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## **Life in Belarus in 2005: Fear or Alternative**

### **Focus Groups Analysis by the Slovakia-Belarus Task Force** (implemented by the NOVAK Laboratories of Belarus)

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#### **Introduction:**

The Slovakia-Belarus Task Force (Civil Society Development) commissioned the NOVAK Laboratories of Belarus in March 2005 to run ten focus groups in order to identify key messages for well-defined target groups in order to mobilize the society before the presidential elections scheduled for 2006. The focus groups were conducted in three main topical groups: 1) active opposition, 2) non-active opposition - supporters, but not active participants, 3) undecided, 4) students, 5) vendors and small business, 6) managers from factories, 7) intelligentsia - doctors/teachers, 8) workers from big factories, 9) pensioners, 10) returned from abroad after spending a certain time – especially working abroad. This report outlines the main conclusions and detailed findings.

#### **Summary:**

The results of ten focus groups showed that it is impossible to define the “target group of change” in terms of socio-democratic intentions (age, profession or education). Except for the group of small entrepreneurs/vendors the rest of the groups presented a certain balance between the dissatisfied and satisfied with the regime. One primary question of the survey, differentiating between dissatisfaction and satisfaction, appeared ambivalent among one group. Overall, the difference between those satisfied and dissatisfied was very fragile, suggesting that satisfaction could be more an image than a reality. Therefore, there is a shift from defining the target groups and to focusing on those creating the opposition in each of the groups (as focus groups suggested). We will refer to these layers as “radicals” (e.g. “radicals in action” or as “dissatisfied hard-core group”).

Comparing to 2001 the majority of the people think that Lukashenka would - still - win a new presidential election, and that he actually did win the referendum in October 17, 2004: the exit poll results are – still – not well-known throughout the country. Therefore the main goal (for civil society campaigns) should be to show the general population that the radicals are not radicals, but the majority – through emotions, expectations and issues.

Regarding concrete issues of change/freedoms (free media, freedom of media and association, quality of life/standard of living) the majority was critical, but remains passive regarding any acute need for change (of regime). However, the focus groups indicated that the target group (e.g. radicals) could be found based on mental/psychological conditions, e.g. common feelings of life, experience, expectation and thinking about the future which connects various target groups.

#### **Main Conclusions:**

- Based on the focus groups analysis there is no exact target groups as key proponents of change, except the vendors and small businessmen. The more “radical” opinion towards the regime, and in general towards democratization (e.g. change) within this group has been proven by the current political development of Belarus, the massive strike driven by vendors started on March 1, 2005.<sup>1</sup>
- However, the focus groups revealed that the potential advocates for change (e.g. the radicals) could be found in each of the focus groups, in each layer of the society. They (radicals) were in the minority in most of the focus groups, but people generally think that those opposing Lukashenka are in the minority. Therefore, our main aim – in preparation for polling of the Task Force - is not to define one or two constituencies as advocates of change in Belarus, but to find the topics which would connect those “radicals” in every possible layer which could be prepared mentally and psychologically to support actively the change.
- The perceived minority of opposition applies to the question of the elections as well. While people are aware that there are no free and fair elections in Belarus, they still think that Lukashenka is popular enough to win elections –although not at the overwhelming margins given as official results. This was the general public opinion from 2001 as well. This means that people have not realized the shift in public opinion.<sup>2</sup> Attacks on independent polling agencies (IISEPS and NOVAK) could be explained by the willingness of the regime to maintain this public perception, and might mean that polling is becoming too dangerous. The feeling/awareness of majority, however, might embolden people and balance the fear/alternative.
- Values (as issues) in communication of civil society should dominate over economic topics (this should be left for political parties), while one of the most sensitive issues could be “freedom”. All focus groups reacted positively on the freedom related issues (freedom of association, media), e.g. the majority of people is aware of these problems and opposes them. However, they are not aware that they are the majority.
- The overwhelming fear - which differs by group, and therefore merits further public opinion polling to define fears for different target groups - could be balanced mainly by a visible alternative. This alternative does not need to be a personality (e.g. single democratic candidate), but something (issues/values) which connects the radicals and makes them more active. Such a connection could bring to light where the majority stands and who belongs there. It is important to mention that similar misbelieve was tracked by polling and focus groups from Ukraine and/or Kyrgyzstan –despite similar feelings of public discontent being higher than research showed.
- The basic contradiction is not in the level of knowledge and efficiency of the exit-poll. The fundamental problem is that **everyone knows – but no one protests**. This appears as the main Belarusian specific feature. All recent “colored revolutions” started with the fact of un-acceptance of fraudulent elections results. In Belarus, there is also such an understanding, but there is no such activity or wish for activity connected with fraud. The given series of the focus groups is an attempt to explain this phenomenon too.

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, Lukashenka, in an unprecedented move, met with the representatives of the vendors, confirming how serious the regime is taking the strikers/vendors. In addition, the vendors stressed that they are not working with the opposition, and the strikes are aimed to create pressure on the government due to their own interest (the problem of the VAT on Russian export). Obviously, the on-going strike (occurring simultaneously with the focus group) could have an impact on the focus group results as well.

<sup>2</sup> The general assumption is that the result of the referendum is not real (feeling), but only 16% of respondents (NOVAK pools) were aware of the exit poll results.

- Therefore, the campaign/mobilization preparation (including the next polling) should be shifted from finding the exact target groups into preparing them mentally/psychologically to support change and pushing them toward more active attitudes and roles within a certain period of time. For this further (quantitative) research is necessary: to define the issues, to increase the emotions: to push them towards the necessary attitude, and to create the necessary atmosphere.

### **Summary of Feelings:**

- *Satisfaction/Tranquility*: especially visible among workers and managers of factories. This is connected to the lessons learned by the regime from the 2001 Presidential Elections. The regime will try to minimize economic reasons for public discontent. However, the second feeling – right after satisfaction – is “hard” – to characterize life in general. They described their life as “living in a volcano”. We face the same picture in the group of managers since they talk about tranquility and continue with instability. As a typical example, a group of managers all gave two answers, one right after another “quiet” (Larisa) and “difficult, maybe” (Vasilij). This means that un-satisfaction and satisfaction are simply too close to each other - therefore it is rather ambivalent.
- *Uncertainty*: visibly especially among the younger generation (student focus groups, but also other focus groups where young people were present). This feeling is connected with the low level of quality of life (as they perceive). “In general, life in Belarus does not cause any positive emotions. If comparing good life and life in Belarus, these will be contrary things, in my opinion. We cannot be compared. We have a low level of living, low level of development. Low level of everything” (Igor, student from Brest).
- *Low cultural quality*: strikes particularly the intelligentsia supported by “the obscenity in youth language” and especially by wide alcoholism as “degradation of the “nation”. As one of the most characteristic opinions from the group “the current OMON are children of alcoholics”.
- *Whatever*: “Whatever” was the answer for question “How life in Belarus looks like?”. This is not the readiness of people to do “whatever” and be active. People simply could not characterize their life with a better emotion/answer.
- *Fear*: from loosing job, but also from change - “you can have your own opinion, but it shall be like mine” (passive opposition). The question of Hamlet here is the “fear or alternative”: the importance is the balance between the two. Fear could be effectively challenged/curtailed if there will be a visible alternative. Additionally, people are unsure that change could be positive. It seems necessary to define the reasons of fear – it can differ group by group (i.e. pensioners are not afraid of smaller pensions for example).

### **Follow up (Public Opinion Poll):**

The results (analysis) of the focus groups suggest that there is a – silent – majority in the Belarusian society – a group of people critical toward the regime (e.g. the radicals are in fact in majority). The goal of the public opinion poll therefore is to identify and to quantify this majority and its influence by means of methodology of psychological radicalism. The foundation of the identification should be their – common – emotions, expectations, and issues/objectives of disagreement. The working name of this process is to demonstrate (and quantify) the “anti-Lukashist majority” of the country, and find out sociological data relevant for (political) campaign to mobilize people (not toward elections, but against Lukashenka).