

Civil Society Monitoring Update March 13, 2006

The Pontis Foundation's Institute for Civic Diplomacy has been assisting civil society organizations in Belarus and monitoring the country's development since 2000. Based on its qualitative and quantitative surveys and monitoring Pontis has prepared the update below about selected civic campaigns and projects targeting presidential election.

According to the January 2006 public opinion survey of the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force, most people would appreciate if NGOs could oversee the electoral process, inform the citizens about the independent or opposition candidates, and 28% of respondents would even like to see NGOs mobilize citizens. The concept of freedom is a uniting factor for different campaigns conducted by different NGOs since all these campaigns covers different aspects of freedom. However, the key question is how visible some civic activities can be in the current atmosphere of fear and repression.

Civic campaigns (selected)

16 Solidarity/Jeans (www.solidarity16.org) initiated and implemented by We Remember, Charter 97, and Zubr is the first civic campaign. It began October 16, 2005. The "16" solidarity campaign aims to create solidarity based on the 'disappeared' as its main issue. Its communication methods build upon the Charter '97 website, an international network, and Zubr activists in the field.



The campaign, using non-violent resistance methods, asks people to light a candle on the 16th of every month to express the main question of whether human resources/structures will be devoted to this effort. **Dostal** is the black-and-white, negative campaign of Zubr targeting Lukashenka.

Hopic! (Enough!) (www.xopic.info) is a network of young local deputies, activists, and civil society organizations. It is an initiative created by several democratic councilors of local government aimed at exacerbating and channeling social discontent with the local status quo (e.g. local hidden unemployment, corrupt local administration, etc.) by contrasting their reality with that presented by official propaganda and stimulating people to think about the contradictions. This initiative was created to conduct a negative campaign against local administration and has a long-term focus on the local government elections planned for 2007.



FREE SPACE Campaign (www.za-svabodu.org) (www.za-svabodu.org) is organized by the NGO Assembly for the purpose of synchronizing the separate campaigns of local and regional NGOs to mobilize Belarusian society before and, more importantly, after the 2006 presidential elections. FREE SPACE provides a common label for a number of actions and smaller campaigns implemented by NGOs and separate activists throughout regions. In conditions where access to all major information sources is blocked by the state, the FREE SPACE campaign uses alternative means to disseminate information, e.g. inter-personal communication, SMS, commix, graphic dissemination of information via screen-savers for computers and mobiles, cartoons, etc. It prepared and is distributing the "songs of freedom" (<http://music.fromby.net/sliberty/>).



Third Way (www.svoboden.org) is a new campaign organized by Belarusian cartoonists who made animated films encouraging people to "fire" Lukashenka. The Third Way in cooperation with leading Visegrad newspapers including Slovak daily *SME*, Polish *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Czech *Lidové noviny* and Hungarian *Népszabadság* appeals to European print media and seeks to commission and print cartoons on Lukashenka, the last dictator of Europe, before the presidential elections. Such an international effort provide a unique possibility to express solidarity with the isolated Belarusians and allow them to learn what European cartoonist think about their regime.



Opposing the third term (January 2006) – "What you'd better do is start by leaving your signature under the petition. You are not alone; there are lots of us, so there's nothing to be ashamed of" reads the new internet and interpersonal networking campaign. It first started in January 2006 to oppose the incumbent's seeking of a third term. Those interested, and brave enough, can sign the appeal and share their thoughts on the website <http://3.lishni.org/>.



Blacklist (www.spisok.net)

This list is created for Belarusian citizens and the international community to know the names of those officials engaged in illegal activity and who use their power against the Belarusians. The purpose of the project is to attract the attention of all interested parties to the personalities involved in gross crimes and mass violation of human rights in Belarus. The webpage gives access to several lists of officials involved in human rights violations in Belarus – media workers, members of electoral commissions, the KGB and militia, "death squadrons" involved in political disappearances, as well as members of Lukashenka's administration.



Civil Society Projects (Selected)

People's Elections is a project seeking to encourage the nomination of people to electoral commissions run by the NGO Assembly. There are 74,107 precinct election officials needed at 6,586 polling stations across Belarus (there will be 41 polling stations outside of the country). In total, during the campaign 1,120 civil society representatives were nominated for PECs (55% of all PECs).

According to the (unofficial) information received from parties' deputy chairpeople, the Belarusian Popular Front managed to nominate slightly more than 200 people, the Communist Party of Belarus (PKB) nominated around 200 people, while the United Civic Party nominated around 850 people (541 in Minsk and around 300 in other areas). The Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Gramada) nominated around 1,000 people for electoral commissions. This makes the total around 2,250 representatives of political parties nominated to PECs. Only two representatives of political parties (UCP and Gromada) were selected.

The **Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ)** runs regular monitoring of the Belarusian electronic and print media focusing on 2006 presidential election coverage. BAJ issued a report summarizing the data over a ten days period (the last one so far was from January 16 to January 27, 2006). BAJ uses the methodology developed by the Slovak media monitoring group Memo 98, which frequently monitors media for OSCE election missions, like in Belarus 2001, 2004, and 2006. The most important findings in January 2006 included coverage of state media (predominantly presented a positive

representation of just one candidate for the Presidency, Alexander Lukashenka, while other prospective candidates were either absent in the State owned media or simply mentioned) and non-state owned press (presented a reasonably wide picture of this period of the election campaign). However, there has been no serious effort to publicly disseminate this information.

"Women of our town" is a socially oriented, long-term project of the Association of Working Women. Its results will likely be visible after the elections. A peculiarity of Belarusian women is that they are attracted not by political slogans but by the social repercussions of choosing a politician. Thus the project presumes to provide information for a female audience through the country which would allow them to compare the social status of a typical European woman to their own social situations. The project also provides for other means of disseminating alternative information providing a positive image of the European way of development for women.

The February 2006 survey of the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force indicates the activities of NGOs have growing visibility. In January 2006 only 11 % of survey respondents noticed any activities or campaigns of the NGOs or civic associations, while in February 2006 this figure grew to 48.4%. In February, 81% responded that it's good or somewhat good that NGOs inform citizens of independent (or oppositional) candidates during the presidential election campaign, and 85% responded that NGOs monitor elections to make them more free and fair. Signature collection was the most well-known activity named by respondents both in January and February followed by the distribution of leaflets and other forms of agitation.