

HOPES
ILLUSIONS
PERSPECTIVES
**BELARUSIAN
SOCIETY '2007**

WARSAW – MINSK 2007

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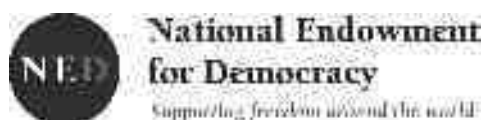


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edited by Marta Pejda

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Marta Pejda

By Way of a Preface

Dictatorship is a sign of collapse. Flowering epochs, characterized by a rich internal life, harmony of mind and spirit are alien to dictatorship. [...] Calls for a leader always occurs there, where old structures and customs, based on tradition, are succumbing or have already succumbed to disintegration.

Dr. Adam Wielomski,
“The Theory of Counterrevolutionary Authoritarianism,” in: *Konserwatyzm.pl*

Belarusian society is a very specific creature. It is difficult to speak about the existence of civil society, as the basic institutions of such a society do not function here, or do not function properly. And it seems there is no particular demand for it; at least this appears to be the case based on the opinion of the majority of people. Non-governmental organizations (i.e., the third sector) do not serve this function as in other modern countries due to the political situation in Belarus, where the authoritarian regime effectively prevents the non-governmental sector from conducting its basic activities. Furthermore, for the further development of this sector, there is no base of socially and politically conscious citizens who understand the role that NGOs could play. It appears that

a large part of Belarusian society still adhere to soviet expectations towards the state apparatus, which results in the deterioration of individual responsibility, a reluctance to independently make decisions, and no need for free choice. In this situation – a situation of a clear threat from the state, extremely unfavourable legal conditions and, at most, indifference from potential beneficiaries – the non-governmental sector remains completely isolated from other sectors and therefore there are no possibilities of conducting programs externally directly, which effectively hampers its natural development and rules out increasing its popularity.

When there is no supply, there is also most often no demand. Therefore the third sector in Belarus not so much as-

sists other sectors in meeting the needs of citizens as attempts to shape these needs. However, the authoritarian state intentionally fails to meet some needs of society, often using them for its own purposes.

One of these unrealized roles, which the Belarusian state apparatus does not allow non-governmental organizations and the mass media to take on, is the educational function. The goal of state policy in this field is raising a citizen loyal to the authorities and with limited intellectual potential, which guarantees that he will be a submissive and rather non-inquisitive voter. The point is to create a passive society, susceptible to manipulation and propaganda, and therefore devoid of critical tools – unable to independently evaluate reality and express opinions. Many facts point to this, including the increasingly lower substantive level of the politically subservient state schools and scientific institutions, the idiotic programs on state television and in other mass media, oscillating between aggressive propaganda and the lowest form of entertainment,

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most frequently imported from Russia, the embarrassingly meagre cultural offer, even in large cities, etc.

When these types of activities reach the fertile ground of post-soviet society, their effect is the progressive demoralization of the citizens. From their earliest years they come into contact not only with the unadulterated sanctioning of corruption in the form of ubiquitous *blat* (pull), but the outright corrupting of entities and entire organizations by the state itself – this is about benefits, derived in exchange for loyalty, as in the case of access to BRSM-type formations, or *Bielaja Ruś*. The mechanism of demoralization in regard to children and young people is also effective due to the fact that a large percentage of teachers are members of electoral commissions on various levels, actively participating in falsifying election results – the situation becomes paradoxical when demoralized people, or at least people with an ambiguous conflict of conscious, are educating the young generation.

The state also scrupulously and successfully takes advantage of the situation in which there is no system of values, and the only social authority seems to be the president. After decades of enforced atheism, post-soviet society is not excessively tied to the conception of Christian morality, but even if it was the state preventively monopolized issues of faith, incorporating the Orthodox Church in its propaganda machinery. For building a modern, permanent national identity based on a universal system of values that could serve as a platform for patriotism and civic activity, Belarus also lacks a national idea, which cannot be formulated by casual, transitory political interest. Therefore, the system of values in Belarus has been officially replaced by state ideology.

It cannot help but be noticed that ten years of this type of state policy has exerted a huge influence on Belarusian society, both directly, leading to regression in the sphere of civic, intellectual, social and political activity, and indirectly, contributing to the ever increasing emigration of more independently thinking people, unable to find a place in this reality or submit to the authoritarian aspirations of the government. The uniqueness of today's Belarusian society therefore is also characterized by a lack of intellectual elites, or rather their very limited number and marginal influence on the situation in the country. In a normally functioning modern society it is precisely the elites who guide the basic directions of state development – on the social, political and economic levels. In Belarus, this remains firmly in the hands of the state apparatus, or more precisely, the president.

The texts collected in this book elaborate on some of the phenomena that have shaped, and continue to shape, today's Belarus. While working on this publication we asked ourselves, among others, whether the events of March 2006 changed anything and has some hidden revolution or evolution, at least on the level social consciousness, begun. Of course there is no unequivocal answer and that is not the point here. The situation appears to be quite pessimistic, but the fact seems to be important that despite the massive, long-term pressure on Belarusian society there are still cases of independent behaviour, testifying to the existence of minute underground islands of internal freedom, morality and social activity. And there are still people there who want and are able to subject this situation to independent analysis.

Jury Čavusau

Belarus' Civic Sector

1. Civic sector evolution

A good start. Belarus' community of non-governmental organizations went through several stages of development. The NGO community was vigorously growing in the early and mid 1990s with registered NGOs increasing in number from 24 in 1990 to nearly 1,000 by the end of 1995¹. Civic society thrived both in terms of organization numbers and their diversity. For instance, in 1993 a city could have just one or two independent civic organizations (mostly chapters of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and the Francišak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society), whereas two or three years later there were about a dozen local NGOs, chapters of national civic organizations and local environmental, youth, history and social groups operating in the same area. At the beginning of that period NGOs were largely integrated into a broader national movement for democracy and independence of Belarus, while later the sector became more depoliticized and more similar to

the standard civic sector characteristic of a classic pluralistic society. A relatively free atmosphere in society was essential for the sector's growth. Even organizations established during the Soviet era were functioning independently of the government at the time.

Politicization and the beginning of confrontation. As the country was sliding toward authoritarianism, NGOs found it more and more difficult to perform their classic functions. The concentration of power in the executive and the president's effort to build an authoritarian system triggered the politicization of the civic sector and prompted many NGOs to side with the political opposition. This new period in civic society evolution began after constitutional referenda held in 1995 and 1996. NGOs could no longer stay out of politics. Many pro-democracy civic organizations cropped up at the start of that period. NGOs started to cooperate more closely with foreign donors and democracy promotion resource cen-

tres significantly increased their influence. Organizations expanded their networks, changed specialization and grew in number. The country had as many as 2,191 NGOs (1,061 national and international groups and 1,130 local NGOs) on 1 April 1998². The number does not include trade unions and political parties. Apart from the registered NGOs, there were many advocacy groups not registered with the authorities. Two major umbrella organizations — the Assembly of Pro-Democracy NGOs of Belarus and the Belarusian Association of Resource Centres — emerged at the time.

NGO politicization irked the authorities and they took various efforts to weaken the civic sector. In 1999, the government required all NGOs to re-register in a bid to purge the sector of the most influential pro-democracy groups. This second re-registration campaign dealt the sector a more severe blow than the first re-registration drive conducted in 1994 and 1995. A total of 1,537 NGOs, 63.2 percent of the total number,

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¹ В. Чернов. Третий сектор в Беларуси: проблемы становления и развития. — Минск–Гомель, 2004. С. 3.

² Т. Кузьменкова. Третий сектор Беларуси: проблемы становления и развития. — Минск, 2004. С. 10.

applied for re-registration. Only 1,326 NGOs were re-registered in 1999, while some big and influential organizations lost their “legal entity” status³.

The government moved to limit the flow of foreign financial assistance to NGOs — in 2001 the president by his Decree N8 required NGOs to obtain permission from the authorities for every single foreign grant.

At that time, the regulatory authority did not exercise tight control over the sector and government agencies in general respected the law when dealing with NGOs.

Unregistered groups did not have big problems with the authorities, although the government had passed legislation stipulating punishment for involvement in unregistered organizations. Relations between the government and NGOs were tense before 2003, but it was not yet a state of war — some joint projects, co-operation and communication between the two sides were still possible, while some NGOs had close ties with government agencies. The “cold peace” and the limited persecution made it possible for NGOs to play a key role during the 2001 presidential election.

NGOs were actively involved in the 2001 presidential election. Some NGOs functioned as part of the political opposition system and were an equal partner to political parties. Membership of the Assembly of Pro-Democracy NGOs in the Coordinating Rada (Council) of Pro-Democracy Forces, involvement of NGOs affiliated with the Belarusian Association of Resource Centres in politics, the increasing influence of the Khartyya-97 human rights group, and an agreement outlining mutual commitments of a common opposition presidential candidate and a broad-based civic coalition — all these facts testified to the lack of a fundamental difference in functions of pro-democracy NGOs and political parties.

Most of the emerging pro-democracy NGOs and the Coordinating Rada “Regional Belarus” backed Siamion Domaś’s presidential bid.

In the run-up to the 2001 presidential election pro-democracy NGOs focused on the following objectives:

- establishing an independent election observation network;
- encouraging voters, especially youths, to vote on the main polling day by conducting a mobilization campaign called “Vybiraj!” [Choose];
- conducting a negative campaign against Alaksandr Łukašenka
- involving the use of various satirical means.

Fundamental policy changes. The opposition heavily relied on the civic sector during its 2001 presidential campaign, while on the other hand that campaign gave an impetus to the development of civic society. Despite an all-out effort to mobilize civic society, the pro-democracy NGOs and opposition groups failed to achieve the goal of bringing about democratic changes. The government mechanically continued to maintain relations with NGOs from late 2001 to early 2003, but it was clear that the authoritarian dictatorship established in Belarus by the time was determined to stifle the pro-democracy NGO community. In 2003 through 2005 the government conducted a large-scale campaign to close down pro-democracy NGOs. In 2005 it rushed new laws governing NGOs and charities though the National Assembly, ordered the re-registration of charities, required NGOs to alter their charters and register the new versions with the Ministry of Justice. The Belarusian leader issued new acts limiting opportunities for raising funds in the country and purposes on which funds could be spent. The government also imposed restrictions on technical assistance from the United Nations Organization and the European Union, foreign-funded seminars, projects and foreign humanitarian aid, and introduced a harsher punishment for failure to comply with the new rules. It established a legal framework for so-called “state civic organizations” and launched a campaign to “nationalize” civic socie-

ty. The few remaining human rights organizations were stripped of the right to represent interests of non-members in court. The authorities stepped up intimidation of unregistered groups by imposing fines and jail sentences of up to 15 days on those suspected of involvement. At the end of 2005, in the lead-up to the March 2006 presidential election, the government introduced a new law criminalizing membership of unregistered organizations.

Third generation: underground activists. After the crackdown on civic society in 2003 through 2005, it was clear that the third sector would never be able to function as freely as during the 2001 presidential election. Then, Belarus’ civic society was a well-structured network involving dozens of legal organizations capable of conducting nationwide campaigns. In the run-up to the 2006 presidential election, civic society represented a weak network of organizations and initiatives divided by political interests, partly depoliticized under threat of persecution or subordinate to other political forces. Since many civic campaigns had to be conducted underground, activists risked arrest, jailing and harassment.

Thus, in the period from 2003 to 2005 Belarus saw the formation of a new model of civic society characterized by a shift from legal activities to the underground operation of NGOs under the authoritarian regime. The next chapter describes how this model functions.

2. Government’s effort to discourage NGOs from involvement in politics

The ruling regime seeks to control civil society and neutralize potentially dangerous sources of dissent. The Łukašenka government has always raised the level of intimidation ahead of big political campaigns. Naturally, persecution and closures of NGOs were often aimed at achieving short-term objectives such as to outlaw groups that could potentially

³ Ibid, P. 11.

influence the political process. In general, all these efforts had one main goal — to eradicate dissent that may spread throughout society like a virus. When fighting NGOs the government combats dissent that spreads through these organizations.

Persecution intensity. The level of persecution changed during various periods — it was usually higher before big political campaigns such as elections and referenda. Authorities used lawsuits and various legal pretexts to close down NGOs, and passed new discriminatory laws. Belarus has more restrictive laws governing NGOs than other former Soviet republics, including the Central Asian nations. In that period, the authorities resorted to various tools to split political parties and movements, complicate their work and prevent them from forming coalitions with NGOs.

During the second phase, which included the political campaign, the authorities resorted to methods that were not based on legal decisions. They intimidated NGOs by searching their offices, seizing computers, equipment, leaflets

and newspapers, and arresting and jailing civic activists. The authorities had no time for passing legal acts to justify their methods. They acted swiftly without any regard for the law.

When a political campaign was over, the authorities took revenge on the most active opposition players by victimizing opposition activists and closing organizations that functioned as opposition centres. Step by step authorities adopted restrictive laws to establish the legal framework to justify persecution.

The authorities repeated the same cycle during every political campaign.

A war against civic society. After the 2001 presidential election the authorities shut down the Association of Belarusian Students, the Youth Information Centre and the Brest-based Vieža centre for support of local initiatives. The government also purged the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus of critical leaders and installed a new, loyal leadership.

It enacted a new religion law designed to eliminate dissent and prevent the opposition from winning over reli-

gious communities. The law enabled the government to sign a cooperation accord with the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2003⁴.

A new phase in the persecution of NGOs began after a seminar on the government's ideology held at the Presidential Administration in April 2003. During that seminar, the president ordered measures that later helped him extend his rule through the 2004 referendum and 2006 presidential election⁵.

Less than a month after the seminar, in April 2003, the Ministry of Justice brought closure suits against the Hrodna-based association Ratusha, the Varuta regional development agency, the Homiel-based organization Civic Initiatives, and the Youth Christian Social Union. The lawsuits marked the beginning of a large-scale campaign that resulted in

⁴ Read more on sociopolitical circumstances surrounding the adoption of the new religion law in the following publication: «Белая книга. Материалы по проекту закона «О свободе совести и религиозных организациях»/ Сост. и ред. Я. Басин. — Мн.: Гражданская инициатива «За свободное вероисповедание», 2002. — 244 с. The new religion law significantly worsened the legal position of religious organizations, as indicated in the work entitled «Белая книга. Материалы мониторинга религиозной ситуации в Беларуси (август 2002 — декабрь 2003 гг.)»/ Сост. и ред. Я. Басин. — Мн.: Гражданская инициатива «За свободное вероисповедание», 2004. — 370 с.

⁵ Some of the specific orders that Lukashenka gave at that seminar can be found in the booklet entitled «О состоянии идеологической работы и мерах по её совершенствованию. Материалы постоянно действующего семинара руководящих работников республиканских и местных государственных органов» (под ред. Пролесковский О.В., Корендо И.А., Петкевич Н.В., Скобелев Э.М., и др., Мн.: Администрация Президента, Академия управления при Президенте, 2003, — 192 с.). The booklet contains so-called Protocol No 15 of Directives of the President of the Republic of Belarus dated 14 April 2003 outlining measures to be taken to carry out decisions made at the seminar, which was held on March 27 and 28, 2003. The authorities took more drastic measures against NGOs than those included in the protocol. Many of Lukashenka's directives were not made public, and some were edited for the booklet to avoid a controversy. The president often issued verbal orders that were carried out with the same diligence as written ones.



photo.bymedia.net

KGB officers are searching the office of the ISEPS polling institute which was closed down by the authorities.

the closure of several dozen pro-democracy NGOs⁶.

The government outlawed 51 NGOs from April 2003 to the end of that year. Seventy-eight NGOs were forced to close down "on recommendation of justice departments". In 2003 authorities inspected several hundred NGOs and issued 810 warnings that could lead to the closure of NGOs in question. The number of warnings had risen from 121 in 2002. In 2004, the authorities had courts outlaw 38 NGOs and 68 were forced to shut down themselves. 2005 saw 68 NGOs outlawed and 43 closed down "on recommendation of justice departments". The authorities often failed to follow correct legal procedures, closing down organizations for one minor irregularity without official warnings required by the law. Not a single closed NGO won an appeal.

In all, the government shut down 157 NGOs from 2003 to 2005 and 190 others closed "on recommendations of justice departments". As many as 347 NGOs, including active and prominent youth, human rights, social and cultural organizations, were struck off the government's register in these three years. A huge segment of civic society had to go underground.

The authorities targeted groups that had been involved in election campaigns, election observation, those linked to political parties, groups that played a key role in building local civic communities and human rights organizations. In short, they targeted NGOs that could play active roles in the next election. In 2004, the authorities closed down think tanks that offered Belarusians alternative views on the country's development. The major NGOs outlawed at that peri-

od included the Association for Legal Assistance to the Population, the Viasna human rights centre, Women's Response and the Łuckievič Foundation in 2003; the Belarusian Association of Young Politicians, the New Group youth association, the Centre of Constitutionalism and Comparative Legal Studies, the Independent Society of Legal Studies and the International Institute of Political Studies in 2004; the Belarusian Union of Youth and Children's Organizations "Rada", the Social Technologies think tank, the Rebirth of the Fatherland women's movement, the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies, the Union of Belarusian Scouts, Usiasław Čaradziej, and the Higher Belarusian School Society in 2005. The authorities also closed dummy organizations like, for instance the Association of Young Entrepreneurs, that the opposition could use in contingencies. Clearly, legal grounds for closure did not matter as both the Ministry of Justice, which brought those cases, and judges who ruled against NGOs were under orders from the Presidential Administration. Orchestrated by the Presidential Administration and its "ideology vertical", the campaign would not be possible without silent approval of the Prosecutor General's Office.

It was accompanied by other efforts to exert pressure on and intimidate civic society. In 2003, the Ministry of Justice directed the NGOs to submit annual reports on activities and membership. In 2005, the requirement was included in a new version of the law governing NGOs along with the new punishment — suspension for the period of up to six months.

Impossible to register a new NGO.

The authorities registered 310 NGOs in the same period — 94 in 2003, 155 in 2004 and 61 in 2005. An overwhelming majority of the newly registered organizations either engaged in sports or were established on the government's initiative. Justice departments routinely rejected applications from independent NGOs. In 2005, for instance, only a

handful of 1,284 applicants were granted official registration.

Registration procedures are very complicated and make it difficult for new NGOs to register in place of the closed ones. In addition to the tight paperwork requirements on the part of registering authorities — the Ministry of Justice and the regional justice departments — applications are rejected on political grounds. Political selection is performed by the Commission on Registration (Re-registration) of Associations led by Aleh Pralaskouski, chief ideology officer of the Łukašenka regime. The commission identifies organizations that may engage in politics in the future and pose a threat to the regime.

Why does the dictatorship not like NGOs? It is necessary to find out how the authorities assess the danger allegedly posed by Belarus' civic society. The authorities seek to root out endogenous dissent. Manifestations of dissent in the form of pro-democracy NGOs are not very dangerous as it is easier for the government to control and restrain dissidents acting in the framework of registered organizations. This is why the authorities still tolerate civic society organizations as long as they do not have a significant impact on public sentiments. The existence of a limited number of legal NGOs opposed to the political regime creates the illusion of a pluralistic society. However the authorities closely monitor the situation to make sure that the influence of NGOs and political parties does not increase and break out of the public discontent concealment and institutionalization limits. This is why time and again the authorities make an effort to limit the interaction of NGOs with the general public, persistently restrict the pro-democracy ghetto and outlaw some of its segments.

The authorities see a great danger in organizations capable of organizing election observation. This is the main reason for the ongoing crackdown on youth and human rights groups, regional resource centres and organizations that played active roles during elections.

⁶ Details and legal assessments of that campaign can be found in the following reports: «Агляд-хроніка парушэнняў правоў чалавека ў Беларусі. 2003 год». — Мн.: Праваабарончы цэнтр «Вясна», 2004, — 264 с.; «Сьведчанні перасьледу беларускіх няўрадавых арганізацый» — Мн.: Калектыўная абарона няўрадавых арганізацый Беларусі, 2004, — 92 с.; «Агляд-хроніка парушэнняў правоў чалавека ў Беларусі. 2004 год». — Мн.: Праваабарончы цэнтр «Вясна», 2005, — 376 с.

Lawsuits against NGOs were accompanied by attempts to stop the flow of money that fuelled what government officials described as the opposition's "information war" against the authorities.

Cutting off NGO funding. The NGOs have limited opportunities for attracting funds from Belarusian non-state sources because of the government's hostile attitude to the non-state sector, while meaningful or legal financial assistance from Belarusian businesses has been out of the question since 1999. The government's first step to prevent money flows to NGOs was the adoption of Presidential Decree N8 in March 2001 outlining the procedure of receiving and using gratuitous foreign aid⁷. The act made it much more difficult for NGOs to obtain foreign grants.

Most pro-democracy organizations refused to comply with the new rules. Many NGOs had their property and equipment seized and some activists were charged with minor "administrative" offences for violating the decree between 2001 and 2005.

The president repeatedly criticized the opposition for reliance on foreign funding, urging the Committee for State Security (KGB) to do more to stop the inflow of foreign cash, including from Russia. Government-controlled media highlighted alleged financial scandals involving the opposition in 2001 and 2002. Later, state TV stations attacked the opposition for using foreign cash for financing election campaigns. Accusations of foreign funding became part of virtually all television shows designed to smear the opposition leadership.

Despite this, opposition and non-governmental organizations continued to receive grants illegally. That prompted the Belarusian leader to issue another decree in late 2003 establishing a mechanism to enforce Decree N8 and introducing a more severe punishment for failure to comply⁸. The new decree

provides for the unconditional closure of NGOs and political parties and the deportation of foreigners involved in illegal financing of opposition and non-governmental organizations.

The latter measure has been widely used. The authorities expanded the blacklist of foreigners unwelcome in Belarus and the number of deportations rose dramatically in 2003 compared to the previous year. The authorities also closed down offices of some foreign and international organizations. After a smear campaign in state-controlled media, in 2003 the authorities closed the local offices of US organizations IREX/Promedia and Internews Network that promoted media development. In 2004, the government shut down the local office of Counterpart, a US organization that assisted the development of local civic communities.

At the beginning of 2004, the authorities brought tax evasion charges against organizations that received grants under the European Union's TACIS program approved by the Belarusian government. The Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC), the Belarusian Union of Youth and Children's Associations "Rada" and Slonim-based Will to Development were charged with failure to pay taxes on grants provided for projects that were exempted from all taxes under an international agreement signed by the Belarusian government. Although judges dismissed the charges, some observers noted that the authorities backed down only after the European Commission threatened to suspend a EUR 16-million border infrastructure development program and other projects involving Belarusian government agencies. Later, the authorities took the case to the Supreme Economic Court, which upheld the tax evasion charges against the BHC. The accusations against the Belarusian Union of Youth and Children's Associations "Rada" were dropped only after the closure of the organization.

Government-controlled quasi-civic society. The effort to suppress independent and pro-opposition NGOs was accompanied by the establishment of

phony NGOs controlled by the government. The process includes opening the so-called "state civic organizations" designed to rally Belarusians for attaining government-set objectives⁹. To replace the acting and closed NGOs the government set up their pseudo-non-governmental copies. In 2002 and 2003, in an effort to prevent unrest involving small business owners, the authorities orchestrated the establishment of associations of market vendors controlled by executive authorities. Later, the authorities founded a pro-presidential Union of Writers to confront an independent Union of Writers critical of the government. The authorities also nationalized some associations. The process began with the election of Alaksandr Łukašenka as president of the National Olympic Committee. Government officials were appointed to the top positions in sports associations and federations that had previously been independent. The government established control over the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus and intervened to install an authorities-friendly leader to the Union of Poles of Belarus in 2005.

Apart from these organizations, the government supported and funded some associations left after the collapse of the Soviet Union, including the Belarusian National Youth Union resurrected in 2002 as an ideological and functional successor to the Leninist Young Communist League, a Soviet-era youth organization also known as Komsomol. These organizations function as government agencies in the non-governmental sector. Students and employees are often forced to join. Shortly before the 2004 elections and referendum, the authorities united pseudo-non-governmental organizations under the umbrella of the government-sponsored National Council of the Leaders of Political Parties and Civic Organizations. Similar umbrella organizations were formed in the re-

⁷ Советская Белоруссия, 15 March 2001, № 72-73.

⁸ Дэкрэт прэзідэнта №24 ад 28 лістапада 2003 года «Аб атрыманы і выкарыстанні замежнай бязвыплатнай дапамогі»/ "Советская Белоруссия", 2 декабря 2003 года, № 225.

⁹ Указ прэзідэнта ад 30 чэрвеня 2003 г. №335 «Аб рэспубліканскіх дзяржаўна-грамадзкіх аб'яднаннях» Національний реєстр правових актів Республіки Беларусь, 2003 г., № 86, 1/4820. The edict acknowledged the existence of "state civic organizations."

gions. The authorities established an umbrella youth association representing organizations like the Belarusian National Youth Union (BRSM). The government-sponsored umbrella organizations attract grass-root civic initiatives, for instance emerging local history and backpacking groups that would have been natural partners to the pro-democracy NGOs, are more likely to function under the umbrella of the BRSM. Pro-government organizations conducted a large-scale campaign called "For Belarus!" from 2004 to 2006 in support of Belarusian leader Alaksandr Łukašenka. The campaign was similar to civic mobilization campaigns characteristic of "colour revolutions." The Central Election Commission said the campaign "For Belarus!" was aimed to stir up political activity and generate interest in the election campaign, which was underway in the country¹⁰.

Before the 2006 presidential election, pro-government organizations took pop musicians on a six-week tour of Belarus in the framework of the "For Belarus!" campaign. Eight concerts were played in regional centres and Minsk, and more dates were arranged in district centres. During the politically-charged gigs, pop stars urged fans "to make the right choice" and vote "for Belarus". Some performers called on the audience to support Lukashenka.

During his 2001 reelection campaign, Łukašenka used the slogan "For Strong and Prosperous Belarus!" The slogan "For Belarus!" was adopted before the 2004 referendum that removed a two-term limit on the presidents.

In addition to various means of intimidation creatively and widely used by the Łukašenka regime and the propaganda of a government ideology, the authorities attempted to arrange civic activity according to their plan in order to keep popular discontent in check. In spite of harassment and intimidation, independent civic organizations proved dangerous during protests held in downtown Minsk in March 2006 against Łukašenka's reelection for a third presidential term.

¹⁰ <http://elections.belapan.com/president2006/bel/article.php?show=1558&rubrica=76>

Obviously, the authorities would like to create a controllable civic society, as Aleh Pralaskouski, ideology chief in the Łukašenka government, admitted in his statement on the formation of a corporate state in Belarus¹¹. The Belarusian president expressed the idea in his address to the National Assembly¹². He talked about civic society issues for about 30 minutes.

It is not yet clear what tactics the authorities will employ to achieve their goal. Łukašenka said that a pro-presidential movement or a pro-presidential party should not be formed by the authorities but emerge from grassroots. Naturally, various groups within the Łukašenka government would like to take the initiative — officials would like to build themselves an organization as powerful and influential as the BRSM led by Michail Arda or the FTUB led by Leanid Kozik. As time went by, pro-organizations would play a greater political role. For instance, the Honar association of veterans of the interior ministry's elite units deployed more than a hundred well-equipped plainclothes fighters to the square during opposition protests held on March 19 and 20, 2006. The regime can use loyal associations for its ends, including to fight the opposition (the notorious Col. Dźmitry Pauličenka, commander of an elite police unit, is deputy chairman of Honar). Other associations may come in handy in suppressing dissent.

Łukašenka's recent statements shed some light on a strategy that the regime may employ to respond to what it perceives as a threat. The regime does not consider political parties, traditional NGOs or new civic groups a big threat unless these forces rally round one strategy or one action plan.

Have the authorities succeeded in their large-scale effort to intimidate civic activists? Have they secured a victory over civic society? The authorities have enjoyed a limited success so

¹¹ He made the statement during the Tough Talk show broadcast by Belarusian Television on March 30, 2006.

¹² <http://president.gov.by/press29486.html>

far. Outlawed NGOs continue to operate underground. Some NGOs continue to function legally. The regime leader seems to be making the same mistake as all other dictators — he does not fight the phenomenon but fights its manifestations, he does not fight the sources of dissent but manifestations of dissent. Dictatorship always deals with consequences, not causes, thus accelerating its own fall.

3. Criminal prosecution is a threat to NGOs

Realizing that formal closures do not stop NGOs from engaging in social and political activity, the authorities reflected on tougher action against civic society.

President Łukašenka issued Decree N2 on 26 January 1999 to ban non-registered civic and religious groups¹³. Belarus was the first former Soviet republic to impose the ban; Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries followed suit. Involvement in unregistered groups was declared an offence punishable by a short jail sentence or a fine under the Administrative Offences Code. The decree targeted opposition groups and was used mainly during elections. It saw a limited use in 2001 against opposition campaigners from the youth organizations Malady Front and Zubr. The decree was not employed in 2002 because of the lack of serious political developments. It was resurrected in 2003. More than 20 activists of Zubr, Malady Front, Charter-97 and the Five Plus opposition coalition were punished under the decree in the run-up to the 2004 parliamentary election and referendum. But the measure proved ineffective and insufficient because civic activists were ready to risk spending 15 days in jail for

¹³ Дэкрэт прэзідэнта ад 26 студзеня 1999 года №2 «Аб некаторых мерах па ўпарадкаванні дзейнасці палітычных партыяў, прафэсійных саюзаў і іншых грамадзкіх аб'яднанняў»/Собрание декретов, указов Президента и постановлений Правительства Республики Беларусь, 1999 г., № 4, с. 74.

their cause. The authorities began thinking of tougher measures.

Sucharenka-proposed changes to the Criminal Code. In November 2005, President Łukašenka submitted to parliament landmark changes to the Criminal Code that criminalized some manifestations of civic and political activity. The House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly gave its preliminary approval to the bill on November 25 and passed it on December 2. The amendments to the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code introduced a harsher punishment for “actions against human and public security”. The bill marked by Łukašenka as “urgent” drew severe criticism from the Belarusian public and the international community. Even some members of the pro-Łukašenka House of Representatives expressed concern about the proposed tough measures, but the Presidential Administration and the Committee for State Security (KGB), which drafted the legislation, pushed the bill through the National Assembly. The House of Representatives voted 94 to one to approve the bill in its first reading and 97 to four to pass the amendments. The Council of the Republic, the upper chamber, approved the bill unanimously. Łukašenka signed the amendments into law in January 2006 shortly before the start of the presidential election campaign stage.

The bill is often referred to as Sucharenka’s law, named after KGB Chief Ściapan Sucharenka who introduced it in parliament. The KGB chief said that the law was aimed to quell the tide of protests that the opposition planned to stage during the presidential election. “Leaders of the politicized opposition parties consciously provide false information on the political procedures in Belarus,” Sucharenka told members of the House of Representatives. “The aim of such declarations is to force western political communities to inflict sanctions on Belarus. Destructive forces want to use the campaign to take over power and change the constitutional regime by organizing a revolution as in



photo.bymedia.net

Members of the Belarusian Union of Writers leave the office confiscated by the Presidential Administration.

Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005¹⁴.”

Sucharenka claimed that the opposition were operating several camps in Belarus to train rebels for the forthcoming protests and cause “mass disorder” during the presidential election. He alleged that the camps were located in the Krupki and Vilejka districts but the allegations were never substantiated with any credible evidence. He said that similar training camps were set up abroad as part of preparations for a “colour revolution” in Belarus. The KGB chief noted that Belarus had to deal with “a whole industry designed for training so-called colour revolution fighters.” He accused the United States of using funds of international and foreign non-governmental organizations to form and train special groups for staging street protests in Belarus. Sucharenka said that non-registered opposition groups Malady Front and Zubr were expected to play leading roles in the protests. However he stressed that the main threat to national security came not from the opposition, which he said

was fragmented and did not enjoy popular support, but from the West, which had been stepping up pressure¹⁵.

A booklet was distributed among lawmakers during discussions of the bill to explain the need for tough measures against “colour revolution fighters.” It listed more than 30 foreign and international NGOs allegedly involved in subversive political activity against the Belarusian regime such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the Poland-based East European Democratic Centre, the Stefan Batory Foundation, the Polish-American Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe, the Pontis Foundation.

Criminal NGOs. Several new articles were added to the Criminal Code. Article 193-1 carries a fine, an arrest sentence of up to six months or a prison sentence of up to two years for running or participating in activities of an organization suspended or closed down by court. Under conditions where most NGOs operate without official registration and it is almost impossible to regis-

¹⁴ Corinne Deloy. Belarus: Election Presidentielle du 19 mars 2006. <http://www.robert-schuman.eu/oee.php?num=277>

¹⁵ <http://www.spring96.org/viewn.php?id=3237&pagelang=by>

ter an NGO with the authorities, thousands of Belarusians automatically became criminals. Individuals who quit unregistered organizations and report their decision to the law enforcement agencies are not held accountable under the law unless they have committed another crime. A clause added to Article 193 stipulates punishment by an arrest sentence of up to six months or a prison sentence of up to three years for setting up an unregistered civic or religious organization deemed to “infringe on personality, rights or duties of individuals”.

Protest conspiracy. Article 293 was complemented with a paragraph that carries an arrest sentence of up to six months or a prison sentence of up to three years for “training or otherwise preparing individuals to take part in mass disorder” or for financing such training. Since Article 293 Paragraph 1 specified punishment for “the organization of mass disorder” before, the new clause actually criminalized actions that are not disorderly and do not disturb public peace. It punishes intentions, not even attempts, to cause mass disorder. The article can be used against any education or training effort that the KGB considers a potential future threat to the authoritarian regime in Belarus. Vague definitions like “training or otherwise preparing” or “financing or other material support” allow for various interpretations that can be used to persecute activists without the need to obtain evidence of their involvement in any crime.

A new clause added to Article 342 carries an arrest sentence of up to six months or a prison sentence of up to two years for training or other preparation of persons for participation in group disorderly actions (disobeying legal orders of representatives of the authorities, disrupting road traffic or the operation of enterprises, establishments or organizations) or financing or providing other material support for such activities. The new clause goes together with the abovementioned new clause from Article 293 and allows the authorities to prosecute activists involved in civic education. It may be used to punish for polit-

ical and civic actions that have nothing to do with mass disorder — non-violent resistance campaigns, strikes, flash-mob protests and demonstrations that incidentally block road traffic.

Criminal calls for overthrowing the government and discrediting Belarus.

The new version of the Criminal Code provides for a harsher punishment for public calls to overthrow the government or use violence to change the constitutional system (Article 361). The offence is punishable by an arrest sentence of up to six months or a prison sentence of up to three years. The new version expands the range of punishable actions and illegal means that may be used to diffuse the calls: “Public calls to seize state power or use violence to change the constitutional system, or to betray the state, or to commit an act of terrorism, a subversive act, or take other actions that may damage the external security of the Republic of Belarus, its sovereignty, territorial integrity, national security and defense capability, or the distribution of materials that contain such calls.” Paragraph 2 of the same article specifies punishment for calls addressed to foreign states or foreign or international organizations: calls and appeals to foreign countries, foreign or international organizations to take action that may damage the external security of Belarus, its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the distribution of materials containing such appeals are punishable by an arrest sentence of up to six months or by a prison sentence of up to three years (appeals disseminated through the media are punishable by a prison sentence of two to five years). Obviously, the vague definitions of possible criminal acts that stop short of specifying methods of committing a crime make it easy for the authorities to turn the article into a tool to restrict media freedom and persecute political opponents. In fact, any manifestation of discontent with the regime and an appeal for change may be interpreted as a crime.

New Article 369-1 makes it a crime to discredit the Republic of Belarus. Discrediting is defined as “providing a

foreign state, a foreign or international organization with knowingly false information about the political, economic, social, military or international position of the Republic of Belarus and the legal status of citizens of the Republic of Belarus or its government agencies.” The offence is punishable by an arrest sentence of up to six months or a prison sentence of up to two years. Since the Criminal Code has a defamation article, Article 369-1 was clearly introduced as a tool against political opponents. Article 369-1 is a classic piece of politically motivated criminal legislation.

Its introduction was an unprecedented move in Belarus' lawmaking practice as it contravenes some principles of territorial applicability of criminal legislation. The same is true for a new clause added to Article 383 concerning the unauthorized use of someone else's title or authority. It describes the offence as follows, “The willful unauthorized use of the title or authority of an official as a pretext for participation in negotiations or other meetings with representatives of foreign states, foreign or international organizations or sessions of international organizations.” The clause allows the authorities to punish Belarusians and foreigners for actions taken abroad even if those actions were absolutely legal under the other country's law.

The new version of the Criminal Procedure Code, which was enacted at the same time as the new Criminal Code, allows the law enforcement agencies to detain terrorism and “malicious hooliganism” suspects for up to 10 days, whereas under the previous version suspects could be held in custody no longer than three days without formal charges and a “preventive detention” warrant issued by a judge.

Human rights groups in Belarus protested the introduction of political articles into the criminal law. “I was shocked by the cynical way it has been done. The authorities did not even try to conceal the fact that all the measures were linked to the forthcoming presi-

dential election,” said Aleh Hulak of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee¹⁶.

Belarus’ secret service succeeded in its effort to have the government enact the law legalizing political oppression and criminal prosecution of human rights defenders and opponents of the regime. The amendments gave the law enforcement agencies a free hand to crack down on the opposition. Most observers said the main purpose of the draconian criminal articles was to intimidate groups independent of the government before the presidential election. One purpose was to intimidate; another purpose was to paralyze political and non-governmental organizations by bringing criminal charges against activists; and the third purpose was to deepen the isolation of the Belarusian public from alternative sources of information.

The KGB began to use new laws immediately after they took effect. In February 2006, KGB agents arrested members of a group called Partnership, which was working to establish an election observation network. Later, the agency opened criminal cases against activists of Malady Front and Hart, a Homiel-based youth centre.

4. NGOs, society and public opinion¹⁷

Attitudes toward non-governmental organizations: Keeping a low profile, but having some potential. The pro-government propaganda paints a negative picture of any activity uncontrolled by the government.

As many as 69.4 percent of respondents were not aware of any civic (NGO) activity in their area. The awareness level was higher, 39.2 percent, in the Homiel region, while in Minsk only 16.3

percent had heard of some NGO activity. The poll suggests that NGOs were underrepresented in local communities.

Civic campaigns conducted before the presidential election also reached a small number of people. In a poll conducted in the run-up to the election, respondents were asked whether they had heard anything about activities/campaigns of non-governmental organizations or civic groups in that period. Only 11 percent of respondents said “Yes”, while 78 percent said they were not aware of any activities/campaigns of NGOs or civic groups.

On the other hand, 46.5 percent of respondents said civic society helps improve the quality of life in their communities, but the fact that 36.2 percent failed to answer the question proves that people know little about NGOs and most

have difficulty describing what they do. Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of respondents were positive about activities of civic society — 92.3 percent know what civic society is and consider it useful. Despite the official propaganda, only one third said that NGOs fulfill orders of those who pay, 22.6 percent said that under present-day conditions in Belarus NGOs are not in a position to address local issues, and approximately the same number of respondents said that the NGOs’ priority should be to improve life quality.

Are you aware of any activities of civic society (NGOs) in your area?	%
Yes	26,5
No	69,4
No answer / difficult to answer	4,1

Do you know what a non-governmental organization is?

	N	%
Yes	929	61,3
No	364	24,0
Difficult to answer	224	14,8

In your opinion, a non-governmental organization is:

	N	%
A voluntary association of people who come together to tackle problems facing a group, local community or whole society	996	65,7
Organizations designed to help the government to deal with education, recreation and social matters	622	41,0
Associations of people with similar interests or of people who would like to pass time together	487	32,1
Organizations funded from abroad to destabilize society	147	9,7
Difficult to answer	26	1,7

Have you ever taken part in any campaign conducted by non-governmental organizations?

	N	%
Yes	363	23,9
No	1015	66,9
Difficult to answer	138	9,1

Have you participated in any event organized by non-governmental organizations within the last 12 months?

	N	%
Yes	139	9,1
No	1278	84,3
Difficult to answer	100	6,6

¹⁶ Наша Ніва, 28.04.2006, № 16.

¹⁷ This section is based on Belarus Civil Society Baseline Survey conducted at the request of Westminster Foundation for Democracy in 2005, and on the report entitled “Грамадзкія аб’яднанні: іх роля ў сучасным беларускім грамадстве” (Менск, верасень 2005) based on a national poll conducted in June 2005.

Obviously, non-governmental organizations have a considerable potential, but they need to make people aware of their work.

Democratic ghetto. Belarus has more than 4,000 NGOs with about half operating underground without official registration, according to the Assembly of Pro-Democracy NGOs of Belarus. As of 1 January 2006, 17 political parties, 41 trade unions, 2,247 associations (239 international, 724 national and 1,284 local) and 16 umbrella organizations were registered with the Ministry of Justice. Also registered with the ministry were 996 chapters of political parties (44 regional, 399 district and city and 553 grass-root cells), 21,992 trade union cells and branches (107 regional, 1,355 district and city, 20,449 grass-root cells and 81 merged branches) and 10,046 branches of associations (488 regional, 3,395 district and city, and 6,203 other branches).

Civic society opinion polls suggest that just 10 percent of these organizations play a role in the democratization of Belarus. Civic society leaders believe that Belarusian NGOs that do nothing to defend their rights or express their political position do not play a significant role in enhancing civic society and do not contribute to the establishment of democracy in the country.

Most Belarusians have a vague idea of the objectives and activities of NGOs. Numbers of those involved in civic campaigns increase dramatically during elections, but still new NGO members fail to reach beyond the so-called democratic ghetto. Moreover, some foreign donors discouraged NGO activists from working together with their Belarusian counterparts, suggesting that they rely only on support from the international community. Despite persecution, many representatives of local communities take active part in NGOs, especially if these organizations advance their interests. That was confirmed by opinion polls. NGOs working in partnership with other non-governmental organizations can successfully address issues



Julija Daraškiewicz

Žmicier Daškiewicz was sentenced two years in prison for leading pro-democratic youth organization Young Front.

without help from the authorities. The population has the greatest confidence in local initiatives, advocacy groups and local communities. NGOs can use such initiatives to influence political decisions, but they should give priority to setting a political agenda, not to tackling local problems.

Politicization as the main goal.

Most civic society leaders are skeptical about the future, expecting the current authorities to continue the onslaught on NGOs. In their opinion, the use of new (human and technical) resources and further politicization of spontaneous civic activity are crucial for success.

The greatest advantage of pro-democracy NGOs may turn out to be their major problem — excessive focus on national political objectives makes it much more difficult for most pro-democracy NGOs to carry out smaller-scale (local) projects. Most representatives of civic society see politics as the main driving force of social change. In their opinion, any other form of social activity cannot significantly influence the situation in the country.

Still, civic society leaders regard environmental campaigns (including those

dealing with the Chornobyl aftermath), youth groups (representing the most vehement opponents of the regime), cultural, educational, human rights, consumer rights projects and charities as promising and potentially effective forms of civic activity.

Pavał Usau

Pro-government Associations in Belarus

Political and ideological independence of associations is an attribute of democracy and a sign of public maturity. A country that has many non-governmental organizations and associations is not necessarily a democracy. The government may set up associations to control the public. Thousands of local, national and countrywide associations functioned in the Soviet Union under tight ideological and political control of the Communist Party. The party would not allow associations to function independently of the government for fear of losing political control.

In Belarus, the authorities establish, control and guide associations. Belarus had 2,214 registered associations in 2004, according to the Ministry of Justice. The number increased to 2,246 despite the fact that the authorities closed down many independent pro-democracy non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In 2004 alone, the authorities shut down 38 NGOs.

The registered organizations include 232 international, 722 national and 1,292 local associations, and 17 alliances. As

of 1 September 2006, Belarus had 39 registered trade unions, including 33 national, three regional and three unions representing employees of a single enterprise or an organization.

The country has 98 associations of ethnic minorities, 165 youth and children associations, 38 associations of women, 71 associations of environmentalists and historic and cultural monument protection groups, 506 sport and physical education associations, 41 associations of artists, 113 scientific and technological associations, 304 educational and cultural associations, 356 charities, 141 associations of the disabled and war veterans and 413 other organizations¹.

Two trends have been observed in the last few years – a rise in the number of associations dealing with non-political matters such as environment or sports, and attempts by the government to make NGOs serve its interests and to shut down independent NGOs.

The country has a network of government-sponsored and pro-government associations.

Belarus has many associations claimed to be non-governmental organizations, but in fact established with assistance from governmental agencies and performing specific political functions. Government-sponsored associations enjoy preferential treatment, receive direct financial and other assistance from the government, participate in government programs, and their activists are often offered jobs with government agencies.

The government-sponsored associations include the Belarusian National Youth Union (BRSM), the Belarusian National Pioneer Organization (BRPO), the association “Honar” [Honour], the Belarusian Committee of Youth Organizations, the Belarusian Youth Association of Firefighters and Rescuers and the Union of Writers of Belarus.

Most pro-government associations were originally founded as independent organizations, but later started to support and work closely with the government in order to survive or derive some political or social benefits. These associations include the Belarusian Association of Entrepreneurs and the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus. The govern-

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political scientist, chief of the Mahilou Informational-Analytical Centre “Politon”

¹ <http://www.president.government.by/press30938.html>

ment deliberately split and brought under its control some associations like the Union of Poles in Belarus.

BRSM

Government-sponsored associations have penetrated all public institutions. The BRSM membership totalled 355,000 in 2006. The association established grass-root cells at all public establishments, schools, universities and most enterprises. The BRPO, which enlists schoolchildren, has more than 482,000 members (30 percent of the total number of secondary school students).

The government's emphasis on youth organizations seems to be logical. On the one hand, youths are active, have greater protest potential and want changes. While on the other, they are more susceptible to indoctrination, which the government uses to turn them into obedient and loyal citizens. The goal has been codified in a national program entitled "The Youth of Belarus" that runs from 2006 to 2010.

Apart from raising patriots of the country and promoting youths' intellectual potential, the program seeks "to bring down the level of political extremism among youth, stimulate electoral activity of young citizens, consolidate public youth movements for building a strong and prosperous Belarus."²

The key objectives of the BRSM, BRPO, the Belarusian Committee of Youth Organizations and similar youth organizations include the following:

1. Raising self-conscious and patriotic youths by means of indoctrination. The president noted that the purpose of youth organizations was to "advance the interests of a new generation and create an environment that helps young people shape and defend a constructive civic position and actively participate in the state and public life of the country."³

On 13 January 2003, the Belarusian president signed Edict N13 outlining measures to support the Belarusian National Youth Union.

2. Forming groups loyal to the president all over the country. Jury Čečukievič, secretary of the BRSM cell at Belarusian National Technical University, publicly admitted that his organization is responsible to the government, not to the public. "Today's leaders should realize that they are responsible for their work to the state, to the president and to youths. They are responsible for their work and for the members of our organizations."⁴
3. Mobilizing or at least creating conditions for controlling and directing active youths. Leanid Kavalou, first secretary of the BRPO, noted, "Youths understand that the opposition's calls to take to the street make no sense. Only work, not protests, but concrete daily work can help address problems and change something in this life. It is not time to protest and destroy, it is time to create and build."⁵
4. Resisting influence of independent pro-democracy organizations. The government established the Belarusian Committee of Youth Organizations in 2003 to supervise and control non-governmental youth organizations. The committee represents 39 youth and children organizations. Aleh Pralaskouski, the Presidential Administration's chief ideology officer, commented on the occasion, "There must be a central force, a unifying centre. It is easier for the government to work with big organizations. This is why we pin our hopes on the largest and most powerful youth and children organizations. They should play the leading role in implementing the government's youth policies." After forming

the Belarusian Committee of Youth Organizations, the government shut down the Belarusian Union of Children and Youth Associations (RADA), an independent association. One of the purposes of the Committee is to establish direct ties with foreign donors and channel funds into government-sponsored and pro-government organizations.

The government-sponsored organizations use sticks and carrots to attract new members and expand their political and ideological influence. The administrations of state enterprises and universities put pressure on workers and students to join government-sponsored youth organizations. On the other hand, the BRSM offers various benefits to its members. Since 2003, BRSM members have been offered discounts on various goods and services. For instance, those who produce a BRSM member's card are entitled to a discotheque admission discount.

One of the BRSM ads said:

"Every Monday (at 22.00) the BRSM invites you to visit the Plaza club and take part in "Taste of Pleasure", a Belarusian music promotion project. The program is tailored to all musical tastes of the population. Invited to play are the best DJs in Eurasia, pop and jazz bands, singers and performers of all styles. A combination of music and cuisine masterpieces will not leave you unimpressed. We have everything for you! Admission: 12,000. BRSM members 8,000."

Discounts, benefits and access to cheap entertainment are an effective way to boost membership. Another incentive is an opportunity to make a successful career without making a great effort. The BRSM said that 1,465 members were elected to local soviets (elected councils) during the local elections held in Belarus on January 14, 2007. The BRSM holds 17 seats in regional and Minsk city soviets, 358 seats in district soviets, 44 on city soviets and 1,046 in village soviets. As many as 3,504 BRSM members were on precinct election com-

² <http://president.government.by/press28322.print.html>

³ <http://president.government.by/press32198.html#doc>

⁴ <http://www.belau.ucoz.Russian/news/2006-11-16-25>

⁵ <http://www.belau.ucoz.Russian/news/2006-11-16-25>

missions and 481 members on territorial election commissions⁶ during the elections. Independent pro-democracy organizations were not given a single seat on election commissions.

Election to a local soviet is just the first step to success. Those who show loyalty may get elected to the National Assembly or offered a good job in the state sector. Take, for instance, the brilliant career of Alaksandr Juškevič born in Mahilou on May 12, 1972. On graduation from Mahilou Technological University he worked as an engineer at the local artificial yarn factory, Chimvalakno. Later, he served as second and first secretary of the BRSM Mahilou Regional Committee, and executive director of the Mahilou Regional Branch of Belarusbank, a state-controlled bank. Juškevič won a seat in the Mahilou Regional Soviet and headed the Belarusian Committee of Youth Organizations. He was elected to the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly. Only those exceptionally loyal to Alaksandr Łukašenka can win a parliamentary seat because the list of new members is said to be subject to presidential approval prior to an election. The current members of House of Representatives include Michaił Arda, former BRSM leader; I. Baryjeva, former second secretary of the BRSM's Miadzel District Committee; and J. Skrypko, former first secretary of the BRSM's Minsk Regional Committee. They are the only three representatives of the young generation in the Belarusian legislature.

Organizations such as BRSM and BRPO are part of the authoritarian system of governance. The government uses them as a political tool to shape the mass consciousness.

Substitution

In an overtly totalitarian fashion, the government orchestrated the establish-



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BRSM – a remake of Komsomol.

ment of the pro-government Union of Writers of Belarus in a bid to suppress the independent Belarusian Union of Writers and establish control over the intellectual and cultural community. Mikalaj Čarhiniec, chairman of the Committee on International Affairs and National Security in the upper parliamentary chamber, was elected as chairman of the pro-government Union of Writers of Belarus.

In an effort to use literature for promoting its ideology, the government injects money into the Union of Writers of Belarus. The organization had no problem obtaining necessary permits and papers for opening regional offices⁷.

Affiliation

Some associations in Belarus are affiliated with government agencies. Established by the Ministry for Emergency Management, the Belarusian Youth Association of Firefighters and Rescuers has 97,000 members. The association's priorities include providing civic and patriotic education, teaching

youth how to lead a safe life, promoting the firefighter's and the rescuer's profession, helping youths realize their potential and charitable activity⁸.

The interior ministry established the "Honar" association of veterans of special purpose forces. Former Interior Minister Jury Sivakou, chairman of Honar, and Dźmitry Pauličenka, deputy chairman, are suspected by the European Union of involvement in the disappearance of prominent Belarusian opposition figures and a journalist in 1999 and 2000. Honar declared "military patriotic work with the population" its top priority.

Pro-government organizations play a key role in exercising political control over various groups and suppressing public protest. Some of them emerged as part of the government's drive to form the so-called constructive opposition and reduce influence of pro-democracy groups.

Official trade unions

The largest pro-government organizations are the Federation of Trade Unions

⁶ <http://www.brsm.by/Russian/news/main?id=73>

⁷ Семкіна С. «Инженеры человеческих душ» будут направляться на поля и заводы// Белорусская нива, 27 снежня 2006.

⁸ <http://rescue01.government.by/topress/show.press.cgi?id=84>

⁹ <http://tchest.org/about/>

of Belarus (FTUB), the Belarusian Association of Entrepreneurs, the Union of Cinematographers of Belarus, Pošuk, Nation Without Drugs and the Belarusian Association of Veterans.

Most pro-government associations have a political role in addition to their main function. The FTUB has more than four million members. Membership of the FTUB may be a mere formality, but it is compulsory for state sector workers. Trade union fees are deducted from workers' wages. In addition, members are required to subscribe to the FTUB's newspaper *Bielaruski Čas*. The FTUB's informal priority is to crush independent trade unions and prevent outbreaks of discontent among workers at big industrial enterprises and in other sectors of the economy. Leanid Kozik, chairman of the FTUB, repeatedly stressed the federation's loyalty to the Belarusian president. "I must admit, the president has supported us on every issue we approached him. Take the problem of pay increases for instance. The president intervened and people's living standards improved within a year. It was not the government that took care of the Belarusians' wellbeing, but it was the president who issued orders to raise wages. This is why trade unions, for their part, will always support and defend the head of state."¹⁰

The Belarusian Association of Entrepreneurs attempts to advance the interests of its members in disputes with the authorities, but is unable to influence the government's policies with regard to private businesses. It avoids confrontation with the authorities for fear of repercussions. On the other hand, the government is suspicious of entrepreneurs and their association.

Sport, cultural and patriotic youth associations like Pošuk and Nation Without Drugs are funded by the government and implement its social policies. The chairpersons of Pošuk and Nation Without Drugs hold seats in

the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly.

The government is likely to increase the level of intervention in the third sector in the future. Only organizations that support its policies will be allowed to function legally. In general, civic society is likely to become extinct or will be fully controlled by the authorities.

¹⁰ Леонид Козик: "Надо учиться работать, а не рапортовать". №4 от 27 января 2005.

Alaksandr Buchvostau

Trade Unions in Belarus

Trade unions formed part of the government system in the Soviet Union, but internal trade union democracy was limited. Trade unions' internal regulations declared democratic centralism to be the main governing principle, but in reality they were guided by the principle of centralism. The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VCSPS) owned all trade union property, including in Belarus. The Belarusian Council of Trade Unions (Belsavpraf) was in fact a branch of the VCSPS. There were no branches of national unions in Belarus, but there were national committees of the Soviet Union's branch unions.

Grass-root unions had limited rights with budgets strictly controlled by superior organizations. The trade union environment began to change after the start of social democratization in the mid 1980s. Some union leaders sought to establish trade unions independent of the government and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The movement for trade union independence gained strength in 1989 and 1990. Delegates

at the last 19th congress of Soviet trade unions voted to reorganize the VCSPS and establish the General Confederation of Trade Unions (VKP), a union independent of the government. That was the end of the Soviet period in the history of trade unions. The VCSPS and Belsavpraf faced perestroika and reform.

My trade union career began in 1984 with election as chairman of the trade union committee of Homsielmash, a state-owned agricultural equipment manufacturing company. The Homsielmash trade union committee was one of the first grass-root unions to embark on a reform path.

Homsielmash workers staged more than 40 strikes between 1985 and 1990 to demand wage increases and better conditions for work. 1990 saw the establishment of Belarusian branch trade unions. On 7 September 1990, delegates at a conference founded the Belarusian Automobile and Agricultural Equipment Manufacturing Trade Union (ASM). The delegates elected the ASM chairman and declared the establishment of

the new union. The conference was suspended and resumed on 30 November 1990 as the first ASM congress. The Belarusian Union of Electronic Industry Workers (REP) was founded in October 1990. The Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB) was established on October 5, 1990. It represented 27 branch unions launched in 1990 and 1991. Some workers formed alternative unions. The Labour Confederation of Belarus emerged around the same time with M. Sobaleu at the head.

This was the beginning of a new phase in the trade union movement triggered by political, economic and social reforms.

Unions assumed their original functions and freed themselves from government control. The Belarusian Association of Independent Industrial Trade Unions (BNAPP) adopted a plan of trade union movement development under conditions of social and political reform. Other unions later adopted similar plans.

The ASM, REP and regional branches of industrial trade unions established the BNAPP in 1992 as an alternative to the FTUB, criticized for conservatism and compromises to the authorities.

Workers in Minsk went on strike in early April 1991, later supported by

Alaksandr Buchvostau

leader of Independent Metal Workers Trade Union

strike committees across the country. The strikers demanded the elimination of Communist Party committees from enterprises, and independence of Belarus from the Soviet Union. The strike committees were led by activists of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and the Labour Confederation of Belarus. The strike committees and the Labour Confederation of Belarus established alternative trade unions — the Free Trade Union, the Independent Union of Miners, the Free Trade Union of Metal and Transport Workers. These unions formed the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP), an alternative trade union centre.

In the early 1990s, many unions distanced themselves from politics in order to be beyond control of the Communist Party.

Trade unions are a form of organization of hired workers for class struggle, therefore they perform both social and political functions. However, they use methods that differ from those employed by political parties. They have different manifestos and goals. Political parties struggle for power, while trade unions seek better conditions and living standards for their members, the hired workers.

The Free Trade Union of Belarus, the Independent Union of Miners, the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions and other unions sought to compete with the FTUB. They pursued more radical and aggressive policies, which made them more attractive. Their membership was on the rise. Political democracy created a good opportunity for trade union reform. Unions competed with each other for members, trying to offer workers better services.

To press for reform of the FTUB and compete with other unions, industrial unions set up the Belarusian Association of Independent Industrial Trade Unions, but it was closed down in 1999 as a result of a conspiracy between the FTUB and the Ministry of Justice. Regretfully, it was not the only mistake made by the FTUB leadership in the last ten years.



Andrej Lankievič

A picket against contract system imposed by the government.

Inconsistent policies, unreasonable hope for an agreement with the government and the employers, failure to develop a new ideology of struggle, and the use of all means to suppress alternative unions prevented the FTUB from establishing itself as a reputable organization of workers.

Despite policy flaws, Belarusian unions forced the authorities to enact the Trade Union Act in 1993 as well as laws governing labour relations, collective bargaining and labour disputes.

The BNAPP staged rallies, demonstrations and strikes to defend workers' rights. It held at least 50 mass protests between 1992 and 1999.

Alaksandr Łukašenka was elected president of Belarus in 1994. He established an authoritarian regime that sought to restrict the rights of trade unions. Łukašenka used police and military forces to disperse peaceful demonstrations by workers. In 1995, special police units broke up a strike by the Minsk Metro workers who were protesting the administration's failure to respect the collective bargaining agreement. Strike leaders were arrested and sentenced to jail. Łukašenka and his regime launched an attack against trade unions. In early 1995, he made an unsuccessful attempt

to bring the FTUB under the government's control. The government adopted laws banning strikes, rallies and demonstrations. Authorities allowed demonstrations only on city outskirts so that organizers could not attract large numbers of participants. The Łukašenka regime's first target was free trade unions affiliated with the BKDP. Leaders of these unions failed to put up strong resistance, and all unions, except for the Independent Union of Miners (NPG), saw their membership fall dramatically as a result of victimization. NPG teamed up with grass-root unions of chemical industry enterprises to form the Belarusian Independent Trade Union. The authorities intervened in union conferences in an attempt to oust critical trade union leaders Hančaryk, Buchvostau, Fiadynič and Jarašuk. But most members rallied round their leaders.

The ASM, REP, BKDP and the Belarusian Trade Union of Agro-Industrial Complex Workers (APK) appealed for support to the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO expressed concern about union rights violations and urged the Belarusian authorities to comply with international standards. Belarusian unions were granted membership in key internation-

al organizations of trade unions. The ASM and REP joined the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), one of the oldest trade union associations founded by Socialists at a congress in Zurich in 1893. Alaksandr Buchvostau held a seat on the IMF Executive Board from 2002 to 2005. Alaksandr Jarašuk, chairman of the APK, was elected to the Executive Board of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association (IUF). When elected chairman of the BKDP, Jarašuk joined the Executive Board of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The BKDP was admitted to the ICFTU in 2002.

The authorities' attacks on trade unions prompted the latter to back FTUB leader Uladzimir Hančaryk's presidential campaign against incumbent President Łukašenka in 2001. Hančaryk ran as candidate from the pro-democratic opposition but lost the race, marred by allegations of large-scale fraud.

Łukašenka dealt another heavy blow to trade unions when he ordered his government to ban the deduction of trade union dues from workers' wages. The Council of Ministers passed a directive to that effect, entitled "On Measures to Protect the Rights of Trade Union Members", on December 14, 2001.

Miners staged a big rally in Salihorsk on 11 January 2002 to protest the move.

Meanwhile, a split widened within the FTUB between leaders loyal to the authorities and those who attempted to defend the federation's independence from the government. The financial position of the FTUB, from grass-root cells to the FTUB Council, deteriorated dramatically after the adoption of the above-mentioned directive amid the rising tensions with the authorities. Many grass-root cells at agricultural and industrial enterprises stopped functioning due to the lack of funds, since it was difficult for trade union activists to collect dues in cash from every member. Industrial unions, unions operating in education



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Alaksandr Jarašuk, chairman of the Belarusian Confederation of the Democratic Trade Unions, member of the Executive Board of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

and other sectors introduced a new mechanism where workers transferred dues through banks by issuing payment orders. Hančaryk stepped down as leader of the FTUB at the time. Members of the FTUB Council elected Franc Vitko, former first deputy chairman, as chairman of the FTUB. But the authorities sought to crush all elements of dissent within the FTUB. The government broke off relations with the FTUB and encouraged managers at state-run enterprises to set up parallel loyal trade union cells, also known as yellow trade unions. In 2002, yellow unions cropped up at several large enterprises including the Minsk Automobile Factory (MAZ), the Mahilou Automobile Factory (MoAZ), the Integral electronic company and the Belarusian Steel Works (BMZ).

The Presidential Administration increased pressure on FTUB Chairman

Vitko with the help of pro-government trade union activists, taking advantage of union bureaucrats' general discontent with the state of affairs. After some hesitation, Vitko tendered his resignation. Presidential Administration officials succeeded in their effort to install a pro-Łukašenka leader in the FTUB.

The takeover of the FTUB and the dismissal of the critical leaders of branch unions was the final phase in the government's effort to subdue the federation. In early September, a few days before the FTUB conference, Leanid Kozik, the new FTUB leader installed by the Presidential Administration, called an APK executive board meeting whose participants dismissed APK Chairman Jarašuk. The meeting was conducted with gross violations of the APK rules of procedure. A few months later Jarašuk took over the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions. He managed to make the BKDP more efficient and gave an impetus to the independent trade union movement in general.

In December 2002, Kozik and the Ministry of Industry, acting on orders from the Presidential Administration, orchestrated executive board meetings of the ASM and REP in an effort to replace the unions' leaders Buchvostau and Fiadynič. However, the executive board members voted down the proposals to dismiss the leaders of the ASM and REP.

Łukašenka severely criticized officials for the unsuccessful attempt. Speaking at a government conference on 27 March 2003, he gave the industry minister two months to replace Buchvostau and Fiadynič with more loyal leaders.

The industry ministry elaborated a new strategy and tactics to purge the two unions of the independent leaders and their supporters. It instructed the management of enterprises to pressure ASM and REP grass-root cells into joining a newly established government-controlled industrial union.

As a result of the manipulations, a group of the grass-root union lead-

ers from large enterprises (the Minsk Tractor Works, Homsielmash, MZKT, the Motavela bicycle and motorcycle factory and others) loyal to the FTUB leadership was formed in the ASM Council Presidium in September-October 2004. The group, guided by the FTUB which sought to carry out Łukašenka's order, managed to dismiss the ASM leader.

The authorities failed in their attempt to use the same tactics to oust the REP leader because each grass-root union regardless of its size had one representative on the Presidium and the REP Council. Fiadyniĭ, supported by most members of the Presidium, managed to block all attempts to convene a special conference to replace him. Meanwhile, most REP grass-root organizations were transferred to the industrial union by the first quarter of 2004. But REP retained its legal status and office.

REP convened a special conference in February 2005 with former ASM leader Buchvostau and his supporters in attendance. The conference participants voted to form a new union called the Trade Union of Electronic and Automobile Industry Workers (REPAM) incorporating REP and ASM members who had formed an independent union by this time.

On 19 July 2004, REPAM held a conference whose delegates elected Buchvostau and Fiadyniĭ as co-chairpersons of the new union.

In March 2004, the Ministry of Information suspended the newspaper *Raboĭčaja Salidarnaść*. In June 2004, the Ministry of Justice brought a clo-

sure suit against the Belarusian Party of Labour (BPL) led by Buchvostau. The Supreme Court outlawed the party in August 2004.

The Ministry of Justice issued Order N 239 on 16 July 2004 to annul its earlier decision made on 12 April 2004 to register a new version of the REP Charter providing for the formation of REPAM. The illegal decision in fact banned REPAM. REPAM appealed to the Supreme Court, but it upheld the ban.

By the end of 2004, most trade unions were under the government's control and turned into ideology squads of the Łukašenka regime. Most independent unions found themselves under conditions where they could not function properly. The Belarusian Independent Trade Union is the only union free of government control with a large membership (7,000 to 8,000 workers), and some of its grass-root organizations have an opportunity for collective bargaining and can sign wage and collective bargaining agreements. Other unions do not have such an opportunity.

Łukašenka launched a large-scale campaign against independent unions, but this failed to eliminate the unions completely.

REPAM and BKDP continue to function, relying on devoted activists and international support. The unions have shifted their focus to human rights defence, and also efforts to expand their influence and form groups of support for the independent trade union movement.

Aleś Uładamirski

Religious Diversity in Belarus

Officials and state-controlled media like to stress the lack of tensions among various faiths and denominations, attributing this fact to the government's wise policies. While it is true that there is no religious enmity, this is rather thanks to the traditions of tolerance and generally amicable relations that have been established by various religious groups co-existing for centuries. It is basically the authorities that give believers reason to worry from time to time. In general, members of various religious congregations do not need to sort out their relationship with each other, but with the authorities.

The government has been criticized for offering preferential treatment to the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, often referred to as the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), and discriminating against other denominations.

The last few months of 2006 saw several strong protests by members of various religious communities. Hunger strikes by Protestants and Catholics

forced authorities to bow to their demands. A more detailed account of the protests will follow, but let us start with some background.

Mosaic formed over centuries

Belarus' religious mosaic has been shaped over the last 1,000 years. Along with the Orthodox religion, adopted in this land in the late 10th century, the Roman Catholic Church has occupied a strong position since the 13th-14th centuries. Judaism and Islam obtained a foothold around the same time. Protestant movements began attracting followers in the early 16th century, and the Eastern-rite (Uniate) church expanded a little later. Old Believers fled from prosecution in Russia to Belarus in the 16th century.

In 2006, the country had 2,943 religious communities with the Orthodox Church accounting for nearly half (1,391). There were 1,006 churches and 274 under construction.

The Roman Catholic Church has four eparchies, the Conference of Catholic Bishops, 439 parishes, nine missions, eight monasteries and two higher theological seminaries. Most Catholics live in Western Belarus and have Polish ethnic roots. There are about 170 Roman Catholic congregations in the Hrodna region alone.

The Uniate Church, which reemerged in the early 1990s, has 13 parishes.

The number of Protestant congregations has been growing vigorously in the last few years. There are more than 1,000 communities in the country — Evangelical Christians (492), Evangelical Christian Baptists (266), Seventh's Day Adventists (74), and Lutherans (27), among others.

Less numerous are Jewish communities (46), Old Believers (33) and Muslims (24). There are six Krishna and five Baha'i groups.

The Orthodox Church has 1,159 churches with 188 under construction, the Roman Catholic Church 427 and 45 respectively, the Evangelical Christian Church 183 and 25, the Baptist Church 139 and 12. The Jewish communities own eight synagogues, and the Muslims have six mosques with one being built.

In all, there are 27 denominations in Belarus. About 50 percent of Belarusians

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Metropolitan Filaret, chief of the Orthodox Church, subordinated to Moscow patriarchate.

consider themselves religious, according to polls. Of all people who profess a religious faith, 80 percent belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, 14 percent identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church, two percent represent Protestant churches, and four percent practise other religions. Just 5.5 percent of believers worship and perform religious rites on a regular basis.

Legacy of empires

Belarus' current religious landscape was considerably influenced by the fact that for two centuries the land was part of an empire — first tsarist Russia and later the Soviet Union. Tsarist Russia sought to expand the domination of the Russian Orthodox Church, while the Bolsheviks spread atheism.

It is astonishing that the Belarusian government has adopted both approaches. Alaksandr Łukašenka once said that he was “an Orthodox atheist.” The oxymoron may be used to describe government's policies with regard to religious denominations.

For instance, in late 2006 President Łukašenka reiterated, “We will always remember and appreciate the outstanding role of the Orthodox Church in Belarus' history, its favourable influence on spiritual and cultural traditions.” The country's Orthodox leader attends various state ceremonies like a member of the government.

On the one hand, the government declares respect for all faiths, while on the other, government-controlled newspapers occasionally run articles calling for a fight against “religious opium” in general and “destructive sects” in particular (the authorities often informally include in the “destructive sects” category all denominations except for the BOC).

Obviously, the current government inherited a suspicious attitude to religious minority groups from the empire. It should be noted, however, that bureaucrats avoid using the term „religious minority groups” in official statements to emphasize allegedly equal treatment of all denominations. But in practice, they unofficially distinguish between loyal and „suspicious” religious groups.

The 2002 law „On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations” creates conditions for the preferential treatment of the BOC.

On the one hand, Article 6 of the religion law declares that „all religions and faiths are equal before the law,” while on the other, Article 8 provides that „relations between the state and religious organizations are regulated by the law taking into consideration their influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people.”

The meaning of this clause becomes clear when one reads the preamble, which says that the law recognizes “the leading role of the Orthodox Church in the historical formation and development of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people.”

In 2003, Prime Minister Navicki and Patriarchal Exarch Filaret, head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus, inked a concordat between the government and the Belarusian Exarchate.

Demons of politicization

Draft versions of the religion law met with opposition from religious groups, especially from Protestants concerned that the law would create conditions for discrimination against religious minority groups and grant the BOC privileged status. Congregations also expressed concern about tighter registration requirements that made it especially difficult for small religious communities to obtain official registration.

Alaksandr Łukašenka defended the draft law in his public statements saying it did not contain any provisions “bullying other denominations”.

The authorities started a witch-hunt in response to the criticism. The Belarusian leader's press office blamed unspecified political groups for allegedly “manipulating religious sentiments”.

Łukašenka reiterated the charge in October 2004. “Some opposition figures, acting on advice from western hench-

men, put forward provocative proposals that the sphere of traditional denominations, that of the Orthodox Church above all, should be narrowed to give more room to various sects and non-traditional faiths,” he said addressing Belarus’ Orthodox leaders. “Such anti-Slavic plans and intentions are directed not only against the Orthodox Church and its parishioners who represent the majority of Belarusians, but also against the state. They target the most valuable achievement of our country — sociopolitical stability, peace and order.”

This statement proves that the authorities needed the law to legalize the persecution of religious minorities.

The government-controlled media have repeatedly attacked “non-traditional” religious groups in the last few years.

The authorities play the religious card with creativity, occasionally using religious communities to achieve their political ends. In early 2006, the authorities used alleged concerns of a small Muslim community over the publication of Muhammad cartoons as a pretext to close down the critical weekly *Zhoda*. After the paper ran the cartoons, state television stations and newspapers broadcast and reprinted angry comments by Muslim clerics (who might not have seen the small-circulation paper distributed mainly among members of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party).

As soon as the weekly was closed down, the clerics disappeared from television screens and newspaper pages.

Fear of the “fifth column”

The Roman Catholic Church is the second largest religion in Belarus (the largest religious minority group). The authorities consider the Roman Catholic Church a “traditional faith” (this official terminology implies a selective approach) and declared its major holidays, Easter and Christmas, official national holidays along with the respective dates of the Orthodox calendar.



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Budslau Catholic fest.

Analysts believe that the government, which has pursued anti-Western policies, is wary of Catholicism mainly because it promotes Western values. The authorities consider Catholic believers as the “fifth column” of the treacherous West.

The government’s attitude toward the church is determined by “the Polish syndrome” — a general suspicious attitude to all that comes from Poland. This suspicion has historic roots in the periods when Belarusian territories were under Polish control, and is also linked to the general mistrust of the authorities for policies associated with the European Union and NATO, as well as the current tensions between the two countries over the Union of Poles in Belarus.

Many Belarusian bureaucrats look at local ethnic Poles, members of the Roman Catholic Church, as potential agents of the West.

In particular, the authorities moved to purge the church of Polish priests. The Roman Catholic Church still has a shortage of Belarusian priests because there was not a place where they could be trained during the Soviet era. Foreign priests are often denied visa extensions.

Seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns of the Hrodna diocese were forced out of Belarus at the end of 2006. The move prompted parishioners in the village of Lazduny, Iuje district, to go on a hunger strike demanding the authorities to extend a visa for local priest Mariusz Iljaszewicz.

The authorities have also harassed Protestant congregations for the same reason, suspecting them of being agents of Western influence. Protestant groups put up tough resistance in the face of a serious threat to their interests.

Back in 2002, Volha Abramava, a member of the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly (who was considered one of few moderate critics of the government in the parliament), criticized the draft new religion law as discriminatory against Protestant congregations. Some analysts alleged that the law was drafted under pressure from the BOC concerned about the growing competition from Protestants.

Abramava predicted, however, that the law would weaken positions of the Orthodox Church. “Protestants can work successfully in an aggressive environment. They can resist strong pressure by an all-out missionary effort,” she said.

Later, Protestant communities proved her right. Protests by members of Protestant congregations, especially a hunger strike that took place in Minsk in 2006, created considerable discomfort for the authorities.

Catholics also showed a strong character. The abovementioned House of Representatives member accurately predicted religious groups' reaction to the new law.

Wave of protests

Observers note signs of cooling between the authorities and the Orthodox Church.

Interestingly, displayed until recently on the official presidential website was Łukašenka's quote: "I cannot take in with my soul and understand that the church [the BOC] is somehow separated from the state." The quote has been removed.

In December 2006, Łukašenka cautioned Orthodox priests against "making excessive haste" in recruiting parishioners. At the meeting with the BOC clerics, he also voiced opposition to introducing religion in schools.

Although the government's honeymoon with the Orthodox Church is over, this does not mean that the authorities are leaning toward other religions.

Political analysts believe that the authorities are watchful of any uncontrolled activity of people, including that of religious groups.

Officials have started to exercise greater vigilance after both hunger strikes — by the New Life Church and by Catholics in Hrodna — forced authorities to yield to believers' demands.

Members of the charismatic New Life Church, affiliated with the Association of Full Gospel Evangelic Christians, were on a hunger strike from October 5 to 28, 2006 in an attempt to defend the church property. The New Life Church had bought a disused cowshed in Minsk and converted it into a church. But the city authorities launched and won a court

action that could force the congregation to sell the building and land beneath it. The move sparked the 23-day hunger strike that involved more than 100 believers. The authorities backed down and the case was sent to the Supreme Economic Court for review.

Catholics in the town of Hrodna, who prayed for New Life during the strike, drew on this community's example in turn by declaring their own hunger strike on December 1 for permission to build a new church. The congregation had been trying to obtain permission from the authorities for 10 years. The authorities backed down in a few days, probably scared by the repercussions of the strike by New Life members, and handed the written permission to the group on December 6.

Commenting on the outcome, Priest Alaksandr Šemiet noted, "The spark that started the hunger strike in defense of the New Life Church in Minsk reached Hrodna and helped us overcome the injustice."

New Life worshippers were also triumphant. "Last year's developments and the victory over the authorities as a result of the hunger strike inspired the faith-

ful, each of whom feels himself or herself a victor," New Life Pastor Viačaslau Hančarenka said in early 2007. He added that the Association of Full Gospel Evangelic Christians should drop a doctrine that commands only passive resistance to injustice.

"We need to change this strategy and take a position of active development," the pastor was quoted as saying. The New Life Church plans to set up its own media outlets — a website, a newspaper and even a radio and television station. But the current authorities are unlikely to allow them to put their plans into practice.

Recurrence of "belligerent atheism"

It can be reasoned that the defeats prompted senior officials to take a more hostile attitude toward religion in general. Many observers were alarmed by an article written by Anatol Rubinau, first deputy head of the Presidential Administration, published in the largest state-controlled national newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* in December



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"New Life" protestant church adherents went on hunger strike to prevent the church building from confiscation.

2006. In the article, the official promotes Bolshevik-style belligerent atheism.

The International Religious Freedom Report 2006 released by the US Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor says, "The government continued to restrict religious freedom."

"Respect for religious freedom continued to be uneven during the period covered by this report, although some improvements occurred."

US experts note that the government restricts religious freedom in accordance with the provisions of a 2002 law on religion and a 2003 concordat with the Belarusian branch of the Russian

Orthodox Church. Although there is no state religion, the concordat grants the BOC privileged status.

The report says that authorities imprisoned a clergyman and a lay activist, and harassed and fined members of certain religious groups.

It is true to say that the authorities do not take a civilized and fair attitude to religious groups and respect the rights of religious minorities.

This attitude could however change if the country made progress toward democracy. A democratic government by its nature will not grant privileges to some denominations at the expense of others.

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Sport As an Ideological Weapon

Dictatorial governments often tend to prioritize sports. Sport achievements help authoritarian leaders gain some recognition. The government imposes fondness for sports and physical training on the people using it as a way to teach discipline and order, and promote the cult of force.

East Germany used sports as a means of propaganda in the 1970s and 1980s. “Victory at any price” was the motto of East German sport executives. East German athletes increasingly used performance enhancing drugs, which helped them achieve outstanding results. Sport gave East Germany an opportunity to create an illusion of superiority. The Belarusian government currently acts in a similar way.

Like in the former Soviet Union, there is a fashion for parades involving athletes who march in front of their revered leader. An impressive parade was held in Moscow on Athlete’s Day in the terrible year of 1937. A similar show took place during the Munich Olympics in 1936.

In authoritarian Belarus, sports play the same role as in totalitarian countries of the 20th century. The state-controlled newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* ran a story about the Republic Day parade held on June 4, 2004. It says, “According to the established tradition, athletes and gymnasts report on their achievements and successes during major state holidays. In the last few years, sports and care of the nation’s health have not only become part of the state’s policy, but also an internal need of the residents of Belarus.... The sport parade evokes memories of the last winter and the great spirit of top-level competitions that took place in Minsk — the Davis Cup, the World U20 Ice Hockey Championships, the World Junior Weightlifting Tournament, the European Biathlon Championships. Belarusian fans did not even dream of such events a few years ago. More is yet to come. And you know what is good? These are not tales.

But the truth is that the Belarusian capital hosts secondary events that

would go unnoticed in other countries. State-controlled newspapers and television channels present them as major tournaments. State television journalists’ favourite question to visiting foreign athletes is “What is your impression of the country?”.

“For Olympic Belarus!”

The government’s high money rewards for Belarusian Olympic medalists are publicized to impress ordinary fans and fill them with admiration and respect. During the last Olympic Games the government promised \$60,000 for a gold medal, \$30,000 for silver and \$20,000 for bronze. Rewards rose 12-fold from what athletes received for medals earned at Lillehammer 1994, Belarus’ first Olympics after the country gained independence.

Belarusian state media often stress that the government spends more on sports than sport superpowers like the United States, Germany, Norway and China.

Belarus is far from holding the top spots in the world rankings of living standards, but its athletes often perform better than competitors from developed

Żmicier Pankaviec

journalist

European countries. This gives the authorities another good reason to assert that the country is on the right track.

The propaganda billboards that authorities posted in the run-up to the 2006 presidential election included one saying “For Olympic Belarus!”. Sports along with agro-towns have been given priority attention because of their propagandistic role.

Not a single athlete refused to join Belarus’ Olympic team for political reasons during the Łukašenka rule. It was not for political reasons, as some observers claimed, that footballer Arciom Mileuski became a Ukrainian citizen.

Not a single athlete refused to compete under the red-green flag condemned by opponents of the regime as a colonial legacy. Although Belarusian fans usually display more white-red-white flags than red-green ones at away games.

The opposition has no appeal for the sports community. Quite the contrary, most athletes publicly express their support for the president who gives them care and attention.

Biathlete Alena Zubryłava, who lived in Ukraine for the larger part of her sport career, has been with the Belarusian team for a few years. After her comfortable win in the World Cup finals on March 19, 2006, she said, “My Sunday’s victory was in support of the incumbent president of Belarus. My victory is his victory. This is something I wish him with all of my heart.” Belarus had a presidential election on the same day.

Zubryłava is not a Belarusian-born athlete. She came to this country to do sports for money. Below are remarks made by young Belarusian gymnasts Lubou Čarkašyna and Valeryja Kurylskaja in an interview with the newspaper *Pressbol*. Kurylskaja: “During the presidential election I tried to persuade my family to vote for the president. We almost had an argument about it. My mother and aunt were ‘for’ [the incumbent president], but my father was ‘against.’” Čarkašyna: “As for me, I did not try to persuade anyone because I knew that the winner’s name was known

in advance. There is no one to challenge the incumbent president. They [rivals] are not shown on television. He is doing a good job — he has it his own way while others yield to him. If they yield, he is the real leader. This is the law of life.”

Athletes usually spend a long time abroad. Before the 2006 presidential election tennis player Uladzimir Vaučkou said, “I will cast my vote for Alaksandr Ryhoravič Łukašenka because I have travelled a lot. I have seen how people live. I have seen what is going on there and what democracy is.” While Michail Usačou, a handball player, explained his attitude to the president in the following way, “I ignored the referendum [the 2004 constitutional referendum that allowed Łukašenka to run for a third term]. If there were an alternative to Łukašenka in our country, voting would make sense regardless of who you support. But I should note that as an athlete I do not have any grudges against the president. He really promotes sports. But my brother and mother-in-law are in business and they have reasons for discontent. I don’t have such reasons.”



Alaksandr Łukašenka is a fan of skiing, skating and hockey.

“Do not look for trouble” is the principle guiding most athletes.

Olympic president

President Łukašenka was elected as chairman of the National Olympic Committee (NOC) in 1997. Chess grand master Viktor Kuprejčyk was the only person to oppose his bid. But it was far from a democratic election.

Łukašenka was unanimously reelected as head of the NOC on March 27, 2001. His candidacy was unanimously supported in November 2004. No surprise, he was the only nominee.

Łukašenka was proposed for the job by the country’s top athletes — 2000 Olympics champion Elina Žvierava and 2004 Olympic gold medalist Julija Nieściarenka.

Apart from the NOC, President Łukašenka is the captain of his own “legendary” ice hockey team which has been beaten just once in its history. In what appeared to be a diplomatic move, it lost to Gazprom in 2007. Playing with the presidential team at different times were NHL stars Ruslan Salei and Nikolai Khabibulin, and key players of the Belarusian Ice Hockey League.

Łukašenka routinely wins annual cross-country ski races and roller ski competitions. He has created himself an image of the world’s most sporty president. All professional athletes are aware of the phony and artificial nature of events involving the president, but they have never refused to participate. The Belarusian leader shows up at all major sporting events in Belarus.

Alaksandr Łukašenka’s younger son, Dźmitry, is in charge of a sports club functioning under the auspices of the Presidential Administration (the elder son oversees security agencies). The club distributes presidential scholarships to young talented athletes.

Medal planning

Medal planning has become part of the phenomena described by the



Julija Daraškiewicz

The government imposes passion for sports and physical training to teach discipline and order, and promote the cult of force. At a football match in Minsk.

Presidential Administration's ideology mouthpiece *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* as "protectionist policies in the area of sports." Before the Athens Olympics, the NOC head instructed the national team to earn at least 25 medals. The chairpersons of all sports federations that contributed athletes to the team were ordered to sign a pledge to produce a specific number of medals. Alaksandr Hryhorau, chairman of the Boxing Federation, was the only one to refuse. He was not sacked, but instead promoted to sports minister after boxers showed a better-than-expected performance unlike other members of the Olympic team.

After the games, Łukašenka scolded the Olympic team for its failure to produce the planned number of medals and sacked Sports Minister Jury Sivakou, a former army general and ex-minister of the interior suspected in the West of involvement in the disappearance of opposition politicians. Due to these allegations, Sivakou was not granted an entry visa to visit Greece during the games.

Bureaucrats in charge of sport federations

When Łukašenka took over the NOC, high-ranking officials were put in charge of sport federations. Hienadź Niavyhłas, head of the Presidential Administration, chairs the Soccer Federation. Interior Minister Uładzimir Navumau, who is also on the EU's travel ban list, was appointed as chairman of the Ice Hockey Federation. House of Representatives speaker Uładzimir Kanaplou heads the Handball Federation and Finance Minister Mikałaj Korbust is responsible for the Gymnastics Federation. Alaksandr Kazulin, former rector of Belarusian State University, used to head the Freestyle Skiing Federation before he sided with the opposition.

The chairmanship of federations is often inherited by successors in government posts. For instance, the Biathlon Federation has been headed by officials who succeeded each other as KGB chiefs — Uładzimir Mackievič, Leanid Jeryn and Šciapan Sucharenka.

In November 2004, new heads were appointed to four sport federations. Only

one of them was not a career bureaucrat. The election of 1988 Olympics champion Alaksandr Ramańkou as chairman of the Fencing Federation came as a big surprise.

Belarusian sport federations rely heavily on subsidies from the government, which has been using administrative tools to raise money for the purpose. General Sivakou once admitted, "When the president was meeting with entrepreneurs they complained about exactions. Can they reject [a request for donations from] Navumau? No...Niavyhłas? No. Others follow [with their requests], probably they would like to give something, but they have nothing left to give. To say nothing of how our officials can collect money for greenery planting, pollination and other landscaping efforts."

Athletes rebel on retirement

Although some athletes do highlight problems in Belarus' sports establishment, they do not do so until they change their country of residence or retire.

In the last few years, a number of Belarusian athletes have moved abroad for one reason or another. They include swimmers Alena Popčanka and Hanna Ščerba, footballer Arciom Mileuski, handball player Siarhiey Rucienka, shooter Lalita Jauhleuskaja and, most recently, biathlete Alaksiej Ajdarau.

When no longer dependent on the Belarusian sports establishment, athletes raised the issue of retirement benefits for Olympic medalists, voiced concern about the lack of an anti-doping laboratory and unclear criteria applied in the selection of coaches for rewards in connection with successful performance at international competitions.

On the other hand, during Łukašenka's rule prominent athletes often addressed their concerns directly to the president. Among those who sent letters to Łukašenka were swimmers, members of various sport teams and the skater Žalazouski. The country

has a flexible system of control and incentives; this is why requests are more common than protests.

Nevertheless, some members of the sports community dare to criticize the current system or take an independent position.

When Alaksandr Łukašenka sought reelection as chairman of the NOC in 2001, Uładzimir Kaminski, 1976 Olympic cycling champion, severely criticized the practice where the president is in complete command of the key sports body. Following his statements, Kaminski was forced to resign from the NOC.

The opposition activity of Uładzimir Parfianovič, a three-time Olympic kayaking champion, had far-reaching repercussions. After his election as member of the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly in 2000, Parfianovič formed the Respublika opposition faction together with Siarhiej Skrabiec and Valery Frałou. In response, the NOC executive board recommended his expulsion from the Committee on the grounds that “members of the NOC lost confidence” in him. In addition, Parfianovič lost his post of the chairman of the Canoe/Kayak Federation.

In 2004 Parfianovič, Frałou and Skrabiec went on a hunger strike to demand that the House of Representatives consider a bill aimed at democratizing the Electoral Code. Parfianovič said then that the hunger strike was supported by prominent athletes Mikalaj Alochin, Viktor Sidziak and Uładzimir Kaminski.

Siarhiej Lištvan, an Olympic silver medalist in Greco-Roman wrestling, launched his parliamentary bid as an independent candidate the same year. However, he was denied registration for the race in one of the Mahilou region's election districts. The athlete's father lost his job because of his son's attempt to run for parliament.

Siarhiej Kanyhin, another former Greco-Roman wrestler and Olympic medalist, intended to run for the Viciebsk

Regional Soviet (elected council), but was not registered as candidate on far-fetched grounds.

Legendary gymnast Volha Korbuto decorated her website with a white-red-white flag used by opponents of the Łukašenka regime.

The authorities have repeatedly denied official registration to the Olympic Champions' Club, an association formed by Sidziak, Parfianovič, Kaminski and other former athletes.

Rumour had it that famous gymnast Ivan Ivankou, known for his sceptical attitude to the authorities' policies, endorsed Uładzimir Hančaryk's presidential bid in 2001. However, the athlete never made any statements to that effect. His father was later appointed as trade minister.

These are probably all the manifestations of dissent in the sports community during Łukašenka's first 13 years in office.

It is impossible to imagine a situation in Belarus where athletes would be equally divided between the two camps like during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

Sport and power

Sport is the sphere of life where dissent rarely takes root. The authorities under-finance culture and humanities, but spare no expense on sports. Victories of Belarusian athletes in international competitions inspire patriotism and loyalty for the state and its symbols.

Hundreds of people took to the street in Minsk waving red-green flags to celebrate the Belarusian ice hockey team's victory over Sweden during the 2002 Winter Olympics. A Davis Cup win over Russia was celebrated like a national holiday. After this victory, Łukašenka honoured Maks Mirny and Uładzimir Vaučkou with Belarus' highest awards.

Łukašenka is active in sports, while the opposition has completely ignored sports in its platforms, having inherit-

ed a feeling of dislike of sports from the Soviet intelligentsia.

On the other hand, Łukašenka's challengers in the 2006 presidential election, Alaksandr Milinkievič and Alaksandr Kazulin, both connected with sports, did pay attention to the topic during their presidential campaigns in what appears to be a sign of change in the opposition's attitude.

Andrzej Poczobut

Situation of Organizations Uniting the Polish Minority in Belarus: the Past, the Present and the Outlook

Polish organizations in Belarus: the past and present

The first organization uniting the Polish minority was founded in 1988. This year also saw the birth of Adam Mickiewicz Polish Scientific and Educational Society in Hrodna. Similar associations were established in Brest, Minsk, Lida, Baranavičy etc. In 1990 they were united in the Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB) which is the oldest and biggest Polish organization in Belarus.

The Union of Poles in Belarus is concentrated on cultural and educational issues. It organizes celebrations of religious and national holidays, festivals, scientific conferences, contests about literature and the Polish language as well as history and geography, takes care of protection of monuments and sites of national memory. Every year ZPB organizes summer vacations for children and adolescents in Poland. ZPB consisted of Polish Academy of Science, Polish Medical Association,

Association of Polish Plastic Artists, Polish Youth Society, Polish Veterans' Association, Union of Home Army Soldiers, Association of Polish Victims of Political Repressions, The Polish Nurses and Midwives Association.

Apart from the Union of Poles in Belarus there exists also "Scouting"-youth organization which deals with upbringing and organization of spare time for youngsters, Polish Alma Mater which provides didactic support for teachers, Polish Cultural Society of Lida town which is a local organization based in the region of Lipsk near Hrodna. There are numerous other organizations registered in the Ministry of Justice, among them are Club of Polish National Traditions, Polish Child Group "Grodzieńskie Słowniki" and Non-profit Polish National Group "Lechici" Association.

All these organizations operate thanks to the financial support granted by the Polish Government. The support from the Belarusian government is insignificant.

Legal basis of activity

The activity of Polish organizations as well as the activity of "ordinary" Belarusian organizations is regulated by Belarusian legislation and also:

Act on Associations,

By decree of the president of 12th March 2001 No. 8 "On certain rules regulating the course of receiving and using non-returnable financial help from abroad" etc.

However, because of being specific, Polish minority organizations in their activity must additionally take into account the following: Act on national minorities in the Republic of Belarus of 11th November 1992 and the Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus on Good-Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation, Agreement between The Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus on protection of graves and memory sites of war victims and repressions, signed in Brest on 21st January 1995, as well as the agreement between the Polish government and the Belarusian government on cooperation in the field of culture, science and education.

Apart from the Ministry of Justice and its local branches activity of Polish

Andrzej Poczobut

Union of Poles of Belarus activist, editor of "Magazyn Polski na uchodźstwie"

organizations is under the control of the Committee on Religion and Religious Minorities, the subdivision of Council of Ministers of the Republic of Poland. This institution frequently intervenes in activity of Polish national minorities. As early as in 1991 there was a disclosure of the document which showed the plan of action in the field of "marginalization of the Union of Poles in Belarus". Among recommendations were "supporting dissenting groups", "supporting all organizations formed from the Union of Poles" etc.

Conflict about the Union of Poles and its influence on the situation of the Polish minority

Current situation of Polish organizations and the Polish minority in general was largely influenced by the conflict connected with ZPB which started in 2005. It happened due to the interference of Belarusian Special Services in the activity of a social organization and subsequently canceling the results of the party management elections which the authorities found unsatisfactory. The war in media, when the Polish organization was accused of being "the fifth column", has on the whole influenced the Polish minority. People who work in state-owned working places, especially on manager posts, try not to be involved in activity of Polish organizations. At the same time, when threatened, Polish organizations "has stucked together". Despite the efforts of authorities to make other Polish organizations condemn the leaders of the Union of Poles, nothing similar has happened in the course of conflict.

Owing to the efforts of authorities, "the Union of Poles", adhering to the system, has been established-in fact local branches of this organization are administered by ideological departments of local Executive Committees. The activity of main executive bodies (presi-

dent, Principal Council) is directly supervised by KGB. However, in spite of various support for activities of this "social organization", it failed to gain recognition among Poles residing in Belarus. First of all it is far too obvious that the leaders are associated with Belarusian Special Services. What is more, activists of authorities supported "The Union of Poles" have taken part in propaganda TV programmes which were aimed at slandering Poland and Poles during the Belarusian-Polish conflict.

Polish education has suffered the heaviest blow. In Belarus there are two schools which teach in Polish: in Vaukavysk and Hrodna (the Union of Poles owns both schools). However, the overwhelming majority of children learn Polish as an additional course in ordinary schools. Authorities are reluctant to contacts between Polish language teachers and directors of such schools with Polish diplomatic missions. For instance in September this year Uladzimir Trachimczyk, the director of Eliza Orzeszkowa school in Milkowszczyzna region near Minsk, was dismissed for inviting a Polish consul to a school party celebrating the beginning of the new school year. Before the conflict, diplomatic missions were providing didactic support and help for the teachers of Polish. In this situation the significant number of directors gave up on teaching Polish in schools which is frequently explained by the lack of interest from parents. In these conditions the number of children learning Polish has diminished.

Outlook

As in the case of "ordinary" Belarusian non-governmental organizations, normal running of Polish social organizations is connected with respecting basic human rights by the Belarusian authorities and liberalization of legislation in the field of social organizations' activity. As far as Polish organizations are concerned relations between Poland

and Belarus could be warmed up if activity of Polish organizations started to be normal and its further development possible. However, it appears that in the present political situation it is impossible to meet these conditions. In connection with this further pressure and restrictions on legal activity of Polish social organizations can be expected. The regime in power is interested in taking over the control of Polish organizations and in downgrading influence of independent activists on the Polish minority. Achieving these goals by authorities depends on determination and creativity of organization members.

Iryna Vidanava

In the Home and On the Streets:

Belarusian Women and Women's Organizations, 2001-06

During the March 2006 events, it was estimated that at least half of those demonstrating on the Square were women. Female participants included those of all ages. Together with the men, they remained in the tent city despite the terrible cold, organized a kitchen there, and smuggled food and warm clothing to other protesters. For many women it was the first time in which they had participated in protests; others were experienced supporters of the democratic movement. During the crackdown, hundreds were insulted, abused, imprisoned, fired from jobs, and expelled from universities.

But during those dramatic days, the majority of Belarusian women remained silent and passive. Most women in Belarus do not yet openly oppose the regime. For many it is because they represent one of the least protected social groups, are paid less than men and are frequently discriminated against, and make up the majority of occupations with the lowest salaries, including health care, education, and culture.

Often the primary parent, sole provider or head of household, women value the stability and minimum living standards guaranteed by Łukašenka. It should not be surprising that public opinion polls show that many core supporters of the regime are women, especially those who are older, less educated and rural dwellers.

Nevertheless, there are a number of pro-democratic women leaders in civil society. One opposition political party, Nadzieja (Hope), is led by a woman. In Belarus' third sector, women head up the Executive Bureau of the Assembly of Belarusian Pro-Democratic NGOs, Belarusian Association of Journalists, and Belarusian Students' Association, as well as important human rights groups, NGO resource centers, and minority organizations. Yet women's organizations per se are scarce and weak. In a survey of 678 registered NGOs conducted in January-February 2006, only 17 national, regional or local organizations indicated that working with women was their core activity and were carry-

ing out one or more women's programs. Of the 204 members of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs (including both registered NGOs and informal groups), which were re-registered in 2004, only 27 organizations (13 percent) work with women. And this figure also includes the regional branches of national women's organizations.

Since 2001, the number and type of women's initiatives have significantly decreased due to the regime's policy of repressing all independent organizations and activities. Nadzieja, which at one time claimed to be the largest political party in Belarus, has, for example, lost most of its membership and regional structures. Many local women's NGOs disappeared after failing to pass a re-registration process imposed by the regime in 1999, or had their registration taken away due to their independent behavior. Others ceased their activities because of pressure from local authorities, especially after the 2001 presidential elections. In Smarhon, for example, practically all of the women's initiatives which existed in 2000-01 have been destroyed.

Women activists are easy targets for the regime because of the current job contract system. Since the state is the

Iryna Vidanava

CDMag, multimedia publication for youth, manager

country's largest employer, workers are forced to sign annual job contracts which can easily be terminated following activities considered to be dangerous by the regime. Women are especially vulnerable to this pressure because they tend to work more in professions controlled by the state, such as schools and hospitals. The results have been devastating. In 2001, it was usually possible to gather 200 to 300 women for conferences on women's or general socio-political issues in the country's regional centers. But today, most women are scared to participate in any independent event, including educational seminars or even informal meetings. The regime's strategy of "divide and conquer" has meant that many promising women's projects—from social assistance to international exchanges—have been blocked. To limit the threat of independent efforts, the state tends to permit only those projects supported by weak and apolitical women's NGOs.

While independent women's organizations are struggling for survival, the state-supported and controlled Belarusian Union of Women reports that it has 170,000 members and more than 3,000 local branches (<http://belunionofwomen.at.tut.by>). A typical Soviet-style mass organization, the Union implements programs within the bounds of the state's social, political and economic policies. The Union and other ephemeral "voluntary organizations" serve the interests of the regime and foster the illusion of the participation of ordinary women in public life.

In such difficult conditions, the women's organizations that remain active are trying to figure out how to reach out to broader circles of the female population and motivate women to become more civically active. Sociological data indicates that women in Belarus are more concerned with daily quality of life problems and rarely concentrate on gender equality. In focus groups, conducted in January 2006 in different regions, women made it clear that they are especially worried about low incomes, unemployment, poor healthcare, hous-

ing problems, spousal alcoholism, self-realization challenges, and a lack of information (<http://widm.iatp.by/widm/index.phtml>). These problems are similar to those facing the rest of the population, and women's NGOs need to decide whether to focus on specific gender issues (equality, discrimination, domestic violence, reproductive health, etc.) or to try to activize women around major social and political challenges. On these issues, the four largest pro-democratic national women's organizations take different approaches.

In 2006, the Belarusian Organization of Working Women (BOWW) celebrated its 10th anniversary. BOWW emerged from Belarus' independent trade union movement of the 1990s; today it is one of the largest and most influential women's NGOs. It includes over 300 active and about 2,000 associate members, has a network of 16 active regional structures and publishes one national and eight regional bulletins. Despite all the difficulties caused by the authorities, BOWW appears to be successful in its mission, which is to assist women in the realization of their civic initiatives.

BOWW encourages its local leaders to come up with their own activi-

ties. For example, an ecological safety program was developed after several local branches raised concerns about the quality of local drinking water and suggested that BOWW should address this problem. BOWW is actively involved in researching and gathering information on women's issues. The Central Office sees its main role as helping local activists to become leaders and providing them with needed information, materials and training. The organization's bulletin, *Women's Care*, plays an important role in the BOWW network. The publication's content includes information about BOWW members, programs, and achievements; methodological and analytical articles on issues which BOWW addresses; and general educational materials. The bulletin also helps BOWW to promote itself and reach out to women who are not members.

BOWW's flagship programs center on developing associations of homeowners and fighting the job contract system. Associations of homeowners, allowed under Belarusian law, provide some possibilities for promoting self-governance at the grassroots level, cultivating independent thinking and activities, and liberating homeowners from



Julija Daraškevič

Union of Poles of Belarus activists protest against the UPB buildings confiscation by the authorities. Andželika Borys (in the center) is a leader of the Polish minority.

their total dependency on local authorities. The job contract system is one of the regime's most powerful tools to impose control and repress independent initiatives. Both of BOWW's programs appeal to women. Females are usually heads of households and therefore are most aware of the everyday economic and other shortcomings of the state communal system, under which they have no decision making authority. This system can be quite different with active homeowners' associations. At the same time, women are often the first, most vulnerable and greatest number of victims of the job contract system. Knowing that it cannot take on these major challenges by itself, BOWW often initiates and enters into coalitions with other organizations. Thus, BOWW works to activate women by addressing issues of concern to different social groups and aims to change certain fundamental elements of the current system, while still devoting some attention to some specific women's issues, such as domestic violence.

The Women's Independent Democratic Movement (WIDM) focuses more on developing and training women political leaders. It was, for example, active in preparing women candidates for the 2004 parliamentary elections. Six months prior to the 2006 presidential elections, the Movement conducted political training seminars for about 100 women. WIDM also organized roundtables on the gender-related aspects of election campaigns for women candidates and their teams, as well as for journalists, many of whom are women. WIDM also focuses on working with businesswomen and helping them to develop small businesses, promoting gender equality, and fostering women's political participation. In May 2004, for example, it organized the first Forum of Belarusian Businesswomen. WIDM is run by a very professional Minsk-based team which is able to attract financial resources from foreign donors, organize educational seminars and topical roundtables, and produce quality reports on gender issues. On a positive note, it has



Julija Daraškievič

During the March 2006 events, female participants organized a kitchen at the tent town, smuggled food and warm clothing to other protesters.

clearly defined target groups and designs its programs to focus on these categories of women. But the organization is limited by its heavy focus on gender issues, which remain incomprehensible or not a priority for the majority of Belarusian women, who are struggling with quality of life issues on a daily basis. This misguided focus makes it difficult for WIDM to reach out to broader circles of women. Soon after the March 2006 crackdown, WIDM published a special issue of its newsletter *We are Women* featuring different women participants in the demonstrations and offering a women's point of view on the events. The print run of this very interesting special issue was confiscated by the authorities, but an electronic version is available online (<http://widm.iatp.by/widm/index.phtml?page=7501&l=e>).

The Belarusian Women's League (BWL), which originated as the women's wing of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party-Narodnaja Hramada in 2002-03, mainly organizes educational seminars and exhibitions dedicated to Stalinist crimes in Belarus and the role of Belarusian women in the struggle against the Soviet regime. The BWL is the most political of the four nation-

al women's organizations, but does not appear to have well-developed structures. In years past, the BWL had taken part in voter mobilization efforts, but in a post-election interview its leader noted that in the 2006 campaign there was no separate women's political initiative. Despite this shortcoming, there were many new female faces on the Square after the election.

The Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women (BAYCW) is an organization which focuses mainly on social work with women. It was founded as the national chapter of the World Movement of Young Christian Women, registered in 1996, and re-registered in 1999. Today, the BAYCW has about 100 active members and a broad network of volunteers. The BAYCW's current projects include: "La Strada Belarus: Preventing Trafficking in Central and Eastern Europe," a Belarusian-Swedish exchange program for women leaders, "HIV/AIDS Education among Belarusian Youth," and "Early Detection of Breast Cancer." Avoiding any political activities, the BAYCW is well-known in the regions and has made an impact by developing independent women leaders. In collaboration with BOWW, the

Association has organized educational events for women on reproductive health, human trafficking, and domestic violence.

These organizations, which employ different strategies in working with women, have one thing in common – each is too small to have a real impact on women and the social, political and economic situation in the country. Like the political opposition, they are not only fighting with the regime, but also find it very difficult to work together. Personal ambitions, conflicts and competition have trumped cooperation and common goals, seriously weakening the women's movement. Only in 2006, 15 years after independence, did leading organizations come together to create a Women's Network. The Network was established before the March presidential election with the goal to educate and mobilize women voters, research women's issues, and introduce them as a part of the electoral platform of the United Democratic Forces. During the campaign, the Network proved to be timely and effective. But after the election, it seems to have lost its focus and has failed to define new goals for further cooperation or agree on the future responsibilities of its partners. As is true for the democratic forces in general, it is crucial for women's organizations to remain united and continue working together if they expect to have any real impact and the possibility of altering the situation in the country.

In this respect, discussions with women activists and representatives of women's organizations have highlighted the following ideas and suggestions for future work in this field. In "Europe's last dictatorship," it is important to understand that not all women are ready to actively participate in civil society. For many, to attend a NGO meeting or to sign a petition is an act of courage and a form of civic resistance. Women's organizations therefore must diversify their programs in order to reach out to as many women as possible. But at the same time, they should be realis-

tic about how many women are ready to participate in various forms of protest, including demonstrations. Every program should include a component which will help women participants to overcome their fear of the regime and local authorities.

At the same time, there is a need for more programs which require active problem solving rather than only the passive acceptance of some type of assistance. Programs which only provide women with free legal aid or collect signatures for petitions tend to cultivate the idea that somebody else will solve their problems. Experts report that women participating in such programs rarely appreciate the assistance they receive for free, often require additional help, and, if their problems were not resolved, often express their dissatisfaction and frustration with the organizations trying to help them, not the regime that is the primary cause of the problem. It is also hard to link such programs to larger social, political or economic issues in the country. Therefore, programs should be aimed at helping women to identify the real source of problems, encouraging them to take the initiative into their own hands, and providing them with the necessary training and support mechanisms to address issues.

In order to become stronger, more sustainable and have a greater impact, it is crucial that women's organizations develop women leaders at the local level. These women leaders better understand local problems and more effectively play the role of opinion makers in their communities, but they also often have "tunnel vision," the lack of a firm understanding of the scope and essence of problems, the "big picture." The role of national women's organizations should be to provide local activists with the information they need, teach them how to think strategically, and network them with other leaders dealing with similar problems. Practical legal education is also crucial for working with women activists. Women join different initiatives more willingly when they

know that what they are advocating for or taking part in falls within Belarusian law. Such education also complicates the life of the authorities, especially those at the local level, who find it harder to ignore or impede the work of women activists who understand and act within their rights and appeal to existing laws and regulations.

Over the years, experience has shown that women's organizations must employ active and creative methods in their work. The regime is strong, experienced, well-prepared and effective at suppressing traditional forms of protest. But the regime's reaction is delayed and less confident when it is surprised by innovative actions. In spring 2006, young people were able to successfully organize a number of flash mobs before the authorities figured out how to counter them. In the fall, a group of women, the wives of "New Life" Church members on a hunger strike for religious freedom, unexpectedly visited the Ministry of Health and the Minsk Municipal Administration to demand immediate action to resolve the conflict. The responsible officials panicked and could find no better course of action other than to run away from their offices in the face of the desperate but peaceful protesters. The women remained in the Administration Building until security guards kicked them out, which was captured and reported on by the independent media. The day before, "New Life" Church members and their supporters organized a non-stop stream of telephone calls to state agencies involved in the conflict, requesting updates on the situation regarding the legal standing of the Church's building. Such absolutely legal, but unusual, methods demoralized and practically paralyzed the work of a number of state agencies, as well as resonated in the capital's citizenry.

Despite all the impediments and repression, a number of women's organizations have managed to survive and continue their work. They have adjusted to worsening conditions and found new ways to connect with ordinary women.

A new generation of female civil society leaders has emerged since 2001, played a leading role during the 2006 election related events, and is working for a better future. The wives of disappeared opponents of the regime – Iryna Krasouskaja and Sviatlana Zavadzkaja – have become international symbols of the fight for justice and truth in the name of their missing husbands and the entire Belarusian democratic movement. Inna Kulej, a well-known NGO activist, stood side by side with her husband, Alaksandr Milinkievič, throughout his presidential campaign. In response to the post-election crackdown, she founded and heads up the Committee in Defense of the Repressed “Solidarity,” which has assisted hundreds of women and men who have suffered for their political convictions at the hands of the regime. Iryna Kazulina has become an effective advocate for another former presidential can-

didate, her husband Alaksandr Kazulin, who is serving a long prison sentence for protesting against the falsified election results in 2006.

The women who took part in the March 2006 demonstrations had differing motivations, but each of them made a conscious choice to call for greater freedom. What is striking about those who were interviewed afterwards is that these women believe normal life can only begin after the situation in the country changes. Other surveys indicate that this view is also shared by a majority of the women in Belarus. But those who took to the streets chose to fight for more democracy and a better future, while the majority decided to stay home and tacitly support the status quo. Women leaders and women’s organizations must continue inspiring more women around the country to be active so that real change will be possible.

Pavał Usau

“Ideology of Belarusian State” Propaganda Mechanisms

It is difficult to grasp the concept of the Belarusian government's ideology. The authors of ideology guidebooks often confuse it with the national idea or outlook (Šymava), or interpret it as a universal civilization concept (Mielnik). Some authors went as far as to equate the ideology with the constitution. Hančarenka, a young Belarusian author, says, “The political ideology of the Republic of Belarus is the system of foundations of the constitutional system.”¹ Anatol Rubinau, deputy chief of the Presidential Administration, suggests a more expanded definition of the government's ideology. “This is a totality of phenomena generated by the vital interests of the people and assimilated, accumulated, creatively processed and advanced by the state leadership. Such cooperation of the people and the state produces a common state ideology, a common understanding of our goals and tasks and ways to achieve them....”² His definition is very similar to the definition of the Soviet ideology, the only difference being that the vital interests of the people were assimilated and ad-

vanced by the Communist Party that led the Soviet people into the bright future. In Belarus, people are not led by the Communist Party, but they are led by the state with the wise and farsighted president at its head who acts in line with expectations of the people.

“An ideology” may be inaccurate word used for describing the product created by the government's propaganda machine. The product is a compilation of reflections on political realities and the functioning of the regime intended to substantiate the existence of the political system. In other words, this is an official opinion that the government imposes on the nation.

The purpose of the government's ideology is to provide psychological security for the regime and shape the public's mentality and political outlook accordingly. The government's political doctrine is very simple. It is based on traditional views that had been implanted in a majority of Belarusians during the Soviet era. First of all, the new ideology is based on manipulations of the concepts of “good and evil,” the identification of “friends and foes” or “good guys and bad guys,” and also on the image of “a good and kind tsar.” The above-mentioned elements, as well as the empha-

sis of “the political system's uniqueness” and its “messianic” role suggest that the Belarusian government's ideology does not differ from totalitarian ideologies or religious doctrines that are used to bend public mentality in the will of the ruler and to control society.

Says Anatol Rubinau: “In daily life, people who have little to do with science find most theoretical explorations unclear and uninteresting. People need simple and clear ideas that stem from practical life, as the President likes to say — from the down-to-earth level.”³ Indeed, do down-to-earth people need to focus their attention on the principles of democracy and freedom? Do they need to have an opportunity to choose the government? Do they really care to go into detail of the constitution and law?

Day-to-day life tells them to mind their own business and stop paying attention to what is going on in the country because *Bačka* guarantees justice and takes care of state matters.

Limited awareness and people's attachment to the traditional social and political way of life make it easy for the government to sell its ideology. Alaksandr Łukašenka, the leader of Belarus, acknowledged, “Our people are not used to

¹ Гончаренко Р.М. Политическая и правовая идеология государства. — Мн.: УП «Технопринт». 2005. С. — 41.

² Рубинов А. «Еще раз об идеологии», — «Беларусь Сегодня». 28 июля 2006.

³ *ibid*

live on their own. They got used to someone always giving them something. They got used to live under socialism. They believe that many functions that must be performed by people and families are in fact the functions of the state.”⁴

Despite the questionable ideals, the political doctrine creates new political and social myths, changes views on the national history, helps rally voters around the president and constructs a cult of personality.

Łukašenka is the pivot of the ideology, which makes no distinction between the president and the state. The president, government and state are merged into one whole. The ideology makes no sense without the president. The Belarusian government’s ideology is more personified than the ideology of the communist regime. Although it also constructed cults of personality, the government did not alter that ideology after the leader’s death. The Belarusian government’s ideology will cease to exist after Łukašenka is gone.

The ideology’s main purpose is to promote and refine the image of Łukašenka. Although ideology guidebooks do not directly praise Łukašenka, they abound in references to the Belarusian leader. Every conclusion or idea is substantiated with Łukašenka’s statements introduced by parentheses like “as the president noted,” “according to the president,” “under the president’s decision” or “as the president put it.” The authors believe that Łukašenka’s quotes guarantee their remarks and conclusions “credibility and weight.”

All propaganda means are employed to emphasize an alleged great role of the president in the country’s history and stress that modern Belarus would not exist without him. The ideology is based on the absurd premise that the state, the people and society would not be able to function properly without the “strong arm” or



Julija Daraškievič

A veteran and a pioneer.

the guiding light of the president. “Let us admit frankly that only efforts by the President prompt us to rise from the gutter and backwardness and develop our daily life, cities, villages, houses, yards and roads in a civilized way,”⁵ says Rubinau.

Some authors do not only play up the role of the president, but attribute to him supernatural, godly features. Many Belarusians naively perceive Łukašenka as “a good daddy” (*Bačka*) and the defender of ordinary people from injustice. But Łukašenka likes the role of a messiah. Public trust in Łukašenka’s exceptional leadership ability is largely to blame for the erosion of public institutions of all levels. Initiatives and independent decisions have been replaced with permissions and orders from higher authorities.

In addition to lauding the president, the new political doctrine creates an image of Belarus and its role in the world. Suffering, misfortunes and tragedies that hit the Belarusians throughout their history are exploited to create a myth of national victimhood and emphasize the messianic role of the Belarusian people in saving the Eastern Slavic civilization. According to official history and ideolo-

gy textbooks, Belarus has been a buffer for a long period in its history, protecting the Eastern Russian Slavic civilization from aggression and attacks from the West. To date, Belarus remains Russia’s only ally that has not resigned itself to the West’s control and retains its unique political system. Belarus is portrayed as the only nation that has not betrayed the ideals of Slavic unity and seeks to restore a powerful Slavic state.

The idea of uniting brotherly nations was for a long time the key motive in politics and later in the government’s ideology. But later ideals of inter-Slavism gave way to ideals of state nationalism because of growing tensions with Russia. Łukašenka and other officials blamed Russia for allegedly compromising its civilization mission. “Multiple processes suggest that Russia today, regrettably, is no longer a spiritual and cultural pillar of the Eastern Eurasian civilization” (Łukašenka 2003)⁶. “Russia today is not the same

⁴ Лукашенко А.Г. О состоянии идеологической работы и мерах по ее совершенствованию // Материалы, постоянно действующего семинара руководящих работников республиканских и местных государственных органов. Минск. 2003 - с. 29.

⁵ Рубинов А. «Еще раз об идеологии», - «Беларусь Сегодня». 28 июля 2006.

⁶ Лукашенко А.Г. О состоянии идеологической работы и мерах по ее совершенствованию // Материалы, постоянно действующего семинара руководящих работников республиканских и местных государственных органов. Минск. 2003 - с. 19.

kind of country with which we used to live together. Russia today is a very contradictory state. It has self-centered financial interests and takes interest in Belarus from pragmatic positions” (Rubinau 2006)⁷.

Thus, a civilization union of Belarus and Russia is falling apart (a sign of that was a dispute at the end of 2006 over prices of gas and oil supplied to Belarus). As Russia loses its civilization positions, Belarus consolidates its stance, according to ideology theorists. Belarus ostensibly preserved all the good left from Slavic unity and the Soviet Union and is becoming the spiritual center of the Slavic civilization. It should be added that the government’s new ideology exaggerates the role of the Soviet Union and almost ignores national history and the concept of “a national state.” This ideology tends to be universal and international, while national elements are almost completely ignored, and nationalism is equated with fascism. According to ideology guidebooks, Belarus would not have emerged and developed as an independent state if it had not been part of the Soviet Union. As if the nation has no history beyond the Soviet period. For instance, Mielnik says, “From our point of view, civilization identity of Belarusian society established in the process of the state development of the Belarusian people as part of the USSR. That state emerged on the basis of the Slavic-Russian civilization and the Belarusian masses have never felt themselves strangers in it. The state in general went down the same road as the whole Soviet nation in its formation process.”⁸

The role of the Soviet Union has been hyperbolized and promoted in many spheres from state symbols to movies. With this purpose in mind, the authorities rebuilt the “Stalin Line” of World War II fortifications and celebrate

⁷ Рубинов А. «Тупики крестового похода за демократию» // «Беларусь сегодня» 27 октября 2006 г.

⁸ Мельник В.А. Цивилизационные основания идеологии Белорусского государства. – Мн.: ООО «БІП-С Плюс». – 2005. – С. 24.



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“Za Bielaruś!” – “For Belarus!” was the main slogan of Łukašenka’s campaign.

the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution as a state holiday on November 7. The government’s political beliefs, social and economic policies, and its political relations with society prove that it sought to establish a pseudo-Soviet state within Belarus’ boundaries.

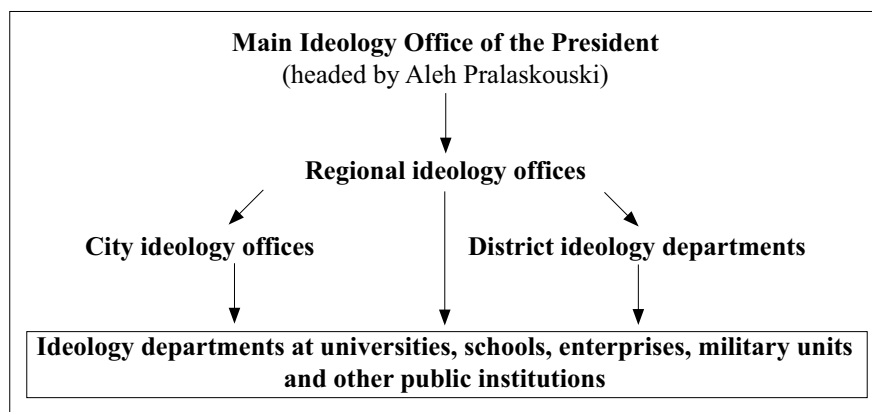
The authorities persistently created an image of enemy, politicizing the

idea of Belarusian statehood. The government found it easy to sell the enemy image to the masses because the Soviet authorities also permanently confronted “enemies of the Soviet country.” State ideology theorists admit that the notion “enemy” is very useful. “The technique of creating ‘an enemy image’ performs a positive function if it is used for ral-

lying the masses round the idea of defending the Fatherland from foreign aggression, something that is sacred to any nation.”⁹

The enemy image projection technique has become one of the main elements of internal and foreign policies. The notion “enemy” proved helpful in manipulating the public opinion and behavior of the people. Those whose views conflict with the official ideology can be turned into an enemy. This helps the authorities to justify the persecution of opponents. Naturally, opponents of the Łukašenka regime are Internal Enemy number one.

One of the main goals of the government’s ideology is to marginalize the opposition and alternative ideas. Nationalism, liberalism, conservatism, social democracy and other ideas are represented in an extremely negative light as destructive for the Belarusian people. Łukašenka, for instance, defines “liberalism” as “an ideology of social inequality of people, profiteering and individualism.”¹⁰ The role of the opposition is boiled down by government propaganda to advancing foreign ideals and values alien to the Belarusian people. “The main purpose of the opposition is to sell the country and destroy the nation,” say government ideology architects. Opposition politicians are usually portrayed as puppets of Western countries seen as the enemies of Belarus. The Western civilization is depicted as a culture spiritually hostile to the Eastern Slavism that seeks to eliminate the Slavs. The West is often associated with the Nazis and sufferings that they caused to the Belarusian people. For instance, NATO is portrayed as a radical hostile alliance, a tool used by the United States to attain its imperi-



al ambitions. Some ideology propagandists draw parallels with Hitler saying the alliance seeks to control the world. To evoke hostile feelings towards the United States and other Western countries and discredit democratic and liberal values, propagandists invented the notion of “liberal terror,” a phenomenon that spreads but meets with resistance from Belarus, and a few other countries like Cuba, Venezuela and China.

Sometimes Russia is seen as “an enemy” too, especially after it moved to phase out subsidies that propped up Belarus’ economy. Not surprisingly, Belarus found itself in a political isolation surrounded by “enemies.”

Freedom restrictions are intended to guarantee Łukašenka political immunity. But official ideologues say that society is immature and unprepared to embrace democratic values. The lack of public instruments to influence government policies enables the authorities to block alternative ideas and direct the mental process. For this purpose, the government has established a propaganda and ideology system that penetrates society from the top to grass-roots. The system is often referred to as “ideological vertical.”

The ideology offices and departments are headed by so-called “ideology workers” (who may be renamed commissars in the near future). Authorities organize regular lectures, seminars and workshops in Minsk and on the ground to train ideology workers and keep them

updated on changes in the official position. The Management Academy of the President, the major training center for ideology workers, is led by Kniazieu, author of ideology textbooks. Ideology workers’ responsibilities include brainwashing personnel at regular political briefings; gathering and analyzing information on political views and sentiments of workers and employees; and reporting their conclusions to agencies concerned. In the run up to elections, ideology workers instruct people when they should vote (usually during the five-day early voting period criticized by domestic and international observers as vulnerable to abuse) and who they should support.

Indoctrination has been particularly intensive at schools, colleges and universities. Education, especially humanities, has been gradually transformed into a mechanism for brainwashing students and discouraging them from taking a critical and independent approach to the world around them. The State Ideology course was introduced into school curriculum at the beginning of the 2003 academic year. The ideology syllabus developed by the Belarusian State University says, “The aim of the [ideology] course is to help students form ideals, values, ideas, convictions and intentions that are vital to Belarusian society and are supported by power of the state and by all of its institutions.”¹¹ The political sci-

⁹ Гончаренко Р.М. Политическая и правовая идеология государства. – Мн.: УП «Технопринт», 2005. – С. 126.

¹⁰ Лукашенко А.Г. О состоянии идеологической работы и мерах по ее совершенствованию // Материалы, постоянно действующего семинара руководящих работников республиканских и местных государственных органов. Минск. 2003. – с. 28.

¹¹ Основы идеологии белорусского государства // Учебное пособие. – Мн., 2003.

ence, sociology, philosophy and history departments conduct training in ideology and write and publish textbooks on the subject. The ideology has become the major humanity subject in the country. Students are required to pass ideology tests and exams. In addition to the ideology, the education ministry introduced a course on “The Great Patriotic War” aimed to emphasize the role of the Soviet people and Belarus in the victory over the Nazi in World War II and implant “patriotic” views on the 20th century history of Belarus.

Additional ideology sessions, also called political briefings, are conducted at schools on a regular basis. Political briefings – the practice that originated in the Soviet Union – are aimed to “propagandize socioeconomic achievements and explain the most topical socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues.”¹²

In addition to academic functions, ideology departments are employed to suppress dissent. Most universities have adopted plans of “proactive measures to prevent students from participating in activities of unregistered youth groups.” Under these plans, ideology department employees and instructors must study sociopolitical views of students, identify students leaning toward unregistered youth groups and prevent students from criticizing the government during classes. KGB agents often hold what they call “preventive discussions” with students face to face.

Apart from “the ideology vertical” involved in spreading the government’s ideology are government-sponsored associations and pro-government political parties such as the Communist Party of Belarus, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Agrarian Party. The Belarusian National Youth Union (BRSM), the largest government-supported youth organization, plays the leading role in promoting the government’s ideology. The or-

ganization, which, in fact, functions as part of the ideology vertical, has cells in all education establishments, military units and law enforcement agencies. It has nearly 500,000 members. It performs basically the same functions as the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (*Komsomol*) performed in the Soviet Union. BRSM membership is almost obligatory for students, young state sector employees and workers and is crucial for one’s career. The BRSM is a monopoly through which the government implements its youth policies. The organization is at the forefront of ideological war against dissent.

The BRSM has wings functioning at schools — the Pioneer Organization and *Naščadki* — which work with small children and students up to the age of 16. To complete the formation of a Soviet-style model of political control of society, the government needs to establish a pro-government party patterned after the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The formation of the socio-ideological system has been completed. It fully satisfies the government’s need for controlling society and suppressing dissent through the dissemination of its ideology to all groups of the population.

The state-controlled media play the key role in promoting the government’s ideology to the masses. Poor access to independent or alternative sources of information makes Belarusians especially vulnerable to pro-government propaganda. All Belarusian television channels — *ANT*, *LAD*, *NTV*, *Belarus* and *STV* are controlled by the government. Programs like “Around the Globe,” “Panorama” and “Human Rights” persistently and systematically shape people’s outlook and help the authorities point out “the enemies” of Belarus to the masses. Naturally, the TV networks extol the merits of President Lukashenka and belittle and blacken his opponents. The broadcasters conduct massive pro-government propaganda campaigns during elections to rally support for Łukašenka. For this purpose, TV networks launch special political programs like “15,” “The New History of Belarus” and “Special Opinion” designed to show advantages of Belarus over other former Soviet republics allegedly hit by social crises caused by attempts to establish democracy, while Belarus managed to raise from the ashes thank to its leader. The opposition, the West and some-



photo.bymedia.net

Łukašenka uses Dažynki, the fest celebrating the end of harvest, to flirt his rural electoral base.

¹² Вытрымка з плану мерапрыемстваў ідэалагічнага забяспячэння выбараў прэзідэнта рэспублікі Беларусь. – Магілёўскі дзяржаўны хіміка-тэхналагічны тэхнікум, 2006.



Andrej Lankievič

“Za Bielaruś!” – “For Belarus!” again and again.

times Russia are portrayed as enemies. Simplistic comments are used to put ideas across to the viewers.

The government also controls the major print media. *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, *Respublika* and *Zvezda* hold a monopoly on information and strongly influence the public opinion. *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* alone had a circulation of more than 500,000 copies in 2006. State sector employees are often forced to subscribe to the newspaper.

The ideological, informational, political and social control significantly limits opportunities for civic activity in Belarus. A lack of access to information from independent sources and pro-government propaganda make the formation

of a new authoritarian mentality a feasible objective for the government. The authorities successfully implement their ideological policies at all levels relying on fear and irrationalism.

In general, the Belarusian leader has established a neo-totalitarian political model based on the government ideology, tight control of the economy and the main spheres of life, and the administrative repressive apparatus.

The Belarusian government’s ideology will never be a cultural challenge to existing ideologies. The Łukašenka regime needs it for internal consumption. The ideology will become useless after the fall of the regime, but it will leave a deep scar in the public mentality.

Piotra Rudkouski

Belarusian National Ideology: Contemporary Utopia

The Belarusian political system is defined by political scientists as authoritarianism with a tendency towards totalitarianism. This system has survived, almost without alteration, for twelve years and there is nothing to suggest its demise in nearest few years. Isolation on the part of Europe, and regular conflicts with Russia, do not pose significant threats to Łukašenka's government. This strength of the Belarusian regime on one hand fills one with dread, and on the other challenges analysts and political scientists to give a satisfactory answer to the question: what is the strength of the Belarusian regime?

An exhaustive answer to this question would require taking into consideration various aspects of this issue: geopolitics, economics, sociological, cultural, psychological, and historical, among others. Clearly it is not possible to analyse the phenomenon considering all possible aspects of the Belarusian political system within the scope of a single article. Consequently, we shall concentrate on a single feature,

the 'ideological strength' of Belarusian authoritarianism.

The departure points for the proposed analysis are two hypotheses: 1) *the Belarusian regime is sustainable due to the support of public opinion*, based on a certain consensus between the authorities and the people, and is sanctioned by a significant proportion of society. Authoritarianism in Belarus is significantly conditioned by 'support from below'. It would however be naïve to draw the conclusion from the above hypothesis that Lukashenka only passively carries out the will of the people. There exists a 'feedback' mechanism: the Belarusian regime is very *active* when it comes to maintaining and promoting an authoritarian outlook in society. Consequently, the first hypothesis should be considered in tight relation with the second: 2) the people are incessantly 'moulded', 'shaped' in such a manner as to above all value a strong state, whose might is guaranteed by a charismatic leader.

The development of these hypotheses will constitute the primary aim of

this work. It will consist of two parts: in the first we shall try to diagnose the aforementioned mentality, which legitimises Łukašenka's government as well as inhibits (impedes) the emergence of an alternative, antiauthoritarian culture in Belarus. In the second part we concentrate on the 'feedback' mechanism, in other words – we will delineate the characteristics of Belarusian state ideology.

I
The 'demand for authoritarianism', rooted in the Soviet era, was significantly strengthened by the 'kingless' period (1991-1994), which was a period of democratisation and 'Belarusianisation', but – unfortunately – also a period of economic crisis and political instability. At the time, regular people as well as elites longed for the return of a strong authority.

Rudimentary Soviet mentality and painful experiences from the 'kingless' period formed a certain cultural model that may be called Spartan culture. The 'Spartan ideal' of social life consists of the unconditional subordination of all aspects of life under a single, per-

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sociologist, philosopher

manent, principle. The overriding value here is not freedom or human dignity but a cohesive society, whose keystone is a strong state and strong leader. Society must be hierarchical and disciplined, and such 'free spaces' as art, literature and academia must be limited and tightly controlled, with their merit measured in terms of their functionality – the degree to which they do, or do not serve the state.

Alaksandr Łukašenka, who came to power in July 1994, became an excellent expression of this then dominant cultural model in Belarus. 'The Belarusian leader's distinguishing catchphrase,' says philosopher Anatol Łysiuk, 'is as follows: I am the only one who truly understands and is concerned with the people, is part of the people and leads it, not heeding enemies, along the proper path.'¹

If someone is 'the only one' then 'others' can function in relation to this 'one' either as absolute subordinates or as enemies and destructive elements. From almost his first day in power the Belarusian president began an intensive process of building political unity (establishing the power 'vertical': completely liquidating local autonomy), economic integrity (strong centralisation as well as total control over private enterprise), and integrality of mass media (establishing complete unanimity in state media and harassment of independent media). The peak of this process was the famous 'constitutional reform' of November 1996. Łukašenka then announced his 'new theory of division of power' according to which all three branches (legislative, administrative and judiciary) grow unassisted from a single tree. According to Siarhiej Laušunou Alaksandr Łukašenka, 'during a closed meeting, according to eyewitnesses, declared to members of parliament, that the principle of division of power, under existing conditions,

constitutes a threat to the Belarusian state.'²

The amendment of the Constitution in 1996, from democratic to authoritarian, was a natural move by the 'Spartan' camp, in whose name only one well-known person has remained active since 1994. This 'reform' as it were 'sealed' and consolidated the grounds of Belarusian 'unity' for a longer term.

Somewhere on the peripheries of this 'Unity' an alternative culture exists, which can be termed 'Athenian'. It is characterised by an ethos of liberty, sensitivity to human dignity and autonomy, recognition of political pluralism and free market principles. During the 2006 (presidential) elections, this culture produced its candidate – Alaksandr Milinkievič – who, despite adverse conditions, managed to gain respect both from Europe as well as rightist democrats in Russia, and relative recognition within the country. For some time Belarusian analysts and intellectuals have been discussing what the position supporters of the individualistic-freedom ethos should be towards authoritarian culture.

From time to time, as a result of these discussions, there arises the proposition for *dialogue*. This idea is as noble as it is problematic. First of all, dialogue as such requires the assumption of a certain axiology, a requisite element of which is the willingness to permit one's opponent to speak and the ability to hear him out. If one side does not accept such an axiology then chances for dialogue are nil. This is the case with Spartan culture: this culture is *monologic*, it does not consider public discussion as a means of finding optimal solutions to problems or attaining compromises. The second factor making dialogue difficult is the existence of an unwritten (though perhaps written) rule that can be expressed as: 'Keep your distance'. This imperative concerns state repre-

sentatives: state workers must bear serious consequences if they enter into dialogue with someone considered by the state as a 'destructive element.' As such even if there is a will for dialogue among members of the Spartan camp it is paralysed by the aforementioned imperative. Thirdly, the problem of *dialogue forum* remains: where should it be held? The opposition has never had, nor will have, access to state media, while the potential outreach of independent media is very limited, to the point where it excludes any real possibility of shaping the cultural dialogue in Belarus. Moreover, for understandable reasons, representatives of the authorities prefer to keep their distance from independent media.

These three reasons due to which dialogue between the two cultures is difficult (if not impossible) can be termed only 'formal'. There also exist other kinds of obstacles to dialogue. Belarus has found itself in a rather dramatic situation, caused by the fact that there is almost a *complete absence of points of reference* for a dialogue between these two cultures. In the case of Spartan cultures one can indicate an *axiological void*, the lack of a defined value system.

Post-Soviet Belarus has three referendums under its belt. All three were held during Łukašenka's rule, all three were initiated by him and all three were 'won' by him. The first (1995) concerned the change of state symbols (national, or modified Soviet symbols), the second (1996), concerned changes in the constitution (democratic or authoritarian), and the third (2004) – concerned allowing Łukašenka to run for a third presidential term despite constitutional prohibition. These three referenda can be regarded as three symbolic 'waves', which, like ocean waves, washed away the most important axiological layers: referendum '95 'washed-away' national symbols, referendum '96 annihilated the classic division of power, and referendum '04 removed the limits on the authorities' tenure. National values and democratic ethos could constitute a certain backdrop for dialogue between

¹ Анатолий Лысюк, 'О культурологических основаниях политического лидерства в Республике Беларусь', *Беларусь: на пути в третье тысячелетие*. – Мн.: ФилСерв плюс 2001, – с. 43.

² Сергей Левшунов, 'Конституционная система: алгоритм белорусской трансформации', *Беларусь: на пути в третье тысячелетие*. – Мн.: ФилСерв плюс 2001, – с. 171.

various groups and political options, but both were destroyed. The referendums were on issues that should not be subject to voting since they are values that form the basis for democracy, and not merely its 'superstructure'.

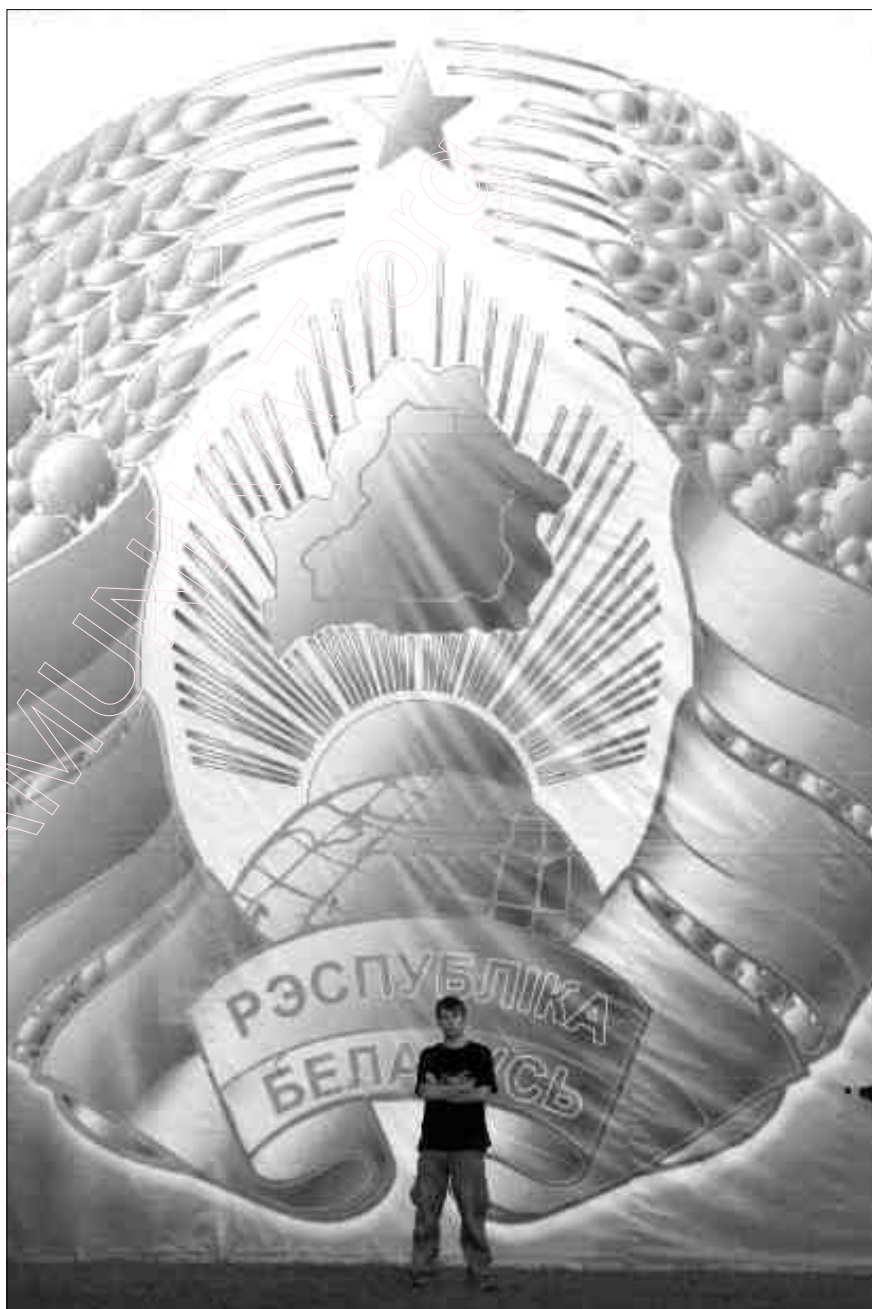
'Public opinion' has long ceased to be a 'grassroots' phenomenon. It is created from above by means of manipulation, meticulous control over information and methodical indoctrination, conducted by the mass media and educational institutions. Plebiscites and controlled elections, by turn, make the emergence of an alternative, democratic culture, impossible. Loyalty to the leader, political monism, irrationalism, subordination, and caste-based hierarchy – are the axiological pillars of 'Lukashism'. Every regime is aware that a *system of enforcement*, professing the aforementioned catalogue of 'values', does not suffice to ensure its sustainability, a *system of persuasion* is also needed. This function is fulfilled by Belarusian state ideology.

II

Belarusian state ideology (BSI) is a multifaceted phenomenon. It has several versions and harkens on different traditions, therefore BSI ought to be considered as a certain collection, elements of which are various socio-political concepts with varying degrees of 'ideological saturation'. State ideology in Belarus functions on different levels and in various 'social sectors' depending on which level and in which sector it appears we have to deal with a different type of ideology. State ideology is manifested differently in President Łukašenka's ideological addresses, than in the words of TV presenters, in propaganda films, ideology handbooks, and different again in the consciousness of state bureaucrats appointed to guard the observance of state orthodoxy. The differences are so marked that the expression 'State ideology' ought to be considered polysemous: in different contexts and spheres

of social life it has different meanings. Consequently, this often results in paradoxes, when for example the director of some local library bans – in the name of state ideology – the displaying of a 'religious' book, while in official ideology handbooks Christianity constitutes almost the foundation of Belarusian state ideology! For many local bureaucrats,

who often, in terms of spirit and mentality, belong to the category of *homo sovieticus*, the very word 'ideology' is associated with the materialist-atheistic communist doctrine, and for this reason they believe that their fidelity to Łukašenka's ideology depends on their consistent opposition to any sort of manifestation of religiosity.



Andrej Lankievič

The State and an individual.

Even on the most official level BSI is very diverse. If we thoroughly read the 'canonical' ideological handbooks,³ the internal contradictions are striking. These consist of, for example, Slavophilistic and pro-Russian elements side by side with nationalism and national revival; liberal-democratic beside authoritarian; collectivistic together with individualistic.

Despite such significant differences I believe we can attempt to define its general characteristics. I would argue that there exist *constituent characteristics* of BSI, which are important for *each* of its forms. However, it should be noted that our characteristics concern only documented versions of BSI, we will not address subjective responses to, or subjective interpretations of, BSI by different local-level bureaucrats. In other words, we shall address the 'third world', in the Popperian sense, meaning an objectivized discourse.

The first thesis, which I advance in regard to BSI, is that this ideology constitutes a sort of replica of Russian national-Bolshevism – Alexander Dugin's imperialist ideology. The Belarusian political scientist Uladzimir Rouda also uses the definition 'national-Bolshevism' in relation to BSI, but interprets it as an 'Eastern Slav version of National-Socialism',⁴ therefore not tying it to A. Dugin's social theory. Let us try to compare Dugin and Łukašenka's ideology.

³ The 'canon' (meaning books approved and promoted by the State) includes: *Основы идеологии белорусского государства*, Mińsk: Академия Управления при Президенте 2004; *Основы идеологии белорусского государства: Учебн.-метод. пособие* / В.В. Шинкарев, В.А. Вартанова, В.А. Зенченко и др.; под ред. В.В. Шинкарева. – Мн.: БГПУ, 2004; Владимир Мельник, *Государственная идеология Республики Беларусь: концептуальные основы*. – Мн.: ТЕСЕЙ 2004; Ядвига Яскевич, *Основы идеологии белорусского государства: мировоззренческие ценности и стратегические приоритеты*. – Мн.: РИВШ БГУ 2003; Надежда Канашевич, *Политика. Идеология. Менталитет: курс лекций*, Могилёв: МГУ им. А. А. Кулешова 2003; Александр Борушко, *О национальной идее. Очерк*, Mińsk: УП «Технопринт» 2004.

⁴ Vide: 'Łukašenka's State Ideology', *Belarusian Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2.

Dugin: 'The goal of Russian expansion is totally soteriological science... We are not one of the nations, but possess a mission – to reveal the whole truth to the world... We, Russians, are destined for this.'⁵

Łukašenka: 'Belarus, by history, fate and location, was clearly chosen to fulfil the great role of leader of East Slav civilisation... Realising this predestination can impel our nation to great feats. Many people in Russian, in Ukraine, as well as other countries look at Belarus as an example of consistent and independent policy... Belarus must draw patriotic forces from the entire post-Soviet space. It is here that people find a platform for expressing themselves, free from neo-liberal terror and persecution.'⁶

Dugin: '[We] exclude individualism, the individual, free market, tolerance of outlook...'⁷

Łukašenka: 'The need to possess high ideals and noble goals, mutual aid and collectivism, we juxtapose against Western individualism.'⁸

That which links both ideologies is also the specific bond with the Soviet past:

Dugin: 'I clearly see the pulse of our historical existence also in communism.'⁹

State Ideology of the Republic of Belarus (handbook): 'The Soviet period became the pinnacle of the history of our Homeland.'¹⁰

The attitude of both – Dugin and Łukašenka – to the Orthodox faith begs particular attention. It is well known that both almost make Orthodoxy a constituent element of their ideology. The real meaning of the inclusion of

Orthodoxy in the context of these ideologies becomes clear when considering Łukašenka's public declaration of being an 'Orthodox Atheist' (it is hard to imagine a more scornful description for Orthodoxy), and national-Bolshevism's ideologue who praises the persecution of the Orthodox Church during Stalinism (*sic!*): 'First of all, the Orthodoxy that Stalin destroyed, was overmuch Occidentalised, steeped in the spirit of the West, and second of all, the messianic dream could exist also outside of Orthodoxy.'¹¹

And so, the first characteristic of BSI would be its ideological relation to Dugin's national-Bolshevism.

The second characteristic of Łukašenka's ideology is the promotion of the dogmatism that the *president and the people, the people and the president form a single, indivisible, whole*, constituting, so to speak, a 'holy symbiosis'. One can belong to a number of doctrinal options (liberalism, conservatism, Marxism, Slavophilism, Nationalism), but this communion – people-president – is unquestionable. Another dogma is tied to this one, which simultaneously constitutes the third characteristic feature of BSI: the existence of a Gnostic hierarchy, meaning that (only) the true Leader knows the truth and others are enlightened only according to the degree of their obedience. In the bibliographies of ideological handbooks Łukašenka's name almost always appears out of alphabetical order (unlike all other authors), in first place, and not only before all other authors but also ahead of the Constitution and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The semantics are quite transparent: the Leader sets the standard for truth.

Łukašenka's dogma, the core of which are three 'truths' – the status of the Belarusian nation as the chosen leader of the eastern Slavs, the holy symbiosis of the president and people and the Gnostic hierarchy – is intensively 'implanted' into mass consciousness by means of state newspapers, radio and tel-

⁵ 'Czekam na Iwana Groźnego', interview with Alexandr Dugin, *FRONDA*, 11/12, summer 1998, pp. 140-141.

⁶ 'Доклад Президента А. Г. Лукашенко на постоянно действующем семинаре руководящих работников республиканских и местных государственных органов по вопросам совершенствования идеологической работы', *Советская Белоруссия*, 28.03.2003.

⁷ 'Czekam na Iwana...'; p. 141.

⁸ 'Доклад Президента...'

⁹ 'Czekam na Iwana...'; p. 141.

¹⁰ Владимир Мельник, p. 195.

¹¹ *Czekam na Iwana... op.cit.*, s. 141.

evision. In this process of indoctrination (which consumes massive financial resources) propaganda films play a special role. Among numerous propagandistic film projects *Дорога в никуда*¹² (*Road to Nowhere*), as well as the seven-part series *Конспирология*¹³ (*Conspirology*) are examples of political Manichaeism in its purest form (the line between Good and Evil runs exactly parallel to the division of president – opposition). Insofar as these two films can be described as ‘warring Lukashism’, the series *Новейшая история*¹⁴ (*Contemporary History*) is better defined as restrained Lukashism.

All these films contain the same message: oppositionists are bourgeois-freeloaders, dangerous fascists and puppets of the West/America. The national white-red-white flag (which, thanks to Łukašenka’s efforts, was replaced by the Soviet-era red and green flag) is presented as an unambiguously fascist symbol, the Soviet Union as a ‘paradise lost’, and the fall of the USSR is like the original sin, the responsibility of which lies with the then-leaders, with Šuškievič and his heirs – meaning the current opposition – at the head. By contrast, Łukašenka appears as someone who came to remove if not the ‘sin’ itself then at least its consequences. He allowed Belarusians to once again feel like a Soviet man.

* * *

Therefore, in the case of Belarusian state ideology we are dealing with a sort of utopia: Belarus is this ‘good place’, where stability, peace and prosperity reign. There is a noble and intelligent ruler, extremely close to the people (hence the moniker ‘бацька’ – or dad-

¹² Authors: Grigorij Kozyrev, Aleksandr Vjugin, Viktor Nikolskij, Vladimir Zhavoronok, Nadiezhda Byvalova, Agafija Krasachka, Siergiej Usatov, show on *Першы канал*; 13.05.2004.

¹³ Authors: Jurij Azaronok, Vladislav Jarovich, Vadim Gigantov, Nina Eromina, show on *BT*; end of September/beginning October 2004.

¹⁴ Authors: Yuriy Koziyatko, Grigorij Kisiel, Viktor Shevelevich, Viktor Chamkovskij, Aleksandr Ridvan, show on *ANT*; end of November/beginning of December 2004.



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TV is the only source of information for most Belarusian citizens.

dy), there is a grateful and happy people, concentrated around this good leader-messiah and there is the ungrateful and unhappy opposition that in this cosmos of Belarusian order are structures of evil and lies. The utopia of the Belarusian state can be defined as *revolutionary*: it creates a state of ‘permanent revolution’ but no longer in the name of *what is to be*, yet in the name of *what is*. Despite the fact that this state of bliss has already been achieved, one must remain in a state of permanent battle with enemy forces, in order that *what is* remain.

Belarusian state ideology constitutes a specific type of utopia. Utopias are always divided between ‘retrospective’ and ‘prospective’, or ‘retro-utopia’ and ‘future-utopia’, ‘utopia of the past’ or ‘utopia of the future’. The first appear as narratives of ‘paradise lost’, and the second as ‘paradise anticipated’. **BSI is neither a retro nor future utopia, it is a utopia of the present.** Belarusian ideology, supported by audio-visual propaganda, was created in order to enable survival of the current state of affairs as though it were a particularly *blessed state*. This ideology foresees not only political mobilisation, but also interpretations of everyday experiences by so-

ciety. The essence of this type of ideology is producing certain paths of interpretation, by means of which members of a given society identify that which in their experiences appears unpleasant, sad and unfair as a consequence of the hidden or overt actions of the *opposition forces*. Paradise, a state of bliss and prosperity *already* exist in the *here and now*, the problem is that it is constantly threatened by foreign and enemy forces.

How long the Łukašenka regime will last depends to a significant extent on the vitality of the Belarusian utopia.

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Language of Streets and Language of the Ploshcha

Evolution and Status of the Belarusian Language after 2000

Immediately after the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis announced a plan to hold a census in 2009, the Francišk Skaryna Belarusian Language Society (TBM) suggested that the census questionnaire should include a question about the language people consider their mother tongue, rather than about the language people normally speak at home. The question about the language people normally use at home was asked during the 1999 census. Colonel Zamiatin, then the official responsible for ideology and culture, introduced the question to justify Łukašenka's Sovietisation and Russification policies. However, the answers disappointed him because many respondents used the opportunity to express their support for the Belarusian language. 75 % of the residents of Belarus declared Belarusian to be their mother, 37 % the language they speak at home. Many sociologists interpreted the high percentage of those who said they spoke Belarusian at home as a subliminal protest.

The TBM clearly fears that the number of Belarusian speakers will

not be as high as in 1999, and therefore it will lose one more persuasive argument against the Russification policies of the government. Is there a reason for this fear? In general, how has the language status changed over recent years? No credible surveys have not been conducted on this issue, and indeed could not be carried out under the current authoritarian regime, because many respondents indicate the language they would like to speak instead of the language they actually use. I have analysed information from various sources to see what has changed in the last few years. These changes may seem insignificant, but they can inspire hope in someone like me who speaks Belarusian and is involved in the struggle for freedom.

Book printing: Private publishers replace state ones

Out of the 421 books in Belarusian printed in Belarus in 2005, state publishers

accounted for 92 titles, while the rest were from private publishers. The share of the private and public sectors has changed dramatically since the break up of the Soviet Union and the early years of independence. During the Soviet era, the colonial regime completely controlled the publication of books in Belarusian. In the first few years of independence, the government subsidised book printing. Now state publishers print fewer books than private ones. The largest private publishers are *Bielaruski Knihazbor* headed by Hienadz Viniarski, *Technalohija* managed by Žmicier Sańko and *Ihar Lohvinau's* Publishing Company. The large number of private publishing companies can be explained by the brisk market demand for Belarusian books.

Education: Back to the USSR

Youth activists staged an audacious performance on 1 September 2006 to mark the Day of Knowledge. They installed a hangman's gallows on Jakub Kołas Square in Minsk and a boy wearing red-green hangman clothes, symbolising the colours of Łukašenka's au-

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thorities, 'executed' a book saying "the Belarusian Language" on one cover and "Belarusian History, 10th Grade" on the other. Police arrived at the scene just a few minutes after the start of the performance, but failed to apprehend the youths. Reporters, invited by the protesters, took pictures and wrote articles about the protest against the decision to use Russian for teaching Belarusian history instead of Belarusian.

Statistical data shows that the Belarusian language is maintaining its positions. In 2006, 23.3 percent of pupils were taught in Belarusian-language classes, up from 22 percent in 1989. It is essential that Belarusian retains its symbolic position in the capital. In 1988, there was not a single class with instruction in Belarusian, whereas in 2006 Minsk had four Belarusian-language pre-university schools and classes with instruction in Belarusian in 43 schools. There are several Belarusian schools functioning unofficially of which the Jakub Kolas Belarusian Humanities Lyceum is the most famous. When the authorities attempted to close down this lyceum in 2003, the teachers, children and their parents agreed to continue instruction underground.

Assessments of the Belarusian-language education depend on the choice of a period for comparison. For instance, compared with 1993, when 76 percent of first-graders attended classes with instruction in Belarusian, or even with 1995, when that proportion dropped to 38 percent, last year's 21 percent does not give any reason for optimism.

But on the other hand, the Łukašenka government has not yet managed to limit Belarusian-language teaching to the level of 1988. Unlike now, pupils were granted exemptions from Belarusian classes on a mass scale during the Soviet era. At most schools, Belarusian language instruction started at the age of nine, whereas now it starts at the age of six. Pupils were taught only two subjects in Belarusian — the Belarusian language and literature, whereas now they also learn history and geography. The education ministry's decision allowing for the use of Russian for teaching Belarusian history met with protests like the above-mentioned hangman's gallows and drew criticism from both private and government-controlled press. A correspondent of the state-run newspaper *Zviazda* asked an education ministry official sarcastically whether

authorities planned to use Russian for teaching the Belarusian language and literature in the future. Belarus' state-controlled newspapers usually do not dare to criticise the government's policies in that way.

While numbers of pupils instructed in Belarusian and the contents of Belarusian textbooks are satisfactory, advocacy groups are deeply concerned about the quality of instruction.

"Belarusian is mostly used for teaching humanities such as languages, history and social sciences," says Aleś Łozka, chairman of the Belarusian School Society, a group advocating the revival of the Belarusian language. The education ministry is guided by colonial stereotypes, convinced that Belarusian is not good for teaching physics, mathematics or chemistry. "The education ministry likes to emphasise that almost 62 percent of the country's schools provide instruction in Belarusian," Łozka goes on to say. "But these are small rural schools that are gradually being closed down."

In 2006, 75,000 (43.9 percent) of future university applicants chose to take entrance exams in Belarusian rather than Russian during the nationwide standardised testing process. As much as 83.3 percent of university applicants took Belarusian history exams in Belarusian, and the rest in Russian, according to the education ministry. The Francišak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society insists that all standardised tests should be available in both languages.



Anatol Klačuk

When the authorities closed down the Belarusian Humanities Lyceum in 2003, the teachers, children and their parents agreed to continue instruction underground.

TBM: Civic lobbyist

TBM is Belarus' most influential language advocacy group. The society has 15,000 members of whom 5,200 pay membership fees on a regular basis and 2,500 are actively involved in its operation, says historian Aleh Trusau, the TBM chairman. The authorities have closed down hundreds of non-governmental organisations, but they would not venture to suppress the TBM for fear of repercussions.

Political prisoner Pavał Sieviaryniec, in his article published in, said that he had found it easy to re-establish a TBM chapter in Maloje Sitna, a small village where he was serving a forced labour term. He maintains that “the revival of national values is an easier task than the revival of democratic values, but the most difficult task is to revive Christian values.”

Science: Crack down on humanities researchers

The problems of the education sector are similar to those of the humanities research centres, which also rely on state funding and are under close scrutiny of the government.

The Skaryna Centre, which used to do groundbreaking research in the field of humanities, was crushed. The new heads of the academic Institutes of History, Literature and Linguistics, Alaksandr Kavalenia, Valery Maksimovič and Alaksandr Łukašanec, respectively, purged the personnel of dissidents or banned specific research subjects in a way that appeared to follow the traditions of the Brezhnev or even pre-Brezhnev period.

A Belarusian State University (BDU) post-graduate student said she was surprised to hear only two presentations in Belarusian during the first scientific conference that she attended after her six-year maternity leave. The conference on a philological subject took place at a Viciebsk university, but the only two Belarusian-language presenters, including her, came from Minsk. Dissertations are assessed based on ideology and language criteria, not on their scientific merits. Scientific advisers caution against defending dissertations in Belarusian unless their subject deals with Belarusian philology or (albeit an even more risky topic), with history. The High Certifying Commission (VAK), in fact, is working to ensure the compliance of dissertations with state ideology. Several researchers — Aleś Paškevič,



Julija Daraškiewicz

Aleh Trusau, head of the Belarusian Language Society.

BDU assistant professor and chairman of the independent Union of Belarusian Writers, and Jauhien Aniščanka of History Institute who studied the divisions of the Commonwealth and Russia's role in this process — had their doctoral dissertations blocked by VAK for clearly political reasons. Most dissertations on sensitive subjects are killed at the early stage of research.

VAK Chairman Anatol Rubinau was promoted to the post of deputy head of the Presidential Administration for ideology in recognition of his uncompromising fight against dissent. Alaksandr Vajtovič, the former head of the National Academy of Sciences and ex-speaker of the upper parliamentary chamber, described Rubinau as having openly Stalinist political views. Strange as it may seem, this chief ideology officer does not deny advantages of the Western system: “The Western system is based on private ownership in the key sectors of the economy and is characterised by the decentralisation of power with many functions and powers transferred to local government bodies and elected authorities. In principle, the system has proved efficient....

But the Western system was shaped over centuries. It requires certain traditions, education, mentality, well-developed local public structures and forms of interaction between them. This is not just an idea or ideology; this is a certain level of civilisation that cannot be achieved in one day or two or three decades” (*Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, 28 July 2006).

Rubinau is very cynical in admitting the advantages of the Western system, while denying that the Belarusian people are mature and wise enough to assume responsibility for the governance and own assets in the key sectors of the economy, and suppressing “traditions”, including the national language.

The ideology agency's mania to banish Belarusian culture from research institutions is indicative of its liberating potential.

Diplomatic corps: Ambassador Krol's example

Several Minsk-based foreign diplomatic missions have consistently used the Belarusian language. Former US Ambassador George Krol promoted the tradition. Unlike his predecessor, or his German, Russian and Polish counterparts who worked in Minsk at the time, Ambassador Krol learned Belarusian and made his public statements in Belarusian inspiring respect and admiration.

Media: Going online

The largest-circulation Belarusian-language press are controlled by the government — *Nastaunickaja Hazeta*, which had a print run of 46,000 copies on 1 September 2006, and *Zviazda*, a rather liberal governmental newspaper with sells around 38,000 copies of each issue. The latter saw its circulation fall from 207,000 copies in 1995, the last year of Belarusianisation. The paper has a small readership in cities.

After most independent periodicals were banished from the government-controlled subscription and retail distribution networks Bielpošta and Bielsajuzdruk, Belarusian-language papers saw their circulation plunge (*Rehijanalnaja Hazeta* sells 6,100 copies, *Nasha Niva* 2,700 copies, *Volnaje Hlybokaje* 2,900 etc.) However, visits to Belarusian Web sites went up sharply during 2006 — *Svaboda*, RFE/RL Belarus Service, reported more than 40,000 visitors in April, 2007, and *Nasha Niva* recorded 28,000 visitors.

The authorities' effort (2002-2004) to enforce a 75-percent lower limit on the presence of Belarusian music in radio broadcasts did not seem to be intended, on the surface, to promote Belarusian-language performers, because selection was based on artists' background rather than on the language in which they sing. Nevertheless, the measure gave Belarusian songs greater chances of being picked by radio DJs.

The most serious set-backs for Belarusian in the last five years was the decision of Belarusian television to use Russian for its news broadcasts and the allocation of the frequency formerly used by the state radio station *Stalica* to a Russian language broadcaster.

Most programmes are broadcast in Belarusian on the first and second state radio channels, which have the largest number of listeners across the country, according to Novak, a private pollster. But the language has almost disappeared from the television stations, except for a few remaining programs and commercials in Belarusian.

There is, probably, no need to cite other examples to illustrate that the Belarusian public lacks the will and resolve to resist the government's discriminatory language policy. The intensive Belarusianisation of the early 1990s met only with sporadic and disorganised protests, mainly by former Soviet military officers who had moved to Belarus following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany. The Lukašenka government's Russification

policy also met with limited resistance. Protests took place in Minsk (the underground operation of the Belarusian Humanities Lyceum, occasional demonstrations by students and youths) Hrodna (the case of Ahata Macko and the expulsion of Yauhien Skrabutan from Hrodna State University for the graffiti «Stop Russification»), Horki (the Karalkou family by open protests forced the authorities to provide instruction for their children in Belarusian), and Žodzina (a similar campaign was successfully conducted by the Łapicki family). These were mostly cultural, not political protests, which, however, were part of a broader campaign of resistance to authoritarianism.

Most teachers, parents and activists give preference to behind-the-scenes efforts in defence of Belarusian-language instruction rather than to public protests because they earnestly believe that disturbances provoke the authorities into using a powerful repressive mechanism.

Rock music: Belarusian-language role models

Rock musicians chose a different strategy. Like some writers and artists, they did not try to hide their civic position and openly condemned the authorities' policies. Bands like NRM, Zet and Neuro Dubel (Minsk-based punk rockers who declared their decision to switch to Belarusian in 2003 starting with the song *Ja Pamru Tut* [I Will Die Here], although they wrote lyrics in Russian in the 1990s) have released rebellious songs that inspired the young generation. A broadcasting ban imposed on about 20 bands made their music even more attractive. Tens of thousands of pirate copies of their discs are distributed, while artists like Lavon Volski can attract thousands of fans to their concerts without advertising.

Rockers entertained protesters during week-long tent-camp demonstration held at Kastryčnickaja Square in Minsk

after Lukašenka's declared re-election for a third presidential term in March 2006. Their appearances were received more enthusiastically than speeches of politicians.

Politics: Language of prisoners

"A. Milinkievič fluently replied in Russian and Belarusian depending on the language of a question," noted Belorusy i Rynok, the country's leading independent business weekly, after Belarusian television had broadcast first televised addresses by presidential candidates. Milinkievič was the only candidate who willingly spoke in Belarusian. Otherwise the Belarusian language was absent from the 2006 presidential elections, both from other candidates' statements and the manifestos.

The four presidential candidates, including Milinkievič, failed to raise the language issue and offer ways to change the status quo. The pro-democracy coalition, which represented diverse political forces and desperately sought to create itself an attractive image, left the complicated language issue off its agenda and concentrated on socio-economic promises in a bid to attract un-



Andrej Lankievič

Lavon Volski, rock singer.

decided voters who supported neither Łukašenka nor the major opposition parties. Regretfully, no surveys were conducted after the election to assess the strategy's effectiveness.

Interestingly, Łukašenka did not make a single statement in Belarusian during his campaign, unlike during the 2001 presidential election. Probably, Łukašenka's 2001 campaign managers sought to disorientate pro-democracy nationalists unhappy with the selection of trade union boss Uładzimir Hančaryk, who could not speak Belarusian fluently, as the opposition's common candidate. In 2006, Łukašenka had no chance to outperform Milinkievič in terms of appeal for nationalists.

Being absent from the campaign, Belarusian dominated in speeches, songs, and signs at Kastryčnickaja Ploshcha (Square) during protests in the wake of the election. It was the everyday language of many of the 1,200 jailed protesters. The concentration of Belarusian-language speakers at Akrescina Street, where the jail is located, was higher at the time than in any other street of the capital.

Government discourse: Finance in order to control

There is not a single Belarusian speaker in the Łukašenka government. There is not a single Belarusian speaker among the officers of the Armed Forces and the Committee for State Security (KGB). The composition of society is much different, especially taking into consideration the fact that the language's cultural value is greater than its role as a means of communication. Therefore, Łukašenka's discourse is ambivalent. It perpetuates the Soviet stereotype that the Belarusian language is something secondary, temporary, additional, transitional, inferior, not self-sufficient, mostly symbolic, but on the other hand ancient, indigenous, popular and folksy.

The Łukašenka government recognises the language's right to exist in a certain social and cultural niche, but denies its right to claim dominant status in the state, just as it denies Belarusian culture equal status with Russian culture.

Government establishments maintain a certain limited proportion of cultural products in Belarusian. In 2006, plays in Belarusian accounted for 38 percent of the theatres' repertoires, as Deputy Culture Minister Uładzimir Rylatka noted during an interview with *Interfax*. The proportion of books published in Belarusian is between 12 and 15 percent of the total number of printed copies.

The Łukašenka government is guided by the Soviet government's principle "finance in order to control." The government finances dull literary magazines led by KGB placemen, academic institutions led by KGB placemen who sack prominent scientists, and theatres that remove Kupała's *Tutejšyja* from the repertoire because the play is very popular with nationalists. The simulacrum profane culture. The same does the hyper-simulacrum — a Russified version of the Belarusian language, which has been developed since 1933 on the initiative of Iosif Stalin, and which is being enforced by the current Belarusian authorities.

The authorities seek a total control, including over the language. In a recent move, Łukašenka ordered the adoption of changes to the Belarusian spelling and punctuation intended to ban a handful of the remaining independent publications and cultural projects for using "unauthorised" orthography. The changes were blocked in 1998 and 2003, but enacted in 2006. Since then, the word "president" must be always capitalised in Belarusian, whereas in Russian the same word requires a lower case. By the same logic, in a couple of years the authorities may be sentencing proofreaders and editors to forced labour for failure to comply with the new requirement.

Despite the authorities' suspicious attitude to Belarusian speak-

ers, some representatives of the ruling elite use Belarusian. Culture University Rector Jadviha Hryharovič and Michail Finbierh, director of the National Symphonic and Variety Music Orchestra, both always speak Belarusian in public. Interestingly, Ms. Hryharovič was appointed to the 2nd Council of the Republic, the upper chamber of the Łukašenka-controlled parliament, while Mr. Finbierh was given a seat on the 3rd Council of the Republic, as if the authorities do not want to have more than one Belarusian speaker in the upper house.

Łukašenka and his entourage found themselves in a dilemma as far as language and other aspects of ethnic identity are concerned. On the one hand, the public expects them to be wise and far-sighted leaders who build and consolidate the independent state. The growing appetites of Russian capitalists cause concern and prompt the authorities to reinforce barriers that defend the country from Russia's economic expansion. Naturally, ethnic identity, including the Belarusian language, is one of these barriers. On the other hand, the Belarusian ruler fears national sentiments and the possibility of using these sentiments to bolster state ideology, because of a powerful irrational element. The regime does not want the Belarusians to be loyal to the nation, but it wants them to be loyal to the president, the owner and chief executive of the financial and industrial group called the Republic of Belarus.

The government's policies consist of incoherent and often conflicting steps, indecisive restrictions and fake support, empty promises and threats. In an attempt to reconstruct the Soviet indoctrination and control system penetrating all layers of society from grassroots upward, the authorities introduced state ideology in 2002 and established ideology offices, which work closely with the KGB, within the executive authorities. But the effort met with cold reaction of the public. The security and law enforcement agencies, which have not changed

much since the Soviet era, embrace and strictly follow the government's "ideology guidelines," while private businesses stay unaffected because they are not interested in the preservation of the Lukashenka-style stability. Economic conditions and ownership relations have changed in the last 15 years, so has the mass mentality.

Advertising: Ideal beauty

The advertising industry exploits mass mentality stereotypes. Some manufacturers have consistently used Belarusian in their advertisements and commercials. Unlike in the early 1990s, not only Belarusian producers but also international corporations' dealers in Belarus were using Belarusian in the 2000s: Samsung with its commercial "Imagine Ideal Beauty," Renault with "For Those Who Always Win," Gallina Blanca, Pepsi, Poland's *Sniezka* to name but few. Even Russia's MTS uses a Belarusian-language slogan — a good illustration of the trend.

The use of Belarusian to advertise goods targeting youths and consumers with higher-than-the-average income reflects a change in public perception of the language.

This may help explain why after 12 years under the rule of Łukašenka (who once gave unequivocal instructions to his government by his statement that "it is impossible to say great things in Belarusian. This is a poor language. There are only two rich languages in the world — English and Russian,") 2.4 percent of pupils were willing to receive instruction in Belarusian in Minsk in 2006, whereas not a single pupil was taught all subjects in Belarusian in the Belarusian capital in 1988. Both the underground Belarusian Lyceum and the Łukašenka-supported 23rd Gymnasium are held in high esteem in the capital. Among their students and graduates are children of high-ranking officials, big businesspeople and artistic elite families.



Julija Daraškiewicz

The use of Belarusian to advertise goods targeting youths and consumers with higher-than-average income reflects a change in public perception of the language.

Belarusian is no longer the language of villages, collective farms and radio programmes transmitted via cable. This is the language of teenagers, non-establishment youths, artistic circles, intellectuals, street protesters, people with pro-Western views and non-conformists. This is the language of challenge. It excites strong political sentiments in ordinary Belarusians.

Any comparison of Belarus with other nations would be flawed because the country has stuck in a time warp. Belarusian nationalism emerged quite late — in 1880s-1890s in the backward Russian Empire. It was not until the late 1990s that the international community started to take interest and show solidarity with Belarus' civic society.

Catalan, Ukrainian or Irish?

In the early 1990s many Russian-speaking intellectuals predicted that Belarusian would suffer the same fate as Gaelic, saying that like the Irish, Belarusian nationalists would speak the

language of colonisers and Belarusian would die out.

Belarusian nationalists, for their part, hoped that the language would see a broader use as result of government support and positive discrimination against other languages, similar to the situation in Ukraine, where 80 percent of the pupils receive instruction in Ukrainian and influential media and politicians use the Ukrainian language.

Their dreams have not come true, and in a symbolic development just one month before the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Łukašenka employed his propaganda machine once again to win a referendum that enabled him to run for the presidency an unlimited number of times.

Catalonia is an example that inspires hope for the revival of Belarusian. The percentage of local residents who speak Catalan in everyday life or can speak Catalan has been rising since the fall of Franco's dictatorship. Democracy gave Catalan culture an opportunity to develop, while improvements to the secondary and higher education system created opportunities for those who want to learn and speak the Catalan language.

One cannot see through ice which way the river flows. It is not until the dictatorship falls that it will be possible to see whether the Belarusian national spirit weakened or strengthened during Łukašenka's rule. Only a free and fair election can show the level of support for political forces that seek the revival of Belarusian and want it to be the country's only official language.

Clearly, as long as Belarusian remains the language of the heart it retains a chance of becoming also the language of minds. As long as Belarusian is the language of choice of protesters at Kastryčnickaja Ploshcha, it has a chance to become the language of choice for people in the streets. Belarusian intellectuals occasionally voice concern about the politicisation of the language and its use as a symbol of a certain political force.

However, since the language is associated with protest and a national liberation movement, it attracts young people. In this sense, Belarusian is in much better position than it was in the late Soviet period. The authorities' maniacal efforts to block communication between Belarusian-speaking intellectuals and the public and suppress Belarusian schools, scholars and periodicals prove that the authoritarian government sees the language as a political tool that helps stir up public activity. This is the way it is. Among Belarus' regions, Homiel has the lowest percentage (17 percent) of pupils taught in Belarusian. This is the region where Łukašenka gains the largest percentage of votes in every election.

The fate of the Belarusian language and culture is inseparable from the fate of democracy and civic society.

Vital Taras

Media in Belarus: on Brink of Breakthrough

In the last 15 years Belarus has moved steadily down the world rankings as regards freedom of expression and other civil liberties. At the same time, it was one of the world's fastest growing economies and had one of the highest standards of living in the CIS, nearing the level of some European countries. The country was influenced by the information technology boom continuing in the developed countries and the development of mass communications based on new technologies and traditional media, including newspapers. Not only have restrictions on the media had subjective effects, they have also slowed the development of Belarus as a European nation.

Media law: lawlessness and censorship

As a result of a study of media laws in the former Soviet republics, the Moscow-based Institute of Media Law Issues (IMLI) ranked Belarus 13th in media freedom in a report released at the end

of 2006. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are the only two countries where the media are less free than in Belarus, according to the ranking.

The IMLI analyzed the following aspects to determine a degree of media freedom — constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, a constitutional ban on censorship, national laws governing the media, laws regarding access to information, television broadcasting and public television, media registration procedures, criminal prosecution for defaming or slandering individuals, especially officials and the president etc., according to a report posted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) on January 3, 2007.

Apart from the first two points (the Belarusian constitution bans media censorship), the analysis of all other aspects proved the restrictive nature of Belarusian laws. The country has laws that make it a crime to defame or dishonour officials. The legislation was used to punish two Hrodna-based journalists, Mikoła Markievič and Pavał Mažejka, with two years and six months “of re-

stricted freedom” for “defaming and dishonouring” the Belarusian leader in an article seized by the police before being printed in the newspaper *Pahonia*.

Even guarantees declared by the constitution and the media law are not respected in practice. For instance, Belarus' state-run and private media are declared equal, including in terms of access to information, but in fact state media outlets enjoy “more equal rights” than the private ones.

The Ministry of Information closed down two newspapers, *Navinki* and *Molodyozhny Prospekt*, in 2005, said BAJ. The Belarusian Supreme Economic Court on 17 March 2006 ordered the closure of the *Zhoda* weekly, the newspaper of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party “Hramada” over reprinted Mohammad cartoons. *BDG. Delovaya Gazeta* stopped coming out in print the same year and is available online (www.bdg.by) only. The weekly was not banned officially, but damages imposed by courts for alleged libel against officials of various levels undermined its financial position. Financial constraints forced another weekly, *Salidarnasć* (www.gazetaby.com), to abandon its print version and go online. In June, Navapolack-based *Chimik* suspended

Vital Taras

publicist

publication six months after state-run retail and subscription distribution monopolies Bielsajuzdruk and Bielposhta refused to renew contracts with the bi-weekly. The authorities also closed down a local newspaper in Barysau, while a weekly in Vaukavysk shut down after its editor asked for political asylum in Ukraine saying he and his newspaper had been harassed by authorities in Belarus.

One should not be deceived by the small number of newspapers closed down in the last two years. Few critical newspapers survived the “purges” carried out by the authorities in the run-up to the 2004 parliamentary election and referendum that enabled President Alaksandr Łukašenka to run for reelection as many times as he wants.

In the eight months before the referendum, the total number of registered periodicals dropped by 160, according to an article by A. Tamkovič published under the headline “Holidays Become Politics” in the 48-49th issue of BAJ’s *Abažur* magazine. During that election, the authorities suspended 12 periodicals with a total circulation of 100,000 copies.

In 2006, the Ministry of Information suspended the *Arche* magazine for three months. The intellectual periodical had a circulation of 1,100 copies.

A few years before, the government introduced the post of deputy chairpersons responsible for ideology in regional, city and district executive committees. A new regulation was enacted requiring the media to obtain permission from local authorities for renting an office at a particular address. The regulation, which runs counter to the Media Law, gives deputy chairpersons for ideology powers to decide the fate of independent periodicals.

For instance, the noose on *Nasha Niva* tightened when the ideology chief of the Minsk City Executive Committee declared that he considered the presence of the 100-year-old paper’s in Minsk “inexpedient”.

Harassment of journalists and public reaction; ban on independent polls

The draconian media legislation and numerous human rights abuses reported by human rights groups in Belarus are accompanied by large-scale harassment of journalists. In an unprecedented crackdown, authorities arrested more than 40 journalists during a week of protests following Łukašenka’s reelection for a third consecutive presidential term in March 2006, according to BAJ. The journalists, who were sentenced to jail terms of up to 15 days, included Aleksandr Podrobinek, editor-in-chief of Russia’s *Prima News* wire service (15 days in jail); Andrzej Pisalnik of the newspaper *Głos znad Niemna na uchodźstwie* (12 days); Weronika Samolińska of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (10 days); Georgian public television journalists, Canadian freelancer Frederic Lavoie who worked without accreditation with the foreign ministry; and *Nasha Niva* editor-in-chief Andrej Dyńko (10 days).

Later, a city official used the jailing of Dyńko, convicted like many other journalists on a trumped-up charge of swearing, as a pretext to deny his weekly formal approval of his office address.

It should be noted that many Minsk residents expressed solidarity with embattled independent newspapers (for in-

stance, a series of flash-mob protests took place in the capital and other cities in support of *Nasha Niva*). Some opposition protesters could not control their anger at state television journalists for biased reporting. The author of this article saw angry youths hurling snowballs at a cameraman of the *ANT* television channel when he was filming outside Minsk’s Akrescina prison, in which arrested protesters and journalists were held.

The tent-camp demonstration on Kastryčnickaja Square caused deep divisions in society because many people did not support the protesters. Even some parents and relatives, who brought parcels for young prisoners, did not share their political views. But their favourable attitude to Belarusian state television networks, *BT* and *ANT* in particular, gave way to aversion due to the biased coverage and also because they were waiting outside the prison wall for hours trying to find out news about their loved ones or pass things on for prisoners, while state television journalists enjoyed free access to prison premises. To many television viewers *BT* symbolized lies, bias and immorality at the time. State television journalists are suspected of having planted empty liquor bottles, pornographic magazines and syringes allegedly used for injecting illicit drugs to humiliate and incriminate opposition activists in their report from Kastryčnickaja Square filmed when police tore down the protesters’ tent camp.

A poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) a year before this protest found that an overwhelming majority of Belarusians (85.7 percent) rely on Belarusian state television for news about the country. Much fewer respondents relied on independent and Russian media for information. Nearly 63 percent of respondents said that Belarus’ state-run media were the most credible source of information. The pollster noted a rise in the credibility of the media that disseminated official information, while



Anatol Klaččuk

Žanna Litvina, head of the Belarusian Association of Journalists.



Andrej Lankievič

Chiefs of presidential ideology services visit an exhibition.

ANT was found to be the nation's most watched television channel, according to a story posted on www.soyuz.by on May 17, 2005.

Surveys conducted by the IISEPS and Novak, another independent pollster, in the late 1990s and early 2000s always showed that a majority of Belarusians considered state media more credible than independent outlets.

Three factors may help explain the findings.

First, Belarus' sociology is in crisis. It is almost impossible to conduct an independent survey because pollsters need to obtain permission from the authorities. The IISEPS was outlawed in Belarus and forced to register in Lithuania to continue operation. The head of the institute was threatened criminal prosecution after he published results of polls conducted in the country without official permission.

Second, polls conducted under the conditions of mistrust, fear, harassment of dissidents, cannot be accurate. Some respondents may not reveal that they read and trust the independent media for fear of repercussions. The fear factor affects the results of opinion polls.

Third, because of a short supply (of unbiased, timely and many-sided information) the demand for such information is also limited. Most Belarusians do not have access to independent newspapers and many are unaware of their existence.

The circulation of *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, a newspaper founded by the Presidential Administration, exceeds 500,000 copies. This is five times the circulation of all independent newspapers taken together. However, there is a big difference between the circulation and readership. Many copies of *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* are sold through

forced subscription and people do not read them. The newspaper *Pravda* was marketed the same way in the Soviet Union. Before elections, *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* prints millions of copies of special issues delivered to nearly all adult residents of the country.

The Presidential Administration's newspaper like many other state periodicals — *Narodnaja Hazeta*, *Respublika*, *Znanyia i Yunisti* etc. — are subsidized by the government, which supplies them with cheap newsprint, provides equipment and electricity at discounted rates, and offers high salaries and social security benefits to journalists.

Naturally, state newspapers never risk confiscation, whereas *Narodnaja vola* and *Tovarishch* had entire print runs seized in the run-up to the 2006 presidential election.

Well-paid and socially secure as they are, state media journalists are unlike-

ly to write something that may put their job, status and privileges at risk. They perform functions that were assigned to censors in the Soviet Union. They engage in self-censorship. Readers will never come across manifestations of freethinking or a message concealed by Aesopisms in state-controlled newspapers. One needs to know culture to write an Aesopian message. In Belarus, a good command of Belarusian language, knowledge of Belarusian history and culture is taken with suspicion and treated as a sign of disloyalty for the authorities and even dissent.

The Belarusian-language independent newspaper, *Nasha Niva*, found itself on the brink of closure when it was celebrating its 100th anniversary.

Independent distribution networks and underground printing

Guaranteed access to services of Bielposhta, a state postal company that delivers newspapers to subscribers, and Bielsajuzdruk, another state-run company selling newspapers through kiosks and newsstands across the country, gives state-controlled newspapers another advantage over the independent ones. The government has been using its monopoly over the distribution systems to separate independent newspapers from their readers. Bielposhta removed a range of private periodicals from its subscription catalogue and Bielsajuzdruk refused to sell independent newspapers through its retail chain.

At the end of 2006, House of Representatives member Valancina Kačan asked the Ministry of Communications to explain the reasons for the expulsion of the Brest-based weekly *Brestsky Kuryer* from the local Bielposhta subsidiary's subscription catalogue for 2007. In her reply Deputy Communications Minister N. Hauryłava claimed that the weekly "failed to meet fully its contractual obligations causing additional financial and labour losses



The independent BelSat TV is expected with hope.

to the postal service" in 2006, according to BAJ. Mikalaj Alaksandrau, editor-in-chief of *Brestsky Kuryer*, denied the charge in an interview with the BAJ monitoring service. "Last year just like during the 16 years of the newspaper's existence, the *Brestsky Kuryer* editorial staff has not received a single complaint from the postal service management about the newspaper's failure to meet its contractual obligations," he said.

Bielposhta and Bielsajuzdruk refuse to distribute many local (*Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni*, *Chinik*, *Borisovskiye Novosti*, *Vitebskiy Kuryer* and other) and national (*Zhoda*, *Nasha Niva*) newspapers. Critical periodicals were deleted from subscription catalogues on far-fetched grounds, while some newspapers were unable to obtain office address approval from local authorities.

On the other hand, periodicals that distance themselves from social and political issues are thriving (the number of papers that carry only crosswords, puzzles and classified ads has been growing in Belarus in the last few years).

There are some exceptions. For instance, the newspaper *Intex Press* in Baranavichy earns profits from advertising, but it also runs news about various local developments presented in a balanced way to attract readers. *Intex Press* has established its own retail distribution and subscription network.

Nasha Niva relies on the services of volunteers to deliver newspapers to subscribers. After losing access to the distribution networks, the weekly remains afloat thanks to private donations from its readers.

Some periodicals unregistered with the Ministry of Information also rely on alternative distribution networks, for instance *Svaboda*, formerly known as *Tut i Ciapier*, which targets areas where other independent newspapers are not available. The main problem of this project is insufficient funding. With a small circulation distributed in rural areas, the newspaper's presence is negligible even in the underdeveloped Belarusian print media market. The legislation currently in force carries penalties under the Administrative Offences and Criminal Codes for the sale of unregistered periodicals.

In any case, there is the need to find a way to print and distribute underground newspapers because there is no other option under the present conditions in Belarus.

Uncensored radio stations and other alternatives

Radio stations operate in almost as difficult conditions as newspapers. In 2005 alone, the Ministry of Information issued 18 official warnings to Belarusian FM stations. At present, 30 FM stations broadcast in Belarus, 14 of them are based in the capital.

In 2005, the government limited broadcasting of foreign music to 25 per cent of the total number of aired tracks. In practice, however, the measure has not helped promote Belarusian music. The Ministry of Information approved a list of performers recommended for broadcasting, which is equivalent to music censorship.

In 2006, members of the staff of the *Novaje Radyjo* FM station, founded by the government-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, declared a strike on air in protest of the dismissal of the station's editor-in-chief. Not a single other station expressed solidarity with *Novaje Radyjo* during the protest that lasted for several hours. The FM station was purged of the rebellious personnel with the help of Security Council

representatives and resumed broadcasting in a few days.

Clearly, there is no alternative to FM stations in Belarus because FM is better adapted than AM to the transmission of quality audio signals, therefore it is more popular with modern radio listeners.

Taking into account the advantages of FM broadcasting, a new radio station, *European Radio for Belarus (ERB)*, was established in Poland. However, *ERB* like another rival station based in Poland, *Radio Racyja*, can be received in Minsk only in the medium-wave band in the early morning hours.

When *ERB* went on the air in March 2006, it really made a difference. *Radio Liberty*, also known as “crisis radio”, was often second to *ERB* in the coverage of the post-election protests in Minsk because the new station was broadcast-

ing more live reports making listeners feel as if they were present at the scene. Many listeners liked the emotional live reports by Kacia Zołatava from Kastryčnickaja Square. However, this turned out to be an episode rather than the rule in the operation of *ERB*.

ERB's FM signal can be received in areas located close to the Belarusian-Polish border.

As for the much-talked-of television channel for Belarus, it is difficult to assess its chances of success.

Like *European Radio for Belarus*, the television project has been conceived in an atmosphere of secrecy. On the one hand, the secrecy is justified by security considerations, while on the other the lack of transparency makes it difficult for coordinators to avoid making the same mistakes as the organizers of radio

projects. For instance, only large corporations were allowed to submit bids for a contract to produce a radio program for Belarus. *RTVi*, which won the contract thanks to its connections in the media market, used the project for its own ends. The company offered jobs and provided training for Belarusian radio journalists, which is good. But what about Belarusian listeners for whom the new radio program was created?

This is why the questions to be answered before the television project gets off the ground should include the following: How many people will be able to watch it and how good will the channel's reception in Belarus be? Should it target a few dozen thousand households that have satellite dishes (although authorities in Iran forced the owners to remove satellite dishes), or a broader au-



photo.bymedia.net

Internet has become the only source of alternative information for many.

dience? Will this channel be informative and at the same time attractive to Belarusian viewers?

Instead of conclusion

This article does not cover the Internet, an area free of censorship in Belarus. The Internet in general and blogs in par-

ticular have been growing rapidly in the past year. This is a sign that the authorities cannot take preemptive action and are losing in the field of new technologies all the time. It is necessary to take advantage of this fact in order to prepare for a breakthrough in media freedom in Belarus.

KAMUNIKAT.ORG

Fair and free Internet and elections in 2006

This text is based on the Internet Watch report on Belarus, a project by Open Net Initiative. It was the result of ONI monitoring of the Belarusian Internet during the March 2006 presidential elections.

The testing was unable to prove that the regime was behind these anomalies, although the problems centering on the state-owned Beltelecom network are unlikely to have been simply coincidental. The “dead” websites may have been victims of deliberate Denial of Service attacks (as the site owners claimed), but ONI cannot confirm this without access to the log server files.

Overall, however, ONI found no evidence of systematic and comprehensive interference with the Net in Belarus. Any regime-directed tampering that may have taken place was fairly subtle, causing disruptions to access, but never completely turning off the alternative information tap.

And yet, this Internet Watch report does not argue that Internet openness in Belarus is robust and guaranteed. The government has the capability to clamp down on Internet openness, and that its capacities to do so are more per-

vasive and subtle than outright filtering and blocking. The openness of the Internet in Belarus is likely to come under increasing threat both from pending legislation that promises to legalize more active state monitoring, content regulation and blocking of the Net, as well as from increased pressures for cyber-self-censorship.

* * *

Legally, all organizational entities – including political parties, NGOs, television and newspapers, and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) – are subject to strict rules for registration and licensing, the technicalities of which have often been used to shut down or stifle independent or oppositional organizations, news media, and those who dare to criticize the President in any way. Articles 367 and 368 of the Criminal Code, which make it a crime to “defame” or “slander” the President, are often used in this respect. Beyond this, new amendments to the Code in December 2005 further restrict the public’s capacity to gather, or-

ganize and speak. Among other things, the amendments criminalize any activities that “discredit the Republic of Belarus.”¹

Economically, the formal financial regulative bodies have extensive powers to supervise all economic activity and financial transactions in the country. These powers are often used to harass independent entities – from civic groups and organizations, through to newspapers and other information producers as well as businesses – to pressure them to conform to state ideology and directives. Many critics and businesses have been effectively curbed after being charged with “tax irregularities” or other “economic crimes.”

When it comes to the traditional channels of Belarus informational space (press, radio, television), the independent press are rendered particularly vulnerable because of the state monopoly on printing and distribution facilities, which is controlled directly by the Presidential Administration. These facilities can and do suspend the production and distribution of publications that chose to carry

¹ According to recent statements by the Minister of the Interior (Uladzimer Navumau), this law will be used to track down regime dissenters in cyberspace



Hackers put a caricature on the web-page of the State-owned channel ANT.

“inappropriate information, and many independent papers have been forced to close. Television and radio is dominated by state-run media, with the remaining independent outlets “choosing” to carry mostly entertainment programmes or local events.

Against this backdrop, the Internet, whose content remains relatively unfettered for now, is seen by many as the last breach in Łukašenka’s informational blockade on free speech.

Discipline and punish: Keeping the opposition and media in line

Civic organizations, political parties, trade unions and the independent media form the backbone of the political opposition in Belarus. It is not coincidental, then, that the Łukašenka regime “disciplines” them collectively. Rather than a frontal assault to ban independent organizations and publications, the authorities use multiple legal, economic and administrative methods to limit activities, prevent public gatherings,

outlaw funding sources, gag public communication efforts, and shut down communication channels and spaces. Control is achieved through legislation (via an ever expanding array of strict financial, organizational and content regulations), administrative harassment amounting to a “persecution by permits” (with “re-registration” being a proven method to thin out the ranks), hounding by tax authorities, and the threat of being accused of “economic crimes.” More “hands on” tactics like phone-tapping, regular monitoring by the KGB, and other forms of intimidation are also wide-spread but difficult to document. Arrests of opposition activists, and their confinement to “administrative detention,” have increased but charges are rarely “political.” Rather the offenses are classified as “economic” or “hooliganism.” At the most extreme, political opponents – including a journalist – have “disappeared.”

For traditional media, the State Press Committee implements state information policy (e.g., ensuring no criticism of the regime) and is empowered to suspend the activity of media outlets, and slap large fines

on publications or individuals. A common reason for State Press Committee intervention is to combat so-called “honor and dignity” offenses, that is, any statement that “defames the honor and dignity” of state officials.

The independent press is attacked administratively through restrictive registration and accreditation policies, unfair taxation. And, as noted in the main text, is vulnerable because of the state’s monopoly on printing and distribution facilities. According to Reporters Without Borders, the Łukašenka regime has, “... systematically shut down the country’s few struggling independent newspapers by throttling them financially with huge fines or using ridiculous bureaucratic pretexts.”

As for television and radio the Belarus Broadcasting Company is subordinate to the President. Remaining independent radio and television outlets operate on shoestring budgets, avoid news programming (so as not to risk license loss) and focus on entertainment and local events.. Licenses are issued on the basis of “political loyalty” and thus can be easily withdrawn.

The penetration of international media is limited and declining. Like domestic media, international publications must be registered (vetted) by the central authorities before being distributed in Belarus. Most individual cable operators, who are responsible for the materials they re-broadcast, have stopped rebroadcasting BBC and CNN, leaving Euronews as the only major international service available to some 30 % of cable subscribers. Russian channels, which used to be a source of alternative information, have been fully or partially suspended (the channels jammed) with Belarus content taking their place. The authorities have been known to charge Russian correspondents in Belarus with “honour and dignity” offences, to prevent them from transmitting (to Russia) materials viewed as unfavorable to the Łukašenka regime.

Internet

As traditional media have become either state-run, state-sanctioned, or shut down

in Belarus, the Internet as a medium for information has grown in importance.

Although Internet penetration in Belarus remains amongst the lowest in Europe, the user-base is on the rise. Estimates suggest that the number of Internet users doubled between 2002 and 2005, and now reaches close to some 2 million or 20 % of the population, although only some 5 % are thought to be “permanent” users due to the high cost of access.² Surveys suggest that most users are young, educated and urban, based in Minsk or the regional centers.³

In this respect, the majority of Łukašenka’s core constituency – the rural workers, middle-aged and elderly – are not active Internet users as of yet. A 2003 survey on the political attitudes of Internet users and non-users found Internet users were more likely to be skeptical of the Łukašenka regime’s policies and propaganda, trust independent news sources more than state-run organs, and were more inclined to actively support the opposition.

Past allegations

Allegations of Internet blocking in Belarus are not new. During the 2001 presidential elections, various independent or oppositional groups claimed that their sites were inaccessible, and that the Łukašenka regime was deliberately blocking access. In June 2003, the *www.batke.net* site was allegedly blocked on the order of the secret police (KGB) because it had posted the text of a book criticizing the President, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had called

“political pornography.” During the 2004 parliamentary elections and referendum (which allowed President Łukašenka to amend the constitution so he could continue his reign), oppositional websites again reported access problems, albeit on a lesser scale.⁴ In 2005, various websites claimed they were victims of deliberate blocking by state authorities or DOS attacks.⁵ However, none of these accusations has been independently verified on the basis of testing. And in the absence of this, the Łukašenka regime’s claim that any Internet problems stem from overloaded servers is at least conceivable.

ONI baseline testing in 2005

To explore allegations of politically-motivated regime blocking of sites, ONI undertook baseline testing between June 2005-January 2006. The results confirmed that filtering was taking place – but *not* of political or independent sites, which remained up and unfettered. Rather, the only websites being filtered in Belarus at that time were Russian gay sites: ONI attempts to access these “gay” sites from within Belarus consistently resulted in a “connection refused” error, even though the sites could be reached from a control location outside Belarus.

In fact, the authorities have formally admitted to the filtering of the Russian sites, which they said were “legally” and openly blocked because of their deemed unacceptable pornographic na-

ture.⁶ What is of note here is that the regime felt obliged to make the legal case for this action, which was put together in 2004. As noted above, the government is characterized by a hyper-legalism, with all state actions requiring a legal basis (even if this stems from a Presidential decree and laws are applied in a highly selective manner).

They have the technology

ONI testing in 2005 confirmed that the Belarus authorities have the technical capacity to filter websites. The testing revealed that Russian sites were filtered by ISPs configuring their routers to reject requests for the offending sites IP address (a method called IP address blocking). Further infield investigation by the ONI team revealed that the state’s capacity to control the physical functioning of the Internet lies at three levels:

The first level is the State Center for Information Security (GCBI), a body that used to be part of the KGB but now reports directly to the President and is roughly equivalent to the US National Security Agency although its focus is domestic rather than international. Among other things, the GCBI controls the top level Internet domain (.by), meaning it is in charge of registering all sites within that domain. This also means the GCBI is in a position to tamper with the DNS records of any website within its registry to render it inaccessible, should this be of interest. Indeed, during the 2001 presidential elections, the opposition accused the GCBI of just such tampering when some of their websites went down.

The second level is by way of the state-owned Beltelecom telecommunications monopoly, which is controlled

² See “Internet Users in Belarus” at <http://www.e-belarus.org/news/200506021.html>. Estimates of users vary considerably. Non-regime sources suggest a significant rise in Internet users since 2002, from 809,000 users in 2002 (RWB “*Internet under Surveillance 2004*”) to 1,391,900 in 2003 (CIA World Factbook 2006). Based on the official estimate of 2 million in 2005, it would seem the user-base has doubled in the space of three years.

³ A 2003 survey found the 33 % of active users were aged between 20-24, 50 % were university graduates, 23 % lived in Minsk and a further 46 % lived in regional centers.

⁴ Some sites which claimed vote rigging on the referendum were allegedly blocked for most of election day. However, no testing was conducted to confirm this was the case. By way of analogy, it is interesting to note that several online newspapers, such as *naviny.by*, had their phones turned off for the day. See Freedom House, Nations in Transition 2005.

⁵ For example, in August 2005 a site with cartoons about President Łukašenka was reportedly blocked, and the two youths who had placed the cartoons online were charged with the criminal offence of slandering the President.

⁶ A senior figure from the Ministry of Communications officially acknowledged the blocking in an interview with Radio Liberty. For information on how the legal case for blocking the sites was built up in 2004, see: Belnet, 12.10.2004.

by the Ministry of Communications. Beltelecom's monopoly extends over all external communication lines, and as such functions as Belarus' central ISP. The thirty or so local ISPs have been granted licenses to connect through Beltelecom facilities, and no operators have fully independent external links to the Net, with the exception of the academic and research network (BasNet), which comes under a different set of controls.⁷ Thus, all Internet traffic within Belarus flows through one state-owned choke point, making for an ideal monitoring or filtering set-up. A filter installed on the main router of Beltelecom can block IP-addresses of external sites that are registered in domains outside of the .by domain – like .com, .net or .org. This means, for example, that an opposition site hosted in the United States and registered as .org can be rendered inaccessible to anyone trying to access the site from within Belarus. At various times, the opposition has accused GCBI of installing filters at Beltelecom.⁸ Beyond this, there is official acknowledgment that other state security organs like the Ministry of the Interior have comprehensively surveilled and intercepted Internet traffic to catch a variety of cybercriminals.

The third level for potential filtering of websites is at the level of the non-state owned ISPs themselves.⁹ In some ways this capacity is superfluous, giv-

ing Beltelecom's overarching control. However, any ISP could install filters to block Internet sites, and no doubt would do so if directly requested by a state security body. ISPs, like all non-state organizations in Belarus, are inherently vulnerable to state persecution by permits, fines or criminal charges. During the 2001 presidential elections, the ISP "Open Contact," which also administers the central database for the .by domain (on behalf of GCBI), was accused by the opposition of blocking various websites within Belarus by way of DNS tampering.

But are they using it?

Just because the regime has the capability to shut down the Net and there have been allegations that it has, does not prove the reality of active filtering for political purposes. With this question in mind, ONI commenced its monitoring of the Internet during the 2006 elections.

What we tested, and what we found...

ONI testing during the 2006 Presidential elections revealed a generally open and accessible Internet throughout the entire election period, including election day (19 March) and the next week when the opposition attempted to challenge the results by staging demonstrations (20-25 March). ONI did not detect *comprehensive* or *systematic* filtering of the Internet using known filtering techniques during the election period.

However, the quality and consistency of access to some sites varied considerably, and on critical days, up to 37 opposition and independent sites were inaccessible. On one occasion Internet connectivity in Belarus failed, apparently for technical reasons, and there were three instances of confirmed "odd DNS errors" affecting opposition websites. While no case yielded conclusive evidence of government inspired tam-

pering, the pattern of failures as well as the fact that mostly opposition and independent media sites were affected, suggests that something other than chance was afoot.

A closer look...

Between 12-25 March 2006, ONI monitored access to a list of "high impact" websites on two Belarus' ISPs.¹⁰ Tests were run from Belinfonet between 12 to 25 March, and on Beltelecom from 17 to 25 March.

16 March: several opposition and independent websites allegedly come under unspecified network-based attacks causing them to fail.

16 March: The website belaruspartisan.org was also reported "under attack." ONI testing found that DNS requests for belaruspartisan.org timed out. The site's primary nameservers – ns1.agava.net.ru (195.161.118.36) and ns2.agava.net.ru (81.176.64.2) – are based in Russia. Both failed to respond to DNS requests or pings. However, the nameservers also failed to resolve the Russian site, agava.net.ru, which suggests that the problems were coincidental and not a deliberate attempt to "attack" the belaruspartisan.org site.

18 March: Five sites accessed through the Beltelecom network returned results consistent with those for "blocked sites". ONI testing indicated that five sites tested from the Beltelecom server returned results typically associated with attempts to filter access. Two kinds of error were observed: two instances of "connection refused" errors typically associated with IP based blocking, and three instances of "Socket connection" errors typical to network time outs (which can be associated with filtering). However,

⁷ Basnet is effectively a government network. Note also that the major wireless service operators – Velcom, MTS, and BelCel – are obliged to use Beltelecom hardware facilities for all international traffic.

⁸ There have also been persistent rumours, reported in the Polish press that the authorities have procured technology for filtering from China. See: <http://www.bybanner.com/show.php?id=1295>; <http://www.charter97.org/2005/11/25/filtr>. Note, however, that ONI has not verified any patterns of filtering consistent with those used in China.

⁹ As of 2005, a total of 32 providers are connected to Internet access nodes through Beltelecom. According to ISP assessments, the dial-up services market totaled some USD 24 million in 2004, which was up USD 17 million from 2003. Beltelecom has established 187 Internet access points with 732 'work places'. It is planned to put into operation 92 more 'work places' in 2005 and 115 in 2006-2007.

¹⁰ In both cases, the testing was carried out from Minsk, which may mean that the results obtained do not reflect the access available from other parts of Belarus. However, as Beltelecom is the top tier ISP, and the one through which most ordinary subscribers as well as other ISPs get their connectivity, we consider the results to be robust.

the results were inconclusive as they could have been the result of problems on the server, or high network latency. (During this period the ONI was not testing for latency on the network). Moreover, ONI testing also indicated that these sites were accessible from the ISP Belinfonet, suggesting that if this were an attempt at filtering, it was not comprehensive.

18 March, 23:00hrs: User forums on the popular site Tut.by are reported to have ceased functioning. Unverified reports in the Belarus “technical press” reported that access to the forums on Tut.by, a popular forum site with over 20,000 subscribers had failed. The report claimed that users received an error indicating that the desired forum was not working, and to “repeat their request in a few minutes.” It is perhaps of interest to note, however, that other sources told ONI that Tut.by was no longer a completely “independent” site, as it had earlier yielded to government pressure.

Election day reports and testing (19th March, 2006)

Numerous opposition and independent media sites are reported as “blocked.” Two rounds of ONI testing on 19 March found that 37 sites – mostly opposition and independent media sites – were inaccessible from the Beltelecom network in Minsk, even though they were accessible from the control location. However, the tests did not yield conclusive evidence of comprehensive filtering. The reasons for failure differed from site to site, and the same sites remained accessible from the Belinfonet network. As a consequence it is conceivable that the results obtained from tests on Beltelecom may have been caused by other factors. For example, network congestion could be one explanation, as our tests indicated high levels of latency and “dropped packets” on the Beltelecom network on 19 March. This is consistent with reports

from users that sites failed to load, or only partially loaded before timing out. However, this explanation is unlikely as testing confirmed that other less political sites remained fully accessible for subscribers of the Beltelecom network. “Congestion” should have affected all sites, and not just the 37. Furthermore, we can exclude that the “failures to load” were a consequence of high demand for the affected website servers, as these servers remained accessible from Belinfonet and the ONI control location. Taking all evidence under consideration, the 37 sites may well have been tampered with on the Beltelecom network.

Hacking reported against main opposition websites, and that of the main opposition candidate.

www.milinkevich.org – Opposition media sources reported that the site had come under a denial of service attack. ONI tests indicate that the site was “dead” from 17:45 on 19 March until 11:45 on 20 March, 2006 – inaccessible from both of our testing locations in Belarus as well as our control location. A “dead” site is consistent with the results of a DOS attack. However, ONI cannot confirm that an attack took place without access to the server logs. ONI was unable to access the server logs, despite requests to the hosting company in the United States as well as the site owners.

www.charter97.org – Belarus sources reported that outages experienced by this site were a result of various forms of electronic attack (DOS and hacking). On 19 March ONI tests revealed a mixed picture. Testing from Belinfonet showed erratic levels of accessibility throughout the day. Three connections from Belinfonet to the site returned “inaccessible” errors, while connections made at the same time from our con-

trol location showed the site as accessible. On average the site was 66 % accessible from Belinfonet. However, testing from Beltelecom found the site to be fully accessible. Follow-up testing conducted by ONI investigators found that the domain charter97.org resolves to two distinct IP addresses. One of these IP addresses behaved erratically and was inaccessible at times. It is possible that that this IP address was subject to a DOS attack. However, as ONI was not able to obtain log files from the charter97.org it was impossible to verify this possibility. Nonetheless, the fact remains that one of the two IP addresses associated with this site was effectively “inaccessible.” This means that users whose nameserver resolved to the affected IP address found that the site failed to load, or loaded only partially (this is consistent with what users in Minsk reported). This may also explain why ONI tests showed the site as mostly accessible, while some users reported difficulties in accessing the site.

Post-election Testing (20-25 March, 2006)

21-22 March: www.milinkevich.org experiences irregular access. The results may indicate the site was under a DOS attack.

22-25 March: some websites continue to experience irregular access, returning error messages consistent to those found in instances of “blocking”. Between 22 and 25 March, some five sites from our high impact list continued to return a variety of unusual access errors, which could have been indicative of blocking. However, the low number of affected sites suggests that factors other than blocking may have been responsible for the observed faults. In one case (unibel.by) the errors were caused by a misconfigured nameserver on the Beltelecom network.

23-24 March: forum site for charter97.org returned anomalous “inaccessible” errors. Two rounds of test-

ing by ONI on the 23 March (from Beltelecom) returned “inaccessible” errors. A further seven tests on the 24th yielded the same result. The types of error received, (502, and 503), as well as the patterns observed, suggests that these errors were due to problems with the server rather than the result of attempted blocking.

25 March: dial-up Internet services in Minsk fails. Beltelecom’s webpage announced that the problems were due to a technical failure. ONI contacted Minsk telephone help desk staff who likewise blamed the outage on a technical fault. The “outage” affected Minsk telephone dial-up numbers only. It was still possible to connect by calling the main Beltelecom access numbers (ie, not through Minsk Telephone). The timing of this error coincided with the day riot police broke up demonstrations in Minsk, ending the opposition’s week-long protest against the results of the elections. It was also the second time that “access” issues affected the Beltelecom network in the week following the elections. (The first being the inaccessibility of 37 sites on 19 March)

24-25 March: the on-line news paper BGD returned “connection refused” errors for on Belinfonet. ONI testing on the evening of 24 March, and all day 25 March returned a “connection refused” error, which was consistent with IP blocking. The site remained accessible from our control location. ONI did not test for accessibility from the Beltelecom network as access in Minsk was “down” for most of the day. The 25th is the day Belarus riot police broke up demonstrations by the opposition in Minsk.

Did the government tamper with the Internet?

Despite considerable evidence of suspicious problems with the Belarus Internet during the election period, ONI testing did not yield conclusive proof that the authorities engaged in systematic and

comprehensive filtering of opposition and independent media websites.

However, ONI testing did return evidence of inaccessible or partially disabled sites on certain days at certain times from certain locations. And follow-up testing and investigation cannot rule out the possibility that some Internet tampering took place during the election period:

- 37 opposition and media websites were inaccessible from Beltelecom on 19 March (election day), although they were accessible from the Belinfonet;
- the Internet was inaccessible to subscribers using Minsk Telephone access numbers on March 25 (the day of a major demonstration, when riot police were used to disperse and arrest protesters);
- the website of the main opposition candidate Milinkievič was “dead” on 19 March and experienced problems on the 21-22, (the post-election protest period); and,
- the main website of the opposition movement (Charter’97) was only partially accessible between 19 to 25 March.

The 37 sites

ONI testing evidence, in combination with user field reports, does suggest that the 37 “inaccessible” oppositional and news sites were partially filtered on 19 March. We say “partial” because the 37 sites remained accessible from the Belinfocom network inside Belarus on the 19th, meaning that any filtering that may have taken place was only partial in effect. At present, ONI does not have sufficient knowledge of the technical configuration of Belinfonet to explain why this was the case. Some sources suggest that the owners of Belinfonet are well connected, and hence its satellite-based downlink is not routed through the Beltelecom network, which would insulate it from a filter placed on Beltelecom’s central server. Certainly ONI tests seem to support this hypoth-

esis, as even the Russian gay sites officially banned by the Belarus government are accessible via Belinfonet.

And yet even the confirmed problems with these sites on the Beltelecom network do not yield an iron-clad case for filtering. The evidence in favour is two-fold: the analysis of message headers whose returns were consistent with those found in cases of filtering; and, our users in Minsk who reported that the opposition websites were only partially loading, while other Internet websites (including others on our high impact list) loaded without any difficulty. This latter evidence rules out the possibility that the 37 sites were inaccessible due to network congestion alone. Indeed, ONI measurements of network latency on Beltelecom during that day indicated a significant packet loss – but this problem would have affected all sites, not just the 37 that were experiencing the consistent and sustained problems. So what are the other possible explanations for such selective difficulties?

It is possible that the 37 sites had excessive loads on the servers themselves, causing failures or time-outs. However, this is unlikely given that the same servers remained accessible for our test runs from Belinfonet and the ONI control collocations, meaning that the servers were behaving normally when dealing with requests. Another explanation could be a combination of intermittent network problems and server loads that combined to create local conditions on Beltelecom which made these sites inaccessible in a random and unpredictable manner, while giving the appearance of being blocked to users in Minsk.

The “dead” websites

ONI cannot verify the claims that two major opposition sites were taken down by way of DOS attacks or hacking (as claimed). In the absence of log files, ONI investigation can only confirm that the website of the main opposition candidate was “dead” on election day. With

respect to the other site – the main opposition movement website charter97.org – ONI investigation found the site to have remained partially accessible because the domain resolved to two separate IP addresses. One of the IP addresses provided uninterrupted access throughout the elections. The other IP address returned an error of “body time out” which could be indicative of a DOS attack (but we didn’t have the logs to prove it), but could also have been caused by high demand, or a misconfiguration of the web-server located on that IP address. Overall, however, the fact remains that both the Milinkevich.org and Charter ’97 sites were down during election day. At the very least this suggests deliberate action, even if ONI is not in a position to prove by whom, and in what manner.

So what can we say for sure?

Taking into account all evidence above, we cannot say for sure whether the Internet in Belarus was deliberately restricted during the elections.

For now, we can say that ONI results suggest that the opposition reports of extensive and outright filtering during the elections are likely overstated. Websites that were down on Beltelecom remained accessible from Belinfonet ISP. At the very least, this suggests the absence of a centrally enforced filtering regime, and casts doubt on newspaper reports that Belarus has benefited from Chinese technical assistance and implemented a comprehensive “filtering system”.

At the same time, it is clear that suspicious irregularities did affect access to opposition and independent media web-

sites before, during and after the elections, although the level of interference was erratic. The effect was information disruption, not blockade. It also seems that the problems were mostly occurring state-owned monopoly provider – Beltelecom.

Overall we are left with a puzzle. Given the authorities’ proven intolerance for oppositional and critical information, and given their known technical capability for potentially and comprehensively filtering, the Net, why didn’t they?

And so? Is the Internet under threat in Belarus?

ONI monitoring of the Internet in Belarus revealed three things. First, the Internet was the only information-rich mass media channel that was large-



Andrej Lankievič

Young activists use the Internet to organize flash mobs like this one, of solidarity with political prisoners.

ly unfettered during the 2006 election period. Second, independent voices, including the political opposition, were actively leveraging the Internet, sporting web-sites for independent news and analysis, the main oppositional candidates, critical commentary including the banned speeches of political opposition leaders, and close coverage of the still-born “denim revolution.” Third, despite vociferous accusations that Belarus’ websites were “taken down,” ONI investigation showed that the regime did not engage in comprehensive tactics to blockade offending web-sites, although it may have “squeezed” the Internet pipe to make certain web-sites more difficult to access for a couple of days or at certain times from within Belarus.

And yet the state has the technical capacity to constrict and even shut down the Internet to users within Belarus because all ISPs must flow through the state-owned Beltelecom, which has exclusive rights to external connections. So why was the Internet relatively untouched?

Not now, darling. We’ve got company

There are four plausible answers. First, it could be that Lukašenka simply didn’t consider the Internet to be much of a threat in early 2006. After all, the Internet reaches less than 20 % of the population in Belarus.

Second, given the Internet’s limited “threat,” why mess with it when all eyes are on Belarus? Better perhaps to let it be, to deal with it later in a more measured and effective manner after the foreign correspondents have gone home.

Third, why shut down a great source of intelligence? By letting those oppositional packets flow, any number of the regime’s security organs may have been collecting intelligence on just whom to pressure next, by way of Internet monitoring and surveillance. The Ministry of the Interior, has proven its capabili-



photo.bymedia.net

Šviatlana Kalinkina (center) and Paviel Šaramiet (right).

ty to monitor and track down users of cyberspace in its effective fight against cybercriminals.

Fourth, ONI researchers on the ground suspect that the regime’s own hyper-legalism may have tempered its comprehensive filtering of websites. These insiders note that the formal legal architecture for regime blocking of the Internet – which would allow the regime to require all ISPs to also block – is not formally in place... yet.

Summary: Wither Belarus?

Given the regime’s efforts to shut down independent informational and organizational space in Belarus, the Internet is likely in its “sights.” This is especially so as independent and oppositional voices are increasingly taking to the web to organize and get their message out, as the 2006 elections have shown.

When it comes to outright Internet filtering, the formal legal architecture that would enable the state to lawfully block and filter Internet sites is not yet fully in place. Perhaps this explains why

the regime, always careful to have a legal basis to pursue its actions, has not pursued overt and sustained political filtering to date. But there are new laws in the works which promise to bring web-sites and website content into the same regulatory framework that have been used to effectively stifle the traditional media in Belarus – both domestic and foreign. As such, the day may be approaching when Belarus cyberspace will be legally and overtly restricted and monitored, with any potentially offending sites being outright blocked.

Recommendations and areas for further investigation

Established election monitoring groups need to be sensitized to the growing importance of the Internet. For this reason, we end this report with two sets of recommendations for: elections monitoring groups; and, civil society or political groups who will be contesting elections in the coming years.

Recommendations for Election Monitoring Groups

- **Election monitoring should be extended to include the Internet.** Measures of openness and access need to be developed and incorporated into overall assessments of the fairness and transparency of electoral campaigns and outcomes. First and foremost this should include the development of methods and indicators to track the accessibility and “openness” of websites belonging to political parties, independent media, watchdog groups and electoral authorities, are accessible throughout the election period.
- **Appropriate monitoring techniques need to be developed, specifically to investigate allegations of DNS tampering, hacking and DOS attacks in “real time”.** Technical testing will need to encompass a boarder range of network metrics, so as to be able to identify other plausible causes for website failures, and identify and investigate “anomalies” with greater precision and detail. Beyond this, election monitoring missions should include an independent technical investigations team empowered to examine log files and conduct other tests to determine the veracity of claims that websites have been attacked or otherwise made unavailable. Consideration should be given to setting up an on-line facility where the public can record complaints, and where a “real time” projection showing the status of on-line resources could be found.

For its part, ONI will work to expand its technical methods, while exploring other opportunities and partnerships to refine and implement these two recommendations. However, implementation will be challenging, for the reasons outlined in the discussion above, and will require work on the following:

- **Base-lining the importance of the Internet.** An overall baseline for the

relative importance of the Internet needs to be established as its relevance to the electoral process may vary between countries, depending on its penetration and uptake.

- **Jurisdictional issues.** Relevant websites are often not located in the country in which an election is being contested. Should websites located outside of a country’s jurisdiction be monitored for accessibility during an election period, and under what conditions?
- **Whom to include?** Should election monitoring extend only to official registered political parties and media, or should unofficial movements, international media as well as civil society groups and individuals also be included? Should monitoring include websites belonging to expatriate or diaspora communities?
- **Does the Internet include mobile services?** Increasingly the Internet can be accessed through a variety of means, including cell phones, whose growth and penetration in societies is higher than that of PCs. Should access to text messaging, multimedia messaging, GPRS and WAP be included in the monitoring methodology?
- **Monitoring interactive services.** E-mail, chat rooms, on-line forums and Internet Relay Chat are also important channels for mobilizing supporters and conducting “grassroots” political campaigns. New methods for detecting deliberate interruptions in these services are also necessary.
- **Over the horizon issues.** New developments and trends in the industry –protocols, routing, services – as well as governance and regulation will prompt new opportunities for indirect informational control. These need to be tracked and assessed for the relevance and impact on election monitoring.

Recommendations for civil society and groups contesting elections:

- **Draw attention to the possibility that the Internet can be tampered**

with, and ensure /insist that election monitoring groups include the Internet in their assessment of the “free and fair” nature of elections. Civil society should encourage watchdog groups to put in place a credible system for monitoring the “openness” of the Internet, as well as means to document and verify abuses or restrictions

- **Prepare contingency plans for their websites being filtered or otherwise blocked.** This can be accomplished by putting in place a mirroring strategy prior to the elections, distributing copies of sites on multiple servers and domains, as well as collocating copies on server farms (where one IP address is shared by numerous sites). Intelligent firewalls that capture possible attacks should also be used on primary servers sites, so as to validate and possibly counteract attempts at hacking or DOS attacks.
- **Increase training and awareness raising.** Civil society needs to increase its awareness of information security and train to anticipate and react to filtering, hacking and DOS type attacks. Civil society needs to become capable of competing in “contested” Internet environment.

Beltelecom monopoly: Revenue, power and control

Beltelecom is the main source of revenue for the Ministry of Communications and Informatization (MCI). Various MCI regulations suggest that protecting Beltelecom’s market hegemony is a priority. One such example is the ban on transceiver satellite antennas for commercial providers. Another is the essential prohibition of IP-telephony services by commercial providers, which, if this were allowed, would undercut Beltelecom’s lucrative earnings from international telephone commu-

nications. Currently, Beltelecom provides IP-telephony services at a substantial profit, (charging only 30 % less than regular telephone costs). Some clandestine IP-telephony operators tried to provide services at vastly reduced rates, and generated some \$200,000 worth of business before caught by the KGB, fined, charged and shut down.

Formally, the monopoly exists only in relation to external communication lines, as any operator may provide serv-

ices for local telephone calls. However, in practice, Beltelecom operates a cross subsidizing system, using profits from the very high charges for international phone calls and Internet to subsidize local call costs, which means that commercial operators cannot compete. In addition, extra profits from Beletelcom subsidize the otherwise unsustainable collective farms and outmoded industries which provide essential jobs to Łukašenka's main powerbase (rural workers).

The state's financial interests in the telecommunications 'market are not unsubstantial. In 2004 the market totaled \$700 million with mobile communications accounting for 39 % of the market, and fixed telephony, Internet access and data transmission equalling 61 %. The growth of the stationary communications segment totalled 40 %, and the mobile communications market had doubled. The government, which has controlling shares in all mobile operators, has been the single greatest beneficiary.

The most popular Belarusian web-sites

(listed according to the rating by www.akavita.by counter)

General

www.tut.by	information, mail and service portal
www.akavita.by	reliable web-counter
www.date.by	information and search system
www.kosht.com	shopping and pricing site
www.realt.by	realty site

Media, news & analysis

www.charter97.org	independent news service, available in Belarusian, Russian, English
www.naviny.by	independent news service of Belapan information agency, available in Russian, English
www.belaruspartisan.org	Russian-language, Russian-oriented independent news-service
www.kp.belkp.by	"Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi" newspaper web-site; the newspaper is affiliated to the Russian "Komsomolskaja Pravda"
www.bdg.by	web news service, made by the editors of the former newspaper "Beloruskaja Delovaja Gazeta"
www.afn.by	independent agency of financial news site
www.svaboda.org	Radio Liberty Belarusian service site
www.nn.by	"Nasha Niva" newspaper web site
www.gazetaby.com	web news service, made by the editors of the former newspaper "Salidarnaść"
www.belta.by	state owned news agency
www.sb.by	"Sovetskaya Belorussiya", official presidential newspaper web site
www.nv-online.info	"Narodnaja vola" newspaper web site
www.nmnby.org	analytical Russian language web site
www.tvr.by	"Belarusian TV Channel 1" site
www.tube.by	video portal
www.belradio.fm	"European Radio for Belarus" site
www.belmarket.by	"Belorusy i Rynok" business newspaper web site
www.belapan.com	Belapan information agency web site, available in Belarusian, Russian, and English versions
www.racyja.by	Radio "Racyja" site
www.camarade.biz	"Tovarishch", communist newspaper site
www.zvyazda.minsk.by	"Zviazda", Belarusian-language official newspaper web site
www.belarustoday.info	Minsk English-language newspaper web site
www.arche.bymedia.net	"Arche" intellectual monthly magazine

State institutions

www.president.gov.by
www.minsk.gov.by
www.pravo.by
www.government.by
www.mfa.gov.by
www.mod.mil.by

President of Belarus official site
 Minsk City Executive Committee site
 national legislation portal
 Council of Ministers site
 Ministry of Foreign Affairs site
 Ministry of Defense site

Politics, NGOs and communities

www.uspb.org
www.minsk_by.livejournal.com
www.kozylin.com
www.milinkevich.org
www.mfront.net
www.generation.by
www.pbnf.org
www.baj.by
www.bielarus.net
www.bchd.info
www.pozirk.org

United Civic Party site
 independent LJ-community uniting people sharing political information as well
 personal site of Alaksandr Kazulin
 personal site of Alaksandr Milinkievič
 Małady Front, most persecuted opposition youth organization site
 site for students close to the underground Association of Belarusian Students
 Belarusian Popular Front Party site
 Belarusian association of journalists site
 Conservative-Christian Party BNF (Zianon Pazniak) site
 Belarusian Christian Democracy forming party site
 Blogging community

Education

www.bsu.by
www.bseu.by
www.bsuir.unibel.by
www.baj.by/belkalehium

Belarusian State University on-line
 Belarusian State Economic University site
 Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radio-Electronics site
 Belarusian College, independent educational initiative

Society, culture & arts

www.music.fromby.net
www.photoclub.by
www.belzhaba.com
www.catholic.by
www.radzima.org
www.church.by

independent musical site
 photo portal
 satirical site, publishing political caricatures and collages
 Catholic Church site
 historical heritage independent site
 Belarusian Orthodox Church site

Libraries & bookshops

www.nlb.by
www.knihi.com
www.kamunikat.org
www.knihi.net

National Library of Belarus
 Belarusian independent electronic library
 another Belarusian independent electronic library
 books and disks by post on-line

Regions

www.blog.grodno.net
www.news.vitebsk.cc
www.gs.by
www.homiel.org
www.hrodna.by
www.dzedzich.org

Hrodna blog
 Viciebsk people, news, services
 Gazeta Slonimskaja, Hrodna region local newspaper site
 Homiel Hart unregistered youth initiative site
 Hrodna independent web portal
 Brest youth initiative site

Alena Šaľajeva

Education in Belarus

Some elements of the Soviet system have recently been reintroduced into Belarus' education system. Especially worrying was the introduction of ideological control and the compulsory job assignment system.

Kindergartens

The kindergarten is a place where young children make their first nearly independent step into the future. Children in Belarus usually go to kindergarten at the age of three to six.

Although the Ministry of Education claims that education services are free of charge, parents begin spending considerable amounts on their children's education starting with kindergartens, which offer optional classes for fees. In addition, they pay for meals provided there.

Parents also have problems placing their children in kindergartens with instruction in Belarusian as there are few Belarusian-language preschool establishments in the country.

Secondary schools

About 70 percent of the first-graders were taught in Belarusian before the 1995 referendum that elevated Russian to the status of an official language. At present, 20.5 percent of pupils are taught in Belarusian-language classes.

Minsk has the lowest percentage of children educated in Belarusian. The situation is also worrying in the Mahilou and Homiel regions. For instance, there is not a single Belarusian-language class in the Mahilou region, according to the Franciřak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society.

Apart from that, the Ministry of Education earlier this year allowed schools that use Russian for teaching most subjects to also teach Belarusian history in Russian. The number of Belarusian-language pupils is shrinking because children at Belarusian schools are purposely transferred to Russian-language classes. Senior grade students are mostly instructed in Russian so that they will have no problem understanding ter-

minology when they take entrance exams and study at universities.

Indoctrination remains part of school curricular. Every school has a deputy principal for ideology and education responsible for shaping students' outlook. As during the Soviet time, pupils are obliged to join the Soviet-style government-supervised children's organizations of Little Octobrists and Young Pioneers. Later, they are forced to join the Belarusian National Youth Union (BRSM), which has the same functions and powers as the Soviet Union's Young Communist League, also known as *Komsomol*. There are BRSM branches in every school, formed of both pupils and teachers.

Those who refuse to join the BRSM are viewed with suspicion, considered "problem children" and are often summoned to "ideologically-mature" mentors for indoctrination sessions.

Belarus has a 12-grade secondary school system. On completion of the 10-year basic school, students can continue education at technical and vocational schools. Pre-university instruction is provided in the 11th and 12th grades.

Most secondary schools have some specialization or several subjects taught in depth. Despite teachers' hard work,

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Leaving a school.

school leavers have almost no chances of passing university entrance exams without additional training. The content of graduation tests and university entrance requirements differ so much that the situation has almost got out hand in the last few years: senior pupils often skip classes to attend tuition sessions with private teachers. A school leaver's chances of getting into a university largely depend on his or her personal effort and the parents' ability to pay for private instructors.

Rural and small town school leavers are at a disadvantage because of a lack of qualified teachers and poor access to technical aids as compared to the capital. Although rural school leavers enjoy preferential treatment during enrollment as tighter selection criteria apply to city school leavers, pupils from rural areas make up just 15 percent of the to-

tal number of first-year students. Most rural school leavers apply to less prestigious faculties and departments, often relying on references from local authorities that require them to return to the area they came from on graduating from university and work there for several years.

Secondary school leavers take tests in three subjects, required for applying to a university. They are given a certificate which is attached to their application. Universities require applicants to pass one or two additional exams depending on the selected major subject.

Much like 30 to 40 years ago, admission depends on secondary school grade point average which is added to points scored in final secondary school tests.

Like before the collapse of the Soviet Union, school leavers can apply to one university only. The government an-

nulled a regulation that allowed applicants to apply to more than one higher education establishment.

In a recent incident that shocked both parents and applicants, a top-scoring applicant was not granted admission to Minsk State Linguistic University. The university did not have a vacant seat for the boy because of a large number of applicants entitled for preferential treatment, which usually means that a lower pass mark is applied during the selection process of applicants who produce referrals given by local authorities, or those who win prizes at science Olympiads.

The flawed selection system often rejects talented and smart applicants who then have to pay a tuition fee, while government-allocated stipends go toward mediocre students.

University students

There are 53 higher education establishments in Belarus, including 11 private ones. A total of 76,700 students were enrolled in the summer of 2006 with 46,200 attending regular courses and the rest studying by correspondence or taking night classes. Of the 76,700 students, 31,400 study at the government's expense, while most students pay a tuition fee.

Each state university enrolls a certain number of students who study free of charge and receive a monthly stipend, and students who pay a tuition fee. Fees range between \$800 and \$2,500 a year depending on the university and the major subject.

Students learning via correspondence or those taking night classes pay between \$300 and \$750 a year.

For several years in succession, the number of students who pay for instruction has exceeded the number of those who do not.

For instance, in the 2006/2007 academic year, the universities are expected to enroll 74,400 students. More than 40,000 will pay for tuition and more than 30,000 will be instructed at the government's expense. In Belarusian State University, the country's top university, those who pay tuition will constitute a majority for the first time this year.

Paradoxically, the constitution declares the right to free education, but most university students either pay tuition fees or are given a compulsory job assignment on graduation as a way of recovering the money that the government had spent on their education. One cannot call the education system free because of the tuition fees and job assignment practices.

The much-advertised student credit does not withstand criticism. It is very difficult to qualify for a soft loan, while most second-year students have no opportunity to take any loan.

Not only did Belarusian State University raise tuition fees (at some departments they jumped by as much as \$400) this year, but it also eliminated



Aleś Čyhir, teacher from Babrujsk, was fired because of his political activity.

discounted rates that had been offered to some students.

Each student taught at the government's expense is given a job and required to work at the designated place for two years to reimburse the government for his or her education. Otherwise, university graduates are required to pay the government around \$5,000 to recompense its expenses. Despite the fact that first-year students sign contracts to that effect starting in the 2005/2006 academic year, the reimbursement requirement applies to all students. This measure has proven effective especially with regard to medical graduates — more than 300 were given jobs this year in the area contaminated as a result of the Chernobyl nuclear accident.

In general, secondary school leavers from rural areas have access only to the least prestigious professions, but they are happy with the opportunity to live in a city. Students from the rural areas do not care about the compulsory job assignment, they have no ambitions and their self-esteem is low. They are an easy target for the BRSM.

Students from the capital are different — parents occasionally take them abroad; they are taught in elite schools and by private teachers.

Secondary school leavers do not normally consider opportunities of studying abroad. This is however offered by European Humanities University in Lithuania and Poland's Kalinouski scholarship program. The Kalinouski program was launched in the wake of the 2006 presidential election to help Belarusian students expelled from universities for taking part in anti-government protests.

Volha Daniševič

Healthcare and Social Issues in Belarus

Health and demographic situation: Result of unhealthy lifestyles

The birthrate in Belarus picked up in the early 2000s after a decrease recorded in the 1990s. The rate rose from 8.9 births per 1,000 people in 2002 to 9.0 in 2003, 9.1 in 2004 and 9.2 in 2005. The Ministry of Health reported a 1.6-percent increase in the birthrate in the first four months of 2006 compared to the same period in 2005. The trend is attributed to the fact that baby boomers – those born between 1983 and 1986 – are in the most active period of their childbearing age. The highest birthrate increase, of 11.1 percent, is reported in the Hrodna region, followed by the Minsk region with 7.5 percent, and Minsk city with 6.9 percent.

The most recent trends in family planning include a sharp increase in families that have one or two children, the narrowing gap between the birthrate in cities and the rural areas, and first birth postponement. Teenage childbear-

ing has been decreasing, while non-marital births have been on the rise.

The death rate rose to 14.5 per 1,000 residents in 2005 from 14.3. The rate dropped by 3.3 percent in the first four months of 2006 compared to the same period in 2005. Higher death rates have been reported in the Viciebsk and Minsk regions in the last 15 years. In Minsk, the death rate is relatively low, but it has risen by 29 percent since 1990. Deaths have been on the rise among working-age people, especially men. Deaths of working-age men jumped by 41 percent between 1991 and 2005 from 11.7 to 16.5 per 1,000 people, while deaths of working-age women went up by 18.7 percent from 10.7 to 12.7 per 1,000 people.

The infant mortality rate has been decreasing since 1995 and has been below 10 deaths per 1,000 newly born babies. In 2005, infant mortality dropped to 6.4, approximately at the level with developed European countries.

Maternal mortality varied between 13.8 (1995) and 24.2 (2000) per 100,000 births between 1990 and 2002. In 2005 the rate dropped to 15.5 from 17.9 in

2004. In the first eight months of 2006, 15 mothers died per 100,000 births. This indicator is still much higher than in the developed European countries, where maternal mortality rates are below 10 mothers per 100,000 births.

The rise in the death rate and the low birthrate in the 1990s caused a four-percent decrease in the population by 461,900 people between 1990 and 2005.

Belarus' life expectancy at birth, a general indicator of public health, is lower by 12-14 years for men and five-six years for women than in developed countries. Life expectancy was at an all-time high – 72.9 years – between 1964 and 1969. It fell in the 1990s. Average life expectancy was 68.83 years in 2005. Life expectancy dropped from 77.2 years in 1984-1985 to 75.1 years for females, and from 68.9 in 1964-1965 to 62.91 for males. The decrease is mainly attributable to unhealthy lifestyles.

Abortions plunged by 36 percent from 247,000 in 1990 to 164,600 in 2005.

More people with disabilities

There are more than 500,000 disabled people in Belarus. In 2005, health es-

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tablishments registered 52,048 new disabled persons of 18 and over, or 66.69 cases per 10,000 people (54,423 or 70.01 per 10,000 in 2004), and 3,461 disabled under 18 years old, or 17.56 cases per 10,000 people (3,739 or 18.23 per 10,000 in 2004).

Circulatory system diseases is the top cause of disabilities among the adults (43.9 percent), followed by neoplasms (21.2 percent), diseases of the nervous system and senses (3.7 percent), musculoskeletal system (8 percent) and injuries (6.2 percent).

The major causes of disabilities in children (under 18) are inborn anomalies (28.4 percent), diseases of the nervous system and senses (17 percent), mental disorders (12.6 percent), neoplasms (7.5 percent), and diseases of the musculoskeletal system (7.7 percent).

Belarus' health establishments managed to raise the level of staffing with doctors and nurses in the last 10 years. The number of doctors has been growing faster than the number of nurses. There is a shortage of primary care personnel, a surplus of doctors who have special training, as well as a surplus of doctors in big cities and a shortage of medical personnel in rural areas. The latter is the main reason for poor access of rural residents to quality health services. In 2003, 106 (22 percent) of 481 rural outpatient clinics had no doctors on staff. The number dropped to 66 (11.8 percent) in 2004.

Health: Tuberculosis on the rise, infectious diseases, and suicides fall

The incidence of primary diseases rose by 14.4 percent from 1994 to 2005 to 77,441.4 per 100,000 population. The incidence of all diseases rose by 16.2 percent to 135,954.7 per 100,000 population. The general-to-primary incidence ratio rose from 1.64-1.60 in 1994-1995 to 1.75 in 2005, which indicates that chronic pathologies were more frequent.

A rise occurred in the following primary diseases between 1994 and 2005: of the circulatory system (73.4 percent), symptoms, signs and abnormal clinical and laboratory findings, not elsewhere classified (62.2 percent), neoplasms (58.7 percent), inborn anomalies (23.7 percent), the musculoskeletal system (40 percent), prenatal, natal and neonatal diseases (37.6 percent), the urinary system (27.7 percent), mental disorders (38.1 percent), blood and blood-forming organs (14.4 percent), the respiratory system (15.6 percent), skin and subcutaneous tissue (12.1 percent), injuries and poisonings (eight percent).

Infectious and parasitic diseases fell by 25.3 percent and endocrine diseases dropped by 20.3 percent in the same period.

The total number of registered diseases decreased to 219,308-217,884 in 2001-2002, but has been rising since 2003 to 221,630-238,341 registered cases. The incidence rate has been rising in the last six years and currently stands at 2,072-2,444.5 per 100,000 population.

Circulatory system diseases are the leading cause of death accounting for 55.9 percent of all deaths. Hypertensive diseases soared by 110 percent, acute myocardial infarction by 67.4 percent (130.7 per 100,000), cerebrovascular diseases by 95.7 percent (552.4 per 100,000). The number of newly diagnosed diseases of the circulatory system rose by 3.6 percent in 2005 to 2,420.3 per 100,000 population.

Neoplasms, the second leading cause, account for 13.1 percent of all deaths. The number of newly diagnosed cases surged by 9,000 during the 1990s.

Despite some success in fighting infectious diseases, the incidence remains high. Especially worrying are infectious diseases that may be aggravated by socioeconomic factors, especially tuberculosis. Tuberculosis is a sociobiological phenomenon responsive to social perturbations, economic depression and poor living standards. The incidence rate of active TB increased from 33.7 cases per 100,000 population in 1992 to 54.3 cas-

es in 2005. However, the reported incidence rates do not include disease relapses, therefore the statistics do not reflect the real picture. Data from one district in Minsk show a rise in TB relapses from nine in 88 patients in 2003, to 25 in 93 patients in 2004, and 23 in 78 patients in 2005. The health ministry's data also do not include TB cases among the prison population.

Data from the health ministry, the prison system and recurrent TB cases combined produce a catastrophic picture.

Experts note a rise in the rate of acutely progressive and destructive strains which are difficult to treat. In addition, there has been an increase in the incidence of drug-resistant strains. The tuberculosis mortality rate rose from four to five patients per 100,000 in the late 1980s and early 1990s to 12.1 in 2005. The number of TB cases in children rose sharply since the early 1990s.

In 2004, the government made a controversial decision to distribute medicines to TB patients through pharmacies. Before the decision was taken, patients received drugs at TB clinics, whereas now they have to take a prescription at the clinic first, and then go to a pharmacy to pick up the prescribed drugs. At pharmacies they often wait in the line putting other people at risk. The government made the decision in an effort to fight corruption, but in fact it helps spread the disease.

Sexually transmitted diseases also soared during the economic decline in the early 1990s. The syphilis incidence rate jumped 40-fold from 5.2 cases per 100,000 population in 1991 to 210.9 cases in 1996. The incidence rate has been falling since 1997 to 32.7 cases in 2005 (41.4 in 2004).

Not a single case of anthrax or tularemia has been reported in the country for many years, and no cases of polio have been registered since 2001. There have been few cases of typhoid, brucellosis, tetanus, and rabies. The incidence of measles plunged in the

last ten years with only one case registered in 2005.

A rise in diphtheria registered in the late 1980s is attributable to immune system suppression. The disease peaked in 1995 with 322 cases (3.1 per 100,000 population). The incidence fell by 2000. In 2005, 11 cases were reported (0.1 per 100,000 people).

Acute intestinal infections have been decreasing in the last few years. The incidence of viral hepatitis rose from 68.5 cases per 100,000 in 1994 to 110.4 in 2001, but was reduced to 12.2 cases per 100,000 people in 2005.

The total number of suicides was 3,450 in 2003, 3,298 in 2004, and 3,005 in 2005.

Alcohol abuse – biggest social problem

A serious problem in Belarus is alcohol and drug abuse, and smoking. In 2005, the annual per capita consumption of liquor exceeded 9.3l per person, which experts of the World Health Organization (WHO) believe may affect the nation's gene pool and cause degeneration (for comparison, the Belarusians consumed 6.7l of alcohol per capita in 1995).

The incidence of chronic alcoholism and alcoholic psychosis soared by 46.3 percent from 1994 to 2005 (from 1,166.8 to 1,803.3 per 100,000 population). Belarus' alcohol and substance abuse treatment facilities registered 172,000 people addicted to alcohol. The number of addicts is rising by seven percent a year. In the last five years, the total number rose by 49,200.

Especially worrying has been the increasing number of women (who account for 14.4 percent of all registered alcoholics) and teenagers abusing alcohol. Addiction treatment facilities currently supervise 25,500 legal minors believed to abuse alcohol. The number of minors under supervision jumped threefold in the last eight years. Most teenagers start drinking at the age of 13 to 16 years. As many as 1,590 Belarusians died of alcohol poisoning in the first six months of 2006.

The real consumption and numbers of alcohol edicts are much higher than the officially reported data, which do not include the consumption of fake brand and homemade alcoholic beverages. Researchers found that people who have drinking problems mostly consume self-made alcoholic beverages. The unreported consumption of liquor

accounted for 41.5 to 55 percent of the official consumption in various years. Research suggests that Belarus' shadow liquor market is comparable with official sales. Illegally sold liquors are mostly low quality homemade beverages that cause great harm to physical and mental health.

There is a stereotype in the mass consciousness and human culture, especially among young people, that drinking is a social and cultural tradition, or a kind of ritual. Social psychology and beliefs contribute to the growing alcohol abuse.

The government of Belarus has been implementing a program to prevent and fight alcohol abuse for 2006 through 2010. This is the second program; the first one ran from 2000 to 2005.

In one of its latest moves, the government has recently launched a compulsory treatment program for alcoholics. Subject to compulsory treatment are persons diagnosed with alcoholism. Doctors refer diagnoses to the police who request courts to issue compulsory treatment orders.

Alcohol-related deaths doubled since 1990 to 4,705 in 2005 (48.1 cases per 100,000 population) with men accounting for 77 percent.



Alcohol is the major life style problem in Belarus.

Drugs: New plague

Along with the rising alcohol abuse, a sharp increase has been reported in the number of illicit drug users. There were just 70 officially registered drug addicts in Belarus 20 years ago. Official numbers rise at an average pace of 36 percent a year with addiction among legal minors rising by 50 percent. The actual number is 10 to 15 times higher. The largest number of drug addicts is registered in the city of Svetlahorsk, followed by Minsk.

More people have been using hard drugs lately. Although opium remains the drug of choice for about 78 percent of users, hashish and marijuana were widely used in the 1990s, while the use of co-

caine and heroin has been on the rise in the last few years. Youths predominantly use synthetic drugs like amphetamine at discotheques and nightclubs.

The number of drug-related crimes jumped 11-fold in the last 10 years, rising by 30 to 40 percent a year.

In January 2003, the government introduced tougher punishment for illicit drug trafficking. Under Article 328 of the Criminal Code, illicit drug production, processing, purchase, possession and trafficking is punishable by a prison sentence of up to 15 years. There is no punishment for the use of drugs.

The main problem in treating drug addiction is that around 80 percent of users referred for treatment and rehabilitation come with a strong dependency. Only 20 percent of all discovered cases involve people who occasionally use drugs and have not developed dependency.

Addiction to medicinal drugs, glues and solvents was also a problem in the early 1990s. The number of registered addicts rose to 570, including 252 legal minors, in 1990. Cases were falling by 15 percent a year in the next five years to 282 users in 1995, but started rising in 1996 by 36 percent a year on average with addiction among legal minors spreading at a rate of 74 percent.

Most glue/solvent and medical drug abusers later become addicted to illicit drugs.

HIV/AIDS

The spread of HIV/AIDS is directly dependent on the spread of drug abuse. To slow the spread of HIV/AIDS the government needs to limit the use of narcotic drugs for non-medical purposes. The first HIV infection case was registered in Belarus in 1987. The infection rate was low until 1995. The country's health services registered 7,703 HIV cases (79 per 100,000 population) as of December 1, 2006.

Some physicians say Belarus may have three to four times its official-

ly stated number of cases. Experts say that HIV infection engulfs new territories spreading from cities to rural areas and affecting people who do not use intravenous drugs. Many people contract HIV through sexual intercourse, for instance with infected drug users.

The HIV infection rate has been relatively flat in the last few years with 710 to 780 new cases registered annually, reported the UN. Most cases are registered in the Homiel region (4,211), followed by Minsk city (1,103) and the Minsk region (900). The Hrodna region is the least affected. Intravenous drug injections are the main way of HIV transmission, accounting for 63.8 percent of all cases.

The proportion of people contracting the virus through sexual contact rose from 49.7 percent in 2004 to 57.2 percent in 2005 and 63 percent in 2006.

Most of the infected, 5,746 or 74.6 percent, are young people aged between 15 and 29.

However the proportion of this age group shrank between 1996 and 2005 from 24.4 percent of new cases registered in 1996 to 4.5 percent of new cases in 2005, and 2.8 percent of new cases reported in the first 11 months of 2006. The decline is attributable to awareness campaigns targeting young people. A special course on AIDS prevention was introduced in the curricula of vocational and technical schools and universities.

Women accounted for 33.6 percent (2,588) of the diagnosed HIV cases and men for 66.4 percent (5,115).

Of the 938 HIV patients who have died in Belarus, 699 (74.5 percent) were drug users.

Smoking

With 42 percent (64 percent of men and 19 percent of women), Belarus has a higher proportion of smokers than Russia (37 percent), Ukraine (36 percent) and Japan (31 percent), the UK (25 percent), Spain (21 percent) and the United States (22 percent). The ratio of smokers

under 40 has risen from 45 percent to 70 percent in the last few years.

The Ministry of Health found that there are more smokers among agricultural workers, vocational school students, the unemployed and civil servants.

Cigarette smoking reportedly caused 101,000 of the 338,000 cancer cases registered in the country in the last 10 years.

The government has recently tightened cigarette sale rules, banning store-owners from keeping cigarettes on self-service counters. The vendors are required to make sure that cigarettes are not sold to youths under 18.

Anti-smoking efforts were part of the government's program to promote healthy lifestyles for the period from 2002 to 2006. The program helped raise the proportion of people who consider healthy lifestyles prestigious and fashionable from 69 percent of youths and 65.5 percent of the population in 2001 to 85 percent of youths and 72 percent of the population in 2006, according to official data.

Polls found that most Belarusians have a negative attitude to smoking with 61.6 percent supporting a ban on smoking in public places.

The government plans to gradually impose a complete ban on tobacco advertising between 2006 and 2010.

Chornobyl

Belarus still grapples with the consequences of the Chornobyl nuclear accident. The government says it has tackled most of the Chornobyl-related problems and plays down health effects of the disaster. Since the general public is less concerned about the problem, the government also overlooks it.

It implements relatively cheap programs to rehabilitate the contaminated areas and the affected population. Officials repeatedly make statements that people can live safely in the contaminated areas and even grow crops

and cattle. The government cuts spending on Chernobyl programs every year, as well as benefits for victims of the accident and participants in the site clean-up operation conducted immediately after the explosion. In addition, the government has established a monopoly on assistance to the affected areas.

Many of the Belarusians' health problems have social roots. Despite some welcome trends, the incidence of so-called social diseases (tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol and drug abuse) remains high. Non-infectious chronic diseases (heart illnesses and neoplasms) continue to rise unabatedly. The nation suffers considera-

ble economic losses as a result of accidents resulting in disabilities and injuries, and also because of a high death rate. Drug and alcohol abuse aggravates the crime situation.

The rise in the number of people addicted to drugs and alcohol is attributable to the poor social conditions existing in the country for many years.



Andrej Lankievič

Chernobyl contaminated vast zones in the South East of Belarus.

Viktar Karniajenka

Analysis of the 2006 Political Campaign

1. The internal political situation in the country in the run up to the election

Government

While preparing for his re-election for a third successive term, Łukašenka made a considerable effort to consolidate his executive “vertical” and to test civil servants (especially members of the law enforcement and security agencies) for loyalty. He raised the salaries of officials, assessed their loyalty or disloyalty in public statements, and ordered multiple inspections of government institutions.

The 2004 election and referendum had been a loyalty test for the Łukašenka “vertical”. Following the election, some civil servants and several executive government officials were replaced with more reliable persons after they failed to meet requirements (failure to deny registration to some aspirants or help government-backed candidates win the election, failure to ensure a government-set

early voting turnout limit or forge protocols on election results).

Hundreds of non-governmental organisations were closed down under various pretexts in the period between the 2001 and 2006 presidential elections. Among the targeted NGOs were nearly all human rights groups, resource centres and organisations dealing with sensitive social issues. The crackdown on the civic sector included an unprecedented move to tighten legislation governing the NGOs. For instance, the government introduced a law that makes it a crime to be a member of an unregistered organisation.

To replace independent NGOs the authorities formed surrogate organisations to create an outward impression of a developed civic society in the country. The government invented and introduced the term “state non-governmental associations.” The most notable example was the establishment of the national youth organisation called the Belarusian National Youth Union. Such organisations are funded by the govern-

ment and, in reality, are part of the state apparatus. Later it became clear that the organisations were set up to rally public support for Łukašenka and to aggressively criticise the opponents of his re-election bid.

The authorities also targeted independent media outlets. As part of the preparations for the election campaign, the authorities shifted focus from efforts to hamper the operation of non-state media (unfounded accreditation denials, administrative pressure on advertisers, lawsuits, measures to give the state media an economic advantage over their non-state competitors) to attempts to block their operation completely. The clearest manifestation of this shift was the refusal by state-controlled distribution monopolies to continue to distribute nearly all major non-state periodicals.

During these four to five years, the authorities launched four new state television channels, including a satellite channel available in dozens of countries, and built up radio broadcasting capabilities. The government tasked local authorities with increasing the circulation of pro-presidential newspapers through making subscription obligatory for local residents.

Viktar Karniajenka

vice-president of the “Movement for Liberty”

A huge ideology and propaganda staff was involved in an effort to brainwash workers and employees at enterprises, establishments and organisations. An ideology course was introduced in all government-controlled education establishments (the few remaining independent schools had been shut down, or forced to go underground or in exile). State ideology textbooks were introduced which play down the pre-Soviet history of Belarus and highlight the current achievements and the role of Alaksandr Łukašenka.

The government's strategy before the 2004-2006 elections included many other measures such as the signing of new "crucial" "Union State" agreements with Russia, ambitious economic and space projects. No funds were spared for the purpose. This is evidence of concern and anxiety of Łukašenka and his entourage about the election outcome. Independent polls suggested, and Łukašenka image-makers realised, that a campaign based on traditional demagoguery could fail.

Opposition

Regretfully, the 2004 election campaign did not result in the establishment of a consolidated pro-democracy coalition.

Even politicians within the most influential coalition Five Plus (formed of the BPF, BPC, UCP, BSDH, BPL and several large NGOs) could not agree on a common list of candidates. Minor differences prevented member organisations from a greater level of consolidation.

Apart from Five Plus candidates, running for parliamentary seats were members of the European Coalition led by Mikalaj Statkievič (which joined the united coalition of pro-democracy forces only after the 2004 election); the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada," which later elected Alaksandr Kazulin as its chairman; several politicians who sought national leadership; and independent candidates. All of the mentioned contenders positioned themselves as opponents of the government. This disorientated the electorate and damaged the image of the opposition, especially among the undecided voters.

Opposition forces failed to unite even after Łukašenka announced a referendum to coincide with the parliamentary elections that would enable him to run for a third presidential term. Moreover, some opposition contenders ignored the authorities' preparations for the referendum.

dum, failing to raise the issue with voters in their public speeches, most likely in an effort to concentrate on their parliamentary campaign.

Candidates' meetings with voters proved the need for the personification of an alternative to the incumbent president. One of the questions voters asked almost at every meeting was "If not him [Łukašenka], then who else?" The opposition faced a challenge to answer that question as soon as possible. Despite differences over a common list of parliamentary candidates, good personal relations among the leaders of major opposition political parties and NGOs, their responsible approach and experience, gave hope for an agreement on a common leader.

2. Opponents elect leader of united pro-democracy forces

Preparations

The two major opposition groupings, Five Plus and the European Coalition, united shortly after the 2004 presidential election. They set up the Political Council, a joint body formed of the leaders of the ten member organisations, each represented by one person.

The coalition declared that its long-term objective was to defeat the dictatorship and put Belarus on a civilised path, while the short-term goal was to elect a common challenger to Łukašenka.

The coalition leaders considered two options:

- electing a common candidate in a vote involving members of the Political Council;
- electing a common pro-democracy candidate at a general congress whose delegates are to be selected by representatives of the public.

Both options had more positive and more negative aspects. The election of a candidate by the coalition leaders would take less time and resources. But it would inevitably raise doubts about the legitimacy of the leader elected this



Andrej Lankievič

At the end of 2005, the Congress of Democratic Forces elected Alaksandr Milinkievič (center) a common candidate in the presidential election.

way. Regional leaders, NGOs and other entities that would not be involved in the selection process could reject the choice for various reasons, while other opposition politicians with presidential ambitions could still receive considerable support. Therefore, this option would not help limit the number of opposition contenders.

After a brief discussion, the coalition leaders agreed to hold a Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces so that rank and file activists would have an opportunity to take part in the selection process along with prominent politicians, former MPs and established NGO leaders. As part of this process, about 100 conferences were held in districts across the country with 25 to 100 voters in attendance to nominate delegates to the congress.

Under the rules of procedure approved by the Political Council, aspirants for the role of a common presidential candidate could be proposed by the political parties affiliated with the coalition and at regional conferences of pro-democracy activists. Four aspirants were nominated:

- Siarhiey Kalakin, leader of the Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC), was put forward by the BPC and participants in conferences held in the Brest, Viciebsk and Minsk regions and the city of Minsk;
- Anatol Labiedzka, chairman of the United Civic Party (UCP), was nominated by the UCP and participants in conferences held in Brest and Minsk regions and the city of Minsk;
- Alaksandr Milinkievič, an NGO leader, was named by the Belarusian Green Party, and received endorsements of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), the Belarusian Women's Party "Nadzieja," the non-registered Party of Freedom and Progress, the non-registered Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Narodnaya Hramada," and participants in the conferences held in Brest, Viciebsk, Hrodna, Homiel and Mahilou regions and the city of Minsk;

- Stanislau Šuškevič, chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada (BSDH), was put forward by the BSDH and participants in conferences held in Hrodna and Minsk regions and the city of Minsk.

The aspirants signed a political agreement in which they pledged to restrain their presidential ambitions and back a common candidate that was to be elected at the Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces.

Other politicians, including Valery Fraŭou, Alaksandr Vajtovič, Uladzimir Kołas and Alaksandr Jarašuk, also announced their presidential bids. They were offered to compete for the role of a common candidate on the basis of the coalition-established rules. They attempted to have their names included on regional conference ballots, but refused to sign the political agreement. For that reason, their names were not entered on ballot papers, as a rule. Later, after the election date was announced, some of these politicians unsuccessfully attempted to collect ballot-access signatures in order to register for the presidential race.

The Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada" (BSDP) sent delegates to the congress but refused to recognise

its results. It named Alaksandr Kazulin as its presidential candidate instead.

The main contenders for the coalition leadership did not have big differences over election procedures. They argued about a date of the congress and a deadline for selecting a common candidate. Alaksandr Milinkievič and his supporters insisted on selecting a coalition leader as soon as possible. They wanted the congress to be held in May 2005, and later accepted July as the deadline. Meanwhile, Anatol Labiedzka and his supporters said there was no rush suggesting that the event could be held as late as February 2006. Further developments proved absurdity of the idea.

The urgency to hold the congress was explained by several circumstances. Firstly, the election of a common candidate was not a broad public process, but an internal matter of the opposition. The congress was to be followed by a national social campaign to mobilise as many people as possible for the forthcoming election. That would enable the coalition to form a single team before the start of the campaign and see it in action. Secondly, after selecting a common candidate the opposition coalition would be able to concentrate efforts on finding resources for the forthcoming campaign. Thirdly, the authorities could announce an early election. In the end, Łukašenka did decide to set the election date for March instead of July 2006, which threw in disarray the opposition's election campaign preparation plans. Unjustified delays in holding the congress proved to be the coalition's strategic mistake that could not be corrected.

Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces

The Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces was held in Minsk on October 1 and 2, 2005. Some 800 delegates approved a political platform and several other papers related to the forthcoming presidential election. The main agenda item was the election of pro-democracy forces' common challenger to Alaksandr Łukašenka. Alaksandr Milinkievič, an aspirant without party



Julija Daraškevič

Siarhej Kalakin, communist leader.



Julija Daraškiewicz

Alaksandr Milinkievič

affiliation, gained more votes than his two rivals (Stanislau Šuškevič withdrew his candidacy). Milinkievič's rivals congratulated him on the victory and publicly pledged to work for success of his campaign. The congress was covered by Belarusian independent and foreign media, raising an interest in opposition activity in Belarus that had not been generated for many years.

The excellent organisation of the congress and its unifying purpose inspired optimism in the overwhelming majority of the opposition supporters. Opposition parties and groups proved capable of unifying and abandoning some of their own vested interests for the common cause. Milinkievič was the first leader elected on the basis of a transparent and democratic procedure where all politicians who considered a possible presidential bid had an opportunity to compete for the role.

The leaders of all political parties involved in the process had adopted common rules and pledged to recognize the results of the congress in order to keep unity in their ranks. In addition, the mutually accepted procedures helped to limit the number of opposition presidential candidates. This was one of the main results of the congress.

Regretfully, not all prominent opposition figures subscribed to the coalition's rules. Valery Fraŭou, Alaksandr Vajtovič, Uładzimir Kołas and Alaksandr Jarašuk (who also unsuccessfully sought presidential nomination in the 2001 election) attempted to get involved in the selection process and compete for nomination. They proposed themselves at regional conferences and had a chance to have their nomination bid endorsed by local activists, but they refused to sign the political agreement that would commit them to comply with the congress decisions.

Uładzimir Kołas finally accepted the congress results, promising to work for the coalition. Valery Fraŭou and Alaksandr Vajtovič subsequently made unsuccessful attempts to register as presidential candidates.

The main achievements of the congress were:

- the election of the common presidential candidate whose legitimacy was guaranteed by transparent democratic procedures;
- the consent of leading opposition figures with presidential ambitions to work toward success of the common presidential candidate;

- the congress received much coverage in Belarusian independent and foreign media;
- preparations for the congress were a test for the opposition's local branches in the run-up to the presidential election;
- the congress inspired confidence in the opposition coalition and optimism in potential opposition supporters.

On the other hand, the congress had some shortcomings. Preparations of the congress required considerable human and financial resources. The wider public was not involved in the selection process; it was an internal matter of the opposition. The Political Council failed to persuade all possible presidential bidders to take part in the congress and back the common candidate; some politicians did not recognise its results.

Some members of the political parties, whose leaders were defeated at the congress, were reluctant to work in the common candidate's team. For instance, the UCP branch in the Hrodna region refused to join in. There were frictions among representatives of various political groups in the Mahilou region. There were small tensions in other areas as well, mainly attributable to loose party discipline. But the problems were insignificant compared to the achievements of the congress.

3. 2006 election

Preparations

Immediately after the congress Alaksandr Milinkievič held talks with his former rivals Anatol Labiedžka and Siarhieĭ Kalakin. By mutual consent, Labiedžka was named chairman of the National Committee and Kalakin was appointed as the manager of Milinkievič's presidential campaign. The appointments were based on recommendations of most coalition partners and the politicians' qualities.

The National Committee, which was yet to be formed, was tasked with

drafting the programme documents for the pro-democracy coalition and developing a strategy for Belarus without Łukašenka at the helm.

The campaign headquarters being formed at the time was to work toward the following targets:

Before the president calls the election:

- at least 60 percent of the voters should be able to recognise Milinkievič;
- 20 to 25 percent of the voters should support Milinkievič;
- at least 10,000 activists should join Milinkievič's campaign team;
- 800,000 petitions of voters to the candidate are to be collected through regional chapters of political parties and NGOs.

After the official start of the election process the coalition planned to:

- propose members of the pro-democracy coalition to every election commission (at least 7,000 people);
- collect at least 1 million ballot-access signatures for Milinkievič;
- send pro-democracy coalition observers to every commission (at least 7,000 people);
- ensure that Milinkievič gains more than 50 percent of the vote on the election day.

The coalition based all of its plans and objectives on the expectation that the president will set the election for July in line with the law. The coalition adopted an action plan, estimated the campaign budget and identified conditions necessary for achieving the targets.

The headquarters began with making arrangements for Milinkievič's tours of the large cities and his meetings with voters. The objective was to introduce Milinkievič, his team and election platform to the public and enlist new volunteers. Milinkievič's campaign tours, which continued almost until the Election Day, were a big success. His first meetings attracted a few dozen voters, whereas later he gathered much bigger crowds, for instance about 6,000 turned out for his campaign rally in Homiel.



Julija Daraškiewicz

Alaksandr Kazulin tried to become the third force, but he was imprisoned soon after the election.

The authorities used various methods to disrupt his rallies such as the intimidation of voters, arrests of local activists, pressure on the press covering the rallies and power cuts in premises where rallies were taking place. However, these methods were ineffective because Milinkievič's team maintained the initiative and conducted a generally successful campaign.

At the same time, the National Committee, formed as a matter of form only and not properly staffed, was little involved in the presidential campaign. Its involvement was limited to a few roundtable meetings.

Election campaign

In December, Łukašenka called an early election. Clearly one of the main reasons for this move was the rising support for Milinkievič and his success in rallying the pro-democracy forces. This disrupted the strategic action plan of the opposition which was based on the expectation that the election would be held in June or July 2006. The authorities seized the initiative, while the opposition coalition had to adapt to the new condi-

tions and revise its plan. The new plan set out the following objectives:

- recognising that an election victory remains an ultimate goal, it is necessary to rally support of at least 30 percent of the voters;
- to prevent Łukašenka from gaining more than 50 percent in the first round and from rigging the vote;
- relying on support of the masses to defend the real results of the election.

The Łukašenka regime used strong-arm methods from the beginning to the end of the election campaign. Even those pro-democracy activists who strictly followed the electoral law came under strong pressure. They were threatened dismissal from work or expulsion from universities; police visited private apartments to warn activists against involvement in anti-government activity. Police illegally dispersed and detained activists who collected ballot-access signatures for the opposition candidates. Thugs bullied and physically assaulted some activists. Police ignored the election law, seizing leaflets and other campaign materials legally printed for money provided by the central election commission. Even the intervention of the central election commission did not help stop harassment of Milinkievič campaign activists. Dozens of local opposition leaders were arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges in the run-up to the election.

The campaign results should be assessed taking into account the repressive conditions in which it was conducted. The opposition coalition collected about 200,000 voter signatures in support of Milinkievič's presidential bid, distributed 4 million copies of print materials and special issues of independent newspapers and staged several big campaign rallies. The most significant events included large campaign rallies held in central Minsk on March 2 and in Homiel on March 15, as well as a rock show staged in a park in the suburbs of Minsk by the Assembly of Pro-Democracy NGOs on the eve of the election in the framework of the "For Freedom" campaign.

While planning their efforts, members of Milinkievič's team clearly realised that it was impossible to defeat the authoritarian regime by means of the election only. The coalition planned to stage mass protests against the authorities' blatantly aggressive attacks on the opposition and election fraud. The Milinkievič election headquarters conducted a separate campaign to inform the public of the planned protests. Milinkievič always concluded his television and radio addresses to voters with an appeal to his supporters to gather at Kastychnickaja Square at 8p.m. on March 19.

The campaign of the pro-democracy coalition and Milinkievič's election headquarters had many shortcomings:

- Failure to foresee the possibility of an early election. This strategic mistake threw the coalition's plans in disarray and gave a significant advantage to the authorities;
- Not all representatives of the pro-democracy forces accepted the choice of Milinkievič as the coalition's common presidential candidate. Some party chapters stayed away from the campaign;
- Some appointments to key positions in the campaign team were influenced by the interests of organisations affiliated with the coalition, rather than being based on professionalism;
- The coalition failed to create an attractive picture of Belarus without Łukašenka. Its declared programme objectives did not contrast sharply with what was proposed by Łukašenka;
- The coalition failed to produce conclusive evidence of election fraud such as results of opinion polls or parallel vote tabulation. Without hard facts many representatives of the public questioned its demand for a repeat election;
- The opposition's strategic plan of mass protests did not envisage various possible scenarios.

There were additional small shortcomings, but on the whole the Political

Council was satisfied with the campaign. Nearly 100 percent of voters knew Milinkievič. Support for Milinkievič rose to a relatively high level and the common opposition candidate acquired a good reputation abroad. Without these specific achievements it would be pointless to expect large numbers of voters to join opposition protests.

Several initiatives were launched in addition to Milinkievič's election campaign to encourage voters to support the opposition candidate and join protests against election fraud. The most notable campaigns were "For Freedom," "Chopić!" "Jeans Solidarity," and "16." These efforts did not have a significant effect on the election outcome, but some of the activists involved played leading roles in protests held in the wake of the election. Other declared campaigns went unnoticed.

Post-election

Milinkievič's team realised that it was impossible to change the situation in the country through the elections itself. During the decade prior to the election, the regime had created a perfect vote rigging mechanism. On the other hand, it was obvious that mass protests would

be impossible without the majority of voters supporting democratic changes in the country. Milinkievič's election headquarters took these circumstances into consideration.

Within the opposition there were many members who hoped to create an illusion of victory without hard work. They suggested that a victory could be won by creating "a presence effect" (by encouraging supporters to wear the same colours and badges), staging campaigns of resistance and blindly copying Ukrainian, Georgian, Kyrgyz and Serbian experience. The politicians who had such illusions ignored the big differences between the political, social and economic situation in Belarus and countries where "colour revolutions" swept away the ruling regimes.

It should be noted that some members of Milinkievič's team thought that the campaign headquarters should not be involved in staging mass protest, in particular as people in charge of separate mobilisation campaigns pledged to do the job. Nevertheless, a majority of the team members were involved in staging demonstrations and sought to coordinate various groups working toward the same goal. Members of Milinkievič's



Andrej Lankievič

Presidential election is always a major political event in Belarus.

campaign staff believed that success was possible on the following conditions:

1. The ideas of the opposition coalition were shared by most voters. Firstly, a minority group cannot overcome a strong dictatorial regime. Secondly, the Milinkievič's team in principle did not plan to resort to violence to overthrow the regime. It sought an election conducted in line with OSCE standards. This is why it relied on peaceful demonstrations.
2. It was necessary to avoid clashes with the police and the use of force during mass protests in the run-up and after the election. That would help people overcome fear instilled by the authorities and encourage more voters to join protests. The authorities attempted to provoke opposition supporters into violent actions to justify the use of force against demonstrators. The opposition did not give them a chance to do it.
3. There must be adequate information and technical support for protests. Voters should be promptly and accurately informed of developments and conditions should be created at protest sites to ensure a permanent rise in the number of protesters. The tent camp site was selected taking into account this condition.
4. Protests must have a clear purpose. The purpose of the post-election protests was to force the authorities to hold a repeat election. It was necessary to provide conclusive evidence of election fraud to persuade voters.
5. All opposition groups must be guided by the same scenario. For that purpose, members of Milinkievič's team held talks with Kazulin's camp and representatives of various civic groups. The team's plan was adjusted in line with agreements reached with other groups on the place and time of the demonstration.

It was clear at the time that it would be possible to shake the foundation of the dictatorship and force the authorities to call a repeat election only if pro-

tests intensified and spilled over to other cities. The opposition's expectations also appeared to be based on intuition, rather than on accurate calculations or scientific facts. The opposition knew little about the public's mood before the Election Day.

For obvious reasons, the authorities were afraid of possible protests. Thousands of police and security forces were deployed to the capital and an unprecedented propaganda campaign was launched to discourage voters from taking part in protests. The prosecutor general, the interior minister and the KGB chairman appeared on television on the eve of the election, threatening those who would dare to protest with the death penalty.

The demonstration began at 8 p.m. on March 19. It attracted up to 15,000 people according to various estimates. The crowd was big considering the authorities' effort to intimidate voters. But the crowd was not big enough to keep up pressure on the authorities. After a rally that featured all major opposition politicians, opposition leaders urged the protesters to disperse and return the fol-

lowing evening. The opposition politicians hoped that the number of protesters would increase dramatically after a peaceful rally. Efforts were made to inform voters about the forthcoming protest.

The opposition leaders were disappointed to see fewer protesters coming to the square on the following day. However, this time opposition supporters did not disperse after the rally and civic activists pitched up tents intending to keep a night vigil. Milinkievič's team brought a sound system for amplifying speeches and patriotic music, but it was unable to create minimal conditions for protesters staying overnight. Opposition activists and city residents delivered food to the protesters.

Police used force to tear down the tent camp in the early hours of March 23. Hundreds of protesters were arrested, beaten and thrown in jail. Demonstrations and rallies were held on March 25, April 26 and May 1. After the March 25 rally, Alaksandr Kazulin led hundreds of protesters headed for a city jail, where the demonstrators arrested in the tent camp were held. Police used bru-



It was a hard election for Alaksandr Lukašenka.



Andrej Lankievič

Opposition meeting, 19 of March, 2006.

tal force to disperse the crowd and arrested the former presidential candidate. Kazulin has been in jail ever since.

The protests by selfless people from across the country, mostly youths, caused far-reaching repercussions and received much coverage, especially in the foreign media. Belarus' state-controlled media launched a massive mud-slinging campaign against the demonstrators using lies and set-ups. They partially succeeded as protests began to run out of steam.

The protests attained their objective. The opposition did not win, but it showed a strong will to resist to injustice and election fraud. Łukašenka had to take unprecedented tough measures to quell protests, which exposed the real nature of his regime. The opposition coalition emerged from the tussle more consolidated. After the end of the pro-

tests, it appeared that the authorities did not know what to do for quite a while, and Łukašenka disappeared from television screens. His first public appearance proved that he had taken a break due to stress.

Opposition following the election

In the period immediately after the election, the Belarusian opposition remained more or less united in comparison to the same period following the 2001 presidential election. It appeared Alaksandr Milinkievič had emerged as a leader whose legitimacy was established through an election on the basis of democratic procedures. His election campaign and protests in the wake of the election testified to the ability of people and organisations involved to work efficiently. As a result, many voters had overcome fear and are full of positive energy.

Despite the defeat, members of the opposition did not feel depressed or confused. The election campaign had helped involve new people in politics and form an expanded civic society network capable of conducting nationwide political, information, social and other campaigns that reach various areas of the country.

However the benefits that came from the election were at risk of being lost because of risks and threats coming from within the opposition.

Firstly, some partners in the coalition became more self-centred and sought to advance their specific interests. In particular, members of the UCP made statements that their party can exist on its own. In addition, many UCP activists, including regional leaders, did not recognise Milinkievič's election as the common candidate and did not take part

in his election campaign. After the election, they severely criticised the conduct of the campaign and still remain resentful of Milinkievič's authority. Similar trends also came from other parties affiliated with the coalition. It was feared that attempts would also be made to split the coalition from the outside.

Secondly, the coalition leaders were reluctant to admit new members and partner organisations. This may weaken the opposition and lead to the establishment of new political centres.

Thirdly, ambitions of the leaders of political parties continued to be a problem. Some of the leaders declared that Milinkievič's mandate as leader of pro-democracy forces was limited to the presidential election. There were concerns that attempts to install a new leader may ruin the coalition and the opposition will find itself in the same condition it was in 2001.

Fourthly, the reorganisation of the coalition is likely to take a long time. The coalition has become less active than during the presidential campaign and some members are growing disheartened. Only vigorous efforts to address problems of specific groups or the entire nation can help boost people's confidence in the opposition. These efforts cannot be replaced with internal opposition activity, including new congresses. It is time to understand that voters do not take interest in the structure of the opposition bureaucracy, but they may be annoyed by disagreements over the matter. The reorganisation plays into the hands of politicians who seek to regain leading positions in the coalition.

Mentioned above were the most obvious internal problems and contradictions observed in the pro-democracy coalition. The opposition's future largely depends on how it will be able to cope with these problems.

Jury Čavusau

“For Freedom!” Campaign

Sociological background

Compared to other elections, the active phase of the civic campaign “For Freedom!” began quite late, after the authorities had announced the presidential election date on December 16, 2005. The campaign began on December 25 with the publication of a special issue of the newspaper *Narodnaja vola* that declared 2006 the Year of Freedom and ran an interview with opposition challenger Alaksandr Milinkievič headlined “A free election is a path to free Belarus”.

The late start of the campaign was linked to a new approach to planning. It was almost the first time in the history of Belarus’ civic and political organizations that a plan emerged as a result of teamwork involving researchers, analysts and civic campaign managers, and was not based on speculations. The “For Freedom!” plan was based on an analysis of opinion polls that demonstrated the need for civic organizations to adopt a new approach under the authoritarian conditions in Belarus.

Preparations for the campaign began in early 2005 with a series of surveys.

Focus groups were held in March and May 2005 with representatives from

various walks of life. The researchers found that Belarus lacked a single social group capable of spearheading changes. Belarus also lacked a single thorny issue that could be used to rally support for an opposition candidate. People were mostly concerned with social and economic issues, but they expected those issues to be addressed by the government in office at the time, rather than by new authorities. Most people considered the political regime as something that they were not in a position to change. People associated the regime with stability and socioeconomic predictability and supported it despite its undemocratic behaviour. Therefore, a platform focusing on social and economic issues could not rally enough support to change the political regime.

However, various groups included people critical of the government. Their disapproval stemmed from the non-acceptance of values imposed by the regime, but had nothing to do with the authorities’ socioeconomic policies. The authoritarian government and its totalitarian ideology conflicted with voters’ outlook on life. The political campaign could therefore draw on the conflict of values. It was a matter of principle for the most active representatives of vari-

ous groups who were ready to stand up for their interests. They accounted for up to 10 percent of the population. A moderate and indecisive campaign with a focus on socioeconomic issues could discourage them from supporting a political alternative. The researchers called this group “radicals”, but it was not a good term because of possible association with “political radicalism”.

The campaign organizers agreed to rely on the radicals, a minority who supported different values to those imposed by the regime. But did that approach give a chance of victory? The reliance on a minority seems to doom any strategy for electoral victory to failure. But Belarus had had no free elections for a decade. Opinion polls conducted in spring 2005 found that 49 percent did not expect the coming election to be free or fair (the percentage dropped during the election campaign stage). These people might have supported the active minority. Around one third of the population were in favour of political changes, but only a small fraction were ready for active steps. The passive majority, who realized that elections would be unfair, seemed to be leaning toward the strong, active and consolidated minority. Moreover, the passive majority was

expected to grow more sympathetic to the values of the minority. According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, when the lower need (socioeconomic in the case of Belarus) has been satisfied, one moves to the next higher level. Therefore, the role of spiritual values was likely to increase.

The social situation in Belarus at the time rendered ineffective strategies targeting undecided voters such as the ones that had been used during the opposition's previous campaigns. Earlier experience showed that it was impossible to effectively reach and win over undecided voters using the limited means available to disseminate information because of the massive government propaganda. The undecided majority would lean toward pro-democracy groups sooner if they displayed their strength. Thus, the campaign organizers agreed to work with the active minority and prepare for mass protests against election fraud.

The campaign was aimed at bringing about changes through public disobedience and resistance to electoral fraud based on the presumption that an opposition challenger had no chance to win an election that was unlikely to be free or fair.

Most civic activists and leaders approved the campaign concept during discussions.

A Belarusian-Slovak working group developed the campaign theory in cooperation with the Assembly of Non-Governmental Pro-Democracy Organizations of Belarus. The group was responsible for strategic planning, while the Assembly was responsible for carrying out the campaign. This model of communication between NGOs and experts proved effective.

After the concept of targeting the minority had been accepted as the methodological basis, experts needed to pick a value that could consolidate active members of the public. Surveys found that freedom was the top value for most representatives of the target group.

Various people naturally differ on what they believe constitutes freedom.

Some want freedom to travel abroad, receive information, publicly express their opinion on political issues, earn money, change jobs and place of residence, freedom from ideological control, freedom to receive instruction in the Belarusian language etc. Despite the different interpretations of freedom, hundreds of thousands of radicals felt a lack of freedom. That placed freedom in contraposition to the Łukašenka government's ideology. Freedom was something that the dictator's rhetoric could never use to its advantage unlike, for instance, the idea of independence, which Łukašenka exploited during his last presidential campaign. The idea of freedom, rather than leftist or rightist platforms, could unite the fragmented active minority in an effort to defend freedom, which they saw as their basic need.

Once the campaign organizers had identified the keynote, they needed to find human and organizational resources to launch the campaign, expecting the free non-partisan radicals to take up the initiative. The civic liberation action was expected to unfold in three stages – 1) civic activists → 2) a potentially active minority → 3) a majority. The organizers hoped to create a snowball effect, expecting civic activists to be the nucleus that would trigger mass movement. The campaign was to involve a large number of civic activists to be conducted on a national scale. Multiple meetings and consultations were held in late 2005 to draw activists. Many members of the Assembly of Non-Governmental Pro-Democracy Organizations of Belarus supported the "For Freedom!" concept.

Role in a broader context

In 2005 and 2006, it was impossible to organize a classic "non-political" civic drive to boost the presidential campaign of an opposition candidate. Independent election observation was impossible. There was no need to urge voters to go to the polls because the government

used its muscle to ensure a high turnout. Human and organizational resources were scarce to conduct a large-scale negative campaign against Łukašenka. The teams of both opposition candidates engaged in negative campaigning, especially that of Alaksandr Kazulin. In addition, some voters were turned off by the obtrusive pro-Łukašenka propaganda in the state media.

Civic organizations had little influence on the political campaign. Their involvement was limited to participation in the Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces whose delegates elected Alaksandr Milinkievič as their common challenger to Łukašenka. Obviously, many activists of NGOs, especially those affiliated with the Belarusian Association of Resource Centres, worked with regional headquarters of the opposition candidate, and even constituted the skeleton personnel, but they did not represent any specific political force. Attempts by NGO activists and leaders to influence political decisions of the opposition coalition and its candidate produced a "limited" result – a common strategy was never adopted.

The pro-democracy forces' strategy, as leaders and activists saw it, consisted of the following three elements:

- The common candidate's election campaign carried out by the coalition of political parties, in particular by the coalition's bodies – the central and regional headquarters and the



Songs of Freedom, CD cover.

National Committee. The purpose of the campaign was to rally support for Milinkievič to ensure his victory in the presidential election. The candidate and the Political Council of the United Pro-Democracy Forces later left this purpose behind, although both had initially declared an election victory to be their goal.

- A civic campaign, which was carried out by NGOs and civic activists. The campaign included several separate campaigns that had various objectives and sought to beef up the common candidate's presidential campaign. Some of these campaigns targeted certain groups, while others sought to engage the general public. These efforts were aimed to stir up voters to action in the name of democracy and freedom. The civic campaign also included efforts by pro-democracy NGOs that were not directly linked to the election.
- Street protests against election fraud were crucial. However, the opposition failed to assign the task of staging street protests to a particular group. Nevertheless, voters turned out to Kastryčnickaja Square in large numbers. Obviously, politicians did not do enough to plan and organize street protests, leaving this key element to chance. Civic activists from various groups showed a good ability for self-organization, leading the street protests, but a single decision-making centre was never formed.

A different outcome was simply impossible because groups willing to spearhead a revolution stayed away from the political process. The opposition declared a revolution as a way to overcome the regime and establish democracy, but there was no one to organize it. No one saw conditions for a revolution in the first place. Spring 2006 was not an attempt to carry out a revolution, it was rather an attempt to simulate a revolution.

“For Freedom!” activities

“For Freedom!” was mainly aimed to create an ideological basis of the common oppo-



Anatol Klačuk

Uładzimir Arłou, a popular writer, support the opposition.

sition candidate's campaign since the pro-democracy coalition had failed to come up with a program. “For Freedom!” challenged Alaksandr Łukašenka's values, not his social and economic policies. Freedom, a value incompatible with the dictatorial regime, challenged Łukašenka's campaign slogans “For Belarus” and “Belarus for ...”. Specific actions and the campaign strategy were planned on the basis of opinion polls. According to the plan, the campaign was to promote freedom and raise the issue of freedom (in connection with the common candidate's campaign) and constitute the ideological pivot of the pro-democracy forces' general campaign.

The point of the campaign and its strategy was to offer voters freedom as the value that forms the foundation of an alternative model of society. Another purpose was to show the importance and strength of freedom supporters to the Belarusian public, the authorities and the international community. The value of freedom and the need for liberating Belarusian society were the main ideas of the awareness campaign.

The main campaign slogans were “I Am for Freedom!”, “For Freedom!”, “2006 Year of Freedom”, “Freedom” etc. The campaign used the national white and red colours. It was expected to cover the entire territory of Belarus, but in fact it was conducted in Minsk and the 50 largest cities, involving activists of the Assembly and scores of pro-democracy activists. It was conducted openly and built on the princi-

ple of autonomy of all elements. After the main polling day the campaign rolled on spontaneously, uncoordinated by its organizers, but it was headed in the planned direction. The coordinators put emphasis on self-organization, which proved efficient during protests against the official election results.

The campaign's target group was “freedom supporters” or potentially active opponents of the government in all groups of the population. The main participation criterion was readiness for action, not political affiliation. In fact, the campaign targeted the young generation — students, business owners, white-collar employees and people not employed in the state sector.

Since the campaign was launched later than other election-related efforts (in December 2005), it was better tailored to the requirements of that political period. Potential activists were identified during the opposition's earlier effort to nominate supporters to precinct election commissions by the collection of signatures.

The campaign was designed to continue after the main polling day, which marked only the beginning of the struggle for freedom.

The following means were used to reach voters: the Internet, leaflets, wallet-size calendars, special issues of legal newspapers, “I Am for Freedom” stickers and badges, a concert of banned rock bands in Minsk, CDs with freedom songs and graffiti.

An important achievement was the coalition candidate's consent to including the issue of freedom in his slogans, speeches and platform (Milinkievič's campaign motto was “Freedom, Truth and Justice”), although the candidate's team was inconsistent in using campaign slogans. Nevertheless, the campaign helped create Milinkievič an image of a freedom fighter.

Unlike other national drives, “For Freedom!” was well coordinated from the very beginning with the common candidate's campaign team, and included a message aimed to prompt voters to join street protests.



photo.bymedia.net

Youth at the only rock concert which was allowed within Milinkievič campaign before 2006 election.

The organizers believe that “For Freedom!” succeeded in rallying voters (mostly youths, but also people of all ages) who had not been active in political parties or NGOs before. Badges help freedom supporters single out likeminded people in a crowd, which inspires confidence. Freedom has become the core of the pro-democracy forces’ ideology, while efforts to have opposition representatives included in election commissions helped expose the unfair and non-free nature of the election. The “For Freedom!” brand came into fashion. Evidence of campaign success is the fact that Alaksandr Milinkievič and the pro-democracy coalition have continued to use its logo and motto after the election.

Post election

The concept of freedom filled the political alternative to the Lukashenka regime with new ideological substance. The national idea did not spark a heated debate during ideological discussions in the run-up to the

election. Some groups made unsuccessful attempts to shift the focus from resisting dictatorship to a clash of Belarusian nationalism with pro-Russian anti-nationalism (the rhetoric of the Conservative Christian Party, a discussion involving Belarusian intellectuals of the language used for broadcasting radio programs to Belarus, and also some statements by presidential candidate Kazulin). The 2006 presidential election was not a fight between nationalism and anti-nationalism, it was a clash between two Belarusian national projects that offered different values. In that context, the democratic slogan “For Freedom!” was an effective and strong response to Lukašenka’s slogan “For Belarus!”. It was obvious that “For Freedom!” did not mean “not for Belarus”. The campaign prompted Lukašenka’s ideologists to publicly admit their opposition to freedom.

When the election was over, freedom advocates faced the challenge to develop a new strategy. The weakness of most Belarusian political projects was that they

were designed for a short term and there was no long-term implementation plan. The architects of most Belarusian civic campaigns had sought to achieve a short-term result that had no effect whatsoever on the general situation in the country. In order not to fall into the same trap, the “For Freedom!” masterminds came up with two scenarios — one was to be used if street protests gained momentum and grew into a revolution, and the other in case protesters run out of steam. The only thing they were sure of is that protests were inevitable because that was the only way to oust the dictator. The election was only expected to trigger the political radicalization of society.

Campaign activists will continue to disseminate their ideas, visual symbols, information about freedom and restrictions of freedom, and also to stage “For Freedom!” events. The campaign should remain an element of a broader strategy of the pro-democracy coalition, if such a strategy is ever to be adopted.

Ina Kulej

The Solidarity Committee Activities

The Solidarity Committee in defence of victims of political persecution began operation on 5 April 2006. It was established in response to the authorities' harassment of opposition supporters during and in the wake of the 2006 presidential election.

The committee has the following functions:

- assistance to persecuted students;
- assistance to victimized employees;
- medical rehabilitation for victims;
- raising public awareness of the Solidarity campaign.

The committee is formed of the leaders of prominent civic organizations:

- Aleś Bialacki of the Viasna human rights centre;
- Ludmiła Hraznova of the Human Rights Alliance;
- Alena Tałapiła of the Association of Belarusian Students;
- Andrej Vituška of the Association of Belarusian Medical Workers;
- Ała Karol of the Parents' Solidarity Committee.

The Solidarity Committee Board decides on the priorities and objectives of the committee. It considers applications for assistance and decides on individual forms of assistance. Decisions are made on the basis of the following papers:

- court rulings;
- certificates given on release from jail;
- a document from court that orders a person to pay a fine;
- a document from the police confirming that a teenager is registered as a "problem child";
- a document confirming that a person was sacked from work;
- medical file records;
- media reports;

and also on the basis of face-to-face interviews with victims. The evidence presented is kept in the board's database.

The committee is responsible for all day-to-day work that includes the following:

- compiling a file for each victim;
- updating the database;

- staying in touch with the victims who applied to the committee for assistance;
- preparing statistical and analytical materials;
- conducting a dialogue with foreign ambassadors accredited in Belarus;
- preparing and holding meetings with victims and their relatives;
- corresponding with donors that assist victims of persecution in Belarus (universities, non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups and individuals from various countries);
- keeping the media informed of its activity;
- conducting the Solidarity awareness campaign in Belarus and abroad.

In all, 678 people asked for help within the first three months of the committee's operation, including 372 students, 122 unemployed persons, 41 persons looking for opportunities for post-diploma training, 17 individuals willing to enroll on internship programs, and 126 individuals who said they needed medical rehabilitation and financial assistance.

The committee provided specific assistance to the following categories:

1. On 1 June 2006, 233 students expelled from universities, persecut-

Ina Kulej

chief of the Help For Repressed Persons "Solidarity" Committee

ed secondary school students and children of harassed activists began studies in Poland under the Kastus Kalinowski Program.

2. The committee has proposed students and persons who need post-diploma education for further training programs in various countries: 12 individuals in the Czech Republic, 10 individuals in Germany, seven in Estonia, three in Norway, two in France and 17 in Ukraine. It keeps working closely with the Czech, Estonian and Ukrainian ambassadors to select participants for further training programs in their countries. The committee is preparing proposals for the Romanian embassy following the Romanian government's announcement of an appropriate program.
3. The committee is compiling a list of 70 workers for temporary employment with a building company in Poland.
4. It has reached agreement with non-governmental organizations in the Czech Republic and Poland willing to enroll 10 and 20 persons, respectively, on internship programs.
5. The committee offered financial assistance to 12 victims using money provided by various religious groups based in Minsk.
6. Protestant groups pledged to assist on a regular basis 25 families of victims facing financial difficulties.
7. Three children of regional leaders aged between 10 and 14 were sent to the Belarusian-Italian integration camp in Radaskavicy to recuperate.
8. The committee reached a preliminary agreement with the Ukrainian embassy to send 10 persons to Ukrainian health resorts for medical rehabilitation.
9. The committee sent more than 100 letters of moral support to victims' families as part of the Solidarity campaign.



Andrej Lankievič

Interview with a young man willing to participate in the Kalinowski Programme for repressed students.

10. Committee members held five meetings with relatives of political prisoners, members of the unregistered organizations Partnership, Malady Front, and others.
11. The committee distributed 20 books signed by writers Uładzimir Arłou, Volha Ipatava and academic Radzim Harecki and five CDs signed by rock star Lavon Volski among pro-democracy activists.
12. The committee delivered an open letter addressed by relatives of victims to participants at the G-8 sum-

mit in St. Petersburg and to respective embassies.

13. The committee members held a news conference to publicize the appeal to the G-8 leaders.

Protests in Belarus will gain strength. Once people overcome fear, they become actively involved in the "For Freedom" movement. Pro-democracy forces have a challenge to instill confidence in activists who should be able to rely on the support of fellow Belarusians and the international community in the event of persecution.

Ihar Lalkou

The New Generation of Opposition

The 2006 presidential election saw a new generation of activists aged between 25 and 30 emerge from the shadow of older leaders who had previously dominated Belarus' political scene. Young people born between 1971 and 1986 played a major role in the nomination of Alaksandr Milinkievič¹ as the pro-democracy coalition's challenger to the incumbent president, and formed the leadership of the candidate's election headquarters. The new generation includes politicians such as Juraś Hubarevič², Kastuś Smolikau³, Siarhiej Antusievič⁴, Alaksiej Janukievič⁵, Uladzimir Łabkovič⁶ and Pavał Mažejka⁷.

Prior to the election, few expected that protesters would be able to pitch a tent camp in downtown Minsk directly across the road from the Presidential Administration office and hold out for four days despite the arrests of hundreds of opposition supporters before and after the election (voting took place from March 19 to 23, in total around 1,000 activists were jailed), as well as intimidation and the authorities' threats to use

force to disperse any possible protests. However some people did not only expect, but planned for developments to take such a course. Their efforts resulted in a week of protests that attracted and united people who had not been involved in preparations.

It all began with an awareness campaign called "Chopić!" [Enough!], which was launched and coordinated by 20-35 year old politicians and civic activists of various political views (from anarchists to right-wing nationalists).

The campaign plan was developed in autumn 2005 and got underway in January 2006. Its purpose was to mobilize opponents of the regime for protests in the event of large-scale election fraud. The campaign engulfed the 30 largest Belarusian towns, where activists distributed leaflets, stickers, posters and video CDs. About 800 activists braved intimidation and arrests to distribute the materials.

A week or two before March 19, "Chopić!" activists started to trickle into the capital from the regions. That saved

them from arrests, which were made across the country two or three days before the election. They were able to reach the city without problems, while a few days later, police deployed additional forces before the voting began to patrol the roads leading to Minsk in an effort to block the movement of opposition supporters to the capital. The authori-

¹ Milinkievič was elected as the coalition's single candidate at the Congress of Pro-Democracy Forces held in Minsk on October 1 and 2, 2005 with 800 delegates, representatives of political parties and civic organizations from all over the country, participating. Milinkievič, supported by the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and representatives of non-governmental organizations, received more votes than the other two contenders.

² Juraś Hubarevič, chairman of the BPF regional chapter in Brest, headed the opposition candidate's Brest regional campaign headquarters.

³ Kastuś Smolikau, chairman of the BPF regional chapter in Viciebsk, acted as deputy head of the Viciebsk regional campaign headquarters.

⁴ Siarhiej Antusievič, chairman of Independent Trade Union at the Azot nitrogen fertilizer factory in Hrodna, headed the campaign headquarters in Hrodna.

⁵ Alaksiej Janukievič, deputy chairman of the BPF, coordinated Milinkievič's tours.

⁶ Uladzimir Łabkovič, chairman of the BPF Organizational and Legal Commission, headed the central campaign headquarters' legal service.

⁷ Journalist Pavał Mažejka is spokesman for Milinkievič.

Ihar Lalkou

historian, political activist



Julija Daraškiewicz

Plošča. The tent town stood on the Kastryńnickaja Square for 4 days despite frosts and arrests.

ties managed to paralyze Milinkievič's regional campaign headquarters by arresting their members a few days before the main polling day. Most "Chopić!" activists were in Minsk by this time and gathered on Kastryńnickaja Square on the evening of March 19.

Some analysts unfoundedly accused Milinkievič's central campaign headquarters of failing to develop a plan of protests. In fact, it had a plan but could not put it into practice because the opposition leadership was weakened by the arrests and also because some actions of the authorities came as a surprise (for instance, no one had expected the authorities to allow opposition supporters to amass on Kastryńnickaja Square). Activists decided to employ an alternative plan — to pitch tents on the square and continue protests in central Minsk as long as possible. Despite the large number of participants, the March

19 rally was too short to put up tents in the middle of the crowd without the police taking them down. Tents were erected during another opposition rally on the following night despite plainclothes security officers' attempts to intervene. Almost immediately protesters adopted internal tent camp rules, and put up a security cordon around it to prevent unwelcome visitors from coming in. The tent camp leaders named persons responsible for each sector of the camp, selected mainly from among "Chopić!" regional leaders. Aleś Mazur⁸ was named the camp coordinator and acted as its commandant until the tents were torn down by police officers in the early hours of March 24.

The tent camp helped prolong protests and attract attention of the

⁸ Aleś Mazur, a civic activist close to the Greens and the former publisher of the satirical newspaper *Navinki* closed down by the authorities.

Belarusian public and the international community. It gave the opposition an opportunity to stage rallies that attracted thousands of participants to downtown Minsk every night. The protests proved that claims by the state-controlled media and some analysts about the lack of support for a democratic alternative to the Łukašenka regime were unfounded. Protesters who put up and defended the tent camp helped the Belarusian pro-democracy forces to avoid an embarrassing defeat. Most of these people, members of Milinkievič's campaign team, and activists of the "Chopić!" campaign represented the emerging new generation of the Belarusian opposition. Not only were they young, but they were also willing to work together for the common cause of democracy in spite of ideological differences.

The tent camp protest proved the new generation's moral right to partici-

pate in the decision-making process of the opposition along with politicians who had been in the leadership of political parties for 10–15 years.

Developments that followed the March 24 crackdown on the tent camp also testified to the emergence of a new force. Young activists who took part in the presidential and mobilization campaign and protests against Łukašenka's re-election formed the backbone of the "For Freedom" movement. Alaksandr Milinkievič announced plans to establish the movement at a rally on March 19, while the enlistment of activists began during a Freedom Day⁹ rally on March 25.

Forming a new organization to represent the new generation has never

⁹ The Belarusian opposition marks Freedom Day — anniversary of the declaration of independence of the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic in 1918 — by street demonstrations.

been on the agenda. Its representatives, who share views on the future of pro-democracy movements and the country as a whole, maintain informal connections. Formally, these people are affiliated with various political parties and civic groups (or are not affiliated with any group), but they advocate the same national values, oppose pro-Russian development scenarios for the country, are well-educated (most of them hold degrees from universities based in Western Europe or Ukraine), and have experience of working together as members of Milinkievič's campaign team or in the framework of the "Chopić!" campaign. Attempts have so far failed to formalize relations among the tent camp protest participants (one of the attempts was made when former tent camp protest participants met in Ratamka outside Minsk on May 12 and 13, 2006).

However, the new generation is becoming more influential within the opposition and its representatives are likely to play leading roles in most parties and civic organizations in a few years, as well as in governmental institutions that will be formed after the fall of the regime.



Independence Avenue, Minsk, 25 of March, 2006.

Julija Daraškievič