



Belarus 50 days after: Facts, moods, forecast

I. Introduction:

This analysis has been prepared by the Andrei Liakhovich of the Minsk-based Center for Political Education for the purpose of the Slovak-Belarus Task Force analyzing the current political developments of the authorities, the political opposition and society of Belarus 50 days after the referendum.

The overall objective of the Slovak-Belarus Task Force is to establish a framework for Slovak know-how transfer to Belarus on key aspects of civil society development. The project seeks to assist civil society in Belarus in preparation for the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for 2006 and further integrate think tanks within civil society in Belarus by linking their expertise and capacity with Belarusian NGOs through the Task Force.

II. Summary:

One can characterize the post-referendum political situation in Belarus as Lukashenka's positions were strengthened (since the referendum was unchallenged both by domestic forces and international community compared to Ukraine) and by a crisis of the opposition. However, for the first time there are preconditions for overcoming inter-coalition and inter-party contradictions paralyzing the opposition for a long period. Nevertheless, even in this case the opposition needs stronger international attention for preventing Lukashenka from getting elected in 2006. The nature of political development of Belarus will to a greater extent (also for the first time) depend not on the administration, but on how fast the opposition will be able to form an effective coalition, as well as on the efficiency of the Belarus policy of the European Union and the United States. The new policy should be set up to provide assistance to the actual shift of the Belarusian society towards Europe, which in the way contrary to interests and despite all the efforts of the administration.

III. The Authorities:

The national referendum about the third term of Lukashenka and the parliamentary elections on October 17, 2004 were a "dress rehearsal" of the 2006 Presidential Elections. Due to the referendum the general public got more interested in politics. This fact was used by Lukashenka's administration to try forming an appropriate outlook of the political situation in Belarus for the next two years.

The authorities have chosen the “roughest” scenario of the referendum and elections on purpose. All possible efforts were used by them in order to openly demonstrate the capacity of the active use of the administrative resources, country-wide falsification of the results, and a broad use of physical and psychological violence. At previous elections and referenda, the authorities undertook certain efforts in order not to make the profound control over the electoral process public. In 2004, Lukashenka’s administration made every effort in order to make it clear that similar control would take place at following electoral campaigns.

Overall "elections" : More than 90% of the employed population in Belarus work for state companies, state institutions and other state-owned or state-controlled organizations.¹ In 2001, only a certain part of state employees was involved into the process of nominating Lukashenka as a candidate to the position of the President.² The efforts of the authorities were mainly directed at the implementation of the principle "it does not matter who votes, it matters who counts". De-facto, most of people had a possibility of "choice" according to the principle "you can be an absentee, or even vote against - your voice will be anyway counted in favor of Lukashenka".

In 2004, Belarusian voters have lost the possibility of even such "choice". The authorities organized a profound campaign directed at providing voters turn-out during the early voting. In this case, managing personnel of the administration at companies, institutions and organizations were ordered to explain the employees that they have a choice between voting for the president (and certain pro-authority candidate) and their jobs.³ On October 8th, all TV channels aired Lukashenka's statement addressed to the West: "we will show who the boss in the house is! We will gain a persuasive victory at the referendum. we will have elected the parliament already after the first round formed by real state people". Already on October 11th people saw leaflets of the pro-government candidates to the parliament at the entrances of state companies, institutions and organizations and even in food stores.⁴

Due to the broad distribution of the information as well as the repression against the employees and students refusing to participate in early voting, there were not necessary any special campaign targeting the opposition. Hence Lukashenka hopes to achieve the following patterns before the 2006 presidential race:

- Through the 2004 elections he has been attempting to control the 2006 electoral process, as well as the acceptance of his candidacy for the third term by the people of Belarus.
- Voters tending to follow the authorities (as it happened in case of coercion to the early voting) despite any claims and possible sanctions could be (psychologically) prepared to do the same in 2006.

"Resistance is of no use": The authorities have planned and implemented the action showing to the oppositional part of Belarusian electorate the most repressive measures and a total disdain of local laws and international principles. On October 18th, in the very center of Minsk in front of hundreds of people special forces (OMON) slaughtered⁵ Anatolij Lebedko, the Chairman of the United Civil Party (UCP). In the result he suffered brain concussion, rib fractures and kidney haematoma. This supposed to be a clear message from Lukashenka’s side aiming to inform his opponents about his readiness to keep the power.

¹ Joint-stock companies whose control share holding belongs to the state

² At a number of bigger businesses the workers had to give away their passport data for the appropriate signature sheets to be filled in for Lukashenka

³ The worker had to confirm his/her participation in early voting by showing at the administration the invitation to the elections signed by the member of electoral commission.

⁴ First, the leaflets of authority candidates were posted along with the leaflets of other candidates a month before the elections - the time specified by law. However, on October 8th, the leaflets of one authority candidate were posted at every constituency (in most of the constituencies there were two authority candidates). These leaflets had the sign of the official Belarusian flag, on the top of the leaflets there was a logo of the official campaign in Lukashenka’s support "For strong and blooming Belarus!". All these candidates were "elected" in the result of the first round of elections.

⁵ This action was run by the head of the special forces/riot police (OMON) Anatolij Tozik.

"Military march": The "military scenario" of the referendum and elections was a result of stronger political positions (the process of acquiring more political power took place in 2003-2004) of the group of strongmen around Lukashenka headed by Viktor Sheiman, the former Prosecutor General and fresh Head of the Office of the President. The strongest position and oversight by Viktor Sheiman¹ over a number of important figures at Lukashenka's surrounding pre-determined the "rotation" taking place on November 29th. Lukashenka changed Ural Latypov that time the the Head of the Office of the President and n (Uraed Sheiman. Latypov could be described as the representative of a comparatively moderate group around at power. Nevertheless, this change completed the process of intensive "clean-up" of Belarusian political elite from the people coming from Russia.

The appointment of Viktor Sheiman for the position of the Head of the Office of the President means further toughening of political regime in Belarus. One of the reasons for this change was to have the 2006 Presidential Elections organized according to the scenario of that of 2004. Expectedly, the political demonstration of the force of authorities (both domestic and international level) will be even more obvious.

IV. Society:

In the previous analysis⁶ we noted that the structure of Belarusian electorate can be generally described according to the following model: 60% of people are "undecided" voters who care mainly about socio-economic issues, 20% are democrats' supporters, 20% are convinced supporters of Lukashenka. The exit polls conducted during the elections and referendum by the Gallup Organizations/Baltic Survey, however, shows that the number of those tends to not listen to the administration, but looking for an alternative is inevitably growing.

Regarding the current moods of Belarusian society, we shall notice that the activities of the authorities were targeted to safeguard exactly the political conformism at the undecided voters. These undecided voters do not already trust Lukashenka, but neither the democrats, yet. The well-spread pre-referendum opinion that the results have already been decided has great impact on this layer and lead to the conviction that the results of the 2006 Presidential Elections are also "pre-decided": Lukashenka will be "elected".² The demonstration of political abilities of Lukashenka's side (connected largely with the official propaganda) only highlighted this tendency and trying to increase the "non-efficiency" of the opposition and its leaders. It is important to notice that according to observers a large number of opposition supporters are disappointed after the referendum, since they were not offered any alternative explanation compare to the official one. They also rather do not believe about possibility of changing the situation in Belarus along with their skepticism towards the leaders of the current opposition.

V. Possible policy of official Belarus by 2006:

From 2001 the "selfish" character of Belarus politics influenced by Lukashenka became more and more characteristics for general policymaking. Especially after 2001 Presidential Elections both domestic and international policy of Lukashenka aimed to create more favorable conditions for the referendum about the "third term". In this period the activity of the authorities chronologically could be divided into two stages:

- September 2001-March 2003⁸: main efforts of Lukashenka's side targeted to suppress his political opponents inside Belarus.⁹

¹ Sheiman has the control over the Committee of State Control (KGB) headed Anatolij Tozik, the person promoted by Sheiman himself at the beginning. By naming him as the Head of the Office of the President one can not be mistaken to call him the most influential person in Belarus

⁶ "Belarus before Voting: Politics and Society", Center for Political Education, Minsk, Issued by the Pontis Foundation, Bratislava, 2004, www.pontisfoundation.sk

² This tendency, however, could be effectively challenged by the Ukrainian elections (note from the Pontis Foundation)

⁸ On march 3rd, 2003 there was the first round of elections into the local Councils.

⁹ For details see "Belarus before Voting: The Referendum (Past, Presence and Perspectives)".

- April 2003 - June 2004: the main efforts targeted to counteract Russian efforts to gain control over Belarusian gas pipes and oil companies in exchange for its consent to the "third term". From this fight Lukashenka came out as the winner¹⁰. After a long period of coolness in Belarus-Russia relations, in June 2004¹¹ Russian President Putin made it clear for Lukashenka that Russian officials would not be negative towards the referendum.

The threat of a total international isolation (including Russia) was the only barrier on Lukashenka's way towards the "third term". This barrier finally fell down in June 2004, when Russia gave "a green light" to Lukashenka toward the referendum. The major steps (regarding domestic and international policy) on securing the victory at 2006 Presidential Elections have already been made by the administration. We can not call the international community to make the necessary lessons learned from this farce referendum and parliamentary elections, since the methods are likely to be the same in 2006. Although Ukraine certainly increase the threat and pressure for the administration, he will insist supporting the internal status-quo inside of Belarus (keep the level of undecided voters), and could be even more reliable on its relations (e.g. support) with Russia.

Domestic policy: In the field of domestic policy, Lukashenka will continue acting in two directions:

- Supporting high mobilization of the administrative resource. Viktor Sheiman, the "retributive sword" of Lukashenka as the new Head of the Administration of the President will provide the necessary oversight, influence and fear at the administration. A commissions headed by Sheiman has already started examine the capacity and stage of the executive structures, military structures, justice agencies.³ On the other hand in order to support the high stage of mobilization of the administrative resource the authorities will also use encouragement methods, e.g. they will proceed with the politics of priority funding of the main executive structures, military structures, and justice agencies¹².
- Further concentrate on weakening the political opposition. Policy of repressions against the oppositional political parties, public associations (NGOs), independent media and trade unions will continue. Through the official fight against the corruption (against the economic elite and business community) will result in keeping directorate away from the involvement into any activities of political nature.

Policy and Economics: The degree of pressure on the opponents is directly dependable on social and economic situation in Belarus as well. In current conditions the GDP growth boosted by Russian "oil dollars" is around 10,6% (for the period May-October 2004 in comparison with the same period 2003), and Lukashenka can afford to continue his politics of priority funding of the executive and military structures. Along with that, he can invest sufficient amounts into the development of industry, the reconstructing of main cities⁴ and supporting the growth of real wages.¹³ With GDP growth for at least 2-4%, oppositional

¹⁰ As many previous times Lukashenka played on the counteraction and difference between Russia and the West. Belarusian "base" is of great importance for the strategic security of Russia. Lukashenka used the "East-West divide" toward Russia feeling well that

¹¹ If being exact, at the meeting in Sochi on June 4th, 2004.

³ On December 9, 2004 the Radio Free Europe quoted Lukashenka's introductory words for Sheiman to the administration: "Remember -- you are the controllers. You are the filters. You are whatever you want to call it," Lukashenka told the presidential-administration staff. "You have to prevent the president from taking wrong decisions. You can say whatever you think is necessary in the decision-making process. You can tell me to exert caution on any issue, on any problem you think is not being solved the way you think it should be. But you must do it in a very specific, accurate, and delicate way."

¹² For details see "Belarus before Voting: The Referendum (Past, Presence and Perspectives)".

⁴ The reconstructions works are part of his propaganda package, but also a proven tool to avoid social tensions in the main cities. Experience shows that social movements have been born in the capital and the biggest cities throughout Eastern and Central Europe including Ukraine as the very fresh example (Note from the Pontis Foundation)

¹³ For the period from January 2004 till October 2004 the actual wage in Belarus has grown for 18,4% in comparison with the similar period 2003.

parties, civil society, independent media and especially independent trade unions¹⁴ are left tête-à-tête with the authorities and so far loosing the battle for the support of workers. This is layer which the administration is afraid the most as potential source of social unrest and especially for street protests.

According to the opinion of Belarusian economist's only drastic drop of oil price (around 20 USD per barrel¹⁵) would decrease significantly the capacity of the main trade and economic partner of Belarus - Russia¹⁶ and would create significant reduction of Belarusian export into Russia and economic crisis in Belarus respectively. Currently - up to 2006 - there are no signs of a serious economic crisis therefore decreasing of living standards - and as a consequence of such decrease - mass protests of workers are not expected.

However, there would be a lot to do still in the current circumstances. The political opposition has not proposed any serious social and economic alternative of reforms to Lukashenka, neither a strong communication strategy with economic and social messages. Even in the case of an economic crisis, Belarusian citizens would most probably adopt a "wait-and-see" attitude waiting for the recovery of economics. In this case, a less heard and non-persuasive democratic opposition would not gain an active support from the majority of Belarusian voters.

International policy: Changes at international policy of Belarus will exclusively concern relations with Russia. These changes are expected largely in connection with the current Ukrainian events. We can foresee two possible scenarios of development of Belarus-Russia relations by 2006, obviously these will depend on which Viktor will be elected in Ukraine on December 26, 2004: Yuschenko or Yanukovich. However, no matter what Ukraine certainly strengthens Lukashenka's positions in Belarus. The "political intervention of the West into the Ukraine" (as the events are described by Russia) will in any case have serious outcomes for Russia's policy in the CIS in general, and for its relations with Belarus in particular.

- The final victory of Viktor Yuschenko would result most probably the beginning of the slow process of Ukraine's integration into the European economic and political area. According to our forecast (and the general logic of Russian policy in other part of CIS) Russia would support separatist moods in the Eastern regions of the Ukraine in order to counteract to closer relations between Ukraine and the West. Russia would also use all possible ways of economic pressure on the Ukraine. As part of the economic pressure in particular, Kremlin would be more inclined to consider Lukashenka's proposals on cooperation in the field of gas pipe transportation.¹⁷ Due to the fear of Ukraine's westernization, the significance of Belarus as Russia's strategic ally would increase significantly. Lukashenka would get additional significant concessions from Russia in the field of bilateral trade and economic relations.
- In the case of Viktor Yanukovich as the new President of Ukraine (although a less possible scenario), Lukashenka could also be sure that up till the next presidential elections in Belarus the problems of Belarusian-Russian relations (establishing Russian control over Belarusian gas pipes, adopting Russian roubles as a national currency) would not occupy high position of the list of interests of Moscow officials. CIS policy of Russia, despite of the engagement of Kremlin will likely you (the more or less self-impose) East-West divide, from which a short-run Lukashenka could gain.

¹⁴ In the result of the political pressure, independent trade unions do not have many members. They lost their significance as a political force already in late 1990s.

¹⁵ Oil of Urals brand, which is extracted mainly in Russia.

¹⁶ Oil and oil products constitute more than 25% of Russian export.

¹⁷ On June 30, 2003 Lukashenko proposed to the Russian company "Gasprom" to increase the amount of gas annually transported through Belarus till up to 100 billions m³.

Not matter on the final results the "Ukrainian issue" will be more topical for Russia than the "Belarusian issue". The attention of Russian ruling elite will be certainly focused much more on Ukraine. Due to Ukrainian events, Russia will be more interested in "warmer" relations with Belarus (in case Ukrainian events follow the first scenario), or, at least, Russia will not be interested in worsening its relations with the strategic ally (in case the Ukrainian events follow the second scenario).

V. Democratic Opposition:

There are many important factors which influence the development of the situation in Belarus (including the economic factor mentioned above), however the most important factor, which lets Lukashenka see his perspectives in 2006, is the crisis of the opposition.

Coalition Building: Despite of the current formal agreement of seven political parties and initiates from November 20, 2004⁵ there is still a strong possibility that 2006 will find the democratic opposition divided into two coalitions ("National Coalition 5+" and European Coalition "Free Belarus" (EC/FB)).¹⁸ Especially the Free Belarus leader Andrei Sannikov (the coordinator of "Charter-97") opposes the idea of merge of the two coalitions, but there are doubts on Statkevich's intentions regarding a common political block. In addition, 5+ leaders tended to be negative towards Nikolaj Statkevich. Especially the participation of one of the strongest political structures BSDP (NG) is crucial for any political coalition. Despite the current shaky internal party situation⁶ Statkevich is the key figure at the party, since the 8th congress of BSDP (NG) (held in June 2004) re-elected him until the next party congress (end of June 2006).

Perhaps one of the biggest lacks (and the biggest need as well) at the democratic opposition is the capability to analyze independently the reasons for non-efficiency of the political structures, and also the lack of interested/trust in independent analysis from outside. There is – still – a strong tendency to explain the lack of popular support by repressions, specific character of post-soviet society -- i.e. reasons not dependent on them. One of the most interesting and important aspects of the post-referendum development at the opposition structures is an admittance of political failure in discussions on how to overcome the crisis of the opposition. This kind of discussions conducted mainly by the representatives of the "young wave" of the democratic oppositional, regional leaders of some of the oppositional parties (Belarusian Popular Front, United Civic Party, BSDG, and BSDP (NG)).

Possible development/Forecast: According to our expectations Lukashenka will likely to declare his victory already after the first round of 2006 Presidential Elections counting that the regime has enough capacity to control the situation. So far in Belarus, there are no conditions to repeat the social unrest, like in Yugoslavia, Georgia or Ukraine, and it will be very hard to create conditions leading to effective challenge of the alleged victory of Lukashenka. Moreover, one can be sure that victory of Lukashenka will be recognized by Russia and by number of other states accordingly. Given the current level of isolation and not clear position especially by the EU, non-recognition by the West will not significantly influence the development of Belarus.

⁵ The leaders of pro-democracy forces have reached an agreement to form a coalition and map out a joint strategy for the 2006 presidential elections. The agreement was signed by Nikolaj Statkevich, Anatolij Lebedko of the United Civic Party, Vintsuk Viachorka of the Belarusian Popular Front, Valentina Matusevich of the Belarusian Women's Party-Hope, Sergey Kaliakin of the Belarusian Party of Communists, trade union leader Aleksandr Bukhvostov, and the youth group leaders Vladimir Novosiad and Pavel Severynets. However, there is a little awareness about the agreement outside of the oppositional elite throughout Belarus until the preparation of the analysis.

¹⁸ After the Belarusian Labor Party was liquidated in august 2004, the "popular Coalition "Five Plus" includes Party Belarusian Popular Front – BPF, United Civic Party (UCP), Belarusian Social-Democratic Gramada (BSDG), Party of Communists Belarusian (PCB). The European Coalition "Free Belarus" includes Belarusian Social-Democratic Party "Narodnaja gramada" (BSDP (NG)), public association "Charter-97", non-registered public association "Young Front".

⁶ Statkevich has been challenged by two its vice-chairmen Nistjuk and Levkovich for a longer period.

Currently there are no eligible candidates among the well-known Belarusian politicians to compete with Lukashenka at 2006 Presidential Elections. Most of the well-known representatives of the society are either imprisoned¹⁹ or psychologically broken. . For the period left to the elections, it is hard to imagine an to build up an unknown person, especially taking into account local conditions. Therefore one of the possible solutions would be to start the campaign as soon as possible by a certain combination of political leaders with non-partisan personalities (to select the final candidate in a later stage) with the backing by all the democratic structures and civil society could at least challenged Lukashenka's plans. Building on the moment of the referendum and the Ukraine elections could have the necessary multiplication effect, and could also decrease the arguments of "Belarus hopeless situation", one of the most repeated arguments at democratic structures

Perspectives of democratization of Belarus to a great extent depend on the success of democrats in Ukraine, a country where conditions for the democratization already exist. It will be very important for Belarus to have the Ukrainian democratic structures to demonstrate their economic efficiency. In addition without considerable signal regarding the integration into European economic and political area would be hard to convince the pro-European minded citizens of Belarus about a European perspective for Belarus. Thus, finances and policy (from the EU especially) invested into Ukraine, if used efficiently, would be the best investment for a democratic Belarus.

What needs to be done:

- Creating of a single platform/coalition of the democratic opposition and overcoming the split into two confronting coalitions, which are currently in stage of animosity towards each other since both claim leading positions and attention of foreign donors.
- Within the new platform/coalition the integration of the social democratic parties could proceed: BSDP (NG) and Belarusian Social-Democratic Gramada are the parties with similar ideology. The difference has been mostly caused by the position of the BSDP (NG) leader Nikolaj Statkevich²¹. Among Belarusian social democratic parties there is also women's party "Nadzeja" and officially liquidated (but de-facto active) Belarusian Labour Party. Judging by their leaders' current statements, as well as the programs, these two parties could join a common social democratic force/coalition. The Party of Communists of Belarus (CPB) should be given a choice to either adopt social-democratic ideas and the social-democratic coalition, or developed nits own political path.
- The platform/coalition of democratic forces should not pursue the strategy of street protests before the elections, but focus on conducting permanent campaign and organize its work and communication with voters more effectively, and increase its communication toward the regions (oppositional and civil society structures) much more effectively then ever before. Voters – especially in the regions - should be aware about all aspects of coalition's position on every single issue that might interest them.
- Finally, the parties should work out and implement campaign to build up the image of well-selected combination of political and civil society leaders. In addition, it is necessary to build up regional leaders, especially from young politicians should be given a chance. The platform/coalition should consider new faces in every possible level.

¹⁹ For example Mikhail Leonov, the director of the biggest Belarusian company, Minsk Tractor Plant or Mikhail Marynich.

²¹ At the 8th congress of BSDP (NG) Nikolaj Statkevich was criticized by his party-members because of his negative attitude to the idea of uniting social-democratic parties. Anatolij Levkovich, the leader of Brest oblast organization of BSDP (NG - convinced adherent of the idea of uniting the social-democratic parties), who was also nominated, needed only several more votes to be elected as the party chairman. He was elected as the first chair deputy of the party.