



**The Belarus Public Policy Fund**  
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*presents*

**Belarus Votes 2008**

**The Parliamentary Election:  
The Authorities and Democratic Candidates**

**Analysis<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. Summary**

The government made no effort to conduct the September Parliamentary elections<sup>2</sup> in accordance with any democratic standard meaning the subsequent parliament consists of pro-regime candidates only. Meanwhile President Lukashenka is seemingly offering the West normalization in relations; but on his terms. He understands the West's anxiety concerning Russian policy and feels the EU and the US are ready to take certain steps in improving relations with Belarus.

The marginal status of the opposition is set to continue. The golden opportunity of upping their votes among the pro-democratic electorate was not used. However, that one campaign out of every five proved successful is surely a good sign that the opposition still holds court with some voters, even under the authoritative regime still in power. Meanwhile, the effective campaigning of a minority of candidates who were generally young, regional democratic leaders, illustrated the essential point that existing opposition leaders who were reluctant to speak directly to the electorate, lost out.

A number of regional democratic leaders were successful, but not successful enough to improve the opposition's image in general. Unsurprisingly, the opposition remained unpopular among the larger apolitical cadre of voters, whilst the majority of pro-democratic voters were clearly disappointed in the opposition's leadership. The plain consequence was another lost chance for the opposition to claw itself out of the electoral pit.

The 2008 elections revealed more than ever, the crisis felt by the opposition, in terms of both an internal generational conflict and its failure to reach out to voters.

## **2. The Government**

### **2.1. The Preparedness of the Regime**

Opposition parties formed a list of candidates in February 2008. Being aware of the personalities of democratic opposition representatives in each constituency and the strong and weak sides of these candidates, the authorities had enough time to determine a concrete scenario for the outcome of the election.

State authorities assailed the democratic opposition with a wave of repression in the spring of 2008.<sup>3</sup> Opposition representatives were not included in election committees,<sup>4</sup> whilst state-owned media happily dragged the opposition's name through the mud. State authorities were acting in strict accordance to a most rigid scenario for the holding of the election.

However, violent events in Georgia, the subsequent deterioration of relations between Russia and the West and, consequently, and the appearance of new opportunities for changing the character of relations between Belarus and the West led to a minor correction in the official plan.

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<sup>2</sup> The elections were to the lower chamber of the Belarusian Parliament, i.e. the Chamber of Representatives. The upper chamber of Belarusian Parliament (the Council of Republic) is an organ of territorial representation. The election to the upper chamber is held on a non-alternative basis.

<sup>3</sup> In particular, more than 100 people were arrested for participating in a demonstration dedicated to the Anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic, celebrated on March 25 2008. State authorities also applied force during policing of the "Chernobyl Way" rally on April 26 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Although the opposition representatives comprised around 40% of all candidates this time, the number of selected opposition polling workers does not exceed 0.07% of all members of local electoral committees.

Unlike in 2004, the authorities didn't apply pressure in relation to members of the initiative groups that nominated opposition candidates. The opposition candidates' teams enjoyed the freedom to campaign without the threat of persecution. Like all other candidates, the opposition was given an opportunity to present their manifestos on TV (albeit only regional TV channels) and radio stations.<sup>5</sup>

On September 18, 2008, President Lukashenka declared that he was interested in encouraging the West to recognize the 2008 elections in Belarus as corresponding to democratic standards.

## **2.2. 'Black-and-White' Election**

The Parliament in Belarus is a de-facto branch of the President's Office. It adopts whatever laws and provisions are sent through. Therefore, parliamentary mandates are not as attractive as those within the groups and factions centered on the ruling elite. Those hungry for power look for liaisons with Lukashenka and his entourage instead, whilst lobbying their interests in the President's Office.

Regime representatives have for a long time, attempted to erase the existence of any independent candidates. Citizens who decided to apply for participation in the 2004 Parliamentary elections as candidates independent of the regime and the opposition, received official warnings at their places of work. The potential candidates, who failed to obey the threats, were dismissed from work and lost any possibility of future employment in Belarus. Opposition candidates' team members were similarly pressurized by the regime's servants.

365 citizens officially nominated themselves as potential candidates for the elections.<sup>6</sup> The regional electoral committees, controlled directly by the executive, registered 276 candidates from the initial list of applicants.

In 12 electoral districts only one candidate's name was put forward. It seemed from the list of official candidates, that registration was pre-determined by the government's fixed election scenario. A number of top-representatives from the executive were nominated as official candidates in what was viewed as a way to enjoy an "honorary retirement" following a rotation scheme.<sup>7</sup> Two candidates per constituency were registered in 53 electoral districts.

The candidates that pretended to be 'independent' were registered in 45 constituencies, mainly within Minsk and in other large urban centers. These so-called independents competed against governmental protégés and opposition candidates in 40 constituencies. They also competed in 5 more constituencies with governmental protégés as their only opposition.

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<sup>5</sup> The possibility to present two 5-minute TV and radio speeches is apart from the more general information blockade of opposition.

<sup>6</sup> 110 MPs are elected to the Chamber of Representatives (the lower chamber). 692 citizens applied to be nominated in the 2004 elections. This bigger number is primarily explained by the widespread nomination of several opposition candidates in the same constituency.

<sup>7</sup> Uladzimir Siniakou, the Head of the Chief Department on Personnel Policies at the President's Office; Vasil Stsiapura, the Chief Deputy Chairman of Hrodna Regional Executive Committee; Maryja Biriukova, a Deputy Chairperson of Hrodna Regional Executive Committee; Uladzimir Mikhasiou, a Department Head at Homiel Regional Executive Committee; Leanid Ilyashevich, the Chairman of Zelva District Executive Committee (Hrodna region).

It is clearly evident that all the candidates for the parliamentary elections were adherent either to the regime in power or to the opposition. The so-called independent candidates at the 2008 elections were thus only acting as alternatives to the government's candidates.

## **2.3. Government Candidates**

### *2.3.1. Main Candidates*

34 deputies of the House of Representatives ran for another term. Among those registered were 30 pro-Presidential officials, two candidates from the Belarusian Republic-wide Youth Union (a pro-presidential youth organization), another two candidates from the judicial authority and two further candidates from the state-controlled trade union. The list of pro-regime candidates also included an army general, the Head of a Military Academy and a Deputy Director on Ideological Work at a state enterprise. In addition, among those sent to parliament to enjoy an honorary retirement were also directors of several companies.<sup>8</sup>

The number of nominees totals 80 people. It is only in one election district that a current deputy of the House of Representatives competed against another pro-presidential candidate.<sup>9</sup> In no other cases were official nominees competing against each other. In 30 other electoral districts, two or more officials from state enterprises and institutions (in general, education and health services) were represented. It is only in 9 of these 30 districts that one cannot easily identify the main candidate.<sup>10</sup>

All 'main' candidates placed a pledge in their election manifestos, promising to support the Presidential cause. These candidates were nominated by employees of state enterprises and institutions, meaning none were required to collect signatures among constituency voters. In contrast to the 2004 elections, a minority of pro-Presidential candidates, met directly with voters. This was not necessary as these potential deputies were well aware that they had already been 'elected' due to their inclusion in the 'President's shortlist'. The electoral committees, were thus under pressure to declare them winners. The current deputies of the Chamber of Representatives of Belarus also made up the "main" governmental candidates.

### *2.3.2. Alternatives*

Authorities had certain reasons for nominating so-called 'independent' candidates as alternatives to the 'main' candidates.

Firstly, these candidates in Minsk and other urban districts foster the illusion of competitive elections.

Secondly, their presence had the potential to considerably lessen the effect of the opposition candidates' radio and TV speeches. The higher the number of candidates, the more manifestos. This in turn, complicates the field of play, disturbing the shaping of opinions and preferences.

The so-called 'independents' had the chance to obtain the support of 'swing' voters from the

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<sup>8</sup> The Head of Belarusian State Railway Company, Uladzimir Zharalo; a Deputy Director General of Mazyr Oil Refinery, Yauhen Artsiushenka; a Deputy Director General of "Integral" scientific and industrial enterprise, Alaksei Kazlou; the Head of Minsk Carriage Repairing Plant, Viktor Talkachou; a Deputy Director of Minsk House Building Enterprise, Alaksei Kuzmich and the Head of Minsk Poultry Factory Henadz Dziaimidchyk.

<sup>9</sup> A present MP Uladzimir Barshchou and a Deputy Head of Ashmiany District Executive Committee Valiantsina Luzina were registered at the same Iuye Constituency in the Hrodna region.

<sup>10</sup> It is remarkable that five of the nine constituencies mentioned, are located in Minsk.

opposition's side. They talked in a language of current socio-economic problems which affect everyone. Significantly, the independent candidates did not discuss issues of state policy.

In comparison with the 'main' pro-Presidential candidates, the alternatives were of low status: officials of a low level, small businessmen, workers, pensioners, etc. Though formally the 'independent' candidates were nominated by means of collecting voters' signatures in their constituencies, the general public learnt only about their existence after the official registration of candidates.

The 'independent' candidates quite frequently resembled their opposition, nominated in their constituencies, by their age, career and even appearance. An example of which was Syarhei Antusievich, a popular man among voters as the regional democratic leader, the Deputy Head of Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) Party City Organization in Hrodna and the Head of the largest in Hrodna "Azot" industrial enterprise. He ran for the seat of deputy for the 50<sup>th</sup> Hrodna Central Constituency. A young worker from the same enterprise Alyaksandr Mikaluta fought against Syarhei Antusievich as an 'independent' candidate. His proposals on solving the region's concrete problems were a carbon copy of those, previously presented by Antusievich.

In another case, Alyaksandr Bukhvostau<sup>11</sup>, an oppositional activist quite popular among workers registered as a parliamentary candidate for the 91st Shabanouski Constituency in Minsk; an area populated with workers from the local industrial enterprises. Uladzimir Markau, a private entrepreneur competed him. Markau is of the same age as Bukhvostau and ran on an identical platform of workers' rights.

### **3. The opposition**

#### **3.1. Election or Boycott?**

The opposition is a set of groups with different views on the past, the present and the future of Belarus. In all, the opposition ran candidates in 80 constituencies.<sup>12</sup>

After the recent Presidential elections, the main efforts of the formal heads of the BPF Party and Belarusian Social Democratic Party – Hramada (BSDP-Hramada) were aimed at eliminating internal party disputes and the retention of their leading positions within their organizations. Consequently, the opposition were not able to present a common Parliamentary election plan due to their comprising of several conflicting groups.

The process of forming a "united list" of parliamentary candidates became yet another struggle for securing leading positions and in the end, became a fight between different generations.

The organizational capacities of formal party leaders appeared to be sufficient enough to include their supporters in the majority of positions in the list. This left a large part of young regional democratic leaders off the list and in turn meant many were forced to pull out of the race all together. The majority of places on the opposition list were given to people, who

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<sup>11</sup> He led the Independent Trade Union of the Automobile Building Industry Workers for more than 10 years. Numerous workers from Minsk Automobile Plant reside on the territory of the 91<sup>st</sup> Constituency in Minsk.

<sup>12</sup> 76 activists out of 98 people, included in the UDF list, were registered as candidates. (12 nominees from the UDF list refused to take part in the election and abstained from submitting signatures collected in their support to the regional election committees). 5 activists supported by Alyaksandr Milinkevich, were also registered as candidates.

were aware they held little chance of success. Instead, their presence was a means to secure the status of the party leaders and their protégés.

The party bosses stated that the election campaign was held in order to promote "the United Democratic Forces" (UDF). At the same time, a number of opposition candidates declared the promotion of democratic values as well as EU membership for Belarus as aims of their election campaigns. In this, they were supported by Alyaksandr Milinkevich.<sup>13</sup>

This situation made it clear to voters and the authorities that the groups of opposition candidates had different reasons to participate in the election and indeed, had different objectives.

In addition to these troublesome difficulties, another group of opposition organizations, namely "The Young Front" and "Charter'97", (an initiative founded by the Belarusian Social Democrat Party [Narodnaya Hramada]) decided to boycott the elections completely, in protest at the lack of democratic standards.

### **3.2. Lavish Gifts from Lukashenka**

During the period of time preceding the election, the authorities took a range of highly unpopular decisions that evoked a significant response in Belarusian society.

Social benefits were cancelled to a large number of citizens at the end of 2007.<sup>14</sup> A large number of private entrepreneurs terminated their activities, as soon as a range of highly restrictive provisions in relation to small businesses were introduced<sup>15</sup>. The state authorities also brought up the controversial issue of building a nuclear power plant in Belarus<sup>16</sup>. The rising costs of foodstuff evoked a certain rise in indignation among the Belarusian population as well. Consequently, Lukashenka's popularity dropped significantly from 60.3% support for the President during the 2006 Presidential elections, to 38.9% of voters who said they would support his candidature if the Presidential election took place in June 2008.<sup>17</sup>

### **3.3. A Young Wave**

A number of BPF Party activists and a range of regional leaders from democratic organizations formed a so-called "Young Wave" and made use of these unpopular decisions. They also seemed to understand the reasons for the low popularity of the UDF, even among democratic-minded voters. They therefore refused to use the UDF brand or promotional materials in their own election campaigns.

In this way they managed to attract democratic voters by using the ideological platform of the "Za Svabodu"<sup>18</sup> movement, based on the fundamental ideals of independence,

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<sup>13</sup> 34 candidates promoting the idea of EU integration of Belarus were included in the UDF list. 8 more candidates with similar views were left off the list. Alyaksandr Milinkevich was a member of their initiative group and took part in campaigning with their support.

<sup>14</sup> According to a March 2008 survey, presented by the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies (further – IISEPS), 75.9% of respondents didn't approve of this decision whilst 24.1% of respondents approved.

<sup>15</sup> According to IISEPS (ibid), 53.3% of citizens didn't approve of the introduced ban on hiring employees.

<sup>16</sup> According to IISEPS (ibid), 43% of voters stated their negative attitude toward building a nuclear power plant in Belarus whilst 37% of voters approved. However, when the well-informed part of population was inquired (www.tut.by which has approximately 600,000 hits a day), it appeared that 61% of respondents voted against the decision and only 22% of respondents supported the idea. It is evident that the post-Chernobyl syndrome is still very strong in the Belarusian society.

<sup>17</sup> According to IISEPS. (Ibid)

<sup>18</sup> "Za Svabodu!" movement is led by A. Milinkievich.

democracy and integration of Belarus into the European Union. This was in contrast to the manifesto put forward by UDF.

The Young Wave represented themselves as team members of Alyaksandr Milinkevich, who was the united opposition candidate at the 2006 Presidential Elections. The presence of Milinkevich in the democratic candidates' initiative groups allowed them to easily answer the voters' question: "Who will take over power from Lukashenka?" Taking into account the specifics of the Belarusian electorate, this question continues to be an important one.

The discontent felt by large portions of the population after the authorities took a number of highly unpopular decisions, helped the democratic candidates draw attention to their proposals on reforming Belarusian society. Moreover, they managed to draw the attention of voters, mainly interested in solving social and economic problems.

The authorities received signals that the opposition had efficient candidates and large groups of activists<sup>19</sup> in a number of important<sup>20</sup> constituencies. The regime was also informed that the candidates' proposals had had a positive response among voters.

The authorities would not dare turn down every opposition candidate which gave cause for concern and so found a middle way. Using the pretext of incorrect income statements, Yuras Karetnikau (BPF Party), Ales Lahviniets ("Za Svabodu" movement), and Syarhei Salash (BPF Party) were all refused registration.

### **3.4. Party Bosses**

The regional leaders of democratic organizations were in constant contact with the voters and the Belarusian expert community. This helped them to determine precisely the "weaknesses" of Lukashenka's regime. At the same time, the formal party leaders spent a considerable part of their time on trips abroad. They were very reluctant to go to the regions and preferred to work with voters "from election to election". This isolation meant three important mistakes were made by the candidates who named themselves UDF:

1. Absence of real message, easily understandable for any significant group of voters. The manifesto for parliamentary candidates, approved by UDF Headquarters proved this.<sup>21</sup> The voters' urgent problems were left unnoticed with UDF candidates ill prepared for communication with voters. Simple criticism of the regime in power did not evoke any significant public response.
2. UDF candidates did not have a clear answer to the question put by the overwhelming majority of Belarusian voters, which was: "Who will take over power from Lukashenka?" The total popularity rate of all party leaders, represented in the United Democratic Forces does not bare recording.

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<sup>19</sup> Yuras Karetnikau's initiative group (South-western Constituency) amounted to 85 people. 45 activists joined Ales Lahviniets' team in Adzintsouski Constituency. According to Belarusian legislation, a candidate's initiative group has to consist of no less than 10 people.

<sup>20</sup> I.e., located in the Belarusian capital and in large cities of the Minsk region.

<sup>21</sup> It was believed that voters would support the UDF candidates as it was suggested the UDF would control the authorities as soon as they become MPs. However, it is general thought that "a union of Communists and the BPF Party" is not a group that could control the country. The mere mechanism of Parliamentary control over the authorities is not understood well by the majority of voters. Finally, the party leaders of the United Democratic Forces did not show their awareness of the concrete problems of the economy, the social field, as well as foreign and domestic policies.

3. In light of interesting and important foreign policy events such as the conflict in Georgia, it became quite clear again that the differences between political groupings within the United Democratic Forces were significant. Indeed, the UDF groups disagreed on all the main issues of utmost importance for voters in the country.

Syarhei Kalakin, leader of the Belarusian Party of Communists, made a number of scandalous statements during August 2008. The politician stood up in support of Russia's actions in Georgia and called for recognizing the independence of Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia by Belarus. On September 2008, he noted that Russia had a right to annex the Crimea. These statements caused indignation among the democratically-minded voters, who predominantly support the integration of Belarus into the European Union.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The election of 2008 in Belarus will be remembered for its lack of democratic standards as well as the lost opportunity of the opposition to capitalize on its golden potential. The pre-ordained strategy of the government won through. It seems Lukashenka and his clench men succeeded in its plan to essentially 'divide and rule'. The inclusion of the so-called independents acted as a clever ruse to pull the wool over the eyes of observers. There were simply no independent candidates put forward. The governmental 'main' candidates were conventional in character and beliefs; predictable in their success.

The EU and the US should recognize these factors and adjust their policies toward Belarus accordingly. The essential failure of the opposition to unite against the regime was also a disappointment. The generational differences within the democratic movement will have to be overcome for the opposition to truly gain the trust of the population. Post-election Belarus looks much as it did before September, which should serve as a stark reminder for the West to change strategy, in order to have some chance of ending this stagnating authoritarian regime.