



## **Belarus Brief**

### **Soberness and Dilemmas**

**March 30, 2006**

#### **1) The regime: own Rubicon crossed**

By announcing the impossibly high 1.9 million signatures (400,000 in 2001), and the 31% turnout at early voting (14% in 2001), it became clear before the election that Lukashenka chose to increase the amount of declared support for himself instead of striving for a more realistically sounded - over 60% - result. However, the "only alternative" policy indicates serious weakness in the system: Lukashenka can not afford even a small opposition in his Belarusian "virtual reality".

Moreover, in trying to keep society and its protest mood under control, the regime itself passed the line it drew ten years ago for its citizens: no politics, no problem. Efforts to increase fear for the first time reached the whole society, not only the dissents. The 450 detained or arrested before the election were followed by at least another 500 sentenced to jail according to available protocols at the disposition of local human rights organizations. Statements of the KGB Chief labeling protesters as terrorists, and especially the short text messages through "Velcom" mobile provider about the threat of "bloodshed" on the street could challenge more serious doubts within society whether those promising "stability and security" are not the ones fueling the chaos themselves. Belarusian society has become much more politicized than before, and demystification of the regime is on its way.

In addition, the regime was hit negatively by the increased international attention, which Belarus had never faced before, despite their effort to divide attention between Belarus and Ukraine. As a matter of fact, Lukashenka provided a genuine lesson for the international community and both Belarusian and Ukrainians what is free and fair election and what is not. Nevertheless, for the first time since the late 90s, Lukashenka faces a serious dilemma: what to do with the emerging solidarity due to stronger opposition and serious international attention? Although many observers suggest that the regime can not return to its previous state, it seems unlikely that Lukashenka will be able or willing to change the current political line without further external pressure. Whether detained opposition activists will face months or years in prison according to the so-called "anti-revolution legislation"<sup>1</sup>, or whether the regime will use its earlier softer tactics toward opposition, will be the first indicator of the regime's post-election strategy.

#### **2) Democratic forces: Consolidation of traditional supporters**

On October 1-2, 2005, when the Congress of Democratic Forces elected Alexander Milinkevich as the single candidate of democratic forces ahead of Anatolij Lebedko, few

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<sup>1</sup> See Anti-Revolution Legislation in Belarus: State is Good, Non-State is Bad, December 22, 2005, [http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset\\_cache/link/0000014579/Legal%20Memo%20on%20Anti%20Revolution%20Legislation%20of%20Belarus.pdf](http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset_cache/link/0000014579/Legal%20Memo%20on%20Anti%20Revolution%20Legislation%20of%20Belarus.pdf)

hoped that he could be the face of the alternative Belarus. Importantly though, most of the politically-active NGOs backed Milinkevich before and after the Congress. His election as single candidate build new trust between opposition and civil society and made possible the development and function of a coalition of political parties and civil society many had already wished for in 2001.

The first indicator of functionality of the coalition of political parties and civil society was the increased number of signatures for registration as presidential candidate (Milinkevich 198,000 and Kazulin 160,000) compared to 2001 (Domash 160,000 and Goncharik 121,000.) His election campaign was based on direct door-to-door voting methods, and he found himself attracting unexpected crowds everywhere he went. At one of the last public meetings in Gomel around 5-6,000 supporters rallied to meet him, while the harassment of campaign activists was also much larger than "normal". Through the direct voter contact campaign and the establishment of the Belarus "Maidan" (as Belarusian youth calls it), the political alternative has become visible for the first time. Nevertheless, the two strategies possible for the democratic opposition<sup>2</sup> have subsequently failed due to lack of credible exit poll figures and loss of momentum after the March 19 mass protest. The opposition – many of its leaders thwarted by finding themselves already in jail, deprived of (technical) possibilities – reportedly had a lack of ideas on what to do to keep protesters on the square and how to attract even more people.

Nevertheless, the democratic forces managed to consolidate and reach out to the traditional oppositional electorate. Given the problem of credible exit polling, there could be only an estimate whether the oppositional-minded electorate had increased from the 20% reported before the election. Milinkevich's campaign – Freedom, Justice, Truth – was designed to give an alternative value for Belarus compared to "stability and security". This campaign – with real people embodying the opposition – proved to be a successful means of mobilization of traditional opposition layers: the urban, educated elite, the intelligentsia, and young people. However, due to lack of access to state media, and the large scale "social advertisement" campaign "Za Belarus" on the other hand, the "stability and security" (main slogan of the regime) remained stronger in political communication than freedom. More importantly, "freedom" did not provide anything substantial for the majority standing for other, mostly social and economic, values. Thus, the majority of Belarusians remained largely unchallenged by the democratic opposition. There were some attempts – the National Committee led by Anatolij Lebedko prepared a reform program – but the Shtab did not manage to present the program in time for the deadline according to election law (20 days before the election), thus missed the opportunity to publish the program in all state newspapers. The roundtables supposed to be organized by the National Committee also had dubious results in terms of reaching out with the program to the necessary audience. Except for a few positive examples (Bielorusi i Rynok) this "miscommunication" with the majority seems supported by the local independent media, and even the newly-created electronic media (radio).

As Milinkevich himself noted after the Freedom Day (March 25, 2006), increasing the number of supporters for the movement will be the most important task for democratic forces from now on. The Belarus opposition might win over fear, but communicating its message thus reaching out the majority, is still the biggest task for near future. The momentum is there: the fraudulent referendum in 2004 was followed by fraudulent elections, and Belarus society seems aware more than ever that Lukashenka is not the legitimate, genuine leader in Belarus anymore. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe on April 26 and the traditional state holidays in May will show further potential of opposition.

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<sup>2</sup> a) Demanding a 2<sup>nd</sup> round, b) demanding new election due to serious violations of free and fair elections

## **The Kazulin Factor**

Despite worries that he may divide the unity of the opposition camp, Alexander Kazulin certainly enriched the presidential race with his aggressive attitude. His radicalism started with his first TV speech on February 22, when he tore up a copy of *Sovietskaya Belarus*, the state daily with biggest circulation, and asked Lukashenka to return the money stolen from the nation. Especially the highly-covered March 2<sup>nd</sup> event, when he was detained and beaten by Colonel Pavlichenko<sup>3</sup>, raised serious speculation about whose interest Kazulin is serving. At his first meeting with Head of Missions of the European Union, Kazulin has clearly stated that he is "the man of Russia". According to local sources, former head of Presidential Administration Latypov, currently serving in Gazprom interest in Belarus, is supporting the Kazulin campaign.

As written previously, the Pontis Foundation believes that the attack on March 2<sup>nd</sup> could be more of a warning for Kazulin's first TV speech for him, but also for those supporting him from Russia.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the Kazulin-factor showed its "capabilities" to divide the opposition, but also to mobilize people. After their agreement to stay together in the race and run a common campaign in the final days, first conflict between Milinkevich and Kazulin erupted over the "tent city", and mainly on Freedom Day (March 25, 2006), when Kazulin led part of the demonstrators to the prison where the previously-arrested demonstrators were being held, after the peaceful meeting had already dispersed. Many think that Kazulin "offered" the special forces a possibility to crack down on the opposition; however, the post-election absence of Lukashenka suggests that democratic forces were closer to breaking the regime than anyone had thought.

The attack by special forces on Freedom Day ended the week-long protests in Minsk and arguably could restore fear in Belarus, which many believed had already been overcome by the positive and festive atmosphere in the square. For sure, following the pre-election logic of the regime, Kazulin faces several years in prison. Lukashenka can not afford not to punish him. If this is about to happen, Kazulin might serve mainly his own interest: as another independent candidate he designed a more aggressive image, which he and his close circle believed would be catchy for radical-minded oppositionists.

### **3) Civil Society: Virtual reality**

Although the role of civil society in the 2006 presidential election is the subject of further in-depth assessments<sup>5</sup>, it seems necessary already to draw preliminary lessons learned, especially since Belarus and civil society have attracted the unprecedented attention of the international and donor communities.

The coalition of civil society and political parties was functional basically for the first time. Civil society, disposing with most of the human and financial resources, backed Alexander Milinkevich (as it backed Semyon Domash in 2001) as its candidate. Therefore his election as a single democratic candidate gave a new wind for NGOs suffering most of the attacks by the regime between 2001 and 2006.<sup>6</sup> However, the focus on oppositional politics by those NGOs believed to bear the largest structures has downplayed their attention to their own civic campaigns. Nevertheless, most of these

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<sup>3</sup> He was named in the CoE's so-called Pourgourides report "Disappeared In Belarus."

<sup>4</sup> The believed support from Russia indicates that the Kremlin might have developed a B-scenario in case of unexpected eruption of protests, e.g. to have its own man within the opposition in any case

<sup>5</sup> The Pontis Foundation is preparing its own assessment, parts of which will be released publicly in May 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Such a coalition was the ultimate goal in 2001 as well. However, the unclear selection process of Vladimir Goncharik as the single candidate fueled more disputes than the previous five candidates' altogether.

NGOs have been engaged in various campaign activities for the democratic forces, from collection of signatures to organization of door-to-door campaigns.

The previous sustained crackdown on civil society has developed a more cautious behavior by civic activists than local NGOs would have admitted. Therefore, most civic campaigns have chosen virtual campaigning, which was made possible by the increasing popularity of the internet in recent years until it reached a certain level. It is most important to understand that virtual campaigning has not allowed communication with the large majority of the voters, though.

While it is important to notice the very positive civil society activities to increase solidarity abroad, in the country the results are largely invisible and unknown civic campaigns. As one of a Belarusian internet user noted few days before the election, „I only learnt yesterday that it was the jeans revolution... and very few of us have jeans<sup>7</sup>“. Indeed, reported campaign activities of NGOs are simply in contradiction with monitoring reports by independent international experts traveling to Belarus, who saw no stickers, newspapers or any other campaign materials on the streets throughout the campaign period, and also with the figures of public opinion surveys of the Pontis Foundation regarding perception of civil society activities from February and March 2006. However, authorities limited campaign activity much more thoroughly and aggressively than previously.

On the other hand, civil society organizations and independent media have managed to increase the quantity and quality of information through their various websites. First-time Belarusian bloggers covering the election development not only increased the variety of information sources, but decreased the possibility of the creation of “virtual reality” by certain websites.

The mobilization throughout Milinkevich`s meetings with people all over Belarus, the concert “Ja za svabodu” on March 18 and emergence of the tent city initiated finally the eruption of other spontaneous civic initiatives. Flash mobs appeared every day in Minsk; an unknown civic activist put a cartoon on the ONT website about the regime`s propaganda. The crowd that gathered on the Freedom Day was also an example of the spontaneous reaction of civil society, since most of the civic and political leaders were at that time in jail already. The emergence of such spontaneous activities and new human resources gives new hope for the further capabilities of civil society in Belarus. However, both democratic forces and civil society must adopt new communication and human resources management skills to further reach out to citizens.

It is very necessary to make a distinction between civic activities before and after March 19. Donors should review thoroughly the support given to civil society, and the international community should make a serious evaluation of what has worked and what has not in order to avoid further mistakes in its donor policy.

#### **4) Russia and Belarus: Back to the USSR?**

According to expectations, Moscow applauded Belarus`s March 2006 presidential elections as “free and fair”. It may, however, also appear that Russia has dilemmas with post-election Belarus. Certainly, the protesters challenging the Belarus election was reminiscent in at least a small way of the Orange Revolution of Ukraine. Russia supported Lukashenka, since this will serve its best interests in CIS politics, but seemingly has developed a plan “B” working with Kazulin.

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<sup>7</sup> Comment of unidentified Belarusian in an IM conversation with The Filter a few days before the election, [http://thefilter.blogs.com/thefilter/2006/03/sunday\\_19th\\_mar.html](http://thefilter.blogs.com/thefilter/2006/03/sunday_19th_mar.html) mentioned by a Belarusian blogger at [www.br23.net](http://www.br23.net)

The current status quo policy has the biggest chance to prevail. However, Russia's current status at the CIS is based on ensuring the highest possible energy profit, including controlling the energy pipelines in the CIS and beyond. In addition, Russia would never join a Western-led democratization, but may promote change on its own in Belarus, since the Kremlin doesn't necessarily see Lukashenka as a guarantee of Russian interest anymore. Russia may start holding Lukashenka accountable for his earlier promises, mainly privatization of the energy sector. Since Lukashenka's power is based on the economy of Belarus as an independent state (and ownership of the national energy sector), it is unlikely that he will allow the Belarusian energy sector to be privatized and/or controlled by Russian companies. The logical reaction from Russia could be an increased gas price for Belarus<sup>8</sup>. Independent experts estimate the upper limit the Belarus economy can afford to pay is \$80/1000 cubic meters compared to the current \$46. Belarus also won't agree to introduce a single currency with Russia within the framework of the Union State for the same reasons.

To carry on the changes necessary to keep Belarus under stronger control Russia already has an existing policy instrument: the union state between Belarus and Russia. Today Russian diplomats often speak of Belarus by saying, "we build up a common state".<sup>9</sup> However, Russian pressure to develop a Union State faster to cement its position in Belarus may reposition Lukashenka as the protector of Belarusian independence and force him to try to turn to the West, boost trade and economic ties with the EU, and make some attempt to liberalize the country's regime economically.

#### **5) The European Union and Belarus: Business as usual or new policy toward change?**

Lukashenka and his regime have been trying to legitimate the third term in the West more than ever<sup>10</sup>. In informal talks, Belarusian diplomats have been suggesting a return to "normal" relations, including the possibility of taking part in the European Neighborhood Policy. The new economic and social program of the Belarus government for 2006-2010 has been putting forward trade and economic cooperation with the EU as the main priority.

However, the conditionality of Belarusian authorities toward the request of the European Commission to open a delegation in Minsk in an attempt to normalize EU-Belarus relations shows little realistic policy thinking on the Belarusian side, and proving that without tougher position the EU will face difficulties to communicate with Minsk.

Nevertheless, previous relations between the EU and Belarus show that stressed political relations do not necessarily negatively influence economic/trade cooperation. Therefore, the minimalist goal of the Belarusian regime is to return to the status quo with the EU, e.g. attain a certain satisfaction with factual recognition (e.g. continuous trade and diplomatic relations) from the EU. The need for recognition and cooperation with the EU will grow if pressure from Russia on the Belarusian regime intensifies.

More importantly, the EU must notice that the political space of Lukashenka has been tightening due to the established domestic political alternative, the energized civil society, and the possible shift of Russian policy toward Belarus. In this case, if the EU is serious about regime change, it can not allow the regime to rest and return to its "business as usual" policy. A cautious attitude of member states due to lack of policy tools and the overwhelming wish of the EU not to isolate the people of Belarus and push

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<sup>8</sup> On January 12, 2006 at the opening of a gas-supply pipeline in Dokshytsy, Lukashenka mentioned to journalists that there will no longer be any cheap fuel for Belarus. RFE RL, January 13, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> The Vice-Speaker of the Russian Duma in Strasbourg before passing the resolution on Belarus on January 27, 2006 warned that due to the Union State Russia won't tolerate interfering in its internal affairs.

<sup>10</sup> See the statements in the interview of Belarusian FM Martynov with Reuters on March 15, 2006

Minsk more toward Russia could support the status quo, which is good only for the regime.

The EU must focus on steps which would shake up the current status quo, since only new initiatives and pressure can lead to democratization of Belarus. Tougher language and position, and the policy of conditionality should be considered as part of the new EU policy. Tough language includes as wide a visa ban list as possible with the possibility of excluding names and/or with expiry of dates. Adding only a few names will not have the necessary impact, especially given the visa ban list developed by Belarusian authorities and shared by Russia reportedly includes around 40,000 names including the most well-known European experts and analysts on it. Most of them can not enter Russia either. As part of its tough position, the EU should take measures for the seizure of assets, and retain the possibility of targeted trade/economic sanctions. At the very least, an impact analysis regarding economic sanctions should be prepared by the Council.

On the other hand, the EU must establish a new communication channel to maintain a much higher level of contact with both the Belarusian democratic forces and the regime. For this purpose, a position of Special Representative of the EU in Belarus should be created.

From now on, confrontation within Belarusian society will only grow. Long-term efforts to support alternative information and civil society development in Belarus by using as flexible mechanisms as possible should be urgently adopted by the EU<sup>11</sup>. After the presidential showdown the West must implement a policy supporting the effort of the democratic opposition with no more hesitation. Given the geopolitics of Belarus, the EU is the most important entity that needs to get the job done.

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<sup>11</sup> One of the possibilities is making the so-called Decentralized Cooperation financial mechanism more flexible, which increases the awareness of its management on conditions in Belarus