Recent Polls: Belarusians Blame Lukashenka for Their Problems (+ Video)

On 18 January the Eastern European Studies Centre and Belarus Research Council organised a panel “What Belarusians Think?”. The participants discussed the results of the December social survey conducted by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies.

Professor Oleg Manaev, director of the IISEPS, presented and analysed the polls. He underlined the importance of presentation of the results abroad since deteriorating situation for freedom of speech in Belarus.

Other panellists Alexei Pikulik, an analyst of the Belarus Institute for Strategic Studies, and Sergey Nikoluk from IISEPS, continued on commenting the survey outcomes. Valery Karbalevich, a journalist of Radio Free Europe/Radio Svoboda, moderated the discussion.

The discussants focused on the reasons for stabilisation of Lukashenka's rating although the pools proved dissatisfaction with the deteriorating economy. They also took a closer look into low social trust for the opposition. Below is a summary of the main issues discussed.

Lukashenka: a Source of Crisis and Solace

The December poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) shows that the personal rating of Lukashenka is actually "frozen". In December, 39.1% respondents trusted him, while 49.1% did not trust (in September – 38.5% vs.51.9%). Also, the president is
considered as the main culprit of the current economic crisis (41%), followed by the government (39.1%), the opposition (11.5%), Europe (10.9%), Russia (7.5%).

The polls also showed that the year 2012 appeared to be very difficult for Belarusians. Despite the salary growth, 57 per cent of respondents claimed that their material situation has not changed (vs. 27% of those who claimed that it deteriorated). 88 per cent of respondents think that Belarusian economy is in crisis. Almost half of Belarusians blamed the president for the current economic crisis (41%). However, it is less that in the previous survey (almost 50 per cent). 39 per cent of Belarusians put responsibility on the authorities.

Whereas respondents remained critical toward Aleksandr Lukashenka, many of them have expected him to overcome the economic crisis. Number of Belarusians who understand that the socio-economic model in Belarus is no longer viable has increased (33 per cent now). Almost 30% of respondents claimed that its ‘success’ depended upon substantial financial aid from Russia.

**Is That Really so Simple: Russia Closer, the EU Further?**

Cultural closeness of Belarusians and Russians remains one of the key factors of the Euro scepticism in the society. Moreover, the idea of similar mindset determines often the geopolitical identity of Belarusians. For example, it encourages to integration with their Eastern neighbours, even at the level of daily life situations, such as at work, entering into mixed marriages. Changes are possible but only as long-term process.

As the data showed, the number of proponents for the integration with Russia remains rather stable (38 per cent). Similarly, there are no dynamics in the attitude toward the idea of joining the European Union (43%). However, 25 per
cent of Belarusians have heard about the European Dialogue on Modernisation. Almost a half of respondents think that the initiative is important for Belarus. It means that the society is obtaining information on that project and expresses its interest in it.

Belarusians expressed positive attitude toward small cross-border movement (50% in favour of it). In particular, people living in the borderland regions remained positive for that initiative (for example, 72 per cent of Grodna’s respondents). Asked for the reasons of problems with implementation of the agreement with Poland and Lithuania, 28 per cent respondents argued that it was due to the Belarusian side.

Only 13% Belarusians put responsibility on Poles and Lithuanians. It can mean that the society understands the political motives staying behind the Lukashenka’s strategy. According to the discussants, it is the civic initiatives that could take more active part in the process.

The Opposition: Frozen in Inability

The rating of Lukashenka remains stable (31.5%), but with a slight decrease from 34.5 per cent in September 2012. Interestingly, over 40 per cent of respondents did not express support to any of the listed politicians. It means that still a substantial part of society remains undecided.

The panellists disagrees on how Belarusians perceived the opposition. One of the speakers suggested that the society does not understand the idea of the political party and its formalised structure. It is thus unsatisfied with the opposition activity. On the other hand, many Belarusians associate the opposition with the concrete political force. Moreover, support for a certain political party means affiliation to it. Therefore, they remain sceptic about expressing their positive attitude.
The low support for the opposition has also other reasons. According to one speaker, the opposition has already showed its weakness and inability to exist in the state system. It is also due to the quality of the regime which efficiently hinders its functioning. For example, the opposition is not present in the information space.

Another key issue is that the Lukashenka’s socio-economic project worked out for many years in Belarus. Thus, the opposition claiming the transformation to the market economy have not yet obtained substantial social trust and acceptance for its vision.

It appears that for the Belarusian public opinion the opposition appears as eccentric and focusing on abstract disputes. On the other hand, as he noticed, the opposition weakness is also due to the regime. Different opposition would meant different regime.

**No Wind of Change?**

Panellists also paid attention to the role of Belarusian language in the public sphere. Many among the opposition claim that presence of the language is necessary for development the Belarusian national project. According to some opinions, the wider usage of Belarusian could foster the national awareness and as a result, it would also have impact on the regime. Such attitude failed to obtaine much support among the discussants. Indeed, it is the Russian language which prevails in the daily life usage (around 55-60 per cent of respondents in the last 18 years).

The survey results proved that Belarusians recognised that the country’s economic and their private material situation deteriorated. Although many of them still hold Lukashenka’s responsible for that, at the same time they perceive him as the one who can manage to improve it.

The December polls showed that Belarusians remain sceptical
about the state institutions. The leader among the organisations of the highest social trust is the Orthodox Church (over 70 per cent). The respondents put their trust respectively in the army (53%) and advocacy (48%). 20% of people trust the oppositional political parties which is almost twice less as number of those who indicated the president (39 per cent). With lack of the social trust, the opposition stacks in its position.

VIDEO

Part 1

Part 2

Part 3