



A game played according to Lukashenka's rules: the political opposition in Belarus

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The Belarusian opposition is currently experiencing its deepest crisis since Alyaksandr Lukashenka took power in 1994. Following many months of negotiations, opposition leaders failed to select a joint candidate for the presidential election scheduled for 11th October. The failure of this latest round of talks has proven that not only is the opposition unlikely to threaten Lukashenka's rule; it will not even be able to demonstrate to society that it could provide a genuine alternative to the present government.

The presidential election in 2010 was a painful landmark for the opposition. The repression that accompanied the election has largely weakened political circles opposed to the government. Against this backdrop, the traditional internal problems of the opposition have worsened, such as its incapacity to reach agreement and develop a common, coherent operational strategy, the excessive ambitions of the leaders of particular groups, the low level of political maturity, mutual distrust and frequent personal conflicts. As a result the opposition has for years been unable to gain confidence in society and reach beyond the limited number (20%) of staunch proponents of democratic transformations. Given the fact that the Belarusian opposition is fragmented and lacks one clear leader, the readiness to support individual leaders does not exceed several per cent, according to independent surveys. Lukashenka's present political opponents rather resemble a group of dissidents, than constitute a genuine opposition to the government. The crisis and helplessness of opposition circles are more acute given Belarus's internal situation since for the first time Alyaksandr Lukashenka will run his presidential campaign in the context of the economic crisis and a forecasted fall in GDP.

The opposition and the political system

One of the characteristic features of the authoritarian regime established by Lukashenka is the fact that there is no single party with a hold on power. In Belarus there are several officially registered political parties which endorse the politics of the government, for example the Belarusian Agrarian Party, the Belarusian Patriotic Party or the Belarusian Social and Sports Party. They are however façade parties which do not have any significance in the country's political life. Lukashenka has based his power on a hierarchical system of *verticals* which is composed of the loyal nomenclature, officials and an extensive security system. This manner of ruling a state is aimed at eliminating the possibility that another centre of power, besides from the presidential one, could emerge and consolidate. For this reason the very idea of a party system is discredited in the regime's ideology as pathogenic and not serving the interests of Belarusian society. It particularly concerns opposition parties and groups. For 20 years of Lukashenka's rule the regime has subjected the opposition to a repressive policy and referred to it as a 'fifth column'.

Repression can take many forms: from prison sentences, frequent arrests, dismissals from jobs or education establishments, to other forms of everyday intimidation. The application of similar methods is supposed to warn society against becoming involved and supporting the opposition. The Belarusian government, however, has not decided to wipe out the institutional opposition completely. Its existence is intended to give the impression of political pluralism in Belarus, confirming the state's democratic and modern character. Furthermore, the legal opposition (which is subject to legal regulations) channels a part of social discontent and thus makes it easier for it to be controlled by the security services. However, when it feels threatened, Lukashenka's regime does not hesitate to use direct violence against opposition members. Following the brutally quelled demonstration after the presidential election held in December 2010 seven presidential candidates were arrested. Some of them were given prison sentences. One of them, Mikalay Statkevich remains imprisoned. Several candidates were forced to leave the country following persecution. Hundreds of opposition activists were victims of repression.

The present state of the opposition

The opposition in Belarus is quite diverse; it encompasses groups which vary in their ideologies, ranging from communists and liberals, former members of the Soviet nomenclature to youth national activists. The fundamental criterion shared by all is their declared opposition to Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rule.

The Belarusian opposition forces claim to have several thousand activists. It should however be noted that the data provided by the opposition parties and movements are usually inflated. Furthermore, apart from leaders in Minsk and in the regions, the majority of the rank and file do not actually participate in their parties' activity or in social activity. The opposition focuses its activity above all on subsequent election campaigns (which is manifested mainly in the high intensity of leadership meetings), while everyday work between campaigns remains relatively less significant. Furthermore, a large part of the activity is Internet-based that often serves as a substitute for everyday activity in the public sphere. Another growing problem for the opposition is the lack of intergenerational change. Many leaders of the opposition parties have remained in their positions for years.

The Belarusian opposition parties and movements cannot reach agreement in such fundamental issues as choosing a joint candidate for presidential elections or a possible boycott of elections. The inability of opposition leaders to develop a long-term political and social strategy which would be adapted to the situation does not reflect well on their political maturity. Furthermore, the opposition leaders rarely establish genuine co-operation with experts in Belarus. Many of their demands are confined to formulas which have been repeated for 20 years (such as 'the range of participants in the political process should be extended') or do not sound very appropriate or realistic (e.g. 'a million new jobs'). The low level of mutual trust among the opposition leaders does not contribute to the opposition's cohesion. Personal conflicts, mutual accusations of destructive actions and collaboration with the security services are a permanent element of the life of the opposition parties and movements.

The above factors have led to a low level of confidence and popularity of the opposition in Belarusian society. This is also linked to the low potential for mobilisation of opposition circles, their inability to reach out to a broader social section. Actions and appeals which 'preach to the converted', that is proponents of democratic transformations, in fact cause the opposition to constantly seek favours of the same electorate.

There is no doubt that the general inertia of Belarusian society, which has been effectively preserved by the repressive regime, is an additional challenge for the functioning of the opposition. A slight majority of Belarusians declare they would be in favour of reforms intended to improve the economic situation in the country, while simultaneously they claim they are not ready to bear the costs of such reforms. The majority of Belarusians seem to believe that it is Lukashenka, not the opposition, who has the formula for solving the country's present economic problems. Few demonstrations of social discontent, e.g. by small business owners, were staged by those outside the institutional opposition.

Western donors are also becoming disillusioned with the Belarusian opposition. In the present situation they see more benefits in supporting long-term projects aiming at building and strengthening Belarusian identity. Even Lidziya Yarmoshyna, the chairwoman of the Central Election Commission of Belarus who supports Lukashenka, has been mocking the opposition's excessive passivity.

At present, the opposition forces are basically divided into two main coalitions. The first one is the alliance of parties which coordinate the 'people's referendum'. It is mainly composed of: the BPF Party, the 'Movement for Freedom', the 'Tell the Truth' campaign and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Assembly). The campaign of the 'people's referendum', which was launched in 2013, is an attempt to reach out to Belarusian society through collecting signatures of support for the proposed socio-political reforms. The proposed reforms consist of six questions and include: the need to keep access to education and healthcare free of charge, to limit the president to two terms in office, and support for integration with the EU. The authors of the campaign, besides their intention to make use of the action in order to target a wider social base, have declared they wanted to collect 500,000 signatures which would then be transferred to the administration to be verified and to hold a nationwide referendum. On 17 March 2014 it was officially announced that 50,000 people had signed the

petition, on 4 February it was 90,000, and on 20 May 2015 during an Internet-based conference one of the leaders of the action Tatsyana Karatkevich said that 120,000 signatures had been collected. Contrary to the announcement and declarations of the campaign's leaders, it has not made a wide impact in society.

The second coalition is the Talaka Civil Alliance for Fair and Honest Elections for a Better Life, which was established in September 2013. It is composed above all of two parties: the liberal United Civic Party of Belarus and the post-Communist Belarusian Left Party 'A Just World'. This alliance is rather tactical, motivated by the will to find an ally by the parties which have not joined the 'people's referendum' campaign. The leaders of both parties have announced that they will separately seek to be appointed a candidate in this year's presidential election, which proves the alliance is ineffective.

The preparations for the presidential election

The question of choosing a joint candidate has been the main topic of discussions and disputes of the opposition in the last two years. Initially, the two main coalitions were unable to reach agreement about the way in which the candidate would be selected. After the concept of holding a joint congress had prevailed, negotiations about the modes of selecting delegates for the congress were launched. The so-called 'seven' took part in them, that is four main parties forming the 'people's referendum', two from Talaka and the organisational committee of the Belarusian Christian Democracy party. In November 2014 it was announced, in an atmosphere of mutual accusations and allegations, that the attempt to reach an agreement had failed and the topic of a joint candidate and the congress was deemed to be closed. In consequence, the following persons, among others, declared they were willing to be the opposition candidate in this year's election:

- Tatsyana Karatkevich – she presents herself as a candidate of the 'people's referendum'. In fact, only the 'Tell the Truth' campaign and the BPF Party have declared support for her candidacy. The Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Assembly) has announced that it will not appoint or support any candidate (which is odd since Karatkevich, besides her involvement in the 'Tell the Truth' campaign is also a member of 'Assembly'). The 'Movement for Freedom', led by Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the former candidate in the 2006 presidential election, has also announced that he will not endorse any candidate. Despite this it can be inferred from what the leaders of the parties forming the 'people's referendum' say that the rank and file of 'Assembly' and the 'Movement for Freedom' may become involved in the organisation of the Karatkevich election campaign.
- Anatol Lyabedzka – whose candidacy has been submitted by the United Civic Party of Belarus of which he is the chairman.
- Syarhey Kalyakin – appointed by the Belarusian Left Party 'A Just World' of which he is the leader.
- Also Syarhey Haydukevich, the leader of the pro-Lukashenka Liberal Democratic Party, has declared his readiness to run in the presidential election. Haydukevich, who is called a traditional sparring partner for Lukashenka, already participated in the elections as a candidate in 2001 and 2006. In 2010, after the government had decided to implement the election scenario with the participation of as many as 10 candidates, Haydukevich withdrew his candidacy just before the election.

The opposition has not also succeeded in reaching agreement about a possible common boycott of the election. This option, which stems from the conviction that the state administration, being subordinated to Lukashenka, fixes election results, is traditionally considered before the elections. This year the concept of a boycott would be linked with the opposition proposing the symbolic candidacy of Mikalay Statkevich, a candidate in the 2010 presidential election who is still serving a prison sentence. This action would in fact be an information campaign on political prisoners, Belarus's repressive regime, and the lack of sense of the election process in this situation. Disputes have already appeared at the stage of opposition leaders ascribing themselves the authorship of the idea and then different scenarios of its realisation. Certain leaders have opted for announcing Statkevich as a symbolic, common candidate of the opposition, and when the registration of his initiative group is refused, to call for a complete boycott of the election. Another section of the opposition leaders declared that

they could use the participation in the election and the collection of signatures in support of a real candidacy to inform society about Statkevich and other political prisoners (possibly to collect signatures in support of their release). Nor have talks between opposition leaders led to the development of a common strategy in this area.

As a result of further misunderstandings inside the opposition, Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu, the leader of the 'Tell the Truth' campaign and the most popular opposition politician in recent years, has announced he is leaving the 'Tell the Truth' campaign and the opposition structures in general. He has also announced that he is going to establish a new social movement 'For the Statehood and Independence of Belarus'. Nyaklyaeu's initiative is in fact another attempt to renew opposition structures by building a so-called third force (apart from the government and the institutional opposition). Its objective would be to transcend the current mobilisation limitations of the opposition, by referring to such common values as statehood and independence, and to gain wide social support. This is not a new idea. Similar motivations for establishing a large social movement were declared by: Alyaksandr Kazulin who formed the 'People's Will' movement in 2006, Alyaksandr Milinkevich who established the 'Movement for Freedom' in 2006 and Nyaklyaeu himself since in 2010 he launched the 'Tell the Truth' campaign. It appears that the newly launched movement will encounter the same problems as its predecessors. It is not enough for someone to state they are not part of the compromised opposition in order to gain a better status in the eyes of society, since society is not quite aware of the details of the opposition's internal schisms. Furthermore, as the surveys indicate, Belarusian society does not have a sense of the state's independence being threatened. Paradoxically, also the slogans of independence and statehood have been to a large extent hijacked by Alyaksandr Lukashenka who has started including topics underlining the distinctiveness of Belarus and the Belarusian nation in the official circuit after 2000. This rhetoric has been intensified over the last year, in the face of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the promotion of the idea of the 'Russian world'.

The opposition and its external and internal challenges

The events in Ukraine have caused many Belarusian citizens to experience a sense of threat of internal chaos and destabilisation, which has had a fundamental impact on the opposition's situation. According to surveys, the majority of Belarusian society interprets the Ukrainian-Russian conflict and the war in the east of Ukraine in line with Russian propaganda, i.e. as a result of protests on Kyiv's Maidan, and not the Russian invasion. The government in Minsk is trying to use these elements for its own purposes by emphasising, as part of its propaganda, Belarus's stability. This is crucial, particularly with regard to the present economic challenges. Belarus's GDP for January-May 2015 fell by 3% (according to the International Monetary Fund's forecasts, in 2015 it will decrease by 2.3%, and according to the World Bank, by 3.5%). Foreign trade, including exports, in this period fell sharply (by 28.3%). This was mainly due to the economic recession in Russia, which is Belarus's main trading partner – in 2014 Russia accounted for 50% of all trade. Between January and April 2015 real revenues of Belarusians also dropped by 4.2%. According to the NISEPI surveys of June 2015, 72% of respondents stated that the Belarusian economy is in crisis and 80.6% feared another devaluation of the Belarusian ruble (the previous one took place in December 2014). However, the present economic situation has not contributed to Belarusian society being more prepared to engage in protests. Lacking a real alternative, many Belarusians see Lukashenka as the guarantor of the state's stability and hope he will improve the situation. The Belarusian opposition, out of its weakness, has not only been unable to use the present economic problems to its advantage, it was also unsuccessful during the economic downturn in 2011 when, following the crisis and two devaluations of the Belarusian currency, support for Lukashenka fell to approximately 20% (according to the NISEPI data in June this year it was at 38.6%). This decline, however, has not led to increased popularity and confidence in the opposition. Additionally discredited street protests in the eyes of Belarusian society following the Maidan demonstrations present another difficult challenge for the opposition. In the last presidential campaigns the opposition presented the idea of a mass protest (often termed 'Ploshcha' – a 'square') as a fundamental or even the only possible way of bringing about a change in power in Belarus. Confronted with this new situation, the opposition leaders have unanimously distanced themselves from the willingness to organise the traditional post-election protests. This reluctance stems not only from the lack of support for the concept of protest in Belarusian society but also from the fear of Russia's aggressive position when such protests break out. The opposition has thus been deprived of one of the main tools of its activity. Also due to the new geopolitical situation, the topic of Russia has not appeared so far in internal debates and disputes of Lukashenka's opponents in the context of this year's election. Accusations

of Russian financial support between rivals in the presidential campaigns in 2006 and 2010 were an inherent element of election campaigns run by the opposition. Certain opposition leaders have also used this card of Russian support in their game in order to increase their own rank. Furthermore, unlike in the previous election campaigns, the Russian ambassador to Minsk Aleksandr Surikov already on 10 June stated that Moscow will support Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the upcoming election.

The negative balance sheet

So far the balance sheet of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's opponents should be assessed as negative. For years they have not only been unable to threaten his hold on power, they have not even moved closer to the realisation of any of their declared fundamental objectives: presenting themselves as an alternative, attractive political option and convincing the broadest sections of society to believe in the idea of democratic and economic transformations.

The Belarusian regime has succeeded in imposing its own rules of the game on the opposition and in relegating it to the margins of social life. However, it is in the regime's interest for a weak, marginalised opposition to take part in the election. The opposition does not present a threat to Lukashenka's power and its participation in the election tends to be used as an argument proving the democratic character of the political system in Belarus. This is important for Minsk, particularly in the context of the attempts made by the Belarusian government, against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, to normalise its relations with the West. However, at present, unlike before the presidential election in 2010, these attempts are not accompanied by even the pretence of internal liberalisation. On the contrary, the government is ostentatiously applying more pressure on political prisoners and independent circles. This should be expected to continue during the election campaign proper. The Belarusian government has drawn conclusions from the 2010 election campaign. At that time even a controlled relaxation of the internal situation (allowing seven opposition candidates to run for the election, granting more space to public canvassing) consequently led to post-election protests and then an internal crisis and Belarus's deeper isolation in the international community. The central authorities in Minsk will therefore seek at all costs to avoid repeating this situation.