

Policy Report on Belarus Civil Society

From: Slovakia-Belarus Task Force: Civil Society Development

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To: Interested Parties

I. Introduction

In January and February 2005, the Pontis Foundation/Institute for Civic Diplomacy organized a series of meetings with civil society leaders from various regions of Belarus, as well as the first strategic meeting of the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force for Civic Society Development. The goal of the meetings was to map the current views of (civil) society and to prepare the ground for further assistance from the Task Force (including upcoming focus groups and polling). This report – prepared by the mixed Slovakia-Belarus Task Force – serves to share the most important findings regarding current developments in Belarus with interested parties.

II. Findings

1) Authorities: Continue the Drive

After the fraudulent national referendum and parliamentary elections, the authorities are continuing to tighten their rule. The January 2005 changes in the structure of the KGB are a clear signal of a new, upcoming crackdown on democratic structures, targeting this time both civil society organizations and political parties. At the same time, a number of politically motivated corruption cases against well-defined layers of the society (e.g. judges¹, directors of large state factories, and businesses²) send an important signal: don't be active, because this can happen to you as well. One of the most monitored cases by observers and local media is certainly that of Galina Zhuravkova, formerly the head of the Presidential Property Management Department, who has been sentenced to four years in a penal colony by the Minsk District Court for corruption. The general opinion is that she could simply know too much about the income of the President and his circle.³

¹In February 2005 the court sentenced a Judge for 10 years in prison for an alleged \$200 bribe.

² Between November 2004 and January 2005, there were at least five monitored corruption cases against state business leaders.

³ It is worth noting that since December 2004 all private money orders from abroad are accumulated in a special account of the Presidential Property Management Department and the money can only be received after submission of the confirmation of the degree of family relationship; if the transmitter and recipients are not natural relatives, such revenues are taxable as unearned income. If this money is qualified as humanitarian aid, it is necessary to have a document with clear spending purposes (which are to correspond with the standard acts on humanitarian aid). Information from Information Bulletin No.218 (February 21 – 28, 2005) of the analytical center "Social Technologies"

It is worth noting that the general public knows little or nothing concrete about the economic situation of the President. This is a significant difference between him and former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. On February 14, 2005 President Lukashenko gave an alleged interview to the *Russian America* newspaper,⁴ declaring that he had no property, not “even an apartment” and that those who have promised to block his accounts abroad (as stipulated by the Belarus Democracy Act) would “have to find them first.” The question is how much such corruption scandals would influence the “untypical” social contract between government and citizens: we give you stability, you cede your civic rights.

The Zhuravkova case points out another important change in the personnel policy (and the structure) around Lukashenko. While the personnel changes in the administration are generally well-known, it is important to note that Lukashenko is building his new structure exclusively on Viktor Sheiman and his circle.⁵ This leads to the point that the regime has never been so fragile. In addition, “old comrades” are (likely) not receiving new high-level state positions as the Soviet custom states. Leonid Yerin, the former head of the State Committee for Security (KGB) is currently leading the Belarus Biathlon Association, while the whereabouts of Ural Latypov (former head of the presidential administration) are only rumors. Based on these personnel changes, some political analysts are predicting the fall of Prime Minister Sidorskij and Anatolij Tozik, head of the State Control Office.

The Ukrainian elections did not start this process of tightening down on Lukashenko’s part, but did increase on-going preparations by the authorities and intensify the upcoming crackdown on democratic institutions with other steps taken by the authorities. Although the surprise of the authorities after Ukraine was visible, the on-going process shows the strength of the authorities on the one hand and the fear combined with apathy of the society on the other. Ukraine – as Belarussians watched it on both sides – could make planning more precise for both.

Currently the main targets in 2005 appear to be the following group of citizens:

- **Students/young people:** At the end of January, Belarussians were presented with a draft of a presidential decree on human trafficking, aimed at controlling the movement of Belarussian citizens abroad. This draft sets forth that all educational establishments, travel agencies, and public associations must obtain the authorization of the ministry of education for every student travelling abroad. Moreover, this draft decree further restricts employment and training of Belarussians abroad. In addition, the draft proposes re-licensing of travel and fashion agencies to increase control over around 40 agencies in Belarus⁶. Beside these restriction, “lukashism” is becoming the new establishment for young people, proving that

⁴ According to the Charter 97 website on February 28, 2005, the U.S. Embassy in Belarus denied having any information that such a newspaper is registered in the USA or kept in the Library of Congress.

⁵ Among the new important players in the administration is Alexander Popkov, deputy chief of the presidential administration, Evgenij Dvernickij, or Gennadij Lavrenkov, who replaced G. Zhuravkova. His position became short-term though: Lukashenko on February 21, 2005 appointed Alexander Kulichkov, former minister of trade as the new presidential property manager (head of the presidential affairs department). From the point of view of some observers, his replacement means further strengthening of Viktor Sheiman’s position and decreasing the Tozik-Sidorskij duo, and confirms Sheiman as the only “silovik” of Belarus.

⁶ All travel agencies must renew their licenses by mid-2007. There have already been several criminal cases brought against minor modeling agencies in Belarus (for example agency "Zara").

state ideology and other special measures of the regime toward young people (including scholarships and priority positions for rural students to study at the universities in Minsk and major regional cities, and establishment of several new universities in the regions aiming to divide active youth) is bearing fruit. Increasing activities and pressure by the official youth organization BRSM (called also “Lukamol,” which also involves teachers who are forced to sign up as “honorary members” of the organization) seems also unchallenged by independent youth or student structures.

- **Political parties:** According to legal practice,⁷ most of the local branches of political parties have been registered at private addresses of party members. However, the ministry of justice has started a new practice based on provisions of the newly adopted Housing Code stating that private apartments shall be used only for the purpose of residence. This provision became the background for the ministry’s claims to re-register local party branches at administrative offices. In autumn 2004, the ministry issued an ultimatum to political parties to re-register all their local branches in the next three months (by February 1, 2005) under threat of liquidation. Since none of the parties could meet the requirements, liquidation by court after February 1, 2005 can be expected. In addition, the \$1,600 fine for former MP Sergej Antonchik, who had organized a meeting in his apartment, created a precedent for law enforcement agencies allowing them to intervene and shut down further meetings in private apartments.

The steps already taken by the authorities⁸ and the expected crackdown on political parties and civil society organizations (further de-legalizing the most active NGOs by taking their registration) are pushing the democratic forces further out of the mainstream. The main message of the official propaganda is easily understandable: the “state” is good; non-state actors (including political parties and NGOs) are bad. This message is also combined with the message that *being active* means *being in trouble*, and has had the effect of removing politics from street (public) discussions. People are simply afraid of talking about politics publicly and do not plan to do so in the future, but rather focus on their survival.

- **International community:** Given the growing number of discreditation campaigns against international organizations, including the diplomatic community in Minsk, authorities are trying to increase fear among the international community⁹ to achieve disengagement of the international community in Belarussian development. Based on recent statements by Lukashenko¹⁰ addressing law-enforcement agencies, observers expect new tax accusations against the opposition, and this would to a great extent target individuals (e.g. politicians).

⁷ The practice was based on the provisions of the Constitution and the Law on Political Parties, which set forth that the state shall provide conditions for the activity of political parties and public associations, and despite the absence of specific concerning registration of the local branches at private addresses, the authorities for a long while registered local structures of political parties at private addresses of party activists.

⁸ Changes in the Law on the Internal Militia adopted at the beginning of February 2005 entitled the president to privately decide the cases where weapons can be used against citizens. Previously, there was a closed list of cases in which the militia could use force, and militia representatives could at any time refuse to fulfill illegal orders which were contradictory to the Law – even illegal orders of the chief of the military (the president). Now the president has obtained the right to give any orders to use force in any cases against anyone.

⁹ In the last year there were discreditation cases or administrative obstacles against U.S., Polish, German, Czech, Slovak, and Latvian diplomats or aid workers.

¹⁰ See RFE RL News Service, February 28, 2005.

The only answer to this new wave of attack is to increase the engagement of both civil society and the international community. The aggressive character of this current drive by the regime seems likely to leave no other chance for the international community than to increase its level of attention and assistance. Once assistance flows from different sources and directions – especially the European Union and its member countries – the regime will be not able to focus on all possible directions. Disengagement or not supporting the most active players could be a serious setback before the most important presidential elections.

2) Civil Society: In Motion

Despite the increased efforts of the authorities to increase control and fear among people, civil society in Belarus are in motion. The new initiatives, ideas, and forums for discussions at civil supports this impression.

Findings: Before addressing current initiatives of civil society, some assumptions regarding civil society need to be made. These assumptions describe a rather pessimistic picture, but are important from the point of view of mobilization. The most influential assumption in the country is that there will be no – free and fair – elections in the near future. The large majority of civil society organizations came to this assumption after the fraudulent parliamentary elections and national referendum on October 17, 2004. Instead of elections there will be a “situation called elections.” This, however, could be used to increase the number of activities and initiatives from civil society, both negative (boycott calls) or positive (mobilization).

Since the majority of civil society does not believe that change can occur through elections, they should find other topics and expectations. One way to do this is to discern various messages for various target groups (e.g. students, workers, or pensioners). Another is to find and spread universal messages focused by elections: free elections, free media, freedom of association, no job contracts (increase social security), and desire for life with dignity. From the viewpoint of increasing emotions in the society, a call for recognition of human dignity seems to be a strong option as topic for mobilization. Emotions, however, would require more creative and interactive tools of communication, which based on the conditions of Belarus would be a real challenge. Leaflets – having large importance in spreading alternative sources of information – seem to be a passive tool to spread emotions and are likely to be insufficient as the only communication tool for emotive political messages.

Regarding civil society structures, there is a more visible wish among NGOs to coordinate their projects – although a general lack of information about each other is still a problem. This could make the current flow of ideas more manageable. However, there is still a strong tendency to talk about obstacles to mobilization, such as:

- all politics is personal: selecting the face, the personal alternative (the democratic candidate) is crucial for many NGOs.
- Lukashenko’s image is still positive in the country compared to (for example) that of Kuchma in Ukraine. Corruption at the highest level should be pursued as an issue, since the upcoming tax trials could further decrease the image of democratic structures.
- no cross-sectoral cooperation: partly due to fear, but also due to lack of trust, there is almost no cooperation among various sectors (third and business sectors). In addition, increased

contacts between NGOs and the state sector would also make flow of information and influence easier.

One of the biggest questions for civic activists is how to tackle the general skepticism and indifference of – especially – young people. Majority of civil society people lack economic and social vision from the political opposition. Additionally civil society organizations strongly suggest to connect the 2006 presidential and 2007 local government elections, since the current ultimate focus on the presidential race by political parties could limit to prepare much more candidates and winning more seats in 2007 compare to the previous local government elections in 2003.

Last, but not least, protection of the active people of civil society is a fast-growing question for civil society. Better protection of activists (based on the expected new attacks on individuals) must be put on the desks of the international community and civil society of Belarus.

Phenomenon: The two most influential phenomena in Belarus society are fear and a lack of information. This fear – fear of repression (e.g. losing one's job) and fear of change – needs to be targeted by civil society. However, it seems that fear of change is in the society indirectly: everybody mentions that “people are worried about change” (in general), however, those we talked with didn't agree with this statement.

The main emotions during interviews with civil society leaders were fear and worry. Despite this, in the civil society and political establishment one can feel a certain level of commitment to react against the fear, in however limited a form. In the democratic elite, the lack of capacity to visualize change (the democratic candidate), general worry about the passivity of society, as well as a certain tiredness of civil society leaders are the main factors. Fear of change is considered to be the main reason for passivity of the society by the leaders of civil society.

Fear comprises the following factors: a) loss of jobs due to the contract system, b) absence of a united candidate, and c) general worry about the state of the society: as one of the regional leaders said during the meeting, many of people might be ready for change mentally (they feel for it), but don't think their neighbors are ready for change (or think change could be positive in their life). Once they have the feeling that their neighbors are ready, it will naturally push away the fear in society. Additionally, it is possible to add one more fear factor: a few civil society leaders are asking what will happen if they win. Comparing to the (comprehensive) fear there is no positive emotion presence in the society and civil society organizations don not bring any so far. This will be the biggest challenge to find through further assistance (focus groups and polling).

Need for Action -- During the Task Force meeting, the following recommendations were prepared:

- Partly “divide” civil society from political parties. Despite cooperation of civil society organizations and political parties (which have been structured in the 5+ Coalition) that has been developed according to local conditions, a partial division might be productive in the current atmosphere of “waiting for the candidate.” It seems that as long as political parties do not choose a candidate, NGOs will not become active and will have no energy/drive. In

addition, while political parties are selecting the candidate, they are expecting NGOs to mobilize people before the elections. This may limit the efforts of political parties to reach out to the regions and citizens with their own messages. In summary, the “connections” among NGOs and political parties seem currently to be limiting rather than encouraging civil society.

- NGOs should work today with their own agenda and issues, such as pressure on the regime’s policies, calls for fair elections, free media, freedom of association, protest against job contracts, or against decreasing possibilities for students/young people to travel. Civil society should not wait for selection of a candidate, but work toward increasing the sense of society for the need for change (no matter whether the alternative will be captured in a single candidate or not).¹¹ If NGOs see that there is a growing number of citizens on their side, this will break the dependency of NGOs on political parties. This would help both sectors (political parties see NGOs as part of their activism, which blocks their structural development).
- Civil society should advocate for change in the basic framework/attributes of Belarus (including political, economic, and social reforms), while political parties should work to personalize the alternative. It is crucial to increase the diversity and number of activities as the election is approaching. People should not see only protests on the streets, and should not see only the same people and organizations in action. Efforts should focus on creating various, small, and local islands of resistance (in schools, towns, trade unions, etc.) that concentrate on new initiatives to make the growing image for those who are ready to become active, e.g. to create a feeling that not only I, but also my neighbor is ready. However, efforts should focus on Minsk and bigger cities; in small cities and villages it is much harder to mobilize people due to greater intensity of fear. The aim should be to show that the movement of active people is growing among various layers of society. This would counter what the regime is trying to do with the current corruption cases, e.g. to keep various layers of society under control, such as judges, teachers, students, etc.
- To strengthen new dynamics by forming new partnerships among citizens of Belarus and Europe (through NGOs) – visits of various delegations focusing on NGOs and local level should be supported from Europe. In addition, NGOs status and more positive image could be strengthening through new domestic partnerships on the local level.

3) New Initiatives:

a) A concept of a democratic council to select a single candidate has been completed by the so-called analytical group. Despite all the concerns, the most important structures – especially political parties – support the concept. It is necessary to emphasize the role of the analytical group including independent experts to prepare the concept. The democratic council and the planned elections of the council participants could give the necessary “representativeness” to the democratic opposition and may lead to a more or less real competition among democratic candidates. Obviously, the biggest questions are whether the democratic structures will be able to

¹¹ The focus groups designed and implemented (March 2005) by the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force and further polling (April 2005) will show the possible topics/issues

carry out such a council inside or even outside the country, and whether the result of the council will be respected by the (failed) candidates.

b) People's Will – the civic movement that emerged to support Aliaksandr Kazulin, former rector of the Belarus State University, who addressed Belarus public in *Narodnaya Volya* on February 19, 2005. The very same day Kazulin appeared as the new leader of the united social-democrats, however, there are indications that the new civic movement would stay behind Kazulin. There are 83 signatories supporting the movement, the main goal of which is to nominate Kazulin as the candidate in the presidential race. The most serious is the signature of Natalya Masherova, although she later made statements not supporting Kazulin. Her appearance among the signatories has created strong rumors that Kazulin may be the Moscow-picked candidate.

c) Civic initiative Together: This new group of civil society organizations including mainly human rights and women's organizations proposes to reconcile political leaders (as independent pressure on political parties from civil society) by involving professional moderators in the candidate selection procedure. Another plan of the coalition is to prepare a reform of judiciary as part of the political/constitutional reform package and challenge the political parties by opening debate on the issues of reform.

d) Boycott: There is a new wave of the boycott based on the (real) results of the referendum. This time such a reaction of the elections have not proposed by Zemjon Paznjak, but it has been pursuing informally by certain leaders of vendors (who has been organizing the vendor strikes starting March 1, 2005). Contrary to the old boycott concept, this initiative does not support a boycott of the elections themselves, but rather the participation of Lukashenko, saying that he has no legal ground to participate in the upcoming presidential elections. It could add to mobilization of part of the society sensitive toward negative messages. The arguments behind this boycott initiative that A. Lukashenka's participation in the next presidential elections opposed by the Constitution (his second term is ending) and he lost the referendum on October 17, 2004 (according to the exit poll results).

e) NGO Assembly. The NGO Assembly claims to coordinate the activities of 500 NGOs¹² in Belarus and is preparing its own strategy through its working groups. The Assembly is trying to build its new mobilization strategy on the lessons learned from the previous campaign of 2001, using both quantitative and qualitative analysis to find out the right messages for the target groups of the new campaign.

f) Youth Initiative "Khvatit" (Enough): Representative of various youth organizations have been preparing a plan for a new youth movement under the working name "Khvatit" (Enough) to mobilize young people through coordinated negative and positive campaigns. The aim of the initiative is not to build up a new youth organization, but to start new campaigns aiming to coordinate the existing capacity of several youth structures as well as young political leaders in the regions.

¹² Around 250 members of the Assembly is still registered, although registration is not a condition for membership