

Belarusian Politicians Do Not Care About the Economy

The Centre for Analytical Initiatives of the *Liberal Club* in Minsk has recently presented the second edition of its research project – *Index of Economic Adequacy of Belarus*.

The researchers found that the vast majority of Belarusian politicians (both pro-government and opposition) do not have any articulated views on the economy. Even though only last year the country suffered a serious crisis politicians find many other topics to devote their time and energy to but not the economy.

This strange state of things in Belarusian politics, probably, results from two major factors: the authoritarian realities and the generous subsidies that come in from Russia. They both keep the economy as a second-rate priority for pro-governmental as well as oppositional politicians. The poor level of economic education in Belarusian schools and universities also plays a role.

Politicians Non-Economicus in Belarus

The presidential campaign in the US was centered on the economy. The budget cliff is looming large and the Americans want their new president to avert it. The public discourse in the EU also focuses on shaky markets and the sovereign debt crises in its member states. Even the Chinese are getting serious about the need for economic reforms.

Thus, the whole world is worried about the prospects for its economic development. And only Belarus can be sure that no economic troubles will ever hit it. At least, this is the impression you get when listening to Belarusian politicians. That goes for both teams: pro-government and the opposition.

For the second year the Centre for Analytical Initiatives of the *Liberal Club*, a think tank in Minsk, carried out a special research project that aims to study the ideas behind the economic platforms of all political actors in the country. The project has a provocative title – *Index of Economic Adequacy of Belarus* – and covers the government, all the registered and unregistered political parties and also civil movements that have clear political ambitions.

Now for the second time, the researchers come to a shocking conclusion: there is, in fact, not much to analyse. The majority of the Belarusian political actors simply have no economic programs at all.

Out of the 25 different political entities in the country only four (!) have at least some economic program that tries to give answers to the present-day challenges in the Belarusian economy. These entities include the government, the United Civil Party, the For Freedom Movement and the BPF Party.

Of course, their programmes raise many questions. But anyway, there is something to debate.

All the rest, perhaps, think that they do not need economic platforms as such. They prefer to focus on other issues in their daily work. For example, opposition parties and organisations prioritise such topics as political prisoners, democracy, human rights, foreign sanctions or Russian imperialism.

Inadequate Stance

No doubt, all these topics are extremely important. And some of them, like the issue of the political prisoners, have to be top priorities for everyone in Belarus.

However, it is strange when organisations that claim to be struggling for the right to govern the country have no outlined vision of what its economy should look like. It is

twice as strange given the worrying state of the economy in Belarus. Especially, after [last year's financial crisis](#), when the inflation rate exceeded 100% and the three-fold devaluation of the Belarusian rouble literally robbed the population.

No surprise that after the economic calamities of 2011 the Belarusians became particularly concerned about the level of their wellbeing. According to various public opinion surveys, nearly two-thirds of the population think that the country's economy needs reforms. From a public relations standpoint, not talking at all about economic issues in this situation looks really inadequate for political actors.

It also looks inadequate from a different standpoint. What if the Belarusian history suddenly takes an unexpected turn and the opposition get a chance to form their own government. What kind of economic policies can we expect from such a government if, apart from a couple of organisations, it takes no interest in the economy as such?

Belarusian MPs Are Economically Ignorant

As part of this year's research the *Liberal Club* devoted a separate chapter of the *Index of Economic Adequacy* to the parliamentary elections that took place on 23 September. The researchers studied the electoral platforms of the newly-elected [109 MPs](#).

The results turned out to be as shocking as for the political parties and for the civil movements. The absolute majority of the MP-elects did not mention economic issues in their programmes at all. They only kept expressing admiration of the government's wise and humane economic policies.

And those MPs who did talk about economics in their programmes demonstrated a great deal of ignorance. A typical example of this would be schizophrenic promises to quickly raise salaries, provide numerous state subsidies and simultaneously

keep inflation under control.

What Keeps Politicians Uninterested in Economics?

This weird unpopularity of economics among Belarusian politicians is difficult to explain. But according to the authors of the *Index of Economic Adequacy*, two factors play a central role.

First of all, the authoritarian political system in Belarus stifles real electoral competition. Elections have been turned by election commissions of all levels into [the art of falsification](#). As a result, only those whom the incumbent authorities choose enter the government. Others do not stand a chance to get a position of public responsibility. Therefore, they are not stimulated to work on programs that they think they will never get an opportunity to put into practice.

Secondly, the Belarusian economy enjoys a phenomenal level of financial support from Russia. According to the World Bank, between 2001-2010 Belarus annually saved about 13% of the GDP thanks to the discounted prices on energy resources from its Eastern neighbour.

This huge amount of subsidies helped to keep the economy afloat without much reform. The political leadership as well as their opponents in the opposition did not have any urgent need to think about the economy. And it looks like they hope that Russian generosity will end forever.

Most disturbingly, there are not very many people in the general public who can convince politicians of the opposite. Economics is taught at a low level with an outdated curriculum in Belarusian schools and universities. The majority of the people do not have even a slightest idea how real economics works.