



Getting a C Grade

Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies

In the country where only one person aspires to the role of a politician in the commanding elite and where the contenders from the opposition camp are proclaimed to be “geeks”, the electoral rating of “the only political figure” turns into a universal integral index. This is why current fluctuations in such a rating allow analysts to make judgements on the personal popularity of its possessor, as well as about various economic, political and social processes which are taking place in the country on the macro levels.

Since the March opinion poll there have no events equal to the “oil and gas war” which broke out between Belarus and Russia in January of 2007. The population have had time to get used to the continued growth of prices which began in November of the previous year. This fact was demonstrated in answers to the standard survey questions concerning changes of respondents’ financial position for the last three months, about their assessment of the socio-economic situation in Belarus over the next few years and about their attitude to the development course of the country. There were no evident dynamics concerning these questions in the course of the June opinion poll. Owing to these fact, there were no considerable changes in the integral index, that is, the electoral rating of the head of state.

Table 1. “If tomorrow there was a presidential election in Belarus, who would you vote for?”, %
(the question allows several answers)

Variant of answer	04'06	08'06	08'06	01'07	05'07	09'07	12'07	03'08	06'08
For A. Lukashenko	60.3	54.9	49.7	50.9	48.0	44.9	39.9	42.5	38.9

Taking into account the margin of error, we may consider that the electoral rating of A. Lukashenko has not changed, although replacement of three – the first figure in the rating – by four might seem symbolic to somebody. This stability of the electoral rating is also confirmed by the invariability of the trust rating. The data in the following table lets us trace the dynamics of the latter for the last seven years. After 2002, the crisis year for the regime, A. Lukashenko’s personal power, generously nourished with dollars from the “oil offshore”, began to grow. The peak of trust in the head of Belarusian state fell in his third presidential election, and after that, the trust rating “lost” a further 10 percentage points under the influence of consternation caused by the “oil and gas war” and rise in prices.

Table 2. “Do you trust the president of Belarus?”, %

Variant of answer	04'02	12'05	02'06	11'06	01'07	05'07	12'07	03'08	06'08
Yes, I do	32.4	59.0	60.2	60.3	55.4	56.9	50.9	47.3	47.3
No, I do not	42.9	30.8	30.8	26.0	28.5	32.7	35.5	38.0	39.5
DA / NA	33.7	10.2	9.0	13.7	16.1	10.4	13.6	14.7	13.2

The cancellation of benefits undoubtedly contributed its share into the decrease of the “only politician’s” ratings during the previous year. It is always difficult to be deprived of what has become customary and natural. In June answering the question: “What is your attitude towards benefit cancellation for the majority of the population?” the overwhelming majority of respondents (69.5%) answered that it had not been necessary to cancel benefits. Only 24.2% supported the policy. By September, 2007 the ratio of opponents and supporters of benefit cancellation was approximately the same: 65.4% vs. 33.5%.

However, ratings of the first person in the state are not the only indicators of a society’s condition; they turn into a policy factor themselves, that is, they are able to influence the state of the society. Such an inverse effect appears in full compliance with Tomson’s law (what people consider real, has real consequences). In sociology “the spiral of silence”, which was first described by the Frenchman de Tocqueville in 1856, is explained by the force of the given law:

“People who adhered to the former faith were afraid to find themselves in the minority of those who were faithful to their religion. Since isolation frightened them more than mistakes they joined the majority without changing their ideas. Views of only one part of the nation seemed to be the opinion of everybody and therefore they invincibly misled exactly those who were responsible for that deceit”.

Let us illustrate the possible untwisting of “the spiral of silence” into the reverse direction by the example of the data of Table 3. The domination of A. Lukashenko in the political field of Belarus has been raising no doubts by anyone for 14 years already, that is why opponents of the “nation-wide elected” in complete compliance with the above mentioned quotation, are afraid to find themselves in the minority and do not, as a rule, demonstrate their opposition views openly thus strengthening the effect of domination. However, as it follows from Table 3 a growing part of the Belarusians considers that A. Lukashenko’s rating is falling. For the time being it does not tell much on the real rating (see Tables 1 and 2). However, as it is known from philosophy, quantity is able to turn into quality and that is why public expectation which is being formed before our eyes may become transformed to the real distrust towards the head of state, in other words – to the decrease of his rating.

Table 3.”In your opinion, has A. Lukashenko’s rating (that is, readiness of the country’s population to vote for him at the next elections) increased or decreased during the time passed since the presidential election?”, %

Variant of answer	09’05	02’06	09’07	06’08
It has increased	37.7	54.9	25.2	17.6
It has decreased	23.4	15.2	30.9	43.0
It has remained the same	31.5	24.9	38.3	33.8
DA / NA	7.4	5.0	5.6	5.6

In conclusion let us have a look at how the Belarusians assess the ability of A. Lukashenko to keep his pre-election promises. It is apparent from Table 4 that even in the years marked by the highest possible ratings the head of state was a mediocre student. In the course of the last opinion poll the average estimate turned out to be below “the water-line” for the first time during the last four years, and it happened in the first place due to the more than twofold reduction in the number of the respondents who graded their idol’s work as excellent. However, judging by the first three columns of Table 4, A. Lukashenko knew much worse times, but the economic background was considerably worse in the country at that time.

Table 4. Dynamics of answering the question: “How would you assess A. Lukashenko’s keeping of his pre-election promises using a five point scale? (1 point – very bad, 5 points – very well)”, %

Variant of answer	09'02	03'03	03'04	03'05	10'06	09'07	06'08
1	17.6	20.6	15.4	9.0	11.0	11.5	18.9
2	20.5	28.6	21.7	13.7	14.0	15.0	16.6
3	30.7	33.7	32.8	26.1	27.2	22.1	27.7
4	21.1	14.1	21.7	27.1	26.6	24.0	25.0
5	8.3	2.8	7.8	23.5	20.1	26.5	11.1
On average	2.8	2.5	2.8	3.4	3.3	3.4	2.9

One should treat the values of ratings, as well as any other quantitative characteristics gathered in the course of national opinion polls with a certain share of skepticism. The mere figures without understanding their nature indicate little. Thus A. Lukashenko’s electoral rating of the beginning of 2007 almost coincides with the rating of the end of 1997. However, the nature of support has considerably changed during this time. It has become more rational, and that is why ratings react to the emotional speeches of “the only political figure” quite weakly, but at the same time they easily respond to the slightest changes in the economy. Within the next few years the rational nature of a rating will only become stronger, and thereby will create a lot of additional problems to its owner.