



CENTRUM STOSUNKÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
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BELARUS – a predictable partner?

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Introduction

Events in Belarus once again caught the attention of international public opinion, especially in Western Europe. The events once again call for a change in a policy towards Belarus.

Presidential elections were the most important political event in Belarus in 2010. Many organizations and politicians associated some hopes with them. Unfortunately, assessments of observation missions within the OSCE and CIS differed completely. The OSCE concluded that Belarus is far from meeting the democratic standards and the CIS observers, traditionally considered the elections to be fully democratic and fair.

Russian Federation and other countries rushed to congratulate, and Foreign Minister of Republic Belarus (RB) Sergei Martynov went on an official visit to Italy.

Belarusian authority has decided to show in a very strong manner who holds the cards in Belarusian politics and with whom one should reckon. However, ruthlessness, the strength and scale of the taken action were surprising.

1. Belarus-Russia relations and EU-Belarus

Relations between Russia - Belarus deteriorated steadily since 2008 to significantly improve few days before the elections. Immediately after the elections President Dmitry Medvedev stated that the elections in Belarus are an internal matter of the country. Alexander Lukashenko's reaction was to quickly push through the parliament the Agreement on the Common Economic Space (EurAzES), which was causing some trouble.

It could be postulated that the conflict between Russia and Belarus could be a cleverly staged project to partially relieve the Russian budget. Loan from the International Monetary Fund was not a decision based purely on economic indicators. The political goal of the loan was to try to push away Belarus from Russia. Alexander Grigorievich and his government managed to persuade the IMF that Belarus is ready for economic reforms and that Russia could save about \$ 2.5 billion (IMF loan is enough). This money under any circumstances needed to be transferred to Belarus. The IMF is committed to affect the Belarusian economy in order to achieve a lasting structural change; it would be a definite success of the IMF, whose reputation has been tarnished as a result of the international monetary crisis.

Relations with Russia are improving rapidly in the 10 days before the election. Alexander Lukashenko is hosted with honors by Dmitry Medvedev. On some websites appeared unproven information that during this meeting, not just agreement on questions of the Belarusian export milk, sugar, meat and other food products were agreed, but also the introduction of single currency for Belarus and the Russian ruble.

Alexander Lukashenko thanks to masterful expectancy in the political split have made smaller price concessions and relatively small steps to encourage the EU to re-open the dialogue about investment liberalization and modernization. Investments from the West helped in supplying the Belarusian economy with "live cash."

The EU succeeded in abandoning the idea of "politics of 12th steps"¹, reducing the requirement to 5². The same 12 steps of setting up policy were extremely vague and unreal, there was no concrete and specific sums which the state of Belarus can expect in exchange for reforms. However, the machinery of concessions has been launched and further steps were made showing that the quality of new developments does not count - the international impression that the "process of change" has begun is in fact important.

The Belarusian authorities have adopted the principle that the changes proposed by the European Union would be implemented on their own terms. Unfortunately, the European Union has not adopted any form of testing the effectiveness of "reform". The elections law used during elections in 2010 received only cosmetic changes (including the financing of candidates), but the main problems (early elections, election of members of election commissions, freedom of campaigning, etc.) and proposed amendments put forward by the Belarusian non-governmental organizations and political parties were rejected³.

Also on the foundation of improving relations with EU the Belarusian side has adopted amendments to the media law and in a very meticulous manner regulated the "life" of Belarusian Internet - the only place where information about events in Belarus was flowing in yet without facing that much obstacles.

Years 2009 and 2010 came under strengthening of the position of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership. Belarus is regarded as one of the rather long-term partners. During the sessions of thematic platforms⁴ the Belarusian side is one of the most active. Activity of Belarus is caused by economic calculations. Alexander Grigorievich counts on the growth of large and lucrative investment from the west. The Eastern Partnership assumes that the most important agent for change is small and medium business. SMEs are the driving

¹ 21 November 2006, the Union submitted a bid to change its policy towards Minsk, presenting a document "What the European Union could bring for Belarus". The document presented the advantage for Belarus, if the authorities meet 12 conditions for the democratization of political life.

² for <http://finans.wnp.pl/ue-gotowa-kredytowac-bialorus>, 83134_1_0_0.html: [European Commissioner] Benita Ferrero-Waldner praised Belarus for their willingness to cooperate and presented five conditions for the development of political contacts: reforming the electoral law by OSCE standards, its use in the coming elections, guaranteeing freedom of speech and assembly, improved legislation on registration of NGOs, the solution to the problem of political prisoners.

³ <http://www.euroradio.fm/en/1237/news/48595/>

⁴ Meetings at senior officials of the ministries involved in the Eastern Partnership of the 27 EU countries and 6 of EaP.

force of the EU economy. Increase of contacts at the business level is expected, which will contribute positively to the strengthening of this sector and will strengthen its voice in relations with the government and president.

Russia does not create problems in this regard. EaP is almost after 3 years an initiative still located in the phase of the organization and development with specific projects to be announced in 2011. Russia is not opposed to the presence of EU business in the territory of Belarus, unless confrontation of businesses occurs.

Poland has worked very hard so that the EU has switched its thinking on Belarus of a total freeze with a limited relationship to still open - virtually without fulfilling any conditions by Alexander Grigorievich. The Belarusian side is trying to exploit this situation by giving in return as little as possible.

Belarus during 2009 and 2010 tested the flexibility of the European Union and the degree of its tolerance:

1. Belarus was the only country in the EaP, which openly blocked the participation of a representative of the Civil Society Forum in the discussions of thematic platforms, and the only one that the expelled from university a participant of the Civil Society Forum.
2. Good field for testing was also still smoldering conflict over the Union of Poles in Belarus, and attempt to grab the Polish House in Iyvanets. The EU's response limited to showing disapproval and condemnation.

These events however didn't stop high-level European politicians⁵ from visiting Belarus, and officially meet with the leadership of the country. Belarus by not giving much in return received what it most wanted from its relations with the West - international recognition of the elites.

The authorities in Minsk got a clear signal "the EU in relation to Belarus is ready for verbal criticism". This was partly justified by launching of the Eastern Partnership initiative, but

⁵ In 2010, Belarus visited - Commissioner Stefan Fuelle, Radoslaw Sikorski, Guido Westerwelle, Göran Lindblad, Dalia Grybauskaite, Vigavdas Ushackas

later became a component completely obvious and not under discussion. On the other hand, the European Union on a regular basis by suspending sanctions against the highest representatives confirmed that this is actually the only mechanism that can be used to discipline and express in a manner other than verbal disapproval for the actions of government in Belarus.

The Polish position in this situation is not easy. On one hand, in 2011 the Polish presidency of the EU is planned as a great success, on the other hand the suspension, exclusion or any stopping of relations with Belarus in the framework of EaP would be a defeat.

Firstly, such a solution is difficult to imagine, because Belarus is not the only undemocratic country included in the program and is not the most brutal (even in light of the tragic events of December 2010) in solving the "problem of the opposition." We can give examples of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia (a big disappointment in the west), not to mention Ukraine (the last local elections). The exemption will only result in a flap of EaP initiative and then you'd have to agree with Lukashenko, often reminding that, in regards to his country double standards that have not been formulated clearly and transparently were applied. Secondly, the exclusion of any country within EaP could result in reformulation of the idea and in debates over the results of the Eastern Partnership and also the need to discuss it during the presidency would mean a defeat of Polish ideas and frantic search for a new EU eastern policy.

2. The opposition in Belarus and Civil Society

Alexander Lukashenko, has recommended the Head of the Central Electoral Commission to register for the presidency all candidates who meet the formal requirements (meeting of the initiative group, its registration and collection of 100,000 signatures for a given candidacy.)

As a result of this decision the CEC has registered 10 candidates.

The state apparatus has been instructed not to interfere in the campaign to collect signatures, allow opposition candidates to present their programs on state television and allowed to undergo television debates. The mere presence of opposition candidates in the state media has not translated into significant growth in support for them. State media favored Alexander Lukashenko. Total percentage of time devoted to "show action" of candidates accounted for 89% in favor of the current head of state. Other candidates were also displayed in the negative and rarely neutral light.

Alexander Lukashenko himself avoided electoral speeches and tried not to avoid comments on the elections. Alexander Grygoriewicz did not participate in the debates and actually the most important occurrence of an election type took place during the All Belarusian Assembly of People. Avoidance from Alexander Lukashenko has created an atmosphere of opposition completely at odds. Leader of the surveys needed to be approached as a person beyond boundaries and not engaged in the political quarrels.

The opposition was tempted. To the defeat of the opposition one may include the fact that in a situation in which Belarus is currently present so many personalities have decided to take part in the campaign. Of course, the elections have become historic at the very first moment. Never before in modern history of Belarus there were so many willing to take up the position of head of state and during the past 16 years, candidates did not have such freedom to proclaim their views. The European Union has received a signal that the "process" is progressing, as candidates can run a campaign - that is collect signatures on the streets, there were televised debates, etc.

Disputes between the presidential candidates were not silenced even at the end of the election campaign when it was well known that the elections have been prepared in such a way that Alexander Lukashenko's victory is not in doubt. Proposition of one of the candidates for all the opposition candidates to withdraw from the elections in order to protest was rejected.

Among the opposition party divisions and internal rivalries, the division between the young and the old generation of politicians continue to count rather than the actual assessment of the situation with the strategy and proper tactics. Lack of unity is a gift to Alexander Lukashenko on the occasion of each election.

It also does not help the Western partners, who must, before each election and before any major new opportunity not only learn the names of political opposition (this list is closed a few years) but their party or organization affiliation.

It can be concluded that the energy with which the nine opposition candidates led the presidential campaign was not addressed in order to be selected (this option was excluded as unrealistic bar), but to identify the leader(s) in the future of the "new" opposition, which will lead to a change of government. It's too early to respond whether the process has been successful

3. 19 XII 2010, and preceding events.

Events at Independence Square gave the impression that it was implemented under the planned scenario. From 13 December to 21 December in the internal troops and militia increased state of readiness was declared and the Ministry of Home Affairs launched Situation and Operational HQ.

On 9 XII 2010 comes to a cordial meeting with Dmitry Medvedev. A few days later, the media goes through the information that Belarus has not only reached an agreement with Russia on issues related to entry into the market of the Russian Federation, but also on the oil and gas prices in 2011. So much success on the eve of presidential elections in Belarus is that Alexander Grigorievich is either a great negotiator, or the Russian Federation considered that this is the person best responds to the periodic-medium interests. The task placed before Alexander Lukashenko was to play election in a way that there was no doubt who is the leader in Belarus⁶. In the realm of speculation one may ask a question about whether Russia was aware of the size and form of action to be taken by the forces subordinate to the current leadership of Belarus.

Already in the second half of December around Minsk circled a rumor that OMON was getting ready to disperse the demonstration not like was the case previously on the October Square, but on the Independence Square. In addition, 15 XII 2010 at a special meeting broadcasted by television Alexander Lukashenko pointed out that police and law enforcement authorities must be prepared for the challenge, which may take place in the evening of Dec. 19 election. The authorities were instructed to act in a calm and appropriate manner but in the case of breaking of the law they should definitely bring order. Before the election, Attorney General of Belarus urged residents not to be provoked and not to appear on the Square.

18 XII 2010 began with preventive arrests of activists from smaller cities. They are mainly members of protests in 2006. The demonstration course seems to be uncontrollable by

⁶ If the long protests were allowed on Independence Square, we would have to deal with the scenario according to T. Bakiyev. See <http://csm.org.pl/pl/informacje/news-entry/wojciech-borodzicz-smolinski-czlonek-zarzadu-csm-kurmanbek-salijewicz-bakijew-papierak-lak.html>

the opposition. There is no prepared text, there is no prepared scenario, candidates and their staffs do not coordinate this event.

During the tragic night of 19 Dec, it appears that disperse of demonstration was provoked by the special service associates, who smashed windows at the behest of the government's front door.

Events that start on the eve of 19 Dec seemed to be planned. Arrests do not include only participants in the demonstration. Messages coming from Belarus also indicate for catching and identification of owners of cell phone numbers that were registered by base stations deployed around the Independence Square.

Prison for Akrescinie a few days before the election is cut off from the rest of the city. Locals are legitimated on the way home. The ones who have not been registered in homes surrounding the prison can not approach the neighborhood. The authorities didn't stop from detaining even the participants of spontaneous solidarity actions that are taking place at the gate of the prison and its walls. The main group of opposition candidates is being held and interrogated (two candidates have been beaten: Andrei Sannikau and Uladzimir Nieklaev). Only seven days after arrest (27 XII 2010) the authorities have allowed a lawyer to meet Uladzimir Nieklaev..

Summary

The European Union is in a very delicate situation. Not in possession of any practical means of pressure on Belarus it must in a powerful way present opposition to the events in Belarus. It depends not only on the EU's credibility as an organization claiming to be a political leader but also the EU's response is the sum of Member States' responses.

Poland is one of the first countries to communicate increase in development assistance announced for Belarus (from PLN 20 million to 40 million PLN) and it is extremely important that these measures will be used wisely.

Increasing resources for Kalinowski program provides an opportunity to study in Poland for students expelled from Belarusian universities and is obviously very important. It is, however, wise to consider whether a program which has resulted in long-term emigration of talented young people from Belarus should not be limited to some extent and, for example, contain a clause that after completion of their studies students should return to their home country.

It is extremely important that the outrage over the central Belarusian authorities have not resulted in only supporting initiatives explicitly and directly aimed at non-governmental organizations in Belarus which are in opposition. It can lead to freeze / of many good projects taking place at the Polish-Belarusian border and integrating peripheral and regional authorities.

Poland can not give up support for activities aimed at strengthening small and medium enterprises, even if the projects involve collaboration with local authorities.

Lead to simplification and increase in the availability of EU funds for the Belarusian organization (registered and unregistered, or outlawed by the Belarusian authorities) should take place as soon as possible. No non-governmental organizations in Belarus can afford to wait for decisions regarding grants for several months.

Following the "the post-election" arrests, in Belarusian prisons over 600 people were detained. Most are doomed either to pay fines or for 10 to 15 days in jail for taking part in

the "hooliganism" or "unsanctioned demonstrations." The European Union must define the concept of a political prisoner in such a way that the Belarusian authorities could not deny the presence in prisons or detention of persons detained as a result of participation in the events of a political nature.

A travel ban can become a sanction of a psychological nature not for the highest representatives of Belarus, but for a group of people who implemented in an uncritical way political orders forgetting about their functions: judges, prosecutors, police officers, KGB officers conducting searches and seizures, members of local electoral commissions, rector and deans responsible for expulsion of students. These sanctions may be placed on the entire Schengen area, but also Poland should regard them as undesirable persons regardless of intra-EU provisions⁷. Poland may seek for introduction of such regulations by other countries.

Coordination of activities at the international level is extremely important. Of course, isolating Belarus will not change anything; however, EU countries should be more flexible in responding to crises. The reception of Sergei Martynov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Head of RB, by the Italian authorities clearly shows that the coordination between EU countries must be strengthened.

⁷ This is possible under article 21 of the Act of 13 June 2003 on foreigners Dz.U.06.234.

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