

## Development of socio-political situation in Belarus

**After years of authoritarian stability ensured by the hardline rule of President of Alexander Lukashenka, Belarus enters the new stage in its post-Communist history. Phasing out of Russia's generous energy subsidies that used to create a backbone of the economic stability of Lukashenka's regime brought to the end to the reform-free period in the Belarusian history. As Lukashenka's government has had to search for new solutions to secure economic and political stability other than reliance on Russian subsidies and sustaining the unreformed command economy, the Belarusian politics, society, economy, and foreign relations of the country are all being transformed. However, given the Russia's re-emerging interest in building close ties to Belarus; Lukashenka's unwillingness to authorize too profound reforms for political reasons; regime's ability to offer a new "social contract" to the population and incorporate some parts of the opposition; the deep internal crisis in the opposition; and the remaining lack of a coherent EU policy towards Belarus, it is more likely that this new transition will return another, though possibly kinder and gentler, form of authoritarianism, whereas prospects for a democratic transformation in Belarus remain dim.**

### AFTERMATH OF THE GAS WAR WITH RUSSIA:

The relations with Russia appeared to be a definitive factor determining the internal political dynamics of Belarus and its foreign policy alike. Indeed, it is the change of the Russian policy in 2006 and the declared transition to the market-based relations with Belarus what has been causing trouble for Lukashenka, pushing Belarus into the verge of change and offering a chance to the EU to establish itself as a player. The Kremlin announced, in April 2006, that the price for oil and gas supplied to Belarus would be eventually raised to the "European" level. In practice, it could have meant the abrogation of implicit subsidies in the amount of 10 to 20% of Belarus's annual GDP that Russia paid for Lukashenka's geopolitical allegiance. The Belarusian government lobbied heavily to avert a too abrupt price hike, and a last-minute compromise deal signed by the governments of Russia and Belarus on the eve of the New Year 2007, foresaw a 5-year grace period for transition to the "European" energy price.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the unregulated relations in the oil sector and the dispute over the so-called "oil offshore zone" in Belarus<sup>2</sup> resulted in

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<sup>1</sup> In 2006, Belarus paid 46 US dollars per 1000 cubic meters of gas, as opposed to 250 US dollars normally paid by the European consumers. The price was raised to 100 US dollars in 2007 and 120 US dollars in the first quarter of 2008. At the same time, the "European" price reached approximately 350 US dollars due to the raising energy prices on world markets.

<sup>2</sup> Russia normally levies export duty on oil shipped abroad to ensure the flow of hard currency revenues while keeping domestic price low. As Belarus de-factor received oil at the domestic price, the exemption from export duties allowed the authorities to make superprofits through re-selling oil products on world markets. Since 2007, Belarus agreed to pay export duty to Russia at 1/3 of the level levied for all other exports.

10 day blockade of the oil supplies to Europe. Eventually, the Belarusian authorities acquiesced with growing energy prices and accepted Russian offer of phasing out implicit subsidies instead of withdrawing them momentarily.

Growing energy prices endangered the post-Soviet consumer society nourished by Lukashenka during the easier times in relations with Russia. As the society is watching the transformation efforts of the regime, politics has been returning to the public discussion. While the postponement of the convergence of energy prices charged by Russia for Belarus, with the world prices avoided a major crisis in 2007, the Belarusian government was forced to consider new policy alternatives, and partially reversed its long-standing policy of avoiding any reforms in the economy. For example, the government was forced as early as in May 2007 to abolish the wide-scale (although highly inefficient) system of social privileges and subsidies. The measure, although not fatal to public welfare, proved highly unpopular among “his” consumer society and the popularity of the president was on steady decline, according to independent polls, throughout the year.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, European and Russian investors were allowed to privatize Belarusian companies. Important privatization deals for 2007 included the sale of the stake in the Beltransgaz gas distribution network to Gazprom, and the privatization of the national mobile operator Velcom by Telecom Austria. The government has also raised cash by selling some of the assets by attracting loans from the West.<sup>4</sup>

These ad-hoc measures do not remove the long-term challenges to the stability of the Belarusian economy, as it already suffers from the declining competitiveness of industrial sector, and the authorities experience problems in maintaining the overextended social safety net and full employment. Nevertheless, even though the economic future of Belarus remains uncertain, it can already be said that the doomsday scenarios propagated by scores of observers in the beginning of 2007 failed to materialize. The Belarusian authorities proved to be fully capable of compensating the financial losses from higher energy price and changing terms of trade in oil products by using the ‘debt and privatization cocktail.’<sup>5</sup> There is a good reason to believe that the same cocktail will allow coping with financial losses in the short-term even if the price for Russian gas grows from the 119 US dollars per thousand cubic meters paid by Belarus in the beginning of 2008 up to 190-200 US dollars, which can materialize in the year 2009-2010. Furthermore, there is a set of cushions that the government can use to mitigate the consequence of gas price hikes, including the inflationary tax.

Moreover, trade between Belarus and Russia remains to be administered on special, non-market conditions, when scores of Belarusian goods are being paid for by the federal and regional budgets in public procurement system, actually allow the

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<sup>3</sup> See results of the IISEPS poll, <http://www.iiseps.org/trend.html>, accessed 12 February 2008.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/blitz20071112debten.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. See also discussion on gas price, <http://www.belinstitute.eu> upcoming

Belarusian authorities to shift a part of the burden of price hikes back to Russia. The functioning of this system largely depends upon the political factors, though. Nevertheless, the renaissance of the 'cold war' rhetoric in the Russia's top leadership (for example, President Putin's recent announcement that the West is pursuing the new 'arms race') hints that Kremlin will pursue a friendlier line to its geopolitical ally, and that any sort of political decisions that can seriously hamper the Belarusian economy is not likely to materialize in the foreseeable future.

## STATE OF THE SOCIETY: DECLINING OPTIMISM AND GROWING ACCEPTANCE FOR POLICY CHANGE

Temporary problems in Belarus-Russia relations might not have shaken the regime or the Belarusian economy, but they did make an imprint on public mindset and spread anxiety about the future, especially as consumer price inflation picked up at the end of 2007.

The data released in December 2007 by the Vilnius-based Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies discovered that support for the government of President Lukashenka consistently declined in 2007.<sup>6</sup> This reversed the tendency of the previous years, when public confidence in the government increased consistently in 2002-2006 on the back of a rapid economic expansion and a precipitant raise of public wages and social benefits. Thus, the number of those believing that the country is moving in the right direction fell from 55 to 41% since the beginning of the year; whereas Lukashenka's own support fell from 50% to 39%. The same poll showed a growing decline in public optimism about the future: the number of those expecting worsening of their lives in the nearest months rose sharply from 11% in the end of 2006 to 28% in December 2007.

IISEPS data contrasted sharply with the data of the Life in Transition Survey by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development released in 2007.<sup>7</sup> The LIT survey found Belarusians to be among the most optimistic societies in the Central Europe and former Soviet Union, whose confidence in the future contrasted sharply with a general mood of pessimism and dissatisfaction in many other post-Soviet republics. The LIT survey also recorded high rates of approval for the existing political and economic system (at the level of 70-80% for all age groups).

The high rates of public optimism and approval for the government in mid-2000s were a result of a strong economic expansion and a deliberate policy of raising real incomes (the dollar-denominated incomes almost tripled since 2003) that were undertaken by the authorities before the key political campaigns (the constitutional referendum of 2004 and the presidential elections of 2006) that ensured continuity of the Lukashenka's rule in contrast to the series of electoral regime changes

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<sup>6</sup> See results of the IISEPS poll, <http://www.iiseps.org/trend.html>, accessed 12 February 2008.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ebrd.com/pubs/econo/lits.pdf>

elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. The ability to extend the income raises even further was seriously undermined in 2007 by the increase of prices for Russian oil and gas. Moreover, the acceleration of inflation in the second half of 2007, promoted by both higher energy prices and external price shocks (such as abrupt weakening of the US dollar, to which the Belarusian ruble is pegged) brought forth in November 2007 the first officially recorded drop in real wages in several years. Last but not least, the government's decision to abolish ineffective but popular system of social benefits and discounts since December 17, 2007, added up to public dissatisfaction with the authorities, even though, unlike in Russia, where a similar move in the beginning of 2005 provoked mass street protests, Belarusians did not turn their complaints into something more vocal than private grumbling.

#### THE REGIME VS. SOCIETY: A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT?

The ongoing process of reformulating the 'social contract' between the regime and the society testifies about the ongoing internal transformation of the regime in Minsk. The public acceptance of the Lukashenka's rule traditionally depended upon the ability of the government to provide acceptable wages, pensions, and job security, while keeping in place other generous social obligations of the state, such as cheap public services and social safety net. The respect for this social contract, the society tended to turn a deaf ear to the issues of democracy and human rights violations. As the government may no longer count to continue with the old system of social benefits and have to authorize privatizations, the authorities search for new sources of legitimizing their policies and reach out to the social groups that might not be their active supporters in the future. Elements of the new 'social contract' include:

- **Strong pro-independence position of the official discourse.** The government recognizes the emergence of the consensus in the Belarusian society on the necessity to preserve independence of the Belarusian state, and moves towards presenting its guardianship of independence as the regime's top achievement. While such overtones had been typical for the official discourse in the past several years, the new tendency disclosed in 2007 was partial acceptance by the authorities of the previously trashed discourse of the nationalist opposition (examples include official celebrations on the 'alternative' independence day celebrated by the opposition on March 25, favorable treatment of the nationalist and pro-European 'opposition' mythology in some official publications, and heavy government investments in restoration of previously neglected architectural monuments from the medieval period that symbolize, in the eyes of the nationalist opposition, the European past of Belarus). In so doing, the authorities attempt to appeal to its staunchest opponents in the society and dilute the moral foundation of the democratic resistance.
- **New treatment of power elites.** In the past five years, Belarus slipped from being one of the cleanest to one of the most corrupt countries in the world,

according to the Transparency International Corruption Perception index. Although a decline from 36<sup>th</sup> to 150<sup>th</sup> place in the world<sup>8</sup> may hint at the substandard methodology of the survey, the studies nevertheless confirm the increasing prominence of conspicuous consumption by the Belarusian power elite: something that Lukashenka consistently tried to avoid in his previous years when he positioned himself as a lone warrior against greedy and corrupt bureaucracy. Belarusian bureaucrats not only benefit from higher wages and chic houses they can now legally build on privileged loans, but also from more ubiquitous rent opportunities, particularly once the government authorizes one multibillion public infrastructure projects after another. At the same time, the corruption trials of top officials became less frequent and more low profile, and officials who can make deals and return the stolen resources can be freed from punishment. In fact, top government officials can only be prosecuted in Belarus with President's consent.

- **Partial debureaucratization and liberalization in business.** Uncertainty about the ability of the Belarusian economy to withstand the price increases in 2007 forced the government not only to abolish a system of social benefits, but also to change the general message to the society. The cradle-to-grave welfare promises were replaced with calls for greater self-sufficiency and a private initiative (in his new year address on 31 December 2007, Lukashenka explicitly told Belarusians that they could no longer count on the government as 'Santa Claus'<sup>9</sup> for all their needs). Getting rid of certain social obligations was compensated by certain liberalization of the business climate. The government made certain moves towards debureaucratization of small business by introducing a 'one window' system for business registration, tax payments, inspections, etc. As a result, Belarus moved few points in the World Bank 'Doing Business Survey'<sup>10</sup> as costs and time needed to run private enterprise declined. New measures announced in January 2008 established favorable tax treatments for small companies in the small towns and villages. At the same time, as the draconian regulations on petty market traders announced in 2007 showed, the government systematically eradicates the potential competition of the big state-private business overseen by the business circles close to the officials. The protests of petty entrepreneurs on 10 and 21 January 2008 turned into political events and were brutally dispersed by the police with personal participation of the interior minister.
- **Engaging with some opponents: and punishing others.** Part of the traditional social contract between the regime and the society in Belarus is offering job security to the population but withdrawing job prospects for the active political opponents. In a more general sense, dissenters used to be

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2007](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2007)

<sup>9</sup> [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/01/01/ic\\_news\\_112\\_283186/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/01/01/ic_news_112_283186/)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.doingbusiness.org/ExploreEconomies/?economyid=19>

removed from the public sphere and the information field. The change of tactics became clear in the end of 2007, when representatives of Presidential Administration met popular Belarusian language rock singers from groups *Palac, NRM, Neiro Dubel, and Krama*, who were banned from airways since 2004 after they played at the opposition rally, and were almost completely banned from performing in Belarus afterwards. The officials offered them the reinstatement on stage and airways in exchange of curtailment of the ties to the opposition. The efficiency of such policy became immediately visible, as musicians agreed on the bureaucrats' terms. Accusations of treason and collaboration traded by many democratic activists in the opposition press provoked further conflicts between musicians and the audience, and the former quickly lost their status of moral authority among the democratic youth. The engagement tactics is also employed at the grassroots level, when many regional activists are being offered, after years of unemployment, 'normal' workplaces, after which they break ties with the opposition. At the same time, committed hardcore activists who refuse to quit their activities face even higher criminal punishments (see below).

In sum, the reconfiguration of the social contract is reflected in the The new 'social contract' does not fundamentally change the nature of Lukashenka's rule, but its emergence testifies the intention to make it easier for new social strata. The authorities do engage and boost the social status of the previously ostracized and marginalized groups, such as pro-independence urban strata, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, and even opposition activists. But, while offering favorable treatment, it also communicates harsh costs of non-compliance with new rules of the game.

## RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND THE EU: CHASING TWO RABBITS OR SUCKING TWO BREASTS?

Belarus's foreign relations in 2007 revealed a remarkable degree of synergy between how Belarus-Russia and Belarus-EU relations proceeded. Attempts to find new ways of securing the long-term stability of the system in the beginning of 2007 briefly opened the bargaining process with the West. Lukashenka's announcement on February 2007 that he "would never forget"<sup>11</sup> the supportive position of the EU and the United States in the oil and gas conflict in Russia seemed to be a sign of warming up mutual relations. However, Lukashenka quickly made it clear that political liberalization was out of question, even though the political repression was somewhat eased in the first half of 2007 (when few political prisoners were released and opposition protests were allowed to assemble peacefully). Part of the reasons for political liberalization was in the unsuccessful attempt by the official Minsk to avoid the exclusion from the EU Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), which was feared to be far more painful for Belarusian economy than it eventually turned

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<sup>11</sup> [http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2005/05/05/ic\\_news\\_116\\_243423/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2005/05/05/ic_news_116_243423/)

out to.<sup>12</sup> However, as Lukashenka continued to insist that no major political reforms would take place, and GSP suspension was enacted on 21 June 2007, prospects for normalizing the relations with the West faded again and were kept alive only by the new series of quarrels between the official Minsk and Gazprom (such as a threat to turn off energy supplies to Belarus over non-payment of debt arrears in August 2007).

The foundation for the EU policy towards Belarus was provided by the ‘non-paper’ document titled ‘What the European Union Could Bring To Belarus’ released by the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Foreign Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner on 22 November 2006.<sup>13</sup> The document set up twelve specific conditions to the Belarusian government that could open the road towards normalizing relations and a deeper cooperation in the economic, political, and humanitarian sphere. The document was part of the EU’s long-standing conditionality approach towards Belarus, which failed to work since 1996 for two reasons: the ‘carrot’ offered by the EU to the Belarusian authorities was not as important as benefits of maintaining absolute control at home, and the Union hardly had the ‘stick’ to enforce its policy. The end of the attempt to leverage the official Minsk with GSP, and the growing confidence by the end of 2007 that the energy price hikes did not seriously hamper the Belarusian economy made the official Minsk increasingly disinterested in normalizing relations with Brussels, whereas the EU (and particularly the major EU states, such as Germany and France) was desperate to find ways of engaging with Lukashenka even in disregard of the EU official position reflected in the non-paper.

Chances for constructive yet principled engagement between Brussels and Minsk were trashed altogether in December 2007 by the new game of the Kremlin towards Belarus. During president Putin’s official visit to Minsk on 14-15 December 2007, Russia agreed offer Belarus a stabilization loan in the amount of 1.5 billion USD, which it consistently denied throughout the year. The loan, offered on highly preferential terms, was generally interpreted as a strategy by the Russian leadership to create incentives for the official Minsk against finding alternative geopolitical and economic sponsorship.<sup>14</sup> It probably also reflected the unexpected (for Russian leadership) results of the economic pressure throughout 2007. Instead of ‘voluntary surrender’ of Belarus’ sovereignty, the challenge of price hike prompted the geopolitical dance by the Belarusian authorities, and in a way galvanized nation-building process in Belarus. The “warming up” of Belarus-Russia relations, after a year of controversy, may be explained by the more global context: as Kremlin is exacerbated with what it believes to be the Western “intrusion” into its sphere of interests, it boosts its strategic presence West of Moscow. Russian opposition to the placement of the US missile defense system elements in Poland and the Czech Republic and the warnings by President Vladimir Putin that “ a new arms race”

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/biss\\_gsp\\_eng.pdf](http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/biss_gsp_eng.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/belarus/intro/non\\_paper\\_1106.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/belarus/intro/non_paper_1106.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/blitz20071217belrus.pdf>

between Russia and the West is in the making all gave hints that Belarus is an important factor in Kremlin's plans for a new confrontation with the West. President Lukashenka obviously caught the opportunity in December 2007, when he offered full cooperation with Russia in opposing the US AMD system in Central Europe.

The new stabilization loan, and the promise of yet another one, in the amount of 2 billion US dollars, by the middle of 2008, seemed to have deprived the official Minsk of the last pieces of motivation towards the engagement with the EU. By the end of the year and in the beginning of 2008, regime's opponents were treated with harsh punishments that were typical for the 'hot' political season of 2006, when extensive prison sentences were used to intimidate the opposition before and after the presidential elections. For example, youth activist Artur Finkevich got in December 2007 additional 1.5 years in jail for violating the internal rules in the labor camp from which he was about to be released (his colleague Zmicier Dashkevich, who served 1.5 years in jail for running unregistered organization, got only 500 US dollars fine for a much greater offense of refusing to testify against prosecuted colleagues). The most striking act of repression was sentencing to three years in prison of journalist Alexander Sdvizhkov for reprinting the infamous Mohammed cartoons in 2006 (Sdvizhkov was only caught in November 2007).

Belarus-EU relations, however, took a surprising turn by late January 2008, when President Lukashenka met German ambassador Gebhardt Weiss on January 31. The meeting raised eyebrows with the observers, many of whom believed it was a sign of Germany (and, in the broader sense, major EU countries) abolishing the joint EU line and making unilateral steps towards engaging with official Minsk. The theory was boosted by the approval of Weiss's diplomacy by the French ambassador in Minsk, who represents the EU presidency in Minsk. It has to be noted that both countries have strong economic interests in Belarus (for example, France hopes to replace Russia as a major contractor for the construction of recently-announced Belarus nuclear power plant). Indeed, when few political prisoners, including Dashkevich and Finkevich, were released few days afterwards, it appeared that the official Minsk was playing a 'divide and rule' game with the EU, trying to encourage Germany's accommodative approach. There is no sign that such singular releases of political prisoners will turn into the comprehensive political liberalization. Instead, the Belarusian authorities consider these steps to be favors made to the EU that need to be paid back in the future. Furthermore, many opposition representatives fear that such contacts would motivate the authorities in Minsk to fill the prison cells before they go for the negotiating table with Brussels once again in order to demonstrate liberalization of political climate. If this theory holds true, it can be concluded that the EU conditionality approach not only fails to penalize incentives towards intensification of political repression by the Belarusian authorities, but, ironically, creates them, as the EU and its member states cannot chose between principled and pragmatic approach.

At the same time, Lukashenka's new attempt of engaging with the EU in January-February 2008 could have been the sign that Kremlin might have been forcing Lukashenka to pay back the economic favors by carrying out the referendum on the ultimate merger of two countries. This theory is supported by the release by the Lukashenka's own administration, of the public opinion poll data showing incredibly low levels of public support for Russia-Belarus Union. In his typical manner, Lukashenka chose to flirt with the West once again, but also to discourage any attempts by Moscow to impose on him stricter conditions on which the political and economic support of Kremlin could depend.

The fact that Lukashenka, after series of announcement by Kremlin and Gazprom that the 'market era' in relations between Belarus and Russia was inevitable, could still play this game with Russia (and the EU), reveals that energy conflict failed to fundamentally change the tenets of Russia's policy towards Belarus. In fact, Lukashenka's ability to consistently outplay Moscow is programmed by Kremlin's inability to choose one of the two policy mutually exclusive policy goals Moscow tries to achieve simultaneously. Energy price hikes in the beginning of 2007 reflected Russia's attempt to reduce the price of geopolitical hegemony of Belarus. Ironically, the price cannot be reduced without curtailing the hegemony itself and giving consent to the unleashing the processes of nation-building and self-determination, frozen by the Belarus-Russia Union. This 'pursuit of two rabbits' makes Lukashenka confident that no Kremlin's policy would stay for long, and no serious attempt to undermine his authority will be made from Moscow. At the same time, he uses the EU as a scare factor in his dealing with Kremlin in order to extract better conditions of geopolitical and economic patronage. The Belarus-EU relations thus represent a mere function of ups and downs of Lukashenka's dealings with Kremlin, and they will remain so until the EU 'conditionality' approach towards the official Minsk remains in place.

#### THE OPPOSITION: SAME OLD?

After the impressive performance and a remarkable show of resilience and determination during the 2006 presidential elections, the Belarusian opposition finds itself in disarray as it is barely capable to maintain internal unity and seems to have lost the ability to attract public interest to itself.

Opposition's impressive performance in the 2006 presidential elections does not negate the fact that it suffered yet another devastating political defeat that year, and the percentage of votes received by its candidates, Alexander Milinkevich and Alexander Kazulin, is smaller than what the opposition nominee Uladzimir Hancharyk received alone in 2001. This being said, it seemed to be in far better shape in 2006 than it was either before or after the election. The creation, in 2005, of the United Democratic Forces coalition and the nomination of Alexander Milinkevich as the single presidential candidate testified about the growing maturity of the opposition and its ability to behave itself responsibly. The Milinkevich's popularity with rank and file democratic activists was particularly important for energizing the opposition

grassroots for the elections in spite of the massive wave of harassment, intimidation, and repression by the authorities. The key to Milinkevich's success with activist was his roots in civil society: as up to 90% of the opposition's street force did not belong to any political party, the rank-and-file activists preferred Milinkevich over the veteran party leaders, each of whom had a long history of political failure behind them. Furthermore, the second opposition candidate Alexander Kazulin, who refused to join UDF, did not enter the fight with Milinkevich but in fact played a back-up role for the major opposition force during the election, trying to reach out to the constituencies with which the opposition traditionally had problems to connect.

Most importantly, the most spectacular act of the democratic resistance during the 2006 election campaign, the street protests and the tent camp on the October Square in Minsk had little to do at all with the political parties or institutionalized opposition. The post-election protests were launched by the youngsters who were primarily driven by considerations of honor, rather than purpose. As the unrest on the streets was the show run by civil society groups, the opposition leaders were either removed from the scene by the preemptive arrests, or showed a remarkable degree of hesitation when facing 'unexpected' crowds and tent camps. Nevertheless, they managed to derive political capital from the youngsters' unrest and used it for a certain time after the March elections. Informal civil society network that sprung up in the post-election period initially tried to continue their activities, but they quickly disintegrated, as activists became exacerbated with opposition's internal infights they could not understand, and when many of them simply had to go on with the routine of daily lives whereas others opted for emigration (as options to leave were generously provided by the European governments in the aftermath of presidential elections: for example, through offering scholarships abroad). Only a small portion of the people who were attracted to politics in 2006 continued with political activism of any sort.

The political opposition was thrown in a deep crisis almost immediately after its leaders were freed from prison cells in March-April 2006. The next year was mostly spent on discussions over how the opposition coalition had to be run. The disputes and disagreements quickly unmasked the mounting confrontation between the UDF leader Milinkevich and the political party leaders who considered themselves as progenitors of his political success and became increasingly concerned that Milinkevich's leadership position would overshadow their own. The party leaders in the UDF council considered Milinkevich's mandate as a leader expired after the elections, and argued for the replacement of a single leader of the UDF by the institution of co-chairpersons. Milinkevich, meanwhile argued that the opposition needed a strong leader who would carry out responsibility for its success or failure. In the end of the day, the matter was brought to the new Congress of Democratic Forces that took place on May 27-28, 2007. Milinkevich managed (originally planned for winter) to postpone the Congress but not to avert it. His civil society roots, conducive to his success in the election campaign, programmed him to failure at the Congress as the rules for its composition were changed to prioritize the political

parties. As the result, the Congress approved the change in the leadership scheme and elected four co-chairmen of the UDF. Milinkevich refused to take the fifth position reserved for him and opted instead to create and lead the 'For Freedom!' movement, which creation he announced on March 25, 2006, at the final post-election demonstration in Minsk. Initially planned to be an umbrella incorporating and possibly replacing all other opposition parties, the 'For Freedom!' movement effectively turned into another partisan group centered on the defeated opposition leader.

Milinkevich's inability to offer a coherent plan of action for the opposition, and to actually press forward both a realistic political agenda and a realistic mechanism of unification was quoted as a reason for his downfall by friends and foes alike. Milinkevich indeed spent far more time traveling abroad and receiving prestigious prizes rather than paying attention to his home base. Nevertheless, the arguments of his opponents were even weaker. The statements of some protagonists of the congress that the leadership change in the opposition was necessary to give a new breath of life in the coalition ran against the fact that the "collective replacement" of Milinkevich were veteran party leaders who had more than enough time to furnish their leadership aspirations with some credibility – and failed times and again.<sup>15</sup>

Milinkevich and the rest of UDF averted the outright split, but the relations between two groups remain strained. For example, several political parties from the UDF adopted a policy of purging members who will join the 'For Freedom!' (although Milinkevich's deputy Yury Hubarevich continues as deputy chairman in one of the largest opposition party, the Belarusian Popular Front). The acrimony between two blocks is partly explained by the peculiar distribution of influence in the opposition. As a fact, strongest NGOs participating in the Belarusian opposition may have more powerful role than political parties, which, due to the lack of competitive political process, are themselves hardly distinguishable from NGO groups. The confrontation for influence and resources between parties and civil society groups is traditional for opposition politics in Belarus for nearly a decade. Moreover, as political parties in Belarus fail to correspond to the overall "dissident" context, they are hardly attractive for younger generation of Belarusian opposition that grew to prominence through NGO channels instead and that found in Milinkevich its leader. The conflict between 'new' and 'old' generations (and at the same time between the political parties and the NGOs) was prominent in the leadership battle in the Belarusian Popular Front in December 2007, when Milinkevich's associate Ales Mikhalevich fought for party leadership with the BPF veteran chairman Vincuk Viachorka. As both came into deadlock, a compromise candidate had to be found.

According to the critics of the UDF leadership, the conflict inside the opposition also reflects a confrontation between the nationalistic and pro-European part of the opposition centered around Milinkevich and the pro-Russian faction that reportedly

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/congresseng1.pdf>

took over the UDF. Although such division may not be entirely valid, as nationalistic forces represented by the BPF are part of the collective leadership in the UDF, the pro-Russian group, headed by the leader of the Belarusian Party of Communist Siarhej Kaliakin, did assume a far more influential role in the opposition than it ever did before. The opponents insist that Kaliakin's influence and his de-facto control over the UDF council through several smaller leftist parties he supports was the result of the Kremlin's new strategy towards the Belarusian opposition pronounced by Sergej Karaganov, one of the Russias' foremost political strategists, in February 2007. The engagement of certain Kremlin circles with the UDF and its support for Kaliakin can be confirmed to some extent by the UDF's reluctance to publicly determine its foreign policy agenda, even though all the coalition members but one (the Communists) openly support the pro-European way for Belarus.

The growing role of the pro-Russian and leftist elements in the opposition had been publicly defended through 2007 by several printed and online media known to be supported from Moscow.<sup>16</sup> The argument is that the pro-Moscow and Leftist agenda would find a better acceptance in the Belarusian society than the pro-European nationalism of Milinkevich. Two opposition demonstrations in the Fall of 2007, however, confirmed that both wings of the opposition have same problem of combating public apathy and disinterest in politics. The European March that took place on October 14 and featured Milinkevich as top speaker gathered mere 2.500 participants. The Social March, organized on November 4 on the slogans of opposition to the curtailment of social privileges, attracted even smaller crowds and was generally regarded as Kaliakin's personal political defeat.

Last but not least, the confrontation between Milinkevich and the rest of UDF also reflects a disarray in the democracy promotion community. Any effective political coalition in Belarus depends upon the coalition of the donors. It is hardly a secret for anyone in the Belarus opposition politics and two sides have supporters in the donor institutions whose work focuses accordingly, with the parties and civil society groups.

As both parts of the new political divide in the opposition spent far more time arguing over leadership and geopolitics than doing grassroots organizing, the opposition approaches the parliamentary elections scheduled for September 28, 2008, without a clear plan how and what for it will use the election campaign. As the 'For Freedom!' movement decided not to run its own candidates aside from the UDF, the split in the opposition is not a threat. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how the Lukashenka's opponents will break the scenario of elections worked out by the authorities and will turn it into political campaign. The parliamentary elections, carried out in 110 separate constituencies, create serious disincentives for participants to raise 'national' issues, and tend to turn into orchestrated competition between regional lobbyists instead. As the parliament is virtually powerless in Belarus, the

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<sup>16</sup> This includes the most popular political internet resource 'Belarusian Partisan' ([www.belaruspartisan.org](http://www.belaruspartisan.org)) ran by the former anchor of the Russian national television and the native of Belarus Pavel Sheremet.

opposition should be far more motivated in electrifying the atmosphere in the society in the run-up to the 2010 presidential elections, which will become the real focal point for the democratic activists, than in how many seats, if any, it will be able to wrestle from the government.

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