
Jury Čavusau

“For Freedom!” Campaign

Sociological background

Compared to other elections, the active phase of the civic campaign “For Freedom!” began quite late, after the authorities had announced the presidential election date on December 16, 2005. The campaign began on December 25 with the publication of a special issue of the newspaper *Narodnaja vola* that declared 2006 the Year of Freedom and ran an interview with opposition challenger Alaksandr Milinkievič headlined “A free election is a path to free Belarus”.

The late start of the campaign was linked to a new approach to planning. It was almost the first time in the history of Belarus’ civic and political organizations that a plan emerged as a result of teamwork involving researchers, analysts and civic campaign managers, and was not based on speculations. The “For Freedom!” plan was based on an analysis of opinion polls that demonstrated the need for civic organizations to adopt a new approach under the authoritarian conditions in Belarus.

Preparations for the campaign began in early 2005 with a series of surveys.

Focus groups were held in March and May 2005 with representatives from

various walks of life. The researchers found that Belarus lacked a single social group capable of spearheading changes. Belarus also lacked a single thorny issue that could be used to rally support for an opposition candidate. People were mostly concerned with social and economic issues, but they expected those issues to be addressed by the government in office at the time, rather than by new authorities. Most people considered the political regime as something that they were not in a position to change. People associated the regime with stability and socioeconomic predictability and supported it despite its undemocratic behaviour. Therefore, a platform focusing on social and economic issues could not rally enough support to change the political regime.

However, various groups included people critical of the government. Their disapproval stemmed from the non-acceptance of values imposed by the regime, but had nothing to do with the authorities’ socioeconomic policies. The authoritarian government and its totalitarian ideology conflicted with voters’ outlook on life. The political campaign could therefore draw on the conflict of values. It was a matter of principle for the most active representatives of vari-

ous groups who were ready to stand up for their interests. They accounted for up to 10 percent of the population. A moderate and indecisive campaign with a focus on socioeconomic issues could discourage them from supporting a political alternative. The researchers called this group “radicals”, but it was not a good term because of possible association with “political radicalism”.

The campaign organizers agreed to rely on the radicals, a minority who supported different values to those imposed by the regime. But did that approach give a chance of victory? The reliance on a minority seems to doom any strategy for electoral victory to failure. But Belarus had had no free elections for a decade. Opinion polls conducted in spring 2005 found that 49 percent did not expect the coming election to be free or fair (the percentage dropped during the election campaign stage). These people might have supported the active minority. Around one third of the population were in favour of political changes, but only a small fraction were ready for active steps. The passive majority, who realized that elections would be unfair, seemed to be leaning toward the strong, active and consolidated minority. Moreover, the passive majority was

expected to grow more sympathetic to the values of the minority. According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, when the lower need (socioeconomic in the case of Belarus) has been satisfied, one moves to the next higher level. Therefore, the role of spiritual values was likely to increase.

The social situation in Belarus at the time rendered ineffective strategies targeting undecided voters such as the ones that had been used during the opposition's previous campaigns. Earlier experience showed that it was impossible to effectively reach and win over undecided voters using the limited means available to disseminate information because of the massive government propaganda. The undecided majority would lean toward pro-democracy groups sooner if they displayed their strength. Thus, the campaign organizers agreed to work with the active minority and prepare for mass protests against election fraud.

The campaign was aimed at bringing about changes through public disobedience and resistance to electoral fraud based on the presumption that an opposition challenger had no chance to win an election that was unlikely to be free or fair.

Most civic activists and leaders approved the campaign concept during discussions.

A Belarusian-Slovak working group developed the campaign theory in cooperation with the Assembly of Non-Governmental Pro-Democracy Organizations of Belarus. The group was responsible for strategic planning, while the Assembly was responsible for carrying out the campaign. This model of communication between NGOs and experts proved effective.

After the concept of targeting the minority had been accepted as the methodological basis, experts needed to pick a value that could consolidate active members of the public. Surveys found that freedom was the top value for most representatives of the target group.

Various people naturally differ on what they believe constitutes freedom.

Some want freedom to travel abroad, receive information, publicly express their opinion on political issues, earn money, change jobs and place of residence, freedom from ideological control, freedom to receive instruction in the Belarusian language etc. Despite the different interpretations of freedom, hundreds of thousands of radicals felt a lack of freedom. That placed freedom in contraposition to the Łukašenka government's ideology. Freedom was something that the dictator's rhetoric could never use to its advantage unlike, for instance, the idea of independence, which Łukašenka exploited during his last presidential campaign. The idea of freedom, rather than leftist or rightist platforms, could unite the fragmented active minority in an effort to defend freedom, which they saw as their basic need.

Once the campaign organizers had identified the keynote, they needed to find human and organizational resources to launch the campaign, expecting the free non-partisan radicals to take up the initiative. The civic liberation action was expected to unfold in three stages – 1) civic activists → 2) a potentially active minority → 3) a majority. The organizers hoped to create a snowball effect, expecting civic activists to be the nucleus that would trigger mass movement. The campaign was to involve a large number of civic activists to be conducted on a national scale. Multiple meetings and consultations were held in late 2005 to draw activists. Many members of the Assembly of Non-Governmental Pro-Democracy Organizations of Belarus supported the "For Freedom!" concept.

Role in a broader context

In 2005 and 2006, it was impossible to organize a classic "non-political" civic drive to boost the presidential campaign of an opposition candidate. Independent election observation was impossible. There was no need to urge voters to go to the polls because the government

used its muscle to ensure a high turnout. Human and organizational resources were scarce to conduct a large-scale negative campaign against Łukašenka. The teams of both opposition candidates engaged in negative campaigning, especially that of Alaksandr Kazulin. In addition, some voters were turned off by the obtrusive pro-Łukašenka propaganda in the state media.

Civic organizations had little influence on the political campaign. Their involvement was limited to participation in the Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces whose delegates elected Alaksandr Milinkievič as their common challenger to Łukašenka. Obviously, many activists of NGOs, especially those affiliated with the Belarusian Association of Resource Centres, worked with regional headquarters of the opposition candidate, and even constituted the skeleton personnel, but they did not represent any specific political force. Attempts by NGO activists and leaders to influence political decisions of the opposition coalition and its candidate produced a "limited" result – a common strategy was never adopted.

The pro-democracy forces' strategy, as leaders and activists saw it, consisted of the following three elements:

- The common candidate's election campaign carried out by the coalition of political parties, in particular by the coalition's bodies – the central and regional headquarters and the



Songs of Freedom, CD cover.

National Committee. The purpose of the campaign was to rally support for Milinkievič to ensure his victory in the presidential election. The candidate and the Political Council of the United Pro-Democracy Forces later left this purpose behind, although both had initially declared an election victory to be their goal.

- A civic campaign, which was carried out by NGOs and civic activists. The campaign included several separate campaigns that had various objectives and sought to beef up the common candidate’s presidential campaign. Some of these campaigns targeted certain groups, while others sought to engage the general public. These efforts were aimed to stir up voters to action in the name of democracy and freedom. The civic campaign also included efforts by pro-democracy NGOs that were not directly linked to the election.
- Street protests against election fraud were crucial. However, the opposition failed to assign the task of staging street protests to a particular group. Nevertheless, voters turned out to Kastychnickaja Square in large numbers. Obviously, politicians did not do enough to plan and organize street protests, leaving this key element to chance. Civic activists from various groups showed a good ability for self-organization, leading the street protests, but a single decision-making centre was never formed.

A different outcome was simply impossible because groups willing to spearhead a revolution stayed away from the political process. The opposition declared a revolution as a way to overcome the regime and establish democracy, but there was no one to organize it. No one saw conditions for a revolution in the first place. Spring 2006 was not an attempt to carry out a revolution, it was rather an attempt to simulate a revolution.

“For Freedom!” activities

“For Freedom!” was mainly aimed to create an ideological basis of the common oppo-



Anatol Klačuk

Uładzimir Arlou, a popular writer, support the opposition.

sition candidate’s campaign since the pro-democracy coalition had failed to come up with a program. “For Freedom!” challenged Alaksandr Łukašenka’s values, not his social and economic policies. Freedom, a value incompatible with the dictatorial regime, challenged Łukašenka’s campaign slogans “For Belarus” and “Belarus for ...”. Specific actions and the campaign strategy were planned on the basis of opinion polls. According to the plan, the campaign was to promote freedom and raise the issue of freedom (in connection with the common candidate’s campaign) and constitute the ideological pivot of the pro-democracy forces’ general campaign.

The point of the campaign and its strategy was to offer voters freedom as the value that forms the foundation of an alternative model of society. Another purpose was to show the importance and strength of freedom supporters to the Belarusian public, the authorities and the international community. The value of freedom and the need for liberating Belarusian society were the main ideas of the awareness campaign.

The main campaign slogans were “I Am for Freedom!”, “For Freedom!”, “2006 Year of Freedom”, “Freedom” etc. The campaign used the national white and red colours. It was expected to cover the entire territory of Belarus, but in fact it was conducted in Minsk and the 50 largest cities, involving activists of the Assembly and scores of pro-democracy activists. It was conducted openly and built on the princi-

ple of autonomy of all elements. After the main polling day the campaign rolled on spontaneously, uncoordinated by its organizers, but it was headed in the planned direction. The coordinators put emphasis on self-organization, which proved efficient during protests against the official election results.

The campaign’s target group was “freedom supporters” or potentially active opponents of the government in all groups of the population. The main participation criterion was readiness for action, not political affiliation. In fact, the campaign targeted the young generation — students, business owners, white-collar employees and people not employed in the state sector.

Since the campaign was launched later than other election-related efforts (in December 2005), it was better tailored to the requirements of that political period. Potential activists were identified during the opposition’s earlier effort to nominate supporters to precinct election commissions by the collection of signatures.

The campaign was designed to continue after the main polling day, which marked only the beginning of the struggle for freedom.

The following means were used to reach voters: the Internet, leaflets, wallet-size calendars, special issues of legal newspapers, “I Am for Freedom” stickers and badges, a concert of banned rock bands in Minsk, CDs with freedom songs and graffiti.

An important achievement was the coalition candidate’s consent to including the issue of freedom in his slogans, speeches and platform (Milinkievič’s campaign motto was “Freedom, Truth and Justice”), although the candidate’s team was inconsistent in using campaign slogans. Nevertheless, the campaign helped create Milinkievič an image of a freedom fighter.

Unlike other national drives, “For Freedom!” was well coordinated from the very beginning with the common candidate’s campaign team, and included a message aimed to prompt voters to join street protests.



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Youth at the only rock concert which was allowed within Milinkievič campaign before 2006 election.

The organizers believe that “For Freedom!” succeeded in rallying voters (mostly youths, but also people of all ages) who had not been active in political parties or NGOs before. Badges help freedom supporters single out likeminded people in a crowd, which inspires confidence. Freedom has become the core of the pro-democracy forces’ ideology, while efforts to have opposition representatives included in election commissions helped expose the unfair and non-free nature of the election. The “For Freedom!” brand came into fashion. Evidence of campaign success is the fact that Alaksandr Milinkievič and the pro-democracy coalition have continued to use its logo and motto after the election.

Post election

The concept of freedom filled the political alternative to the Lukashenka regime with new ideological substance. The national idea did not spark a heated debate during ideological discussions in the run-up to the

election. Some groups made unsuccessful attempts to shift the focus from resisting dictatorship to a clash of Belarusian nationalism with pro-Russian anti-nationalism (the rhetoric of the Conservative Christian Party, a discussion involving Belarusian intellectuals of the language used for broadcasting radio programs to Belarus, and also some statements by presidential candidate Kazulin). The 2006 presidential election was not a fight between nationalism and anti-nationalism, it was a clash between two Belarusian national projects that offered different values. In that context, the democratic slogan “For Freedom!” was an effective and strong response to Lukašenka’s slogan “For Belarus!”. It was obvious that “For Freedom!” did not mean “not for Belarus”. The campaign prompted Lukašenka’s ideologists to publicly admit their opposition to freedom.

When the election was over, freedom advocates faced the challenge to develop a new strategy. The weakness of most Belarusian political projects was that they

were designed for a short term and there was no long-term implementation plan. The architects of most Belarusian civic campaigns had sought to achieve a short-term result that had no effect whatsoever on the general situation in the country. In order not to fall into the same trap, the “For Freedom!” masterminds came up with two scenarios — one was to be used if street protests gained momentum and grew into a revolution, and the other in case protesters run out of steam. The only thing they were sure of is that protests were inevitable because that was the only way to oust the dictator. The election was only expected to trigger the political radicalization of society.

Campaign activists will continue to disseminate their ideas, visual symbols, information about freedom and restrictions of freedom, and also to stage “For Freedom!” events. The campaign should remain an element of a broader strategy of the pro-democracy coalition, if such a strategy is ever to be adopted.