

ЦЭНТАР ПАЛІТЫЧНАЙ АДУКАЦЫІ
CENTER FOR POLITICAL EDUCATION

Miensk, Republic of Belarus
E-mail: cpe@tut.by

Gutta
cavat
lapidem



grösslingova 4, 811 09 bratislava, slovakia, phone 421 2 5296 2215,
5296 2231, fax 421 2 5263 2362, pontis@pontisfoundation.sk

Belarus before Voting: Politics and Society

Introduction:

This analysis was prepared from July 25 - August 25, 2004 by Andrei Liakhovich, the head of the Minsk-based Center for Political Education (CPE) focusing on political players (authorities and political parties), as well as on the society of Belarus.

From September 2003, the Pontis Foundation of Slovakia has been implementing a project in Belarus assisting think-tank and analytical groups mainly through exchange programs¹. As part of the project, Pontis is distributing two analyses before the parliamentary elections (and the referendum about the third term of President Lukashenka) scheduled for October 17, 2004. The goal of the two analyses is to increase flow of analytical information from Belarus before the parliamentary elections. The referendum, which was announced by the President of Belarus on September 7th, 2004, only increased the importance of the parliamentary elections (both are scheduled for October 17, 2004) for both the citizens of the country and for the international community. The referendum will be subject of the second analysis prepared by CPE and distributed by the Pontis Foundation in the beginning of October.

The views in the analysis are by the CPE's; the Pontis Foundation does not necessarily share them.

Summary:

The majority of voters in Belarus is not satisfied with the social and economic situation in the country and does not trust President Lukashenka. However, there is mistrust toward the opposition, as well. One of the main reasons for this mistrust from the citizen's point of view is that the opposition is perceived as wanting to destroy the current political, administrative, and economic system of the country without proposing any alternative. The lack of popular support for the opposition gives the president a chance to stack the parliament with his loyal adherents and keep the political status-quo in Belarus.

The Authorities:

Any examination of the current political situation in Belarus inevitably leads to the following conclusion: President Lukashenka's government will take all efforts to make the new parliament to be elected on October 17, 2004 as loyal and controlled as possible. The following facts supporting this contention:

- *Election Legislation*

¹ The project was supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, D.C.

On June 22, 2004 the lower chamber of parliament (House of Representatives) by majority² vote rejected provisions on the liberalization of the country's election legislation which were proposed by Valerij Frolov, Vladimir Parfenovich, and Sergej Skrebets, deputies of the "Respublika" parliamentary fraction, the only opposition in the current parliament. There is no doubt that the House of Representatives adopted this decision in fulfillment of President Lukashenka's will. Before the discussion of the "Respublika" proposal, Lukashenka himself had meetings with those members of parliament who are his "eyes and ears" in the chamber.³

- *Referendum*

Since the 2001 presidential elections, Lukashenka has often announced his intention to continue his political carrier after 2006. The essence of his statements focuses on the elimination of the constitutional limit of two terms in the presidency⁴. Such a change must be approved by referendum, which the president announced as expected on September 7, 2004. In the current conditions, Lukashenka needs to show a rather high level of public support to demonstrate its legitimacy. Obtaining results favorable for Lukashenka (not less than 75% of votes in his favor, as was the case in the 2001 presidential elections) is possible only if both the referendum and the presidential elections to be held in 2006 are organized according to principle "it does not matter who votes, but who counts the votes." According to public opinion polls,⁵ Lukashenka's support in 2003 and the first half of 2004 has held at a level between 26-32%. Implementation of Lukashenka's plans and his victory in the 2006 presidential elections are possible only in the case that the opposition is excluded from structural politics (e.g. the parliament) and does not have access to power structures and circles. This would mean have no possibility to change the electoral legislation or to change the application of the existing election legislation.

The referendum and the presidential elections of 2006, coupled with the expected falsification of the elections results on October 17, 2004 will cause further deterioration in relations between official Minsk and the USA and EU. This will also intensify domestic political debate in Belarus.⁶ In such conditions, the president can not afford to have members of parliament potentially speaking against his plans.⁷ Currently there are fears that even relatively loyal groups, such as the "Assistance to Economic Development" (and in particular its chairman, Kirill Holopik), might be

² 71 councilors voted against changes in the Elections code, eight for the changes (the total number of deputies in the House of Representatives is 110).

³ According to sources close to the parliament, the following group of deputies are closest to the President: Speaker of the House of Representatives Vadim Popov, Chairman of the State Customs Committee Alexander Shpilevski, Leader of the pro-Lukashenka youth organization "Belarusian Republican Youth Union" Michail Orda, Sergej Zabolotets, Vladimir Dervenkov, Alexander Svirid, and Viktor Guminski.

⁴ According to Art. 81 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus "the same person cannot be president for more than two terms." The President announced the referendum on his third term on September 7, 2004.

⁵ The analysis refers to polling data conducted by the Independent Institute for Social and Economic Studies of Belarus in the quoted period.

⁶ From May 1, 2004, Belarus became one of the new neighbors of the enlarged EU

⁷ The term of office of the House of Representative is four years.

off the “wish list” of new members of parliament already drafted by the Administration of the President.

- *“Siloviki”*

Lukashenka’s political future is organically connected with the political future of his “siloviki” (strongmen). The ongoing campaign to suppress the economic elite⁸ begun soon after the 2001 presidential elections has confirmed the strong political position and influence of the representatives of Lukashenka’s circle, which clearly stands for his politics and has cause more confrontation with the West, which supports Belarusian democrats. The 2001 presidential elections also strengthened the political position and influence of these “siloviki,” headed by the Prosecutor General Viktor Sheiman.

Sheiman and his clients (Minister of Internal Affairs Vladimir Naumov, Minister of Sport and the Head of pro-Lukashenko public association “Association of Veterans of Special Force Divisions” Jurij Sivakov,⁹ and the commander of the special forces division which serves as Lukashenka’s so-called “Praetorian Guards” Dmitri Pavlichenko) are the key figures in the case of disappeared politicians who were once Lukashenka’s political opponents. The above-mentioned persons also have many other clients in the departments and organizations under their control.

Another important figure in Lukashenka’s surroundings is a Sheiman’s protégée, the Chair of the Committee of State Control, KGB Major General Anatolij Tozik, who took active part in defeating the economic elite. Since there is no counterbalance to the group of special forces around the president, no (larger) change of his circles can be expected. Sheiman serves basically as a punitive force of Lukashenka and to a great extent influences the personnel politics of the current regime. When the legitimacy of Lukashenka’s power is put in doubt either within or outside Belarus, Lukashenka has to act with caution about his circle and take into the account the interests of the most faithful representatives of his team. If democrats appear in the Parliament, it might mean that criminal proceedings could be instituted against Sheiman and his group.

- *Privatization:*

Due to the authoritarian government, many Belarusian bureaucrats have a chance to lobby in favor of interests of various commercial structures and therefore obtain economic benefits depending on their position in administrative hierarchy. Privatization with participation of Western and/or Russian

⁸ After the 2001 presidential elections, the following economic leaders were arrested: Leonid Kalugin, the general manager of Minsk Refrigerator Factory (arrested on November 22, 2001), after speaking publicly about his intentions to run for president in 2001; Michail Leonov, general manager of one of the biggest Belarusian enterprises, the Minsk Tractor Factory (arrested on January 7, 2002), who several times expressed disagreement with Lukashenka’s politics. The arrests of these individuals were connected with an intensifying state campaign on the fight against corruption. As the result of this campaign, dozens of managers of smaller enterprises were fired or punished.

⁹ Jurij Sivakov was the head of the Belarusian Delegation to the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. Greece, in line with EU recommendations, denied a visa for Sivakov, based on the so-called Portoruges-report of the Council of Europe on disappeared persons in Belarus from 2004.

businessmen would mean less (or no) control over businesses and financial sources (which will inevitably happen in case of democratization of Belarusian society), therefore are in contradiction to the interests of the majority in the bureaucracy. Representatives of executive “vertical” structures favor Lukashenka’s policy and are for preservation of the status-quo. Moreover, they are ready to act in accordance with his policy. There should be no unexpected changes in work of current organizational system even during the parliamentary elections and the referendum.

Elections:

Currently, there are no serious factors within Belarus that can oppose Lukashenka’s planned scenario for the parliamentary elections and the referendum. The democratic opposition has very limited possibilities for preventing falsification of the elections results. The interpretation of the election legislation by the Central Election Commission prohibits exit-polls and blocks possibilities of independent observation over the electoral process. Moreover, experience in previous elections in Belarus shows that authorities work for getting the necessary results and do not stop when they need to violate rules established in the election legislation.

The experience of the 2003 local government elections supports this observation. During the preparation of the local government elections (held in March 2003), more than 20,000 election commissions were created in Belarus. The authorities had neither enough human resources nor proper motivation to obtain the necessary results in 100% of the constituencies. On the other hand, the opposition in some of the constituencies managed to ensure serious public support for its candidates. As a result, the democratic opposition received around 1% of the total number of local government seats.

Before the parliamentary elections the situation is different. The Central Election Commission has created 6,500 local election commissions (LEC) and 110 district election commissions (DEC). Authorities have made sure to have enough people and proper motivation for blocking attempts of the opposition to nominate its representatives to the LECs and DECs,¹⁰ and to organize effective observation over elections process and vote count. Authorities can now deliver “proper” election results in every single constituency.

The international situation also is favorable to Lukashenka’s aspiration for preserving the status-quo in Belarus and electing his “own” parliament. As far as Belarusian-Russian relations are concerned, the situation in the CIS and reactions of Moscow officials at CIS events demonstrate that, despite the growing (personal) conflicts between Minsk and Moscow (on the interests Moscow to gain control of shares of the major and most profitable Belarusian businesses¹¹), Russian President Putin

¹⁰ According to the latest information (September 12, 2004) before issuing this paper, the referendum will be organized by the same LECs as the parliamentary elections. Moreover, LECs will use the same ballot boxes during voting. The CEC created special territorial elections commissions (TEC) being responsible for the referendum results at the regional level.

¹¹ Oil products and gas transport.

will most probably leave without comment the expected manipulation of election results in Belarus. The position of Russia towards Lukashenka's regime is determinant for the other CIS countries.

Currently, there is no perspective that Russia would share the opinion of Western states on non-recognition of the legality of Lukashenka's government. This means that the possibility of a complete international isolation of the current political regime in Belarus will be limited even after fraudulent elections and a fraudulent referendum.

The opposition:

Despite the fact the authorities' attempts to block the democratic opposition from having its representatives in parliament, the elections still have great significance from the perspective of democratization of Belarus. In the case of an effective election campaign, the Belarusian democrats would have a chance to increase popular support for their platform and candidates and thereby to lay down the political foundation for victory of a democratic candidate in the 2006 presidential elections.

Despite the actual results¹² of the democratic opposition platform, the most recent "union of all forces" after the announcement of the referendum, a comprehensive analysis of all factors shows many obstacles for reaching increased support. It is important to mention these factors now, since we believe they will remain after the parliamentary elections and most importantly before the presidential elections to be held in 2006. Here are the most important factors determining opposition policymaking:

- *Coalition Building and Human Resources*

Despite the fact that the majority of the democratic forces were able to create a large coalition (the National Coalition 5+), there is still a limited perspective for uniting and mobilizing all voters supporting democrats. The democratic opposition is still split both at level of relations between political parties and within political parties.¹³

Looking at public opinion polling, around 60% of voters consider social and economic issues as the most important. Around 20% of voters are against the state symbols introduced by Lukashenka and against making Russian an official language in Belarus. For this part of the electorate, the issues of

¹² According to the tracking polls from August 22, 2004 prepared by IRI-Gallup Baltic Surveys, compared to 2001, generic support for pro-democratic forces has increased by over 14% and support for Lukashenko is down 8% during the same period prior to elections

¹³ The opposition is represented by two coalitions in the 2004 parliamentary elections:

- 1) People's Coalition "Five Plus" (5+, Party Belarusian Popular Front - BPF, United Civic Party – UCP, Belarusian Social-Democratic Gramada (BSDG), Belarusian Labor Party (BLP), Party of Communists – Belarusian (PCB), Parliamentary Fraction "Respublika").
- 2) European Coalition "Free Belarus" (EC/FB, Belarusian Social-Democratic Party "Narodnaja gramada" (BSDP NG), public association Charter-97). Most recently the Coalition "Young Belarus" (its main body is the non-registered public association "Young Front") joined the EC/FB

human rights and civil freedoms are important. This is the stable electorate of the democrats. Around 20% of Belarusian voters (mostly pensioners) vote for Lukashenka and his supporters regardless of the social and economic situation. This is the stable electorate of Lukashenka and strong opponents to democratic change. This constellation of forces on the electoral field has not changed much since middle of the 1990s.¹⁴

Currently there is no organization among democratic structures that would be able to consolidate the democratic forces. Non-governmental organizations (e.g. the third sector) do not seem able to fulfill this role. One of the biggest obstacles is the lack of human resources. According to the official data of justice agencies, the number of members in any party of both 5+ and EC/FB is no more than 2,500 persons.¹⁵ After the 2001 presidential elections, the human resource capacity of the strongest oppositional parties (BPF, UCP, BSDP NG) has shrunk significantly. The long dispute to define a single candidate of democratic forces before the elections and the performance of the finally chosen candidate Vladimir Goncharik (with no political perspective) resulted in the large-scale disappointment of many party members and NGOs taking part in the 2001 campaign. Opposition parties lost a significant number of volunteers who had campaign and public experience. According to those political party activists who coordinated the mobilization campaign in different regions of Belarus in 2001, the total number of active party members in July 2004 was one-fourth the number of activists in July 2001.¹⁶ This shrinkage in human resources was also the result of reluctance by party leaders to learn the lessons of the 2001 presidential elections.

Given the current interpersonal situation among the democratic forces, it seems the possibility to create a coalition that would unite all forces in opposition to Lukashenka is limited. Any coalition has to agree on a single candidate to run against the president as soon as possible after the upcoming parliamentary elections. Despite the current “union” of both coalitions on the wave of the referendum announcement, it is generally expected that disunity will continue between the two current blocks after the elections. Based on current knowledge of interpersonal relations among the democratic opposition one can deduce that the leaders of 5+ are rather negative towards the candidacy of Nikolaj Statkevich, the leader of the European Coalition (and chairman of Social Democratic Party of National Gromada), who already expressed his intention to run for president in 2006.

The split of the opposition into two coalitions before the parliamentary elections resulted in the nomination of 3-4 opposition candidates in the majority of constituencies. Only in a few

¹⁴ In the presidential elections in 1994 around 20% of people voted for democratic candidates – Zenon Pozdniak and Stanislav Shushkevich.

¹⁵ According to the membership data provided by the political parties to justice agencies. It is necessary to mention that the fear (mainly of losing jobs) is a serious limitation of citizens being a member of an opposition party. This fear is the biggest help for the authorities to ensure election results through “loyal” (dependent) employees of the state administration. Sadly enough, the authorities in the local elections commissions are using mainly teachers for “accomplishing” the elections results (editorial note from the Pontis Foundation).

¹⁶ Regional interviews, August 2004 (Molodechna, Brest)

constituencies have the opposition blocks reached agreements. Not taking into account the active use of administrative resource by the authorities, such a high level of dispersion of votes of democratic electorate by itself reduces the chances of every opposition candidate to conduct a successful election campaign and pass into the second round of elections.

The European Coalition/Free Belarus is basically built upon the structures of the Social Democratic Party “National Gromada” led by Nikolaj Statkievich. The 5+ Coalition is by far the stronger alliance of opposition forces and non-governmental organizations. There can be two factors determining why BPF, UCP, BSDG, BLP and PCB decided to unite: mutual favor and opposing the regime. Despite the fact that 5+ is the only successful coalition so far, there are some internal factors that weaken the coalition. One of them is the suspicious attitude of the BPF toward the active contacts of UCP with the “Union of Right Forces” of Russia and representatives of Russian large businesses. UCP actively advocates for Russian business to participate more actively in the privatization in Belarus, which makes BPF members more distrustful towards their coalition partner. On the other hand, UCP in their majority think that BPF is too much concentrated on the idea of national revival; they percept BPF as “romantic national-radicals.” Another problem especially in the regions is the perception of how the Communist Party of Belarus (PCB) by BPF (and to a lesser degree by UCP and BSDG) was influenced by the Soviet past. Also, members of PCB quite often accuse the party leadership of cooperation with fascists and nationalists – that is to say with BPF.

Despite all the problems, 5+ unites the large majority of the opposition parties, which have different views on the past, present, and future. Moreover, the leaders of 5+ have managed to agree on the program “Five Steps to a Better Life.” This program is rather vague, though it does contain promises to increase salaries, reduce municipal payments, create jobs, and attract investment. These are serious issues indeed, although they may not work for supporters of democratic change (the usual supporters of the opposition) and may not attract the majority of electorate, which has little faith in the capacity of the opposition.

- *Efforts to Provide an Alternative*

Apart from the “Five Steps to a Better Life,” the democrats have made little effort to show their awareness of current social and economic problems and most importantly their ability to offer solutions for these problems. The argument about the lack of access to the media is serious, given the current problems of the alternative media in Belarus. However, there are still independent newspapers, which are distributed in all regions of the country.¹⁷ These newspapers are popular with key supporters of democratic ideas, the intelligentsia, skilled workers, and businessmen. We

¹⁷ Such as the weekly newspapers “Narodnaja Volia” (circulation around 30,000), “Belaruski Rynok” (15,000), “Nasha Niva” (4,000), or “Belarusian Newspaper” which comes out 3 times per week (15,000). Moreover, there are still a reasonable number of regional, independent newspapers. The currently suspended Vremje also reached a weekly circulation of around 25,000.

would say that the democrats have not used this resource to the full extent. Independent newspapers publish articles on events of opposition organizations (e.g. on decisions adopted by party congresses) and critical statements of opposition leaders regarding governmental policies. However, there are no proposals/offers by the democratic opposition in the newspapers on political, economic, and social problems. Opposition reaction on more serious questions of the majority of Belarusian is outdated or non-existent. Belarusian citizens are missing answers on how to reform key industries and/or specific businesses, or what steps could be taken to attract (foreign) investment to Belarus.

The usually vague and abstract statements of democrats concerning the future and perspectives of the country could be caused by the lack of consensus and disunity within the opposition itself. So far, citizens seem to feel that the democrats have acted under the slogan "let's change the regime first and then figure out what to do." This could lead to a situation in which the majority of voters is rather hesitant toward opposition candidates because they are afraid of economic and political instability to follow. Obviously, this is greatly reinforced by the official propaganda, as well. Last but not least, compare to the opposition, for the majority of Belarusians, Lukashenka seems more understandable, persuasive, and predictable than the opposition.

- *Lack of protest votes*

Democrats seem still count on the protest behavior of voters in 2004. However, the GDP of Belarus grew in the first half of 2004 by 10.3%. Between January and June 2004, Belarusian exports increased by 28.6% in comparison with the first half of 2003. Independent economists have no doubt that this was caused by the increased Russian oil income. Official data also show growth of income of the population, which is supported by some indirect evidence: e.g. the growth of customer activity in the real estate market with increasing prices for real estate, and a decrease in public transportation usage (coupled with increase in taxi services), etc. In these circumstances the democrats' attack on the economic policy of Lukashenka might not much in the way of results.

- *Candidates*

Currently, there are no politicians in the opposition with significant public support. After the disappearances of Gennadij Karpenko (deputy speaker of the 13th Parliament) and Viktor Gonchar (very active member of the 13th Parliament, former chairman of the Central Election Commission), there is no political leader whom the majority of the population would consider as a serious competitor to Lukashenka. The experience of both the local government and the parliamentary election campaign shows that the most effective approach is to couple a good program with a strong and popular individual candidate. It seems that the current coalitions formed by opposition forces do not have the possibility to deliver a popular face. Based on the currently available public opinion research, the already announced opposition candidates (General Valerij Frolov, BSDP NG leader Nikolaj Statkevich, and businessman Andrej Klimov¹⁸) have basically no chance in the 2006 presidential elections. Therefore the two biggest questions of both the parliamentary elections and

¹⁸ Member of the 13th Parliament. He proposed the impeachment of President Lukashenka in 1996 in the Parliament.

the referendum are whether the democratic opposition will be able to increase popular support through campaigning and be able to find a candidate as soon as possible to effectively challenge the incumbent president in 2006.