

## PUBLIC OPINION: HISTORIC COLLAPSE

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### Summary

The three-digit consumer inflation and almost three-fold devaluation of the national currency came as a shock to Belarusians. All social indicators went down to an all-time low. The public blamed the government for their falling incomes, but also Alexander Lukashenko personally, due to which his electoral rating dropped from 55% in December 2010 to 21% in September 2011. At the same time, it did not have any effect on the popularity of the opposition, nor did it ignite mass protests.

### Trends:

- Alexander Lukashenko became a president of “minority” for the first time since late 2003.
- The social indexes’ insensitivity to official propaganda stunts, such as looking for external and internal enemies to shift the blame to, actually displays irreversible desacralization of Belarusian leadership.
- Stabilization on the currency market in October broke the negative trend; the fall of the social indexes was followed by an insignificant rise, although society is still far away from the pre-crisis status.

The financial and economic crisis which overwhelmed the Belarusians completely in 2011 resulted in a massive panic attack. The state was no longer thought of as a provider for the people whose prosperity used to be mostly dependent on the generous national budget, and such people — pension holders, public sector employees, workers of state-run enterprises and organizations, etc. — constitute a substantial majority. Table 1 presents changes in social indexes<sup>1</sup> reported by sociologists of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) within a year following the third and fourth presidential elections.

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<sup>1</sup> Social indexes represent a difference between the positive and negative answers to the following questions: “How has your personal material standing changed over the past three months?” (Financial Status Index); “In your opinion, how is the socioeconomic situation in Belarus going to change in the next twelve months?” (Expectations Index); “In your opinion, is the situation in our country changing in the right or wrong way?” (Policy Correctness Index, PCI).

**Table 1. Changes in the indexes of financial status (FSI), expectations (EI) and policy correctness (PCI)**

Social indexes	04' 06	11' 06	01' 07	05' 07	12' 10	03' 11	05' 11	06' 11	09' 11	12' 11
FSI	12	8	5	-3	9	-4	-45	-72	-69	-53
EI	29	32	-5	-4	13	6	-37	-44	-40	-28
PCI	32	25	27	28	22	5	-33	-36	-52	-30

The difference between the social indexes obtained directly after the presidential elections (the first and the fifth columns) is insignificant, while all subsequent indexes of the year 2011 (except for March) are two digits with a minus. Nothing like that has been observed since the third presidential election. As concerns March 2011, the month stands out just for a technical reason: the opinion poll was conducted in the first half of the month, i.e. before the shopping turmoil.

Social tension peaked in June-September. This period saw the all-time low of all the three social indexes. The records of the early 1990s were beaten. Let's have a look at one of the indexes-champions, the IMP, for better understanding: only 2% of respondents marked a certain improvement in their material standing in September, whereas 74% complained about a decline (index: -72).

On October 20, after months-long attempts to stabilize the currency market using administrative methods, the Belarusian Currency-Stock Exchange held a unified trading session during which both the official and market exchange rates of the U.S. dollar and euro were made even. Traditionally, many Belarusians use U.S. dollars to calculate and compare prices. Therefore they took the equaling as a sign that the bottom of the crisis was finally reached. After that, the negative trend in what concerns social moods started turning upward, taking the December poll as a point of reference.

### **Who is to blame?**

According to classified research carried out in May, which Lukashenko publicized later on in a press conference for Russian regional media outlets held on October 7, most respondents (around 25%) quite surprisingly blamed themselves for the decline; 24% said it was a consequence of the financial recession; nearly 20%

cast the blame upon the government and local authorities, and only 10% said the president was at fault.

In September, IISEPS sociologists outlined a totally different rating of entities said to be responsible for the crisis. The top three answers to the question "Who is guilty of the current crisis in Belarus?" were "the president" (61%), "the government" (41%) and "the United States" (16%). As to the people allegedly inclined to self-flagellation, they were only the sixth on the list with 10%.

It is worthy of note that in the 2000s, the government always was in the top of the list of those to blame for price hikes and other negative developments and President Lukashenko was the second. All the others — the United States, the European Union, the Belarusian opposition and so on — lagged far behind the country leadership. This configuration of responsibility is likely to be a direct consequence of the authoritarian governance in the top-down command structure. On the other hand, this differentiation results from a divergence between the pragmatic and symbolic functions, the first being attributed to the government and the second to the president. Therefore troubles seem to come from the ministers while the hopes for improvements are usually put on the head of state. However, the entire system, which functioned fairly well when household incomes were going up, failed when it came to the rampant three-digit inflation that naturally affected Lukashenko's electoral rating<sup>2</sup> (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2. Changes in President Lukashenko's electoral rating (%)**

03'10	06'10	09'10	10'10	12'10	03'11	06'11	09'11	12'11
43	46	39	44	53	43	29	21	25

We note once again that the March poll was taken before the panic buying started. The poll indicated a usual decrease in the president's rating after the pre-election resource leveraging. Then came the fall which brought Lukashenko's electoral rating to the unprecedented low in September (the previous "record" of 26% was reported in March 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The electoral rating should be distinguished from the trust rating. The first one is determined by the answers to the open-end question "If an election is scheduled for this Sunday, who would you vote for?" and the second one is based on the answers to the close-end question "Do you trust the president?"

## Budget as a political differentiation factor

Now we get from the president's electoral rating to his confidence rating (Table 3). The maximum level of confidence in the president was marked right after the presidential elections in April 2006 and December 2010 that resulted from the electoral mobilization by means of generous social payments and propaganda efforts of the governmental mass media. The election of 2006 was arranged when Russian loans were the most plentiful. As to the 2010 election, the Belarusian leadership managed to fulfill the basic promise to raise the average salary up to USD 500 in the very nick of time. Therefore the ratio of those who trusted the president and those who did not stood at 1.9 in 2006 and 1.6 in 2010.

**Table 3. Answers to the question "Do you trust the president of Belarus?" (%)**

	04' 06	06' 08	06' 09	06' 10	12' 10	03' 11	06' 11	09' 11	12' 11
Trust	60	47	51	54	55	48	34	25	31
Do not trust	31	40	35	34	34	42	54	62	55

The number of those who opposed Lukashenko exceeded the number of his supporters in the second half of 2011. The traditional pro-presidential "majority" and the opposition "minority" changed places on the chart and Lukashenko became a president of minority. In September, the number of Belarusians who did not trust the president, who was re-elected for the fourth time, increased to a record-breaking 62%.

Some independent analysts seized the moment to reanimate once more the idea of the opposition's coming out of what they called the "electoral ghetto." Opinion polls however did not fortify this possibility. The split in Belarusian society posed an obstacle to the expansion of electoral support for the opposition by attraction of Lukashenko's former supporters. The "majority" unites the people whose financial status directly depends on the budget's capacity and the "minority" is mostly composed of the so-called "creative class" (this term is gaining popularity after the December protest rallies in Moscow).

Disappointment in President Lukashenko does not necessarily mean that a person belongs to the "creative class." The degree of

people's dependence on the budget does not reduce. Therefore, Belarusian society which consists of the "majority" and "minority" cannot be pictured as communicating vessels like those showed in physics classes at school. It does not mean that the split is irreparable, though. But the experience of the early 1990s suggests that a drop in the living standards is not enough. In all likelihood, the economic crisis will entail a political crisis.

## **Conclusion**

In the second half of 2011, all three social indicators calculated by the IISEPS went down to an all-time low. Nevertheless, in the medium term (a year or a year and a half), the December 2011 tendency of public sentiment on the rise will most likely continue and the government surely cannot take the credit for that. One more dose of Russian money made it possible to stabilize the exchange rate of the Belarusian ruble and push down inflation considerably. At the same time, the public opinion is not anywhere near the pre-crisis degree of approval. The declared amount of loans will not suffice for the second coming of 500-dollar wages. The rules of play established for the Common Economic Space will limit Lukashenko's opportunity to redistribute resources for the benefit of the so-called "majority."