

## Memorandum

**Re:** Belarus Pre-Elections Conclusions and Recommendations  
**By:** Institute for Civic Diplomacy/Pontis Foundation, Slovakia  
**To:** Interested Parties  
**Date:** September 27, 2004

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### Introduction:

This memorandum has been prepared following a mission monitoring the parliamentary elections campaign in Belarus (August 21-September 15, 2004) by the program officer of the Institute for Civic Diplomacy at the Pontis Foundation of Slovakia. The mission was completed for and supported by the Belarus project of the International Republican Institute, based in Vilnius, Lithuania. The memo serves to share the most important findings with interested parties and also as a discussion paper.

### Pre-Election Procedures:

With the referendum about the third term of the “citizen” and President Aleksandr Lukashenka, Belarus moves into another stage in its history. Although it is a European country, Belarus seems to be heading along the path of the Central Asian Republics, namely Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, with the referendum to be held along with parliamentary elections on October 17, 2004.

During his ten years of rule, President Lukashenka has managed to build up an effective state-based system serving his own interest. The system strongly counts on people dependant on maintaining and wielding power: the so-called “siloviki,” including Prosecutor General Viktor Sheiman and Chairman of the Committee of State Control, KGB Major General Anatolij Tozik.<sup>1</sup>

The ideology of the regime builds on division of the society into two parts:

- The state and its structures, with a strong positive image reinforced by strong enforcement agencies on one hand and extensive propaganda by the state-owned media (electronic and print) on the other.
- Non-state actors, including democratic civil society organizations, political parties, entrepreneurs, and the alternative media – all with a negative image

This division is supported by the general policy of authorities that is based on the idea that as long as one does not get involved in politics (e.g. the opposition), one can live (relatively) freely in Belarus. Meanwhile, more and more Belarusians are dependant on the state. This dependancy, when coupled with fear, creates the well-known apathy that is rampant in Belarusian society. This combination has been strenghted markedly since autumn 2003, when essentially all state employees were forces into terminable job contracts. One can

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<sup>1</sup> For more about the “siloviki” see “Belarus before Voting: Players and Society” by the Center for Political Education, Minsk) at [www.pontisfoundation.sk](http://www.pontisfoundation.sk)

understand this combination of fear and dependency, exacerbated by large bureaucratic obstacles, even more among small and medium entrepreneurs. This layer of the society has been suffering a new wave of repression since 2003, topped so far by the sentence of Valery Levaneuski and his colleagues in Grodna on September 7, 2004,<sup>2</sup> the very same day of the referendum announcement by the President.

It would be highly recommendable to introduce adequate response to the current wave of repression, especially by the European Union. The new neighbor of Belarus is the largest sources of hope within the democratic structures, but also ordinary citizens are more sensitive toward any European message (than from example United States). The question, however, is whether authorities will continue in their current harsher attitude or it will be back to a “normal” way of life after the elections and referendum.<sup>3</sup> Either way, a so-called “black list” of the most prominent representatives of the regime, to be agreed upon by the international community, is envisioned by democratic activists in Belarus.<sup>4</sup> The blocking of access by Jurij Sivakov to the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens suggests that such a list may exist de facto. In addition, early warning needs to be strengthened from Belarus. There were many signs long before the parliamentary elections (and the referendum) about the tightening of control (especially the creation of election commissions with insufficient number of opposition representations) and the introduction of new forms of repression. Unfortunately, they were followed by no serious protest or political steps by the international community.

Based on the extensive administrative operations being undertaken by Lukashenka regarding the referendum, domestic observers believe the results of the referendum can be taken for granted. This being the case, it may well be more important for international organizations to concentrate on helping registered opposition candidates to be elected to parliament, that is to try to decrease the possibility of massive election fraud. The importance of having opposition MPs holding seats in parliament is shown in a “theory” gathering popularity among independent journalists in Belarus today, who are talking about a so-called “Trojan Horse” scenario, in which Lukashenka will create his own opposition fraction in the Parliament to decrease the attention and importance of the real opposition in the country.

Increasing the amount of quality political analysis from Belarus seems to be one of the most important tasks for the upcoming years in general. Politicians and political scientists mostly failed in their political forecasts regarding the referendum, and it seems the opposition lacks ties to the state administration. These could be the reasons why political parties are putting their hope above reality in their analysis of the political situation (see referendum expectations).

### **Lessons Learned:**

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<sup>2</sup> Valery Levaneuski, leader of a local market vendors' strike committee, and Alyaksandr Vasilyeu, deputy chairman of the same strike committee were sentenced to two-year prison terms for allegedly insulting the President in leaflets they distributed in May. The incriminating sentence was the following: “Come and say that you are against [the situation] where SOMEBODY goes to Austria to ski and live happily at your expense.”

<sup>3</sup> Just for comparison, the authorities reacted with the same tightened control and harsh attitude during the initiative to hold alternative parliamentary elections in 1999 (organized by Viktor Gonchar, former CEC chairman) and also during the 1996 referendum.

<sup>4</sup> It would be highly recommendable to consider to put on any such list not only the highest representatives, but those (mainly judges), who are actually serving as hands of implementation of unlawful actions, such as the judges in the Levaneuski case in Grodna.

One of the goals of the opposition in the parliamentary elections (a declared goal of the People's Coalition 5+<sup>5</sup>) is to increase popular support for the coalition. The on-going campaign and possibly the election results could show whether this is realistic or not (an exit poll would show a more accurate picture). It is important to note that the 5+ coalition in its campaign has moved from the usual democracy issues (human rights violations and dictatorship) toward social and economic issues that matter most to the citizens of Belarus.<sup>6</sup> The second coalition of democratic forces, the European Coalition/Free Belarus, has not developed any specific campaign issue, but in general it advocates European integration of Belarus.

The monitoring mission showed that the program alternative is working more effectively where there is a face (e.g. strong candidate) in the constituencies. Especially in the regions, a coalition of NGOs, political parties, and alternative media (especially in Gomel, Grodno, or Borisov) seems to be working effectively, especially in providing alternative information to citizens in contrast to state propaganda. According to the findings of the mission these coalitions are usually drawn together by strong personalities. This kind of regional coalition-building should be supported in the near future, however the number of these coalitions (and new regional leaders) needs to be higher to challenge the regime in the upcoming presidential elections. Except for some very positive regional examples, NGOs are currently more or less reluctant to engage actively in the parliamentary elections, and the referendum announcement found them rather unprepared. A more pro-active approach and clear role/strategy for nationwide civic organizations within the democratic structures are missing. Addressing this problem separately from the political parties and their strategies should be a key objective in the period immediately after the elections.

The lack of human resources is perhaps the biggest problem of the democratic structures both in political parties and NGOs. According to the Interim Report of the ODIHR Election Monitoring Mission, the regime-friendly Belarusian Liberal Democratic Party (with 107 of the 110 constituencies) represents the largest number of nominations put forward by a single party,<sup>7</sup> not the democratic parties. Other political scientists suggest<sup>8</sup> that number of activists has shrunk to one fourth of what it was in the 2001 presidential campaign. Behind this shrinkage one can look for the effective state campaign against non-governmental organizations and independent media. According to a fresh report, altogether 56 non-governmental organizations have been closed in Belarus in 2003 and 2004.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that the majority of organizations continue, the illegal status does not help to attract well-educated, young people to work for them. Compared to Slovakia before the democratic change in 1998 or Serbia before 2000, the regime in Belarus has effectively blocked NGOs from becoming an alternative sector able to collect talented, young professionals. Additionally, the general (and currently growing) fear of ordinary citizens of losing state jobs blocks many from active participation. This limited

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<sup>5</sup> The People's Coalition Five Plus includes the United Civic Party, the Belarusian Popular Front, the Belarusian Party of Communists, the Belarusian Social Democratic Hromada, and the Belarusian Party of Labour (liquidated in June 2004 by the Ministry of Justice). The coalition has endorsed a program alternative entitled "Five Steps Toward a Better Life."

<sup>6</sup> According to the results of various public opinion polls, around 60% of Belarusians said social and economic issues are most important for them.

<sup>7</sup> Belarus Interim Report, September 17, 2004, p.2

<sup>8</sup> See Belarus Before Voting: Players and Society, September 2004, Center for Political Education, Minsk ([www.pontisfoundation.sk](http://www.pontisfoundation.sk)).

<sup>9</sup> See "Evidence of Chase for Belarusian Non-Governmental Organizations" by the "Collective Defense of Non-Governmental Organizations in Belarus," September 2004, Minsk

capacity of civic organizations to mobilize people is another contributing factor to the high degree of apathy in society.

Along with the lack of human resources and the general sense of fear, the lack of information (and access to information) is another quite serious issue. The “information war” – as it is usually described by opposition politicians – is actually not a war. Independent printed media in its current conditions and size is not able to compete with state propaganda. In the next two years, it is crucial to increase political and financial support and technical assistance to independent media.

The main question before the parliamentary elections and the referendum is not whether citizens will vote in favor of the “request” of the president, but whether the democratic opposition will be able to increase its popular support through campaigning and whether the democratic opposition will be present in the new parliament. Although this memorandum intends to cover pre-elections findings, we believe it is important to address the major post-election question as well: whether democratic structures will be able to select a common candidate to face with the incumbent president in the 2006 elections. Based on our four years of experience working in Belarus we believe no “revolution strategy” or “Yugoslavia-scenario” could help the country. The average Belarusian is simply not supportive toward protests – the last protest on July 21, 2004 initiated by “Respublika” and supported by the other coalitions attracted a few hundred supporters.<sup>10</sup>

A single democratic candidate, a personal alternative who fits with a program alternative like the one that has started to form with the “Five Steps to a Better Life” could be the answer. Both public opinion polls and field experience show that this is what the majority of Belarusian is waiting for. If the democratic opposition were able to agree on a personal alternative quickly after the elections, it could cause a little revolution, indeed. In this case, the democratic opposition (and the world) would have less than two years to figure out how to win the 2006 presidential elections.

### **Recommendations (to the international community)**

- Support efforts focused on selecting a credible alternative candidate
- Increase support for alternative civil society and for those active organizations that have lost their registration due to political reasons
- Support quality analytical work in Belarus
- Focus more on early warning regarding political development

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<sup>10</sup> According to some political scientist, law enforcement agencies closely watched the protest rally to test the capacity of opposition to mobilize the citizens. This opinion is strengthened by the – unreasonably strong – attack on a group of protesters, as part of the “testing” strategy by the law enforcement agencies.