

Mediabarometer: Belarusian Opposition Needs to Do its Homework

At the end of October the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) published a [new issue](#) of its Political Mediabarometer. It shows that many in the Belarus opposition seem to focus more on international activities and less on work inside the country.

The Political Mediabarometer reflects public communications of Belarusian political parties and movements and their presence in Belarusian media and covers April-June 2013. According to the BISS' findings, the public campaign Tell the Truth, United Civic Party and the Party of the Belarusian People's Front appeared the most frequently in Belarusian media.

This media presence, however, does not lead to any serious level of public support even for the biggest parties or the most well-known politicians. The Belarusian opposition needs to fight for any publicity just to be recognised by the common people. Some of the new political forces – for example, the campaign Tell the Truth – manage to do it better.

Who is the Opposition?

Many opposition activists may become upset after reading the new BISS study done by Aliaksei Pikulik and Alena Artsiomenka. The number of politicians' mentions according to the BISS – dropped from 3,900 in January-March to 3,084 in April-June. This means that as a whole, the opponents of the current government became less visible in the public sphere.

Essentially, oppositional political forces often have to focus on, in the least, publicity before looking for new supporters.

Moreover, according to Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS)□, the level of trust in oppositional parties among Belarusians in March stood at 13.1%, while the level of distrust reached 60.1%.

The media paid more attention to those politicians who demonstrated more offline activities and communicated proactively, not only reacting to what others have done or said but taking the initiative themselves.



Anatol Liabedzka of the United Civic Party still leads the ranking of media presence, while the tendency towards a growing media presence for both Yanukevich and Milinkevich continues (at the end of 2012 the former was in 12th place and the latter 7th place).

In 2012, Liabedzka and a former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau replaced each other at first place in the BISS ranking. In the first quarter of 2013, Sannikau found himself already at third place. And according to the study in April-June 2013 he fell even lower – to sixth place. In October 2012, he received political asylum in the UK, and as is often the case, physical absence rarely makes a politician more popular at home.



Tell the Truth traditionally leads the ranking of political forces which more or less corresponded with the ranking of their leaders. Absolute media presence rankings for the top-5 parties and movements remain higher than those of their individual representatives and it proves that they are more than “one-man-parties”.

Party Equals Leader?

They, however, remain very much concentrated on Minsk. The proportion of regional activists, according to the BISS study,

had declined. The share of provincial party leaders and members anyway never reached a tangible level. Only Tell the Truth has a tangible share of alternative representatives who articulated political messages in the period screened by the BISS. In all cases, when the media mentioned the United Civic Party, PBNF, Christian Democrats, and For the Freedom, their reporting was related only to their leader (or leaders).

Only Young Front had a considerable share of coverage linked to their regional leaders, and the Conservative-Christian Party of the Belarusian People's Front – to a regional party member.

This means that politics involved the same circle of well-known faces. Unfortunately, the old politicians of the Belarusian opposition have limited popularity among the broader public. According to the IISEPS opinion survey conducted in March, support for Niakliaeu reached 5.1% and Milinkevich and Sannikau got only 2.8% each.

Along with regional activists, the share of women also declined. In the first quarter of 2013 four women, namely Iryna Khalip, Maryna Adamovich, Natallia Radzina and Nasta Dashkevich (Palazhanka) made it into the top-12 of the ranking. But later in the year only Maryna Adamovich, the wife of the incarcerated presidential candidate Mikola Statkevich, was still at the top.

The Opposition Prefers International Activities

Politicians and political forces over this period of time actively discussed a more balanced and diverse set of issues. In particular they focused more upon issues of international relations, domestic politics and social matters. Since April 2012, when BISS started this study, Belarusian politicians rather frequently talked about economics. The share of such statements doubled: previously it never exceeded 6-7 per cent, now it reached 15 per cent of all communications. It made the

discourse of the opposition more interesting to common people.

The BISS experts named the events related to the communications of Belarusian political forces from April-June, although they did not study them per se. The study suggests that the Belarusian opposition pays more attention to international activities than to domestic problems, which are more important to common people.

Domestic events included [Chernobyl Way](#), a traditional rally dedicated to the anniversary of Chernobyl catastrophe; and formation of political coalition People's Referendum (Narodny Referendum). Inside this coalition, Tell the Truth, For Freedom, the PBNF and BSDP declared that they would work together as strategic partners during the forthcoming local, presidential and parliamentary elections.

The international activities of opposition, on the other hand, were more impressive. In the second quarter of this year, its representatives participated in a conference on Belarus in Brussels held by the European People's Party, urged the EU to ease visa regime, hold a series of meeting in Lithuanian Seimas and addressed the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry about the conditions under which the EU could normalise relations with Belarus.

Tell the Truth Grows Stronger

Yet international advocacy cannot substitute active political work inside the country. The study suggests that politicians proposed fewer new initiatives between April and June. Only Andrei Dzmitryeu (Tell the Truth) and Dzmitry Vus in this time span put forth any proposals. In general, the share of proactive communication – those when the politicians addressed publicity out of their own initiative – declined, while share of reactive communication responding to somebody else's actions or statements, grew to 85 per cent.

The structure of opposition and its activities are changing

very slowly. An obvious maverick, the movement Tell the Truth demonstrate steady and vibrant activity. In less than five years it made it from zero to probably the most promising political force in an otherwise conservative Belarusian opposition. The political agenda of the movement looks rather flexible. So far, it simply takes on every local initiative it can find.

The Belarusian opposition has faced harsh suppression for years, and yet it still exists and is functioning. The new BISS study suggests that to become more visible in the domestic media and more popular among Belarusians, the opposition should spend less time doing international activities and work more inside Belarus, with its potential electorate.

Opposition Groups Call Not to Vote – Parliamentary Elections Digest

As early voting continues police targets both opposition groups which actively take part in elections and those who call to boycott the elections. A number of opposition parties withdraw their candidates and urge not to participate in elections.

[Opposition groups call not to vote.](#) Several major opposition political groups called on people not to vote in parliamentary elections. They include the United Civic Party, Belarusian Popular Front, Young Front, Belarusian Christian Democrats and Independent Trade Union of the Radioelectronic Industry. They stated as a [reason](#) for their decision the presence of political prisoners in Belarus, a lack of legislative

framework for fair elections, an absence of control over vote counting and persistent repression against opposition groups.

Two opposition parties withdraw their candidates. The Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and the United Civic Party (UCP) decided to withdraw their parliamentary candidates (31 and 38 representatives respectively), explaining that the election process was not transparent and democratic, and authorities were ignoring their demands to release political prisoners.

Early voting begins in House of Representatives elections. Polling stations opened in Belarus on September 18 for early voting in the elections for the House of Representatives. The main voting day in the elections is September 23.

Police seize printed material from office of «Tell the Truth!» movement. Police seized a large amount of printed material from the office of the "Tell the Truth!" movement in Minsk on September 6. The officers raided the office, located in an apartment building, when many members of the opposition movement were staying there to watch a television address by a parliamentary candidate.

Minsk court convicts Zmena activists. Minsk Frunzenski District Court has considered the administrative charges brought against activists of the Zmena movement (youth wing of the Tell the Truth campaign), who were brutally detained during an election picket on September 18. Hanna Kurlovich was sentenced to a fine of 2 million rubles; Yahor Viniatski to 7 days of arrest; Aliaksandr Artsybashau to 10 days of arrest; Pavel Vinahradau to 12 days of arrest.

Police break up demonstration for election boycott in Minsk. Police in civilian clothes broke up a demonstration for an election boycott in Minsk on September 18, violently grabbing opposition activists and journalists who were

covering the event.

Election contest of #electby. Resource of the people election monitoring #electby jointly with the project "Election Observation: Theory and Practice" announce a contest for the best photos and videos for the parliamentary elections in Belarus. Among the nominations there are best photo, dedicated to the campaign; best video of/about the candidate. The competition prizes – camera, smartphone, e-book – will go those who will collect the largest number of "likes" in social media and at the website electby.org.

Analytics

Report of Early Voting Observation Results. 200 short-term and 95 long-term observers of the "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" campaign carry out everyday monitoring of the early voting at 150 polling stations all over Belarus. They note the number of early voters, evidence of compulsion to vote early and obstacles created for observers to count the number of early voters. The recent diagrams reflects information from over 120 polling stations, the reports from which were processed as of September 19, 10 p.m.

Typical young candidate. Alternative Youth Platform has examined all the young people registered as candidates to the parliamentary elections, and compiled a portrait of a typical candidate. There are 38 candidates at the age of 18 to 31 years. A typical candidate is a resident of Minsk. 89 percent of them are male. Most of them do not belong to any party, the second and the third largest group are representatives of the Liberal Democratic Party and Belarusian Popular Front.

EU Poised to Extend Sanctions Against Belarus After Elections (for subscribers only) – The European Voice reports that the EU will be watching parliamentary elections in Belarus on Sunday (23 September) with a sense of uncertainty about how to adjust its policy towards its eastern neighbour after another year of clashes with the regime

of Aleksandr Lukashenka. The EV also gives reference to the think-tanks Carnegie Europe, IISEPS and BISS quoting their vision of the current situation, as well as, mentions the Brussels-based ODB burglary.

[The Belarusian Opposition on the Eve of the Election Day](#) – the Analytical Belarusian Centre presents an analytical overview which is described the Belarusian opposition on the eve of the election day. The issue is dedicated to the existing situation among opposition parties on the eve of the main polling day. The experts predict the results of the parliamentary elections and possible alliances among the opposition.

[Elections from Belarus: a view from Poland](#). The monthly bulletin of the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) is dedicated to Belarus, specifically to pre-election situation and named "Election without choices". The experts note that the campaign running up to the parliamentary elections highlighted the lack of dialogue between the authorities and society. It also underlined the problems of the Belarusian opposition, i.e., the internal divisions and the lack of resources required to conduct political agitation.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

Changes in Belarus: The Task for the Opposition, not Foreign Powers

The recent release of two opposition activists is an important event but hardly a turning point for the political situation in Belarus. More than a dozen political prisoners remain incarcerated. Even if Alexandr Lukashenka frees all political prisoners and welcomes EU ministers in Minsk, it will not be a turning point, either.

First, Lukashenka can very soon change his mind, take new prisoners and start the liberalisation game anew. Second, the release of opposition activists taken hostage by the regime may have humanitarian or personal significance but no political impact – as long as they do not undertake real work with people inside Belarus. The fundamental problem is that only three actors play this liberalisation game – the Belarusian regime, Russia and the EU. The Belarusian opposition's role is that of a ball with which they are playing.

Belarusian Opposition: Mission Possible

The reasons for the latest friendly gestures towards West by top officials are the same as before. Worsening of Belarusian relations with EU has narrowed options of Belarusian ruler to a pitiful role of Moscow's vassal. After Putin became the Russian president, he declared his intent to intensify building of Eurasian Union which can be dangerous for Lukashenka's power and survival.

No wonder, the Belarusian leader looked westwards again to return to his older model of multi-vector foreign policy. He is gradually accepting some demands of the EU as in 2008, when

he also released political prisoners and began dialogue with the EU. The pressure on the opposition diminished – yet it did not result in strengthening opposition inside the country. Then came the 2010 elections, confrontation and suppression of the opposition within Belarus. The same happened in 2004 and 2006.

The opposition should become a visible player not only in Brussels and Washington

The vicious cycle will repeat again as the interests of stakeholders and power balance on the part of the EU, Russia and Belarusian regime remain the same. The situation can change only when the opposition inside Belarus emerge as an organised and self-conscious force. The opposition should become a visible player not only in Brussels and Washington.

True, Lukashenka's regime blocks many movement of his opponents but there are absolutely no grounds to compare it to Stalin or even Third World dictatorships. Working with the population in Belarus is possible.

Currently, many in the opposition are preoccupied with retaining their financial support without being able to produce any proof of their own efficiency and popularity inside the country.

Is Anyone Alive?

The year 2011 demonstrated that the opposition could not organise any serious political campaigns despite widespread anger at government policy displayed by Belarusians because of economic and social problems. The silent protest actions remained spontaneous mob actions without content, and “People's Assemblies” simply failed to attract any considerable numbers of people.

Apparently little has changed in this regard in recent months.

The websites of oppositional parties – their main representation platforms given the current situation with media – demonstrate just that. The websites of three major oppositional parties – Belarusian People's Front Party, United Civic Party and Social Democratic Party – resemble internet news sites rather than outlets of political organisations.

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Parties usually reprint various news already available elsewhere on Internet and may occasionally publish their own analytical pieces or statements. Yet they give little indication of actual activities inside Belarus and work with people.

Of course, topics such as prospects of the Eastern Partnership, the role of the Belarusian People's Republic' government in exile and the Belarusian origins of Scarlett Johansson are very interesting. But they have little to do with the situation in Belarus or the parties' own activities.

The situation looks better with political movements. Both "Tell the Truth" of Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu and "For Freedom" of Alaksandr Milinkevich look more dynamic. Their sites demonstrate concrete examples of working with the Belarusians inside the country. "For Freedom" is organising public lectures and "Tell the Truth" is conducting a campaign on the newly proposed Chinese Industrial Park which seriously worries local residents. But their own reported activities still resemble the old parties.

What this means is that the problem of little work with the people have plagued all major oppositional political structures.

Belarusian "Cargo Cult"

That was a form of religious belief that salvation shall come from foreign land on a ship or aircraft

Anthropological insights help to understand activities of Belarusian opposition and society. Some South Pacific islanders, after seeing Western vessels with valuable items arriving to their lands, developed the so called "cargo cult". That was a form of religious belief that salvation shall come from foreign land on a ship or aircraft. That is a pattern to describe activities of Belarusian opposition in recent times.

Activity of most oppositional politicians concentrate on foreign governments and stakeholders. It is assumed that the opposition anyway cannot do anything within the country. That means that they need not undertake any efforts to improve their performance inside Belarus. Instead, the oppositional politicians put pressure on Lukashenka from abroad using the EU. But such behaviour is more likely to produce their further marginalisation inside the country rather than any real, albeit small, change.

The futility of such an approach is evident. The deputy head of the campaign "Tell the Truth" Andrei Dmitryeu speaking to Radio Liberty admitted, "The Belarusian opposition should stop looking for happiness in other capitals. It has to look for happiness here. [...] While Belarusian society is not willing to follow the Belarusian opposition, it does not matter what is happening around Belarus."

Need to Develop An Alternative

Many radical activists call for Western sanctions but not for funding the deeply needed projects – like new media projects or the improvement of the existing ones

Tendencies to focus primarily on foreign advocacy lowered efficiency of opposition and their chances to achieve changes within the country. The gap between the opposition and reality in Belarus may end badly for all. Just one example.

Many radical activists call for Western sanctions but not for funding the deeply needed new initiatives – like new media projects or the improvement of the existing ones. Mass media in Belarus should become much more vigorous, provide society with independent information about what is going on in the country, and serve as a discussion platform.

For instance, the only Belarusian-language TV channel Belsat is broadcasting original content under extreme pressure put by Belarusian authorities on its journalists in the country. It has much better chances to help changing the situation in Belarus than dozens of websites. Nevertheless, Belsat is chronically underfunded even now.

And there is no such thing as too much funding for media, education, cultural and academic exchange projects. Of course, such a policy is more expensive than sanctions. Sanctions are an easy solution particularly when they are imposed against a relatively small country. They can nicely demonstrate how the EU can punish a dictator. But breaking the vicious circle requires not just sanctions but real work inside the country.

The opposition will have a hard time getting more money for this kind of projects. Finding money inside Belarus is virtually impossible. For foreign donors supporting real projects directed at Belarusian people could be more expensive and risky than supporting various exile opposition groups or yet another website.

But it is important to understand that only working with Belarusians rather than Brussels insiders can seriously increase respect for the Belarusian opposition. It should appear as a responsible and trustworthy political actor inside the country. Once the public opinion starts to change in the right direction, the question of changing the situation in Belarus will become a question of time.

Otherwise, the cycles of taking and releasing political hostages will be repeated again and again.

Authorities Target Recipients of Foreign Aid – Politics and Civil Society Digest

Belarusian authorities increasingly target those who receive financial support from international and foreign donors. Years ago they cut off virtually all sources of domestic financial support of civil society. Now they have stepped up their efforts to punish those who manage to find external funding and fail to comply with the draconian domestic regulation of foreign aid. Even after the arrest of Ales Byaliatski on tax fraud charges, representatives of donors fail to take the necessary measures not to worsen the risks which Belarusian activists have to deal with.

POLITICS

Investigations on relationships with foreign funds. On 22 September, Aliaksandr Silkou, Mahiliou regional coordinator of the movement “For Freedom”, was [interrogated](#) by a local customs department over smuggling charges. According to the activist, Brest police detained a Polish citizen Mr. Jaskowicki and seized a grant application with Mr. Silkou’s name on it as the stated applicant. On 22 September, Head of Hrodna branch of Belarusian Popular Front Vadzim Saranchukou was [interrogated](#) by the KGB about the relationship he has with foreign funds. Officials also mentioned a Polish citizen detained at the border who was carrying financial information, but with a different name.

Arrests for leaflets about silent protests. On 19 September, District Court in Homel [sentenced](#) activists Dmitry Shevchenko and Dmitry Karashkov to administrative detention respectively to 15 days and 3 days (violation of procedures for organization and conduct of mass events). The activists were arrested for distribution of information materials for the planned 21 September, actions of silent protest. Immediately after the trial, Shevchenko went on hunger strike.

Arrests for white-red-white flags. On 19 September, Tsentralny District Court in Minsk [sentenced](#) Uladzimer Yaromenak and Nasta Palazhanka respectively to 12 and 11 days of administrative arrest for alleged violating Art. 23.34 of the Administrative Code (violation of procedures for organization and conduct of mass events). The activists were detained in downtown Minsk as they were trying to hang out white-red-white flags of the pre-Lukashenka Belarus. This way they tried to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the white-red-white flag as the state symbols back in 1991.

Arrest and fine for leaflets about People Assembly. On 21 September, Homel District Court [sentenced](#) two local activists Andrei Tsianiuta (10 days of arrest) and Vasil Takarenka (Br 350,000 fine or \$50) for distributing leaflets the day before. Leaflets were devoted to the upcoming [People Assembly](#) on 8 October.

Activist arrested right at police department. On 21 September, a United Civic Party activist Olga Paderina has been [sentenced](#) to 10 days' administrative arrest by the court of Leninski district of Minsk under Article 21.14 of the Administrative Code (violation of municipal improvement and maintenance rules in centers of population). Olga Paderina was detained on 18 September late at night for pasting up stickers for the "Revolution through social networks" campaign.

Homel activist sentenced to 15 days of arrest. On 22 September, Homel Tsentralny District Court [sentenced](#)

local opposition activist Kanstantsin Zhukouski to 15 days of administrative arrest for alleged usage of foul language and resisting arrest. Zhukouski was detained in downtown Homel before silent protests, and was reportedly beaten and later taken to the hospital.

Uladzimir Kobets: How I was recruited by KGB. Uladzimir Kobets, Andrei Sannikov's campaign chief, has told how he had been [forced](#) to sign a collaboration agreement at the KGB.

Silent protestson 21 September. After a two-month break, the organizers of silent protests called again people to the streets. On 21 September, [participants](#) should have been just walking down along the main avenues/streets of their cities. A small number of people were noticed at the action: dozens of regions, up to 300 people in Minsk. Despite the presence of police there were no detentions.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Forum of cyclists in Hrodna. On 17-18 September, the first Forum of cyclists was [held](#) in Hrodna. The Forum aimed at gathering of cyclists to fight for the development of a cycling movement. There were 12 participants, representatives of regional centers of Belarus.

Independent Student Conference. On 18 September, Minsk hosted the conference "Higher Education in Belarus through the eyes of students". The organizer is "Center for Development of student initiatives". The conference [adopted](#) a resolution in which the participants, noting the absence in the public sphere students' position in relation to higher education in Belarus, presented their vision to improve its elements.

Public Advisory Council dismissed. On 23 September, Head of Presidential Administration Vladimir Makey [dismissed](#) the Public Advisory Council due to its members desire not to be accused of collaboration with the authorities. Makey notes that "the personal experience and constructivism of former

Council's members could be useful in the future in the context of the great dialog, announced by the government".

Group of reaction. National platform of Civil Society Forum of EaP is [establishing](#) a "Group of reaction" empowered to conduct dialogue and negotiation with different actors of the political process. Ulad Velichko (EuroBelarus), Ales Belyatsky (Viasna), Vladimir Mackievich (AHT/CSI) and Sergei Mackievich (the NGO Assembly) are nominated to the Group. The final decision on the composition and functions of the Group should be taken at the Conference of the National Platform in October.

Tournament of Zabej. On September 24, the 2nd tournament of community Zabej will [bring](#) together more than 30 teams from various amateur football championships and towns in Belarus. Conducting the mass game Zabej demonstrates to young people possibility of self-organizing and contributes to the development of initiatives at the grassroots level.

Week of Informal Education. On 24 September-2 October, the 6th Week of Informal Education will be [held](#) in Belarus. This year the main topic of the Week is "Informal education and regional development". Seminars, trainings, round tables, master classes will be held in Grodno, Gomel, Mogilev, Brest, as well as in Smalyavichi, Hodosy, Krychau, Barysau, Zhodzina, Svetlahorsk, Shchuchin, Maladechna.

Republican Social Forum. On 24-25 October, the Republican Social Forum will be [held](#) in Homel. The purpose of the Forum is a demonstration, development and promotion of mechanisms and practices of social partnership between public authorities, NGOs and business for sustainable social development. Among the organizers there are Homel regional executive committee, International Education Center (IBB), NGO ACT, etc.

Belarusian House in Warsaw. In Warsaw, Belarusian political

emigrants [establish](#) an organization that aims to unite local Belarusians through counseling, organization of joint events, cultural activities and lobbying of the Belarusian minority in Polish society. One of the Belarusian House founders is a member of movement "For Freedom" Ales Zarembyuk.

Stable dynamics of registration. During the eight months of this year the Ministry of Justice has [registered](#) 55 NGOs, 11 foundations, one trade union and one association. Compared to the previous five years, the dynamics of registration has not changed significantly.

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Belarus Opposition Struggles to Gain from Lukashenka's Losses

The decline in Belarusians' income led to the corresponding reduction of Lukashenka's rating. However, the regime's opponents' popularity did not grow significantly.

The Independent Institute for Social, Economic, and Political Studies conducted a sociological survey in Belarus last month. According to the research findings, 73.4% of respondents noted

that their economic conditions had deteriorated during the previous three months. 23.2% of respondents stated that the standard of their well-being hadn't changed. Only 1.6% of respondents noted that their economic conditions had improved. The similar indicators totaled 16%, 57.7%, and 24.9% correspondingly in December 2010 and amounted to 26.9%, 54.8%, and 17.2% correspondingly in March 2011.

61.8% of respondents noted that generally the situation in Belarus developed in the wrong direction. 26.1% of respondents hailed the official policies at that. The indicators totaled 32.5% and 54.2% correspondingly in December 2010 and amounted to 40% and 45.3% correspondingly in March 2011.

The rating of confidence to Lukashenka decreased considerably (i.e., almost by 20 points) in comparison with December 2010. Thus, 53.8% of respondents stated they didn't trust the President in June 2011. 35.7% of respondents noted they confided in Lukashenka. The similar indicators had amounted to 35.1% and 55% correspondingly in December 2010.

Lukashenka's electoral rating has decreased by more than 20 points since recently. According to the Independent Institute for Social, Economic, and Political Studies, Lukashenka would be supported by 29.3% of voters, if the Presidential election took place in June 2011, to be compared to 53% of supporters in December 2010.

The majority of respondents (44.5%) put the whole blame for the foreign currency crisis on Lukashenka, 36.7% of respondents blame the government, and 27% condemn the global crisis.

The society responds to the statements about the main danger to the independence of Belarus, coming from Russia and the unfair policies of Russian authorities in relation to Belarus, delivered by Belarusian public officials. Thus, 47.8% of respondents noted they would vote against the unification of

Belarus and Russia, if a corresponding referendum was conducted. 31.4% of eligible voters would back such a union at that. It should be underscored that the Belarusian people mainly regard the unification as an economic union. According to sociological surveys, no more than 5% of respondents only support the perspective of getting Belarus incorporated into the Russian Federation.

Surprisingly, the considerable decrease of Lukashenka's popularity didn't lead to the corresponding rise of his opponents' rating points. Thus, 7.4% of respondents would vote for Andrei Sannikau, 5.4% of respondents would support Uladzimir Niaklayeu, and 11.2% of respondents would vote for other politicians at the would-be election in June 2011 to be compared to 3.2%, 6.9%, and 7.9% correspondingly in December 2010.

The opposition struggle to leave the democratic ghetto even under the present-day conditions of falling living standards. All in all, around 25% of voters support the oppositional politicians nowadays.

The opposition movement includes the politicians, who stand up for closer integration with Russia. Thus, Siarhei Kaliakin, the Head of "Spraviadlivy Sviet" ('Fair World') stated once that Belarus had to acknowledge independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and that Russia had a right to annex the Crimea, since he regarded the peninsula as the Russian territory.

The United Civil Party (UCP) representatives stand for the sales of Belarusian enterprises to Russian companies. Surprisingly, Uladzimir Niaklayeu articulated a similar motto during the Presidential election campaign: "We should sell everything to Russia that depends on Russia and that nobody else generally needs, apart from Russia."

A range of other oppositional parties keep to the contrary position. Thus, the "Za Svabodu" movement stands up for

integration of Belarus into the European Union. The Belarusian Popular Front Party supports integration of Belarus into the EU and NATO. Just like the Belarusian Christian Democracy, they treat the sales of enterprises to the Russian businesses as a danger to independence of Belarus.

The “Spraviadlivy Sviet” left-winged party representatives speak Russian and lay flowers to Lenin monument. The representatives of “Za svabodu” civil movement, PBNF, and Belarusian Christian Democracy speak Belarusian and condemn the totalitarian past..

An independent Belarusian journalist Mikola Buhay noted as follows: “The authoritarian strategy of Belarus development has collapsed”. However, the split opposition cannot propose an alternative development strategy for Belarus at that.

Andrei Liakhovich

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Kremlin’s Plan of Taming Lukashenka Goes Ahead

After June’s gas dispute and Russian enforcing Belarus to join the Customs Union, political tension between Minsk and Moscow persists, taking ever new turns and twists. Belarusian leadership retaliated for the film about Lukashenka shown on Gazprom-controlled NTV by meetings with conspicuous nemesis of Russia – president Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia.

Furthemore, Saakashvili was invited to explain evil nature of Kremlin on Belarusian state TV. Reaction of Russian side was immediate – the same Moscow’s channel showed second film about Lukashenka. At least the first film really reached general audience – something that Polish-based TV channel Belsat did not manage to do since three years despite all efforts and hopes of Lukashenka’s opponents. Ordinary people discussed the NTV film, though quite few watched it by themselves.

It was a hard blow for Belarusian president, because it made clear how susceptible his people are to Russian propaganda. After all, it cannot be seriously deemed as Russian concern for lack of human rights or democracy in Belarus. Of course, there are these problems under Lukashenka’s reign yet Moscow channel, critisizing Minsk for human rights violations and disappearances while silently omitting much grosser abuses in the own land, resembles not so old times of USSR lashing out at USA for American racism.

Weak national identity and nonexistent civic and political consciousness of Belarusians aggravate the situation, while assisting Russian attempts to tame if not to oust Lukashenka altogether. A bulk part of Belarusian opposition facing the problems with Western support are inclined to turn to old Eastern comrades and this week proved that Moscow can count not only on popular reaction to anti-Lukashenka propaganda but also look toward collaboration of many politicians left for years without access to power in the country.

Thus, following the Russian film which mentioned disappearances of four persons in 1999-2000, the issue of disappearances was raised again with explicit references to Russia at Friday’s press conference by “European Belarus” Coordinator Andrei Sannikau, leader of Social Democratic Party Stanislau Shushkevich, leader of United Civic Party Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the former Communist party Siarhiey Kaliakin, deputy chairman of Belarusian People’s Front (BNF) Ryhor Kastusiou and head of the Minsk City Organization Of BNF

Viktar Ivashkievich – the whole range of political opposition for the first time.

Shushkevich – sometimes considered to be a moderate National Democrat – said that spin doctors of Belarusian regime are trying to begin in Belarus an anti-Russian PR campaign. Yet, Russia cannot be our enemy, we are neighbours. We are told that Lukashenka is a guarantor of our independence, but a person which does not know Belarusianhood, language and history cannot be such guarantor. Such leader cannot bring us to independence.

Such statements one time were monopoly of the Belarusian president, but now the situation seemed to be contrary – Lukashenka is struggling with Kremlin and opposition seeks Russian friendship! They have to hurry, since Moscow possibly have already made up its strategy and put its agents in action.

New public campaign “Tell the Truth” – widely believed to have at least some deals with Russia and favorable stature toward it – demonstrates a high professional level in both installing control over oppositional political and NGOs’ structures and buying up most active oppositional organizations. Actually, there are almost no critical materials about that campaign in non-governmental media anymore, while all steps of Lukashenka in confrontation with Russia are accompanied by new waves of attacks on him in both press outlets and public statements of oppositional politicians.

A leader of the campaign – the famous poet Uladzimir Niakliajeu – declared last week his intent to participate in presidential elections. Apart from Russian support supposed by many, the campaign has a lot of funding, and at the same time it is clear that this time Western gave opposition no major resources. The campaign first denied Russian origin of its money. However, one time Niakliajeu got tired of questions about money and rhetorically asked,

“Why it is bad to say the truth for Russian money?”

The explicitly pro-Kremlin position of campaign's representatives during the gas conflict with Russia has only increased suspicions of campaign's Russian link. Very illustrative was Niakliajeu's statement on 600th anniversary of the Grunwald Battle, as he proclaimed that

“The Battle of Grunwald is a genuine symbol of cultural and political unity of Belarus, Poland, Lithuania and Russia”.

One can hardly find anything Russian to this battle except for later pan-Slavic and anti-German speculations of Russian imperial ideologues.

There is another bad news for Lukashenka. The campaign “Tell the Truth” regardless of its Russian connections, enjoys good relations with Western politicians. Niakliajeu began his international tour de force by visiting Canada but ended with meeting the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton!

It means that Belarusian regime cannot count on West while facing the most extensive and intensive Russian intrusion in its history. And Minsk is showing first signs of weakness – always obedient to Lukashenka Belarusian judges this week did not even dare to close a facade organization of the campaign “Tell the Truth”.

SB

Will the Kremlin Foment Trouble For Belarus' Presidential Elections?

The most important issue in Belarusian politics today is the next presidential election. However, the candidates that have been proposed by the parties so far are no major politicians as the opposition has been kept out of the parliament since 1996. As a result, they see the election as little more than an opportunity to announce their existence to the broader public. Having selected relatively unknown candidates to represent them (such as Romanchuk, Kastusiou, Hlushakou), the opposition parties seem to already consider the election a lost cause. They as if avoid risking the reputation of their better known party members.

The issue of most interest in the next election is the extent and the nature of the Russian involvement. For the first time, Moscow is thought to have abandoned the side of the incumbent president Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Looking back at the demise of the Kyrgyz government with Russia's blessing in April, one wonders how the Kremlin's disfavor could affect the current Belarusian regime.

As a colleague versed in the Kyrgyz politics has recently explained to me, the Russians did not initially plan to get rid of president Kurmanbek Bakiyev for good. Instead, they hoped to merely to rein him in once Bakiyev stopped supporting the Russian interests in his country. The US influence was also critical for this self-serving Central Asian kleptocracy. Because of the increasing problems with the US military base in Kyrgyzstan, Washington was encouraging Bakiyev's opponents hoping to tilt the scales in favor of a more reasonable regime in the country.

Of course, neither of the world powers had wanted a revolution. But the Kyrgyz opposition understood their message in its own way. Seeing Moscow as ready to help out with ousting the Bakiyev's regime and Washington as not opposed to the idea enough to stall it, the opposition rushed to attack the governmental institutions.

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Having inadvertently created so much havoc, Moscow may have decided to not challenge a post-Soviet regime to such an extent again. In this case, the Kremlin's meddling would hardly be disastrous for Lukashenka. The leader has a lot to worry about if Moscow has instead adopted a strategy that includes the option of ousting 'unwanted' leaders in the post-Soviet countries, however. This would mean that after expelling Bakiyev, Moscow could go after the Georgian and the Belarusian leaders. This is why the Belarusian political scene has been seething with rumors about the money and support that the Kremlin is supposedly channelling to one or the other public initiative or politician. The most probable actors to be receiving such support are the public initiative "For the Truth" ("Za Pravdu") and the United Civic Party (AHP).

In reality, the question of whose bid for presidency Moscow is going to support is far from clear. Newsweek

wrote about former Deputy Foreign Minister Andrej Sannikau as the Kremlin's stooge; however, some political analysts close to the right-wing Belarusian People's Front Party (BPPF) believe Russia does not support a single candidate. They write that "Russia is preparing its scenario of regime changing in Belarus through controlled chaos" and destabilizing Belarus by all possible means. Last week, BPPF declared its intent to contend the next elections 'on two fronts', i.e. both against Lukashenka and the pro-Russian forces.

Excluded from any involvement in Belarus' political decision-making since 2000, the Belarusian opposition is getting increasingly marginalized. As a result, many political

analysts have stopped studying the internal affairs of the Belarusian opposition. The fact that the country's political forces are too disorganized and weak to participate in the political struggle proves the gravity of Belarus' political problems. This holds even for the loyalists of the current Belarusian regime: as typical for the populist regimes, Lukashenka does not have an organized political basis to support him. Because Lukashenka's attempts to create mass organizations have failed, the President will hardly be able to defend his regime were a large-scale public confrontation to happen in the streets during the next presidential election.

In these circumstances, the threat of the Russian intrusion seems even greater. Having crushed the pro-independence forces, the Belarusian regime stands alone against the most serious foreign threat in its history. This threat is not the US or the EU support for the Belarusian Nationalists vilified by the state propaganda machine for all these years. This threat is Moscow, which has been repeatedly declared by Lukashenka to be his closest ally.

The good news for Lukashenka is the West's benign neglect to his regime that has developed since 2008. The EU was the first to apply the principle that "everything that exists has an explanation for its existence" to the Belarusian regime, changing its policies to accommodate and engage Lukashenka. Washington has recently followed, reluctant to get involved with Belarus' democratization efforts again, just as was expected to happen after Barack Obama's presidential victory in 2008.

Historically, the West was far less interested in the Belarusian politics than Russia, and even the EU bids to support changes in Belarus have been always far less impressive than the Kremlin's meddling. Thus, while he may face an energetic Russian support for the Belarusian opposition, Lukashenka will probably bask in the West's

friendly neutrality.

SB

Shifts in Belarus's Domestic and Foreign Policies and Its Implications For The Region

You are invited to attend a presentation by **Jaroslav ** **Romanchuk**, a leading market-oriented Belarusian economist. The presentation is organized by the Baltic Black Sea Initiative (BBSI).

Mr. Romanchuk is the Founder and President of the Minsk-based Research Mises Center, Vice President of the United Civic Party, and the Executive Director of the independent think tank Analytical Center "Strategy."

He has authored over 1,000 articles and co-authored numerous books on market-based economics and democratic governance, including a handbook that offers an alternative path of Belarusian development with free-market solutions in monetary, taxation, budgetary, social security and privatization issues.

WHEN:

Friday, May 8, 2009
1:00pm-2:00pm (EST)

WHERE:

US-Ukraine Foundation
1701 K Street NW – Suite 903
Washington, DC

The presentation will also be webcast live at:
www.usukraine.org/events/belarus050809.shtml