



The Regime Change(s)

Survey of Current Trends and Development in Belarus

Summer 2007

Introduction

The Bratislava-based Pontis Foundation has completed a new survey regarding current political, economic, and social trends in Belarus. This survey included in-depth interviews with a total of 43 Belarusian opinion makers – including analysts, think-tank representatives, and journalists – in the period from June 17-30, 2007. It concentrated on the most recent policy trends within the regime and the opposition, in addition to focusing on development of the country's ties with the EU and Russia. The draft report was further updated with 4 additional interviews in September 2007.

Summary of Findings

1) The current political situation is clearly influenced by the development of trends within the regime and significantly less or not at all by the democratic opposition. Therefore the major findings of this survey focus more on regime developments.

2) The feeling of "liberalization" of spring 2007, when there were signs of a possible amnesty for all political prisoners, has been hidden behind political uncertainty within the regime connected to the on-going transformation and to the regime's search for a way out of the current (geo-) political situation.

3) Both Russia and the EU are holding their positions. The EU has diminished its previous requirements to hold a dialogue to only one – freeing all political prisoners – and is waiting for Minsk respond. As Belarus has no serious geopolitical incentives to offer (despite Lukashenka's efforts trying to beef up his country's position with the energy issue), the EU is likely to hold to its tougher stance toward the regime. Russia, standing before its own transition, has devoted less focus to Minsk, except for its clear and unchanged energy policy and its appetite for privatization. With the most recent developments in Russia (Viktor Zubkov as new prime minister and Vladimir Putin as the designated leader of United Russia in the parliamentary elections to be held in December 2007), Lukashenka must understand that there is no way back to the former privileged relationship and to Russian financial subsidies. Nevertheless, Putin will still provide a shield for the Belarusian regime against democratization attempts.

4) Looking for an exit strategy from the current situation, the regime seems to be focusing on three major issues:

- Consolidation of the personal power of President Lukashenka in order to prepare the transition – probably to his son, Viktor. The upcoming parliamentary elections (likely to be called earlier than autumn 2008) could provide a clearer picture of the plans for and implementation of this (so far only suspected) transition.

- Nationalization of Belarusian domestic and foreign policies and escalation of political cleansings inside the ruling structures, with signs that a generational change is being enforced. The change in the KGB leadership and the resignation of Speaker of Parliament Uladzimir Kanaplyow are just a couple of the signs that seem to confirm such a trend. On the other side, beside the growing influence of Viktor Lukashenka in the Security Council, there is also the role being played by Natallya Pyatkevich, serving currently as the deputy head of the Presidential Administration, which suggests a generational change is at the door. This development may further lead to a significant decrease in the influence of the “old guard,” including Viktor Sheyman, the current head of the Security Council or Uladzimir Navumaw, the current minister of interior. Until now both played a crucial role in protecting the Lukashenka regime and one of the main questions is whether they will be willing to accept a transition or will actively resist. With their wealth, Belarus could see development of some sort of “oligarch opposition,” although it is more likely that they will remain loyal to Lukashenka’s will. Perhaps the key is the battle within the KGB after its takeover by Yuri Zhadobin, a close ally of the Lukashenkas.
- The on-going (hidden) privatization could serve as the economic base for this transition, but may also serve the old guard should it try to resist. All of this depends on who exactly is behind the non-transparent privatization processes.¹ Nevertheless, the willingness of Western (especially European) banks and financial subjects may push the regime further toward Europe, but slow down the fulfillment of political conditions from the EU.

5) As the survey reveals, there are some signs of willingness to undertake moderate reforms, but these are more connected to populist measures. These signs are further strengthened by the absence (N.B., this was the perception in the interviews during the summer – *the editor*) of mass repression activities, which are perceived as unnecessary by the regime at the moment. Nevertheless, the on-going “mild” repression shows that there is confusion about the “right approach” toward the opposition, as various structures of the regime are reacting differently. In addition, the new wave of repression against young opposition activists and the suspension of the activities of the Communist Party of Belarus (PKB) suggest that the regime is taking its own transformation (into a family business) more seriously than it takes having a dialogue with the EU. Nevertheless, the government is surprisingly warning the population about a worsening economy, thus diminishing the room for political maneuvering for the opposition.

6) After becoming basically inactive following the 2006 elections, the opposition is fighting to re-gain its credibility at home. After personal infighting between Alyksandar Milinkevich and other opposition leaders, the strategy has been shifted into one of maintaining the United Democratic Forces (UDF). However, this attempt appeared more formal than real for the survey participants, given the uncoordinated messages and efforts by the various political parties within the UDF, as well as by Milinkevich’s civic movement *Za svabodu*, which itself displays clear political features. It is yet to be seen whether having two structures means more effective outreach at home, but due to personal infighting and very frequent, but rather substantively empty, trips to the West, the opposition is losing its credibility in Brussels.

7) According to the survey, none of the sides has a clear vision for the further development of Belarus. Their current steps might seem controversial and unclear due to the absence of a general vision or – from the side of the regime, at least – the lack of clear communication of a new vision.

8) In the current vacuum of general vision within the country, as well as the geopolitical deadlock, Lukashenka may try to enforce a plan to turn Belarus from his personal fiefdom into more of a family enterprise. Although when in power the new and

¹ The best example is the Belarusian mobile phone operator *Velcom* first sold to a Cypriot company, then in October 2007 - 3 months after the first transaction - to *Austrian Telekom*.

(seemingly) “clean” generation may only reinforce the status quo, the chances for its acceptance by Belarusians, as well as by the international community, might be higher than ever before – especially if in the end such a transition would eventually bring the earlier retirement of Lukashenka.

The Regime: An Evolution

A period of softening repression came definitely to an end during June and July 2007. On the other hand, Lukashenka’s regime shows certain tendencies toward a change of existing policy, although only at the level of consideration and announced intentions. According to the opinions of respondents, more important were the personal changes among elites in power, which do not represent any systematic changes or changes in existing government policies.

Stability of the Regime: None of the respondents recognized any substantial transformation or possible liberalization of the authoritarian system. They do not expect any relevant changes in this area. This was eventually confirmed by official denial of rumors of a possible amnesty of political prisoners. The short-term softening of repressions was only “cosmetic.” Moreover it took place during the time when the opposition did not represent any significant threat to the regime. However, the possibility of a formal dialogue with some part of the opposition structures chosen ahead of time by the regime (as happened, for example, in 1999-2000 on the initiative of the head of the OSCE in Belarus Hans-Georg Wieck) cannot be ruled out. While some “partners” for cooperation, like the Belarusian Helsinki Committee are chosen by the government, others are under threat of elimination. A similar situation of “public dialogue” occurred, for example, in Grodno in connection with protests against the demolition of buildings in the historical center, when no protesters or independent journalists were invited to so-called “public discussions.”

At the same time, respondents cited the considerable stability of the regime, which until now was not shaken even by the recent increase in energy prices. It managed to maintain stability mainly because of the economic growth which persisted (though decreasing in pace) despite the country’s negative foreign trade balance. This is a fact which the opposition has also admitted. At the Congress of Democratic Forces in May 2007, such opinions were expressed: “The Belarusian people have never lived as well as nowadays.” The consumer boom is mirrored not only in the increase of apartment and other real-estate prices, but also in the shortage of construction materials caused by high demand.

So far even declared intentions to eliminate the majority of discounts for socially marginalized population groups have not caused political turmoil, perhaps given the timing of their implementation, which is set for the beginning of 2008. Yet their potential consequences are discussed among ordinary citizens, for example with regard to public transport. Citizens have reacted to the fact that pensions have so far not been increased for the year 2007, as has been the rule in recent years. Even today some groups of society have been affected by the intended changes (e.g. the victims of Chernobyl disaster, students who lost their accommodation in dormitories, families with many children, etc.), but these are not significant parts of the population. Nor has a feeling of pessimism, which was expressed by massive withdrawal of bank deposits in Belarusian rubles at the turn of 2006/07, yet been politicized. Moreover, the shape of the intended restrictive measures is unknown, and some respondents expect their moderation after the intervention of President Lukashenka, which will represent another move to secure his popularity.

Some analysts point out the ability of the regime to effectively adapt to changed external and internal conditions. In the short and medium term, respondents do not predict any destabilization of Lukashenka’s regime. At the same time, they do not expect Russia to have an interest in bringing Belarus to an economic decline. The majority of respondents agrees that the Belarusian economy is capable of coping with the results of further

energy price increases in the medium term. The deterioration of the social and economic situation of the population is predicted by the respondents in the long term. Only a minor portion of respondents expects these developments to be projected in the political turmoil, as was the case in Russia after the implementation of so-called "monetization" of discounts for pensioners in the beginning of 2005. Some even do not eliminate the possibility of escalation of nationalism in the case of economic decline being caused by economic pressure from Moscow.

Some reforms are expected in the economy, with some first steps already having been implemented, as the state, for example, has renounced the rule of holding "the golden share" (50+1% of shares) in privatized enterprises. These reforms probably will be of a gradual nature, and their draft has not been made public yet. In the state research institutions, e.g. at the Faculty of Economy of the Belarusian State University (BGU) and in the Management Academy of the President's Administration, a higher level of interest in the reform experience in V4 countries (including Slovakia) has been noticed. Government officials are at the same time interested in having more information about the experience of the agriculture reform implemented in Ukraine.

At the same time, upcoming economic reforms are expected to have a "selective" character. Reforms will be undertaken for the benefit of large state enterprises and their management or the members of the *nomenklatura* who are in charge of them. Under pressure from Russia, whose goal is to protect its internal market, one can expect a decrease in state subsidies for the consumer goods industry and agriculture.

Several changes which occurred in the last several years have met with positive feedback, including, for example, the building of supermarket chains throughout the country or the creation of a system of "one counter" when dealing with administrative matters. On the other hand, there is an adverse attitude toward small entrepreneurs whose loyalty toward the regime is understandably smaller.

It is quite probable, given the weakness of the current opposition, that the main player in economic transformation will remain the current authority. The vast majority of analysts considers it highly probable that President Lukashenka will remain in power for a fourth term in the presidency. In case of a deterioration in the economic situation, it is more probable that an escalation of repression will occur than an implementation of more radical reforms which would weaken the government's hold on the economy. Long-term reform projects require external assistance from abroad, which opens the potential for an increase of EU influence in the country. Only a smaller part of analysts contacted could envision the possibility of an outburst of civic unrest after a deterioration in the economic situation in the country. On the other hand, strikes and socially motivated protests are not an unknown phenomenon. Until now, however, under the conditions defined by the authoritarian regime, they have been only of a local nature.

Changes in the Ruling Elites: One of the biggest changes of a systematic character ongoing in today's Belarus is the building of a stable power base that would allow the continuation of the regime's existence even after a potential departure of the current president. This basis is represented by a public movement called *Belaya Rus*, which is considered to be the core of a future government party. The preparations for its construction were intensified in the summer months of 2007; on the other hand, the role of this movement in the formation of high-level politics is not yet clear. Officials in the hierarchy and the people closest to the President Lukashenka are not actively participating in its creation – rather it seems to gather official artists, scientists, sportsmen, and other celebrities who do not play any major role in political life. It seems that in the nearest future the role of forming the movement will shift to consolidating the regime's power center on the local and regional basis. For example, school headmasters and directors of state enterprises have been delegated with its conception. The more important representatives of the regime may be not involved for the reason that President Lukashenka is afraid of *Belaya Rus* turning into a basis for the formation of his future political opposition. In the extended future this movement could, in the case of a

weakening of President's Lukashenka position, guarantee creation of a pro-presidential fraction in the parliament. *Belaya Rus* would in this way complement the already existing mass organizations which constitute the political base of the regime – the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, state controlled unions, and the Union of Commissioned Officers.

Another trend in Belarusian domestic politics is a strong nationalization and strengthening of anti-Russian sentiments. Anti-Russian rhetoric appears not only in connection with the tensions concerning energy supplies, but also generally in the state ideology. The anti-Russian atmosphere in state institutions, but also among the public, is gradually increasing, even though the official state propaganda is more reserved in this matter. The evidence of increasing nationalization of Belarusian politics is also an opening for debate on the possible staking of a claim to charge the Russian Federation for using its military bases in Belarus, as was presented by Prime Minister Syarhei Sidorskiy and the Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Semashka in 2007. Even though domestic observers do not expect these claims to be officially raised by Belarus, even such speculations were considered taboo in Belarus before 2003. The shift in the present paradigm in geopolitical thinking of elites in power endorses the thought of possible membership of Belarus in the EU (or in the Council of Europe) in the future. An editorial in the presidential daily *Belarus Segodnia* suggests content proximity to the motto: *Za Belarus* ("For Belarus," used by government propaganda) and the opposition motto *Zhive Belarus* ("Live Belarus"), which symbolize two different concepts of forming national identity.

Current propaganda promotes a picture of Russia as a country of wild capitalism with a high rate of crime. The course of consolidation of Belarusian state sovereignty has contributed in a major way to the consolidation of the elites in power but also of public opinion around President Lukashenka. Moreover, the space for opposition argumentation has been weakened in this way. The final outcome may have a positive impact on building a consensus concerning the national and state interests of the country in the case of a regime change.

Since May 2007 the anti-corruption campaign has been intensified, accompanied by arrests and cleansing in the highest positions. Even the members of security structures were affected, including KGB head Styapan Sukharenka. According to respondents the real reasons for this is the rearrangement of controls over financial flows and the fear on the part of President Lukashenka that a group could be formed inside the power clans in the state machinery which may carry out a palace coup. Therefore the leading positions are gained by people from the periphery who directly owe the president their career advances. The quick rise of Viktor Lukashenka also serves to consolidate the president's power. Respondents agree with the opinion that current cleansings are an expression of consolidation of the president's personal power rather than an expression of conflicts inside the elites. Similar cleansings have not been unusual in Belarus since 1994; Lukashenka regularly exchanges people at the top.

From the perspective of the function of the power clans, one can observe a certain rearrangement of power inside the establishment. Domestic observers talk about the weakening of the two main clans led by Security Council Secretary Viktor Sheyman and the Leader of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly Uladzimir Kanaplyow. While Sheyman has to face competition from the president's adviser for security issues, Viktor Lukashenka, the businessmen close to Kanaplyow were affected by repressions, and even his personal driver was arrested. In case of Alyaksandr Barouski we see how one of Lukashenka's closest colleagues was affected. On the other hand, even though Sheyman has retreated, his journey to Venezuela in July 2007 is evidence that he is still entrusted by president to execute delicate tasks. The replacement of Minsk region governor Mikalay Damashkevich signals the dissolution of another cluster inside the power structures. Probably pressure from Russia caused speculation about a possible departure of Sidorskiy from the post of prime minister. The withdrawal of Henadz Nevyhlas, the chief of President's Administration, is also not out of question. Whereas Sidorskiy's managerial and diplomatic skills are judged positively also in the opposition

environment, Navumaw is considered to be a politician who has a joint responsibility for human rights violations in Belarus and therefore appeared on the list of people who have been denied entry to EU.

Another potential line of conflict inside pro-regime elites is represented in the tension between the part of the power structures which profits from close cooperation with Russia, i.e. representatives of the security structures and traders in arms, and the young people who are more open to cooperation with the West and are connected to the business structures.

Potential conflicts in Belarusian elites in power can also be derived from their interest in participation in privatization. According to some opinions, high-profile state officers take part in privatization in its first phase and then resell firms to foreign companies. Other respondents expect rather massive involvement from the third world – e.g. from Arab countries (Oman, Sudan, Qatar), Iran, or Venezuela. Privatization of some state enterprises has already been promised to a few “applicants” at the same time.

Under the conditions of the authoritarian society of Belarus, clans often have a personal character that affects the nature of the conflicts. The fact that real influence and power do not necessary need to match with an official position is another characteristic. Conflicts among several concentrations of power or among different political leaders now contribute to consolidation of the president’s power, because all power clans are dependant on the president and compete for his favor.

The character of governing elites deserves some attention, as well. In most cases they are not the leading representatives of the pre-1991 communist authorities; rather, Lukashenka relies to a considerable extent on young officials or people from the lower levels of the party and state apparatus. He has managed to remove the more important protagonists from the final period of the Soviet era. The last of this group to go was former Head of the President’s Administration and current Head of the National Academy of Science Mikhail Myasnikowich.

The potential fracturing inside the elites could be conditioned by the style of individual representatives of the state authority. Some representatives of the elites in power, like MPs Volha Abramava and Usevlad Jancheuski, are willing to criticize the largest misdemeanors of the regime or to lead a dialogue with independent intellectuals. Similarly, Paval Jakubouski, the chief editor of *Belarus Segodnia*, belongs to a moderate wing of the elites in power. Other representatives of power structures, such as people in charge of the official Belarusian Republican Youth Union, are also aware of the limitations on their activities stemming from the framework imposed by the authoritarian regime, but they are not willing to comment in public. Their presentation is addressed more abroad and they have no real influence on politics. None of them questions the current system or the authority of President Lukashenka.

While in the past officials of the state administration were relatively poorly paid, their situation started to change in 2004. Their salaries increased considerably and the way to having their own commercial activities was opened through privatization, although members of the *nomenklatura* are far more vulnerable than in the past. Under the current law, it is possible to detain the heads of state enterprises who received a state subsidy and do not achieve adequate economic indicators.

An important factor in the power elites’ consolidation is a fear raised by arrests in the summer months of 2007. Besides the state structures, criminal prosecution pertains also to business structures, for example banks. Another way to enforce loyalty is by arrests carried out on the grounds of alleged arrears in taxes or for the suspicion of corruption. If the “targeted” businessman transfers the alleged outstanding amount to the state, criminal prosecution against him will be ceased. Fear of such arrests makes it impossible for stable alliances in the *nomenklatura* or alternative centers of power to be created. Even though the younger generation behaves quite pragmatically, one cannot expect it to

initiate political changes alone. As long as they do not see a clear perspective of coming changes, they will remain loyal to Lukashenka. The president's popularity inside the *nomenklatura* is decreasing with the diminishing material resources of the regime, but this fall has not reached such a level that clans would be able to achieve their political goals. Moreover they are not interested doing so as long as the current power system is stable.

The Situation of the Political Opposition

One of the important sources of stability of the regime is the weakness of the political opposition. While in 2006 (see previous Pontis surveys) an optimistic mood still echoed from the short-term successful consolidation of the democratic forces and opposition activists during the presidential election in March, one year later almost none of this enthusiasm is left. It has been replaced by apathy and pessimism concerning the future of a political alternative to the regime, and the persuasion is widely shared that Lukashenka does not have a competitor on the political scene in the long-term.

The Congress of Democratic Forces and the Position of Milinkevich: Pessimistic expectations escalated in connection with the Congress of Democratic Forces of May 26–27, 2007, at which friction between the supporters of former presidential candidate Alyaksandar Milinkevich and leaders of political parties associated within the United Democratic Forces (UDF) broke out. The majority of respondents acknowledges the leader of the Communist Party of Belarus, Syarhei Kalyakin, as the strongest representative of the UDF. Kalyakin, they say, controls more than 50% of the political council of this alliance. At the same time they maintain the opinion that leaders of the parties have consolidated their positions. The influence of Kalyakin is based on the volume of financial resources, rather than real influence on voters.

However, analysts differ in their opinions on the future destiny of the opposition. The friction concerns mainly Milinkevich as a person and his decision to create his own political vehicle as noted above. According to some analytical communities, Milinkevich is the only hope the opposition has. They consider his removal from the position of the Democratic Forces leader as a mistake, because they perceive his position to be more understandable and readable under the conditions of dictated by the authoritarian regime. One advantage of Milinkevich is the fact that he managed to gain public awareness as a personal alternative to Lukashenka and achieved international recognition – something that none of the opposition candidates for president has ever managed. Another advantage is Milinkevich's ability to communicate more flexibly with different segments of the society, e.g. the businessmen.

Some observers perceive the idea of the *Za svabodu* movement as a step forward, as it is built on the basis of regional activists and NGOs, in comparison to the current ineffective tactics; others question this model and think that despite its strong popularity, the movement will not attain stronger organizational backing. A segment of analysts questions Milinkevich's organizational abilities and notes his lack of charisma. Other analysts criticize him for the timing of creating a new movement. They say that it came late, and that the right time would be before presidential elections. Also the fraction of the analytical community which has a positive attitude towards Milinkevich reproaches him for sending a letter to Lukashenka in January 2007 in which he offered him mediation during the negotiations with the West through the conflict with Russia.

United Democratic Forces – A Crisis: While in the case of the Milinkevich opinions in the expert community differ, there is consensus on the question of the functioning of the block of opposition parties. Analysts are unanimous in the opinion that the Union of Opposition Forces does not have any serious hope of winning sympathizers among citizens. Even respondents, who supported the withdrawal of Milinkevich from the post of democratic opposition leader, were able to defend either the organization or the approach chosen by it. Instead they just tried to minimize the importance of the public support for Milinkevich.

One can thus expect a deepening of conflicts and schisms inside political parties caused by disappointment from years of setbacks and the overall atmosphere in the opposition, as well as by the opening of the question of leadership in ODS. The future of the opposition parties' block depends to a certain extent on the outcomes of the autumn convention of the Belarusian People's Front (BNF), where Deputy Chairman Ales Mikhalevich, a Milinkevich supporter, will run against current chairman. Respondents pointed out the fact that self-reflection is absent in the opposition environment and that mechanisms of internal competition have been destroyed. Even though it is true that the opposition parties which are constituted on the basis of declared inclinations to certain ideological agendas have more predictable political behavior, they argue that the current structure of the opposition is inadequate to deal with the conditions of the authoritarian regime. A constant and exclusive orientation on parliamentary or presidential elections is identified as a mistake, given the fact that the regime is not willing to allow any free elections. According to this argument, the political opposition has not yet understood that elections have until now contributed to the *de facto* legitimization of the current regime. Leaders of political parties who have come into conflict with Milinkevich do not have any public popularity.

At the current moment it is unrealistic to expect the opposition's integration, since integration is not desired either by supporters of the *Za svabodu* movement or by the initiators of the convention of the Congress of Democratic Forces and the removal of Milinkevich from the post of opposition leader. Therefore pressure to attain the unity of the opposition forces through setting it as a condition of granting financial assistance is counter-productive; it ignores public opinion and the views of a major part of the intellectual community. These political friction express real conflicts which exist in the environment of the opposition structures. These conflicts are concentrated around several lines. The first one is the attitude to the current authorities, where supporters of Milinkevich prefer more radical moves. The majority of the opposition leaders is not willing to take risks and enter into more radical conflicts with the authorities, which minimizes their political assets. In contrast with the United Democratic Forces, *Za svabodu* tries to establish contacts with various civic initiatives and seeks their support. The third conflict line could be different opinions on the foreign policy orientation of Belarus, where the supporters of Milinkevich openly speak about the necessity of Belarusian integration into European structures. The integration of the opposition before the parliamentary elections is very unlikely and in general this question so far does not play an important role in the opposition's agenda. The analysts surveyed do not consider upcoming elections to be important.

Despite the fact that political elites are trapped in conflicts which seem irreconcilable at the moment, the current friction at the top is not such an acute problem at the lower levels. A good example is seen in the roundtables dedicated to solution of smaller problems and regularly organized on the ground of various opposition parties which are attended by experts of diverse political affiliations. Opposition groups are able to further communicate at their lower levels and to cooperate to find solutions to real local problems. Unfortunately, the potential for cooperation among opposition forces can be decreased or even eliminated as a result of the policies of leading boards of political parties. Such a case, for example, took place when BNF called its activists to choose between supporting Milinkevich or holding a function in the party. OGP went even further by threatening activists who supported Milinkevich with expulsion.

Insufficient communication between opposition forces and civil society still persists. Despite the above-mentioned contacts on the expert level, the opposition does not have an interest in systematic development of its own expert base and it does not use experts' recommendations. The UDF, as well as *Za svabodu*, is for example thinking about building its own sociologic center dedicated to public opinion research.

Non-Governmental Organizations – Fatigue: NGOs appear to be in a similarly deep crisis. According to several analysts, the third sector in Belarus is on the brink of erosion

because it lacks a target group, the needs of which it could help meet. Non-governmental organizations and the opposition have reached the margins, especially in the small cities, where there are significant unsolved economic problems and widespread corruption is rampant.

According to several political analysts, the Belarusian opposition and civil society today are in the deepest crisis yet. The opposition does not play an active role in solving substantial problems of Belarusian society, as was demonstrated for example the case in the energy conflict between Belarus and Russia or in the decision to reduce discounts for socially marginalized groups of the population. It seems the competition for the favor of foreign donors among several opposition groups has pushed aside political questions, including the fundamental problem of the fight against the regime. The opposition is not perceived in public or among experts as a potential actor of political change or as a communication channel for dialogue with society.

The biggest problem is the fact that both the opposition and the third sector are losing moral legitimacy in the eyes of the public and the part of intellectual community which is not directly engaged in their activities. Respondents called into question the transparency of financing of the opposition and non-governmental organizations, and even the term "grant" has been tainted, being associated with the misuse of financial resources for personal profit. This negative image is not only a result of government propaganda, but also of discrediting campaigns inside the opposition.

A characteristic trend is the departure of citizens from the opposition or non-governmental initiatives resulting from disappointment in the progress of opposition so far, but also from the strong pressure of the authorities. Thus in two years (2006–2007) membership in the independent trade union in the *Hrodna Azot* enterprise fell from the original 580 to only 200. Other organizations have re-registered as official unions, where members are privileged with various discounts and the right to longer vacation leave and extra salary benefits which may reach even 150,000 rubles, a sum which could cover the rent of a two-room apartment. Apart from financial tools, the authorities are also using a traditional form of motivation used in the Soviet era, as "boards of honor," to which only people from an official trade union can be nominated, have been reinstated.

Conflicts within the opposition in the end do not serve the particular interests of individual political leaders and groups. On the contrary, they eliminate any possibility of forming an alternative to the regime. The public does not perceive the opposition as a differentiated phenomenon, but as a single force. The isolation of the Belarusian opposition is intensified by an absence of new initiatives and the increasing passivity of its elites. Some respondents emphasized the lack of organizational skills of the opposition. New rallies (the so-called European and Social marches) may confirm or defy such opinions.

Attempts to form a "new" opposition among the young actors of the protests after the presidential elections in March 2006 have not yielded any results. Even though this movement won a moral victory by organizing the camp city and so called flash-mobs, it did not manage to unite its program and form its requests and it did not win the support of current opposition leaders. One piece of positive news is the formation of new organization and growing realization of previous mistakes as well as a search for new ways by more and more NGOs. This, together with a new generation to play more important role, will help, in the long run, to revitalize civil society in Belarus.

Belarus and the EU

A critical perception of EU policy towards Belarus dominated among respondents. They criticize its inconsistency, conditioned by an insufficient level of the knowledge of Belarusian problem and a lack of unity in the common strategy of member states. Respondents agreed that the regime in Minsk is attempting to find ways to intensify contacts with the West. On the other hand, a significant number questioned the stability

of this course. According to this opinion, President Lukashenka is pursuing rather tactical goals, mainly the improvement of his negotiation position in relation to Russia.

The majority of people interviewed unanimously agreed that dialogue between the EU and official Minsk is needed. They appreciate the decision of EU to open a diplomatic representation in Minsk, but argue that bilateral dialogue should not directly include the top state representatives and especially not Lukashenka himself. It would be accepted at the lower levels (experts, state deputies, local and regional governments and organs of the state administration and the level of regions, etc) and on the diplomatic level.

At the same time, according to their opinion, it is necessary to keep a value-oriented framework around EU policy towards Belarus. Dialogue should therefore be made conditional on at least partial improvements in the area of human rights and democracy. The primary requirement from the side of EU should be retraction of the anti-revolutionary laws from 2005, which made it possible to sanction, *inter alia*, membership in unregistered organizations or the writing of any article in the foreign press which criticizes the current Belarusian regime. Another request which should not be compromised is enabling the operation of free media and ceasing the current situation in which 13 out of 25 non-state periodicals are affected by the prohibition to publish or distribute within the borders of Belarus. Until these conditions are fulfilled, it makes no real sense to demand the liberation of political prisoners, because the conditions under which repressions may be renewed and opposition activists repeatedly arrested remain. Communication with the official Belarusian structures must be held in such a manner that leading representatives from Minsk realize that they are constantly in the center of attention of the international community.

The analytical community is divided with regard to the question of economic sanctions. They reject their possible implementation; one part would, however, accept their use as a means of pressure on the regime. Their implementation could have a counterproductive effect, as they could mean an increase in economic dependency of Belarus on Russia. Another negative effect could be a consolidation of the population around the current authorities. From this point of view some people assessed the EU move in the question of expulsion of Belarus from the General Standard of Preferences (GSP) as unfortunate. They took a skeptical stand also towards measures taken so far, such as the entry ban for high-profile representatives of Belarusian regime which, they say, missed its purpose.

Instead of negative and restrictive instruments of EU policy towards Belarusian regime, respondents would welcome rather positive measures. The pressure to respect human rights should be coupled with a policy of concessions to the current government. They pointed out the visa regime issue as an important aspect of EU policy towards Minsk. They are against the increase in visa fees to Schengen states, which affects normal Belarusian citizens above all. A few of them mentioned the worrying trend of annually decreasing numbers of Belarusian citizens who visit EU countries. The visa question according to them should not be perceived as a part of the bilateral intergovernmental EU-Belarus agenda, but as a vehicle of communication for the EU with the entire Belarusian society. Also today's practice of visa granting meets criticism, where Lithuania is mentioned as a negative example for long administrative procedures.

Another instrument of communication between the EU and the Belarusian public is projects of alternative radio and TV broadcasting into Belarus financed from EU resources or individual member states resources. Compared to the skeptical attitude of recent years towards these media, concerns have decreased, but they continue to be perceived as an insufficient tool for influencing public opinion. According to Belarusian respondents it would be desirable to strengthen the radio broadcasters alongside the Belarusian borders in order for the European Radio for Belarus or the *Radio Racyja* to be broadcast in the Minsk area. Also existing media like Euronews should be used more effectively. The respondents perceive a possibility of launching satellite TV broadcasting with restraint mainly because of the ability of the regime to confine its reception through satellite antennas. On the other side an attempt to restrict them or to dismantle the ones

which do not comply with the set standards caused significant discontent in society and therefore the regime silently gave up similar attempts for now. In connection with recently published speculations on tightening state control over the internet, together with the possibility of launching internet censorship, one cannot eliminate the possibility that the attacks towards satellite antennas will be repeated. Some respondents have doubts about the extent to which journalists of the mentioned TV channel will be allowed to operate directly in Belarus and cover domestic issues. The question of granting of accreditations to journalists could also become a part of the EU pressure on the regime.

Some respondents speak about the possibilities of the EU to influence the Belarusian democratization process via Russia. These opinions arise very sporadically though. The EU should, according to this line of argument, try to persuade Russia that through the democratization of Belarus the possibilities to influence its politics through the free media and political parties would increase.

Some respondents positively assessed Lukashenka's initiative to create cooperation with Lithuania and Ukraine in the energy area. According to their opinions, the EU should support this model because it contributes to the strengthening of its own energy security. The respondents pointed out strongly the need for a united approach by EU member states towards official Minsk. In this connection they praised the attitude of Denmark and Sweden and criticized the policy of Germany and Austria, which focus on communication with the official state representatives. Another interesting point that shows to what extent the Belarusian issue a part of the pan-European context is an opinion that Belarus should not be perceived as a specific and separate case of the authoritarian tendencies, but that it should be understood in the context of a slowing or stopped consolidation process of democracy in all of Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Turkey.

Respondents also mentioned the need to evaluate the form of EU policy. According to their opinions, the current offers of the West in the area of travel, but also obtaining scholarships, are ceasing to be attractive for not only Belarusian citizens but also for other CIS countries. The possibilities which cooperation with the official structures or loyalty toward the state authorities offers are starting to become equivalent to those granted by the West. Similarly, on the level of interstate relations, the Neighborhood Policy so far has been a disappointment and is perceived as insufficient. Several intellectuals in the CIS countries are dissatisfied with such an approach of the EU and the US. They question the ability and willingness to perceive the post-Soviet republics and their citizens as equal partners. The result is an increase in anti-Western sentiments in the former USSR area.

Belarus and Russia

Relations to Russia are being analyzed on three different levels, on the level of bilateral interstate relations and the possibility of the integration of Belarus and Russia, as well as on the level of domestic politics, where focus is on the possibilities of Russian Federation to influence the political development in Belarus.

Bilateral Relations between Belarus and Russia. Perspectives on Belarusian-Russian Integration: One can feel a significant decrease in public sentiments concerning the integration of Belarus and Russia. This is also mirrored in public opinion polls. The increase of anti-Russian sentiments is conditioned by tensions between Belarus and Russia which broke out in connection with the conflict about energy supply and Belarusian payments related to it. The development of the conflict, which escalated in January 2007, was closely watched by the population.

Maintenance of Belarusian independence is today perceived as an point of consensus between the government elites and the opposition, even though a portion of respondents thinks that Lukashenka uses nationalistic rhetoric only instrumentally with the goal of strengthening his negotiation position towards Moscow. The events of 2003 and the first months of 2007 are projected in the development of public opinion in Russia where the

percentage of people who consider Belarus as the closest ally of Russia is decreasing. In Belarus, but also in Russia, the image of Belarus as an independent country is strengthened when in media news from Russia is increasingly often introduced as the news from abroad and vice versa. The final result is a significant severing of Belarus and Russia, which could have a positive influence on democratization prospects of Belarus.

On the other side one has to perceive bilateral Russian-Belarusian relations in the context of presidential elections in Russia. According to the opinion of several respondents, Russia will not have an interest in escalating the conflict with Belarus, even though it pressures the current government to serious concessions like the sale of *Beltransgaz* or paying off the Belarusian debt connected to gas supplies. According to them, Lukashenka will be forced in the future to agree to sell Belarusian petrochemical assets to Russian buyers. On the other side, respondents point out that in the upcoming parliamentary elections in Russian Federation, the pro-government candidates will have an interest in reaching out to the former communist and nationalist electorate, which sympathizes with Lukashenka and his politics.

In the economic area, the position of Belarus towards Russia is complicated by the intention of Russia to protect its own internal market against the supplies of Belarusian merchandise (e.g. in the area of sugar, meat, and milk, etc) and the decreasing competitiveness of Belarusian products in comparison with Western production. Belarus remains strongly dependant on Russia in the economic area, because more than 50-80% of Belarusian high-tech production goes to Russia. For EU businesses, possibilities in the eco-energy technologies and IT areas are opening, because of the high demand from the Belarusian side. On the other side, the geopolitical importance of Belarus to Russia in connection with the strategic intentions of the US to broaden its missile defense system to the states of Central Europe causes a situation in which Russia may offer some economic concessions also in the form of toning down of import restrictions for Belarusian food and other merchandise.

Economic cooperation between Belarus and Russia in the military area is developing continually, and at least the Russian military industry is flooded by subcontract orders. Belarusian subcontracts for Russian military systems comprise mainly electronics and optics, but also wheel tractors and repairs and modernization of airborne technology. Russia probably carries out exports of a part of its arm sales through Belarus. It is in the Russian interest to maintain the current military cooperation and prevent Belarus from becoming a part of security and political integration alliances that Russia considers to be its competitors, i.e. EU and NATO. At the same time Lukashenka has an interest in escalation of tensions between Russia and the West, in connection to the US plans to set up missile defense system in Czech Republic and Poland. Lukashenka is interested in Russia placing its missiles in Belarus, which would give him leverage and open the possibility of receiving direct or indirect assistance from Russia. Moscow is not interested in a similar move.

Another important aspect of so-called soft security risks is the threat of terrorism or illegal migration. In this area Russia has an interest in the control of Belarusian border and migration of people via Belarus. Therefore, common record-keeping of people crossing Belarusian or Russian borders has been launched, as have common migration cards.

According to opinions of some respondents an unnecessarily hard-line course in the question of energy supplies was conditioned by the highly independent attitude of Belarus for example during the fuel crisis in Ukraine in 2005, when Minsk supplied crude oil products despite the blockade from the side of Russian producers or when Belarus decided not to join the sanctions against Georgia and Moldavia in 2006. However in general Belarus does not belong to priorities of Russian foreign policy. Russia pays significantly higher attention to Ukraine.

All respondents agreed with the opinion that creation of a federative state of Belarus and Russia is unrealistic at the moment. Changes in Russian policy towards Belarus may occur after the presidential elections, not immediately, but approximately within the 2–3 years that will be necessary for consolidation of the new government.

The Influence of Russia on Domestic Politics in Belarus: On one hand the conflict between Belarus and Russia at the beginning of 2007 brought a consolidation of Lukashenka's power. A minority of respondents is convinced that the perpetuation of this conflict could be used by the members of ruling *nomenklatura* to become more independent from Lukashenka. The fact remains true that under the conditions of cleansings inside the ruling elites, as well as the unwillingness of officials of the *nomenklatura* who are dependent on their state administration office, it is improbable that the *nomenklatura* could become an actor that would initiate a departure of the current state leadership.

In general the majority of respondents questions the real possibilities of Russia to directly influence domestic political life in Belarus. They point out the fact that until now no openly pro-Russian grouping has been established, or that attempts to do so (by Fralou, Skrabetz, Sinitzyn) have not succeeded. Even those groupings or political players labeled as supporters of rapprochement of Belarus and Russia are now denying similar accusations. This applies, for example, to the initiators and supporters of the convocation of the Congress of Democratic Forces and the removal of Milinkevich from the post of the informal opposition leader. Therefore the majority of respondents thinks that Russia is unable to enforce or stimulate the creation of openly pro-Russian groups under current conditions. The attempt to create a new pro-Russian group on the basis of the members of the MP group *Respublika* (Skrabetz, Fralou, etc.) which operated in the House of Representatives before 2004 ended up with a failure.

Lukashenka tries to keep his dominant position in shaping relations with Russia. Therefore attempts to create a stronger pro-Russian group are powerfully suppressed as in the case of the presidential elections in 2006 with Alyaksandar Kazulin, or in the past in case of the political party *Slovansky sobor – Biela Rus* (the first half of the 90's), or in the case of former minister and ambassador Mikhail Marynich, who tried to create a branch of the United Russia party in Brest before he was arrested. The result was not only the detention of Marynich, but also other members of the initiative. Moreover in the course of last few of years sympathy for Russia has been decreasing especially among the supporters of Lukashenka, who are becoming supporters of the non-alignment of Belarus. The potential of the pro-Russian forces in an eventual free election is around 25%. Even though this figure can be questioned in relation to the political inclination of a respondent, the supporters of a clear orientation toward Russia or integration of both states into one state union can hardly represent a majority.

According to opinions of the majority of respondents, Russia is also interested in maintaining the status quo in current Belarus policy and has no interest in the departure of President Lukashenka. This is the case, they argue, among the circles of the Russian military–industrial complex, on one hand, and nationalist and post-communist forces on the other, for whose favor the majority of the Russian political spectrum competes. Russia is at the same time not interested in the deeper democratization of the country, even though some respondents admit that Belarusian issue should be solved with the cooperation of the EU and Russia together. However an eventual change in the regime would bring a decrease in Russian political influence.

Business circles in Russia are interested in implementation of such economic reforms that would allow them to participate in the privatization of the Belarusian economy. Belarus seems like an attractive territory for potential Russian investments also in connection to their negative perception in the EU member states. Russia can stimulate the acceleration of economic reforms indirectly through the increase in energy prices or by creation of trade barriers for Belarusian products on its internal market. One manifestation of the economic pressure from the side of Russia is allegedly the increase in real-estate prices

in Belarus, which, according to the opinions of respondents, is caused by speculations of Russian businessmen, especially the ones close to Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. A smaller part of respondents thinks that the above-mentioned increase in real-estate prices is a result of Belarusian Diaspora in Russia. Several respondents think it is possible that in the long term economic influence can be transformed into political influence. The dependency of Belarus on Russia is increasing also because of high debt that Belarus has towards Russia.

In the area of relations of Russia towards the Belarusian opposition, respondents have not observed any radical changes compared to recent years, which is a result of the lack of interest in political changes in the country from the side of Russia. A clear majority of respondents, with the exception of direct coworkers of Milinkevich, is restrained about speculations according to which the convocation of the Congress of Democratic Forces was inspired under the pressure of Russia. They question also the opinion that Russia financially supported the Communist Party.

Several initiatives from the side of Russia that focused on supporting the opposition are rather of a local nature and serve as a tool of pressure towards the current Belarusian leadership. On the other hand, one cannot speak about actual Russian support for the political opposition either on the financial level or the political or symbolic one (for example an invitation for the events organized by the Russian embassy in Minsk). Neither have any relevant signals of Russian support to politicians, who could be described as representatives of the pro-Russian forces, e.g. Kazulin, Piotr Krauchanka, or General Paulau, appeared. Instead of contacts with the opposition, Moscow prefers more contacts with the representatives of the current authorities and in the case of a departure of Lukashenka it would prefer a change in the form of a "palace coup."

The members of Belarusian Diaspora in Moscow are more active towards Belarus, and it is probable that they act so with acceptance from Russian authorities. While these are usually not people on the highest posts in political or economic hierarchy the solid financial base of this group is expressed also by the fact that not so long time ago were established several relatively good quality Belarusian restaurants. The presidential election campaign of Alyaksandar Kazulin was allegedly supported from the financial resources of the Belarusian Diaspora in Russia.