



## Focus Group Analysis -- Detailed Findings

The focus groups and analysis were prepared by the NOVAK Laboratories and commented on by the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force)

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### I. Focus Group Analysis Based on Methodology/Questions

#### 1) Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction

**Quality of life:** This polling-discussion was based on open-ended questions and spontaneous responses, e.g. the moderator asked the participants about their first feelings/reaction when talking about life in Belarus in general. Most of the descriptions involved negative adjectives characterizing: financial problems, a suffocating social and political environment, and a psychology of fear. The general impression is that the situation is uncertain and/or unclear due to the obscure playing rules. Positive adjectives comprised around 20% of the descriptions. The most dominant emotion expressed is in relation to the current political atmosphere of the country - fear. In addition, satisfaction (especially at workers) is also a strong factor, but with deeper interaction contradictions emerged in the opinions of every group. Satisfaction was often given as a first answer, followed by “hard” for double-check questions. It could mean ambiguousness or self-protection by most respondents.

**Fear:** Fear is strongly present connected to job loss and overall change. The question could be raised as “fear of alternative”, and there is an important balance between the two. Fear will be effectively challenged if there will be a visible alternative. However, people are not certain that change would be positive. It seems necessary to define (through quantitative polling) the reasons for fear since it can differ from group to group (pensioners are not afraid of smaller pensions for example).

**Socio-psychological mechanism for pre-electoral mobilization of voters-Lukashenka adherents - the situation of positive borderline choice:** Leading up to past presidential elections a larger part of the electorate used to criticize Lukashenka before actually voting in his favor. They must make difficult borderline decisions: they clearly see the disadvantages of Lukashenka, but vote for him since they see no alternative or know/aware of no other name(s). The same mechanism worked in 2001, when Lukashenka was running against candidates like Goncharik (democratic single presidential candidate in 2001) and Gajdukevich (pro-regime presidential candidate in 2001). *"Lukashenka was in power for four years and he was criticized by everyone everywhere, at work, in transport, at home. But when elections time approaching, 2-3 months in advance everyone started defending him. If somewhere one start criticizing him there would be a scandal. A scandal everywhere, at work, at home, or in public transport"* (Olga, Minsk, workers).

**Specific examples of violations of civic and human rights:** Most responses to this issue in all focus groups - regardless of social group status - considered the elections on October 17, 2004 fraudulent. *"Just such moment – everyone among my friends voted during early voting. All students were forced to do so. There were threats toward everyone such as informing administration in your work... I have a girlfriend whose brother was standing at elections as an authority candidate, so he told that all 100% early voting ballots were checked (Katia, Minsk, economist). "You wanna live? Or we are taking you to the mental hospital..." (vendor) – the description of the talk with the observer at a polling station. "All already voted, but the (local elections) commission still has 600 voting ballots left" (vendor). "In Volkovysk even dead people voted".*

## 2) Attitude toward changes

Generally, people do not foresee any change: "nothing could happen". However, it is important to note that similar disbelief was characteristic in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan as well before the elections.

**Apathy:** This is characteristic especially among young people in every group. However, when questions were posed such that if there is no change now there will be no change in the next ten years, then people want changes. This was confirmed by actual polling data, where around 88% of respondents answered affirmatively on the question whether there must be changes in the country. (This question itself made respondents puzzled – it's obvious for them that changes are necessary). In any case, the important driving factor is the local mentality. At the same time, people are afraid that changes could lead to a worse situation. The Belarusian historical experience has shown that if change happens it happens only at the top and does not include regular people: *"one thief changed by another thief"*. Therefore, practical work with people should be directed at showing the possibility of changes for the better: *"Open the window and let fresh air in"*. Questions about attitudes towards change are good examples of working on interpretations of data of large quantitative polls: it shall be done very carefully, and other research methods should also be considered.

**Attitude towards Referendum on October 17 (Are the final results true?):** The general unanimous opinion (except 2-3 respondents) for the whole series of 10 focus groups is that the officially declared referendum results are false. The margin of victory is too high, but it is hard to state whether this is still a feeling or a general awareness. While opinions vary about the extent of falsification, people are talking about several dozens of percents. Nonetheless, people are unanimous in their belief that the referendum results are fraudulent. The source/background of this belief is neither Belarusian independent media, nor Western media, but simply people getting the information/feeling from interpersonal communication (talking to neighbors, colleagues, relatives, etc.).

**Regarding exit-poll data:** Only 1-2 persons in each group were aware of the actual exit poll results conducted by the Gallup Institute/Baltic Survey, and almost no one was able to mention the exact figure of the exit-poll. People here are getting confused. At one point they are talking about the exit-poll declared on TV (e.g. the official exit-poll). They have also heard about the Gallup exit poll, but they can even remember the results of the official exit-poll. So we saw a lack of awareness of exit-polling among most people. While the exit poll was extremely efficient in the international community, among diplomats, politicians, experts, it proved inefficient for regular citizens of Belarus.

**Attitude towards elections in Belarus in general (are they fair?):** Attitudes towards the referendum are separate than those towards elections in general. People do not believe that elections are free or fair. Still, one can generalize the comparison: the attitude towards elections is the same as the attitude towards the 2004 referendum, since people do not believe that elections will be fair in the future. The problem is not people's understand whether or not the results are actually fraudulent: everyone realizes that the results declared by state media are fake. The problem is that the feeling of unfairness does not lead to any activity/feelings similar in Georgia and/or in the Ukraine.

- **3) Issues (What makes you unhappy/unsatisfied?)**

**Contract System:** A general contract system is a rather progressive regulation of relations between employer and employee. This form is popular in Western countries, where it sets forth mutual rights and concrete obligations of the parties. In Belarus, however, the problem is that contract form is rather unilateral setting forth only the rights of an employer: "...in our organization everyone had to sign contracts, however its impossible to name this as a contract. Because of the conditions set forth by the administration, it is favorable only for the administration. So, on the one hand there is an employer, and on the other hand there is an employed person, who lost his scanty rights. A contract with a person of working age is concluded for 2 years, but a contract with a person of pension age is concluded for only one year" (Galina, Minsk, intelligence).

Moreover, the social and legal background of the contract system in the West is represented by trade unions, which are practically absent in contemporary Belarus: "People are silent. They are afraid to loose their jobs. This is what makes the situation interesting, people are working and keeping silent. Because if you would not like something - go, leave! Now, the situation is like that" (Elena, Minsk).

**Municipal Payments:** Everyone feels the pressure of the growth of municipal payments. However, these prices increase slowly in order not to provoke public discontent and/or to generate general protest. The increase is kept gradual by the administration on purpose. It was carefully calculated: an increase of 5USD (or percent) per month, no more. Therefore, there is no explosion in the public mood: "It is slow, but it grows non-stop, by 2 rubles or by a ruble. Slowly, but surely" (Victor, handicapped). For some groups this is notable, but this factor is not crucial (mid-level manager). Therefore, the problem is (for the democratic opposition) to evaluate (or further generate) the degree of tension it creates: "when there is an increase of salary, you are waiting for an increase of municipal fees" (Victor, handicapped). Increases in municipal fees were the main reason Lukashenka lost popularity after the 2001 presidential elections (NOVAK Laboratory showed this in relevant correlation at representative polls). This situation is clearly reflected by analysts: the authorities learn fast and efficiently. Overall, the increase in prices is portrayed as a plan. In general, in judging the total reactions in all groups, the contract system appears to be a much bigger problem for the people than municipal payments.

**Freedom of communication:** The quality and level of interpersonal communication has decreased: "My opinion is that people have changed. They have become more angry, and do not trust each other very much" (Sergej, business directors). "People are closed. Extremely closed. Before people were much more easy-going and open. They sort of felt their selves like they had more freedom. And now they are sort of strained" (Liudmila, handicapped). Participants find various economic and political reasons for this (i.e. the hypothesis on only political reasons - meaning fear - is not substantiated).

Economic reasons for the decrease in quality of communication include:

- Economic stratification of the society: *"and how I will communicate with the person who has the whole "gentleman set" - apartment, car, summerhouse - if I do not have all that"*
- People generally work more, so they have no time for simple human communication: *"I come home at midnight, whom can I call at midnight?"*
- Transfer of business-relations into private life: *"Youth is tougher in this sense. They lack some spiritual warmth. In business, the framework is extremely tough. So they grew up in tougher rules. And they all lack some sort of kindness" (Natalia, Minsk, intelligence). "And also - this is transferred into life. If you have worked the whole day according to these rules, it is very difficult to switch to something else. So this is transferred into family and on relatives" (Alexej, Minsk, intelligence).*

**Perception of Media :** The most radical disapproval of (state run) Belarusian media is among people who returned from abroad. *"There are very specific presenters at Belarusian TV. If they saw Lukashenka's ass on the screen, they would've started kissing it".* Most students have similarly negative attitudes: *"Mass-media have started actively working on ideology. It was scary to watch the film "Modern History" at ONT channel. Grannies living in villages and simple people - they would believe that. There were also "scientific doctors" stepping out and telling the facts which are impossible to believe. Just to think logically... when professors are talking on the screen..." (Oksana, Minsk - foreign languages).* The information situation in Belarus shows that participants were more confident in remembering names of Russian political actors. Russian politicians are better known than those in Belarus - especially opposition activists. People notice the contradiction between the reality and what is presented as news on Belarusian TV channels. *"When I watch the news, it seems like I live in a different country, not in Belarus" (managers).*

**Perception of Media (Effect of Negative Adaptation):** Perceived as an important and looming theoretical problem, many question when the effect of negative adaptation towards the information given by the Belarusian media will begin. It seems that the process has started.<sup>1</sup> This occurred in 1994 when all Belarusian media sources campaigned for Prime Minister Kebich (who lost the first presidential elections against Lukashenka in 1994). All positive information about Prime Minister Kebich was perceived negatively, and negative aspects about Lukashenka were perceived as positive. Today, however, the effect of negative adaptation is likely to differ from 1994. Then, there was a feeling and hope in the possibility of positive changes after the chaos (mainly economic reform) the government created. There were new individuals, parties and ideas. The one-sided positive picture of Prime Minister Kebich produced diverse opinions. Now, Lukashenka stands alone; there are no other individuals at all, which has created a doleful situation. The effect of negative adaptation in 1994 caused boiling activity, in 2005 only apathy and depression.

**Possibility of Ukrainian scenario in Belarus:** The general opinion of all respondents was that Ukrainian-type events in Belarus are impossible (or, more correctly it is impossible at this point), due to the following differences:

- National character: Ukrainians are southern, temperamental people; Belarusian history full of wars and subservience has taught people not to stand up; national "pamiarkounasc" (tolerance), which is good in private and family life, becomes a negative feature (conformism) in interpersonal communication, which carries over to the level of political psychology.

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<sup>1</sup> The effect of negative adaptation is when the media presents positive information about "Object A" but it is perceived as negative, and vice versa- any negative information about "Object B" is perceived as positive. (Comments by Novak Laboratories).

- National idea: there is no national Belarusian idea so far. Belarusians have a low level of self-identification.
- Ukraine had a worse economic situation than Belarus
- Authority pressure is much tougher in Belarus.
- Currently, there is no clear national leader who stands for change.

Analyzing these factors (as people's perceptions), we have to remember that Ukrainian public opinion also did not foresee that all people would go into the streets and that change would happen so fast. Similar expectations existed in Romania (1989), as well as the last unfathomable example of Kyrgyzstan.

#### 4) Personalities

The general opinion is that there is no visible alternative for people, or there is no awareness of such.

**Opposition in general:** Everyone admits the need for democratic opposition (in terms of political parties) in the country. However, the general image of the opposition is not very good. It is necessary to understand that this image has been formed mainly by the "fruitful" propaganda work of state media over the past ten years. In this sense, there was a irrefragable statement of one mid-level manager: *"opposition shall exist. If the state does not have forces oppositional to the Government and President, it is not a state. This is like one of the philosophy laws. Opposition must exist. This is an engine of history...But unfortunately, from what I know about our opposition, I cannot say anything good about it. Moreover, from what I see on TV, they get 300-500 rascals into the streets and start throwing stones. The traffic is blocked and so on. I cannot say anything specific"* (Vladimir, manager of medium level)

Notably, the Coalition 5+ is perceived as unnatural, and this projects a poor image of both the coalition and its politicians. Particular references were made to Sergej Kaliakin (head of the Communist Party of Belarus), whose overall image is actually not bad. *"How to assess? He has switched the platform. He agreed to the compromise which was generally impossible."*

The level of knowledge of the names of opposition figures is extremely low. For example, Alexander Milinkevich (the independent candidate endorsed by the Belarusian Popular Front) was not mentioned by anyone in any group (can you name anyone else among the current candidates). As to personal characteristics, the level of knowledge is extremely low. Even if someone has heard some name, almost no one is able to make judgments about the actual person. There is just no information available to do so. In this sense, the current information vacuum is the biggest political problem for the opposition. Providing information should thus be the most important priority for any political activity. Even if we speak about street protests: even people in the streets need information. For example, Anatolij Lebedko's (Chairman of the United Civic Party) popularity grew after the October 17-18 protest, not because he was severely beaten by the special forces (OMON), but because Russian TV showed how him being beaten.

*Moderator: "Question: We have no other candidates (except Lukashenka) or we do not know other candidates?"*

*Leonid: We do not know.*

*Vladimir: Maybe we do not know.*

*Moderator: But you say in Russia there are 4 or 5 alternative candidates to Putin and you can mention them.*

*Vladimir: Yes - they are leaders of other blocks" (group of mid-level managers)*

The assessment procedure for the candidacies of Nikolaj Statkevich, Vladimir Kolos, Alexander Voitovich, Alexander Milinkevich, Sergej Kaliakin failed since respondents lacked information for evaluation (except for Statkevich – someone knew him personally—and Sergej Kaliakin who ran a door-to-door campaign in one participant’s constituency). There were instances of limited discussions only when someone from Minsk would happen to personally know some candidate.

*Moderator: "Let us talk about opposition. Now please take a sheet of paper and name any opposition activists you know. Do we know these names?"*

*Tatjana: I do not know.*

*Natalia: Everyone was killed. I can write this."*

### **5) Being Belarusian**

Based on the focus groups, this issue is not generating political activity. While the concern for sitting at home and having materialistic possessions suggests that economic issues could be the main campaign topic, however this would increase the materialistic vision so characteristic of Belarusians under the ten years of Lukashenka. Fundamental moral issues are well-known in Belarus, but so far have not raised (enough) emotions – e.g. human rights, human dignity and moral issues.

### **6) Belarus, its neighbors and the international community**

This topic did not appear as important during the focus groups. The main characteristic about this topic was an orientation and thinking gravitating towards Russia, but there is no consensus. The public image of the US is connected to money: *"US money could change the situation in Belarus, as it changed Ukraine"* (a statement made with no expressed hope). Europe is *"sleeping (regarding Belarus), does not care, has no interest"*.

Participants would not suggest any international examples for Belarus, or, more precisely, no CIS country is comparable. The closest examples are the Baltic countries, but many view these countries negatively (mainly Latvia) and especially Poland as well.

Regarding international and geo-political orientations, a "bi-vector orientation" dominates, (e.g. orientation both towards Russia and the West). *"We have to be oriented to the West because of their new technologies, but who needs us there? With Russia we have a common mentality and common history, we are Slavic brothers, relatives, etc. Yet, Russia may incorporate us, and the situation there is worse in all fields - economy, crime and military"*.

**What the West can do/USA:** American money can have a crucial influence on the Belarusian situation, at least there is significant confidence in that. In this light, the majority of Belarusians believe that the Ukrainian situation was decided by American money. However, Ukraine also had domestic money sources from Ukrainians oligarchs. As for money from international sources provided for the Ukrainian elections, Russian money actually outweighed American funding.

**What the West can do/European Union:** Europe is in a deep sleep regarding Belarus. It is generally not interested, it just *"lazily watches"*.

**What Russia can do:** Public opinion (within the focus groups) clearly reflects **that Russia can but does not want to** influence the situation in Belarus. In general, we cannot say that people admire Russia. No one mentioned Russia as a country that could serve as an example for Belarus (there were discussions about the Baltic countries and Poland, however, they were mentioned as rather good examples for Belarus). *"The further (East) you go into Russia from Moscow and Petersburg, the bigger devastation you face"*.

There was a firm opinion that Russia and the West will negotiate on Belarus. Only in this case would the situation in Belarus change. *"Our Belarusian mentality is bigger than international experiences"* - this was a statement by one vendor on the isolation of Belarus.

## 7) Elections

- Referendum -- the general assumption is that the result of the referendum is not credible (feeling). Only 16% of respondents (NOVAK polls), however, were aware of the exit poll results – due to poor information by the democratic opposition (who can't reach beyond usual opposition constituency) or because people did not want to receive such information.
- General – people don't believe that elections are free and fair. In 2001, however, people still viewed parliamentary elections/referendum as valid: the results were falsified, but Lukashenka would still have won. This means that people are unaware of the shift in public opinion (the attack on IISEPS/NOVAK could be explained by this shift and such work may thus be becoming too dangerous). The feeling/awareness of being the majority might embolden people and balance the fear/alternative. Based on the focus groups, the available information tools (e.g. leaflets) is working; nobody considers it spam.

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## II. Some Interesting Features from Focus Groups

**Workers:** The mood of workers can be characterized as *"apathy caused by the feeling of the impossibility of changes"*. Everyone has the basics, *"vodka shot and piece of lard"*, so there will be no hungry uprising. Monitoring of economic self-sensation of population suggest decrease. Thus, so far we can not talk about economic reasons to fight against the regime, and there are no Marxist economic reasons as well. One should not expect thousands of people at Independence Square, as in 1991 and 1992. People are afraid, and they know what will be the personal outcome for protesting.

**Youth (including students):** The most important observation is that fear is transforming into apathy. This mood to a great extent irradiates onto youth and intellectuals (especially onto so called paid-from-state-budget intellectuals). *"Youth becomes more apathetic. If youth all over the world is fanatical, Belarusian youth is apathetic"*.

*"They (Zianon Pazniak) had an idea. There were not many of them left, and they did not manage to motivate the people. And now no one would be able to motivate them. There is no force able to do it. No matter for whom you vote - he will be killed..."* (Natalia, Minsk, intellectuals). Currently, the problem of Belarusian society lies in the possibility of return process (Orwell is in the air). Belarusian society has less believe/hope/love and is less politically active than in the beginning of the 1990s. Belarusian civil society now is like a dying cow. If this was happening in India, people would've run to it - to the sacred animal - in order to help somehow. Since its happening in the West, no one pays major attention to this. This cow cannot even mumble about how bad it feels - it has no media for expressing itself.

**Pensioners:** There is no need to work with pensioners in the sense of agitation and propaganda. They have irresistible axiological aims and a rigid system of values. It is pensioners who believe that the *"tsar is good, officials are bad"* (among all social groups, only pensioners think so). There is one definite impression - these people will be pro-Lukashenka forever. Even pensioners with higher education, who can discuss various intellectual topics and refer to the names of composers-poets-writers, are firmly pro-Lukashenka. Among them there is a small layer (15-

20%) that is firmly anti-Lukashenka. However, there is no need to work with these people since they understand everything themselves.

**Entrepreneurs:** This is the most radically oriented part of the society. These are young, energetic and smart people who know what they want and who could efficiently and quickly develop the Belarusian economy. This group is the best prospect for political work - even more so than students. They do not believe in Lukashenka's promises. *"The fire is not down"*. They feel the international isolation very strongly. The problem is that they do not really trust the opposition activists - *"opposition is all legalized"* (connected to KGB).

**Passive opposition:** This group has strong feelings about the injustice and oppression of Lukashenka's regime, and they know that the \$250 salary is a myth. *"There are two big troubles in Belarus - Chernobyl and Lukashenka"*. Yet, they remain passive because they are extremely critical towards the opposition and see no way to overcome fear (within society themselves). From their point of view, the opposition is a) too minor, petty (on the national stage and relative to Lukashenka), b) the authorities are fine with such an opposition, c) communication with the authorities based on the principle *"you are stupid"* is not political communication, d) the current opposition is only negative - they are against Lukashenka and that is it (they do not know what to do positively). *"If they would suddenly become lucky enough to get the power, they won't know what to do with it"*. Passive opposition exists among various social groups - it is a state of mind.