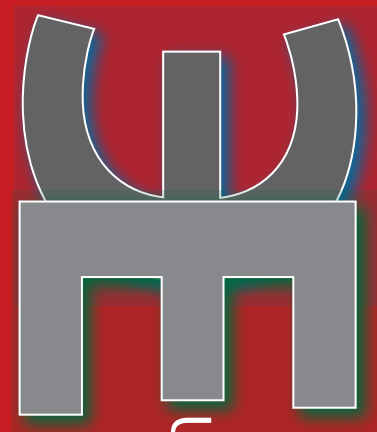




# Towards Unity Belarusian Opposition Before the Presidential Election 2006

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EUROPEAN CHOICE FOR **BELARUS**

# Towards Unity. Belarusian Opposition Before the Presidential Elections

The weakness of the Belarusian opposition and the majority of the defeats it suffered has usually been explained by its inability to unite and act together. The choice of Alyaksandr Milinkevich as the oppositional forces' common candidate in the presidential elections – almost a year ahead of the projected date of elections – constitutes a significant progress when compared to the situation in 2001. At that time the divided opposition chose its leader, Uladzimir Hancharyk, only a month and a half before the election date. A comparison of biographies and political backgrounds of both politicians speaks decisively in favor of Milinkevich. In spite of that positive course of events among the united Belarusian opposition, two important questions remain topical: will the opposition manage to keep its unity until the election time? Will its candidate have a chance to break the information monopoly of the government which has been carefully preparing for an earlier election, and to reach the citizens with his political platform?

## The elections of 2001 – the myth of a united opposition

Before the presidential elections in September 2001 the Belarusian opposition encountered huge problems to select a single candidate, in spite of the fact that its activity after the parliamentary elections of 2000 (in which the oppositional parties intentionally did not participate) was focused on choosing a leader. After several months of consultations and discussions within the Coordination Council of the Democratic Forces it still failed to appoint a common candidate. Four months before the election, it was a partial success to build a coalition consisting of five main oppositional candidates: Mikhail Chihir (former prime minister), Syamyon Domash (NGO activist), Uladzimir Hancharyk (labor union leader), Syarhey Kalyakin (leader of the communists) and Pavel Kazlouski (former minister of defense). According to the agreement concluded among them in May 2001, they were to cooperate during the electoral campaign, and then, after their candidatures would be registered by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), cede their support to the candidate among them who “was stood the best chances to win”. Consequently, the opposition remained in fact divided almost until the eve of the election and it was not able to avoid internal rivalries, as all the candidates solicited votes of similar electorates.

At that time the main division among the opposition was between oppositionists coming from the Soviet nomenklatura, who supported Uladzimir Hancharyk, and the democrats supporting Syamyon Domash. After the CEC registered only these two candidates out of the coalition of “five”, they concluded an agreement, pursuant to which Domash withdrew from the election and transferred his support to Hancharyk. This meant that at the end of July 2001 the opposition was finally able to appoint a common candidate. The choice could not, however, change much and was only seemingly accepted by a part of the opposition. Some of the oppositional forces did not accept the choice of a labor union leader with a nomenklatura past and did not support his campaign. What is more, according to the polls it was Syamyon Domash who had bigger support of the rural regions and of the public opinion in general.

The decision to choose Hancharyk had a negative impact on the short electoral campaign and showed that due to the weakness of democratic political parties nomenklatura opposition could not seize control over all the opposition and to force through its own candidate. The unification of the Belarusian opposition in 2001 was incomplete and in fact did not abolish existing divisions.

According to the official results, in the election of 9 September 2001 75.6% of the Belarusians supported Alyaksandr Lukashenka, 15.65% voted for Uladzimir Hancharyk and 2.5% cast their votes for Syarhey Haydukevich, the leader of the pro-Russian Liberal-Democratic Party, who was moderately critical of the incumbent president. Putting aside electoral frauds and the fact that Lukashenka was supported by state institutions (chairwoman of the Central Electoral Commission Lidziya Yarmoshina stated publicly that a potential defeat of the incumbent president would be her personal failure), the opposition and its leader suffered a defeat. It was also significant that Uladzimir Hancharyk, who was supposed to become a leader of the opposition, disappeared from the political scene soon afterwards – he took a post with the CIS’s labor union bodies in Moscow.

## **Congress of Democratic Forces – October 2005**

Before the subsequent presidential elections the Belarusian opposition almost unanimously declared that this time it was going to select a common candidate much earlier. It managed to build a “10+” coalition, comprising all the major oppositional parties (among others: Belarusian National Front, United Civic Party, Social Democratic Party Hramada, Communist Party of Belarus, Green Party) and over 200 NGOs, youth organizations and independent labor unions. Within the coalition a permanent Coordination Council was appointed, which took up the task of working out a common program and strategy. From the beginning of 2005 seven conventions of oppositional parties’ and organizations’ representatives were held in various regions of Belarus. Representatives for the Congress of Democratic Forces, chosen during the conventions, were to select a single presidential candidate of the united opposition. At the same time four presidential candidates were selected: Syarhey Kalyakin, Anatol Lyabedzka, Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Stanislav Shushkevich.

In spite of the fears that the government would not allow for a opposition congress to be organized in the Belarusian territory, the Congress was opened on

1 October in Minsk. It became possible after Alyaksandr Lukashenka unexpectedly personally ordered to make rooms available for the meeting “so that they would not spread slander in front of foreign cameras”. Over 800 participants of the Congress, representing majority of the oppositional political parties and NGOs, were supposed to choose one candidate out of four contenders. This common candidate was not chosen until the second round of voting (in the first round Syarhey Kalyakin was eliminated, Stanislav Shushkevich withdrew his candidature). 399 votes were cast for Alyaksandr Milinkevich, while his main competitor, Anatol Lyabedzka, received 391 votes.

According to the signed agreement all the groups participating in the Congress committed to support one candidate for president. The other contenders: Lyabedzka, Kalyakin and Shushkevich became Milinkevich’s „doubles”, in case the government would not let him register his candidature. Soon afterwards they became involved in his campaign. It is worth noting that, contrary to the situation in 2001, the common oppositional candidate for the presidential election was not selected during behind-the-scenes negotiations, but in a public forum, the participants of which were chosen democratically. The Congress of Democratic Forces was the most important public event organized by the opposition since Lukashenka was elected president.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich is a new figure, not widely known in Belarusian society. It might be a disadvantage, as he still remains anonymous as a politician, but it might as well be an advantage, because almost all oppositional parties’ leaders have regularly been discredited by the government-controlled media and do not enjoy trust of the majority of Belarusians. Milinkevich’s chief asset is his activity in the non-governmental sector, as well as the fact that he does not belong to any of the political parties; citizens of Belarus are generally skeptical of political activists and parties. The opposition’s common candidate comes from Grodno, where he was an academic teacher from 1976, and then in the years 1990-1996 vice-mayor of the city, in charge of culture, science and international contacts. From 1996 to 2003 he chaired a Grodno-based non-governmental organization “Ratusha”. During the 2001 elections he was Syamyon Domash’s chief of staff.

Most observers considered the choice of Alyaksandr Milinkevich to be a right decision. The chosen candidate is the most neutral and the least controversial of all the contenders pursuing the nomination, which gives reasons for hope that the opposition will be able to avoid divisions at least until the presidential elections. And a split amongst the opposition is something Alyaksandr Lukashenka definitely counts on.

## **The common candidate of the opposition after the Congress**

The Congress of Democratic Forces was only a first step on the road to victory in the presidential election, although it fulfilled its task and selected the opposition’s single presidential candidate. It remains to be seen in the upcoming months if this event can be perceived as a success of the whole opposition. Much will depend on the fact whether the other candidates, and also their political bases and structures, will be able to curb their ambitions and to support Alyaksandr Milinkevich proactively. The very small difference between the number of votes cast for the two main

contenders might prove that there are two strong groups within the opposition, which could possibly, yet not necessarily, cause divisions in the future.

Although all the former rivals of Alyaksandr Milinkevich declare that they are going to fulfill the obligations accepted during the Congress and give him joint support, one cannot completely exclude the possibility that some part of the united opposition might refuse to keep supporting Alyaksandr Milinkevich (as it happened in the case of Uladzimir Hancharyk in 2001). Success of the common candidate's electoral campaign, as well as his ability to mitigate potential internal disputes among the opposition may turn out to be very significant. Milinkevich has experience in running a campaign: he was Syamyon Domash's chief of staff in the elections of 2001, and it is said that all the credit for gathering 150 thousands of signatures required to register the candidate goes to him.

An important challenge that the Belarusian democrats will face in the months to come will be keeping together the "10+" coalition (which was transformed into Political Council of the Democratic Forces during the Congress). This "exotic" alliance of oppositional parties and organizations, each having a different program and belonging to a different part of the political spectrum, cannot be lasting. The key question is – how long will they be able to keep the alliance? This issue will determine the selected common candidate's chances to remain the only one until the election in 2006, as well as it will determine the efficiency of his electoral campaign.

The support of the international community is also of importance. It reacted positively to the choice of united opposition's single candidate and should give him its support, thus strengthening the unity of the oppositional forces. The two first international meetings of Alyaksandr Milinkevich with the Czech foreign minister Cyril Svoboda and the president of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus are a good sign. The course of events in Belarus is also often a subject of interest of the whole EU, which must be considered a significant progress compared to the situation before the 2001 election, when the Brussels did not attach much importance the situation in Belarus.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich does not, however, stand a chance to win Russia's support, although much will depend on the support he can gain among the voters. Some Belarusian political analysts claim should his popularity rise considerably within a short period of time, Russia may seriously reconsider whether not to back a new figure in its policy towards Belarus. On the other hand, Milinkevich's meeting with the Russian Duma's Commission on CIS and with the representatives of the Russian business circles may be perceived as a positive sign. Alyaksandr Lukashenka has been concerned about a potential Kremlin's support for the oppositional candidate; at the end of November he warned that his defeat "will be a serious blow to Russia, which will take her a long time to recover from. This will not even be like it was in Ukraine. It will be particularly painful."

The forming of Milinkevich's electoral staff began two weeks after the Congress; the staff will be lead by Syarhey Kalyakin. Vintsuk Vyachorka will be responsible for international contacts, and Anatol Lyabedzka will be the leader of the shadow cabinet, whose main task is to create the common candidate's economic platform. This team includes among others: former president of the national bank Stanislav Bogdankevich and director of the Institute of Privatization and Management Pavel

Daneyko. Thus all the most important leaders of the Belarusian democratic forces became involved in the campaign for Milinkevich, which is a good sign for the opposition's unity until the elections in March.

However, the ambitions of other oppositional politicians, like Alyaksandr Vaytovich, Valery Fralou and particularly Alyaksandr Kazulin, may constitute a problem. The latter, former president of the State University in Minsk and leader of the Social Democratic Party was the only important oppositional figure who refrained from participating in the Congress, deeming it only a stage in the process selecting a single candidate. Kazulin, like Syarhey Haydukevich, who has already announced his intention run for president again, presents himself as a „third power” between the government and the opposition. Nevertheless, the problem of certain politicians' particularistic ambitions will be solved automatically, if the support for the single candidate rises. Polls indicated that yet before the Congress the number of voters trusting a virtual “opposition's common candidate” amounted to 10%, and recently 18% of respondents have declared their willingness to vote for Milinkevich.

## Government before the election

In Belarus there is now even less space left for politics than in 2001. The last actions and decisions of the government show that being uncertain before the upcoming election and being afraid of a “colorful revolution” scenario government tries to prepare for it “in any case”.

The first measures taken by the government were aimed at eliminating the last independent newspapers. At the beginning of November Belpochta announced its withdrawal from delivering the subscriptions of „Narodnaya Volya” (issue of 27 thousands) and „Salidarnast” (issue of about 5 thousands) from the following year on. The reason given was an alleged failure to fulfill formal obligations by both newspapers. By hindering the spreading of even low-circulation oppositional newspapers the government is heading towards achieving a total information monopoly, thus making it difficult for the common candidate to reach the voters. State-controlled media not only did not inform about the nomination of Alyaksandr Milinkevich, but also attempted to discredit the Congress. Milinkevich has not yet become a target of the Belarusian propaganda, but one may suspect that this remains only a question of time, and no doubt there will be attempts to discredit him, as it was the case with other leaders of opposition.

Far more dangerous for the opposition may turn out an amendment of the Criminal Code, enforced hastily in the beginning of December. It resulted in introducing criminal liability for “discrediting the Republic of Belarus”, which includes “transmitting to a foreign state, or an international or foreign organization blatantly deceitful information about the political, economic, social, military or international situation of the Republic of Belarus”. Activity within unregistered social organizations was also forbidden. These changes, totalitarian in spirit, may be interpreted very broadly, and if they were to be observed rigorously by the courts, the opposition and its common candidate might consequently lose almost entirely the possibilities to act legally and to criticize the current government.

In the middle of December the Chamber of Representatives, the lower chamber of the Belarusian parliament, decided unanimously to reschedule the election

to the earliest date possible, that is 19 March 2006. Although this decision was anticipated, it must be seen as sign of the government's growing apprehension of increasing support for the opposition's common candidate. Bringing forward the election is undoubtedly going to make it more difficult for Alyaksandr Milinkevich to perform his electoral campaign as planned and to reach with his program the widest possible audience.

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Appointing one candidate for the 2006 presidential election was an undeniable success of the Belarusian opposition. However, the prerequisite of Alyaksandr Milinkevich's good electoral result, and also to a large degree of the future of the opposition, is harmony and unity of all the democratic forces. It is one of the few assets that is left for them to use. It is crucial that the 2001 scenario of a seemingly united opposition does not repeat. Although two months have passed since the Congress of Democratic Forces took place and the course of events implies that this time the opposition will be able to keep its unity, one cannot exclude that Alyaksandr Kazulin or another oppositional politician decides to run in the election, thus competing with Alyaksandr Milinkevich for the votes of a similar electorate.

Public opinion polls show that 45% of Belarusians believe Alyaksandr Lukashenka should be replaced by a new president in the next election, while about 40% of voters declare their willingness to vote for him and 15% remain undecided. This offers an opportunity for the opposition's common candidate to take over a large portion of the electorate. Alyaksandr Milinkevich, trying not to repeat Uladzimir Hancharyk's mistake, began a very intensive campaign immediately after the Congress of Democratic Forces. He focuses mainly on meetings in the rural regions, and not only in big cities. This early start of the electoral campaign was intended to break the government's information monopoly and to promote Milinkevich, who remains anonymous for a large part of the society. The decision to use NGOs in the electoral campaign is also right, but it may cause repressions against them, as more than a half of Belarusian NGOs are not officially registered.

It is a wholly different question whether the upcoming elections will be democratic, and if so, to what extent. It would be naïve to assume that the situation in this regard will be better than in 2001. There are already grounds to believe that the government might not admit independent observers to the electoral commissions or might significantly limit their access to the commissions. Milinkevich and the united opposition now face the difficult task of organizing an independent vote counting, so that potential accusations of rigging elections could be supported by hard evidence. According to the polls 17% of Belarusians claim that they are ready to go to the streets to defend their right to vote. It remains vague however, whether they will indeed do so, should the situation require this.

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