

Parliamentary Elections: Belarusian Tranquility, European Intrigue?

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Elections to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus had been set for 28 September 2008. Will this election bring any political breakthrough, or does it carry a substantial intrigue at the very least? The unforeseen scenarios cannot be ruled out altogether, but for now, the intrigue surrounding the election has almost exclusively an international dimension, and very little of the domestic one.

Background

Parliamentary elections had turned in Belarus long ago into a routinized and somewhat boring exercise, occasionally spiced up by the referenda that tend to be combined with the parliamentary vote. The elections are carried out to the 110-strong House of Representatives – a lower chamber of the Parliament, whose powers do not even include the fully-fledged legislative prerogatives, as laws adopted by the Parliament can be superseded by the presidential decrees. The Belarusian parliament lacks party structure, which is enforced by the single member constituency system on the basis of which elections are being carried out. An MP preserves in the popular attitude a Soviet-era status of regional lobbyist for a region or constituency in the central corridors of power, rather than a true representative and decision maker. The near lack of intrigue, absence of serious expectations towards powerless representative bodies, and somewhat sluggish approach of the opposition to the election campaigns, left the society with little choice but to accept the scripts prepared in advance by the authorities. In particular, there is almost no resistance to the officially-organized campaigns of the early voting (a procedure opposition fears to be particularly fraud-prone) in which up to 30% used to cast ballots before the election date in previous elections. In this situation, the elections had turned into the Soviet-era ritual, which is mandatory to follow once one has to stay on the good terms with authorities, with a very little cost of participation in this ritual for most people for disobedience to be seriously considered.

Yet, there 2008 elections will not be lacking an intrigue altogether, although it will not likely to be found in the confrontation between the regime and the opposition. The one intrigue in the election, however, remain: that is, they may become a benchmark upon which the progress in Belarus-EU relations will be measured.

Over the past few years, Belarus-EU relations develop according to the sinusoid scenario, in which periods of 'normalization' and attempts of dialogue are being accompanied by the freeze, usually prompted by the intensification of political repression in Belarus. The last such freeze took place in March 2008, when, instead of the widely-expected release of Alexander Kazulin, the authorities opted for a brutal dispersal of Freedom day demonstration on 25 March, raided offices of EU-financed opposition media two days later, and consequently slapped prison terms on participants of the entrepreneurs' protests, thus increasing number of those who the EU and the US consider to be political prisoners.

In previous BISS analyses, we considered the Belarus-EU relations to be a mere function of the dynamics of the Russia-Belarus affairs. According to this logic, when Lukashenka is able to wrestle measurable economic concessions and political support from the Eastern neighbor, official Minsk loses interest to the EU: and vice versa. From this perspective, the last freeze period in the relations with both EU and the US in March neatly coincided with the decision by Kremlin to keep gas prices for Belarus in 2008 at less than a half of the 'European' price. According to many opinions, intensification of conflict with the United States, which had certain repercussions for the Belarus-EU relations as well, was pressed exactly to leave Moscow no space but to adopt such decision.

Nowadays, however, Lukashenka faces a new face in Kremlin, an increasingly confident and business-like president Dmitry Medvedev, alongside his predecessor and new prime minister Vladimir Putin, who used his position to take off the mask and become a front person for advancing Russia's economic interests in the neighboring countries without need to respect the diplomatic protocol of the presidency. Although there is no major conflict with Russia in the sight, Lukashenka may need to keep some room of maneuver in the relations with the EU.

Intrigue That Never Was?

Parliamentary elections appear to be the perfect situation to broaden this room for maneuver. First, the entry of the opposition to the parliament does not shift the balance of power in the country in any way, as the legislature remains effectively powerless. Second, victory of several opposition members in separate constituencies, as experience shows, may not necessarily add up to public profile and credibility of the entire opposition. Third, liberalization of election practices does not guarantee the opposition will in fact win seats: in the last resort, the authorities would always have an argument that 'the people decided' not to admit the opposition to the legislature. Last but not least, the very relaxation of election practices may boost identity crisis in the opposition, as more radical parts of it would strengthen themselves in conviction that the opposition, by entering the election campaign, is 'selling' itself to the regime.

The task of 'ensuring' a minimum acceptable standard of freeness and transparency of the elections has been facilitated enormously by the internal contradictions, apathy, and a certain 'generation conflict' inside the political opposition. The possible boycott of the elections by a part of opposition forces may bring forth a situation similar to the 2000 elections, when the opposition was largely busy with internal score-settling between pro- and anti- boycott factions, and not the contestation with the regime. The boycott campaign has to be regarded as an attempt to restructure the opposition field between the 2011 presidential elections by raising the stakes of those parts of the opposition than advocate a more radical scenario than the one the democratic forces attempted

to implement during the last presidential campaign on 2006. At any situation, the boycott increases the chances for the international recognition of the elections by the mere fact that the group that advocate it would lose the last traces of credibility as political, rather than underground dissident, force. The government will be left as the only force to deal with by default.

However, even under these consequences, liberalization of the election practices would mean the change of the entire well-oiled routine of the government, which can bring forth undesirable consequences. On one hand, the government would voluntarily give some weight to political opponents, which runs contrary to the long-standing policy of the consistent destruction and emaciation of the opposition. Even if opposition does appear in the Parliament, such normalization can be short-lived, as there is more than one way to worsen the political climate in the country and hence provoke a new period of 'deep freeze' with the EU. Changing the election routine may have many more long-term undesirable consequences than usual stop-and-go measures (such as release of prisoners or easing the attacks) On the other, the authorities risk to turn the electoral arena into the stage for 'inter-regime pluralism' and factional rivalry: something that may be even more risky for the long-term stability of the system than the opposition per se. The tendency to avoid the inter-faction rivalry was best demonstrated by the postponement of the inauguration of pro-presidential party '*Belaya Rus*', which many believed to be a major representative of the presidential will in these elections. In fact, Lukashenka lambasted the *Belaya Rus* and its creators for exploring Soviet-style formalistic methods in building the organization, thus in fact dissociating himself with the project.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

The expectations that the 2008 parliamentary elections could be a landmark event leading towards political liberalization were based so far mostly on the official discourse that stressed the necessity of democratic and transparent elections. President Lukashenka consistently repeated, throughout the year, that the elections would be carried out in the most transparent manner and 'at the supreme European level,' and promised that Belarus would ['show to both West and Russia how the elections have to be carried out,'](#) whereas the head of Central Election Commission Lidia Yermoshina [explicitly declared that she would 'work to achieve international recognition of the elections.'](#) Yet, it has to be remembered that similar announcements are being routinely made before previous election campaigns as well. One remarkable distinction of this parliamentary campaign from previous ones is that the authorities seemed to have cured themselves from the fear that the opposition could attempt a 'colored' revolution during elections: though demonizing of the opponents does continue in the official media, it is far from being as intense as it used to be.

The authorities also made some low-cost cosmetic but efficient from the viewpoint of PR steps to prove election progress. For example, the authorities allowed the observer mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) to observe the elections, contrasting themselves with the official Moscow that turned the mission down for the presidential and parliamentary elections several months ago. Several cosmetic steps, for example, invitation by the head of the Central Election Commission Lidia Yermoshina of members of the political parties to be observers at the Central Election Commission do not change the overall rules of the political game in Belarus, but did create a good publicity for the Belarusian authorities.

Declarations by President Lukashenka that several opposition members could be admitted to the Parliament was rightly considered by observers as invitation of

the European Union to the bargaining table. In a more blatant way, one can even call it a 'market research' move. By dropping a hint (with no obligations to be honored, however) that the elections could be carried out according to a slightly different scenario, the official Minsk might have attempted to touch the ground with the Europeans regarding how far they could go in normalizing relations (for example, lifting sanctions and visa bans) if the official Minsk ensures that the opposition would have been granted seats in the parliament.

Apparently, research brought unsatisfactory results, as, since June 2008, all the indicators pointed that the elections would most likely be carried out according to a habitual scenario. The propaganda serial "The Network" aired on Belarusian TV on June 10-12, 2008. Confirmed that the official 'fear mongering' repertoire had not changed a bit since earlier political campaigns. The broadcast was kept in the traditional defamatory manner basically unchanged from the similar propaganda broadcasts the Belarusian audience could have seen in the past fourteen years. The main villains in the three-part documentary were representatives of the youth organizations and the foreign democracy promotion organizations, such as NDI, based in Kiev and Vilnius. The propaganda broadcasts once again strongly hinted that the opposition was going to engage into violent activities in order to overthrow the government. Remarkably, beside the voice of the announcer, all the commentators in the documentary were prominent figures of the Communist and ultranationalist opposition in Russia, as well of the marginalized pro-Russian leftist parties in Ukraine, and not a single front man for Lukashenka's own propaganda.

The adoption of a new media law in June 2008 was also a clear sign that the political climate in the country was not bettering. The law did not radically change the conditions for independent press (and, contrary to many fears, did not introduce substantial restrictions on the internet press) , but it effectively targets the electronic media operation from abroad and supported by the Western money, as working for such media without accreditation had been criminalized from now. Interesting by enough, the adoption of media law was turned into a drama, as the shock from the draft adopted in the first reading (which did contain many of the repressive measures feared by independent journalists) was replaced with some sort of relief when the ultimate bill was cleaned from some of them and even contained recommendations of independent journalist unions and the international community.

The attacks on the opponents of the government began almost at the moment when the election campaign was announced, also pointed that the pessimistic scenario for elections remained the most probable one. For example, many of the prospective opposition candidates lost their jobs upon their announcement of intentions to run, whereas leaders of human rights organizations (potential organizers of the election monitoring networks) began to be simultaneously harassed by the tax authorities. The president himself directed the attack against the opposition [by instructing the officials to start checking the financial records of the opponents who would run for elections.](#) Overall, it appeared that the government resorted to the low-intensity harassment techniques aiming at minimizing the public profile of the opposition in order to deprive it of any chance to make a serious impact on the parliamentary campaign. The presentation of free and transparent character of elections to the international community had to follow afterwards.

The Fear Factor

The low-intensity scenario, however, seemed to have been reversed by President Lukashenka himself in his interview to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published on 3

July 2008. He renounced the rumors that the government was going to 'take the opposition by the ears and bring it to the parliament,' called opposition leaders 'dishonest' people who 'sold themselves' to the West, [and claimed that his opponents would engage in organizing mass disorders, including explosions, to destabilize the situation in the country and attract the attention of the West that had lost interest in the opposition.](#)

The very fact that the explosions on Independence Day occurred literally the next day after the publication of the interview raised suspicions among the opponents of the government that this could have been a pre-election provocation aimed at provoking a wave of repressions against the opposition. Yet, the fact that head of Security Council Viktor Sheiman was pointed by Lukashenka as the main scapegoat responsible for the failure to prevent the attack and was subsequently sacked points to the possibility that the whole incident may be a part of the power game inside the security agencies that began to spin out of control. The downfall of Sheiman, generally considered as hardliner and major regime top protagonist, was a hurry to specifically point to the opposition as culprits (even though official media were full of hints that the organizers had to be found among the 'young extremists'), the inevitable routine pertaining the security agencies brought forth detainment of 13 former members of unregistered radical groups. Moreover, it is quite possible that the explosions will be used as a mere pretext for intimidation and harassment of political opponents for several months to come, if not longer. In the end of the day, the attack created a distinct background for the parliamentary elections, and the official Minsk now faces even tougher challenge, if it is serious about building ties to the EU: now what is expected from it is not only a decent conduct of the parliamentary elections, but also objective and impartial investigation of the attack. On the other hand, abstention from charging the opposition may be presented to the international audience as another evidence of 'softening' of the regime, in lieu of real political liberalization.

Conclusions

Two and a half months before the elections, it appears that the major political players either lack motivation to change the scenario for the election campaign (the government), or have no capacity to alter the scenario pressed by the other side (the opposition). Even if the official Minsk does intend to leave room for normalization of relations with the EU, it may simply not find commitment to revamp what had already become a customary routine of a gigantic government bureaucracy. All progress one can expect regarding the elections per se is some cosmetic changes in the routine, for example, allowing larger number of opposition representatives to take part in the work of the election commissions. Fortunately for the Belarusian authorities, there is more than one way to create a semblance of progress and thus nudge Europe towards some sort of engagement. Hence, the most likely scenario is that the post-election period could be accompanied by a showcase 'thaw' aimed at downplaying criticism regarding the conduct of elections per se. This 'thaw' may be substantiated, for example, in the moratorium on death penalty or One can also expect that several new MPs would adopt a critical stance towards certain government policies and will be presented as the very opposition, whose emergence in the parliament was hinted by the authorities. In any case, the intrigue surrounding the parliamentary elections has a far greater international than domestic dimension.

