

Belarus: Presidential elections without Alaksandar Milinkievic

On 17 September Alaksandar Milinkievic announced that he will not be taking part in presidential elections in Belarus set for 19 December. The withdrawal of one of the most popular opposition candidates from participation in Belarus's most important election demonstrates the profound crisis in the Belarusian opposition and the impossibility of a real election battle with Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

In the previous presidential election in March 2006, Milinkievic took second place after Alyaksandr Lukashenka—according to independent institutes, he garnered as much as 25% of the vote. Despite the fact that Milinkievic's support fell to 5-6% (according to research conducted by the independent NISEPI institute in June of this year) he remained one of the most popular leaders of the Belarusian opposition and thus a natural candidate to represent them in the forthcoming presidential elections. It appears that the real cause of his withdrawal is the poor perspectives for sufficient campaign funding. A further factor influencing his decision could be the failed attempts to appoint a common candidate to represent the opposition – approximately ten politicians have expressed an interest in taking part in elections. However, only a handful of them have a chance of acquiring the required 100,000 signatures supporting their candidature before the deadline. This development points to a profound crisis in the Belarusian democratic camp and an increasing disillusionment from the West which supports it politically and financially. None of the remaining candidates will be able to defeat the incumbent president; furthermore, none of them will be able to repeat Milinkievic's result from 2006. <kam>