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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.

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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.

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