

The Presidential Election Campaign: An Analysis

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The date for the 2006 presidential elections was announced by the Belarusian House of Representatives on December 16, 2005. The date provided – March 19 – was much earlier than expected by many within and outside the country. It had been anticipated that the election would be held in July. The date selection followed a summit meeting between President Lukashenko and President Vladimir Putin of Russia at Sochi (December 15, 2005). Putin may have been concerned that the election should not coincide with the summer G-8 summit that was to be chaired by Russia. The date also signified that the Belarus election would be held just one week prior to the parliamentary elections in Ukraine, which clearly would be a focus of international attention. By December 28, the Central Election Commission (CEC), chaired by Lidziya Yarmoshyna, had registered eight initiative groups supporting various contenders: Alyaksandr Lukashenko, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, Alyaksandr Kazulin, Syarhey Haydukevich, Zyanon Paznyak, Alyaksandr Voytovich, Valery Fralou and Syarhey Skrabets.

With the exception of the incumbent president Lukashenko and Haydukevich, the leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party, all could be termed members of the political opposition. There then followed an inspection of the candidates over a period of one month. All had to be citizens of Belarus, who had lived in the country without interruption for a decade prior to the election, and over the age of 35. The initiative groups had the task of amassing a minimum of 100,000 signatures, which also had to be verified, and have no more than 15 percent declared invalid.

Gradually the fringe candidates began to drop out of the contest. Voytovich, the sixty seven year old former president of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, and a well-known physicist, had formerly been the chairman of the upper house of Parliament, but had been dismissed in 2003 upon reaching retirement age and was the first to drop out. Skrabets, former leader of the *Respublika* faction in the pre-October 2004 parliament, was on trial for alleged embezzlement from mid-January 2006, and his campaign never really began. Fralou, also a member of that same faction and a former military general, soon joined the camp of Kazulin. Paznyak, the founder of the Belarusian Popular Front, as a political exile, could not have a major impact on the campaign, and alternated between demands for a complete boycott of the election and mounting a protest on the day of the election by retaining ballot papers. The result was that after the collection of signatures, only four candidates remained:

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Lukashenka, Haydukevich (Liberal-Democratic Party), Milinkevich (united democratic candidate), and Kazulin (Social Democratic Party). Haydukevich, a candidate in 2001, had buried his differences with Lukashenka. Ostensibly he ran to validate the elections in case of an opposition boycott. Kazulin elected not to join the United Democratic camp and to run against Milinkevich. On February 17, the CEC announced that Lukashenka had received 1,903,069 valid signatures, Milinkevich had over 180,000, and the other two candidates had slightly lower totals. These unusual figures – the president already laid claim to one third of the electorate before the official campaign began – already indicated the circumstances under which the campaign was to be carried out.

The Nature of the Campaign

The campaign was not conducted under conditions that could be called free or fair. In the first place, the composition of the territorial commissions and the CEC was limited to the supporters of the president or neutrals in all but a few exceptional cases. Thus the United Civic Party nominated around 800 candidates for these organs but only one was accepted. In some cases, it was reported, the composition of the commissions had been determined beforehand. Opposition parties were subjected to harassment and warnings. The Labor Party had been dissolved prior to the elections, and two others, the Party of Communists and the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, were given second warnings (the last before official dissolution) because of minor infringements. In the latter case the transgression was invalid addresses for two of the regional party headquarters. Public demonstrations by the opposition, such as the Day of Solidarity campaign on October Square in central Minsk on February 16, were met with violence from Belarusian Special Forces, a prelude to what would happen during the aftermath of the election itself.

In early March, on instructions from Lukashenka, an all-Belarusian People's Assembly was held at the Palace of the Republic. The Assembly mirrored that held during the presidential elections of 2001. It was used then as a front for the president to outline his future policies. On March 2, 2006, Kazulin, the presidential candidate for the United Social Democratic Party, tried to register for the assembly at the Palace of Sport and Culture of the Minsk railway workers. Special Forces under the command of Dzmitry Paulichenka detained Kazulin and subjected him to a severe beating. The opposition newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* issued a special edition of 250,000 copies (its regular print run is under 30,000) containing photographs of the troops' actions, but the copies were confiscated by the Belarusian authorities as soon as they crossed the border from the printing house in Smolensk, Russia. Subsequently, the regime put pressure on the printing house not to print or distribute further copies of the newspaper. By the date of the election, there were no newspapers other than government-run organs in operation in Belarus. On election day itself, even web pages were shut down, and the news agency *Belapan* was temporarily

suspended, so that there were no sources of independent information as to what was taking place.

Belarusian TV meanwhile declared that fabricated exit poll bulletins had been discovered showing that in 107 election precincts, Milinkevich had gathered 53.7 percent of the vote, Lukashenka 41.3 percent, Kazulin 3.8 percent, and Haydukevich 1.2 percent. The program posited that the results would be used as a pretext for a color revolution in Minsk. In a similar vein, it was reported that Kazulin had tried to reach a deal with Lukashenka to receive 32 percent of the vote and the position of Prime Minister in the next Lukashenka government. All candidates in theory were given two radio and two television broadcasts of 30 minutes each. In practice, the TV appearances of Milinkevich and Kazulin were limited by censorship, though Kazulin in particular used his time to make very personal comments about the president's private life and corruption within his administration. Milinkevich also used the election campaign to visit with several European leaders and grew visibly in stature as the campaign progressed. Before long he was holding rallies in Western and Central regions of the country that were gathering several thousand people despite official restrictions on buildings and outdoor sites. The president, who remained in office throughout the election, declared that he was too busy to campaign actively but appeared on national television almost constantly, as well as making a four hour speech at the People's Assembly. On the eve of the election, he warned of a potential coup attempt and placed Special Forces on full alert.

Those supporting the united opposition candidate, Milinkevich, adopted blue denim as its symbol, leaving denim ribbons around official buildings in cities and at universities. The authorities arrested many young activists in response: many had daubed graffiti with the word *Dostal* (Fed up!) on walls. Computers and campaign literature on behalf of both opposition candidates were expropriated widely. The government maintained that the opposition was being supported by foreign powers, and that there was a coordinated campaign to overthrow the Lukashenka regime in which the United States, the EU countries, Georgia, and Ukraine were the guilty parties. Belarusian TV announced that a supply of US-made military goods and tents had been discovered on the Latvian border, and the police established an emergency headquarters, and began monitoring polling stations. Programs on TV claimed that the United States, in particular, had deliberately ignored state officials while courting the opposition, even when entering the country for official purposes. Lukashenka also maintained that his continued presidency was the only means to ensure stability and economic prosperity in the country. He defended his close links with Russia, and used his December 2005 agreement with *Gazprom* to maintain gas prices at the same level for 2006 (Ukraine had been offered a deal in which prices were five times higher) as an example of the fruits of this cooperation.

Arrests and detentions quickly spread to the official leadership teams of Milinkevich and Kazulin. Virtually no-one was immune. Syarhey Kalyakin, who led the headquarters of the Milinkevich campaign, pointed out that the very

high number of signatures gathered by the Lukashenka team had been attained by threats from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Prosecutor. In many cases entire factories or universities had been obliged to sign lists, and in the case of the factories, before workers could receive wage packets. He was accused of libel and denigrating the president of Belarus (a criminal offence). The chairman of the executive committee of the democratic forces, Anatol Lyabedzka, was detained in Salihorsk for an identity check in mid-February. Vintsuk Vyachorka, leader of the Popular Front, received a fifteen day jail sentence for “petty hooliganism”. Similar charges were made in many other instances. On Kazulin’s team, the frequent attacks and beatings of personnel (including an assault on General Fralou) led the candidate to propose to Milinkevich on March 9 that they withdraw from the campaign. Milinkevich declined, but both candidates urged their supporters to assemble in October Square on March 19 for a peaceful demonstration and discussion of the election results. Lukashenka responded to this call by declaring that he would wring his opponents’ necks if they took part in an illegal demonstration.

The Standings and the Results

The tense and dangerous conditions in which the election was held rendered it impossible for independent pollsters to assess the relative standings of the candidates. The personal popularity of the president in recent years has varied from a low of 26 to a high of 55 percent. It had risen in the year before the election. Of the opposition candidates, correspondingly, it was estimated that the popularity of Milinkevich was highest and might be around 17 percent. What is not clear is whether Lukashenka had enough support to win outright in the first round, though from his perspective this was critical in terms of stemming the opposition’s momentum. Adding to the confusion was the fact that about 30 percent of those voting did so at advance polls, which opened on March 14 and could not be monitored by external observers. The initial official results were reported by CEC Chairperson Yarmoshyna on March 20. According to her statement, Lukashenka received 5.46 million votes (82.6 percent), Milinkevich almost 400,000 (6 percent), Haydukevich 250,000 (3.5 percent), and Kazulin 154,000 (2.3 percent). Beyond announcing the results as would be appropriate, Yarmoshyna ventured to comment that Kazulin’s low total was merited because of his “rowdy campaign”! Later, when the “final figures” were released Lukashenka’s total was amended to 5,501,249 out of 6,630,653 votes cast, or 83 percent with a turnout of more than 92 percent. That the results were padded seems clear. Neither the size of the turnout nor total for Lukashenka would have been possible during a democratic election. Also the combined total of 11.8 percent for the three other candidates seems exceptionally low. By way of comparison, even the uncharismatic opposition leader Uladzimir Hancharyk attained 15 percent in 2001.

The Popular Response

On the evening of March 19, about 15,000 people gathered on October Square, a vast complex adjacent to the Palace of the Republic and the House of Trade Unions, and separated by a small park from the residence of the president. Both Milinkevich and Kazulin addressed the crowd, and called on people to return to the square on the following day at 18.30. A smaller number of people then marched to Victory Square. On the next evening, a somewhat smaller crowd came together to repeat their protest at the way the election had been conducted. They were encouraged by the almost universal condemnation of the election by foreign powers with the exception of Russia. During that night, activists of several youth groups, including Young Front, *Zubr* and *Khopits!*, set up a small tent camp that was to serve as a catalyst for daily protests to continue over the following evenings. The numbers in the square dwindled at night and during working hours, and increased again from the time of official assembly, which was 18.30. After March 19, the numbers were between 2,000 and 5,000 each evening. Web pages such as those of Charter 97 and the youth group *Zubr*, provided directions for the participants. Music was laid on and tents were set up in replication of the Orange Revolution in Kiev in late 2004. The militia was restrained from interference, perhaps because of the number of protesters and the international interest in what was happening in Belarus. Indeed, ambassadors and diplomats from some ten EU member states visited the square in the evening of March 21. Nevertheless, an estimated 250 people were arrested between March 20 and 24, usually when leaving the square en route home.

Milinkevich stated that the election results had been fabricated. He said that various sources, mostly Russian, including *Holdinga Rossiya*, had indicated that Lukashenka had received 43 percent of the vote, while his own return was 31 percent and Kazulin’s 18 percent. He demanded that the election be repeated, but without the participation of Lukashenka. This was in line with the official request from Lyabedzka to the Belarusian Supreme Court that the 2004 referendum had been illegal, and the president should not have been permitted a third term in office. He also expressed, after some hesitation, his support for the decision of the tent protesters to remain on the square. In making that statement he reportedly broke an agreement with Kazulin that the protest would be ended earlier. The authorities remained largely passive onlookers but away from the square they took action against various opposition supporters. For example, the deputy leader of Milinkevich’s staff, Viktor Karniyenka was assaulted outside his apartment by two assailants and had to be hospitalized. Such overreaction was an indicator of the nervousness of the president. At 3am on March 24, the Special Forces broke up the small tent city, and arrested the mostly young people who had remained there in very cold conditions for more than three days. Several hundred protesters were taken to Akrestsina prison, and the sudden action ended the period of sustained protest in central Minsk. If the authorities anticipated that the protests were over, however, they

were mistaken. Both Milinkevich and Kazulin led a march on Independence Day in a sequel to the election campaign signaling the refusal of the opposition forces to remain passive.

On March 25, the anniversary of the short-lived Belarusian independent state of 1918, about 10,000 people gathered on Independence Avenue carrying the white-red-white national flag and the jeans emblem, and encountered a large group of militia. Forcefully prevented by police from holding their rally, demonstrators moved to Yanka Kupala Park and held a meeting that was addressed by Milinkevich, Kazulin and a range of other opposition figures. Kazulin, in particular, called on protesters to march to the remand center at Akrestsina and demand the release of the tent campers arrested in October Square, and an estimated 5,000 set off with him. After a peaceful march along Nyamiha boulevard, there followed the most brutal clash to date with police at Dzerzhinsky Avenue. Milinkevich had intended to use the Independence Day rally to announce a new movement for the liberation of Belarus, while Kazulin demanded a new government of democratic unity. Riot police beat and clubbed the demonstrators, using tear gas. Kazulin was again beaten and detained and moved to the remand center outside Minsk at Zhodzina. Several hundred were arrested, including several foreigners, such as the well-known Russian TV reporter Pavel Sheremet and the former Polish ambassador to Belarus, Mariusz Matusiewicz. Sheremet was assaulted as he walked in central Minsk, handcuffed and refused permission to call the Russian Embassy. Matusiewicz had to be moved to hospital after a suspected heart attack, but he received a fifteen day sentence for petty hooliganism. The brutality bore the hallmark of Paulichenka, who was once again ordered to take extreme measures during an occasion of peaceful protest. Lukashenka's inauguration was then delayed from March 31 until April 8, and it was several days before the president was seen again in public.

Conclusion

The 2006 election campaign differed from its predecessors in several respects. The authorities took restrictive measures even before the campaign began that instituted heavy prison terms for anyone contacting or receiving funds from partners outside the country, such as the EU and the US. In the crackdown that occurred during and after the campaign, an unprecedented number of people were arrested, mostly young adults, and the regime demonstrated its fear of a popular revolt. There were constant references to the role of external forces in Belarus. At the same time, the protests were well-organized, and despite relatively low numbers compared to those in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine in earlier cases of regime change, they manifested growing civic awareness and coordination of movements. In this respect one can contrast the more extreme responses of Kazulin and the restrained attitude of Milinkevich. The former did not really offer an election platform, other than the manifesto of the

Social Democratic Party, and indulged in strident protests and confrontational tactics that were calculated to incense the regime. At crucial times Kazulin and Milinkevich worked together, but ultimately there was no sustained partnership. Milinkevich did not entertain hopes of winning the election, but rather intended to "win the hearts and minds" of the public gradually, and offer them the possibility of an alternative outlook to that offered by the president. Unlike in past campaigns, Milinkevich also intended to offer this same perspective beyond the date of the election. In this way, the Belarusian opposition can prepare for later elections, whether municipal, parliamentary, or presidential. The youth activists also appear committed to his cause and a majority of them appear alienated from the Lukashenka regime.

The Lukashenka team showed a surprising lack of acumen given its success in previous campaigns. At a time when world attention turned to Minsk and there was genuine interest in the election, the regime showed its worst side, demonstrating in a self-fulfilling prophecy that it is indeed "the last dictatorship in Europe". The violent scenes against students and youth activists convinced no one that the Lukashenka regime was legitimate. Even Russia was somewhat muted in its support and Russian television depicted some of the most violent scenes. And yet the president could have won the contest without resorting to such measures. The question is why he adopted such tactics. Three reasons are suggested. First, Lukashenka has for some time had a genuine fear of external intervention in Belarus (usually the United States and/or NATO are cited), and a particular concern about the policies of his Western neighbor, Poland, and East European countries in the EU in general. Second, it is evident that the 2004 referendum had failed to satisfy critics that he had the right to run for a third term in office. Third, any election forces the regime – albeit partially – to accept temporary conditions in which the opposition can campaign, offer critiques of the president's policies and lifestyle, and especially of his infringements of human rights. As a leader shielded from reality in many respects, Lukashenka is acutely sensitive to attacks on his policies or to suggestions that an opposition government could offer an alternative and viable vision of a transformation of Belarusian society and government along a democratic path. The 2006 election, his third victory, has weakened rather than strengthened his regime.

Dispatches from Minsk March 2006

On the train to Minsk a passenger entered the sleeping compartment and tried to strike up conversation with the passenger next to him. "Where are you going?" he asked. She replied, "Who are you – some kind of control?" One might be forgiven for thinking that she was simply not in the mood for conversation, were it not for the more general atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty that quickly seizes everyone arriving to Belarus, and especially its capital, Minsk. *Militsya*, *Spetsnaz* in black, and other uniformed officials were everywhere, seen and wishing to be seen. With such an overwhelming presence of uniforms the cautious behavior of people in public was hardly surprising. And indeed, people on buses, trams and in the metro did look at each other suspiciously, as if they were worried about being spied on, worried in case they might somehow betray sympathy for the opposition. At the same time, they were seemingly trying to sound each other out. Was the prevailing mood for voting against Lukashenka?

In spite of the presidential elections being only a few days away, hardly any signs of campaigning could be spotted. Although specifically marked election stands did exist, they were only erected at a safe distance from the city center. These were the only places where campaign posters were permitted, and they were the battleground for a poster war between the different camps. Efforts at plastering over or tearing down each other's posters were more often than not won by Syarhey Haydukevich. Alyaksandr Lukashenka adverts were completely absent, in line with the incumbent's announcement that he would refrain from campaigning altogether. His portrait was only to be seen later on a large poster with basic information on all four candidates.

Taking a closer look, though, a large part of Minsk was covered in the official red and green Lukashenka elevated to national colors when he banned the national white-red-white flag, accompanied by the slogan *ZA Belarus* (For Belarus). Shop windows carried posters declaring "For plenty". On buses and trams children were portrayed asking "For a talented Belarus". In central Minsk billboards portrayed athletes advocating "For an Olympic Belarus" and displayed soldiers and war veterans, leaving little doubt which candidate they were for. This was not election campaigning but official propaganda, not an endorsement of a specific candidate, party or program, but simple advocacy for continuity under the guidance of the incumbent president.

Yet Minsk did not appear in full agreement with the call for stability. Here and there, one could spot an opposition slogan written across the posters. Someone crossed out *ZA Belarus* and replaced it with the opposition slogan *Zhivye Belarus* (Long live Belarus). Needless to say, posters so amended did not last long and were soon removed. Similarly short-lived were the stickers and graffiti that appeared over night, most commonly in the suburbs rather

than in the city center. Sometimes it was a circled 16, as part of the monthly day of solidarity with disappeared opposition leaders that was initiated by civil society, or a lamp-post that carried a piece of denim, chosen by opposition groups to symbolize freedom. Elsewhere graffiti more aggressively declared *Dostal* (Enough!) or *Novava* (We want a new one!), clearly addressing the current president. Most frequent, however, were the patches of fresh paint, signaling the effectiveness of the government apparatus in reinstating a smart and orderly appearance as soon as possible.

Campaign efforts by the democratic opposition were similarly subtle. Only very occasionally did one find campaign activists handing out leaflets, independent newspapers or election programs. Usually, they lurked by the metro stations, almost in hiding, only briefly coming out when a larger crowd of passengers disembarked. Meanwhile, Belarusian state TV was portraying Lukashenka as an ice hockey loving and caring *bat'ka* (literally: father), praising him in songs demanding that people *Slushay bat'ku* (listen to the father). Political shows such as *Zhostki dialog* (roughly: hard talk) lashed out at the opposition, demonizing them as hooligans or fascists.

Friday, March 17

At a packed *Elektron* cinema in the southern outskirts of Minsk the two opposition candidates Kazulin and Milinkevich held a joint meeting. On the way to the cinema, at a bus stop, a few printed leaflets were spotted. Upon closer inspection these turned out to anti-opposition propaganda, and carried the clear message that Milinkevich and his team were Western marionettes and foreign-paid spies, aiming to auction off Belarus. Later in the journey, a taxi driver was openly displaying Milinkevich's portrait on the dashboard. A cautious enquiry with the driver prompted this small entrepreneur to launch into a tirade about the economic misery and red-tape, isolation of the country, and the Soviet style conditions gripping Belarus. Further, the driver's, admittedly not representative, poll of passengers' political preferences, indicated that a vast majority opposed Lukashenka.

At the cinema, a considerable crowd gathered, including a large number of foreign media and several international election observers, including foreign parliamentarians. Kazulin appeared first, a commanding, jovial, towering baldhead. Milinkevich, who arrived a few minutes later, gave a contrasting softer and more intellectual impression. Their appearance together was unexpected as the relationship of the two candidates was said to be strained. Rumors circulated that Kazulin was trying to persuade Milinkevich to join him in withdrawing from the race. Instead, they came together to release a joint declaration urging the National Assembly to dissolve the Central Election Commission and to postpone the elections because of the arrests of opposition supporters and violations of the election law. The candidates also presented a letter to state organizations including the Ministry of the Interior and the

KGB calling them to respect the law, the constitution and the election code of Belarus

The public meeting was clearly designed as a display of unity between the candidates. In a hall packed with a good 800 people, mostly young, and facilitated by the head of Milinkevich's campaign team Syarhey Kalyakin, an animated meeting lasted for a full two hours. It opened with brief programmatic remarks by each candidate. Milinkevich was concise and produced clear, straightforward, understandable (and well rehearsed) answers to the many questions submitted from the audience. Kazulin, in turn, always spoke for longer, often animating the crowd while recounting anecdotes about Lukashenka or his time working on educational issues in Belarus. While Kazulin was received well, the sympathies of the majority were clearly with Milinkevich, judging from applause and questions addressed to the candidates.

The majority of questions covered issues such as what to do with Lukashenka, taxes, electing governors, the fear factor in the country, the unfair election campaign, and the contract system. Both candidates urged voters to rally in the center of Minsk at 8pm on March 19 after the closure of polling stations. In this respect, Kazulin called on people not to be afraid and to maintain peace, while Milinkevich's rallying call – often heard over the next days – was for Belarusians to show that “they were not cattle”. The meeting ended in an uplifted atmosphere and with joint victory salutes by Kazulin, Milinkevich and Kalyakin. While the meeting did not confirm earlier rumors that Kazulin was considering withdrawing in favor of Milinkevich, it clearly signaled a new level of cooperation between the two opposition candidates. The day ended on an optimistic note as a result of this and the absence of any visible attempts at provocation by the state authorities.

In spite of this, there remained some at Milinkevich's headquarters, especially several from the Belarusian Popular Front that questioned the value of the joint meeting with Kazulin. After the meeting some scepticism remained, including about the real intentions of Kazulin, even though he had been so positive about Milinkevich during the evening.

Saturday, March 18

At noon, Milinkevich held his last campaign meeting with voters outside the Kiev cinema in a Northern neighborhood of Minsk. Attendance was around 400, and it seemed that people at the meeting represented a cross-section of generations, rather than primarily young people. Questions asked from the audience largely related to the meeting planned for the next day on October Square in downtown Minsk, and these enquiries, as well as Milinkevich's answers, indicated the level of concern about possible provocations and violence.

The official media, in which warnings of violent protests had taken on hysterical tones over previous days, were clearly trying to create panic. Milinkevich

underlined that the protests would be peaceful and called on people to attend the rally. At the same time, he stressed that it was essential for protesters to beware of provocations. He illustrated his point with a fake campaign leaflet, which had been fly-posted around Minsk calling for a revolution by force. Addressing the security apparatus, he stressed that there were many decent people in the *Militsya* and even in the KGB, and called on them to be “with the nation”.

While talking to journalists after the meeting, Milinkevich mentioned that the time he would spend in the square would depend on the turnout. Whatever the outcome of elections and protest, he stressed, the coalition was to remain united, and to continue to work with civil society in Belarus. He likened this movement to “Solidarity” in Poland. These statements, too, indicated two main issues that were to become obvious over the next days: Milinkevich and the opposition remained insecure about the support they could muster among Belarusians, and despite much good will, it seemed that little had been concretely prepared for the various conceivable scenarios on election day and thereafter.

In the evening, the civic campaign *Za svabodu* (For Freedom) held a rock concert in support of the democratic opposition (and surprisingly received permission from state authorities). More than 5,000, mostly young people, gathered in a park near Bangalore Square for the concert that was the finale of the Milinkevich campaign. A large banner proclaiming “I am for Freedom” decorated the stage, the crowd brought a large number of white-red-white Belarusian national flags, a few European flags could be seen, many visitors carried the scarves and stickers of a variety of civic campaigns, including *Za svabodu* and *Khopits!* (Enough!), and a number of leaflets, newspapers and other materials of numerous opposition groups were distributed openly.

All the main “opposition” bands played, including *Neyra Dyubel*, *Partizanskaya shkola*, and *IQ-48*. Most memorable was the appearance of the group *NRM*, arguably the most popular “opposition” band in Belarus. At the start of their famous song *Tri Charapakhi*, they suggested that the song's usual chorus *syurprizau nya budzye* (there won't be any surprises) was not appropriate given the hopes of Belarusians for the elections on the following day. Instead they changed the words to *chakanye dastala* (we've had enough of waiting), which the audience chanted enthusiastically. Around the middle of the concert, Milinkevich made a dramatic entry through the crowd and took the stage for brief remarks. “You are our future,” he greeted the young crowd. “Freedom, truth, justice are for you. I know that all of you like freedom. But, today in our country it is not enough to love freedom. Today we need to fight for freedom!”

An interesting observation related to the high degree of discipline at the concert. While clearly a joyful crowd, the prohibition on alcohol imposed by the organizers was well observed, and regular appeals were made from the stage to avoid any provocations, expected from the side of the authorities. In the few cases where drunken visitors or provocateurs misbehaved or attempted

to start a fight, concert organizers intervened immediately and had those individuals taken away by *Militsya*, which observed the event from a distance in considerable numbers.

While the event had clear political undertones there was limited open political agitation. Although sizeable numbers turned up and Milinkevich and the most popular bands were well received, anxiety over what would happen the following day appeared to hang over the event. Yet when the event concluded without disturbance, crowds making their way home appeared uplifted, even singing on the bus home. Nonetheless, and with the elections only a few hours away, little to nothing was in the air to suggest that extraordinary events were likely to take place in the hours and days ahead.

Sunday, March 19

After voting at 10am, Milinkevich hosted a press conference at lunchtime where he looked ahead to the evening protests and underlined that they would be peaceful. He also lambasted Belarusian TV for showing the results of “exit-polls”, carried out by the pro-government youth group BRSM, which showed Lukashenka with over 80 percent support. Kalyakin quoted figures from a Russian exit poll, which he said indicated that Lukashenka was had just about 50 percent of the vote. He argued that the largest number of opposition supporters were expected to vote in the afternoon, and that it could be expected that the incumbent would not get a majority in the first round.

A second press conference with Milinkevich was planned for later in the day, but his election headquarters only announced the exact time of 7pm during the afternoon. Meanwhile the leaders became nervous with waiting, unsure of how many people to expect on the square, and afraid of the reaction from the authorities. It was expected that Milinkevich would leave after the press conference and head down to October Square. However, a few minutes after 7pm, the editor of the newspaper *Tovarish*, Syarhey Vozniak, arrived and dramatically announced that the press conference had been cancelled as word had been received that *Spetsnaz* police had plans to arrest Milinkevich immediately after the meeting.

The authorities were clearly preparing for a demonstration. Shops, bars and restaurants in the vicinity of the square all closed around 6pm for “technical reasons”. October Square metro station was closed by 7.30pm, and there were rumors that cars heading towards the center were being stopped. Astonishingly, however, the square itself remained open and the people who began arriving were able to gather without hindrance from the authorities.

The first people arriving congregated on the square near the big TV screen and kept an eye on the news that was being shown. They reacted by chanting *Hanba* (shame) when Lukashenka was shown casting his ballot. Belarusian national white-red-white flags began to appear as people grew in numbers and those on the square became more confident that the *Militsya* were not planning

to intervene. A large number of bystanders were clearly there to support the protests, yet they kept their distance by standing on the other side of the road. Obviously, they believed that they were in a better protected place should violence break out. The most visible presence of the authorities on the square was the traffic police, who kept the traffic moving. Cars moving alongside the square began to honk in support. Suddenly, the traffic was stopped, and the reason for the hold-up soon became clear: around 15 buses full of riot police in full combat gear had arrived on Karl Marx Street in front of the British Embassy.

Just before 9pm, Milinkevich appeared on the square in front of the Trade Union Palace. The crowd swiftly moved to the other end of the square to hear him and other opposition leaders speak. Syarhey Kalyakin declared that, according to an exit poll, Alyaksandr Milinkevich had won 30 percent of the vote and that, thus, a second round of voting should take place. A clearly relieved and confident Milinkevich thanked the almost 15,000 people who came to the square to defend their vote. He said that this was a new and a free Belarus, which would no longer be brought to its knees, that Belarusians had shown the whole world that they want to live in a free and democratic European country, and that they considered the elections illegitimate. He also called for the international community not to recognize the results and declared the elections a farce. Later, Alyaksandr Kazulin, accompanied by Orthodox priests, arrived, along with other speakers from Belarus, as well as Polish and Russian politicians and Marieluise Beck from the German Bundestag who expressed their support for the demands of the democratic opposition.

During the rally, a bizarre and intense blizzard struck the center of Minsk. Rumor had it that this was artificial snow put on by the authorities for the occasion, although high snowfall in other central parts of Minsk seemed to disprove this theory. With the snow and freezing temperatures, the numbers on the square began to dwindle, and Kazulin announced at 10.30pm that protesters should go home and come back at 6.30pm the next day when the results of the election were known. First though, the protesters were encouraged to head off towards *Peremoha* (Victory) Square to lay flowers at the victory monument. Headed by Milinkevich and Kazulin up to 10,000 people marched along the Independence Prospect to the war memorial before dispersing into the night.

Meanwhile the riot police remained in over 30 buses and 20 army trucks in nearby streets. This wait-and-see response from the authorities contrasted markedly with the extremely aggressive rhetoric of the previous weeks. Warnings had culminated in a press conference on 16 March, during which KGB head Sukharenko declared that protestors taking to the streets would be considered as terrorists, and would be punishable with anything from eight years to life imprisonment, or even with the death penalty. In the end, the order to intervene was never given, and *Militsya* present in the area around the square showed constraint. None of the expected provocations materialized and the events passed off peacefully.

Opposition leaders were clearly delighted with the size and success of the

protest. They had been extremely reluctant to predict how many would come and what would be the reaction of the authorities. It was a surprise to most observers that the protests were actually allowed on the square. Given all these circumstances, it was perhaps understandable that opposition leaders seemed to be improvising during the meeting, illustrated by the fact that proper sound equipment only appeared halfway through the meeting.

Monday, March 20

Milinkevich held a press conference, during which he argued that the election was conducted by the security services rather than the election commissions. He stressed that he considered the result an illegal seizure of power and declared that the president would be in power illegitimately after the announcement of the official results. Later that day, the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission held a press conference to state that the elections failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections.

For the evening protest in October Square, some 7,000 people appeared which, although significantly fewer than on the previous day, was still substantial given the freezing conditions, and it did allow the opposition to keep up the pressure on the authorities. The tension that had characterized the previous evening was significantly reduced, and in comparison the opposition was also much better prepared. Protesters congregated naturally around the Trade Union Palace with a good sound system present from the start, allowing for Belarusian music to be played between the speeches. This noticeably helped to keep up the atmosphere and spirit of the crowd.

Milinkevich demanded free and fair elections, underlined the need to fight against dictatorship, and emphasized his campaign slogans “freedom, truth and justice”. He declared that the people would stay on the square “until victory” and asked people to call their relatives and friends to bring warm clothes and hot drinks to the square for the protesters. There was an extensive program of prominent speakers, including Kazulin and Russian *Duma* deputy Ryzhkov, and even some live music from *NRM*. Protesters, too, were better prepared and brought with them numerous banners, flags and posters. A 100-kilogram bronze Freedom Bell was also brought to the square and rung regularly during the protest.

New opportunities opened up for the Belarusian opposition with the appearance on October Square of a small group of tents following this second evening of peaceful protest against the falsification of the elections. Activists of various youth groups, including *Zubr* and *Malady Front*, and from civic campaigns, such as *Khopits!*, had used the demonstration to set up a dozen or so tents in front of the Trade Union Palace, and some 100 mostly young people stayed through the night.

In the morning mutterings of disapproval were already to be heard in opposition circles that Milinkevich had taken people to the square but had himself only

stayed there two and a half hours. Some felt let down, as they believed he had promised to stay until victory. However the large crowds that came for Sunday were repeated and the extra time allowed the opposition to prepare properly for a longer lasting protest. As a result, the strategy of leaving on Sunday evening on a high and peaceful note could be judged to have worked out well. Further the decision of Milinkevich to stay on the square into Monday night with the protesters also showed that he was prepared to lead from the front

Tuesday, March 21

A serious debate in opposition circles took place during the day on the merits of continuing the tent city. The previous night had been very difficult and tense, and over 100 activists had been arrested, mostly when leaving the tent city (including United Civic Party leader, Anatol Lyabedko). However a determined hard core, with the support of the international media present, had helped ensure their survival until the morning. By midday, there were rumors that Milinkevich was going to ask people to go home, and he was reported to have told journalists in the afternoon that he would call the protest off. When the ambassadors of eleven EU countries came to the square after 6pm to visit the protest, he was understood to have told them the same.

Milinkevich spoke around 7pm to the more than 3,000-strong crowd assembled, and he called on everyone to rally on the following Saturday, March 25. It appeared the opposition were too small to make a difference, and that the way forward was to try to mobilize a larger number of people to come from all over the country, on the occasion of the anniversary of the declaration of Belarusian Independence in 1918 (officially celebrated as a national holiday in the early 1990's). Following Milinkevich, Kazulin spoke and repeated this call for everyone to meet again on March 25. But, he also asked the protestors to disband the tent city, and it appeared that Kazulin and Milinkevich had agreed to call off the vigil for fear of interference by state authorities. In response, a significant part of the crowd started to chant *zastaemsya* (we will stay). A young activist from Soligorsk then spoke and argued strongly that they should stay and that, if they left now, the people would never come back, including for the protest on March 25. Inna Kuley, Milinkevich's wife, responded that she had spoken with the people in the tents and promised that she would stay with them. Kazulin stated that if the people stayed, they would be simply disbanded by the Special Forces, to which statement the crowd again chanted *zastaemsya*. Milinkevich brought the discussion to a close by stating that he, too, would stay with the protesters.

The organizers of the tent city began to get serious, insisting that only people, who were going to stay the night, should stay in the central area. Around the camp, a more solid circle of people was formed to protect the tents and to stop provocateurs from entering. For the night, two lines were formed, one facing out of the camp to warn of any advance by the police, the other facing

inward to keep an eye on demonstrators. The protestors on the outside of the line facing the road held banners (acknowledged by occasional honks of car horns) saying "Belarus for Milinkevich" and "We believe, we can, we will be victorious".

Milinkevich and his wife came back to the tent city at 11pm, spoke briefly and then were reported to have stayed with the protestors until 6am the following morning. While numbers dwindled as the night progressed, around 300 were said to have braved the cold until the morning. Some of the foreign journalists set up a rotation system, with some arriving at 3am to replace their colleagues, so as to ensure a permanent international press presence on the square.

Milinkevich gained credit amongst the protestors and showed leadership by quickly recognizing that there was a core of people who were convinced that they should stay, even if this meant going against an earlier decision (and agreements). At that moment it appeared that civil society was taking over the running of the protests, and Milinkevich followed suit when seeing these strongest willed of the opposition supporters firmly behind staying on the square. By contrast, Kazulin made few friends amongst the tent camp inhabitants by calling on them to go home.

Wednesday, March 22

As a sunny morning unfolded, the tent camp had grown to nearly 30 tents, brought in during the demonstration of the previous evening and set up over night. During the day, it was difficult to bring equipment into the tent city, as *Militsya* were carefully searching anyone approaching the area to stop any food or supplies reaching the protestors. At the same time, the camp population had shrunk to about 120 people by 10am, when it became clear that the authorities would not try to break up the city. Some of the over night protestors left at this stage to take a break and catch up on sleep. The morning saw a small Orthodox mass being carried out by priests of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church that supports an independent Belarus and an independent Belarusian church and, for this stance, faces by the Lukashenka regime.

Late in the morning, some 100 pensioners gathered on the square and Belarusian TV crews appeared. This suggested a provocation from the side of the authorities that must have hoped that the pensioners would turn against the largely young protestors in the tent camp. However, once there in the sun and in the politically charged atmosphere, the pensioners suddenly started to debate the situation among themselves, with different people taking different viewpoints. At one point, one group of three old ladies was debating the situation: one was for *bat'ka* while another was wearing an orange scarf signaling her opposition. When joined by an elderly man who argued provocatively that the protestors had been paid money to come here, one of the ladies turned round and asked how much he had received to be there. Unable to find a suitable response, he left.

In the mid-afternoon, several *Militsya* and three workers of the *Vodokanal* sewage company approached the tent city, demanding to clean the sewers underneath the tent city. After some discussion, the workers were allowed into the tent city on the condition that reporters and cameramen followed them, while the *Militsya* were to stay outside. The workers examined the situation, and four water trucks came to the area, with one backing up to a manhole at the edge of the tent city. Although now in a position to spray the crowd, the workmen took to clearing the sewer that had been covered with a tent and used by protesters as a toilet to avoid leaving the camp and being arrested. Afterwards, the sewer was sealed to prevent it from being used further, and the workers left. While there may have been some justification for the workmen's visit, it appeared to all present that this was another act by the authorities to keep up the pressure on the tent city.

As evening fell, the numbers of protestors increased again to approximately 3,000, as people came to the square after work and studies. A large banner was held up in the middle of the tent city proclaiming the square *Kastus Kalinouski Square*, after a Belarusian hero of the 19th century uprisings. An almost festive atmosphere reigned. The determination of the tent city protestors was growing, fuelled by two nights and days of withstanding cold, fear, provocations and police pressure. A convergence of civil society groups active in Belarus became visible in the tent camp, with *Khopits!* (Enough) clearly written on two of the tents and this campaign's blue head banners "Belarus in Europe" visible on many activists, with *Za svobodu* (For Freedom) stickers worn by many a protester, *Zubr* flags flying over the square, and *Malady Front* (Young Front) members wearing their distinct headbands. Further momentum derived from the growing number of people staying overnight, and attendance of the evening protests stabilizing at several thousand. No less importantly, a considerable presence of international journalists remained, although reporters had begun to leave Minsk as the world's attention slowly shifted away from Belarus and towards, in particular, the Ukrainian elections taking place the following weekend.

Yet the situation remained fragile. A handful of coaches full of police in riot gear were on standby around the corner on Karl Marx Street (and more were in the area). The tent city remained under permanent surveillance from both the *Militsya* and black clad KGB, some with earpieces, others with cameras, liberally filming everything. Yet for the time being, no action seemed imminent against the island of the free Belarus that had emerged in October Square.

Thursday, March 23

Another warm, sunny day began at the tent camp that had grown over night to about 35 tents. A cheerful atmosphere reigned, music was being played and throughout the day, people gave public and often emotional accounts of their encounters with the Lukashenka regime, at universities, in workplaces and in public offices. One man even presented a poem he had written in the last

days that called for the true Belarus to rise above the current regime. The only disturbance was that the municipal authorities turned on the sound system in the square to “entertain” the public.

In the evening, a crowd of several thousand gathered for the daily protest. Candles were distributed and lit, several people handed out print materials on behalf of a variety of opposition groups, songs were chanted. The security personnel at the tent camp quickly discharged attempts to provoke the demonstrators, including one incident involving a few young men clad in the official red and green flags who tried to foment discord among the demonstrators. At around 8pm, Milinkevich made a short appearance to encourage protesters and tent villagers to hold out in the square, and many demonstrators mentioned that they intended to stay overnight on the following evening (Friday), not being able to do so this evening because of work or school.

By midnight, as most regular demonstrators left the square and only a few hundred people remained in the tent camp, tension increased notably. Many in the square expected the night to bring with it a *shturm* by police, as most international media had already left and as larger numbers could be expected to stay overnight on Friday. A chain of 200 people surrounded the tent camp, with another 100 demonstrators inside, all anxiously waiting as time went by slowly and for good reason.

Friday, March 24

At exactly 3am, some six buses with riot police drove onto October Square, while several green prison cars pulled up on Independence Avenue. Police stormed the square and formed a cordon around the tent camp. Journalists were asked to leave the perimeter, and protesters were demanded to clear the square. In response, people inside the camp sat down to show their determination to stay. Everything went very quickly from then on. Before the eyes of the dozen or so international media watching from a distance, and without use of excessive force, police pulled out a few protesters. Acknowledging the hopelessness of their sit-in, inhabitants of the tent camp moved in an orderly fashion onto the prison buses and were taken to, as discovered later, Minsk’s Akrestsina prison. Within barely 30 minutes, protesters and police were gone, leaving the square to a clean-up team. They moved in with trucks and tractors to clear the remains of the camp, all with a shocking effectiveness in clearing what had taken so long to build.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich, Inna Kuley and Alyaksandr Kazulin with his daughter all arrived at Akrestsina prison shortly before 4am, ostensibly because relatives of both were among the arrested. All were visibly shocked, silent and in despair. Despite Milinkevich’s enquiries, prison guards would not provide any information. At around 5am, two young girls were released who, in tears, but having been threatened with violence, refused to speak to any of the people waiting outside the prison. Only later was it to become known, through picture

and text messages sent from inside the prison, that protesters had been made to stand outdoors for the rest of the night and into the morning. In an on the spot interview, Milinkevich said “the government is not able to engage in dialogue with society. But this is not the 19th century. You cannot build a society by force. This is not the kingdom of Alyaksandr Lukashenka”.

Passing by October Square in the morning left one with an overwhelming feeling of emptiness. If not for a very few people wandering around and speaking quietly, as well as a few tell tale scraps of blue cloth or remains of posters, it was hard to believe that until a few hours ago, this place was brimming with life. And quickly, images of the last days returned, reinforced by international media, including Russian channels that covered the removal of the tent camp extensively.

At 2pm, Milinkevich gave a short press conference at the headquarters of the Belarusian Popular Front. In his assessment of the situation, the number of people arrested during the removal of the tent camp stood between 200 and 300, in addition to more than 200 arrested since election day. No information was given by the authorities as to which charges were to be made and where trials were to be held. The little information available pointed to massive human rights violations. An appeal to the international community, including Russia, to put pressure on the Belarusian government and to help those persecuted by the regime, followed. Milinkevich stressed that what Minsk had witnessed over the last days filled him with confidence that Belarus would not see another five years of Lukashenka. He concluded with information on the demonstration planned for the next day, which was to celebrate Belarusian independence, rather than being part of the election campaign. In his view, however, it was likely that the demonstration would not be permitted to take place in October Square and that police violence could not be ruled out.

Saturday, March 25

On the way to downtown Minsk shortly before noon, one passed the seven or eight buses with *Spetsnaz* riot police on standby outside the Palace of Sports on Victors’ Boulevard. Police blocked access to October Square and a large number of people gathered around the junction of Independence Avenue and Lenin Street, one block away from the square. People have come equipped with white-red-white flags, banners and placards demanding freedom for the political prisoners, stating, “we will return” or carrying the bison logo of the *Zubr* youth movement. Slogans are shouted, including *Zhivye Belarus* (Long live Belarus) and *Militsya z narodom* (police with the people). As protesters tried to interrupt the traffic and form a crowd by converging from all four street corners, and as more and more people came streaming out of the October Square metro station, hundreds of additional police were ordered to the scene to disperse protesters, gradually moving them down Lenin Street

towards Freedom Square that was lined with a good thousand regular *Militsya* and *Spetsnaz* in full riot gear.

Suddenly, word went out that the rally was to be held in Yanka Kupala Park, and long columns of people moved towards and along Nyamiha Boulevard and on through Yanka Kupala Street, to a concert of car horns honked by drivers-by. At the park, a crowd of 10,000 and more gathered around the Kupala monument that served as a podium for opposition leaders as they addressed the crowd. Visibly relieved and excited about the enormous turnout, Milinkevich and Kazulin addressed protesters through megaphones, followed by several leaders of opposition parties, civic activists including Inna Kuley, well-known public figures such as historian Uladzimir Arlou, and a youth leader of *Malady Front* (Young Front). The principal theme of all speakers was concern for those imprisoned for their democratic protest and Kazulin's explicit appeal to march to Akrestsina prison to demand the release of those arrested resonated with many.

By around 3pm, about half of those attending the rally started to move towards Nyamiha Boulevard to make their way to the prison. Smiling and chanting, carrying flags and balloons, the cheerful crowd moved in long columns past strollers and onlookers out on a sunny Saturday, only occasionally stopping at a traffic light. Yet at the same time, scores of buses full of riot police drive past them. Few knew what was awaiting them only minutes later.

What happened next has been broadcast around the world: As the crowd reached the area of *Moskovsky Izpolkom* (district executive committee), at around 4pm, the road was blocked with riot police equipped with batons and shields. At 4.10pm, at least three explosions could be heard in close succession, revealed later to be mock grenades, and police moved violently against protesters. Kazulin, in an attempt to approach the police, was arrested. Dozens were beaten and injured, although hospitals refused to provide any information on the numbers or the severity of the protesters' injuries. Hundreds were arrested on the spot, while a manhunt ensued across town, with prison cars cruising the streets of Minsk and collecting people for showing opposition symbols. An empire struck back...

As the day ended, little was known about what exactly had happened and at which cost. Dozens of buses with police in the center of town and the usual propaganda machine running at full speed were the only visible remnant of the afternoon's shameful events. Belarusian TV featured interior minister Uladzimir Navumau praising the "professional and effective" police measures against a few hundred people gathered for an "unsanctioned activity disturbing citizens in taking their well deserved rest". Foreign "instructors" giving orders to Belarusians were blamed and Javier Solana, George W. Bush, Madeleine Albright and Václav Havel were all implicated. And the tent camp, too, received coverage, as police findings of injection needles, plenty of alcohol and pornography found when clearing the camp were presented. Was it possible that anyone believed these lies, after so many saw with their own eyes what really happened over the last days?

Departure

Leaving Minsk, it was hard to believe that only ten days had passed since arriving. Packed with people and names, places and events, emotions and hopes, slogans and chants, those few days were a roller coaster ride of history. Coming from a Western country, arriving in Belarus had seemed like traveling back in time, to the Central and Eastern Europe of the deep 1980's. Yet within days, the autumn of 1989 was replayed and the center of Minsk started to resemble Prague or Leipzig. The final scenes of those ten days were reminiscent of those in Poland in December 1981 when martial law put an end to all hope among Poles for several years to come. What remained were memories of islands of a free Belarus – October Square, Yanka Kupala Park, the *Elektron* Cinema, Bangalore Square Park. And, not unimportantly, confidence that a process has been started that will be impossible to stop, however long it may take.

As the train departed Minsk and rolled through the Belarusian countryside, the conversation of the two middle-aged women sharing the compartment drifted to Milinkevich and the protests on the square. The imagination of the women had clearly been captured by news of the events, and it seemed that the election campaign and its aftermath were stirring the people into political thought and discussion. Without doubt, a signal that an independently thinking and acting Belarus has finally started to emerge.

Cry Freedom!

A Photographic Diary

Minsk, March 2006

Democracy is about people. It is in democracy that their freedom, their beliefs, their passions and their pursuits are realized to the fullest. It is people whose courage and sacrifice brings democracy about. It is people whose engagement and solidarity makes democracy thrive. Yet it is also people who may prevent democracy, be it out of a genuine fear of change or of simple greed for power.

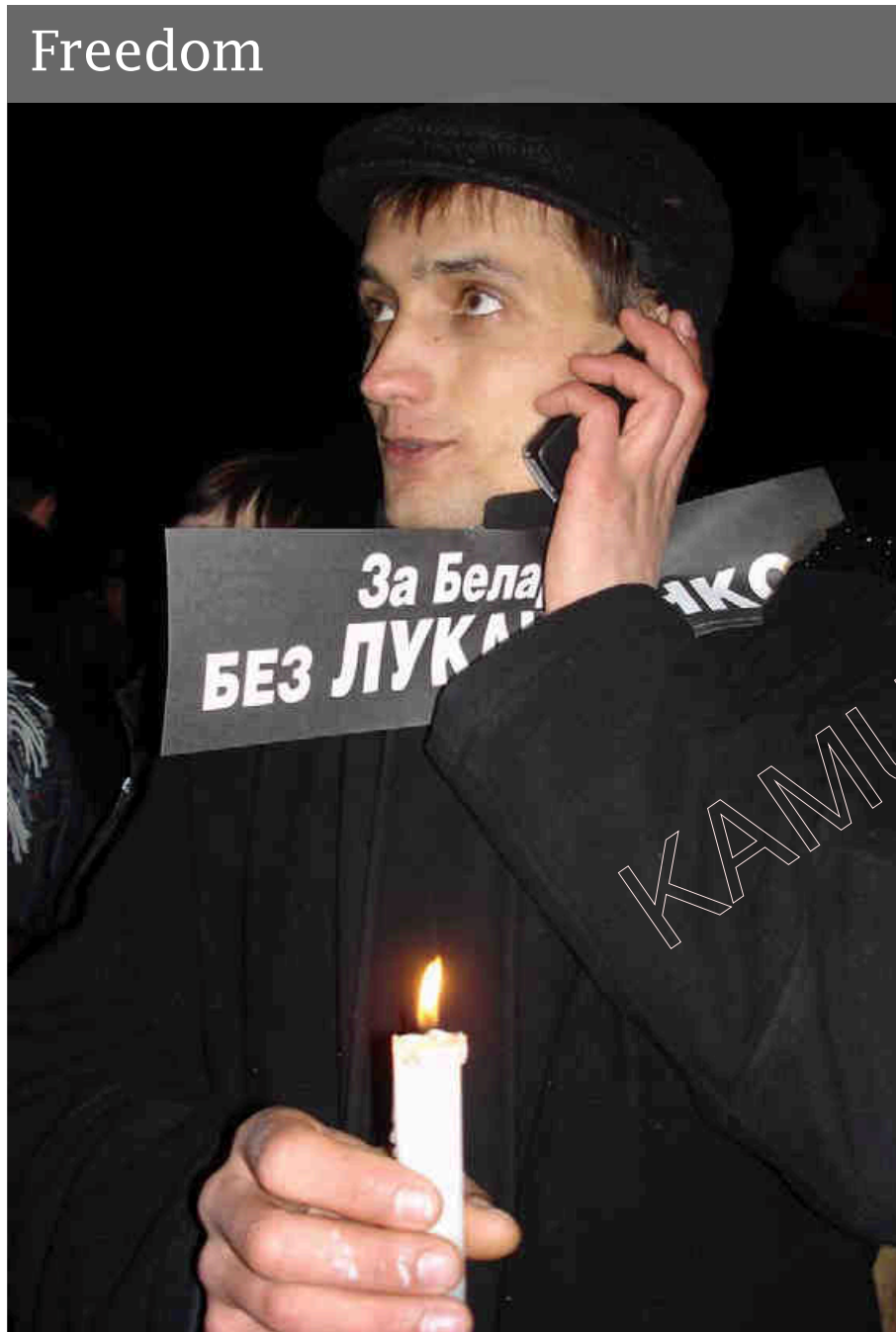
Hardly anything illustrates this better than Belarus in recent days. For a short time around the presidential elections in March 2006, the yearning of many Belarusians for freedom and democracy surfaced powerfully. They came together to protest against rigged elections, hypocrisy and violence. They came to opposition meetings, attended solidarity concerts, and took to the streets in a peaceful demonstration of their desire to be free. These Belarusian citizens were people of all generations and of all walks of life. Young and old, male and female, rural or urban, they had one thing in common. Their wish to be granted their right: basic civic liberties such as freedom to choose one's government in a free and fair election and to speak out against oppression.

The photographs brought together here were taken by an amateur who, as a Western observer of the events on the ground in Minsk in March 2006, wishes to remain anonymous. These photographs were taken in the hope that they can give a face to the courage of all those working towards democracy in Belarus today and in the hope that they testify to their struggle.



Freedom Bell, rung in October Square, Minsk, March 20, 2006. An index of photographs can be found at the end of this section.

Freedom



Courage



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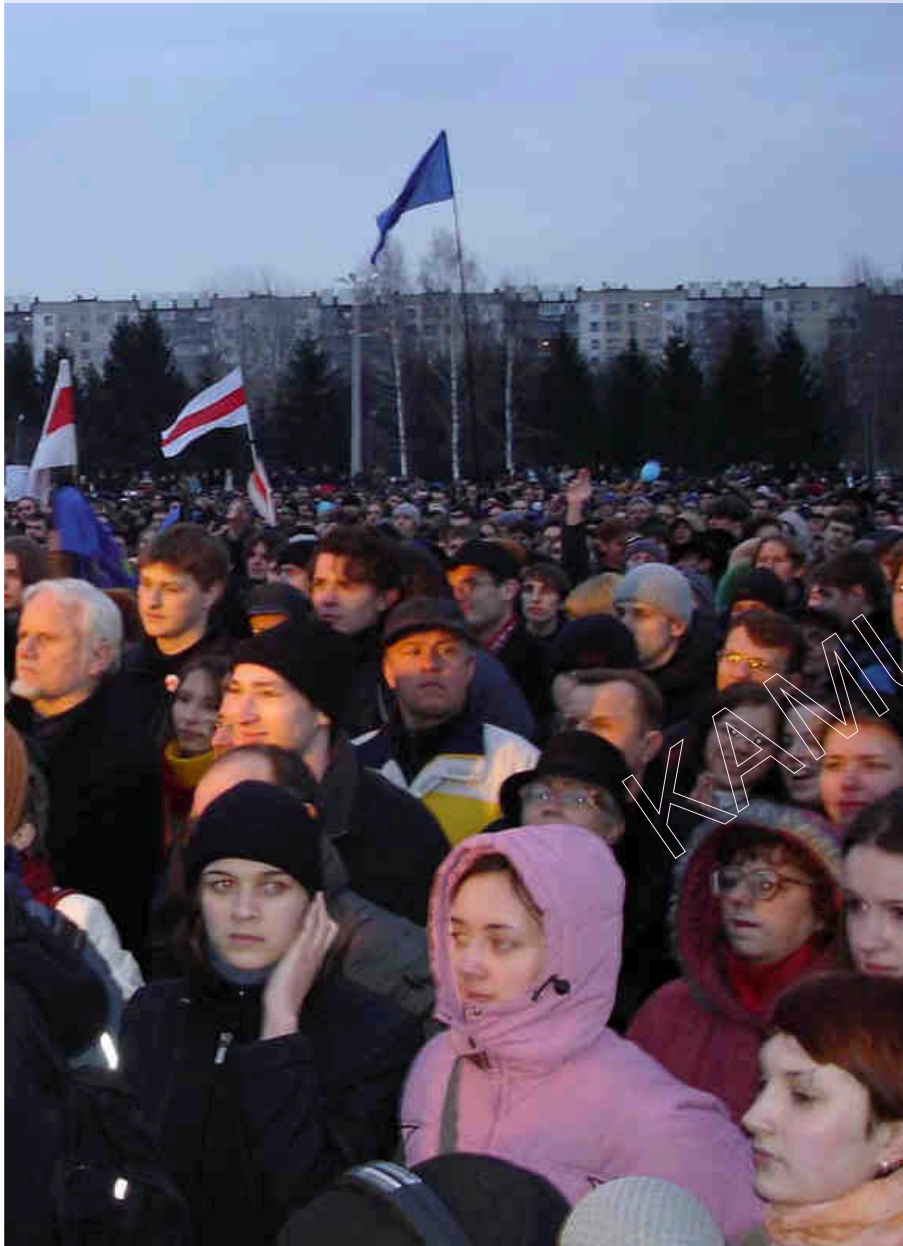


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Solidarity



People Power



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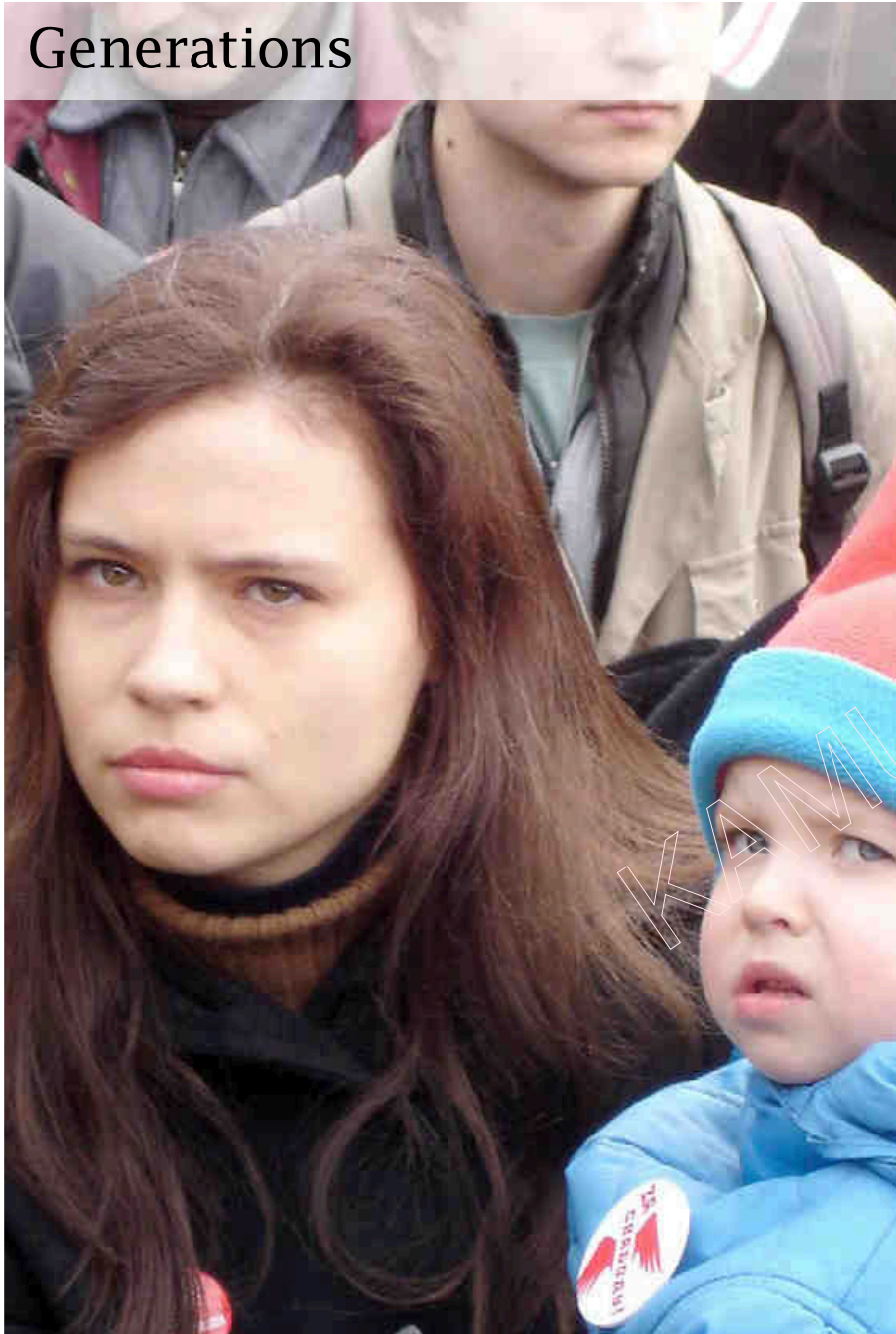


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Generations



1



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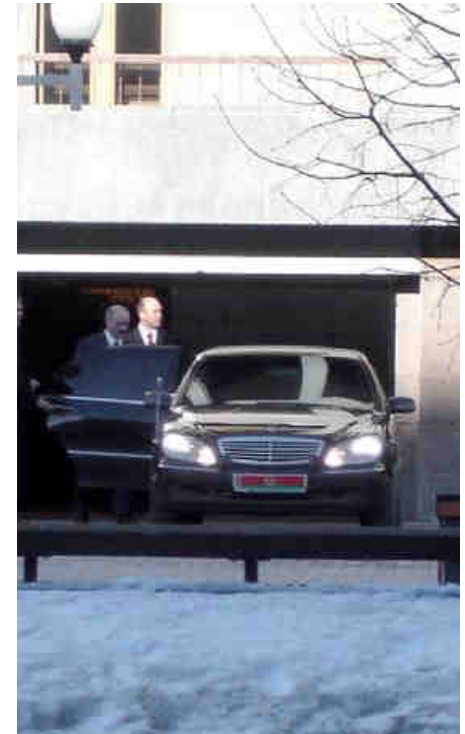


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Youth



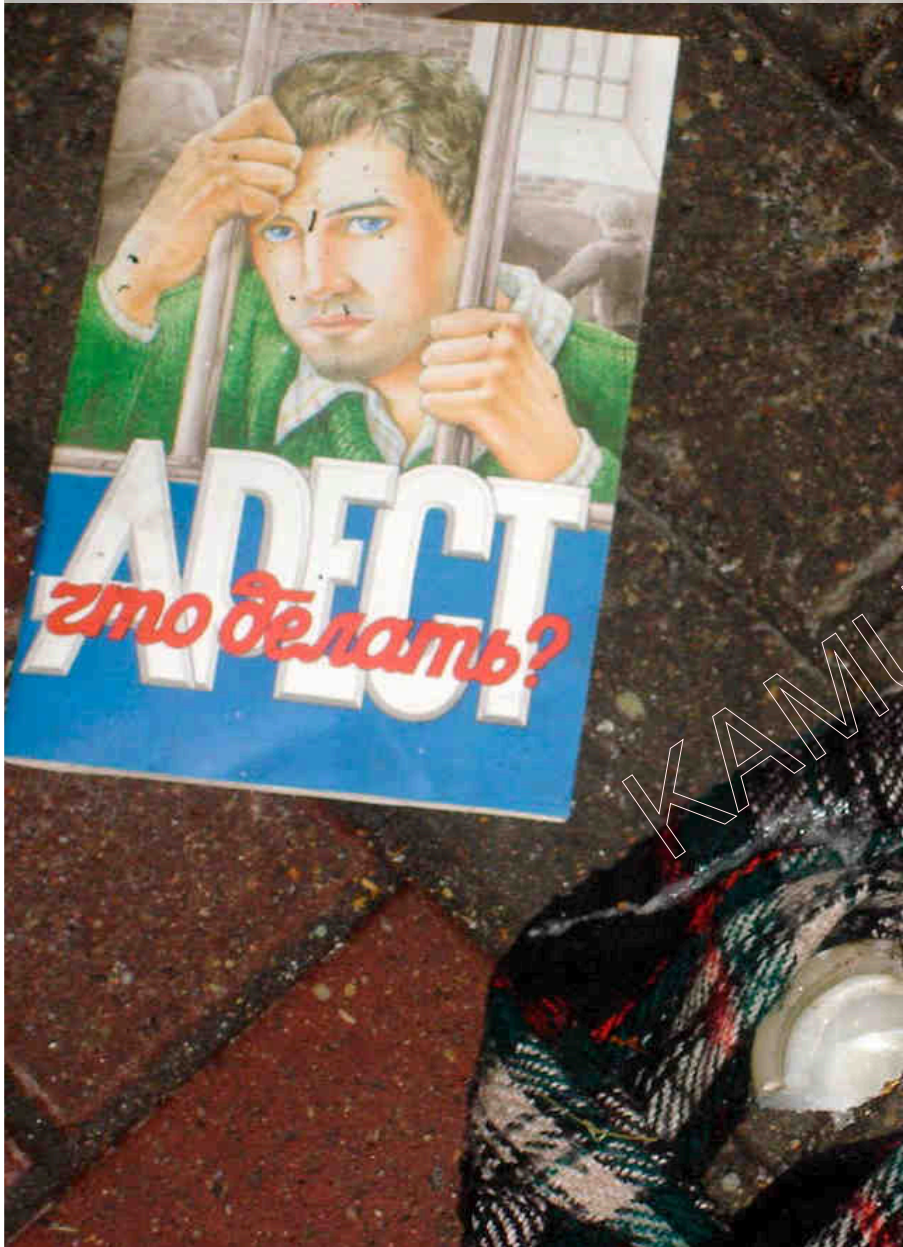
Leaders



Propaganda



State Power



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The Die is Cast!

Bogdan Klich

It may sound surprising but the days of Lukashenka's regime are numbered. The recent measures taken by the state authorities against the democratic opposition can, at most, delay changes but they will not reverse the general trend. The opposition in Belarus has gained in experience: it has grown united and acted rationally, rather than being divided, in the run-up to the elections. It united in a comprehensive coalition ranging from the communists to the nationalists, and it has created a powerful weapon: Alyaksandr Milinkevich, presidential candidate of the united opposition.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich is a cultured and educated personality, with a strong sense for the mission, with which he has been entrusted. He is a charismatic leader who managed to unite around his person the hitherto fractured parties of the democratic opposition. His greatest advantage in the eyes of the Belarusian public is precisely his non-partisanship. It enables him more than anybody else to build the democratic opposition into a powerful social movement for political change. Milinkevich embodies the longing of Belarusians for democracy, normality and an end to isolation.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich was elected presidential candidate on October 1, 2005. Back then, many feared that his main weakness was in the low recognition and support levels he enjoyed among Belarusians. This disadvantage quickly turned to his advantage. What is more, he built something his main contender for office can only dream about: support beyond Belarus' borders. Even Lukashenka's Ministry of Foreign Affairs lamented that Milinkevich was received in Brussels in a way normally reserved for heads of state. His traditional election campaign, based on a maximum of individual contacts with voters, turned out to be unexpectedly successful. Today Milinkevich is a serious alternative to the current president and an opponent feared by the powers-that-be.

This is most obvious during public meetings and rallies, usually attended by several hundred to several thousand Belarusians and indicating that the barrier of fear has been broken. The few thousand expressing their support in public may well be a precursor for more soon. And then Belarusians may quickly go through an experience known to Poles from Pope John Paul II's visit in 1979. They will understand how many they actually are. They will also show this to those backing the current president, and his support may quickly fade. The system may collapse swiftly, like a house of cards.

Certainly, Lukashenka will do what he can to remain in power. The first "preventive" measures have already been taken. The opposition is being

deprived of its leaders. Several of those who could, jointly with Alyaksandr Milinkevich, bring the people out onto the streets have been arrested, and they were in prison during the decisive moments around election day. A similar approach was taken to students who traditionally support the opposition in great numbers. University holidays were extended to March 20 and early voting was encouraged at universities, as was departure from Minsk for election day itself. Clearly, the authorities feared mass demonstrations in Minsk.

In the long run, however, these and other measures taken by the Lukashenka regime will be irrelevant. The opposition has been growing stronger and more confident of its strength and social support. It is also the opposition leader whom people trust: a man who represents the opposite of the current president on all counts, and who can lead the country out of international isolation. The Lukashenka regime is slowly crumbling, while society is awakening. This is a process that cannot be reversed. It can only be drawn out. This, precisely, seems to be the strategy of Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

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International Responses to the Presidential Elections in Belarus

Alina Belskaya

The presidential elections in Belarus held on March 19, 2006 had the highest level of coverage by international media ever and elicited a wide response from the international community. Some have even gone as far as saying that the response of the international community was timelier and more focused than the initial reaction to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004.

Though the elections were scheduled for just one week before the crucial parliamentary elections in Ukraine, the first after the Orange Revolution, the media and the international community kept Belarus in the spotlight for as long as there was action on the ground. This was indeed a novelty for elections in Belarus, as the previous presidential poll, which took place on September 9, 2001 was overshadowed by the terrorist attacks on the United States two days later, while the parliamentary elections in 2004 were overtaken by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

By contrast, this time the presidential elections in Belarus received a fair amount of international attention. Though the most serious and violent reprisals against Belarusian democrats came after most international observers and foreign reporters had left Minsk, the international community kept an eye on developments on the ground in Belarus, decrying the violence employed by the government and law enforcement agencies.

International Election Monitors

International election observation missions are considered the most reliable source of information on the conduct of elections by many in the international community. The elections in Minsk were monitored by two election observation missions: by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), and by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) observation mission.

The OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission was opened in Minsk on February 7, 2006 after initial hesitation in ODIHR concerning the usefulness of sending observers to monitor elections, which were already obviously not going to be free or fair. The mission comprised 48 experts and long-term observers stationed in Minsk and in 14 regional centers. On the day of the election 440

observers from 38 countries and 98 parliamentarians from the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE observed voting at over 2,000 polling stations and more than 100 territorial election commissions. 19 further observers from the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE and 9 observers from the OSCE/ODIHR mission were denied visas or refused entry into Belarus.

The preliminary results of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission were announced in Minsk on March 20 and laid the ground for most international responses. The mission stated that “The Belarusian presidential election on March 19 failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections, despite the fact that voters were offered the potential for a genuine choice between four candidates. Arbitrary use of state power and widespread detentions showed a disregard for the basic rights of freedom of assembly, association and expression, and raise doubts regarding the authorities’ willingness to tolerate political competition. A statement by the security services, accusing the opposition and civil society of planning to seize power and associating them with terrorism, contributed significantly to a climate of intimidation and insecurity. This was further exacerbated by harassment and detention of political and civil society activists. Opposition candidates faced difficulties in conveying their messages to the public, while the coverage of the President was extensive and favorable. State employees and students were under pressure not to participate in the campaign of the opposition candidates and to vote for the incumbent president. The vote count proved highly problematic, with observers assessing it negatively in a large number of counts witnessed. In a number of instances, the results were completed in pencil, and the majority of observers were prevented from standing close enough to see the marks on the ballot”.

The OSCE/ODIHR report was largely contradicted by the CIS observation mission, an election monitoring mechanism established in 2002 by the executive committee of the Commonwealth of the Independent States to monitor elections in CIS countries. The mission was headed by the executive secretary of the CIS, Vladimir Rushailo, and comprised of 467 observers. The preliminary results of the mission stated that the Belarusian elections were “free, open and transparent” although admittedly had some drawbacks, a statement which was supported publicly by a Russian observer named Velichkin from the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission.

In particular, Rushailo stressed the international atmosphere surrounding the elections. He characterized it as one of “unprecedented external pressure” and criticized “biased statements, harsh judgments and warnings of restrictive political and economic measures which were perceived as an attempt to influence the election process during the last stage of the elections”.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs used the results of the CIS observation mission in their official evaluation of the elections, considering the election free and fair, even taking into account some shortcomings at some polling stations.

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Reactions from the European Union

In run up to the elections the European Union (EU) and United States (US) were expecting more serious violence, and possibly even bloodshed, on the streets of Belarus. Several warnings were issued to the Belarusian authorities to refrain from violence before the elections by high ranking EU and US officials, as well as by President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation.

The European Commission reaction to the election results in Belarus followed polling day swiftly. European Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, expressed that she was “saddened, but relieved” that there had been no violence on the streets, and called on the government to release all of the arrested. She went on to say that “It is now really very likely that some action will be taken following up on what the Council [of EU foreign ministers] said both in November and January – that ministers stood ready to take further restrictive measures if the elections turned out not to be free and fair”.

On part of the European Council, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana endorsed the OSCE preliminary election report saying “What we have seen [on] television last night and the results that have come out from the OSCE speak for themselves. We would like to continue being engaged with the people of Belarus, and continue being firm with the leaders of Belarus so that they really accept to move on to being a democratic country”.

A day later he expressed his support in even stronger words saying “I would like to stress that the EU considers the Belarusians our European brothers and sisters and strives for strong human partnership” and added that the Belarusian government was preventing the Belarusian people from having a better future.

With the OSCE/ODIHR report in hand the foreign ministers of the 25 member states of the EU, gathered on March 20-21 in Brussels for the European Council meeting and started a debate on Belarus. Although the ministers recognized that the elections were neither free nor fair, they did not manage to come to a joint position on Belarus. New member states, such as Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic insisted that harsher sanctions should be quickly imposed on Belarus, but the resolution was muted by German Foreign Minister Steinmeier, who argued that a hasty and ill-considered reaction could damage the EU’s future options regarding Belarus.

A declaration outlining the short-term position of the EU toward Belarus after the presidential elections was passed by the Council of the European Union on March 24. In the declaration, the European Union promised to look into restrictive measures against those responsible for the violations of international electoral standards, and to develop closer relations with the Belarusian people. The EU also urged the Belarusian authorities to allow people to demonstrate peacefully and called for the release of all arrested.

The highlight of the declaration, however, was the recognition that “In the course of this election campaign, the European Union has witnessed the emergence

of pluralistic forces and the consolidation of a genuine Belarusian opposition as well as a politically active civil society. In very difficult circumstances and at great personal risk, opposition candidates and their supporters have offered the Belarusian population a democratic alternative. Their efforts deserve our recognition and support. The European Union pledges to further strengthen its support for civil society and for democratization in Belarus”.

Several members of the European Parliament who wished to observe the elections in Belarus suffered setbacks from the very outset. Many were not issued visas to enter Belarus for an election observation mission. In response, members of the delegation decided to establish a situation room in Brussels to follow developments in Belarus. Reactions from the European Parliament to the results of the elections in Belarus were voiced already on March 20, refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the elections.

The President of the European Parliament Josep Borrell said that “the failure to respect international electoral standards in combination with a steadily deteriorating political situation and persistent violations of the civil and fundamental rights of the Belarusian people will not remain without consequences for the relations between the EU and Belarus”.

The resolution on Belarus issued on March 20 after the official results of the OSCE/ODIHR mission were announced refused to recognize president Lukashenka as legitimately elected and called for a rerun of the elections, at the same time supporting the demonstrations in Minsk: “We welcome the impressive mass demonstrations against the non-democratic nature of the election showing the desire of the large part of the society to restore democratic rights and political freedoms in their country, thus revealing the huge democratic potential of the Belarusian people. It is a victory over fear.”

Other International Organizations

A number of other international organizations also reacted to the elections in Belarus. In a speech on March 20, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), condemned the conduct of the elections in Belarus saying that “[t]he people of Belarus have the right to choose their leadership through a true democratic process; that right was again denied to them in these elections. I strongly urge the authorities in Belarus to take steps to respect Euro-Atlantic democratic standards, including those to which they have committed in the Partnership for Peace”.

Terry Davis, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, in his reaction to the rigged vote said “Alyaksandr Lukashenka is a president with a tainted mandate. Some elections are stolen by tampering with people’s votes, others by tampering with people’s minds through threats, harassment and intimidation (...) In a country in which freedom of expression and association are so thoroughly and aggressively suppressed, a vote is not an exercise in democracy, it is a farce”.

The President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Rene van der Linden, was one of the first to raise the question of Russia: "The international community must now give a firm, coordinated response (...) As the Council of Europe approaches the beginning of the first ever Russian chairmanship of its Committee of Ministers, we can look forward to new opportunities for bringing about democratic reforms in Belarus."

The United States of America

An important and powerful response to the elections came from the United States. The day after the elections the State Department stated that "[t]he United States cannot accept as legitimate the election results announced yesterday by the Belarusian Central Election Commission declaring Alyaksandr Lukashenka the winner in a landslide. The United States congratulates the courageous Belarusian democrats who, against appalling electoral conditions and at great risk, have moved their country closer toward reclaiming its democratic rights (...) The United States is preparing to take serious, appropriate measures against those officials responsible for election fraud and other human rights abuses, and we will be coordinating these steps with the European Union".

David Kramer, Assistant Deputy Secretary of State, talked in more detail about the policy of the United States toward Belarus and the US response to the elections during a speech at the Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center on March 21.

"The Secretary of State, as you know, has referred to Alyaksandr Lukashenka as the last outpost of tyranny, the last dictatorship in Europe... what we saw on Sunday itself certainly confirmed those descriptions (...) Our policy is well known. Before the election we wanted to shine a bright light on Belarus and on the regime's record. We wanted to help those activities working to promote democratic change, and we wanted to break the regime's stranglehold on information (...). We will continue to stand for these principles in the post-election period (...). The US and the EU are on record as ready to take additional measures against individuals responsible for violations of international standards. Specifically, we will look to expand travel restrictions on additional individuals responsible for fraud and human rights abuses (...). We also will look at going after assets in a targeted way of key people in the regime in Minsk."

Western Europe: Germany, Austria, France

After initial disappointment with the statement by German Foreign Minister Steinmeier at the Council of the EU Foreign Ministers, German politicians picked up the tone echoed in other countries of Europe. Chancellor Angela Merkel supported the Belarusian opposition saying that "... with its actions

during the election campaign the opposition garnered deep respect in the eyes of the German government and deserves its solidarity and support".

Members of the Bundestag were also outspoken in regard to the elections in Belarus, with Manfred Grund stating that human rights are more important to the current government of Germany than before and characterizing the events in Minsk as brutal and violent. In Minsk, a delegation of German parliamentarians followed the elections and civic protests. Of this group, Marieluise Beck addressed the democratic opposition at the March 19 rally, ensuring protesters of the full support of their demand for free and fair elections.

The Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik stated on March 20: "In today's Europe, Belarus is a sad exception. (...) We are convinced that the bleak winter for democracy and democrats in Belarus will not endure."

The French Foreign Minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, called on the EU to be extremely firm with the Minsk government: "Vigorous sanctions against Belarusian leaders and support for the civilian population will be clearly in order."

Central and Eastern Europe: Slovakia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Ukraine

By comparison, Slovak, Polish and Baltic responses were much harsher than the responses coming from older member states. In the debates at the Council of Foreign Ministers in Brussels they called for harsher measures to be imposed and fast.

Immediately on election day, Slovak Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda issued a statement to say that "[we] cannot recognize the results of the Presidential elections in Belarus as presented by President Lukashenka's regime". In addressing the democratic opposition, he emphasized that "[the] flame of civic protest and hope (...) is now burning in Belarus. Slovakia and the international community must not leave the people of Belarus alone in their struggle for a free and democratic country."

Poland, too, reacted quickly. Most outspoken was the Vice President of the European Parliament, Poland's Janusz Onyszkiewicz: "[T]his is not the end of the process, this is probably the beginning. Finally somebody shouted out loud that the King is naked – many people heard it. Recent events in Belarus may facilitate the repetition of the Polish events in 1989."

The Lithuanian and Latvian foreign ministries stated "that in a certain part of the Belarusian civil society a breakthrough has taken place regarding the understanding of democratic values and principles. This part of the society has chosen to demonstrate its civic position by means of peaceful protest".

The Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, together with the President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko, stated in response to the suggestion to impose

economic sanctions, visa bans and to freeze Belarusian assets that “the conditions in Belarus less and less represent the democratic situation. We can only express our regrets to the Belarusian people. But wide-ranging economic sanctions would affect the people and not the political elite”.

In a briefing on March 20, President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia, one of the most outspoken foreign leaders on the Belarus question, stated that “Belarus is not an *idée fixe*. It is a fundamental issue. I am convinced that the people of Belarus will be freed and Europe will be finally united”.

Although Ukraine joined the EU declaration on the presidential elections in Belarus, the response of President Victor Yushchenko was less outspoken. He reiterated that “Belarus must not be internationally isolated, for it will not benefit democracy in this country. We want to have pragmatic relations. We want to develop trade and economic relations with our neighbor”. By contrast, the chairman of the Ukrainian *Rada*, Vladimir Litvin, expressed support for the president of Belarus: “We are all to respect the choice of Belarusian people.”

Russia and Other States

Russia was among the first to congratulate Lukashenka on his reelection. President Putin sent a telegram which read “The results of the election that has just taken place are evidence of the voters’ confidence in the course you have chosen to ensure rising prosperity for the Belarusian people...”

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expanded the explanation: “Understandable is the interest which Moscow showed in the election campaign in Belarus (...) Belarus is not only our closest neighbor, but also an ally of Russia.”

On March 24, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Igor Lavrov, sharply criticized the work of the OSCE/ODIHR observation mission, stating “we again became witnesses of a situation where a monitoring mission (...) began to make statements that these elections would be illegitimate...”

Three other countries joined Russia in congratulating Alyaksandr Lukashenka on his reelection: Iran, Cuba and China. Among the most quoted was the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who expressed confidence that “during the new term in office of Alyaksandr Lukashenka relations between Iran and Belarus will continue developing in all directions.”

Prominent Individuals and Non-Governmental Organizations

Madeleine K. Albright, former US Secretary of State and Chairperson of the National Democratic Institute, said “I have watched with admiration as many of you have braved the cold and snow and the fear of intimidation and arrest

in your peaceful call for democracy (...) I stand in solidarity with you, in the conviction that the principles, to which we aspire together, for a political process based on equality and respect for human rights, reflect the hopes and aspirations of people the world over.”

Former Czech President Václav Havel joined a delegation of Czech Senators and parliamentarians in their attempt to hand over a petition to the Belarusian Embassy in Prague. The petition expressed support for the Belarusian opposition and demanded the resignation of President Lukashenka. Václav Havel said “This is an act of solidarity. From our own experience we know how important signs of solidarity are for those struggling for freedom.”

International Non-Governmental Organizations like the International Helsinki Committee and Amnesty International reacted to the events with similar statements: “The Belarusian authorities have yet again demonstrated a total disregard for freedom of expression. All those that have been detained for the legitimate and peaceful expression of their views must be released immediately.” Amnesty International launched a petition to free the arrested demonstrators and political prisoners in Belarus.

Conclusion

When later during the week following the elections, events in Minsk turned violent, there came a second wave of international reactions, condemning violence and calling on the Belarusian authorities to release prisoners. On March 24, the tent village on October Square was removed by the police, and a peaceful demonstration called by the opposition to celebrate Independence Day on March 25 was violently dispersed.

In response to the arrest of hundreds of people, including opposition candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin, Western officials responded with concern, including the Foreign Minister of Belgium, Karel de Gucht, who holds the presidency of the OSCE: “It is particularly disappointing and worrying that the Belarusian authorities did not take the many calls for restraint into account and did not refrain from repressive action. I am concerned now over the safety and the well-being of those arrested.” This concern was echoed by the EU, its individual member states, and the United States, while Russia offered a sharply different view. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov responded to the violence in Minsk, saying “I would not call what we saw on television a ‘breaking-up’” and played down measures taken by the Belarusian authorities. In Russia’s reading, what occurred in Minsk on March 25 was clearly a failed attempt to repeat opposition tactics used during elections in other CIS countries, such as Georgia and Ukraine.

These opposing assessments and responses notwithstanding, the recent presidential elections in Belarus undeniably received unprecedented international attention. Major newspapers and TV channels, in the West, in Russia and worldwide, covered the events as they were unfolding in Belarus.

Major international broadcasters ran reports from Belarus among their headline features for almost a week as the demonstrators gathered on October Square. For some observers, however, this extensive coverage was still not sufficient to raise the awareness of the international community and audience about the situation in Belarus, and the *Wall Street Journal* asked on March 21, “Who will cry, after yesterday’s fiasco of a presidential election, for Belarus? More to the point, who can find this nation of 10 million (mostly delightful) Slavic souls without a peek at a map? Safe to say, not many, which is good news for Alexander Lukashenka’s career plans.” It is now for international media, opinion leaders and decision makers to make sure that international interest in and knowledge about this country remain and further increase.

Part Four

Beyond Elections: Prospects for Democracy in Belarus