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Viktar Karniajenka

# Analysis of the 2006 Political Campaign

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## 1. The internal political situation in the country in the run up to the election

### Government

While preparing for his re-election for a third successive term, Łukašenka made a considerable effort to consolidate his executive “vertical” and to test civil servants (especially members of the law enforcement and security agencies) for loyalty. He raised the salaries of officials, assessed their loyalty or disloyalty in public statements, and ordered multiple inspections of government institutions.

The 2004 election and referendum had been a loyalty test for the Łukašenka “vertical”. Following the election, some civil servants and several executive government officials were replaced with more reliable persons after they failed to meet requirements (failure to deny registration to some aspirants or help government-backed candidates win the election, failure to ensure a government-set

early voting turnout limit or forge protocols on election results).

Hundreds of non-governmental organisations were closed down under various pretexts in the period between the 2001 and 2006 presidential elections. Among the targeted NGOs were nearly all human rights groups, resource centres and organisations dealing with sensitive social issues. The crackdown on the civic sector included an unprecedented move to tighten legislation governing the NGOs. For instance, the government introduced a law that makes it a crime to be a member of an unregistered organisation.

To replace independent NGOs the authorities formed surrogate organisations to create an outward impression of a developed civic society in the country. The government invented and introduced the term “state non-governmental associations.” The most notable example was the establishment of the national youth organisation called the Belarusian National Youth Union. Such organisations are funded by the govern-

ment and, in reality, are part of the state apparatus. Later it became clear that the organisations were set up to rally public support for Łukašenka and to aggressively criticise the opponents of his re-election bid.

The authorities also targeted independent media outlets. As part of the preparations for the election campaign, the authorities shifted focus from efforts to hamper the operation of non-state media (unfounded accreditation denials, administrative pressure on advertisers, lawsuits, measures to give the state media an economic advantage over their non-state competitors) to attempts to block their operation completely. The clearest manifestation of this shift was the refusal by state-controlled distribution monopolies to continue to distribute nearly all major non-state periodicals.

During these four to five years, the authorities launched four new state television channels, including a satellite channel available in dozens of countries, and built up radio broadcasting capabilities. The government tasked local authorities with increasing the circulation of pro-presidential newspapers through making subscription obligatory for local residents.

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A huge ideology and propaganda staff was involved in an effort to brainwash workers and employees at enterprises, establishments and organisations. An ideology course was introduced in all government-controlled education establishments (the few remaining independent schools had been shut down, or forced to go underground or in exile). State ideology textbooks were introduced which play down the pre-Soviet history of Belarus and highlight the current achievements and the role of Alaksandr Łukašenka.

The government's strategy before the 2004-2006 elections included many other measures such as the signing of new "crucial" "Union State" agreements with Russia, ambitious economic and space projects. No funds were spared for the purpose. This is evidence of concern and anxiety of Łukašenka and his entourage about the election outcome. Independent polls suggested, and Łukašenka image-makers realised, that a campaign based on traditional demagoguery could fail.

### Opposition

Regretfully, the 2004 election campaign did not result in the establishment of a consolidated pro-democracy coalition.

Even politicians within the most influential coalition Five Plus (formed of the BPF, BPC, UCP, BSDH, BPL and several large NGOs) could not agree on a common list of candidates. Minor differences prevented member organisations from a greater level of consolidation.

Apart from Five Plus candidates, running for parliamentary seats were members of the European Coalition led by Mikalaj Statkievič (which joined the united coalition of pro-democracy forces only after the 2004 election); the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada," which later elected Alaksandr Kazulin as its chairman; several politicians who sought national leadership; and independent candidates. All of the mentioned contenders positioned themselves as opponents of the government. This disorientated the electorate and damaged the image of the opposition, especially among the undecided voters.

Opposition forces failed to unite even after Łukašenka announced a referendum to coincide with the parliamentary elections that would enable him to run for a third presidential term. Moreover, some opposition contenders ignored the authorities' preparations for the referendum.

dum, failing to raise the issue with voters in their public speeches, most likely in an effort to concentrate on their parliamentary campaign.

Candidates' meetings with voters proved the need for the personification of an alternative to the incumbent president. One of the questions voters asked almost at every meeting was "If not him [Łukašenka], then who else?" The opposition faced a challenge to answer that question as soon as possible. Despite differences over a common list of parliamentary candidates, good personal relations among the leaders of major opposition political parties and NGOs, their responsible approach and experience, gave hope for an agreement on a common leader.

## 2. Opponents elect leader of united pro-democracy forces

### Preparations

The two major opposition groupings, Five Plus and the European Coalition, united shortly after the 2004 presidential election. They set up the Political Council, a joint body formed of the leaders of the ten member organisations, each represented by one person.

The coalition declared that its long-term objective was to defeat the dictatorship and put Belarus on a civilised path, while the short-term goal was to elect a common challenger to Łukašenka.

The coalition leaders considered two options:

- electing a common candidate in a vote involving members of the Political Council;
- electing a common pro-democracy candidate at a general congress whose delegates are to be selected by representatives of the public.

Both options had more positive and more negative aspects. The election of a candidate by the coalition leaders would take less time and resources. But it would inevitably raise doubts about the legitimacy of the leader elected this



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At the end of 2005, the Congress of Democratic Forces elected Alaksandr Milinkievič (center) a common candidate in the presidential election.

way. Regional leaders, NGOs and other entities that would not be involved in the selection process could reject the choice for various reasons, while other opposition politicians with presidential ambitions could still receive considerable support. Therefore, this option would not help limit the number of opposition contenders.

After a brief discussion, the coalition leaders agreed to hold a Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces so that rank and file activists would have an opportunity to take part in the selection process along with prominent politicians, former MPs and established NGO leaders. As part of this process, about 100 conferences were held in districts across the country with 25 to 100 voters in attendance to nominate delegates to the congress.

Under the rules of procedure approved by the Political Council, aspirants for the role of a common presidential candidate could be proposed by the political parties affiliated with the coalition and at regional conferences of pro-democracy activists. Four aspirants were nominated:

- Siarhiey Kalakin, leader of the Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC), was put forward by the BPC and participants in conferences held in the Brest, Viciebsk and Minsk regions and the city of Minsk;
- Anatol Labiedzka, chairman of the United Civic Party (UCP), was nominated by the UCP and participants in conferences held in Brest and Minsk regions and the city of Minsk;
- Alaksandr Milinkievič, an NGO leader, was named by the Belarusian Green Party, and received endorsements of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), the Belarusian Women's Party "Nadzieja," the non-registered Party of Freedom and Progress, the non-registered Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Narodnaya Hramada," and participants in the conferences held in Brest, Viciebsk, Hrodna, Homiel and Mahilou regions and the city of Minsk;

- Stanislau Šuškevič, chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada (BSDH), was put forward by the BSDH and participants in conferences held in Hrodna and Minsk regions and the city of Minsk.

The aspirants signed a political agreement in which they pledged to restrain their presidential ambitions and back a common candidate that was to be elected at the Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces.

Other politicians, including Valery Fraŭou, Alaksandr Vajtovič, Uladzimir Kołas and Alaksandr Jarašuk, also announced their presidential bids. They were offered to compete for the role of a common candidate on the basis of the coalition-established rules. They attempted to have their names included on regional conference ballots, but refused to sign the political agreement. For that reason, their names were not entered on ballot papers, as a rule. Later, after the election date was announced, some of these politicians unsuccessfully attempted to collect ballot-access signatures in order to register for the presidential race.

The Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada" (BSDP) sent delegates to the congress but refused to recognise

its results. It named Alaksandr Kazulin as its presidential candidate instead.

The main contenders for the coalition leadership did not have big differences over election procedures. They argued about a date of the congress and a deadline for selecting a common candidate. Alaksandr Milinkievič and his supporters insisted on selecting a coalition leader as soon as possible. They wanted the congress to be held in May 2005, and later accepted July as the deadline. Meanwhile, Anatol Labiedzka and his supporters said there was no rush suggesting that the event could be held as late as February 2006. Further developments proved absurdity of the idea.

The urgency to hold the congress was explained by several circumstances. Firstly, the election of a common candidate was not a broad public process, but an internal matter of the opposition. The congress was to be followed by a national social campaign to mobilise as many people as possible for the forthcoming election. That would enable the coalition to form a single team before the start of the campaign and see it in action. Secondly, after selecting a common candidate the opposition coalition would be able to concentrate efforts on finding resources for the forthcoming campaign. Thirdly, the authorities could announce an early election. In the end, Łukašenka did decide to set the election date for March instead of July 2006, which threw in disarray the opposition's election campaign preparation plans. Unjustified delays in holding the congress proved to be the coalition's strategic mistake that could not be corrected.

### Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces

The Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces was held in Minsk on October 1 and 2, 2005. Some 800 delegates approved a political platform and several other papers related to the forthcoming presidential election. The main agenda item was the election of pro-democracy forces' common challenger to Alaksandr Łukašenka. Alaksandr Milinkievič, an aspirant without party



Julija Daraškevič

**Siarhiey Kalakin, communist leader.**





Julija Daraškiewicz

### Alaksandr Milinkievič

affiliation, gained more votes than his two rivals (Stanislau Šuškevič withdrew his candidacy). Milinkievič's rivals congratulated him on the victory and publicly pledged to work for success of his campaign. The congress was covered by Belarusian independent and foreign media, raising an interest in opposition activity in Belarus that had not been generated for many years.

The excellent organisation of the congress and its unifying purpose inspired optimism in the overwhelming majority of the opposition supporters. Opposition parties and groups proved capable of unifying and abandoning some of their own vested interests for the common cause. Milinkievič was the first leader elected on the basis of a transparent and democratic procedure where all politicians who considered a possible presidential bid had an opportunity to compete for the role.

The leaders of all political parties involved in the process had adopted common rules and pledged to recognize the results of the congress in order to keep unity in their ranks. In addition, the mutually accepted procedures helped to limit the number of opposition presidential candidates. This was one of the main results of the congress.

Regretfully, not all prominent opposition figures subscribed to the coalition's rules. Valery Fraŭou, Alaksandr Vajtovič, Uładzimir Kołas and Alaksandr Jarašuk (who also unsuccessfully sought presidential nomination in the 2001 election) attempted to get involved in the selection process and compete for nomination. They proposed themselves at regional conferences and had a chance to have their nomination bid endorsed by local activists, but they refused to sign the political agreement that would commit them to comply with the congress decisions.

Uładzimir Kołas finally accepted the congress results, promising to work for the coalition. Valery Fraŭou and Alaksandr Vajtovič subsequently made unsuccessful attempts to register as presidential candidates.

The main achievements of the congress were:

- the election of the common presidential candidate whose legitimacy was guaranteed by transparent democratic procedures;
- the consent of leading opposition figures with presidential ambitions to work toward success of the common presidential candidate;

- the congress received much coverage in Belarusian independent and foreign media;
- preparations for the congress were a test for the opposition's local branches in the run-up to the presidential election;
- the congress inspired confidence in the opposition coalition and optimism in potential opposition supporters.

On the other hand, the congress had some shortcomings. Preparations of the congress required considerable human and financial resources. The wider public was not involved in the selection process; it was an internal matter of the opposition. The Political Council failed to persuade all possible presidential bidders to take part in the congress and back the common candidate; some politicians did not recognise its results.

Some members of the political parties, whose leaders were defeated at the congress, were reluctant to work in the common candidate's team. For instance, the UCP branch in the Hrodna region refused to join in. There were frictions among representatives of various political groups in the Mahilou region. There were small tensions in other areas as well, mainly attributable to loose party discipline. But the problems were insignificant compared to the achievements of the congress.

## 3. 2006 election

### Preparations

Immediately after the congress Alaksandr Milinkievič held talks with his former rivals Anatol Labiedžka and Siarhieĭ Kalakin. By mutual consent, Labiedžka was named chairman of the National Committee and Kalakin was appointed as the manager of Milinkievič's presidential campaign. The appointments were based on recommendations of most coalition partners and the politicians' qualities.

The National Committee, which was yet to be formed, was tasked with

drafting the programme documents for the pro-democracy coalition and developing a strategy for Belarus without Łukašenka at the helm.

The campaign headquarters being formed at the time was to work toward the following targets:

Before the president calls the election:

- at least 60 percent of the voters should be able to recognise Milinkievič;
- 20 to 25 percent of the voters should support Milinkievič;
- at least 10,000 activists should join Milinkievič's campaign team;
- 800,000 petitions of voters to the candidate are to be collected through regional chapters of political parties and NGOs.

After the official start of the election process the coalition planned to:

- propose members of the pro-democracy coalition to every election commission (at least 7,000 people);
- collect at least 1 million ballot-access signatures for Milinkievič;
- send pro-democracy coalition observers to every commission (at least 7,000 people);
- ensure that Milinkievič gains more than 50 percent of the vote on the election day.

The coalition based all of its plans and objectives on the expectation that the president will set the election for July in line with the law. The coalition adopted an action plan, estimated the campaign budget and identified conditions necessary for achieving the targets.

The headquarters began with making arrangements for Milinkievič's tours of the large cities and his meetings with voters. The objective was to introduce Milinkievič, his team and election platform to the public and enlist new volunteers. Milinkievič's campaign tours, which continued almost until the Election Day, were a big success. His first meetings attracted a few dozen voters, whereas later he gathered much bigger crowds, for instance about 6,000 turned out for his campaign rally in Homiel.



Julija Daraškiewicz

**Alaksandr Kazulin tried to become the third force, but he was imprisoned soon after the election.**

The authorities used various methods to disrupt his rallies such as the intimidation of voters, arrests of local activists, pressure on the press covering the rallies and power cuts in premises where rallies were taking place. However, these methods were ineffective because Milinkievič's team maintained the initiative and conducted a generally successful campaign.

At the same time, the National Committee, formed as a matter of form only and not properly staffed, was little involved in the presidential campaign. Its involvement was limited to a few roundtable meetings.

### Election campaign

In December, Łukašenka called an early election. Clearly one of the main reasons for this move was the rising support for Milinkievič and his success in rallying the pro-democracy forces. This disrupted the strategic action plan of the opposition which was based on the expectation that the election would be held in June or July 2006. The authorities seized the initiative, while the opposition coalition had to adapt to the new condi-

tions and revise its plan. The new plan set out the following objectives:

- recognising that an election victory remains an ultimate goal, it is necessary to rally support of at least 30 percent of the voters;
- to prevent Łukašenka from gaining more than 50 percent in the first round and from rigging the vote;
- relying on support of the masses to defend the real results of the election.

The Łukašenka regime used strong-arm methods from the beginning to the end of the election campaign. Even those pro-democracy activists who strictly followed the electoral law came under strong pressure. They were threatened dismissal from work or expulsion from universities; police visited private apartments to warn activists against involvement in anti-government activity. Police illegally dispersed and detained activists who collected ballot-access signatures for the opposition candidates. Thus bullied and physically assaulted some activists. Police ignored the election law, seizing leaflets and other campaign materials legally printed for money provided by the central election commission. Even the intervention of the central election commission did not help stop harassment of Milinkievič campaign activists. Dozens of local opposition leaders were arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges in the run-up to the election.

The campaign results should be assessed taking into account the repressive conditions in which it was conducted. The opposition coalition collected about 200,000 voter signatures in support of Milinkievič's presidential bid, distributed 4 million copies of print materials and special issues of independent newspapers and staged several big campaign rallies. The most significant events included large campaign rallies held in central Minsk on March 2 and in Homiel on March 15, as well as a rock show staged in a park in the suburbs of Minsk by the Assembly of Pro-Democracy NGOs on the eve of the election in the framework of the "For Freedom" campaign.

While planning their efforts, members of Milinkievič's team clearly realised that it was impossible to defeat the authoritarian regime by means of the election only. The coalition planned to stage mass protests against the authorities' blatantly aggressive attacks on the opposition and election fraud. The Milinkievič election headquarters conducted a separate campaign to inform the public of the planned protests. Milinkievič always concluded his television and radio addresses to voters with an appeal to his supporters to gather at Kastychnickaja Square at 8p.m. on March 19.

The campaign of the pro-democracy coalition and Milinkievič's election headquarters had many shortcomings:

- Failure to foresee the possibility of an early election. This strategic mistake threw the coalition's plans in disarray and gave a significant advantage to the authorities;
- Not all representatives of the pro-democracy forces accepted the choice of Milinkievič as the coalition's common presidential candidate. Some party chapters stayed away from the campaign;
- Some appointments to key positions in the campaign team were influenced by the interests of organisations affiliated with the coalition, rather than being based on professionalism;
- The coalition failed to create an attractive picture of Belarus without Łukašenka. Its declared programme objectives did not contrast sharply with what was proposed by Łukašenka;
- The coalition failed to produce conclusive evidence of election fraud such as results of opinion polls or parallel vote tabulation. Without hard facts many representatives of the public questioned its demand for a repeat election;
- The opposition's strategic plan of mass protests did not envisage various possible scenarios.

There were additional small shortcomings, but on the whole the Political

Council was satisfied with the campaign. Nearly 100 percent of voters knew Milinkievič. Support for Milinkievič rose to a relatively high level and the common opposition candidate acquired a good reputation abroad. Without these specific achievements it would be pointless to expect large numbers of voters to join opposition protests.

Several initiatives were launched in addition to Milinkievič's election campaign to encourage voters to support the opposition candidate and join protests against election fraud. The most notable campaigns were "For Freedom," "Chopić!" "Jeans Solidarity," and "16." These efforts did not have a significant effect on the election outcome, but some of the activists involved played leading roles in protests held in the wake of the election. Other declared campaigns went unnoticed.

#### Post-election

Milinkievič's team realised that it was impossible to change the situation in the country through the elections itself. During the decade prior to the election, the regime had created a perfect vote rigging mechanism. On the other hand, it was obvious that mass protests would

be impossible without the majority of voters supporting democratic changes in the country. Milinkievič's election headquarters took these circumstances into consideration.

Within the opposition there were many members who hoped to create an illusion of victory without hard work. They suggested that a victory could be won by creating "a presence effect" (by encouraging supporters to wear the same colours and badges), staging campaigns of resistance and blindly copying Ukrainian, Georgian, Kyrgyz and Serbian experience. The politicians who had such illusions ignored the big differences between the political, social and economic situation in Belarus and countries where "colour revolutions" swept away the ruling regimes.

It should be noted that some members of Milinkievič's team thought that the campaign headquarters should not be involved in staging mass protest, in particular as people in charge of separate mobilisation campaigns pledged to do the job. Nevertheless, a majority of the team members were involved in staging demonstrations and sought to coordinate various groups working toward the same goal. Members of Milinkievič's



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**Presidential election is always a major political event in Belarus.**



campaign staff believed that success was possible on the following conditions:

1. The ideas of the opposition coalition were shared by most voters. Firstly, a minority group cannot overcome a strong dictatorial regime. Secondly, the Milinkievič's team in principle did not plan to resort to violence to overthrow the regime. It sought an election conducted in line with OSCE standards. This is why it relied on peaceful demonstrations.
2. It was necessary to avoid clashes with the police and the use of force during mass protests in the run-up and after the election. That would help people overcome fear instilled by the authorities and encourage more voters to join protests. The authorities attempted to provoke opposition supporters into violent actions to justify the use of force against demonstrators. The opposition did not give them a chance to do it.
3. There must be adequate information and technical support for protests. Voters should be promptly and accurately informed of developments and conditions should be created at protest sites to ensure a permanent rise in the number of protesters. The tent camp site was selected taking into account this condition.
4. Protests must have a clear purpose. The purpose of the post-election protests was to force the authorities to hold a repeat election. It was necessary to provide conclusive evidence of election fraud to persuade voters.
5. All opposition groups must be guided by the same scenario. For that purpose, members of Milinkievič's team held talks with Kazulin's camp and representatives of various civic groups. The team's plan was adjusted in line with agreements reached with other groups on the place and time of the demonstration.

It was clear at the time that it would be possible to shake the foundation of the dictatorship and force the authorities to call a repeat election only if pro-

tests intensified and spilled over to other cities. The opposition's expectations also appeared to be based on intuition, rather than on accurate calculations or scientific facts. The opposition knew little about the public's mood before the Election Day.

For obvious reasons, the authorities were afraid of possible protests. Thousands of police and security forces were deployed to the capital and an unprecedented propaganda campaign was launched to discourage voters from taking part in protests. The prosecutor general, the interior minister and the KGB chairman appeared on television on the eve of the election, threatening those who would dare to protest with the death penalty.

The demonstration began at 8 p.m. on March 19. It attracted up to 15,000 people according to various estimates. The crowd was big considering the authorities' effort to intimidate voters. But the crowd was not big enough to keep up pressure on the authorities. After a rally that featured all major opposition politicians, opposition leaders urged the protesters to disperse and return the fol-

lowing evening. The opposition politicians hoped that the number of protesters would increase dramatically after a peaceful rally. Efforts were made to inform voters about the forthcoming protest.

The opposition leaders were disappointed to see fewer protesters coming to the square on the following day. However, this time opposition supporters did not disperse after the rally and civic activists pitched up tents intending to keep a night vigil. Milinkievič's team brought a sound system for amplifying speeches and patriotic music, but it was unable to create minimal conditions for protesters staying overnight. Opposition activists and city residents delivered food to the protesters.

Police used force to tear down the tent camp in the early hours of March 23. Hundreds of protesters were arrested, beaten and thrown in jail. Demonstrations and rallies were held on March 25, April 26 and May 1. After the March 25 rally, Alaksandr Kazulin led hundreds of protesters headed for a city jail, where the demonstrators arrested in the tent camp were held. Police used bru-



It was a hard election for Alaksandr Lukašenka.



Andrej Lankievič

#### Opposition meeting, 19 of March, 2006.

tal force to disperse the crowd and arrested the former presidential candidate. Kazulin has been in jail ever since.

The protests by selfless people from across the country, mostly youths, caused far-reaching repercussions and received much coverage, especially in the foreign media. Belarus' state-controlled media launched a massive mud-slinging campaign against the demonstrators using lies and set-ups. They partially succeeded as protests began to run out of steam.

The protests attained their objective. The opposition did not win, but it showed a strong will to resist to injustice and election fraud. Łukašenka had to take unprecedented tough measures to quell protests, which exposed the real nature of his regime. The opposition coalition emerged from the tussle more consolidated. After the end of the pro-

tests, it appeared that the authorities did not know what to do for quite a while, and Łukašenka disappeared from television screens. His first public appearance proved that he had taken a break due to stress.

#### Opposition following the election

In the period immediately after the election, the Belarusian opposition remained more or less united in comparison to the same period following the 2001 presidential election. It appeared Alaksandr Milinkievič had emerged as a leader whose legitimacy was established through an election on the basis of democratic procedures. His election campaign and protests in the wake of the election testified to the ability of people and organisations involved to work efficiently. As a result, many voters had overcome fear and are full of positive energy.

Despite the defeat, members of the opposition did not feel depressed or confused. The election campaign had helped involve new people in politics and form an expanded civic society network capable of conducting nationwide political, information, social and other campaigns that reach various areas of the country.

However the benefits that came from the election were at risk of being lost because of risks and threats coming from within the opposition.

Firstly, some partners in the coalition became more self-centred and sought to advance their specific interests. In particular, members of the UCP made statements that their party can exist on its own. In addition, many UCP activists, including regional leaders, did not recognise Milinkievič's election as the common candidate and did not take part



in his election campaign. After the election, they severely criticised the conduct of the campaign and still remain resentful of Milinkievič's authority. Similar trends also came from other parties affiliated with the coalition. It was feared that attempts would also be made to split the coalition from the outside.

Secondly, the coalition leaders were reluctant to admit new members and partner organisations. This may weaken the opposition and lead to the establishment of new political centres.

Thirdly, ambitions of the leaders of political parties continued to be a problem. Some of the leaders declared that Milinkievič's mandate as leader of pro-democracy forces was limited to the presidential election. There were concerns that attempts to install a new leader may ruin the coalition and the opposition will find itself in the same condition it was in 2001.

Fourthly, the reorganisation of the coalition is likely to take a long time. The coalition has become less active than during the presidential campaign and some members are growing disheartened. Only vigorous efforts to address problems of specific groups or the entire nation can help boost people's confidence in the opposition. These efforts cannot be replaced with internal opposition activity, including new congresses. It is time to understand that voters do not take interest in the structure of the opposition bureaucracy, but they may be annoyed by disagreements over the matter. The reorganisation plays into the hands of politicians who seek to regain leading positions in the coalition.

Mentioned above were the most obvious internal problems and contradictions observed in the pro-democracy coalition. The opposition's future largely depends on how it will be able to cope with these problems.