

Polling Memorandum (Based on focus groups in March 2005 and public opinion poll in May 2005)

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From: Slovakia-Belarus Task Force

Introduction

Analysis of the focus groups implemented by the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force in May 2005 suggested that there is a silent majority in the Belarusian society, i.e. a group of people critical toward the Lukashenka regime who could become active supporters of the political change. The goal of the public opinion poll which followed the focus groups therefore was to verify this hypothesis, and to more precisely identify and define this group. The aim of the survey was to produce sociological data relevant to a (political) campaign to increase the number of regime opponents and to mobilize them.

The survey was directed at measuring peoples' perceptions of developments in Belarus during the Lukashenka era; establishing a hierarchy of crucial social issues; perception of 'winners and losers' attitudes toward Lukashenka and his opponents; perception of recent elections; trust in the fairness of electoral process; prediction of future elections results; potential for citizen/political activism; credibility of crucial political institutions; the importance of human rights and their enactment in Belarus; perception of life under Lukashenka; political communication and sources of information; and other topics.

The questionnaire for the survey was prepared by the Task Force in cooperation with ISEPS Vilnius, the NGO Assembly, Minsk, the Pontis Foundation, Bratislava and the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO), Bratislava. The design of the questionnaire was to a certain extent inspired by the sociological survey carried out in Slovakia in October 1997, before the 1998 elections. The survey was conducted on a representative sample of 1,510 people in May 2005 by ISEPS. The following analysis includes interpretation of data by Belarusian and Slovak experts (Task Force).

Main Findings

Public Mood/Criticism toward the Regime:

- Representative data does not support the hypothetic conclusion from the focus groups that there is a majority of people who are supporters of political change. Only 26% of people consider that their quality of life has deteriorated under Lukashenka. The population of Belarus does not incline toward the negative, pessimistic pole when expressing its feelings of optimism (vs. pessimism) vis-à-vis the country's future (only 22% are pessimistic), overall satisfaction with life (only 25% of respondents reported frustration); perception of

freedom of expression (only 32% are critical); control over one's life / helplessness (33% felt out of control); job security/insecurity (34% experience fear of unemployment).

- Most people are more or less satisfied with their quality of life. Expectations of Belarus' prospects under a continued Lukashenka presidency are not prevalingly critical (average evaluation 5.5 on a scale 1 to 10). There is a general feeling of stability (which is the main message and goal of the regime), and people connect stability with the regime.
- A majority of people believe that Lukashenka/the regime is better suited to solve their crucial problems than the opposition. Main issues are of an economic or social character. As many as 71% of the people look to the administration to solve them. These topics are clearly dominated by Lukashenka and there is no reason to expect a large opinion shift soon.
- However, negative feelings are prevailing when respondents evaluate the chance of regular citizens to influence the decision-making of power elites (54%).

Underestimating elections as an instrument of democracy:

- Due to past gross irregularities the image of the electoral process is not positive is not positive. People do not perceive elections as an instrument of democracy, but rather as a tool used by the administration to guarantee the continuity of its power.
- As for the future elections, 49% of respondents believe they could be free and fair, while 41% have doubts and 10% do not know. As for the means of defending the fairness of elections, respondents clearly prefer "softer preventive methods" of independent oversight (37%) and parallel counting (25%) to more radical methods of protest (general strike; mass protest rallies).
- A majority of Belarusians do not expect that the victory of an opposition candidate would bring automatic improvement of the country's state of economy and democracy. Should the opposition win, 39% expect improved relations with the EU; 30% expect better outlooks for democracy, 29% brighter future for youth, 23% greater respect for human rights, 23% increase of living standards, etc. The remaining respondents expect that the situation will not change, i.e. continuity, or will be worse, or cannot say. This indicates that most Belarusians do not perceive elections as a potential 'watershed event', rather anticipating intransigence in their country's development. This reflects the low visibility and insufficient charisma of the opposition leaders, and effective government propaganda combine with little awareness of what is going on outside the country.
- In the current situation the democratic opposition represented by political parties is not perceived as real alternative to the regime. Although personification of this alternative is crucial, this alone – without articulating a clear, plausible vision of a 'free' society – will not mobilize society.

Demand for independent media:

- There is no real freedom of media in Belarus and citizens are subjected to a heavy state propaganda. Every third respondent said that free media rank among their important

citizen rights. However, only 23 % maintain that this right is always respected in Belarus, while 40% think it is sometimes respected and 25% state it is never respected. According to the data the right to free media is one of the least respected citizen rights in Belarus. This finding reflects huge demand for free independent media in Belarus

Lack of critical feedback:

- Due to a lack of open political discourse in Belarusian media the public lacks a reliable “mirror”, and has an inadequate estimation of prevailing views. As many as 68 % of respondents believe that their views are shared by a majority of population. Surprisingly enough, this conviction is prevailing both among Lukashenka’s supporters (74%), as well as among his opponents (70%). This finding indicates a widespread illusion among the opponents of Lukashenka who suppose that they represent a majority. This illusion can be attributed to the lack of free public discourse (and the increasing isolation and atomization of society).

One-third is ready (quantification of the target group of change):

There is no clear-cut social “group of change” in Belarus. Polling results indicate that around one-third of the population is ready for change even in the current conditions in Belarus:

- This group of opponents of the regime consists of respondents who think that the referendum was manipulated (38%); expect that the situation in the country will worsen if Lukashenka wins again (45%); would vote for a democratic opposition candidate (23%); support protesters against the regime (40%); disagree with Lukashenka’s statement that Belarus is a democratic country (33%); share the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s opinion that Belarusians deserve a better life (29%); think that basic political rights and freedoms are not respected in Belarus, e.g. freedom of media (25%); equality before the law (23%); freedom of expression (22%).
- Opponents of the regime are more frequent among people with higher education; in the younger and middle age groups – in contrast with the oldest age categories; among students; entrepreneurs; managers; unemployed, men (while women’s political views are somewhat less clear-cut); and the inhabitants of Minsk – in contrast with smaller settlements. However, support for the organized political opposition is not prevailing in any of these social groups.
- **Lukashenka opponents** have significantly more critical opinions about the life under Lukashenka: they are less satisfied with life, less optimistic about their country’s future, more afraid of unemployment; feel less in control over the decision-making in the society, etc. They are much more critical of the changes of all analyzed aspects of Belarusian development during the years of Lukashenka’s presidency and expect significantly more positive impacts from the victory of an opposition candidate. The most sensitive issues for them are observation of human rights, democracy, rule of law; and relations with the EU. But also their perception of the development of position and chances of young people, of living standards, chances for ‘hard-working and honest people’, etc. is significantly more critical in comparison with the views of Lukashenka’s supporters. They perceive negatively the impact of Lukashenka’s rule for entrepreneurs, young people, opposition politicians, and journalists. Their trust toward the President, parliament, and government is significantly lower, while their trust toward the NGOs, opposition parties, and

entrepreneurs is relatively stronger. They have a stronger pro-western orientation and accept western criticism of the democratic deficit in Belarus. Because of their more critical attitude toward various aspects of Belarusian society they are less proud to be the citizens of Belarus than Lukashenka supporters. They are more aware of the threat of unfair elections and are more supportive of activities that aim to prevent this.

- Support for Lukashenka in this group is relatively weak; however – at least as yet – the opposition has not persuaded a majority of them about its ability to provide a real alternative to Lukashenka. So it can be concluded that this group has a relatively high latent support for the opposition that has not yet been mobilized.
- While more than one-third of people (38%) believe that there are people in Belarus who could govern the country better than Lukashenka, this belief does not translate into their support for the opposition parties. This also means that a civil society campaign should *not* focus on a single person (e.g. the candidate), but on popular issues and should have a mass character. In this respect, the civil society campaign is more important for changing voters' perceptions and increasing the anti-Lukashenka potential than the campaign of any political party that would advertise the candidate. The common candidate could join in through value issues. Though it is clear that such a campaign should start as soon as possible.

Conclusions

- Dominant feelings in society are passivity, indecisiveness and mistrust. The main challenge for democratic forces is to shift this public mood toward a more active citizenry, by demonstrating that there is someone they can trust.
- Results of the research showed that people do not expect free and fair elections in Belarus. Therefore elections should be not the goal, but a tool in a longer-term effort for administration change.
- There are people unsatisfied with the current situation some of whom are ready to actively support changes. Democratic forces should seek to increase the number of active supporters of change among those unsatisfied. The active part of society should be shifted toward political action, while groundwork should be laid to prepare the passive part of society to accept changes as reasonable and valid.
- A 'trigger' issue is currently missing in Belarus. The crucial issues bothering the Belarusians – social and economic problems – are not a suitable agenda for the Belarusian democratic structures, since the majority of the population expects the improvement of the socio-economic situation from Lukashenka. However, democratic structures can address the population with freedom and value issues, such as freedom of elections, freedom of media, freedom of expression, and level of democracy /democratic governance. Here, the potential of people to disagree with the Lukashenka regime is high.
- Finding the 'trigger' issue should lead to creating a new vision of the country by civil society – without Lukashenka. This could be the framework where the majority of the nation and the democratic structures (civil society and political parties) agree. This seems to be the task for civil society. NGOs should not wait for the results of the process of selecting the single candidate to begin work on this campaign.