

## **Current Trends in Belarus Politics**

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**Summer 2006**

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#### Summary

The survey discusses the most pressing internal and external factors that determine current political trends in Belarus. It is based on twenty-six interviews with political and social scientists in Belarus carried out during the summer (June 2006). A survey with a similar methodology was conducted by the Pontis Foundation in September-October 2005.

As the survey reveals, among most important internal factors the continued repressions against the third sector activists may further strengthen the already existing tendency to push civic activists towards the individual work approach. While the summer atmosphere can not be compared to the atmosphere from March 2006, it can also not be compared to the defeatist mood that had existed before the elections among civil society. However, this spirit does not correlate with the trust in the opposition. This is reinforced by the conflict within the United Democratic Forces before the local government elections, where formation of regional coalitions (without the national party leaders) will further decrease the importance of Aleksandr Milinkevich as a national leader, since he lacks organized (local) structures behind him. The absence of any concrete steps by Milinkevich himself to clarify his post-election position is also slowly but surely pushing him out of the position of a universal oppositional leader. Therefore, Belarusian experts forecast two major trends for the near future: continuation of the current inclination to conformism by the majority of the population and a further decline in opposition membership; and the increased tendency of marginalized opposition groups to take radical and uncoordinated steps.

While the current conflict has destructive tendencies with regard to democratic forces, the local-level preparation for local government elections can at least ease the tensions. While there is no clear vision towards participation in local government elections (most of the candidates are expected not to be elected due to the non-free and unfair process), various regional and local coalitions have still been formed to utilize the "elections" for campaign purposes. Pro-democratic NGOs may play the role of a mediator in the process of forming regional coalitions, as happened by the end of the summer in Mohylev, but most of them must be much more active, and not only wait for political leaders to solve the current crisis.

Majority of respondents do not predict any substantial changes at the side of the regime, which is considered to be consolidated and internally stable. Few respondents expect at least some changes throughout the local elections within the administration - especially members of the state controlled trade unions and official youth organization BRSM are expected to be "elected". Along with this "shake-up" a few respondents pointed out the (rather limited) efforts of the regime to implement some sort of market reforms aimed to increase the inflow of foreign assets coming to Belarus.

There are not too many changes in external factors: Russia is not expected by the respondents to resign itself to support the current regime, unless there is an acceptable alternative. It is generally assumed that highly reflected gas price hike for Belarus will be similar to those currently paid by Armenia (approximately 100 – 120 USD/1000 m<sup>3</sup>) with some sort of "compensation" from Russia. On the other hand, Russia perceives Belarus increasing unwillingness to integrate economically within the framework of Kremlin-designed economic

projects (SES, EURASEC). This could eventually change the Russian political communication towards Belarus, and make larger room for pressure at least until the 2008 Russian presidential election. The survey argues that it is necessary to further increase the pressure not only on Belarus, but on Russia by the West, since this seems to be the most effective way to ensure the opening of the current Belarusian regime.

### **Main Tendencies in Society**

**Repression pushes towards individualization:** The escalation of repressions against the third sector activists, e.g. the latest and largest one which was targeted on Partnership activists (an unregistered civic initiative for the presidential elections monitoring whose members were imprisoned before the elections), remains the most characteristic trend in Belarusian civil society. According to respondents, this will further push civic activists towards the individual work approach, which is already a visible trend. On the other hand, the persecution of independent think-tanks has strengthened their orientation towards foreign institutions. This only increases the brain drain of independent experts in the area of social sciences from Belarus, which is already under way.

Even though the access to the independent information is becoming more and more restricted, what is indicated not only by repressions against independent press, but also by the prohibition of the distribution of remaining independent newspapers in the streets and at the metro stations, the author's personal impression was that following the events of March 2006, it is possible to observe the weakening of the power of fear as an instrument of the control of society. It is still possible to see a considerable number of young people wearing the badge „Za svabodu“ (“For Freedom”, a symbol of the presidential campaign of democratic forces in March 2006 which later became the name of the opposition movement led by A. Milinkievich) in the streets of Minsk. While the situation in the summer of 2006 can not be compared to the atmosphere from three months ago, it can also not be compared to the defeatist mood that had existed among opposition activists before Aleksandr Milinkievich was elected as the single candidate of the United Democratic Forces for the 2006 presidential elections.

**Good spirit, but disbelief:** However, this spirit – which still exists – does not correlate with the trust in the opposition, which remains considerably low. Moreover, according to the survey results, this trust seems to be slightly declining. Several respondents pointed out that the so-called “Belarusian Maidan,” the post-election protest in March 2006, was not inspired by the opposition itself but it was more a result of the spontaneous citizens' activity, especially of the so-called “new youth.” A prominent sociologist forecasts that one of the two trends in the further development of the opposition background might prevail: 1) continuation of the current inclination to conformism and a further decline in opposition membership; and/or 2) the increased tendency of marginalized opposition groups to take radical and uncoordinated steps. Both tendencies are already in progress, as documented mainly by hunger strikes.

There are also other efforts to build a foundation for a policy-based alternative for the opposition. Strengthening analytical centers in regions and the interest in institutionalizing the Minsk Analytical Group grouped around the journal *Arché* or the elaboration of projects focusing on regional development strategies prepared with the assistance of expert from various fields deserves attention.

**Conflicts at national level, but local government elections could ease them:** The situation in smaller regional centers, such as Mohylev or Brest, is substantially different from the situation in Minsk. Opposition activity was nearly paralyzed in several regions after the presidential elections, mainly due to the conflict of political parties at the national level. This conflict between the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) and the United Civil Party (OGP), which has triggered the leadership crisis of United Democratic Forces (e.g. the status of Milinkievich),

is not necessarily manifested in the same way at the regional level. In Mohylev and also in Vitebsk, the conflict at the national level has reached regional structures as well, but respondents in Brest did not observe anything similar.

Nevertheless, this conflict has destructive tendencies with regard to democratic forces. However, local-level preparation for local government elections, along with the proposal to “reform” the UDF leadership, can at least ease the tensions. While there is no clear vision towards participation in local government elections (most of the candidates are expected not to be elected due to the non-free and unfair process), various regional and local coalitions have still been formed to utilize the “elections” for campaign purposes. After the Congress of Democratic Forces in October 2005, where many party delegates observed NGO support for the election of Alexander Milinkievich as the single candidate, and also after the presidential campaign, pro-democratic NGOs could play the role of a mediator in the process of forming regional coalitions, as happened by the end of the summer in Mohylev. While at the regional level party differences are not so relevant and NGOs have a stronger base, in a few cases – such as in Brest – party representatives still refuse to accept NGO activists as part of the “democratic forces”.

One of the reasons is that the bulk of assistance remains allocated in structures based in Minsk. This gives national (party and civic) leaders a reason to be out of touch with reality, and discourages regional activists. However, the preparation for local government elections and formation of regional coalitions could further decrease the importance of Aleksandr Milinkievich as a national leader, since he lacks organized (local) structures behind him.

### **Trends within the Opposition**

Despite of the critical attitudes towards functioning of the official opposition among members of Belarusian opposition, especially among intellectuals active in think-tanks, there has been less criticism towards Aleksandr Milinkievich as leader of the opposition. Even though his own followers criticize him for irresoluteness and ineffective use of his opportunities, his advantages in comparison to other potential leaders (such as the absence of negative rating, respect for his personal qualities, etc.) have been respected even by his critics so far. However, the absence of Milikievich’s further steps to clarify his post-election position within the UDF is slowly but surely pushing him out of the position of a universal oppositional leader.

**Conflict as Usual:** The existence of internal conflict was recognized by the overwhelming majority of respondents, which was no surprise for them. The conflict between BNF and OGP has been occurring long-term; on the other hand, respondents do not expect any open conflict within the opposition. However, several respondents criticized the absence of a clear signal from the West in favor of maintaining the unity of the democratic camp. The core of the opposition’s internal conflict lies in the effort to take control of the leadership while maintaining Milikievich’s symbolic position of a formal leader. Even top leaders of OGP have stated their intention to keep Milinkievich in high politics. However, the leaders’ goal could be to strengthen the position of their own party through elimination of smaller political groups from the leadership of UDF and to keep control over resources.

**Views on Milinkevich:** According to some respondents, Milinkievich, who was criticized for offering fewer impulses for the opposition than expected, should not prevent the organization of the second congress. On one hand, this could enable the reunification of opposition groups (however, it might be too late in the autumn already). On the other hand, several others think that in this stage, the opposition could not have a leader.

In general, respondents state non-entanglement, steady character, and image of a fair man as Milikievich’s positive qualities. Independence from any political party is still viewed as his

strength. However, his (as respondents saw it) self-imposed position as the “apostle of democratic values” was rather believed to be his weakness, as it limits his ability to broaden the existing political and social background of the opposition. His own supporters talk about weaker leadership qualities (as expected), while other respondents think he should weaken his pro-European behavior to achieve greater impact. Other respondents considered him to be dependent on and work under the pressure of party leaders.

**Need for a transparent support mechanism:** Financial machinations within the opposition are discussed more openly than ever before. Especially BNF and some of its representatives are criticized; such accusations dominate the current BNF conflict between BNF chairman Vincuk Viachorka and his younger opponents. Many critics refer to the pre-election mobilization campaign “Xopits!” as too expensive given its (exclusively) internet implementation. Similar accusations have been directed also towards OGP. After the election campaign, one of OGP representatives was criticized for obstructing the opposition campaign for not providing the electoral program to the editorial office of the national daily “Sovetskaja Belarussija” on time, or for preparing electoral materials in Belarusian with major grammatical errors.

**Communists as a Case Study?:** The effort to eliminate the Party of Belarusian Communists (PKB) by the state power is perceived as an issue to probe the UDF. On one hand, after the visit of the PKB chairman Sergey Kaliakin in Moscow, there were rumors about his ambitions to gain the leading position in democratic forces. On the other hand, the pro-Lukashenka Communist Party of Belarus (KPB) developed an initiative to unify the party with communists who are active in the opposition. Even though PKB refuses to take this step, respondents do not rule out the possibility of formation of a fictive initiative group that would announce the unification of both parties and later followed by official dissolution of the PKB, might be formed. Another possible scenario is the elimination of registration of local, county, and respective regional organizations of political parties. Taking into consideration Belarusian legislation, political parties have to be active in at least four areas. If they do not fulfill this condition, they cannot be registered. Thus, consecutive and silent elimination of oppositional elements is more than viable, and the PKB could serve as the case study for such liquidation for other opposition parties – only in a later stage.

**Local Government Elections - in search for a strategy:** Chances that the independent or opposition candidates will succeed in being elected in upcoming local elections are quite low. The only opportunity is given by the generation exchange which was “announced” by the Central Electoral Commission Head Lidia Yermoshina, who said that local government elections will bring new faces to Belarus politics. The two new cadre bases of the regime are supposed to be the official youth movement, BRSM (the so-called Luka-mol), and trade unions.

The opposition does not expect any serious success and throughout the election campaign it rather focuses on its own promotion, and propagation of their program. Nevertheless, respondents (during the summer) in the regions showed only a limited knowledge of the opposition’s preparation for local elections, which indicates that the local government campaign is either prepared on the central level, or simply that respondents have been gathering information from Minsk. This suggests that democratic candidates independent of party-led campaigns will be left out and will not be able to gather sufficient support. If so, this could decrease the chances of independent local councilors, as it happened in 2003 when a handful of young democratic candidates won seats after running successful get-out-the-vote campaigns in various regions (mainly small towns).

**New opposition:** The phenomenon of the so-called new opposition, formed on the wave of post-election protests in March 2006, is perceived in various ways: respondents appreciate its

establishment and especially the fact that it involves people who had previously not been active in politics. Its importance is appreciated especially in regard to its mobilization potential. However, the survey points to the weakness related to its program and organizational functioning and majority of respondents doubts that “the new opposition” could become an independent entity in Belarusian political life. Nevertheless, only few respondents criticized the effort of political parties to gain control over this new emerged movement.

**Kozulin factor:** The potential of Aleksander Kozulin’s camp is considered to be limited, especially since its leader was imprisoned. After his arrest, the leadership phenomenon of Kozulin, who showed the capability to consolidate his social-democratic movement, has been extensively missing in Belarusian politics. Especially OGP and its leader Anatol Lebedko are openly trying to integrate Kozulin’s camp into the UDF. Nonetheless, several respondents supposed that Kozulin’s imprisonment might further strengthen his electoral potential in the future. Survey respondents admitted the need for a unifying process within the opposition as well as the need to overcome ideological differences; however, the high level of mistrust among followers of individual leaders remains the biggest challenge. Such mistrust is largely related to Kozulin himself as many oppositional activists still perceive him as the former destructive follower of Lukashenka responsible for repressions at Belarusian State University (Kozulin was the rector of the BSU).

**Contacts with the Administration?:** Some respondents mentioned the existence of informal contacts with the administration. These contacts exist on the level of technocratic elites, e.g., through the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. According to the survey, there are informal contacts with the administration, (economic) consultants of the President or with top officers at the Ministry of Economy. In connection with this, some respondents doubt the opposition might play a (relevant) role in the fall of the regime. They perceive as a mistake the insufficient communication with the business sector. In this regard the opposition is by many respondents seen not only as passive in building contacts and returning to the mainstream of Belarusian politics, but unable to meet its own commitments, too. Post-election goals of the opposition, such as announced collection of signatures against the contract system in the employer- employee relations, legal actions concerning elections, and possible impeachment of MPs has been either unnoticed or did not take place at all.

### **Stability of Ruling Elites**

Majority of respondents do not predict any substantial changes of the regime. Government elites are considered to be consolidated and internally stable, even though this position was shaken during the March elections. The recent withdrawal of Head of the Security Council Tozik, who was not long ago perceived as Lukashenka’s favorite and potential future successor, appears to be falling victim to a “clannish” type of conflict between power groups: the technocrats (Tozik, Prime Minister Sidorskij) and the so-called “siloviki” (former Head of Presidential Administration and present Head of State Security Council Victor Sheiman). However, Tozik’s new position as Belarusian Ambassador to China also seems to be related to a stronger need to oversee business activities by various regime representatives and to the re-prioritization of economic and political strategies in Belarus. China is widely considered to be the country in which the current Belarusian elite is interested in, especially after contacts with various Arab and Islamic states had failed to be developed into effective business. The role of Ural Latypov, the former Head of the Presidential Administration and Minister of Foreign Affairs in this “Chinese” direction remains unclear, still, Viktor Lukashenka, the president’s older son, is believed to be an important actor in the export of assets to China. Nevertheless, in case of a more intense pressure from the Western countries, these new target countries would not protect bank assets of the Lukashenka’s regime.

**Elite shaking?:** Currently, the position of Sheiman as the chief of the Security Council is believed to be considerably weaker compared to the powers he used to have as the Head of the Presidential Administration. The withdrawal of Prime Minister Sidorskiy is generally perceived as being related to the gas price hike, while in the same time he was considered to be the best negotiator with Russia regarding hydro-carbons. However, such shake-ups and conflicts among individuals of the "clans" do not have a strong impact on the stability of the regime. President Lukashenka incites and exploits the disputes between different parties while he remains the ultimate arbiter in these disagreements. This is not a real conflict of elites, but an imposed exhaustion by some representatives of the regime, such as the case of Pavel Jakubovich, the editor in chief of the daily Sovetskaja Belorussija.

**Party of power and market reform:** Few respondents expect specific changes in political course in connection with a speech given by Lukashenka in Belarusian Parliament on May 23, 2006. President indicated the possibility of building "the party of power"; either a political party or a social movement based on trade unions and the structures of BRSM, the so-called Luka-mol. In doing so, he did not exclude the dialogue with the so-called "constructive opposition" ("which sets normal goals in the area of survival of the state and the nation") as one of the possibilities, but at the same time he rejected a dialogue with the current opposition. This shows that in the near future, efforts in the area of building a "loyal opposition" that "would respect the leading position of Lukashenka as well as efforts to build an own pro-regime third sector" can be expected. A similar possibility has already been explored in Russia, especially in the area of Trans-Dnistrina (youth organizations "Nashi", "Idushciye vmeste"). In this region, civic organizations (who, in their style of work and their methods of presentation, try to imitate the Serbian "Otpor", or Belarusian "Zubr"), were established under the auspices of the local administration to "work with the "electorate", focusing especially on youth but at the same time promoting the official policy. Another issue, which was perceived by a few respondents as significant, was the effort of the regime to implement limited market reforms aimed to increase the inflow of foreign assets coming to Belarus. The cancellation of the so-called "golden share of the state" in corporations with foreign stakes, the preparation of a new tax legislation, or the decision to sell of "Slavneftbank" to the Russian "Vneshtorgbank" shows that young technocrats have been given a chance to launch the market reform à la Belarus.

### **Russia and Belarus: No sudden change is expected**

The opinion of the respondents about Russia's role in Belarusian political struggle was unified: Russia would resign itself to support the current regime only if there is an acceptable alternative. However, a pro-Russian alternative to Lukashenka in Belarus is not very probable. Nevertheless, respondents mentioned the absence of a consistent Russian foreign policy towards Belarus, and highlighted the differences in political communication and economic cooperation. Only a minority of respondents admitted that there had not been any changes in the current Russian policy towards Belarus, or believed in the possibility of cooperation between the EU and Russia to change the current Belarusian regime.

The announced increase in gas prices is perceived as occurring in connection with the G8's July 2006 summit in St. Petersburg: It was an argument for Western partners to counterbalance the Kremlin's support for the Lukashenka regime, to support Russia's entry into the WTO and also simply to increase revenues for Gazprom. It is important to note that respondents do not expect the increase to be a dramatic one, i.e. that prices would not reach a European level. It is generally assumed that prices will be similar to those currently paid by Armenia, which would be a double increase at most (approximately 100 - 120 USD/1000 m<sup>3</sup>). Many respondents expect some sort of "compensation" for the price hike, such as the increase of transit fees or provisions of loans from Russia. Almost nobody considers the increase to be the Kremlin's attack on the Belarusian regime. On the other hand, Russia perceives Belarus as

unwilling to integrate economically within the framework of Kremlin-designed economic projects (SES, EURASEC). This could eventually change the Russian political communication towards Belarus. Respondents agreed that it is necessary to further increase the pressure on Russia by the West, since this seems to be the most effective way to ensure the opening of the current Belarusian regime.

Nevertheless, many respondents pointed to the possibility of participation of Russian special units in interventions against Belarusian demonstrators. It may have happened for the first time in the 2004 Parliamentary Elections, as well as during the protest action on March 25, 2006. Some believe in the joint training of Russian and Belarusian special police forces. Opposition activists arrested during demonstrations remembered that during the police action and also during interrogations there were some people present who did not understand the Belarusian language and asked for interpretation.

**Belarus and EU: Not too much change either:**

Respondents largely criticized the EU's current position towards Lukashenka's regime. Although many of them perceived the increasing interest and assistance of Brussels regarding the situation in Belarus positively, the latest measures – especially those aimed to support independent media – are considered to be inefficient. According to respondents, the need for broadcasting an independent satellite TV channel is the most pressing, regardless of other projects that also might be able to provide information to citizens more effectively. Few even view the increase of anti-Western feelings as a consequence of failed implementation of the EU policy.

The respondents do not expect that the visa ban would influence the behavior of the government elites. The list is too rigid (i.e., short) to be taken seriously, and EU policy is perceived to be too soft and lacking serious implementation to be taken seriously by the regime. However, it would be different if this list were open and flexible, i.e., if it were regularly updated with the names of those participating in political repressions after the 2006 presidential elections. Some argued that there is a risk that the regime might react by limiting traveling of opposition and civic activists or restricting the entry of foreign journalists into the country. Moreover, extensive expansion of this "black list" might strengthen the consolidation the state bureaucracy and bring the administrative machinery closer to the state power. In majority of cases, the possibility of potential EU economic sanctions towards Belarus meets with criticism as well. Respondents fear that the regime might also use the criminalization of Belarusian opposition to compromise it, while gaining political capital. Reflections on sanctions were used by Lukashenka as an argument against the dialogue with the opposition during his speech in Parliament on May 23, 2006 ("What kind of dialogue can it be if they are calling for economic sanctions against their own nation?"). Mainly, sanctions could lead to Belarus further exporting its products through Russian companies, which would in fact increase its dependency on Moscow. Cancelling trade preferences due to the violation of trade unions without talks following these sanctions would put the democratic trade union in an awkward situation.

In addition to restrictions, the EU should offer Belarusian citizens more positive programming and incentives – for example in the form of the liberalization of visa policy for regular Belarus citizens. A smaller part of respondents were willing to accept only selective sanctions, for example the limitation of a general system of preferences for Belarus as a state that limits the rights of trade union organizations, specifically with implications on gas products.