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***Slovakia-Belarus Task Force presents***  
**Belarus Before Election: David against Goliath**

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## Executive Summary

Since the 2001 presidential elections Alexander Lukashenka has been keeping control over the situation in Belarus. Economic growth<sup>1</sup> fueled by unconditional support from Russia and growing trading relations with the EU allows him using the habitual toolkit - material interest and fear - of control over society.

Lukashenka cannot afford full prohibition of the opposition: to render economic and political support he needs demonstrating the existence of two alternatives for Russia - Lukashenka or "Westerners". But he needs it in a condition representing no threat to his authority. Stability of the regime depends on adhering to the principle "divide et impera". However, his toolkit does not seem to be enough to keep "tight" control in 2006. Aside from the changing of crucial external factors (Russia and the EU) supporting his preservation, one of the most important domestic ones - preservation of crisis among the opposition - seems to be diverging from Lukashenka's intentions.

The four months since the selection of Alexander Milinkevich as the "single candidate" have shown that his presence in politics seriously influences Belarus's political development. Due to lack of time he has less chance to convince voters, whose political behavior depends on the current social and economic situation. His campaign has already made him widely known in and out of Belarus, though. Lukashenka and his strongman Viktor Sheiman certainly understand the threat from the growing movement and what steps can be taken to limit it. Therefore his position in politics after the elections will depend not only on further consolidation of democratic forces around him as "the single candidate," but his personal safety, too.

The large amount of domestic and international media coverage of the attack on Alexander Kazulin, the second independent candidate, seems to serve to overshadow the protest meeting of Milinkevich with people on the very same day. This has increased the reputation of Kazulin in the international community (which rallied overwhelmingly behind Milinkevich as key democratic challenger) and increased Kazulin`s popularity among opponents of the regime, thus dividing opposition votes. His political behavior after his registration as a presidential candidate, especially his TV speech February 22, 2006 clearly indicates that he is sure he won't be subject to criminal prosecution. There is only one logical explanation for this, as argued by this analysis.

Lukashenka will declare his elegant victory in the 1<sup>st</sup> round of the presidential elections. He cannot afford to organize the 2<sup>nd</sup> round due to his strong internal wish to prove domestically and internationally that he is the only alternative. However, this time the declared "elegant victory" may be not accepted as genuine in the society, as it used to be. Therefore, future politics won't develop necessary the way Lukashenka projects. It might be too late to win the struggle on March 19 for the democratic forces, but a new political movement capable of becoming Lukashenka's alternative has been, nevertheless, developed. If Lukashenka decides to announce official results with too large of a margin in his favor, he may loose control over society. Thus, the elections might be the first step for change of regime.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2004 GDP growth in Belarus comprised 10.6%, in 2005 - 9%. In 2006 GDP is expected to increase by 9%.

## The alternative: Alexander Milinkevich

By re-scheduling the presidential elections for March 19, 2006 Lukashenka wanted to create a situation where democratic forces would have no time to convince a significant number of voters about the new alternative. However, even the four months since the selection of Alexander Milinkevich as the "single candidate" have shown that his presence in politics may seriously influence Belarus's political development in the near future.

- **Consolidation around the single candidate**

During the last quarter of 2005, the core segment of the opposition consolidated around the "single candidate" despite earlier difficulties with that process<sup>2</sup>. Three formal oppositional coalitions united in the campaign for Milinkevich, the National Coalition 5 +<sup>3</sup>, the European Coalition (EC)<sup>4</sup>, and the Council of Civil Initiatives/"Free Belarus" (FB)<sup>5</sup>.

Utter importance is attributed to the following consequences of the consolidation:

- Consolidation of human, financial, material resources of " 5 +," EC and FB within the scope of Milinkevich's election campaign (except perhaps the Belarusian Popular Front/BPF)<sup>6</sup>
- As an institute, the democratic opposition becomes clearer, more "transparent" for voters. Consolidation around Milinkevich is easier to understand than the systems of the three separate oppositional organizations with a significant number of persons pretending to play leading roles.
- The consolidation around Milinkevich comprised of BPF activists and NGOs representing the major part of politically active society.
- Political conditions necessary to consolidate democratic electorate matches with Milinkevich's record: independence of Belarus, market economy, democratic institutions (division of powers, rule of law, etc.), Belarusian as a state language, integration to the European Union as an issue of strategic importance.

Ambitious, but unpromising political figures (Andrei Klimov<sup>7</sup>, Alexander Voitovich<sup>8</sup>, Valeri

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<sup>2</sup> Please see earlier analysis The Fading Pillars of Power: 100 days of Milinkevich at [http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset\\_cache/link/0000014612/100%20days%20of%20Milinkevicz.pdf](http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset_cache/link/0000014612/100%20days%20of%20Milinkevicz.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> BPF (chairman - Vintsuk Vyachorka), UCP (Anatoly Lebedko), CPB (Sergey Kaljakin), Belarusian Socio-Democratic Hramada (Stanislav Shushkevich), the Greens (Oleg Gromyko), the liquidated Belarus Labor Party (BLP) (Alexander Bukhvostov). A significant number of NGOs takes active part in 5+ activities.

<sup>4</sup> Belarusian Socio-Democratic Party supporting Nikolaj Statkevich (National Hramada); the Party of Women of Belarus "Nadzeya" (chairman - Natalia Matusevich); non-registered Party of Freedom and Progress (the leader - Vladimir Novosjad), non-registered " Young Front " NGO (formally the organization was headed by co-chairmen - Dmitry Dashkevich and Sergey Bahun; Pavel Severinets, who was sentenced to forced labor, has real influence).

<sup>5</sup> The Council of Civil Initiatives "Free Belarus" is comprised of "Charter-97" NGO (leaders - Andrei Sannikov and Dmitry Bondarenko) and non-registered "Zubr" youth organization.

<sup>6</sup> The Congress of Democratic Forces might trigger decomposition of PCB. Its regional structures are apparently joining CPB - Communist Party of Belarus, supporting Lukashenka.

<sup>7</sup> Deputy of the Supreme Council of 13th Convocation. On June, 10th, 2005 Andrei Klimov was sentenced to 1.5 years of forced labor for the organization of a protest on March, 25th, 2005

<sup>8</sup> Former Chairman of the Upper House of Parliament (Council of the Republic)

Frolov and Sergei Skrebets<sup>9</sup>, Vladimir Kolos<sup>10</sup>) have lost opportunities to run and thus fragment democratic forces.

- **Milinkevich and the democratic forces: possibilities and threats**

Due to the mentality and history of Belarusian understanding of authority, opposition must personalize its alternative toward Lukashenka. Despite the achievements of democratic forces, due to time limitations Milinkevich is unlikely to become a fully acknowledged alternative before the presidential elections, but nevertheless he seems to be the man of the future.

He started on October 2, 2005 from zero, and had already reached 18.1% support in December 2005.<sup>11</sup> Given the late start to his election campaign due to the change of the election date, but also the campaign headquarters with politicians taking the lead, this is a remarkable outcome. The authorities did not manage to collect any new compromising material against him, therefore the usual "black PR" of Belarusian TV seems ineffective. So far attempts at discrediting Milinkevich have been based on his partly Polish blood and being a "Westerner" by culture. Their estimates are not deemed negative by the significant majority of Belarusians who also have mixed ancestry. Through such attacks Lukashenka's advisors are unwittingly cultivating an image of a "man of culture," that is corresponding with Milinkevich's manner to behave, speak, and to his general appearance. Since a considerable part of undecided voters (mainly women) vote for an "image," Milinkevich's appearance on TV on February 22, 2006 with the image of the single candidate as a successful public politician could strengthen his chance to talk to undecided voters. However, the above mentioned characteristics of Milinkevich's image are not attractive enough for a significant part (about 60 %) of the electorate whose main priorities are "material," social, and economic issues<sup>12</sup>. Milinkevich and democratic forces are still insufficiently persuasive in this field. To convince voters, whose political behavior (also during elections) depends on the social and economic situation, and who are mostly concerned about materialistic and "household" problems, simply more time is required. By March, 19th, 2006 Milinkevich will hardly exceed the limits of the democratic electorate, around 25% of the population.

Deprived of any access to mass-media, the opposition does not have sufficient leverage to replace the regime. This remains true even after considering the following sources of leverage: support from the economic elite and trade unions, consolidation of the democratic opposition, appearance of an alternative leader, and mobilization of opposition supporters. It is most important to increase public debate in Belarus and in the meantime create sufficient preconditions to ensure irreversibility of the integration process of Ukraine into the EU and NATO.

Throughout the elections, the opposition should eventually prove that it acknowledges how to use resources most efficiently, and mainly that it is ready work with the majority of voters. However, the USA and EU should also decide how far they can and want to go with democratization of Belarus. It is more than urgent to break the information blockade and provide independent broadcasting in Belarus. More political and financial support is

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<sup>9</sup> Former representatives of the "Republic" Parliamentary Group. On February, 14th, 2006 S. Skrebets was sentenced to 2 years and 6 months of imprisonment. He was accused of using illegal means for obtaining a state loan

<sup>10</sup> Former Director of the National Humanitarian Lyceum

<sup>11</sup> Based on public opinion poll data released by the Independent Institute for Political, Social and Economic Studies, Minsk (IISEPS), Belarus

<sup>12</sup> See polling memorandum of the Pontis Foundation and the Institute for Public Affairs from January 2006 at [http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset\\_cache/link/0000014736/Pontis\\_IVO%20Polling%20Memo\\_Feb%2022%202006x.pdf](http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset_cache/link/0000014736/Pontis_IVO%20Polling%20Memo_Feb%2022%202006x.pdf)

necessary, especially now, when there is a chance Belarusian democrats might have overcome their internal disputes and are forming a visible and effective opposition against the regime.

Lukashenka and his strongman Viktor Sheiman<sup>13</sup> certainly understand the threat from the growing movement and what steps can be taken to limit the alternative. It is enough to think about the politicians who disappeared in 1999-2000. The regime probably realized that the early election date only postponed the problem called Milinkevich. Especially Sheiman has overwhelming influence on political affairs, and he is as a good student of Stalin who used to say "no person - no problems".

Milinkevich's campaign has already made him widely known within Belarus. Moreover, he is recognized highly by the international community. However, his position in politics after the elections will depend not only on further consolidation of democratic forces around him as "the single candidate," and strengthening the organizational base for further unification of all oppositional forces. Ensuring his personal safety is the most important task.

- **March 2: the movement is on the rise**

On March 2, 2006, the very same day Alexander Kazulin, another registered candidate was beaten up and detained at the All-Belarusian Congress, according to different estimations, 3 to 10 thousand people gathered for a meeting with Milinkevich.<sup>14</sup> Formally the assembly of people in the center of the Belarusian capital looked like a meeting with "the single candidate." De facto, it was a dress rehearsal for protests against the falsification of the results of the upcoming presidential elections. All those who came to meet Milinkevich were facing the risk of being beaten up, detained by riot police, fired from their jobs, and expelled from their places of study. Alongside the information regarding the place and time of the meeting, the official sources were disseminating warnings on strict measures which would be applied to the participants of this "unlawful" assembly. The choice of the place for Lukashenka's supporters' meeting - the Palace of the Republic - clearly indicated that the authorities might resort to force to disperse the peaceful assembly.

After this psychological breakthrough, more people are likely to take part in protests after the presidential election than expected, although it is unlikely that there will be sufficient numbers for a repeat Serbia or Ukraine. Since oppositional rallies hardly achieved one thousand participants in the past five years, only a few people believed that in conditions of total intimidation and reprisal even this number of people would come to express their support for Milinkevich. Belarusian society has not woken up yet, but signs of awakening are clear. The meeting on March 2<sup>nd</sup> demonstrated that significant numbers of democratic parties' activists and NGOs consider Milinkevich deserving support regardless of the bad image of oppositional political parties and the danger of reprisals.

- **Post-election demand for democratic forces**

Further activities to gain the majority demand serious changes among the democratic forces: institutional (the current management of opposition parties should be replaced by more effective, young political figures) and functional (constant and effective communication with the electorate). However, in the very emotional, personalized, and small constituency,

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<sup>13</sup> For more about Lukashenka and his circle see the previous analysis [Belarus Before Voting: Politics and Society \(July-August 2004\)](#)

[http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset\\_cache/link/0000012397/Belarus%20Before%20Voting\\_CPE.pdf](http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset_cache/link/0000012397/Belarus%20Before%20Voting_CPE.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> CPE believes that the number of participants (except for "gapers" and casual passers-by) comprised approximately 5 thousand people.

the opposition does not appear to be ready for the necessary changes, but post-election developments can strengthen the conditions necessary to carry out the changes.

### **Man with a mission: Alexander Kazulin**

On March 2 Alexander Kazulin was detained and beaten by KGB officers under the command of colonel Pavlichenko, named in the **CoE`s so-called Pourgourides-report** (\*\*\*)This report needs quotation marks if it's part of a book, or italics if it's a book)responsible for disappearances of oppositional politicians. The large amount of coverage of the incident by international media raised speculation that the attack on Kazulin served to overshadow the meeting of Milinkevich with people on the very same day, slow down Milinkevich`s fast growing popularity, increase the reputation of Kazulin in the international community (which rallied overwhelmingly behind Milinkevich as the key democratic challenger to the incumbent in the election), and increase Kazulin`s popularity among opponents of the regime, thus dividing opposition votes.

After both domestic and international media gave significant coverage to the event, the ultimate question, mainly for international community, was - who is Alexander Kazulin?

- **The only former high level official not imprisoned after joining the opposition**

Civil servants are well aware of the consequences of supporting the opposition. The demonstration of any disloyalty meant criminal proceedings and imprisonment. The logic of Lukashenka's previous actions would demonstrate the "necessity" of Kazulin`s imprisonment as a preventive measure, like he did in the last such example, against former Minister of Foreign Economic Relations, Mikhail Marynich.

- **The pro-Russian politician**

As one of the representatives of Belarusian Social Democratic Party (BSDP) told the author, he is not afraid of criminal prosecution because Lukashenka is aware of Russia's support for Kazulin.

However, Andrei Klimov, declaring the necessity of partnership with Russian President Putin regarding "democratic transformations in Belarus" is currently serving his term at a forced labor camp. Sergei Skrebets, accused by the KGB of receiving funds from "Russian democrats," is also serving a prison sentence. Mikhail Marynich was also believed to be close to Russia. Therefore support from the Kremlin appears to be another reason for criminal prosecution of Kazulin.

- **Kazulin the rector....**

According to unofficial sources, the authorities have had a chance to take legal actions against Kazulin for some time. Rumors are suggesting corruption at Belarus State University while he was rector there. In the summer of 2003, heads of the BSU enterprise involved in the processing of components containing precious metals (platinum, gold, silver) were summoned into court as defendants in criminal proceedings. They were accused of large-scale thefts of precious metals. At that time BSU rector Kazulin, was called to court as a witness. When Kazulin resigned on November 24, 2003 he was about to be summoned to court. On February, 22, 2005, with the appeal of his new public movement "Will of the People," he declared himself as an oppositional politician in the wave of the next

"anticorruption campaign".<sup>15</sup>

- **...and as oppositional politician**

On April 10, 2005 Kazulin was appointed chairman of the Belarusian Social-Democratic Party "Narodnaya Gromada" (BSDP/NG). He suddenly - and immediately after starting his own new movement - became head of one of the largest oppositional parties. Considering his past, his appearance in politics could be easily explained by his active political stand and belief in democracy. However, his image as democrat had contrasted sharply with the image of Kazulin as a state official until his appearance in politics. Being BSU rector for five years, Kazulin diligently fulfilled his political obligations as well. He did not show any discontent signing orders to expel detained students - participants in protest actions - and dismissal of teachers convicted of disloyal behavior.

- **Kazulin`s campaign: no fear**

His campaign and especially political behavior after his registration as a presidential candidate<sup>16</sup>, and his TV speech February 22, 2006<sup>17</sup> clearly indicates that Kazulin is absolutely sure he won't be subject to criminal prosecution, and he won't be imprisoned. There is only one logical explanation, especially considering that the one who can provide such guarantees in Belarus is definitely not Putin, but Lukashenka.<sup>18</sup> By strengthening the minor independent candidate's position, with no real chance of unifying those who would like to see an alternative candidate, the regime fulfills its main goal: marginalization of Milinkevich as the alternative to Lukashenka.

1) As long as Kazulin remains BSDP(NG) chairman there will be no chance for uniting the electorate of all opposition parties. Looking back at the end of 2004, Lukashenka's team started counter-measures against the unification processes of the opposition. At approximately the same time, a group of BSDP(NG) leaders (Anatolij Levkovich, Vladimir Nistiuk, Alexej Korol) initiated the removal of Nikolaj Statkevich, often viewed as an obstacle in unifying democratic parties due to his political tactics in the position of party chairman.

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<sup>15</sup> In December, 2004 the heads of the oil refinery "Naftan" (Novopolotsk), directors of "Belarusian Wallpapers", chairman of the State Committee of Aviation Fedor Ivanov were summoned into court as defendants in criminal proceedings. On December, 30th, 2004 a former Minister of Foreign Economic Relations Mikhail Marinich was sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment. In January, 2005, the general director of the Minsk Bearing Plant, Valery Penza, the former general director of the Minsk Machinery Plant, Mikhaill Krivomaz, the director of the enterprise "Gomelenergo," Oleg Richter were arrested. Litigation involving high-level officials was initiated in February, 2005. On February 14th, the former general director of National State Teleradiocompany Egor Rybakov was sentenced to 11 years of imprisonment for embezzlement of \$ 100,000. On February 16th, 2005 Galina Zhuravkova, the former Head of the Presidential Administrative Office was sentenced to 4 years in prison. She later received a presidential pardon, however.

<sup>16</sup> Despite the active counteraction of "people in civilian clothes," on February 17, 2006, Kazulin tried to break into the building of the National Press Centre, but never faced criminal charges. Interestingly, before the presidential elections of 1994 Lukashenka played the same trick: he made a PR-event out of his "break" into the House of Government, despite the counteraction of militia forces.

<sup>17</sup> In his speech Kazulin personally insulted Lukashenka, having accused him of matrimonial infidelity and of having a mistress. He also accused him of embezzlement of income from weapon sales. There are enough examples of criminal cases initiated under Article 367 part 1 of Criminal Code of Belarus (slander concerning the president of Belarus, containing in public performance, or in printed or publicly shown product, or in mass media). Nobody had dare make such allegations on TV before.

<sup>18</sup> Pontis Foundation believes that the brutal attack was more "revenge" for Kazulin`s first TV speech and a message for him and those supporting him from Russia. In the meantime, the regime is using the benefit of having two independent candidates in the race and manipulating Kazulin without having any agreement with him.

These people together with Oleg Trusov, an influential member of another social-democratic party (BSDG - part of 5+), supported the idea of uniting all social-democrats into a single party and developing cooperation with the 5+ Coalition. However, prospective cooperation with social-democrats was slowed down through some unfriendly steps taken by 5+ leaders. Finally, the possibility of uniting social-democrats was absolutely eliminated only after Alexander Kazulin appeared in politics.

2) Kazulin seems to be serving as an efficient disinformation tool against the most dangerous of Lukashenka's rivals, Alexander Milinkevich, by using opposition resources. Kazulin forced Milinkevich and united democratic forces in general out of the pages of *Narodnaja Volia*, the opposition newspaper with the biggest circulation.<sup>19</sup> As election day approaches, Kazulin continues giving out more and more information discrediting Milinkevich in public speeches and printed interviews, including that Milinkevich is a nationalist and a pro-American politician, who would not be able to set and keep normal relations with Russia, Belarus's main political and economic partner.

But Kazulin's attacks are directed not only against Milinkevich, but democratic forces as a whole saying that the opposition is split, and its representatives cannot compete with Lukashenka. However, recent statements from Kazulin after his incident with law enforcement agencies, caused by him calling people to go out into the streets on March 19, might have been showing that Kazulin may not necessarily be in agreement with the regime's manipulation of him.

On the other hand, Kazulin's negative style of addressing the public and his aggressive activities (an attempt to break into the building of the National Press-Center or the fist fight with Colonel Pavlichenko) do not leave any positive impressions on the majority of the electorate, those voters interested primarily in social and economic issues. These voters do not perceive Kazulin as a serious politician. Kazulin simply frightens the majority, pushes them towards Lukashenka, and may even increase their approval of a crackdown on street protests by riot police.

Borrowing ideas from Lukashenka's 1994 campaign (breaking into the press center and shooting into a car with his supporters) suggests that Lukashenka's team could be organizing or at least encouraging these events. Scandals connected to Kazulin's name will provide him increased presence in media. Last, but not least, Kazulin may continue to secure opposition's split and frighten the majority of voters.<sup>20</sup>

- **Used as cover for repressions?**

Kazulin is making sure he attracts public attention by speaking loudly and about taboo topics like Lukashenka's private life. While Kazulin attracts attention, the regime applies severe repression against real activists among the democratic opposition, with no significant echo in

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<sup>19</sup> According to a study by the Belarusian Association of Journalists conducted in January 2006, 18% of the printing area in *Narodnaja Volia* is given to Kazulin's publications and the articles of his supporters. Only 2% of printing area is given to Milinkevich and his supporters.

<sup>20</sup> Kazulin's political activity may not lead to a situation where present and former state officials start believing in the possibility of unpunished activity on the opposition's side. On January 27, 2006 Lukashenka declared that he intended to take "pitiless fight against corruption" during his entire rule. According to this scenario, in order to distract attention from Lukashenka's informant in a rival's camp, the administration could start demonstrative court proceedings against officials' right after the elections.

society in response to the crackdown. There is no information about repression in media distributed by the state, and regular citizens have almost no access to alternative information channels.

Lukashenka just made the first steps toward cleaning up the political arena in Belarus. On February 21, 2006 KGB officials arrested activists involved in an unregistered NGO "Partnership" - Alexander Shalaiko, Timofej Dranchuk, Nikolaj Astrejko and Ema Bronitskaja. Thus, security agencies created a precedent of initiating criminal proceedings under Article 193.2 of the Criminal Code (establishment or leading an unregistered public association, religious organization or a political party which infringes upon a person, or rights and obligations of citizens). Under this article, the administration can persecute the majority of activists involved in active opposition organizations in Belarus.

On March 8 the Belarusian police detained Belarusian Popular Front leader Vincuk Viachorka, foreign affairs advisor for the campaign of the single democratic candidate Alexander Milinkevich. Also arrested were ten others colleagues of Viachorka from the Milinkevich campaign team. Viachorka, and his colleagues', as registered "agents" of the single candidate Milinkevich, have been sentenced to 15 days in jail. A few days earlier, on March 7, a court in Mogilov issued a \$750 fine to another opposition leader and Milinkevich ally United Civic Party head, Anatolij Lebedko. Similar steps had been included in the election related memorandum which was leaked earlier this year from the Commission of State Security (KGB).

However, most clean ups of the political arena and securing of political "stability" will take place after elections. The regime will use the same scenario as the one after the 2004 referendum and parliamentary elections. Opposition activists will be fired, students expelled. The repression might be followed by a wave of arrests at traditional oppositional protests, at the Day of the Declaration of the Belarusian People's Republic on March 25 and at the Chernobyl Way on April 26, 2006.