9. (C) Tusk and Sikorski see engagement with Belarusian authorities as the lesser of two evils. In the Pole's view, an isolated Belarus could become completely ensnared by Russia, with or without Lukashenka in power. Russian domination would jeopardize democratic transformation and - more importantly, in Warsaw's view -- would dash hopes that Belarus could become a buffer state between Poland and Russia. The GoP is betting that Lukashenka enjoys enough power to resist the elimination of independent Belarusian institutions and maintain his freedom of maneuver. MFA officials tell us that in response to the lifting of EU visa sanctions, Belarus has signaled Brussels that Minsk would ease some media.<sup>1</sup>

Has Poland convinced the American political establishment to let themselves be tempted and change their policy toward Belarus, which is usually much harsher than European? Does Warsaw have great influence on the policy of Brussels as well as other European capitals, with regard to Belarus? Answers to these questions deserve a separate discussion. However, judging by the facts available to attentive observers, the West is ready to legitimize Lukashenka to a certain degree, should his elegant victory at the elections be announced once again. At the same

<sup>1</sup> <http://wikileaks.renout.nl/cable/2008/12/08WARSAW1409.html>

time, the West already announces support of the opposition as well as Belarusian civil society.

### Democracy for three billion?

Those who did in-depth research on the situation in Belarus during Lukashenka's presidency state with confidence that the present Belarusian leader will never agree to conduct the election campaign in accordance with democratic standards. On the other hand, the West hardly expects that the Belarusian regime will follow all rules listed in international treaties despite the fact that the latter have been signed by Belarus. The properties and staging liberalization are already perceived as a progress.

The West has not yet received the number of promises by Lukashenka that Russia has been receiving for years in return for promises of integration. Taking into consideration his skills at maneuvering, the current Belarusian president has some time in reserve to work out a plan for further action. According to the economists, Belarus will not be able to stay without Russia's subsidies for long, while non-recurrent financial bonuses of the West or credits of international organizations will hardly be able to serve a substitute.

Meanwhile the observation of democratic standards and liberalization according to the traditional western standard is no less perilous for Lukashenka's political future than Russia's tight embrace. However, today, against the background of the irrevocably damaged relations with the Russian ruling duumvirate, the current Belarusian leader, just like the West, chooses the "lesser of the two evils." Lukashenka seems to have realized that the politically correct West, constrained by the proprieties, is less dangerous than Russia, the policy of which more often than not reminds of ultimate fighting. Therefore the lesser evil for him is to imitate liberalization and the elections. Besides, the efforts of Belarusian opponents of the regime to convince the West that fair elections are impossible (while the proofs are innumerable), from the viewpoint of the probability of Lukashenka's legitimization, seem to have a lower score than the efforts of Lukashenka himself to prove the opposite. At any rate, ten days before the elections the situation looked just like that.

## POLITICAL ELECTIONS IN BELARUS: OLD TECHNIQUES IN NEW CONDITIONS

*Pavel Usov, Belarusian Centre for European Studies*

The current presidential campaign in Belarus has taken an absolutely unexpected political format, which for convenience could be referred to as the "triumph of democracy". Never before has Belarus'

authoritarian regime allowed political opponents to run their campaigns effectively, unconstrained by external restrictions or pressure: to meet with the electorate in squares, at universities, recreation centres, and to criticize and berate the authorities even in the state mass media.

## The regime has successfully created two political spaces: the space of virtual politics and that of real politics.

In reality, however, the political system has not undergone any changes. The regime has successfully created two political spaces: the space of virtual politics and that of real politics. The space of virtual politics enjoys pluralism, democracy, clash of opinions, a multitude of candidates, and even freedom of elections. Nevertheless this space is closed, detached from the people and incapable of influencing political processes in the country. This space has been created for export and, primarily, for the West, which is ready to pay back by “improving relations”.

The space of real politics has only one choice available, and any changes are impossible as has been publicly declared by Aliaksandr Lukashenka in his speech at the 4th All-Belarusian National People's Assembly. President Lukashenka stated that the opponents of the regime should not expect to win: „You might come out in the square, somewhere else... You will not get the country. We will not let you tear it to pieces, as we have got it at a cost”<sup>1</sup>. In other words, democracy and freedom end where the issue of retaining power is raised. The outcome of elections is predetermined, and neither the opposition, nor the society can influence it in any way.

State power has concentrated in its apparatus all levers for managing election processes, and the mechanism has functioned flawlessly for ten years. The regime has control over all state mass media, the ideological and administrative apparatus, while the non-governmental organizations the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the White Russia supporting the state ensure loyalty and mobilization among the population: students of higher education institutions and civil servants at all levels. The election commissions are an iterative part of the presidential administrative apparatus formed exclusively by those loyal to the regime. The operation of the commissions is not subject to public control, which makes large-scale manipulations at any stage of voting possible.

The creation of the illusion of freedom in the country during the electoral campaigns had its own reasons and objectives; however this has nothing to do with the weakness of the regime and Lukashenka's wish to democratize.

### Internal and external factors of running the electoral campaign

The main reason why the leadership of the country has turned down the harsh scenario of running the elections implemented in 2006 is the global economic crisis and changes in the geopolitical situation around Belarus. The nature of these changes is both negative and positive.

Over the last years the relations between Belarus and Russia have become gravely strained. Belarus' non-recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as demanded by Russia, demonstrated that Lukash-

enka would aim at pursuing relatively independent foreign policy, which would meet current interests of the ruling regime. Meanwhile Russia attempted to use the presidential campaign in Belarus as a pressure mechanism on the regime. This triggered off unprecedented information warfare between the two countries. The mass media kept receiving messages that Moscow might not recognize the results of elections in Belarus.

One could assume that the conflict with Moscow could have been averted if Lukashenka was not confident that it would not be made up for and counter-balanced by other factors. One of these factors is the development of relations, primarily, in the economic domain, with the European Union.

In its turn and despite the fact that the European community perceives Lukashenka as a dictator, the EU is actively mending relations with the Belarusian regime. The intensification of Europe-Belarus relations is related to the following processes both within and beyond Belarus:

1. Failure of democratic reorganization after the revolution in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan;
2. Enhancement by the Belarusian authorities of the concept of the “independence” of the country threatened by imperial Russia.
3. Stability of the political regime and the internal weakness and disunity of the Belarusian opposition.

The political situation in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan has demonstrated clearly that toppling authoritarian regimes does not mean the establishment of a strong democratic system. Rather, on the contrary, the internal policy of the new authorities would shortly result in disillusionment in society and a return to non-democratic methods of the government of the state (Ukraine), or to overall destabilization of the situation in the country (Kyrgyzstan). The idea of a revolution in the post-Soviet space has lost its relevance in the West, just like for part of Belarusian democratic community which related the success of revolutions in the neighbouring countries to the possibility of political changes in Belarus, too. The official propaganda actively uses the last examples of unsuccessful political transformations in Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Georgia as a proof that revolutionary changes are not conducive to anything good. Therefore it is important that stability and well-being of the society be maintained, which the present regime copes with successfully and, consequently, modifying the regime is of no use. In addition, Lukashenka fairly successfully persuades the West that he is the unquestionable guarantor of Belarus' independence and sovereignty. This has become the key statement in his speech at the 4th All-Belarusian National Assembly: “I have said a number of times that real sovereignty stands high, comes at a cost, but without it the nation is inviable. Belarus' independence has become an unquestionable factor

<sup>1</sup> «Лукашенко — оппозиции: страну вы не получите» [Lukashenka to opposition: You will not get the country], [http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2010/12/06/ic\\_news\\_623\\_356633/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2010/12/06/ic_news_623_356633/)

The regime only needed to create conditions for formal requirements and outward attributes of democracy to be observed, yet the latter would never allow the opposition to win, without any apparent intervention of the authorities.

of world politics. A factor that cannot be ignored! And this is our greatest achievement”<sup>2</sup>.

The conflict with Russia has made it possible to enhance in the West Lukashenka’s image as an opponent of Russian Empire and advocate of national sovereignty. It should be pointed out, however, and this has already been voiced on a number of occasions, that for Lukashenka sovereignty is not a historical and political value, but the necessity to retain his own power. Due to the fact that the number of threats to subvert the authorities in the Republic in Belarus from the West has decreased, confrontation with Russia became possible. It is the new “geopolitical image” of the Belarusian president that has become the basis for the formation of the EU strategy for the dialogue with the regime.

### **Opposition as an instrument to legitimize the political regime**

The conviction of European politicians that the dialogue with the regime is necessary concurrently aggravates the weakness of the Belarusian opposition, which the regime has successfully been destroying all these years. It is obvious that neither by resorting to revolution, nor by means of elections the opposition will be able to come to power; nor is it a serious political actor within the country.

Nevertheless, the Belarusian opposition is an important element of legitimacy of the political regime, both for its own community and for the EU.

It is crucial for Lukashenka that the EU deems the elections legitimate, although the legitimacy of Lukashenka’s rule was subject to doubt as early as in 1996, immediately after the “constitutional coup”. Its illegitimacy was confirmed in 2001, 2004, and eventually in 2006. Therefore all electoral farce that is taking place at present is of no use. To participate in processes organized by the illegitimate regime is to contradict logic, while the participation of the opposition renders this regime legitimate. Hence the conclusion comes naturally: the EU has the objective to legitimize the Belarusian regime for its own purposes, while the opposition is but an instrument to achieve this goal.

For this reason the participation of numerous opposition representatives in the elections is advantageous to both the Belarusian regime and Europe. On the one hand, multiple opposition representatives legitimize the election process; on the other hand, the opposition condemns itself to failure and thereby gives the West a just cause to maintain that it is not the regime that is to blame for the failure of the opposition, but the weak and non-consolidated opposition.

The regime only needed to create conditions for formal requirements and outward attributes of democracy to be observed, yet the latter would never

allow the opposition to win, without any apparent intervention of the authorities.

This is why virtually all independent candidates were registered, 9 persons in total. One may already predict the election results. The elections will take place in one round (as the second round for Lukashenka is incomprehensible). Lukashenka will receive from 70 to 75 % of votes, while the rest will be distributed among alternative candidates.

Giving general assessment of the organization and election campaign, one may maintain that it is designed and is carried out in accordance with the expectations of the authorities. It is possible that the arrangement of a boycott or the last-minute unanimous refusal to participate in voting could turn an unpleasant surprise for the regime. However, both this step and victory in the elections need a unified opposition with a common strategy, which at present does not exist. In the Belarus of today, given the disunity among the opposition, intermittent internal conflicts and discord, and in the absence of a single leader, implementation of any significant scenarios, except for power scenarios, is impossible. As long as the regime manages to keep the Belarusian opposition in a state of schism, there can be no changes in the country.

Most likely, however, the authorities foresaw the possibility of boycotting the elections by the opposition and even removal of candidates from the presidential race. Additional “candidates-marionettes” were launched which openly distance themselves from the authorities and position themselves as independent candidates. Should the elections be boycotted, they would become a formal alternative to the current president.

In addition to everything else, the authorities registered oppositional candidates representing miscellaneous ideological movements, which renders impossible the implementation of the idea of their unification in a single front, or their removal in favour of one leader.

For convenience purposes the majority of the candidates may be divided into 3 ideological blocs: the Nationalist bloc (Rymashevski, Kastisev), the pro-Russian bloc (Sannikov, Nekliayev, and, to a certain extent, Romanchuk), and the moderate bloc (Mikhalevich, Tereschenko, Uss). Since Nikolai Statkevich does not represent any ideological movement, his position may be characterized as the position “against Lukashenka”. The authorities expected a clash between two main ideological blocs, the pro-Russian and the Nationalist, which essentially did happen during the last appearance of Kastisev on the Belarusian TV channel BT, when he openly accused Sannikov and Nekliayev of ties with Russia. Lukashenka emphasized this fact, too, by stating in his interview to the French newspaper *Le Figaro* that “Vladimir Nekliayev and Andrei Sannikov are the persons currently sponsored by Russia”<sup>3</sup>. This

<sup>2</sup> Наш исторический выбор — независимая, сильная и процветающая Беларусь. [Our historic choice is independent, strong and prosperous Belarus]. Report by President Lukashenka at the 4th All-Belarusian National People’s Assembly, <http://sb.by/post/109293/>

<sup>3</sup> In his interview to *Le Figaro*, Lukashenka disclosed who finances the Belarusian opposition, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2010/11/25/ic\\_media\\_video\\_112\\_4994/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2010/11/25/ic_media_video_112_4994/)

However, as soon as there is a threat that the “illusion” might turn into reality, the masks will be thrown off and the regime will severely suppress any protest from the opposition.

statement was intended to aggravate tensions in the opposition camp, to make the unification of the candidates impossible, and to convince the EU that, by using the Belarusian opposition, Russia was concocting its own scenario of the change of power.

In this way, the significant number of alternative candidates not only intensifies contradictions inside the oppositional bloc, facilitates the task of the authorities to manipulate the electoral votes, but also minimizes chances of the opposition to organize effective protest events.

In addition to technical measures aimed at discrediting and weakening the opponents, Lukashenka took several populist steps designed to convince Belarus' citizens in the necessity to vote for the current president. The main step was signing a law on average wage increase up to 500 dollars. In this way Lukashenka essentially bought the electorates' votes. Naturally, after the elections the socio-economic situation will begin to deteriorate and the temporary wage increase will be “eaten up” by inflation. Lukashenka did not hesitate to use the ideas and critique of his opponents to his own advantage; as a matter of fact, he has stolen several popular ideas made during public appearances by his oppositional candidates. Thus, after a critique of the authorities on the fact that pensioners, students and schoolchildren had been deprived of transport fare privilege, Lukashenka ordered to restore the

discount fare immediately. Besides, during his public appearance at the 4<sup>th</sup> All-Belarusian National Assembly, he promised to introduce mortgage and concessional loans, to establish sports infrastructure which would be affordable to the majority of the population, to increase childbirth cash benefits, etc. All these promises had been voiced by Romanchuk, Rymashevski, and Kastsev. Lukashenko appropriated the ideas which expressed public discontent and expectations and helped alternative candidates gain popularity among the society.

### Power at any cost

Many a time has Lukashenka proven that retaining power is his major goal, and he is ready to go to any lengths to attain it. At this stage an illusion of democracy is the most effective measure that enables him to neutralize his opponents on the one hand, and to gain “friendship” with the European Union. However, as soon as there is a threat that the “illusion” might turn into reality, the masks will be thrown off and the regime will severely suppress any protest from the opposition. It should be noted that, after the elections, the political regime will resume the normal course of its operation. Democratic freedoms will hardly be extended; moreover, one may expect an intensification of the pressure on the opposition in order to prevent it from enhancing its position in the society after the presidential campaign and to get ready for the parliamentary elections.

## BELARUS AFTER E-DAY

*Yekaterina Glod, an independent political analyst and consultant*

During one of his recent interviews, president Lukashenka frankly admitted that “It is not the election which matters but what will happen afterwards.” Indeed, a few days ahead of the Belarusian polls, not many doubt the outcome. The state machine controlling the election process has mastered ways to come up with the required figures to ensure a resounding success for the incumbent president. Far more intriguing is the question of what will happen after E-day. How will the country progress after Lukashenka has been re-elected for the fourth time? Will it fall into a prolonged economic slump or manage to stay afloat financially? How will the deteriorating economic situation affect Belarus' foreign policy agenda? On the other side of the coin, what course of action towards Belarus will be chosen by the EU and Russia?

### The West: no reversal to status quo-ante

Perhaps the most predictable reaction towards Belarus' presidential election is expected from the European Union. One can recall the case of the 2008

parliamentary elections when, in spite of the many shortcomings noted by the international observers, the EU emphasised limited progress in the election process and moved to suspend the visa sanctions against Belarusian officials. The situation is likely to unfold along the same lines this time. The EU Council's October statement on Belarus reaffirmed that the EU would be prepared to expand its relations with Belarus if the presidential election were held in line with international standards. Realising the stakes, the Belarusian authorities have made efforts to bring to the attention of observers the few positive improvements of the current campaign. The amendments to the election law, the existence of the “genuine choice between distinct political alternatives” (i.e. 10 candidates representing different political programmes), the improved signature collection and registration procedures and similar enhancements during this election, may be sufficient for Brussels officials to acknowledge some degree of wanted “progress” as the basis for further cooperation with the country.

The past EU interactions with Belarus caused considerable frustration in Brussels. Indeed, the failures of the previous EU policies towards Belarus (the

**In short one can predict that, however disappointed the EU may feel in the end about the conduct of the Belarusian presidential election, it will move on to continue engaging Belarus into its agenda.**

step-by-step approach, conditionality, etc.) led to a deadlock in the relations with Belarus and demonstrated the EU inability to influence the course of development in the country. Now the EU has to prove that its current policy of “critical engagement” with the country is working. On the other hand, after two years of high-level political dialogue and intensified technical cooperation with Belarus, the EU cannot simply sweep under the carpet its efforts and revert to the status quo-ante. Yet many in the EU fear that attacking Lukashenka and cutting contacts with his government will signify surrendering Belarus to Russia and opening the door for China to Europe. Hence the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Stefan Füle unequivocally hinted that “it has never been possible to isolate a country situated in the heart of Europe and it will not be possible to do so in the future.”

In short one can predict that, however disappointed the EU may feel in the end about the conduct of the Belarusian presidential election, it will move on to continue engaging Belarus into its agenda. The Joint Interim Plan due to come out soon under EU sponsorship will set out in detail the course of EU’s future cooperation with Belarus.

#### **Russia’s hardening line**

The prospective reaction of Russia towards the outcome of the presidential election in Belarus has been unusually debated this time at great length. The recent rift in the countries’ bilateral relations provoked speculations that the Kremlin is preparing a hard-line response aimed at non-recognition of the legitimacy of Lukashenka’s 4<sup>th</sup> term. Although such a scenario cannot be completely discarded, if realised, it would create a practical collision for Moscow, bearing in mind the collaborative ties between the two countries, such as the Union State, the Eurasian Economic Community, or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, to name just a few. How would it be possible to continue cooperation with Belarus within these organisations if the legitimacy of the country’s president were severely questioned? On the other hand, Russia so far has never failed to legitimise election results in the post-Soviet space. Breaking the tradition now may create an undesirable precedent for Moscow in the future.

Therefore, all in all it is unrealistic to expect that Moscow would voice discontent to Lukashenka’s victory. In the most optimistic scenario, it may take on a reticent position – to accept the election’s outcome de facto without publicly condoning it. After all, for the sake of its national interests, Russia has to remain hard-nosed and seek pragmatic solutions, dealing with whoever is in control rather than preferred.

The projected recognition of Lukashenka’s victory by the Kremlin is only one side of the coin however. The other side is far from looking rosy for the incumbent Belarusian president, as it entails Russia’s continuing withdrawing political and economic support from his regime. The trend which began several years ago is expected to accelerate in the

near future and might even turn into a full scale economic war against Lukashenka if Minsk fails to make tangible steps towards reconciliation with Moscow. What are the reasons for this?

Firstly, Lukashenka’s persistent failure to honour his commitments to Russia, whilst continuing to receive Russian subsidies and political backing, has broken Moscow’s trust in Minsk as a reliable ally. It is difficult to foresee that the trust between the two leaders can be easily restored and that Moscow would agree to resume sponsoring Lukashenka just in the name of his good word. Secondly, Russia has realised that post-Soviet authoritative regimes are in effect not such guarantors of stability as they were perceived earlier. Nor are they predictable and fully loyal to Russia insofar as their geopolitical orientation is concerned. Hence they are no longer believed worthy of Moscow’s unconditional support. That is why President Medvedev has set on a course of pragmatic and business-oriented relations with Russia’s former satellites, moving away from the old model of supporting the post-Soviet integration efforts at all costs.

In order to minimise the leverage of these regimes to exert pressure on Moscow, Russia has embarked on a strategy aimed at lowering the country’s dependency on them. With regard to Belarus, Russia has already made a positive move with regard to energy and cargo transit, and in the military and defence fields, where its dependency on Belarus has been greatest. For example, Moscow has started deploying new radar and communication facilities duplicating those in Belarus (in the Leningrad Region); assimilated alternative cargo transit routes (through Finland, Latvia and Ukraine); and begun building energy transportation corridors by-passing Belarus, such as BTS-2 and the North Stream. The latter pose the greatest danger to Belarus, as not only does the country risk losing its major transit revenues, but it may be left without Russian oil altogether, which would be a serious blow to the Belarusian economy since a third of Belarus’ GDP comes from the two oil refineries. Lukashenka’s efforts to make Belarus’ oil-refining industry profitable through Venezuelan crude are not a credible alternative. Unlikely to produce the volumes of oil nor the revenues to replace the lost Russian transit and processing income.

Since the Russian strategy outlined above has already seen considerable financial investment, it cannot be easily reverted. On the contrary, the invested resources have to pay off, thereby leaving little appetite for the Russian government to continue providing incentives to Lukashenka. The Belarusian transit system will no longer be in demand and hence the risk of Russian energy transit to Europe being hijacked by Minsk will disappear. The ball will be on the Russian side, putting Moscow in a position to easily stifle Lukashenka through economic means. It has already deprived the regime of substantial economic revenues by introducing duty on Russian crude deliveries to Belarus. The eventual cancellation of this toll will not yield the previous profits if Belarus ends up paying the export duty on oil products

Also the high pace of the foreign debt growth will push it up to the critical level of 60% of the GDP already in 2011-12. Yet who will agree to become Belarus' next lenders?

into the Russian budget. Russia has shown that it is not going to concede in its determination to bring the gas price for Belarus up to the European market level. Neither is Russia prepared to extend a helping hand to Minsk struggling to join the WTO. These actions have demonstrated the Russian soft power approach aimed at bringing down the unreliable and arrogant Lukashenka.

#### **Belarus' economic ordeal**

Finding credible solutions for the accumulated economic problems will be the major challenge for Lukashenka's government after E-day. According to expert forecasts, the receding Belarusian economy has the capacity to endure for no longer than six – twelve months at most. The high growth figures and wage hikes are deceptive as they were conditioned by the active credit support from the banking sphere, whereas in reality as much as 60% of Belarusian enterprises experience shortfalls in financing their current account activities.

The biggest problem for the Belarusian economy today is the growing current trade deficit, which puts pressure on the country's foreign reserves, thereby undermining the Belarusian rouble. From January to October, the current account deficit has plummeted to USD 6.9 billion from USD 5.7 billion compared to the equivalent period in the preceding year. The main reason behind the increase in the negative trade balance has been the rising costs for imported hydrocarbons and the consequential drop in Belarus' revenues from exported oil-based products. The cycle will only get worse next year as the price of oil and gas will continue to go up. The faltering Belarusian economy and the inefficient state regulation are incapable of mending the problem.

The reduction of the trade deficit would require the use of foreign reserves, as they have been nearly the only country's resort in the event of cash flow problems. However, those are not so high. Belarus' foreign reserves went down by USD 123 million from November and on 1 December equaled USD

5.7 billion, amounting to 60 days worth of import value versus the recommended IMF threshold of 3 months. Since the reserves comprise principally borrowed money (as the hard currency revenues of the Belarusian enterprises have been insufficient to bring up the reserves to the adequate level), their increase adds to Belarus' foreign debt, which at the end of the first six months of the year reached 45% of the country's GDP (compared to the beginning of 2007 when it was only 18% of GDP). Although compared to other Central and Eastern European countries, the level of the current external debt of Belarus is relatively low, the structure of the debt, which is mainly short-term trade and bank loans, makes the cost of its servicing high.

Also the high pace of the foreign debt growth will push it up to the critical level of 60% of the GDP already in 2011-12. Yet who will agree to become Belarus' next lenders? The strained relations with Russia negate the possibility of Russian financial support, whilst the IMF's conditions for the next loan programme with Belarus are not so agreeable to the Belarusian government. On the other hand, China's loans involve importing Chinese products, which is to widen the current account deficit further, while the 8.7 % Eurobonds' interest rate is hard to digest for the Belarusian economy.

In his search for cash, Lukashenka will go as global as possible. Belarus has already set on boosting its relations with Asian and Latin American countries. Regional cooperation with Ukraine and the Baltic countries has gathered pace recently too. In terms of energy security, Lukashenka will continue making efforts to reach out to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan as well as to the Middle East. The dire economic situation will push him to make further albeit small concessions to the West, which is conditioning its financial support to Belarus' political reforms. The question remains whether Lukashenka will manage to balance his new 'friends' against the loss of the Russian subsidies to keep himself politically aboard notwithstanding Russia's potential to bring him down.

## **PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS-2010: CANDIDATES' PROGRAMMES ON THE BACKGROUND OF A UNIQUE ELECTORAL CONTEXT**

*Yauheni Preiherman*

*Liberal Club, MA in European Politics*

The presidential campaign-2010 in Belarus is still in progress. The candidates and their teams have some more time to go before the voters cast ballots on 19 December and the short political race is expected to be over. If nothing extraordinary happens

before or on the day of the election, the authorities will again proclaim a convincing landslide victory of the incumbent president notwithstanding how big his real public support is. In this respect the current campaign does not differ from the previous ones in 2001 and 2006. However, this year's campaign is unique for the Belarusian politics in a number of ways.



**If nothing extraordinary happens before or on the day of the election, the authorities will again proclaim a convincing landslide victory of the incumbent president notwithstanding how big his real public support is.**

### **External and internal factors of the campaign**

Even before the first politicians announced in April and May 2010 that they would run for office, it was quite evident that the presidential campaign would unfold on the background of two new developments. Firstly, the protracted interpersonal conflict between the leadership of Belarus and Russia resulted in the relations between the two states reaching the point of lowest cooperation ever. Besides the bitter rows over energy issues (that everyone is more or less used to) in the winter and summer of this year, the Kremlin launched a series of information attacks against Aliaksandr Lukashenka and his closest surrounding. The Gazprom-owned television channel NTV showed 4 documentaries under the title "Godfather" ("Krestnyi bat'ka") which depicted the Belarusian president as insane and openly accused him of violating the Constitution, favouring corruption and killing political opponents. This was followed by numerous reports of the same kind on other Russian TV channels and in articles in the leading newspapers. Finally, in October in an address on his videoblog Dmitry Medvedev made it clear that the relations with Lukashenka would never be friendly again. In such circumstances Lukashenka could no longer rely on the Russian support during the elections.

Secondly, the deteriorating economic indicators (first of all, foreign trade, budget and current account deficits) implied that the Lukashenka government would have to reform what the official propaganda called the Belarusian economic model. The reduction of gains from the previously highly beneficial energy regime with Russia, new difficulties with the access to the Russian market, and the general inefficiency of the administrative economy convinced everyone, including the authorities, that the model is close to its exhaustion. Obviously, this is not a very nice background for an electoral campaign. Even though the government still has resources to demonstrate its social generosity before the elections, it faces a complicated task of preparing the population for tougher life after 19 December.

In this situation Aliaksandr Lukashenka had to counterbalance the loss of the Russian pillar of the Belarusian socio-economic system and his personal power. Attempts to maximize gains from the close relations with Venezuela and China apparently produced only limited results. Therefore, he expectedly started making moves towards better relations with the European Union. To his luck, these moves favourably coincided with the dominant present-day policy thinking on Belarus in EU institutions and Member States. The former paradigm of no dialogue or critical dialogue is generally being replaced by some form of active policy engagement, while the Russian-Belarusian contradictions only encourage this policy. Moreover, since this time the opposition failed to unite behind a single candidate, the EU does not see a strong and legitimate alternative to Lukashenka.

As a result, we have witnessed an unusual increase in the number and intensity of high-level contacts

between the Belarusian authorities and representatives of EU institutions and governments. Lots of promising statements about good prospects for economic and political cooperation have been made by Belarusian and EU officials. This has created a unique context for the 2010 elections, in which the EU is no longer portrayed by the Belarusian state media as a foe. Rather, it is shown as a good neighbour who is growing mature enough to accept its past mistakes and replace Russia as our most beloved friend. However, with all pragmatism and geopolitical calculations in place the EU is not Russia: in return for closer cooperation and financial assistance the Union and its member states demand that at least basic election standards be met and concrete steps towards reforms be made. These demands have impacted the current presidential campaign on two levels: the electoral process and candidates' messages.

### **The electoral process**

In order to have the election results recognized the authorities need to demonstrate at least some progress in how the elections are held. This explains the unexpected liberalization during the first stage of the campaign, i.e. during the signatures collection period. The authorities also tried to show their new democratic standards by registering 10(!) presidential candidates, even though some of them have hardly passed the required threshold of 100.000 signatures<sup>1</sup>. This is a record number in the history of independent Belarus.

There have also been some other improvements compared to the 2006 campaign. For instance, the candidates' addresses have been aired both on TV and radio 2 times for 30 minutes each. Live TV and radio debates have been staged<sup>2</sup>. Other crucial criteria of a democratic electoral process, however, are not fulfilled. Most importantly, less than 0.5% of the members of all the local election commissions are opposition representatives, which gives the government ample opportunities for large scale falsifications. The national TV channels continue the usual routine of black PR against the oppositional candidates. The state machine ("administrative resource") is used as usual to create an aura of total support for Lukashenka and to force people to vote in advance. But even with the named limited improvements the current campaign looks positively different from the previous ones.

### **Unique agenda**

Yet what really makes the current presidential campaign unique is the electoral agenda. For the first time in the history of Belarus the programmes of the contesting candidates have no explicit dividing line between them. Ironically, assessing the candidates' programmes, one can even talk about a sort

<sup>1</sup> Apart from a sheer demonstrative effect, registering many candidates is an effective move to minimize the chances of the opposition uniting behind a single candidate.

<sup>2</sup> Aliaksandr Lukashenka ignored both the opportunity to address the nation in the 30-minute format on TV and radio and the debates.

**Yet what really makes the current presidential campaign unique is the electoral agenda. For the first time in the history of Belarus the programmes of the contesting candidates have no explicit dividing line between them.**

of national consensus expressed by the political elites and counter elites. The content analysis of the programmes that have been published in the national and regional newspapers reveals an unexpected agreement between the incumbent president and his oppositional opponents on the issues of primary importance for the future of the country.

Only one issue (the relations with Russia) out of the top-10 in the programmes of the candidates is raised in Lukashenka's programme. Interestingly, all the candidates, including Lukashenka himself, make similar points on the rest of the issues of the list. The most obvious explanation for this unique consensus is that facing the aforementioned foreign policy and economic difficulties Lukashenka has nothing to do but accept many of the slogans and points traditionally expressed by the opposition. The fact that there are no big discrepancies between the programmes of the different opposition candidates

also suggests that the space for policy manoeuvring is rather limited.

It should be noted, however, that the presidential candidates have chosen to pursue different communication and positioning strategies: some focus on sheer criticism, others promote their programmes, still others emphasize a personal alternative to the incumbent president rather than their programmes. Therefore, most of the candidates do not even have comprehensive programmes, which makes their analysis and comparison problematic. Nonetheless, the "declarative consensus" observed in the candidates' programmes gives the current political campaign a unique flavour.

In the light of these facts far more interesting developments are expected after the elections. It remains to be seen whether and how this unique consensus on the level of electoral programmes will be rendered into systemic socio-economic and political shifts.

**Table. Top-10 thematic issues in the candidates' programmes**

No.	Subject	Number of candidates addressing the issue in their programmes
1	Foreign investments	10*
2	Taxes	10*
3	Economic modernization / liberalization	9*
4	Small and medium size enterprises	9*
5	Educational system	9*
6	Relations with Russia	8*
7	Agriculture	8*
8	Loans and credits (internal and external)	8*
9	Legal system	8*
10	Local governance	8*

\*Issues which are touched upon in Lukashenka's programme

*Source:* Study "Electoral messages and communication strategies" by the Discussion and Analytical Society *Liberal Club*

**This newsletter represents the independent analysis of the authors of the articles. The views expressed within are not necessarily those of the Eastern Europe Studies Centre, its partners and supporters, nor of the persons consulted in producing this publication.**