



Siarhei Nikaliuk is an expert of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) since 2006. Graduated the Department of Chemistry of the Belarusian State University in 1974. He worked as a journalist after the registration of first independent newspapers in Belarus. Interests: social, political and cultural particularities of the Belarusian society as a society of incomplete modernization.

Pavel Usov is an political analyst, head of the board of the Belarusian Independent Centre for The European Studies and co-founder of the Belarusian Analytical Center in Warsaw (Poland). PhD in political science. He is an author of the more than 300 hundred analytical, publicist and scientific articles.

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WHY THERE IS NO UNDIVIDED OPPOSITION IN BELARUS?

If you think about something that is not suitable for a majority, you believe that they are united as one in fighting against it. Unfortunately, this is not the case of Belarus. Since the beginning of the regime opposition was hoped to consolidate its power and work hand in hand towards the democratisation of Belarus. But did it happen?

Siarhei Nikaliuk states that there is a big and harmful division of the opposition in the country. The author shows that this problem is not only created by the successful methods for riving the opposition of the regime but it is deeper mentally based problem of the Belarusian society. We should stop uphold the simplifying myth “govern-

ment vs. opposition” and look for the possible scenarios of a really united opposition.

There is a big variety of opposition parties and movements but as a whole it remains weak, unstructured and divided Pavel Usov argues in his article. He states that there are both internal and external factors of the disintegration of the opposition. Lack of responsibility, personal ambitions led to big mistakes so current opposition leaders do not have the necessary support. Adding the external factors, the opposition comes to the deadlock. Therefore, some recommendations are given by the author.

Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor

THE DISAVOWAL OF REALITY AS A FACTOR FOR EXISTENCE

Siarhei Nikaliuk

The issue of consolidation is a common thread throughout the history of the Belarusian opposition. It is exactly the lack of consolidation and a ‘single presidential candidate’, something seen by many politicians and experts as a primary condition thereof, what serves as an explanation for the series of electoral failures by the opposition. To successfully oppose Mr. Lukashenka, a personal alternative is needed, i.e. a charismatic leader to answer a question “If not him, who then?”

Why cannot such a leader emerge in the oppositional environment? The answer is obvious: personal ambitions are the obstacle. One cannot help recalling the presidential elections of 2010 with eight oppositional candidates dividing the protest votes.

Eight oppositional candidates is a lot, by any measure. Yet, there were two of them in 2006: Aliaksandr Milinkevich, the so-called ‘single candidate’ nominated by the Congress of Democratic Forces, and Aliaksandr Kazulin, a ‘self-appointed intruder’. Uladzimir Rouda, a political analyst, believes that the presence of the ‘intruder’ made it impossible for the opposition to win the third presidential elections: ‘What hurts the most is that all con-

ditions were present in run-up to elections’06 in Belarus (for the victory of the opposition - S.N.). However, the stubbornness and unreasonable egoism of the democratic coalition which did not have charismatic faces before the elections, on one hand, and the overconfidence of Kazulin’s forces, on another hand, prevented the opposition from reaching totally different outcomes of the political campaign’2006.’

Contemporary myth-making

‘Some kind of myth-making is natural for absolutely all cultural mentalities, even the most rational ones, with only the nature and the content of myths varying,’ - claims Andrey Pilipenko, a culture expert. The mentality of the advanced ‘minority’ is exactly an example from the divided Belarusian society (both on the level of the mass consciousness and the politicians/experts’ community).

Simplification is the core idea of the myth, helping to make it absolute. The simplified oppositional myth in Belarus centers on the confrontation ‘government vs. opposition’ as an axis of the political process. Borrowed from the Western political practices, it is yet doubtful in terms of applicability in Belarus.

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In Belarus, politics as a representation / accommodation of social groups' interests is hindered by a lack of self-aware groups. This is why party-building is always a top-down process here. As a rule, a party is a personal project. Having organized themselves, they always face a problem of finding *their* voters (in other words, having designed a medicine, they are looking for a disease to be cured).

It seems obvious that an economic crisis and a growing dissatisfaction with the government should generate support for the parties. Still, it is not happening. Alike, the ratings of the opposition parties and the opposition moods in the society stay stably low, with just 20 per cent answering the question "Do you consider yourself in an opposition to the government?" positively in December 2012 and 19 per cent two years earlier, immediately after the presidential elections.

Compared to the Soviet Union, the level of control over private lives of citizens has lowered considerably in nowadays Belarus. However, it has not resulted in Belarusians investing their energy in addressing the nationwide problems. The prevailing majority of them are preoccupied with arranging their own private space. Both the opposition with their alternative projects **and** the state have been pushed away.

In a view of the society's atomization, the authoritarian Belarusian government had to give up attempts to mobilize the public, with presidential electoral campaigns being the only exception, and to maintain the sociopolitical status quo by keeping the public passive rather than active.

On the other hand, the opposition keeps aspiring for a goal to mobilize their potential supporters, though their media resources are marginal compared to those of the state. If measured by national opinion polls, such efforts rarely result in something going beyond the standard statistical error of 3 per cent.

We can use the presidential elections of 2012 as an example. With a trust rating of 60.3 per cent, Lukashenka received votes of 51.1 per cent of the interviewees, i.e. 9.2 per cent inside his trust rating. For the pool of the opposition candidates, the relation was inverse, with 27.8 per cent voting for them, 6.4 per cent outside their rating of trust which reached 21.4 per cent.

How can we interpret such a discrepancy? As the electoral support level was measured as a share of the whole survey population rather than the turnout (88.4 per cent), it is logical for Lukashenka's trust rating to exceed his result at the elections. On the other hand, the inverse dependency for the opposition politicians is the result of protest voting.

The discrepancy is repeated at each elections, no matter how many candidates were nominated by the opposition or successful/unsuccessful their electoral campaign was. The sum of the votes received by the opposition candidates is determined by the fundamental characteristics of the Belarusian society, primarily the social and cultural split. The opposition cannot bridge it.

So, all the talks about a need to go beyond the 'oppositional ghetto' are generated by not just a lack of understanding about the society's nature, but an active unwillingness to understand it. It is logical, since every myth, even as a simplification or a fairy-tale, is always a way to describe the world as well as to defend oneself from it.

An 'imaginary society'

To understand the specifics of the oppositional myth-making, let us refer to the book 'The Old Regime and the Revolution' by Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political thinker of the 19th century: "In countries where the intellectuals are not detached from the political participation, 'writers on the theory of government and those who actually govern co-operate with each other, the former setting forth their new theories, the latter amending or circumscribing these in the light of practical experience'. While in a situation when the intellectuals are prevented from participating in the political life of a country, 'precept and practice are kept quite distinct and remain in the hands of two quite independent groups'. One of these carry on the actual administration while the other set forth the abstract principles without a thought for their practical application; one group shape the course of public affairs, the other that of public opinion. Thus alongside the social system of the day there is gradually built up in men's minds an imaginary ideal society in which all is simple and uniform".

In other words, the situation in Belarus is by far not unique. The faith in the 'imaginary society' one can get through to by answering a question 'If not him, then who?' or by finding appropriate political slogans is a key element for the reproduction of the Belarusian opposition.

To justify this statement, we can come back to the point of Rouda on the opposition's chances to reach 'totally different outcomes' in 2006. The table below enables us to realize how far from reality his optimism was. Please pay attention to the third column which outlines the suddenly-dropping standards of living in all states neighboring Belarus, long before the actual global economic crisis. Neither was 2006 a year of an extraordinary economic growth in Belarus, as the real incomes of people in Belarus grew by 10 per cent in 2004, by 18 per cent in 2005, by 18 per cent in 2006, by 13 per cent in 2007 and by 13 per cent in 2008.

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	06'96	11'99	08'06	03'11
In Russia	67.4	40.9	21.2	46.1
In Latvia	83.1	77.8	34.1	56.7
In Lithuania	79.2	77.7	33.1	55.7
In Ukraine	14.4	34.2	8.4	20.4
In Poland	85.0	85.3	46.2	71.9

Dynamics of answers to the question: "How do you think people in the neighboring countries live?"; % (just one answer presented in the table: "better than in Belarus")

2006 was a peak of the resource opportunities of the Belarusian government and, consequently, Lukashenka's popularity. He received 58 per cent at the presidential elections, by II-SEPS data, with his average electoral rating 55 per cent throughout the year (45 per cent in 2010). Belarusians' incomes saw double-digit growth during five years (two years before and two years after the elections) without the government having to borrow or cutting the investments. Why shouldn't the people agree to again vote for Lukashenka?

On this background, one can hardly expect any electoral wins for the opposition.

The transition as a social and cultural process

The Belarusian opposition is used to consider the transition from the authoritarian regime to the democratic system as an organized event. This point is supported by a majority of independent analysts and citizens who are opposed to the regime. It provokes endless debates on procedures, with the issue of nominating a 'single candidate' being central, of course. The preparations for the fifth presidential elections are likely to follow the old scenario well-developed during the last two decades. We can hear rising voices for a need to identify the 'single candidate' as soon as possible, 'so that he has enough time to campaign'.

Alexander Akhiezer, a historian, outlined two main delusions: the delusion of an intellectual and the delusion of the mass perception. By the former he meant the faith of intelligentsia in people as an absolute embodiment of the good and the Truth, whose creative potential is held back by the bureaucracy. The second delusion is the faith of the people in an opportunity for a leader ('the boss') to solely solve all their life problems. Should a leader fail to meet his duty, he proves to be not 'the boss', so he is to be replaced by 'the real one'. Hence, the leader is seen as a totem.

In contemporary Belarus, we are observing a case of an active absorption by intellectuals (at least, the politicized ones) of the key delusion of the mass perception. This absorption is only possible on a condition of giving up the exploration of reality, something we are actually facing. We can hardly imagine a discussion in the oppositional environment focusing on the nature of the society and the government rather than technical issues.

The global experience of transitions from a authoritarian regime to a democracy stays not utilized properly in this situation. By the way, such a transition has never been accomplished solely by efforts of party activists, something expected by party activists and their supporters alike in Belarus. In his book "Democracy and the Market", Adam Przeworski, an American political scientist, summarized the experience of both successful and unsuccessful transitions: "Liberalization is a result of an interaction between splits in the authoritarian regime and autonomous organization of the civil society».

I would also add that the liberalization process is a social and cultural process. It cannot come down to a set of events carried out by a team of party activists.

According to Yury Levada, Russia's foremost sociologist, the Russian society, as a society of incomplete modernization, is switching between two statuses: the one of a political apathy, and the one of a political activation. It fully applies to the Belarusian society as well. This theoretical doctrine implies an important practical conclusion for the Belarusian opposition.

The Strategy I should be designed for conditions of a consolidated authoritarian regime, with the society in a political apathy. It does not leave chances for the opposition to win elections or even to go outside the 'electoral ghetto'. They should completely focus on efforts to engage with their potential supporters inside the 'ghetto'.

The Strategy II is a strategy of a real struggle for power after the society's switch to the political activation. Given the exhaustion of resources by the social and economic model existing in Belarus since 1994 (a point to be elaborated on in another article), such a switch is quite likely in a mid-term. However, one should get rid of the comfortable myth-making to start actually developing both the Strategy I and the Strategy II.

Since the rise to power by Lukashenka and the institutionalization of the authoritarian regime, the democratic forces have failed to create a single and stable political front capable of influencing the political processes inside the country.

THE BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Pavel Usov

For a long time, any criticism of the Belarusian opposition's activities has been considered a regime-orchestrated provocation both by the democratic community itself and their foreign partners. The opposition was a kind of a 'sacred cow', with all its mistakes, failures and slip-ups being explained exclusively by the regime's obstacles rather than some negative processes inside the opposition.

It has resulted in major systemic problems of the opposition being overlooked or ignored and, subsequently, the atrophy and degradation of the opposition itself. Crucially, the time was lost, enabling the regime to consolidate itself and neutralize the major external threats.

All the problems of the democratic camp we are discussing today, e.g. deconsolidation, conflicts, a lack of strategy or efficiency, have been there in a certain degree since as early as 1994.

Since the rise to power by Lukashenka and the institutionalization of the authoritarian regime, the democratic forces have failed to create a single and stable political front capable of influencing the political processes inside the country. It has been a key reason for a fast crackdown on political freedoms by the authoritarian government.

The diversity of the political field in Belarus

Despite the government's repressions and restrictions, a huge number of opposition parties and movements continue to exist in Belarus today. There are seven political parties registered with the Ministry of Justice: the Conservative Christian Party of BPF (Zianon Pazniak), the BPF Party (Aliaksei Yanukevich), the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada Party (Stanislau Shushkevich), the United Civic Party (Anatol Liabedzka), the Belarusian United Left Party 'The Just World', or the former *Belarusian Party of Communists* (Siarhei Kaliakin), the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) (Iryna Veshtard), and the Belarusian Party of Greens (Yury Hlushakou). A range of unregistered parties also are there, e.g. the Belarusian Christian Democracy (Vitali Rymasheuski) and the Party of Freedom and Progress (Uladzimir Navasiad), as well as some public movements also acting on the political field and claiming a role of political parties: the Movement for Freedom (Aliaksandr Milinkevich), formerly registered by the Ministry of Justice as an NGO, the movement Tell the Truth (Uladzimir Niak-

liayeu), the Belarusian Movement (Viktar Ivashkevich) and the European Belarus.

The Council of Belarusian Intelligentsia (Uladzimir Kolas) and the Belarusian National Platform of NGOs (Uladzimir Matskevich) are also active in the opposition, alongside with some youth organizations, e.g. the Young Front (Zmitser Dashkevich), Zmiena (the youth branch of the Tell the Truth), Alternatyva (Aleh Korban), etc.

Regardless of the diversity of the oppositional political organizations, the opposition as a whole remains weak, unstructured and divided. *One can claim it is exactly the variety and the ideological divisions among its structures are a symptom of its political weakness and inefficiency.* Internal conflicts and splits constitute the major reason for so many opposition organizations to emerge.

The origins of the opposition's erosion

There are multiple reasons behind the erosion and de facto disintegration of the opposition's camp. The origins can be categorized as internal and external ones.

There are three key groups of internal negative factors influencing the opposition's activities: psychological, cultural, and moral (or political) ones.

1. The psychological factor includes personal ambitions of certain individuals who claim the leadership in consolidating the opposition. They put their own interests above the joint priorities and agreements. The mask of an ambitious leader can actually hide trivial motivations, e.g. an opportunity to get financial support; it can also be the regime's scenario to keep the opposition divided. Personal dislikes or even mutual hatred between certain opposition politicians / leaders constitute another aspect of the psychological factor, resulting in them investing the energy in internal fights rather than fighting the regime. Suffice it to mention the conflicts between Aliaksandr Fiaduta (Tell the Truth) and Vitali Rymasheuski; Mikalai Statkevich and Uladzimir Niakliayeu; Mikalai Statkevich and Vitali Rymasheuski etc. Personal disagreements and antipathies prevent the opposition from any kind of consolidation / creation of a coordinated structure. We can hardly find at least one 'leader' in this country who does not feel 'let down' or 'exposed' or has never 'let down' or 'exposed' others. It

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suggests that any consolidation of today's opposition leaders would be weak, vulnerable and unreliable.

2. By the cultural factor, I mean a specific way of conduct by the leaders of opposition organizations as well as their approach to and mechanisms of managing their parties and organizations. De facto authoritarian culture and management style are typical for all opposition leaders and party bosses. It is visible in their attempts to cling to leadership and ruling positions by any means, regardless of the negative consequences for the organization as a whole. Many political parties and organizations are run by the same people for years. As a result, no 'career opportunities' are there for young activists; loyalty to the leader becomes crucial. Attempts to change the leadership by legitimate mechanisms lead to major conflicts and splits. It applies to almost all opposition parties. Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People's Hramada) underwent splits in 2004 and 2012, the BPF in 2010, the UCP in 2012. It brings negative effects to the functioning of both individual parties, since it pushes many members to quit, and the image of the opposition as a whole.
3. By the moral or political factor, I mean a lack of any responsibility of the opposition leaders / organizations for steps that contradict common goals, interests and agreements. Having sabotaged some pan-oppositional agreements or joint strategies, politicians and organizations remain a part of the opposition field and continue participating in development of 'new joint strategies'.

The events of recent years have demonstrated that no common tragedy, value, or goal can make the opposition groups, leaders, or organizations of Belarus consolidate their efforts. This is why it is, in fact, impossible to find a universal model or strategy of consolidation. The parliamentary elections of 2012 have served yet another example. Despite an agreement signed by all leading opposition forces in 2011 on non-participation in electoral campaign until all political prisoners are released, a number of opposition organizations, e.g. Tell the Truth, the BPF, the Movement for Freedom, and the Just World, have later announced about their participation, making the split inside the opposition even deeper. Unfortunately, adherence to principles is not a strength of the Belarusian oppositionists, resulting in inefficiency and divisions. Lack of morality and responsibility is also a primary reason for a blind eye turned on mistakes and failures by the opposition structures or individual members; should it be different, all people in the Belarusian opposition would have to leave the scene now. There are

no tools to assess the activities of the opposition politicians / organizations and to isolate the self-discredited ones. It enables opposition leaders to quickly forget both their own promises and misdoings as well as mistakes or even an obvious treason on the side of other opposition members. Each leader reserves the right to breach his/her promises knowing that no one can make him/her accountable.

The analysis of the situation inside the opposition, however, is neither complete nor fair if no external factors are taken into account.

By external negative factors, I mean activities or policies of the government to preserve the marginal state of the opposition, including the following tools: controlling, dividing, repressing, administrative and legal pressure, and the social isolation.

1. We should keep in mind that a number of organizations opposed to the regime or their leaders might be directly controlled by the security services, something making any attempts to develop a reasonable and sound joint strategy impossible. Some politicians will always either be 'too ambitious' or feel 'discriminated', so they will find a reason to undermine all the previous agreements. It happens during electoral campaigns in Belarus on regular basis. With this being said, it is extremely problematic to identify the controlled politicians. The current situation can only be changed by a deep and comprehensive analysis of each opposition politician's activities in some particular situations. In other words, the only way to raise the efficiency of the opposition above zero is to carry out a kind of self-lustration.
2. Repressions remain a key mechanism for suppressing any open defiance or for elimination of the opposition organizations that in government's opinion are capable of destabilizing the environment and the existing balance of power between the authorities and the opposition.
3. The government has created an administrative framework and restrictions that favor lowering political activism of the opposition, resulting immediately in repressions if neglected. The obligatory registration procedure with the Ministry of Justice for parties and NGOs is just one example. On one hand, the registration enables the authorities to receive full information about the members of the opposition organizations and to pressurize them at any time, if needed. On the other hand, the party leadership tries to keep the organization legally registered by any means, thus promoting their passiveness and unwillingness to confront the government.

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If not registered formally, organizations, among many difficulties, face a problem of cooperation with foreign foundations, since they demand a formal status. Article 193.1 of the Penal Code «Illegal organization of or participation in the activity of a NGO, religious organization or a foundation» provides an opportunity for a criminal prosecution of members of unregistered organizations.

4. The regime has effectively isolated the opposition from the public. Members of the democratic camp have no access to the state media, labor communities or universities. The majority of people in Belarus have no idea about opposition organizations and politicians, leave alone the level of trust in them.

Therefore, the political situation in Belarus is in a dead-lock. The consolidation of the opposition is impossible because of tough resistance from the government and the presence of controlled actors. On the other hand, the consolidation of the democratic community and a joint strategy against the regime are only possible in a case of modernization, restructuring and upgrading the opposition itself. The opposition as it is now is a suitable opponent for the government.

The strategy of foreign partners towards the Belarusian opposition should be created with above-mentioned factors kept in mind. The cooperation model with the Belarusian political actors should be completely transformed.

1. Relations between opposition organizations and foreign partners are currently personal rather than rational or subject to impartial assessment of organizations' / leaders' activities. Any recommendations are pointless without a radical revision of approaches towards cooperation with the

Belarusian opposition.

2. Financial support of opposition is inefficient without a modernization and a major audit, i.e. assessment of the real control over branches and the political responsibility of leaders. (I find it necessary for foreign partners to create a particular think-tank / bureau for researching the activities of democratic organizations in Belarus and developing practical recommendations for stakeholders).
3. Self-compromised individuals should be eliminated from the discussions on consolidation issues to prevent subsequent obstruction.
4. A factor of external pressure and coercion did play a positive role in consolidating the opposition before the presidential elections'2006; however, a lack of moral values on the side of certain opposition activists has anyhow resulted in the creation of a 'parallel opposition'. Dealing with opposition in Belarus is likely to remain ineffective without some sanctions against politicians who destroy joint strategies.
5. Neither a strategy nor a leader should be artificially imposed from outside, without taking into consideration the real situation in the country and the opposition. Otherwise, it will lead to more conflicts rather than benefits, something seen in 2001 and partially 2006.
6. Ultimately, should the opposition deliberately avoid internal modernization and reforms (the modernization package could be developed for them by Western partners), funds for Belarusians opposition parties / organizations should be drastically cut.



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

Vytautas Keršanskas

Phone: +370 5 2705993

Fax: +370 5 2736953

Email: vytautas.kersanskas@eesc.lt

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