



FLOATING ON THE POWER RAFT

February has been a month rich in political events in Belarus. As economic crisis deepens regime in Belarus searches for the ways to secure the country and the ruling elite's positions from turmoil. Thus balancing between EU and Russia continues: high level meetings with EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy J. Solana and Latvian Prime Minister I. Godmanis were on A. Lukashenka's agenda together with the meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State and an extraordinary session of the Collective Security Council of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The latter meetings and their results will be analyzed in detail in the current issue.

The economic downfall requires not only a more balanced foreign policy but also calculated steps inside the country to avoid public discontent and unrest that could be used by the opposition. The

creation of three public advisory structures under the President Administration and invitation of representatives of Belarusian opposition to work in them is the adaptation of the regime to the new economic and social circumstances. The opposition's response and its limited capacity to use the changing environment to its advantage are analyzed in the article below.

It is usually considered that economic instability is a threat to democracy. However, the current unprecedented economic downturn can soon help us answer the question whether economic recession can be a threat to undemocratic rule. But while European Union is seeking to facilitate such a political reversal, regime in Belarus finds new ways to float on the power raft.

Julija Narkeviciute, *Editor*

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN BELARUS AND ITS POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Usov Pavel, *New Europe*

The economic crisis has shattered the foundations of the Belarusian economic system, which for several years was considered to be one of the most stable among the countries of the former USSR, and surprised political opponents in the West. In crisis conditions the Belarusian economic model turned out to be inefficient, bureaucratized and too inflexible to make prompt and effective decisions.

Unlike the economic model, the political system appeared to be more stable and flexible. The Belarusian regime has demonstrated that it is capable of making unexpected decisions aimed at preventing undesirable consequences of the economic crisis in the political and social space of Belarus.

Within the first month of 2009 Belarusian authorities created three socio-political structures and invited representatives of Belarusian opposition to work in them.

We hereby refer to Yaroslav Romanchuk (Director of Independent Economic Center *Strategiya*) and Andrey Vardomatsky (Director of Independent Center of Social Research *Novak*), who were invited to the Interdepartmental Commission for Country Marketing Developments; Zhanna Litvina (Chairwoman of the public organization *Belarusian Association of Journalists*) and Iosif Seredich (Editor

of the independent newspaper *Narodnaya Volia*), who were invited to the Mass Media Coordination Center; and representatives of oppositional political parties with A. Milinkevich (leader of the movement *Za Svabodu*) among them, who were invited to the Public Council under Administration of President of Belarus.

Such an apparently friendly step of the authorities towards the opposition has received different assessments among the Belarusian democratic community. A number of political actors, primarily representatives of the UDF (United Democratic Forces) and the movement *Za Svabodu* see it as the beginning of a dialogue between the authorities and the opposition and the victory of the "democratic forces". The other part of the opposition, including some of Belarusian analysts, regards these actions as a crafty game of those in power, which may turn into a "trap for the opposition"¹.

Before moving on to the analysis of this situation and its possible consequences for the opposition, one should mention that the latter, as usual, was absolutely unprepared for this turn of events. The offer of the authorities was a sensation which

1 Yuriy Chausov: „The Council” under Lukashenka's administration may become a trap for the opposition”- <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2009/1/30/14564/>.

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All previous calls for dialogue to the authorities on behalf of the leaders of the opposition did not come as a result of a thought-out strategy, but were only a part of a PR company for the oppositional leadership and its dialogue with the West.

humbled and took the Belarusian opposition by surprise. As usual, a series of serious questions came up: "What's to be done? To collaborate or not? What does it mean?" What this means is the following: if these questions are posed as late as now, then the political opposition is not ready for this collaboration. It has neither a package of proposals, nor a list of requirements, nor a strategy for action under the new circumstances, nor at least a vague understanding of what may happen in the nearest future. All previous calls for dialogue to the authorities on behalf of the leaders of the opposition did not come as a result of a thought-out strategy. Since the opposition was confident that the authorities would not respond, these calls were only used as part of a PR company for the oppositional leadership and its dialogue with the West. In today's game led by the political regime, the opposition is not an active participant either, but an object which, beyond all doubt, will be used by the authorities for their own gain. The Belarusian political regime has once again demonstrated its skill at adapting to the complex and unorthodox situations while using its enemies.

Undoubtedly, the economic crisis as well as devaluation of the rouble has had an impact on the trust of the population to the authorities and its support for A. Lukashenka. This has led to an increased, yet concealed, dissatisfaction within the Belarusian society. Even though 72 % of the population do not intend to take part in any street protest actions based on the economic issue (according to the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies, IISEPS²), the country's leadership has decided to secure itself from both the discontent of the population and possible activation of the opposition.

Given the crisis and growth of discontent, the support for the opposition automatically receives a new stimulus, which means that within the nearest future its influence on the society could extend while political structures could gain strength and, through massive mobilization of the population, get an opportunity to exert pressure on the authorities. Naturally, overall weakness, disorganization and factionism of the opposition bring into question its organizational skills and readiness to head any protests whatsoever. Nevertheless, should overall socio-economic situation deteriorate and legitimacy of the regime fall, one could witness a totally unpredictable revolutionary situation arise, which is easier prevented than controlled and quenched later on.

A natural and logical move of the Belarusian authorities undoubtedly should have been the intensification of repressions among the democratic community and the opposition in order to prevent radicalization of the situation. However, given the improvement in the relations with the West and the need for economic and political collaboration with the EU, this would lead to yet another conflict,

the consequences of which for the regime could be lamentable. The only way out is to follow the principle: what cannot be destroyed has to be employed. In this case it is the opposition that becomes an object to be used and this eventually will bring the authorities more dividends than to the opposition itself. Moreover, the leadership of the country is absolutely confident that, in any of its states, the opposition poses no threat to the regime.

For the Belarusian regime the positive outcomes of the policy of the opposition's inclusion into "structures" within the authorities are obvious, just as the threats this collaboration would pose to the opposition.

First, the regime plays for time in order to cope with the crisis situation and its consequences and thus to retain control over the political and social processes, which the opposition could use to its advantage.



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Second, a positive image of the regime is being created abroad and psychological climate for investment improved in order to attract Western capital.

Moreover, actions taken by the Belarusian authorities may also be viewed as the following political message to Russia: if you keep on putting pressure, the opposition will come to power and you will lose your last ally. However, in this situation it is hard to predict what Russia's reaction will be, as it may be just the opposite to what the Belarusian authorities expect.

In addition, the regime legitimizes itself in the eyes of the society, primarily its democratically minded

² IISEPS, National Poll in December 2008, <http://www.iiseps.org/opros53.html>.

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part. The essence of the steps taken and the political message sent by the authorities may be summed up as follows: even the opposition works for us, therefore everything we do is correct and protests do not have any sense.

Such message may decrease possible radical moods both among the population and the opposition. By joining the commissions the opposition, in a certain sense, loses the possibility to criticize the authorities.

In turn, this may lead to the delegitimization of the opposition in the eyes of the critically disposed population. Participation in the oppositional movement loses any sense, as the opposition, which used to call for the subversion of the regime, is now ready to collaborate with it. One may expect aggravation of internal conflicts and disillusionment with the opposition among its supporters.

Last but not least, the government's policy of inclusion may lead to the weakening and split of the oppositional structures into those ready to collaborate and those against such collaboration. Besides, there will also be a conflict between those who have been invited and those who have been "forgotten". Naturally, the latter are to be found among vehement opponents of the regime (for instance, had Stanislav Shushkevich been invited to the council, he might not have responded so

the society, they are mistaken. First of all, the problem lies in the fact that the activities of commissions and councils "created" by the authorities are closed while the information about their existence is virtually unavailable in the public space, let alone the personalities involved. Moreover, the very fact of the existence of such "councils" and commissions does not mean anything except populist and propaganda goals.

In addition, formation of commissions and councils is the initiative of the authorities rather than the result of the pressure from the opposition, whose representatives have also been invited at the pleasure of the authorities. This again underscores the fact that the authorities hold management of all political processes in their hands, while the opposition does not have any influence on them. Should the need arise, the authorities can just as quickly close these projects once they become unprofitable. If so, the opposition will be able neither to stay in these projects, nor to preserve them. Besides, the existence of commissions and councils does not change the way the regime presents itself, nor does it affect the authoritarian mechanisms and methods of the way it functions. It may happen that the authorities will carry on exerting pressure on the more active representatives of the radical opposition, which primarily refers to the youth and which is happening at the present time. This is why the "victory" celebrated by many of the representatives of the opposition may be referred to as "illusionary". Moreover, given ongoing repressions and pressure on the oppositionists, collaboration with the authorities seems ambiguous, to say the least. Such actions undertaken by one part of the opposition legitimize repressions against the other part.

The only thing that can be said in defence of the Belarusian opposition is that the predicament in which it finds itself now turns negative the outcome of any choice it might make. The reason for that is not so much in the weakness of the opposition, but rather in the absence of consolidation and inability to make decisions which would be unanimous for all democratic movement. Undoubtedly, had the oppositionists rejected the invitation to take part in the projects undertaken by the authorities, they would have enabled the Belarusian state propaganda to proclaim that the opposition did not wish to use the opportunities given by the state in solving specific tasks for the benefit of the population. The opposition might not present itself any better to either the Belarusian community or the West. However, it is not the propaganda is threatening, but the fact that factionism and lack of coordination in the opposition can always lead to some part of the opposition movement eventually joining the authorities. Meanwhile joint and consolidated position of the entire democratic community in the issue of "working with the authorities" could have placed the political regime in a predicament and make it collaborate with the opposition on the opposition's terms rather than its own.



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harshly to the possible invitation of A. Lukashenka to the EU Summit in Prague).

Thus the authorities receive additional resources which enable it to maneuver in a complex situation, while oppositionists who agree to collaborate will be greatly restricted in their moves. Besides, all of them will be discredited should such collaboration suddenly come to a halt in the foreseeable future (which is likely).

If some of the representatives of the opposition expect that their collaboration with the authorities will provide them with an opportunity to influence

MINSK'S DOUBTFUL MILITARY BARGAINS WITH MOSCOW: TODAY'S ANTI-CRISIS "REMEDIES" AS TOMORROW'S PROBLEMS

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On February 3-4th 2009 the meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State of Belarus and Russia (thereinafter – Supreme State Council) and an extraordinary session of the Collective Security Council of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (thereinafter - CSTO) took place in Moscow.

The Supreme State Council approved the budget of the Union State for the year 2009. An Agreement of the Joint Protection of the External Borders of the Union State in the Airspace and the Creation of the Single Regional Air Defence System of Belarus and Russia (thereinafter – Single Air Defence System) was signed together with the resolutions on the promotion of cooperation in the military field, on the programme of the coordinated actions in foreign policy for the year 2008-2009 as well as on the measures to overcome the impact of the global financial crisis and other documents.

Supposedly the creation of a Single Air Defence System will enhance the radar control of the air space above the western border of the Union State with the Baltic States and Ukraine. In the framework of the given system Belarus should become the first echelon of the single airspace defence of the CIS countries.

The following documents have been approved at the session of Collective Security Council of the CSTO: the budget of the organization for the year 2009 and the Agreement on the Creation of Collective Forces of Immediate Reaction of CSTO (thereinafter – Collective Forces).

Russia is prepared to complete the above mentioned forces with its two mobile formations (around 8 500 soldiers and officers). The second contingent in terms of numbers is represented by Kazakhstan. The rest of the states will assign a battalion each. All units will be on permanent standby and each of them is already a constituent part of the national immediate reaction units. Units of the Ministries of Emergency Situations and task-force of the Ministries of the Interior of the members states have to be included into the Collective Forces. The general number of the forces may amount to 20 000. It is expected that contingents of the Collective Forces will be stationed in their habitual places of dislocation. In peacetime they will be subordinated to national headquarters and in the situation of crisis

they will get into the strategic subordination of the CSTO headquarters¹.

The decisions of the Union State and of the Collective Security Treaty Organization are extremely important for the State of Belarus and may become a landmark for its further development. Let's analyze the decisions in detail.

Framework documents lacking content and agreement

In both cases the political "casing" turned out to be more important than the content. Outwardly, the Union State and CSTO managed to demonstrate its necessity and the ability to take serious decisions. Making use of the financial-economic levers, Russia secured the support for its military-political course in Eurasia and beyond it on the part of its allies in the block.

Nevertheless, the fact that attracts attention is that agreements on Single Air Defence System as well as on Collective Forces are only frameworks, they are not fully explicated and reflect controversies and differences in approaches of the parties.

The agreement on Single Air Defence System only provides that it is being drafted to solve the problem of air defence in the region and is a constituent part of the single air defence system of CIS states. Within the framework of the implementation of the given agreement the parties will later define the list of the bodies of military command, command posts, amalgamations, formations and military units that have to make up the Single Air Defence System of Belarus and Russia. A draft protocol of the agreement has to be drawn and submitted to the heads of the states in the nearest future². Only after this phase is accomplished, the implementation of the agreement will be commenced³.

Russian-Belarusian agreement on Single Air Defence System has to "simplify the procedure of making decisions for the commanders". It sanctions the crossing of the Russian-Belarusian border by the military pilots without any special political agreements. On the intrusion of an offender into the airspace of the Union State or under any *force majeure* event the order of the commander-in-chief of the Regional Grouping of the Armed Forces given for the prompt flight will suffice. Territorially, the headquarters of the Single Air Defence System are planned to be dislocated in Russia at the Central

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1 05.02.2009. www.rg.ru.

2 05.02.2009. www.belta.by/.

3 06.02.2009. www.belta.by/.

Belarusian diplomatic corps and public mass media tried to do their best to mitigate the acuteness of the problems called forth by the signing of the agreements on Single Air Defence System and Collective Forces.

Command Point of the Air Force, the auxiliary unit – in Belarus⁴.

“The stumbling block” for the creation of a single regional Russian-Belarusian Air Defence System (ADS) for the last ten years is the problem of a single command, to be more exact, - unwelcome for the Belarusian leadership the loss of the control over the Belarusian segment of ADS on behalf of the Russian generals.

According to the assessment of the head of the Belarusian department of the CIS states Alexander Fadejev (Moscow) this time the negotiations were quite difficult. Minsk insisted on the supply of the modern systems of air defence on easy terms, including C-400, and on other agreement conditions, made attempts to “maintain equal distance” from the East and the West⁵.

As it is known, “the devil is in the details”, and the forthcoming co-ordination of the itemizing documents will show whether the new framework document will remain basically a fixation of the de-facto existing mechanisms of the exchange of information and joint operational vigil or the co-ordination will start to turn into the incorporation of the part of the Belarusian military organization into that of Russia.

To be or not to be?

Preparation, signing and, most importantly, the possible options of the forthcoming “filling” and implementation of the agreement on the creation of Collective Forces brought forth even more questions.

Commenting the results of the meeting of CSTO, the official representative of the MFA of Russia announced that discussions on the creation of Collective Forces “will continue in the CSTO”⁶.

Special stand was taken by Uzbekistan, which, with the exception of military units, will not include into the Collective Forces on a standing basis its forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Emergency Situations, military formations of the Drug Control Service and the Service for Combating Illegal Migration. Instead, it will delegate them only to prevent emergencies and for separate operations under the heading “terrorism”, drug threat” etc.⁷

Already on February 4th, on the day when the agreement was signed, an unnamed representative of the delegation who accompanied the Belarusian President to the summit of CSTO stated that “by and large, the Belarusian party supported the creation of Collective Forces”, although “the given initiative needed thorough examination, including the necessity to take into account the international experience”⁸ According to the representative of the Belarusian delegation, the use of the armed forces

of Belarus outside the country is regulated by the existing national legislation and participation of Belarus in Collective Forces can not presuppose the service of Belarusian servicemen outside the country’s borders and their participation in any military conflicts. Military formations and units, which would participate in the Collective Forces, will be under the jurisdiction of the national legislation and may not be taken out from the composition of the Armed Forces or any other structures of power as separate components. They “will be discharging their tasks within the composition of the regional Belarusian-Russian grouping of the armed forces in the westward direction”⁹.

On the next day, making a comment related to the agreement on the creation of Collective Forces, the press-secretary of the MFA of Belarus Andrej Popov stated that “actual participation” of Belarus within the framework of the given structure will be provided as earlier by the forces of the joint Belarusian-Russian grouping in the western zone of the responsibility of CSTO and that there “was absolutely nothing new about that”. Participation of Belarusian servicemen in the “hot points” is prohibited by the Belarusian legislation: “this never happened and will never happen”¹⁰. In the interview for the programme “Week Panorama” on March 8th the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the RB Sergej Martinov confirmed the invariability of the given stand¹¹.

At the same time Russia proceeds from the necessity of making respective amendments in the legislation on the part of the participating states so as to provide the realistic possibility to bring the Collective Forces into being.

On the eve of the summit of CSTO on January 26th, during the discussions over the concept of the Collective Forces with the President of the RF D. Medvedev the Secretary General of the given organization Nikolaj Bordiuzha informed that one of the underlying problems is the “necessity of legal amendments on the level of national legislation, which would allow to make use of the given forces in emergency cases by the decision of the Collective Security Council”¹².

Business as usual?

Belarusian diplomatic corps and public mass media tried to do their best to mitigate the acuteness of the problems called forth by the signing of the agreements on Single Air Defence System and Collective Forces. First and foremost, the issue of the conformity of the given agreements with the provisions of the Constitution (Article 18 of the Constitution of the RB) was deliberately not given attention. The general keynote of the statements made by the MFA of the RB was that nothing extraordinary was happening and everything is left

4 05.02.2009. <http://www.rg.ru/>.

5 03.02.2009. www.materik.ru/.

6 04.02.2009. www.belta.by/.

7 04.02.2009. www.rian.ru/.

8 04.02.2009. www.belta.by/.

9 04.02.2009. <http://telegraf.by/>.

10 05.02.2009. www.mfa.gov.by/.

11 09.02.2009. www.mfa.gov.by/.

12 09.02.2009. www.mfa.gov.by/.

A realistic attachment of Minsk to the Russian military schemes threatens to turn into a further risky strengthening of universal dependence of Belarus on its eastern neighbour.

as it used to be without any significant changes. Nevertheless, a logical question arises – why were the agreements necessary at all?

It is noteworthy that on the part of Belarus (as distinct from Russia) the traditional anti-NATO and anti-American propaganda was absent during the given meetings. As is usually said, everything related to the threat of NATO and ADS of the USA was already said in 2008 and the preceding years. Could it be, that in the process of the improving dialogue with Brussels, Minsk managed to glean an “appalling military secret” related to the fact that 21 member states of the European Union at the same time are participants of NATO?

Whatever that may be, the given fact could be interpreted in different ways: as unwillingness to harm the dialogue with the EU, as a clear-cut ambiguity (“dialogue is dialogue, but there are things that are more important than peace”) and, finally, as an unarticulated sign that, in fact, there’s no threat.

What will happen?

It is possible that Moscow, having a rich experience of coping with Minsk will, continue a

pragmatic and far from altruistic line of relations with Belarus. This means applying the so-called “related assistance” and provision of credits, whereby the supplied funds return to the budget of Russia by means of payments for the military techniques and property, energy carriers, etc. purchased on easy terms. Thus agreements in the military sphere concluded by the Belarusian President in Moscow in early February may have a doubtless “commercial” value for Belarus in terms of provision of further financial support, modern armament, military-technical property, etc. from Russia on preferential terms.

The military-strategic value of those agreements, however, is quite provisory. In much the same way as NATO fails to pose threat to Belarus, the single regional system is not capable of “preventing” further enlargement of the alliance or “deterring” the deployment of Air Defence System in Europe.

At the same time, a realistic attachment of Minsk to the Russian military schemes threatens to turn into a further risky strengthening of universal dependence of Belarus on its eastern neighbour, dangerous growth of the external debt and serious harm to the dialogue that commenced with the West.



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