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## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM ELECTIONS'15?

As the opposition is still seeking compromise for a single candidate in the 2015 Presidential Elections, analysts name events in Ukraine as one of the key factors that may have serious implications for Belarus as well. President Lukashenka has now become a sign of stability, while the opposition, still very fragmented and barely recognised by society, struggles to find a new strategy.

Even though it is unlikely that there will be a re-enactment of the Square, Lukashenka is still in search of a new 'social contract' that would keep him in office. Having in mind the geopolitical situation and slowing Russian economy, Lukashenka will most likely try to re-approach the West – this could give the opposition space for action.

In the first article Artem Shraibman overviews recent trends in the opposition, which have developed since the Presidential elections in 2010. He argues that finding a single candidate between groups of "pragmatists", "radicals" and "principled" will not be easy and the changes in the geopolitical landscape in the region make it even harder.

In the second article Pavel Usov lists how the revolution in Ukraine has strengthened the position of Lukashenka and narrowed the space for action by the opposition, which now cannot build its campaign on the formula "no single candidate means no revolution". He sums up that the opposition has nothing new to offer a society that is not in favour of revolution, so the upcoming elections will probably be fragmented.

*Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor*

## BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION AND FORTHCOMING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: RECENT TRENDS AND CHANCES FOR A SINGLE CANDIDATE

*Artem Shraibman*

### Opposition in post-2010 Belarus

The Belarusian opposition is in an extremely difficult situation after the violent suppression of massive protests in Minsk in the evening after the presidential elections on 19 December, 2010. In addition to their usual passivity, parties and movements were shocked and paralyzed by the crackdown, resulting in emigration, arrests of leaders and activists, searches in offices, seizure of equipment, and mutual bad faith accusations.

Regime opponents showed first indications of political recovery as late as in run-up to parliamentary elections in September 2012. Faced with a choice of an electoral strategy, the opposition split to three camps. Though very nominal, they still exist in a certain degree. The camp of "pragmatists" includes Tell the Truth (TtT), Movement for Freedom (MfF), Just World (the Left), and Hramada (Social Democrats,

BSDPH); they advocated for full participation in the electoral campaign in order to present their views to as many voters as possible. The camp of "radicals", including campaign European Belarus (EB), unregistered party of Belarusian Christian Democracy (BCD) and Young Front (YF), promoted the boycott idea amid the lack of transparent elections. The "principled" camp, bringing together the United Civil Party (UCP) and the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), decided to participate in elections but to withdraw all their candidates just before the voting, in an attempt to combine the pragmatism and the values of two first camps.

All strategies failed. Unsurprisingly, the opposition stayed outside of the parliament. Their rating did not improve, according to the IISEPS polling. Polls also suggest less than 10 per cent supported the boycott, and over 50 per cent turned out to vote.

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**Maidan has given Lukashenka a significant ideological resource, turning him into a symbol of Belarusian stability.**

### How the current configuration emerged

The opposition started to look for new ways of outreach in 2013, to be better prepared for 2015. The group of “pragmatists” (TtT, BCDPH and MfF), the Left excluded and the BPF included, launched the People’s Referendum campaign in May. They focused on reaching out to people on popular issues. Having consulted many voters and experts, the coalition selected six questions for an eventual national referendum and started signature collection to initiate it formally. The People’s Referendum preferred to exclude divisive issues of human rights, electoral reform, or political prisoners. It looks like a first attempt by the opposition ever to prioritize issues of public education, healthcare or lost bank deposits in their campaigning.

Actors who stayed outside this new initiative, primarily the Left and UCP along with five minor organizations, announced a coalition For Fair Elections (Talaka) in 2013. This step was partially based on personal ambitions and partially on avoidance of latent populism inherent to the People’s Referendum strategy. Talaka placed its bets on achieving at least semi-free elections and convincing the public that such elections are crucial to make opposition’s demands realistic.

Radicals went through further marginalization throughout 2012 to 2013 period. The European Belarus saw almost all its leaders leaving the country, with all activities reduced to media statements and labelling the rest of the opposition as “collaborators”. The Young Front had trouble electing a new leader, something that resulted in a collective leadership scheme with four co-chairpersons and lower efficiency. BCD chose to stay away of both ad hoc coalitions and to focus on a joint opposition strategy for elections’2015 with an aspiration to nominate a single opposition candidate. The party showed a trend towards a more moderate stance.

Therefore, in mid-2014, opposition consisted of nominal “pragmatists” (the People’s Referendum), the “principled” ones (Talaka), and a range of other non-aligned and (or) marginal organizations. The two camps had two colliding strategies for 2015, with the People’s Referendum focusing on popular concerns and the referendum idea, and Talaka opting for the topic of fair elections. Coalitions’ ideas concerning the nomination of a single candidate were also in conflict: Talaka, with UCP in the upfront, lobbied for “primaries” to involve general “pro-change” voters; the pro-referendum group supported the Congress of democratic activists, as usual.

### The model of seven

It looked almost certain that the opposition was

going to approach the presidential elections split to at least two blocks. Uladzimir Niakliayeu, the TtT leader, and Anatol Liabedzka, UCP Chairperson and an informal leader of Talaka who stood strongly in media for its slogan “For Free and Fair Elections”, both announced their aspiration to run for the presidency. Other sources indicated a possibility for other candidacies to emerge, including General Valer Fralou, BSDPH Deputy Chair; Volha Karach, the Chair of Our House campaign; Ales Lahvinets, the Vice-Chairperson on MfF; Alena Anisim, the First Vice-Chairperson of the Belarusian Language Society, etc.

However, a new process started in late spring or early summer’2014, involving UCP, BPF, TtT, MfF, the Left, BCD, and BSDPH: these seven leading opposition forces engaged in unpublicized negotiations on a single candidate and joint strategy for 2015.

It is hard to guess the reasons behind this new negotiability. It could be caused either by politicians’ understanding of a fact that a good campaign is impossible in divisions, or a position of donors, or both factors.

At first, the “G7” agreed on a procedure for single candidate nomination, this being a congress of activists. Later, they discussed the process for delegating congress participants. Traditionally strong in outreach but with small membership in regions, Tell the Truth advocated for signature collection as a way to nominate “congressmen”. The parties (UCP, BPF and the Left) preferred electing delegates at regional congresses of activists, where parties, as opposed to non-party actors, have long lists of members, active or inactive.

Negotiations brought the seven organizations to a compromise idea to nominate Mikalai Statkevich, a political prisoner, as a single opposition candidate. Uladzimir Niakliayeu offered this candidacy to colleagues in June without publicity. Statkevich himself backed the idea in a letter, published in August. Such a move could bring moral support for a political prisoner; however, negotiators rejected it in September. Despite its symbolic attraction, such tactics would result in opposition’s non-participation in elections. Neither a convict, nor his or her initiative group can be registered as a candidate.

The negotiations of seven have to be finalized in October’2014 with an eye to the Congress in winter.

### Possible scenarios

Increasingly realistic scenarios become possible

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**Renouncement of a revolution as a tool for political and ideological struggle makes it pointless to join efforts and nominate a common candidate.**

regarding the upcoming presidential campaign. Obviously, Aliaksandr Lukashenka has plans to run for his fifth term in office and win it by using his administrative resources, e.g. control over the electoral commissions and an opportunity to suppress protests, and his actual electoral domination.

What will be new about the elections'2015 are the factors the president will exploit in attempts to mobilize his supporters. Traditionally, he used to do it by mechanically increasing voters' incomes in the pre-electoral year. However, this scheme will not work this time, with the economy in a permanent down, two-digit inflation, GDP growth hardly above zero, the average monthly salary 600 USD instead of promised 1000 USD by 2015, and losses of external markets. The likeliest messages from Lukashenka now could be preserving Belarusian stability amid post-revolutionary turmoil and war in Ukraine, as well as new "tough measures" against corrupted officials, including arrests and resignations, new anti-corruption law, and the announced public administration cuts.

In a case of real or imminent economic crisis, Lukashenka might be on the edge of an emotional step to hold earlier election, e.g. in spring'2015, something already predicted by some analysts. Considered by many a fake sparring partner of the regime, the Liberal Democrat Party (LDP) has already thrown this idea to the discourse. By the way, LDP leader Siarhei Haidukevich is also going to run at elections in 2015.

A number of oppositional candidates is not clear yet. If the negotiations of seven and the Congress are successful, a single candidate to represent the major opposition forces is a realistic option. If a conflict emerged at any stage, e.g. negotiations, nomination of congress participants or the Congress itself, a new split is likely between the camps of "pragmatists" and the "principled".

Uladzimir Niakliayeu has the best chances to become a single candidate. The IISEPS surveys indicate his permanent top position among alternative candidates during last three years, with 6 to 8 per cent of support. His Tell the Truth campaign is a leading force of People's Referendum, a major oppositional coalition. In a case of a split, Anatol Liabedzka is the likeliest to become a second candidate, as the most ambitious one out of Talaka leaders. In such a case, Niakliayeu or another leader of "pragmatists" will prioritize social and economic failures of the authorities in his campaign, while Liabedzka will keep his focus on issues of fair elections and human rights. Given the lack of interest in politics in the Belarusian society and his bigger army of activists, a leader of

"pragmatists" has a chance to win more votes. However, it is hardly going to have a considerable impact on official voting results.

Other opposition candidates out of those who dislike the system of nomination, or spoiler candidates from non-political actors, are also possible. As it is a "mission impossible" in Belarusian reality for such aspirants to collect 100 thousand signatures and to become actual candidates, their participation will depend on regime preferences regarding the number of contestants. Many observers speculate that, out of nine registered challengers in 2010, some actually had failed to collect a necessary number of signatures.

### **Square'2015 through the lens of Ukrainian developments**

Prospects for Ploshcha (Square), a traditional mass protest on the Election Day, deserve a separate reflection. Exposed to Belarusian and Russian propaganda, the society as well as the government grew more suspicious toward mass protests. IISEPS poll in June'2014 indicated that just 3 per cent of voters believed a revolution is an optimal scenario for change in Belarus. "Maidan syndrome" is a huge challenge for opposition's communication. Voices rise in opposition's internal discussions to drop plans for street protests. In any situation, opposition is under pressure to emphasize peaceful nature of change they are promoting.

However, Ploshcha is still an option. What makes Belarus different from Ukraine is that, rather than a deliberate attempt to topple the government, Belarusians participate in protests merely to express their civil position. This motivation will stay there in 2015; this is why Ploshcha, even if smaller one because of Ukraine, is likely to take place no matter who represents the opposition at elections.

The regime seems to prevent the repetition of 2010 events, when the opposition used a limited liberalization to campaign actively, and 40 to 50 thousand protesters gathered at Ploshcha. Probably, the government will choose to limit opposition's freedom and preventively deter possible rally participants.

The regime is also willing to avoid another crisis in ties with the West, amid normalization of relations during last months. Belarus' conciliatory position on Russia-Ukraine conflict can facilitate further rapprochement. To keep this trend, Lukashenka will do his best to avoid violent dispersal of Ploshcha. Authorities might let the big crowd take their time at the Square and go in peace, and later detain the rest 'carefully'. If the government sticks to this logic,

Belarus is unlikely to have many new political prisoners.

Therefore, a plausible scenario for elections'2015 is an approximate repetition of campaign'2006,

with an incumbent challenged by a fake "sparring partner" from LDP and one or two opposition candidates, limited freedom for the opposition, and a small Ploshcha, first minimized by preventive actions, and later dispersed softly.

Until recently, the army was a minor institution of the state power system. Developments in Ukraine forced them to change the approach.

## THE BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION BEFORE THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: RELEVANT TRENDS AND PROSPECTS FOR A SINGLE CANDIDATE STRATEGY

*Pavel Usov*

Any analysis, predictions or assessments of the situation in Belarus, processes related to the 2015 elections and strategies of the opposition and the government must take the political impact of the revolution and the military conflict in Ukraine into account.

The developments in the neighbouring country have already considerably affected Belarusian domestic politics, the government, the opposition, and the public. This will be a crucial factor during the 2015 presidential elections in Belarus.

This article presents an analysis of the negative and positive effects of Ukrainian events on the activities and strategies of key political actors.

### I. The Government

Undoubtedly, the Belarusian authorities have enjoyed the maximum in terms of political dividends because of events in Ukraine. They actively exploit the topic of bloodshed in the neighbourhood for their own ideological and propaganda purposes; the topic will be central to Aliaksandr Lukashenka's electoral campaign.

The primary idea is to stress the correctness and effectiveness of the Belarusian model and its current focus on the struggle against corruption, and on peace and stability to avoid bloody clashes. Lukashenka's electoral rating has already reached 45 per cent, according to IISEPS findings.<sup>1</sup> The propaganda will refer to the Ukrainian experience and emphasize the threat of a revolution for society as well as the opposition's inability to ensure the country's security.

In its turn, the Belarusian regime will make

every effort to suppress anything resembling a protest during the elections. To do so, the security services will have to:

- step up repressions and control;
- maintain and strengthen divisions in the opposition;
- neutralize radical political groups at the earliest stage possible.

The experience of 19 December 2010 will also influence the style of the 2015 elections. The minimal liberalization of 2010 led to spontaneous mobilization and growing activism of the population, resulting in the Square protests on 19 December in Minsk. To prevent such scenarios, the Belarusian authorities are going to refuse practices of even façade democratization during the electoral campaign. They will only register candidates who have neither moral authority nor the will for strong actions.

Therefore, the factor of the 2014 Ukrainian revolution and the 2010 Belarusian Square will determine the strategy of the Belarusian government for the 2015 elections. In my view, the strategy will include intensification of repressions, pressure on the opposition and society, and minimization of space for the opposition.

In fact, the regime will face no obstacles in eliminating the opposition. The opposition has lost its key function of indirect legitimization of the political processes and the Belarusian government. Now, Ukraine plays this role. Maidan has given Lukashenka a significant ideological resource, turning him into a symbol of Belarusian stability.

The only reason to keep the opposition on stage is Lukashenka's unwillingness to lose his ties with the West and his realization of Russia as a real threat. This is why the opposition is just a mechanism for building relations with the West. Its participation in elections is an

<sup>1</sup> «Электоральная стабильность на фоне роста доверия», 05.07.2014 НИСЕПИ, <http://iiseps.org/analitica/585>, 10.09.2014.

**The military leadership is under the tough control of at least two security centers: the KGB Military Counterintelligence and the Operations and Analysis Center.**

element of that mechanism. However, even the West, especially the EU, prefers the stable authoritarian rule in Belarus to an unstable democracy.

## II. The opposition

The opposition's key problem is that it has failed to overcome its internal systemic crisis, amplified by massive repressions after December 2010 and reinforced by the revolution and war in Ukraine.

Until recently, the opposition's crisis was structural, caused by the need for internal renewal in parties, consolidation, a common strategy, and a single leader. After the revolution in Ukraine, an ideological crisis has supplemented the structural one. Revolution had been a key conceptual element of opposing the regime. *All electoral campaigns and opposition participation in elections were only seen as a prelude to revolution.* Even the 2010 Square protest and massive repressions did not force them to drop the idea of overthrowing the regime one day. The Arab spring gave this idea a new lease of life, something that sparked a new form of protests in Belarus: the "revolution via social media" in 2011.

Maidan has deprived the Belarusian opposition of its traditional revolutionary appeal for at least the next few years; revolution is no longer seen as a peaceful or effective tool with which to fight Lukashenka's authoritarianism. Along with the regime's readiness to be tough against any manifestations of rebellion, the key reason is the extreme unpopularity of the idea of a revolution in Belarus, a fact reinforced by the Ukrainian events. If opponents of the regime tried to call for open protests in the Square, Belarusians would reject and condemn both the idea and the opposition as a whole.

As a result, the opposition movement is trapped in an ideological limbo, since it has no backup mobilizing ideas and is hardly going to embrace them in the nearest future. The described ideological crisis completely changes their approach to a single strategy and a single candidate. The whole model of the opposition's participation in elections is changing.

In the old model, a single candidate had to work as a catalyst for revolutionary process, public mobilization and the Square. "No Single Candidate means no Revolution"; this was an axiom for everyone in the opposition, since they realized that only open pressure against the regime could help them to defend their victory and achieve political transformation. Consolidation was a crucial precondition for finding a single candidate and agreeing on a

common revolutionary strategy. The formula was simple: A. Opposition Consolidation + B. Single Candidate + C. Society Mobilization = D. Revolution.

Renouncement of a revolution as a tool for political and ideological struggle makes it pointless to join efforts and nominate a common candidate. No Revolution means no Single Candidate. The issue of a single candidate is a minor one. In general, having a common candidate is pointless if no one knows how to use him or her. With the current opposition and in the situation we have in Belarus, the only point of participating in elections is to promote someone's personality, rather than to fight for power. It does not matter then how many candidates we might have in this promotion campaign, one or ten.<sup>2</sup>

The lack of a clear understanding about how to run the political struggle in Belarus in the light of current developments is freezing the opposition in its status of splits. It also empowers certain political figures to act according to their personal rather than political motives.

In terms of the number of candidates, the above-mentioned arguments suggest that the opposition's participation in the 2015 elections will resemble the 2010 elections. The difference is that the opposition will have fewer resources and opportunities for political mobilization, while the level of political influence and experience of new 'candidates' will be much lower than those of Lukashenka's contestants during previous elections.

Challengers will fall into one of two categories: self-nominated and party-nominated. Certain statements suggest that the first category will include Volha Karach and Valer Fralou; both seek to organize a financial self-promotion campaign to consolidate (in the case of Karach) or to re-establish (Fralou) their role as political players as seen by the rest of the opposition or donors. The campaign might be limited to "election-related noise" for the purpose of fundraising without actually running.

The second category should include candidates nominated either by parties, or coalitions, e.g. Talaka or People's Referendum, or bodies like the Council of Belarusian Intellectuals. The campaign will aim at raising funds, self-promotion, claiming a role in Belarusian oppositional politics, and weakening or marginalizing competitors inside the opposition. Running in elections has effectively

<sup>2</sup> Нужен ли на выборах-2015 единый кандидат от оппозиции? <http://www.camarade.biz/node/15625>

**The Belarusian regime creatively rephrased Mao's idea: "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun". In Minsk, it sounds like this: "Money grows out of the gun to help preserve power".**

transformed into their only chance of staying visible as the opposition. Many indications suggest that preparation and participation in the 2015 elections will boil down to a struggle among opposition actors.

### III. Society

The political change in Ukraine has affected Belarusian society by strengthening conservative trends and fostering support for

Lukashenka. Obviously and rather logically, Belarusians prefer the security of peace and order under authoritarianism to a domestic conflict and war.

Therefore, the opposition has nothing to offer to society today. Along with its general internal crisis, the primary reason is the lack of a success story of political and economic transformations in neighboring states like Ukraine, Russia or Moldova.

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