

Warmer relations between Minsk and Brussels – dilemmas of the opposition.

Once the EU's policy towards Minsk has changed, instead of increasing their popularity in the European capitals, leaders of the Belarusian opposition need to focus on winning the sympathy of Belarusians. Under the pressure of the West, Lukashenka should come to terms with the opposition, which will be given access to the parliament and local governments, in exchange for certain concessions in favor of the authorities.

The Belarusian political scene is fragmented. It is difficult to assess the strength of individual organizations, as the country is ruled by a totalitarian regime. No opposition representatives are present in executive authorities or the parliament, or even in the local governments that enjoy very limited decision making freedoms.

Opposition organizations manifest their political programs mainly during rare street demonstrations, the social impact of which remains very limited. People who are not tied with the opposition take no interest in such rallies whatsoever. No reliable data is available that would determine the number of members of individual organizations. However, the total number of all organization members equals as little as a few thousand.

The potential of a given organization is best indicated by its presence in the media and by its international contacts. In other words, those organizations that journalists and foreigners consider important seem to be most influential.

By adopting this highly imprecise criterion, which is the only one that may be applied in the Belarusian context, the following three major opposition parties may be distinguished: the Belarusian National Front (**BNF**), the United Civil Party (**AGP**) and the Belarusian Communist Party (**PKB**). The recently established and still officially unregistered Belarusian Christian Democracy (**BChD**) and the **Young Front** Youth Organization are entities which are considered to be of lesser potential.

The lower league of opposition organizations is made up of the "**Hramada**" **Social Democratic Party (BSDP)** and the **Freedom Movement**. The remaining organizations have no formal structures. This last group also includes **Charter 97**. Despite the fact that it has been running one of the most popular Belarusian websites, it may not be considered a serious political force.

Until recently, the most influential opposition organizations, i.e. BNF, AGP, PKB and the “Freedom Movement” formed the coalition of United Democratic Forces (**ADS**).

The authority that the most respected politicians enjoy is not rooted in their position in the organizational hierarchy. **Alexander Milinkevich**, the former presidential candidate, is the most popular and influential of opposition representatives. His rival from the 2006 election, **Alexander Kazulin**, has lost his influence as a result of imprisonment. He was released thanks to the support of third countries, but he ceased to be the secretary of BSDP while still behind bars. He is no longer an activist of this party and represents no organization at present .

AGP leader **Anatoly Lebedko** and **Syarhey Kalyakin** of PKB are also influential opposition politicians. **Aliaksey Yanukevich**, the new **BNF** leader who remains a not well-known politician does not enjoy any special authority.

The second row of the opposition elite is made up of: **Andrey Sannikau**, the leader of **Charter 97** and **Pavel Sewiarynets**, the head of BChD. Sewiarynets is popular among youths. He controls a popular information portal. As a former diplomat he is skilled in cooperating with foreign partners.

Post-election shift in alliances

Defeat in the presidential elections and burying the chances for an imminent colorful revolution in Belarus have initiated a deep crisis in the opposition coalition. Anatoly Lebedko (AGP) and Syarhey Kalyakynov, the leader of PKB, did not like the fact that the political council of the United Opposition Forces was headed by Milinkevitch. In their opinion, having lost the election, he could no longer be the most important face of the opposition, both abroad and for the majority of Belarusians. Milinkevitch was accused of acting on credit, fighting political battles without a strong, political backup.

This year Milinkevitch took a revenge on his opposition colleagues. The control of BNF was taken over by his supporters, and a new organization was established – the **Belarusian Independence Block (BNB)**. It was joined by BNF, “Movement for Freedom”, and the “Young Front”. The block is led by Milinkevitch, which has made his relations with the former ADS partners even more tense.

Establishment of the BNB under the auspices of the most renowned opposition politicians has weakened the ADS considerably, as having lost the “Movement for Freedom” and the BNF, it no longer represents the majority of the opposition. Only two high-ranking opposition parties have remained in the coalition: AGP and the communists. Their cooperation is hindered by program differences, which are more evident today than when the coalition was made up of a larger number of members.

The communists show a strong Russia-oriented approach. Their leader - Syarhey Kalyakin – called for recognizing Abkhazia and Southern Osetia as independent entities. He also claims that Crimea should be handed over to Russia. Such an attitude of the leader proves that PKB intends to become Russia’s major opposition partner. At its last congress, the party changed its name for the Belarusian United Left Party “Just World”.

The BChD is one of the most interesting phenomena on the Belarusian opposition scene. It was created by young people with – despite the young age -considerable political experience. Pavel Seviarynets was the leader of youth protests in 1996 and a long-time head of the “Young Front”. BChD is characterized by a clear conservative and religious orientation. Statements given by BChD activists were criticized as clerical not only by members of the government, but also by journalists and opposition colleagues. Christian democrats oppose abortion and call for the “Christianization of Belarusians”. Some of the leaders have expressed critical opinions on sexual minorities and interethnic marriages.

It seems that it was this ethno-cultural model of building a nation that has joined the moderate Milinkevitch and the leaders of BChD, BNF and the “Young Front”. The BNB was established because young and radical activists of the member parties had no clear-cut leader and agreed for an alliance with Alexander Milinkevitch, a politician of much greater compromise - reaching abilities, but enjoying considerable popularity. The different styles of doing politics may cause the coalition to collapse in the future. For the time being, however, its establishment has forced other opposition groups to redefine their ideological objectives.

Ethnic and cultural or political nation?

All opposition parties aim at dismantling the authoritarian regime, which would facilitate their functioning on the political scene. Those organizations, however, have a long history of failures. The last time the opposition was united was during the 2006 elections, but its joint

candidate - Alexander Milinkevitch – received 6% of the vote according to official sources, while data provided by independent opinion polls shows the figure of 18%.

In the situation in which reaching the ultimate goal seems to be so distant, the individual leaders attempt to win something for themselves. This only makes the unification of the opposition even more difficult. The great divides inside the opposition result not only from the personal ambitions of its leaders. The varying visions concerning the future of Belarus, stemming from different nation building concepts, are of crucial importance as well. BNB favors the ethnic and cultural model, while PKB backs the political one. For the latter party, all inhabitants of Belarus are considered Belarusians, regardless of their ethnic origin. This core difference gives rise to all other disagreements. BNB wants to promote the Belarusian language and culture, and considers Russian influence a threat to national identity. The pro-European attitude displayed by BNB is based on the perception of cultural hostility towards Russia.

PKB, and AGP in particular, also support the tightening of relations with Europe, but do not perceive Russia as a threat to Belarusian national existence.

Europe starts talking with Minsk

The announcement of EU's new policy towards Belarus was a shocking moment of truth for the opposition. Since it was eliminated from official politics at the end of the 1990s, the opposition considered Western institutions its main point of reference, which has resulted in distorted objectives and priorities. It became the opposition's main task to convince the West not to recognize the official Belarusian state institutions.

But Europe decided such a strategy was ineffective, as it catered neither for European interests nor impacted the internal situation in Belarus. A dialogue was commenced with Minsk, which has forced the opposition to redefine its policy values. Alexander Milinkevitch and other opposition activists grasped that in order to survive they need to support the new strategy of the West. Therefore, they started to look for a place that they and their formations could take in the dialogue between Europe and Minsk.

But since the dialogue moved from the ideological to the practical dimension, the opposition was only capable of becoming involved to the extent corresponding to the actual meaning it

enjoys in the society. And since that meaning is rather insignificant, the role of the opposition at the negotiating table has also been marginalized.

Paradoxically, those parties that still oppose the new European strategy have the most limited ability to confront the Belarusian authorities in a radical manner outside the system. It was by no accident that only AGP and PKB representatives were present in the Parliament of the 13th term in office – the last one in which the opposition was allowed. Experience in conducting street protests was gathered by those organizations that found themselves outside the Parliament. Today, those organizations (BNF, BChD, and “Young Front”), united under Milinkevitch, have decided to strive for an agreement with the Belarusian authorities, in line with the new policy adopted by the EU, at least in such matters as the protection of Belarusian independence.

Support for EU’s new policy has allowed Milinkevitch to step out of the shadow and find allies outside his own, organizationally weak “Movement for Freedom”. The clear pro-European character of the BNB block may transform it into an ideological alternative for the authorities, who have adopted a policy of balancing between the East and the West.

It is not likely, however, for BNB to become an equal contender for the authorities. Firstly, it does not represent all opposition forces, and secondly, its nation building vision means it is fated for marginalization under Belarusian conditions.

Opposition not well known

The greatest problem that the Belarusian opposition is facing is its insignificant popularity in the society. The opposition itself explains that by limited access to the media, many years of a mocking campaign conducted by the government media, and persecutions that have threatened the society. Those explanations make sense, but are not the only reasons behind opposition’s low popularity indicated by data gathered by the Independent Social, Economic and Political Studies Institute (NISEPD).

Table 1.

The question was if respondents trusted the state and social institutions listed below. .
Survey conducted in June 2009.

Institution	I trust	I do not trust
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Orthodox Church	60.6	21.4
Army	53.4	30.5
President	50.6	35.3
Independent research centers	45.0	31.6
Government	49.3	36.4
Courts	47.9	36.9
Independent media	45.3	35.5
Lawyers	45.5	37.1
State research centers	43.0	35.1
Prosecution office	43.5	40.8
State media	44.7	42.1
National Assembly	37.0	41.1
International organizations (UN, EU OCSE, other)	38.1	36.4
KGB	41.3	39.9
Human rights organizations	35.0	34.1
Business associations	37.3	38.5
Central Election Committee	41.5	43.7
Militia	42.1	46.3
Catholic church	32.2	39.4
Independent trade unions	32.2	40.6
Trade unions associated in the Federation of Belarusian Trade Unions	29.7	44.8
Local executive committees	35.4	52.3
Local councils	35.4	52.4
Pro-government parties	28.5	45.7
Opposition parties	19.0	53.7
Protestant church	12.3	58.0

Table 2.

Question: If the presidential election was to take place tomorrow, who would you vote for.
(open question)

Name	XI 06	IX 07	III 08	VI 08	IX 08	X 08	XII 08	III 09	VI 09	IX 09
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A. Lukashenka	49.7	44.9	42.5	38.9	42.5	40.6	40.2	39.2	40.9	39.4
A. Kazulin	3.5	3.2	5.2	4.8	5.2	2.9	5.0	2.3	2.4	2.0
A. Milinkevitch	10.3	12.3	8.8	6.4	6.2	2.9	3.6	4.4	3.1	3.4
S. Hajdukevitch	1.8	1.3	0.5	2.0	1.7	1.6	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.6
A. Lebedka	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.4
S. Kalyakin	0.1	0	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.4

Table 1 shows that the opposition is one of the least popular social institutions. It is trusted less than independent research centers, independent media or human rights organizations. Even those respondents who criticize the authorities (i.e. the great minority) tend not to trust the opposition. Full consolidation of opponents of the authorities does not take place even at such, one would think, mobilizing moments as presidential elections.

The above explains the great rift between the popularity enjoyed by Alexander Lukashenka and even the most renowned opposition leaders. Even the economic crisis has failed to change that. The opposition was hoping that dissatisfied with the economic situation, the society would turn away from the government and strengthen its influence. In the meantime, the crisis has only deepened social atomization and has rendered the society even more indifferent to the political message of the opposition.

Table 3.

Question: If you were to choose between unification with Russia and EU accession, what would you chose.

Response	IX 05	IV 06	XII 07	III 08	VI 08	IX 08	X 08	XII 08	III 09	VI 09	IX 09
Unification with Russia	59.2	56.1	47.5	45.3	50.3	54.0	48.1	46.0	42.4	42.1	38.3
EU accession	28.6	31.9	33.3	33.4	32.4	26.2	31.1	30.1	35.1	41.4	42.7

Table 3 indicates that the supporters of tightening the ties with Russia prevailed until recently. The number of those in favor of EU accession started to rise in August 2008. It was then that the EU verified its policy towards Belarus and the Belarusian authorities modified its information policy concerning Europe.

It seems that such a mass-scale shift in the attitude towards the EU is not only based on a temporary state of affairs. The Belarusian society fails to share BNB's views, in line with which closer relations with Europe are equal to turning away from Russia. In the September survey conducted by NISEPD, nearly 80% of the respondents claimed that they do not consider Russia to be a foreign country(!). Even among those willing to vote for the opposition, as many as 42% declared support for a politician who will equally cater for improving relations with the EU as well as Russia. Only 14% of the respondents would choose a politician who would be in favor of improving the relations with the EU only.

Deal with the authorities, i.e. a chance to mark one's presence

The opposition has great hopes for the elections. Local government elections will take place in the spring of 2010, the presidential vote will be held in 2011 and 2012 will see the parliamentary elections. It is of crucial importance for the opposition to return to the real political system, as the new European policy has deprived it of its role as the only partner of the West in Belarus. It is also rather likely that European partners will start to judge the opposition and its individual constituents by the impact they exert on the political life. It will be important, therefore, how many representatives the opposition will have within the authorities.

The task will be extremely difficult for the opposition. It may not win any greater popularity without access to the state media and without its people in the individual authority organs. In order to achieve both of those objectives under the authoritarian regime ruling in Belarus, the opposition needs a strong political backup and high popularity figures. That is where the vicious circle begins. One should not expect that the West, either using the stick method, as it was the case before August 2008, or the carrot it has been using since, will succeed in forcing the authorities to fulfill the opposition's demands. The regime may make some minor concessions, but it will definitely not allow for a free election to be held. As stated by the political scientist Alyaksey Pikulyk - it is not the opposition's victory in free elections, but free elections themselves that would be equal to the collapse of the regime.

In light of the above, even the relative success of the opposition in local and parliamentary elections will not be a result of effective election campaigns, but of transactions concluded between Europe and the regime, as well as between the individual opposition formations and the authorities. Milinkevitch and his supporters are especially likely to propose such an arrangement. The regime will strike a deal with the opposition in order not to give up the

advantages it has been enjoying as a result of the new European policy. It is difficult to assess today how many MP seats and council places to be taken by opposition activists the government will agree for.

The opposition stands absolutely no chance of succeeding in the presidential election. Taking part in the elections may only result in a rearrangement of the current opposition scene. No unification is likely to happen. Firstly, the opposition leaders are aware that even if it did take place, the chances of winning are equal to zero. Secondly, the Western partners are no longer promoting such a unification as well. Without a strong stimulus from the outside, the Belarusian opposition is even less motivated to unite.

Pro European attitude becomes attractive

The new European policy has so far failed to bring about any advantages for the opposition. The repressions have become slightly less severe, but new forms of exerting pressure have been encountered. The opposition still has very limited abilities to operate legally. Before August 2008 it was noticeable that the opposition was not capable of becoming an alternative Belarusian ministry of foreign affairs. The final abandonment of this concept, however, has resulted in the opposition force being at a complete loss. They have not been able to re-identify themselves under the new circumstances until this day.

But in the long term, the new attitude towards Europe will be of advantage for the opposition. The regime will self-restrict itself in victimizing the opposition in order to not to lose the advantages it has been enjoying as a result of leading a dialogue with EU partners.

Opposition leaders, instead of focusing on increasing their popularity in Washington, Brussels, Berlin or Warsaw, will finally have to consider means to win the sympathy of Belarusians. In addition, the pro-European trend that has surfaced in the public awareness after the EU policy shift, gives a lot of room for action for the majority of the pro-European Belarusian opposition.

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