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## SITUATION IN BELARUS REMAINS "STABLE"

Lukashenka has always positioned himself as a guarantor of stability and social security. Ironically, steadily raising prices, deficit of commodities and tail-spin inflation are among the things that are "stably" present in today's Belarus. Reacting to numerous attempts by the President to assure that the situation is firmly under control, the Belarusian bloggers joke that there is no need to worry about the exchange rate of the ruble: it is safely fixed against the dollar. The problem is that in Belarus the latter is fixed against the number of the current month. In order to cope with the economic turmoil, the officials will have to implement socially painful economic and political reforms.

Such a task is even more complicated to achieve in the light of the growing social discontent, which has already burst out as a series of "silent protests" and "stop petrol" actions. In the first article of the *Bell*, Andrej Dynko, Editor of *Nasha Niva*, studies the potential, scale and impact of these actions. The author also raises the question of who stands behind the "silent protests, as well as behind the informal movement that inspired them: "Revolution through social networks". Judging by the lists of the persons detained during the protests, a large number participants have not taken part in

oppositional activities before. This suggests that should political and economic situation further deteriorate, more and more people might come out to the streets.

In the second article, Yuri Chausau, Lawyer and Political Scientist, analyses the prospects of introducing proportional electoral system during the next parliamentary elections in Belarus. The rhetoric and the moves the current political elite clearly indicate that elements of proportional representation will be introduced indeed. Contrary to a common believe, such a change might have negative outcomes for the oppositional parties. This is because such a system would diminish the importance of the electoral campaign, which is one of the main strengths of the opposition, namely direct contacts with the electorate in any given district. Furthermore, the democratic or non-democratic nature of the elections is not a subject to the representation system. Nevertheless, Lukashenka will certainly try to present such an "improvement" as yet another step towards democratisation of the country.

*Justinas Pimpė,  
Editor*

## ALL THE GREAT THINGS ARE SIMPLE: SUMMER 2011 SILENT PROTESTS

*Andrej Dynko,  
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The first gatherings in squares remained unnoticed by the media. Calls to participate spread exclusively in social networks and as few as several dozens participants showed up. The newspaper "Brestskaya gazeta" was the first media to respond to the actions: it coined a derisive term "the microscale protest action".

**Nickname: Revolution**

"First meetings may gather few people, but day by day our numbers will grow", the organizers of the

community believed<sup>1</sup>. They ambitiously referred to their initiative as "Revolution through social network". Their avatar is a clinched fist and their slogan is "Help your neighbour overcome his fear". It is hard to calculate the number of participants of this movement. At the present time the community comprises over 11,000 participants, but its older versions were blocked by special services. As a result, some activists discontinued participation in the community while others left as instances of KGB pressure became more frequent.

<sup>1</sup> Movement in V Kontakte: Revolution through social networks. Available at: <<http://Vkontakte.ru/event27324643>>

Importantly, experienced leaders of local oppositional groups saw that they were readily followed by people they knew absolutely nothing about.

### Why *Vkontakte*?

*Vkontakte* (Vkontakte.ru, vk.com) (Eng “in touch”) is by far the most popular social network in Belarus. According to modest estimates, the network has around 2,700,000 registered Belarusian users. This is why this platform, rather than *Facebook*, was selected for the protest initiative. An estimated 65 per cent of Belarusians using social networks have favoured *Vkontakte*, according to Internet researcher Alexey Liavonchyk. By comparison, the social networks *Odnoklassniki* (Eng “Classmates”) and *Facebook* have around 25 per cent and 13 per cent of Belarusian users respectively. It should also be noted in this respect that, as a rule, those, who have links with the West prefer *Facebook*. As the movement *Vkontakte* gained momentum, various initiatives in support of or aimed at development of street marches started to appear both in *Facebook*<sup>2</sup> and in Twitter.

### Stop-petrol was first

Alexander Lukashenka accused the opposition of contriving the “Revolution through social networks.” To discredit the actions, he referred to them negatively as “the mooing and clapping” (“Who is mooing and clapping out there? 16- or 17-year-olds, with a cigarette in their teeth and a girl under their arms, like a log”). However, Lukashenka spoke disparagingly of the demonstrators in an attempt to weaken their popular movement. Revolution through social networks was invented neither by ex-candidates running for presidency, nor NGO leaders. It was the success of the Stop-petrol action which took place on June 7 that served as an impetus to the unfolding of the protests.

Several hundreds of automobile drivers blocked spectacularly the central avenue of Minsk. Moreover, they were heartily welcomed by people in the streets. The following day Lukashenka ordered to lower petrol prices by 15-20 per cent (after they had grown by 30-35 per cent the day before<sup>3</sup>). It is noteworthy that during a press-conference on June 17, Lukashenka pretended not to have noticed the Stop-petrol action, apparently so as not to incite similar protests. Nevertheless, a few seconds later he warned internal affairs minister Kuleshov that the latter might be demoted should the Stop-petrol action take place again. As a result, during the next Stop-petrol action militia troops merely blocked the central avenue themselves.

It was the spontaneous Stop-petrol action that has demonstrated to the society and young activists who spent their leisure time in social networks that 1) there are many people ready to participate in protest actions; 2) the society lends its enthusiastic support to the bravehearts, and 3) protest actions are capable of gaining concessions out of the authorities.

2 Facebook group National Indefinite Strike. Available at: <<http://www.Facebook.com/event.php?eid=231576830200698>>

3 Interfax, Лукашенко распорядился с завтрашнего утра снизить цены на топливо, 2011-06-08.

Available at: <<http://www.interfax.by/news/belarus/93860>>

### Who stands behind these actions?

90 per cent of participants detained in Minsk have not been arrested before and have never appeared as opposition activists<sup>4</sup>. The remaining 10 per cent of the arrested were activists of movements and parties as well as relatives of political prisoners. It seems, however, that opposition activists constituted a larger part of the participants. The “experienced” demonstrators were more alert to the danger and evaded detention whereas special service agents arrested the novices more often. In this respect, Lukashenka spoke the truth: it was the opposition, but in a certain sense, it was a new opposition.

At the regional level, activists of the traditional opposition constituted a larger part in the total number of participants. Importantly, experienced leaders of local oppositional groups saw that they were readily followed by people they knew absolutely nothing about.

### Geography and scale of protests

It is the unusually broad geographical coverage that was a major outcome of a simple formula of protests and mobilization through the Internet. Protest actions took place across entire Belarus. The list of cities generally matches epicentres of the organized opposition. More specifically, one might notice that the number of cities involved is slightly bigger in Western Belarus and around Minsk. Meanwhile the scale of the protests was rather limited. Over the entire protest period only about 15 thousand people came out to the streets across Belarus.

In the capital alone, over a thousand people came out to the streets at a time (with the largest number of participants on June 22).

In Brest, Gomel, (with the peak on June 22), Grodno and Mogilev (with peaks on June 29 and July 6 respectively), the number of protesters in the streets ranged from 500 to 1000 or slightly more (listed hereinafter in descending order).

From 100 to 300 people gathered in squares in Molodechno, Baranovichi, Vitebsk, Lida, Pinsk, Novopolotsk, Polotsk, Bobruisk. Several dozens or at least several people assembled in other towns. According to the data available, 51 towns and cities were involved in the recent protest actions<sup>5</sup>.

### Repressions were effective

During the first weeks, special services confined their actions to preventive discussions with young men they suspected to be ringleaders<sup>6</sup>. It also appeared that special agents were not only following the discus-

4 Data of Viasna, Human rights defense centre. Available at: <<http://spring96.org/persecution/?Name=&DateFrom=2011-01-01&DateTo=2011-12-31&JDateFrom=&JDateTo=&ArticleID=&Judge=&Town=&Court=&ArrestFrom=&ArrestTo=&FineFrom=&FineTo=&iDecription=&Page=0>>

5 The map of protest activity on June 22. Available at: <<http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=56240>>

6 Nasha Niva, Напярэдадні 15 чэрвеня з моладдзю масава праводзіліся «гутаркі». Available at: <<http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=55896>>

**Protests did have political outcomes, however. From June 7 to almost mid-July, the authorities froze price growth and postponed adoption of other unpopular measures.**

sions in relevant social networks, but also monitored telephone conversations of novice protesters.

As soon as Lukashenka's people saw that the movement was growing exponentially, they enhanced their repressive measures. Of course, actions the authorities resorted to severely violated the

constitutional right of free speech and peaceful assembly.

The numbers of those detained by the day are given below (in parenthesis names of cities and towns where over 10 persons were detained are given, in descending order):

15 June	140 persons	Borisov, Grodno, Vitebsk, Soligorsk, Minsk, Smolevichi.
22 June	440 persons	Minsk - 210, Borisov - 30, Slutsk, Molodechno, Berezovka, Soligorsk, Zhodino, Grodno, Smolevichi.
29 June	240 persons	Minsk - 150, Brest - 70.
3 July	390 persons	Minsk - 210, Grodno - 120.
6 July	250 persons	Minsk - 190, Mogilev.
13 July	60 persons	Minsk - 25.

Data by Nasha Niva (nn.by) and Viasna (<http://spring96.org/>).

Prior to June 15, the majority of the arrested were released without punishment. On June 15, the authorities were appalled by the number of people inundating Minsk's centre and had to close exits of the subway stations *Kupalovskaya* and *Oktiabrskaya* and to block access to *Oktiabrskaya Square* and *Freedom Square* with barriers. Yet everything was in vain as people were peacefully enjoying themselves on the pavements. The increasing scale of protests alarmed the authorities. During his press-conference on June 17, Alexander Lukashenka stated in a vexed tone that "Minsk City Executive Committee has passed its decision. [Assemblies] may be held anywhere within the limits of decency: on automobiles, on wagons, on horses, on dogs, anywhere. But if Independence Avenue, which is a political avenue, is blocked, this becomes an obstacle to other people and hence needs be given a hard-and-fast response", he said<sup>7</sup>.

Starting June 22, many of the detained received fines. After July 3, the detained were massively imprisoned for up to 15 days. As can be seen, KGB agents and militia of Minsk, Minsk region and Grodno were particularly active. Therefore these regions must be perceived by special services as dangerous. Overall, Belarusians were not ready to protest at the expense of their freedom, let alone their life. Protests started to decline after the authorities had used repressive measures.

**Who was the organizer?**

Social networks decentralized the protests. If they wanted to, the coordinators could use pseudonyms to hide their identities, which made it hard to determine how many of them really existed. Vyacheslav Dianov<sup>8</sup>, a student on the Kalinowski Program, assumed the function of the "speaker for the Revolution". Member of the "Movement

of the future" campaign, after the elections of 19 December 2010 and following a house-check in the headquarters of the movement, he fled from Belarus fearing possible charges with a criminal offence. Dianov coordinated the "Revolution through social networks" from Krakow. Ironically, he was expelled from the Kalinowski Program for non-attendance of Polish language classes.

**Far from critical mass**

The protests have not yet reached critical mass, but social scientists have foreseen this phenomenon. According to a survey conducted in June 2011 by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies<sup>9</sup> (IISEPS, <http://iiseps.org/press15.html>), 62 per cent of the respondents believed that the country had taken the wrong course (against the 26 per cent who were supportive of the current policies), yet less that 20 per cent were ready to take part in protest actions.

Protests did have political outcomes, however. From June 7 to almost mid-July, the authorities froze price growth and postponed adoption of other unpopular measures. This was an outcome of an apparent fear that protests might escalate, but the pause aggravated economic imbalances.

Organizers of the series of actions "Revolution through social networks" have reported that they suspend "silent protests" until mid-September. This decision was made after the protest action scheduled for July 26 did not take place: nobody showed up except militiamen, journalists and foreign diplomats.

**The bottom line**

The secret of the relative success of applause protest actions was their exceptional simplicity. The venue was made known in advance and was easy to remember. The scheme was perfectly self-organized. As soon as the organizers gave their preferences for

7 Таццяна Каравянюкова, Лукашэнка: Несанкцыянаваныя акцыі ў цэнтры Мінска будуць спыняцца, БелаПАН, 2011-06-17. Available at: <[http://belapan.com/archive/2011/06/17/478576\\_478595/](http://belapan.com/archive/2011/06/17/478576_478595/)>

8 Vyacheslav Dianov's profile in Vkontakte. Available at:<<http://vk.com/dziyanau>>

9 ИИЭС, ВАЖНЕЙШИЕ РЕЗУЛЬТАТЫ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОГО ОПРОСА. Available at: <<http://www.iiseps.org/press15.html>>



Yet despite this frustration with the regime, the overwhelming majority does not believe that changes are possible.

more sophisticated action design, the action failed. For example, on July 3, when the organizers had planned a demonstration to culminate with a protest action, the latter merely failed since no assembly point had been specified. As a result, individual activists scattered and could not be noticed. They were arrested one after another, as soon as they began clapping their hands.

Attempts at more complicated action designs involving itinerancy were doomed to failure because the organizers lacked strategic perception. Like Milinkevich in 2006 or oppositional candidates in 2010, the organizers faced problems trying to forecast the course of events. They encountered difficulties in responding to changes in the operating situation. They called actions in July when activity was on the decline, which blurred the success of June protests.

According to coordinators, "All these actions were aimed at a deliverance from fear and at raising public awareness about impending and irrevocable changes". "Supporters of change came out on the streets to prove that such people do exist and that not all goes as well in the republic as is shown on TV"<sup>10</sup>. Yet these statements hardly differ from claims by oppositional candidates in the presidential elections in 2006 and 2010.

The objective of the largest action called "All people's assembly" scheduled for October 8 is to demand

the resignation of Lukashenka. The initiative was proposed by leaders of the traditional opposition. "Revolutionists through social networks" lend their support to the Assembly and schedule their first autumn action for 14 September.

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Protest actions have been numerically insignificant as the majority of Belarus' population sees no hope that demonstrations could lead to the change of the regime. Most Belarusians have no illusions upon Lukashenka. Yet despite this frustration with the regime, the overwhelming majority does not believe that changes are possible. "He has the power in his hands", people believe. Actions will become more massive only when the feeling that Lukashenka's control over himself, the situation and force structures slips away.

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SHOS (Bel, Rus *III*OC) is a joke that became a slogan. "I support SHOS", a popular blogger joked in spring. SHOS is a Russian abbreviation for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. But SHOS is also an acrostic of a slang expression "*Shob on sdokh*" (or *Shob on sieu*) which means "I'd like him to be dead (jailed)". The slogan has since been widely used as an interjection in on-line chats, and some have even printed T-shirts with it.

<sup>10</sup> Movement in Vkontakte: Revolution through social networks. Available at: <<http://Vkontakte.ru/event27324643>>

## PROSPECTS FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF A PROPORTIONAL ELECTORAL SYSTEM AT THE NEXT PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN BELARUS

*Yuri Chausau,*  
*Lawyer and Political Scientist*

### Show must go on

The powers of the Chamber of Representatives of the fourth convocation expire in just about a year; however, for the Belarusian political elite the issue of the next parliamentary elections remains yet to be addressed. The upcoming election campaign, which must finish at the end of September 2012 at the latest, seems of little importance compared to the still relevant afterthoughts on the consequences of the past presidential elections. The existence of political prisoners provides the opposition with an opportunity to hide behind the slogan "do anything to free prisoners of conscience" a lack of a com-

mon framework for either participation or rational nonparticipation at the elections.

A number of oppositional structures are preparing for the elections with a clear intent to actively participate. By contrast, other organizations expect that the future parliament will be delegitimized and the election campaign boycotted should it be taking place under familiar circumstances of non-transparent vote count alongside the presence of political prisoners.

The majority of oppositional leaders prefer not to discuss in public the uncomfortable question about the participation in the upcoming elections and avoid clear answers. In a broad spectrum of oppositionists, sceptical attitude toward participation in the elections as well as distrust of the possibility

**I personally believe that the authorities will use the next parliamentary elections to demonstrate a new turn in liberalization in pursuit of reconciliation with the West.**

to change the political system by way of elections is prevalent, which prepares the ground for boycotting the elections.

Yet analysts accumulate forecasts on how the next elections spectacle will take place in the Belarusian political arena. I personally believe that the authorities will use the next parliamentary elections to demonstrate a new turn in liberalization in pursuit of reconciliation with the West. Accompanied by other symbolic moves in areas that are sensitive to Western observers (the release of some political prisoners, releasing pressure on rights advocates, abolition of death penalty, revisiting the refusal to build an NPP), holding parliamentary elections in a liberal atmosphere may prompt the West to initiate yet another public dialogue with the Lukashenka's regime. Naturally, given this situation, the regime should bring to naught chances of the opposition to win the elections while the campaign itself should not be perceived by society as meaningful. However, it is vital for the authorities that the opposition should participate in the elections – otherwise, without this actor the spectacle will be extremely unconvincing.

#### **An offer that cannot be turned down**

Under these circumstances, Belarusian authorities may use their old tactics and entice the opposition into an election through demonstration of possible changes in the legislation. In particular, political parties may be exceptionally responsive to the introduction of elements of the party-list proportional electoral system.

Currently the Belarusian electoral system is unique in our region not only due to its fraudulent nature. Unlike its neighbours, all elections to Belarus' representative bodies of power are void of any elements of proportional representation. Belarus is a country with absolute dominance of majoritarian representation, which results in marginalizing the opposition and stipulates the secondary role of both the governmental and oppositional political parties.

It should be pointed out that announcements of possible transition to the proportional system are voiced by Belarusian political subjects on a regular basis: pro-governmental parties and movements are outspoken about the need for such reform. In spring 2011, functionaries of the massive pro-governmental movement "Belaya Rus" ("White Russia") broke the news about the potential reorganization of the movement into a party due to the possible introduction of the proportional electoral system. Head of the central electoral commission Lidia Yermoshina has spoken in favour of such reform more than once: "We are facing the long-felt need to move to the proportional electoral system. Until then, our political parties will not be developing", - she said in an online conference of the newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda Belarusi"<sup>1</sup>.

1 Interfax.by, В Беларуси назрел переход к выборам по партийным спискам, считает Л.Ермошина. Available at: <<http://www.interfax.by/news/belarus/83572>>

In this way, by informing about the potential introduction of the proportional system, members of power establishment have essentially acknowledged the soundness of relevant demands of oppositional parties, which is a unique instance of unanimity of views of the opposing sides. In particular, as early as 2009, a group of oppositionists who were part of the Public Advisory Council under the aegis of the Presidential Administration, developed a strategy for reforming electoral legislation which posited as its cornerstone a transition to party-list elections<sup>2</sup>. According to the strategy<sup>3</sup>, the priority of political parties as main actors of the political process and a transition to the formation of parliament on the basis of a mixed majoritarian-proportional electoral system are to be formalized.

#### **Possible outcomes for the opposition**

It seems that the attempt at topicality of Belarus' transition to the proportional electoral system is strained. This issue is artificially pushed into the media before parliamentary elections as a possible democratization factor. However, by no means does democratic or non-democratic nature of elections depend on the representation system.

Introduction of the proportional electoral system will not improve the state of democracy in the bodies of representative power. Anyway, democracy is a prerequisite for the transition to a feasibly fair system of proportional representation to take place.

Moreover, as far as stakes of democratic parties are concerned, it is more convenient to struggle for the objectives they postulate in the framework of the majoritarian electoral system, i.e., by directly contacting the electorate in the relevant district. The majoritarian system merely forces parties to act outside the capital city. Meanwhile, a transition to party-list elections may prompt the opposition to confine their efforts to Minsk. Belarus' opposition is strong only where there are strong regional leaders who have experience in parliamentary and local campaigns in their districts.

Of course, incumbent leaders of oppositional parties count on increasing the sphere of influence of their own quarters should elements of the proportional system be introduced. Indeed, this may happen at the level of redistribution of influence within the opposition; however, influence on the society might shrink. Kazakhstan's transition to the proportional electoral system shows that the relevant reform may weaken the opposition.

It is believed that, besides subjective stakes of parties, the popularity of the transition to the proportional system is stipulated by the media factor. Belarusians are merely keen to follow proportional elections in other countries and to compare semicircular

2 oboz.by, Профессор Станислав Богданкевич: в центре избирательного процесса должны стоять политические партии. Available at: <<http://www.oboz.by/articles/detail.php?article=424>>

3 Станислав Богданкевич, К вопросу о совершенствовании избирательного законодательства. Available at: <<http://www.qwas.ru/belarus/ucpb/Stanslav-Bogdankevich-K-voprosu-o-sovershenstvovanii-izbiratel'nogo-zakonodatelstva/>>

**It is very likely that the potential transition to the proportional system will be unreasonably presented by Belarusian authorities as a step toward the democratization process.**

diagrams and columns in TV reports on the elections in Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine.

However, from the legal perspective, the transition to the proportional system is not that simple. Although the majoritarian system is not directly formalized in the Constitution of Belarus, the option of recalling a deputy is endorsed in Article 72 of the Constitution. The article has never been used in practice, yet the institute of recalling deputies exists. Meanwhile in practice, it is incompatible with the proportional system (even though the world abounds in exotic electoral mechanisms and the flexibility of Belarusian law-making is axiomatic).

But elections are a sophisticated political and legal process in which far from everything can be regulated by the rule of law. A change in the political climate may be conceived without abandoning the majoritarian system. Concurrently, problems like fraudulent vote count, massive coercion for early voting, breach of voting privacy, or absence of opposition representatives among electoral commissions - cannot be resolved by the transition to the proportional system alone. In general,

the present-day machine of falsification is impossible without the control over employees in the framework of contractual system at schools and enterprises (where district commissions are formed from employees and are physically headed by their chiefs). Meanwhile, it is very likely that the potential transition to the proportional system will be unreasonably presented by Belarusian authorities as a step toward the democratization process in the country.

In anticipation of the next parliamentary elections in the autumn 2012, the Belarusian regime may move to the proportional electoral system only if this reform is conducive to weakening the opposition and mitigating threats of destabilizing the regime. Taking this into consideration, the question on the introduction of the proportional electoral system must not be seen as a prerequisite for restructuring the political system in Belarus.

Meanwhile the opposition should focus on advocacy for other regulatory and non-regulatory tools for holding elections, including those that go beyond the framework of the narrow view of the electoral process.

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