

Belarus Brief: How long will the awakening take?
March 20, 2006 (20.30 CET)

Updates

1) Monday evening **at 8pm local time, there were around 10 000 people at Oktiabrskaja Square.** Both Milinkevich and Kozulin asked for non-recognition of the election results and **called for new elections on July 16, 2006.** Comparing to the demonstration yesterday, there were much stronger and more visible special police forces standing by. Uniformed police was checking IDs of everyone approaching the square. There were widespread rumors that tonight there may be multiple detentions and violence. However, people were reportedly prepared to stay at the square overnight – they already several tents appeared.

2) Current developments suggest that **the regime might implement similar scenario to 2004,** where on referendum evening protesters surrounded the KGB building without police interference, which came only on the next day. Based on previous behavior police interference and post-election repression is expected to start after today's rally. Lukashenka after his "landslide" victory must show Belarusians that he won't tolerate demonstrations by the opposition and waiting for international attention re-focuses on the upcoming Ukrainian elections.

3) It is clear that those around 25-30,000 people who met at Minsk main square on Sunday evening signaled an awakening, "alternative" Belarus – a clear sign that part of the society wants change. Belarusian authorities meanwhile announced official results with 83% for incumbent Lukashenka and 6% for main challenger Milinkevich, who called the results a "complete farce" and demanded "new, honest election". When following Belarusian news, the international media tend to forget that it **is watching not election, but a Soviet-style political farce.**

4) Sunday afternoon police and people in civilian clothes blocked the access of intercity busses and mini-vans from regional towns to Minsk – to prevent regional activist's access to Minsk. Busses were reportedly turned back to regional towns. The number of intercity train routes was cut, and the militia has been checking passports of arrivals at Minsk train stations.

5) Nevertheless, during the last days the opposition managed to increase the hunger for freedom through the good atmosphere created by the concert on March 18, and by the biggest opposition rally in the past ten years. It is necessary to acknowledge the progress on the side of the opposition, especially in light of the authorities' measures against them. Milinkevich at his press-conference today said Lukashenka seized power by unconstitutional means and called for non-recognition of elections results and organization of new free and fair elections. Since opposition leader and presidential candidate Milinkevich called for a big protest today at 18.30, the question is still which "f" factor – **freedom or fear** - will be stronger in the coming days among Belarusians.

6) The Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs announced on Monday that leaders of Belarusian opposition did not manage to organize a major action after the end of Belarusian elections. Lukashenka at his press-conference commented that the demonstration consisted of 15-year-olds, each of whom received 10USD for their participation.

7) The head of Central Elections Commission Lidia Yermoshina already on Sunday afternoon announced that a 2nd round won't be necessary based on "electoral preferences" no doubt that everything is according to the plan of the regime, which can not afford to show any weakness.

- **Exit Polls/Official results**

8) Compared to the 2004 referendum and parliamentary elections there were not major independent exit polls. Majority of international media quoted the state-funded dubious exit polls suggesting 82% of the incumbent, while previous independent polls suggested support around 50%.

9) According to the press release of the **Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization**, based in Vilnius, Lithuania with the current situation in Belarus **it is impossible to implement independent and reliable exit poll, free of the Government pressure.** Andrei Vardomatskii, a Belarusian pollster, quoted by Washington Post on March 19, 2006 said that "the climate of fear in the country causes many people to say publicly that they will vote for Lukashenka. That result in an overestimate of his support in pre-election polls by at least 10 percent, meaning **he probably could not secure a first-round victory in a fair vote**".¹

10) Despite all exit poll turmoil there are some independent exit poll results actually supporting the estimation about the necessity of 2nd round. Although Russian Levada denied any exit poll survey carried out in Belarus by its network², another Russian agency reportedly measured **43% for Lukashenka, 31% for Milinkevich, 18% for Kazulin and 6% for Gajdukevich**. Ironically, any independent exit polls should be largely unknown for the public, otherwise authorities would have blocked them as they did with the efforts of Danish SILBA and the Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization.

- **International Development**

11) While CIS Observer saw no problem during its observation mission, the presidential election failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections, despite the fact that voters were offered the potential for a genuine choice between four candidates. Arbitrary use of state power and widespread detentions showed a disregard for the basic rights of freedom of assembly, association and expression, and raise doubts regarding the authorities' willingness to tolerate political competition, concludes the OSCE Election Observation Mission in a statement, issued today.

12) The **European Union is "very likely" to bolster sanctions on Belarus** after a weekend poll which handed a crushing victory to President Alexander Lukashenka, EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said today. The Presidential poll was everything but free and fair, said Hans-Gert Poettering, Chairman of the EPP-ED Group in the European Parliament.

¹ Washington Post, March 19, 2006 "Keeping the Opposition in Check, if Not in Jail"

² <http://news.tut.by/elections/65718.html>

13) The **United States did not recognize elections results** and called Belarus to organize democratic and free elections, told the Secretary of Bush administration Scott McLellan.

14) **Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly congratulated Lukashenka even before the official results are declared.** Vladimir Rushailo, the head of an observer mission from the Commonwealth of Independent States, concluded that, despite some technical violations, the election took place within the requirements of Belarusian law. According to information provided by members of the Russian Duma (parliament)³, today Russia and Belarus are expected to sign all necessary papers to make Beltransgaz under the control of Russian Gazprom concern.

³ Statement of Vladimir Ryzhkov at the press-conference in Minsk <http://www.ucpb.org/?lang=rus&open=8806>

