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DOES CHANGING PUBLIC SUPPORT TOWARDS THE BELARUS GOVERNMENT MEAN TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT?

It was a wild period back in 1994, the year when the leader with the strong hand, Mr Lukashenka came to power. The newly elected leader soon was described as “the last dictator in Europe” as he established a system of authority in the country which rules from the top down and has turned the country into a pseudo-democracy. However, for most Belarusians, Aliaksandr Lukashenka means stability, the most desirable objective for the everyday citizen.

Public support towards the government (actually, Lukashenka) was always highly influenced by pragmatic tools: better economic situation, for example, higher wages meant higher trust in the regime. As more fields were directly influenced by the regime, the “social contract” became stronger. But the financial crisis, which struck like lightning, changed the situation and now new trends can be observed. Therefore, this issue of The Bell will look at the changed playing field.

Alena Artsiomenka, a part-time lecturer of social communication, examines whether the direct connection between the level of wages and trust in government is still valid today. She proves that this was the case from the beginning of the Lukashenka era until 2010. After the financial crisis new trends were seen. Alena concludes that the concept of “stability feeling” should be included while studying this connection.

Uladimir Charvonenka in the second article introduces us to the broader view of the social contract, also listing those who benefitted. However, the author argues that the social contract in Belarus has worked for 20 years but there are now more and more threats to it. Finally, Charvonenka states several possible future scenarios for the transformation of the social contract in Belarus.

Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor

CHANGING PUBLIC ATTITUDE TOWARDS BELARUSIAN GOVERNMENT: A NEW TREND OR SAME OLD STORY

Alena Artsiomenka

Under the rule of Mr Lukashenka, people’s attitude towards the government has been heterogeneous. For a long time, it had clear pragmatic foundations, despite popular opinion about the nation’s support for its charismatic leader. However, the ongoing presidential term has forced the experts to reconsider their concepts of the regime’s nature and people’s attitudes, with a challenging need to create a new model.

Traditionally described as loyalty, Belarusians see power on one hand, as the basis of the country’s social and political stability; on the other hand, it constitutes a factor that obstructs political development and limits the opportunity for change in the country. This is why the changing type of support for the government is interesting for anyone who is also interested in

change in the current situation.

The critical factor here is public opinion about the incumbent leader. What people think about Lukashenka is the most adequate indicator of what they think about the country’s authorities in general, because he is the only official political player in the field. The ministers are implementers, periodically rotated by the President. State media present them as managers who can be more or less successful in fulfilling the President’s assignments and implementing his strategies. Political life in the country is reduced to the presidential elections, with parliamentary or local elections being widely uninteresting – in June 2012, days before the upcoming parliamentary elections, only 50.9% of citizens expressed their readiness to vote.

After another stage of lowering economic growth and stagnating income, people were easily “bribed” again by a yet another pre-electoral growth of wages.

Therefore, to judge people's views on the power establishment, one could examine their stance on Lukashenka, his electoral rating and trust rating. The President's electoral rating is the most sensitive public opinion indicator for measuring public attitude in general. The rating of trust is an alternative indicator; traditionally, it is slightly higher than the electoral one. For example, the IISEPS opinion poll in June 2013 indicated that the share of citizens who would vote for Lukashenka in upcoming elections is 40.9% but 48.9% claimed they trusted the President. The level of trust in the government is lower than both presidential ratings at 39.9%. On the other hand, the level of trust in the President does not include people's opinion about whether he is successful in his office; it also fails to reflect whether people feel that they need a change. It is essential to understand the factors of Lukashenka's electoral support in order to describe the nature of “the unique Belarusian social and political model” and to get an idea about future developments.

The concept of political and economic cycle: from the beginning until the “crisis”

For many years since the election of Lukashenka, the dynamics of the attitudes towards the President were determined by rational reasons, or, more specifically, by the political and economic cycle described by IPM Research Center experts.¹ Spending for economic growth and wages tended to be increased at pre-electoral stages and decreased after the elections. Research has proved that real income peaks coincided with the periods prior to presidential and parliamentary elections as well as constitutional referenda of 1994, 1995 and 2004.

The strategy has proved successful for quite a long time. A research of the political and business cycle in Belarus by BISS² found a direct correlation between growing wages and support for the President. On one hand, it allows to claim a rational type of support for the authorities. On the other, the findings are pessimistic in that they showed that the population keeps meeting the government's expectation without “learning from mistakes”. After another stage of lowering economic growth and stagnating income, people were easily “bribed” again by yet another pre-electoral increase in wages.

Politicians and experts could only hope that the social and political situation in Belarus would change as a result of a complete economic recession, so that the government would become

short of funds to launch one more recovery stage prior to upcoming elections.

The arrival of the “new majority” concept

A need to generate electoral support prior to the presidential elections in December 2010 by achieving an ambitious USD 500 level of average wages and overheating the economy, along with other factors, resulted in the financial crisis of 2011. The rate of the Belarusian rouble against the dollar decreased by two thirds, with a corresponding re-calculation of wages and social benefits protracted until the beginning of 2012. This has resulted in shrinking support for the President, something which can be logically explained by the rating-salary correlation. In March 2011, 46.2% of Belarusians stated that they wanted Lukashenka to win the elections; while in December 2011, just 21.7% said they would prefer the incumbent President to another “potentially successful” candidate.

However, the further dynamics of the electoral rating challenged the old approach to interpreting the political support type and the social and political sustainability. Despite expectations, the stable and dynamic increase of income throughout 2012 did not increase support for the President significantly. His electoral rating was just 31.5% in December 2012 (down from 34.5% in September 2012), while the level of monthly wages was in its highest (USD 546, compared to USD 486 in September).

These processes and, in particular, the obvious discrepancy between the rating and income dynamics provoked an assumption of changing electoral support. It led to the new concept of the “new majority”, a possible central target group for alternative political actors.

“The new majority is the 60% of Belarusians who trust neither the government, nor the opposition, but they want change in the country”.³ Before 2012, sociologists used to point to two traditionally consistent groups: the pro-presidential one (around 30%) and the pro-oppositional one, or those “considering themselves an opposition to the government”, while the pragmatic rest, or some 40 to 50% of citizens, were switching attitudes according to the stage of the cycle. The novelty of the “new majority” concept was not just the fact that these people had no clear opinion about the political arena, but also the fact that they remained suspicious despite the obvious

¹ <http://www.research.by/webroot/delivery/files/wp2012r03.pdf>

² http://belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/sa_04_2012_ru.pdf

³ http://www.vybory.ej.by/forecasts/2013/01/09/sotsiologicheskoe_novoe_bol_shinstvo_v_belarusi_uvelichivaetsya.html

A need to generate electoral support prior to the presidential elections in December 2010 by achieving an ambitious 500 USD level of average wages and overheating the economy, along with other factors, resulted in a financial crisis of 2011.

The “stability feeling” is now growing, despite the real economic problems, shrinking budget income, overloaded stocks and the negative trade balance.

growth of income in 2012. This fact led to an assumption that the political and economic cycle mechanism had been broken, with the apolitical segment of the Belarusian population departing from purely shortsighted pragmatic reasons and becoming more open to the appeal of the potential efforts of independent politicians.

A need for a new concept

Yet, the growing electoral support for Lukashenka in 2013 dismissed the idea of a sustainable “new majority” which could oppose the logics of the political and economic cycle, following the fall of the idea of direct rating-wage correlation.

The growth of Lukashenka’s rating was rather fast and unexpected: up from 33.4% in March 2013 (still on the level of 2012) to 40.9% in June. No additional leverage was used by the regime to influence public opinion, beyond the economic ones, with the rhetoric of the state media keeping the same positive note on the authorities and hardly being able to produce such a sharp growth. On the other hand, independent media are not popular: the joint coverage of major independent web resources (including news.tut.by, charter97.org and naviny.by) was 26.95% of the internet audience of 4.856 million⁴ in June, or some 13% of the population.

People still use their own day-to-day practices and economic well being as a source of information about the life of the country. Notably, the growth of wages slowed down considerably in May 2013 (1.3% growth of real income, compared to 3.7% in April). Obviously, the link between people’s stance on the economic situation and the government is more complicated now.

To properly conceptualise this change, one could try to add one more variable to the model of “wages and support for the government”. This variable could be called “the stability feeling”. This feeling is now growing, despite the real economic

problems, shrinking budget income, overloaded stocks and the negative trade balance. It is not enough to consider just the objective factors, given the very strong influence of this subjective feeling.

For the first time in a long while, the share of people who believed the economy was in crisis decreased between December 2012 and June 2013, down from 88% in December to 65% in March and 60% in June. Probably, the stance on the economy has a delayed effect on the presidential rating; this is why the growing feeling at the end of the crisis did not directly influence support for him in March. Other opinions of the public on the social and economic situation, that could hypothetically influence the growing support for the President, were the level of general approval of the country’s development: the share of those who believed that the country was on the wrong track decreased from 51% in March to 46%. People’s assessment of their own financial situation also changed. Interestingly, the same level (13%) reported positive changes, but the share of those who reported deterioration fell from 29 to 22%, and the share of people who felt no difference rose from 56 to 63%.

To check these indicators as determinates of support for the government we will need further polls. However, one can draw provisional conclusions. We can hardly claim that the “new majority” in Belarus consists of people who are consistently negative about the regime. Even in a situation when the level of income is losing its direct link with electoral trends, other economy-based indicators remain important. It is worth adding the factor of “stability feeling” to the traditional model of “level of income and attitude to the government”. This feeling consists of people’s answers to the following two questions: (1) Is the country on the right track; (2) Is the economy in crisis; and also (3) People’s own financial situation, whereas the lack of negative trends prevail over positive ones.

⁴ Gemius, исследование GemiusAudience 06/2013

**Unspoken social contract:
do anything but stay out
of politics!**

SOCIAL CONTRACT IN BELARUS: A SURVIVAL TEST

Uladzimir Chervonenka

In its broad meaning, a social contract is a voluntary agreement between the rulers and those ruled, based on a set of rules. According to the contract, some powers and sovereignty are transferred from those ruled to the rulers in exchange for certain assets, benefits, or services. The situation in Belarus during the last two decades is a typical example of a social contract which has been more or less successful, with a stable and rather high level of support for the never-changing power establishment, a lack of open social or other conflicts and a minimal use of power by the government, as well as the insignificant role of the opposition in the political landscape.

This was largely caused by the fact that in the early 90s the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was the most Soviet of all former Soviet republics, with just one generation separating the industrial society from the agrarian one, the experience of significant investments to economic and infrastructural sectors, and the status of simultaneously being, the “assembly shop” of the USSR and its “visiting card” for the outside world.

Along with this, the leadership resources of the Belarusian proto-nation had been exhausted by numerous wars, repressions, deportations during several previous centuries, resulting in the so-called Belarusian tolerance or non-responsiveness and paternalistic life attitude, typical of the rest of the survivors of the nation. Tragically, Belarusians stayed just a generation behind the completion of a full-fledged nation-building process; they were hardly even fighting for their national independence, when it came to them in 1990 as a free lunch.

Belarusian citizens satisfied with “lower” needs

In general, the electoral preferences of Belarusians fit the paternalistic worldview of the majority of the country’s population, focusing on satisfying physiological or “lower” needs (according to Maslow’s hierarchy) at the expense of socially significant ones, traditionally considered as “higher” ones.

Between 1994 and 2013, the keynote ideas of platforms and messages sent by Mr Lukashenka and his team (actually, teams) were clearly targeting the social demand based on the lower needs of Belarusian voters, as opposed to the higher ones.

The lower needs are: (1) Physiological needs (food, drink, sexual attraction); (2) Safety and protection needs; (3) Belonging and love; (4)

Belonging and respect. The activities and social policies of the Belarusian “state for the people” primarily target the abovementioned needs. Satisfaction of higher needs ([1] Cognitive and competence needs, [2] Aesthetic needs – beauty, balance, and [3] Esteem and self-actualisation needs) is probably only available to the ruler of the Belarusian state and a very small community of people who meet their own needs according to their intellectual mindset and values, and oppose spontaneous manifestations of such needs by the emerging civil society of Belarus.

The incomes of the majority in Belarus only enable them to satisfy their basic needs: food, housing, cheap transport, in-country travel, minimal entertainment, with all the undersupplies compensated by the social policies of the state.

The unspoken social contract of Mr Lukashenka with the Belarusian people is as follows: do whatever you want, feel free to work or not to work, do business, engage in manufacturing, study, travel, create things (according to official standards), participate in public activities (find the list of ‘right’ NGOs attached), but STAY OUT OF POLITICS!

Belarusians who accept the terms and conditions are the beneficiaries and can even achieve self-actualisation, if they choose to work in the state education system, healthcare, or even the state administration. However, they have to make sure they are loyal and play by the system’s rules. Objectors to the contract are quickly eliminated from the field as oppositionists, by administrative pressure (as a rule, resulting in the loss of their job) or criminal prosecution for invented economic or openly political reasons, and have to move to the category of “hard-core/professional regime fighters”, to choose the option of “I don’t care”, or just to emigrate. Objectors, and especially active ones, are in a clear minority. There is an obvious majority of social conservatives in Belarus now, compared to supporters of change.

Social contract: content and threats

To understand how the existing social contract was shaped in Belarus, one has to switch to the situation of the first presidential elections in Belarus in 1994. The old Soviet ideology is in crisis and almost banned, the broken economic ties result in the collapse of industries; the governance crisis causes corruption and lack of social protection. Total anarchy and unregulated trade prevail. All of a sudden, a new

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strong charismatic leader emerges. He dares to challenge the government and pledges to fight the corruption, to re-launch factories, and to face off the threat to the country, in general. Notably, he is non-partisan, does not prioritise controversial nationalistic issues, and is not marked by participation in executive authorities. After a clean vote count, Mr Lukashenka receives a landslide victory in a second round with 80,1% support. It was a clear victory and a credit of trust from the nation which had been disappointed by democracy, longing for a “powerful hand” and educated by the Soviet tradition of subordination to leadership, something fitting the Eastern mentality pattern of respect towards satrapies and czarism.

The groups of citizens that can feel satisfied now are:

- Children and adolescents – available pre-schools; free secondary and high education, and partially free higher education; social benefits and preferential housing loans; regulated pricing for socially important goods; relative safety of streets thanks to the efforts of the Ministry of the Interior.
- Youth – sufficient number of schools, vocational and higher schools, minimal fees and exactions, low corruption element, level of teaching comparable to that in Russia, available entertainments.
- Young professionals – subsidised housing, guaranteed job, labour contracts, opportunity to emigrate.
- Factory and office workers – job protection due to a ban on the liquidation of unprofitable enterprises, stable salary guaranteeing a minimum standard of living, housing loans.
- Pensioners – stable high pensions, social benefits and an opportunity to earn extra money.
- Agricultural workers – easy-term housing loans, support for young professionals, state procurement, state support to agrarian holdings and state subsidies.
- Entrepreneurs – adequate taxation burden, minimisation of the corruption element, no organised criminality, adequate efforts of law enforcement agencies.
- Public servants, staff of interior, security and military services – state social support, easy-term housing loans, prestigious work and high pensions.

As we can see, the coverage of the social partnership between the Belarusian state and society is quite extensive, with the share of those satisfied significantly exceeding the share of those unhappy with the situation.

However, the existing social contract is quite risky and has some weaknesses:

1. Cuts in social spending because of the

privatisation of flagship industries: Belaruskaliy, oil refineries in Mazyr and Navapolack, etc.;

2. Cuts in social spending due to the lack of industry modernisation and decreased competitiveness of Belarusian goods;
3. Reallocation of funds from the public sector to other sectors, given the costs of state machinery and the need to “purchase” its loyalty;
4. New budget lobbyists generated by the expansion of Russian capital which invests in protecting its own interests against the public sector;
5. The development and availability of IT tools raise the social demands of Belarusians, because of integration to the global informational space;
6. Growing incomes and living standards will result in new aspirations and a willingness to have uncensored self-expression and self-fulfilment;
7. The Europeanisation and growing living standards in Ukraine will force the Belarusian government to implement appropriate reforms and embrace the European choice;
8. The growing private sector and consolidation of the middle class will reduce the dependence of a part of the society on the state, resulting in the revision of the social contract;
9. In a situation of the weakening of Lukashenka's power, significant state assets will create a temptation for some segments of the establishment to participate in privatisation, competition between pro-market and pro-state actors, and a significant revision of the contract;
10. Civil disobedience or massive protests because of “Lukashenka fatigue”, if a clear alternative idea or leader emerge.

Possible future scenarios

“Simmering” – step-by-step cuts of certain social services might result in “grumbling” of the most vulnerable groups without them taking action, leading to the conservation of problems, stagnation of society and shrinking support for the government, but with the status quo kept. This scenario could take a decade or more.

“Revolutionary revision” – in a situation of an abrupt shortage of resources, the government might need to make severe cuts to social policies and hurt the interests of a significant share of society, resulting in a fall in living standards and a outburst of social protest, a new social contract or a regime change. The duration of the scenario is two to three years after the launch.

“Pro-Russian turn” implies the incorporation of Belarus to Russian business groups, with an agenda of “wild privatisation”, redistribution of

It does not look realistic to change the existing situation in Belarus towards the revision of the current social contract without significant political and financial efforts from outside.

property, growing corruption and criminality, and emerging lobby groups. In this scenario, the originally preserved high level of social support will fade out down to the Russian level, public safety will decrease, and the Russian model of “state capitalism” will be introduced, with the prospect of the political incorporation of Belarus into Russia. This scenario would take three to five years; it is possible both in the case of a regime change and under the current regime.

“Elite inner conflict” is possible in a case of decreased capability of the incumbent President of Belarus. This scenario can contain some or all elements of the abovementioned scenarios. What is certain is that it will result in cuts in social spending and revision of the social contract. It might result in a competitive democracy; however, this scenario is the closest to the Belarusian situation of the mid-90s, in terms of predictability.

Continuation of the current policies based on the **steady privatisation of state assets, opening up to domestic and foreign investments and modernisation of the economy**, preservation of

social spending and upholding the social facilities, preservation of the current regime and its partial modernisation, upholding high living standards and the current social contract. In a favourable geopolitical environment, this scenario could be implemented in 10 to 15 years.

As we can see, the existing social contract between Belarusian society and the government has proved very enduring for the last 20 years. It has succeeded in meeting the social demand, preserving stability and consolidating society. However, it has obvious risks; so far, the government has managed to tackle them.

It does not look realistic to change the existing situation in Belarus towards the revision of the current social contract without significant political and financial efforts from outside. However, the financial resources in the country are clearly insufficient to maintain the present social sphere, even with state assets periodically privatised; with the passing of time, this circumstance will inevitably lead to the need to revise the current social contract.



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