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STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG

Prospects for Democracy in Belarus

Joerg Forbrig, David R. Marples and Pavol Demeš, Editors

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List of Contents

Preface
Pavol Demeš and Sascha Müller-Kraenner 7

Foreword
Alyaksandr Milinkevich 9

Introduction
Joerg Forbrig, David R. Marples and Pavol Demeš 11

Signs of Hope Rather than a Color Revolution
Vitali Silitski 20

Part One
Before the Presidential Elections:
Domestic Developments in Belarus

Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Consolidation of Power
Ethan S. Burger and Viktar Minchuk 29

Recent Trends in Belarusian Public Opinion
Oleg Manaev 37

The Democratic Political Opposition
David R. Marples and Uladzimir Padhol 47

Civil Society and the Struggle for Freedom
Andrei Sannikov and Inna Kuley 57

Part Two
Belarus in the International Context:
Europe, the United States and Russia

European Union Policy towards Belarus: An Extended Hand
Pirkka Tapiola 65

The United States and Europe's Last Dictatorship
Robin Shepherd 71

Russia's Policy towards Belarus: A Tale of Two Presidents
Dmitri Trenin 79

International Democracy Assistance to Belarus: An Effective Tool?
Balázs Jarábik 85

Part Three
The 2006 Presidential Elections in Belarus

The Presidential Election Campaign: An Analysis
David R. Marples 95

Dispatches from Minsk, March 2006 102

Cry Freedom! A Photographic Diary 117

The Die is Cast!
Bogdan Klich 138

International Responses to the Presidential Elections in Belarus
Alina Belskaya 140

Part Four
Beyond Elections: Prospects for Democracy in Belarus

A Transatlantic Approach to Democracy in Belarus
David J. Kramer 151

A European Strategy towards Belarus: Becoming "Real"
Dov Lynch 156

A European Foundation for Democracy
Markus Meckel 164

Making Civil Society Support Central to EU Democracy Assistance
Kristi Raik 170

Assisting Democratic Transition in Belarus:
Lessons from Pre-1989 Poland
Jacek Kucharczyk 178

Sanctions for Lukashenka's Regime!
Milan Horáček 186

Appendix

Selected Bibliography 197

Preface

Pavol Demeš and Sascha Müller-Kraenner

This book is a joint project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Heinrich Böll Foundation and comes in the wake of two conferences – one in Warsaw, Poland, another in Bratislava, Slovakia – which examined recent developments in Belarus. This volume brings together contributions from democracy activists, analysts, policy makers and opinion leaders from Belarus, Europe and North America who share a deep concern about the prospects for democracy in Belarus.

With the recent eastward enlargement of the European Union, Belarus has become a direct neighbor of this community of democratic states. Yet its own domestic path of development has led the country further and further away from democratic norms, respect for human rights and fruitful cooperation with the international community.

The recent presidential elections on March 19, 2006, the vote-rigging that accompanied them and the subsequent police brutality against peaceful protesters have once again highlighted the nature of the current regime in Belarus, and have further isolated the country. By contrast, neighboring Ukraine reaffirmed its commitment to democracy with free and fair parliamentary elections on March 26, 2006 offering an example of what can be accomplished.

Without a doubt, the situation in Belarus poses a major challenge not only for democrats inside the country but also for policy makers in the European Union, the United States and Russia. There is clearly, therefore, a pressing need to better understand the domestic and international dynamics at the root of the current situation in Belarus. Such insights will also help to formulate coherent international strategies that are crucial to facilitating democratic development in Eastern Europe.

How should we proceed? How can we better focus our foreign policy instruments to support democratic developments? What sort of diplomatic initiatives or assistance programs should we undertake in the context of a closed, oppressive society in the European Union's immediate neighborhood? Such questions are not easy to answer. But given what is at stake, for Belarusians but also for the credibility of our own democracies, it is vital that answers are found.

Both parties to this project will continue to cooperate with institutions inside and outside Belarus that are working towards democracy in that country. However complicated, the situation in Belarus is not at all hopeless. On the

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contrary, recent events have demonstrated that the democratic spirit in Belarusian society is strong, and that civic activists and opposition groups have never been more united.

We present this collection of essays in the hope that it will help a wider public to better understand recent social and political developments in the country, and contribute to the development of international strategies that can enhance prospects for democracy in Belarus.

Foreword

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

As I write these words, dozens of people are still in jail in my country, including my fellow presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin, following the unprecedented wave of popular protests against the rigged elections of March 19, 2006. People have been beaten and bloodied. Families inquire after the fate of their loved ones. None of us knows what repressive measures the regime is now planning.

And yet, I am filled with confidence. In the week following the farce of the "election" the tens of thousands of ordinary Belarusians that came out into the freezing streets of Minsk sent a message not only to the regime but to the whole country and to the wider world. The content of that message is clear and unambiguous: We refuse to be lied to! We demand to be free! We are no longer afraid!

The March 19 elections marked a watershed in the short history of Belarus as an independent state. The regime that planned an "elegant" victory has been exposed as nothing other than a fraud. The mask of legitimacy has slipped off.

Our country will never be the same. We have set in motion something that will not be forgotten and cannot be stopped. We do not know when victory will come but we do know that, at some time in the future, our victory is assured. We have never been as united as we are today with people, parties and civic groups from all across the political spectrum coming together to fight for freedom. We have never been as clear about the urgency of our task as we are today. We have never been as confident as we are today.

And part of that confidence is owed to those of you in the outside world that stood by us in our darkest hour. It is owed to the journalists who shone the light of truth on the darkest regime on the continent. It is owed to the people who lit candles with us on the 16th of each month to remember the disappeared. It is owed to the governments who argued in favor of our cause and to the representatives of Europe and America who received me and my colleagues with such warmth and hospitality in the run up to March 19. All of you showed us that we were not alone, that our fate was your fate and that we mattered to you. As the leader of the democratic opposition, I thank you for everything you have done.

This book will help a wider audience to understand the background to recent events in Belarus and, I hope, will inspire even more people to rally in our support. The book also addresses the crucial question of how the international community can help us in our struggle for democracy, and I am confident

Alyaksandr Milinkevich is leader of the United Democratic Forces in Belarus.

that the ideas outlined here will contribute to effective strategies in Europe, America and beyond.

It is vital that the momentum for democratic change continues to gather strength in Belarus. The struggle is not over. It has just begun.

Introduction

Joerg Forbrig, David R. Marples and Pavol Demeš

On March 19, 2006, presidential elections were held in Belarus. At first glance, nothing seems to have changed. As with other Belarusian elections in recent years, the poll was blatantly rigged, confirming Alyaksandr Lukashenka as president for yet another term. Prior to the elections, massive pressure was mounted by state authorities on the democratic opposition and civil society, depriving them of organizational structures and financial resources, arresting key leaders and activists *en masse*, and impeding any of their attempts to reach out to Belarusian society at large. A massive propaganda campaign was waged in the state-run media, praising the incumbent ruler (or *bat'ka*, father of all Belarusians) while denigrating those opposing him as hooligans, fascists and Western spies. During the elections, massive manipulations took place to ensure a landslide victory for Lukashenka, officially announced as having taken over 80 percent of the votes. This is known to be far beyond the support he actually enjoys in Belarus, extending as it does to approximately half of the Belarusian population. And when, after these sham elections, considerable numbers of Belarusians took to the streets of Minsk, the regime showed little reluctance to crush protests with brutal violence and to arrest hundreds of people. In light of recent events, then, one may be forgiven for thinking that business remains as usual in this unfortunate and overlooked country on the doorstep of the European Union.

Yet such an assessment would be premature. Important developments have taken place on several levels that cannot be without effects for democracy in Belarus, no matter how remote the prospect of a democratic breakthrough may seem after the recent presidential elections. Firstly, one cannot but be impressed with the strong show made by the political opposition, civic groups, and democratically-minded citizens at large, despite massive and prohibitive pressure by the state apparatus. In a sign of maturity, the political opposition largely united and rallied behind a joint candidate. Alyaksandr Milinkevich relentlessly toured the country for numerous meetings with Belarusians, and canvassed thousands of citizens door-to-door. Within a few months, and without access to mass media, this effort made the candidate known to a majority of citizens and demonstrated that democratic alternatives indeed exist to the powers-that-be.

No less than the political opposition, civil society visibly engaged in the struggle for democracy in Belarus. Several campaign efforts were launched

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by civic groups that variously addressed human rights abuses and the fate of political opponents and prisoners, demanded a free choice of Belarusians over the future of their country or, more aggressively, announced that many people had indeed enough of the propaganda, repressions and isolation that conditions their daily lives under the Lukashenka regime. Other civic organizations monitored the coverage of the election campaign in the state-run media, provided alternative information and critical content to the Belarusian electorate, addressed specific social groups from entrepreneurs to pensioners, monitored and recorded the manifold repressions faced by civic activists, and engaged considerable numbers of new volunteers.

These combined efforts by the democratic political opposition and civic groups and activists resulted, on election day and thereafter, in the largest protests seen in Belarus in many years. Thousands of Belarusian citizens took to the streets of Minsk for week-long peaceful demonstrations against the elections, withstanding both threats of violence by the regime and icy temperatures. Islands of a free and democratic Belarus emerged, such as the tent camp in October Square, where civic courage, solidarity and open debate defied the fear and apathy that many consider grip Belarusian society. Although this upsurge of civic feeling was soon thwarted by Lukashenka's police state, it signals an important change among Belarusian citizens, or a "revolution of the spirit" as one author in this book observes.

Secondly, and no less importantly, the Lukashenka regime itself has clearly undergone a significant evolution in the context of the presidential elections. Against the background of democratic change in other countries of the region, such as Georgia and Ukraine, and for fear that Belarus may become another stage of the success of people power, the regime has markedly stepped up its repressive actions. Hundreds of democratic leaders and civic activists have faced arrests, interrogations, prison sentences or heavy fines over the last months. Dozens of non-governmental groups and organizations have been shut down, and independent newspapers have essentially disappeared. New legislation was introduced to suppress critical voices from within and to prevent democracy assistance from outside. Propaganda in state-run media has taken on hysterical tones and the police eventually lost all restraint using unmitigated violence against peaceful demonstrators.

This unprecedented crackdown on the expression of democracy in Belarus should not, however, be misinterpreted as a sign of strength on the part of the regime. Instead, it indicates the regime's high degree of nervousness about demands for freedom, democracy and prosperity that are gradually becoming more widespread among Belarusians. The authoritarian logic of Lukashenka and his regime cannot accommodate and satisfy these demands, but requires acquiescence on the part of the population that can only be attained through ever greater repression. This repression is gradually beginning to affect a growing number of Belarusian citizens, rather than just isolated and small groups of activists. This was certainly the case with the mass arrests after the March elections. This authoritarian spiral of repression is likely to

de-legitimate Lukashenka among many Belarusians, including many not fundamentally opposed to his regime. In parallel, state-run media have taken their propaganda to levels of aggressiveness and hysteria that contradict the personal experiences of many Belarusians, trigger doubt among them and ultimately undermine the credibility of the regime's channels of information. Taken together, recent developments indicate a number of notable weaknesses in the structure of the Lukashenka regime.

Lastly, the international community has begun to pay more serious attention to the question of democracy in Belarus. While for a long time, Belarus had been a marginalized country known to few and covered rarely in the media, the recent elections and events thereafter have catapulted the country into the limelight of foreign media and policy makers. Western governments received opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich prior to the elections, and a flurry of resolutions and appeals from foreign governments and parliaments called upon the Belarusian authorities to ensure a free, fair and peaceful electoral process. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) sent an election monitoring mission, despite initial hesitation, as did the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Major international broadcasters covered news from Belarus for a full week after the poll, and European Union ambassadors visited street protesters in Minsk. Strong condemnations by the democratic community followed the election results and, in particular, the violence employed against protesters. And even Russia is known to have called upon Minsk to exercise restraint towards demonstrators, while congratulating Lukashenka upon his reelection.

This stronger engagement on part of the international community is a very promising, and much-needed, signal. For too long, the far-reaching international isolation imposed on Belarus by the Lukashenka regime has been replicated by little foreign interest in the country, especially on the part of the West. Yet domestic developments in Belarus cannot be uncoupled from broader international politics. The European Union directly borders Belarus, the United States have made explicit references to this country within its freedom agenda, and for Russia, this Slavic neighbor is a particularly close and strategic partner. It is through this triangle that international politics impacts on the domestic situation in Belarus, and foreign responses to the recent presidential elections appear to indicate considerable changes in this constellation.

It is against the background of these recent events and developments that this book was conceived. It brings together contributions from analysts, activists and policy makers involved with and caring about democracy in Belarus from within the country and abroad. These lend their expertise and experience to shedding light on a broad range of social, political and international factors conditioning the prospects for democracy in Belarus. In so doing, this book hopes to contribute to helping the growing international audience that is interested in Belarus to better understand recent developments in this country. No less importantly, it is on the basis of such better understanding that more effective strategies can be devised among Belarusian democrats and their

international partners. For this reason, the contributions to this book combine analytical insight with policy orientation.

The Contributions to this Book

The book opens with an introductory article placing Belarus in the context of recent democratic change in Central and Eastern Europe. Many observers harbored hopes that Belarus would witness a similar color-coded revolution as the ones that overturned authoritarian regimes in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in recent years. However, as Vitali Silitski of Stanford University argues in his contribution, such expectations have overlooked the critical fact that, compared with those more fortunate neighbors, Belarus today is a significantly more consolidated authoritarian regime. Faced with incomparably harsher conditions for democratic struggle, the events accompanying the recent presidential elections should be appreciated as encouraging signs of hope rather than interpreted as a failed color revolution.

In the first part of the book, the articles further deepen this analysis of the domestic situation in Belarus prior to the presidential elections. Ethan S. Burger and Viktar Minchuk, two Washington-based observers and analysts of Belarusian affairs, provide a detailed account of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's consolidation of power in recent years. Their chapter points to the fact that the regime in Minsk has systematically built its control over virtually all aspects of public life, while at the same time grooming its considerable base in society through anti-corruption measures, re-distributive policies, and job security.

Recent trends in public opinion in Belarus are the subject of a contribution by Oleg Manaev, a Belarusian sociologist of renown. Socio-economic attitudes as well as opinions on geopolitical issues substantiate the observation that Lukashenka can indeed rely on considerable support among Belarusians, yet one that is by no means as overwhelming as portrayed in official election results. Instead, a considerable portion of society clearly desires change in Belarus, but has not as yet crystallized into a strong and active electorate.

The political parties and actors to address change-oriented voters and pursue democratic transformation in Belarus are the subject of a contribution by David R. Marples of the University of Alberta, Canada, and Uladzimir Padhol, a political consultant from Minsk. Their detailed overview of the political opposition is followed by an analysis of the gradual emergence of coalitions among parties and politicians, which resulted in the candidacy of Alyaksandr Milinkevich on behalf of the united democratic opposition that was one of the main achievements of the democratic opposition in this presidential campaign.

A parallel process of cooperation has occurred among civil society groups, as outlined by Andrei Sannikov and Inna Kuley, two key civic pro-democracy activists in Belarus today, in their article. Their key observation is that the increasingly totalitarian nature of the pressure put on civic activists by the

Lukashenka regime forced them to choose between winding up their activities altogether and continuing to work in underground conditions. Those who continued substantially increased cooperation within civil society and made a considerable contribution to the pro-democracy struggle prior to the presidential elections, either through pre-election activities in close coordination with the political opposition, or more independently by mobilizing the public against the incumbent regime's human rights abuses and democratic lacunae.

The second part of the book turns to the international context of developments in Belarus. It opens with a contribution by Pirkka Tapiola, Senior Advisor to the European Union's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and a long-time observer of developments in Belarus and Eastern Europe. He provides a detailed account of European Union policy towards Belarus and argues that the EU is clearly committed to support the development of democracy, civil society, the rule of law and a market economy in that country. Yet its efforts to build partnership with Belarus have been frustrated by the authoritarian backslide of the regime in Minsk. In response, the EU has increased its pressure on the Lukashenka government while at the same time seeking to identify approaches to engage with Belarusian citizens, civil society and independent media directly.

This approach is, by and large, mirrored by the United States, as argues Robin Shepherd, Adjunct Fellow of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. The policies of the US government derive their broad moral impetus from the freedom agenda announced by President Bush at the outset of his second term in office, while facing important constraints in US relations with Russia, for which Belarus is a complicating factor. Navigating between these two poles, it appears that US policies to support the democratization of Belarus have reached a certain limit, beyond which engagement seems unlikely.

Russia and its policies towards Belarus are central to the contribution by Dmitri Trenin of the Moscow Center of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. They are conditioned by a broader shift in foreign policy in recent years, away from a comparably liberal paradigm to a harder-line set of policies. This change certainly benefited Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Yet as the recent presidential elections have signaled, the Kremlin would also be well-advised to think beyond the current Belarusian regime and to pursue a more pro-active policy, in contrast to the hitherto reactive one.

The last article in this part is devoted to international democracy assistance, an instrument that in recent years has increasingly become a tool of foreign policy. Balázs Jarábik of the Pontis Foundation in Slovakia scrutinizes the extent, to which Western programs to support democracy in Belarus have been effective. The contribution presents sobering findings, as inappropriate policies and mechanisms for implementing democracy assistance on part of the United States and the European Union have combined with prohibitive strategies and hurdles imposed by the Belarusian government. As a result, American and European democracy assistance leaves much to be desired. Current interest

in Belarus provides an occasion to review approaches to supporting the democratization of authoritarian regimes.

The third part of the book looks more closely into the presidential elections that took place in Belarus on March 19, 2006. In a first article, Belarus expert David R. Marples provides a comprehensive overview of the presidential campaign and the elections. Detailed evidence is provided that the election campaign was accompanied by massive propaganda, intimidation of opposition leaders and their supporters, and manipulations of the electoral process that left few, if any, surprised at Lukashenka's landslide victory. More importantly, the aftermath of the elections, large-scale and enduring public protests, and the violent crackdown by security forces that ensued, were unexpected for many. Indeed, the events that followed the elections may well prove to be of more lasting significance than the elections themselves.

These observations are followed by two anonymous contributions that are based on personal observations by Western analysts of Belarusian affairs. The first of these provides a diary-style account of the atmosphere and events in Minsk prior to, during and after the elections, while the second contribution illustrates this account with amateur photographs taken on the ground. Both these contributions constitute evidence of the strengthening of civil society that, for many, signals the impending, if gradual, demise of Lukashenka's regime. The fact that "the die is cast!" in Belarus is passionately put forth in the contribution by Bogdan Klich, Member of the European Parliament and chairman of the EU-Belarus delegation.

Concluding this part of the book is an overview of international responses to the presidential elections, provided by Alina Belskaya of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. This account of reactions by the European Union, international organizations, and individual governments indicates clearly the unprecedented and wide attention Belarus has received in the context of the presidential elections, permitting the tentative hope that a degree of this interest will follow the further evolution of the situation in Belarus.

The last part of the book shifts in the direction of a strategy and policy-oriented discussion. Central to the articles included is the question how the West and Europe in particular can effectively help make democracy in Belarus a viable prospect. The opening article by David J. Kramer, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs at the US Department of State, stresses that Belarus is a challenge that is faced jointly by the United States and Europe. This partnership is based on the shared belief that Belarusians deserve their place in the transatlantic community of democratic nations, and cooperation towards assisting democracy in Belarus is to further intensify in the coming months.

On the part of the European Union, however, effective support for Belarusian democrats requires considerable strategic adjustment, as several further articles argue. According to Dov Lynch of the EU Institute for Strategic Studies, the principal problem of the EU is that it has been successful in exporting

democracy through enlargement but that it lacks strategies for assisting democratic developments in countries that have not, as yet, a membership perspective. Yet if the EU wishes to see stable democracies emerging in its neighborhood, it urgently needs to develop effective democracy assistance as a tool of its foreign policy.

One such mechanism for rendering support to democrats in countries neighboring the European Union is a European Foundation for Democracy, as proposed by Markus Meckel of the German Bundestag. As an autonomous entity funded from the EU budget, such an agency would provide assistance to civil society groups and activities to strengthen democracy, human rights, the rule of law and independent media in countries in the process of democratization or even before the process has begun. This foundation would not only enable the EU to assist democracy in countries with less-than-democratic credentials but it would also be able to act more flexibly and faster than the European Commission with its often cumbersome procedures.

The contribution by Kristi Raik of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs further expands this line of thinking. It stresses the critical role civil society has played for democratization in Central and Eastern Europe but observes that this importance is not sufficiently appreciated by EU democracy assistance. Consequently, EU policies require adjustments to reflect the role of civil society for democracy, and commensurate support programs and mechanisms for their implementation need to be devised, including cooperation with EU-based NGOs active in democratizing countries, and specialized grant making foundations to disburse EU assistance.

These proposals indicate that much needs to be done to transform EU democracy assistance, to Belarus but also to other countries in its neighborhood where democracy has not yet taken hold. Adjustments of strategies and policies, and the possible establishment of new mechanisms and institutions are certainly necessary, but they will materialize and yield effects only in the long run. By contrast, democrats in Belarus also need immediate support, and a variety of options exist for the EU to help in the short term, as the last two articles of this book argue.

In his contribution, Jacek Kucharczyk of the Institute of Public Affairs in Poland draws on his country's rich experience with struggling for democracy prior to 1989. Back then, the democratic opposition was supported by symbolic acts on the part of the international community, such as international recognition of its leaders as legitimate representatives of a democratic society, the welcome offered by foreign embassies to opposition activists, providing them with resources, and serving as meeting spaces with representatives of the nomenklatura. There was also support for creating alternative channels to provide large parts of the citizenry with independent information. All of these and other forms of help can and should be rendered to the Belarusian opposition and civil society in the short term.

In a similar vein, sanctions are an instrument that can and should be employed

swiftly vis-à-vis Belarus. As Milan Horáček, Member of the European Parliament argues in his chapter, the European Union has not nearly exhausted the potential of sanctions. Although further steps in this direction have been made recently, a much broader range of regime officials in Belarus should face visa bans. Economic sanctions also deserve renewed consideration, especially those that target the foreign assets of officials. At the same time, it needs to be ensured that the negative effects of sanctions for ordinary Belarusians are kept to a minimum, and that they are accompanied by programs directly benefiting the population.

Taken together, the strategic papers brought together in the last part of this book provide a rich pool of thought and inspiration for policy makers, democracy activists and civil society leaders, analysts and experts concerned with democracy in Belarus, be they based in the country itself or abroad. The suggestions laid out here flow, in many ways, from the analytical parts of this book that provide a multifaceted view on recent social and political developments affecting Belarus. In this combination, this volume hopes to be a resource to all those who wish to better understand the complicated tasks facing Belarusian democrats today, as well as to those who are in a position to help their Belarusian partners in living up to those challenges.

An important caveat is appropriate at this point. Inspired by the March 2006 presidential elections in Belarus, the contributions to this book were drafted and published as events in the country were unfolding. While this will certainly add a note of authenticity to this publication, the tight timeframe has also placed limits on both authors and editors. Thus, this publication cannot claim absolute comprehensiveness in covering all aspects of developments in Belarus, nor has it been possible to establish full coherence on all accounts. For example, exact and reliable data on the numbers of protesters participating in the demonstrations in Minsk has not yet become available. These constraints, it is trusted, will be overcome by future analyses of the events.

Acknowledgements

This publication, and the larger seminar project that it results from, owe to the efforts of many. First and foremost, a special word of thanks goes to all authors who, despite covering, analyzing and responding to ongoing events in Belarus provided their contributions in time for this publication to appear swiftly. The participants of two seminars entitled “Prospects for Democracy in Belarus” in Warsaw, Poland, in January 2006 and in Bratislava, Slovakia, in March 2006 contributed to interesting and timely discussions, which provided inspiration for several of the ideas presented in this volume. Over the course of this project, the partnership between the Heinrich Böll Foundation of Germany and the German Marshall Fund of the United States has grown, becoming an effective transatlantic tandem that received generous support from the European Commission and its “Enlargement 2004” program. At the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the project is indebted to Agnieszka Rochon, Sören Haffer and their colleagues at the Warsaw office for handling all administrative matters superbly. At the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Craig Kennedy and Phil Henderson have accompanied this project with much interest, trust and encouragement, while Alexandra Petrášová and Helena Mudríková of the Bratislava office managed both seminar and book preparations with excellence. Yael Ohana deserves many thanks for her flexibility and patience during the editing process, while Lucia Lörinczová and her colleagues at Feriva in Bratislava, Slovakia, are thanked for making sure that this book was produced in quality and on time.

Signs of Hope Rather than a Color Revolution

Vitali Silitski

Some things are best learned through comparison. On the dark evening of September 7, 2004, when Alyaksandr Lukashenka announced the referendum to allow himself infinite rule over Belarus, only one person out of thousands who watched the announcement on October Square in Minsk dared to shout "No!" He was immediately arrested for hooliganism. Less than two years later, the same square was full on the cold and snowy nights following the March 19 presidential elections, as thousands protested the fraudulent vote and demanded new elections. Hundreds of them ended up in jail, only to find a new determination to continue the struggle for democracy. In the end, even though there was no orange-style revolution in Belarus, there may have been the beginning of a revolution of the spirit that will bring the last autocratic regime in Europe to an end. Nevertheless, Belarus seems to have just embarked on its agonizingly long and difficult road towards democracy.

From the beginning of this campaign, there was little sign of a real contest or prospect for a strong protest action afterwards. Among the multitude of factors that precluded Belarus from following the scenario known from Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, one is fundamental. Even the few independent opinion polls available showed that Lukashenka can rely on considerable support in Belarusian society, and could possibly have won a free and fair election. Strong economic growth and social stability might have guaranteed him half of the vote or so, had the vote been counted fairly. But, a free and fair vote carried the risk of defeat, however remote, and the ghost of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 fueled hysteria within the regime. Consequently, Lukashenka unleashed a series of preemptive actions aimed at ensuring a problem-free reelection. His security apparatus was boosted, and new legislation was passed giving the president a free hand in deciding when police can shoot in peace-time (in other words, when fire can be opened against protesters). Most active street organizers in the opposition were rounded up and sent to prison, or into exile. Dozens of independent newspapers were closed down, suspended, or denied publication and distribution. Last, but not least, just before the campaign was announced, the government criminalized opposition-related activity and began to arrest election monitors and activists from nongovernmental organizations on charges of terrorism.

In the end, the preemption of a democratic revolution transformed the country so much that any comparison with other unconsolidated semi-authoritarian regimes in the postcommunist world seems inadequate. Put simply, it lacked meaningful competitive elections, an institutionalized opposition, at least partial respect for the rule of law by the government and due procedure in government, all factors decisive in facilitating victories for the democratic opposition in recent cases of successful color-coded revolutions. By March 2006, the political and social order in Belarus had acquired many elements of what Lukashenka's chief ideologue promised would come to pass after the election: that is, the "corporatist state". Never mind that Lukashenka's front men are not ashamed of using definitions usually reserved for the regimes of Mussolini and Franco. Indeed, many of the elements of the Francist-style regime are in place in Belarus by now, for example, the personalized system of authority, almost unlimited subordination of the individual to the state through political, administrative, and repressive means, de-legitimation of the zones of political and social autonomy from the regime, and the institutionalization of repression by the codification of punishment for unwanted political activity.

Can there even be a talk about elections or politics in general in a "corporatist state"? Indeed, political regimes so organized never lose an election: their end usually comes as a result of an external intervention, internal disorganization, or the death of the chief protagonist. But, Belarus is not yet a "corporatist state" in the full sense. One of the reasons is that the regime lacks means of legitimating itself through anything other than elections. To the extent that this is true, Lukashenka needs someone to run against him, needs enemies to defeat, and hence cannot completely remove all the elements of political pluralism in Belarus. Therefore, politics still matter and the opposition, although emaciated, has not been completely erased from the social map.

Contradictions within the Lukashenka Regime

This contradiction of Lukashenka's regime was fully demonstrated during the March 2006 presidential elections, viewed by many (including the author) from the outset as an administrative procedure instituted to merely validate the status quo. Since Lukashenka did want some legitimacy for his reelection, he had no choice but to allow opposition candidates to participate. Surprisingly, two challengers, the leader of the united opposition, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, and the former rector of the Belarusian State University, Alyaksandr Kazulin, refused to bow to the dictator and decided to play by their own rules. Their 30-minute campaign speeches on state TV (that is how much exposure to alternative opinions an ordinary TV viewer in Belarus has had in five years) were devoted not so much to the issues but to attacking Lukashenka's character – an act previously unthinkable in a country where one official once declared Lukashenka to be "a bit higher than God." Both candidates emphasized freedom and democracy rather than day-to-day issues in their messages and found much sympathy, much to the surprise of observers. Thousands turned out on

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the streets to hear speeches from opposition candidates, numbers that were unthinkable in Minsk even a year ago.

As a result of the campaign, the opposition can boast some modest but nevertheless important achievements. First, it achieved unity. This stands true even in the face of the fact that there were two opposition candidates running instead of one. In fact, the second opposition candidate, Alyaksandr Kazulin, defied the expectations of some that he was candidate planted to dilute the democratic alternative in the election, and he added an aggressive attitude to the race. In the end of the day, the Belarusian opposition received two leaders who established trust with the democratic constituency and will most likely become faces of the democratic opposition in the future. Last, but not least, the campaign helped to consolidate the anti-Lukashenka segment of society.

The sad truth for the Belarusian democrats, however, is that they failed to score these modest achievements in the past, before Lukashenka's regime hardened its grip and the opposition's space for maneuver in society became severely limited. Nowadays, Lukashenka's opponents have to make monumental efforts to achieve minor progress in the fight for democracy as the regime is in full position to neutralize any damage done by active campaigning. Kazulin, whose particularly scathing attacks instantly made him a celebrity, has been beaten up by riot police. Dozens of observers and reporters were denied visas, expelled, or even arrested and charged with helping to plot a coup. State TV stepped up its propaganda, and the KGB began to discover one alleged plot after another every few days. In the last revelation, the head of the KGB claimed that the opposition would attempt to poison the tap water in Minsk, using decomposing rats. Dozens of opposition activists with experience in street protests were rounded up in the run-up to the vote.

Yet even in the face of these repressive tactics, Lukashenka's autocratic regime failed to deter people from mobilizing on the streets after the vote and denouncing the fraudulent results. On March 19, at least 20,000 people took to the streets to protest the announcement of a "smashing" victory for Lukashenka, who was declared winner with 83 percent of the votes cast. And the protesters did not stop there, organizing an around-the-clock vigil on the central square of Minsk to demand the annulment of the vote and new elections. To be sure, the size of the protests was nowhere near the crowds that turned out in the streets in Kiev a year and half ago. Yet thousands of Belarusians braved not only below-zero temperatures and blizzards but also explicit threats of imprisonment and even the death penalty made by the KGB on the eve of elections. Most of them faced immediate dismissal from state jobs or university if found in the crowd or even caught checking an opposition website. And they barely had means to communicate with each other due to the suspension of most of the opposition press and an almost total blockade of the Internet and mobile communications. Could one have expected a protest of more than just a handful of dissidents in these, almost Soviet-style, conditions?

The protests, however, did not account even for an attempt to start the

revolution. In the classical sense of the word, revolution is a situation when two political forces or personalities put forward contesting claims of sovereign authority over the same territory. This was not the case in Belarus, as the opposition did not even attempt to declare victory and only disputed the margin of Lukashenka's lead. In fact, it would have been hard for it to create this clash of legitimacies even in the event that the opposition had fared better with the voters (according to the most optimistic estimates, Lukashenka's main opponent did not even receive one third of the votes), as all channels that could have been used to quickly communicate the opposition's victory to society, such as independent exit polls, electronic media, and, on the day of the election, even the Internet, had been cut off by the regime and were, thus, not available to its opponents. The demand for a fair recount (and possibly a revote) is an extremely weak message for mobilizing the masses, as it essentially provides them with no hope of regime change. Hence, the protest was doomed at its very inception, and was carried out on the wave of enthusiasm that was produced by the somewhat unexpectedly high turnout at the first opposition rally on March 19. The numbers of protesters quickly dwindled but nevertheless, the protest continued long enough to have some impact on the opposition and on society, in spite of its violent dispersal and the subsequent wave of arrests.

One such consequence is the demonstration of the fact that the struggle for democracy can and will continue even in the unbearable conditions of a near-"corporatist state". Another one is the demonstration of the quality of the democratic subculture in Belarus. For a long time, observers and insiders alike explained the current state of affairs in the country by pointing to factors explaining why Belarusian society is not like its neighbors in Eastern Europe. Now there is evidence that at least part of it is as imbued with the democratic spirit and sense of personal responsibility for setting the country on the path to freedom that has been demonstrated by Serbs, Georgians or Ukrainians in recent years. Some of these similarities are presented below.

Signs of Hope for a Democratic Belarus

First, the growing repression resulted not only in increased apathy within the society but also in a certain radicalization of its democratic subculture, especially of the core of opposition activists who turned out to be ready to engage in seemingly hopeless and illogical protest actions.

Second, the post-election protests confirmed that civil society in Belarus had matured and enhanced its commitment to democracy building in spite of the prohibitive consequences and even criminalization of its activities. Particularly after the regime rounded up some of the principal political opposition leaders before the ballot, it became clear that NGO activists have become capable of self-organization to the extent that even the disruption of the chain of command failed to cause disarray and stop the protest efforts. The maturity

of civil society, however, is the reverse side of insufficient professionalism on the part of political leaders who seemed to be perplexed by the unexpectedly high turnout on the square and failed to come up with any meaningful plan of action to harness the mobilization before them.

Third, there are signs of a broader democratic subculture being activated, or of the activation of democratic-minded citizens who are so far not actively involved in the opposition. Invigorated by the election campaign they refilled the ranks once protesters were arrested *en masse*, and came up with new forms of activity and new methods for communicating with the public. For the first time ever, the mood of this social opposition changed from waiting until the political opposition would do something to get rid of Lukashenka to getting ready to make small independent actions by themselves. This segment of the opposition, for example, was responsible for an outburst of unconventional protest activities, such as flash mobs, in the Belarusian capital following the election. Internet blogs and discussion forums were full of spontaneous suggestions and calls for action, be it *samizdat* printing of leaflets or creating alternative web sites to make up for the ones blocked during the campaign.

Fourth, for the first time in Belarusian political history, Internet was an important alternative medium of information. During the peak political events, such as the beating of Kazulin by riot police, the voting day, and the protests in its aftermath, the number of visits to the principal independent sites, in spite of the attempts to block them, was several times higher than usual. Likewise, spontaneous protest actions were mostly coordinated online. The Internet has also become a tool of campaigning for the "traditional" NGO sector, even if this was a consequence of the near impossibility to continue its work legally. Of course, speaking about breaking through the information blockade imposed on society by Lukashenka would be premature as the Internet is off limits for the large parts of Belarusian society and access to sites can easily be blocked. Yet there is visible potential. At the very least, it can be asserted that online communication made it impossible to keep the democratic subculture in society disorganized.

Last but not least, the protests confirmed the importance of identity, culture, and symbols in consolidating the democratic forces. The ranks of independent, socially-active citizens who took huge personal risks during the election campaign and in its aftermath, were dominated by those who were struggling not only for democracy, but for the right to use and study in their native language, revive national culture suppressed by the Russification politics of the regime, and even to listen to their own music. The campaign showed the extent to which cultural and political divides in Belarus have been intertwined. While regime media instigated images of a "cultural war" between the West and the Orthodox civilization, protesters renamed the square where they set up the tent camp after Kastus' Kalinouski, the leader of the uprising against the Russian empire in 1860 and despised by Lukashenka's officialdom as an extremist terrorist. With scores of local and Russian pop-stars joining the bandwagon of official propaganda, the opposition was supported by Belarusian-language

rock and folk musicians who sang their songs of freedom. And the denim color chosen by the opposition as a symbol of freedom was quickly joined by the white-red-white of the traditional Belarusian flag banned by the regime in 1995. Much was said and written about the feasibility of political nationalism in the extensively de-nationalized and Sovietized society of Belarus. But, there seems to be no other alternative when it comes to mobilizing those who are ready for a personal sacrifice for democracy.

Some Caveats

All the above, however, only refers to a certain segment of the society, and the story of the March 2006 events in Belarus also has its other, more sobering, side. Unfortunately, this show of commitment and activism also highlighted the gap that separates this democratic subculture from the rest of society, and it confirmed an unpleasant fact for the Belarusian opposition. A combination of fear imposed by the government on some parts of society and acceptance of the regime by others still limits the opposition's appeal and following. The streets of Minsk these days were full of pictures of solidarity and defiance, but also of indifference from passers-by and loathing for the protesters from the regime's supporters.

In this context, Minsk was indeed a radically different place compared to Kiev just over a year ago. There, the protest on the Maidan was a magnet that pulled people from all corners of the country. Here in Minsk, the island of democracy on October Square was a thorn in the flesh that most tried to ignore even when passing by. In Kiev, the city administration provided the protesters with food and supplies. In Minsk, the police arrested anyone who tried to bring food to the youngsters who held an around-the-clock vigil. There, university administrations cancelled classes to allow the students to join demonstrations. Here, universities explicitly threatened anyone caught on the square with expulsion. There, the police smiled and chatted with protesters, even if that happened only after a few tense days of indecision and unclear intentions on the part of the government. Here, the police mercilessly attacked, not being shy, according to eyewitness records, of beating even young girls. There, TV journalists refused to repeat the propaganda supplied from the "black boxes" of the government. Here, official TV crews provoked the protesters and quickly cooked up stories about drug addiction and prostitution rings on the square. And the manifestation of national identity, the rallying cry to defend freedom and democracy on the streets of Ukraine, was met with refusal by many in Belarus who still associate, at the prompting of the authorities, the nationally-minded opposition with the descendants of the Nazis.

In sum, there is another sobering fact for the advocates of democracy in Belarus. Whereas most pessimistic forecasts about the prospects for democratic change in Belarus usually focus on institutional factors (such as the character of elections) and the repressive capacities of the government,

they do not always take into account the societal consequences of more than a decade of the Lukashenka regime and the degree to which it has created its clientele within society and among those strata that are usually considered as potential building blocks of the democratic constituency. Most of them, be it urban professionals or private entrepreneurs, are too dependent upon the state to actively support the opposition even if they wanted to. Many managed to adapt to the conditions dictated by the system and have settled for what they have. Others even became active participants in repression. Thus, even if young democracy activists were a majority among the protesters, the success of Lukashenka's politics of using both sticks and carrots with the younger generation (that is, punishments for unwanted activities and opportunities for cozy living and lucrative careers in the state apparatus for loyalists) was also evident: riot police, KGB provocateurs, and official TV propagandists were also young people.

But, does this all mean that the struggle for democracy in Belarus is hopeless? Surely not, even though the Belarusian opposition will have to face an even tougher crackdown from the regime and a new round of preemptive attacks following the partially successful campaign. One of the greatest questions is whether the Lukashenka regime will finally decide to pursue its project of a "corporatist state" to the end and, thus, come up with some other idea of reproducing power than elections. In this case, the opposition is automatically transformed into a network of dissidents who pursue not a political fight but rather personal struggles for rights and liberties. If not, and elections remain the principal tool of legitimizing the regime, this flaw in design may turn out to be that of Chekhov's gun that, even unloaded, can shoot in the third act. This being said, this author's previous assertion that a Ukraine-style electoral revolution in Belarus is already impossible remains valid. But, elections (any elections) may galvanize the society to the extent that other, unexpected forms of regime change may become possible. After all, if the secret ballot turns into roll-call voting as people take to the streets, who will give a dime about all the niceties of vote counting?

Of course, Belarus is far from this at this point, and the struggle for democracy promises to be long and hopeless for at least some time. But the largely unnoticed revolution of the spirit experienced by many Belarusians may have its long-lasting legacies. If this democratic subculture proves to be capable of expanding even under immense pressure, if this largely cultural and idealistic movement will have a chance to be reinforced in the future by other societal elements, including those who turn their backs on the government for social and economic reasons, if the political opposition preserves itself and continues to provide society with a credible democratic alternative to the current regime, change cannot be ruled out. And it may well turn out in the future that its first seeds were planted during those hopeless protests on snowy nights in Minsk in March 2006.

Part One
Before the Presidential Elections: Domestic Developments in Belarus

Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Consolidation of Power

Ethan S. Burger and Viktar Minchuk

"There will be no pink, orange, or even banana revolution in Belarus." Alyaksandr Lukashenka, January 7, 2005.

Shortly after assuming the Belarusian presidency in 1994, Alyaksandr Lukashenka began to seek ways to increase his powers. Initially, he took small incremental steps to limit the media's independence as well as the role played by non-governmental organizations to ascertain the degree to which he would encounter domestic and foreign opposition to his policies. Perhaps due to Belarus' Soviet past, the majority of the population did not comprehend the significance of these actions. By November 1996, Lukashenka believed that he was sufficiently popular and had weakened those opposed to his agenda to order a national referendum on amending the 1994 Belarusian constitution (hereinafter the 1996 constitution) and to set about changing the nature of the Belarusian political system.

The 1996 amendments to the constitution radically increased the Belarusian president's power: in addition to extending the president's term of office from four to five years, it granted him the power to issue decrees (or edicts) previously solely within the competence of the legislature. It is noteworthy that this power has been available to most chief executives only during states of emergency. Despite opposition to his expansion of power, many members of the Belarusian political elite, as well as international actors, were unable to stop Lukashenka. While the Belarusian Supreme Court, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the US government took the position that the amendment of the Belarusian constitution by referendum was invalid, all eventually treated the outcome as a *fait accompli*.

Drazdy: Testing the Resolve of the West

Ironically, the international community only seemed to become more agitated after the Belarusian authorities evicted twelve foreign ambassadors, who lived in the residential compound of Drazdy on the outskirts of Minsk, in April 1998. The official reason given for the order to the diplomats to vacate their

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residences was the alleged need for utility repairs. The diplomats argued that these demands violated the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the leases signed by respective foreign missions with the Belarusian government. Many of the EU and US ambassadors departed Belarus on June 22, 1998. Their respective governments then imposed relatively minor retaliatory measures on senior Belarusian officials, such as travel restrictions. Independent observers have speculated that Lukashenka did not want foreign ambassadors living in such close proximity to him and certain senior Belarusian officials. This incident provoked the greatest anti-Lukashenka response hitherto seen on the part of the West and led to Belarus agreeing to accept an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) consultative and monitoring mission to Minsk.

The Disappeared: Intimidating Domestic Opponents

An important factor that has both intimidated opposition figures (and the Belarusian public) and that has galvanized their resolve has been the knowledge of the disappearance (and presumed murder) of four prominent public figures, including a former interior minister, a former deputy chairman of the parliament and head of the Central Election Commission, a businessman, and a television cameraman. This has revealed the true nature of the Lukashenka government.

On June 11, 2001, two Belarusian prosecutors, who had participated in the "investigation" of one of the disappearances, sent a sensational e-mail to independent press outlets in Minsk. Dzmitry Petrushkevich, a former employee of the Belarusian prosecutor's office, and his colleague, Aleh Sluchek, announced that their findings implicated Lukashenka and members of his inner circle in setting up a "death squad" to carry out assassinations. Not surprisingly, these prosecutors fled Belarus and began releasing evidence in support of their claims from abroad.

Petrushkevich and Sluchek alleged that this "death squad" consisted of five to ten current and former members of an elite anti-terrorist unit and acted on the orders of one of Lukashenka's closest associates, Viktar Sheiman, then-head of the Belarusian National Security Council. In addition, then-deputy chief of the presidential administration and the boss of the presidential bodyguards, Uladzimir Navumau, was also implicated in the disappearances.

The investigators claimed that several assassinations had occurred in Belarus, such as those of Major General Yuri Zakharenka, former minister of the interior and an opposition figure since 1995; Viktar Hanchar, deputy chairman of the 13th Supreme Soviet, the legitimate parliament disbanded by Lukashenka; and Hanchar's associate, businessman Yuri Krasouski. The investigators claimed that Russian cameraman Yury Zavadsky, a close associate of influential Belarusian journalist Pavel Sheremet, had also been killed.

In response to these accusations, Mr. Lukashenka fired the heads of the KGB, the Prosecutor General and the Interior Minister, replacing them with more "reliable" individuals. Viktar Sheiman was named the new Prosecutor General, and Uladzimir Navumau was appointed Minister of the Interior.

These allegations have been corroborated by the so-called Pourgourides Report on "Disappeared Persons in Belarus" initiated by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The US State Department also acknowledged its findings as credible. Nevertheless, Western democracies did not visibly alter their policies toward the Lukashenka government in any way that was likely to have a real impact on events within Belarus.

The First "Elegant" Victory: The Presidential Elections in 2001

In 2001, Belarus held its first presidential election under the 1996 constitution. Lukashenka was able to orchestrate a decisive "victory", allegedly winning 75.66 percent of votes counted, which was sufficient for avoiding a run-off second round of voting. A total of 83.86 percent of the 6,169,087 million Belarusian citizens eligible to vote were claimed to have cast ballots. Prior to the "election", the opposition decided to back a compromise candidate, trade union leader Uladzimir Hancharyk, rather than one of the more prominent opposition leaders. The principal rationale for doing so was that to a risk-averse Belarusian electorate, Hancharyk was a known "commodity" and would not be viewed as a threat by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Officially, Hancharyk received 15.65 percent of the vote.

The OSCE concluded that the elections were neither fair nor free, and that they violated Belarus' OSCE commitments and other international standards. Its criticisms covered both the campaigning and voting process. That the allegedly independent Belarusian Central Election Commission (CEC) announced the final "results" only hours after the polls closed is but one of the signs pointing to the large scale state sponsored fraud that occurred during early voting as well as during the election itself on September 9, 2001.

After the 2001 election, Lukashenka made a series of personnel changes so as to ensure that he be surrounded by only the absolutely loyal. He also sent an unmistakable message to potential political opponents. In 2002, two former presidential candidates – both directors of large industrial enterprises, Mikhail Leonau and Leonid Kaluhin – were arrested and charged with the embezzlement of state funds. A third candidate – former Belarusian ambassador to Latvia Mikhail Marynich – was arrested and imprisoned on trumped-up charges. In addition, a Belarusian court sentenced Mikola Markevich and Pavel Mazheika of the independent newspaper Pahonya to prison for allegedly libeling Lukashenka during the presidential campaign. Similarly, journalist Viktar Ivashkevich, the editor-in-chief of the independent paper *Rabochy*, was charged with defamation

of character for accusing Lukashenka and his administration of corruption. Late in 2003, the Belarusian KGB detained the chairman of the United Civic Party Anatol Lyabedzka, after he visited the US Embassy in Minsk. Lyabedzka was charged with treason for merely meeting foreign diplomats. He was further subjected to an intensive campaign of harassment, including detentions and beatings.

At the same time as harassing individual opposition leaders, the Lukashenka government expanded its control over Belarusian civil society more broadly, since non-governmental organizations were seen as harboring opposition supporters and providing them with organizational structures and financial resources. In a concerted effort to restrict the activities of civil society, all political parties, labor unions, and NGOs were required to reregister in 2000, and the KGB subsequently audited many. Needless to say, those viewed as anti-regime faced many obstacles in getting the necessary approvals. Following that, severe restrictions were placed on the receipt of funds by NGOs from abroad. Despite the language of and purported motives for such legislation, few doubted that they were directed against Belarus' few remaining independent voices for political reasons. With domestic human rights groups finding themselves with fewer resources, many organizations became less effective, or simply disappeared. At the same time, many of those who had hoped to change the Belarusian political scene became demoralized and left to avail of opportunities in the West, or in Russia.

The 2004 Referendum on Presidential Term Limits

In October 2004, the first legislative elections under the provisions of the 1996 constitution were held in Belarus. More importantly, the parliamentary elections were held simultaneously with a referendum of far-reaching consequences. At the last moment, Lukashenka decided the time was ripe to establish a legal basis to allow him to run for reelection in 2006 beyond the hitherto term limit for presidential office, thereby giving him a political shield against charges of subverting the Belarusian constitution.

The text of the referendum could hardly be described as artful prose. The question the Belarusian citizenry was asked to consider was: "Do you allow the first President of the Republic of Belarus Alyaksandr Hryhorevich Lukashenka to participate in the presidential election as a candidate for the post of the President of the Republic of Belarus and do you accept Part I of Article 81 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus in the wording that follows, 'The President shall be elected directly by the people of the Republic of Belarus for a term of five years by universal, free, equal, direct, and secret ballot'."

According to the Central Election Commission's chairperson Lidziya Yarmoshyna, appointed to the position by Lukashenka, 86.2 percent of those

who voted supported the constitutional amendment, which corresponds to 77.2 percent of the Belarusian electorate. By contrast, exit polls conducted by Gallup indicated that Lukashenka's constitutional change was backed by only 48.4 percent of votes cast (and a lower percentage of the electorate).

Be that as it may, the referendum led to the further consolidation of Lukashenka's power, and his personal control over Belarus' Central Election Commission, the KGB, the judiciary, both the Ministries of Justice and the Interior, the media, and other institutions. Within only three years since 2001, the democratic opposition, any NGOs of broader societal appeal, or individuals inclined to complain about the absence of democratic mechanisms to ensure a fair ballot seemed to have been effectively silenced. In contrast to 2001, any pretense of holding "elections" in the conventional sense had become a ritual to permit Lukashenka the ability to claim political legitimacy and widespread support for his authoritarian rule.

Holding onto Power by all Means

However, it seems that Lukashenka still did not feel sufficiently reassured of his grip on power, especially as the Orange Revolution was unfolding in neighboring Ukraine. In November 2004, President Lukashenka fired the head of the Belarusian KGB, Leonid Yerin, for meeting with reporters and opposition members. He subsequently explained that "[a]s head of state (...) I am capable of controlling the secret services myself." Soon after, in January 2005, Lukashenka appointed General Stepan Sukhorenka as the new KGB head and made it clear that he expected the KGB to play a more active role in monitoring societal developments. Sukhorenka did not disappoint Lukashenka, bringing criminal cases against opposition activists on what most neutral observers believed were politically motivated grounds.

On August 17, 2005, Lukashenka issued a decree establishing new restrictions on foreign technical assistance to Belarus. This decree prohibits organizations and individuals from receiving and using assistance for "preparing and conducting elections and referenda, recalling deputies and members of the Council of the Republic, staging gatherings, rallies, street marches, demonstrations, picketing, strikes, producing and distributing campaign materials and for other forms of mass politicking among the population". It provided a legal basis for prohibiting technical assistance in the form of organizing seminars, conferences and public discussions.

With a similar goal in mind, on November 1, 2005, the Belarusian parliament adopted a law restricting the creation of political parties and the kind of activities they are allowed to undertake. The law contained provisions outlining grounds on which the Belarusian Supreme Court, upon an application of the Ministry of Justice, can suspend the right of a political party to engage in political activities. This law was applied against the Union of Belarusian Poles and the

youth platform *Rada* and in all practical respects prevented the establishment of new political entities.

At the same time, the Belarusian Council of Ministers issued a decree aimed at establishing state monopoly over new opinion polling entities, thereby creating a new body under the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus to exercise control over existing entities authorized to conduct polling activities. If the panel determined that there were irregularities in the activities of a pollster or if the released poll results were regarded as "biased and unreliable", the organization risked losing its accreditation.

Clearly, these steps were designed to prevent events like those in Ukraine from occurring in Belarus. This is even more obvious from a number of further measures taken at the time of Ukraine's democratic breakthrough. Belarusians who went to Kiev to see the Orange Revolution first-hand were arrested upon their return to Belarus. Lukashenka arranged for the Belarusian parliament to provide him with additional tools to prevent the opposition from mobilizing "people power". New legislation was enacted that increased criminal penalties for organizing protests, becoming a member of a banned organization, or speaking out against "national interests".

With his sights set firmly on the 2006 presidential elections, Lukashenka signed a law in December 2005 providing for criminal penalties for activities deemed to be "discrediting the state powers" in Belarus. The text of the law amended the Belarusian Criminal Code, making it a crime to train people to take part in street protests, to discredit Belarus' international image, and to appeal to countries and international organizations for help. Under the new legal provisions, any such activity was deemed "to the detriment of the country's security, sovereignty and territorial integrity".

In addition, the Belarusian parliament amended the Law "On Interior Ministry Troops of Belarus" explicitly empowering internal security troops to disband anti-government demonstrations. Parliament granted the president the right to order Belarusian troops to use weapons and other military equipment to maintain domestic order. The right of Belarusian servicemen to refuse to follow what they deemed to be an illegal order, such as refusal to shoot at or use military vehicles against civilians, was restricted. Furthermore, and reminiscent of the worst 20th century European dictatorships, Belarusian military and police personnel, henceforth, had to swear allegiance to Lukashenka rather than to the Republic of Belarus or to its constitution. This had the clear intention of lessening the likelihood of units defecting to the political opposition.

The police, military and security apparatus at the disposal of Lukashenka is considerable. It consists of at least 110,000 paramilitary forces, including the special police (*Otryad Militsii Osobovo Naznacheniya*, or OMON), which can be supplemented with a significant number of reserves. A highly secretive contingent of personal presidential bodyguards comprises, according to some estimates, more than 200 enlisted men, specially trained and equipped with cutting edge equipment. Lukashenka himself selects them. An equally powerful

SWAT team, called *Alma* (Diamond), is operational within the Ministry of the Interior, and a further paramilitary rapid reaction detachment (*Spetsialny Otryad Bistrovo Reagirovania*, or SOBR) is headed by Colonel Dzmitry Paulichenka.

Only days before the March 2006 presidential elections, KGB head Sukhorenka, along with Interior Minister Navumau and Prosecutor General Miklashevich went on national TV to expose the "opposition's conspiracy to instigate violent protests on the day of the elections, using explosive devices, and to attempt to storm government offices". The authorities threatened to apply the Belarusian criminal code's anti-terrorism provisions against leading members of the opposition. If convicted, such individuals could face capital sentences, life imprisonment, or even the death penalty.

Lukashenka Plays to his Political Base

In parallel to increasing pressure on political opponents, Lukashenka has also made sure to solidify and expand his, undoubtedly considerable, power base within Belarusian society. Having become a political actor on an anti-corruption ticket, it was hardly surprising that he sought to repeat earlier successes by bringing criminal charges against directors of state-run enterprises for alleged misuse of public funds. The chairman of the state committee on the aircraft industry, Fiodor Ivanau, and the general director of the Republican State Enterprise *"Belaeroaviatsiya"*, Ivan Shimanets, both faced accusations of embezzlement of state property by abusing their positions. Both are exemplary cases of the state's approach.

The political opposition sought to demonstrate the regime's hypocrisy by publicizing the case of Halyna Zhuraukova. As former head of the presidential property management department, she received a prison sentence for embezzlement through abuse of office duty made by an organized group or at an especially large scale, although she was pardoned despite admitting to having stolen five million dollars. At approximately the same time, a prominent Belarusian political figure, Mikhail Marynich, was given a five-year prison sentence on spurious charges of theft of equipment provided to his non-governmental organization.

These anti-corruption moves combine with a fear widespread in Belarusian society, and illustrated regularly by Russian television watched by many in the country, that privatization inevitably results in the emergence of oligarchs and extreme differences in income and between standards of living. Consequently, Lukashenka does his utmost to retain a high degree of egalitarianism, and he has made it a high priority that salaries and pensions are paid on time. What is more, to avoid a situation in which Belarusians lose jobs in unprofitable enterprises, he promised to support such companies with loans or even to nationalize them.

Running counter to the carefully groomed image of Belarus as a successful economic model have been accusations that Lukashenka and other government

officials have themselves misappropriated state funds. Some of these are believed to have found their way into banks abroad, while others, as the political opposition has tried to point out to Belarusians, were used for the president's private house in the Belarusian countryside.

These and other question marks over the integrity of the president and his performance notwithstanding, Lukashenka enjoys genuine support among large sections of the Belarusian population. Yet it is problematic that it is often taken as an article of faith that Lukashenka is backed by a majority of Belarusian citizens. In the context of Belarus today, with full regime control of the media, the economy and political institutions, it is impossible to ascertain the real degree of societal support for the president.

If anything, it is Lukashenka and his regime itself that appears less sure of its social base than it frequently pronounces in public. Only such insecurity can explain that, over the years, Lukashenka has developed very elaborate tactics to ensure favorable voting outcomes, including pre-election day voting, mobile ballots for people allegedly unable to attend polling stations, and ballot stuffing. Extraordinary efforts have been made to prevent exit polls from being conducted by the opposition or neutral observers, while providing for officially sanctioned exit polls. Harassment of the democratic opposition and its supporters, and closure of independent civic organizations and alternative media were clearly aimed at "unreliable" segments of Belarusian society. Last but not least, the fact that the 2006 presidential elections were moved from the original July date to March indicated that Lukashenka, his officials, advisors and pollsters were not nearly as confident of a favorable result as it may have seemed.

Recent Trends in Belarusian Public Opinion

Oleg Manaev

This article analyzes the main trends in Belarusian public opinion in the period between the national referendum of October 17, 2004 and the presidential elections of March 19, 2006. In a first part, the gap between the official outcome (announced by the Central Election Commission) and the results based on findings by the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys of the referendum and general elections are described. In a second part, the reasons why public opinion has continued to assess the economic situation of the country during this period as positive are explained. The third part seeks to explain some of the peculiarities of the geopolitical attitudes of the Belarusian population. A final part focuses on a dramatic cleavage in Belarusian society that can be understood as a root cause of the ongoing instability of the country, implying an uncertain future.

Belarus after the National Referendum of October 2004

On October 17, 2004, Belarusian politics came to a crucial impasse. In an attempt to prolong his rule, Alyaksandr Lukashenka organized a national referendum with the aim of removing time limits for presidential terms from the constitution. A general election was organized to coincide with the referendum in order to avert attention from its political significance and to ensure that the parliament would remain under the firm control of the president. According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), 90.3 percent of registered voters participated in the national referendum and general elections in October 2004. According to opinion polls conducted by the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys during the election on October 17, the turnout was estimated at 87.3 percent, while a public opinion poll conducted nationally by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) after the referendum in November 2004 determined a turnout of 82.7 percent.

According to the results of this poll only 49 percent of respondents said that they voted in favor of changing the constitution. This figure is almost identical to the estimates provided by Gallup (48.4 percent of voters), and it is in marked

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contrast to the result announced by the Central Election Commission, which set the figure of those in favor of changing the constitution at almost 79 percent. It was on the basis of these conflicting results that the international community refused to recognize the Belarusian general elections and referendum as free and fair.

However, further polling revealed that an estimated 57.7 percent of respondents had never even heard about the Gallup research (32.7 percent of respondents indicated they had heard about it), and only 28.6 percent of those polled think that the data provided by Gallup is honest and correct (44.3 percent were of the opinion that the figures announced by the Central Election Commission were correct). To a certain extent this could explain why the announcement of the real results of voting did not become a crucial factor in provoking change in Belarus, as was the case in Serbia in 2000 or in Georgia in 2003.

An analysis of the responses to the poll provides insight into the character of the average Lukashenka supporter and opponent. Typical Lukashenka supporters are a) female, in retirement, having completed elementary education or having not completed secondary education, and b) elderly public sector workers living in villages or in the Eastern regions of Belarus, in particular, in the Homel region. Typical Lukashenka opponents are a) young, employed in the private sector, having completed higher education, and b) students living in Minsk or another large city, in particular, in the Brest region.

It should be noted that the result of the referendum changed the relevance of the general elections, essentially rendering them insignificant. Given the stipulations of the political system, with the right to remain in office beyond 2006 secured and with parliament continuing to have little influence, there was little indication that any change in Belarusian politics would be possible. Although a near majority of voters polled (over 40 percent) indicated they did not discuss who to vote for in the general election, such conversations did take place in every fourth Belarusian family. The choice of voters was to the greatest extent determined by the referendum. One of the first questions asked in discussions with candidates in the parliamentary elections was ideological in nature. They were questioned on their attitude to the constitutional amendment. Perhaps, this is why polling shows that over one third of respondents had already chosen their candidate long before the election. If one compares the differing ways in which Lukashenka supporters and opponents resolved the issue, one finds that twice as many Lukashenka supporters (52.5 percent) chose their candidate long before the election as Lukashenka opponents (26.7 percent). To put it differently, the president's supporters were still well organized, mobile and willing to support their candidate.

According to the official interpretation of the results of the parliamentary elections, Belarusians were in full agreement with the socio-economic course being steered by the incumbent authorities and, hence, gave their votes to those who positioned themselves in support of that course, thereby ousting the opposition, none of whose candidates actually managed to win a seat in parliament. Yet, exit polls conducted in some constituencies, as well as

opinion polls conducted by IISEPS paint a very different picture. Slightly over one third of respondents indicated that they voted for candidates supporting Lukashenka, while over 30 percent of Belarusians voted either for opponents or for independent candidates. According to such figures, the composition of parliament should have been very different. Lukashenka required an outright triumph (as in the case of the referendum). He required not just mere control over parliament, but total control. In the first place, such an "elegant" result actively works in favor of the myth that there is only one politician in the country who has no serious opponents. Secondly, it releases that politician from the obligation to consider the interests of the remainder of society, the part that may not support him, and therefore, ensures that no compromises have to be made.

Dynamics in Socio-Economic Attitudes

Opinion polls indicate that Belarusians consider their personal economic situation quite positively. Thus, since 2003, the number of those who consider their economic situation to have improved over the three months preceding being polled increased more than three times (from 6.5 to 23.5 percent), while the number of those who consider their situation worsened decreased almost three-fold (from 41.6 to 14.2 percent). Despite the fact that the number of those who consider their economic situation unchanged increased by approximately 10 percent, the general distribution of respondents' assessments demonstrates a perception of significant change for the better. Noteworthy is the fact that the most significant growth in improvement took place in 2005, indicating that the authorities had begun to prepare for the presidential elections well in advance. The same trend is confirmed by respondents' assessments of their incomes. Thus, in June 2004, the correlation of those who had a per capita income below the minimal consumer budget (MCB) and those who had income over the MCB was 4.5 vs. 1. For 2006, however, this correlation declined to 2 vs. 1. In other words, if in 2004 four out of five respondents lived below the minimum subsistence level, today only two out of three face the same situation. Nevertheless, and despite these perceived improvements in the economic situation, the quality of life in Belarus is generally considered in not very positive terms. Thus, a quarter of respondent considers it as very or quite bad, and 57.6 percent of respondents considered it as moderate. Just fewer than 18 percent of respondents consider the quality of life in Belarus quite or very good.

Analysis shows that assessments of quality of life affect electoral behavior most significantly. Thus, among those who considered quality of life good, 91.3 percent were going to vote on March 19, 2006, in comparison to only 57.2 percent among those who considered it bad. Furthermore, 80.6 percent of those who considered quality of life to be good were going to vote in favor of Lukashenka, while only 5.1 percent of these intended to vote in

favor of Alyaksandr Milinkevich. This compares with 25 percent among those who considered quality of life bad intending to vote for Lukashenka, while 36.8 percent of these intended to vote in favor of Milinkevich. In other words, support to one or another candidate in the presidential elections was significantly determined by the voters' assessment of the quality of their lives and this assessment does not correlate with respondents' incomes. The result is reversed for those respondents whose per capita income is below the MCB. The number of Lukashenka supporters is 10 percent higher than among those whose per capita income is over the MCB (62 percent vs. 52.5 percent). This demonstrates that people are significantly concerned about more than only the economic aspects of the quality of their lives. For example, there is a direct correlation between respondents' negative opinions of the authorities and assessments of the quality of their lives. Less than 20 percent of those who consider the authorities negatively are among those who are satisfied with the quality of their lives, and they make up more than half of those who are dissatisfied.

A pre-election poll indicated that the most important problems to determine the electoral choice of Belarusians in the presidential election of March 19, 2006 were socio-economic, mirroring previous occasions and including general quality of life (mentioned by 44.2 percent of respondents), price rises (31.8 percent), healthcare (24.8 percent), and jobs (23.1 percent). Any other problems, including democracy, independence, corruption, crime, and freedom of conscience remain less important for Belarusians. Therefore, those politicians who were seen by voters to ensure the improvement of socio-economic conditions had a higher chance of electoral success.

This is one of the most important explanations for the growth of Lukashenka's popularity rating (from 47.7 percent just after the referendum in October 2004 to 58.6 percent just before the presidential election of 2006). Twice as many Belarusians considered that their socio-economic conditions would improve if Lukashenka won the election (i.e. "optimists") than those who considered that their conditions would worsen (i.e. "pessimists"). Nevertheless, when asked about an eventual victory of a democratic candidate, the number of "optimists" and "pessimists" was equal. Furthermore, the number of "optimists" that expected Lukashenka's victory was twice that of "optimists" that expected the victory of a democratic candidate. When asked to consider their socio-economic perspectives in the eventuality of the victory of a democratic candidate, more than one third of respondents could not give any definitive answer. It is possible, therefore, to conclude that other candidates did not succeed in convincing voters of the advantages offered by their socio-economic programs.

A further consideration is that over the last two years, the number of those who expect to see a deterioration in the socio-economic situation in the near future has decreased two-fold and that the number of those who expect to see an improvement has increased two-fold. In 2004, the number of the former was twice the latter. In 2006, the situation has been reversed. Thus, pessimism

concerning the immediate socio-economic perspectives of Belarus among Belarusians has developed into growing optimism.

What are the reasons for this change? One is certainly the massive concentration of economic recourses in the hands of the authorities and what they have done with them (for example, increasing salaries, pensions, stipends, reducing the rate of interest for loans to different social groups etc.). Another is the increased and aggressive use of propaganda campaigns by the authorities concerning its socio-economic achievements and against a stereotypical notion of the "Western lifestyle". Together, and over several years, these have significantly affected Belarusian mass consciousness. For example, analyses undertaken by the author show a significant deterioration in public assessments of the socio-economic achievements of neighboring countries over the last years. Thus, the number of those who consider the standard of living in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland as higher than in Belarus, has significantly decreased (by as much as 12 to 24 percent). At the same time, the number of those who consider the standard of living in neighboring countries as similar to that in Belarus or as worse has increased. Paradoxically, the basic indicators that characterize the standard of living in these countries are still far away from being achieved in Belarus, even if one takes a mid-term perspective.

Dynamics in Geopolitical Attitudes

Despite the popularity of the politician who, ten years ago, promised "not to lead his people after the civilized world", Belarusians seem to have relatively kind feelings to the so-called civilized world. Today, 36.4 percent of respondents express positive attitudes to the European Union, while only 12.9 percent are negatively disposed. Approximately one third expressed indifference. 51 percent of respondents think that people live better in EU countries, while the opposite view is shared by two times fewer respondents. Almost two thirds of Belarusians would "like to live like people in EU countries". Less than 30 percent would not. It is noteworthy that slightly more respondents would like to live like people in the EU as compared to those who said that people in the united Europe live better than in Belarus. These results beg the question, why? Giving an assessment of the European Union involves reflection on a political issue. Thus, it is difficult for some to give preference to the EU as compared to Belarus because of their patriotic feelings. When the question seems to have no political pretext and does not involve comparison with the homeland, the preference given to the EU appears to dominate.

At the same time, respondents feel they have a lack of information about life in EU countries, but still demonstrate that they would love to know more. Thus to the question, "Would you like to know more about what is going on in the EU member states as well as about the activities of European organizations?", 54 percent of respondents answered positively, and only 32.6 percent answered negatively. As for fellow citizens who managed to enter educational institutions

or to find a job in EU countries, Belarusians generally have a positive attitude towards them and do not think they are traitors or turncoats.

Yet more thorough research shows that the attitude of Belarusians towards the European Union is both unsteady and contradictory. Thus, if the number of supporters of Belarus entering the EU exceeded 60 percent in December 2002, it had declined to a low of 36.7 percent in December 2005. And, the reason? It might follow that the accession of neighboring countries, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, to the EU would strengthen pro-European attitudes in Belarusian society, as more Belarusians would now be able to see this united Europe with their own eyes. But, according to the results of recent polls, EU countries are not unfamiliar to Belarusians. Each fourth Belarusian has visited a country in the EU in the past five years. Furthermore, accession of the new EU member states, or to be more precise, the Belarusian public's assessment of the consequences of accession to the EU for these countries, seems to have turned a proportion of Belarusians off Europe. Thus, to the question: "Neighboring countries of Belarus (Poland, Latvia and Lithuania) are EU members from May 1, 2004. In your opinion, has living in these countries become better or worse?" almost one quarter of respondents answered "became worse", and another quarter answered, "remains the same". Less than 20 percent answered "became better", while almost a quarter is not sure.

Influential as they may be, however, the Belarusian state-run mass media are not almighty and have so far failed to persuade Belarusians that their condition is pure paradise as compared to life in the EU. Such negative assessments might, however, be the result of discussions with Poles and Lithuanians, with whom Belarusians regularly communicate. Judgments on the situation in the new EU member states cannot yet, however, be considered clear-cut, as people often interpret uncertainty in negative terms. Against the background of great expectations reality is often considered worse than it actually is. Indeed, positive changes are taken as self-evident, while negative changes are experienced painfully.

The recent conflict over the Union of Poles in Belarus, which developed into a large international row between Belarus and its most influential neighbor and closest EU member state, is probably also at the root of such reserved assessments of the European Union. In December 2005, when the conflict had already died down, Belarusians felt markedly more distant towards the Polish stance than even at the peak of the conflict. This can certainly, at least in part, be attributed to the efforts of the state-run mass media. Thus, to the question: "In 2005, the conflict over the Union of Poles in Belarus caused significant tension and strain in relations between Belarus and Poland. In your opinion, who is most to blame for this situation?" 31.4 percent of respondents in September 2005 answered "the Polish authorities" or "leaders of the Union of Poles", and by December, the figure had risen to almost 38 percent. The number of those who answered "the Belarusian authorities", however, decreased almost two-fold (from 19.7 to 10.6 percent).

Public opinion polls show that despite all concerns, and although respondents

are split almost equally as regards the necessity for Belarus to join the European Union, it is noteworthy that less than 30 percent of them think that Belarus will never enter the EU and over 40 percent say that Belarus will sooner or later join the united Europe. Hence, it can be concluded that the prospects of European integration for Belarus are not so vague or distant as the current authorities would have the citizens believe.

At the same time, opinion polls show that pro-Russian attitudes and sympathies in Belarusian society are still high. Thus, to the question: "What variant of Belarus-Russia relations would be better from your point of view?" 45.5 percent of respondents said "good neighborhood of two independent states", 39.2 percent indicated "a union of two independent states", and 13.6 percent indicated "integration into one state" in February 2006. Responding to the question "If a referendum on the unification of Belarus and Russia takes place tomorrow, how would you vote?", 43.3 percent said "in favor of unification" and 33.2 percent indicated against (the remainder was unsure or would not vote at all). These attitudes are not dangerous for Belarusian state sovereignty, but they show that pro-Russian attitudes in Belarus today are higher than in any other country of the region. In the case of having to make a clear choice between unification with Russia and entering the EU, the correlation between "Russo-Belarusians" and "Euro-Belarusians" is estimated today as 2 vs. 1.

The data collected in our poll is also confirmed by the presidential election campaign and the contents of candidates' programs and statements. All of them tried to take into account the widespread pro-Russian attitude of Belarusian society. This was manifest in a variety of forms, from the statements each candidate made on television in Russian language to open references to their "special interest in close and good relations with Russia". Hence, the presidential campaign of 2006 did not focus significantly on competition between Russia and the West, and all the candidates tried to avoid that they would be perceived by the public as favoring only one geopolitical "pole". Thus, Milinkevich, whom the authorities and other competitors tried to label as a "pro-Western" candidate, spoke openly against Belarus entering NATO and about Belarusian accession to the EU as a long term plan. Even Lukashenka made references to the value of the national sovereignty and the independence of Belarus, and stated that the Kremlin did not support him. Such a convergence among the geopolitical positions of candidates for the presidency meant that the perspectives for the ongoing and future geopolitical stance of Belarus did not become a hot issue in the campaign, with the competing candidates preferring to discuss other issues.

The research data underlying this article demonstrates that the major reason for this situation is that both "Russo-Belarusians" and "Euro-Belarusians" form significant and influential parts of the electorate, and no serious politicians could ignore their interests or wishes completely. Furthermore, pro-Russian attitudes in Belarus do not necessarily imply anti-European attitudes. On many counts they are very complementary. Therefore, it is necessary for democratic

politicians to maintain a balanced discourse and to promote Belarusian openness both to the East and to the West.

The Societal Divide is Widening

Comparative analysis of the demographics of Lukashenka's supporters and opponents shows that these two groups differ significantly. Elderly voters with a low level of education, those who are economically inactive or in retirement, and who live in villages are a dominant majority among the president's convinced supporters. Their economic and political standpoints are very explicit. They are clearly against the privatization of state property, and they are not of the opinion that there are problems of democracy in Belarus, or that the government has infringed human rights. The majority voted "for" at the referendum and supported Lukashenka's candidates in the parliamentary elections that they consider to have been both free and fair. Lastly, this electorate is very suspicious of both the European Union and the United States of America.

By contrast, citizens with a high level of education, the young or middle-aged, those who are economically active and resident in big cities, prevail among the opponents of the president. They speak out in favor of privatization and are seriously concerned about human rights infringements, the Belarusian political climate and the state of democracy in the country. The majority voted "against" at the referendum and supported alternative or independent candidates in the parliamentary elections, which they do not consider to have been either free or fair. They also demonstrate positive attitudes towards the European Union and the United States.

The difference between the two groups is especially striking if one considers the extent to which they are informed and share certain cultural features. Thus, the opponents of the president can be seen as being able to cope better with the process of globalization that even Belarus has not been immune to, while his supporters remain isolated and lag behind.

In itself, this is nothing new and the results of polls and surveys undertaken by IISEPS have time and again confirmed this constellation. The official approach to this important societal cleavage is well known: "People living in Belarus, just like in other countries, have different values. This is quite natural." But, in recent years, presidential supporters have come to believe that living in Belarus is not worse than living in neighboring countries. Hence, they are optimistic about the future and do not plan to move to another country. Presidential opponents are convinced that living in Belarus is much worse than living in neighboring countries. They are more pessimistic about their prospects and many of them are ready and willing to emigrate.

It is obvious that a socially weak and passive group of voters who are nostalgic about the past dominates the president's current electoral constituency. Under normal conditions, this group gradually and naturally decreases in size and

its political influence inevitably also declines. But, in Belarus, a socially strong and active group that could move the country forward at any relevant pace of development in political and social terms remains very much at the fringe of society. Perhaps, the only point in which presidential opponents will give his supporters some credit is that they are a consolidated and well organized constituency. One month before the presidential election of 2006, more than 90 percent of the president's supporters could confirm that they would once again vote for Lukashenka, while only less than 70 percent of those opposing the president were ready to support one of the democratic candidates. The president's supporters all came to the October 2004 election and referendum with transparent intentions, unlike his opponents, who look uncoordinated and even confused in comparison. The current course steered by the Belarusian authorities serves the interests of the president's supporters, while those of his opponents are ignored or even suppressed. Thus, the ideological split in Belarusian society that was visible already at the beginning of the 1990's has widened significantly in the years of Lukashenka's rule, jeopardizing the unity of Belarusians as a nation.

On the eve of the presidential elections in March 2006, this cleavage was still markedly visible. In response to the question, "If A. Lukashenka is competing with only one other candidate in the presidential elections, would you vote for him or the alternative candidate?" 58.7 percent of respondents indicated "in favor of A. Lukashenka", 30.6 percent indicated "in favor of the alternative candidate" (while over 10 percent were undecided). This means that at least one third of voters (i.e. almost 2.5 million people) want change and have understood that their expectations will not be fulfilled if Lukashenka is reelected. In response to the question, "For whom would you vote in the presidential election if there are the following four candidates on the ballot?", 4.5 percent of respondents indicated Syarhey Haydukevich, 6.4 percent indicated Alyaksandr Kazulin, 58.6 percent indicated Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and 16.6 percent indicated Alyaksandr Milinkevich. In response to the question, "If A. Lukashenka is competing with only one candidate in the presidential election, which of the following three politicians would you vote for?", 13.5 percent of respondents said S. Haydukevich, 10.3 percent opted for A. Kazulin, and 26.6 percent signalled support for A. Milinkevich. Clearly, the total number of Milinkevich supporters exceeds the number of Haydukevich and Kazulin supporters counted together. This means that most Belarusians who want change consider Milinkevich their candidate.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above analysis of available data, it is possible to conclude that both the widespread view that Lukashenka's power is stable and supported by the people (promoted by the Lukashenka regime and its allies, including Russia) and the idea that his regime has lost its public support and could be

overthrown with just a little more effort (promoted by some opposition leaders and Western experts) are equally irrelevant. The evidence suggests that the Belarusian regime does not have enough public support for a sustainable development within the authoritarian framework, which explains why the regime has become progressively more repressive inside the country and has continued to isolate itself from the international community. Nevertheless, to become a crucial factor of change in Belarus, the democratic alternative, which is already relatively well developed in society, needs to be strengthened further. This requires further efforts towards mustering internal and external support for democratic development and change in Belarus.

The Democratic Political Opposition

David R. Marples and Uladzimir Padhol

This article examines the history of the democratic opposition in Belarus prior to the presidential election of 2006. The focus will be with political parties and the coalitions these have formed in their opposition to the Lukashenka regime since the mid-1990's, and most recently in preparation of the 2006 presidential elections.

Belarus has numerous political parties. They are small in numbers, ranging from 1,100 to 17,000 in membership, and all of them have failed to break through the critical level of support of ten percent of the electorate. An opinion poll conducted in the spring of 2003 by the Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) in Minsk found the following percentage levels of support in response to the question: "Which political party do you consider closest to your political views?"

Liberal-Democratic Party	6.2
United Civic Party	4.7
Belarusian Social Democratic *Hramada*	4.5
Party of Communists of Belorussia	4.3
Belarusian Green Party	4.1
Belarusian Popular Front	3.9
Party of Labor	3.7
Belarusian Social Democratic Party *"Narodnaya Hramada"*	3.0
Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front	2.6
None of the above	37.5

The Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front (CCP BPF)

The Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) was created in the USSR in the late 1980's during the Gorbachev regime. Initially, it was established as a social-

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political movement called *"Adradzhenne"* (Revival) in 1988 and as an informal organization dealing with victims of Stalinism called "Martyrology of Belarus." The movement was led by archeologist and historian Zyanon Paznyak and had a threefold focus on the effects of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, the fate of the Belarusian language and culture, and on the 1988 uncovering of the mass victims of Stalin's NKVD at Kurapaty Forest outside Minsk. The founding congress of the BPF was held on June 24-25, 1989 in Vilnius, Lithuania and over the next two years, the BPF was the only organization in the republic with a strongly anti-communist orientation.

In May 1993 at its third congress, the Belarusian Popular Front was transformed into an official political party called the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front. After parliamentary chairman Stanislau Shushkevich's removal in January 1994, and the election of Lukashenka as the first president in the summer of that year, the BPF took on the role of a more formal opposition, particularly in 1995, following the referendum that replaced the national symbols and state flag with emblems similar to those of the Soviet period. Due to their lack of success in the 1995 parliamentary elections (the BPF won no seats), Paznyak initiated several mass demonstrations in the streets of Minsk. In 1996, declaring that his life was in danger, Paznyak left Belarus and has operated from exile in Poland ever since. In 1996, he took part in the "alternative presidential elections" organized by the leaders of the parliament of the 13th session, declaring himself a presidential candidate, though he soon withdrew from the "contest". By this time it was evident that Paznyak had become distanced from affairs in Belarus. In September 1999, at its sixth party congress, the BPF split into two factions of roughly equal size, one led by Paznyak, and one by his younger protégé Vintsuk Vyachorka. In February 2000, Paznyak's group was formally registered by the Ministry of Justice as the Conservative-Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front.

The party is organized on a territorial basis under the ultimate authority of a congress, convoked at least once every two years. Its political platform is one of non-convoluted Belarusian nationalism. In other words, support for the Belarusian language, preservation of Belarusian territorial integrity, restoration of national symbols and the "national-ideological freedom", and opposition to "Russian imperialism and colonialism". The party has a strong religious element (Paznyak is a devout Catholic), and is devoted to an independent Belarus, and the protection of the Belarusian language and culture. It supports the establishment of a parliamentary republic and the election of the president by the parliament. It also stands for a market economy, and for private ownership of land and the means of production. It advocates a mixture of private and state-owned health care and medicine. In foreign affairs, the CCP BPF wishes Belarus to join NATO and develop warm relations with the political and economic structures of Europe, with an especially close partnership envisaged between Belarus and the Baltic States, Ukraine, and Poland.

The Party of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF)

The BPF in its current form is also a result of the split of 1999 and operates on a similar basis to the CCP BPF, holding a congress every two years. The congress elects the chairman of the party, the deputy chairman, the *Soim* (Assembly), and auditing committee. Its executive organ is the *Uprava* (administration), formed by the *Soim*. The chairman of the party is Vintsuk Vyachorka. Its program advocates a free, independent and consolidated Belarusian nation through its national and cultural self-awareness and spiritual rebirth on the basis of the highest moral values. Like its sister party, it focuses on family values and Belarusian cultural traditions, supports privatization of state property and the creation of a legal foundation that would support a substantial rise in foreign investment, as well as "authentic" land reform based on private ownership and the use of land as a commodity. The party program accepts the presidential form of government but proposes to reduce the authority of the president. It proposes the development of relations with neighboring countries, and first and foremost with Ukraine and Latvia which, it is anticipated, might join with Belarus to form a Baltic-Black Sea confederation of states.

The Party of Communists of Belorussia (PKB)

There are two rival communist parties in Belarus, of which only the one opposing the current regime will be discussed here, given the focus of this article on the political opposition. On December 17, 1994, at its third party congress, Syarhey Kalyakin became the party leader and the party renamed itself as the Party of Communists of Belorussia, as demanded by a new government law "About political parties", which prohibited the use of the name of the country in the title of any party. In the elections to the new Supreme Soviet, the party received 22 percent of the popular vote, or 45 deputies, which made it the third largest faction in the assembly. Its second secretary, Vasily Novikau, was elected first deputy chairman of the parliament. The PKB opposed the constitutional changes of late 1996 and also supported the proposed impeachment of Lukashenka by the parliament (eventually thwarted by the intervention of Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin). In the presidential elections of September 2001, the PKB initially tried to advance Kalyakin as a candidate, but was unable to secure a sufficient number of signatures in support of his campaign. They then agreed to join the democratic parties in backing Uladzimir Hancharyk. Though President Lukashenka has put pressure on the PKB to unite with the pro-government party, the two parties remain far apart. Kalyakin has consistently supported the democratic parties in their efforts to form a united bloc against the government.

The party platform has been constructed according to the slogan of "democratic centralism", and lists as its goal workers' unity in attaining "full freedom from exploitation" and the construction of a classless society of social equality. In

the political sphere it seeks the establishment of "Soviet power", equal rights for all citizens and considers workers' councils the most democratic and effective form of state authority. It supports socialist control over production and a planned economy, and commodity-currency circulation under state regulations. It is prepared to allow partial private ownership during the transition from capitalism to socialism, especially for average-sized or smaller companies. It would seek to ban the sale of land. In foreign policy, it advocates "peaceful coexistence" with other nations and strongly opposes globalization, berating what it terms the "aggressive actions of the United States and NATO against other sovereign states", necessitating building up the defense sector and backing a union with Russia.

The Social Democratic Parties of Belarus

Belarusian social democrats date their traditions back to the Socialist *Hramada* (literally "Community") formed in late 1902, which was to play a critical role in the establishment of the Belarusian People's Republic in March 1918 that for a brief period formed an independent republic in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. In the late 1980's there were attempts to resurrect the party, and on December 1, 1990, a group of parliamentary deputies, academic and cultural leaders announced their intention to form a new Social Democratic *Hramada*. Its founding congress was held in Minsk on March 2-3, 1991, and Professor Mikhail Tkachev was elected chairman of the central *rada*, or council. Two months later the *Hramada* formed a faction of 15 delegates in the Supreme Soviet, led by Viktar Alampiev. Tkachev died on October 30, 1992, and was replaced by Aleh Trusau, a parliamentary deputy. Trusau, also a member of the BPF, tried to unite the two groups. At the same time, a second social democratic party began to form from communists who leaned toward democracy and who supported Gorbachev's reforms. One of the leading figures in this group in its early days was Lukashenka himself, then a parliamentary deputy. Under the name the Party of People's Accord (PPA), this second group held a founding congress in April 1992, electing Henadz Karpenka as party leader.

In the parliamentary elections of 1995, three members of the PPA were elected to the new assembly but the Belarusian Social Democratic *Hramada* (BSDH) failed to elect any deputies. Both Trusau and Karpenka gave up their positions after this failure, and the two groups began to consolidate, particularly after Mikola Statkevich became the leader of the BSDH. In June 1996, the two parties combined to form the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People's *Hramada*), or BSDP PH, with co-leadership between Statkevich and Leonid Sechka. The constitutional crisis in the summer and fall of 1996 caused a split in the party, with Sechka supporting the president's plans to enhance his authority, while Statkevich along with other prominent members, such as Myacheslau Hryb, Pyotr Krauchenka, and Uladzimir Nistyuk opposing. Sechka was expelled from the party in December 1996. Together with a breakaway group, he formed

the Social Democratic Party of People's Accord (SDPPA) in March 1997. A third group, initiated by the Belarusian National Party of Anatol Ostapenka in the summer of 1997, combined with the original PPA faction (Trusau) and formed a third Social Democratic Party *Hramada* under the leadership of Stanislau Shushkevich in February 1998.

During the presidential elections of 2001, the Statkevich group, the Belarusian Labor Party and the Women's Party *"Nadezhda"* supported the campaign of Hancharyk. In December, fourteen regional organizations of the Shushkevich group decided to defect to Statkevich's BSDH, accusing Shushkevich of being authoritarian. An attempt in August 2001 to establish a united party under Valentina Polevikova fell through when the Ministry of Justice refused to register such a party, citing legislative violations at the constituent congress. In 2005, the party achieved some unity at a unification congress held in March, in which Shushkevich did not participate. Following the arrest and incarceration of Statkevich on March 22 for his role in the street protests that followed the 2004 parliamentary elections, Alyaksandr Kazulin, former Rector of the Belarusian State University and leader of the "Will of the People" movement, was elected as the united leader in the summer of 2005. Kazulin was advanced by the united party as a presidential candidate for the 2006 elections, as the party opted not to join the united democratic movement that supported a single candidate.

Kazulin was born on November 25, 1955 in Minsk, and served in the Baltic Fleet in the period 1974-76. Subsequently, he studied at the faculty of mechanics and mathematics at the Belarusian State University, and later taught at the same institution. From 1988 he began a career at the Ministry of Education, and attained the position of First Deputy Minister, completing his doctoral degree during this same period. He was appointed Rector of the State University in 1996 by Lukashenka, and succeeded in improving the financial situation of the university by introducing several radical schemes. In 2003, he was dismissed from his post, ostensibly for a scandal that involved the university's link with a factory that extracted metals from waste. But Kazulin had been notably unresponsive to the president's campaign for reelection in 2001. His emergence as the new leader of the united Social Democrats was somewhat unexpected as he was clearly a compromise candidate among the different factions.

The United Civic Party (UCP)

The United Civic Party emerged from the United Democratic Party of Belarus (UDPB), the first political party to be registered by the Ministry of Justice in March 1991. The UDPB comprised people of very diverse views, from Pan-Slavs to Belarusian nationalists. After its unification with the Civic Party at a founding congress in October 1995, a leading economist and the former chairman of the National Bank of Belarus, Stanislau Bahdankevich, was elected

leader of the joint party. The goal was to create a party of "liberal-conservative" orientation and a large faction in the parliament, and to pursue privatization of state property, the protection of the constitution and respect for human rights. In April 1998, the political council of the UCP supported the candidacy of Viktar Karpenka as national opposition leader and the single candidate of the democratic forces in a forthcoming presidential election, anticipated for the summer of 1999 when Lukashenka's official mandate as president ended. In January 1999, most of the party supported the concept of alternative presidential elections put forward by UCP leader Viktar Hanchar. However, the party then suffered serious setbacks. Karpenka died in April 1999, another leader, Yury Zakharenka, former interior minister, disappeared in May, while Hanchar was kidnapped in September and has disappeared since. An internal conflict then ensued, and at the party's fifth congress, Bahdankevich stood down, while Anatol Lyabedzka was elected as the new chairperson.

Other Opposition Parties

The other major opposition parties in Belarus include first of all the Belarusian Labor Party (BLP), founded in November 1993. It has formed "party clubs" in each region and oblast city and is run by a congress, which elects its chairperson, deputy chairpersons, and council for a period of two years. Its chairperson is Alyaksandr Bukhvostov, and its program combines social democracy with concern for the workers' movement. It advocates a strong system of state support for the social needs of workers (health care, unemployment, etc) and care for veterans, invalids, children and large families. In August 2004, the Belarusian authorities officially disbanded the party.

Another opposition party, the Belarusian Women's Party *"Nadezhda"* (Hope), was formed in April 1994, has branches throughout Belarus and holds a party congress every three years. As well as promoting the equal rights of women in society, the party seeks to raise the living standards of the population, and the construction of a democratic, social, and lawful state, the protection of mothers and children, and the promotion of family values. It supports a market economy with equality of all forms of ownership and advocates close cooperation with trade union organizations. On August 17, 1992, a special congress of the party took place, and elected a new leader, Valentina Matusevich. Former leader, Valentina Polevikova contested the results of the congress and subsequently, in June 2003, she organized the founding congress of a Belarusian Democratic Party which, however, has not to date been registered by the justice ministry.

Attempts at Cooperation before 2005

The first notable effort to coordinate opposition activities was the consultative council of the opposition political parties initiated in 1999 by the OSCE Advisory

and Monitoring Group in Minsk, under the leadership of Ambassador Hans-Georg Wieck. The major parties in forming this council were the Belarusian Popular Front, the United Civic Party, and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Statkevich), along with the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, the Assembly of Informal Organizations, and the civic initiative Charter 97. Further parties participating in the council included the Belarusian Women's Party *"Nadezhda"*, the Belarusian Party of Labor, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (*Narodnaya Hramada*), the Liberal-Democratic Party, the United Civic Party, the Belarusian Social Democratic *Hramada*, the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, and the Party of Communists of Belorussia.

Following the split in the BPF in 1999, the CCP BPF of Paznyak left the consultative council on the grounds that its existence constituted collaboration with the Lukashenka regime. The council held several rounds of talks with the government, but the latter refused to follow the suggestions of the OSCE to end arbitrary arrests, allow equal access to state media, and to increase the authority of the parliament. On July 2, 2000 an extraordinary congress of democratic forces formed a coordinating council, made up of the above-listed parties with the exception of the communists, along with the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, the Assembly of Informal Organizations, and Charter 97. Over the next months and years, however, various parties and groups left the council: the BSDP (*Narodnaya Hramada*) and Labor Party in December 2000, the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions in April 2002, and the Women's Party *"Nadezhda"* in August 2002. In effect, what remained of the council was a bloc of right and center-right political forces, whose main activities have been limited to protests and a boycott of the parliamentary elections of 2000. Objecting to this boycott, Statkevich's BSDP (*Narodnaya Hramada*) equally decided to leave the council.

In December 2001, a group of center-left parties, trade unions, and public associations formed a confederation for social change. Campaigns were launched for the monitoring of the 2001 presidential elections (under Myacheslav Hryb), and to elect a single candidate for president from a broad citizens' coalition, organized by General Pavel Kozlousky, former Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir, former agriculture minister Vasily Leonou, communist party leader Kalyakin, the deputy of the former Supreme Soviet Syamon Domash, the chairman of the Belarusian Trade Unions and the eventual opposition presidential candidate Uladzimir Hancharyk. All these efforts, eventually, had only limited success, primarily owing to the various groups's widely differing interests and – in several instances – to complicated relationships among individual leaders.

Over the years that followed, several further attempts at cooperation among different political parties were launched in the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 2004 and the simultaneous referendum on presidential term limits, and prior to the presidential election of 2006. A first formation that emerged came to be known as the Bloc of Five Parties, comprising the United Civic Party led by Lyabedzka, the Belarusian Popular Front headed by Vyachorka, the Social Democratic Party under Shushkevich, the Party of Labor under Bukhvostov, and

the Party of Communists of Belorussia led by Kalyakin. The second formation, now defunct, was a group of ten to eleven deputies in the truncated Belarusian parliament known as the *Respublika* (Republic) faction and led by General Valery Fralou, prominent Baptist Ivan Pashkevich, businessman Syarhey Skrabets, and former Olympic rowing champion Ivan Parfenovich.

A third group consisted of pro-democracy deputies of the local Soviets that joined forces, while a fourth coalition, a public movement called "For a Dignified (*dostoinyi*) Life" included Republic deputies and some members of the former communist *nomenklatura*. Lastly, several important political parties remained outside the Bloc of Five Parties: the Social Democratic Party "*Narodnaya Hramada*" of Statkevich, the Women's Party *"Nadezhda"* of Valentina Matusevich, the Liberal-Democratic Party of Syarhey Haydukevich, and the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front headed by Zyanon Paznyak.

In addition to the above, numerous associations, both registered and unregistered, also played a role in these coalitions, including youth groups, women's associations, NGOs, and public movements. Several of these proved influential on one or more occasions. The public association Charter 97, led by Andrei Sannikov, helped to organize the March 2003 demonstration "For a Better Life" and plays an important role as a provider of independent information through its web page. The Youth Movement for a Democratic and European Belarus *Zubr* (or Bison, one of the national symbols of Belarus), and *Malady Front* (Young Front) are two of the more influential networks of youth groups. Of importance are also the Union of Belarusian Students, the Independent and Free Trade Unions led by Alyaksandr Yaroshuk, and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee headed by Tatsyana Protska.

The Bloc of Five Parties campaigned actively for the 2004 parliamentary elections in Belarus. The parties divided the country into districts in order to create an initial list of candidates for election. In an article in the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya*, Anatol Lyabedzka declared that those who remained outside the bloc should be regarded as opponents. This group included the deputies of the Republic group in the parliament, part of the former Soviet *nomenklatura*, and a group headed by Charter 97. Sannikov, leader of the latter, advocated the creation of a movement called "For a Free Life," to be joined by democrats who would then stand for election.

The Bloc of Five Parties struggled to maintain a semblance of unity. One example was the influence of Polevikova who, while on good terms with the leaders of the five parties, allegedly prevented the Belarusian Women's Party *"Nadezhda"* (which removed her as leader in 2002) from joining the coalition. In turn, Statkevich remained aloof from the coalition, in support of *"Nadezhda"*, but also led an independent "Euro-coalition" and intended initially to run in the 2006 presidential elections.

The Election of a United Candidate

By the summer of 2005, a permanent council of pro-democracy forces was formed from the Five Plus group and a broader body of ten opposition parties and organizations, with the goal of holding a national congress of democratic forces from September 1 to October 1, 2005. The council was headed by Bukhvostov and his deputy chairmen Alyaksandr Dabravolsky (United Civic Party) and Viktar Ivashekvich (Party of the BPF). By mid-June, meetings had been held for the nomination of around 900 congress delegates, despite difficult circumstances and a constant struggle with local authorities to find meeting venues. By August, Bukhvostov noted that 80 out of a planned 143 meetings had been held. Most of the delegates elected had no party affiliation, and the two leading candidates by this stage were Alyaksandr Milinkevich, a 57-year old professor from the Hrodna region without party affiliation, and Anatol Lyabedzka, the 44-year old leader of the United Civic Party. Other contenders for the candidacy were former chairman of the Belarusian parliament, Shushkevich, and PCB chairman Kalyakin. The prospects of finding a venue for the national congress appeared dim, as cities from Minsk to Babruisk either declared suitable buildings occupied or requested exorbitant sums for room rental. Surprisingly, however, permission was given to hold the national congress at the Palace of Culture of the Minsk Automobile Factory, and more than 800 delegates gathered on October 2, 2005. Shushkevich resigned from the contest prior to the initial vote, leaving three candidates in the contest for the united leadership: Milinkevich, Lyabedzka, and Kalyakin. In the first round, Milinkevich was well ahead with 383 votes, to Lyabedzka's 263 and Kalyakin's 152. In the final round, Milinkevich won a narrow victory over Lyabedzka by 399 votes to 391, with 16 blank or invalid votes. In a notable triumph for democracy, Alyaksandr Milinkevich was named as the single candidate of the united democratic opposition.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the democratic opposition has consisted of diverse groups and numerous political parties that are generally small, urban, and often at odds with one another. The main opposition centers are Minsk, as clearly illustrated by the results of the 2001 presidential election, and the Hrodna region in Western Belarus. Social support for the opposition is almost negligible in the Vitsebsk, Mahileu, and Homel oblasts, where the Agrarian Party and the pro-government Communist Party of Belarus remain strong. There is a notable and general lack of sympathy for opposition political parties in the rural areas of the country. Conversely, towns with heavy industry and high levels of unemployment or under-employment have supported the opposition, particularly the Party of Labor, the Liberal-Democrats and the Party of Communists of Belorussia, and these regions also are strongholds of the Federation of Free Trade Unions.

One of the main dilemmas for the opposition has been whether and how to cooperate with the Russian government on removing Lukashenka. Not surprisingly this remains a divisive issue. The two wings of the Popular Front are solidly against any form of relations with Russia, while other parties are more open to such an option. Another key issue, the question of whether to participate in official structures and elections, seems to have been resolved through the national congress of democratic forces.

Cooperation among diverse opposition forces remains a central issue in Belarus. Recent years have seen many attempts at establishing a more unified democratic opposition, few of which have been successful. Against this background, the process of electing a single joint candidate – Alyaksandr Milinkevich – to represent large parts of the anti-Lukashenka political forces in the 2006 presidential elections was a promising signal, although it remains to be seen if this newfound unity will last.

Civil Society and the Struggle for Freedom

Andrei Sannikov and Inna Kuley

There are certain rather obvious obstacles to overcome when writing about civil society under a totalitarian regime, at the same time as being part of that civil society, as the authors are. Those obstacles become even more obvious when the regime resorts to the kind of violence witnessed by the thousands of people who mounted peaceful protests in defense of their rights and liberties in Belarus in March 2006. They demonstrated the impressive metal of civil society in Belarus. For these reasons, this article will provide a broad overview of civil society activities in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections. However, this has to be done in a way that does not put at further risk any of the individuals, groups and activities involved.

The general situation in Belarus today is often compared to other post-communist states that underwent democratic revolutions recently, and where change was significantly energized and led by civic organizations. Unlike Slovakia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, however, it is all but impossible to openly express alternative views or to engage in open political and civic campaigning in Belarus. The situation in Belarus is, in important respects, unique. We need to understand how this situation came about.

Dilemmas for Civic Actors

After the presidential elections in 2001, the OSCE talked optimistically about the "vibrant civil society" that had emerged in Belarus. This was more wishful thinking than statement of fact. At that time, civil society was already deep in crisis and desperately trying to adapt to an increasingly totalitarian style of government. Civic organizations at this time were still trying to play by the established rules by registering formally, for example. To try to play by those rules was to enter a moral maze: in order to survive as officially recognized civic organizations such compromises were necessary as to call into question the purpose and *raison d'être* of real civic organizations at all. Their *modus vivendi*, under such conditions, became little more than a game of survival for survival's sake. To illustrate the point, consider the conditions attached to registration: a civic organization, such as a political party, is required at registration to provide the personal information of all members. As soon as such details are provided, therefore, the members become targets for

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repression and must either compromise further with the regime or simply suffer the consequences. Just after the congress of democratic forces was held in Minsk on October 1 and 2, 2005, the Ministry of Justice started collecting data on members of NGOs, which took part. It is strongly suspected that such information was used by the security forces to compile lists of people to be arrested on the eve of the March 19, 2006 presidential election.

In essence, the problem for civil society is this: in order to function properly, civil society requires the presence of certain conditions – freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom from interference by the government, etc. Such conditions are, to all intents and purposes, absent in Belarus. Civic organizations have operated under the kind of assumptions which are valid in most post-communist societies but which, to a large extent, no longer apply in a society, which is being run along ever more communist-era lines.

To exemplify the kind of measures, which have now been enacted in Belarus, consider the following: In October 2004, the Ministry of Justice decreed that all NGOs and parties, which have offices in residential buildings, move them to office buildings. This necessitated formal reregistration – a precarious exercise in itself, and also finding funds to pay for the new accommodation. If organizations failed to raise the money, they were simply shut down. The authorities have also sought to wipe out legitimate organizations by setting up their own "NGOs", which they can control directly. Subsequently, they closed down independent organizations on the grounds that they had been superseded. This along with various other methods was employed to deprive the Union of Poles in Belarus and the Writers Union of their official and independent status in 2005.

This attempt to co-opt civil society has emerged as a key regime strategy. Sensitive to and scared of the potential of youth activities, the regime increased financial support to the ideologically motivated Belarusian Republican Youth Union, increasing pressure on young people to join this Komsomol-like organization to ensure the loyalty of Belarusian youth. Slavic organizations strongly supported by the regime also became very active. Immediately after the inauguration of Lukashenka in 2001, Minsk became host city for the Slavic *Sobor* (Assembly) comprising representatives from Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. In one attempt to offer justification to the blatantly rigged presidential election, the authorities even spoke about civil society coming out strongly in support of the existing regime – a clear admission by the authorities that they were aware of the potential and importance of civil society.

Civic organizations can be and have been closed down or condemned to financial ruin using a variety of different methods including politically motivated tax swoops and fines for holding unauthorized seminars or distributing non-registered information materials. The primary targets were youth organizations, such as the Youth Movement for a Democratic and European Belarus *Zubr* (Bison) or *Malady Front* (Young Front), human rights NGOs, and those civic organizations that could serve as "incubators" for broader civil society development, through information, capacity-building, resources or mobilization. In the period between the 2001 and 2006 presidential election,

more than 100 NGOs were closed down under a variety of pretexts including legal problems, criminal charges or tax evasion, to name but a few reasons typically cited for cracking down on civic organizations. Victims included well known human rights NGOs and civic groups, such as *Vyasna* (Spring), the Hrodna-based *Ratusha* (Town Hall) headed for a long time by opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, Civil Initiatives of Homel, *Vezha* from Brest, the Association of Belarusian Students, and many more. In the same period, the only Belarusian language high school, the Belarusian Humanistic Lyceum, was also closed.

The regime also keeps constant pressure on civic activists using short and long-term prison sentences and so called *"himiya"* (chemistry, or exile and compulsory labor). Before and after the 2004 parliamentary election and referendum on changes to the constitution that allowed Lukashenka to remain in government for an unlimited number of terms, well known political and civic activists were put in jail or sent to *"himiya"*, including Valery Levaneusky and Alyaksandr Vasilieu of the Republican Strike Committee of Entrepreneurs from Hrodna; Mikola Statkevich, social democratic party leader; youth leader Paval Sevyarynets; former parliament deputy Syarhey Skrabets; and former minister, parliament deputy and ambassador Mikhail Marinich.

The general situation for civil society is, therefore, dire although there are some organizations still operating. They, however, face constant surveillance by the authorities. The independent press has virtually ceased to exist. Over fifty independent papers have been closed down. The few remaining have to deal with constant pressure from the authorities. From January 1, 2004, 34 publications ceased to exist. Detailed information on the media situation in Belarus, including media monitoring during the presidential election can be found on the web site of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (www.baj.ru). Independent papers have now lost the presence they once had and those, which have survived, quite often try to maneuver between the authorities and the opposition – a state of affairs, which has often confused their readers and left them unclear about what is actually going on. In order to survive they had to accept the circumstances and many introduced self-censorship.

An important element of civil society are independent structures of social, political and economic research, or think tanks, which inform and influence the public debate on developments in a given country. In Belarus today, few such independent institutes remain. As soon as a think tank achieves a certain degree of visibility and influence, it is either closed down or taken over by the authorities and their cronies. The Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies and the Sociological Laboratory Novak are most noteworthy. These and other independent analysts do their utmost to analyze current developments and publicize their findings, mostly in some of the remaining independent papers, magazines or internet sites, such as *Arche* (http://arche.bymedia.net/), *BDG* (http://bdg.by/), *Naviny* (http://www.naviny.by/), NGO Assembly (http://www.belngo.info/), *Nasha Niva* (www.nn.by), and *Belarusy i Rynok* (www.belmarket.by).

Civil Society Transformed

By the time the regime had rigged the previously mentioned referendum in 2004, allowing Lukashenka to run for as many terms as he wished, it had become obvious to everyone that a new strategy was required. It was no longer possible to work with the regime. The regime would have to be challenged head on. But it was not simply a question of confronting the regime. Civic organizations would also need to wake ordinary Belarusians from their apathetic slumber and help others overcome basic fears about losing their jobs or being kicked out of university for showing disloyalty to the regime. Both problems needed to be addressed in time for the presidential elections, which would take place in 2006. With the regime also sensing a shift in direction and setting the elections for March rather than July, the stage was set for a new phase in the development of Belarusian civil society.

Two distinct but ultimately compatible strands of development characterized that new phase. The first strand involved NGOs and other civic groups actively working with the campaign of joint opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich. Hundreds of civic activists joined regional support groups for Milinkevich's campaign and went out onto the streets to help collect the 100,000 signatures required by law for his participation in the presidential elections. Eventually close to 200,000 were brought together in support of Milinkevich. Two civic campaigns, specifically, tied their activities to the calendar of the presidential campaign: *Khopits!* (Enough!) that emerged as an ad-hoc civic coalition prior to the elections, and *Za Svabodu* (For Freedom), which was led by the NGO Assembly. The latter campaign, for example, organized a rock concert on the eve of the elections, which attracted close to 10,000 people. The former, together with other groups, had a noticeable presence in the "tent city", which was set up in the central square of Minsk in protest at the rigging of the March 19 elections. Well-known figures from civil society – notably from the independent Writers Union – were also supportive of the campaign led by Alyaksandr Kazulin, the other anti-Lukashenka candidate in the presidential election. An important project to mention in this context is the independent election monitoring that was planned by the Partnership group, similar to earlier observation activities during the 2004 referendum and parliamentary elections. However, shortly before the elections, key activists were arrested by the KGB and accused of plotting against the authorities and preparing terrorist attacks.

The second main strand of new thinking culminated in the Jeans Solidarity Campaign or Solidarity 16. This campaign, which engineered key symbols later taken up by Milinkevich, such as denim blue, was not initially connected with the elections. It started on September 16, 2005 when Mikita Sasim, an activist from the *Zubr* youth resistance movement was brutally beaten by police for hoisting his denim shirt aloft in the form of a flag at a small protest gathering in the center of Minsk. The protest action had been called to commemorate the disappearance of two opponents of the regime – Viktar Hanchar, deputy

speaker of parliament, and businessman Anatoly Krasousky – on the same day six years earlier. From then on leading civic activists urged people to light candles in their apartment windows on the 16th of each month in a silent show of solidarity with the disappeared and the imprisoned. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians took part. According to some opinion polls 20.8 percent of Belarusians knew of and supported the campaign; in Minsk, knowledge of the campaign was 31.7 percent, while support stood at 21.4 percent. As time went by, the Solidarity 16 and Jeans Solidarity campaign became ever more closely associated with the political opposition and achieved major successes domestically in rallying large numbers of people to their own and Milinkevich's cause, simultaneously attracting the support and attention of the foreign media and foreign dignitaries such as former Czech President Vaclav Havel, leading figures in Poland's "Solidarity" movement and many other politicians across Europe and America.

Conclusion: Getting Together, Staying Together

In general, during the preparation for the presidential election and in the events after the election, it can be stated clearly that coordination and cooperation between different groups increased substantially. The first powerful impetus was provided by the congress of democratic forces at the beginning of October, which selected a single candidate in a democratic voting procedure. The fact that Alyaksandr Milinkevich was a respected representative of the NGO sector also contributed to the mobilization of activists. He and many members of his team used the resources and contacts in the NGO community to organize the campaign. The campaign created a real coalition built from a variety of civic groups. In the end, activists from both traditional civil society and the overtly political opposition freely reveled in each other's symbols and logos such as blue scarves, jeans-ribbons, and pins saying "For Freedom".

The key point to understand about civil society in contemporary Belarus is that it came to the world of politics because the world of politics, in the form of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's repressive regime, came to it. The totalitarian mindset believes that all things are political. In an irony which may well escape it, the regime's quasi-totalitarian tendencies have become a self-fulfilling prophesy and have pushed large sections of civil society right into the arms of the overtly political opposition. As the protests following the elections showed, what remains of Belarusian civil society is now deeply intertwined with the campaign to oust Lukashenka and his cohorts from power. They were left with little choice. And if this kind of combination of forces does eventually bring the regime in Minsk to its knees it will have none other than the regime itself to thank for bringing it together in the first place. For this to become possible, however, support, cooperation and solidarity of international partners will have to continue and further grow.

Part Two
Belarus in the International Context: Europe, the United States and Russia

European Union Policy towards Belarus: An Extended Hand

Pirkka Tapiola

The basic philosophy behind European Union (EU) policy towards Belarus has been a strong willingness to engage in a relationship enabling the development of Belarus as a European country with a strong civil society, a strengthening democracy, the rule of law and a functioning market economy. It is against this backdrop that the EU has sent the consistent and clear message to Minsk of its preparedness to build a real partnership, including through the instruments contained in the European Neighborhood Policy.

However, the EU has been unable to move forward with engagement, as the preconditions for doing so have not been present. Belarus remains an island of authoritarianism in the middle of a region where democracy has increasingly gained momentum. Engagement is only possible when both sides desire it. Disappointingly, the Belarusian leadership have refused to open up their country. Through their actions, they stand in the way of a better and more European future for the citizens of Belarus.

The March 19, 2006 presidential elections were a sad reminder of the realities, which the Belarusian population face in their daily lives. As noted by the OSCE/ ODIHR International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), these elections were neither free nor fair. The report of the observers cited abuse of state power to protect incumbent President Lukashenka in the run-up to the poll and drew attention to serious problems encountered during the counting of votes and the tabulation of results. The election result announced by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) lacked any credibility. While under the current circumstances in Belarus, President Lukashenka could well have prevailed in the elections, his announced support of over 82 percent of the vote and the official voter turnout of around 92 percent has raised serious questions on whether the electorate had been given an opportunity to have their say.

The months and weeks preceding polling day saw reports of harassment of the opposition and arrests of its supporters. The statements of the chairman of the Belarusian KGB and the Prosecutor-General in the week before the poll, threatening to treat those participating in unauthorized demonstrations as terrorists who could ultimately face even the death penalty, sent chills down the spine of people both within the international community and in Belarus. It was clear that the elections would be held in an atmosphere of fear, aimed at crushing the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people.

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Remarks to the EU Ambassadors in Minsk by Foreign Minister Martynov that responsibility for the consequences of post-election disorder would lie with the opposition and "those foreign governments supporting it" underlined the deteriorating atmosphere before the elections. EU High Representative Javier Solana replied to Martynov in public, stressing that full responsibility for upholding the fundamental rights of and guaranteeing the safety of the Belarusian population lies with the authorities of Belarus. He reminded the Belarusian authorities that the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators exercising their indisputable rights of freedom of expression and assembly would meet with a strong international reaction.

Despite this background and the difficult atmosphere, the world saw strong popular mobilization in the aftermath of the poll, with supporters of the democratic opposition led by presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich gathering peacefully in the center of Minsk, demanding respect for their political rights. While the demonstrations were a far cry from the mass mobilization that had been seen in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, important segments of the Belarusian population showed strong will to take ownership of democratic political processes. Meeting on March 24, 2006, the European Council paid homage to the message of hope brought by Belarus' democratic opposition and civil society and noted that "their brave efforts to advance the cause of democracy in exceptionally difficult circumstances" deserved the EU's "full recognition and support".

While the worst-case scenario of a massive and violent crackdown on demonstrators did not materialize, the Belarusian authorities did – after a period of hesitation – come down hard on those who opposed it publicly. As the week of March 20 progressed, arrests of demonstrators started again. The trend became all too clear when, in the early hours of March 24, the authorities dismantled a small tent camp, which had been set up on March 20, on October Square in Minsk, and arrested those at the camp. This camp had become a symbol of the perseverance of the democratic opposition. Its dismantling sent a clear signal that the regime would not tolerate further dissent. This was also proven on March 25 when a large opposition rally was held in the center of Minsk, under heavy surveillance by security forces. When a group of demonstrators joined the other opposition candidate, Alyaksandr Kazulin, on a march to the detention center where arrested demonstrators were being held, Belarusian Special Forces cracked down. They assaulted the marchers, arresting Kazulin and the most active participants.

The EU was quick to react to the elections and their dramatic aftermath. Already on March 20, the Presidency of the European Union announced that restrictive measures would be taken against those responsible for abuse and violations of international electoral standards. Following the dismantling of the tent camp on March 24, the European Council resolved to directly point to the responsibility of President Lukashenka and to include him as a target of the restrictive measures the EU would put in place. These restrictions – closely coordinated with international partners, especially the United States – will include the expansion of the current visa ban list, which was originally drafted as a response to the disappearance of leading opposition figures and the fraudulent constitutional referendum of October 2004. It was this referendum, which allowed President Lukashenka to stand for a third term. Other measures are being closely looked into as well. The EU will review these restrictive measures on an ongoing basis, remaining open to any additions or other changes to the list of individuals that will be targeted by restrictive measures.

In addition to announcing the upcoming measures, the European Council called for the release of all detained opposition activists and underlined the continued right of the opposition to demonstrate peacefully. This continues to be a priority for the EU and will remain a focus in direct contacts with the Belarusian authorities and in consultations with the EU's key international partners, especially the United States and the Russian Federation.

The immediate post-election reaction understandably focused on the dismay and disappointment the EU felt over the elections and on restrictive measures. At the same time, the Union's message remains two-track. While the EU will continue to be tough on those responsible for the violations we have seen in Belarus, there is a strong commitment to engage with the Belarusian population, to support their efforts for democratization and development. The strongest link of the EU – Belarus relationship needs to be a people-to-people relationship. However, it is precisely this link, which the current regime most fears, as it will assist in developing civil society, providing objective information to the population and through this contribute to laying a strong foundation for truly democratic processes. It is the regime's fear of its own people that leads it to isolate Belarus. In this vein, it is important that the EU works actively to counter this self-isolation and attempts to contribute to the empowerment of the country's citizenry. In this context, it is also clear that the EU would not look into any form of sanctions, which would hurt the population, as a possible measure to respond to the recent political events.

Following the March 19 elections, Belarus stands at a crossroads in its development. On the one hand, President Lukashenka has reestablished his iron grip on the country. On the other, there is new and important momentum for change, emanating from civil society and the newly consolidated democratic opposition. Their bravery has given new hope to many Belarusians and can be the foundation of a stronger popular push for a democratic process. It is in this framework of a grim reality and growing hope that EU policy towards Belarus needs to develop further.

The cornerstone of the EU's policy is already in place. The foundation has been laid by various past decisions by the European Union's highest decision-making bodies. The restrictive approach of the EU towards the leadership will persist if no clear movement towards liberalization is evident. This approach will now be underpinned by a strong set of sanctions targeted at those responsible. However, a real policy cannot build on sanctions alone. The restrictive approach needs to be balanced by further consistent actions and programs to support

the Belarusian population in its course of becoming a stronger political and social actor. The EU realizes that democratic change in Belarus will not happen overnight and that there is a strong need for a consistent long-term approach. Even if current circumstances do not allow the use of the full toolbox of EU programs and policies in support of Belarus, there are important possibilities and assistance tools to help the people within the current framework.

Chief among the current community-funded tools are the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the so-called decentralized cooperation. These programs allow for direct support to civil society and independent media. Programs launched through them do not require the approval of the Belarusian authorities. They also make it possible to support even those civil society organizations, which are not officially registered in Belarus and to give support to Belarus through entities registered and functioning outside Belarus. In terms of civil society support, both EIDHR and the decentralized cooperation are the best possible community tools for direct support to strengthening the capacity of the population to act in promoting its participation in society. These tools are being used, and support from these programs to civil society and independent media has been considerably increased in the past years and is likely to be increased even further.

Support for independent media is of crucial importance. Were it up to the current authorities in Minsk, the Belarusian population would be nearly completely cut-off, not just from the outside world, but also from objective information and news about events in their own country. In close coordination with other international donors, the EU is supporting media programs aimed at filling the information vacuum in Belarus. Two new programs were started in 2005–2006, focusing on electronic media. In the autumn of 2006, the EU began funding regular radio news programming to Belarus, through a program implemented by *Deutsche Welle*. In an even bolder move, a €2 million program enabling an international consortium to provide a wide range of independent media services, including satellite television, was approved by the European Commission. These are important steps, but they will certainly not be the last. Further consistent efforts will be made to provide Belarusian audiences with objective news and information on developments in their own country, breaking the information monopoly of the current regime.

Another focus of EU support is education. This needs to be one of the main focal points in developing a new generation of Belarusian professionals and leaders to take charge of their country's destiny. The Union's support has enabled the Minsk European Humanities University (EHU), which was closed down by the authorities, to reestablish itself in Vilnius, the capital of neighboring Lithuania. While of key importance, this support is clearly not sufficient. The EU, its institutions and its member states are looking into further possibilities to enable Belarusian students to study abroad, either in the EU or the region. Scholarship programs are being developed for this purpose. Their importance is becoming increasingly central also as a way of helping those students who may have lost their places of study as a result of being active in the popular

mobilization for democracy seen around the March 19, 2006 presidential elections. The EU is prepared to do its part and very much hopes that the Belarusian authorities will refrain from preventing these students from taking their places at foreign educational institutions. They should remember that any such action would further harm the future of the Belarusian nation.

The people-to-people partnership to which the EU is so strongly committed needs to flow from a strong interface between Belarusian and EU citizens. The travel restrictions which are being placed on the leadership and other responsible officials are based on clear criteria of personal responsibility. They need to be balanced by facilitating travel to the EU of ordinary Belarusians, especially students and young people. Belarus is a neighbor of the EU, and one, which the European Union very much wants to engage in a common project for development of a functioning democratic society. In this context, it is vital that the Belarusian people know more about the realities of life in the EU.

If and when democratic change takes place, the European Neighborhood Policy will provide the framework for developing a close partnership between the EU and Belarus. This policy is a differentiated one, building on tailor-made Action Plans. While the status quo in Belarus makes it impossible to define in detail what would go into a Neighborhood Action Plan between the EU and Belarus, such a plan would provide a consistent and benchmarked roadmap for common efforts in moving forward with reforms in Belarus through joint policy action, including extensive and targeted financial assistance.

Depending on results - both in the implementation of reforms and in consolidating democracy - the policy would enable the eventual development of a very strong partnership, encompassing political, economic and trade fields, while also introducing elements of integration. It would provide tools for enabling the development of a strong Belarus as part of the European family of nations. Embarking on such cooperation and partnership building would require a strong commitment by both sides to work towards common goals, based on shared values. The commitment is there from the side of the EU, but currently absent from the side of the leadership in Minsk. We hope that over time, this commitment will be a mutual one. The European Union is working actively to make the benefits of the European Neighborhood Policy known to the Belarusian population so that it can make an informed choice in relation to its future.

The current situation largely rules out cooperation with the Belarusian authorities. However, here too the EU is concerned that its policy should not hurt the population. Programs aimed at the basic needs of the population cannot and should not be discontinued. Most notably, these programs focus on dealing with the consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe, the 20th anniversary of which is being marked at the end of April 2006.

In order to have an effective policy on Belarus, there is a strong need for consistency in the actions of the EU and its international partners. This is true for both the policy and assistance coordination. The EU acts together with its

international partners. Of key importance among these partners is the United States, which shares the EU's overall aim of supporting the evolution of a strong, democratic and prosperous Belarus. Many have tried to look for cracks in the EU – United States partnership on Belarus. While there may be minor differences in nuance, there is little difference in the overall goals.

Ukraine is another potentially important partner, and one, which is in the region. In late 2004, Ukraine experienced large-scale political mobilization in support of democracy. As a result of this, the policies on Belarus of Kiev and the EU have been converging, and Ukraine has aligned with all of the EU's statements on Belarus. Ukraine's role is especially important, as it is a direct neighbor to Belarus, with relations on multiple levels.

The Russian Federation remains the one country in the region with the strongest potential leverage on Belarus, based on strong historical ties, economic cooperation and many elements of shared cultural heritage. It is also a strategic partner of the EU. At the 2005 EU – Russia Summit, this partnership was further operationalized with agreement on roadmaps for the so-called "four spaces". The third of these is the Common Space for External Security, within which the partners have agreed to work for stability in their common neighborhood, based on shared values. For the EU, the concept of stability is closely connected to the consolidation of democracy. In this context, the Union continues to raise its concerns over Belarus with Russia.

The EU has a multi-faceted policy on Belarus with one clear aim: to foster the development of democracy, the rule of law and the market economy. In a nutshell, it is a policy to support the Belarusian population in assuming control of its own destiny, through the establishment of democratic processes. All elements of this policy are directed towards this aim. Independent media providing unbiased information on both domestic and foreign developments and a strong civil society are pre-conditions for this to happen. The policy also provides a roadmap for moving towards further domestic reforms and a closer EU – Belarus partnership.

It is the EU's hope that it can see a decent election in Belarus in the not too distant future and start work on a fully-fledged EU – Belarus partnership.

The United States and Europe's Last Dictatorship

Robin Shepherd

"We will work with our allies and partners to assist those seeking to return Belarus to its rightful place among the Euro-Atlantic community of democracies. There is no place in a Europe whole and free for a regime of this kind." President George W. Bush after signing the Belarus Democracy Act into law in October 2004.

On March 16, 2006, just three days before the Belarusian presidential "elections", President Bush sent a letter and accompanying report to the chairmen and ranking members of the House Committee on International Relations and the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. The material was sent in accordance with the terms of the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004, the landmark piece of US legislation seeking to foster democratic change in Belarus.

While repeating long-standing US concerns about Alyaksandr Lukashenka's creation of a "repressive dictatorship on the doorstep of the European Union and NATO", the primary purpose of the report was to detail Lukashenka's links, including arms sales, to rogue states and "state sponsors of terrorism" such as Iran, Syria, Sudan and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and to explain the way in which the Belarusian president has amassed a vast personal fortune, amounting according to some estimates to over $1 billion dollars, partly arising from such links. The regime was specifically accused of selling weapons of mass destruction (WMD) related technologies to Iran.

The timing of the report's release could hardly have been more provocative. And the substance goes some way to explaining why a country of such relatively small strategic or economic significance to the United States should have pushed its way so high up the administration's agenda. Clearly, since Belarus does not stand accused of actually being a state sponsor of terrorism its importance to the administration in this respect is not of the same order as for Iran or Syria, for example. But its links with these regimes do add a certain kind of piquancy to the situation.

While bearing this in mind, in order to understand US policy towards Belarus in recent years we need to put together two important blocks of administration thinking: the global freedom and democracy agenda set down by President Bush in his inaugural address in January 2005, and administration policy towards Russia. The former could be said to establish the broad moral and

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theoretical framework behind US policy on Belarus. The latter could be said to explain some of the difficulties of translating theory into practice.

Democratizing the World

In general terms, the global democracy agenda was always going to be a risky strategy for the administration. Even its most ardent supporters were aware at the outset that issues such as the war on terror or less grand but equally intrusive issues such as energy policy would make it impossible to apply such lofty ideals in practice with any great degree of speed or consistency. The administration's enemies would inevitably seize upon such inconsistencies as evidence of "double standards" or "hypocrisy". What value is there really, many have asked, in setting out a strategy for the democratization of the world, while the Bush administration stands shoulder to shoulder with the likes of President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan? Something similar could be said of the Bush administration's relationship with Russia, a country whose headlong retreat from democracy under President Vladimir Putin must count as one of the administration's most embarrassing setbacks, especially given the famously warm friendship which has been established between the countries' two leaders.

The more sophisticated members of the administration and its supporters, however, have come up with some interesting ripostes. Ruminating on the matter in *Commentary Magazine* in July 2005, *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer argued "The question of alliances with dictators, of deals with the devil, can be approached openly, forthrightly, and without any need for defensiveness. The principle is that we cannot democratize the world overnight and, therefore, if we are sincere about the democratic project, we must proceed sequentially". In other words, tactical compromises in the short term do not impinge upon the long term strategic goal. Speaking in the context of a lecture on the upcoming elections in Belarus and Ukraine at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC on March 9, 2006 Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Daniel Fried acknowledged that there were difficulties in implementing the freedom agenda but said: "...The challenge the administration faces, and I'll admit this frankly, is how to operationalize a very bold vision with what it is possible to accomplish every day...[But] I would much rather deal with the problems of support for democracy, recognizing that there are problems, than the problems of the alternative". In other words, all potential foreign policy frameworks are imperfect. While alerting the administration to the difficulties and dangers of promoting democracy, therefore, do not forget the difficulties and dangers implicit in the "realist" foreign policy option which makes no substantial distinction between a tyrannical dictatorship and a liberal democracy. There are problems with both options. This administration, Fried

suggests, has decided that from a moral and ultimately practical point of view, the first option is superior to the latter.

So much for the theory. How has the democracy agenda translated into reality in terms of policy towards Belarus in recent years? And how has that reality been affected by relations with Russia, a country which claims Belarus as part of its sphere of influence?

Russia First?

To start with the second question, it is helpful to recognize just how important Russia has been perceived to be to the United States. The country is seen as crucial to at least four key areas of American foreign policy:

Firstly, intelligence sharing and general cooperation in the war on terror: Vladimir Putin was the first foreign leader to express his condolences and support following the terror attacks of 9/11. Since Russia's Southern arc borders into the Islamic world and since Russia in its incarnation as the Soviet Union fought a decade long war in Afghanistan in the 1980's, the country's ability to help or hinder operations against the Taliban and subsequently to secure stability in that country has long been perceived as invaluable. As has cooperation on broader intelligence sharing from the vast global intelligence infrastructure passed down to Russia after the demise of the Soviet Union.

Secondly, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and related technology and know-how, especially to rogue states: After the United States, Russia has the largest stockpiles of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in the world. It also has thousands of scientists and technical support staff with the training and qualifications to help build WMD. No other country could pose greater danger to the United States were cooperation on non-proliferation not forthcoming.

Thirdly, diversification of energy supplies away from the Middle East: Russia is a major supplier of and transit country for oil and natural gas. Its importance to United States energy policy is, therefore, enormous.

Fourthly, and finally, long term containment of China: While Europeans and others outside the United States usually overlook the fact, American policy makers are deeply concerned about the rise of China as a global power in the coming decades. Since Russia shares a 4,300 kilometer long border with China and is increasingly feeding the Chinese economy with much needed energy resources, Moscow is clearly a key consideration in US policy towards Beijing.

It is perfectly possible, of course, that on some of the above mentioned matters the United States is operating on misguided assumptions. It is not clear, for example, just how useful Russian intelligence sharing has actually been in the war on terror. Nor is it certain that Russia has played such a valuable role in non-proliferation especially in view of the fact that Russia is actually building Iran's civil nuclear capability. The perceptions of US foreign policy

makers may not match the realities. Nevertheless, such perceptions exist. And from this thumbnail sketch, it is not hard to see that Russia plays a hugely important role in some of the biggest issues of concern to US foreign policy makers and will probably continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Since the Putin administration views Belarus as part of its patch it should also be clear, therefore, that the United States, operating under the assumptions about Russia that it currently does, faces significant constraints in the practical application of policy towards Lukashenka. Before coming to that policy and its implementation it is worth pausing to consider Belarus from the other side of the same fence. Why does Russia view Western and specifically US designs on Belarus with such sensitivity?

In the eyes of many in Moscow, Belarus is the "last chance saloon" in the European theater. Following the humiliating "loss" of Ukraine in the wake of the Orange Revolution, it is the only remaining country in Europe through which nostalgic illusions of imperial greatness can still be sustained and its territory forms the ground for the last battle for "strategic space" in post-Cold War Europe. Clearly oil and gas issues, notably transit and refining capacity, are also important. But, the real political significance of Belarus to Russia is psychological, fitting as it does into a particular nationalist mind-set. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov put it succinctly in an interview with *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in February 2006: "Belarusians and Russians are one people" he said, adding that the United States and the wider West had no business interfering. The Putin administration, despite widely mooted antipathy to the person of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, has so far shown itself determined to hold onto Belarus and subsidizes the Belarusian economy to the tune of billions of dollars a year in the form of cheap gas exports. One does not need to delve too far into the realm of pure speculation to also surmise that genuine democratic change in Belarus could be perceived in Moscow as a potentially dire threat to the model of so called "managed democracy" so much in vogue inside Vladimir Putin's Kremlin. A democratized Belarus would leave Russia as the sole remaining bastion of authoritarianism in Europe and, the Kremlin must fear, may help reactivate pro-democracy forces in Russia itself.

For the United States then, Belarus emerges as a both an object of concern because of the pro-democracy agenda but also as a complicating factor in the wider interplay between US and Russian foreign policy.

An Evolving Policy Framework

Over the years, policy towards Belarus has evolved in fits and starts, and not a little controversy. The first US ambassador to independent Belarus, David H. Swartz, stepped down in 1994 in a storm of protest at what he saw as deep flaws in the first Clinton administration's policy. Outlining those concerns in no uncertain terms in an op-ed revealingly entitled "The mess of Belarus, care

of the State Department" in *the Washington Times* on June 5, 1997 he said of that policy:

"Mr. Clinton and Co.'s Russo-centrism evinced itself from Day 1 of this administration. It served to: a) discourage independence-minded reformers in Belarus; b) encourage those in Belarus who want restoration of the Soviet empire; and c) give the clear message to Moscow that the US recognizes Russia's hegemonic rights in what it calls the 'near abroad'. (...) Devastating for the explicit US goal of fostering reform in Belarus was the near-total lack of effective US technical and economic assistance during the period when it could have made a real difference, 1993-95. (...) Instead of providing aid that could help advance US interests, Washington took steps that harmed our interests. Specifically, through 1995 the US provided nearly $200 million in US surplus agricultural commodities to Belarus - a country which, as a Soviet republic, was a net exporter of food. This US "aid" did nothing other than help prop up the Soviet collective farm system there - the very heart of President Lukashenka's political support."

Even the Clinton administration's greatest success in Belarus - getting the Belarusian authorities to hand over all Soviet era nuclear weapons to Moscow - was described by Ambassador Swartz as much less significant than was claimed since Russia's military had complete control over the weapons in any case.

Whatever the truth about that controversy, the Clinton administration did change tack on Belarus. By 1997, a policy of "selective engagement" had been put in place and governmental relations were downgraded to the level of assistant secretary of state or below. Relations with Belarus at governmental level continued to deteriorate for the remainder of Clinton's term while contacts with Belarusian civil society were significantly expanded.

Since then, broad bi-partisan agreement has developed culminating in the passing of the Belarus Democracy Act which was approved by Congress unanimously. The approval of the Act itself coincided with the rigged 2004 referendum allowing Lukashenka to stand for another term of office in 2006, but was introduced to Congress by Senator Jesse Helms as far back as November 2001. Its central aims were to authorize financial aid for pro-democracy organizations while banning financial support for agencies of the government. It also called on the President of the United States to issue reports to Congress on Lukashenka's personal finances and the regime's links, specifically via arms sales, to rogue states.

This then raises the question of what the United States has actually been able to do to promote change in Belarus, which kind of policies have been enacted and which have been ruled out.

To start at the extreme end of the spectrum of possibilities, military action has always been held to be out of the question partly because of the country's proximity to Russia and also because the Lukashenka regime, for all its faults, is not warlike. Lukashenka is no Slobodan Miloševič. On the contrary, one of the central strategies of regime propaganda is to constantly remind a people

that lost between a quarter and a third of its population in World War II of how fortunate they are to have a leadership which has kept them free from conflict. Neither is the regime so central to the WMD and global terrorism debate to constitute a real and present danger to US national security. Lukashenka has not in the past and is unlikely in the future to pose a direct threat to American soldiers or American civilians. (The only high profile incident involving loss of life occurred in September 1995 when the Belarusian air force shot down a hot air balloon participating in the Gordon Benett Cup race killing two Americans. No apology was issued). In short, the regime, however obnoxious from a moral point of view, has not yet done anything which would, in the eyes of the administration, merit a formal policy of "regime change". And although the Bush administration clearly does want a change of regime in Minsk, it has not yet regarded Lukashenka as being of such critical importance, especially given what else is at stake, to publicly outline its policy in such incendiary terms.

Policy has, therefore, focused on supporting "democratic processes" rather than anointing alternative candidates to Lukashenka, although administration officials have made their preferences crystal clear in terms of who they have been prepared to meet and, thus, to legitimize. Notable meetings have included Condoleezza Rice holding talks with Belarusian democracy activists in Vilnius in April 2005 and President Bush receiving two prominent wives of disappeared oppositionists at the White House in February 2006. Other officials, including Daniel Fried, met opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich personally in the weeks leading up to the election. The rhetoric against the Lukashenka regime has also been ramped up considerably in recent years. In January 2005, Condoleezza Rice named Belarus as one of six "outposts of tyranny" alongside Cuba, Zimbabwe, Myanmar, Iran and North Korea.

In concrete terms, administration policy has mainly been built around helping create the internal prerequisites for democratic change by pumping in millions of dollars ($11.8 million in 2005, for example) in assistance, though serious questions remain in the minds of some about how much of that money has actually gone to the kind of civic groups, such as those surrounding the Jeans Solidarity Campaign, which had such a powerful impact prior to and following the March 19 elections.

And the timeframe in which success is expected has been set for the long term. As Daniel Fried put it in the afore-mentioned speech at CSIS, "... We, the supporters of freedom and democracy in Belarus must be prepared for a long game. We must be prepared to work for the years it will take to build on (...) the base that the united opposition has presented and to work with civil society in Belarus and to make our message clear."

Generally speaking, US policy since 2001 has moved further away from a "single event", election focused strategy to one which divides its attention between elections, the development and sustenance of civil society and support for independent media.

Visa bans have also been put in place on a small number of officials associated

with vote rigging or participating in direct acts of repression, and there has been talk of exploring the possibility of freezing some Belarusian assets held abroad.

Conclusion: Where to Next?

The Lukashenka regime is viewed as an affront to the current US administration's broad political and moral vision. The fact that it is located in Europe may also inject a certain amount of added urgency, and Belarus has become the centerpiece of the administration's democratisation project in Europe's East now that countries such as Georgia and Ukraine have, we hope, matured into genuinely transitional states. President Bush and his senior colleagues may feel a strong incentive to mop up the remaining dictatorship on at least one continent while problems with implementing the democracy agenda remain so conspicuous elsewhere. After all, if Washington is unable to deal with Alyaksandr Lukashenka's little Belarus, what hope for democratizing China, the greater Middle East, or indeed, Russia itself?

What happens next in terms of Belarus policy will depend upon a number of factors. But it is unlikely, unless there is a democratic revolution that any of the major building blocks of that policy will change substantially as the Bush administration rolls on to the end of its final term of office. The pro-democracy agenda is the administration's proudest policy innovation and is here to stay. And despite a marked cooling in the tone of relations between Washington and Moscow in recent months, Russia is perceived as too important to US foreign policy to risk a major rift over Belarus. Reports are currently circulating that hardliners associated with Vice President Dick Cheney are arguing for a tougher line against Russia in response to President Putin's backsliding on democracy. However commendable this might be from a moral point of view, there seems little likelihood, though, that this will translate into anything much more substantial than stronger rhetoric. The White House and the State Department simply believe there is too much to lose. The only thing that may change as far as Russia is concerned is that Moscow itself may alter course on Belarus especially if Putin and his allies come to believe that Lukashenka's days are numbered or that it is too costly, in both political and financial terms, to continue subsidizing his increasingly ludicrous regime. That, however, is mainly a matter for Russia and it is unlikely that Washington could do much more than try to coax President Putin in that direction by the standard diplomatic means or try to exacerbate existing conflicts between Putin and Lukashenka to help destabilize the regime.

More broadly, it is not easy to see what more the United States could do to promote democratic change in Belarus. Even if the stakes were raised by introducing a formal policy of "regime change" most of the tools which could be used to achieve that aim are either being used already, such as visa bans, financial aid to civil society and the opposition, political isolation and rhetorical

denunciation, or have already been ruled out as unfeasible, such as military force, or economic sanctions which are (wrongly in the view of this author) currently opposed by the main leaders of the Belarusian opposition.

One much talked about tack which the United States could take would be to push for enhanced cooperation with the European Union along the lines pursued so effectively in the 1990's with Vladimir Mečiar's Slovakia. This, however, runs up against a two-fold problem. US and EU policy worked in Central and Eastern Europe because of the clear prospect of NATO and EU membership which in Slovakia's case acted as a powerful tool (often referred to as "conditionality") rallying the country's population to back democratic forces.

However, the Belarusian opposition says it is against NATO membership, which rules out the benefits of conditionality on that score. And, currently, there is great opposition within the EU to further expansion which rules out conditionality on the other score as well. It would certainly be helpful if the United States could use its influence to encourage a change of heart. But, as with Vladimir Putin's Russia, behind the scenes diplomatic cajoling is probably all we can reasonably expect.

This is not to diminish the importance of transatlantic cooperation on Belarus. A united front in terms of punitive sanctions is obviously crucial. It is also possible that the United States and the European Union could develop common strategies aimed, for example, at trying to split elements of the government apparatus and the security forces from Lukashenka and his closest cohorts. But none of these moves could be expected to yield the same results as prospective membership of transatlantic structures themselves.

In the end then, beyond fine tuning and a certain tightening of the screws, Washington's foreign policy towards Belarus has probably evolved as far as it can. Filled with indignation at the brutal and abusive nature of the Lukashenka regime, that policy is laudable and has been instrumental in setting the broader Western agenda on Belarus. Faced with a regime that appears not to care about international isolation, however, and which is located in a sphere of influence claimed by Russia, the United States has emerged as a potential facilitator for change in Belarus, but not as a prime mover. Washington is doing its best. But the real task of liberating Belarus remains something which can only be undertaken by other players, most notably the people of Belarus themselves.

Russia's Policy towards Belarus: A Tale of Two Presidents

Dmitri Trenin

Russia and its position vis-à-vis Belarus has, since its independence, been something of a thorny subject. Undoubtedly, the attitude of successive Russian presidents towards Belarus has been ambiguous and demands a certain attention, especially since the approach of President Vladimir Putin seems to be beginning to evolve and change.

During much of his first presidential term, Vladimir Putin did not particularly hide his dislike for the regime built by Alyaksandr Lukashenka or for the man himself. Above all, Putin wanted to bring to an end the games Lukashenka had been playing with former President Yeltsin, endlessly promising integration while profiting from Russian subsidies. Rather unceremoniously, Putin laid down Moscow's terms for integration and the options available to Belarus. Essentially, Russia offered Belarus full integration, European Union style, or accession to the Russian Federation on the model of East Germany. Lukashenka was shaken and vowed to defend Belarusian sovereignty. Moscow, for its part, chose to play hardball. When Minsk reneged on its promise to sign over the Belarusian gas transportation system *Beltransgas* to Russia, *Gazprom* halted for 24 hours its gas shipments to Belarus. Putin's succession of Yeltsin at the Kremlin undoubtedly put an end to Lukashenka's hopes, no matter how far-fetched, of rising to the position of supreme power in a reunified Russo-Belarusian state. Putin, for his part, reacted negatively to the idea of a third term for Lukashenka. After 9/11 and Russia's realignment with the West, the Kremlin feels embarrassed by an ally who has been dubbed "Europe's last dictator" by the international community.

The presidential administration in Moscow started putting out feelers to gauge who would be the best alternative figure in Belarus to receive Putin's support and contacted several potential successors to Lukashenka. Kremlin officials held private talks with prominent Belarusian figures, representing both the establishment and the opposition. Moscow, however, was cautious. Long accustomed to dealing with incumbent leaders, even those who were not too palatable, the Kremlin wanted to avoid an open break with Lukashenka. It feared that the Minsk leader would turn against Russia and embrace the West, and that the West would forgive him in exchange for launching Belarus into the European and Euro-Atlantic orbit. Afraid of the risks of exposure, the Kremlin did not want to plot to overthrow Lukashenka. Those in the Kremlin, who would have preferred a change of leadership in Minsk, also had to warily look over

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their shoulder: the cohort of Lukashenka friends in the Russian establishment were on their guard. Nevertheless and however indecisive or inconclusive, Moscow's policies toward Belarus from 2000 to 2003 already anticipated a post-Lukashenka Belarus.

Russia's Foreign Policy Change

Between 2003 and 2005, however, major changes occurred in Russia's domestic situation and its foreign policy. The Khodorkovsky/YUKOS affair resulted in the once relatively liberal approach of the government to domestic politics and economics giving way to a harder-line set of policies. The terrorist atrocity of Beslan, led to further political centralization with the announcement that regional governors would be appointed by the president rather than popularly elected. Reacting to Western criticisms of the rescue operation that had gone badly wrong, and of its steps towards power centralization, the Kremlin in turn accused the West of sympathizing with Chechen separatists, supporting a "fifth column" inside the country and wishing to diminish and even dismember Russia. The Rose Revolution in Georgia and particularly the Orange Revolution in Ukraine resulted in a revision of Russia's relations with the West. Essentially, Moscow decided to leave the outermost Western orbit and opt for an independent trajectory. Since then, Russia's foreign policy has been increasingly oriented towards building its own "solar system" separate from the West.

As a minor consequence of these fundamental changes, Lukashenka was essentially let off the hook. Ever the master tactician, he was able to use the post-Beslan confusion and consternation in Moscow to hold a referendum on changing the Belarusian constitution in October 2004, thereby giving him the formal right to run for (a hitherto unconstitutional) third term. Moscow was not in a position to object and had to accept "the will of the people". Thereafter, Lukashenka could fully exploit the frustration and fear experienced by Moscow in the wake of the Orange Revolution in neighboring Ukraine, which finally triumphed in December 2004. After the change of regime in Kiev, and Ukraine's increasingly pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation, holding onto Belarus became even more important, from the Kremlin's perspective.

The last of the three color revolutions, which took place in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005, was followed by the riots in Uzbek Andijan, bloodily suppressed by the authorities with a massive loss of life in May 2005. By giving his support to Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov, Vladimir Putin made it clear that Moscow favored stability in Central Asia and across the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) at almost any price. The Kremlin was not amused by the founding in September 2005 of a Community of Democratic Choice which brought Ukraine and Georgia together with Poland and Lithuania. To the Russian leadership, color revolutions were the result of the West using

state-of-the-art political technologies to remove former Soviet republics from Russia's sphere of influence.

Lukashenka again made full use of the opportunity that presented itself. He claimed to be a victim of Western NGOs, and portrayed himself as the weak link in what the Kremlin perceived as the new Baltic-to-the-Black-Sea *cordon sanitaire*, intended to isolate Russia from Europe. The idea was that Belarus under his regime would be a bulwark preventing such a *cordon* from becoming reality. Alternatively, a regime change in Belarus would be tantamount to Moscow getting "a second Ukraine" right on its doorstep. While the Russian authorities were restricting the activities of Russian civil society organizations supported by the West, Lukashenka passed draconian laws to choke off outside funding to Belarusian NGOs.

Moscow and the 2006 Election

Putin must have heeded the message, despite his personal resentment of Lukashenka. Moscow refrained from any steps which could damage Lukashenka's position in the run-up to the elections. While all prices for Russian natural gas from January 2006 were at least doubled, even for Russian allies such as Armenia (or more than quadrupled, as in the case of Ukraine), the price level for Belarus remained the same. The Russian electronic media generally supported the incumbent. Belarusian opposition hopeful Alyaksandr Milinkevich traveled to Moscow, and met some Russian lawmakers, but no senior administration figure would meet him. Even though Putin himself refrained from personal expressions of support, high-level Russian delegations visited Minsk just before the elections to demonstrate Moscow's official backing for Lukashenka.

There had never been any doubt as to Moscow's verdict on the 2006 Belarusian election. In the eyes of the Russian *Duma* observers, and the Russia-led CIS team, the voting was free and fair, and Lukashenka's victory was fully legitimate. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, rejected the negative judgment of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on the election as biased. President Putin duly congratulated the victor. However, Russian television did report on the mass demonstrations in Minsk following the elections, and refrained from summarily branding the protestors as "agents of the West". The Russian liberal press, that usually treats Lukashenka as something of a *bête noir*, was scathingly critical. In the end, there was a sigh of relief that the election protests had not ended in bloodshed, but also some frustration that the Belarusian *bat'ka* (father) had done it again.

Lukashenka's "83 percent landslide" does not resolve any of Russia's problems with Belarus. The Kremlin is determined to permanently link Belarus to Russia by means of economic, financial, social and political integration. In terms of the Moscow-centered "solar system", Belarus is the closest and most hospitable candidate planet. Especially now that it has become clear that Ukraine will not

join a single economic space with Russia, tightening ties to Belarus is a major priority. There is a feeling in the Kremlin that by 2008, when Vladimir Putin is due to step down as Russia's president, and when Ukraine may be invited to join NATO, "something must be done" about Belarus.

The hard fact is that during Putin's second term Alyaksandr Lukashenka has been able to considerably strengthen his position vis-à-vis Moscow. He has found new ways of exploiting the topic of Russo-Belarusian unity in order to consolidate his own rule and to prevent, or at least significantly restrict, the two countries' integration. Lukashenka knows full well that meaningful integration would mean the loss of the financial and economic power base of his regime. Once Minsk accepts the Russian ruble issued by the Central Bank in Moscow, and allows the privatization of Belarusian assets, Lukashenka's game will be up. Thus, he has a very good reason to persevere.

Future Scenarios?

The Kremlin sees itself outmanoeuvered. Even those who support Lukashenka as a lesser evil to a Western-leaning Belarus, privately refer to him as "our s.o.b". The truth is that, although notoriously obstinate and treacherous, he is not Russia's s.o.b., but very much his own. In the past, Lukashenka countered Russian moves to make him behave by appeals to Belarusian sovereignty and even hints, however implausible, that he might re-orient his policy away from Moscow and toward Brussels. In the near future, his trump cards could be Kiev's desire to join NATO and plans to enlarge the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to include Belarus. Unless Moscow is careful, Lukashenka will play those cards to expand his room for manoeuver even further in his dealings with Russia.

If Moscow continues with the current approach of supporting the status quo in order to prevent a regime change, assumed to be anti-Russian, it is unlikely to achieve much, and will make its interests dependent on Lukashenka's political future. For a time, Belarus will continue as before, with Lukashenka dominating, and the opposition weak. Having supported Lukashenka in 2006, Moscow may now be ready to put him under pressure, as seems to be indicated by the rise in gas prices announced immediately after the elections. Russia will also seek control of *Beltransgas*, and will press Minsk for some real integration and openness to Russian business. Lukashenka, however, will play for time. If Putin actually leaves the Kremlin in 2008, his successor will probably need some time before he is ready for a more active policy towards Belarus. As discussed, 2008 could be a very difficult year for Russia's relations with the West. Tension and suspicion form exactly the right environment for Lukashenka to peddle his unique commodity – loyalty to Russia against encroachments from the West.

Still, serious Russian observers can hardly ignore the message of the 2006 election. Lukashenka may have retained power, but he will not be president for life. Belarus is not Central Asia. In comparison with the previous elections, the

opposition has grown bolder, both at the level of its leaders and supporters. Lukashenka, the builder of a highly paternalistic system, is the default choice of the passive part of the electorate. The more active people prefer change. It is only a matter of time before the critical mass develops.

When this finally happens, much will be up for grabs in Belarus. There are immense dangers inherent in one-man rule. Even though it is frequently argued that Russia's political system has evolved to become virtually indistinguishable from that of Belarus, there is a difference. Under Russia's czarist political system, all major decisions are either made or sanctioned by one institution, the presidency. The czar, however, rules on behalf of the dominant corporation, and is more of a function than a personality. Transfer of power takes place within the corporation and is ratified in a popular election. In Belarus, Lukashenka is the regime. Thus, the political and economic system as a whole is intimately linked to one individual. Over the long term, this is not sustainable.

By 2011, when his newly-acquired term is due to expire, Lukashenka will have served almost as long as head of state, 17 years, as Brezhnev had when he died. Belarus' vaunted stability will look more like stagnation. The system will be eroding fast from within. Since two-thirds of Belarusian borders are with EU member states and genuinely pluralist, Europe-leaning Ukraine, the demonstration effect of the neighbors will also be significant. "We've had enough" could become a very popular slogan, uniting freedom-loving students and property-hungry elites. The more active part of the electorate would grow, and become more restive. Isolation of Lukashenka would increase, and his capacity for rational and adequate action will diminish. In principle, a revolution in Belarus could be realistically averted if Lukashenka decides to turn the country over to a successor who would then have to loosen up the system, and hold a free election. So far, however, grooming a successor is precisely the thing Lukashenka has been trying to avoid. If impatience for change on the one hand, and a provocation on behalf of those resisting it, combine and produce violence, the cost to Russia would be very high. Inside Belarus, Moscow would be associated with support for oppression. Internationally, the "Belarusian question" would become a permanent fixture on the Russia-EU and Russia-US agendas.

A Pro-active Strategy

For Russia not to be "used", it would need to act, rather than merely react. There is good reason to think that a post-Lukashenka leadership in Belarus would draw legitimacy from being anti-Lukashenka. It is not clear, however, whether the Kremlin understands this and how capable it is of developing a strategy that would be future-oriented. If they understood the realities clearly and were willing to act, they would probably have to use integration as a tool for change.

The Kremlin would have to publicly call Lukashenka's bluff on the issue of union with Russia. Moscow would have to seize the initiative, using integration as the vehicle. A serious and generous offer should be made to the Belarusian people, explaining the advantages of a common market with Russia, complete with the four economic freedoms, equal rights and equal treatment of the two countries' nationals in each country's territory, and the Russian ruble as a currency. The Kremlin would make clear at the same time that it upholds Belarusian independence and sovereignty.

It is crucial that the Kremlin, using the formal intimacy of the union state, publicly calls for political freedom in Belarus and privately tells Lukashenka that it will not support any further extension of his presidential mandate. Rather than leaving Lukashenka then to groom a successor, Moscow would need to open a dialogue with Belarusian politicians, thus encouraging them to come forward and engage. Lukashenka would have to be prevailed upon to hold early parliamentary, and then presidential elections. In order not to be constrained and second-guessed, Russia should not support Belarusian membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, citing geography as a reason. Finally, the Kremlin must give Lukashenka an offer he cannot refuse, for example, some honorary position as head of the Russo-Belarusian parliamentary assembly that would give him immunity from prosecution, the only concession Moscow would have to make.

The possibilities for Russian-Western interaction on the Belarusian issue are limited, but an understanding is crucial. From Moscow's perspective, Belarus can not be "divided" or "shared" between Russia and the West, not to speak of Moscow "delivering" its nearest neighbor to the "common home" of NATO and the European Union. Russia would work with the West to eliminate the risk of bloodshed in Belarus and to win support for its policy when and if it decides to drop its support for Lukashenka in favor of another pro-Russian candidate. In this case, the "deal" would be relative freedom and a democratic future in exchange for informal Western recognition of Belarus as a Russian ally and as part of the Moscow-centered system. If this integration coincides with the wishes and interests of the bulk of the Belarusian people, then so be it.

There are risks for the Kremlin in the pro-active scenario. From being less free than Russia, Belarus would emerge as more free. That freedom of choice could also be translated onto international relations. The Russian offer would be judged against the possibility, no matter how distant, of acceding to the European Union. Russian business' appetite for privatizing the juicier chunks of Belarusian property would run against the desire of the Belarusian elites to enrich themselves, and the widespread anti-oligarchy sentiment of many ordinary people.

Yet, there is a price to be paid for inaction as well as for action. The difference is that in the former case one simply submits oneself to the tides of history, while in the latter case one consciously promotes one's interests. There is always a place for uncertainty in world affairs. However, a Belarus that is free to develop its identity beyond Lukashenka's unique and bleak brand of neo-Sovietism is not only a boon for all its neighbors, but a genuinely close partner to Russia, stimulating it, too, to move forward.

International Democracy Assistance to Belarus: An Effective Tool?

Balázs Jarábik

Democratic breakthroughs as witnessed in Georgia and Ukraine in recent years are often taken as reference points for assessing developments in Belarus. Yet, compared to those countries, it is blatantly obvious that the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka has been infinitely better prepared for thwarting anything resembling a color revolution from happening in Belarus, while the Belarusian democracy movement comprising political parties, non-governmental organizations and other civic actors is considerably less developed and strong. The key factor behind this state of affairs is (self) isolation. Over the twelve years of Lukashenka's rule, Belarus has increasingly isolated itself from the West and the rest of the international community, while retaining close ties with, and receiving massively subsidized natural resources from, Russia. This has enabled Lukashenka to maintain the Soviet heritage of far-reaching social welfare policies and redistribution that so far appeased a good part of domestic society, while conducting massive repression of independent political and social forces.

Faced with this regime, most analysts agree that the policies of the United States and the European Union have failed to achieve their often-stated goal: a democratic Belarus. This goal itself, it seems, has been rather weakly enforced over the last twelve years, a situation that appears to be slowly changing, as the blatant democratic lacunae and human rights abuses under Lukashenka are increasingly taken seriously by the West. More importantly, however, experiences to date have shown that making Western policies vis-à-vis Belarus more effective requires a review and redesign of its policy tools. This article argues that limited Western influence on democratization in Belarus is due to a lack of appropriate policy focus and mechanisms for implementing support.

Western Policy in the Past: Experiences and Constraints

If Lukashenka has managed to turn Belarus into the quasi-totalitarian regime it is today, this is also because of a long-standing lack of serious interest on

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the part of the West. Western concern was only really drawn by the presidential elections in 2001 and 2006 and by the referendums in 1996 and 2004. On those occasions, the United States increased election related assistance, especially in 2000 and 2001, while little was forthcoming from the European side to seriously support civic activities to ensure free and fair elections. More broadly, it seems that civil society support has not been prominent in Western policies, which were rather built around foundations of cooperation with the regime in Minsk. According to most analysts, this government focus has been the primary reason for the failure of Western policies to date.

Nevertheless, the US and EU assistance differ profoundly in character: while the US wishes to support democratization in the most direct way, the EU prefers to address "the needs of the population" through the establishment of humanitarian, healthcare and social welfare programs.

The US is by far the biggest donor in terms of democracy assistance and civil society. Prior to the 2001 presidential election, an estimated $37.78 million in assistance was given to Belarus, including $12.41 million in Freedom Support Act assistance largely addressing the elections themselves. After the election fraud became blatantly obvious, the US decided to maintain humanitarian aid and exchange programs, while democracy assistance decreased dramatically to $7.8million. This shift indicates a lack of long-term strategy for supporting the development of Belarusian civil society.

The EU has found it even more difficult to address the erosion of democracy under Lukashenka. While the European Commission declares on its website that "[the] EU has consistently attempted to overcome this situation, providing assistance to bolster democracy, repeating its hope that Belarus would take its place among European democratic countries and offering co-operation in support of this path", the scale, scope and impact of EU support seem to have been very limited. EU "assistance to bolster democracy" was provided overwhelmingly through TACIS, the program for Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States, one of the conditions of which is permission from the government in Minsk. Since 1997, TACIS implemented two programs for civil society (in 2000-2001 and 2002-2003) with a value of €5 million each. For comparison, activities related to the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster received a similar sum in EU support in 2003 alone. It is noteworthy that it is near-impossible to receive detailed information on projects supported, and the results generated, through EU democracy assistance to Belarus.

Usually, EU assistance is dispersed through government structures, and implementation agencies are used to being welcomed rather than restricted. In Belarus, however, the latter is the case, a realization that took considerable time to emerge in the EU. The only flexible mechanism for a long time – the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) – was largely paralyzed with unsuitable priorities, such as children's rights that, while important, limited more effective support to democracy groups. In part as a result of diverging approaches to and focus areas for Belarus assistance, US and EU funded civil society efforts lacked communication and coordination on the ground. Structural differences, especially, inhibited such coordination. The US provides assistance through regranting NGOs, while EU financial mechanisms are tailored primarily at consulting companies.

A further consequence of these diverging structures became apparent when it came to advocating for Belarus among policymakers: while US NGOs took an active role in pushing Belarus further up the policy agenda, European interest remained low until, with EU enlargement, NGOs from new member states started more active EU-level lobbying on behalf of Belarus.

A final obstacle to effective democracy assistance for Belarus also resulted from the broader policy debate. With the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, widespread suspicion emerged that US groups, such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Freedom House, or the Open Society Institute, played a key role behind the scenes role in fomenting these democratic breakthroughs. The fact that the second administration of President Bush has made democracy promotion a central pillar of US foreign policy clearly added to an impression of "American interventionism", a card played skillfully by authoritarian rulers in Belarus and beyond. What is more, Lukashenka drew important lessons from regime change in Slovakia (1998) and Serbia (2000), and particularly from Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), resulting in the regime's imposition of substantial limits on international democracy assistance.

The Belarusian Regime: From Soft to Hard Repression of Civil Society

After 2001, the legal conditions for civil society in Belarus have changed rapidly and beyond recognition, and it has become increasingly impossible for foreign donors to support civic actors. Only a few donors, more American than European, have been flexible enough to continue support to civil society, which was forced to operate under conditions recognizable from pre-1989 communist Eastern Europe rather than from post-1989 new democracies. Largely de-legalized, civil society and its supporters abroad have been struggling to adjust to this new-old reality which, in operational terms, required most of all secure mechanisms for the provision of small-scale, highly targeted and swift financial assistance.

Limiting access to international organizations and partners engaged in Belarus has long been standard to the repertory of the Belarusian authorities. Numerous international activists and experts (including the author) have been denied entry to the country after the 2004 referendum and parliamentary elections. Some of them have become regular "participants" of propaganda films on Belarusian TV. According to independent observers, the Belarusian authorities keep a blacklist of about 40,000 names that includes criminal and political entries, the latter estimated to comprise several hundred names, at least.

Within Belarus, and on the recipient side for democracy assistance, pressure has equally heightened. Prohibitive conditions for the registration of non-governmental organizations were put in place, and any more active and visible NGOs were forcibly shut down between 2001 and 2006. These included those that took an active role in the 2001 presidential campaign, such as *Viasna 96* and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee. In 2003, in particular, the state authorities unleashed a massive "clean-up" of Belarusian civil society, issuing numerous official warnings to NGOs, closing 51 public associations (NGOs) by court ruling, while the statutory bodies of another 78 associations opted for self-closure. One target of this campaign were regional NGO resource centers, such as *Varuta* in Baranovichi, Civic Initiatives in Homel, *Ratusha* in Grodno, and *Vezha* in Brest. Another group of NGOs affected were youth organizations, such as *Hart* in Homel, *Kontur* from Vitsebsk, the Association of Belarusian Students, the Youth Information Center, the youth wing of the United Civic Party, and *Malady Front* (Young Front), which all lost their official status. As of 2005, thus, virtually no independent civil society organization remained registered in Belarus.

A next step was to de-legalize foreign aid. Belarusian legislation adopted in 2001 determines that development assistance cannot be provided to unregistered non-governmental organizations. The procedure for grant making foreseen by the Belarusian authorities is, according to the Minsk-based Foundation for Legal Technologies, as follows: the donor sends the financial support it wishes to make to the presidential fund and indicates the purposes of the grant, while the grantee is to request reimbursement. The fund's administration keeps the grant until an official decision has been made whether or not the indicated purpose of the grant is admissible. This procedure may last for years, and the administration tends to not to approve funds for civic activities, as happened with several projects supported by TACIS and private US donors.

Prior to the March 2006 presidential elections, the Belarusian authorities concluded a year-long legislative campaign designed to prevent any popular protest by criminalizing its own citizens. A comprehensive legal package, known as "anti-revolution" legislation, was passed that included a presidential decree on human trafficking, a law on counteracting extremism, amendments to the criminal code pertaining to offenses against individuals and state security, legal measures designed to prevent the financing of terrorism, and a law on fighting corruption. While seizing international trends and addressing seemingly global problems, such as terrorism and trafficking, the legislation passed has been used primarily to put pressure on the democratic opposition, to discourage citizens by criminalizing any form of independent activity and civic protest, and to threaten international partners with criminal responsibility for supporting democratic actors, such as political parties and civil society. In passing these new laws, the Belarusian regime has markedly changed its attitude towards civil society. The phase of "kind" repression is over, and henceforth "tough" measures were to be taken against civil society, effectively criminalized by its mere existence.

The United States: "Their Money Can Change the Situation"

Focus group research undertaken recently by the Pontis Foundation seems to indicate that many people in Belarus think that US financial support can change the situation. Current US government assistance to Belarus is framed by a policy of "selective engagement". Adopted after the constitutional referendum of November 1996, and reinforced after the fraudulent 2001 presidential election, "selective engagement" determines that no US bilateral assistance is channeled through Belarus' central government except for humanitarian assistance and exchange programs with state-run educational institutions. According to a government website, US assistance to Belarus is almost exclusively targeted at the country's non-governmental sector and independent media working to promote the development of civil society and the free flow of information.

Most of this assistance is channeled through US non-governmental structures, which have proved to be active and flexible actors in civil society development in Belarus, as well as important advocates for Belarus on Capitol Hill. When after 2001, US assistance decreased as a result of a lack of interest for keeping Belarus on the agenda of US foreign policy, lobbying became an important additional activity of American NGOs providing assistance to Belarus.

An important shift in US attention to Belarus occurred in 2005 when State Secretary Condoleezza Rice described the regime as "the last true dictatorship in the centre of Europe". This followed the new policy of President Bush's second administration that made democracy promotion a key pillar of US foreign policy. The Belarus Democracy Act, passed unanimously by the House of Representatives on October 4, 2004, stressed democratic development, human rights and the rule of law in Belarus, and a supplementary assistance bill added democracy assistance worth $5 million in 2005. The act authorized necessary assistance for supporting Belarusian political parties and non-governmental organizations, independent media, including radio and television broadcasting into Belarus, and international exchanges. Finally, the House of Representatives earmarked a further $24 million for the period of 2006 to 2007 and authorized the US government to spend the assistance on building democracy in Belarus including the promotion of free elections, the development of political parties and independent media, protection of human rights and ensuring the rule of law.

Considerable interest and resources notwithstanding, there are two main problems that impede effective US development policy towards Belarus. One is to do with an inconsistency between the stated aim of its policy – democracy – and the approach taken. While the US has arguably done more than any other country to provide political support and technical assistance, it has insisted on maintaining so-called "soft programs". This implies a strictly non-political and non-partisan approach which, given the Belarusian context, weakens and dissipates the policy as a whole. In the unfavorable political climate, many

traditionally conceived and designed programs are simply not feasible. The second problem are inadequate implementation mechanisms, that is, limited capacity to provide direct assistance, such as small-grant facilities, urgently needed in Belarus. Few US implementers seem to have sufficient flexibility to respond to this need.

The US made clear its intention to remain engaged in Belarus for the long haul. At the same time, the US has started closer coordination with other state donors actively supporting Belarus, especially Europeans. This process has improved coordination of democracy assistance and increased the transparency of aid, awareness and information from inside Belarus. In engaging in such a practical coordination process and serious effort to engage the EU, the US basically accepted the geopolitics of Belarus and sent an important signal: unless the EU is engaged strongly in working towards democracy in Belarus, chances of success remain slim.

The EU: "Sleeping on Belarus"

This impression is also evident in focus group research in Belarus conducted by the Pontis Foundation. What it indicates is, at best, a lack of awareness among Belarusians regarding EU activities towards their country. At worst, this impression signals that the EU has little interest, and therefore, few programs, in Belarus.

It was only following the fraudulent 2004 parliamentary elections and national referendum that the EU committed itself to more serious support for civil society and democracy in Belarus. Not only did it seek out more flexible mechanisms than TACIS, it also increased its assistance to Belarus from around €10 million annually to around €12 million in 2005 and 2006, respectively. The European Commission announced publicly that "over €5 million will be available in 2005 alone to support civil society in areas such as strengthening NGO capacity, promoting awareness of and respect for human rights and democracy, promoting cultural diversity, and the fights against poverty and intolerance."

However, only around €2 million of the annual €12 million was available through grant mechanisms independent of the Belarusian authorities and aimed at direct democratization and civil society programs: the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Decentralized Cooperation Budget Line (DC). Major parts of EU assistance continue to be processed through TACIS programs serving "to address the needs of the population, as well as to support democratization and civil society in a broad sense". Yet TACIS has an in-built tendency to support non-political projects for the selected grants to be acceptable to the government authorities in Belarus.

Unfortunately, one of the EU's "flexible mechanisms" proved to be counter productive to its own stated aim. Although formally not required, the DC budget line continues to try to register EU approved projects with the Belarusian authorities. While the selection time for projects has been rapidly decreased

to about three months for both flexible mechanisms EIDHR only managed to support two projects and the DC budget line only managed to support ten, before the 2006 presidential elections. A lack of management resources at Europaid seems obvious. Available information on grants awarded points to discrepancies between program priorities and decisions made on project support. DC budget line grants mostly went to humanitarian organizations with little or no experience in democratization or civil society development. Apparently, neither of the EU mechanisms seems to respond effectively to the Belarusian context and the need to support unregistered civic initiatives in a flexible and timely manner. And while the European Commission has demonstrated considerable willingness to adjust its regulations and procedures for rendering assistance to Belarus, the implementation of EU support remains disconnected from officially-stated policy.

In this respect, donors from individual countries, be they the US or be they EU member states (in particular Sweden, the Netherlands, Great Britain, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), are often more flexible and effective in supporting civil society and democratization projects in Belarus. Some European countries, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Sweden and Poland support Belarusian civil society via NGOs in their own countries, and despite more modest funding than that provided by the EU, the individual country programs and NGO interlocutors have been successful in developing closer contacts with (civil) society in Belarus, and more effective in addressing its most pressing need: small grants.

The West and Belarus: What Next?

With considerably more effort than before, Lukashenka and his regime have been trying to legitimate the third presidential term in the West. In informal talks, Belarusian diplomats have been suggesting a return to "normal" relations, including the possibility of taking part in the European Neighborhood Policy. This suggests a new, increased role for the EU and greater potential for the implementation of its policy. At the same time, however, the conditionality imposed by the Belarusian authorities toward the request of the European Commission to open a delegation in Minsk in an attempt to normalize EU-Belarus relations also shows the limits of what the Lukashenka regime is willing to concede.

EU assistance clearly lags behind the current policy. One of the primary reasons for this discrepancy is that the EU and the West more broadly believe that they lack influence on Belarus. Some analysts already argue that the EU should consider giving a chance to engaging with the regime at the same time as increasing the number of both carrots and sticks in its relations with Belarus. The EU seems to have noticed that the political space Lukashenka occupies has been shrinking in the face of the clear political alternative represented by the united democratic forces and a re-energized civil society, as visible in the

March 2006 post-election period. Adding to this are growing signs of a shift, if only temporary, in Russian policy towards Belarus.

What the EU can certainly do, and swiftly, is to openly provide assistance to the democratic movement, besides supporting civil society and establishing new communication and information channels in Belarus. It should put pressure on Belarus to restore the (legal) position of civil society organizations in the country. It should also increase the effectiveness of its existing "flexible mechanisms", through the institution of clear priority for selecting projects in support of civil society and democratization.

If the European Commission finds it hard to provide such assistance within the constraints of its own procedures and regulations, the EU should consider an external grant-making structure. Such an external "European Fund for Democracy", if not finding sufficient support from the European Commission, could be pushed ahead by those EU member states most active on Belarus, as well as by the European Parliament.

The West has made some important steps to improve its policy, and thus influence, on Belarus over the past two years. However, much remains to be done to improve Western assistance to Belarusian democrats, starting with those flexible mechanisms that exist already, but which need to become more effective. Only then will Western assistance tools live up to the good intentions of Western policy toward Belarus.

Part Three
The 2006 Presidential Elections in Belarus

The Presidential Election Campaign: An Analysis

David R. Marples

The date for the 2006 presidential elections was announced by the Belarusian House of Representatives on December 16, 2005. The date provided – March 19 – was much earlier than expected by many within and outside the country. It had been anticipated that the election would be held in July. The date selection followed a summit meeting between President Lukashenka and President Vladimir Putin of Russia at Sochi (December 15, 2005). Putin may have been concerned that the election should not coincide with the summer G-8 summit that was to be chaired by Russia. The date also signified that the Belarus election would be held just one week prior to the parliamentary elections in Ukraine, which clearly would be a focus of international attention. By December 28, the Central Election Commission (CEC), chaired by Lidziya Yarmoshyna, had registered eight initiative groups supporting various contenders: Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, Alyaksandr Kazulin, Syarhey Haydukevich, Zyanon Paznyak, Alyaksandr Voytovich, Valery Fralou and Syarhey Skrabets.

With the exception of the incumbent president Lukashenka and Haydukevich, the leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party, all could be termed members of the political opposition. There then followed an inspection of the candidates over a period of one month. All had to be citizens of Belarus, who had lived in the country without interruption for a decade prior to the election, and over the age of 35. The initiative groups had the task of amassing a minimum of 100,000 signatures, which also had to be verified, and have no more than 15 percent declared invalid.

Gradually the fringe candidates began to drop out of the contest. Voytovich, the sixty seven year old former president of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, and a well-known physicist, had formerly been the chairman of the upper house of Parliament, but had been dismissed in 2003 upon reaching retirement age and was the first to drop out. Skrabets, former leader of the *Respublika* faction in the pre-October 2004 parliament, was on trial for alleged embezzlement from mid-January 2006, and his campaign never really began. Fralou, also a member of that same faction and a former military general, soon joined the camp of Kazulin. Paznyak, the founder of the Belarusian Popular Front, as a political exile, could not have a major impact on the campaign, and alternated between demands for a complete boycott of the election and mounting a protest on the day of the election by retaining ballot papers. The result was that after the collection of signatures, only four candidates remained:

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Lukashenka, Haydukevich (Liberal-Democratic Party), Milinkevich (united democratic candidate), and Kazulin (Social Democratic Party). Haydukevich, a candidate in 2001, had buried his differences with Lukashenka. Ostensibly he ran to validate the elections in case of an opposition boycott. Kazulin elected not to join the United Democratic camp and to run against Milinkevich. On February 17, the CEC announced that Lukashenka had received 1,903,069 valid signatures, Milinkevich had over 180,000, and the other two candidates had slightly lower totals. These unusual figures – the president already laid claim to one third of the electorate before the official campaign began – already indicated the circumstances under which the campaign was to be carried out.

The Nature of the Campaign

The campaign was not conducted under conditions that could be called free or fair. In the first place, the composition of the territorial commissions and the CEC was limited to the supporters of the president or neutrals in all but a few exceptional cases. Thus the United Civic Party nominated around 800 candidates for these organs but only one was accepted. In some cases, it was reported, the composition of the commissions had been determined beforehand. Opposition parties were subjected to harassment and warnings. The Labor Party had been dissolved prior to the elections, and two others, the Party of Communists and the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, were given second warnings (the last before official dissolution) because of minor infringements. In the latter case the transgression was invalid addresses for two of the regional party headquarters. Public demonstrations by the opposition, such as the Day of Solidarity campaign on October Square in central Minsk on February 16, were met with violence from Belarusian Special Forces, a prelude to what would happen during the aftermath of the election itself.

In early March, on instructions from Lukashenka, an all-Belarusian People's Assembly was held at the Palace of the Republic. The Assembly mirrored that held during the presidential elections of 2001. It was used then as a front for the president to outline his future policies. On March 2, 2006, Kazulin, the presidential candidate for the United Social Democratic Party, tried to register for the assembly at the Palace of Sport and Culture of the Minsk railway workers. Special Forces under the command of Dzmitry Paulichenka detained Kazulin and subjected him to a severe beating. The opposition newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* issued a special edition of 250,000 copies (its regular print run is under 30,000) containing photographs of the troops' actions, but the copies were confiscated by the Belarusian authorities as soon as they crossed the border from the printing house in Smolensk, Russia. Subsequently, the regime put pressure on the printing house not to print or distribute further copies of the newspaper. By the date of the election, there were no newspapers other than government-run organs in operation in Belarus. On election day itself, even web pages were shut down, and the news agency *Belapan* was temporarily

suspended, so that there were no sources of independent information as to what was taking place.

Belarusian TV meanwhile declared that fabricated exit poll bulletins had been discovered showing that in 107 election precincts, Milinkevich had gathered 53.7 percent of the vote, Lukashenka 41.3 percent, Kazulin 3.8 percent, and Haydukevich 1.2 percent. The program posited that the results would be used as a pretext for a color revolution in Minsk. In a similar vein, it was reported that Kazulin had tried to reach a deal with Lukashenka to receive 32 percent of the vote and the position of Prime Minister in the next Lukashenka government. All candidates in theory were given two radio and two television broadcasts of 30 minutes each. In practice, the TV appearances of Milinkevich and Kazulin were limited by censorship, though Kazulin in particular used his time to make very personal comments about the president's private life and corruption within his administration. Milinkevich also used the election campaign to visit with several European leaders and grew visibly in stature as the campaign progressed. Before long he was holding rallies in Western and Central regions of the country that were gathering several thousand people despite official restrictions on buildings and outdoor sites. The president, who remained in office throughout the election, declared that he was too busy to campaign actively but appeared on national television almost constantly, as well as making a four hour speech at the People's Assembly. On the eve of the election, he warned of a potential coup attempt and placed Special Forces on full alert.

Those supporting the united opposition candidate, Milinkevich, adopted blue denim as its symbol, leaving denim ribbons around official buildings in cities and at universities. The authorities arrested many young activists in response: many had daubed graffiti with the word *Dostal* (Fed up!) on walls. Computers and campaign literature on behalf of both opposition candidates were expropriated widely. The government maintained that the opposition was being supported by foreign powers, and that there was a coordinated campaign to overthrow the Lukashenka regime in which the United States, the EU countries, Georgia, and Ukraine were the guilty parties. Belarusian TV announced that a supply of US-made military goods and tents had been discovered on the Latvian border, and the police established an emergency headquarters, and began monitoring polling stations. Programs on TV claimed that the United States, in particular, had deliberately ignored state officials while courting the opposition, even when entering the country for official purposes. Lukashenka also maintained that his continued presidency was the only means to ensure stability and economic prosperity in the country. He defended his close links with Russia, and used his December 2005 agreement with *Gazprom* to maintain gas prices at the same level for 2006 (Ukraine had been offered a deal in which prices were five times higher) as an example of the fruits of this cooperation.

Arrests and detentions quickly spread to the official leadership teams of Milinkevich and Kazulin. Virtually no-one was immune. Syarhey Kalyakin, who led the headquarters of the Milinkevich campaign, pointed out that the very

high number of signatures gathered by the Lukashenka team had been attained by threats from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Prosecutor. In many cases entire factories or universities had been obliged to sign lists, and in the case of the factories, before workers could receive wage packets. He was accused of libel and denigrating the president of Belarus (a criminal offence). The chairman of the executive committee of the democratic forces, Anatol Lyabedzka, was detained in Salihorsk for an identity check in mid-February. Vintsuk Vyachorka, leader of the Popular Front, received a fifteen day jail sentence for "petty hooliganism". Similar charges were made in many other instances. On Kazulin's team, the frequent attacks and beatings of personnel (including an assault on General Fralou) led the candidate to propose to Milinkevich on March 9 that they withdraw from the campaign. Milinkevich declined, but both candidates urged their supporters to assemble in October Square on March 19 for a peaceful demonstration and discussion of the election results. Lukashenka responded to this call by declaring that he would wring his opponents' necks if they took part in an illegal demonstration.

The Standings and the Results

The tense and dangerous conditions in which the election was held rendered it impossible for independent pollsters to assess the relative standings of the candidates. The personal popularity of the president in recent years has varied from a low of 26 to a high of 55 percent. It had risen in the year before the election. Of the opposition candidates, correspondingly, it was estimated that the popularity of Milinkevich was highest and might be around 17 percent. What is not clear is whether Lukashenka had enough support to win outright in the first round, though from his perspective this was critical in terms of stemming the opposition's momentum. Adding to the confusion was the fact that about 30 percent of those voting did so at advance polls, which opened on March 14 and could not be monitored by external observers. The initial official results were reported by CEC Chairperson Yarmoshyna on March 20. According to her statement, Lukashenka received 5.46 million votes (82.6 percent), Milinkevich almost 400,000 (6 percent), Haydukevich 250,000 (3.5 percent), and Kazulin 154,000 (2.3 percent). Beyond announcing the results as would be appropriate, Yarmoshyna ventured to comment that Kazulin's low total was merited because of his "rowdy campaign"! Later, when the "final figures" were released Lukashenka's total was amended to 5,501,249 out of 6,630,653 votes cast, or 83 percent with a turnout of more than 92 percent. That the results were padded seems clear. Neither the size of the turnout nor total for Lukashenka would have been possible during a democratic election. Also the combined total of 11.8 percent for the three other candidates seems exceptionally low. By way of comparison, even the uncharismatic opposition leader Uladzimir Hancharyk attained 15 percent in 2001.

The Popular Response

On the evening of March 19, about 15,000 people gathered on October Square, a vast complex adjacent to the Palace of the Republic and the House of Trade Unions, and separated by a small park from the residence of the president. Both Milinkevich and Kazulin addressed the crowd, and called on people to return to the square on the following day at 18.30. A smaller number of people then marched to Victory Square. On the next evening, a somewhat smaller crowd came together to repeat their protest at the way the election had been conducted. They were encouraged by the almost universal condemnation of the election by foreign powers with the exception of Russia. During that night, activists of several youth groups, including Young Front, *Zubr* and *Khopits!*, set up a small tent camp that was to serve as a catalyst for daily protests to continue over the following evenings. The numbers in the square dwindled at night and during working hours, and increased again from the time of official assembly, which was 18.30. After March 19, the numbers were between 2,000 and 5,000 each evening. Web pages such as those of Charter 97 and the youth group *Zubr*, provided directions for the participants. Music was laid on and tents were set up in replication of the Orange Revolution in Kiev in late 2004. The militia was restrained from interference, perhaps because of the number of protesters and the international interest in what was happening in Belarus. Indeed, ambassadors and diplomats from some ten EU member states visited the square in the evening of March 21. Nevertheless, an estimated 250 people were arrested between March 20 and 24, usually when leaving the square en route home.

Milinkevich stated that the election results had been fabricated. He said that various sources, mostly Russian, including *Holdinga Rossiyi*, had indicated that Lukashenka had received 43 percent of the vote, while his own return was 31 percent and Kazulin's 18 percent. He demanded that the election be repeated, but without the participation of Lukashenka. This was in line with the official request from Lyabedzka to the Belarusian Supreme Court that the 2004 referendum had been illegal, and the president should not have been permitted a third term in office. He also expressed, after some hesitation, his support for the decision of the tent protesters to remain on the square. In making that statement he reportedly broke an agreement with Kazulin that the protest would be ended earlier. The authorities remained largely passive onlookers but away from the square they took action against various opposition supporters. For example, the deputy leader of Milinkevich's staff, Viktar Karniyenka was assaulted outside his apartment by two assailants and had to be hospitalized. Such overreaction was an indicator of the nervousness of the president. At 3am on March 24, the Special Forces broke up the small tent city, and arrested the mostly young people who had remained there in very cold conditions for more than three days. Several hundred protesters were taken to Akrestsina prison, and the sudden action ended the period of sustained protest in central Minsk. If the authorities anticipated that the protests were over, however, they

were mistaken. Both Milinkevich and Kazulin led a march on Independence Day in a sequel to the election campaign signaling the refusal of the opposition forces to remain passive.

On March 25, the anniversary of the short-lived Belarusian independent state of 1918, about 10,000 people gathered on Independence Avenue carrying the white-red-white national flag and the jeans emblem, and encountered a large group of militia. Forcefully prevented by police from holding their rally, demonstrators moved to Yanka Kupala Park and held a meeting that was addressed by Milinkevich, Kazulin and a range of other opposition figures. Kazulin, in particular, called on protesters to march to the remand center at Akrestsina and demand the release of the tent campers arrested in October Square, and an estimated 5,000 set off with him. After a peaceful march along Nyamiha boulevard, there followed the most brutal clash to date with police at Dzerzhinsky Avenue. Milinkevich had intended to use the Independence Day rally to announce a new movement for the liberation of Belarus, while Kazulin demanded a new government of democratic unity. Riot police beat and clubbed the demonstrators, using tear gas. Kazulin was again beaten and detained and moved to the remand center outside Minsk at Zhodzina. Several hundred were arrested, including several foreigners, such as the well-known Russian TV reporter Pavel Sheremet and the former Polish ambassador to Belarus, Mariusz Matusewicz. Sheremet was assaulted as he walked in central Minsk, handcuffed and refused permission to call the Russian Embassy. Matusewicz had to be moved to hospital after a suspected heart attack, but he received a fifteen day sentence for petty hooliganism. The brutality bore the hallmark of Paulichenka, who was once again ordered to take extreme measures during an occasion of peaceful protest. Lukashenka's inauguration was then delayed from March 31 until April 8, and it was several days before the president was seen again in public.

Conclusion

The 2006 election campaign differed from its predecessors in several respects. The authorities took restrictive measures even before the campaign began that instituted heavy prison terms for anyone contacting or receiving funds from partners outside the country, such as the EU and the US. In the crackdown that occurred during and after the campaign, an unprecedented number of people were arrested, mostly young adults, and the regime demonstrated its fear of a popular revolt. There were constant references to the role of external forces in Belarus. At the same time, the protests were well-organized, and despite relatively low numbers compared to those in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine in earlier cases of regime change, they manifested growing civic awareness and coordination of movements. In this respect one can contrast the more extreme responses of Kazulin and the restrained attitude of Milinkevich. The former did not really offer an election platform, other than the manifesto of the

Social Democratic Party, and indulged in strident protests and confrontational tactics that were calculated to incense the regime. At crucial times Kazulin and Milinkevich worked together, but ultimately there was no sustained partnership. Milinkevich did not entertain hopes of winning the election, but rather intended to "win the hearts and minds" of the public gradually, and offer them the possibility of an alternative outlook to that offered by the president. Unlike in past campaigns, Milinkevich also intended to offer this same perspective beyond the date of the election. In this way, the Belarusian opposition can prepare for later elections, whether municipal, parliamentary, or presidential. The youth activists also appear committed to his cause and a majority of them appear alienated from the Lukashenka regime.

The Lukashenka team showed a surprising lack of acumen given its success in previous campaigns. At a time when world attention turned to Minsk and there was genuine interest in the election, the regime showed its worst side, demonstrating in a self-fulfilling prophecy that it is indeed "the last dictatorship in Europe". The violent scenes against students and youth activists convinced no one that the Lukashenka regime was legitimate. Even Russia was somewhat muted in its support and Russian television depicted some of the most violent scenes. And yet the president could have won the contest without resorting to such measures. The question is why he adopted such tactics. Three reasons are suggested. First, Lukashenka has for some time had a genuine fear of external intervention in Belarus (usually the United States and/or NATO are cited), and a particular concern about the policies of his Western neighbor, Poland, and East European countries in the EU in general. Second, it is evident that the 2004 referendum had failed to satisfy critics that he had the right to run for a third term in office. Third, any election forces the regime – albeit partially – to accept temporary conditions in which the opposition can campaign, offer critiques of the president's policies and lifestyle, and especially of his infringements of human rights. As a leader shielded from reality in many respects, Lukashenka is acutely sensitive to attacks on his policies or to suggestions that an opposition government could offer an alternative and viable vision of a transformation of Belarusian society and government along a democratic path. The 2006 election, his third victory, has weakened rather than strengthened his regime.

Dispatches from Minsk March 2006

On the train to Minsk a passenger entered the sleeping compartment and tried to strike up conversation with the passenger next to him. "Where are you going?" he asked. She replied, "Who are you – some kind of control?" One might be forgiven for thinking that she was simply not in the mood for conversation, were it not for the more general atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty that quickly seizes everyone arriving to Belarus, and especially its capital, Minsk. *Militsya, Spetsnaz* in black, and other uniformed officials were everywhere, seen and wishing to be seen. With such an overwhelming presence of uniforms the cautious behavior of people in public was hardly surprising. And indeed, people on buses, trams and in the metro did look at each other suspiciously, as if they were worried about being spied on, worried in case they might somehow betray sympathy for the opposition. At the same time, they were seemingly trying to sound each other out. Was the prevailing mood for voting against Lukashenka?

In spite of the presidential elections being only a few days away, hardly any signs of campaigning could be spotted. Although specifically marked election stands did exist, they were only erected at a safe distance from the city center. These were the only places where campaign posters were permitted, and they were the battleground for a poster war between the different camps. Efforts at plastering over or tearing down each other's posters were more often than not won by Syarhey Haydukevich. Alyaksandr Lukashenka adverts were completely absent, in line with the incumbent's announcement that he would refrain from campaigning altogether. His portrait was only to be seen later on a large poster with basic information on all four candidates.

Taking a closer look, though, a large part of Minsk was covered in the official red and green Lukashenka elevated to national colors when he banned the national white-red-white flag, accompanied by the slogan *ZA Belarus* (For Belarus). Shop windows carried posters declaring "For plenty". On buses and trams children were portrayed asking "For a talented Belarus". In central Minsk billboards portrayed athletes advocating "For an Olympic Belarus" and displayed soldiers and war veterans, leaving little doubt which candidate they were for. This was not election campaigning but official propaganda, not an endorsement of a specific candidate, party or program, but simple advocacy for continuity under the guidance of the incumbent president.

Yet Minsk did not appear in full agreement with the call for stability. Here and there, one could spot an opposition slogan written across the posters. Someone crossed out *ZA Belarus* and replaced it with the opposition slogan *Zhivye Belarus* (Long live Belarus). Needless to say, posters so amended did not last long and were soon removed. Similarly short-lived were the stickers and graffiti that appeared over night, most commonly in the suburbs rather than in the city center. Sometimes it was a circled 16, as part of the monthly day of solidarity with disappeared opposition leaders that was initiated by civil society, or a lamp-post that carried a piece of denim, chosen by opposition groups to symbolize freedom. Elsewhere graffiti more aggressively declared *Dostal* (Enough!) or *Novava* (We want a new one!), clearly addressing the current president. Most frequent, however, were the patches of fresh paint, signaling the effectiveness of the government apparatus in reinstating a smart and orderly appearance as soon as possible.

Campaign efforts by the democratic opposition were similarly subtle. Only very occasionally did one find campaign activists handing out leaflets, independent newspapers or election programs. Usually, they lurked by the metro stations, almost in hiding, only briefly coming out when a larger crowd of passengers disembarked. Meanwhile, Belarusian state TV was portraying Lukashenka as an ice hockey loving and caring *bat'ka* (literally: father), praising him in songs demanding that people *Slushay bat'ku* (listen to the father). Political shows such as *Zhostki dialog* (roughly: hard talk) lashed out at the opposition, demonizing them as hooligans or fascists.

Friday, March 17

At a packed *Elektron* cinema in the southern outskirts of Minsk the two opposition candidates Kazulin and Milinkevich held a joint meeting. On the way to the cinema, at a bus stop, a few printed leaflets were spotted. Upon closer inspection these turned out to anti-opposition propaganda, and carried the clear message that Milinkevich and his team were Western marionettes and foreign-paid spies, aiming to auction off Belarus. Later in the journey, a taxi driver was openly displaying Milinkevich's portrait on the dashboard. A cautious enquiry with the driver prompted this small entrepreneur to launch into a tirade about the economic misery and red-tape, isolation of the country, and the Soviet style conditions gripping Belarus. Further, the driver's, admittedly not representative, poll of passengers' political preferences, indicated that a vast majority opposed Lukashenka.

At the cinema, a considerable crowd gathered, including a large number of foreign media and several international election observers, including foreign parliamentarians. Kazulin appeared first, a commanding, jovial, towering baldhead. Milinkevich, who arrived a few minutes later, gave a contrasting softer and more intellectual impression. Their appearance together was unexpected as the relationship of the two candidates was said to be strained. Rumors circulated that Kazulin was trying to persuade Milinkevich to join him in withdrawing from the race. Instead, they came together to release a joint declaration urging the National Assembly to dissolve the Central Election Commission and to postpone the elections because of the arrests of opposition supporters and violations of the election law. The candidates also presented a letter to state organizations including the Ministry of the Interior and the

KGB calling them to respect the law, the constitution and the election code of Belarus

The public meeting was clearly designed as a display of unity between the candidates. In a hall packed with a good 800 people, mostly young, and facilitated by the head of Milinkevich's campaign team Syarhey Kalyakin, an animated meeting lasted for a full two hours. It opened with brief programmatic remarks by each candidate. Milinkevich was concise and produced clear, straightforward, understandable (and well rehearsed) answers to the many questions submitted from the audience. Kazulin, in turn, always spoke for longer, often animating the crowd while recounting anecdotes about Lukashenka or his time working on educational issues in Belarus. While Kazulin was received well, the sympathies of the majority were clearly with Milinkevich, judging from applause and questions addressed to the candidates.

The majority of questions covered issues such as what to do with Lukashenka, taxes, electing governors, the fear factor in the country, the unfair election campaign, and the contract system. Both candidates urged voters to rally in the center of Minsk at 8pm on March 19 after the closure of polling stations. In this respect, Kazulin called on people not to be afraid and to maintain peace, while Milinkevich's rallying call – often heard over the next days – was for Belarusians to show that "they were not cattle". The meeting ended in an uplifted atmosphere and with joint victory salutes by Kazulin, Milinkevich and Kalyakin. While the meeting did not confirm earlier rumors that Kazulin was considering withdrawing in favor of Milinkevich, it clearly signaled a new level of cooperation between the two opposition candidates. The day ended on an optimistic note as a result of this and the absence of any visible attempts at provocation by the state authorities.

In spite of this, there remained some at Milinkevich's headquarters, especially several from the Belarusian Popular Front that questioned the value of the joint meeting with Kazulin. After the meeting some scepticism remained, including about the real intentions of Kazulin, even though he had been so positive about Milinkevich during the evening.

Saturday, March 18

At noon, Milinkevich held his last campaign meeting with voters outside the Kiev cinema in a Northern neighborhood of Minsk. Attendance was around 400, and it seemed that people at the meeting represented a cross-section of generations, rather than primarily young people. Questions asked from the audience largely related to the meeting planned for the next day on October Square in downtown Minsk, and these enquiries, as well as Milinkevich's answers, indicated the level of concern about possible provocations and violence.

The official media, in which warnings of violent protests had taken on hysterical tones over previous days, were clearly trying to create panic. Milinkevich

underlined that the protests would be peaceful and called on people to attend the rally. At the same time, he stressed that it was essential for protesters to beware of provocations. He illustrated his point with a fake campaign leaflet, which had been fly-posted around Minsk calling for a revolution by force. Addressing the security apparatus, he stressed that there were many decent people in the *Militsya* and even in the KGB, and called on them to be "with the nation".

While talking to journalists after the meeting, Milinkevich mentioned that the time he would spend in the square would depend on the turnout. Whatever the outcome of elections and protest, he stressed, the coalition was to remain united, and to continue to work with civil society in Belarus. He likened this movement to "Solidarity" in Poland. These statements, too, indicated two main issues that were to become obvious over the next days: Milinkevich and the opposition remained insecure about the support they could muster among Belarusians, and despite much good will, it seemed that little had been concretely prepared for the various conceivable scenarios on election day and thereafter.

In the evening, the civic campaign *Za svabodu* (For Freedom) held a rock concert in support of the democratic opposition (and surprisingly received permission from state authorities). More than 5,000, mostly young people, gathered in a park near Bangalore Square for the concert that was the finale of the Milinkevich campaign. A large banner proclaiming "I am for Freedom" decorated the stage, the crowd brought a large number of white-red-white Belarusian national flags, a few European flags could be seen, many visitors carried the scarves and stickers of a variety of civic campaigns, including *Za svabodu* and *Khopits!* (Enough!), and a number of leaflets, newspapers and other materials of numerous opposition groups were distributed openly.

All the main "opposition" bands played, including *Neyra Dyubel, Partizanskaya shkola,* and *IQ-48*. Most memorable was the appearance of the group *NRM*, arguably the most popular "opposition" band in Belarus. At the start of their famous song *Tri Charapakhi*, they suggested that the song's usual chorus *syurprizau nya budzye* (there won't be any surprises) was not appropriate given the hopes of Belarusians for the elections on the following day. Instead they changed the words to *chakanye dastala* (we've had enough of waiting), which the audience chanted enthusiastically. Around the middle of the concert, Milinkevich made a dramatic entry through the crowd and took the stage for brief remarks. "You are our future," he greeted the young crowd. "Freedom, truth, justice are for you. I know that all of you like freedom. But, today in our country it is not enough to love freedom. Today we need to fight for freedom!"

An interesting observation related to the high degree of discipline at the concert. While clearly a joyful crowd, the prohibition on alcohol imposed by the organizers was well observed, and regular appeals were made from the stage to avoid any provocations, expected from the side of the authorities. In the few cases where drunken visitors or provocateurs misbehaved or attempted

to start a fight, concert organizers intervened immediately and had those individuals taken away by *Militsya*, which observed the event from a distance in considerable numbers.

While the event had clear political undertones there was limited open political agitation. Although sizeable numbers turned up and Milinkevich and the most popular bands were well received, anxiety over what would happen the following day appeared to hang over the event. Yet when the event concluded without disturbance, crowds making their way home appeared uplifted, even singing on the bus home. Nonetheless, and with the elections only a few hours away, little to nothing was in the air to suggest that extraordinary events were likely to take place in the hours and days ahead.

Sunday, March 19

After voting at 10am, Milinkevich hosted a press conference at lunchtime where he looked ahead to the evening protests and underlined that they would be peaceful. He also lambasted Belarusian TV for showing the results of "exit-polls", carried out by the pro-government youth group BRSM, which showed Lukashenka with over 80 percent support. Kalyakin quoted figures from a Russian exit poll, which he said indicated that Lukashenka was had just about 50 percent of the vote. He argued that the largest number of opposition supporters were expected to vote in the afternoon, and that it could be expected that the incumbent would not get a majority in the first round.

A second press conference with Milinkevich was planned for later in the day, but his election headquarters only announced the exact time of 7pm during the afternoon. Meanwhile the leaders became nervous with waiting, unsure of how many people to expect on the square, and afraid of the reaction from the authorities. It was expected that Milinkevich would leave after the press conference and head down to October Square. However, a few minutes after 7pm, the editor of the newspaper *Tovarish*, Syarhey Vozniak, arrived and dramatically announced that the press conference had been cancelled as word had been received that *Spetsnaz* police had plans to arrest Milinkevich immediately after the meeting.

The authorities were clearly preparing for a demonstration. Shops, bars and restaurants in the vicinity of the square all closed around 6pm for "technical reasons". October Square metro station was closed by 7.30pm, and there were rumors that cars heading towards the center were being stopped. Astonishingly, however, the square itself remained open and the people who began arriving were able to gather without hindrance from the authorities.

The first people arriving congregated on the square near the big TV screen and kept an eye on the news that was being shown. They reacted by chanting *Hanba* (shame) when Lukashenka was shown casting his ballot. Belarusian national white-red-white flags began to appear as people grew in numbers and those on the square became more confident that the *Militsya* were not planning

to intervene. A large number of bystanders were clearly there to support the protests, yet they kept their distance by standing on the other side of the road. Obviously, they believed that they were in a better protected place should violence break out. The most visible presence of the authorities on the square was the traffic police, who kept the traffic moving. Cars moving alongside the square began to honk in support. Suddenly, the traffic was stopped, and the reason for the hold-up soon became clear: around 15 buses full of riot police in full combat gear had arrived on Karl Marx Street in front of the British Embassy.

Just before 9pm, Milinkevich appeared on the square in front of the Trade Union Palace. The crowd swiftly moved to the other end of the square to hear him and other opposition leaders speak. Syarhey Kalyakin declared that, according to an exit poll, Alyaksandr Milinkevich had won 30 percent of the vote and that, thus, a second round of voting should take place. A clearly relieved and confident Milinkievich thanked the almost 15,000 people who came to the square to defend their vote. He said that this was a new and a free Belarus, which would no longer be brought to its knees, that Belarusians had shown the whole world that they want to live in a free and democratic European country, and that they considered the elections illegitimate. He also called for the international community not to recognize the results and declared the elections a farce. Later, Alyaksandr Kazulin, accompanied by Orthodox priests, arrived, along with other speakers from Belarus, as well as Polish and Russian politicians and Marieluise Beck from the German Bundestag who expressed their support for the demands of the democratic opposition.

During the rally, a bizarre and intense blizzard struck the center of Minsk. Rumor had it that this was artificial snow put on by the authorities for the occasion, although high snowfall in other central parts of Minsk seemed to disprove this theory. With the snow and freezing temperatures, the numbers on the square began to dwindle, and Kazulin announced at 10.30pm that protesters should go home and come back at 6.30pm the next day when the results of the election were known. First though, the protesters were encouraged to head off towards *Peremoha* (Victory) Square to lay flowers at the victory monument. Headed by Milinkevich and Kazulin up to 10,000 people marched along the Independence Prospect to the war memorial before dispersing into the night.

Meanwhile the riot police remained in over 30 buses and 20 army trucks in nearby streets. This wait-and-see response from the authorities contrasted markedly with the extremely aggressive rhetoric of the previous weeks. Warnings had culminated in a press conference on 16 March, during which KGB head Sukharenko declared that protestors taking to the streets would be considered as terrorists, and would be punishable with anything from eight years to life imprisonment, or even with the death penalty. In the end, the order to intervene was never given, and *Militsya* present in the area around the square showed constraint. None of the expected provocations materialized and the events passed off peacefully.

Opposition leaders were clearly delighted with the size and success of the

protest. They had been extremely reluctant to predict how many would come and what would be the reaction of the authorities. It was a surprise to most observers that the protests were actually allowed on the square. Given all these circumstances, it was perhaps understandable that opposition leaders seemed to be improvising during the meeting, illustrated by the fact that proper sound equipment only appeared halfway through the meeting.

Monday, March 20

Milinkevich held a press conference, during which he argued that the election was conducted by the security services rather than the election commissions. He stressed that he considered the result an illegal seizure of power and declared that the president would be in power illegitimately after the announcement of the official results. Later that day, the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission held a press conference to state that the elections failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections.

For the evening protest in October Square, some 7,000 people appeared which, although significantly fewer than on the previous day, was still substantial given the freezing conditions, and it did allow the opposition to keep up the pressure on the authorities. The tension that had characterized the previous evening was significantly reduced, and in comparison the opposition was also much better prepared. Protesters congregated naturally around the Trade Union Palace with a good sound system present from the start, allowing for Belarusian music to be played between the speeches. This noticeably helped to keep up the atmosphere and spirit of the crowd.

Milinkevich demanded free and fair elections, underlined the need to fight against dictatorship, and emphasized his campaign slogans “freedom, truth and justice”. He declared that the people would stay on the square “until victory” and asked people to call their relatives and friends to bring warm clothes and hot drinks to the square for the protesters. There was an extensive program of prominent speakers, including Kazulin and Russian *Duma* deputy Ryzhkov, and even some live music from *NRM*. Protesters, too, were better prepared and brought with them numerous banners, flags and posters. A 100-kilogram bronze Freedom Bell was also brought to the square and rung regularly during the protest.

New opportunities opened up for the Belarusian opposition with the appearance on October Square of a small group of tents following this second evening of peaceful protest against the falsification of the elections. Activists of various youth groups, including *Zubr* and *Malady Front*, and from civic campaigns, such as *Khopits!*, had used the demonstration to set up a dozen or so tents in front of the Trade Union Palace, and some 100 mostly young people stayed through the night.

In the morning mutterings of disapproval were already to be heard in opposition circles that Milinkevich had taken people to the square but had himself only

stayed there two and a half hours. Some felt let down, as they believed he had promised to stay until victory. However the large crowds that came for Sunday were repeated and the extra time allowed the opposition to prepare properly for a longer lasting protest. As a result, the strategy of leaving on Sunday evening on a high and peaceful note could be judged to have worked out well. Further the decision of Milinkevich to stay on the square into Monday night with the protesters also showed that he was prepared to lead from the front

Tuesday, March 21

A serious debate in opposition circles took place during the day on the merits of continuing the tent city. The previous night had been very difficult and tense, and over 100 activists had been arrested, mostly when leaving the tent city (including United Civic Party leader, Anatol Lyabedko). However a determined hard core, with the support of the international media present, had helped ensure their survival until the morning. By midday, there were rumors that Milinkevich was going to ask people to go home, and he was reported to have told journalists in the afternoon that he would call the protest off. When the ambassadors of eleven EU countries came to the square after 6pm to visit the protest, he was understood to have told them the same.

Milinkevich spoke around 7pm to the more than 3,000-strong crowd assembled, and he called on everyone to rally on the following Saturday, March 25. It appeared the opposition were too small to make a difference, and that the way forward was to try to mobilize a larger number of people to come from all over the country, on the occasion of the anniversary of the declaration of Belarusian Independence in 1918 (officially celebrated as a national holiday in the early 1990’s). Following Milinkevich, Kazulin spoke and repeated this call for everyone to meet again on March 25. But, he also asked the protestors to disband the tent city, and it appeared that Kazulin and Milinkevich had agreed to call off the vigil for fear of interference by state authorities. In response, a significant part of the crowd started to chant *zastaemsya* (we will stay). A young activist from Soligorsk then spoke and argued strongly that they should stay and that, if they left now, the people would never come back, including for the protest on March 25. Inna Kuley, Milinkevich’s wife, responded that she had spoken with the people in the tents and promised that she would stay with them. Kazulin stated that if the people stayed, they would be simply disbanded by the Special Forces, to which statement the crowd again chanted *zastaemsya*. Milinkevich brought the discussion to a close by stating that he, too, would stay with the protesters.

The organizers of the tent city began to get serious, insisting that only people, who were going to stay the night, should stay in the central area. Around the camp, a more solid circle of people was formed to protect the tents and to stop provocateurs from entering. For the night, two lines were formed, one facing out of the camp to warn of any advance by the police, the other facing

inward to keep an eye on demonstrators. The protestors on the outside of the line facing the road held banners (acknowledged by occasional honks of car horns) saying "Belarus for Milinkevich" and "We believe, we can, we will be victorious".

Milinkevich and his wife came back to the tent city at 11pm, spoke briefly and then were reported to have stayed with the protestors until 6am the following morning. While numbers dwindled as the night progressed, around 300 were said to have braved the cold until the morning. Some of the foreign journalists set up a rotation system, with some arriving at 3am to replace their colleagues, so as to ensure a permanent international press presence on the square.

Milinkevich gained credit amongst the protestors and showed leadership by quickly recognizing that there was a core of people who were convinced that they should stay, even if this meant going against an earlier decision (and agreements). At that moment it appeared that civil society was taking over the running of the protests, and Milinkevich followed suit when seeing these strongest willed of the opposition supporters firmly behind staying on the square. By contrast, Kazulin made few friends amongst the tent camp inhabitants by calling on them to go home.

Wednesday, March 22

As a sunny morning unfolded, the tent camp had grown to nearly 30 tents, brought in during the demonstration of the previous evening and set up over night. During the day, it was difficult to bring equipment into the tent city, as *Militsya* were carefully searching anyone approaching the area to stop any food or supplies reaching the protestors. At the same time, the camp population had shrunk to about 120 people by 10am, when it became clear that the authorities would not try to break up the city. Some of the over night protestors left at this stage to take a break and catch up on sleep. The morning saw a small Orthodox mass being carried out by priests of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church that supports an independent Belarus and an independent Belarusian church and, for this stance, faces by the Lukashenka regime.

Late in the morning, some 100 pensioners gathered on the square and Belarusian TV crews appeared. This suggested a provocation from the side of the authorities that must have hoped that the pensioners would turn against the largely young protesters in the tent camp. However, once there in the sun and in the politically charged atmosphere, the pensioners suddenly started to debate the situation among themselves, with different people taking different viewpoints. At one point, one group of three old ladies was debating the situation: one was for *bat'ka* while another was wearing an orange scarf signaling her opposition. When joined by an elderly man who argued provocatively that the protesters had been paid money to come here, one of the ladies turned round and asked how much he had received to be there. Unable to find a suitable response, he left.

In the mid-afternoon, several *Militsya* and three workers of the *Vodokanal* sewage company approached the tent city, demanding to clean the sewers underneath the tent city. After some discussion, the workers were allowed into the tent city on the condition that reporters and cameramen followed them, while the *Militsya* were to stay outside. The workers examined the situation, and four water trucks came to the area, with one backing up to a manhole at the edge of the tent city. Although now in a position to spray the crowd, the workmen took to clearing the sewer that had been covered with a tent and used by protesters as a toilet to avoid leaving the camp and being arrested. Afterwards, the sewer was sealed to prevent it from being used further, and the workers left. While there may have been some justification for the workmen's visit, it appeared to all present that this was another act by the authorities to keep up the pressure on the tent city.

As evening fell, the numbers of protesters increased again to approximately 3,000, as people came to the square after work and studies. A large banner was held up in the middle of the tent city proclaiming the square *Kastus Kalinouski Square*, after a Belarusian hero of the 19th century uprisings. An almost festive atmosphere reigned. The determination of the tent city protesters was growing, fuelled by two nights and days of withstanding cold, fear, provocations and police pressure. A convergence of civil society groups active in Belarus became visible in the tent camp, with *Khopits!* (Enough) clearly written on two of the tents and this campaign's blue head banners "Belarus in Europe" visible on many activists, with *Za svobodu* (For Freedom) stickers worn by many a protester, *Zubr* flags flying over the square, and *Malady Front* (Young Front) members wearing their distinct headbands. Further momentum derived from the growing number of people staying overnight, and attendance of the evening protests stabilizing at several thousand. No less importantly, a considerable presence of international journalists remained, although reporters had begun to leave Minsk as the world's attention slowly shifted away from Belarus and towards, in particular, the Ukrainian elections taking place the following weekend.

Yet the situation remained fragile. A handful of coaches full of police in riot gear were on standby around the corner on Karl Marx Street (and more were in the area). The tent city remained under permanent surveillance from both the *Militsya* and black clad KGB, some with earpieces, others with cameras, liberally filming everything. Yet for the time being, no action seemed imminent against the island of the free Belarus that had emerged in October Square.

Thursday, March 23

Another warm, sunny day began at the tent camp that had grown over night to about 35 tents. A cheerful atmosphere reigned, music was being played and throughout the day, people gave public and often emotional accounts of their encounters with the Lukashenka regime, at universities, in workplaces and in public offices. One man even presented a poem he had written in the last

days that called for the true Belarus to rise above the current regime. The only disturbance was that the municipal authorities turned on the sound system in the square to "entertain" the public.

In the evening, a crowd of several thousand gathered for the daily protest. Candles were distributed and lit, several people handed out print materials on behalf of a variety of opposition groups, songs were chanted. The security personnel at the tent camp quickly discharged attempts to provoke the demonstrators, including one incident involving a few young men clad in the official red and green flags who tried to foment discord among the demonstrators. At around 8pm, Milinkevich made a short appearance to encourage protesters and tent villagers to hold out in the square, and many demonstrators mentioned that they intended to stay overnight on the following evening (Friday), not being able to do so this evening because of work or school.

By midnight, as most regular demonstrators left the square and only a few hundred people remained in the tent camp, tension increased notably. Many in the square expected the night to bring with it a *shturm* by police, as most international media had already left and as larger numbers could be expected to stay overnight on Friday. A chain of 200 people surrounded the tent camp, with another 100 demonstrators inside, all anxiously waiting as time went by slowly and for good reason.

Friday, March 24

At exactly 3am, some six buses with riot police drove onto October Square, while several green prison cars pulled up on Independence Avenue. Police stormed the square and formed a cordon around the tent camp. Journalists were asked to leave the perimeter, and protesters were demanded to clear the square. In response, people inside the camp sat down to show their determination to stay. Everything went very quickly from then on. Before the eyes of the dozen or so international media watching from a distance, and without use of excessive force, police pulled out a few protesters. Acknowledging the hopelessness of their sit-in, inhabitants of the tent camp moved in an orderly fashion onto the prison buses and were taken to, as discovered later, Minsk's Akrestsina prison. Within barely 30 minutes, protesters and police were gone, leaving the square to a clean-up team. They moved in with trucks and tractors to clear the remains of the camp, all with a shocking effectiveness in clearing what had taken so long to build.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich, Inna Kuley and Alyaksandr Kazulin with his daughter all arrived at Akrestina prison shortly before 4am, ostensibly because relatives of both were among the arrested. All were visibly shocked, silent and in despair. Despite Milinkevich's enquiries, prison guards would not provide any information. At around 5am, two young girls were released who, in tears, but having been threatened with violence, refused to speak to any of the people waiting outside the prison. Only later was it to become known, through picture

and text messages sent from inside the prison, that protesters had been made to stand outdoors for the rest of the night and into the morning. In an on the spot interview, Milinkevich said "the government is not able to engage in dialogue with society. But this is not the 19th century. You cannot build a society by force. This is not the kingdom of Alyaksandr Lukashenka".

Passing by October Square in the morning left one with an overwhelming feeling of emptiness. If not for a very few people wandering around and speaking quietly, as well as a few tell tale scraps of blue cloth or remains of posters, it was hard to believe that until a few hours ago, this place was brimming with life. And quickly, images of the last days returned, reinforced by international media, including Russian channels that covered the removal of the tent camp extensively.

At 2pm, Milinkevich gave a short press conference at the headquarters of the Belarusian Popular Front. In his assessment of the situation, the number of people arrested during the removal of the tent camp stood between 200 and 300, in addition to more than 200 arrested since election day. No information was given by the authorities as to which charges were to be made and where trials were to be held. The little information available pointed to massive human rights violations. An appeal to the international community, including Russia, to put pressure on the Belarusian government and to help those persecuted by the regime, followed. Milinkevich stressed that what Minsk had witnessed over the last days filled him with confidence that Belarus would not see another five years of Lukashenka. He concluded with information on the demonstration planned for the next day, which was to celebrate Belarusian independence, rather than being part of the election campaign. In his view, however, it was likely that the demonstration would not be permitted to take place in October Square and that police violence could not be ruled out.

Saturday, March 25

On the way to downtown Minsk shortly before noon, one passed the seven or eight buses with *Spetsnaz* riot police on standby outside the Palace of Sports on Victors' Boulevard. Police blocked access to October Square and a large number of people gathered around the junction of Independence Avenue and Lenin Street, one block away from the square. People have come equipped with white-red-white flags, banners and placards demanding freedom for the political prisoners, stating, "we will return" or carrying the bison logo of the *Zubr* youth movement. Slogans are shouted, including *Zhivye Belarus* (Long live Belarus) and *Militsya z narodom* (police with the people). As protesters tried to interrupt the traffic and form a crowd by converging from all four street corners, and as more and more people came streaming out of the October Square metro station, hundreds of additional police were ordered to the scene to disperse protesters, gradually moving them down Lenin Street

towards Freedom Square that was lined with a good thousand regular *Militsya* and *Spetsnaz* in full riot gear.

Suddenly, word went out that the rally was to be held in Yanka Kupala Park, and long columns of people moved towards and along Nyamiha Boulevard and on through Yanka Kupala Street, to a concert of car horns honked by drivers-by. At the park, a crowd of 10,000 and more gathered around the Kupala monument that served as a podium for opposition leaders as they addressed the crowd. Visibly relieved and excited about the enormous turnout, Milinkevich and Kazulin addressed protesters through megaphones, followed by several leaders of opposition parties, civic activists including Inna Kuley, well-known public figures such as historian Uladzimir Arlou, and a youth leader of *Malady Front* (Young Front). The principal theme of all speakers was concern for those imprisoned for their democratic protest and Kazulin's explicit appeal to march to Akrestsina prison to demand the release of those arrested resonated with many.

By around 3pm, about half of those attending the rally started to move towards Nyamiha Boulevard to make their way to the prison. Smiling and chanting, carrying flags and balloons, the cheerful crowd moved in long columns past strollers and onlookers out on a sunny Saturday, only occasionally stopping at a traffic light. Yet at the same time, scores of buses full of riot police drive past them. Few knew what was awaiting them only minutes later.

What happened next has been broadcast around the world: As the crowd reached the area of *Moskovsky Izpolkom* (district executive committee), at around 4pm, the road was blocked with riot police equipped with batons and shields. At 4.10pm, at least three explosions could be heard in close succession, revealed later to be mock grenades, and police moved violently against protesters. Kazulin, in an attempt to approach the police, was arrested. Dozens were beaten and injured, although hospitals refused to provide any information on the numbers or the severity of the protesters' injuries. Hundreds were arrested on the spot, while a manhunt ensued across town, with prison cars cruising the streets of Minsk and collecting people for showing opposition symbols. An empire struck back…

As the day ended, little was known about what exactly had happened and at which cost. Dozens of buses with police in the center of town and the usual propaganda machine running at full speed were the only visible remnant of the afternoon's shameful events. Belarusian TV featured interior minister Uladzimir Navumau praising the "professional and effective" police measures against a few hundred people gathered for an "unsanctioned activity disturbing citizens in taking their well deserved rest". Foreign "instructors" giving orders to Belarusians were blamed and Javier Solana, George W. Bush, Madeleine Albright and Václav Havel were all implicated. And the tent camp, too, received coverage, as police findings of injection needles, plenty of alcohol and pornography found when clearing the camp were presented. Was it possible that anyone believed these lies, after so many saw with their own eyes what really happened over the last days?

Departure

Leaving Minsk, it was hard to believe that only ten days had passed since arriving. Packed with people and names, places and events, emotions and hopes, slogans and chants, those few days were a roller coaster ride of history. Coming from a Western country, arriving in Belarus had seemed like traveling back in time, to the Central and Eastern Europe of the deep 1980's. Yet within days, the autumn of 1989 was replayed and the center of Minsk started to resemble Prague or Leipzig. The final scenes of those ten days were reminiscent of those in Poland in December 1981 when martial law put an end to all hope among Poles for several years to come. What remained were memories of islands of a free Belarus – October Square, Yanka Kupala Park, the *Elektron* Cinema, Bangalore Square Park. And, not unimportantly, confidence that a process has been started that will be impossible to stop, however long it may take.

As the train departed Minsk and rolled through the Belarusian countryside, the conversation of the two middle-aged women sharing the compartment drifted to Milinkevich and the protests on the square. The imagination of the women had clearly been captured by news of the events, and it seemed that the election campaign and its aftermath were stirring the people into political thought and discussion. Without doubt, a signal that an independently thinking and acting Belarus has finally started to emerge.

Cry Freedom!
A Photographic Diary

Minsk, March 2006

Democracy is about people. It is in democracy that their freedom, their beliefs, their passions and their pursuits are realized to the fullest. It is people whose courage and sacrifice brings democracy about. It is people whose engagement and solidarity makes democracy thrive. Yet it is also people who may prevent democracy, be it out of a genuine fear of change or of simple greed for power.

Hardly anything illustrates this better than Belarus in recent days. For a short time around the presidential elections in March 2006, the yearning of many Belarusians for freedom and democracy surfaced powerfully. They came together to protest against rigged elections, hypocrisy and violence. They came to opposition meetings, attended solidarity concerts, and took to the streets in a peaceful demonstration of their desire to be free. These Belarusian citizens were people of all generations and of all walks of life. Young and old, male and female, rural or urban, they had one thing in common. Their wish to be granted their right: basic civic liberties such as freedom to choose one's government in a free and fair election and to speak out against oppression.

The photographs brought together here were taken by an amateur who, as a Western observer of the events on the ground in Minsk in March 2006, wishes to remain anonymous. These photographs were taken in the hope that they can give a face to the courage of all those working towards democracy in Belarus today and in the hope that they testify to their struggle.

Freedom Bell, rung in October Square, Minsk, March 20, 2006. An index of photographs can be found at the end of this section.

Freedom

1

2

3

4

Courage

1

2

3

4

Solidarity

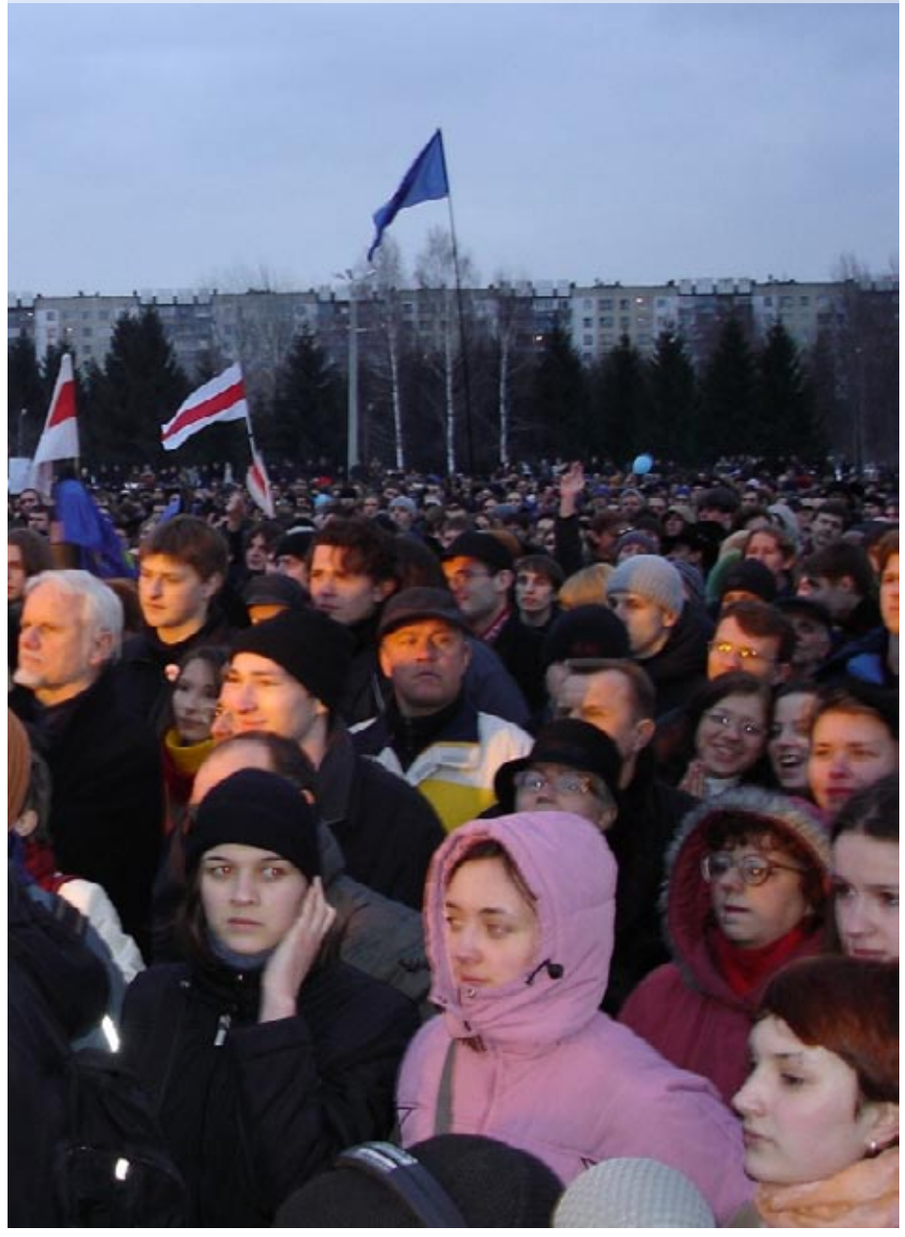
1

2

3

4

People Power



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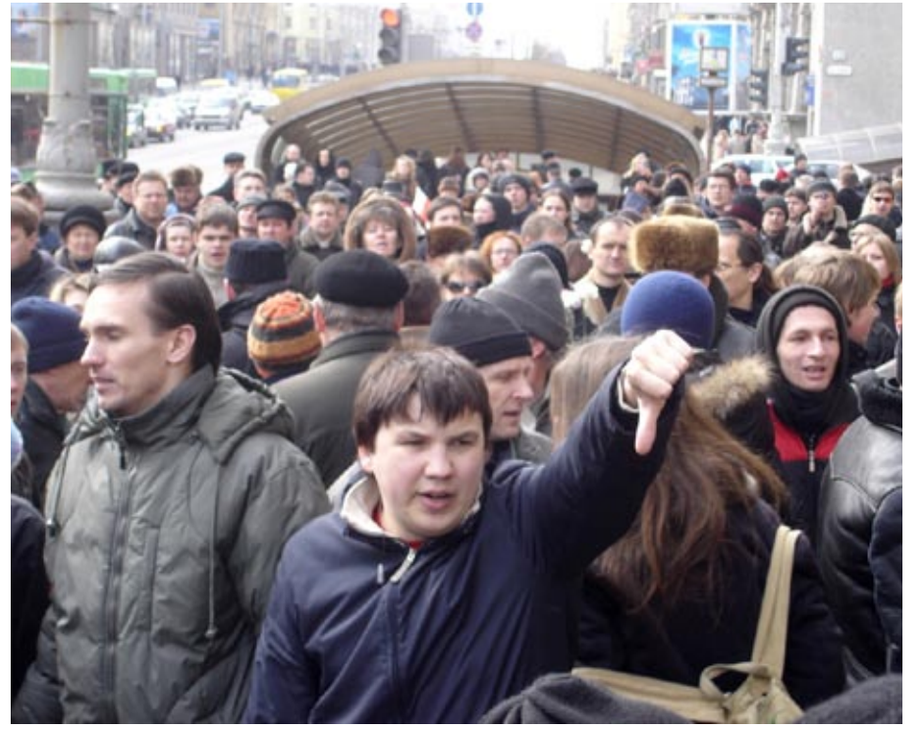
2

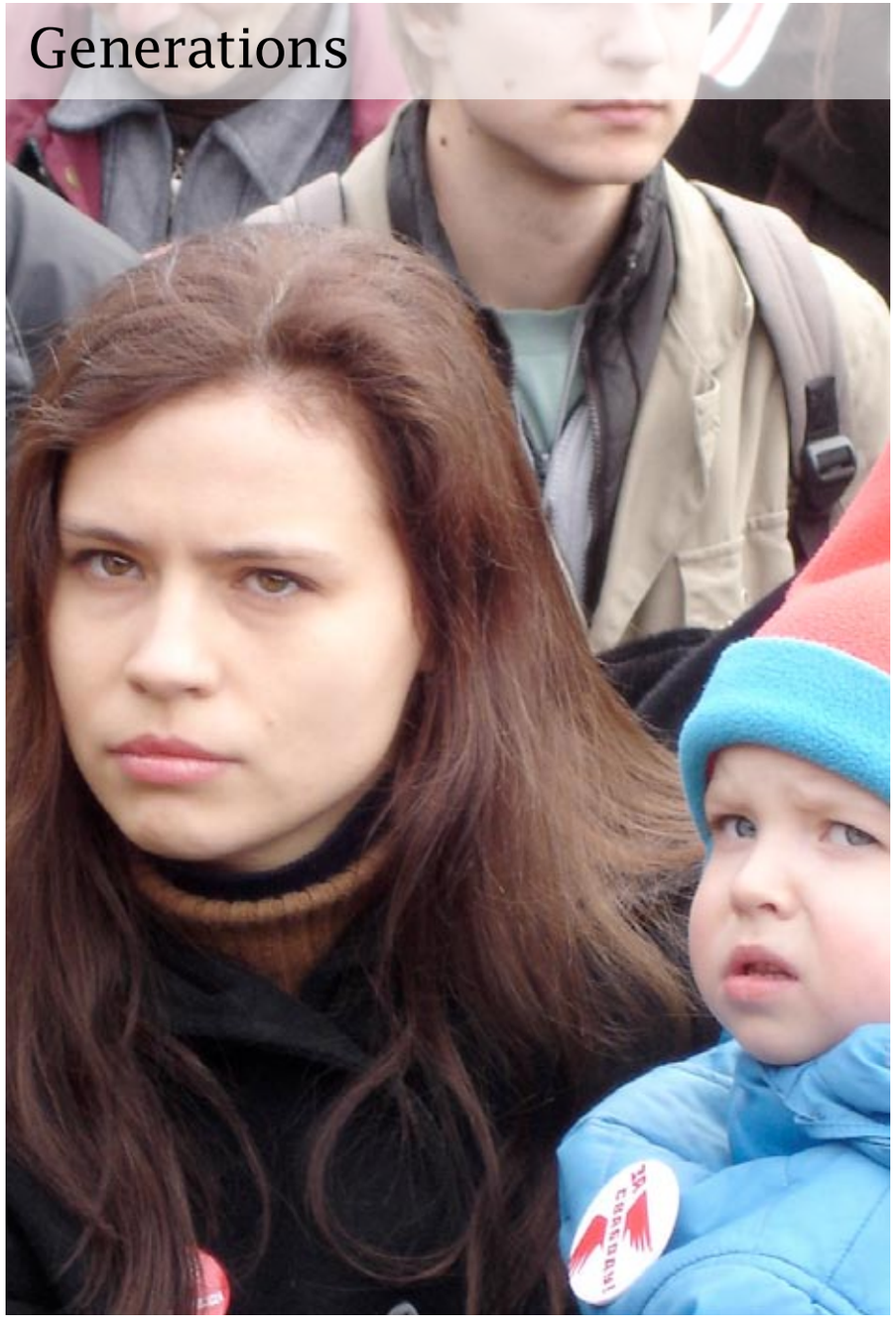
3

4



5

Generations



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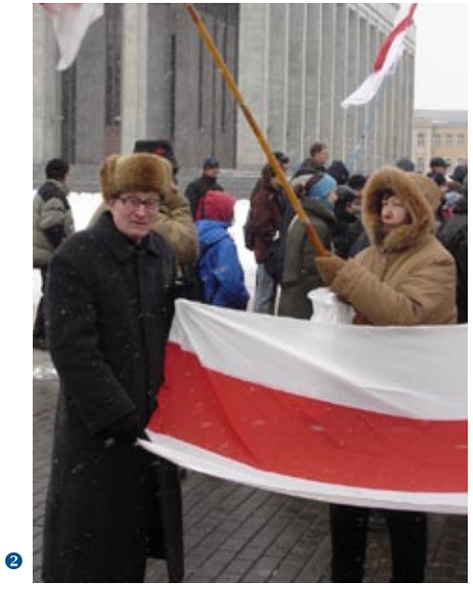


2

3

4

Youth

1

2

3

4

Leaders

1

2

3

4

5

Propaganda

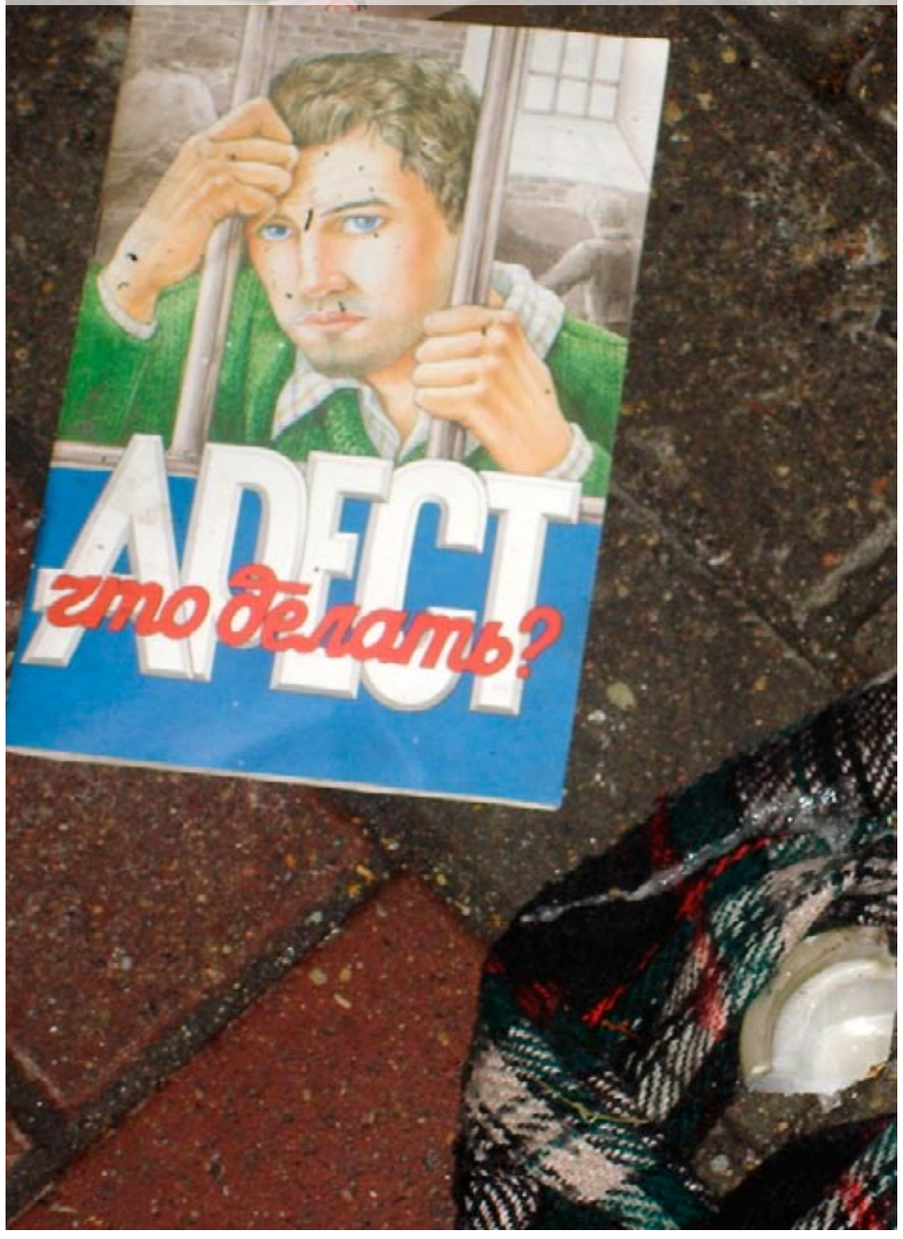
1

2

3

4

State Power



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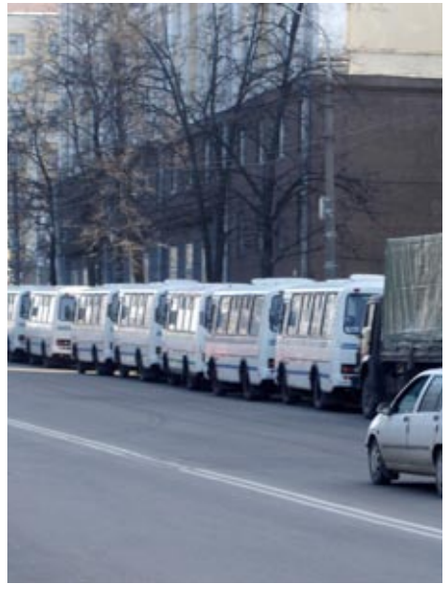

3

4

Index of Photographs

Freedom

1 “For a Belarus without Lukashenka”. Protester in October Square, Minsk, March 23, 2006
2 Freedom from corruption. A pensioner protesting in October Square, Minsk, March 22, 2006
3 Belarus in Europe. Demonstrators in Yanka Kupala Park, Minsk, 25 March 2006
4 “Freedom for Political Prisoners”. Demonstrators in Lenin Street, Minsk, March 25, 2006

Courage

1 “Stop Terror in Belarus”. Protester in October Square, Minsk, March 22, 2006
2 Protecting the tent camp. Human chain in October Square, Minsk, March 22, 2006
3 Enough! At a solidarity concert in Bangalore Square Park, Minsk, March 18, 2006
4 The first day. Tent camp in October Square, Minsk, March 21, 2006

Solidarity

1 Tea for two. At the tent camp in October Square, Minsk, March 22, 2006
2 “We are waiting for you”. At the tent camp in October Square, Minsk, March 22, 2006
3 Who needs a hot drink? At the tent camp in October Square, Minsk, March 21, 2006
4 Helping with food. At the tent camp in October Square, Minsk, March 21, 2006

People Power

1 Solidarity concert in Bangalore Square Park, Minsk, March 18, 2006
2 Protesters marching in Nyamiha Boulevard, Minsk, March 25, 2006
3 “Long live Belarus”. Graffiti in Northern Minsk, March 17, 2006
4 The basic equipment of a protester. At the tent camp in October Square, Minsk, March 21, 2006
5 Down with Lukashenka. Protester in Independence Avenue, Minsk, March 25, 2006

Generations

1 Convinced? Listening to Alyaksandr Milinkevich at Kiev Cinema, Minsk, March 18, 2006
2 Flags and snow in October Square, Minsk, March 21, 2006
3 Telling the folks back home. Demonstrator in Yanka Kupala Park, Minsk, 25 March 2006
4 Young and old. At the tent camp in October Square, Minsk, March 22, 2006

Youth

1 Wrapped up in opposition symbols. Protester in October Square, Minsk, March 21, 2006
2 International solidarity. *Zubr* and Polish flags in October Square, Minsk, March 21, 2006
3 *Khopits!* (Enough!) A tent of *Khopits!* activists in October Square, Minsk, March 20, 2006
4 *Malady Front* (Young Front) and *Zubr* activists in October Square, Minsk, March 22, 2006

Leaders

1 Opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich addresses a meeting at Kiev Cinema, Minsk, March 18, 2006
2 Opposition leader Alyaksandr Kazulin on his way to a public meeting at Elektron Cinema, Minsk, March 17, 2006
3 Civic activist Inna Kuley addresses demonstrators in Yanka Kupala Park, Minsk, 25 March 2006
4 A priest of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church discusses with protesters, October Square, Minsk, March 22, 2006
5 The victor. Alyaksandr Lukashenka leaves the Palace of the Republic, Minsk, March 20, 2006

Propaganda

1 “The hope of the fatherland”. Banner on Victors’ Avenue, Minsk, March 18, 2006
2 “For Belarus”. Billboard in the Frunze district of Minsk, March 17, 2006
3 “Belarus for stability”. Billboard in downtown Minsk, March 17, 2006
4 “Belarus for stability”. Billboard in downtown Minsk, March 17, 2006

State Power

1 “What to do in case of arrest”. After the removal of the tent camp in October Square, Minsk, March 24, 2006
2 Ready for action. Riot police on Lenin Street, Minsk, March 25, 2006
3 On alert. Buses with riot police at Yanka Kupala Park, Minsk, March 25, 2006
4 Men in black. *Militsya* in Independence Avenue, Minsk, March 25, 2006

The Die is Cast!

Bogdan Klich

It may sound surprising but the days of Lukashenka's regime are numbered. The recent measures taken by the state authorities against the democratic opposition can, at most, delay changes but they will not reverse the general trend. The opposition in Belarus has gained in experience: it has grown united and acted rationally, rather than being divided, in the run-up to the elections. It united in a comprehensive coalition ranging from the communists to the nationalists, and it has created a powerful weapon: Alyaksandr Milinkevich, presidential candidate of the united opposition.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich is a cultured and educated personality, with a strong sense for the mission, with which he has been entrusted. He is a charismatic leader who managed to unite around his person the hitherto fractured parties of the democratic opposition. His greatest advantage in the eyes of the Belarusian public is precisely his non-partisanship. It enables him more than anybody else to build the democratic opposition into a powerful social movement for political change. Milinkevich embodies the longing of Belarusians for democracy, normality and an end to isolation.

Alyaksander Milinkevich was elected presidential candidate on October 1, 2005. Back then, many feared that his main weakness was in the low recognition and support levels he enjoyed among Belarusians. This disadvantage quickly turned to his advantage. What is more, he built something his main contender for office can only dream about: support beyond Belarus' borders. Even Lukashenka's Ministry of Foreign Affairs lamented that Milinkevich was received in Brussels in a way normally reserved for heads of state. His traditional election campaign, based on a maximum of individual contacts with voters, turned out to be unexpectedly successful. Today Milinkevich is a serious alternative to the current president and an opponent feared by the powers-that-be.

This is most obvious during public meetings and rallies, usually attended by several hundred to several thousand Belarusians and indicating that the barrier of fear has been broken. The few thousand expressing their support in public may well be a precursor for more soon. And then Belarusians may quickly go through an experience known to Poles from Pope John Paul II's visit in 1979. They will understand how many they actually are. They will also show this to those backing the current president, and his support may quickly fade. The system may collapse swiftly, like a house of cards.

Certainly, Lukashenka will do what he can to remain in power. The first "preventive" measures have already been taken. The opposition is being deprived of its leaders. Several of those who could, jointly with Alyaksandr Milinkevich, bring the people out onto the streets have been arrested, and they were in prison during the decisive moments around election day. A similar approach was taken to students who traditionally support the opposition in great numbers. University holidays were extended to March 20 and early voting was encouraged at universities, as was departure from Minsk for election day itself. Clearly, the authorities feared mass demonstrations in Minsk.

In the long run, however, these and other measures taken by the Lukashenka regime will be irrelevant. The opposition has been growing stronger and more confident of its strength and social support. It is also the opposition leader whom people trust: a man who represents the opposite of the current president on all counts, and who can lead the country out of international isolation. The Lukashenka regime is slowly crumbling, while society is awakening. This is a process that cannot be reversed. It can only be drawn out. This, precisely, seems to be the strategy of Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

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International Responses to the Presidential Elections in Belarus

Alina Belskaya

The presidential elections in Belarus held on March 19, 2006 had the highest level of coverage by international media ever and elicited a wide response from the international community. Some have even gone as far as saying that the response of the international community was timelier and more focused than the initial reaction to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004.

Though the elections were scheduled for just one week before the crucial parliamentary elections in Ukraine, the first after the Orange Revolution, the media and the international community kept Belarus in the spotlight for as long as there was action on the ground. This was indeed a novelty for elections in Belarus, as the previous presidential poll, which took place on September 9, 2001 was overshadowed by the terrorist attacks on the United States two days later, while the parliamentary elections in 2004 were overtaken by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

By contrast, this time the presidential elections in Belarus received a fair amount of international attention. Though the most serious and violent reprisals against Belarusian democrats came after most international observers and foreign reporters had left Minsk, the international community kept an eye on developments on the ground in Belarus, decrying the violence employed by the government and law enforcement agencies.

International Election Monitors

International election observation missions are considered the most reliable source of information on the conduct of elections by many in the international community. The elections in Minsk were monitored by two election observation missions: by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), and by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) observation mission.

The OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission was opened in Minsk on February 7, 2006 after initial hesitation in ODIHR concerning the usefulness of sending observers to monitor elections, which were already obviously not going to be free or fair. The mission comprised 48 experts and long-term observers stationed in Minsk and in 14 regional centers. On the day of the election 440 observers from 38 countries and 98 parliamentarians from the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE observed voting at over 2,000 polling stations and more than 100 territorial election commissions. 19 further observers from the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE and 9 observers from the OSCE/ODIHR mission were denied visas or refused entry into Belarus.

The preliminary results of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission were announced in Minsk on March 20 and laid the ground for most international responses. The mission stated that "The Belarusian presidential election on March 19 failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections, despite the fact that voters were offered the potential for a genuine choice between four candidates. Arbitrary use of state power and widespread detentions showed a disregard for the basic rights of freedom of assembly, association and expression, and raise doubts regarding the authorities' willingness to tolerate political competition. A statement by the security services, accusing the opposition and civil society of planning to seize power and associating them with terrorism, contributed significantly to a climate of intimidation and insecurity. This was further exacerbated by harassment and detention of political and civil society activists. Opposition candidates faced difficulties in conveying their messages to the public, while the coverage of the President was extensive and favorable. State employees and students were under pressure not to participate in the campaign of the opposition candidates and to vote for the incumbent president. The vote count proved highly problematic, with observers assessing it negatively in a large number of counts witnessed. In a number of instances, the results were completed in pencil, and the majority of observers were prevented from standing close enough to see the marks on the ballot".

The OSCE/ODIHR report was largely contradicted by the CIS observation mission, an election monitoring mechanism established in 2002 by the executive committee of the Commonwealth of the Independent States to monitor elections in CIS countries. The mission was headed by the executive secretary of the CIS, Vladimir Rushailo, and comprised of 467 observers. The preliminary results of the mission stated that the Belarusian elections were "free, open and transparent" although admittedly had some drawbacks, a statement which was supported publicly by a Russian observer named Velichkin from the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission.

In particular, Rushailo stressed the international atmosphere surrounding the elections. He characterized it as one of "unprecedented external pressure" and criticized "biased statements, harsh judgments and warnings of restrictive political and economic measures which were perceived as an attempt to influence the election process during the last stage of the elections".

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs used the results of the CIS observation mission in their official evaluation of the elections, considering the election free and fair, even taking into account some shortcomings at some polling stations.

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Reactions from the European Union

In run up to the elections the European Union (EU) and United States (US) were expecting more serious violence, and possibly even bloodshed, on the streets of Belarus. Several warnings were issued to the Belarusian authorities to refrain from violence before the elections by high ranking EU and US officials, as well as by President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation.

The European Commission reaction to the election results in Belarus followed polling day swiftly. European Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, expressed that she was "saddened, but relieved" that there had been no violence on the streets, and called on the government to release all of the arrested. She went on to say that "It is now really very likely that some action will be taken following up on what the Council [of EU foreign ministers] said both in November and January – that ministers stood ready to take further restrictive measures if the elections turned out not to be free and fair".

On part of the European Council, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana endorsed the OSCE preliminary election report saying "What we have seen [on] television last night and the results that have come out from the OSCE speak for themselves. We would like to continue being engaged with the people of Belarus, and continue being firm with the leaders of Belarus so that they really accept to move on to being a democratic country".

A day later he expressed his support in even stronger words saying "I would like to stress that the EU considers the Belarusians our European brothers and sisters and strives for strong human partnership" and added that the Belarusian government was preventing the Belarusian people from having a better future.

With the OSCE/ODIHR report in hand the foreign ministers of the 25 member states of the EU, gathered on March 20-21 in Brussels for the European Council meeting and started a debate on Belarus. Although the ministers recognized that the elections were neither free nor fair, they did not manage to come to a joint position on Belarus. New member states, such as Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic insisted that harsher sanctions should be quickly imposed on Belarus, but the resolution was muted by German Foreign Minister Steinmeier, who argued that a hasty and ill-considered reaction could damage the EU's future options regarding Belarus.

A declaration outlining the short-term position of the EU toward Belarus after the presidential elections was passed by the Council of the European Union on March 24. In the declaration, the European Union promised to look into restrictive measures against those responsible for the violations of international electoral standards, and to develop closer relations with the Belarusian people. The EU also urged the Belarusian authorities to allow people to demonstrate peacefully and called for the release of all arrested.

The highlight of the declaration, however, was the recognition that "In the course of this election campaign, the European Union has witnessed the emergence

of pluralistic forces and the consolidation of a genuine Belarusian opposition as well as a politically active civil society. In very difficult circumstances and at great personal risk, opposition candidates and their supporters have offered the Belarusian population a democratic alternative. Their efforts deserve our recognition and support. The European Union pledges to further strengthen its support for civil society and for democratization in Belarus".

Several members of the European Parliament who wished to observe the elections in Belarus suffered setbacks from the very outset. Many were not issued visas to enter Belarus for an election observation mission. In response, members of the delegation decided to establish a situation room in Brussels to follow developments in Belarus. Reactions from the European Parliament to the results of the elections in Belarus were voiced already on March 20, refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the elections.

The President of the European Parliament Josep Borrell said that "the failure to respect international electoral standards in combination with a steadily deteriorating political situation and persistent violations of the civil and fundamental rights of the Belarusian people will not remain without consequences for the relations between the EU and Belarus".

The resolution on Belarus issued on March 20 after the official results of the OSCE/ODIHR mission were announced refused to recognize president Lukashenka as legitimately elected and called for a rerun of the elections, at the same time supporting the demonstrations in Minsk: "We welcome the impressive mass demonstrations against the non-democratic nature of the election showing the desire of the large part of the society to restore democratic rights and political freedoms in their country, thus revealing the huge democratic potential of the Belarusian people. It is a victory over fear."

Other International Organizations

A number of other international organizations also reacted to the elections in Belarus. In a speech on March 20, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), condemned the conduct of the elections in Belarus saying that "[t]he people of Belarus have the right to choose their leadership through a true democratic process; that right was again denied to them in these elections. I strongly urge the authorities in Belarus to take steps to respect Euro-Atlantic democratic standards, including those to which they have committed in the Partnership for Peace".

Terry Davis, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, in his reaction to the rigged vote said "Alyaksandr Lukashenka is a president with a tainted mandate. Some elections are stolen by tampering with people's votes, others by tampering with people's minds through threats, harassment and intimidation (...) In a country in which freedom of expression and association are so thoroughly and aggressively suppressed, a vote is not an exercise in democracy, it is a farce".

The President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Rene van der Linden, was one of the first to raise the question of Russia: "The international community must now give a firm, coordinated response (...) As the Council of Europe approaches the beginning of the first ever Russian chairmanship of its Committee of Ministers, we can look forward to new opportunities for bringing about democratic reforms in Belarus."

The United States of America

An important and powerful response to the elections came from the United States. The day after the elections the State Department stated that "[t]he United States cannot accept as legitimate the election results announced yesterday by the Belarusian Central Election Commission declaring Alyaksandr Lukashenka the winner in a landslide. The United States congratulates the courageous Belarusian democrats who, against appalling electoral conditions and at great risk, have moved their country closer toward reclaiming its democratic rights (...) The United States is preparing to take serious, appropriate measures against those officials responsible for election fraud and other human rights abuses, and we will be coordinating these steps with the European Union".

David Kramer, Assistant Deputy Secretary of State, talked in more detail about the policy of the United States toward Belarus and the US response to the elections during a speech at the Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center on March 21.

"The Secretary of State, as you know, has referred to Alyaksandr Lukashenka as the last outpost of tyranny, the last dictatorship in Europe... what we saw on Sunday itself certainly confirmed those descriptions (...) Our policy is well known. Before the election we wanted to shine a bright light on Belarus and on the regime's record. We wanted to help those activities working to promote democratic change, and we wanted to break the regime's stranglehold on information (...). We will continue to stand for these principles in the post-election period (...). The US and the EU are on record as ready to take additional measures against individuals responsible for violations of international standards. Specifically, we will look to expand travel restrictions on additional individuals responsible for fraud and human rights abuses (...). We also will look at going after assets in a targeted way of key people in the regime in Minsk."

Western Europe: Germany, Austria, France

After initial disappointment with the statement by German Foreign Minister Steinmeier at the Council of the EU Foreign Ministers, German politicians picked up the tone echoed in other countries of Europe. Chancellor Angela Merkel supported the Belarusian opposition saying that "... with its actions during the election campaign the opposition garnered deep respect in the eyes of the German government and deserves its solidarity and support".

Members of the Bundestag were also outspoken in regard to the elections in Belarus, with Manfred Grund stating that human rights are more important to the current government of Germany than before and characterizing the events in Minsk as brutal and violent. In Minsk, a delegation of German parliamentarians followed the elections and civic protests. Of this group, Marieluise Beck addressed the democratic opposition at the March 19 rally, ensuring protesters of the full support of their demand for free and fair elections.

The Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik stated on March 20: "In today's Europe, Belarus is a sad exception. (...) We are convinced that the bleak winter for democracy and democrats in Belarus will not endure."

The French Foreign Minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, called on the EU to be extremely firm with the Minsk government: "Vigorous sanctions against Belarusian leaders and support for the civilian population will be clearly in order."

Central and Eastern Europe: Slovakia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Ukraine

By comparison, Slovak, Polish and Baltic responses were much harsher than the responses coming from older member states. In the debates at the Council of Foreign Ministers in Brussels they called for harsher measures to be imposed and fast.

Immediately on election day, Slovak Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda issued a statement to say that "[we] cannot recognize the results of the Presidential elections in Belarus as presented by President Lukashenka's regime". In addressing the democratic opposition, he emphasized that "[the] flame of civic protest and hope (...) is now burning in Belarus. Slovakia and the international community must not leave the people of Belarus alone in their struggle for a free and democratic country."

Poland, too, reacted quickly. Most outspoken was the Vice President of the European Parliament, Poland's Janusz Onyszkiewicz: "[T]his is not the end of the process, this is probably the beginning. Finally somebody shouted out loud that the King is naked – many people heard it. Recent events in Belarus may facilitate the repetition of the Polish events in 1989."

The Lithuanian and Latvian foreign ministries stated "that in a certain part of the Belarusian civil society a breakthrough has taken place regarding the understanding of democratic values and principles. This part of the society has chosen to demonstrate its civic position by means of peaceful protest".

The Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, together with the President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko, stated in response to the suggestion to impose

economic sanctions, visa bans and to freeze Belarusian assets that "the conditions in Belarus less and less represent the democratic situation. We can only express our regrets to the Belarusian people. But wide-ranging economic sanctions would affect the people and not the political elite".

In a briefing on March 20, President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia, one of the most outspoken foreign leaders on the Belarus question, stated that "Belarus is not an *idée fixe*. It is a fundamental issue. I am convinced that the people of Belarus will be freed and Europe will be finally united".

Although Ukraine joined the EU declaration on the presidential elections in Belarus, the response of President Victor Yushchenko was less outspoken. He reiterated that "Belarus must not be internationally isolated, for it will not benefit democracy in this country. We want to have pragmatic relations. We want to develop trade and economic relations with our neighbor". By contrast, the chairman of the Ukrainian *Rada*, Vladimir Litvin, expressed support for the president of Belarus: "We are all to respect the choice of Belarusian people."

Russia and Other States

Russia was among the first to congratulate Lukashenka on his reelection. President Putin sent a telegram which read "The results of the election that has just taken place are evidence of the voters' confidence in the course you have chosen to ensure rising prosperity for the Belarusian people…"

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expanded the explanation: "Understandable is the interest which Moscow showed in the election campaign in Belarus (…) Belarus is not only our closest neighbor, but also an ally of Russia."

On March 24, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Igor Lavrov, sharply criticized the work of the OSCE/ODIHR observation mission, stating "we again became witnesses of a situation where a monitoring mission (…) began to make statements that these elections would be illegitimate…"

Three other countries joined Russia in congratulating Alyaksandr Lukashenka on his reelection: Iran, Cuba and China. Among the most quoted was the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who expressed confidence that "during the new term in office of Alyaksandr Lukashenka relations between Iran and Belarus will continue developing in all directions."

Prominent Individuals and Non-Governmental Organizations

Madeleine K. Albright, former US Secretary of State and Chairperson of the National Democratic Institute, said "I have watched with admiration as many of you have braved the cold and snow and the fear of intimidation and arrest

in your peaceful call for democracy (…) I stand in solidarity with you, in the conviction that the principles, to which we aspire together, for a political process based on equality and respect for human rights, reflect the hopes and aspirations of people the world over."

Former Czech President Václav Havel joined a delegation of Czech Senators and parliamentarians in their attempt to hand over a petition to the Belarusian Embassy in Prague. The petition expressed support for the Belarusian opposition and demanded the resignation of President Lukashenka. Václav Havel said "This is an act of solidarity. From our own experience we know how important signs of solidarity are for those struggling for freedom."

International Non-Governmental Organizations like the International Helsinki Committee and Amnesty International reacted to the events with similar statements: "The Belarusian authorities have yet again demonstrated a total disregard for freedom of expression. All those that have been detained for the legitimate and peaceful expression of their views must be released immediately." Amnesty International launched a petition to free the arrested demonstrators and political prisoners in Belarus.

Conclusion

When later during the week following the elections, events in Minsk turned violent, there came a second wave of international reactions, condemning violence and calling on the Belarusian authorities to release prisoners. On March 24, the tent village on October Square was removed by the police, and a peaceful demonstration called by the opposition to celebrate Independence Day on March 25 was violently dispersed.

In response to the arrest of hundreds of people, including opposition candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin, Western officials responded with concern, including the Foreign Minister of Belgium, Karel de Gucht, who holds the presidency of the OSCE: "It is particularly disappointing and worrying that the Belarusian authorities did not take the many calls for restraint into account and did not refrain from repressive action. I am concerned now over the safety and the well-being of those arrested." This concern was echoed by the EU, its individual member states, and the United States, while Russia offered a sharply different view. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov responded to the violence in Minsk, saying "I would not call what we saw on television a 'breaking-up'" and played down measures taken by the Belarusian authorities. In Russia's reading, what occurred in Minsk on March 25 was clearly a failed attempt to repeat opposition tactics used during elections in other CIS countries, such as Georgia and Ukraine.

These opposing assessments and responses notwithstanding, the recent presidential elections in Belarus undeniably received unprecedented international attention. Major newspapers and TV channels, in the West, in Russia and worldwide, covered the events as they were unfolding in Belarus.

Major international broadcasters ran reports from Belarus among their headline features for almost a week as the demonstrators gathered on October Square. For some observers, however, this extensive coverage was still not sufficient to raise the awareness of the international community and audience about the situation in Belarus, and the *Wall Street Journal* asked on March 21, "Who will cry, after yesterday's fiasco of a presidential election, for Belarus? More to the point, who can find this nation of 10 million (mostly delightful) Slavic souls without a peek at a map? Safe to say, not many, which is good news for Alexander Lukashenka's career plans." It is now for international media, opinion leaders and decision makers to make sure that international interest in and knowledge about this country remain and further increase.

Part Four
Beyond Elections: Prospects for Democracy in Belarus

A Transatlantic Approach to Democracy in Belarus

David J. Kramer

US policy toward Belarus is straightforward: The United States wants to see Belarusians chart their own future path, exercising the freedom to choose a government. As simple as these aspirations may seem, they have been repeatedly thwarted by a regime that appears determined to silence the opposition and hold onto power at all costs.

At a time when freedom is advancing around the world, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime has turned Belarus into an outpost of tyranny in the heart of Europe. His government has isolated Belarus from its neighbors and the international community, seemingly dedicated to moving backwards while the world around him moves forward.

Despite tremendous obstacles thrown up by the regime, many Belarusians continue to struggle courageously for a democratic future. The events surrounding the March 19 election showed that pro-democracy forces are increasingly unified and have a message of hope that resonates with the population. The post-election demonstrations were the largest such events in Belarus in years – a remarkable achievement given the regime's efforts to create a climate of fear around the election. The United States will continue to stand with the people of Belarus in their aspirations for democracy.

The United States is hardly alone in attempting to shine a light on Belarus. We have and will continue to work with our allies and partners to assist those seeking to return Belarus to its rightful place among the Euro-Atlantic community of democracies. There is no place in the Europe of today for a regime of this kind. The US and European Union are working closely together in promoting freedom and democracy in Belarus.

The conduct of the election was the latest sad chapter in more than a decade of dictatorial rule by Lukashenka's regime. From the announcement of the early election to the balloting itself, we saw a regime bent on utilizing the theatrical props of a democratic process for a clearly undemocratic end. We saw a regime use the tools of fear and lies to consolidate power in a nation where independence is thwarted and ideas are seen as dangerous.

The world saw the process for what it was. From the European Union to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to the White House, the global democratic community criticized the elections as fatally flawed – not even close to free and fair. And we have subsequently seen Lukashenka's

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security forces come down hard on peaceful protesters, dragging hundreds off to jail.

While dictators have long justified crackdowns in the name of preserving peace and stability, Lukashenka's security forces were blunt in their purpose. By waiting until 3am to sweep in and cart away hundreds of peaceful protestors from Minsk's main square, the regime made clear that they were dedicated only to silencing the voice of the opposition. That is why the efforts of the united democratic opposition are so impressive. They offer inspiration that a different, brighter future lies ahead for Belarus.

The Regime We Face

Over the past 15 years we have seen the face of Europe change, as free peoples across the Frontiers of Freedom have stood up to take control of their destiny. As a result, the Europe of 2006 bears little resemblance to the divided continent of the past. Debate and dialogue are the norm; integration and prosperity are the trends. From the Baltics to Central Europe to the Balkans, hope is on the rise – but the government of Belarus is attempting to move in the other direction.

Lukashenka's actions threaten the realization of a Europe that is truly whole, free and at peace. His government introduces an element of unpredictability and potential instability in Europe. With his history of sham elections, "disappearances" of opponents, trumped-up charges against opponents and attacks on anything resembling a free press, Lukashenka has demonstrated that he is incapable of leading Belarus toward a democratic future. Furthermore, as Belarus' self-imposed isolation intensifies, Lukashenka is increasingly seeking partners from other states of concern.

Most troubling are the increased contacts between Belarusian authorities and Iran. During last September's United Nations General Assembly, Lukashenka met with Iranian President Ahmadinejad and echoed some of his most troubling rhetoric with a speech of his own, expressing Belarus' solidarity with Iran, North Korea and Cuba. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Presidential Envoy Mehdi Safari visited Belarus in November 2005, gaining Belarusian public support for Iran's position on the nuclear issue in the International Atomic Energy Agency. And the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament led a delegation to Minsk in December 2005, publicly suggesting that Belarus and Iran increase their nuclear cooperation.

Lukashenka's regime has also reached out to increase contacts with Sudan and Syria seeking to increase economic, scientific and cultural exchanges - all this at the same time that Lukashenka stepped up verbal attacks on Poland and other European neighbors for their support for an open press and democratic dialogue.

Apart from its well-documented penchant for suppressing the opposition

and its troubling foreign policy partners, the Lukashenka regime has made corruption and self-enrichment hallmarks of its presidential administration. The Presidential Reserve Fund is separate from and unaccountable to the main state budget. Lukashenka himself has admitted that such funds are worth roughly $1 billion and were drawn from secret arms sales. According to former regime insiders, Lukashenka has profited from expensive gifts from supporters and business people, making him one of the richest men in the CIS.

US and EU United

We have no candidate, we support no platform, but believe that Belarusians have the right to choose their own leaders in a free and fair process. And we believe that with free speech, open debate and a fair election the country would move forward, beyond this dark chapter. It is in no-one's interests for Belarus to remain an island of corrupt, dictatorial rule amid a continent of strengthening democracies.

Our beliefs, in fact, mirror those of the European Union. In the months prior to the March election, the United States and the EU worked closely to seek means of supporting the people of Belarus in their efforts to promote democratic change. Together, we wanted to break the regime's stranglehold on information, allowing Belarusians to receive objective sources of news and information via radio, Internet and other means. And working with the OSCE, we continually urged the regime to provide conditions conducive to a truly free and fair election process.

To say we were disappointed by the March 19 process would be an understatement. The elections did not reflect the expression of the will of the people. Therefore, the results cannot be accepted as legitimate.

The OSCE was clear in its language: "The conduct of the 19 March presidential election failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections." It cited "the climate of intimidation and atmosphere of insecurity on the eve of the election", charging Lukashenka with using his security apparatus "in a manner which did not allow citizens to freely and fairly express their will at the ballot box".

As the United States spoke out against this fraud, so did Europe. From Austria, the Foreign Minister called Belarus "the sad exception" to the democratic trend. In France, the Foreign Minister immediately called for sanctions against the regime and support for the civilian population. EU High Representative Javier Solana echoed the same commitment to strengthening support for Belarusians while speaking out strongly against the regime. He said, "I very much regret that by consolidating its authoritarian hold on Belarus, the government stands in the way of a brighter future for the country's population."

Those who live closer to the Frontiers of Freedom have spoken the most clearly. Leaders in Lithuania and Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, among many

others, have been extremely outspoken in their condemnation of the election and their support for democratic forces in Belarus.

Not all of Belarus' neighbors have been so outspoken. Unfortunately, Russia has supported Lukashenka's fraudulent victory, setting itself apart from virtually every other member of the international community. Belarus should not be an issue that divides Russia and us – promoting democracy in Belarus should instead be a common interest.

United in What?

On the eve of the March 19 elections, as it became more and more clear that Lukashenka had no intention to allow anything more than a sham election, we began hearing more and more questions about what, exactly, the United States and Europe can do. Shining a light is all good and well, skeptics would say, but what can you do?

As this book goes to press, the reply to that question is becoming clear. We are working intensively with our European allies and partners to take a united approach in dealing with Belarus, as we did in the months before the election and as we will continue to do over the long run.

We have identified a growing number of Lukashenka's co-conspirators, and we are taking action against them. Specifically, we are expanding travel restrictions on those responsible for the election fraud and human rights abuses. These people will simply not be able to travel the way they used to.

In a similar way, we are discussing ways to go after the assets of key people in the regime. The United States and the EU are dedicated to making sure that the regime's key players pay the price for their abuses. Our net is cast carefully, as we want to ensure that we do not harm innocent Belarusians, but we will continue to expand the number of people on our lists as we confirm their identities and learn of their activities.

A Concrete Collaboration

This US-EU collaboration is a concrete example of the new reality in transatlantic relations. The United States welcomes a strong, activist European Union as a partner in getting things done. Our relationship is not about the relationship anymore. It is about putting that relationship to work. In the past, when issues divided the United States and Europe, we were left with a moral fog. Standing together – speaking and acting in unison – that fog is lifted, and the bright light of the globe's center of democratic legitimacy shines clearly.

The story of Belarus and the aspirations of freedom-loving Belarusians did not end with the March elections. On the contrary, it began a new chapter. The weeks, months and even years ahead may not be easy. At the same time,

change may come sooner than many people think. Either way, we and our European allies remain united on Belarus.

The United States will continue to stand for the principles of democratic debate and government by the people. In 2006, we have provided substantial assistance to implement programs aimed at building democracy, ranging from improving access to information to strengthening civil society. The European Union – in helping set up a radio service for Belarus and in supporting those who dare to dream of democracy – is our essential partner.

Together, we are dedicated to support the brave Belarusians who have dared to speak out, despite the repressive environment. The road ahead is not yet mapped, and it may not be easy, but history as well as the power of democracy's proponents tell us that Lukashenka's days are numbered.

A European Strategy towards Belarus: Becoming "Real"

Dov Lynch

The presidential elections that occurred on March 19, 2006 in Belarus produced the predicted result: Alyaksandr Lukashenka won the vast majority of the votes after a campaign that was heavily controlled by the government, featuring harassment of the opposition, censorship of the media and general repression of Belarusian civil society. Once again, the European Union (EU) faces the same question it has sought to answer since 1996: how to influence political developments inside Belarus and how to support the democratization of this EU neighbor? Almost ten years after this question was first raised the European Union needs new thinking and a new strategy.

The Problem

The problem with our attempt to influence political developments in Minsk is that Alyaksandr Lukashenka could not care less. The freshly "reelected" Belarusian president does not respond to the "carrots" or the "sticks" proffered by the European Union because the logic of his reign is contrary to the nature of the EU model. Indeed, the essence of Lukashenka's rule goes against the grain of mainstream European approaches to politics, economics and societal development. So, why on earth do we expect Lukashenka to change his behavior and open his regime in a direction that is utterly alien to him?

There is no evidence that would indicate he might be ready to do so. Since 1996, Alyaksandr Lukashenka has not deviated in the slightest from his objective of building an authoritarian regime in Belarus. Nothing the EU or the international community has done has been able to alter this fundamental drive. In fact, it would seem that external pressure has only served to deepen Lukashenka's determination. The Belarusian president has regularly raised the bogeymen of "massive foreign pressure" and "external interference" as justifications for stronger actions to strengthen the Belarusian "state" – for "state" we must read "his rule".

And his position is strong. Despite the fielding of a single and a strong candidate for the March 19 presidential elections, the opposition in Belarus remains nascent, without the means yet to challenge Lukashenka's ability to seduce, persuade and control. In the words of the EU presidency, the March 2006 presidential elections were "fundamentally flawed". The opposition was

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systematically harassed, detained and censored in the run-up to voting. And yet, however strange it may seem, Lukashenka does have strong support inside the country, which draws on the fact that Belarus has avoided many of the difficulties of "transition", witnessed in other countries in its neighborhood. Lukashenka has also presided over reasonably impressive growth rates that have allowed Minsk to increase minimal wages and to sustain social structures.

Belarus is not Georgia and Ukraine before the Rose and Orange revolutions. Differences lie at three levels. First, both Georgia and Ukraine had developed strong civil societies, with numerous active non-governmental organizations, and a balance of views across the political spectrum. Civil society in Belarus is becoming increasingly active, but it remains relatively nascent. Secondly, in Georgia and Ukraine, incumbent leaders at least pretended to play by the rules of the democratic game. This locked them into responding to massive popular pressure through legal and constitutional processes, which in the end weakened their ability to maintain personal power. Lukashenka does not pretend to play by these rules, and there is no legal or constitutional framework standing above him to which the opposition may appeal. Finally, incumbent leaders in Georgia and Ukraine were in the end not prepared to authorize the use of force to "restore law and order". Lukashenka has shown that he has no such qualms. Before their revolutions, Ukraine and Georgia were weak states that acted within the democratization paradigm of politics. In 2006, Belarus is a stronger state that is authoritarian.

What should the European Union do? The framework for current EU policy towards Belarus was established in 1997, and it has changed very little since then. In essence, the policy framework may be summarized as follows: the EU has limited contacts with the regime in Minsk and has provided assistance to civil society with the aim of pressuring the government and of inducing positive change through the prospect of renewed ties. Almost ten years on, the policy has not succeeded.

In thinking about a new European strategy towards Belarus, we must keep two points in mind. The first is strategic, while the second is tactical. First, the EU does not really "exist" yet for Belarus. Put bluntly, the EU is not seen as a credible prospect by most Belarusian citizens and elites. Membership of the EU is seen as being unrealistic by most people. And this membership is often interpreted in geopolitical terms, with the European Union seen as an association of potentially, if not already, hostile states to Russia and Belarus. Belarusian reliance on Russia is founded on a bleak assessment of the country's future, which is seen fatalistically as having little choice but closer association with Russia. Moreover, for many inside the country, the prospect of moving in the direction of the EU seems to be full of obstacles. Under Lukashenka, Belarus has avoided the real difficulties of "transition", but the path towards the EU would seem to produce only "losers". Thus, the EU faces the challenge of becoming "real" for Belarus – a real partner, a real alternative and a real model. Certainly, this is no easy task.

Second, since 1997, EU policy has reacted to the electoral moments in Belarusian

politics, with every successive election being seized as an opportunity to call upon Lukashenka to alter his behavior and lead the regime towards democracy. Every election has seen EU hopes shattered, and highlighted ever more sharply the authoritarian logic of politics in Minsk. It is natural that the EU fixes on the prospect of change with each successive election. By 2006, however, it should be clear that "elections" in Belarus are not elections, as the EU understands them. In current conditions, these controlled "plebiscites" offer little hope for democratization. Also, our focus has been episodic, sequenced to follow the rise and fall of each election. This cycle must be broken. The EU must give continued attention to Belarus, independently of the country's "electoral" process.

The argument in this article is two-fold. First, the context around the "Belarus question" is reviewed in order to understand its importance for the EU. Second, options for a new European strategy towards Belarus are explored. This article proposes a framework for EU policy that navigates between the extremes of full engagement and serious coercion.

The difficulties that the EU faces in promoting democratization in Belarus have much wider relevance. Indeed, Belarus raises a question about the ambition of the EU as a foreign policy actor. The central message of the European Security Strategy agreed by all EU member states in December 2003 is the EU's desire to build a rule-based international society of states: "The quality of international society depends on the quality of the governments that are its foundation. The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states". According to the EU Security Strategy, the EU's main ambition should be the promotion of democracy beyond its borders. Through successive waves of enlargement, the EU has an unbroken record of exporting democracy and importing democracies. However, enlargement is not yet conceivable for a country such as Belarus. The question facing the EU in 2006 has, therefore, become: How can the EU best promote democracy in a country to which it cannot (now) offer the perspective of enlargement? While the case of authoritarian Belarus is acute, the EU faces this same question in other important countries on its borders and further afield. An adequate answer has not yet been found.

A New Context

Belarus does not pose a direct challenge or a hard security threat to the EU. In some respects, the argument may be made that the EU could afford to continue its current policy, betting on the hope that some day the people of Belarus will topple their leaders and return the country to the European fold.

And yet, the context around the "Belarus question" is changing dramatically. The framework for current policy was set in 1997. At that time, the EU was preoccupied with enlargement and other pressing housekeeping chores. Relations with Russia were quite positive, which seemed to posit a standoffish position from Brussels on Belarus. In addition, the EU did not have the policy tools necessary to engage with Belarus; the European Neighborhood Policy (launched in 2004) and the European Security Strategy were still to come. In some respects, therefore, Belarus was "forgettable" in 1997. In 2006, the EU can no longer afford to ignore this country. The context has changed at four levels, which, taken together, press for a new European strategy.

First, a new Europe is in the making around Belarus. The security architecture that Europe inherited from the Cold War is transforming and a new order is emerging. This order remains nascent and uncertain, but deep trends are becoming clear. For one, NATO is becoming more globally oriented, with less direct involvement in European security. At the same time, the OSCE has entered a crisis, with Participating States debating its enduring relevance and utility. Meanwhile, the EU is rising as Europe's security provider, with growing capacities and ambitions. What does this mean? For one, as a result of these changes, the EU will find it difficult to rely on the OSCE as the framework for policy towards Belarus. Also, the EU can consider options towards Belarus that were not available in 1997.

Second, in the wake of the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, a more forceful US agenda is emerging towards the countries of the former Soviet Union that seeks to stimulate and direct the change that is occurring. From the perspective of Washington, the former Soviet Union is in "movement" again, after the stagnation the region had fallen into by the late 1990's. This movement is seen as an opportunity to be exploited in US policy. The sharpening of US policy must be factored into EU thinking.

A third change concerns the Russian Federation. The Russia of 2006 is different to that of 1997. For many European countries, this is not the Russia that had been hoped for in the 1990's. What is more, relations with Russia today are different to those of 1997, a highpoint of optimism in EU – Russia interaction. By 2006, many member states have become concerned with domestic trends inside Russia as well as with elements of Russian foreign policy. At the same time, the EU remains deeply interested in developing cooperative relations with Russia, especially in the new shared neighborhood between the enlarged European Union and the Russian Federation. Belarus stands out in this new neighborhood. Under Vladimir Putin, Russian-Belarusian relations have become troubled, but Belarus is still seen by many in Moscow as a strategic ally. With the recent revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, and the changes in Moldovan foreign policy, this ally has gained importance for Russian interests. The EU faces the challenge of striking a balance between seeking strategic cooperation with Russia and promoting its interests in countries on the EU's borders.

Finally, the region around Belarus has changed dramatically since the 1990's. Belarus' immediate neighbors of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland have joined NATO and the EU. Ukraine and Moldova seem intent on integrating into mainstream Europe. However fragile the results of the Ukrainian and Georgian revolutions may be, they may mark the start of a period of upheaval across the post-Soviet space, with the rise of nationalist and European-oriented regimes that come

to power through significant demonstrations of popular support. Certainly, the inertia of the post-Soviet order of the 1990's seems to have broken. This regional context is increasingly uncomfortable for the regime in Minsk. Events show that people will go out into the streets, regimes can be toppled in weeks and change can occur. The regime in Minsk no longer seems inevitable.

This means that in 2006, the EU can no longer leave Belarus to its own devices. The presidential elections in March 2006 place the "Belarus question" ever more sharply before the EU. How should the EU respond to a regime that is increasingly authoritarian? How should the EU interact with a regime whose legitimacy it does not recognize? The electoral process also showed the burgeoning strength of civil society in Belarus and the unity of opposition forces. How can the EU support these developments? These are tough questions.

Becoming "Real"

In theory, the EU could either adopt a policy of coercion against the regime in Minsk or rather accept the limits of reality and engage with the regime in order to prepare the ground for long term change. Rather than choosing between these options, EU policy should become active at different levels in order to embed positive change in the region surrounding Belarus and to catalyze change inside the country. In the view of this author, the essential objective leading a new European strategy should be to become a real actor for this country. Becoming "real" has several levels.

Firstly, the EU must become a "real" actor for the regime. Since 1996, Lukashenka has blatantly ignored all EU injunctions and statements, with few costs or penalties. In order for this to change, the EU must take actions that are heard in Minsk.

Secondly, the EU must become a "real" actor in support of Belarusian civil society and opposition forces. EU assistance until now has been limited and difficult to obtain. The scale and forms of EU assistance must be rethought.

Finally, the EU has to become "real" in terms of the alternative and future model of development it can propose to Belarusian society as a whole. For now, the EU seems unrealistic and distant. For the EU to develop traction inside the country, it must convince the Belarusian people that the EU can "exist" for them too. Achieving these objectives requires the EU to act at all three levels.

A Regional Policy

First, the EU should seek to tie Belarus to the positive changes that are occurring around it in Eastern Europe, in Ukraine and Moldova. In this, it is vital that the European Neighborhood Policy be given sufficient resources to support the movement of Ukraine and Moldova towards greater integration with the EU, if

not full membership thereof. Real progress in Ukraine and Moldova would alter the immediate neighborhood around Belarus fundamentally. Their success would make credible the alternative that the EU could present to Belarus in contrast to other external models. Significant progress in Ukraine and Moldova could act as a magnet to Belarusian society and parts of the political elite.

Secondly, Belarus must be an element of EU – Russia dialogue. The EU has sought to place Belarus on the agenda of political dialogue with Moscow, but with great difficulty. The importance of Belarus for the enlarged EU makes it all the more important for Belarus to feature in EU – Russian discussions, especially in light of any eventual future crisis. The agreement at the Moscow 2005 Russia – EU summit on a roadmap for building a "common space on external security" offers an opportunity for increased dialogue on areas "adjacent" to the EU and Russia. Belarus is a prime candidate.

Thirdly, the EU should seek to embed Belarus more deeply into the region that surrounds it. The European Neighborhood and Partnership Programs offer instruments with which to start developing a regional approach to Belarus that would advance of a range of EU interests at the regional level, such as cross-border issues, questions of Justice and Home Affairs and transport and infrastructure concerns. These programs also have the advantage of not being Minsk-centric.

Policy towards Belarus

The EU must abandon the learned helplessness it has developed towards Belarus since 1996, in which little is done because everything is seen as impossible. The reality is that the EU is already doing a lot. Many member states, and not only new ones, have active programs supporting civil society, culture, education and healthcare in Belarus. The EU is a vital trading partner of Belarus. Put simply, the EU already does a lot: it should do more and should do it better.

First, the EU should consider how to increase pressure on the Minsk regime. The actions of the current regime leave no alternative to stepping up the pressure. The targeted visa ban should be widened greatly to include other members of the top leadership who were involved in the fraudulent elections. The question of investigating and freezing assets (estimated at several billions of US dollars) held in Europe and abroad by Lukashenka and his circle must now be considered seriously. At the same time, the EU should combine such pressure with measures to simplify visa regulations for certain categories of Belarusian citizens (especially scholars, students and members of civil society).

Secondly, the EU should seek to open an office in Minsk, composed initially of at least three to four *chargés d'affaires* and with the perspective of opening a full delegation. Having a presence on the ground would provide the EU with a "face" in Belarus. This office would also be important in providing well-

founded and up-to-date analysis of domestic Belarusian developments for EU structures.

Thirdly, an assessment of the activities of Belarusian NGOs during the elections and EU assistance to them should be undertaken in order to understand clearly what worked and what did not. The EU should exploit the flexibility offered by the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Decentralized Cooperation Instrument in terms of funding and supporting non-registered NGOs and undertaking other measures without the explicit support of the central government.

Fourthly, the EU could develop a Belarus-specific student exchange program, as part of *Tempus Mundus*, which widens the possibilities for student and scholar visits and exchanges. Even if the Belarusian government cracks down on these exchanges, the onus should fall on Minsk for being afraid of such contacts and not on the EU for not proposing enough.

Fifthly, EU and member state officials must support the development of a more effective and professional opposition in Belarus, through high level contacts, support for capacity-building and public statements in their favor.

Finally, it should be admitted that, while there is much that the EU can do in Belarus, member states can do more. It is imperative that member states pick up where the EU leaves off. Member states are already deeply involved in Belarus, with a range of programs supporting civil society and cultural activities. An inventory should be taken by the EU of member states activities to share information and avoid duplication. Following this, the EU should consider framing the creation of a Belarus Task Force, composed of willing member states, to coordinate approaches. Increased member state activity could include funding for radio and television broadcasting from outside Belarusian borders, forging ties between European trade unions and Belarusian structures and varied forms of support for the Belarusian opposition. The role for the EU should be to provide a framework for member state activities and to help their coordination.

An Agency for Democracy

Within the framework of enlargement, the EU has developed an excellent track record of promoting and supporting the democratization of neighboring countries. Outside of enlargement, however, the EU record is poor, without strategy and with few resources. How can the European Union promote democracy in neighboring countries without offering enlargement and without having the tool of conditionality at its disposal?

This question gains salience because it arises at a time when the EU has to reinvent itself as a foreign policy actor that advances its values and interests abroad without using the policy of enlargement. In the 1990's, enlargement was a surrogate for a genuine EU foreign policy, wherein the EU advanced its values and interests with states on its borders by transforming them into mirror images of itself. As a foreign policy tool, enlargement was luxurious because it relied on the full cooperation of the candidate state and placed the EU in a deeply asymmetrical relationship. With enlargement, European values and interests were advanced at one and the same time with neighboring states, with no need to find a balance between them. The EU did not have to distinguish between strategic and tactical interests: they were the same. Nor did the EU have to untangle the order of priorities for its interests with a neighbor, as these were set forth uniformly in the thirty-odd chapters of the *acquis communitaire* that each candidate had to close.

Genuine foreign policy is something different. It operates in a world that is the opposite of luxurious, defined first of all by constraint: constrained resources, constrained ambitions, and a constrained ability to control foreign partners. In foreign policy, your foreign partner rarely wants to become like you and only sometimes wants the same thing as you do. In the current climate in Europe, there can be no talk for now of enlarging beyond the pledges already made. In Belarus and throughout the EU neighborhood, therefore, the EU faces the challenge of developing a real foreign policy.

The EU has started the process. The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) reflects the birth of the EU as a post-enlargement foreign policy actor. With ENP, the EU is moving beyond the straitjacket of enlargement thinking about advancing its interests without offering accession, and by acting with means that are more than technical assistance but less than membership. But only the first steps have been taken. The hard work of crafting a post-enlargement foreign policy still lies ahead.

Promoting democracy in its neighbors should be a key part of EU foreign policy. The EU already has some tools in this area (EIDHR, etc.), but they are not yet up to the task at hand. It is time, as the case of Belarus demonstrates, for the EU to create a European Democracy Agency (as proposed by the European Parliament) dedicated to supporting the democratization of EU neighbors. This agency should be funded to the scale of the task at hand, and could be placed under the joint leadership of the European Council, European Commission and European Parliament. What is more, the regulations for projects funded by this democracy agency must be tailored to the difficulties of promoting democracy in harsh circumstances.

In sum, the "Belarus question" for the EU is not one of enlargement but of foreign policy. The issue of Belarus joining the EU one day is beside the point for now. In contrast, the EU must develop genuine foreign policy strategies and tools towards Belarus. In this sense, Belarus poses a challenge of strategic importance for the EU.

A European Foundation for Democracy

Markus Meckel

Democracy and freedom are among the founding values of the European Union. Its stability and prosperity are built upon the consolidation of democracy, both within the European Union and outside it. It is in the interests of the EU and its member states to promote democracy and, thus, to contribute to security and sustainable economic development in the world. However, there are deficiencies in the EU's foreign policy instruments that aim at promoting democracy. Democracy assistance should become a more visible and more effective element in the EU's external policies. Therefore, the EU needs to establish a "European Foundation for Democracy".

In the enlargement framework, the EU, through its pre-accession strategy, contributed considerably to the development of democracy and the rule of law in those transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which have now become members. Without a doubt, the enlargement and integration process has become an effective tool for democratic development and stability in Europe and its immediate neighborhood. Yet the EU lacks instruments to effectively promote democratic change in countries which have no perspective for membership in the near future. This counts especially for countries subject to authoritarian and dictatorial rule.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, EU programs in third countries are generally implemented in cooperation with the government of the country concerned and funds are often disbursed via the government. Hence, where the government of a recipient country has no interest in cooperating with the EU in the field of democracy and human rights, the programs cannot be adequately applied. Secondly, even where the European Commission decides independently and can give funds directly to NGOs and civil society, application procedures and the system of financial control are so complex and bureaucratic, that the programs become rigid. This, for example, is the case with the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which has an annual budget of €100 to €130 million. At present, the time lapse between project proposals being submitted and contracts being signed is between 12 and 24 months. And, it takes even longer for the funds to be paid.

The program has received a lot of criticism from the NGO community, politicians and experts. Recently, the European Commission decided to streamline the application process and to decentralize the program. Now, the EU missions abroad can also grant funding. However, the tendency is still to finance "macro-projects" with a budgets of €300,000 and more and whose application process takes significant periods of time. Small NGOs often do not stand a chance.

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Belarus, unfortunately, is an example of the poor record of the EU to directly promote democratic development and to support civil society. One reason for this is that EU assistance within the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) framework required the Belarusian government's consent. Furthermore, civil society in Belarus was not the target of EIDHR until 2004. In 2005, the European Commission decided to fund a €2 million TV and radio broadcasting program, after a long EU internal debate about where the money should come from. The projects include a 60-minute radio information magazine entitled "Window to Europe" and a weekly half-hour TV magazine-style program in Belarusian and Russian languages. These TV and radio broadcasts follow a smaller €138,000 EU-funded broadcasting project which was already underway, implemented by *Deutsche Welle*. Both projects were met with criticism from Belarusian democrats, among others, who say that the programs' effectiveness leaves a lot to be desired and that they will have little impact. The EU also provides €600,000 in sponsorship to the European Humanities University, which had to leave Minsk due to pressure from Lukashenka's regime and which is now operating from Vilnius in Lithuania. There are also some further calls for tender for projects under the umbrella of the European Neighborhood Policy and the budget line for Decentralized Cooperation and EIDHR, for which Belarusian NGOs are eligible.

In general, however, Belarusian democratic forces and NGOs complain that flexibility to provide small-scale and short term assistance and to react to the often difficult situation of NGOs is lacking, especially when the EU is dealing with unregistered entities. For example, the joint candidate of the democratic forces for the presidential elections, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, once complained that his election team did not have enough cash to pay for the petrol needed to run a proper election campaign in rural areas, although he did receive a lot of moral and political support from the EU and the United States. At the same time, the EU decided to sponsor a €2m TV and radio project for Belarus, which started to operate in February 2005, only a few days before the elections.

A European Foundation for Democracy

In order to correct the EU's deficiencies in this area, it should step up its efforts to support civil society in establishing an autonomous "European Foundation for Democracy" (EFD) as a new instrument of European foreign policy. By way of autonomously deciding on the allocation of funding to projects, this foundation would be intended to internationally promote the development of democracy, a strong civil society, the rule of law and the protection of human rights. The foundation would complement the current range of tools that exist within EU foreign policy, allowing for flexible cooperation, free of red tape, with the civil societies of other countries, underpinning their efforts, thereby

promoting democratic development. At the same time, it would lend weight to the Europeans' ambition to play an important role in the development of civil society and the promotion of democratic change in Europe and beyond, and would enhance the EU's visibility as an international political player.

Already in autumn 2004, on the basis of a Polish initiative, the establishment of a "European Democracy Fund" was discussed, the idea being to incite the EU to boost its activities in promoting democracy and civil and political human rights vis-à-vis its Eastern neighbors in the framework of its European Neighborhood Policy. Many experts dealing with the European Neighborhood Policy have asserted the need for a flexible and autonomous European Fund for Democracy Promotion. At that time, the Polish initiative met with considerable resistance and now has scant chance of playing a role in the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy.

The present initiative for the establishment of an EFD follows on from these efforts, but is wider in scope. The initiative foresees an instrument which would not be restricted to the European Neighborhood Policy and would not replace current instruments, but instead would provide the EU with an effective and flexible instrument which can be used across the world. Experience gained until 2001 with the European Human Rights Foundation can be used in structuring such a foundation. In addition, consideration should be given to whether the EuropAid Co-operation Office set up since then to administer the EU's external aid would need to be complemented.

The instrument provided by a new autonomous foundation of this kind would increase the flexibility of European foreign policy and allow a more individualized approach. It would be like an additional arm, able to act in a complementary fashion as an independent player – on a common basis yet autonomously – without disrupting or impeding official diplomatic relations between the EU and the states in which the foundation was active.

This European Foundation for Democracy is intended to provide support for civil society activities and structures in other countries in order to boost the spread of democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights across the world. Its activities would, therefore, be essentially aimed at supporting long term processes of change. The idea is to fund as many activities as possible, run by not-for-profit and non-governmental organizations with a direct impact on society and the general public. Such projects might concern building up and supporting independent media, or independent trade unions, or support for churches and social projects or community organizations, or – in authoritarian systems – support for democratic forces. Where competent and experienced partner organizations, such as foundations, exist in the countries concerned or in neighboring EU Member States, or in member states with a particular commitment, the EFD should, where possible, cooperate with these organizations in selecting and running projects.

Experience in Europe since 1989 has shown that political reform processes sometimes unexpectedly take on a dynamic of their own. Every process of

democratization offers short term "windows of opportunity" in which the potential for democratization is particularly large. For this reason, long term strategic work to underpin democratic institutions and procedures should be complemented by a "rapid reaction facility", allowing for swift and flexible reaction to opportunities for short term democratic change or acute human rights crises.

The Foundation should recognizably be an EU institution. It should be set up by the European Commission and the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and control by the European Parliament should be guaranteed. Working on the basis of structures used in the private sector, and tried and tested by many foundations, it would seem sensible to have a director responsible for the day-to-day management, along with a managing board to play a central role in decisions on the work program and priorities. This board would also take decisions on the award of contracts for projects up to a certain ceiling and implement a process of pre-selection and assessment of project applications for larger funding volumes. In addition, the Foundation would have a board of trustees, or a "supervisory board", which would set general guidelines for the Foundation's work and decide on project applications with a particularly large volume of funding.

Consideration should be given to appointing to the Foundation's bodies not only members of European Parliament and representatives of other EU institutions, but also persons who have gained similar experience in the member states as national parliamentarians or actors of civil society. The decision making structures of the Foundation must be structured in such a way as to also permit more small scale funding (compared with the amounts of funding otherwise usual in the EU) to be provided to smaller NGOs, since it is these NGOs in particular which often play an important role in situations of change and in democratic transformation processes.

The EFD should be funded by means of lump sum allocations from the EU budget. Furthermore, it should be possible for it to receive additional funding from third parties, for example, from other foundations, private companies or member states and use this to provide support in the framework of the Foundation's aims. The EU could couple allocations from its budget to conditions concerning the use of the funds, such as the distribution amongst a) individual countries, b) regions or c) certain issues.

Will the European Union Move Forward?

There is some hope that the EU will step up its momentum of assistance to democratic development outside its borders since it is currently reviewing its strategy in this area. At the end of 2006, the EU's current financial arrangements expire, and there is not yet agreement on what will replace the current instruments for democracy promotion. Nevertheless, there is awareness in the European Parliament, in the European Commission and in the

Council of Ministers that something has to be done. The European Commission has recently issued a communication on human rights and democracy, and the European Parliament has stated in a report that it "considers it useful to establish a special European fund to support, in an efficient and flexible manner, initiatives promoting parliamentary democracy in neighboring countries" (Resolution on the EU's Neighborhood Policy on January 18, 2006). In the context of discussions on the next 2007 to 2013 financial perspective, the European Parliament also calls for a separate instrument of financing or budget line for the promotion of democracy and human rights. This could form the basis for allocations to the Foundation. In order to have an impact internationally, an allocation from the EU budget of around €50 to €70 million should be aimed at in the medium term, in addition to the volume of EIDHR.

Further, on the initiative of Edward McMillan-Scott, Vice-President of the European Parliament, the all-party "Democracy Caucus" of the European Parliament developed a proposal for a "European Fund for Democracy through Partnership" (March 2006), which is very similar to the initiative proposed here. This proposal calls for a Foundation which "[…] should provide a flexible funding instrument to support democratic reform processes and programs, capable of operating at a greater level of suppleness, responsiveness and risk than would be appropriate for the EU institutions themselves. The Foundation would enhance the European profile in worldwide democracy assistance and could at the same time enrich the debate about democracy within Europe".

There are also some members of the European Parliament and experts who are arguing for the establishment of European political foundations, which are affiliated to the parliamentary groups in the European Parliament, rather than a multi-party foundation. This debate is to be welcomed. Political foundations would not constitute a contradiction to the establishment of an autonomous EFD. In countries under transformation with a politically differentiated and more developed civil society, political foundations find partners and actors for their work. Where this is not the case, the work of politically independent actors can be more efficient.

It is hoped that such initiatives will come to fruition. The EU would be in a better position to react to new challenges such as the support of democratic movements in Belarus and elsewhere. From today's perspective, the political future of Belarus looks bleak. The dictatorial regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka seems to be firmly in place. Lukashenka has secured a third term using a fraudulent presidential "election". He continues to suppress civil society and democracy. Independent newspapers have been closed, the opposition is deprived of free access to state TV and radio, NGOs are required to register with the state authorities, and many of them have not been able to continue working because of newly imposed restrictions. Opposition leaders are constantly being harassed and some of them or their aides have been imprisoned, as are people who peacefully demonstrated against the election fraud.

On the other hand events during and after the pseudo-elections in March 2006 also show signs of hope. We did not witness a color revolution, as in Serbia, Georgia or Ukraine, but thousands of Belarusians stood up for freedom and democracy, protesting on October Square in Minsk and elsewhere in the country against the falsified election result. The democratic opposition has a common and credible leader, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, and, in contrast to previous elections, is more united. The election campaign was much more professional, and especially many young people seem to see their future in a free and democratic Belarus rather than in a country ruled by someone who takes away their rights and destroys their perspectives for the future.

It is not only in the interest of the EU to support democratic movements outside the EU, it is also its duty. A European Foundation for Democracy would signal to the people of Belarus, but also to other people across the world, who are standing up for freedom and democracy, that the EU takes its self proclaimed aspirations seriously.

Making Civil Society Support Central to EU Democracy Assistance

Kristi Raik

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has begun to realize the key role that civil society can play in the democratization of Belarus. Raising the awareness of the local population and pro-democracy activity among citizens is rightly seen by the EU (as well as other Western donors) as one of the main opportunities for promoting democratic change in the neighboring dictatorship. The EU's new emphasis on civil society reflects a broader shift of paradigm in Western policies of democracy promotion. Since the collapse of the Soviet system in the late 1980's, the importance of civil society for democratization has become widely acknowledged, and hence bottom-up, voluntary civic activity has been included in the democracy assistance programs of most donors. The central role of peaceful civic activity in bringing about political change was reaffirmed by the recent cases of transition to democracy in Georgia and Ukraine.

While the EU acknowledges the need to support civil society in Belarus, there is currently a wide gap between its rhetoric and practice. Since 1991, the EU has been the largest Western donor to Belarus (with a modest total of €222 million in assistance from 1991 to 2005), with only a maximum of 5 percent of that assistance going to civil society. The United States has given many times more aid to Belarusian NGOs than the EU. Even Sweden, one of the main supporters of Belarusian civil society, has contributed almost as much to this sector as the EU. Civil society has also been of minor significance in EU assistance to other Eastern European countries, including Ukraine and Moldova, where NGOs have received only a small percentage of the total funds available (2 percent and 5 percent respectively from 1998 to 2004). The low level of assistance to civil society is particularly problematic in the case of Belarus, because in an authoritarian regime democracy assistance has to be directed to non-state actors, whereas in Ukraine and Moldova, the EU has been able support democratic reforms carried out by the government.

Civil Society as a Force for Democratization

In the midst of the flourishing rhetoric about civil society among democracy promoters, it is worth recalling briefly why independent civic activity is so essential for democracy and democratization. To begin with, it is one of the key features of democracy that people act together in an organized manner in order to formulate and express their interests, values and identities. Civil society is the sphere where such organized bottom-up activity takes place. It is by definition autonomous from the state and the business sector and includes a wide variety of civil society actors that do not necessarily share more with each other than the core characteristics of being voluntary, independent, not-for-profit, open, public, legal and non-violent. The existence of civil society obviously requires a democratic political system that guarantees the civic freedoms of association, opinion and speech. On the other hand, the functioning of democracy requires civic activity, and the quality and strength of democracy are defined, among other things, by the level of activity and development of civil society.

From the viewpoint of the citizen, civil society is first and foremost a channel for protecting and promoting personal values and interests. In addition to policy advocacy that aims to directly influence policy making, civic activity also has the broader function of shaping public opinion and bringing the views of different groups to the attention of the general public. Secondly, it is a classical function of civil society to exercise control over power holders and to prevent the concentration and misuse of power. In this watchdog and countervailing role, NGOs complement the media, as they scrutinize the work of public officials, demand openness and accountability, and expose possible misbehavior. For example, NGOs have a significant role in the fight against corruption. Another important task of NGOs in democratizing countries is to observe the election process, as they did for example in Ukraine during the presidential elections in 2004. In Belarus, on the other hand, independent domestic NGOs were not allowed to observe the recent elections. Thirdly, NGOs can perform social tasks such as taking care of children and the elderly, helping disadvantaged groups and promoting public health. This may be particularly valuable in poorer societies where the state has limited resources. NGO activity in the social sector is to some extent allowed in Belarus and other authoritarian regimes, whereas the first two functions of civil society are systematically suppressed by authoritarian leaders.

From the viewpoint of the democratic system, an active, well-organized citizenry may enhance the stability of democracy and the effectiveness and efficiency of decision making in many ways. NGOs and interest groups provide public authorities with valuable information and expertise on the problems and needs of the society. Civic activity also has an educative function: it teaches responsible social and political action and respect for the common public interest. People are more likely to approve public decisions and comply with common rules and norms if they take part in public life themselves and feel that they have a say in decision making affecting their lives. Furthermore, civil society is a channel for the state to communicate its decisions and policies to the people.

Under the conditions imposed by an authoritarian regime, where democracy and civic freedoms do not exist or are severely restricted, there is limited space,

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if any, for an open, public, legal and independent civil society. The primary task of civic activity is, therefore, to work for democratic political change that can create the conditions for the normal functioning of civil society. It is first and foremost politically oriented civic activity (politically is meant in a broad sense, as aimed at having an impact on public life and the functioning of a certain aspect of society) that helps to establish democracy. It stands close to two other sectors that are also essential for democracy: the media and political parties. The media, however, is often commercial as opposed to the not-for-profit nature of civil society. And political parties, unlike civil society organizations, strive for the attainment of power in state institutions.

Democracy assistance to Belarus should focus on these three sectors: politically oriented civic activity, independent media and democratic parties. It is essential for pro-democratic groups in Belarus to maintain independent communications and try to reach a broader public through alternative media. This is needed above all for spreading information about their own goals and activities in order to mobilize support and make people believe that they offer a credible alternative to the authoritarian regime. It is also necessary to delegitimize the incumbent leader by making available uncensored information about repressions and violations of human rights.

If the state does not allow democratic freedoms, civic activity cannot be fully open and it may have to ignore or violate the non-democratic legislation imposed by the regime. Instead of taking place in the public sphere, politically oriented civic activity is forced underground and treated by the regime as criminal. Under such circumstances, civil society entails, first, dissident groups that are not allowed to act publicly, but that work for democratic change more or less in secret and second, non-political organizations that are allowed by the regime to be active, but are autonomous and do not work for the regime. Thirdly, there are fake NGOs, established and supported by the regime, which do not, of course, qualify as part of civil society, for example, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union that takes its orders from President Lukashenka.

These specifications cause some difficulty for making a distinction between civil and un-civil society, and between true NGOs that are bottom-up and autonomous, and fake NGOs that are established by and dependent on the government. Pro-democratic groups may be forced to violate the law, which makes them vulnerable to being discredited by the regime. On the other hand, criminals and other groups that are un-civil according to democratic standards may try to portray themselves as victims of the repressive system and seek legitimacy in the eyes of external actors. It is a complicated but all the more essential task for external donors in such circumstances to find reliable partners and to deliver assistance to independent pro-democratic forces. Obviously, external actors can do very little through formal channels of assistance that are approved by the non-democratic regime. Assistance to pro-democratic groups often has to be given in secret or indirectly, and is, for example, channeled through neighboring countries or NGOs based outside the target country.

In order for civil society to initiate transition to democracy, it needs to organize a united opposition front that is able to mobilize the masses, as it did in the recent revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, and even more broadly in the late 1980's in East-Central Europe. At this stage of democratization, large-scale civic engagement is probably most important. The democratic opposition is more likely to succeed if the following preconditions are in place: the regime is not fully authoritarian, but allows some civic freedom (note, for instance, the effect of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* in the Soviet Union); the incumbent leader is unpopular; there is at least some independent media; independent NGOs are able to monitor elections; and the regime is not united and cannot rely on the military, police and security forces in case of mass demonstrations.

All these factors contributed to change in Ukraine and Georgia, but they all seem to be absent in Belarus. Western support is needed there, first of all, to make people realize and believe that there are alternatives to the current regime, alternatives that may be better than the stability of today, and that it is possible for the citizens to contribute to positive change. Many Belarusians know little about life in the democratic neighboring countries and may be encouraged to pursue democracy once they see how much better off people in, for example, the Baltic countries are. In order to open the eyes and minds of Belarusians, external donors should support as many grass-root contacts as possible. It may indirectly contribute to democratic change if one helps to bring a football club from a Belarusian town to play a match with their fellow club in, say, a town in Latvia, to invite Belarusian biology students to a summer camp in Poland, or to help a Belarusian choir or rock band tour Europe. It also strengthens civil society if individuals (instead of organizations) receive support to study and travel abroad. In general, all forms of linkages with the outside world tend to undermine the authoritarian leadership, whereas policies of isolation and sanctions are not likely to have a democratizing impact.

The Shortcomings of European Union Assistance to Civil Society

During the past years, the legal and political conditions for organized civic activity in Belarus have become increasingly difficult, as President Lukashenka has used new restrictions and repressive measures to prevent the recent wave of color revolutions from reaching the country. It has also become more and more complicated to support Belarusian NGOs from outside, and representatives of many donors have left the country. At the same time the EU has increased democracy assistance to Belarus (€8.7 million was earmarked for this sector in 2005). While it is difficult for any foreign donor to promote democracy in an authoritarian environment, the EU is particularly badly equipped for this kind of activity. To a large extent, this is explained by broader shortcomings in the Union's democracy assistance policy, as well as in the neighborhood policy.

First, the EU lacks a specific strategy for supporting civil society. The European

Neighborhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2003 pays more attention to civil society than any earlier EU policy instruments for its Eastern neighbors (excluding candidate countries). However, the ENP does not contain a specific analysis or vision of the role of civil society and ways for supporting it. This is part of a broader problem: the inconsistency and ineffectiveness of EU democracy promotion (again, excluding enlargement). It should be positively noted, however, that recent discussions in both the European Commission and the European Parliament, as well as among the member states, foresee a stronger role for civil society in EU democracy promotion in the future.

Second, the EU is not clear about its overall strategic aims in the Eastern neighborhood, and there is a lack of political will on the side of some member states to develop a more proactive strategy. While the new EU member states are eager to give all possible support to the democratization of Eastern neighbors, including the prospect of membership in the EU, some old members are skeptical about stepping up the EU's engagement in the region. One of the main reasons for caution, shared in particular by the large and old member states, is that Belarus and other new Eastern neighbors have traditionally belonged to the Russian sphere of influence. Promoting democracy in Belarus is by far less important for many member states than good relations with President Putin.

The third major obstacle to effective civil society support is bureaucracy, and in particular, the overly strict Financial Regulation of the EU. Several recent studies analyze in detail the problems caused by the Regulation for NGOs that are supported by the European Commission. In brief, the system is criticized for raising the costs, increasing uncertainty and reducing the effectiveness of NGOs that seek funding from the European Commission. Since the process is extremely slow, laborious and costly, it is particularly difficult for small NGOs to apply for EU funding. The procedure for applying for assistance takes such a long time, usually several years from programming until actual payments are made, that local conditions and needs may change radically during the period, and few NGOs are able to plan their work so far in advance. The Regulation imposes tight financial controls with auditing rules that are far stricter than the usual standards in both the public and private sectors. The extensive and complicated reporting requirements pose a further extra burden on recipients of assistance.

It is particularly difficult for the EU to support civil society in non-democratic countries where its bureaucratic rules often pose insurmountable obstacles and political agreement among its institutions and member states is particularly difficult to reach. The EU is not alone with this challenge: the aid of Western governments is also focused on democratizing countries, while much less is done in non-democratic countries. However, the current EU assistance programs are more rigid than those of other donors. For example, it is essential in an authoritarian environment that civil society assistance is independent from the approval of the recipient country's government. This principle is followed by the EU under a specific democracy program, the European Initiative for

Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), but not under the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States program (TACIS) that has been the major assistance program for the CIS countries, including Belarus. Even in non-authoritarian countries the involvement of government in civil society assistance contradicts the very idea of civil society as a sphere that is independent from government. It is, thus, most welcome that the European Commission has recently acknowledged the need to assist civil society directly, without the involvement of recipient country governments. Under the new system of EU external assistance, to be applied from 2007 onwards, it would be crucial to make this principle a rule in all civil society assistance.

Another obstacle to supporting Belarusian civil society is that most independent NGOs in the country have been closed down by the authorities and are, thus, not officially registered. The EU, however, can only support registered organizations. Furthermore, the EU does not support political groups, since this is considered illegitimate involvement in the internal affairs of other countries. Yet it is essential for democracy promotion in authoritarian environments to support pro-democratic political forces.

As it has become virtually impossible to allocate EU funds to civil society in Belarus, most of the money is used for activities outside the country, such as the work of the European Humanities University that is in exile in Vilnius, and TV and radio programs broadcast by German, Polish, Lithuanian and Russian channels. This kind of indirect support to democracy can be valuable and is practiced by many other donors. It should not, however, replace assistance to groups working inside Belarus, but should rather be complementary.

Channeling European Union Aid through European NGOs

Even if the EU substantially reforms the rules governing assistance, it will still be difficult for the European Commission to work extensively with NGOs in foreign countries, and in particular authoritarian ones, for both political and institutional reasons. Small-scale support to NGOs is very laborious and in authoritarian environments it is also politically sensitive. Hence, the EU needs to create new mechanisms for democracy assistance. There are at least two possibilities to enhance support to civil society in Belarus and other similar countries.

First, as discussed in more detail by Markus Meckel in this volume, the EU should establish a European foundation to support democratization and civil society. International practice suggests that private foundations that receive regular public funding are one of the best ways of supporting civil society. A foundation could work more effectively, especially in non-democratic countries, since it would not be constrained by the same bureaucratic requirements as the European Commission. It could be designed according to the model of the

United States National Endowment for Democracy and the Eurasia Foundation or the German *Stiftungen*. In addition, following the German model, some assistance, in particular to pro-democratic political forces, could be channeled through party groups in the European Parliament.

Second, the EU should develop long-term partnerships with European NGOs that support democratization outside the EU. The European Commission is to some extent already working with NGOs in this field, but the cooperation is hampered by its bureaucratic rules, so a reform of the rules is necessary also from this perspective. Again, there are good models among the member states. In a manner comparable to the foundation system, some governments have long-term partners among domestic NGOs that function as channels to allocate external assistance to non-state actors in other countries. (Where foundations exist, it is one of their tasks to support democracy promotion and development projects of domestic NGOs.) The NGOs that work as partners of government are more independent than the foundations, although they are also accountable to public authorities for the public funding that they receive. The division of labor is the same in both cases: in the field of democracy promotion, governments work mainly with institution building, and foundations and/or NGOs support civil society.

A good example is Sweden, one of the largest contributors to democracy and civil society in Belarus since the mid 1990's. Sweden's total assistance to Belarus has constantly increased, reaching over €3 million in 2005 and is expected to rise above €4 million in 2006. The main reason for the increase is the deteriorating state of democracy and human rights in the country. Close to half of Swedish assistance is directed to this sector, the other main targets being health and education. Belarusian NGOs have received support under both democracy and social programs of the Swedish governmental aid agency SIDA. From 1998 to 2004, NGOs received almost one third of the total assistance disbursed.

SIDA delegates a considerable share of external assistance to NGOs through Swedish NGOs, among others *Forum Syd*, an umbrella organization of close to 200 Swedish organizations working with development assistance. SIDA has supported numerous projects of cooperation between Swedish and Belarusian NGOs, including for instance anti-drugs and HIV/AIDS projects. It became increasingly difficult to start such projects in 2005 because of the registration process required by the Belarusian authorities. One way to avoid registration has been to support activities taking place outside the country. For example, the Belarusian Association of Journalists has taken part in seminars funded by SIDA that have taken place in Sweden, Ukraine and Russia. Local politicians from Belarus have also been trained in Sweden. On the whole, and in comparison with the EU, SIDA has worked in a faster and more flexible manner, reacting to changing circumstances in Belarus and cooperating with numerous partners from Sweden, Belarus as well as other countries.

The most complicated task for donors is to support pro-democracy groups in Belarus that are not registered and would definitely not be allowed to receive

foreign aid through the formal registration procedure required by the Belarusian authorities. The programs of Western foundations and governmental agencies are flexible enough to allow some funds to be disbursed clandestinely and to informal groups. Giving out public information about such assistance would be counterproductive and dangerous for its recipients.

The two channels of civil society assistance – a democracy foundation and European NGOs – are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the EU should aim to pluralize its aid mechanisms and could both create a new foundation and develop partnerships with European NGOs. Whatever model will be chosen, it is obvious that in order to make civil society a more important priority of external assistance and especially democracy assistance, the EU must adjust its aid mechanisms considerably. The case of Belarus exposes the limitations of EU foreign policy in a way that undermines its credibility as an international actor and as the soft, normative power that it claims to be. One can only hope that the tightening dictatorship in Belarus will speed up the reform efforts in the EU.

Assisting Democratic Transition in Belarus: Lessons from Pre-1989 Poland

Jacek Kucharczyk

The outcome of the Belarusian elections of March 19, 2006 opens up the prospect of a prolonged struggle between Lukashenka's dictatorial regime and the forces of democratic opposition and politically awakened parts of the civil society. In view of the brutal repression of protesters against the fraudulent elections and anyone daring to challenge the regime, the question arises as to what will be the best tactics and strategies for pro-democracy activists and their supporters in the West.

The degree of repressiveness of the Lukashenka regime, its methods combining soft and hard power, eludes comparison with pre-Orange Revolution Ukraine. Indeed, some Belarusian activists are inclined to draw comparisons between the situation in Belarus and Poland after martial law was imposed in late 1981. This article will examine such comparisons more closely, and will reflect on useful lessons that can be drawn from the struggle of Poland's "Solidarity" movement by those who wish to see a free, democratic and Western-oriented Belarus. Such comparisons will also provide clues as to instruments of democratic assistance that could effectively be applied by those wishing to support democracy in Belarus.

Let Them Know the World is Watching!

The imposition of martial law in Poland sent shockwaves around the world, even though reactions from the democratic world were less than consistent. Strong condemnation by US President Ronald Reagan of the unfolding drama were accompanied by complicity in Western Europe, best exemplified by "the sigh of relief" from German chancellor Helmut Schmidt upon hearing the news that "Solidarity has been prevented from starting the third World War". This seems to sum up the way that pro-democratic activists perceived and remembered the world's reactions: words of encouragement from the US and opportunism on the part of German and other European politicians, preoccupied "not to wake the Russian bear".

The pro-Americanism of the Polish post-1989 elites, so difficult to understand

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to politicians and opinion makers of "old Europe", can to a large extent be traced back to those reactions to the banning of "Solidarity" and the imprisonment of its activists. European leaders should draw a lesson from this: strong criticism of the Lukashenka regime today is an investment in good relations with the future leaders of Belarus.

In view of the fact that the EU is emerging as a regional political (and not merely economic) centre of gravity, the key responsibility here falls on European institutions and the capitals of those member states that – in the public eye – are most closely associated with Europe, such as Germany. The imprisoned and persecuted democracy activists in Belarus have every right to expect a clear and unambiguous voice of support from Europe, and they will certainly reciprocate as democratic politicians in the future.

It is very encouraging to see the involvement of a number of new member states, most notably Lithuania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland, in supporting democracy in Belarus. In addition to conducting their own activities, these countries should combine their efforts in order to mobilize other EU players. No less important is the involvement of non-member states of the EU, such as Ukraine and Georgia, whose own experience with recent democratic change should be tapped to build broad-based international support for Belarus.

Such assistance also needs to go beyond vague statements about supporting the "democratic process in Belarus". What is needed is general recognition of Alyaksandr Milinkevich and other opposition leaders as genuine representatives of the other, the democratic, Belarus. Here another Polish experience can be informative. The award of the Nobel peace price to Lech Walesa increased the visibility of the "Solidarity" struggle at a time when the world was beginning to shift its attention away from Poland. Likewise, it should be ensured that concrete names and faces of Belarusian opposition leaders remain in the focus of any policy related to Belarus. All gestures of recognition by governments as well as by international and civic organizations are welcome and important.

"Fanning the Flames of Freedom"

It will be important to make sure that the recent high levels of international attention do not give way to "Belarus fatigue" by the democratic world. It would, therefore, be advisable for the EU to undertake regular monitoring activities on the situation in Belarus, publish regular reports and statements and perhaps appoint a high ranking rapporteur charged with day-to-day assessment of developments in the country.

Keeping Belarus and pro-democracy activists domestically and internationally visible and recognized is also a task for the international media and foreign diplomats residing in Minsk. Poland's experience under martial law suggests that the ability to speak to foreign correspondents was an important political asset for "Solidarity" activists. This was not only a way to criticize and embarrass

the regime vis-à-vis an international audience, but also to communicate with Polish society through the Polish-language radio programs, such as *Radio Free Europe, BBC, Voice of America, Radio France Internationale* and others. This established a communication circuit, alternative to the official media, whose accessibility went well beyond the politically awakened segments of society to those who were not willing to directly challenge the regime and yet wanted to have access to information banned from government-controlled media. Reaching out to such an audience, and breaking the "Lukashenka spell" over parts of the Belarusian society, is a crucial task for democracy activists. International media presence and interest in developments in Belarus deserve encouragement.

Foreign embassies should also become meeting spaces and resource centers for the opposition and certain segments of the society, such as students. In Poland under martial law, the American embassy was a place where one could read Western press and books, as well as watch *CNN*. Despite the regime's efforts to discourage the users of the library facilities, it was broadly used and served as an important channel of information. Both the American library and the British Council served as "windows on the West", and embassies in Minsk should strive to provide as many such windows as possible in Belarus today.

The embassies in Minsk should also remain open for democracy activists. Inviting the oppositionists to all formal and informal events organized by embassies (such as national holidays, conferences, etc.) should become the rule rather than the exception. This is not only a way of increasing the recognition and legitimacy of those activists, but also a way of creating a meeting ground for the opponents of the regime and its representatives. Providing such a channel of communication between the two sides of the conflict may help part of the *nomenklatura* to develop acquaintance with "the enemy" and thus prepare possible future interactions and "round tables".

"Actions Speak Louder than Words"

Certainly, more is needed and should be expected than strong words. The scale of the repression following the protests against the elections is clear grounds for sanctions against the Lukashenka regime. The most obvious instrument of sanctions is a visa ban to the EU, and the recent EU decision to expand the blacklist from its current six to possibly four hundred names of people involved in repressions is a start in this respect, however inadequate. For comparison, it is estimated that 40,000 foreign persons are currently blacklisted by the Belarus authorities, including politicians, journalists, experts and NGO activists. The EU should use the principle of reciprocity to expand its blacklist to a similar level. It should insist that the visa ban covers entire categories of regime officials, including police, special forces, civil servants in some ministries, in other words, all the groups without whose support the regime would not last a fortnight. Moreover, the visa ban should also affect the immediate family members of officials. To achieve EU consensus on such a radical move will not be easy and will take time but as a first impulse in this direction, individual countries, such as Lithuania, Poland and possibly Ukraine, could unilaterally expand the blacklist to a level where it could make a difference.

The visa ban should provide a powerful incentive for the *nomenklatura* to reconsider their support for Lukashenka. They should not be able to enjoy open borders but keep the rest of society locked up under an authoritarian system. At the same time, the EU border regime has to be kept friendly and permeable for the ordinary citizens of Belarus. From this point of view, recent proposals to raise visa fees to €60 after the impending expansion of the Schengen area to include new EU member states are very unfortunate, since it would make even short trips to Poland and Lithuania unaffordable to most Belarusians.

Depending on the further development of the domestic situation in Belarus, the imposition of economic sanctions should not be ruled out. While it is true that the regime would try to use the sanctions as a propaganda tool against the West, again judging by Polish experience, such propaganda is not necessarily effective. American sanctions against Poland after the imposition of martial law did not cause an upsurge of anti-Americanism. On the contrary, official posters denouncing Ronald Regan's "crusade against Poland" became cult-objects and were quickly snatched up by collectors. The imposition of sanctions may have had a limited economic impact but was an important symbolic signal to opponents of the communist regime.

In the case of Belarus, the economic sanctions should be targeted against the companies closely associated with, and subsidizing, the current regime. The growing dependence of Belarus on trade with the EU, especially in oil and natural gas derivatives, makes this country susceptible to economic pressure. Such targeted sanctions would hurt the regime and *nomenklatura* more than ordinary citizens. In depriving the regime of much-needed revenues, economic sanctions will make it difficult for Lukashenka's government to uphold the *façade* of economic stability and prosperity that is so effectively portrayed in official propaganda.

In turn, the large scale of protests and repression following the March 19 elections also necessitate an increase in direct assistance to victims of repression and their families. Important and needed support includes scholarships for studies abroad for those students who were banned from Belarusian universities for their civic activism. Special "advanced studies" fellowships should be provided for academics unable to continue their work in Belarus for political reasons. Such students and scholars could be affiliated with EU universities but also with policy think-tanks, where they could work on public policy analysis and development. In building necessary expertise, such work will be crucial once the democratic breakthrough is achieved in Belarus

Information Channels: Creating Alternatives to Government-Controlled Media

One of the striking features of the Polish democratic opposition in the 1980's was the degree to which it could challenge the regime's media monopoly. The diversity of printed information material (from leaflets to lengthy volumes) made it possible to reach different target groups, and the diversity of different independent sources and channels of information was difficult to suppress. The underground press was also a school of independent journalism and seriously contributed to the development of free media in Poland after 1989, with *Gazeta Wyborcza* as the most spectacular, yet not unique example.

Technological progress since the 1980's should make the supply of independent information easier and assistance in this area to democratic activists in Belarus needs to be a priority. New technologies, such as the Internet and mobile phones, should be used to the fullest, while "old-fashioned" print materials, such as leaflets or newspapers, must not be forgotten to reach the less technology-aware segments of society.

Two more aspects of the Polish experience with alternative media are worth stressing here. Firstly, one should keep in mind that the influence of clandestine print media was magnified through foreign radio broadcasts to Poland, which duly reported the contents of such publications and made them accessible to a broader audience. This also means that new broadcasting initiatives for Belarus should, to a larger extent than to date, rely on informational materials produced by Belarusians inside the country. In so doing, such broadcasts would be perceived as Belarusian programs from abroad rather than EU, Polish or Lithuanian broadcasts in the Belarusian language.

The second important lesson from the Polish struggle for information in the 1980's is that although the government monopoly in electronic media (especially TV) cannot be broken, its credibility can be greatly reduced by concerted efforts of the opposition. In Poland under martial law there were a number of initiatives of this type, and the slogan *Telewizja klamie!* ("Television lies!") was familiar even to the most politically passive Poles. The slogan was popularized through leaflets, graffiti and stickers on trams and busses. Other initiatives, such as the act of individual citizens to put their TV sets in the windows of their apartments or conspicuous "TV walks" during official evening news broadcasts further weakened the spell of state propaganda. Convincing the average Belarusian citizen that what they see on TV is not necessarily what really happened will be crucial to winning the propaganda war against Lukashenka.

Instruments of Assistance: Flexibility, Pluralism and Decentralization

Polish "Solidarity" has often been described as a *sui generis* movement which, judged by political criteria, was at the same time socialist, liberal and conservative. The hybrid ideological nature of "Solidarity" made it easier to seek and find supporters in various places in Poland and outside, among people with very different ideological inclinations, from conservatives to anarchists, from Western trade unions to the Reagan Republicans. Therefore, it is advisable to build the broadest-possible support for the cause of democracy in Belarus across the political and ideological spectrum in the EU and the US. This also implies that assistance should be provided by a broad variety of institutions, both national and supranational.

The US is and will long remain the country with the most experience, will and resources in the field of assisting democracy. However, in view of the controversies surrounding US attempts to establish democracy in Iraq as well as suspicions towards America among the populations of the former Soviet Union, which had long been subdued by anti-American propaganda, it is necessary to expand the basis of support for pro-democracy activists. The EU and individual member states can and should be more pro-active in assisting democrats in Belarus, beyond the European response to date that has remained below expectations. As if believing that "if you break it you own it", some European leaders seem hesitant to take the responsibility for encouraging democratic transformation in Belarus. The example of Ukraine, where the spectacular victory of the Orange Revolution was also a clear "European choice" of its citizens, demonstrates that once democracy prevails in Belarus, its citizens too will start knocking on EU doors. At present this seems to be something many in the EU would rather avoid.

Although the recent eastward enlargement was the biggest-ever EU success in strengthening new democracies, prospects for countries such as Ukraine or eventually Belarus to enjoy similar EU support are limited, if not absent altogether. The European Neighborhood Policy, created as an alternative to enlargement for countries without clear prospects of membership, is hardly appropriate for effectively assisting democracy in Belarus or elsewhere. Clearly, new instruments are needed.

The idea of establishing a European Democracy Fund deserves both attention and support. Such a foundation should focus on assisting democracy activists under adverse conditions and should, therefore, be based on the principle of maximum flexibility. It should be staffed with people with broad field experience, rather than Eurocrats. For this reason, the new foundation should be established and overseen by the European Parliament rather than the European Commission, and it should work closely with NGOs in those member states, which have a demonstrable track record in building democracy at home

in recent years. This experience, especially strong in new EU member states, should be tapped for assisting democrats in Belarus and beyond.

Another, and complementary rather than competing, idea is to allow factions of the European Parliament to establish political foundations, along the lines of the German party foundations (Konrad Adenauer, Friedrich Ebert, Heinrich Böll, etc.) or the American National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute. Their primary objective should be to consolidate the EU-wide political party scene, and an additional task would be to work with democratic parties outside the EU, in an effort to project European political values, strengthen democratic discourse, and influence the policy agendas of their counterparts in new and fledgling democracies.

Conclusion: Keep Europe Open

The collapse of communism in Europe in 1989 surprised most Sovietologists, who thought that they would spend a lifetime trying to fathom the outcome of the power struggles in the Soviet politburo by studying the line-up of party apparatchiks during May 1 parades. Somewhat in a similar vein, albeit less spectacularly, the international community was taken by surprise by the pace of events and the degree of societal mobilization during the Orange Revolution. Likewise in Belarus, and the recent March elections already provided a glimpse, the victory of democracy may be closer than we think even when the forces of the regime seem overwhelming. This is why, while trying to be as realistic as possible in evaluating the chances of success of the democratic opposition in Belarus, we should also prepare plans and scenarios for the day after Lukashenka.

In fact, the first lesson from democratic revolutions, more recently in Ukraine, more remote already in Poland, is that democratic forces and their partners abroad can never be sufficiently prepared for taking over responsibility for a country. The case of post-revolutionary Ukraine should be a warning. The victors of the Orange Revolution failed to move quickly to consolidate their victory by implementing ambitious and far-reaching political and economic reforms. Similarly, the reaction of the Western democracies, which enthusiastically welcomed the outburst of civic activism in Kiev and other Ukrainian cities, has been disappointing when it came to assisting Ukrainians in their European choice. The icy silence as regards EU membership prospects for Ukraine from most European capitals and the failure to liberalize visa restrictions for travel to the EU (a relatively simple and effective method of "rewarding" Ukrainians for making a good choice) are testimony to the political opportunism, lack of political vision and leadership failure haunting Europe today.

In this respect, Poland was certainly more fortunate than Ukraine. Not only did Leszek Balcerowicz introduce his reforms while social support for the first non-communist government was at its height, but also reactions from both Europe and America were unambiguous: they indicated clearly that the West was keen

to see a democratic, stable and European Poland. As early as 1991, for example, visas were abolished for Poles and other Central Europeans to travel throughout Europe without restrictions. In 1993 already Poland negotiated and signed its association agreement with the EU and unilaterally declared its intent to join this organization. The EU action plan for Ukraine, by contrast, was hardly even modified in the wake of Yushchenko's victory, and any membership prospects, however vague and remote, fell on deaf ears in the European Council, the European Commission and national capitals in the EU.

For Belarus, one can only hope that the West and especially Europe, follows the path it took in the case of Poland. It is of the utmost importance that a strategy for assisting democratic transition in Belarus includes generous EU and US support for the democratic opposition struggling with Lukashenka but also a vision, plans and offers for the day after Europe's last dictator is removed from power. 25 years after the creation of the "Solidarity" movement in Poland, Europe was celebrating the first anniversary of EU membership of eight former-communist countries. Their transformation from communist dictatorships to countries characterized by democracy, respect for human rights, and functioning market economies is one of the most spectacular recent achievements of European integration and transatlantic cooperation. This success should encourage democrats in Europe and in the West more broadly to design effective assistance for those still struggling to achieve democracy in Belarus and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

Sanctions for Lukashenka's Regime!

Milan Horáček

Alyaksandr Lukashenka is one of the last dictators in Europe. For more than a decade he has managed to remain in power by systematically disregarding human rights, in particular the right of access to information, and by increasing pressure on opposition forces. Belarus' self-imposed isolation within Europe has reached its peak with the fraudulent elections of March 2006 and Lukashenka's reelection for a third term as principal leader of a self-made dictatorship. But, this most recent period of self-isolation began with the Rose and Orange revolutions that took place in Georgia and the Ukraine, respectively.

In particular since the transition to democracy in neighboring Ukraine, the leadership in Belarus has reacted ever more sharply to any sign of political criticism within the country. Demonstrations have been broken up by force (for example, the one on April 26, 2005 to commemorate the anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster), Ukrainian sympathizers towards the opposition in Belarus have been locked up for days, and leading opposition figures, such as Vintsuk Vyachorka, have been arrested.

Countries such as the member states of the EU, the US and others have refused to recognize the results of the Belarusian election, which officially saw a landslide victory by Alyaksandr Lukashenka but were characterized as fraudulent by observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The pressure from abroad on the presidential administration in Minsk is, at the moment, still greater than that from the structurally weak opposition. The demonstrations of opposition and pro-democracy protesters at October Square in the Minsk have faced continuous police repression. The fact that opposition leader Alyaksandr Kazulin was arrested on March 25 while marching towards a jail where other demonstrators were being held and that activists and volunteers of the Belarusian youth organizations have been arrested for participating in peaceful protests on March 28 are alarming signs of the intent of the Lukashenka regime. The European Union demanded the immediate release of Kazulin. As commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner put it: "I urge the Belarusian government to adhere to the rules of democracy". The authorities in Minsk rejected this demand. For them, the EU and the US with their "anti-Belarusian hysteria" are attempting to destabilize the country from abroad. A statement from the Belarusian Foreign Ministry declared "It is self-evident to objective observers that the situation in Belarus is absolutely calm".

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Given these two quite opposite perceptions of the situation in Belarus, one would be forgiven for thinking that the players were speaking about two different countries. Given the fact that the ad-hoc delegation of the European Parliament to the presidential elections in Belarus was refused visas to enter the country after a "bureaucracy marathon", resulting in the elections being monitored from afar, one can only conclude that (as indeed the ad-hoc delegation itself concluded in the aftermath of the elections) the elections were neither fair nor democratic. This cannot be without consequences for EU policy towards Belarus.

Negative Sanctions

Josep Borrell, president of the European Parliament, declared "The failure to respect international electoral standards in combination with a steadily deteriorating political situation and persistent violations of the fundamental rights of the Belarusian people will not remain without consequences for relations between the EU and Belarus". The consequences President Borrell is talking about are sanctions. In the wake of the recent election fraud, the European Union has declared the sanctions on Belarus already in place as still valid and is now seeking to extend their application.

Sanctions are measures against a state, which is considered by other states to be violating international law. They are introduced to ensure that a state acts in conformity with international law. To avoid the use of armed force in a conflict between different states or in order to maintain or restore certain values, sanctions can be decided either unilaterally or collectively. The sanctions that are most commonly used are various restrictions on international trade, financial flows or the movement of people through visa bans. Other less popular sanctions consist of the withholding of diplomatic recognition, the boycotting of athletic and cultural events and the sequestering of property of citizens of the targeted country.

On December 13, 2004 the European Council ordered that visa bans be extended to include a further two high officials. However, such visa restrictions have questionable effectiveness if limited to a very small number of top-level officials. They are effective, however, when extended to all levels of the regime. Every official, police officer and judge who actively participates in the Lukashenka regime and in the oppression of non-governmental organizations, political parties, the independent media and students or who has taken part in the falsification of the elections in October 2004 and more recently in March 2006 should be the target of sanctions. Even officials from the regional level, who may not consider themselves as a real part of the "Lukashenka-machinery", and journalists who work for the state-controlled media or pro-regime newspapers, should be included in an extended blacklist. This list could even be published inside Belarus, through independent media. Blacklisting "ordinary citizens" as well as high-level officials could act as a deterrent to others. Given latest

developments, it appears the European Parliament will soon extend the visa ban to a list of around thirty persons, among them ministers, members of parliament, representatives of the presidential administration and Lukashenka himself.

Extending the visa ban to those actively involved in oppression is a first step. Another complementary measure is to make it easier for ordinary and innocent citizens to obtain visas to travel abroad: students, representatives of civil society, opposition leaders and even tourists should not be punished for the excesses of the Lukashenka regime. Today, the cost in Belarus of obtaining a visa to enter many European countries is approximately €60. This deters ordinary people from traveling, as they do not have much money. Giving those people the chance to come to European countries is crucial, as in the absence of independent and correct information, they can only get to know about what is happening in the world and how democracy functions outside their own country. An extension of this logic is to also find arrangements for those students who, due to their involvement in the protests, have been deprived of their right to attend university in Belarus, to study abroad, through scholarships and study programs.

Other sanctions are economic in nature. According to members of the opposition, economic sanctions are seen as effective on the condition that they are imposed selectively and precisely. In the case of Belarus, sanctions against the arms trade would be effective and the least harmful to ordinary citizens. Such sanctions could take the form of freezing the bank accounts of high officials and companies, which take part in illegal arms exports. Belarus is known to be trading arms with Iran and some African states, and even if unofficially, with Libya, Syria, North Korea, Russia and representatives of Chechnya.

For many scholars, there is an ethical problem with economic sanctions, because they almost always have an effect on the rights of people, as recognized in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. They are often at the origin of important disruptions to the distribution of nutrition, pharmaceuticals and sanitation supplies. They can put at risk the quality of food and the availability of clean drinking water. They also interfere to a high extent with the functioning of basic health and education systems and they undermine the right to work. A counter-productive effect of economic sanctions can also be that they lead to the reinforcement of the power of oppressive elites and the establishment of a black market, which only strengthens the corruption of elites and of the rich at the expense of the population at large.

The United Nations (UN) Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights points out that "economic sanctions most seriously affect the innocent population, in particular the weak and the poor, especially women and children, (and) have a tendency to aggravate the imbalances in income distribution already present in the countries concerned". But, as mentioned previously, if economic sanctions are imposed selectively and precisely, society at large can be protected from their most negative consequences.

In order to avoid suffering among innocent members of the population, negative sanctions have to be accompanied by positive sanctions and programs addressed to easing their situation.

Positive Sanctions and Supportive Programs

In August 2005, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, European Commissioner for External Relations, declared that the European Union would use all means at its disposal to promote the values of democracy and pluralism in Belarus.

Concretely, several actions can be taken. Coordination between the EU and Russia on a neighborhood policy towards Belarus has to be stepped up. The EU should try much harder to engage Russia on the question of Belarus. In this perspective, the EU should insist that the issue of Belarus is on its agenda with Russia in their dialogues, and the Russian chairmanship in the G-8 group in 2006 should be used as an opportunity to demand that Russia acknowledge its shared responsibility for democratic development in the region.

In particular, Germany must assert its special responsibility in such a coordination process, as one of Poland's closest EU neighbors and as Russia's important trading partner. In this perspective, bilateral Russo-German summits must be used to the best effect. True, this might have been easier in the past when Gerhard Schröder was still in power, due to his special relationship with Vladimir Putin. However, in his position as former chancellor he could still involve himself actively in mediating between Belarus and the EU by using his friendship with Putin. Furthermore, Chancellor Angela Merkel could, given her different approach to Russia and Vladimir Putin himself, also find a way to prevail upon Russia to play a more constructive role. The EU should convince Russia that it is in its own interest to support democracy in its immediate neighborhood.

Like the Orange Revolution, the situation in Belarus exposes the dramatic need for coordination in the Common Foreign and Security Policy. The EU's neighborhood policy in Central and Eastern Europe needs to be reconsidered and made more precise, taking into consideration the experience of Poland and Lithuania and deciding on a common and joint approach. Back in November 2004, the European Council underlined how important it is "(...) that Belarus, as a direct neighbor of the European Union, has the opportunity to be an active partner of the EU in the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy". Nevertheless, for action in this field to become possible certain conditions have to be met by Belarus, such as basic democratic standards and respect for human rights, and this is unfortunately not the case at the moment. And since the aim is not to punish the population but rather the regime, it is important to support NGOs inside the country, as well as continuing to involve Belarus in the European communication process.

For the moment, the only program of the European Commission designed to support the development of civil society and democracy is the so-called

Decentralized Cooperation. This program is particularly important since it does not require the agreement of the country's government to provide financial support to civil society organizations (which was one of the main problems with the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States, or TACIS program). The main problem, however, is that the €1 million the Decentralized Cooperation currently provides is not nearly enough for the country's needs. Furthermore, the process of selection should be better elaborated. For the time being, around ten organizations benefit from the program. Only two of those are involved directly in the democratization process in Belarus. The other organizations are social, health or environmental organizations. As much as such issues are of paramount importance, for the time being the main concern should be democratization, and support to organizations involved in pro-democracy activities should be extended.

The European Union should also focus on the promotion of the activity of Belarusian society, the consolidation and strengthening of opposition forces and the development of pro-European attitudes. The European Commission should support and implement projects that help the free media to develop, in particular electronic media broadcasting from abroad. Examples of this already exist. The EU has started in February 2006 with the broadcasting of radio *(Deutsche Welle)* and TV programs. They are part of a wider €2 million project that will cover internet, support to the Belarusian written press and the training of journalists, in addition to radio and TV broadcasts. The Lithuanian radio station *Baltic Wave* broadcasts news for one hour daily in Belarus (financed by the EU). The Polish radio station *Radio Racja* broadcasts every day for two hours, a project of the Belarusian minority in Poland. These initiatives are a first good step. However, for mainly technical and organizational reasons, these programs do not reach a large number of Belarusians. For instance, the *Deutsche Welle* program is broadcast on short wave and for only one hour, making it hard to reach a lot of households and easy to miss.

What seems to be needed at this point is a massive information campaign using all possible media. Such a campaign would allow the population at large to find out more about what is happening inside and outside Belarus, to explain why sanctions are being imposed (this is very important in order to avoid that Lukashenka turns the introduction of sanctions against the West), and to inform the population about texts adopted concerning Belarus by, for example, the European Parliament (such as the resolution on the presidential elections in Belarus of April 2006) and their consequences for the country. So far, *Euronews* seems to be the most popular international channel. This success has to be used and extended to other broadcasts.

Another important step is to find a way to create and open European exchange programs to students from Belarus. This has to be done independently of both the Belarusian government and the school administrations since they are an integral part of Lukashenka's repressive regime.

The Commission should create a direct representation in Minsk and should have a Special EU Representative for Belarus, who would inform all the European

institutions of the current situation in the country, propose actions towards Belarus and provide information on EU – Belarus relations on an ongoing basis. The person chosen could also act as a contact person for civil society and the opposition.

The establishment of a new instrument, a "European Democracy Fund", could become a useful tool for the promotion of democracy not only in Belarus, but also in other non-democratic regimes. Its advantage is that it could act without the permission and agreement of the country in question. The same approach can already be seen in political foundations, for example, the German party foundations such as the Heinrich Böll Foundation, which support the development of democracy in countries such as Belarus. Since they work independently from the government and in cooperation with local actors their actions are very effective. Some have argued that such political foundations would be in competition with a "European Democracy Fund". However, it seems to be more appropriate to see both instruments as complementary, since it is obvious that there remains more than enough work for several organizations if democracy is to become a universal reality.

The EU has to formulate a new policy towards Belarus, as the previous policy has not been effective in the least. While it is important that the European Union reacted and continues to react to developments in Belarus, it remains a problem that EU policy in relation to the country seems to be more about reaction than actual action. What is needed now is a strategy, developed for the short-, medium- and long-term. And, whatever the proposed policy might be, it may have to be decided unilaterally, as there is little chance that Lukashenka would agree to cooperate.

What could this policy look like? The European Union must declare that the promotion of democracy and the gradual integration of Belarus into Europe are among its highest priorities within the EU neighborhood policy. The EU should not only react to current events and the current political situation, but has to establish a proper strategy with the ultimate goal of democratizing Belarus. Since "elections" just took place, the medium and long-term strategy should mainly consist of supporting the development of civil society. Therefore, better cooperation has to be developed and a joint position needs to be forged by the European Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the member states. Those countries neighboring Belarus, the Central and Eastern Europe – Visegrad group and other EU member states should establish relationships of cooperation in order to build a broader coalition within the EU to support democratization in Belarus.

The level of coordination between the EU and the United States also has to improve. Both the EU and the US have as a goal supporting democratic developments within dictatorial systems. According to NGOs in Belarus, the rules of the Initiative on Democracy and Human Rights of the European Commission are very complex and do not leave any margin for flexibility, thereby failing to support and strengthen civil society. On the contrary the same NGOs declare that American institutions, such as the National Endowment for Democracy,

have managed better to get the money to the right people. Such good practices should serve Europe as examples for how to finance in a flexible way the most deserving NGOs. With better cooperation and, in particular by learning from the American example, Europe could maximize its potential for success.

Quo Vadis Belarus – Quo Vadis Europe?

More than ten years of experience show that cooperation with Lukashenka's regime is not an option. The EU has again and again declared that it desires true democracy in Belarus. However, it is important to admit that EU policy in this regard has not been very successful. As a result, the EU has to develop a new approach, focusing primarily on civil society and direct cooperation with non-governmental actors. It is in the non-state sector that impulses for democratic change in Belarus can emerge, not in the governmental realm, which at present is the primary recipient of EU technical assistance. Hence, the main partner for the EU should be non-governmental structures and initiatives.

Belarus is also a member of several international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO). In addition to that, Belarus applied for membership of the Word Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 and aims to join within the next five years. The situation in Belarus begs the question: How can a country, which abuses all democratic principles, be represented in all these internationally recognized and respected organizations?

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to point only at Lukashenka and his totalitarian regime and not to apply some self-criticism. We should also ask ourselves why we criticize some countries and why we stay silent as concerns others. It is most laudable to fight for human rights and democracy, against social exclusion and for respect. Those are honorable values. But, first of all we should look at our own countries and check if all those values we seek to be upheld in other countries are respected in our own. A further consideration is the political expediency of such a moral stance. It does not always suit us to uphold all the values we stand for all the time. The European Union depends on other countries outside its borders. Gas and oil pipelines run through Belarus, coming from Russia, and the EU needs those supplies. Is it not contradictory that sanctions are not applied in a more consequent manner? The EU is Belarus' main trading partner outside the CIS, but trade with Belarus is rather marginal for the EU. Should we not use this fact to mount pressure on the Lukashenka regime? Should we not be more consequent in our actions?

It might be that after the recent elections, people outside Belarus have become more aware about the distinction between Lukashenka's anti-Western and pro-Russian official stance and the opinions of Belarusian society. Despite official propaganda against the West and the European Union, more than half of Belarusians are in favor of close cooperation with the EU. Nevertheless, making a distinction between the regime and civil society is only one part of a bigger picture. Seeing the need to support civil society and enforce democracy and respect for human rights is another and crucial part.

Appendix

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STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

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Alyaksandr Milinkevich
Leader of the United Democratic Forces in Belarus

Our country will never be the same. We have set in motion something that will not be forgotten and cannot be stopped. We do not know when victory will come but we do know that, at some time in the future, our victory is assured.

Mikuláš Dzurinda
Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic

A free and democratic Belarus will be a better home for its people and for their children. It will be a good neighbor for Europe and Russia [...] And a free Belarus would send a message to the world that the last dictatorship in Europe has finally come to an end.

David J. Kramer
Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, US Department of State

The story of Belarus and the aspirations of freedom-loving Belarusians did not end with the March elections. On the contrary, it began a new chapter. The weeks, months and even years ahead may not be easy. At the same time, change may come sooner than many people think. Either way, we and our European allies remain united on Belarus.

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