



HAS THE BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION OUTSMARTED THEMSELVES AGAIN?

Ahead of the presidential election the strategic thinking of the current president of Belarus Alyaksandr Lukashenka can only be appreciated. Even the timing of the election (December 19th) seems perfectly chosen: not only it precedes the annual energy dispute with Russia, it also “coincides” with the change of seats of the OSCE chairmanship and the winter festivities to leave as little as possible time and opportunity for the international community to keep a close watch and react. But will there be anything to watch? In this issue *Pavel Usov* and *Ahniya Asanovich* examine the question if there

is any match to Lukashenka’s strategic thinking among the Belarusian opposition during and beyond the presidential election of 2010. Campaigning in presidential election is certainly a “health-check” of the potential of Belarusian democratic forces, but could we be misinterpreting the results? Has the presidential seat become too bumpy to compete for in the aftermath of economic downturn and a media row with Russia? Should we rather be looking forward to the election of 2015?

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OPPOSITION FORCES ON THRESHOLD OF ELECTION CAMPAIGN: STATE AND STRATEGY

Pavel Usov

About Political Conditions of Election Campaign

Despite the stability of the Belarusian political system and absence of inner threats for the regime, the presidential election campaign in Belarus will be held in new political conditions. The main factor determining them is the serious conflict between the leadership of Russia and Belarus.

During the whole period of Lukashenka’s rule, Russia was a strong resource of stabilization for the regime in Belarus, both political and economic one. We observe a dramatic change in Russia’s attitude to Lukashenka; the last information war and appearance of the Russian-produced materials (movies) exposing and compromising Lukashenka are the evidence of the change. Certainly, we should be under no illusion about serious plans and desires of Moscow to change the political regime in Belarus. In its current state, Lukashenka regime is a mechanism of keeping Belarus in the sphere of Russia’s influence, despite Lukashenka’s statements about the multi-vector nature of foreign policy in Belarus. This is rather the matter of changing

configuration of the relations between Moscow and Minsk. If earlier Russia rendered support to the Belarusian regime basing on its loyalty, now the condition for its existence would be implicit obedience to the demands of Moscow, both in political and economic spheres. Although “exposure” of Lukashenka has not led to the growth of the social unrest, consolidation of the opposition forces, or creation of the real inner threats for the regime, the change of Moscow’s attitude to Lukashenka is quite unpleasant for him. Intensified information attacks during the election in Belarus might lead to unpredictable scenarios.

For the opposition forces, the external factor has become a reason for increased political activity and a ground for assurance that Russia decided to realize the regime-change scenario in Belarus. In that case the opposition groups might become one of the tools for implementing the plan. A number of opposition politicians and parties expect financial and political support from Moscow in their campaigns. Nevertheless, this is not the first time when external reasons stir up the hopes of fast political transformation within the opposition camp. We have already observed such assurance during the economic crisis that had an impact on

CONTENTS

OPPOSITION FORCES ON THRESHOLD OF ELECTION CAMPAIGN: STATE AND STRATEGY

Pavel Usov

1

RELUCTANT LUKASHENKA’S COMPETITORS IN 2010: “BEING AN OPPOSITIONER IS WHAT I DO FOR LIVING”?

Ahniya Asanovich

3

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the Belarusian economy. Independent political leaders and economic analysts predicted the collapse of the economic system, and, consequently, growing social unrest on the score of deteriorating living standards. However, the predictions of neither the sharp drop of the living standards, nor the growth of the public unrest came true in Belarus.

The fact that the opposition forces rely exclusively on the external factors of impact on the regime is rather the evidence of their weakness and inability to offer the Belarusian society a real alternative to the existing regime. On the other hand, the opposition leaders expect that, due to negative changes in the socio-economic situation and growing protest moods, the people will overthrow the regime on their own, and the opposition forces will only have to take the power into their own hands.

At present, the opposition forces on the whole do not possess serious inner resources and cannot rely on the broad political support inside the country. That is why they are not the main actor of political changes in Belarus. According to opinion polls, 45% of the Belarusians are ready to vote for A. Lukashenka in the upcoming election; the ratings of the opposition candidates do not add up even to 20% of the citizens' votes¹. That is why it is possible to say that the fate of the political regime is currently not in the hands of the Belarusian people, but in the hands of Moscow.

State of Opposition Forces

From the last presidential election in 2006 the state of the opposition forces deteriorated significantly. This is caused not only by the permanent pressure and repression by the authorities. The main reason is the deep disappointment of the pro-democratic part of the population in the activity of the opposition parties. We observe a paradoxical situation when the political opposition got separated not only from the population on the whole, but also from the intellectual independent part of the society, turning into little closed groups. Still, the opposition camp is being continually torn apart by inner segmentation and growing conflicts both between the organizations and inside the parties. After the presidential election 2006 serious conflicts took place in: BSDP (Hramada) – its chair Alexander Kazulin left the party with his supporters; BPF Party – its members Ales Mikhalevich, and later Franak Viachorka were excluded from the party, the party is on the brink of the split. In 2008 one of the most active youth organizations “Young Front” split, its members, who dropped out or were excluded, created a new group “Young Belarus”, headed by Artur Finkevich. The broad coalition of pro-democratic parties – the United Democratic Forces -- practically ceased to exist, burying the hopes for the single candidate.

At present the opposition camp has no leaders, no values, and no ideas that would work for consolida-

tion and forming of the single political bloc. For the sake of fairness we should note that the opposition camp could never boast of unity. All previous single-candidate strategies were not the result of the inner compromise and political will of the leaders, but the result of the external pressure by the Western partners. However, the absence of inner principles and real political agreements between the parties and the leaders led to the failure of such projects and even bigger confrontation between the opposition parties. This is exactly what happened after the elections of 2001 and 2006.

The opposition forces as they exist at the moment do not constitute a menace for the regime, even in case of deterioration of the economic situation, or stronger political pressure from Russia.

Despite statements of some political leaders that the “situation in the country for the opposition victory is better than in 2001 and 2006”², that would not reflect in the election results. The opposition forces have never been as weak and disunited as on the edge of the upcoming presidential election. The contradictions between the leaders and political structures are too strong; they would hardly be surmounted in the near future, just as the single action plan would hardly be developed. Even the ideologically-close organizations did not succeed in their attempts to join the efforts. In 2009 the right-wing conservative organizations and the parties The Movement for Freedom, BPF, BCD, Young Front, etc. created the so-called “Belarusian Independent Bloc”. The Bloc was expected to nominate the single candidate for the election. However, it practically collapsed after the internal conflict between the leader of the Movement for Freedom Alexander Milinkevich and the leadership of BCD.

By now, already 9 opposition candidates claimed their participation in the presidential election. It is likely that Uladzimir Niakliayeu and (“Tell the Truth” movement) and Siarhie Kaliakin (Fair World party) will be running for the presidency after all registration procedures are finalized.

A number of the opposition candidates, for instance, Ales Mikhalevich, Mikalai Statkevich, Valery Fralou, Yury Hlushakou, do not have any essential resources. Participation in the election for them is an element of the self-PR, but not a political struggle. The other candidates have some organizational (Milinkevich, Romanchuk, Rymasheuski, Kostuseu), informational (Sannikau), and financial (Niakliayeu) resources. However, the resources of each candidate are not sufficient enough to run an effective election campaign, at least on the level of 2006. It's clear that the candidates with resources do not have much desire to negotiate with those who have nothing to offer. Involvement of such politicians as Statkevich, Fralou, Mikhalevich into the negotiation process will not change the general situation within the opposition and will hardly strengthen the camp they would join.

1 Who will Belarusians vote for during the presidential election?
<http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/2095097.html>

2 Liabedzka: the situation for victory is better than in 2001 and 2006. <http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/2140711.html>

Lukashenka regime is a mechanism of keeping Belarus in the sphere of Russia's influence, despite Lukashenka's statements about the multi-vector nature of foreign policy in Belarus.

It's quite evident now that the only strategy of the opposition at the moment is to wait and see if the conflicts and contradictions fade out in the process of the election race. There was some certainty among the leaders right from the beginning of informal nomination of the candidates that the majority of contenders would drop out during the first two stages of the election -- registration of the initiative groups and signature collection -- being unable to collect the necessary 100,000 signatures. As a result, only 3 to 5 candidates would be able to continue the race. They can then negotiate on joining the efforts in the new election landscape. However, this strategy will not lead to positive results and unite the opposition forces. Firstly, the government might artfully register the majority of the opposition candidates in order to support the internal conflicts and disunity. Secondly, during many months the opposition forces failed to develop a mechanism of determining the single candidate. It would be even more difficult to do during the presidential race. Moreover, the process of single candidate nomination will take a lot of the time which is especially precious during the campaign period. Thirdly, the majority of Belarusians have limited possibilities to receive information about the opposition candidates; participation of such a number of opposition contenders in the first stage of the election is likely to confuse the population and strengthen the negative image of the opposition forces. Fourthly, Lukashenka will stand out among such a huge number of little-known opposition candidates. Finally, all previous activities of the

opposition forces demonstrate that they could not achieve unity even in their best times. That means, on the last stage of the election at least two opposition candidates will take part in the race. Basing on the human factor, we can name the most resource-rich and ambitious candidates who would not want to give in their "single candidate" status: Sannikau and Niakliayeu. Most probably, they are the people who would fight for support of other organizations and structures. As for the ideological component of the campaign, the opposition would break up into two confronting camps: "pro-Russian" and "national-European" ones. Although the presidential race has not begun yet, the opposition camp is already undergoing the process of revealing the "pro-Russian" candidate. At present Andrei Sannikau and Uladzimir Niakliayeu are named among such candidates. There is an evident threat that during the campaign period the main efforts of the candidates would be directed not against Lukashenka, but against each other.

What's in the upshot?

All opposition candidates point to the Square rallies as the culmination point of the election. However, the opposition forces do not see street actions as a revolution, or a tool to overthrow the ruling regime. They only consider it as a way to protest against election fraud. The general state of affairs in the opposition camp will not contribute to large-scale mobilization of the population and organization of efficient street actions.

RELUCTANT LUKASHENKA'S COMPETITORS IN 2010: "BEING AN OPPOSITIONER IS WHAT I DO FOR LIVING"?

Ahniya Asanovich

Introduction

This article does not aim to conclude who could become the future president of Belarus. Rather than that it aims at taking a closer look at the potential of the leaders of Belarusian opposition and their strategies ahead and beyond the election.

The presidential election in Belarus will be held on December 19th 2010. The final registration of the candidates to the Belarusian presidency will take place on end of November. Afterwards the agitation campaign will start.

More than nine candidates have initially announced their intention to enter presidential election. Eight

candidates opposing the present government and one loyal to it are going to compete with the so far unbeatable president – a Alexander Lukashenka: Sergei Gaidukevich (Democratic Liberal party), Andrei Sannikau (movement "For European Belarus") and Viktor Tereshenko (Small and Medium Business Association) already have some experience of work in the government. The "right" wing opposition candidates so far but have no such experience: Grigory Kostusev (Belarus National Front), Vital Rymashevsky (Belarus Christian Democratic party) and Ales Mikhalevich ("For modernization" movement). The "left" wing opposition forwarded Yaraslau Ramanchuk (United Civil Party), Uladzimir Nekliaeu ("Tell the Truth" civil campaign), Mikola Stakevich (Belarusian Social Democratic party) and Yuri Glushakov (The Greens) as their candidates.

Belarusian opposition remains reluctant in its attempts to gain support of the voters and elaboration of efficient electoral programs.

Quite surprisingly for some Western observers, more broadly known politicians such as the leader of the United Civil party Anatol Liabedzka have refrained from joining the presidential race.

Several pre-election trends of the opposition strategy can be identified. Some of these trends have actually turned into a sort of “traditions” throughout the Lukashenka’s rule:

- Belarusian opposition remains reluctant in its attempts to gain support of the voters and elaboration of efficient electoral programs. Not least due to the fact that their chances of actually winning the election are particularly poor.
- Some Belarusian NGOs and social movements do try to elaborate efficient political and social projects for the future development of Belarus. However a conceptual abyss exists between those who are attempting to do politics and those who do the strategic thinking.
- The latest trend suggests that many of Lukashenka’s opponents try to find their way into politics as representatives of civil campaigns or movements rather than political parties. This is considered to be easier than mobilizing apolitical voters through explanation of party ideologies but hampers the prospects of future development of efficient party democracy in Belarus.
- Some Belarusian civil society activists and intellectuals have been suggesting that 2010 presidential elections should be ignored by democratic forces altogether. However, the primary rationale for opposition participation in the presidential race of 2010 is not so much winning the election, but rather “defining who the president of alternative Belarus is”.

General mood in the opposition and governmental camps

Although the candidates represent quite a spectrum of economic and political projects, the real attempts of campaigning are rather passive. Most of A. Lukashenka’s opponents seem to have entered the elections for the sake of competition itself and to indulge in some self-promotion. As the expectations were not very high many candidates are quite content with their up to date performance.

- **Nekliueu** seems to be already satisfied with his civil campaign results but still has all intentions to get the outmost results from elections.
- The pre-registration period for **Ramanchuk** concentrated on collection of the necessary signatures. Other than that the campaign has been rather passive and overshadowed by concerns that authorities might reject his candidacy altogether.
- **Sannikau** has rejoiced the results of a comparative opinion poll by the Charter 97, which showed he was a forerunner among internet users. Other than that he has been rather passive as well.

• **Glushakov** and his team spent a lot of time composing their “Electoral project: Social justice, ecological safety and self-governance”. Despite that, his ambitions are quite low as he repeatedly mentioned being ready to make way for a single candidate of democratic forces at any time.

• **Rymashevsky** and his party Belarusian Christian Democrats based their election campaign on a slogan “Lukashenka, go away!”. The slogan was expected to spark a popular movement and turn into mass strikes after September 24, but did not.

• **Mikhalevich** was the only candidate to openly announce that he does not support the idea of the single opposition candidate. Along with Glushakov, Kostusev, Statkevich and Tereshenko, A. Mikhalevich is one of the weakest candidates. To them the elections are the chance to introduce themselves to the public. The strongest highlights of Mikhalevich’s electoral program could be summarized as follows: Belarus must neither join NATO, nor further develop the Union State with Russia. Domestic affairs such as privatization and modernization of economy are of higher importance at the moment. Probably because of that his vision of future EU-Belarus relations also remains vague.

• **Kostusev’s** campaign relies heavily on his 8 years experience in housing and utilities infrastructure and 9 years in agricultural sector as his strongest feature. Besides this experience he also believes that his affiliation to the oldest national opposition party in Belarus would attract support. Unfortunately, these might not be enough to convince the voters.

• **Gaidukevich** is a non-opposition candidate, who has traditionally conceded his votes to A. Lukashenka in previous elections. This year will hardly be an exclusion.

Political programs and electoral slogans of the candidates

Elections are a great moment for analysis of alternative development visions of a country. Presenting original and brave, yet feasible vision and ensuring voters’ support is not an easy task in any country. Furthermore so in Belarus. The visions and slogans of the candidates need to reach the hearts of 40 % of the yet undecided Belarusian voters. In these terms, basically every candidate other than Lukashenka must start from scratch or at least so the opinion polls show. What are the highlights of the candidates’ visions?

• **Ramanchuk** sees unemployment and poor economic situation in Belarus as key political and economic problems. Therefore he employs the following slogans: “Millions of new working places for Belarus” and “We create new and keep the best of present regulation”. “New regulation” stands for “market based and liberal measures” in his program. He however avoids using liberal

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terms directly not to repel the more conservative share of the population.

- **Nekliaeu** founds his campaign on the concept of “public will”, including strong representation of the national interests and respect for human rights. In economic terms he concentrates on preservation of the existing working places and creation of new under a rather strong proposition that his victory would be the people’s victory as well.
- **Sannikau** is a direct defender of a hardliner oppositionist claims and calls Lukashenka a dictator and human rights violator. Sannikau’s campaign is grounded on the vision of “European Belarus”.
- **Glushakov** uses slogans as “Respect, justice and social protection for everyone!” and “Science – 21st century”. Beyond this slogan lies a call for modernisation, democracy and harmonious economic development of the country.
- **Rymashevsky** refers to Christian and European values in his call for a “Christian Belarus in Europe”.
- **Mikhalevich** falls into the difficult to distinguish category of candidates under the slogan of “Economic growth, effective government and active society”.
- **Kostusev** defines his priorities in the following way: “Defending national interests is our main and last principle”, “Free and independent Belarus”.
- Although loyal to the government **Gaidukevich** states several points of disapproval with the current policies of Lukashenka. Namely, Gaidukevich resists any ideas of liberalization of economy; furthermore, he is wary of the tensions in Belarus-Russia relations. What Lukashenka and Gaidukevich do agree upon is the concept of “strong government and stability” along with slogans like “New Belarus — Unity” and “For sovereign, independent and flourishing Belarus!”. S. Gaidukevich addresses the still overwhelming needs of the electorate, namely, “order in the country and a rich table at home”.
- **Lukashenka** similarly stands for a “strong state”, resistance to Russian influences and refraining from the EU assistance.

Why don’t the candidates to the presidential elections 2006 try their chances again?

Alexander Kazulin, former rector of the Belarusian State University, member of the Social Democratic party and former candidate for presidency refused to run for the presidency this year pointing at the ongoing divide in opposition forces. Kazulin claimed he would have competed Lukashenka only as a single candidate.

Alaksandar Milinkevich who is well known in Europe and recognized not exclusively within his political circle but also among Belarusian grassroots decided not to take part in the 2010 elections un-

less the democratic forces are represented in the vote counting commission. Despite that, refusal to candidate clearly did not mean that he was stepping away from Belarusian politics altogether, nor this particular election. Although Milinkevich is not running for the presidency this year, he has presented his electoral program¹ for the public quite ahead of the election. What it is more, he continues to participate in internet discussions about his program and Belarusian perspectives.

Milinkevich has expressed readiness to support candidacies of Kostusev, Glushakov and Mikhalevich quite surprisingly as they don’t mention ambitious plans of Belarus EU membership in their programs. However, Milinkevich seems to ignore his ideological “twin” Andrei Sannikau, also a prominent Euro-optimist. That could be explained by Milinkevich’s own ambition to be the person “to bring Belarus to Europe”.

Clearly Milinkevich does not support U. Nekliaeu because of the alleged Kremlin support and Russia-oriented electoral program. The mismatch of opinions between Milinkevich, Nekliaeu and Ramanchuk can be further explained by their view on economy. Ramanchuk is an advocate of neo-liberal economy; Nekliaeu supports privatization, including the energy sector; whereas Milinkevich doesn’t support liberal economy principles giving preference to socially oriented economy.

A very popular explanation of Milinkevich’s non-participation in the elections of 2010 could be his desire to take part in the elections of 2015 leaving the responsibility to drive Belarusian national democratic forces on the shoulders of Nekliaeu and Ramanchuk this year. This year has been shaky in terms of stability of Belarusian status quo. Lukashenka had to deal with the local consequences of global economic downturn and questionable sustainability of existing levels of welfare and, eventually, with a conflict with Moscow. If Lukashenka fails to ensure economic growth, he may not stand such a good chance of winning the next election. Therefore the democratic opposition may have better positions in 2015 than today.

Could these projects of a “New and democratic Belarus” win this election?

Belarusian opposition never fully abandoned the idea of choosing a single candidate for the presidency from democratic forces as a key factor to success against Lukashenka, however, there is still no consensus among various opposition movements in the country on such a candidate. This internal disagreement has decreased credibility of the democratic forces in the minds of the public. Under these conditions the idea of “toppling” Lukashenka has been discrediting the opposition during the past 16 years in the eyes of majority of Belarusian grassroots population who associated “democracy” with chaos and bad rule increasingly. Not least controversial is the issue of future

¹ <http://by.milinkevich.org/forfreedom/tezisy/>

The real projects of a new and democratic Belarus will have to wait for their turn in 2015.

Belarus-Russia relations. Majority of Belarusian people support the idea of sustaining good and close relations with Russia (74, 5 % of Belarusian people prefer closer ties with Russia than Europe). Lastly, the potential of current democratic forces to run a country is often questioned arguing that there are hardly any professional politicians among them. Most democrats come from very different spheres of life (literature, journalism, education, etc.). These factors make a grassroots overturn of Lukashenka impossible even if the elections of 2010 go totally fraud.

More than ever before it is evident that it takes an external actor to determine the winner of elections in Belarus. Despite 16 years of European attempts to promote democracy in Belarus by non-coercive means, Russia always had a final say on the outcome of every election. Possibility exists that Russia will not recognize Lukashenka's victory for the first time in history. However, at the moment Russia does

not have any realistic alternative to Lukashenka, even if it allegedly supports his opponents. Russia-Belarus energy conflicts, reduction of Belarusian dairy imports to Russia and the so-called information war should not be interpreted as Moscow's attempts to overthrow Lukashenka but rather as consolidation of the better negotiation position Russia has against Belarus.

The fact that democratic forces decided not to nominate a single candidate indicates that their intentions in the elections of 2010 were limited. The only candidate who could win votes by himself is U. Nekliaeu. Other mostly "virtual" candidates such as Sannikau, Ramanchuk, and those, whose surnames are unknown to Belarusian public (Kostusev, Rimashevsky, Glushakov, Mihalevich) do not stand a chance at least for now. Therefore, the real projects of a new and democratic Belarus will have to wait for their turn in 2015. And even then a victory is only feasible if a single candidate is chosen.

Opinion expressed by the authors of "Bell" does not necessarily correspond with that of the Eastern Europe Studies Centre.



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