



Lukashenko doesn't want to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Belarusian political scientist Andrey Liakhovich for DespiteBorders.

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On 28th September, 2008, parliamentary elections were held in Belarus. The observer mission of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe has rejected to recognise their result. DespiteBorders talks with the political scientist Andrey Liakhovich, the Director of the Centre for Political Education, about their implications for innerpolitical development in Belarus as well as the latest development within Belarusian-Russian relations.

How do you asses the course of the parliamentary elections in Belarus and their results?

Under the conditions of an authoritarian regime the elections couldn't have free and democratic character. Like in the past, the work of all structures of state apparatus was orientated towards the achievement of results contrived by the authority. All 110 candidates nominated by the authority and included in the "presidential list" have been "elected". It means that according to election results the Parliament remains a branch of the President's administration. Executive, legislative as well as judicial power is concentrated in President Lukashenko's hands. The Opposition is kept aloof from system policy. Lukashenko has shown that he isn't interested in changing this situation.

Although the elections weren't correct, the meeting, which was held on the evening after polling stations had been closed, confirmed that the Opposition



hadn't the support of the citizens since only a few hundreds of people took part in it. What are the causes of the Opposition's failure in the elections?

The formation of the Opposition's candidate list amounted to another round of the battle for influence, the battle between generations in terms of the Opposition. Party leaders had enough organisation possibilities of filling a considerable part of vacancies in the candidate list with own adherents. Within the Opposition, the criterion of candidate nomination wasn't popularity or experience of working with voters or the existence of an operational team of co-workers, but the support of party functionaries. By their participation in elections, most of opposition candidates strived to confirm their formal status in parties. They didn't orientate themselves towards the work with voters. They weren't capable of deciding what to do in the elections, whether they were supposed to withdraw their candidacy at the first suitable moment or boycott the elections or evoke the illusion of conducting election campaign. Just 20-25 out of 110 opposition candidates really wanted to carry out an efficient election campaign and achieve factual, though officially unrecognised, election victory. The primary cause of failure was a very poor quality of candidates.

Were there yet other causes of the Opposition's failure?

The majority of United Democratic Powers of Belarus (ODS) candidates didn't have a comprehensible idea platform. They didn't have an understandable message which would have corresponded with society's interests. United Democratic Forces of Belarus are a trademark for western sponsor organisations. Belarusian voters, party activists as well as state authority, i.e. all subjects perceive ODS to be a set of political groupings with completely different perception of the country's past, present as well as future. They are only united by negative stance on Lukashenko's regime.



The artificial alliance of national democrats, liberals and orthodox communists of Soviet type, which was established on the basis of western organisations' order, are in the eyes of most of voters bigger evil than Lukashenko's regime. The voters see in this grouping a fuse for Belarus which is sure to explode when these groups start to divide power among them.

Moreover, ODS candidates weren't able to answer the voters' question "Who, if not Lukashenko?". A considerable part of Belarusian voters perceive the authority to be personified. For an effective fight for power, it's necessary to offer not only an alternative in the shape of a comprehensible program of the development of Belarus, but also an alternative to Lukashenko himself. The overall popularity of all leaders of opposition parties doesn't exceed the level of a statistical error.

Solely a small part of candidates answered this question by presenting the conscientious democratic and pro-European and subsequently also the most popular opposition politician Aleksandr Milinkievich, who was the Opposition's presidential candidate in 2006, as an alternative to Lukashenko. This was one of the causes of the efficiency of their election campaigns.

A part of ODS proposed boycotting the elections and some opposition candidates gave up candidacy. To what extent was their strategy correct in your opinion?

The boycott campaign as regards parliamentary elections was efficient in 2000. However, power division within the Opposition was different that time. Several opposition leaders were pretty popular. During the 2008 parliamentary elections, the Opposition was in a state of dissension. Many voters knew of internal conflicts inside



the Opposition. Thus not only the power, but also the Opposition's own mistakes are the reason for its negative image. Party leaders have lost popularity also among a large part of voters who used to be out of tune with Lukashenko.

The motto of the boycott would have been topical if voters regarded the Opposition as an alternative to Lukashenko's regime. The Opposition was to use this year's elections for showing that it really was the alternative. For the Opposition, the elections stood also for the last legal opportunity to work with voters massively prior to the 2011 presidential elections and regain the support of democratic electorate, which accounts for approximately 20 to 25 per cent of the total number of voters. Under the current circumstances the boycott strategy has been absolutely wrong.

What is the future of democratic opposition in Belarus after the elections like according to you?

Not every opposition activist is a democratic politician. Party leaders struggle with might and main for the preservation of their formal status in parties. They have been changing the composition of the delegates of regional organisations at party assemblies and they have been using lie and disinformation in order to discredit their political rivals. They regard themselves as efficient politicians misunderstood by the activists and voters who aren't willing to accept their opinions. As politicians, they have been copying Lukashenko, they work using his methods.

The battle for top positions in parties among current leaders, their environment and the young generation will resume after the elections. There must be a generation change within opposition parties. Only then is it possible to constitute an efficient and democratic opposition in Belarus.



Why does Lukashenko refuse to make even such small concessions to the West like the entry of some opposition deputies into the Parliament, although the House of Representatives isn't vested with almost any power, although he concurrently claims that he is interested in forging good ties with the West?

Lukashenko sees that the West is afraid of Russian steps. He assumes that the West will accept his conditions of relations normalisation, i.e. the release of prisoners of conscience, and then Belarus under his rule won't accept the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Lukashenko labels the facts that opposition candidates got the room for two five-minute appearances in television and that the members of their election teams aren't persecuted by the militia and dismissed from their jobs as unprecedented forthcoming steps towards the West.

Lukashenko plans to use dissensions between the West and Russia more effectively in order not to admit the West along with a democratisation wave to Belarus. It also doesn't want to admit Russia with a wave of Russian privatisation model. He wants to be himself. This type of Belarusian independence of the West as well as Russia caters to the interests of the ruling elite, which conducts nomenclature privatisation nowadays. It also caters to the interests of the majority of voters who aren't ready to work according to western traditions, but they don't want to live like in Russian regions either.

Can the restrained attitude of Belarus during the events in South Ossetia affect Russian policy on this country in the future?



The authority is aware that the non-recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is an important condition of the normalisation of relations with the West. Lukashenko at the same time doesn't like the demands of the presidents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia for the membership of the Union of Belarus and Russia. He doesn't want Kokoity and Bagabsh to be on Medvedev's side. He said that owing to the development of cooperation with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, he didn't need to recognise their independence at all.

Russia has found itself in international isolation with regard to the question of the independence of two Georgian provinces. It hasn't been backed by Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) member states either. Russia needs Lukashenko's public statements about the support of its steps in Georgia under the circumstances. It's interesting that Lukashenko appeared in the role of Russian ally on Russian TV channels. Russia pays for this by increasing the economic support of Belarus. It's highly probable that Belarus will buy Russian gas for 140 dollars per thousand cubic metres, which is three times less than the price for EU states. Like in the past, Belarus buys Russian oil for low prices and sells it to the West for world prices. Belarusian export to Russia has been stepped up too.

Russia doesn't deal with questions which spark tension in terms of mutual relations, like the sale of the controlling interest of Belarusian enterprises to Russian companies. Negotiations about the unification of monetary systems and the adoption of the Union State Constitutional Act have been postponed. Business and economic relations have been shaping up, although the political integration project has been suspended.