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Belarus Brief

There can be Only One

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Introduction

As local government elections are approaching, the current political development of Belarus may bring some surprising elements. First and foremost, the European Union current policy – being tough on the regime and supporting civil society and independent media - seems to be collapsing due to the negative stand of the new Member states reinforced by Italy, on the suspension of trade benefits for Belarus under the GSP. This will leave the EU without any leverage on Belarus – when its strongman Lukashenka is nowadays disputing with Russia and preparing to occupy the role of the Belarusian national hero.

Local Government Elections: Groundhog Day - Again...

Belarus faces local elections on January 14, 2007 where 22,641 seats are to be contested in Belarus's 1,583 local councils (Soviets): the Minsk City Council, six oblast councils, 118 district councils, 13 councils in cities of regional subordination, 14 councils in cities of district subordination, 66 town councils, and 1,365 village councils. The elections will be held under the amended election law, which provides for a one-round vote. As a lesson learned from the presidential race, the law toughens rules for holding outdoor meetings with voters, the most successful part of the UDF/Milinkevich presidential campaign.¹

Both the regime and the United Democratic Forces (UDF) are taking a different approach to get ready for the elections. While the regime is believed to prepare the refreshment of its cadres throughout the elections using the “official” Kozik led trade unions and the BRSM, the republican youth organization called Lukamol², the democratic forces – on the regional and local level - are trying to develop coalitions with field candidates. The generally low level of enthusiasm and expectations toward actual election results, the on-going leadership dispute with various moves within the DF may limit this effort. Nevertheless, only the actual election campaign will show to what extent this new approach will succeed in terms of information campaign aiming to widen the democratic movement as well as the number of democratic candidates.

The Opposition: Look who is talking – to whom

At the national level the pro-presidential leadership crisis is still unsolved and makes the UDF look disunited. Meanwhile, various structures within the UDF are in the move. Alexander Milinkevich, the former sole democratic candidate, who due to his post-election position has become the target of the leadership disputes, continues in his frequent foreign

¹ RFE/RL Newsline, October 3, 2006

² See more in Pontis Survey at

http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset_cache/link/0000013803/PONTIS%20Summer%20Survey%20on%20Belarus.pdf

trips: last week in Prague during the Conference of the Forum 2000 he sought Vaclav Havel's support for independence of Belarus and warned international community – once again – about the threat of Anschluss from Russia, if Moscow conducts steps toward the Union State of Belarus and Russia.³ However, Milinkevich seems now to be more determined to move toward establishment of the movement, building on the success of the presidential civic campaign "Za svobodu". This unconfirmed news might motivate United Civic Party leader Anatoliy Lebedko to call him to discuss this matter.⁴

Establishing a new movement may end up the uncertainty around Milinkevich's status within the UDF, indeed, but – as Lebedko certainly hopes – also may lead to an end of his position as a holder of the opposition unity. The main question, however, remains: what will be the goal of – still unannounced – new movement? Based on the name "Za svobodu", Milinkevich may choose the topic which proved to be effective in uniting those opposing the regime in March 2006, but seems to be ineffective in connecting the democratic minority with the majority looking for the opposition as out of mainstream. His movement, however, can certainly make changes within the center right forces of the UDF, since it would be most probably based on the structures of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) and allied NGOs.

On the left side of the UDF there are moves which may lead to the integration of the leftist forces. The leader of the Communist Party of Belarus is trying to find a way out of the regime-initiated process of "uniting" the two existing communist parties (one pro-regime and one, Kaliakin-led, part of the UDF). The Regional convention of workers – organized by Kaliakin and his ally Alexander Buhvostov of the unregistered Labor Party – held in Minsk in the beginning of October has opened the question of integration of forces on the political left, including the social democratic structures led by Stanislav Shushkevich and the imprisoned Alexander Kazulin.

There are rumors already having Kaliakin as the new man of Moscow, but the new "Left" includes the UCP as well. Based on this it seems nothing really has changed in development of opposition scene since the Congress of Democratic Forces. Many depend on local government election campaigns, and whether the left integration will lead to the – again rumored – next Congress to deal with who will be the next "leader of opposition". The overall focus of party leaders on the leadership question just makes the UDF a paper coalition, and leaves Belarus still waiting for a moral authority that would be able to connect those already supporting change with the majority of the population.

The Regime: Rhetoric changed, but business as usual

While Milinkevich seeks the support for the independence of Belarus in the West, and Lebedko calls Milinkevich to discuss his possible new movement at home, Lukashenka is talking to Belarusian people more intensively – more and more about the independence of Belarus. Thus, the difference between the target of political communication between the regime and the opposition is obvious. Still, it is Lukashenka who is talking with Belarusian public – even about the independence and moving further away from Russia, and thus may occupy a certain moral (sic!) position for a reasonable part of the society. The change of his policy is so obvious, albeit logical, that one can only wonder when he will follow the example of the new Prime Minister of Ukraine Yanukovych, and start using Belarusian (the language of the opposition) in public...?

Is this new tendency surprising? Not at all. As the working meeting of Belarusian independent analysts who gathered in the beginning of October in Vilnius revealed, the only stabilizing factors of the regime have been changing: While previously the anti-elitism together with the declared orientation towards Russia used to be the leading policy, currently, consolidation of the state is viewed through independence, mainly due to the

³ Press release of Alexander Milinkevich "Will Europe allow one more anschluss and iron curtain on its territory?", printed in the newspaper " Belarusians and market " on October 9, 2006 №39(724)

⁴ Lebedko proposes open debates to Milinkevich, UCP website, October 10, 2006

Kremlin's pressure. Simply, the West is less dangerous for the regime than the support from Russia. On the other hand, "Belarusization" of the newly recruited cadres and replacement of employees with Russian origins is another trend noticed by analysts. Even though the economic elites (including business elites) are closer to the opposition in their values, nowadays they are one of the pillars of the regime. This is caused both by insufficient communication of the opposition and fears of potential negative repercussions from the regime.

Therefore, this new focus on independence, along with the already existing, although very cautious, steps towards liberalization of the economy aiming to increase certain openness of the Belarusian economy for perspective foreign partners (e.g. lately the abolition of the compulsory quota paid for Belarusian products in retail shops) should not lead into – false – expectation of changing the main political course in Minsk. Neither the new rhetoric nor cautious attempts of economic "reforms" could serve as accelerators for political changes – this is confirmed by other steps of the regime to further intensify the repressions towards the opposition and the personal cult of the leader.

First and foremost, there is the case of the two young activists connected to BNF. Zmitser Daskehich, already in jail since September 2006, is facing up to two years of imprisonment for his alleged activities on behalf of an unregistered organization "Young Front" (violation of the article 193 of the Criminal Code (involvement in activities of an unregistered organization). However, the case of the young journalists and BNF activists Pavel Krasouski who is in jail for his alleged participation in the blasts in Vitsebsk on September 14 and 22, 2005, might be charged with punishment of a life sentence or capital punishment. Krasouski is not "anybody": he used to lead election headquarters of the UDF in Minsk region. He might be the first person in the modern history of Belarus, to be charged with act of terrorism, thus the first victim of the Belarusian "war against terrorism". One can wonder, whether the BNF connection in these cases is just a mere coincidence...

What even surprised the „hardcore“ bloggers of the Belarus TOLBLog, according to the Lukashenka's new decree No 426, government officials could not be prosecuted without his personal permission. As the bloggers put, this list includes ministers and vice-ministers, chiefs of province administrations, chiefs of police, army, KGB, President's security guard, chiefs of regional police departments, all judges and members of parliament and local councils – this means that they are out of the juridical system and there is the only One, whom they can serve and fear...⁵

Last, but not least, there are new rumors in Minsk that the right hand of the One, currently the head of the Security Council Viktor Sheiman may leave Belarus soon and become the new Ambassador of Belarus to – Venezuela. If that would be confirmed, after the former head of State Control Tozik, now being the Ambassador of Belarus in China, he would be the second important "silovik" (strongman) to leave Belarus. While many wondered at Tozik's sudden leave and considered it to be the result of power struggle, now it more seems to be the strategy of the One controlling the new, important channels where money flows in – and out- of Belarus. Lesson learned: in Belarus there can be only One...

Russia and Belarus: Rhetoric changed, but business as usual

Besides raising the gas prices for its closest partner, Moscow may find another topic to increase its pressure on Belarus and show to the international community its responsibility and commitments toward Western rules. The Warsaw visit of the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov two weeks ago, brought a sudden declaration that the situation with the Union of Poles in Belarus reminds him of the situation with Russians in Latvia.

⁵ Belarus TOLBLog

While this new rhetoric gave some food for thinking about how deep is the conflict between Russia and Belarus, it might just be a reaction to Lukashenka's previous message for Russian journalists that merger with Russia would lead to violence worse than in Chechnya⁶. We are of the same opinion with the TOL Belarus bloggers stating that neither Lukashenka can afford breaking up with Russia, nor Russia can afford losing its most precious ally. But both states need propaganda exercises, while the actual state of relations between Russia and Belarus will be tested by the Belarus reaction to the current Russian proposal to introduce a visa regime for Georgia.⁷

EU and Belarus: Rhetoric remains, but (national) business as usual

Apparently the European Union (EU) is in no need for the propaganda in Belarus. In a move, which might make the day in Minsk, the expert committee under the Council of European Union rejected the proposal to temporarily suspend Belarus' trade benefits under the General System of Preferences. The GSP is a trade and development tool designed to grant a preference to developing countries and economies in transition provided that certain conditions are met.⁸ Thus, the suspension of it is not economic sanctions, as the Lukashenka's regime is trying to portray it.

Although there are other, higher decision making levels in the EU which may change this stand, it is interesting to draw some conclusions based on what happened. Firstly, the main actors behind the current EU policy are acting according to Lukashenka's rhetoric. It was Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia (with Greece and Cyprus) who voted against the proposal while Italy, the Czech Republic and Slovakia abstained. Since the decision about the suspension was the subject of the support by qualified majority (the proposal must be supported by 232 out of 321 votes - 72%), the sudden change in the Italian course was crucially important. There is nothing new in behind such sudden change within the EU: Italy and Lithuania may have traded "votes" in regard for LT supporting Italy on the unrelated Asian shoe issue – a typical example of on-going EU "horse-trading".⁹

While especially Poland and Lithuania argued that the tariffs might affect ordinary Belarusians and damage the EU's profile in Belarus, those countries opposing and abstaining are the ones that have been pushing the EU into its current policy toward Belarus: though on the regime, and supporting civil society and independent media. Keeping the trade benefits for Belarus would mean that the EU tolerates systematic violation of conditions to grant these benefits, thus would simply lose its face, credibility and a major stick toward Belarus.

On the other hand, the suspension would be the logical upgrade for the current European policy. Moreover, the EU would be considered "tough" basically for the first time in the East. Nevertheless, the six months between the decision and actual implementation would allow the EU to change its policy and attempt a conditioned dialogue with the regime. Taking into account the lack of time to comply with ILO's 12 recommendations the EU could ask

⁶ Belarus' president says merger with Russia would lead to violence worse than in Chechnya, The Associated Press, September 29, 2006

⁷ Belarus TOLBlog,

⁸ Currently there are 177 countries benefiting from the GSP, while Burma is the only country to have been expelled from it. The benefits of GSP should be seen as a preference, not as an automatic right.

⁹ FT on September 27, "EU states delay vote on tariffs on cheap Asian shoes, by Andrew Bounds and EUobserver on September 29 "EU 'horse-trading' links Belarus and Chinese shoes, by Andrew Rettman.

The ILO Commission of Inquiry adopted the 12 recommendations for the Belarusian government in late 2004, after considering a 200-page report compiled by a special commission formed to probe the Belarusian government's alleged interference in the activities of trade unions. Originally it gave the government deadline until June 1, 2005 to fulfill twelve recommendations, in particular to remove all obstacles to freedom of association; guarantee protection of independent trade unions; to make changes in the country's laws to allow unions to organize freely; to respect independent unionists' civil rights.

Lukashenka to make two steps (as he promised) in this period: one could be the already prepared new legislation on trade unions¹⁰, while the second one to proceed with the opening of the EU Delegation in Minsk, what the authorities have been ignoring so far.

¹⁰ On October 6, 2006 Lukashenka has issued decree No 605 that a new edition of the Trade Unions Law should ease the registration process for such organizations. Drawn up by the government, the new law would govern all matters connected with the establishment, registration and activities of trade unions, the Belarusian leader's press office said. According to the press office, the bill is based on international legal standards in the sphere, Belarus' commitments in the framework of the International Labor Organization and the current operation of labor unions in the country. The new law would allow employees to form a trade union without its registration as a legal entity. Such organizations would have to be registered with local executive authorities. The bill would specify criteria allowing a trade union to cooperate with the government in solving social and economic issues and negotiate and sign collective bargaining agreements (see the decree at: www.president.gov.by/press31607.html#doc).