



## **Belarus Public Opinion Survey<sup>1</sup>**

by the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force

*Issued February 21, 2006*

This confidential polling memorandum was commissioned by the Slovak-Belarus Task Force and implemented by the Bratislava-based Pontis Foundation and the Bratislava-based Institute for Public Affairs, in cooperation with Belarusian NGOs and a Minsk-based research agency conducting pre-election polling. This memorandum is not for media distribution.<sup>2</sup>

The representative sample encompassed 1,095 people, and the fieldwork was carried out from **January 20 through January 27, 2006**, when the collection of signatures was completed, but the registration of the candidates was still ahead. The main aim of the survey was to bring relevant information for and about the civic pre-election campaigns, as well as to measure the public mood and expectations toward the presidential elections scheduled for March 19, 2006.

The overall objective of the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force is to establish a framework for greater cooperation between Slovakia, as a new EU member state, and Belarusian democratic forces, to transfer policy reform know-how from Slovakia to Belarus, and to share experience between civil societies of the two countries.

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<sup>2</sup> Media representatives should contact the Pontis Foundation ([jarbal@pontisfoundation.sk](mailto:jarbal@pontisfoundation.sk)) with any inquiries.

## Summary of Findings

Public mood in Belarus is currently characterized by the prevailing adaptation of citizens to the current economic and political situation, where feelings of enthusiasm, but also of deprivation, are rather rare. Most people do not expect that the change of the election term could have any impact on the election results. Trust in the fairness of the election is relatively low. Only one third of Belarusians believes that the election will be completely free and fair. Those respondents who doubt that the upcoming presidential election could fulfill the high standards of freedom and fairness prefer “softer preventive methods” such as such independent monitoring of the electoral process (79%); parallel counting (71%), and exit polling (63%) to the more radical methods of collective protest such as mass protest rallies (43%) and general strike (36%).

Most people in Belarus would appreciate if NGOs could monitor the electoral process and inform citizens about independent or opposition candidates, while more than fourth of them (28%) even thinks that NGOs should mobilize citizens to protest in case of the fraudulent election. However, the activities of NGOs have low visibility in Belarusian society so far.

According to almost all Belarusians, the ideal president should first and foremost contribute to their decent living standards. The state sovereignty of Belarus and democracy should be the next items on the list of the president’s crucial goals and values.

The results indicate that before the election campaign period, most people do not expect the election to become a “watershed event,” but rather suppose continuity in their country’s development. Only 17% of Belarusians expect mass protests as a reaction to a fraudulent election. This makes the mobilization of atomized individuals much more complicated and challenging task.

## Pontis Commentary

Analyzing public opinion polls in Belarus is complicated by the wide-spread fear of repression and by resignation of many people inside the country. To give a more comprehensive picture on current trends in society, Pontis is trying to raise other – non-quantitative – reference points in addition to the polling analysis.

Due to the increased level of fear and state propaganda before the elections, the results of this poll correspond neither with results from previous independent public opinion polls, nor with the actual number of the signatures that the opposition candidates have collected.<sup>3</sup>

The public opinion poll was conducted on January 20 - 27, 2006 when most of the civic campaign was about to launch and the single candidate Milinkevich was just finishing the collection of signatures. In the meantime, both campaigns might have contributed to changing the atmosphere in society and breaking the information vacuum imposed by the regime. Anecdotal reports from Minsk suggest that politics is returning to everyday talks, while the “increasing ratings” of the challenger are one of the most frequent topics. Such a possible development suggests the challenger himself is becoming the “trigger issue” before the elections.

High turnout suggests that people are aware of the importance of elections, but before the start of the actual presidential campaign are not yet convinced that it will bring any significant change. In the current isolated conditions of Belarus, the next five weeks could have more determinate impact on further development of the country than any survey could predict at this moment.

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<sup>3</sup> Milinkevich and Kazulin (as the head of the Social-Democratic Party of “Hramada”) collected 198,798 and 158,014 signatures respectively, compared to 161,000 for Semyon Domash and 123,000 for Goncharik in 2001.

## Detailed Findings

### **Public Mood: *Prevailing adaptation to the current social and economic situation***

The people of Belarus perceive the economic situation in their country as stabilized and unchanged. Feelings of satisfaction on the one hand and of social deprivation on the other hand are rather rare.

As many as 59% of respondents assess the economic situation of Belarus as “average,” while 23% see it as “positive” and 13% see it as “negative.” According to 70% of respondents, the economic situation in Belarus has not changed in the last month, while 13% see it as improved and 7% as having deteriorated.

**How would you assess the current economic situation in Belarus?**

	%
Very good	2
Good	22
Fair	59
Bad	12
Very bad	1
Can't say	4
No answer	0

**How would you assess the political situation in Belarus?**

	%
Safe	12
Peaceful	65
Tense	15
Critical	1
Can't say	5
No answer	2

Very similar is the evaluation of people’s own economic situation. For 15% of respondents, it is good; for 63% it is average, and for 21% it is bad. The perception of changes on the micro level is very similar to the macro level: according to 73% of respondents, the situation of their household has remained the same, for 9%, it has improved, while for 18% it has worsened.

As for the political situation in Belarus, there is a strong feeling of stability, with little sign of upcoming eruptions or crises. According to 65% of respondents it is calm and 12% find it even positive. On the other hand, according to 15% of respondents it is full of tension and according to 1% it is critical.

### **Election: No watershed event expected so far**

- *For most citizens of Belarus, the change of election term does not matter.*

When evaluating the impact of the earlier election term, only 27% of respondents expressed the view that it could influence the election results. As many as 53% thought the opposite and did not expect any impact by the changed election term on the election results. The remaining 20% of respondents gave an evasive answer. From the 27% respondents who thought that the earlier term would influence the election results, as many as 49% believed it will increase chances for Lukashenka, while only 2% expected a better outlook for Milinkevich.

- **Only one third of Belarusians believes that the election will be completely free and fair.**

Respondents professed a relatively low belief in the fairness of the upcoming election. Only 34% of them expressed the conviction that the election will be *completely* free and fair. All other types of responses indicated a higher or lower degree of *doubts or uncertainty*: 27% of respondents said that the elections will be prevailingly free and fair, while only 22% expected the opposite – that the election will be prevailingly or fully fraudulent (14% and 8% respectively). The number of undecided or evasive answers was rather high (17%).

**According to your expectations, how will be the presidential election in Belarus?**

	%
Election will be completely free and fair	34
Election will be rather free and fair	27
Election will be rather not free and not fair	14
Election will be completely not free and not fair	8
Hard to say, no answer	17

- **People anticipating fraudulent election prefers “softer” preventive methods.**

This question was given only to those respondents who doubted that the election could fulfill the high standards of freedom and fairness. As the means of defending or securing freedom and fairness of election, respondents clearly preferred “softer preventive methods” – independent monitoring (79%); parallel counting (71%) and exit polling (63%) – to more radical methods of collective protest – mass protest rallies (43%) and general strike (36%).

- **According to Belarusians, the presidential candidate should put primary emphasis on decent living standards as value #1, followed by state sovereignty of Belarus and democracy.**

The preferred values and goals, which the citizens attribute to the ideal President, can be ranked in the following order:

1. **Decent living standards:** 81% of respondents fully and 16% partly (97% all together) appreciated the presidential candidate’s promise to guarantee people’s decent living standards.
2. **Preservation of state sovereignty:** 60% of respondents fully and 31% partly (91% all together) appreciated the emphasis on the preservation of state sovereignty of Belarus.
3. **Democratic development:** 51% of respondents fully and 36% partly (86% all together) appreciated the willingness to strengthen democratic development of Belarus.
4. **Rapprochement with the European Union:** 26% of respondents fully and 32% partly (58% all together) appreciated the intention to bring Belarus closer to the Western Europe and European Union.

- **High turnout expected**

The survey findings indicate that there might be a high turnout in the upcoming presidential election – 84% of all respondents belonging to eligible voters chose options 8, 9 or 10 on a ten-point scale indicating the probability of participation (mean value = 8.9). The voting intention is slightly above average among Lukashenka supporters and slightly below average among those who are still undecided. There are no substantial differences in the preparedness of Lukashenka and Milinkevich supporters to participate in the election. Nonetheless get-out-the vote mobilization efforts focusing on fairness of the vote would work in favor of the challenger

Are you going to participate in the coming presidential elections?	
	%
1	2,0
2	0,2
3	1,1
4	0,5
5	3,2
6	3,3
7	5,5
8	9,6
9	14,9
10	59,2
Hard to say	0,5
Average point	8,90

### Civil Society Before the Election

- **Most people would appreciate if NGOs could oversee the electoral process and inform citizens about the independent or opposition candidates; 28% would like them to even mobilize citizens in case of the fraudulent election.**

What are the opinions of citizens about the acceptable activities of NGOs? As many as 83% of respondents find it right if the NGOs oversee the electoral process so that it is free and fair; 78% find it right if the NGOs inform citizens about the independent or opposition presidential candidates. On the other hand, only 28% of respondents think that the NGOs should mobilize the citizens to protest in case of the fraudulent election.

According to your opinion, it is right or wrong if NGOs inform citizens about independent or opposition presidential candidates?

	%
Definitely good	40
Rather good	38
Rather bad	4
Definitely bad	3
Hard to say, no answer	5

- **Activities of NGOs are visible only to a few people.**

Respondents were asked whether they have noticed any activities or campaigns of the NGOs or civic associations before the presidential election. Only 11 % gave a positive answer, while for as many as 78% the activities of NGOs were virtually invisible. The respondents' attention was most frequently drawn by the collection of signatures (73%), direct mail (18%), campaigning (8%), and other activities (2%).

Have you noticed any activity of non-governmental organizations or civic associations before the presidential election?

	%
Yes	11
No	78
Hard to say	8
No answer	2

- **Less than one fifth of Belarusians expect mass protests as a reaction to a fraudulent election.**

How do people see the chance of mass protests against the fraudulent election in Belarus similar to the demonstrations which occurred in Ukraine or Georgia? A total of 17% of respondents expressed the view that mass protests in Belarus are probable, while the

majority was of the opposite opinion (70%). The remaining 14% gave an evasive answer or declined to answer.

### Socio-demographic and value profiles of core segments of electorate<sup>4</sup>

There are three groupings within the electorate which deserve particular attention:

- Lukashenka supporters
- Milinkevich supporters
- Undecideds.

**Support for Lukashenka** is above average among older people (55+), with lower education (9 out of 10 people with primary education would vote for him, whereas only 4 out of 10 people with partial or completed university education would. Lukashenka supporters are more likely to live in villages under 5,000 inhabitants.

**Support for Milinkevich** is evenly distributed among various age categories. It is stronger among people with higher education and dwellers of large towns.

**Undecideds** are more likely to be found among younger voters (in the age category 18-24, they represent 41%, in the age category from 25-34, 38%). Undecideds are frequent among people with higher education and inhabitants of Minsk (39% of Minsk inhabitants are undecided).

Views and attitudes of selected groups of eligible voters (column %)	Lukashenk a supporters	Milinke vich support ers	Unde cided	Total
<b>“In your opinion, how will the presidential election in Belarus be?”</b>				
Election will be <u>completely</u> free and fair	52	17	15	34
Election will be <u>rather</u> free and fair	31	27	22	27
Election will be rather NOT free and fair	3	31	22	14
Election will be <u>completely</u> NOT free and fair	3	12	8	8
Hard to say , no answer	11	13	33	17
<b>“In your opinion, is it right or wrong if NGOs mobilize people to protest against fraudulent election?”</b>				
Definitely+rather good	18	39	33	28
Definitely+rather bad	59	41	33	48
Hard to say, no answer	23	20	34	24
<b>“In other countries of the former Soviet Union there were mass protests after elections. Based on your knowledge of the situation in Belarus, how likely are such protests in Belarus?”</b>				
Very+rather likely	9	33	21	16
Rather unlikely+not likely at all	77	61	62	70
Hard to say, no answer	14	6	17	14

- *Stability vs. democracy.*

The three selected groups of eligible voters (Lukashenka supporters, Milinkevich supporters and undecided) differ in their views on a number of issues.

Milinkevich supporters, as well as undecideds are less satisfied with the economic and political situation in Belarus than Lukashenka supporters. They emphasize significantly more frequently a pro-European orientation for Belarus, as well as the need for a

<sup>4</sup> Given the fact that the poll was conducted before the registration of presidential candidates, this memo does not include the ratings of individual candidates.

democratic path for Belarus. Milinkevich supporters more frequently admit that the earlier election term will influence the outcome in favor of Lukashenka.

All three groupings anticipate the electoral victory of the incumbent. This conviction is especially strong among Lukashenka supporters. However, there is a principal difference in their views on the coming election. Doubts about free and fair election are more widespread among undecideds and Milinkevich supporters – only 15% of undecideds and 17% of Milinkevich supporters fully believe that the election will be free and fair. On the other hand, as many as 52% of Lukashenka supporters do not demonstrate even the slightest doubt.

Lukashenka supporters are rarer advocates of independent monitoring, parallel counting, protest rallies, national strikes, and exit polling than the undecideds and especially the Milinkevich supporters. Lukashenka supporters expect significantly less involvement of NGOs in informing voters about independent and opposition candidates, in monitoring election, and in mobilizing citizens in case of fraudulent elections. According to them, such collective protests are less probable than according to undecideds, but particularly according to Milinkevich supporters.

- *Age, education, and place of residence matter*

The strength of support for Lukashenka and Milinkevich in various socio-demographic groups is related to their perception of the situation in Belarus and of the upcoming election. As shown above, there are three groups which are worth of deeper analysis:

- Inhabitants of Minsk
- Younger generation
- People with higher education.

**The inhabitants of Minsk** are more pro-European than is the Belarus average (67% stress the importance of the rapprochement of Belarus with the EU in contrast with 58% in the whole population).

They are less convinced that the election will be free and fair (only 23% of them have no doubt about it vs. 34% in the whole population). At the same time, they are very skeptical about the chance to attain fairness of the electoral process by employing “softer political means” (like organizing parallel counting, independent monitoring of election and exit polling), as well as by using more radical methods of collective protest activities (mass protest rallies and general strike).

The visibility of NGOs in Minsk is slightly higher than in the whole population (17% in Minsk vs. 11% in the whole population). Inhabitants of Minsk more frequently believe that the NGOs should inform the citizens about independent candidates (89% vs. 78% in the whole population) and monitor the electoral process (86% vs. 83%). However, only 30% of them expect that NGOs will mobilize the citizens to protest in the streets against a fraudulent election (average for Belarus - 28%). Only 21% of Minsk inhabitants find the demonstrations probable, which is slightly more than in the whole population (16%).

**Age and education** are relatively strong factors influencing the public perception in Belarus and the attitudes toward the election.

**Respondents with higher education and younger respondents** are much more pro-European than the older generation. They are slightly less satisfied with the economic and political situation in the country. They are more skeptical about the fairness of the upcoming election. While half of the 65+ generation has no doubt about it, only one fourth of the young generation thinks the same. While 63% respondents with the lowest education have no doubt about it, only 27% of university-educated respondents think the same.

Among the people with higher education and younger age, there is a stronger support for using radical methods of political pressure (general strike and mass protest rallies) which should serve as means to reach free and fair election. Better-educated respondents, as well as younger people, more frequently believe that the earlier term of the election will influence the election results in favor of Lukashenka.

Both these groupings more frequently believe that the NGOs should inform the citizens about the independent and opposition candidates, organize monitoring of the election and mobilize protesters in case of fraudulent election. At the same time, they find such mass protests slightly more probable than the average population.

The visibility of NGOs among younger people and people with higher education is a slightly higher than in the older generation and among less educated citizens.