

**Memorandum** on Civil Society Development in Belarus

**From:** Slovakia-Belarus Task Force (the project of the Pontis Foundation)

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**Introduction:**

In August-September 2005, after completing the survey on the current conditions of civil society in Belarus, the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force organized a series of regional meetings with local NGOs to inform them about the results of the survey, evaluate the NGO levels of preparation, and discussed further plans of the civic campaign. This report summarizes the current mood of civil society organizations based on the regional seminars, and outlines the processes being undertaken by democratic structures in Belarus.

**Democratic Structures and the Elections:**

While political leaders have been gathering around the cause of a single presidential candidate and the Congress of Democratic Forces is schedule to gather in Minsk on October 1-2, 2005, several processes by NGOs are identifying means and structures to mobilize people before the 2006 presidential elections. Formulation of a civic campaign to mobilize the society before the elections by the Assembly of pro-Democratic NGOs began with the survey of the *Slovakia-Belarus Task Force*. (This survey was commissioned with the help of Belarusian and Slovak think tanks.) After the survey was completed, the NGO Assembly ran a series of regional meetings with NGOs to present the results and the following summarizes the conclusions of these exchanges.

The so-called “*Game*” is the project of Vladimir Maczkevicz, a well-know independent communications expert from Minsk. Maczkevicz collected a few political party and civil society leaders in January 2005 in order to help in determining a single candidate through a 7-day interpersonal training workshop. Despite the claims of the organizers, most of the political elite were not “full-time” participants. Since then, Maczkevicz and his team developed a strategy for winning the presidential elections, and presented it to various democratic forces. Currently, they are attempting to recruit volunteers, but the motivations being used to mobilize people remain unclear.

The “*Appeal to People*” aiming to change Belarus from dictatorship to democracy was signed by Vladimir Voitovich (former President of the Academy of Science), Vasilij Leonov (former minister of agriculture), Valerij Frolov (former military general and MP) and presented on September 7, 2005. Except Voitovich, they present retired politicians, who claimed to represent civil society since they are not part of the process of selecting the single candidate. The main objective of the initiative is to force Lukashenka not to run in the presidential election. The organizers announced their networking of volunteers, but regular meetings of

the network did not define how they will convince Lukashenka not to participate in the elections.

*Honesty over Crisis:* Civic leaders and activists welcomed the effort as a fresh approach towards civil society, and were grateful to hear truthful results. Although the survey strongly confirmed the lack of change in the public mood, NGOs throughout the regions were satisfied to receive frank information. This also increased the legitimacy of many NGOs, which are now being taken more seriously. As one of the NGO representatives concluded, open dialogue would help the opposition out of the crisis experienced since the 2001 presidential elections. This suggests an overall conclusion that people want honesty – from the democratic structures. The question is why not (and how) to turn this around on the authorities given their track record of honesty, and show what the longer-term consequences of dishonesty will be.

*Consolidation continues:* Without dismissing early initiatives of civil society – including the “Game” - perhaps the most important step of Belarusian NGOs to initiate a sort of coalition around the civic campaign was the meeting in Lviv, Ukraine of Belarusian civic leaders on July 1-2, 2005. The meeting showed the common wish of various NGOs to act cooperatively. Yet, no common themes on the role of NGOs between now and the presidential election emerged. NGOs have had a follow-up debate in Minsk, however there is no clear development regarding this topic.

*Willingness, but lack of motivation:* Despite the apparent willingness of NGOs to act, there is no vision of what to do, and regional civic structures look merely towards Minsk regarding elections related activities. Nonetheless, most of the NGOs do not have faith in the capacity of the opposition (e.g. encouragement of people able to take part in protest actions). Civic activists support this position by noting that people will not protest if they are not adequately informed or motivated or if there is no persuasive alternative to Lukashenka. “The number of people ready to take part in protest actions is less than the number of those who talk about that (during opinion poll)”, as one of the activist phrase it. The regional meetings showed that it would be possible to challenge the regional civic structures with a strategy, where canal possible democratic structures could be useful no matter of political preferences. However, as another participant stated, “in order to make people go out into the streets they must have certain motivation, and people do not have that.” No one objected that the only possible way to prevent falsifications of the elections is getting people into the streets for active mass protest.

*Lack of Civic Confidence in Parties:* Before the 2001 presidential elections, NGOs attracted several people believing that they could change the situation. They participated in signature drives, different election campaigns, and elections observation. However, after several “death” years, people are losing their interest and confidence in NGOs. Those who remain are mostly activists working directly under such auspices. Meanwhile, NGOs expressed the opinion that the 2006 elections will be organized according to the 2001 scenario, but that the falsification of the results will not meet serious resistance, given their failures in 2001. Regional activists fear being led as in 2001 by the same leaders who have not managed to reach any conclusions regarding their failure. Thus their working methods have not changed. In turn, NGO leaders are referring to a crisis of popular trust in party leaders. Changing the approach towards civil society, for example talking with them more often and openly could improve the “civic mood,” and this is particularly important given the hunger for activities by NGOs.

*East-West Divide within Belarus:* The regional cultural, historical and socio-economic variations must be considered in evaluating the attitudes of civil society towards the elections and the stage for mobilization before 2006. In Western Belarus, the Grodno region bordering the EU, where most of the Polish minority (Catholics) resides, the general mood is characterized in that “sooner or later Belarus will become a part of the EU”. Despite the crisis situation described above, NGOs (and most of their activists) believe in change.

In contrast, the Eastern regions are influenced by industrial, chemical, and manufacturing companies. Bordering Russia, business is oriented towards the Russian market. While in the Western regions many people have relatives in Europe, in the East people have relatives in Russia. The same tendency is true regarding seasonal employment, with westerners going abroad to the west and easterners heading to Russia. Generally, companies exporting goods to Russia contribute to maintain the cities and towns. Also, some indirect signs show that the growth of real salary in cities in Eastern Belarus is larger than the average for the country as a whole.

### **The Processes among the Democratic Structures:**

The current political developments in Belarus reveal three deliberate processes in relation to the upcoming presidential elections in 2006:

1) Selecting a *single candidate* campaign (process of the political parties/democratic opposition): During the summer of 2005, more political structures (independent trade unions and NGOs) joined actively the process of selecting a single democratic candidate. Projected to conclude with the Congress of Democratic Forces of Belarus, this development strengthens the hope for a strong democratic candidate to face Lukashenka in the presidential elections, most likely scheduled for July 16, 2006.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the regional seminars organized by Pontis in August-September indicate that many regional activists do not have much faith in the opposition.

2) Formulating a broad *civic campaign* (process of civil society): The central theme of the civic campaign focuses on creating an atmosphere of change and advocating issues where the majority are against the regime, such as injustice, freedom, and other values. Such a focus by NGOs could continue after the presidential elections, thereby increasing their influence on the society in the long-term. The new local civic initiatives of NGOs, launched after the 2004 referendum, have ultimately served as the catalyst in helping to define the civic campaign. Additionally, these initiatives have done well to recognize the importance of this civic process by civil society organizations themselves.<sup>2</sup> Regional seminars suggested that these principles were generally understood and accepted, except the skepticism towards the “street solution”. This was mainly based on a lack of faith in party structures. Formulating civic campaign goals without the street as a potential solution, however, seems to be ineffective. On the contrary, efforts must be increased to diminish the skepticism and increase the capacity for such activities. Thus, a civic campaign structures with a reasonable goal (with long-term effect) and messages should be presented. In addition, political parties should not only conclude the campaign, but also present their plan/campaign for the elections to regional structures and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> Both Pontis polling (May 05) and the Gallup/Baltic Survey (June 05) measured 38% support for Lukashenka in the upcoming polls.

<sup>2</sup> More about this initiative see Pontis's report on civil society from February 2005 at [www.pontisfoundation.sk](http://www.pontisfoundation.sk).

3) Formulating a post-election *mobilization campaign* (process of youth organizations with street protest): Increasing the circles of those (radicals) willing to take the streets on post-election day is the primary focus of this campaign. Here, Zubr is one of the long-time precipitators, but many believe that its activities have not been effective and that it lacks real structures in many regions. While Zubr has been pursuing its original activities and trying to maintain its network, in January 2006 a new coalition of youth organizations was born under the name “Xvatit” (Enough). This includes elements of the Young Front, Young Belarus Coalition, 7<sup>th</sup> Side, and most importantly those local, young politicians, many of whom - due to their effective door-to-door campaigns – were elected in the 2003 local government elections. Several of them have been actively building their constituencies and local structures, which could be a serious help in this effort.

### **Conclusions:**

- These three processes will ultimately converge before the presidential elections. Moreover, these processes offer the possibility for democratic forces to engage all possible segments of society. Regional structures, however, should learn more about current plans, and those responsible for each segment should reach out to regional and local structures. Such a coordinated and well-organized effort would not only contribute to consolidating civil society and party structures throughout the regions, but also would increase the number of activists who believe in this work.
- The regional seminars showed that honesty and concrete strategy would mobilize activists much more than bombastic, but unrealistic statements about revolution. Further question is whether the mood for honesty could be raised effectively toward the authorities given their track record on any policy.
- Regarding the campaign topics, the Pontis survey suggests that political parties could try to solidify their platform, constituency, and trust among people to concentrate on (alternative) economic and social issues. This is based on the finding that as much as 38% of the population believes that there are people in Belarus who could govern the country better than Lukashenka. On the other hand, civil society should create an atmosphere of change based on value issues, such as injustice and human dignity. The civil campaign needs to start as soon as possible to create an environment where a single candidate will seem realistic and preferable
- Civil society is currently realizing its responsibility to develop a new vision for society and to communicate it to the public. The primary goal for civil society is to find the ‘trigger’ issue, which will lead to creating a new vision of the country by civil society. This will be the framework for an agreement among the majority of the nation.
- The main question in relation to the 2006 elections is whether the feelings of injustice and repressed dignity prevails over the comfort and stability created by the current socio-economic situation.