

Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Consolidation of Power

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"There will be no pink, orange, or even banana revolution in Belarus." Alyaksandr Lukashenka, January 7, 2005.

Shortly after assuming the Belarusian presidency in 1994, Alyaksandr Lukashenka began to seek ways to increase his powers. Initially, he took small incremental steps to limit the media's independence as well as the role played by non-governmental organizations to ascertain the degree to which he would encounter domestic and foreign opposition to his policies. Perhaps due to Belarus' Soviet past, the majority of the population did not comprehend the significance of these actions. By November 1996, Lukashenka believed that he was sufficiently popular and had weakened those opposed to his agenda to order a national referendum on amending the 1994 Belarusian constitution (hereinafter the 1996 constitution) and to set about changing the nature of the Belarusian political system.

The 1996 amendments to the constitution radically increased the Belarusian president's power: in addition to extending the president's term of office from four to five years, it granted him the power to issue decrees (or edicts) previously solely within the competence of the legislature. It is noteworthy that this power has been available to most chief executives only during states of emergency. Despite opposition to his expansion of power, many members of the Belarusian political elite, as well as international actors, were unable to stop Lukashenka. While the Belarusian Supreme Court, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the US government took the position that the amendment of the Belarusian constitution by referendum was invalid, all eventually treated the outcome as a *fait accompli*.

Drazdy: Testing the Resolve of the West

Ironically, the international community only seemed to become more agitated after the Belarusian authorities evicted twelve foreign ambassadors, who lived in the residential compound of Drazdy on the outskirts of Minsk, in April 1998. The official reason given for the order to the diplomats to vacate their

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residences was the alleged need for utility repairs. The diplomats argued that these demands violated the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the leases signed by respective foreign missions with the Belarusian government. Many of the EU and US ambassadors departed Belarus on June 22, 1998. Their respective governments then imposed relatively minor retaliatory measures on senior Belarusian officials, such as travel restrictions. Independent observers have speculated that Lukashenka did not want foreign ambassadors living in such close proximity to him and certain senior Belarusian officials. This incident provoked the greatest anti-Lukashenka response hitherto seen on the part of the West and led to Belarus agreeing to accept an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) consultative and monitoring mission to Minsk.

The Disappeared: Intimidating Domestic Opponents

An important factor that has both intimidated opposition figures (and the Belarusian public) and that has galvanized their resolve has been the knowledge of the disappearance (and presumed murder) of four prominent public figures, including a former interior minister, a former deputy chairman of the parliament and head of the Central Election Commission, a businessman, and a television cameraman. This has revealed the true nature of the Lukashenka government.

On June 11, 2001, two Belarusian prosecutors, who had participated in the “investigation” of one of the disappearances, sent a sensational e-mail to independent press outlets in Minsk. Dzmitry Petrushkevich, a former employee of the Belarusian prosecutor’s office, and his colleague, Aleh Sluchek, announced that their findings implicated Lukashenka and members of his inner circle in setting up a “death squad” to carry out assassinations. Not surprisingly, these prosecutors fled Belarus and began releasing evidence in support of their claims from abroad.

Petrushkevich and Sluchek alleged that this “death squad” consisted of five to ten current and former members of an elite anti-terrorist unit and acted on the orders of one of Lukashenka’s closest associates, Viktor Sheiman, then-head of the Belarusian National Security Council. In addition, then-deputy chief of the presidential administration and the boss of the presidential bodyguards, Uladzimir Navumau, was also implicated in the disappearances.

The investigators claimed that several assassinations had occurred in Belarus, such as those of Major General Yuri Zakharenka, former minister of the interior and an opposition figure since 1995; Viktor Hanchar, deputy chairman of the 13th Supreme Soviet, the legitimate parliament disbanded by Lukashenka; and Hanchar’s associate, businessman Yuri Krasouski. The investigators claimed that Russian cameraman Yuri Zavadsky, a close associate of influential Belarusian journalist Pavel Sheremet, had also been killed.

In response to these accusations, Mr. Lukashenka fired the heads of the KGB, the Prosecutor General and the Interior Minister, replacing them with more “reliable” individuals. Viktor Sheiman was named the new Prosecutor General, and Uladzimir Navumau was appointed Minister of the Interior.

These allegations have been corroborated by the so-called Pourgourides Report on “Disappeared Persons in Belarus” initiated by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The US State Department also acknowledged its findings as credible. Nevertheless, Western democracies did not visibly alter their policies toward the Lukashenka government in any way that was likely to have a real impact on events within Belarus.

The First “Elegant” Victory: The Presidential Elections in 2001

In 2001, Belarus held its first presidential election under the 1996 constitution. Lukashenka was able to orchestrate a decisive “victory”, allegedly winning 75.66 percent of votes counted, which was sufficient for avoiding a run-off second round of voting. A total of 83.86 percent of the 6,169,087 million Belarusian citizens eligible to vote were claimed to have cast ballots. Prior to the “election”, the opposition decided to back a compromise candidate, trade union leader Uladzimir Hancharyk, rather than one of the more prominent opposition leaders. The principal rationale for doing so was that to a risk-averse Belarusian electorate, Hancharyk was a known “commodity” and would not be viewed as a threat by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Officially, Hancharyk received 15.65 percent of the vote.

The OSCE concluded that the elections were neither fair nor free, and that they violated Belarus’ OSCE commitments and other international standards. Its criticisms covered both the campaigning and voting process. That the allegedly independent Belarusian Central Election Commission (CEC) announced the final “results” only hours after the polls closed is but one of the signs pointing to the large scale state sponsored fraud that occurred during early voting as well as during the election itself on September 9, 2001.

After the 2001 election, Lukashenka made a series of personnel changes so as to ensure that he be surrounded by only the absolutely loyal. He also sent an unmistakable message to potential political opponents. In 2002, two former presidential candidates – both directors of large industrial enterprises, Mikhail Leonau and Leonid Kaluhin – were arrested and charged with the embezzlement of state funds. A third candidate – former Belarusian ambassador to Latvia Mikhail Marynich – was arrested and imprisoned on trumped-up charges. In addition, a Belarusian court sentenced Mikola Markevich and Pavel Mazheika of the independent newspaper Pahonya to prison for allegedly libeling Lukashenka during the presidential campaign. Similarly, journalist Viktor Ivashkevich, the editor-in-chief of the independent paper *Rabochy*, was charged with defamation

of character for accusing Lukashenka and his administration of corruption. Late in 2003, the Belarusian KGB detained the chairman of the United Civic Party Anatol Lyabedzka, after he visited the US Embassy in Minsk. Lyabedzka was charged with treason for merely meeting foreign diplomats. He was further subjected to an intensive campaign of harassment, including detentions and beatings.

At the same time as harassing individual opposition leaders, the Lukashenka government expanded its control over Belarusian civil society more broadly, since non-governmental organizations were seen as harboring opposition supporters and providing them with organizational structures and financial resources. In a concerted effort to restrict the activities of civil society, all political parties, labor unions, and NGOs were required to reregister in 2000, and the KGB subsequently audited many. Needless to say, those viewed as anti-regime faced many obstacles in getting the necessary approvals. Following that, severe restrictions were placed on the receipt of funds by NGOs from abroad. Despite the language of and purported motives for such legislation, few doubted that they were directed against Belarus' few remaining independent voices for political reasons. With domestic human rights groups finding themselves with fewer resources, many organizations became less effective, or simply disappeared. At the same time, many of those who had hoped to change the Belarusian political scene became demoralized and left to avail of opportunities in the West, or in Russia.

The 2004 Referendum on Presidential Term Limits

In October 2004, the first legislative elections under the provisions of the 1996 constitution were held in Belarus. More importantly, the parliamentary elections were held simultaneously with a referendum of far-reaching consequences. At the last moment, Lukashenka decided the time was ripe to establish a legal basis to allow him to run for reelection in 2006 beyond the hitherto term limit for presidential office, thereby giving him a political shield against charges of subverting the Belarusian constitution.

The text of the referendum could hardly be described as artful prose. The question the Belarusian citizenry was asked to consider was: "Do you allow the first President of the Republic of Belarus Alyaksandr Hryhorevich Lukashenka to participate in the presidential election as a candidate for the post of the President of the Republic of Belarus and do you accept Part I of Article 81 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus in the wording that follows, 'The President shall be elected directly by the people of the Republic of Belarus for a term of five years by universal, free, equal, direct, and secret ballot'."

According to the Central Election Commission's chairperson Lidziya Yarmoshyna, appointed to the position by Lukashenka, 86.2 percent of those

who voted supported the constitutional amendment, which corresponds to 77.2 percent of the Belarusian electorate. By contrast, exit polls conducted by Gallup indicated that Lukashenka's constitutional change was backed by only 48.4 percent of votes cast (and a lower percentage of the electorate).

Be that as it may, the referendum led to the further consolidation of Lukashenka's power, and his personal control over Belarus' Central Election Commission, the KGB, the judiciary, both the Ministries of Justice and the Interior, the media, and other institutions. Within only three years since 2001, the democratic opposition, any NGOs of broader societal appeal, or individuals inclined to complain about the absence of democratic mechanisms to ensure a fair ballot seemed to have been effectively silenced. In contrast to 2001, any pretense of holding "elections" in the conventional sense had become a ritual to permit Lukashenka the ability to claim political legitimacy and widespread support for his authoritarian rule.

Holding onto Power by all Means

However, it seems that Lukashenka still did not feel sufficiently reassured of his grip on power, especially as the Orange Revolution was unfolding in neighboring Ukraine. In November 2004, President Lukashenka fired the head of the Belarusian KGB, Leonid Yerin, for meeting with reporters and opposition members. He subsequently explained that "[a]s head of state (...) I am capable of controlling the secret services myself." Soon after, in January 2005, Lukashenka appointed General Stepan Sukhorenka as the new KGB head and made it clear that he expected the KGB to play a more active role in monitoring societal developments. Sukhorenka did not disappoint Lukashenka, bringing criminal cases against opposition activists on what most neutral observers believed were politically motivated grounds.

On August 17, 2005, Lukashenka issued a decree establishing new restrictions on foreign technical assistance to Belarus. This decree prohibits organizations and individuals from receiving and using assistance for "preparing and conducting elections and referenda, recalling deputies and members of the Council of the Republic, staging gatherings, rallies, street marches, demonstrations, picketing, strikes, producing and distributing campaign materials and for other forms of mass politicking among the population". It provided a legal basis for prohibiting technical assistance in the form of organizing seminars, conferences and public discussions.

With a similar goal in mind, on November 1, 2005, the Belarusian parliament adopted a law restricting the creation of political parties and the kind of activities they are allowed to undertake. The law contained provisions outlining grounds on which the Belarusian Supreme Court, upon an application of the Ministry of Justice, can suspend the right of a political party to engage in political activities. This law was applied against the Union of Belarusian Poles and the

youth platform *Rada* and in all practical respects prevented the establishment of new political entities.

At the same time, the Belarusian Council of Ministers issued a decree aimed at establishing state monopoly over new opinion polling entities, thereby creating a new body under the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus to exercise control over existing entities authorized to conduct polling activities. If the panel determined that there were irregularities in the activities of a pollster or if the released poll results were regarded as “biased and unreliable”, the organization risked losing its accreditation.

Clearly, these steps were designed to prevent events like those in Ukraine from occurring in Belarus. This is even more obvious from a number of further measures taken at the time of Ukraine’s democratic breakthrough. Belarusians who went to Kiev to see the Orange Revolution first-hand were arrested upon their return to Belarus. Lukashenka arranged for the Belarusian parliament to provide him with additional tools to prevent the opposition from mobilizing “people power”. New legislation was enacted that increased criminal penalties for organizing protests, becoming a member of a banned organization, or speaking out against “national interests”.

With his sights set firmly on the 2006 presidential elections, Lukashenka signed a law in December 2005 providing for criminal penalties for activities deemed to be “discrediting the state powers” in Belarus. The text of the law amended the Belarusian Criminal Code, making it a crime to train people to take part in street protests, to discredit Belarus’ international image, and to appeal to countries and international organizations for help. Under the new legal provisions, any such activity was deemed “to the detriment of the country’s security, sovereignty and territorial integrity”.

In addition, the Belarusian parliament amended the Law “On Interior Ministry Troops of Belarus” explicitly empowering internal security troops to disband anti-government demonstrations. Parliament granted the president the right to order Belarusian troops to use weapons and other military equipment to maintain domestic order. The right of Belarusian servicemen to refuse to follow what they deemed to be an illegal order, such as refusal to shoot at or use military vehicles against civilians, was restricted. Furthermore, and reminiscent of the worst 20th century European dictatorships, Belarusian military and police personnel, henceforth, had to swear allegiance to Lukashenka rather than to the Republic of Belarus or to its constitution. This had the clear intention of lessening the likelihood of units defecting to the political opposition.

The police, military and security apparatus at the disposal of Lukashenka is considerable. It consists of at least 110,000 paramilitary forces, including the special police (*Otryad Militsii Osobovo Naznacheniya*, or OMON), which can be supplemented with a significant number of reserves. A highly secretive contingent of personal presidential bodyguards comprises, according to some estimates, more than 200 enlisted men, specially trained and equipped with cutting edge equipment. Lukashenka himself selects them. An equally powerful

SWAT team, called *Alma* (Diamond), is operational within the Ministry of the Interior, and a further paramilitary rapid reaction detachment (*Spetsialny Otryad Bistroy Reagirovaniya*, or SOBR) is headed by Colonel Dzmitry Paulichenka.

Only days before the March 2006 presidential elections, KGB head Sukhorenka, along with Interior Minister Navumau and Prosecutor General Miklashevich went on national TV to expose the “opposition’s conspiracy to instigate violent protests on the day of the elections, using explosive devices, and to attempt to storm government offices”. The authorities threatened to apply the Belarusian criminal code’s anti-terrorism provisions against leading members of the opposition. If convicted, such individuals could face capital sentences, life imprisonment, or even the death penalty.

Lukashenka Plays to his Political Base

In parallel to increasing pressure on political opponents, Lukashenka has also made sure to solidify and expand his, undoubtedly considerable, power base within Belarusian society. Having become a political actor on an anti-corruption ticket, it was hardly surprising that he sought to repeat earlier successes by bringing criminal charges against directors of state-run enterprises for alleged misuse of public funds. The chairman of the state committee on the aircraft industry, Fiodor Ivanau, and the general director of the Republican State Enterprise “*Belaeroaviatsiya*”, Ivan Shimanets, both faced accusations of embezzlement of state property by abusing their positions. Both are exemplary cases of the state’s approach.

The political opposition sought to demonstrate the regime’s hypocrisy by publicizing the case of Halyna Zhuraukova. As former head of the presidential property management department, she received a prison sentence for embezzlement through abuse of office duty made by an organized group or at an especially large scale, although she was pardoned despite admitting to having stolen five million dollars. At approximately the same time, a prominent Belarusian political figure, Mikhail Marynich, was given a five-year prison sentence on spurious charges of theft of equipment provided to his non-governmental organization.

These anti-corruption moves combine with a fear widespread in Belarusian society, and illustrated regularly by Russian television watched by many in the country, that privatization inevitably results in the emergence of oligarchs and extreme differences in income and between standards of living. Consequently, Lukashenka does his utmost to retain a high degree of egalitarianism, and he has made it a high priority that salaries and pensions are paid on time. What is more, to avoid a situation in which Belarusians lose jobs in unprofitable enterprises, he promised to support such companies with loans or even to nationalize them.

Running counter to the carefully groomed image of Belarus as a successful economic model have been accusations that Lukashenka and other government

officials have themselves misappropriated state funds. Some of these are believed to have found their way into banks abroad, while others, as the political opposition has tried to point out to Belarusians, were used for the president's private house in the Belarusian countryside.

These and other question marks over the integrity of the president and his performance notwithstanding, Lukashenka enjoys genuine support among large sections of the Belarusian population. Yet it is problematic that it is often taken as an article of faith that Lukashenka is backed by a majority of Belarusian citizens. In the context of Belarus today, with full regime control of the media, the economy and political institutions, it is impossible to ascertain the real degree of societal support for the president.

If anything, it is Lukashenka and his regime itself that appears less sure of its social base than it frequently pronounces in public. Only such insecurity can explain that, over the years, Lukashenka has developed very elaborate tactics to ensure favorable voting outcomes, including pre-election day voting, mobile ballots for people allegedly unable to attend polling stations, and ballot stuffing. Extraordinary efforts have been made to prevent exit polls from being conducted by the opposition or neutral observers, while providing for officially sanctioned exit polls. Harassment of the democratic opposition and its supporters, and closure of independent civic organizations and alternative media were clearly aimed at "unreliable" segments of Belarusian society. Last but not least, the fact that the 2006 presidential elections were moved from the original July date to March indicated that Lukashenka, his officials, advisors and pollsters were not nearly as confident of a favorable result as it may have seemed.

Recent Trends in Belarusian Public Opinion

Oleg Manaev

This article analyzes the main trends in Belarusian public opinion in the period between the national referendum of October 17, 2004 and the presidential elections of March 19, 2006. In a first part, the gap between the official outcome (announced by the Central Election Commission) and the results based on findings by the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys of the referendum and general elections are described. In a second part, the reasons why public opinion has continued to assess the economic situation of the country during this period as positive are explained. The third part seeks to explain some of the peculiarities of the geopolitical attitudes of the Belarusian population. A final part focuses on a dramatic cleavage in Belarusian society that can be understood as a root cause of the ongoing instability of the country, implying an uncertain future.

Belarus after the National Referendum of October 2004

On October 17, 2004, Belarusian politics came to a crucial impasse. In an attempt to prolong his rule, Alyaksandr Lukashenka organized a national referendum with the aim of removing time limits for presidential terms from the constitution. A general election was organized to coincide with the referendum in order to avert attention from its political significance and to ensure that the parliament would remain under the firm control of the president. According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), 90.3 percent of registered voters participated in the national referendum and general elections in October 2004. According to opinion polls conducted by the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys during the election on October 17, the turnout was estimated at 87.3 percent, while a public opinion poll conducted nationally by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IIEPS) after the referendum in November 2004 determined a turnout of 82.7 percent.

According to the results of this poll only 49 percent of respondents said that they voted in favor of changing the constitution. This figure is almost identical to the estimates provided by Gallup (48.4 percent of voters), and it is in marked

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contrast to the result announced by the Central Election Commission, which set the figure of those in favor of changing the constitution at almost 79 percent. It was on the basis of these conflicting results that the international community refused to recognize the Belarusian general elections and referendum as free and fair.

However, further polling revealed that an estimated 57.7 percent of respondents had never even heard about the Gallup research (32.7 percent of respondents indicated they had heard about it), and only 28.6 percent of those polled think that the data provided by Gallup is honest and correct (44.3 percent were of the opinion that the figures announced by the Central Election Commission were correct). To a certain extent this could explain why the announcement of the real results of voting did not become a crucial factor in provoking change in Belarus, as was the case in Serbia in 2000 or in Georgia in 2003.

An analysis of the responses to the poll provides insight into the character of the average Lukashenka supporter and opponent. Typical Lukashenka supporters are a) female, in retirement, having completed elementary education or having not completed secondary education, and b) elderly public sector workers living in villages or in the Eastern regions of Belarus, in particular, in the Homel region. Typical Lukashenka opponents are a) young, employed in the private sector, having completed higher education, and b) students living in Minsk or another large city, in particular, in the Brest region.

It should be noted that the result of the referendum changed the relevance of the general elections, essentially rendering them insignificant. Given the stipulations of the political system, with the right to remain in office beyond 2006 secured and with parliament continuing to have little influence, there was little indication that any change in Belarusian politics would be possible. Although a near majority of voters polled (over 40 percent) indicated they did not discuss who to vote for in the general election, such conversations did take place in every fourth Belarusian family. The choice of voters was to the greatest extent determined by the referendum. One of the first questions asked in discussions with candidates in the parliamentary elections was ideological in nature. They were questioned on their attitude to the constitutional amendment. Perhaps, this is why polling shows that over one third of respondents had already chosen their candidate long before the election. If one compares the differing ways in which Lukashenka supporters and opponents resolved the issue, one finds that twice as many Lukashenka supporters (52.5 percent) chose their candidate long before the election as Lukashenka opponents (26.7 percent). To put it differently, the president's supporters were still well organized, mobile and willing to support their candidate.

According to the official interpretation of the results of the parliamentary elections, Belarusians were in full agreement with the socio-economic course being steered by the incumbent authorities and, hence, gave their votes to those who positioned themselves in support of that course, thereby ousting the opposition, none of whose candidates actually managed to win a seat in parliament. Yet, exit polls conducted in some constituencies, as well as

opinion polls conducted by ISEPS paint a very different picture. Slightly over one third of respondents indicated that they voted for candidates supporting Lukashenka, while over 30 percent of Belarusians voted either for opponents or for independent candidates. According to such figures, the composition of parliament should have been very different. Lukashenka required an outright triumph (as in the case of the referendum). He required not just mere control over parliament, but total control. In the first place, such an "elegant" result actively works in favor of the myth that there is only one politician in the country who has no serious opponents. Secondly, it releases that politician from the obligation to consider the interests of the remainder of society, the part that may not support him, and therefore, ensures that no compromises have to be made.

Dynamics in Socio-Economic Attitudes

Opinion polls indicate that Belarusians consider their personal economic situation quite positively. Thus, since 2003, the number of those who consider their economic situation to have improved over the three months preceding being polled increased more than three times (from 6.5 to 23.5 percent), while the number of those who consider their situation worsened decreased almost three-fold (from 41.6 to 14.2 percent). Despite the fact that the number of those who consider their economic situation unchanged increased by approximately 10 percent, the general distribution of respondents' assessments demonstrates a perception of significant change for the better. Noteworthy is the fact that the most significant growth in improvement took place in 2005, indicating that the authorities had begun to prepare for the presidential elections well in advance. The same trend is confirmed by respondents' assessments of their incomes. Thus, in June 2004, the correlation of those who had a per capita income below the minimal consumer budget (MCB) and those who had income over the MCB was 4.5 vs. 1. For 2006, however, this correlation declined to 2 vs. 1. In other words, if in 2004 four out of five respondents lived below the minimum subsistence level, today only two out of three face the same situation. Nevertheless, and despite these perceived improvements in the economic situation, the quality of life in Belarus is generally considered in not very positive terms. Thus, a quarter of respondent considers it as very or quite bad, and 57.6 percent of respondents considered it as moderate. Just fewer than 18 percent of respondents consider the quality of life in Belarus quite or very good.

Analysis shows that assessments of quality of life affect electoral behavior most significantly. Thus, among those who considered quality of life good, 91.3 percent were going to vote on March 19, 2006, in comparison to only 57.2 percent among those who considered it bad. Furthermore, 80.6 percent of those who considered quality of life to be good were going to vote in favor of Lukashenka, while only 5.1 percent of these intended to vote in

favor of Alyaksandr Milinkevich. This compares with 25 percent among those who considered quality of life bad intending to vote for Lukashenka, while 36.8 percent of these intended to vote in favor of Milinkevich. In other words, support to one or another candidate in the presidential elections was significantly determined by the voters' assessment of the quality of their lives and this assessment does not correlate with respondents' incomes. The result is reversed for those respondents whose per capita income is below the MCB. The number of Lukashenka supporters is 10 percent higher than among those whose per capita income is over the MCB (62 percent vs. 52.5 percent). This demonstrates that people are significantly concerned about more than only the economic aspects of the quality of their lives. For example, there is a direct correlation between respondents' negative opinions of the authorities and assessments of the quality of their lives. Less than 20 percent of those who consider the authorities negatively are among those who are satisfied with the quality of their lives, and they make up more than half of those who are dissatisfied.

A pre-election poll indicated that the most important problems to determine the electoral choice of Belarusians in the presidential election of March 19, 2006 were socio-economic, mirroring previous occasions and including general quality of life (mentioned by 44.2 percent of respondents), price rises (31.8 percent), healthcare (24.8 percent), and jobs (23.1 percent). Any other problems, including democracy, independence, corruption, crime, and freedom of conscience remain less important for Belarusians. Therefore, those politicians who were seen by voters to ensure the improvement of socio-economic conditions had a higher chance of electoral success.

This is one of the most important explanations for the growth of Lukashenka's popularity rating (from 47.7 percent just after the referendum in October 2004 to 58.6 percent just before the presidential election of 2006). Twice as many Belarusians considered that their socio-economic conditions would improve if Lukashenka won the election (i.e. "optimists") than those who considered that their conditions would worsen (i.e. "pessimists"). Nevertheless, when asked about an eventual victory of a democratic candidate, the number of "optimists" and "pessimists" was equal. Furthermore, the number of "optimists" that expected Lukashenka's victory was twice that of "optimists" that expected the victory of a democratic candidate. When asked to consider their socio-economic perspectives in the eventuality of the victory of a democratic candidate, more than one third of respondents could not give any definitive answer. It is possible, therefore, to conclude that other candidates did not succeed in convincing voters of the advantages offered by their socio-economic programs.

A further consideration is that over the last two years, the number of those who expect to see a deterioration in the socio-economic situation in the near future has decreased two-fold and that the number of those who expect to see an improvement has increased two-fold. In 2004, the number of the former was twice the latter. In 2006, the situation has been reversed. Thus, pessimism

concerning the immediate socio-economic perspectives of Belarus among Belarusians has developed into growing optimism.

What are the reasons for this change? One is certainly the massive concentration of economic resources in the hands of the authorities and what they have done with them (for example, increasing salaries, pensions, stipends, reducing the rate of interest for loans to different social groups etc.). Another is the increased and aggressive use of propaganda campaigns by the authorities concerning its socio-economic achievements and against a stereotypical notion of the "Western lifestyle". Together, and over several years, these have significantly affected Belarusian mass consciousness. For example, analyses undertaken by the author show a significant deterioration in public assessments of the socio-economic achievements of neighboring countries over the last years. Thus, the number of those who consider the standard of living in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland as higher than in Belarus, has significantly decreased (by as much as 12 to 24 percent). At the same time, the number of those who consider the standard of living in neighboring countries as similar to that in Belarus or as worse has increased. Paradoxically, the basic indicators that characterize the standard of living in these countries are still far away from being achieved in Belarus, even if one takes a mid-term perspective.

Dynamics in Geopolitical Attitudes

Despite the popularity of the politician who, ten years ago, promised "not to lead his people after the civilized world", Belarusians seem to have relatively kind feelings to the so-called civilized world. Today, 36.4 percent of respondents express positive attitudes to the European Union, while only 12.9 percent are negatively disposed. Approximately one third expressed indifference. 51 percent of respondents think that people live better in EU countries, while the opposite view is shared by two times fewer respondents. Almost two thirds of Belarusians would "like to live like people in EU countries". Less than 30 percent would not. It is noteworthy that slightly more respondents would like to live like people in the EU as compared to those who said that people in the united Europe live better than in Belarus. These results beg the question, why? Giving an assessment of the European Union involves reflection on a political issue. Thus, it is difficult for some to give preference to the EU as compared to Belarus because of their patriotic feelings. When the question seems to have no political pretext and does not involve comparison with the homeland, the preference given to the EU appears to dominate.

At the same time, respondents feel they have a lack of information about life in EU countries, but still demonstrate that they would love to know more. Thus to the question, "Would you like to know more about what is going on in the EU member states as well as about the activities of European organizations?", 54 percent of respondents answered positively, and only 32.6 percent answered negatively. As for fellow citizens who managed to enter educational institutions

or to find a job in EU countries, Belarusians generally have a positive attitude towards them and do not think they are traitors or turncoats.

Yet more thorough research shows that the attitude of Belarusians towards the European Union is both unsteady and contradictory. Thus, if the number of supporters of Belarus entering the EU exceeded 60 percent in December 2002, it had declined to a low of 36.7 percent in December 2005. And, the reason? It might follow that the accession of neighboring countries, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, to the EU would strengthen pro-European attitudes in Belarusian society, as more Belarusians would now be able to see this united Europe with their own eyes. But, according to the results of recent polls, EU countries are not unfamiliar to Belarusians. Each fourth Belarusian has visited a country in the EU in the past five years. Furthermore, accession of the new EU member states, or to be more precise, the Belarusian public's assessment of the consequences of accession to the EU for these countries, seems to have turned a proportion of Belarusians off Europe. Thus, to the question: "Neighboring countries of Belarus (Poland, Latvia and Lithuania) are EU members from May 1, 2004. In your opinion, has living in these countries become better or worse?" almost one quarter of respondents answered "became worse", and another quarter answered, "remains the same". Less than 20 percent answered "became better", while almost a quarter is not sure.

Influential as they may be, however, the Belarusian state-run mass media are not almighty and have so far failed to persuade Belarusians that their condition is pure paradise as compared to life in the EU. Such negative assessments might, however, be the result of discussions with Poles and Lithuanians, with whom Belarusians regularly communicate. Judgments on the situation in the new EU member states cannot yet, however, be considered clear-cut, as people often interpret uncertainty in negative terms. Against the background of great expectations reality is often considered worse than it actually is. Indeed, positive changes are taken as self-evident, while negative changes are experienced painfully.

The recent conflict over the Union of Poles in Belarus, which developed into a large international row between Belarus and its most influential neighbor and closest EU member state, is probably also at the root of such reserved assessments of the European Union. In December 2005, when the conflict had already died down, Belarusians felt markedly more distant towards the Polish stance than even at the peak of the conflict. This can certainly, at least in part, be attributed to the efforts of the state-run mass media. Thus, to the question: "In 2005, the conflict over the Union of Poles in Belarus caused significant tension and strain in relations between Belarus and Poland. In your opinion, who is most to blame for this situation?" 31.4 percent of respondents in September 2005 answered "the Polish authorities" or "leaders of the Union of Poles", and by December, the figure had risen to almost 38 percent. The number of those who answered "the Belarusian authorities", however, decreased almost two-fold (from 19.7 to 10.6 percent).

Public opinion polls show that despite all concerns, and although respondents

are split almost equally as regards the necessity for Belarus to join the European Union, it is noteworthy that less than 30 percent of them think that Belarus will never enter the EU and over 40 percent say that Belarus will sooner or later join the united Europe. Hence, it can be concluded that the prospects of European integration for Belarus are not so vague or distant as the current authorities would have the citizens believe.

At the same time, opinion polls show that pro-Russian attitudes and sympathies in Belarusian society are still high. Thus, to the question: "What variant of Belarus-Russia relations would be better from your point of view?" 45.5 percent of respondents said "good neighborhood of two independent states", 39.2 percent indicated "a union of two independent states", and 13.6 percent indicated "integration into one state" in February 2006. Responding to the question "If a referendum on the unification of Belarus and Russia takes place tomorrow, how would you vote?", 43.3 percent said "in favor of unification" and 33.2 percent indicated against (the remainder was unsure or would not vote at all). These attitudes are not dangerous for Belarusian state sovereignty, but they show that pro-Russian attitudes in Belarus today are higher than in any other country of the region. In the case of having to make a clear choice between unification with Russia and entering the EU, the correlation between "Russo-Belarusians" and "Euro-Belarusians" is estimated today as 2 vs. 1.

The data collected in our poll is also confirmed by the presidential election campaign and the contents of candidates' programs and statements. All of them tried to take into account the widespread pro-Russian attitude of Belarusian society. This was manifest in a variety of forms, from the statements each candidate made on television in Russian language to open references to their "special interest in close and good relations with Russia". Hence, the presidential campaign of 2006 did not focus significantly on competition between Russia and the West, and all the candidates tried to avoid that they would be perceived by the public as favoring only one geopolitical "pole". Thus, Milinkevich, whom the authorities and other competitors tried to label as a "pro-Western" candidate, spoke openly against Belarus entering NATO and about Belarusian accession to the EU as a long term plan. Even Lukashenka made references to the value of the national sovereignty and the independence of Belarus, and stated that the Kremlin did not support him. Such a convergence among the geopolitical positions of candidates for the presidency meant that the perspectives for the ongoing and future geopolitical stance of Belarus did not become a hot issue in the campaign, with the competing candidates preferring to discuss other issues.

The research data underlying this article demonstrates that the major reason for this situation is that both "Russo-Belarusians" and "Euro-Belarusians" form significant and influential parts of the electorate, and no serious politicians could ignore their interests or wishes completely. Furthermore, pro-Russian attitudes in Belarus do not necessarily imply anti-European attitudes. On many counts they are very complementary. Therefore, it is necessary for democratic

politicians to maintain a balanced discourse and to promote Belarusian openness both to the East and to the West.

The Societal Divide is Widening

Comparative analysis of the demographics of Lukashenka's supporters and opponents shows that these two groups differ significantly. Elderly voters with a low level of education, those who are economically inactive or in retirement, and who live in villages are a dominant majority among the president's convinced supporters. Their economic and political standpoints are very explicit. They are clearly against the privatization of state property, and they are not of the opinion that there are problems of democracy in Belarus, or that the government has infringed human rights. The majority voted "for" at the referendum and supported Lukashenka's candidates in the parliamentary elections that they consider to have been both free and fair. Lastly, this electorate is very suspicious of both the European Union and the United States of America.

By contrast, citizens with a high level of education, the young or middle-aged, those who are economically active and resident in big cities, prevail among the opponents of the president. They speak out in favor of privatization and are seriously concerned about human rights infringements, the Belarusian political climate and the state of democracy in the country. The majority voted "against" at the referendum and supported alternative or independent candidates in the parliamentary elections, which they do not consider to have been either free or fair. They also demonstrate positive attitudes towards the European Union and the United States.

The difference between the two groups is especially striking if one considers the extent to which they are informed and share certain cultural features. Thus, the opponents of the president can be seen as being able to cope better with the process of globalization that even Belarus has not been immune to, while his supporters remain isolated and lag behind.

In itself, this is nothing new and the results of polls and surveys undertaken by ISEPS have time and again confirmed this constellation. The official approach to this important societal cleavage is well known: "People living in Belarus, just like in other countries, have different values. This is quite natural." But, in recent years, presidential supporters have come to believe that living in Belarus is not worse than living in neighboring countries. Hence, they are optimistic about the future and do not plan to move to another country. Presidential opponents are convinced that living in Belarus is much worse than living in neighboring countries. They are more pessimistic about their prospects and many of them are ready and willing to emigrate.

It is obvious that a socially weak and passive group of voters who are nostalgic about the past dominates the president's current electoral constituency. Under normal conditions, this group gradually and naturally decreases in size and

its political influence inevitably also declines. But, in Belarus, a socially strong and active group that could move the country forward at any relevant pace of development in political and social terms remains very much at the fringe of society. Perhaps, the only point in which presidential opponents will give his supporters some credit is that they are a consolidated and well organized constituency. One month before the presidential election of 2006, more than 90 percent of the president's supporters could confirm that they would once again vote for Lukashenka, while only less than 70 percent of those opposing the president were ready to support one of the democratic candidates. The president's supporters all came to the October 2004 election and referendum with transparent intentions, unlike his opponents, who look uncoordinated and even confused in comparison. The current course steered by the Belarusian authorities serves the interests of the president's supporters, while those of his opponents are ignored or even suppressed. Thus, the ideological split in Belarusian society that was visible already at the beginning of the 1990's has widened significantly in the years of Lukashenka's rule, jeopardizing the unity of Belarusians as a nation.

On the eve of the presidential elections in March 2006, this cleavage was still markedly visible. In response to the question, "If A. Lukashenka is competing with only one other candidate in the presidential elections, would you vote for him or the alternative candidate?" 58.7 percent of respondents indicated "in favor of A. Lukashenka", 30.6 percent indicated "in favor of the alternative candidate" (while over 10 percent were undecided). This means that at least one third of voters (i.e. almost 2.5 million people) want change and have understood that their expectations will not be fulfilled if Lukashenka is reelected. In response to the question, "For whom would you vote in the presidential election if there are the following four candidates on the ballot?", 4.5 percent of respondents indicated Syarhey Haydukevich, 6.4 percent indicated Alyaksandr Kazulin, 58.6 percent indicated Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and 16.6 percent indicated Alyaksandr Milinkevich. In response to the question, "If A. Lukashenka is competing with only one candidate in the presidential election, which of the following three politicians would you vote for?", 13.5 percent of respondents said S. Haydukevich, 10.3 percent opted for A. Kazulin, and 26.6 percent signalled support for A. Milinkevich. Clearly, the total number of Milinkevich supporters exceeds the number of Haydukevich and Kazulin supporters counted together. This means that most Belarusians who want change consider Milinkevich their candidate.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above analysis of available data, it is possible to conclude that both the widespread view that Lukashenka's power is stable and supported by the people (promoted by the Lukashenka regime and its allies, including Russia) and the idea that his regime has lost its public support and could be

overthrown with just a little more effort (promoted by some opposition leaders and Western experts) are equally irrelevant. The evidence suggests that the Belarusian regime does not have enough public support for a sustainable development within the authoritarian framework, which explains why the regime has become progressively more repressive inside the country and has continued to isolate itself from the international community. Nevertheless, to become a crucial factor of change in Belarus, the democratic alternative, which is already relatively well developed in society, needs to be strengthened further. This requires further efforts towards mustering internal and external support for democratic development and change in Belarus.

The Democratic Political Opposition

David R. Marples and Uladzimir Padhol

This article examines the history of the democratic opposition in Belarus prior to the presidential election of 2006. The focus will be with political parties and the coalitions these have formed in their opposition to the Lukashenka regime since the mid-1990's, and most recently in preparation of the 2006 presidential elections.

Belarus has numerous political parties. They are small in numbers, ranging from 1,100 to 17,000 in membership, and all of them have failed to break through the critical level of support of ten percent of the electorate. An opinion poll conducted in the spring of 2003 by the Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Studies (IIEPS) in Minsk found the following percentage levels of support in response to the question: "Which political party do you consider closest to your political views?"

Liberal-Democratic Party	6.2
United Civic Party	4.7
Belarusian Social Democratic <i>Hramada</i>	4.5
Party of Communists of Belorussia	4.3
Belarusian Green Party	4.1
Belarusian Popular Front	3.9
Party of Labor	3.7
Belarusian Social Democratic Party " <i>Narodnaya Hramada</i> "	3.0
Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front	2.6
None of the above	37.5

The Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front (CCP BPF)

The Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) was created in the USSR in the late 1980's during the Gorbachev regime. Initially, it was established as a social-

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political movement called “*Adradzhennie*” (Revival) in 1988 and as an informal organization dealing with victims of Stalinism called “Martyrology of Belarus.” The movement was led by archeologist and historian Zyanon Paznyak and had a threefold focus on the effects of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, the fate of the Belarusian language and culture, and on the 1988 uncovering of the mass victims of Stalin’s NKVD at Kurapaty Forest outside Minsk. The founding congress of the BPF was held on June 24-25, 1989 in Vilnius, Lithuania and over the next two years, the BPF was the only organization in the republic with a strongly anti-communist orientation.

In May 1993 at its third congress, the Belarusian Popular Front was transformed into an official political party called the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front. After parliamentary chairman Stanislau Shushkevich’s removal in January 1994, and the election of Lukashenka as the first president in the summer of that year, the BPF took on the role of a more formal opposition, particularly in 1995, following the referendum that replaced the national symbols and state flag with emblems similar to those of the Soviet period. Due to their lack of success in the 1995 parliamentary elections (the BPF won no seats), Paznyak initiated several mass demonstrations in the streets of Minsk. In 1996, declaring that his life was in danger, Paznyak left Belarus and has operated from exile in Poland ever since. In 1996, he took part in the “alternative presidential elections” organized by the leaders of the parliament of the 13th session, declaring himself a presidential candidate, though he soon withdrew from the “contest”. By this time it was evident that Paznyak had become distanced from affairs in Belarus. In September 1999, at its sixth party congress, the BPF split into two factions of roughly equal size, one led by Paznyak, and one by his younger protégé Vintsuk Vyachorka. In February 2000, Paznyak’s group was formally registered by the Ministry of Justice as the Conservative-Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front.

The party is organized on a territorial basis under the ultimate authority of a congress, convoked at least once every two years. Its political platform is one of non-convoluted Belarusian nationalism. In other words, support for the Belarusian language, preservation of Belarusian territorial integrity, restoration of national symbols and the “national-ideological freedom”, and opposition to “Russian imperialism and colonialism”. The party has a strong religious element (Paznyak is a devout Catholic), and is devoted to an independent Belarus, and the protection of the Belarusian language and culture. It supports the establishment of a parliamentary republic and the election of the president by the parliament. It also stands for a market economy, and for private ownership of land and the means of production. It advocates a mixture of private and state-owned health care and medicine. In foreign affairs, the CCP BPF wishes Belarus to join NATO and develop warm relations with the political and economic structures of Europe, with an especially close partnership envisaged between Belarus and the Baltic States, Ukraine, and Poland.

The Party of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF)

The BPF in its current form is also a result of the split of 1999 and operates on a similar basis to the CCP BPF, holding a congress every two years. The congress elects the chairman of the party, the deputy chairman, the *Soim* (Assembly), and auditing committee. Its executive organ is the *Uprava* (administration), formed by the *Soim*. The chairman of the party is Vintsuk Vyachorka. Its program advocates a free, independent and consolidated Belarusian nation through its national and cultural self-awareness and spiritual rebirth on the basis of the highest moral values. Like its sister party, it focuses on family values and Belarusian cultural traditions, supports privatization of state property and the creation of a legal foundation that would support a substantial rise in foreign investment, as well as “authentic” land reform based on private ownership and the use of land as a commodity. The party program accepts the presidential form of government but proposes to reduce the authority of the president. It proposes the development of relations with neighboring countries, and first and foremost with Ukraine and Latvia which, it is anticipated, might join with Belarus to form a Baltic-Black Sea confederation of states.

The Party of Communists of Belorussia (PKB)

There are two rival communist parties in Belarus, of which only the one opposing the current regime will be discussed here, given the focus of this article on the political opposition. On December 17, 1994, at its third party congress, Syarhey Kalyakin became the party leader and the party renamed itself as the Party of Communists of Belorussia, as demanded by a new government law “About political parties”, which prohibited the use of the name of the country in the title of any party. In the elections to the new Supreme Soviet, the party received 22 percent of the popular vote, or 45 deputies, which made it the third largest faction in the assembly. Its second secretary, Vasily Novikau, was elected first deputy chairman of the parliament. The PKB opposed the constitutional changes of late 1996 and also supported the proposed impeachment of Lukashenka by the parliament (eventually thwarted by the intervention of Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin). In the presidential elections of September 2001, the PKB initially tried to advance Kalyakin as a candidate, but was unable to secure a sufficient number of signatures in support of his campaign. They then agreed to join the democratic parties in backing Uladzimir Hancharyk. Though President Lukashenka has put pressure on the PKB to unite with the pro-government party, the two parties remain far apart. Kalyakin has consistently supported the democratic parties in their efforts to form a united bloc against the government.

The party platform has been constructed according to the slogan of “democratic centralism”, and lists as its goal workers’ unity in attaining “full freedom from exploitation” and the construction of a classless society of social equality. In

the political sphere it seeks the establishment of “Soviet power”, equal rights for all citizens and considers workers’ councils the most democratic and effective form of state authority. It supports socialist control over production and a planned economy, and commodity-currency circulation under state regulations. It is prepared to allow partial private ownership during the transition from capitalism to socialism, especially for average-sized or smaller companies. It would seek to ban the sale of land. In foreign policy, it advocates “peaceful coexistence” with other nations and strongly opposes globalization, berating what it terms the “aggressive actions of the United States and NATO against other sovereign states”, necessitating building up the defense sector and backing a union with Russia.

The Social Democratic Parties of Belarus

Belarusian social democrats date their traditions back to the Socialist *Hramada* (literally “Community”) formed in late 1902, which was to play a critical role in the establishment of the Belarusian People’s Republic in March 1918 that for a brief period formed an independent republic in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. In the late 1980’s there were attempts to resurrect the party, and on December 1, 1990, a group of parliamentary deputies, academic and cultural leaders announced their intention to form a new Social Democratic *Hramada*. Its founding congress was held in Minsk on March 2-3, 1991, and Professor Mikhail Tkachev was elected chairman of the central *rada*, or council. Two months later the *Hramada* formed a faction of 15 delegates in the Supreme Soviet, led by Viktor Alampiev. Tkachev died on October 30, 1992, and was replaced by Aleh Trusau, a parliamentary deputy. Trusau, also a member of the BPF, tried to unite the two groups. At the same time, a second social democratic party began to form from communists who leaned toward democracy and who supported Gorbachev’s reforms. One of the leading figures in this group in its early days was Lukashenka himself, then a parliamentary deputy. Under the name the Party of People’s Accord (PPA), this second group held a founding congress in April 1992, electing Henadz Karpenka as party leader.

In the parliamentary elections of 1995, three members of the PPA were elected to the new assembly but the Belarusian Social Democratic *Hramada* (BSDH) failed to elect any deputies. Both Trusau and Karpenka gave up their positions after this failure, and the two groups began to consolidate, particularly after Mikola Statkevich became the leader of the BSDH. In June 1996, the two parties combined to form the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People’s *Hramada*), or BSDP PH, with co-leadership between Statkevich and Leonid Sechka. The constitutional crisis in the summer and fall of 1996 caused a split in the party, with Sechka supporting the president’s plans to enhance his authority, while Statkevich along with other prominent members, such as Myacheslau Hryb, Pyotr Krauchenka, and Uladzimir Nistyuk opposing. Sechka was expelled from the party in December 1996. Together with a breakaway group, he formed

the Social Democratic Party of People’s Accord (SDPPA) in March 1997. A third group, initiated by the Belarusian National Party of Anatol Ostapenka in the summer of 1997, combined with the original PPA faction (Trusau) and formed a third Social Democratic Party *Hramada* under the leadership of Stanislau Shushkevich in February 1998.

During the presidential elections of 2001, the Statkevich group, the Belarusian Labor Party and the Women’s Party “*Nadezhda*” supported the campaign of Hancharyk. In December, fourteen regional organizations of the Shushkevich group decided to defect to Statkevich’s BSDH, accusing Shushkevich of being authoritarian. An attempt in August 2001 to establish a united party under Valentina Polevikova fell through when the Ministry of Justice refused to register such a party, citing legislative violations at the constituent congress. In 2005, the party achieved some unity at a unification congress held in March, in which Shushkevich did not participate. Following the arrest and incarceration of Statkevich on March 22 for his role in the street protests that followed the 2004 parliamentary elections, Alyaksandr Kazulin, former Rector of the Belarusian State University and leader of the “Will of the People” movement, was elected as the united leader in the summer of 2005. Kazulin was advanced by the united party as a presidential candidate for the 2006 elections, as the party opted not to join the united democratic movement that supported a single candidate.

Kazulin was born on November 25, 1955 in Minsk, and served in the Baltic Fleet in the period 1974-76. Subsequently, he studied at the faculty of mechanics and mathematics at the Belarusian State University, and later taught at the same institution. From 1988 he began a career at the Ministry of Education, and attained the position of First Deputy Minister, completing his doctoral degree during this same period. He was appointed Rector of the State University in 1996 by Lukashenka, and succeeded in improving the financial situation of the university by introducing several radical schemes. In 2003, he was dismissed from his post, ostensibly for a scandal that involved the university’s link with a factory that extracted metals from waste. But Kazulin had been notably unresponsive to the president’s campaign for reelection in 2001. His emergence as the new leader of the united Social Democrats was somewhat unexpected as he was clearly a compromise candidate among the different factions.

The United Civic Party (UCP)

The United Civic Party emerged from the United Democratic Party of Belarus (UDPB), the first political party to be registered by the Ministry of Justice in March 1991. The UDPB comprised people of very diverse views, from Pan-Slavs to Belarusian nationalists. After its unification with the Civic Party at a founding congress in October 1995, a leading economist and the former chairman of the National Bank of Belarus, Stanislau Bahdankevich, was elected

leader of the joint party. The goal was to create a party of “liberal-conservative” orientation and a large faction in the parliament, and to pursue privatization of state property, the protection of the constitution and respect for human rights. In April 1998, the political council of the UCP supported the candidacy of Viktor Karpenka as national opposition leader and the single candidate of the democratic forces in a forthcoming presidential election, anticipated for the summer of 1999 when Lukashenka’s official mandate as president ended. In January 1999, most of the party supported the concept of alternative presidential elections put forward by UCP leader Viktor Hanchar. However, the party then suffered serious setbacks. Karpenka died in April 1999, another leader, Yury Zakharenka, former interior minister, disappeared in May, while Hanchar was kidnapped in September and has disappeared since. An internal conflict then ensued, and at the party’s fifth congress, Bahdankevich stood down, while Anatol Lyabedzka was elected as the new chairperson.

Other Opposition Parties

The other major opposition parties in Belarus include first of all the Belarusian Labor Party (BLP), founded in November 1993. It has formed “party clubs” in each region and oblast city and is run by a congress, which elects its chairperson, deputy chairpersons, and council for a period of two years. Its chairperson is Alyaksandr Bukhvostov, and its program combines social democracy with concern for the workers’ movement. It advocates a strong system of state support for the social needs of workers (health care, unemployment, etc) and care for veterans, invalids, children and large families. In August 2004, the Belarusian authorities officially disbanded the party.

Another opposition party, the Belarusian Women’s Party “*Nadezhda*” (Hope), was formed in April 1994, has branches throughout Belarus and holds a party congress every three years. As well as promoting the equal rights of women in society, the party seeks to raise the living standards of the population, and the construction of a democratic, social, and lawful state, the protection of mothers and children, and the promotion of family values. It supports a market economy with equality of all forms of ownership and advocates close cooperation with trade union organizations. On August 17, 1992, a special congress of the party took place, and elected a new leader, Valentina Matusevich. Former leader, Valentina Polevikova contested the results of the congress and subsequently, in June 2003, she organized the founding congress of a Belarusian Democratic Party which, however, has not to date been registered by the justice ministry.

Attempts at Cooperation before 2005

The first notable effort to coordinate opposition activities was the consultative council of the opposition political parties initiated in 1999 by the OSCE Advisory

and Monitoring Group in Minsk, under the leadership of Ambassador Hans-Georg Wieck. The major parties in forming this council were the Belarusian Popular Front, the United Civic Party, and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Statkevich), along with the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, the Assembly of Informal Organizations, and the civic initiative Charter 97. Further parties participating in the council included the Belarusian Women’s Party “*Nadezhda*”, the Belarusian Party of Labor, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (*Narodnaya Hramada*), the Liberal-Democratic Party, the United Civic Party, the Belarusian Social Democratic *Hramada*, the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, and the Party of Communists of Belorussia.

Following the split in the BPF in 1999, the CCP BPF of Paznyak left the consultative council on the grounds that its existence constituted collaboration with the Lukashenka regime. The council held several rounds of talks with the government, but the latter refused to follow the suggestions of the OSCE to end arbitrary arrests, allow equal access to state media, and to increase the authority of the parliament. On July 2, 2000 an extraordinary congress of democratic forces formed a coordinating council, made up of the above-listed parties with the exception of the communists, along with the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, the Assembly of Informal Organizations, and Charter 97. Over the next months and years, however, various parties and groups left the council: the BSDP (*Narodnaya Hramada*) and Labor Party in December 2000, the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions in April 2002, and the Women’s Party “*Nadezhda*” in August 2002. In effect, what remained of the council was a bloc of right and center-right political forces, whose main activities have been limited to protests and a boycott of the parliamentary elections of 2000. Objecting to this boycott, Statkevich’s BSDP (*Narodnaya Hramada*) equally decided to leave the council.

In December 2001, a group of center-left parties, trade unions, and public associations formed a confederation for social change. Campaigns were launched for the monitoring of the 2001 presidential elections (under Myachoslav Hryb), and to elect a single candidate for president from a broad citizens’ coalition, organized by General Pavel Kozlousky, former Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir, former agriculture minister Vasily Leonou, communist party leader Kalyakin, the deputy of the former Supreme Soviet Syamon Domash, the chairman of the Belarusian Trade Unions and the eventual opposition presidential candidate Uladzimir Hancharyk. All these efforts, eventually, had only limited success, primarily owing to the various groups’s widely differing interests and – in several instances – to complicated relationships among individual leaders.

Over the years that followed, several further attempts at cooperation among different political parties were launched in the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 2004 and the simultaneous referendum on presidential term limits, and prior to the presidential election of 2006. A first formation that emerged came to be known as the Bloc of Five Parties, comprising the United Civic Party led by Lyabedzka, the Belarusian Popular Front headed by Vyachorka, the Social Democratic Party under Shushkevich, the Party of Labor under Bukhvostov, and

the Party of Communists of Belorussia led by Kalyakin. The second formation, now defunct, was a group of ten to eleven deputies in the truncated Belarusian parliament known as the *Respublika* (Republic) faction and led by General Valery Fralou, prominent Baptist Ivan Pashkevich, businessman Syarhey Skrabets, and former Olympic rowing champion Ivan Parfenovich.

A third group consisted of pro-democracy deputies of the local Soviets that joined forces, while a fourth coalition, a public movement called “For a Dignified (*dostoinyi*) Life” included Republic deputies and some members of the former communist *nomenklatura*. Lastly, several important political parties remained outside the Bloc of Five Parties: the Social Democratic Party “*Narodnaya Hramada*” of Statkevich, the Women’s Party “*Nadezhda*” of Valentina Matusевич, the Liberal-Democratic Party of Syarhey Haydukevich, and the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front headed by Zyanon Paznyak.

In addition to the above, numerous associations, both registered and unregistered, also played a role in these coalitions, including youth groups, women’s associations, NGOs, and public movements. Several of these proved influential on one or more occasions. The public association Charter 97, led by Andrei Sannikov, helped to organize the March 2003 demonstration “For a Better Life” and plays an important role as a provider of independent information through its web page. The Youth Movement for a Democratic and European Belarus *Zubr* (or Bison, one of the national symbols of Belarus), and *Malady Front* (Young Front) are two of the more influential networks of youth groups. Of importance are also the Union of Belarusian Students, the Independent and Free Trade Unions led by Alyaksandr Yaroshuk, and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee headed by Tatsyana Protska.

The Bloc of Five Parties campaigned actively for the 2004 parliamentary elections in Belarus. The parties divided the country into districts in order to create an initial list of candidates for election. In an article in the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya*, Anatol Lyabedzka declared that those who remained outside the bloc should be regarded as opponents. This group included the deputies of the Republic group in the parliament, part of the former Soviet *nomenklatura*, and a group headed by Charter 97. Sannikov, leader of the latter, advocated the creation of a movement called “For a Free Life,” to be joined by democrats who would then stand for election.

The Bloc of Five Parties struggled to maintain a semblance of unity. One example was the influence of Polevikova who, while on good terms with the leaders of the five parties, allegedly prevented the Belarusian Women’s Party “*Nadezhda*” (which removed her as leader in 2002) from joining the coalition. In turn, Statkevich remained aloof from the coalition, in support of “*Nadezhda*”, but also led an independent “Euro-coalition” and intended initially to run in the 2006 presidential elections.

The Election of a United Candidate

By the summer of 2005, a permanent council of pro-democracy forces was formed from the Five Plus group and a broader body of ten opposition parties and organizations, with the goal of holding a national congress of democratic forces from September 1 to October 1, 2005. The council was headed by Bukhvostov and his deputy chairmen Alyaksandr Dabravolsky (United Civic Party) and Viktor Ivashekvich (Party of the BPF). By mid-June, meetings had been held for the nomination of around 900 congress delegates, despite difficult circumstances and a constant struggle with local authorities to find meeting venues. By August, Bukhvostov noted that 80 out of a planned 143 meetings had been held. Most of the delegates elected had no party affiliation, and the two leading candidates by this stage were Alyaksandr Milinkevich, a 57-year old professor from the Hrodna region without party affiliation, and Anatol Lyabedzka, the 44-year old leader of the United Civic Party. Other contenders for the candidacy were former chairman of the Belarusian parliament, Shushkevich, and PCB chairman Kalyakin. The prospects of finding a venue for the national congress appeared dim, as cities from Minsk to Babruisk either declared suitable buildings occupied or requested exorbitant sums for room rental. Surprisingly, however, permission was given to hold the national congress at the Palace of Culture of the Minsk Automobile Factory, and more than 800 delegates gathered on October 2, 2005. Shushkevich resigned from the contest prior to the initial vote, leaving three candidates in the contest for the united leadership: Milinkevich, Lyabedzka, and Kalyakin. In the first round, Milinkevich was well ahead with 383 votes, to Lyabedzka’s 263 and Kalyakin’s 152. In the final round, Milinkevich won a narrow victory over Lyabedzka by 399 votes to 391, with 16 blank or invalid votes. In a notable triumph for democracy, Alyaksandr Milinkevich was named as the single candidate of the united democratic opposition.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the democratic opposition has consisted of diverse groups and numerous political parties that are generally small, urban, and often at odds with one another. The main opposition centers are Minsk, as clearly illustrated by the results of the 2001 presidential election, and the Hrodna region in Western Belarus. Social support for the opposition is almost negligible in the Vitebsk, Mahileu, and Homel oblasts, where the Agrarian Party and the pro-government Communist Party of Belarus remain strong. There is a notable and general lack of sympathy for opposition political parties in the rural areas of the country. Conversely, towns with heavy industry and high levels of unemployment or under-employment have supported the opposition, particularly the Party of Labor, the Liberal-Democrats and the Party of Communists of Belorussia, and these regions also are strongholds of the Federation of Free Trade Unions.

One of the main dilemmas for the opposition has been whether and how to cooperate with the Russian government on removing Lukashenka. Not surprisingly this remains a divisive issue. The two wings of the Popular Front are solidly against any form of relations with Russia, while other parties are more open to such an option. Another key issue, the question of whether to participate in official structures and elections, seems to have been resolved through the national congress of democratic forces.

Cooperation among diverse opposition forces remains a central issue in Belarus. Recent years have seen many attempts at establishing a more unified democratic opposition, few of which have been successful. Against this background, the process of electing a single joint candidate – Alyaksandr Milinkevich – to represent large parts of the anti-Lukashenka political forces in the 2006 presidential elections was a promising signal, although it remains to be seen if this newfound unity will last.

Civil Society and the Struggle for Freedom

Andrei Sannikov and Inna Kuley

There are certain rather obvious obstacles to overcome when writing about civil society under a totalitarian regime, at the same time as being part of that civil society, as the authors are. Those obstacles become even more obvious when the regime resorts to the kind of violence witnessed by the thousands of people who mounted peaceful protests in defense of their rights and liberties in Belarus in March 2006. They demonstrated the impressive metal of civil society in Belarus. For these reasons, this article will provide a broad overview of civil society activities in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections. However, this has to be done in a way that does not put at further risk any of the individuals, groups and activities involved.

The general situation in Belarus today is often compared to other post-communist states that underwent democratic revolutions recently, and where change was significantly energized and led by civic organizations. Unlike Slovakia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, however, it is all but impossible to openly express alternative views or to engage in open political and civic campaigning in Belarus. The situation in Belarus is, in important respects, unique. We need to understand how this situation came about.

Dilemmas for Civic Actors

After the presidential elections in 2001, the OSCE talked optimistically about the “vibrant civil society” that had emerged in Belarus. This was more wishful thinking than statement of fact. At that time, civil society was already deep in crisis and desperately trying to adapt to an increasingly totalitarian style of government. Civic organizations at this time were still trying to play by the established rules by registering formally, for example. To try to play by those rules was to enter a moral maze: in order to survive as officially recognized civic organizations such compromises were necessary as to call into question the purpose and *raison d'être* of real civic organizations at all. Their *modus vivendi*, under such conditions, became little more than a game of survival for survival's sake. To illustrate the point, consider the conditions attached to registration: a civic organization, such as a political party, is required at registration to provide the personal information of all members. As soon as such details are provided, therefore, the members become targets for

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repression and must either compromise further with the regime or simply suffer the consequences. Just after the congress of democratic forces was held in Minsk on October 1 and 2, 2005, the Ministry of Justice started collecting data on members of NGOs, which took part. It is strongly suspected that such information was used by the security forces to compile lists of people to be arrested on the eve of the March 19, 2006 presidential election.

In essence, the problem for civil society is this: in order to function properly, civil society requires the presence of certain conditions – freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom from interference by the government, etc. Such conditions are, to all intents and purposes, absent in Belarus. Civic organizations have operated under the kind of assumptions which are valid in most post-communist societies but which, to a large extent, no longer apply in a society, which is being run along ever more communist-era lines.

To exemplify the kind of measures, which have now been enacted in Belarus, consider the following: In October 2004, the Ministry of Justice decreed that all NGOs and parties, which have offices in residential buildings, move them to office buildings. This necessitated formal reregistration – a precarious exercise in itself, and also finding funds to pay for the new accommodation. If organizations failed to raise the money, they were simply shut down. The authorities have also sought to wipe out legitimate organizations by setting up their own “NGOs”, which they can control directly. Subsequently, they closed down independent organizations on the grounds that they had been superseded. This along with various other methods was employed to deprive the Union of Poles in Belarus and the Writers Union of their official and independent status in 2005.

This attempt to co-opt civil society has emerged as a key regime strategy. Sensitive to and scared of the potential of youth activities, the regime increased financial support to the ideologically motivated Belarusian Republican Youth Union, increasing pressure on young people to join this Komsomol-like organization to ensure the loyalty of Belarusian youth. Slavic organizations strongly supported by the regime also became very active. Immediately after the inauguration of Lukashenka in 2001, Minsk became host city for the Slavic *Sobor* (Assembly) comprising representatives from Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. In one attempt to offer justification to the blatantly rigged presidential election, the authorities even spoke about civil society coming out strongly in support of the existing regime – a clear admission by the authorities that they were aware of the potential and importance of civil society.

Civic organizations can be and have been closed down or condemned to financial ruin using a variety of different methods including politically motivated tax swoops and fines for holding unauthorized seminars or distributing non-registered information materials. The primary targets were youth organizations, such as the Youth Movement for a Democratic and European Belarus *Zubr* (Bison) or *Malady Front* (Young Front), human rights NGOs, and those civic organizations that could serve as “incubators” for broader civil society development, through information, capacity-building, resources or mobilization. In the period between the 2001 and 2006 presidential election,

more than 100 NGOs were closed down under a variety of pretexts including legal problems, criminal charges or tax evasion, to name but a few reasons typically cited for cracking down on civic organizations. Victims included well known human rights NGOs and civic groups, such as *Vyasna* (Spring), the Hrodna-based *Ratusha* (Town Hall) headed for a long time by opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, Civil Initiatives of Homel, *Vezha* from Brest, the Association of Belarusian Students, and many more. In the same period, the only Belarusian language high school, the Belarusian Humanistic Lyceum, was also closed.

The regime also keeps constant pressure on civic activists using short and long-term prison sentences and so called “*himiya*” (chemistry, or exile and compulsory labor). Before and after the 2004 parliamentary election and referendum on changes to the constitution that allowed Lukashenka to remain in government for an unlimited number of terms, well known political and civic activists were put in jail or sent to “*himiya*”, including Valery Levaneusky and Alyaksandr Vasilieu of the Republican Strike Committee of Entrepreneurs from Hrodna; Mikola Statkevich, social democratic party leader; youth leader Pavai Sevyarynets; former parliament deputy Syarhey Skrabets; and former minister, parliament deputy and ambassador Mikhail Marinich.

The general situation for civil society is, therefore, dire although there are some organizations still operating. They, however, face constant surveillance by the authorities. The independent press has virtually ceased to exist. Over fifty independent papers have been closed down. The few remaining have to deal with constant pressure from the authorities. From January 1, 2004, 34 publications ceased to exist. Detailed information on the media situation in Belarus, including media monitoring during the presidential election can be found on the web site of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (www.baj.ru). Independent papers have now lost the presence they once had and those, which have survived, quite often try to maneuver between the authorities and the opposition – a state of affairs, which has often confused their readers and left them unclear about what is actually going on. In order to survive they had to accept the circumstances and many introduced self-censorship.

An important element of civil society are independent structures of social, political and economic research, or think tanks, which inform and influence the public debate on developments in a given country. In Belarus today, few such independent institutes remain. As soon as a think tank achieves a certain degree of visibility and influence, it is either closed down or taken over by the authorities and their cronies. The Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies and the Sociological Laboratory Novak are most noteworthy. These and other independent analysts do their utmost to analyze current developments and publicize their findings, mostly in some of the remaining independent papers, magazines or internet sites, such as *Arche* (<http://arche.bymedia.net/>), *BDG* (<http://bdg.by/>), *Naviny* (<http://www.naviny.by/>), NGO Assembly (<http://www.belngo.info/>), *Nasha Niva* (www.nn.by/), and *Belarusy i Rynok* (www.belmarket.by/).

Civil Society Transformed

By the time the regime had rigged the previously mentioned referendum in 2004, allowing Lukashenka to run for as many terms as he wished, it had become obvious to everyone that a new strategy was required. It was no longer possible to work with the regime. The regime would have to be challenged head on. But it was not simply a question of confronting the regime. Civic organizations would also need to wake ordinary Belarusians from their apathetic slumber and help others overcome basic fears about losing their jobs or being kicked out of university for showing disloyalty to the regime. Both problems needed to be addressed in time for the presidential elections, which would take place in 2006. With the regime also sensing a shift in direction and setting the elections for March rather than July, the stage was set for a new phase in the development of Belarusian civil society.

Two distinct but ultimately compatible strands of development characterized that new phase. The first strand involved NGOs and other civic groups actively working with the campaign of joint opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich. Hundreds of civic activists joined regional support groups for Milinkevich's campaign and went out onto the streets to help collect the 100,000 signatures required by law for his participation in the presidential elections. Eventually close to 200,000 were brought together in support of Milinkevich. Two civic campaigns, specifically, tied their activities to the calendar of the presidential campaign: *Khopits!* (Enough!) that emerged as an ad-hoc civic coalition prior to the elections, and *Za Svabodu* (For Freedom), which was led by the NGO Assembly. The latter campaign, for example, organized a rock concert on the eve of the elections, which attracted close to 10,000 people. The former, together with other groups, had a noticeable presence in the "tent city", which was set up in the central square of Minsk in protest at the rigging of the March 19 elections. Well-known figures from civil society – notably from the independent Writers Union – were also supportive of the campaign led by Alyaksandr Kazulin, the other anti-Lukashenka candidate in the presidential election. An important project to mention in this context is the independent election monitoring that was planned by the Partnership group, similar to earlier observation activities during the 2004 referendum and parliamentary elections. However, shortly before the elections, key activists were arrested by the KGB and accused of plotting against the authorities and preparing terrorist attacks.

The second main strand of new thinking culminated in the Jeans Solidarity Campaign or Solidarity 16. This campaign, which engineered key symbols later taken up by Milinkevich, such as denim blue, was not initially connected with the elections. It started on September 16, 2005 when Mikita Sasim, an activist from the *Zubr* youth resistance movement was brutally beaten by police for hoisting his denim shirt aloft in the form of a flag at a small protest gathering in the center of Minsk. The protest action had been called to commemorate the disappearance of two opponents of the regime – Viktor Hanchar, deputy

speaker of parliament, and businessman Anatoly Krasousky – on the same day six years earlier. From then on leading civic activists urged people to light candles in their apartment windows on the 16th of each month in a silent show of solidarity with the disappeared and the imprisoned. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians took part. According to some opinion polls 20.8 percent of Belarusians knew of and supported the campaign; in Minsk, knowledge of the campaign was 31.7 percent, while support stood at 21.4 percent. As time went by, the Solidarity 16 and Jeans Solidarity campaign became ever more closely associated with the political opposition and achieved major successes domestically in rallying large numbers of people to their own and Milinkevich's cause, simultaneously attracting the support and attention of the foreign media and foreign dignitaries such as former Czech President Vaclav Havel, leading figures in Poland's "Solidarity" movement and many other politicians across Europe and America.

Conclusion: Getting Together, Staying Together

In general, during the preparation for the presidential election and in the events after the election, it can be stated clearly that coordination and cooperation between different groups increased substantially. The first powerful impetus was provided by the congress of democratic forces at the beginning of October, which selected a single candidate in a democratic voting procedure. The fact that Alyaksandr Milinkevich was a respected representative of the NGO sector also contributed to the mobilization of activists. He and many members of his team used the resources and contacts in the NGO community to organize the campaign. The campaign created a real coalition built from a variety of civic groups. In the end, activists from both traditional civil society and the overtly political opposition freely reveled in each other's symbols and logos such as blue scarves, jeans-ribbons, and pins saying "For Freedom".

The key point to understand about civil society in contemporary Belarus is that it came to the world of politics because the world of politics, in the form of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's repressive regime, came to it. The totalitarian mindset believes that all things are political. In an irony which may well escape it, the regime's quasi-totalitarian tendencies have become a self-fulfilling prophesy and have pushed large sections of civil society right into the arms of the overtly political opposition. As the protests following the elections showed, what remains of Belarusian civil society is now deeply intertwined with the campaign to oust Lukashenka and his cohorts from power. They were left with little choice. And if this kind of combination of forces does eventually bring the regime in Minsk to its knees it will have none other than the regime itself to thank for bringing it together in the first place. For this to become possible, however, support, cooperation and solidarity of international partners will have to continue and further grow.