



Dzianis Melyantsou is a senior analyst at Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies, Minsk. In 2006, he obtained a Master's Degree at the Belarusian State University. Currently, Dzianis Melyantsou is working on his PhD dissertation on Belarus-NATO relations. His academic interests are Belarus' foreign policy, European and international security and International relations theory.

Siarhei Nikoliuk is an independent political analyst and sociologist. The author conducts analyses of the results of sociological surveys, carried out by independent sociological services. His studies are regularly published in the Belarusian media. The topics that Siarhei Nikoliuk covers are transformational processes of the Belarusian society and the government.

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PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2010: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED THIS TIME?

A couple months have passed since the presidential elections in Belarus. During this period, the regime has demonstrated its true face and its attitude towards the citizens' right to decide the fate of the country. After the initial days of trials, closings, searches and harsh suppressions, the situation has been gradually improving. Currently, we observe the phase of getting back to "normal". It is in this stage that we can sum up the outcomes and lessons learned.

The EU had a lot of lessons to learn. Some questions regarding its failed rapprochement policy and a new long term strategy towards Belarus are yet to be answered. However, one thing that the EU has learned is quite simple and straightforward: the regime is unwilling and, even more so, unable to incorporate elements of democracy. After the Lukashenka's liberalisation show has failed, the EU had only one option remaining: to demonstrate its discontent and to impose restrictive measures and sanctions. A thorough analysis regarding the (in) efficiency of sanctions, their logic and purpose is presented in the article *EU Reaction to Belarusian Election* by Dzianis Melyantsou. As the author points, the visa ban for government officials who do not travel to Europe will most probably have little

impact. The withdrawal of the EU as a geopolitical vector is, however, a far greater challenge for the regime and its balancing games with Russia.

Yet another set of lessons to be learned are outlined by Belarusian sociologists. Siarhei Nikoliuk, an independent political scientist and sociologist, emphasises some of them in his article *Waiting in Tense Anticipation*. According to him, social discontent has been dangerously high in the run-up to the election of December 2010. Only with the help of drastic measures, the government has reversed this trend. With decreasing political and economic resources, Lukashenka has less and less space to influence the potentially rebellious state of the society. Furthermore, as the results of the presidential elections in 2010 show, the social division of the Belarusian society is steadily increasing, as compared to the elections in 2001 and 2006. This evident process has even forced Lukashenka publicly admit that the groups of "majority" and "minority" exist within the Belarusian society. Whether the "minority" can become a serious threat to the regime and a catalyst for social change remains to be seen.

Justinas Pimpė, Editor

EU REACTION TO BELARUSIAN ELECTION

*Dzianis Melyantsou, senior analyst at the
Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies*

The reaction of the European Union to the current events in Belarus turned out to be a lot softer than expected by observers and members of the opposition. Despite the calls to apply economic sanctions and suspend all kinds of contacts with the official Minsk made during the EP hearings, the Council did not go beyond an entry ban for 158 Belarusian officials.

Resolution of the European Parliament – Back to Isolation?

The European Union viewed the presidential election in Belarus as a test of intentions of the official

Minsk regarding its relations with the EU and liberalization in the country. European politicians continuously stressed that the election campaign was to become a milestone marking off the next stage in the EU-Belarus relations. A lot would depend on the EU opinion about the election process and the government's actions during the election. The presidential election was to end a peculiar trial period that lasted since the summer of 2008.

The Belarusian leadership was very well aware of that. The country's administration did everything possible in their desire to win the recognition of the EU and the international community: they allowed for the most liberal election campaign during the last 16 years, stayed in contact with foreign journal-

On that stage of events the European politicians were aware of only one thing – Lukashenka broke the promises that he had given before the elections to Commissioner Fuele, ministers Sikorski and Westerwelle, and other EU representatives.

ists, provided unprecedented security measures for OSCE observers, and refrained from criticizing the West and the opposition. Very few observers and analysts had doubts regarding Brussels' positive response to the Belarusian election and further improvement of the bilateral relations.

Those expectations and the seeming predictability of the election results made the first EU reaction to the December 19 events in Minsk so strident. The contrast between the expectations and the reality was too high. On that stage of events the European politicians were aware of only one thing – Lukashenka broke the promises that he had given before the elections to Commissioner Fuele, ministers Sikorski and Westerwelle, and other EU representatives.

In January the representatives of the opposition forces, human rights defenders, and families of the arrested visited the European capitals and met with the top European politicians and EU officials. These meetings, along with the hearings on Belarus in the political groups and the extraordinary session in the European Parliament on January 12, predetermined the unprecedentedly tough resolution motions from the EP political groups.

For instance, the European People's Party proposed to freeze all micro-financial aid, to suspend Belarus' participation in the Eastern partnership, limit contacts with Belarus' administration to an absolute minimum, and even to freeze the accounts of Beltechexport and other companies that export weapons. The Liberals pointed out in their proposal for the resolution that "the previous European Union policy of 'rapprochement' with Belarus has failed", and called to consider introducing smart and targeted economic sanctions on Belarusian government owned companies until the unconditional liberation of all political prisoners, as well as to consider establishment of a pan-European Belarus Forum that would serve as a structure to promote democratic reform in Belarus. The European socialists also proposed to freeze all contacts with the Belarusian government, but to refrain from the economic sanctions.

Isolation of the Belarusian government (lowering the level of contacts to an absolute minimum) and suspending financial aid was the commonplace of the motions proposed by political groups. They also established a clear condition for lifting the sanctions – release of the political prisoners. In other words, the proposed counter-measures were not a response to violations of the election process, or to the brutal dispersal and beating of peaceful protesters; but a mere reaction to imprisonment of the presidential candidates and opposition activists.

However, having consulted with experts, the members of the European Parliament held the general debates and corrected their position, adopting a resolution which was significantly different from the motions of the parliament factions. The resolution includes the following proposals on the counter-measures regarding Belarus:

- to review EU policy towards Belarus including **consideration** of targeted economic sanctions and the freezing of all the macrofinancial aid provided via IMF loans as well as lending operations by the EIB and EBRD programmes;
- to immediately re-apply the **visa ban** on the Belarusian leading authorities expanding it to the state officials, members of judiciary and security officers (...) and to freeze their assets;
- to **consider the possibility** of suspending Belarusian participation in the Eastern Partnership activities no later than at the Eastern Partnership summit in Budapest **if it there is not an acceptable explanation** and considerable improvement of the situation in Belarus; this suspension not apply to NGOs and civil society;
- The European Parliament **expresses its opinion** that sport events, like the World Ice Hockey Championships in 2014, should not be held in Belarus while there are political prisoners in that country.

As appears from the above, the wording regarding economic sanctions, suspension of micro-financial aid, and boycott of sports events has become a lot softer (the resolution proposed only to consider the possibilities). Besides that, the final draft of the document is missing sections regarding the ban against contacts with the top state officials, freezing the Joint interim plan, sanctions against Beltechexport. At the same time, the EP left the demand of immediate and unconditional release of political prisoners, promising to lift personal sanctions in that case. The latter means, the European Parliament encourages the regime to trade political prisoners, presenting them as the main and only condition.

At the same time, just as it was assumed, the EP called to increase political and financial aid to NGOs, mass media, the European Humanities University and the repressed students, and to intensify work on the negotiations for visa facilitation, including affordable visa fees.

We can generally conclude, the Resolution adopted by the European Parliament, being harsh in word, does not really stipulate for serious counter-measures, which could lead to fast changes in the official Minsk policy and stop repressive practices. The lobbying potential of the Belarusian opposition forces in the European Parliament is quite high, but it works only at the beginning stage of drafting the documents (by providing initial information and lobbying in the EP political groups). The Belarusian opposition loses impact when experts and national governments enter the process.

EU Council Decides: 158 on Visa Ban List

On January 31, 2011 the Council of the EU foreign ministers made a decision on Belarus. It was even softer than the resolution adopted by the European Parliament. According to the Council's decision, the only counter-measure in response to the events in Minsk was repeated visa ban for Belarusian officials and expanding the ban to 158 persons.

So far, the policy of engagement has not yielded the desired outcome, but, as it needs time to prove its effectiveness, it is too early to talk about its failure. That means, the EU has no choice but to continue making attempts to cooperate with the Belarusian government.

Sergei Martynov, Belarus' foreign minister, was not included in the black list, as he was supposed to lead negotiations with the EU. According to the decision, Belarus stays in the Eastern partnership. The Council even underlines that the EU is interested in deepening of the bilateral relations. The level of contacts with the Belarusian officials will not be reduced. The financial aid will officially not be suspended, although that was most likely of all countermeasures (besides the entry ban). At the same time, the conditions for lifting the sanctions have been changed: the condition of the imprisoned opposition members' discharge was supplemented with a bit unclear and indistinct conditions regarding the reform of the election code, freedom of speech and mass media, assembly and association. In other words, the national governments of the EU member countries found it necessary to resist political prisoners trade and return to former conditionalities.

Why did the EU reaction, initially harsh (the first statements of the EU officials and member countries after the elections, the debates and the EP resolution) give place to such a soft decision of the Council? There are several reasons to be mentioned:

- Lack of unity in the positions regarding Belarus among the EU member countries, some of which supported strict sanctions against the regime (Poland, Germany, Sweden), some others were against any sanctions (Italy, Portugal), while the rest kept neutrality. As the Council makes decisions by consensus, a compromise was to be found, which turned out to be quite moderate.
- Today the European Union has only two approaches regarding Belarus – isolation and engagement. It has become absolutely evident that the first approach proved to be ineffective. So far, the policy of engagement has not yielded the desired outcome, but, as it needs time to prove its effectiveness, it is too early to talk about its failure. That means, the EU has no choice but to continue making attempts to cooperate with the Belarusian government.
- Belarus remains important for the European Union, both in the view of its geographical position and securing uninterrupted transit and geopolitical importance for building the "good-neighbor belt" of the states loyal to the EU. The latter anticipates maintaining independence of Belarus and resisting expansion of Russia's influence on this territory. That is why Lukashenka's attempts to appeal to integration with Russia if isolated by the West immediately resonate with Brussels and Washington.
- Business, economic (and even personal) ties of Belarus with some EU countries prove to be more important than the necessity to build democracy and market economy.
- Many European capitals have a concept of proportional counter-measures against the Belarusian government, which violates the rights of its

own citizens, but does not represent any threat to the neighboring countries and the international community. The EU Council also tried to avoid accusations of having double-standards: if the EU applies discriminatory measures to Belarus, why does it have an absolutely different approach to the Azerbaijan and Uzbek leaders?

Will Visa Ban Work?

At the end of the day, the question is quite rhetorical. Really, what impact can an entry ban make on the people who do not travel to the EU? Visa restrictions are not meant to correct the domestic policies of the Belarusian regime. First of all, they are meant to demonstrate the attitude of the European Union to the actions of the Belarusian authorities and to warn the international community about their inability to respect agreements. In its turn, this message can transform into something more significant for the official Minsk: suspicion of the potential investors, lower level of contacts with the key international actors, suspension of foreign aid, and image losses. Consequently, the indirect effects of visa restrictions are a lot more dangerous for the Belarusian authorities than the direct ones. However, is the threat of the potential losses strong enough to make Lukashenka come to terms with the EU and release the political prisoners?

Objectively, the Belarusian administration is not interested in confrontation with the European Union. That does not only deprive Belarus of the Western financial sources, but also creates a dangerous imbalance in relations with Russia. At this point, missing the Western vector in its foreign policy, the Belarusian government is forced to comply with all requirements of the Kremlin. The situation can't last for long; that is why the official Minsk is interested in returning to *status quo ante* as soon as possible, and normalizing the relations with Brussels. However, the current domestic environment does not allow for immediate release of all political prisoners and the end of repression against the political opponents, as such actions would be perceived as a weakness by its own ruling elite and the leadership of the neighboring countries. That is why this process is most likely to be stretched in time and be finished closer to the end of the year.

The third presidential election fell right on the middle of the “fat” five years. In 2009 the real income growth rate fell by three times, but that did not reflect on Lukashenka’s popularity numbers.

WAITING IN TENSE ANTICIPATION

Siarhei Nikoliuk, political scientist

According to IISEPS poll, held right after the fourth presidential election, Lukashenka received 51 % of votes of the people interviewed¹ (59% of those who voted). This way, the level of his electoral support decreased by 7 pct, in comparison with the third presidential election in 2006. As the structure of the Belarusian electorate remained stable during the two decades, such a decrease in electoral support must have its reasons. The election of 2006 fell on the peak of the Russian grants. In its turn, Russia’s generosity was the result of the favorable external conditions. The end of 2003 started a new cycle of increase in raw material prices. Petrodollars pouring into Russia generated the demand on the Belarusian goods. Besides that, Belarus managed to significantly enhance its budget due to the so-called

“oil offshore” (selling oil products made from the duty-free Russian oil to Europe).

Abundance of resources is illustrated in table 1. During five years (from 2004 to 2008) the real income of population demonstrated double digit growth in Belarus. The third presidential election fell right on the middle of the “fat” five years. In 2009 the real income growth rate fell by three times, but that did not reflect on Lukashenka’s popularity numbers. The difficult 2002-2003 did not repeat. Not least of all due to the vigorous propaganda campaign which explained the problems with income growth by the global crisis, and not the government’s policy. In December 2009, 70% of the Belarusians completely/partially agreed with the first opinion, while 52% – with the second opinion.

¹ According to CEC, Lukashenka received 79.7% of votes.

Table 1. Real monetary income of the population, percentage change versus previous year, and Lukashenka’s electoral rating.

Year	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
Real monetary income	114	128	104	104	110	118	118	113	113	104	115
Lukashenka’s rating*	36	41	30	29	39	47	55	46	41	41	45

* Year average

“Sacred Figure”

In fact, Lukashenka began his fourth presidential campaign on December 30, 2009, when at a meeting with the Belarusian central and regional mass media he “sacralized” salaries: “Regarding salaries, you know that we have an obligation: an average salary should reach 500 dollars during the year. This figure is sacred! It is approved by the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly. We must accomplish that!”¹

We should point out, during the crisis year of 2009, the real salary grew by 0.1% (pensions – by 0.2%), jeopardizing the schedule of increase of the Belarusians’ welfare, approved by the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly. In conditions of resource deficit, the rise from 381 to 500 dollars during the last year of the five-year plan was accomplished thanks to the final spurt, when the government increased the first-class rate by 31%, and the minimal wage – by 55%.

The strenuous exertion, with which the government tried to meet its social commitments, did not go unnoticed by the population. The National Bank registered growing anxiety in the society since the second half of 2010. Traditionally, Belarusians tend to sell more foreign currency as opposed to buying it. However, by late fall they changed their prefer-

ences. By the end of the year, the net purchase of foreign currency by natural persons was 1.5 billion dollars. This is a huge amount for Belarus.

Social indexes are a good way to measure changes of the public mood. IISEPS polls let us monitor the dynamics of three basic indexes during 18 years. Indexes are the difference between positive and negative opinions when answering three standard questions: “How did your material situation change during the last three months?” (financial situation index), “In your opinion, how will the socio-economic situation change in Belarus within the next few years?” (expectation index), and “On the whole, does the situation in Belarus go in the right or the wrong direction?” (right direction/wrong track index).

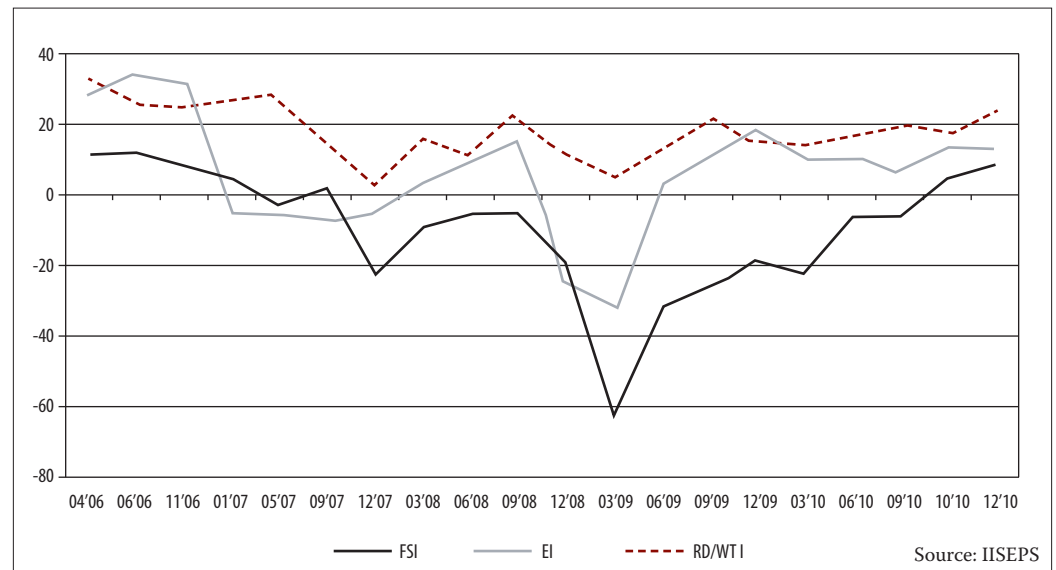
In the early nineties all three indexes were steadily below the -60 mark, which was the evidence of the system crisis and the collapse of the state system. The electoral revolution is not a surprise in such circumstances, which resulted in the victory of the candidate who opposed the communist nomenclature.

The graph lets us evaluate the dynamics of social indexes on the time scale between the third (March 2006) and the fourth (December 2010) presidential election.

¹ pda.sb.by/post/95352/

In his traditional speech Lukashenka for the first time addressed not the “united Belarusian family”, but the “majority”.

Dynamics of Financial Situation Index (FSI), Expectations Index (EI), and Right Direction/Wrong Track Index (RD/WT I)



First of all, we should draw your attention to the fact that the Right direction/wrong track index has never become negative, i.e. the number of Belarusians who approve of the state policy has always been higher than the number of those who disapprove it. Even in March 2009, when the wave of the financial crisis hit the country, the RD/WT index remained positive.

In the fall of 2008 the people began to realize, despite Lukashenka's assurances, Belarus was too far from being the “island of stability”. The expectations index was the first to slump, as, in perfect coincidence with the proverb “the eyes of fear see danger everywhere”, it is the most “fearful”. However, during the first quarter of 2009 the expectation index decreased at a significantly slower rate, indicating a possible turning point in the moods of the Belarusian society. It was a turning point, indeed. Having reached the bottom in March, the social indexes began to grow. It is not just the ability of the Belarusians to adapt to unfavorable conditions that explains the change of trend. It is the state policy, which focused on not letting the level of population support drop in the beginning of the new election cycle. The financial result of that policy was the increase of the gross external debt by 6.9 billion dollars, or 45.4% during 2009. As of January 1, 2010 it was 22.3 billion dollars, which is more than 2.3 thousand dollars per capita (1.6 thousand dollars in the beginning of 2009).

When the Belarusian government began the fight for the “sacred figure” during the last year of the third five-year period, the financial situation index had a negative value. However, by the end of the year they managed to reach the goal they had set. However, the social indexes did not reach the level of 2006, which resulted in the decrease of Lukashenka's electoral support by 7 pct, as compared with 2006.

Society Split

The Belarusian society is divided. This fact is not a secret for the pollsters from the beginning of the nineties. As for the authorities, they were forced to recognize the society split only after the protest on the Independence Square on December 19. During the press-conference the next day Lukashenka claimed: “Let us be honest: 20% either opposed, or voted for alternative candidates. That's something to think about. I will think about that first of all, but will not forget about my supporters, the people, who supported me”².

The split was unexpectedly mentioned during the New Year night. In his traditional speech Lukashenka for the first time addressed not the “united Belarusian family”, but the “majority”, thanks to which he got a “unique possibility to enter the homes of the Belarusians, your families with greetings and wishes of peace and well-being, during these exciting history moments”, and the “minority”³.

We should point out, in his remarks about the result of the 2006 election campaign, Lukashenka did not leave the space for the “minority”. Putting the CEC chairperson on the spot, he repeatedly confessed in falsification of the election results. In particular, in August 2008, in the interview to M. Gusman, first deputy of director-general of ITAR-TASS news agency, Lukashenka said the following: “For your information, during the last election I got 93%. And I later confessed, when they simply began to press on me, that we falsified the election. And I said boldly – yes, we did falsify it. I ordered that they don't give me 93%, but somewhere around 80, I don't remember exactly. Numbers above 90 are psychologically hard to apprehend. But that was the truth”⁴.

2 www.president.gov.by/press104953.html

3 [www.president.gov.by/search.html?...9...](http://www.president.gov.by/search.html?...)

4 www.izvestia.ru/Политика/article3132313

The main body of Lukashenka supporters is represented by peripheral social groups (public sector workers, people with low level of education, pensioners, and rural residents), i.e. people who cannot survive without state aid in the modern circumstances.

If we count the social indexes separately for Lukashenka's supporters and Lukashenka's opponents (see table 2), we might have an impression that these groups live in different countries. At least, both groups have their own perception of Belarus, their own ideas of its future, and their own opinion about the direction it is going.

It is most surprising that the political preferences of the Belarusians impact the perception of their own financial situation. In December, 38% of respondents who trust Lukashenka stated the improvement of their financial situation during the last three months. There were only 8% of such lucky fellows among those who do not trust the state leader.

Table 2. Social indexes, depending on the attitude to Lukashenka. (December 2010)

	FSI	EI	RD/WT I
All respondents	9	13	22
Those who trust Lukashenka (55%)	30	45	72
Those who do not trust Lukashenka (34%)	-28	-26	-52

The split of the Belarusian society is not the pollsters' invention. It is registered on the level of institutions. There are two writers' unions (one, loyal to the administration, and one in the opposition), two trade union federations, and, as a result of division of mass media into state-owned and independent – two journalists' unions. Accordingly, we have two parallel societies – the society of TV viewers and the society of Internet (In December 2010, 51%

of adults in the country use Internet with various degree of regularity).

Obviously, each group of the society has its own opinion about the voting results. It's no small wonder that positive and negative answers on the question in table 3 practically coincide with the results of the voting, while the difference in positive answers of the first and the second columns is the 7 pct we have spoken about.

Table 3. Dynamics and breakdown of answers on the question "In your opinion, was the presidential election in Belarus free and fair?", %

Answer	04'06	12'10	Those who trust Lukashenka	Those who do not trust Lukashenka
Yes	61.2	54.4	82.8	11.6
No	27.2	32.3	8.2	73.6
DK/NA	11.6	13.3	7.8	14.5

Despite the fact that the split in the society is evident in the example of the Belarusians' attitude to Lukashenka, in this case the head of the state is only an indicator, but not the reason of the split. The main body of Lukashenka supporters is represented by peripheral social groups (public sector workers, people with low level of education, pensioners, and rural residents), i.e. the people who cannot survive without the aid from the state in the modern circumstances. As the number of such people practically does not change within the "Belarusian economic model", the structure of the Belarusian electorate remains stable.

Old people do not live forever, but senility does. New pensioners replace those who died. In December 2010, among Lukashenka's supporters there were quite a few people who voted for Pazniak or Shushkevich 16 years ago.

Stable structure of the electorate is manifested by the fact that the level of support of the opposition candidates depends neither on the personality, nor on the number of the candidates. Redundancy of opposition candidates in 2010 led to only temporary difficulties for potential opponents of Lukashenka. In 2001, 67% of respondents made the decision to come to the polls long before the voting, in 2006 they made up 68%, while in 2010 – only 48%. However, it is quite interesting, that the indecision had almost no influence on the turn-out (2001 – 87%, 2006 – 92%, and 2010 – 88%). Similar temporary confusion was registered in the answer to the question: "When did you make the final decision, who of the candidates would you vote for?". The percentage of those who decided long before the voting was the following: 54% in 2001, 60% in 2006, and 40% in 2010!

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TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEXT ISSUE OF "BELL", PLEASE CONTACT:

Justinas Pimpe
Phone: +370 5 2705993
Fax: +370 5 2736953
E-mail: justinas.pimpe@eesc.lt
EASTERN EUROPE STUDIES CENTRE