
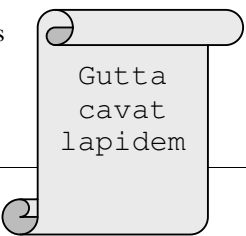


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Belarus Votes

The Parliamentary Elections: Authorities and Democratic Candidates

Summary:

The democratic opposition of Belarus – despite its reasonably large number of registered candidates – has already lost both the time and possibility to elect their candidates to the Parliament of Belarus. The current campaign by the administration leading up to the referendum and the parliamentary elections makes the democratic opposition a passive observer among democratic structures and shows the crisis of the political opposition and civil society. New perspectives on getting out of this crisis must include strengthening the role of new, more efficient political elite, overcoming inter-party and intra-coalition contradictions, and proposing new political alternatives to the society of Belarus.

The Authorities:

October 16, 2004 was the deadline for registering candidates by the Central Election Commission (CEC). The actual analysis of registration results confirms earlier conclusions by CPE/Pontis regarding the creation of a well-controlled “pocket” parliament by the authorities in the upcoming crucial years. The fact that the most active deputies from the "Respublika" parliamentary fraction (except Valerij Frolov, who is the well-known leader of the fraction) were not registered (among them Vladimir Parfenovich and Sergej Skrebets) seems to support the scenario of a “manageable parliament” for the President.¹

In the end, the CEC registered 359 candidates out of 692 nominees for the 110 seats in the parliament. According to the list of registered candidates on the website of the CEC,² there were 159 candidates representing the opposition.³ This means that around 50% of all democratic candidates were allowed to be registered. The actual number of registered candidates, however, is a subject of constant change, and according to the latest information, around 20 oppositional candidates already have lost their registration due to administrative obstacles, while up to 30 have received the first warning from the election commission.⁴ All opposition leaders⁵ – both

¹ General Frolov was registered after he successfully appealed to the court and the CEC registered him a few days after the deadline. Vladimir Goncharik, the candidate in the 2001 presidential elections was also denied registration. Frolov did not manage to get the support of the necessary number of voters in his constituency (1,000) and has been registered on a party list (Social Democratic Party of Statkevich). This seems to confirm his weak chances as a candidate in the presidential elections in 2006 – a view widely shared by local analysts in Belarus.

² See <http://www.rec.gov.by/elect/ppns3/ppns3namekand.html>. The list was published at November 4, 2004. Despite promises by the CEC, the list so far has not been updated.

³ There were 125 registered candidates for 5+ Coalition and 33 from the European Coalition/Free Belarus (all from the main force of the coalition, the Social democratic Party of Nikolaj Statkevich). The prominent public activist Alexandr Milinkevich stands as an independent candidate.

⁴ Information from the Secretariat of the United Civic Party (5+ Coalition) and the Belarusian Popular Front (5+ Coalition) on November 11, 2004. A second warning means automatic cancellation of registration

⁵ Except Alexander Bukhvostov, the leader of the liquidated Labour Party

from the 5+ Coalition and European Coalition/Free Belarus – are so far standing in the race. They are all running in Minsk constituencies.

There are many signs that the authorities planned for participation of the opposition, especially well-known opposition politicians. This could be a part of the official strategy to discredit the opposition by showing that is not able to win any seats, despite having been registered. This would show the citizens that the official propaganda on the opposition – e.g. they are not capable of ruling Belarus – is actually confirmed through the parliamentary elections. This would back the “favourable” result of the referendum for President Lukashenka. On the other hand, the registration demonstrates the democratic character of the elections and the “goodwill” of the authorities toward the international community, especially the European Union.⁶

Wish List from the President:

Still, in many constituencies representatives of the state authorities are opposed by democratic candidates. Mapping the candidates close to authorities suggests that the “democratic game” started by Lukashenka will be over on October 17, the actual day of the first round of the parliamentary elections. Many facts suggest that the 2004 parliamentary elections, like the previous ones in 2000, will be orchestrated based on the so-called “presidential list.” President Lukashenka long ago ordered the Administration of the President to create a list of new members of the House of Representatives. The state administration is heavily engaged in forcing through individuals loyal to Lukashenka. In each constituency, the state (represented by executive committees), the management of companies, organizations, and institutions⁷ nominate a person from the “presidential list” as the “main” candidate. In many constituencies there are also “distracting” nominees of the executive, who have lower popularity than the “main” candidate. Based on the experience of the campaign (and taking into consideration the possibilities of the official candidates with the “fight” of oppositional candidates with all possible obstacles and smear campaigns) the regime is seeking to use the registration of opposition candidates to create an image of competitive democratic elections corresponding with international standards.

In 89 constituencies (Brest, Grodno, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Gomel regions) it is not difficult to figure out who could be from the “presidential list.” In these constituencies there are three candidates: two representatives of the authorities and one from the opposition. A “distracting” nominee has lower status than the “main” candidate.

Current Deputies: As we expected, all 54 incumbent deputies of the House of Representatives (who were seeking re-election) were registered. On July 20, Lukashenka addressed the parliament and expressed his wish to keep “continuity” in the work of the lower chamber. Current deputies running for a parliamentary seat are the absolute front-runners in their constituencies and most are unopposed by other competitors from administration,⁸ like Vladimir Konoplev, the president’s childhood friend and vice-speaker of the House of Representatives in Shklov (the birthplace of Lukashenka, District no. 75).

⁶ This “goodwill” and the participation and registration of opposition candidates as “positive” messages toward international community was presented by Ural Latypov, head of the Administration of the President in the Interview on Belarusian TV on October 10, 2004 (Program called “Bolsoja Politika”)

⁷ Foreign companies in Belarus employ only 0.2% of all employees. Companies of mixed state-foreign ownership employ 1.3% of workers. Other companies, institutions, and organizations (which employ 98.5% of workers) are state-controlled.

⁸ The exception is only 1 out of 54 constituencies. In Bobrujsk District No. 63, current MP Maria Vinokurova stands against a member of the upper chamber of parliament, the Council of the Republic (Tatsiana Artiushina).

Orthodox Communists: Six nominees of the Communist Party of Belarus⁹ – Lukashenka's “former guards” – were all registered. In the constituencies where they stand, they have either local (regional) officials or opposition candidates as competitors.¹⁰

State Officials and Directors: In 29 constituencies, there is no problem to define the individual in the role of state favourite. These candidates include: Leonid Kozik, the former chair deputy of the administration of the president and chair of the Federation of Trade Unions (District no. 78); two assistants of the President (Viktor Koziak, District No. 62, and Jurij Kulakovskij, No. 65); Major General of the Militia (police) Anatolij Beloshevskij (No. 54); and Head of the Main Headquarters of the Military Air Forces Anatolij Vankovich. In addition, there are four directors of local executive committees, directors of regional committees of state control, and directors of educational institutions, institutions of public health, and state companies.

Illusion of Elections:

There is a different situation in Minsk and the Minsk region, where there are 21 constituencies. Since the central region will be under tougher international observation during the parliamentary elections, authorities are trying to create a better illusion of free elections.

Lack of Obvious Favourites: All representatives of the authorities are more or less of the same status level – representatives of the directorate bodies of state companies, institutions, and organizations) – and every one of them can be considered a favourite candidate from the “presidential list.”

Illusion of Choice: The average number of candidates in every constituency in the central region is higher as compared to the other regions of Belarus. The authorities no doubt are seeking to create the picture of more democratic elections in the capital city, where all opposition leaders are running for seats.

Based on the current campaign, the 2004 parliamentary elections can be hardly considered free and fair. There is no equal competition among candidates. The authorities, the opposition, and Belarusian voters all feel that the election results have been decided in advance. Everyone feels that elections results are determined not by voting, but by political will, by the personal political interests of some few individuals controlling the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Hence, everyone understands the predetermined character of elections results, and this has influenced the campaigns of both pro-presidential candidates and opposition candidates. “Official” candidates see no sense in being active. Despite some positive achievements, the majority of the opposition candidates still seem to lack understanding about this campaign goal. This was particularly visible during the radio and TV ads of many of the candidates,¹¹ who used their time slandering the President or making other negative statements.¹²

⁹ Representatives of KPB quite often take charge of the important executive and legislative offices. Sergej Posohov, member of the directorate (secretary of the Central Committee) who is currently out of politics, was in 1994-2001 advisor of the President. Viktor Chickin (KPB leader until 2001) was the chair of the Executive Committee of the Soviet region in Minsk and director of the National TV and Radio Company. Among the 54 current MPs registered as candidates, there are two secretaries of the KPB Central Committee who play important roles in referendum propaganda (Sergej Kostian and Igor Kotliarov, chair of the parliamentary commission on education, science, culture and scientific progress).

¹⁰ For example, in Niasvizh District No. 87 Maria Hudaja, the pro-authority candidate and KPB member, has no other authority competitors.

¹¹ The opposition – for the first time – has been provided air time in electronic media (5 minutes each candidate). The radio and TV ads were, however, censored; the authorities were extremely sensitive toward any criticism of the president and negative statements on the referendum. This very limited airtime, obviously, cannot compare to the huge official campaign in the electronic media.

¹² This campaign behaviour only reinforced the official propaganda, e.g. that the opposition is not able to provide an alternative and would be incapable of running the country. On the other side, international observers were noticed

The Democratic Opposition:

Long before the elections were announced, the Coalition 5+ geared up to hold 111 individual election campaigns: one national campaign for a democratic Belarus (basically the Five Steps to a Better Life) and 110 campaigns for their candidates. In addition, at the end of 2003, Nikolaj Statkevich, the leader of the European Coalition/Free Belarus, declared the campaign of collecting a million signatures for the integration of Belarus into the European Union. Differences in opinions within the democratic opposition, lack of mutual trust, and inefficiency of leaders all come together to prevent the opposition from escaping the “electoral trap” set by the administration. Lack of consensus within both coalitions was an obstacle to uniting the resources of the opposition and running a more united campaign. In most constituencies with registered democratic candidates, there would be more signs of the up-coming elections.

On the other hand, some of the young democratic candidates (mostly young regional leaders of Belarusian Popular Front, United Civic Party, Belarusian Social-Democratic Gramada, Belarusian Social-Democratic Party “Narodnaja Gramada” who showed effective ways of campaigning in the 2003 local elections¹³) have managed to overcome inter-party and intra-coalition disagreements to create new links to cooperate each other and have attracted more volunteers, signatures, and popular support. However, their success was too obvious: in order to neutralize political activity of the representatives of the “young wave,” district electoral commissions were ordered not to register them.¹⁴

Trap for Democrats:

If there will be no strong interest of opposition leaders in developing alternative programs for reforming Belarus and Belarusian society, empty criticism of the regime will likely not help. Current leaders seem still to lack willingness to discuss possible solutions to national problems, and continue to engage in negative communication/campaigning. Declaration of the referendum has resulted in even greater critique of the regime by opposition candidates. The “electoral trap” prepared by Lukashenka so far seems to be working: addresses by opposition candidates were not in line with the interests and needs of the majority of the Belarusian electorate.

The expectations of party leaders are that the referendum and “life-term rule” of Lukashenka would increase the number of votes in favor of opposition candidates. Indeed, according to available and trustworthy polling data, around 60% of Belarusian voters do not support the idea of Lukashenka's third term. However, the opposition could have made effective use of this fact if an alternative to Lukashenka had been proposed. Belarusian society – ten years under the rule of Lukashenka – is used to the personification and paternalist understanding of executive. People perceive the current situation as the power of an individual, not as the authority of the official. Most of Belarusian citizens agree that the third term is a bad idea, but they are interested in who is going to challenge and replace Lukashenka. To find the answer will be the biggest challenge for the democratic opposition.

many cases, when candidates were talking – united – about the program alternative using the “Five Steps to a Better Life” campaign.

¹³ Despite the pressure of local authorities, many representatives of party youth were elected into local Councils. For example, Ales Mihalevich, leader of Minsk oblast organization of Belarusian Popular Front won in the first round of elections with 75% of votes and was elected into Puhovichi Regional Council.

¹⁴ In particular, some efficient, young regional leaders of the Belarusian Popular Front were refused registration – among them Siarhej Antusevich (leader of the independent trade union of workers of the biggest Grodno company - “GrodnoAZOT”) and prominent civil society activists, member of the last Soviet Parliament, Viktor Karnienka (Gomel, United Civic Party).