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NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN BELARUS IN 2001: THE FIRST STEP MADE, WE ARE MOVING ON

The night of September 9, 2001, sleepless for most NGO' activists in Belarus, opened a new phase in the life of Belarusian society and development of its third sector. Initial shock gave way to apathy. For a long time, a lot of those people had been concentrating their efforts on September 9. As that day went down in history, time challenged them to move on. Many asked themselves wither, with whom, and whether it was altogether worthwhile. The easiest option was to declare a defeat of the democratic movement, sprinkle one's head with ashes and do nothing. If so, then the democratic movement was not truly worth the victory it was striving for. Instead, one has to realise that first steps are always difficult, but they have been made. Time is come to scrutinise them in order not repeat one's mistakes and use the achievements accomplished.



The specific feature of the Belarusian situation is that political parties are not developed enough to fill up their niche. The state automatically perceives any activity independent from it as political opposition, and that was why NGOs did not have to think twice whether to participate in election campaigns. Non-governmental organisations are called upon to solve problems of society, and if some problems

cannot be solved without radical changes in the state, the only way to solve them is through making citizens vote.

In order to plan further activities of non-governmental organisations, it is necessary to analyse their activity in 2001. The present article is an attempt of such analysis and does not claim to encompass everything or be complete.

The election process in 2001 was made up of two non-political components — a mobilising campaign and observing the elections, and three political ones — a negative campaign, collecting signatures, and agitation. Some members of non-governmental organisations participated in some of those parts.

Let us now consider each of them in more detail.

The mobilisation campaign “Vybiray!”

The experience of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe in 1996–2000 proved that given general apathy of the voters, election results can be strongly affected by mobilising certain categories of the electorate, which usually do not vote. In Belarus, like in many European countries, the least active voters are the young and the educated. Those strata were the main target of the mobilising campaign carried out according to a decision by the 3rd Congress of the Assembly of Democratic Non-Governmental Organisations of Belarus (more than 500 member organisations) in December 2000.

The campaign was mainly aimed at fullest possible involvement of responsible votes in the campaign.

The three tasks of the campaign were:

1. To deliver objective information about the situation before the election and general situation in the country to the target groups by using various media.
2. To create an optimistic message and confidence in the possibility of changes for the better, which challenged to cope with the fear of repression, being in a minority, and disbelief in change.
3. To call to come to vote on the last day of election (instead of early voting) to minimise the opportunities for rigging the election.

The campaign was titled “Vybiray!”, which in Belarusian and Russian alike means both “Elect!” and “Choose!”.

The campaign drew on the following guiding principles:

1. Community (it had a co-ordinated emblem, logo, style, and concept).
2. Positive character.
3. Being separated from other campaigns.
4. Decentralisation, i.e. co-ordination by a staff.

The campaign was carried out in the following stages:

1. Preliminary evaluation (December-January): to assess forces and identify target groups.
2. Preparation (February-May): to develop a concept and schedule of the campaign, to draw a structure of the headquarters, to train staff.
3. Advertising (June-July): official advertising, concerts, and other actions.
4. Informational (August-Election Day September 9): distribution of booklets, special issues of newspapers, mass-scale distribution of the merchandise.
5. Post-electoral analysis.

To achieve its aims, the campaign used about 90 kinds of actions, most successful of which were the following:

- a) The Good Will movement in the Berastysye region.
- b) A series of concerts under the motto "Rock for Change."
- c) Sand plain air "Lion's Grave" in Mahyleu.
- d) Bicycle races in the Barysaw and Maladzechna districts.
- e) Happenings during Town Day (July 3).
- f) The 9.09 service by Young Hramada.
- g) Actions in market places.
- h) Family festival "When We Are Together."
- i) "The Orange Mood" by the Association of Belarusian Students.
- j) Concerts in small towns (Kasya Kamotskaya, Viktor Shaukevich, Zmitser Bartosik, Zmitser Sidarovich), organised in co-operation with local organisations.

Let us describe some of the above mentioned actions in brief:

1. The Good Will movement was a hiking journey in the Palesse area in July 2001 and took 20 days. About 50 young people walked through villages and towns staging sports and cultural events, giving away souvenirs (made centrally or by themselves) and newspapers.

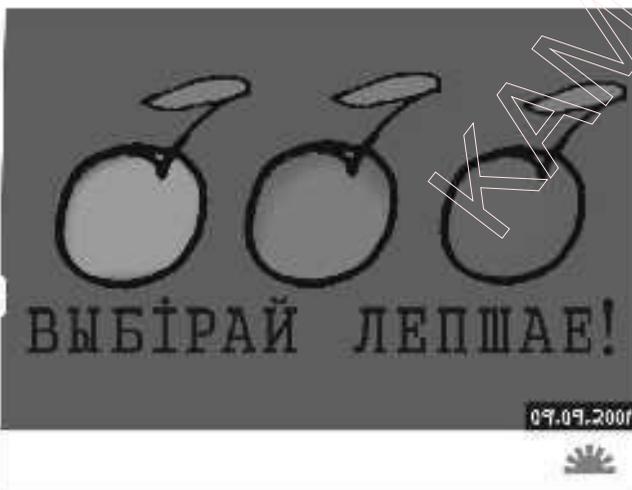
2. The Family festival "When We Are Together" was organised by the Belarusian organisation of working women. Originally planned to cover 35 towns, it was banned in many of them. The form included contests and fairs in small towns. The main characters were mommy-the-hostess (wearing a "Vybiray!" apron) and a boy called Vybirayka (wearing a T-shirt, cap, and badge with the "Vybiray!" logo). The shows advertised the election date and the need to vote in order to provide children with normal future. The prizes included ball-pens, balloons, T-shirts, etc. with the campaign insignia.

9.09.2001

НОВЫЙ ПРЕЗИДЕНТ



**ВЫБІРАЙ
БЕЛАРУСЬ**



Those actions (about 500 total) were held in more than 100 towns of the country by about 200 organisations.

The mobilisation campaign combined centralised and decentralised approaches. The authoring of the motto, drawing up the schedule, producing the large batches of printed material and other attributes, and work with the media was carried out in a centralised fashion. At the same time, local groups had the opportunity to independently chose the format, place, and time of their actions, produce their own material, and distribute functions among themselves. This made the campaign truly democratic.

The Belarusian Association of Resource Centres (BARC) as an information network was responsible for timely collection of information and its distribution. The campaign encountered some temporary problems with printed media, some of which in the beginning did not consider "Vybiray!" interesting for the reader.

Educational programmes were also important: the training centre ran programmes for local NGO activists. There were over 30 seminars for 103 civic organisations organised. The campaign's web-site devoted to teaching methods became quite important tool, too (www.vybary.net/mk).

A very important development, both for the campaign in general and for the third sector in Belarus, was the founding of youth coalition. In particular, the youth coalition "Peramenaw!"¹ was joined by the Young Front, the Association of Belarusian Students, the Association of Young Entrepreneurs, Young Hramada, the UCP Youth, the Belarusian Association of Young Politicians, Youth Solidarity, and the Youth Christian Social Union (YCSU).

Unfortunately, only one part of the "Peramenaw!" coalition joined the "Vybiray!" campaign. The other decided to pursue an independent mobilisation campaign, which of course sprayed the forces of youth organisations. Among the actions by that independent campaign worth mentioning is an action under the title "Let's Exchange the Old for the New," within which old Soviet books were being exchanged for new Belarusian ones, and old Soviet flags for Belarusian ones.

Some other organisations were also busy with independent mobilising activities, including the "Pilgrims" caravan by Next Stop — New Life jointly with a number of other organisations.

The results of the mobilisation campaign can be considered from two viewpoints. On one hand, in the short-term, the campaign as an instrument of affecting the result of the election, failed, mainly because of a weak campaign of the democratic candidate and cheating the election during the voting. However, the official reported turn-up of 83,86%, even if overrated

¹ "Peramenaw!" in Belarusian and "Peremen!" in Russian, the name means a demand of changes.

by the electoral commissions, shows that the mobilisation objective of the campaign was accomplished.

The main problems encountered by the "Vybiray!" campaign:

- a) A lack of co-ordination with the agitation campaign (often because there was none) and confusion between the campaigns.
- b) Some organisations did not even intend to work within the coalition, some only declared this intent.
- c) Some organisations used the campaign to promote themselves.
- d) Shortage of experience, especially for regional organisations.
- e) Sometimes the campaign targeted groups that would have voted anyway ("doing it for our lot").
- f) Due to shortage of time, some organisations limited their part to posting stickers and giving away information booklets.
- g) It took quite a while to persuade journalists of independent media to take part in distributing information about the mobilisation campaign, even not in a way of direct participation in it, but dissemination of its ideas and aims.

The main achievements of the campaign, useful for future work:

1. Organisations have been revealed that can be relied upon in nation-wide campaigns.
2. Various kinds of campaigning have been tried out.
3. Non-governmental organisations expanded their influence onto new groups in society.
4. A creative expert group was set up.
5. Experience in running nation-wide campaigns.
6. New volunteers were attracted to non-governmental organisations.

Observation

In 2000, non-governmental organisations for the first time tried to organise systematic observation of elections by means of a body called the Central Co-ordination Council². The election in question was that to the House of Representatives, boycotted by most democratic forces in Belarus, which did not allow non-governmental organisations to fully realise their potential of organising observation. For example, although the Assembly of Democratic Non-Governmental Organisations officially did not take part in observation in 2000, many representatives of its member organisations did it privately. The 3rd Congress of the Assembly decided that the Assembly was to participate in the observation to maximise the number of participant organisations and observers as such. The Assembly commissioned Ales Byalatski, head of its Working Group, to head the Central Co-ordination Council.

Among the Assembly's member organisations, about 200 supported participation in the observation, including the Frantsyshak Skaryna Fellowship of the Belarusian Language, the human rights centre "Vyasna" (Spring), the association "Legal Assistance to the Population," the Centre for Human Rights, and others.

The Assembly set up an observation network that created both new possibilities and new issues to tackle. One of the issues was co-ordinating the activity of two networks, which was resolved by introducing co-co-ordinators working jointly at both national and local levels. The joining of the two observation networks gave rise to the civic initiative "Independent Observation."

The main tasks of the Independent Observation initiative are:

- To create a strong, effective network of independent, non-party observation of elections throughout the country.
- Civil control of presidential elections in Belarus to ensure it is democratic, open, public, and transparent.
- To inform the Belarusian public and international community about true results of voting in the country.

More than 16,000 observers were trained for those purposes in about 320 courses. Two educational brochures were published intended for observers of two stages, described below.

The observation process was organised in two stages. The first, longer stage consisted in observing the pre-electoral proceedings: delegation to the electoral commissions and their work, collection of signatures, registration of candidates, etc. The second stage consisted in observing the very process of voting, both early (started five days in advance) and on the election day, and the counting of ballots. One of the first important facts was delegation of members of non-governmental organisations to territorial and local electoral commissions, since working within them is the most efficient way of preventing violations. Political parties and other non-governmental organisations delegated more than 600 persons to territorial commissions, however, only 1% of them was admitted. Thus, at this stage the authorities did not allow active participation in electoral commission of non-governmental organisations or representatives of non-governmental circles in general.

Collecting information from observers was tried out during the first stage.

During the voting before schedule and on the election day, the observers had two main tasks: to register violations and carry out parallel counting of votes. The former task was carried out jointly by the

² The following non-governmental organisations participated in the Central Co-ordination Council: the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Belarusian Republican Club of

Voters, the Free Trade Union Belarusian, the Lew Sapieha foundation, the "Belarusian Initiative" Centre, the Belarusian Women's Information and Co-ordination Centre, and the Movement for Democratic and Free Elections.

two networks so that two persons from either network were present at each polling station. The latter task employed a joint sub-network run by representatives of both structures.

According to those in charge of the observation, approximately 25% of participants in the observers' network could have quitted before the election due to objective or subjective reasons. They might have given in to repression, exercised by state bodies onto future observers: under that pressure, about 4,000 people refused to observe. This situation remained until the very eve of election, when the registration of officially delegated observers of the human rights organisation "Vyasna" was cancelled the day before the election. Some observers quit on their own, giving in to pressure. Thus, well according to original forecasts, about 10,000 observers were present at polling stations on election day.

The purpose of parallel counting of votes was to reveal violations during the transportation of ballots to higher commissions and the summing of figures by territorial and the central electoral commissions. To fulfil that purpose, the observers were to collect copies of counting statements signed by members of local electoral commissions, sum them independently from higher commissions and compare the results with those published by the Central Electoral Commission. Strong difference in the two versions would give grounds for questioning the election results.

The parallel counting was carried out, however, it failed to produce concrete figures, being based on data rendered useless due to the following reasons:

- Observers were not admitted to be present during the counting of ballots in such a way to really observe it.
- The electoral commissions in most stations refused to openly check the turnout with the amount of signatures in their lists of voters.
- Ballots were counted out of all the boxes together (not separately for pre-schedule voting).
- The observers were not allowed to familiarise with the records of electoral commissions.

Those infringements did not allow for parallel counting based on trustworthy data.

In general, non-governmental organisations encountered the following problems while organising observations:

- Pressure from authorities.
- Shortage of prepared, experienced observers.
- Insufficient co-ordination between the two sub-networks.

The positive achievements of the observation were that a lot of new people are ready for further work and the organisations received experience of running a large-scale observation on the national level.

The Negative Campaign

A negative campaign against present president Alaksandar Lukashenka is the most understandable

from the perspective of the campaign aim and least safe in terms of conditions under which it was to be implemented. This clearly political campaign was carried out mainly by an unregistered movement called "Zubr," initiated, among others, by representatives of the civic initiative Charter'97. Thanks to Charter'97, Zubr have enjoyed professional assistance since its founding in January 2001. Its organisers wanted copy the Yugoslav movement "Otpor" (Resistance), with adjustment to specific Belarusian conditions. Zubr built its structure within a very short time. An important asset of the movement was experience in designing promotional material, although ordinary Zubr members did not have a possibility to do it. The fact that Zubr was building its network on concrete work, that is, spreading promotional material, at the time when other youth organisations had neither plans for their campaigns, nor printed matter, enabled Zubr to quickly engage a lot of activists of other organisations. Also, they managed to involve in their activity young people, who have not participated in such movements before.

Among the outcomes of the negative campaign, it is worth mentioning its broad advertising and public awareness of it. This circumstance is very important for Belarus where few organisations are known to society. At the same time, central management resulted in a certain level of discipline, self-organisation, and responsibility.

Inside the campaign, unfortunately, it was scarcely democratic.

Although Zubr activists did their best to reuse the experience of their Yugoslav colleagues, some aspects of that experience were not properly heeded.

The negative campaign aimed to destroy the positive image of the president in office, highlight his personal negative aspects and the shortcomings of his policy.

It is disputable whether the movement Zubr belongs to non-governmental organisations. On one hand, one can argue that the core of the movement was made up of former or actual members of other youth non-governmental organisations. On the other hand, Zubr considered those organisations its main rivals in image-making. Brought about for a negative campaign, Zubr sometimes radiated negativism elsewhere, for example, into relations among non-governmental organisations. The movement almost never co-ordinated its activities with other organisations.

A major flaw was Zubr's running a negative campaign against president in office alongside with their mobilisation campaign under the motto "Time to Choose (Elect)." One of the secrets of Otpor's success was separation of a negative campaign from a positive one (the black and the white one in the Yugoslav version). Running the two campaigns under one name harmed not only Zubr's mobilisation activity, it also affected the "Vybiray!" campaign.

The structure of Zubr, based on vertical management, has more in common with military subordination than a democratic non-governmental

organisation. Material incentive, widely used by Zubr to recruit new people and motivating its activists, did probably rise their efficiency during the campaign, but washed apart foundation of the movement as a potential non-governmental organisation that would be viable in a longer run.

Evaluating the role of Zubr in the election run-up, one should remember their campaign of enquiry about the fate of missing people, touching also on the human rights in Belarus. That campaign, of rather civic character, was backed by the one the United Civic Party ran under the motto "We Want to Know the Truth."

Another challenge Zubr faced was to defend the victory of a democratic candidate should it have happened, or make sure a second round of election took place. Those tasks are only meaningful under two conditions, one being the victory in the first round or such results that call for a second round of elections, and second being the will of broad masses to take to the street. Neither condition was created.

The negative campaign as such was a precedent of a mass-scale negative campaign in Belarus, and succeeded in instilling an atmosphere of denial. Another matter is whether that atmosphere was effective in influencing voting, especially given that the electoral campaign of the single nominee of the opposition was also built on a negative message, if any.

Collection of Signatures

The presidential election in 2001 did not offer a choice between democratic candidates, it was rather an attempt to return Belarus to a democratic path of development. Under those conditions, participation in collecting signatures for one of the democratic runners was a civic action, not just politics.

Activists of non-governmental organisations took part in those processes, above all, as individual citizens. Most of them collected signatures for Syamyon Domash, yielding about 163,000, a second highest result after president in office. The collateral indicators — few signatures turned down and a large share of signatures collected on the periphery — witness for organisational abilities of NGOs. The civic and political movement "Regional Belarus" played an important part in that process.

Syamyon Domash withdrew in favour of Uladzimir Hancharyk (singled out as the joint hopeful of a coalition of democratic forces), despite the large number of signatures collected for him and Hancharyk's disputable chances. This can also be explained by the fact that many of those who had collected signatures for Domash had their background in the third sector and therefore a developed sense of civic duty.

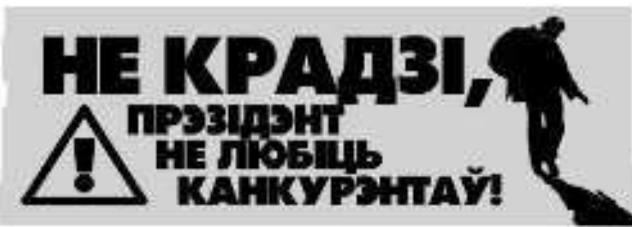
The Agitation Campaign

The agitation campaign for the single opposition hopeful failed by most assessments, and did so thanks to not using the staff and organisational resources of NGO activists, who collected signatures for any democratic candidate. Hancharyk's campaign was build on the negative, because it was be-



lieved that he was put forth too late for unrolling a positive campaign and making a positive image for the coalition nominee. His negative campaign on top of those negative campaigns against Lukashenka, the one run by Zubr in the first place, created a situation in which the voters sought to isolate themselves from those negative feelings, the people who were instilling it, and the person in the focus of the campaign. Without a positive perspective or an attractive way out of the negative situation, the electorate did not see the opposition candidate as a real alternative.

The agitation campaign for the single opposition hopeful produced leaflets, posters, and other material too late. Therefore the headquarters had to make do with material of the mobilisation campaign while motivating their volunteers' structures, which harmed mobilisation. Late distribution of agitation material (a week or a few days before election day), a lack of a positive message, not using resources of non-governmental organisations — these factors made other elements (mobilisation, observation, and the negative campaign) come short not only because of their own flaws, but due to mistakes of the agitation campaign.



Conclusion

The 2001 president election took place in the atmosphere of repression of participants in political and non-political campaigns alike. Numerous arrests of Zubr activists, seizure of NGOs' property³ and material of mobilisation campaigns were actions within one policy. The main instrument of fighting the presidential rivals was Decree No. 8, which made it very difficult or impossible to receive foreign aide. Some non-governmental organisations put up a coalition to counter the decree (including Next Stop — New Life, BelAPDICH, the Belarusian Organisation of Working Women, and the Independent Society for Law Studies). The coalition initiated public dialogue about Decree No. 8.

The results of the 2001 election disappointed many people in Belarus and abroad. They were disappointed with specific personalities, organisations, working methods, approaches, ways of putting up coalitions, etc. Everybody has the right to disap-

pointment. Non-governmental organisations do have the right to two kinds of disappointment: that in society, because all our efforts are for its benefit, and that in the work we have done, because it was not in vain.

Over the past five years, Belarusian non-governmental organisations have evolved from separate and small organisations into all-national networks, so that now they can influence civil processes.

For the third sector, 1996–2001 became a period when organisations had the opportunity to develop and educate themselves, build structures, train their members into professionals, try out new people and ways of functioning. No doubt, this activity must continue. However, one of the problems revealed by the last electoral campaigns is insufficient contact between non-governmental organisations and society, insufficient knowledge and trust in NGOs and their leaders. At the same time, electioneering distracted NGOs from concrete problems in society. Some of the organisations have come to interpreting politicisation as a sign of unity, which results in a wrong perception of their role by political parties. Non-political NGOs have to avoid the danger of assuming the biological rhythm of political parties — from election to election, no matter how important they are, because the goal of those organisations is to build civil society. NGOs have to de-politicise.

The main positive outcome of the election for non-governmental organisations is a unique experience and new people. The next challenge is to win confidence of society. For this, non-governmental organisations have only one possibility: to work for the benefit of society and show it this benefit. This has to become the top priority for NGOs for the next several years: exactly those kinds of activity that are both positive and clearly beneficial for society. NGO leaders have to gain a reputation of those who really care about people's problems.

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Syarhey Mackevich, born 1964. In 1986 graduated from physics faculty of the State Belarusian University. From 1996 financial director of the "Supolnast" Centre, since 1998 executive director of "Supolnast". President of the board of the Assembly of Belarusian Non-Governmental Organisations.

³ This happened to the Lew Sapeha Foundation in Vitsebsk and Mahilew, Hart and Civic Initiatives in Homel.

