



Potential of Change or Backsliding to Conformism: Future Trends of Belarus Politics

Survey on External and Internal Factors and its Impact on Belarus Before and After the 2006 Presidential Elections

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Introduction

This analysis was elaborated by Juraj Marušiak, a Slovak political scientist based on thirty-one interviews with Belarusian political and social scientists from state and non-governmental analytical centres on September 3-17, 2005. The survey discusses the most important external and internal factors in the mirror of the Belarusian analysts, while outlines possible future trends of Belarus in the context of the 2006 Presidential Elections. The methodology of the survey was prepared in cooperation with the Pontis Foundation. The views presented in the survey are not necessarily those of Pontis.

Summary

According to the opinions of Belarusian political scientists, among the most important external factors to influence future trends in Belarus will be relations with Russia. Since the Belarusian regime strongly intends to control the economy, cooperation has been limited mainly to the military. The national political interest of Russia has been shaken by the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine, which has also had the effect of increasing the popularity of Lukashenka as the “tough guy” among the young Russian elite. With the 2006 Presidential Elections in Belarus approaching, Russia’s global interests have encouraged the government to leave both possible scenarios open: supporting Lukashenka or cooperating with opposition parties. Cooperation of Russia with the opposition could weaken cooperation with the EU and USA, and even divide the EU over Belarus offering benefits of bilateral economic cooperation to certain countries. According to most of the respondents, the EU does not have enough possibilities nor the political will to support change under the current establishment. Current European assistance has been evaluated as ineffective by independent analysts, who have advocated for a “pro-Belarus” coalition within the EU. Such a coalition would combine new member states with willing member states from Western Europe. Analysts point out that the Ukraine, a potential positive example to enhance change, actually acts more as a deterring example for most people.

Only a few respondents expected that the opposition would reach consensus in choosing the single candidate in October 2005, and that the regime would accept the result of the elections

without further conflicts or public accusations. This could mean that the potential for change in Belarusian society is greater than experts and political elites had previously assumed. Nevertheless, the 2006 Presidential Elections are of great importance, maybe even a key moment for Belarusian society. If the opposition, after the successful Congress of Democratic Forces, does not present itself as a real alternative for Lukashenka's regime, the already existing tendency to stick to conformism will be intensified in Belarusian society.

The current rise in the public acceptance of Lukashenka's regime is another dangerous factor raised by the survey. While it is possible that in his first term Lukashenka and his elite were unsure how the "neo-soviet Belarus" should look, the successful implementation of the new state ideology, which began in 2002, is bearing its fruit through young people today. Another factor for intensifying the conformism is the fact that the current regime has been in power for more than ten years. Although at the beginning it seemed like a short term solution, for today's young generation the regime is a reality. Therefore, the actual post-Lukashenka future of Belarus could be different than the future projected by opposition leaders. The stability of Lukashenka's regime is supported by the newly created patriotism of the ruling elites, reinforced by an effective mechanism of pressure. Beside non-stop threats, Lukashenka made the elite interested in independent Belarus through economic benefits. Many elites fear losing these economic benefits, as would be likely to happen if the proposed union with Russia were to become a reality. Therefore one cannot expect that the current elites could play an active role in the change.

Despite widespread belief that there is limited potential for change, some analysts noted that changes are actually possible. These analysts highlighted not a new leader, but new methods of mobilizing citizens as the main issue. They focussed on the high rate of discontent and the experience of civil society to organize demonstrations, as shown after the 2004 referendum. Existing potential for change is confirmed by the growing "mental opposition" in the country, and by Lukashenka becoming the main object of political humour and folklore, a sign that a regime is losing legitimacy in society. A couple of respondents did not exclude the possibility of a "revolution" in case preferences of oppositional leaders would be close to that of Lukashenka's. The key layer in this is the mysterious "third power," those segments of society not yet engaged politically, but with large protest potential.

According to the survey respondents, even 30-35% support for the single democratic candidate in the upcoming elections could mean also a breakthrough in Belarus. Such a result would signal that the opposition is a real political power, taken seriously not only by foreign partners, but also by the regime. This would send a strong message to Belarusians about a real alternative to the present regime, and could enhance restructuring within the current system, which managed to sustain continuously from Soviet times more than in any CIS country.

I. External Factors in Belarus Politics

Relations between Russia and Belarus

The negative relationship between Belarusian president Lukashenka and Russian President Putin, which is frequently mentioned by media, is not a crucial factor for Belarusian-Russian relations. The relationship between the two countries has remained constant even after the problem of the designated Ambassador of the Russian Federation Dmitrij Ajackov being refused to accept by a Minsk official after his negative statements about the Belarusian regime. It is necessary to analyze the Kremlin's relationship towards Lukashenka's regime on four issues:

- Current geopolitical interests of Russia in the region
- Economic interests of Russia and Russian enterprises
- National political interest of Russia
- Global interests of Russia

Current geopolitical interests of Russia in the region: After political changes in the Ukraine at the end of 2004, the geopolitical importance of Belarus as a country lying on the eastern borders of NATO and the EU has grown in the eyes of the Kremlin. From a military point of view, Belarus became a significant element for Russia due to its position on a strategic line connecting Berlin, Warsaw, and Moscow. Therefore, in spite of numerous countries, different economic systems, problems concerning the economic integration of these and Lukashenka's refusal to release control of the economy (e.g. the official position towards privatization, currency), Russia and Belarus have maintained good and intensive cooperation in the military sphere. Belarus also hinders the Ukraine's advancement towards EU integration by refusing to ratify a agreement about official borders with the Ukraine. Although the question of Russian enterprises participating in the privatization of the biggest Belarusian companies (e.g. petrochemicals, engineering, food industry) remains a very important matter, just as it was in the year 2001, at the present moment geopolitical aspects are a higher priority. The Russian military-industrial complex together with nationalistic and pro-communist forces, as in the past, remains influential elements of the "pro-Lukashenka lobby" in Russia.

Economic interests of Russia and Russian enterprises: Despite the customs union of Belarus and Russia, Minsk continues in protectionist politics in favour of its producers, which provokes great discontent among Russian companies. Belarus also refuses to accept the rouble as common currency. Russia is, on the contrary, opening its markets (ie. Gorizont and Vitjaz in the television manufacturing industry, and agricultural products). As regions of the Russian Federation have a considerable amount of power in matters of foreign trade, Belarus tends to communicate primarily with Russian regional elite, who defend the position of the Belarusian regime. Prime examples include Moscow's Mayor Luzhkov, and elite in the regions around Moscow, the Volga, Krasnodar, and North-western Russia.

National political interest of Russia: The Orange Revolution in the Ukraine and other changes in post-Soviet republics left traumatic feelings among some Russian political elites and members of the public, because the winning elites proclaimed themselves as pro-Western, and the losing elites as pro-Russian. In the context of post-imperialistic syndrome, Belarus under Lukashenka's leadership remains the sole trustworthy ally of Moscow in Europe. A considerable number of Russian elite are displeased with the fact that pro-Russian policies do not play a central role in the Commonwealth of Independent States. The possibilities of cooperation with countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, in spite of rising authoritarian tendencies in present day Russia are being refused as too "exotic". This sentiment reappeared during discussions to create a federation between Russia and Kazakhstan.

Global interests of Russia: The attitude of European institutions in the case of this summer's diplomatic crisis between Poland and Belarus showed that the EU fears further distancing itself from Russia. The present situation in Belarus is not a significant obstacle in relations with countries of the EU 15, therefore Russia does not have a reason to encourage regime

change in Minsk. This situation could change if the Belarus question would be a condition for Russian membership in the WTO.

Most likely, Moscow will leave both scenarios open: supporting Lukashenka, but also probing possibilities of cooperation with opposition. The priorities of the geopolitical interests of Russia were shown during this summer's diplomatic crisis between Poland and Belarus. Although Moscow, during escalation of conflict, refrained from giving an official statement, the foreign minister of the RF on 12th October 2005 in Paris evaluated the steps taken by Belarusian authorities as positive. Russia, furthermore, on 30th August 2005 made public its decision to sell Belarus 20 of the most modern Russian anti-aircraft defence weapons, the ZRS S-300. Unofficial information to strengthen cooperation between Russia and the EU in the democratization of Belarus¹ should be taken as pressure on the Belarusian regime, and will act to weaken cooperation between the EU and USA on the issue of Belarus. However, most of the respondents predicted a passive endorsement of the regime, such as leaving the prices of gas unchanged instead of more active help. All respondents pointed out the change in Russian policy after the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine. A number of respondents stated that Moscow would be willing to support an alternative candidate in the case that this would guarantee protection of its geopolitical and economic interests in Belarus. However, respondents admit that such a candidate would have no real chance of succeeding in the elections. Additionally, large numbers of interviewed experts stand firm on the opinion that Lukashenka has a strong enough position in his own country for him to not depend on Russian support.

On the other hand, some analysts insinuated that the United Civic Party, or the potential presidential candidate Alexander Kazulin, is supported by Russia. This support is however interpreted more as pressure on the current regime, than a real support for democratic structures. According to Belarusian experts, Russia fears changes in Belarus because it would mean further strengthening of pro-Western tendencies. After taking into consideration details about the case of Khodorkovsky, respondents are rather sceptical about whether Russian oligarchs would support change without the silent support of the Kremlin. One of the respondents however, indirectly mentioned this as possible, pointing out that there are strong groups in the RF with some interest in changes in Belarus.

A majority of the experts emphasized the necessity of cooperation for Belarus with Russia possible in the Single Economic Space (SES) even after Lukashenka's fall, arguing by small chances to integrate to the EU in the next fifteen years. The work of independent Belarusian think tanks, however, lacks more in-depth reflection on the current position of Belarus in Europe; the only discussed strategic goal is entering the EU. There is only limited interest in concepts of Russia's Democratic Choice (RDC) (post-GUUAM) or the perspective of the cooperation of Belarus with the Baltic Group. Similarly there is little interest in the problems of Belarusian energy security. Neither official nor independent media, for example, mentioned the project of extending the oil pipeline from Odessa–Brody to Poland, although this could be lucrative for Belarus as well.

Belarus and the EU

In comparison to Russia, the European Union is not truly considered a potential partner. According to most of the respondents, the EU does not have enough possibilities and means to enhance change in the present situation. Shortly before the Congress of Democratic Forces,

¹ Mentioned regarding the meeting between United Russia Party MPs and a delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Russian Pskov

opposition started intense polemics about the decision of the European Commission to finance Russian language radio broadcast for Belarus on the airwaves of Deutsche Welle. Part of the national democratic-oriented opposition openly criticized broadcasting of Deutsche Welle in Russian language as an offence for Belarus. Some of the respondents evaluated this decision as positive.

However, respondents were critical toward the new broadcasts for their lack of influence in the country. Similar to other foreign broadcasting programmes Deutsche Welle presently has low ratings. There are problems with radio reception when broadcasting on short or middle radio waves. According to respondents, it would be ideal to broadcast over satellite TV channels, thereby allowing two radio stations to be broadcasted over the FM band. In the year 2003, there were approximately 300 thousand satellite aerials. The question remains however whether these aerials could receive TV channel signals. Some of the respondents are positive regarding the idea of reviving Radio Racyja broadcasting, arguing that Belarus journalists would work there.

All of the respondents evaluated as ineffective the present assistance of the EU provided to Belarus civil society through the TACIS programme. Newer mechanisms of EU assistance were also evaluated as ineffective. The applied technical approach is considered ignorant of the problems and current conditions of Belarus. The analytical center's experts found the EU procedures of providing help as too bureaucratic, favouring big corporations over small entities (NGOs). For the majority of Belarusians it is almost impossible to meet these standards.

However, respondents emphasized greater expectations from the new member states of the EU, because they openly declared their support of the process of democratization in Belarus. This problem is similar to the Ukraine, in that each country prefers individual actions instead of mutual consulting and coordination. Existence of a "pro-Belarus" coalition that would include Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, Slovakia and Czech Republic and potentially even Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Great Britain is considered as highly effective in defining the European policy towards Belarus.

Influence of the Ukraine on Belarus

Changes in the Ukraine could become a positive catalyst for Belarusian society in case the Ukraine's living standard rises. Although young generations showed enthusiasm for the Orange Revolution during the winter of 2004, the rest of the citizens feared that Belarus could follow the Ukraine in negative economic tendencies, such as wild privatization, and other issues which were strongly echoed by official Belarusian propaganda.

Belarusian state media started to increase coverage on the Ukraine especially after recent economic problems, and the disunion of the post-revolutionary political elite. The mentality of the Belarus people and their fears of revolutionary changes also have to be taken into consideration. Most of the respondents pointed out the differences in political situation in Belarus and Ukraine not only concerning economic stability, but also concerning the presence of strong opposition with charismatic leader, existence of free media, relatively strong civil society and possibility to run a business.

Even among young people who take a critical stance towards the present Belarusian regime, Ukraine acts more as a deterring example. The negative image of the Ukraine presented in Belarusian media is reinforced by people's experiences of visiting the country. The Ukraine

currently is an example of a state that is failing, and it would be better to avoid similar development in Belarus.

II. Evaluation of Belarus Political Situation

Before the Congress of Democratic Forces the prevailing feelings were apathy and discontent among Belarusian NGOs. These feelings were developed in the aftermath of the 2001 presidential elections, or more precisely, after dropping the NGO favorite Semion Domas in exchange for the trade union leader Vladimir Goncharik as the democratic frontrunner. There were still disagreements among the opposition, reported by the respondents, mainly between the Belarusian Popular Front and the United Civic Party. According to respondents, primary elections in each region took place with conflicts and intrigues. The negative atmosphere was surely supported by the KGB and its associates among the opposition. Slandering letters and e-mails with accusations of opposition candidates often created an atmosphere, where the opposition factions tended to forget their common target - the regime. Many respondents had doubts about the utility of the coalition before the Congress. There were a few respondents mentioning that disagreement and competition among democratic forces is a natural part of democratic dialogue. This was also the opinion of a sociologist evaluating the dynamics of changes in opposition as positive. However, surprisingly, the Congress of Democratic Forces passed without conflicts, which was evaluated as a very positive development. Only a few respondents expected that opposition would reach consensus in choosing a single candidate in October, and that the other side would accept the results of the elections without further conflicts or public accusations. This could mean that the potential for changes in Belarusian society is higher than experts and political had previously assumed.

The opposition, busy settling its own internal problems, is unable to act as a decisive force in the way that Lukashenka is, and does not offer a comprehensive alternative for social and economic problems (e.g. question of wages, work, employment), on relations with Russia, and a viable alternative for political reform. The object of general criticism of independent analysts was the way that political parties function, and the behaviour of party leaders. Therefore, the respondents emphasized the importance of the independence of a single democratic candidate from political party structures. Respondents raised the case of Alexander Kazulin as an example for why this is important. After being a potential Lukashenka challenger due to his engagement in social democratic party politics, and following the internal conflicts of social democrats, he ended up as a marginal politician without any serious chance. His candidacy stays open, and similarly to the group of marginalized politicians, ex parliamentarians from the Respublika group, for example, could only add to the game of the regime to increase number of “opposition single candidate”(s).

Perspectives of changes in Belarus

The 2006 Presidential elections are of great importance, perhaps even a key moment for Belarusian society. If opposition does not present itself as a real alternative for Lukashenka's regime, the already existing tendency to stick to conformism will be intensified. The success of the Congress of Democratic Forces must be followed with the capability to persuade voters. Failing to consolidate opposition can lead to wasting the existing protest potential. Conformism and fear in society rises and the present regime buys voters by offering relative economic stability. This situation could remind one of the atmosphere during the normalization period in Czechoslovakia at the beginning of 70's.

All of the respondents stated relative economic stability, a low amount of consolidation, and the mistakes of democratic forces, Russian financial, military and political support as reasons for passive acceptance of the current regime by the citizens. The economic prosperity is given by price increase of the main Belarus export articles, for example petrol and oil products, potassium, steel and wood. Due to this, the state is able to artificially keep non-prosperous companies going and to consolidate agriculture, benefiting from financial donations and the free labour of students and industry employees or employees of state institutions.

The current rise in the public acceptance of Lukashenka's regime is a dangerous factor. This is confirmed by fresh opinion polls². Especially in the last few years, the regime oriented on gaining the interest of youth. At entrance exams at universities, in receiving scholarships, and getting lucrative jobs, young candidates from rural areas, or members of pro-regime Belarusian Republic Youth Union are favoured, regardless of the results of the interviews. This process creates the so-called "new intelligentsia" or elite. During the highly publicized conflicts with Moscow during 2003-2004, these youth approved of Lukashenka's nationalistic rhetoric. While it is possible that in first term Lukashenka and his elite were unsure how the "neo-soviet Belarus" should look, the state ideology and its successful implementation has come to bear its fruit through young people.

A further factor for intensifying the conformism is the fact that the current regime has been in power for more than ten years, although at the beginning it seemed to be a short term solution. For today's young generation, born in the 1980's, this regime is a reality, through which they were growing up, and with which they identify themselves through the educational system, despite their principles and commitment towards democracy being different from those of older generations. Therefore, the potential post-Lukashenka future of Belarus could be different than the one projected by the opposition leaders.³ The stability of Lukashenka's regime is supported by long term patriotism of the ruling elites, reinforced by an effective mechanism of pressure. Beside non-stop threats Lukashenka made them interested in independent Belarus through economic benefits. They may be afraid to lose these benefits, as is likely to happen through a union with Russia. Therefore, one cannot expect that the current elite would play an active role in the change. Analysts expected, even in the case of serious pressure from society, that the current elite would stay neutral. The elimination of Ural Latypov, former Head of the Presidential Administration and Leonid Yerin, Head of the KGB after the 2004 referendum shows that regime control institutions of power. Therefore some analysts do not exclude the possibility that regime (e.g. the character) could remain even after Lukashenka leaves. Despite all expectations, this regime succeeded in lasting for eleven years in the centre of Europe, lying on important communication lines without being a serious obstacle for Russia or the West.

Risky factors for the regime are, according to respondents, mainly unexpected economic developments, such as the fall of oil prices or the sudden rise of US dollar, which would mean that Lukashenka will not be able to fulfil the promised rise of wages. Economic stability can be endangered if Russia enters WTO, which would leave Belarus buying significantly more expensive energy sources from Russia, and would decrease the competitiveness of Belarusian companies on Russian market. No wonder the relation of Belarus to the WTO is one of the most serious taboos in official media.

² At the 2004 referendum 49% of citizens were against Lukashenka's continued time in power during his third term in office, while in June 2005 it was only 40%.

³ An example of this were football fans, who were walking through Minsk during a match against Italy with scarves around their necks in colours of the present neo-Soviet state flag.

Possible trends after Presidential Elections 2006

Due to the current conditions, and lack of belief in opposition's capacity to win the elections, respondents tended to the opinion that presidential elections would not mean a significant change of the political situation in the country. However, according to them, the goal for the democratic forces could be to reach 30 – 35 % of votes for the single democratic candidate in the upcoming elections. This would signal that the opposition is a real political power, whose opinion would be taken seriously by foreign partners, but by the regime, too. Such a result would send strong messages for Belarusians about the real alternative to the present regime, and could enhance restructuring within the current system.

A majority of the respondents do not believe in possibility of repeating the Ukraine scenario in 2006. Among reasons analysts stressed were weak civil society, the lack of a charismatic leader, and relative economic stability. A sociologist pointed out the results of a comparative sociological research which analyzed the situation in each country of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) according to which the highest citizens' discontent with their social situation was in Georgia and Ukraine.

Some analysts stated that in spite of all negative indications political changes in the country are possible. They feel that not the leader but the way of mobilizing citizens to come out in the street is the main issue. They underlined a high rate of discontent, and experience of the NGO organizations with demonstrations after the referendum in October 2004, when they succeeded to mobilize five thousand people without any serious assistance by opposition leaders. Existing potential for a change is shown by so called mental opposition and the fact that Lukashenka has become an object of political humour and a part of Belarusian folklore. This is a sign that a regime loses legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. A couple of respondents do not exclude a possibility of "revolution" in case preferences of oppositional leaders would reach Lukashenka's. The fact that young, educated people and middle class Belarusians were the main actors of revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine speaks in favour of changes. In both cases these were the segments of society that did not find ensuring existential needs as crucial. Similarly in Belarus people with higher education, members of the middle class and people from larger cities are potential allies. The analysts refuted the pessimism as they find that revolution can be expected from people not from political activists.

According to the respondents, the attention of opposition and those who have an influence on public opinion should be oriented on those segments of society that have not by now engaged politically but have a great protest potential. The proofs of this are demonstrations of entrepreneurs in early 2005. Before the parliamentary elections in 2004 a group of entrepreneurs was considering making an alternative list of candidates, which would distance them from the present power, but also from the opposition. Although they gave this up, respondents mentioned this as the potential third power. According to them it is necessary to pay attention to immense protest electorate consisting of young and educated people and inhabitants of bigger towns. This segment of society believes in liberal values but does not support necessarily the liberal political party (United Civic Party). Despite preferring Russian language (although Belarusian language is not explicitly refused by them), it has strong Belarusian national awareness. This segment of voters is prepared to support a political alternative, but is not able to identify it at the moment from the present offer. Analysts noted that none from the representatives of the political power work with this segment trying to find their motivations, and the conditions in which the present opposition could be accepted for them as lesser of the two evils.