

A FEW IMPRESSIONS FROM BELARUS AFTER THE ELECTIONS (2006)

Even though I had visited this strange country only three years ago, and even though I thought I knew it quite well, to the extent that nothing could really surprise me here, upon my recent return I got chills, and shivers down my spine and even experienced real feelings of depression and resignation...

Before these impressions can slip my mind, I have decided to put some of them to paper. I do so with the benefit of a few weeks' distance, but hopefully this is not long enough to have forgotten the hardest of them.

Living standard

Though I would tend to say "unfortunately," I now definitely saw Belarus richer than it was three years ago. Cleaner streets, cities with new parks (though with lamps made out of concrete and no functioning bulbs), houses renovated, people richer, shops supplied with all sorts of goods, modern cars... I say "unfortunately" because this rising living standard makes people even more indifferent to what is below the surface of the society. It lowers the chances for any fundamental change and in its way it keeps the corrupt regime strong. But especially in Belarus this is understandable – this country has never experienced such a high living standard in its history. Even (in the rest of the former Soviet Union) such an unreachable luxury as pensions paid in time is a reality here. Maslow's theory of values simply works.

Propaganda

What (again) took hold of me most strongly was the television, and the propaganda in general. Three days before the main election day the TVs were transmitting over and over again a press conference run by the KGB chief, Minister of Interior and I think also of Defense, wherein they announced that they had thwarted a terrorist attack on major Belarussian cities. This show had a dramatic plot – the terrorists (the confession of one of which was transmitted on the screen in the press center) planned the poisoning of the irrigation system of Minsk (by a dead mouse left for a fortnight in a barrel full of water, believe it or not), several explosions, fires and other acts of diversion. All this was planned for Sunday when the opposition rally was announced. Potential commotions would therefore not be considered as offences, but from then on as terrorist actions, which are rewarded by life imprisonment or even the death penalty. A bowed-down terrorist, who reminded me of American soldiers captured in Iraq, confessed from the screen that he was trained in a terrorist camp in Georgia. Sometimes it is Georgia, sometimes Ukraine...

In the same news programme one could see long coverage of Lukashenka sitting on golden bricks in the central bank, which had succeeded in doubling the amount of its golden reserves.

Two days before the elections President Lukashenka had a message for the nation. I expected a Castro-styled speech, but when I arrived four minutes late to my TV receiver, the message was about to finish. However, the news was to follow and that compensated me enough. I bring you few theses (without exaggeration, really):

- "Today Belarus finally entered the economic map of the world". The workers of the Belaz company developed the biggest car in the world, which was a truck with load capacity of I think 320 tons. On this occasion (and as part of the evening news programme) Lukashenka gave a 40 minute interview to local journalists
- one question related to the planned terrorists attacks disclosed the previous day. The President explained - with incredible face-play (and a voice which The Economist describes as "squeaky" and which some may find "funny") – that he knows who is behind the attacks, whom they have been meeting, how often and where, but that after yesterday's disclosure many of them dented. And those, who did not and had planned something for Sunday, shall expect that he will 'wring their necks like small ducks' („otkrutim golovu kak utyonkam“)
- he also commented on the opposition: "let them shout, we are a democratic country, but I must tell you they are dullards. Would you choose a denim as your symbolic colour? (denim is a pejorative labeling of gays) Be it orange or yellow, but blue? Maybe that is why they are only supported by all these faggots, in any case that says something about their debility..."

Needless to say that all this was accompanied by sophisticated propaganda between the lines. There was another press conference at which the Chairman of the Central Electoral Commission waved a paper

on which allegedly forged election results were printed (the opposition candidate Milinkievich was supposed to get 51% of votes), there was a reportage in which a representative of war veterans incredibly slyly blemished the reputation of the same Milinkievich, there was information that OSCE already has „its own“ evaluation before the election even took place, there were interviews with election observers from Russia, China and Iran who had just arrived to the country, etc. The rest of the news was devoted mainly to social unrest in France, hurricanes in Australia and to American victims in Iraq.

The day before the E-day a long-awaited three- or four-hour concert “For Belarus” was transmitted. The (sometimes very bizarre) stars of show business who participated concluded each of their performances by exclaiming “For Belarus!” Unfortunately, I cannot comment on the whole concert as I spent most of that evening in front of the Brest police station “Leninskaya”...

Just few words about the “For Belarus” campaign – it was Lukashenka’s pre-election campaign (campaigns practically did not exist, being limited to one two-hour censored appearance of each presidential candidate on TV; the billboards, posters etc. were not seen anywhere). On the other hand the “For Belarus” campaign was everywhere. Except for the TV show it was represented by about 15 variations of seemingly neutral billboards, such as “For secure Belarus” (policeman standing with three citizens), “For working Belarus” (workers in overalls), “For self-sufficient Belarus” (grandma with barley or rye), then a saluting tank trooper, war veteran with students in school, engineer in front of his computer, etc. etc. wherever you looked.

Elections

From the point of view of an observer the election procedures were in good order – the ballot boxes sealed, selection from four candidates, secret voting behind the booths, no machinations with voting lists, etc. So where was (also from the point of view of observers) the problem? Well, a few points:

- the so-called “early election”, a genius Lukashenka invention. So that „the people were able to use their constitutional voting right as much as possible”, the people could vote already about four days before the official election day (the ballot boxes stayed in voting stations during the nights, guarded by police with the key). As many as over 30% of all voters took advantage of this possibility.
- The election commissions were composed of verified personnel (their composition would be enough for a separate chapter, like the above-mentioned concert)
- Except for about 400 OSCE representatives there were no independent observers present in the country
- The observers were not given the chance to observe the counting from a close enough distance (in my case it was ca. 15 meters), and the counting took place in absolute silence.
- The observers were not allowed to be present at the stations where the actual counting of results took place

The period shortly before the elections was accompanied by big acts of repression focused on the opposition candidates’ collaborators. According to the law, each of the candidates had 30 so called “proxies” who enjoyed certain immunity (they could observe the elections; based on their status they became part of the election process and therefore also subject to the OSCE monitoring mission, which had the right to meet them anytime, etc.). By the pre-election day almost all of them were jailed. I witnessed one of these detentions with my own eyes. Still, it was necessary to spend two hours at the police station and to repeatedly call the deputy chief of the Brest police only to learn that the proxy really was present at the police station, detained for an alleged fight (with three colleagues of his), and that his court hearing would be on Monday (one day after the elections and planned opposition rally). The story of another proxy, which I heard from another eye witness, is of his being arrested for having his lights off while in the car. A police commando pulled him out of the car a second after he started the engine and just before turning on the lights. Jailed until Monday. Even though my colleague OSCE observers made it to just a few meters from his cell, meeting with the detainee was eventually not allowed because of the quarantine (bird flu).

Otherwise the elections were a great feast: live music was performed in front of polling stations (either children of all school grades – of course concluding their performances by exclaiming „For Belarus“ – or

karaoke), cheap food and drinks were being sold, volleyball tournaments took place, and the overall environment was festive, indeed.

Results

I personally observed the elections in the villages surrounding a town called Malarita, south of Brest. Agricultural villages populated mostly by old people not familiar with voting. I remember a lively old man who came to the table, signed the voting list, contentedly nodded and was about to leave being convinced that he had just voted... I could give more examples, nevertheless I am convinced that real support for Lukashenka here was far above 80 percent. His popularity based on several objective opinion polls throughout the country is about 60 percent anyway. Why falsify the elections, then? Simply because 60 percent is too little...

Demonstration

I also witnessed part of this sad event, although only two days after the elections took place, when about 5000 people met in Minsk and as the freezing night drew closer about 1000 stayed. I dare not say how many of them were intelligence agents but I observed maybe 15 video cameras with sensitive microphones during the whole day. The only positive impression I left with were the cars passing by the square whose drivers showed Victory signs from the windows. This anonymous support was impressive but definitely no denim revolution is on the horizon... Well, and that feeling of depression and resignation I did not experience here, but already when watching the news about the biggest car in the world.

For those of you who have gone through all this in the past, it isn't anything new on Earth. But I just had to write it down, because there are some things people (very gladly) tend to forget.

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