

## Does the Belarusian opposition need a generational change?

*Dzianis Melyantsov*

Various crisis and occasional scandals among the leaderships of political parties erupting inside the Belarusian opposition, force numerous analysts and observers to talk about a generational conflict within the opposition. Has such a conflict really appeared and is a generational change necessary in the Belarusian democratic movement? We shall venture an explanation.

### Opposition's age bracket

In 2008, the author of this article carried out a small research project aimed at determining the age bracket of the leadership strata in the three most influential Belarusian political parties – the Belarusian National Front Party (BNF), United Civic Party (AGP) and Belarusian Communist Party (PKB) ( the current “Just World” party). An analysis of the age bracket of the parties' leadership was made including the leader, his deputies and leaders of regional party organisations, as well as the age of each party's management members (PBFN Sojm, AGP Political Council and PKB Central Committee). The choice of the concrete parties was made taking into account the mass character of the organisation and its influence in the democratic camp as well as equableness of representation on the political scene – from the right to the left. The results of the research are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

*Table 1. Average age of members of political parties' leaderships*

	<b>BNF</b>	<b>AGP</b>	<b>PKB</b>
Average age of leadership members (leader, deputies, leaders of regional party organisations).	407	50.3	56.8
Average age of leadership organ members (Sejm, Political Council, Central Committee)	447	50.4	54

*Table 2. Age groups in political parties' leaderships (in %)*

	<b>BNF</b>	<b>AGP</b>	<b>PKB</b>
Age group up to 35 in leadership (leader, deputies, leaders of regional party organisations)	38.5	14.3	7.7
Age group up to 35 in leading organ	28.3	15.4	11.8
Age group 35-45 in leadership	15.4	15.4	0
Age group 35-45 in leading organ	18.9	15.4	7.8
Age group above 45 in leadership	46.1	70.3	92.3
Age group above 45 in leading organ	52.8	69.2	80.4

Despite the fact that the abovementioned data were acquired two years ago, the situation in the opposition milieu changed insignificantly and the numbers actually reflect the current age structure of the opposition parties. Some changes occurred only in the BNF Party, where the leadership was changed in September 2009, but I will discuss it later on.

Research results indicate that the age of the party elite is rather advanced and is growing together with the relocation from the right side of the political scene to the left. The Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (Assembly), in which the average age of leaders is 53.3 years, fits the scheme excellently. This fact may be a proof for the lack of popularity of left-wing ideas among youth and of greater intra-party democracy of the centre-right-wing parties admitting younger politicians to their leading organs as compared with the left wing parties.

In the leaderships of all political parties under discussion, the 35-45 age group constitutes only an insignificant percentage. This fact is a proof for the lack of continuity in party traditions because the exceptionally important age category composed of the most self-contained, professional and goal-oriented people at the peak of their creative possibilities is being "washed away". After completing the in-party socialisation "course" and reaching defined positions, party youth resigns from political activity to fulfil itself in other spheres of life. The reason for this phenomenon may be that there are no visible perspectives of coming to power at home, thus the youth views political activity as useless and sees no possibility for self-fulfilment within the party for various reasons (conservatism of the leadership, lack of acceptance for the tactics and methods of operation, etc.). The reason may also be the change of priorities in life; fear of repressions; lack of effective youth-oriented policy in the earlier stage of the party's development, which has led to a reduction in the number of middle-age party members. Such a situation is observable in practically all political parties in Belarus.

Earlier, (in the mid and till the end of the 1990s), party leaders used to solve the question of youth-oriented policy through the creation of an autonomous youth organisation inside the party. However, this strategy failed the practical test and eventually, the organisations of young people started to act independently attracting the majority of young opposition party members (this, e.g., happened in the case of the Young Front and the Civic Forum). In effect, the parties had to create new youth organisations but already with considerably limited rights as far as the question of taking independent decisions is concerned.

Thus, **there exists a generational gap inside the Belarus opposition**, a "washing away" of the middle-age group. This conclusion in particular concerns the "Just World" party (former Belarusian Communist Party, PKB). The proportions between "youth" and the "elder generation" vary from one party to another.

### **Does the generational gap exist?**

The existing generational gap does not necessarily have to lead to intra-party conflicts. Obviously enough, gaps in the parties' age structure do not contribute to greater unity and mutual understanding because various generations are carriers of different experiences, habits and even values and philosophies of life. The lack of full understanding between parents and children has been there since time immemorial and is characteristic for most communities. For party activists such generational gaps can, in the best case, cause communication barriers, and in the worst - conflicts.

Gaps in the opposition's age structure are conducive to generating conflicts, but they are not a sufficient reason for them to appear. Conflicts can more frequently be generated by such an intra-party configuration, in which the older and younger generations have comparable numerical strength and intra-party "working load", but where the youth representation is disproportionate in the party's leading organs. The conflict also occurs in case of serious contradictions regarding the strategies of the development of organisations presented by various intra-party generations. Usually, the deeper the generational gap is, the more important given contradictions are. The possession by the young generation of a strong leader and formal or informal structure facilitating the organisation of communication within the group should be recognised as the precondition for the emergence of conflicts.

While tracing the history of the Belarusian opposition movement one can spot few conflicts, which, with a considerable degree of certainty, can be qualified as generational conflicts. These include the separation of the Young Front from the BNF Party, separation of the Civic Forum from the AGP and the change of the leadership in the BNF Party in 2009. A generational conflict on a greater scale – the scale of the entire democratic movement - took place during the abortive Belarusian Majdan in 2006, when young activists came up with the initiative of holding round-the-clock duties on the October Square. The party leadership appealed to leave the place.

However, in case of the separation of the Young Front and Civic Forum from their mother parties, an important role was played by personal ambitions of those organisations' leaders, and not only mass discontent of youth with party policy. The fact that those leaders had the autonomous structure within the party organisation at their disposal, was very helpful for them in gaining full independence and, accordingly, full power in the organisation entrusted to them.

Today the generational conflict in the opposition milieu is most conspicuous in the BNF Party, where the change of leadership took place last year, which nearly led to a split in the party. The removed PBFN leaders (L. Barshcheuski, V. Viachorka, J. Khadyka et.al.) could not come to terms with the fact that a new group headed by Alaksei Yanukewich came to power in the party and did all they could to hamper the implementation of the new leadership's plans, even blocked the party's website. The former leadership also wanted to question the legal validity of the party congress in putting forward the party's candidate to take part in the forthcoming presidential election having their own pretender in reserve – Liavon Barshcheuski. In effect, some party veterans declared that in future election, they would work in Andrei Sannikov's staff.

Undoubtedly, the essence of contradiction between Yanukevich and the Viachorka groups should be sought not only in the age difference. It should be stressed that at the party congresses in 2007 and in 2009, numerous representatives of the Front's elder generation (especially in the regions), supported the young group and vice versa. In other words, the point is not the inter-generational struggle but rather the struggle of fractions within the party. However, the leaders of those fractions undoubtedly belong to different age groups, which forces the observers to talk about a generational change in party leadership. On the other hand, the fact that G. Kostuseu (representative of the elder generation) was nominated to the post of deputy chairman, the search for compromise with former leadership and the exclusion from the party of some young activists, who supported the elder generation, is evidence of both the instability of the generational change in the party and of the general lack of ideological homogeneity of the young generation.

As far as other opposition parties are concerned, no sharp generational conflict in them is visible. This, to some degree, can be explained by the general crisis of the opposition in Belarus, which led to abating the competition in the opposition milieu. After the recent warming up of relations between Minsk and the West and curtailing democratic parties' financing, the interest in constructing parties and party activity dwindled totally. Mostly professional politicians, who cannot imagine life without opposition activity and neophytes from the young generation group seeking the romanticism of struggle, remain within party ranks. The latter, however, generally do not stay there for long.

### **Is a generational change necessary?**

Parties, like other organisations, in order to develop, need a rotation of leaders. And even not because the opposition parties failed to win any single election campaign, and some of their

leaders started their careers in Lukashenka's electoral staff, but because new ideas, new methods and a new style of work were indispensable. After all, most opposition leaders remain on the posts of party chairmen since last century. The BNF Party is an exception here.

Yet, returning to the BNF example, one should note that coming to power of Yanukevich's groups did not result in any radical changes inside the party, and the party itself did not become a leader of the opposition milieu. Between the young and elder party members there were no cardinal differences concerning the values, the strategy of party activity, and the future of the political system in the country. What actually differed them was the level of influence on the decision-making process and methods of achieving goals set by the party. Moreover, the new leadership specialised itself inside its own party, which provides no ground to expect from it any radical changes in the strategy and party activity tactics.

Generalising the BNF example, one can conclude that the very generational change in the opposition will not lead to resolving all problems of the opposition parties. It will only lead to a reshuffle of leaders and – in the best case – to the implementation of new ideas and new, for Belarus, methods of political activity. However, the consolidated authoritarian regime dominant in Belarus does not anticipate the share of political parties in real politics. The opposition parties do not participate in parliamentary work and have no influence on forming the government. Under such conditions, parties are gradually degraded to the level of their ancestors – political interest clubs. That is why people aspiring to exercise real power will most readily select state-oriented service, rather than opposition activity, which does not offer such developmental prospects and self-realisation. Unless the process of political rivalry starts in the country, the opposition political parties are doomed to the existence on the margin of the political system. A generational change in their leadership will not solve this systemic question.

**Dzianis Melyantsov** is senior analyst in the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS, Vilnius). An MA in political science, he is currently writing his doctoral thesis on the relations between Belarus and NATO. Until 2009 he lectured in the European Humanistic University in Vilnius, but after the conflict with the management, lost the possibility of lecturing there. Co-founder of the "Palitichnaya Sfera" - Political Research Institute.