



2 CASES - BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION AND ASTRAVETS NUCLEAR POWER PLANT: IMITATING CHANGES?

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The Eastern Europe Studies Centre brings to your attention yet another issue of the electronic info letter – *The Bell*. In the current issue our readers will find articles on two very different topics: 1) the state and the prospects of the systemic opposition in Belarus and 2) construction of the Astravets nuclear power plant. Albeit inherently very different, these issues have an aspect in common – in both cases the actions undertaken are more an imitation of a change rather than successful, goal-oriented policies.

In the first article *Belarusian Opposition: Strategy of Survival* political analyst Pavel Usov studies the state and the prospects of the systemic opposition in Belarus. Needless to say, it has been dramatically weakened because of the post-electoral crackdown. In addition, the author enumerates a list of fundamental problems that Belarusian oppositional parties continue to suffer from. Despite numerous declarations, no mechanisms have been elaborated for solving these problems. The only relevant issue on today's oppositional agenda is "the strategy of survival". Because of its state, the systemic opposition is not able to increase its activities even in the light of the growing socio-economic tensions. Bearing

in mind that recent actions and protests were self-organised by the democratically-minded citizens, it seems legitimate to ask, whether existence of such opposition is beneficial to all?

In the second article Anna Serova, expert on energy governance at the Vilnius-based Public Policy and Management Institute, analyses the motives and prospects of the Astravets nuclear power plant (NPP) construction. Officially, the goal of the NPP is to ensure Belarus' energy security and diversify its energy sources. A closer look at the project suggests that Belarus indeed "diversifies" the energy sources: from thermal stations working on Russian gas to electricity, which will be generated by a Russia-financed nuclear plant. Does this mean that construction of the NPP is merely an imitation of the energy security policy? Anna Serova attempts to answer this question in her article *Astravets Nuclear Power Plant: Panacea for Belarusian Energy Security?*

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Editor

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION: STRATEGY OF SURVIVAL

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Prior to analysis and evaluation of the near-term strategy of the Belarusian opposition forces, a few words are needed about their state of affairs after the election 2010.

The opposition structures, just as the whole pro-democratic community, were hammered by the Belarusian regime. In fact, before the presidential election the opposition did not represent any consolidated force that could have any serious impact on the social moods. Nevertheless, the "pre-election thaw" period created conditions for intensified activity of the political parties and organizations. In their turn, various alternative

movements and initiatives managed to recruit new members from among sympathizing but earlier inactive citizens. That raised deep concern of the Belarusian authorities.

It is disputable if the street protest on December 19, 2010 was the result of the opposition's activity, less oppression or the society's disappointment with the government. Perhaps, all factors together provoked the social and political blast changing the internal political situation in the country and forced Lukashenka to use brutal force against the opposition.

This day we see that the structural opposition (political parties) is completely paralyzed as a result of repression and can hardly become a real

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mechanism of political impact on the government in the near future.

Negative processes inside political organizations have been lasting for years. They affect all aspects of the activity of the parties in opposition. The problems are systemic, and, regrettably, no mechanisms have been elaborated for solving them. In fact, the negative phenomena and processes that took place within the opposition two or three years ago are still relevant in present. The only factor that has changed is the external political environment the opposition forces are functioning in. Among the main problems of the opposition structures one may list the following:

1. Deficit of human resources;
2. Aggravation of inter-party conflicts;
3. Absence of the single strategy for uniting the opposition into one camp;
4. Absence of the strategy for further political activity (the problem of leadership).

1. The problem of human resources. After the presidential election and as a result of deteriorating socio-economic situation in the country, the public sympathy and confidence in the opposition grew to a significant extent. Nevertheless, apart from symbolic actions (like March 25th), the activity of the opposition remains practically imperceptible. Currently, none of the political organizations are able to effectively work with the society, recruit new activists, or propose new (alternative) methods of political struggle.

Certainly, there is nothing surprising about that. The democratic community received a smashing blow and is still in shock. To prevent activation of the opposition structures, the government continues to build up pressure and oppress its political opponents, conducting regular arrests and detentions of the activists. Besides dozens of activists behind bars, it is the political emigration after the presidential election that is seriously weakening the opposition structures. In fact, the opposition has moved its activity abroad.

On the other hand, representatives of political parties and organizations are waiting for the next steps of the government, whether it would strengthen or weaken the pressure on its political opponents. Strengthening the pressure means complete liquidation of all opposition parties in Belarus, which, in my opinion, is quite likely in the current circumstances.

2. The problem of internal rifts. Despite the general difficulty of the situation in the country and the need for consolidation, one may observe negative trends inside some political parties. Another rift took place in the BPF Party in 2011, leading to creation of a new structure – “The Belarusian Movement”. The Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) is still in the state of a conflict. The party leadership is claimed by both Iryna Veshtard, elected at a congress in June 2011, and Anatol Liaukovich, who does not recognize the results of the congress and whose claims are backed by the Ministry of

Justice. On the one hand, the conflict may lead to emergence of one more quasi-oppositional social democratic party. On the other hand, there is a risk of complete liquidation of the party.

Such opposition groups as “Govori Pravdu” (Tell the Truth) and the “European Belarus” were created exclusively for the election. Their actions were rather of the PR nature and were not aimed at functioning in the long-term perspective, i.e. doing everyday political work. Besides that, having lost their leaders (European Belarus’ Sannikau is serving a sentence in jail and Govori Pravdu’s Niakliayeu is on a 3-year conditional sentence), these initiatives have also lost their meaning, as these groups were created to serve the political figures, and not vice versa.

Among the more or less structured political organizations that still function there are The Fair World, The Movement for Freedom, and UCP. However, these structures are either small in number, or have problems with public confidence, as, for instance, UCP, after actions and statements of their candidate Ramanchuk.

3. The problem of consolidation. After the presidential election the democratic community has not seen any concrete moves for consolidation of the Belarusian opposition into a single political front. The opposition made a number of steps towards consolidation which resulted in: creation of the National Coordination Council in January 2011, and signing the single platform on June 29th, 2011. The agreement about the single platform was signed by BCD, BPF, “Govori Pravdu”, the Fair World, UCP, and the Movement for Freedom). These initiatives and declarations are absolutely identical and are supposed to serve the goals of release of political prisoners and creation of favorable conditions for holding elections.^{1,2} In my opinion, such duplicating actions are the evidence of disorganization and disorientation of the opposition structures rather than about their consolidation. In fact, the opposition is only imitating the consolidation process, i.e. we deal with “*process for the sake of the process*”, just to demonstrate to the public and the international community that the opposition still exists. However, this will hardly bring the political parties closer to the real consolidation.

Moreover, many of the declarations are populist and void, as the opposition has neither resources, nor strength or political will to implement them. For instance, here’s one of the clauses of the common platform: “*In case the demands are not met (by the government – P.U.), the democratic forces of the Republic of Belarus participating in this agreement reserve the right to boycott the elections and to organize political protests.*”³

Analyzing the statement one should point out that any ultimatum foresees concrete deadlines, which

1 Belarusian opposition created the National Coordination Council, - <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,14759586,00.html>
2 Opposition created new platform for joint activity, - http://www.news.date.bs/politics_233090.html
3 Belarusian opposition is consolidating <http://www.odsgomel.org/rus>

In such circumstances, the only strategy of the opposition structures would be the effort to “survive”, i.e. keep the official registration and possibility for legal activity.

is not the case of this platform. In its turn, that means that even from a formal point of view the statements are politically insignificant. It is quite likely that this is not the last declaration and not the last attempt of consolidation of the Belarusian opposition leading to no result.

4. The problem of the single political strategy.

Regarding the political strategy in general, it is possible to state that the single political strategy as such, just as the really consolidated opposition, does not exist. What's more, we can hardly hope for such a strategy being elaborated in the near future.

Without real unity in the opposition camp it makes no sense to talk about any elaborate strategy. The only thing that might be interesting for consideration is the possible moves of separate parties and initiatives. In their turn, the moves will depend only on the policy carried out by Lukashenka regime in the near future. In other words, the main strategy paradigm of the political parties in opposition is the strategy of “waiting”.

A significant part of representatives of the Belarusian opposition shares the hopes that the government will make political concessions under pressure of the objective economic factors. New political thaw would create conditions for revitalizing the opposition activity. Nevertheless, in the conditions of the thaw such activity would not include any new elements and would just repeat the steps the opposition made before the election, i.e.: hope for dialog with the authorities and participation in the next election campaigns (parliamentary campaign of 2012). Moreover, the issue of participation in the election campaign would bring up serious disagreements between the opposition structures and lead to new conflicts.

Niakliayeu (“Govori Pravdu”), Milinkevich (Movement for Freedom), and Liabedzka (UCP) are among supporters of the dialogue with the authorities, on conditions that political prisoners are released.

Despite discouraging experience of the previous parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2008, for some reason the opposition politicians continue to believe that the government would make concessions and let some representatives of the opposition get seats in the parliament. They think the government would do that in order to achieve a status quo with the West. In my opinion, in conditions of the growing socio-economic tension one should not hope for any changes in the regime's home policy. Any alleviation at this stage might further destabilize

the situation in the country. That is why, most probably the Belarusian authorities would tighten control and pressure on both the society and the opposition.

In such circumstances, the only strategy of the opposition structures would be the effort to “survive”, i.e. keep the official registration and possibility for legal activity.

Consequently, further steps of the opposition will solely depend on the strategy chosen by the Belarusian regime. In conditions of harder political pressure and tougher control the opposition would hardly become more active. In other words, the opposition would remain an object of political events happening in the country, rather than the subject provoking them.

Another element of the “waiting” strategy is the hope for further deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the country, which would provoke a socio-economic outburst. Certainly, worsening of the economic situation creates favorable conditions for increase of the opposition activity. Still, however paradoxical it may be, such increase can not be observed this day. The only political reaction of the opposition was the idea of calling an “All-Belarusian People's Congress” in October 2011. The goal of the congress, as declared by one of its organizers, is to “bring to the streets the people who are now holding rallies in their kitchens, in lines, and working places. Our goal is for the people to see that there are many of them, to stop thinking that nothing depends on them.”⁴

Again, it is possible to state that the above-mentioned statements and actions are purely declarative. They demonstrate that the opposition forces are not preparing but rather waiting for the social outburst in Belarus. However, the recent events in the country show that the society does not need help and participation of the opposition in the struggle with the regime. Self-organization of the democratically-minded citizens through Internet's social networks makes the existence of the structured opposition rather senseless.

⁴ Belarusian opposition is preparing an All-Belarusian People's Congress, - <http://www.ucpb.org/news/political-news/63911-congres-26052011>

Heavy dependence on energy imports from Russia (85.7% in 2007) and frequent energy disputes between Moscow and Minsk make Belarusian government rack the brains over the ways to enhance national energy security.

ASTRAVETS NUCLEAR POWER PLANT: PANACEA FOR BELARUSIAN ENERGY SECURITY?

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By constructing new nuclear plant Belarus tends to assure energy security and diversify its energy sources. Belarusian officials refer to wide markets, competitiveness, cost-effectiveness and ecological safety of “atoms for peace” when talking about Astravets nuclear power plant project. However, isn't it building just a castle in the air?

Meaning of energy security for Belarus

Energy, being a key factor of production and even, a key component of national security, is no longer produced where it is consumed. This fact means all possible risks of cross-border trade, price uncertainty and unstable supply that may threaten country's energy security. In the context of Belarus, energy security, meaning stable reasonably priced energy supplies, is directly related not only to the national security itself but to the stability of the ruling regime. Therefore, ensuring stable energy supplies is one of the main tasks of the current government.

However, the status of a transition country and presence of the relevant infrastructure no longer guarantee energy security for Belarus. Heavy dependence on energy imports from Russia (85.7% in 2007¹) [1] and frequent energy disputes between Moscow and Minsk make Belarusian government rack the brains over the ways to enhance national energy security, which is keen to ensure its stability.

Obviously, a country can reduce energy dependence by diversifying energy supplies and increasing its own energy production. But diversification of suppliers will not reduce the externality of political conflict and the possibility of unstable energy supplies to Belarus. Political tensions in the country and accordingly poor political dialogue with the EU hardly make Europe (Baltic nuclear power plant) a possible partner in this regard. And it's impossible for Belarus to bypass Russia in energy trade with CIS and other post-soviet countries.

It makes Belarus stick to the idea of generating its own energy power and diversifying its own energy sources without crossing borders and chasing new horizons. Renewables are on official policy agenda, but such practices are rare in Belarus (there are several wind farms built in the country) [2], for they won't satisfy the needs of the whole country. But the perspective of nuclear power production presupposes totally different scopes.

Moreover, nuclear power supporters advocate for friendly character of the type of energy in terms of climate change, as it is emissions-free power production, while hydro power is not environmentally compatible and wind/solar power depends on weather conditions. Nuclear proponents see added-value of nuclear energy in increase of national energy independence and creation of a “hedge” against fossil fuel prices. [3].

Therefore, national NPP construction project is quite a logical step for Belarus. According to the information at the official website of the president of the Republic of Belarus, the necessity to develop nuclear energy in the country is determined by the following factors: lack of own energy sources, the necessity to diversify energy sources and partially replace the imports, reduce cost price for imported energy and start own energy export [4]. When the majority of Belarusian thermal power plants work on Russian gas, which constantly goes up in price, and not climate-friendly perspective of replacing it with fuel oil again leads us to imports from Russia, official arguments on the one hand seem to be quite sound. But let's look at the project from another perspective and see whether the game is worth the candle.

What's in the project: possible implications?

Nuclear power plant will be constructed in two blocks. The first is to be finished in 2016 and the second in 2018. Their total capacity should amount to about 2.4 thousand MW. Mikhail Mikhadiuk [5], deputy energy minister of Belarus, said that after constructing NPP and several coal-fired plants, the country would reduce the demand for natural gas for production of energy from 94 percent (2008) to 55 percent in 2020.

Geographical location of Belarusian NPP

Town of Astravets, Grodno oblast, has been chosen as the best place for Belarusian NPP, which will be constructed according to the “NPP – 2006” project worked out by “Atomenrgoproject, St-Petersburg. The project obtained its legal framework after drawing and signing of the intergovernmental agreement between Russia and Belarus in Minsk on March 15, 2011. The target dates for NPP completion are the years 2017 – 2018 [6]. The strategy of locating the plant in Astravets is also explained by the country's plans to export extra energy to Poland and Baltic States.

Costs

The total cost of the power plant project is assessed at 9 bln USD. Russia is supposed to be an official

1 International Energy Agency Statistics.

Under Belarusian Constitution it's the president, who decides whether to consider public opinion or not, and Mr. Lukashenka decided to violate Aarhus convention.

contractor for building the nuclear plant. The credit agreement has not been signed yet though. Moreover, in the context of regular energy supply and payments disputes between Russia and Belarus Belarusian Ministry of Energy thought of attracting Chinese investors to finance the project. Still, the chief contractor remained the investor [7]. If the credit agreement is finally signed with Russia and the plant is built Belarus will pay off the credit with the energy the plant is going to produce.

Plant-pros

In general nuclear power is used in 30 states and Taiwan, with three quarters of the nuclear electricity in the world produced in France, Germany, Japan, Russia and the United States. The contribution of nuclear power to the global energy mix, according to the IEA in 2006, was 16% of electricity generation, 6.3% for final energy production and 2.6% for final energy consumption [3]. Uranium resources might be exhaustible in the long run, but they are enough to satisfy the current rate of consumption.

Nuclear energy is claimed to be environmentally friendly when it comes to climate change debates, due to its low emissions of CO₂. There is a discussion at a European level as to whether nuclear energy can be classified as renewable (France is advocating this point). Finally, on February 4, 2011, the European Council recognized its status as carbon-neutral energy, which is alongside renewable [8]. This significant change highlighted nuclear power's come back in recent years.

The cost structure of nuclear electricity is also believed to be advantageous for country's competitiveness, especially given the fluctuations in fossil-fuel (gas and coal) markets. The cost of fuel represents only around 10% of production costs in nuclear electricity, what adds to cost stability – unlike classical thermal power plants, where cost is strongly linked to the price of fossil fuels. In addition, the cost per kilowatt-hour (Kwh) of nuclear electricity is said to be less than that from other sources.

Plant-cons

Russian Prime Minister assured that future Belarusian nuclear power plant built by Russia will meet the highest safety standards [9], but, unfortunately, there is a strong mournful argument against any such promises and guarantees. The tragedies at Chernobyl (1986) and Fukushima-1 (2011) drastically changed the concept and attitude towards nuclear power generation in Europe and the rest of the world. Here no one can abolish the risk to environment, and even human life.

"Atoms for peace" in Belarus, which is more than flexible to European democratic and security standards, is the subject of political debate with the neighboring states, such as Poland and Lithuania, and of environmental security concern in European institutions, which demanded conducting obligatory stress-tests of the plant, and preferably by independent experts [10]. Under Belarusian Constitution it's the president, who decides whether to consider

public opinion or not, and Mr. Lukashenka decided to violate Aarhus convention [11].

Doubts are also focused on the issue of radioactive waste, of which some elements remain dangerous for over 100, 000 years. The necessity of safe and continuous management of storage places over such periods is a definite problem (e.g. difficulties experienced at the German storage site of Asse [12]), what makes nuclear energy very expensive in the long-run.

Rebutting the argument for nuclear power cost-efficiency, some point to the major national and European subsidies granted to nuclear power, which makes its cost artificial. Again, the price of nuclear power does not include the cost of plant decommissioning and of long-term waste treatment. Lastly, it is important to note that tightening safety conditions in nuclear facilities could be costly and have repercussions on the price of nuclear energy.

Is the game worth the candle?

The credit of 9 bln USD will increase financial dependence of Belarus from Russia and oblige it to share the profits from exported electricity. By referring to Russian credit and inviting Russian contractor Belarus indeed "diversifies" the energy sources: from thermal stations working on Russian gas to electricity which will be generated by Russia-financed nuclear plant. The argument for diversifying electricity suppliers looks strange against the fact, that the amount of electricity Belarus imports from Russia is not critical (10 %), though less expensive than self coal-based energy production. And Belarus can practice electricity imports from neighboring Ukraine [13].

Future export possibilities of Astravets nuclear power plant are also under question, and so is the "strategic" location of the plant itself advocated by the government. Russia and Lithuania also build their NPPs in the Baltic region (Kaliningrad and Visaginas), thus, remarkably reducing the competitiveness of Belarus in this respect. One station would be more than enough to provide the whole region with electricity. Therefore, for return on investment all suppliers will have to introduce high tariffs. In this case, the race is who builds the plant first and collects the major profits. Again, Belarus is not in advantageous situation, as the credit agreement was not even signed yet, while the construction of Kaliningrad NNP has started already [14].

Also, whether or not nuclear power can play a role in achieving domestic energy security is complicated by economic and social issues. Because of huge up-front costs, nuclear power has an inclusive "boom and bust" cycle which responds to consumer demand for electricity. The construction of new nuclear capacity always translates to extremely large up-front investments which require massive state subsidies (with significant opportunity costs) in order to get off the ground [8]. In addition, the need to place stations close to centers of demand (i.e. urban areas) is complicated by the "not in my backyard" attitude of consumers.

Astravets nuclear power plant is just another lever of pressure of Moscow, while Belarus is losing all the trump cards.

In the long-run it is possible that nuclear power will become the most cost effective alternative. However, uncertainties in up-front investments, operation and maintenance costs, fuel prices and decommissioning, etc, make it extremely difficult to foresee in advance the financial viability of the projects. And as it was said earlier, most cost estimates do not cover the many hidden costs, for example, political and security arguments on global fissile materials and long-term waste management costs.

In the light of the above discussion, nuclear power plant can hardly be a panacea for current energy security of Belarus, rather being a headache. Astravets nuclear power plant is just another lever of pressure of Moscow, while Belarus is losing all the trump cards.

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