

SUMMARY

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The presidential election generated significant tension and agitation within society. Incredible predictions concerning the election results were being made during the summer. Huge quantities of material and human resources were involved, which at some point led to the impression that on September 9 the entire country would witness mortal combat between the two main adversaries in Belarusian society – the regime and its opposition. Both sides emphasised the importance of the date. The incumbent Alyaksandar Lukashenka stated: "...a presidential election is more than choosing one politician over another. It is choosing the destiny of the state." United democratic candidate Uladzimir Hancharyk compared the election to a battle between Good and Evil.

However, after the election, it appeared that the scale of the event had been highly exaggerated. For Lukashenka's camp, the election was another occasion to demonstrate its political, administrative and ideological potential. For the democratic forces, it was an opportunity to increase their influence on society, consolidate their positions and fortify themselves for future struggle. Based on a sober assessment of the current political situation, the goal of democratic strategists was not winning at any cost. It would appear that the goal was rather to gain a long-term advantage through increasing social awareness of the opposition and testing the efficiency of its central and regional structures under pressure from the state. The great victory of the opposition is the fact that Uladzimir Hancharyk has transformed himself from the head of an organisation collaborating with the regime into a non-compromising opposition leader.

The election campaign will leave a positive imprint in the collective memory of the Belarusians. Being one of the rare events of nation-wide importance, it drew the attention of the entire society by its cunning plot and conflict. Split again, in terms of culture and world outlook,

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Belarusian society was obsessed for months with the intricacies of domestic politics, and it is precisely this that is most important.

Presidential elections accustom people to being citizens of their own country and therefore play a role in developing an independent mindset among the masses. Elections construct the real political history of Belarus and create an invaluable experience which people will draw on in the future.

Still more time is required before the Soviet era is seen by the masses as merely prehistory to independent Belarus.

THE NATIONAL PROBLEM DURING THE ELECTION

The election campaign once again showed that independence and national sovereignty for the majority of Belarusians is a political not cultural category, associated with the realisation of the political and not cultural rights of the nation. Those political forces that focused on the implementation of cultural rights ended up in the minority in the 1990s. This is why the national problem was left in the background during this election.

Neither Lukashenka's regime (no surprise here) nor the democratic forces drew attention to national symbols. This fact can be explained by a pragmatic factor: the focus of the summer campaign was on those voters who remained undecided until the last moment. According to various sources, this portion of voters constituted about 30% of all voters and mainly comprised culturally frustrated Russian speakers who fail to recognise Belarusian national symbols.

The opposition's strategy of ignoring the national problem was an important victory for the Lukashenka camp as it allowed the campaign to be fought on its own ground and according to its own scenario.

THE OPPOSITION BEYOND THE ELECTION

Before the election, the right-centrist wing of the opposition failed to reach a total understanding with the West represented by the OSCE

Advisory and Monitoring Group in Minsk, frequently disagreeing with it over strategic and tactical issues.

The election also failed to increase the rank and file among the Belarusian political opposition. The opposition remains dispersed and “lone politicians” continue to exert as much influence as leaders of parties. At certain points in the election race, party leaders showed more interest in their networks survival after the election than in achieving tactical and strategic aims during the campaign.

However, a positive result of the election is the further self-definition of the left and right wings of the democratic forces.

WHY HANCHARYK?

Both Hancharyk and Domash owe their appearance on the political scene to the third sector. The difference between the two consists in the fact that while Hancharyk comes from the “Soviet” third sector that was roughly moulded in the late Soviet era and has adapted to independent Belarus with relative ease, Domash rode in on the coattails of the new wave third sector that emerged after the constitutional coup of 1996. This difference explains both the lenience of Hancharyk’s positions and the larger number of signatures collected for Domash.

The new third sector is increasingly becoming a pool of pure opposition uniting people that, for one reason or another, refuse to collaborate with the Belarusian regime. Incidentally, this is related to one of the long-term weaknesses of the state system. In a democratic society, leaders of state do not try to exclude socially relevant individuals from the development of society as a whole. Meanwhile, Lukashenka’s rule has no place for the thousands of educated and motivated professionals entering the workforce each year. The majority of them, seeing no other options, find their niche in the institutions of the “new third sector.”

The outflow of the disloyal to the organisations of the new third sector spells nothing good for the structures personified by Uladzimir Hancharyk. Once cradles of civil society under the authoritarian Soviet

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political system, they have yet to initiate fundamental restructuring over the ten years of Belarus' independence. Therefore, in many aspects they function as formal, symbolic social institutions.

Paradoxically, in the long-term Lukashenka's victory over the trade union empire of Hancharyk does not mean that the viability of democratic forces has been undermined, but rather a forced sanitation of the democratic camp. Weeding out the weaker links from its structure is another positive outcome of the presidential election.

As for Uladzimir Hancharyk's personal political fate, it need not mirror that of Mikhail Chyhir or Zyanon Paznyak, both of whom need a miracle to remain on centre stage of the Belarusian political scene. In regard to Domash, his withdrawal from the race to some extent saved the new third sector from disgrace, which is important as it was still in the development stage and not yet fully ready for struggle.

The selection of Hancharyk as the single opposition candidate can be explained by both pre-electoral and post-electoral reasons. It can be said with a fair amount of certainty that having won the election, the regime will be looking to exact revenge on the rebellious Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions and its leaders. However, an institutional conflict between the executive branch and the trade unions (an integral element of civil society) is not easy nor is Lukashenka's victory certain. In every such scenario, the regime is to blame for the destabilisation of the political situation in Belarus.

HAYDUKEVICH

This "third force" nominee is clear proof of the regime's potential to manipulate public opinion. Lukashenka's camp had other pseudo-rivals, who were sifted out along the campaign trail. Meanwhile, Haydukevich, backed by grey market and criminal structures, lasted until the voting to provide possible support for Lukashenka on the last lap. Neither Masherava, Sinitsyn nor Marynich were able to accomplish as much. Haydukevich did, as his presence on the ballot appeared the most natural, LDPB being the largest party in Belarus with 20,000 members.

The collection of signatures showed that there were four real political forces in the country. Three of them are quite stable: the post-colonial clan of the economic administration represented by Lukashenka (395,000 signatures), “independent society” (Domash, 161,000) and the grey business community closely tied to corrupt elements of the state machine (Haydukevich, 136,000). The fourth force was a coalition thrown together by the current political situation and uniting those elements of the nomenclature disappointed in Lukashenka’s policies, private businesses, the old-school third sector and state functionaries whose interests were jeopardised by Lukashenka’s regime. Uladzimir Hancharyk was able to gather 123,000 signatures, but it is difficult to predict how long this alliance will last.

THE MOBILISATION CAMPAIGN

The main objective of the mobilisation campaign by democratic forces was not so much to bring voters to polling stations (those ready to decide on the fate of their country) as demonstrate the hidden potential of democratic organisations. The campaign was limited. It did not set any ambitious tasks. The campaign primarily focused on less serious activities: distributing stickers and leaflets, printing T-shirts with democratic appeals, conducting local (in terms of social repercussions and numbers of participants) activities involving civil disobedience, as well as performances and concerts, bicycle races as well as hiking and rafting trips. There was no focus on establishing contact with voters.

The main difference between the mobilisation campaign by the Belarusian democratic forces and classical models (which usually involve human resources with a positive social image) is that the Belarusian campaign was conducted by opposition groups (mainly youth). For the most part Belarusian society knows very little about their activity and if it knows anything at all it is based on the biased coverage by the state-owned media. Some elements of Belarusian society saw the campaign as a wide-scale opposition endeavour that inspired confrontation rather than consolidation among society.

LUKASHENKA AND LUKASHENKISTS

Drawing on Soviet symbolic capital during his first term, Lukashenka has seen the branch he is sitting on. Overused and abused, Soviet myths rooted in mass consciousness lose their attraction, and Lukashenka's aggressive xenophobic rhetoric no longer resonates as it once did. Comparing the modern national revival movement with the World War II *Polizei* (Nazi collaborators) and democratic leaders with venal Judas becomes merely *mauvais ton*.

Soviet myths are going cheap on the Belarusian political market. Sensing their devaluation, Lukashenka had to resort to promising large-scale economic liberalisation and slashing control organs of the state in his election platform. In an expression of presidential grace, he assured the public that "the number of licensed businesses will be cut to 10–12."

Shortly before election day, Lukashenka gave a welcoming message to an assembly of officers of the Republic of Belarus, repeatedly stressing the sanctity of national independence: "The Republic of Belarus has been, is, and will be an independent European state... Our armed forces are the creation of the Belarusian people and their national pride*."

In fact, the Belarusian president has assumed the rhetoric once used by national democratic forces during Belarus' struggle for independence. The same rhetoric was echoed by post-Chykin era BT in its typical absurd manner. Now, Hancharyk was blamed for "flirting with Russia" which might allegedly put national independence in jeopardy. Obviously, this rhetoric was above all directed at discrediting Hancharyk in the eyes of the national democratic electorate, however, it is also indicative of the expansion of the discourse on sovereignty.

The topic of Belarusian-Russian integration can be expected to move from being a foreign policy issue to a domestic issue in the next several

* Belarus's "Neman-2001" military exercises were extremely important and timed to start shortly before the election. The red forces under president Lukashenka's direct command defeated the blue forces while destroying 79 planes and 13 cruise missiles of the adversary. The idea of sovereignty pervaded the exercise, as it was conducted exclusively by Belarusian troops without any allied forces from Russia. Moreover, the state-run media advertised the fact that anti-air defence complexes used during the manoeuvres were designed and made in Belarus.

years. Even now the issue is openly used to mobilise supporters of the current policy when necessary.

The election also showed that democratic forces underestimate the intellectual potential of the Lukashenkists. Despite the scandals about the missing (or assassinated?) politicians and sensations related by defectors from Lukashenka's camp, the democrats never seemed to grasp the initiative during the entire campaign. The incumbent's team succeeded in all of its goals: to neutralise the newly emerged business elites, secure the support of Russia and other CIS countries, advertise the economic upsurge, confuse independent media by throwing in a dozen pseudo-candidates as well as buy some and deceive the others. In short, they did everything that had been successfully done over the previous couple of years by their Russian, Ukrainian, or Kazakh colleagues.

The underestimation of Lukashenka's "brain centre" and inability to promptly react to challenges of the moment and acknowledge the unique reality of post-Soviet Belarus is evidence of the exaggerated self-perception of many leaders of democratic forces and their poor knowledge of today's state machine. The power of this machine created by Lukashenka was demonstrated during the election.

MINSK AS A FACTOR IN LUKASHENKA'S NATIONALISM

Lukashenka in 2001 is not the same Lukashenka from 1994. The Minsk entourage surrounding him for the past ten years has had a significant influence on the president. The new Belarusian identity and its creolised deformation have taken a far stronger hold in the capital than in the eastern regions of the country.

The creolised portion of Belarusian society form the foundation of Lukashenka's electoral support, and the last election confirmed him as president of all Belarusian Creoles. In the Belarusian context, the Creoles are not simply ethnic Belarusians who have not assumed a definite national identity, they comprise the element in society whose identity was formed during the period of a pre-national society. Yury Sivakow,

Ural Latypaw and Alyksandar Lukashenka differ little in this respect.

Russian-speaking and pidgin-speaking Creoles with Belarusian passports are responsible for regenerating Lukashenka's political regime. Their cultural inferiority (and consequently psychological instability) makes them especially sensitive to ideological indoctrination and other manipulation for political purposes. Only the Creoles can provide for the establishment of a durable, long-term regime and guarantee the succession of power that Lukashenka longs so much for. Other than short-term political results, his referenda in 1995 and 1996 removed all limits on the reproduction of Creoles throughout society, which turned into a major goal of state policy.

The abolishment of virtually all pro-Russian organisations and media that advocated the diasporic approach (a modern version of the imperialist doctrine concerning the triune Russian people) within Zamyatalin-led re-registration of parties and NGOs appears as another significant aspect of this policy.

The mass of Creoles is not so much a threat to the Belarusian independent state, so feared by national intelligentsia, as a guarantee of stability and unshaken authoritarianism.

Naturally, Russian-Belarusian integration has symbolic significance for the Belarusian Creoles. It supplies them with a positive emotional tone, creates the illusion that their personal interests coincide with those of the state. To satisfy this illusion, Lukashenka keeps a handful of hardcore Russophiles in his entourage in order to show that the Belarusian regime is still pursuing a pro-Russian line. Meanwhile, Lukashenka is perfectly aware that Belarus' alienation from Russia will increase as the new Russian national identity (or rather, the new identity of Russian Federation nationals) takes hold.

As an authoritarian state, Belarus is unfit for integration. Stable interstate structures are only feasible with a democratic system and on a democratic basis, as can be seen in the European Union. As for authoritarian states, integration is employed in order to consolidate their regimes and to secure additional resources for internal consolidation.

Creoles are no threat to independence primarily due to their lack of

political will and susceptibility to manipulation. For the same reason, they are not a danger to the anachronistic political regime and its eccentric leader.

AWAITING CULTURAL CHANGES

The presidential election highlighted that Lukashenka's weakest points are where Belarusian culture and the Catholic anti-imperialist ethos are best preserved. This is clearly illustrated by a broad-based poll conducted in mid-summer by the International Republican Institute (USA).

Support for Lukashenka by region							
	Minsk City	Minsk region	Berastse region	Homel region	Horadnya region	Mahilyow region	Vitsebsk region
Trust	45%	50%	67%	67%	40%	53%	48%
Do not trust	48%	41%	25%	27%	42%	35%	40%
Will vote for	32%	38%	50%	51%	30%	44%	39%

Lukashenka was least trusted in the Horadnya region (40 %) and also noted low support in the Western (Belarusian-language and/or Catholic) districts of the Minsk and Vitsebsk regions. He enjoyed the strongest support, not in his native Mahilyow region (52 %), but in the patriarchal Homel and de-ethnicised Berastse (67 %) regions. The Homel region is known to have retained pre-capitalist forms of agricultural production for the longest period of time, while Catholic influence in the region, coming to Belarus from the north-west, was the weakest. As for the Berastse region, ethnic Ukrainians living there have not completely incorporated into the Belarusian nation while the Orthodox Christian church remains exceptionally strong. Therefore, Lukashenka is most popular where modernisation, accompanied by the national idea, arrived last, after World War II (as opposed to the turn of the 20th century as in the Maladzechna, Horadnya, and Minsk areas). It is noteworthy that in the beginning of the 20th century, Berastse and Homel used to

be mere district centres of the Mahilyow and Horadnya (Mogilev and Grodno) provinces.

No significant growth occurred during the years of independence in the number of people who perceive Belarusian culture as their own. This was the main handicap for the opposition in its campaign in 2001.

The irreversible democratisation of society cannot be accomplished without bringing the creolised community into the bosom of Belarusian culture*. Without taking this into account, it is quixotic to oppose Lukashenka. Increasing the population with a national-orientation will make political change historically inevitable.

The Western rational mind tends to seek roots of Belarus' uniqueness in relation to other East European countries either in the so-called mysterious Slavic soul so brilliantly depicted by Fyodor Dostoyevskiy or in the profound and ineradicable plebeian quality of this society and culture. Both are typical delusions, as Belarus is first and foremost an unfinished national project. The weakness of Belarusian nationalism is an indication that, in this corner of Europe, the moulding of a modern political nation continues, unlike Western Europe where such developments began more than two centuries ago. At present, ethnic Belarusians have a choice of three options with which to identify on the cultural level: Belarusian, Creole and unmodified Russian. The majority of Belarusian citizens combine the Belarusian and Creole identity, which produces deviant (by European standards) political preferences. Nothing would connect Belarus with Europe more than European capital and a Western-inspired national project of building a political nation on the basis of its own cultural identity.

As for the cultural options available, most widespread identities had formed long before Belarus attained independence. They merely illustrate the total character of colonisation and modernisation pursued by the centre of empire in relation to this culture.

Belarus: an unfinished national project.

* Characteristically, the only independent newspaper closed by the authorities immediately after the election was *Pahonya*. This Belarusian-language newspaper published in Horadnya had a major cultural influence on the region.