

Postscript

Belarus after the March 2006 Presidential Elections

David R. Marples

At first glance, it may have seemed that the presidential elections of March 19, 2006, strengthened the position of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and allowed him to commence his third term (and possibly future terms) in office with some confidence. Yet it was also apparent that Lukashenka's position had been acquired at considerable cost. A highly divisive election campaign, the protests following the obviously fraudulent poll and their brutal suppression by the security apparatus alienated part of the populace, particularly young people, as well as most of the outside world, including the European Union and the United States. Both of the latter issued strong condemnations of the way the election had been conducted and both have retained their critical stance since. In turn, relations with the regime's hitherto staunchest of allies, Russia, were calm throughout the election campaign, but several troubling issues have now surfaced. Lastly, the united democratic opposition was buoyed by the electoral campaign and needed to find ways of continuing its resistance to the government in the post-election period, including a possible realignment of its forces and tactics. This postscript, drafted six months after the March elections, examines each of these issues in turn.

Relations with the West

Already strained prior to the March elections, relations between Belarus and the West have further deteriorated in the aftermath of the poll. On April 10, the EU imposed visa bans on Lukashenka and thirty leading government figures, particularly those who were known to have participated in acts of violence or retribution against the democratic opposition during the campaign. The United States followed suit, imposing a similar ban on May 12. In late July 2006, Congressman Christopher Smith of New Jersey put forward a proposal that the United States should renew the Belarusian Democracy Act, initially signed into law in October 2004. This bill would authorize \$20 million in assistance for NGOs, youth groups, independent media, and domestic political parties in Belarus for each of the years 2007 and 2008 and an additional \$7.5 million over the same period for the creation of alternative TV and radio broadcasts for the people of Belarus. These actions reflect current thinking in Europe and the U.S. that there is little sign of any improvement and democratic

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development in Belarus. Further consolidating this approach is the Canadian Conservative government of Stephen Harper, which supported these strong Western positions and refused landing rights to a Belarusian plane en route for Cuba, with Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorsky on board, on April 20. Lukashenka responded with a similar ban on U.S. and EU officials traveling to Belarus and on transit for flights over Belarusian territory by U.S. and Canadian planes.

Belarusian relations with neighboring states have been no less acrimonious. Disputes with Poland, already aggravated in the run-up to the elections, have continued and pertain to the Belarusian government's takeover of the Union of Poles and the incarceration of former Polish ambassador Mariusz Maszkiewicz, who was arrested during the breakup of the tent camp on October Square in the early hours of March 24. In responding to the repressions against protesters, Poland, like other European states, has offered generous study alternatives for Belarusian students that have been victimized by the Lukashenka regime for their participation in protests. On March 30, Polish Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz initiated the Konstantin Kalinouski Scholarship Program to assist more than 300 students expelled from Belarusian universities and colleges, particularly after the March protests. Similar aid has been forthcoming from other European countries, including the Czech Republic, Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany.

The Lukashenka regime has responded by provoking international scandals. On July 25, Belarusian militia entered the apartment of the Second Secretary of the Latvian Embassy, Reimo Smits, in a raid aimed at uncovering pornographic materials. Subsequently a highly provocative video of Smits and another man was shown on Belarusian Television. This state-manufactured scandal reminiscent of the Soviet period was strongly condemned by the Latvian government and a demand for an apology was made, after its own investigator could uncover no wrongdoing on the part of the diplomat (who subsequently left Minsk) or any reason why the militia should have broken into his apartment in violation of the 1961 Vienna Convention on the rules of diplomatic behavior. Another incident occurred in late August when the body of a Lithuanian diplomat and advisor to the Lithuanian Consulate in Hrodna, Vytautas Pociunas, was discovered in Brest. Belarusian authorities reported that Pociunas had fallen from his hotel window, but the Lithuanians pressed for an official investigation of his death. These events also signal the increasingly precarious existence of Western diplomats resident in Belarus and the hostile relations of the regime with some of its closest neighbors.

Relations with Russia

Somewhat surprisingly, ties between Belarus and its closest ally, Russia, entered a difficult phase immediately after the presidential election. On April 26, Russian President Vladimir Putin had an important meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Tomsk. Although not the main focus of the

meeting, Belarus was discussed, coinciding with a large demonstration in Minsk to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. This demonstration culminated in the arrests of dozens of people, including the united democratic candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, who received a 15-day sentence for "petty hooliganism". On May 9, Putin signed a decree on fundamental changes in the trade-economic and credit-financial policies of Russia vis-à-vis Belarus. At the same time, the conglomerate *Gazprom*, in which the Russian government has a majority stake, announced plans for a threefold rise in the price of gas to be sold to neighboring countries in 2007. Implicitly, therefore, the decision anticipated a dramatic increase in the price of gas, which stood at a very favorable \$46.48 per 1,000 cubic meters thanks to an agreement between Putin and Lukashenka made prior to the Belarusian election. Clearly also the Russian government was frustrated with the way oil companies exploit the economic relationship with Belarus to re-export oil without benefit to the Russian budget. *Gazprom* maintains that it cannot continue to subsidize Belarus with prices that are well below market levels without some form of compensation. In turn it continues to demand control over the significant Belarusian gas transit company, *Beltransgaz*.

Putin and Lukashenka held a meeting on April 28 at Strel'nyy near St. Petersburg, at which the Russian president made reference to the disaffected political forces in Belarus and asked his Belarusian counterpart whether he would propose any measures to unite them. Presumably he was referring to the large crowds formed in October Square and at the March 25 demonstration. It was evident to Putin that Lukashenka's tactics during and after the election, as well as the obviously faked results with inflated totals for the president, had provoked large-scale opposition. The question arises to which extent Russian pressure on Lukashenka reflects Russia's anxiety to assuage Western concerns prior to the G-8 Summit in St. Petersburg in July.

Putin has evidently been dissatisfied with the lack of progress on the Russia-Belarus Union, the transition to a single currency and the protracted process of adopting a final draft version of the new Union Treaty. In 2002, he dismissed the proposition that the Union could be based on an equal partnership and hinted that Russia might simply absorb Belarus as a new Western province of the Russian Federation. This put Lukashenka on the defensive to the extent that he *ipso facto* defended the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of Belarus. Though national referenda have been anticipated in both countries on the issue of a new Union by the end of 2006, it seems unlikely that they will be held during this period, if at all. Lukashenka announced at a press conference with Russian journalists in late September that he expected difficult relations with Russia for the next three years, a period that will see new parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia. He also maintained that Russian amendments to the terms of the Russia-Belarus Union had rendered the agreement unacceptable to the Belarusian side. Implicit in these remarks is the question of whether his nemesis, Vladimir Putin, will remain in power when his second presidential term comes to an end in 2008. From Lukashenka's perspective,

Putin's replacement by a more conciliatory figure would be preferable and perhaps allow the Belarusian president to cultivate new contacts in Russia and to establish a partnership that allows Belarus more leeway and, at the very least, the maintenance of its position as Russia's privileged (read, subsidized) trading partner.

While the outside observer should not make too much of these apparent disagreements, they have made it clear to Belarusians, and to Lukashenka in particular, that there is little to be gained and much to be lost by concluding the Union agreement and putting it to national referenda. Most residents of Belarus do not support a union that would result in a loss of independence for Belarus. Putin, as noted above, has been far less accommodating on potential terms than his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, who preferred to keep options for both sides more open.

What is the alternative? Lukashenka also works with Russia through other mechanisms, including the Commonwealth of Independence States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whose six members - Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Belarus - have agreed to abstain from threats of force against each other and not to join any alternative military alliances. Perhaps most significant in Lukashenka's view is the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), which has six member states (Russia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Speaking at a meeting of the EAEC in June 2006, Lukashenka suggested the creation of a fully-fledged customs union, a merger of the EAEC and the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (which contains the same four Central Asian states and Russia), as well as the formation of a common energy policy within the EAEC. The latter, in particular, indicates that his ultimate goal is for Belarusians and Russians to pay the same price for energy.

The State of the Nation Address

The main indicator of Lukashenka's proposed policy for his third term was his "state of the nation" address, delivered on May 23 and broadcast on Belarusian TV. Notably, his speech contained some proposals from the election manifestos of the opposition, and particularly those of Alyaksandr Kazulin. He focused on what he termed "people power" and the resolution of the most important issues through popular participation in elections, referenda and all-Belarusian assemblies. He maintained, countering criticisms from the West, that civil society already existed in Belarus and expressed itself through labor collectives, over 2,000 public associations, 41 trade unions and other organizations that provide conditions for partnership with the state. He declared his intention to adhere to the contentious system of labor contracts and announced that the Federation of Trade Unions must uncover violations in the labor relations system. The president announced that he did not intend to create a party of power, which in any case could not be mandated from above but required some

grassroots initiative. In his view, such a party is not needed because Belarusian society is based on four foundations: trade unions, councils of deputies, youth groups and veterans' organizations. He stated that some local councils were being run by extremists and that the opposition was seeking revenge for its electoral defeat, so that much work had to be undertaken by pro-government youth and veteran's organizations with students and young people.

Lukashenka was honest enough to muse that his two immediate problems are the rise of energy prices and the constant threats of sanctions and other "preposterous measures" against Belarus by the EU and the United States. His method of countering such threats is a "multi-directional" policy that can establish a multi-polar world with new centers of power, including China, Iran, India and the countries of Latin America, such as Venezuela whose President Hugo Chavez received an ecstatic welcome in Belarus on July 25. In mid-September, Lukashenka appeared to move in a somewhat different direction at the Non-Aligned Movement's summit in Cuba where he had a personal meeting with Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Lukashenka called on the Non-Aligned Movement to develop into an independent global center of political power.

His statement demonstrates, perhaps, the relatively undeveloped nature of his strategy for the future, in that the simultaneous emergence of new centers of power alongside an independent non-aligned center would surely be unworkable. What the two concepts have in common is opposition to the United States (and to some extent to the EU), as well as to the position of NATO on the Western border of Belarus. Lukashenka has complained frequently that the so-called joint Russia-Belarus army on that border is comprised almost one hundred percent of Belarusian troops. Interesting also is that both ideas implicitly exclude the Russian Federation, an old rather than new center of power, and a country that has manifested an ambiguous and inconsistent attitude to countries like Iran, a close but unpredictable trading partner. It is difficult to assess the seriousness of Lukashenka's political strategy. In the past it has been almost impossible to discern a strategy at all. It can best be summarized as one that relies on maintaining friendship with Russia and increasing trade with the EU despite hostile rhetoric, but also overtly seeks alternatives to strengthen Belarus' position in negotiation with others and particularly with the Kremlin and its economic partners.

The Opposition

The united democratic opposition emerged with credit from the election campaign and efforts were discernible to continue the new unity in the form of a broader movement called "For Freedom!" The new tactics represent the preferred method of Alyaksandr Milinkevich, namely to promote a popular Solidarity-style movement rather than to go through bureaucratic and party channels. This includes a re-alignment of civic actors, such as the announced

self-dissolution of the *Zubryouth* network to pave the way for a new and broader civic alliance and the use of new methods, such as so-called “flashmobs”, spontaneous protest actions taking the regime by surprise. In the context of this broader debate, criticisms of mainstream opposition tactics emerged soon after the elections. Thus, Viktor Karneyenka, a member of the Political Council of the united opposition, remarked that democrats must leave their ghetto and approach the people. In his view there is a danger that the opposition could be distracted by bureaucratic issues including the potential (and unnecessary) election of a new leader. That comment was corroborated by the refusal of Anatol Lyabedzka to vote on a new two-year strategy for bringing democracy to Belarus. Lyabedzka suggested instead that a new Congress of Democratic Forces be convoked, but his proposal was rejected by a majority. Political scientist Uladzimir Matskevich stated that the campaign “*For Freedom!*” was simply a play on words and lacked conceptual grounding. He felt that those who had for days held out in October Square would not be fooled by political slogans and were losing faith in both Lyabedzka and Milinkevich. In short, the feeling was that these leaders were allowing political ambitions and in-fighting to take priority over the immediate and more pressing priority of placing pressure on the regime.

In the meantime, opposition leaders “returned” to their political bases and over the early summer many of them consolidated their positions in new leadership contests within their various parties. Thus at the 10th Congress of the United Civic Party in late May, Lyabedzka was re-elected leader with 138 votes out of a possible 164. In his speech, Lyabedzka suggested that supporters of jailed presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin should have been invited to the congress, as well as those who were in the tent camp on October Square. Party priorities for the future would encompass a campaign to release political detainees and an international public tribunal of the Lukashenka regime. In mid-July, the Lukashenka regime attempted to undermine the position of the leader of the Party of Communists of Belarus, Syarhey Kalyakin, an important partner in the united opposition camp, by officially merging the two rival communist parties and effectively ousting him from his position. Kalyakin declared his intention to form a new party. The exiled leader of the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, Zyanon Paznyak, was re-elected leader at his party’s 7th Congress in late May by 94 votes to 2. Paznyak, however, has renounced cooperation with the united opposition. The Social Democrats, whose two most prominent figures Mikola Statkevich and Alyaksandr Kazulin remain in jail, continue to be divided despite the temporary unity attained under Kazulin during the election campaign.

On July 6, Alyaksandr Kazulin’s trial began in Minsk under highly restrictive conditions. Hundreds of observers turned up but many were prevented from attending, including two heads of EU diplomatic missions. The judge, Alyaksey Rybakou, banned the use of cameras and ordered several photographers to leave the courtroom. One week later, the judge announced a sentence of 5 1/2 years of confinement for the organization of group actions disturbing the

public peace. It will be recalled that Kazulin led some demonstrators toward a detention center containing many of those arrested during the elections. The severity of the sentence shocked observers, and both the United States and the EU promptly extended their travel bans to the presiding judge and prosecutor of the case. Kazulin went on hunger strike in September and has unflinchingly demanded that residents of Belarus remove the Lukashenka regime.

On August 4, the authorities also reached a verdict in the trial of four young activists from the informal association “*Partnerstvo*”, an election-monitoring group whose leaders were arrested by the KGB in March. The sentences were predictably harsh. The court, presided over by Judge Leanid Yasinovich, issued a two-year sentence in a minimum security institution to Mikalay Astreyka, a one-year sentence to Tsimafey Dranchuk, and six-month sentences to the other two members of the group, Alyaksandr Shalayka and Enira Branitskaya.

Following the election campaign, Milinkevich was the only prominent leader who did not need to return to party affairs. In September he acknowledged that the momentum of the election period had not been maintained and that to some extent he must take responsibility for the relative inertia. Youth activists continue to oppose the Lukashenka regime but they have not received adequate leadership. At a “Jeans Festival” on September 16, Milinkevich announced a new era of street protests to bring about a change of government in Belarus. The statement implied a further period of cooperation between the united democratic forces and the youth movements and the concept of public confrontation is reminiscent of Paznyak’s policy in Belarus in the mid-1990s following Lukashenka’s first referendum. On April 11, 1995, Paznyak organized a sit-in in the parliament building together with 18 members of the opposition to protest the referendum, and subsequently advocated that his party and supporters resort to street protests to bring down the Lukashenka government. This also suggests that opposition tactics for the local council elections in January 2007 may move in the direction of a boycott rather than participation. What is less clear, however, is how the street protests will be coordinated. It is also uncertain whether the actions of the united democratic opposition will be merged with the more active participants in recent protests, such as small entrepreneurs, independent trade unions and others, or linked to the general demands for better respect of human rights that have been key to many recent protest actions.

Conclusion

Can the opposition remain united or will its leaders again succumb to divisions? Unity remains attractive for several reasons. First, the electorate is disaffected with political parties, which are justifiably regarded as riddled with rifts and prone to divisiveness according to the ambitions of individual leaders. Second, the Belarusian opposition did manage to attract significant international attention during the elections because of their unity. Both the

EU and the United States are sympathetic to the united opposition as the best prospect for bringing democracy to Belarus. Conversely they have little faith in the other alternative, in other words, waiting for Lukashenka to change course and democratize society from above. Third, the opposition's election campaign generated an enthusiastic response among Belarusian young people, many of whom took considerable personal risks by taking to the streets. For the first time, Lukashenka was shown to have "lost" the youth vote, despite the efforts of his government-sponsored Belarusian Republican Youth Union, appropriately based at the building of the former *Komsomol* of Belarus in Minsk. Fourth, it is becoming increasingly evident that the government faces some difficult times, particularly in the economic sphere, as gas prices (and likely oil prices) will rise sharply. In short, there are good grounds for continuing and strengthening the unity of democratic forces in Belarus. Yet in this pursuit, democrats in the country will have to address several challenges.

Ultimately the 2006 election campaign was fought, not on the grounds suggested by the united opposition, in other words, the need for a democratic society, but on the economic front. Lukashenka himself set the playing field when announcing at the start of the campaign that there would be no increase in oil prices in 2006. Consequently, many Belarusians were convinced that the removal of Lukashenka would bring economic chaos and declining living standards, as was the case after the declaration of independence in 1991. These fears, combined with a lack of experience in democracy among the majority of the electorate (in particular, those over 40 years of age) and their vulnerability to televised propaganda about the malevolence of the United States and NATO, the victimization of Belarus in a line with Serbia and Iraq and its being a target for a color revolution *a la* Georgia and Ukraine. However, the myth of a unique Belarusian path, or economic and political model, may be hard to sustain once citizens begin to see dramatic rises in their heating bills or the price of gasoline. Likely economic difficulties in the near future should provide an opportunity for the democratic opposition to broaden its support base in society. Democrats in Belarus would be well advised to prepare appropriate responses and strategies for the economic development of their country and to reach out to such segments of society as the growing sector of private traders, independent trade unions and the rural constituency, the most impoverished in Belarus.

No less important is a demographic divide that has become apparent between the part of the population under 35 and those in older age groups. In the former, and especially among young people, there has been a clear rift with the authorities or a sullen acquiescence to existing conditions. Among the latter, the government has maintained its influence, and importantly, with over some parts of the urban intellectual elites. In addition, the government has solid support in the countryside, the military, the security forces and the police. The dilemma from the perspective of the democratic forces and their supporters is how to reach out to these segments of society. An especially daunting task will be to counter official propaganda that portrays democrats

as emissaries of a destructive and imperialistic West, attempting to impose itself on reluctant and peace-loving Belarusians under a father figure in the shape of the president.

International factors contribute to this complex constellation. In this respect, the West has sent mixed signals to Belarus. On the one hand, there is a consensus that it is necessary to isolate the Lukashenka regime, issue visa bans and demonstrate a general lack of recognition for the results of recent elections. Europe and the United States have opened their doors to the Belarusian opposition and to Milinkevich in particular. They have developed a variety of programs to assist the opposition, support victims of political repression and provide alternative news services to the Belarusian population. There are, on the other hand, clear divisions within the EU on the issue of sanctions and the extent to which they can be applied without adversely affecting the general population. This split has become particularly obvious in the context of a recent proposal by the European Commission to remove trade preferences in its relations with Belarus, which was blocked by several European countries including Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. Clearly, no single policy can be introduced or imposed that guarantees a serious weakening of the current government. Instead, such weakening and political change must come from within, which raises two related questions, namely the future and longevity of Lukashenka and Belarusian-Russian relations as the pivotal partnership that will determine the fate of the authoritarian regime in Minsk.

There is no question that the 2006 elections and their aftermath posed some serious questions for Lukashenka. He appeared unnerved by the ordeal, which may explain the delay of one week before his official inauguration. On that occasion, he appeared pale and drawn a shadow of his usual ebullient self. It took some time before events in Belarus returned to the familiar pattern of the president's ingratiating speeches to the population accompanied by arrests and harassment of real and perceived opposition, and invasive policies in all walks of life. Adding to this nervousness have been dilemmas in Belarus-Russia relations. The union treaty remains a rather distant prospect, while negotiations over the price of oil and gas bought from Russia and resulting economic hardship for the Belarusian population, as well as the bigger neighbor's continued pressure to control *Beltransgaz*, are of more serious and immediate concern. It appears that Lukashenka's strategy aims at delaying any final decision on any of these questions and to maintain a *façade* of very close relations with Russia, while watching the political scene in Moscow rather nervously for any signs of the emergence of a future leader. Lukashenka surmises, and is probably correct to do so, that Putin will recognize the advantages of maintaining him in office for the immediate future, particularly in view of the uncertain political situation in several other Eurasian neighbors such as Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine.

Both domestically and internationally, uncertainty prevails as to developments in Belarus over the months to come. There are good grounds to expect opportunities for democrats to make their voice heard and to attract the support of an ever-larger number of Belarusians. In doing so, the democratic

forces and civil society can derive confidence from their considerable unity and strong showing in recent months, which will need to be continued and strengthened. 2006 was a step forward, but the road ahead remains long and difficult.

Appendix