Belarusian Society and Authorities in the Process of Searching the European Way

BELARUS' RULING ELITE: READINESS FOR DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION WITH THE EU

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Introduction

On September 28, an estimated 600[1] demonstrators marched through the Belarusian capital, Minsk, to protest alleged fraud during the September 23-28 parliamentary election. The small number of participants indicates that two of the political players in Belarus — the opposition and the public — will not be able to influence developments in the country for quite a long time.

The opposition is fragmented, with various small groups having absolutely different visions of the past, present and future. The conflicting opposition parties of national democrats, liberals and hard-line Soviet communists cannot come up with an alternative to Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Belarusian society has been overtaken by consumerism. Many people give credit to Lukashenka and his "correct" policies for the opportunity to consume. Even if the global financial crisis cripples Belarus' economy, a considerable number of Belarusians will remember how much they consumed in the last ten years. They will try to get though hard times and wait for the economic situation to improve.

The government will be the driving force for change in Belarus.

When we talk about the government in Belarus, it is difficult to explain what it really is by defining it in terms of the responsibilities and functions

[1] The estimate includes journalists and plainclothes security officers.

of officials or the role of political institutions. You could read through all the legal acts outlining the powers of the president, but this would give you only a vague idea of what the presidency really is in Belarus. Power is personified in this country. When we speak of "the authrorities" in Belarus, we do not refer to officials and political institutions, but rather to concrete individuals and groups.

Lukashenka: Team player

There is not a single country where one person has a monopoly to make all political decisions. Even in absolute monarchies, the entourage has an influence on the king to a certain point. If he loses the support of the ruling elite, the king loses his crown and his life. Belarus is not an exception. Lukashenka often describes himself as "a popular president" and "a man of the people."

In reality, Lukashenka is beholden to the former Soviet *nomenklatura* for the success of his political career. An influential group within the ruling elite threw its weight behind Lukashenka in the run-up to Belarus' first presidential election. It backed the right horse and Lukashenka won the race.

Three reasons can be cited to explain why Lukashenka has been in office for more than 14 years and will be "re-elected" in the next presidential election in 2010[2], if health permits.

Firstly, Lukashenka fulfils his contract with the people: the nation retains its independence; the economy has been growing; living standards have been rising; and the quality of services offered by the government to the people has improved. Most people do not expect a better performance from the authorities.

Secondly, Lukashenka has fulfilled his contract with the *nomenklatura*.

Thirdly, Lukashenka is a rather flexible politician. He is very responsive to changes in public sentiment and the interests of the electorate and the *nomenklatura*.

Precisely because Lukashenka possesses this quality, he became a stalwart advocate of Belarus' independence in 2002, and portrays himself as the de-

[2] Mikalay Lazavik, secretary of the central election commission, said on November 25 that the next local elections would be held on December 14, 2010 at the latest, and the next presidential election would take place on February 8, 2011 at the latest. Officials indicated that the local and presidential elections may be held on the same day to save public funds.

fender of Belarus from Russian pressure. Since the beginning of 2007, the authorities have been losing interest in pushing "a state ideology" into people's minds, and have become more interested in using Belarusian culture and history to create an attractive image of Belarus for the masses.

Lukashenka has radically changed his views on the economy. He has been trying to sell to the electorate the idea of market-oriented reform, economic liberalisation and cautious privatisation. He has called for liberalising society and building stronger ties with the West.

Changes in the composition of the ruling elite

Lukashenka is not the central figure of the political process in Belarus. He does not play as crucial role in setting the direction of change in Belarus as the West thinks. Lukashenka retains an opportunity to control the speed of change in Belarus. He can slow change but he cannot reverse it. Groups dominating the ruling elite are the main driving force of Belarus' political development. They decide on the direction of change and Belarus' political transformation. The composition of the ruling elite changed dramatically after the March 2006 presidential election. This reshuffle is responsible for changes in internal and foreign policies.

The fall of the *siloviki*

Viktor Sheyman was considered the second most powerful figure in the government hierarchy after Lukashenka. Between 1999[3] and 2006, he served as state secretary of the Security Council, prosecutor general and head of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Presidential Administration. He coordinated the efforts of the State Control Committee, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Committee for State Security (KGB), the police and courts. All these agencies were led by people picked by Sheyman. Many posts in the Presidential Administration were held by Sheyman's allies.

[3] In 1999, Lukashenka's presidential term ran out based on the 1994 Constitution, but he refused to step down. Sheyman gained much influence because as state secretary of the Security Council, he coordinated efforts by law enforcement agencies and courts to thwart the opposition's attempt to hold a presidential election that year to oust Lukashenka.

This powerful group of *siloviki* in the ruling elite had a considerable influence on the country's internal and foreign policy. The *siloviki*, implicated in brutal oppression, including abductions and murders[4], opposed steps aimed at liberalisation for fear that they may eventually be held accountable.

Sheyman saw his influence wane after Moscow demanded in late March 2006 that Belarus pay market prices for energy. By that time, he had actually accomplished his mission. Economic top-managers and technocrats took over the leading posts in the Lukashenka government.

In late March 2006, Zyanon Lomats[5], a member of the Shklou/Mahilyou group, replaced Anatol Tozik, Sheyman's protégé, as chairman of the State Control Committee.

In July 2007, Sheyman's ally Stsyapan Sukharenka was replaced by Yury Zhadobin as chairman of the KGB. Zhadobin had served as chief of the Presidential Security Service prior to the appointment.

In February 2008, Ryhor Vasilevich, ex-chairman of the Constitutional Court, succeeded Pyotr Miklashevich, Sheyman's protégé, as prosecutor general.

On July 8, 2008, the Belarusian leader sacked Sheyman as state secretary of the Security Council over a bomb explosion that injured about 50 people during an Independence Day concert in Minsk on July 3. Lukashenka also dismissed Henadz Nyavyhlas, head of the Presidential Administration and an ally of Sheyman.

Lukashenka's decision delivered a fatal blow to Sheyman's group.

The crackdown on Sheyman's *siloviki* group led to considerable internal changes in the government system, put an end to the *siloviki's* arbitrary rule and increased the influence of the technocrats. It also spurred privatisation, tightly controlled by the *nomenklatura*, and some liberal changes — the authorities suspended mass audits of businesses, reduced the tax burden on enterprises, gave more powers to top managers, etc.

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[4] Sheyman, and officials answerable to him at the time — Yury Sivakou, interior minister in 1999 and 2000, and Dzmitry Paulichenka, then-commander of an elite police unit, were accused of involvement in the disappearance of two prominent opposition figures, a businessman and a journalist in 1999 and 2000 in a report that Cypriot MP Christos Pourgourides presented to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly in 2004. Some opposition figures also hold Sheyman responsible for the death of opposition leader Henadz Karpenka in mysterious circumstances in March 1999.

[5] Lukashenka first met Lomats in the early 1990s. The former was a member of the Supreme Soviet at the time.

The rise of Viktar Lukashenka

Sheyman will never regain his former political clout (as the second most powerful official in the government) because his fall was orchestrated by Lukashenka's elder son, Viktar. Viktar actually filled the position left vacant after Sheyman's departure.

In 2007, Viktar Lukashenka masterminded a major reshuffle in the government to take over new spheres of influence, seize economic positions from the Sheyman group and crash the *siloviki*. Viktar Lukashenka used the State Control Committee and the Ministry of Internal Affairs as a tool to secure his objectives. He established control over commercial companies that used to be a source of income for top officials of the audit agency and the interior ministry[6].

Most likely, Viktar Lukashenka was behind his father's decisions to replace key officials in the audit and law enforcement agencies in 2007 and 2008.

Before the March 2006 presidential election, the audit and law enforcement agencies and courts were coordinated by Sheyman, state secretary of the Security Council at the time, whereas now these agencies operate under the close supervision of Viktar Lukashenka, presidential security aide[7]. The Security Council currently plays a less prominent role in the political system.

In July 2008, President Lukashenka appointed Uladzimir Makey, a protégé of Viktar Lukashenka, to direct his administration. In September and October 2008, the Belarusian leader appointed to key positions at the administration persons who had studied at Viktar Lukashenka's alma mater, the Belarusian State University's International Relations Faculty.

Alliance between technocrats and Viktar Lukashenka

Russian pressure on Belarus over energy prices[8] threw President Lukashenka into a dilemma: either to bow to pressure and sell controlling stakes in

[6] For details on the subject read Andrej Lachowicz. Dynastia Lukaszenkow // Nowa Europa Wschodnia. №1, S.40-49.

[7] Alyaksandr Lukashenka has one security aide.

[8] Gazprom cut off gas supplies to Belarus on January 24, 2006. Natural gas accounts for 90 percent of Belarus' fuel consumption.

Beltranshaz, a gas pipeline system operator, and other major enterprises to Russian companies, or launch a large-scale economic modernisation and energy efficiency programme.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka does not want to be a Russian puppet, a political figure dependent on Russia and easily replaceable. He chose the latter option. As a result, a group of his top economic advisers, technocrats led by Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski and Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Syamashka, grew more powerful within the ruling elite.

1The technocrats welcomed the rise of Viktar Lukashenka. They sought guarantees of protection from *siloviki* pressure and an opportunity to do their job without fear of excessive intervention by Sheyman's group[9]. The fall of the *siloviki* and greater influence of Viktar Lukashenka (as a guarantee of protection from Sheyman) was in their interests.

The technocrats and Viktar Lukashenka have similar interests for a number of other reasons.

1. The technocrats helped Viktar Lukashenka gain experience in managing large economic organisations.

Syarhey Sidorski was named prime minister in July 2003. It would have been unwise and short-sighted of him not to try to establish a good relationship with Alyaksandr Lukashenka's elder son, who was making a promising career as a manager at a major state company between April 2003 and December 2005[10]. After Alyaksandr Lukashenka's re-election in March 2006, his elder son received a "crown prince" status. Sidorski was smart and far-sighted enough to befriend him.

2. The technocrats helped Viktar Lukashenka acquire business experience.

Viktar Lukashenka was not involved in major privatisation deals, nor was he considered one of the major businesspeople, up until 2007. He was just gathering experience. The technocrats played an important role in this learning process.

[9] Sheyman orchestrated and coordinated an anti-corruption drive in 2001 and 2002 that resulted in the arrest of many top managers of state enterprises.

[10] During that period, Viktar Lukashenka was a deputy director for external economic activities at Ahat, a defence industry company that manufactures command-and-control systems and other defence products.

The group of directors of defence industry enterprises is not an independent political player, but some top defence company executives are associated with the group of technocrats. Hyanadz Sinyahouski, director general of the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Factory, one of the largest defence-oriented companies, was under criminal investigation in 2005. He was released from prison at Prime Minister Sidorski's request. The top executives of other defence enterprises are not known to have ever tired to solicit his release.

3. Viktar Lukashenka went to college together with the children of technocrats.[11]

Viktar Lukashenka has a background that dissociates him from members of Sheyman's *siloviki* group. He earned a degree in international relations from the Belarusian State University, where he completed an extensive course in economics and international economics. During his career after graduating from university, he learned to make money using methods not as criminal as those employed by the *siloviki,* but still involving the abuse of power and his official status. Like the technocrats, he regarded Sheyman's *siloviki* as criminals and undereducated people.

4. Both the technocrats[12] and Viktar Lukashenka are interested in privatisation, organised in such a way as to enrich the *nomenklatura*.

There are all grounds to assume that the alliance between the technocrats and the "crown prince," Viktar Lukashenka, will be a long-lasting one.

Privatisation designed to enrich the *nomenklatura*

The technocrats used Viktar Lukashenka, up to a point, to remove the obstacles preventing a large-scale privatisation designed to enrich the *nomenklatura*. After the group of Viktor Sheyman, coordinator of anti-corruption drives, was eliminated in June 2007[13], the Belarusian leader's threats to "cut off the hands" of those pushing for an unfair privatisation which would benefit the *nomenklatura* were just hot air. Sheyman and his group had acted as a deterrent for the *nomenklatura*'s appetite to take possession of state assets.

Interestingly, since July 2007, reports have been coming in of the government's plans to launch large-scale elite housing construction projects in various areas in Minsk. The *siloviki* with their uncivilised methods were expelled

[11] Unlike the children of the technocrats, few children of high-ranking military officers go to civilian colleges, let alone study at elite civilian universities.

[12] Like the other groups within the ruling elite, such as the Shklou-Mahilyou group and smaller less influential groups.

[13] By this time, Sheyman had lost control of the State Control Committee, the KGB and the interior ministry. Of all his protégés, Prosecutor General Miklashevich was the only one retaining his job. Miklashevich was hardly interested to act in Sheyman's interests in late July 2007 because he was aware of what was going on.

from that market. The technocrats neutralised them to grab their share[14]. The real estate market is too big for one major player like Viktor Lukashenka to control. He shares it with other big players — the technocrats and possibly other groups.

Since September 2007, Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski, First Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Syamashka, National Bank head Pyotr Prakapovich and Ryhor Kuznyatsou, chairman of the State Property Management Committee, have called for transforming state enterprises into stock companies, speeding up privatisation and creating a more favourable investment climate.

Sidorski's aides (Belarusian independent experts call them "economic nationalists") repeatedly warned against allowing Russian oligarchs to buy up assets on the cheap.

In March 2008, the board of governors of the National Bank announced that "bank executives are eligible to acquire up to 20 percent of shares in banks and other companies." The National Bank was giving voice to plans by the *nomenklatura* to take over manufacturing enterprises. By virtue of their profession, bankers are cautious, pragmatic and well-informed people. By making this declaration, they were aware that something that was not allowed yesterday was today becoming permitted.

Back in April 2006, Alyaksandr Lukashenka said that bureaucrats had been discussing behind the scenes the possibility of privatising state assets, and warned that those who seek to make fortunes in the process of privatisation will be severely punished. Since September 20007, many *nomenklatura* voices have openly and loudly declared their desire to participate in privatisation[15], but their statements have elicited no reaction from the Belarusian leader.

Moreover, Lukashenka signed edicts that gave the *nomenklatura* access to a broad range of state assets. In April 2008, he issued an edict to phase out a moratorium on the sale of stakes in stock companies[16]. The edict gives the *nomenklatura* an opportunity to buy stakes from holders who have less money and power.

[14] Independent economists say that the real estate business is almost as lucrative as arms sales. It costs $350 to $500 per sq meter of floor space to build an apartment in Minsk, while the average market price is close to $2,000 per sq meter. Elite housing is marketed at $3,500 per sq meter.
[15] Belarus' *nomenklatura* has privatised most trade and services enterprises. Now they are eyeing banks and manufacturing enterprises.
[16] Restrictions on the sale of shares in stock companies are to be fully lifted before January 1, 2011.

The State Property Management Committee suggested that the president's permission should be required only for deals in excess of one million times the Base Rate[17]. That means that the State Property Management Committee would have the power to authorise transactions of less than $16.5 million. By all appearances, representatives of higher government echelons will be able to use their formidable powers of persuasion to have the committee approve the sale of state property.

Based on painful experiences in Russia, where chaotic privatisation efforts caused political and social tensions, and the political instability of the mid 1990s, the Belarusian *nomenklatura* is not insisting on a rapid and sweeping privatisation of manufacturing enterprises. It has called for "a controllable, cautious and well-considered" approach to guarantee political stability during the privatisation process and enable the n*omenklatura* and the public to become accustomed to the process.

By setting the 20 percent limit, the *nomenklatura* made public its plans to profit from the possession of stakes in major manufacturing companies. It may be a long time before it announces its intention to control the blue chips. First, they will wait and see whether the companies survive an energy price hike. Delays in the introduction of market-driven pricing should help Lukashenka to ease the pressure from the *nomenklatura* to sell off shares in major industrial enterprises.

The transformation of state manufacturing enterprises into stock corporations gives the *nomenklatura* an opportunity to immediately acquire infrastructure elements that are not essential for their operation, but may be quite profitable[18].

Nomenklatura income legalisation

Back in April 2007, Lukashenka said he was dismayed by the fact that factory managers earned more than $1,500, alleging that their salaries are higher than the president's pay. He urged the law enforcement agencies to look into the le-

[17] At present, all transactions involving state property in access of 10,000 times the Base Rate (the Base Rate currently amounts to 35,000 rubels or $16.5) are subject to the approval of the president.

[18] Take, for instance, the Belarusian Railways (BR) leadership's proposal on the state company's transformation into a stock corporation. BR, one of Belarus' largest state companies, operates facilities that generate considerable profits such as cafeterias, pubs, restaurants, stores, slot machines, etc. But as far as BR is concerned, groups within the ruling elite that stand to benefit from the company's privatisation will not immediately insist on the sale of elements instrumental for the company's operation.

gality of the income of owners of luxurious cottages in Minsk's suburbs. Things changed dramatically that year, during which Viktar Lukashenka and the technocrats overpowered the *siloviki*. In the fall of 2007, luxury villas appeared in a prestigious neighbourhood located close to Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Drazdy complex. Each of the 100 villas built is worth more than $1 million[19]. One often sees expensive vehicles such as Bentleys, Hammers and Jaguars worth more than €100,000 on Minsk's streets, as well as brand-new Mercedes and Volvos. Therefore, in late 2007 and early 2008 wealthy Belarusians were no longer afraid to show off to Lukashenka their possessions worth over $1.5 million.

It is appropriate at this point to quote a statement made by Belarusian economist Leanid Zaika on 20 May 2008, "The Belarusian *nomenklatura* is seeking to monetise its political power. It has been 10 years since Lukashenka issued an edict in 1998 banning the privatisation of fixed assets. During this period, the *nomenklatura* managed to take possession of the working capital of companies. Now, pressure from the Belarusian *nomenklatura* is aimed at the redistribution of fixed assets in the country. Belarus is the only country in the post-Soviet space where property has not yet been divided. What we're about to see is an interesting act of the Belarusian drama.

Several thousand people in Belarus will manage to become millionaires, others will remain hired workers. In Belarus, €20,000 could generate €1 million in the next three to five years. But only several thousand people will be able to do so. The children of 20 to 30 of Belarus' leading families have reached the right age (…). The Russian privatisation began when Deripaska and Abramovich were 25-27 years old (…). As soon as the kids grow older than 20, their dads launch privatisation."

The children of Belarus' leading families, Viktar Lukashenka for instance, are already over 30. They do not want to miss opportunities which should just fall into their laps.

Lukashenka's new contract with the *nomenklatura*: Contents and guarantees

Changes in the alignment of forces within the ruling elite and the government system took place with approval from Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The

[19] Plots for building in the neighbourhood sold at an auction for $350,000. Every home's floor space is in excess of 400 sq meters.

years of 2006 and 2007 were the point at which he realised the need to rewrite a contract with the *nomenklatura* to make sure that it remains loyal to him. The terms and conditions of the contract were determined by the interests of the groups dominating the ruling elite — the technocrats, the Shklou-Mahilyou group and Viktar Lukashenka's team.

The new contractual conditions included safeguards against pressure from Sheyman's *siloviki,* expanded privatisation benefiting the *nomenklatura* and *nomenklatura* income legalisation.

However, the new contract also reaffirmed the old conditions that Lukashenka has fulfilled since his election as president in 1994. The Belarusian leader believes that the rising economic clout of certain groups within the ruling elite does not pose a threat to his authority, because the *nomenklatura* relies on him for fulfilling the old and very important conditions.

Firstly, during the planned privatisation, Lukashenka will protect the *nomenklatura* from its competitors such as Western businesses, and the Russian business-political community. He will shut out rivals.

Secondly, he will protect the *nomenklatura* from itself. It is in the best interests of the ruling elite to prevent privatisation from plunging into chaos.

The statement by the National Bank of Belarus that makes executives eligible to buy a 20-percent stake in "banks and other companies" is also remarkable in the following sense: the *nomenklatura* does not seek to acquire controlling stakes in major enterprises immediately. Their operation depends considerably on political circumstances, in particular on Minsk's ability to reach a deal with Russia on cheap energy supplies and market access, and to secure Russian government orders for Belarusian enterprises. On the other hand, the smooth operation of major manufacturing enterprises is crucial for political stability in Belarus.

Thirdly, Lukashenka plays the role of a moderator in relations among various groups within the ruling elite, forcing them to act in the common interest.

Fourthly, he plays a large role in making sure that the state fulfils its social obligations to the population and maintains political stability.

Fifthly, Lukashenka guarantees Belarus access to the Russian market and cheap energy supplies from Russia. These guarantees created conditions for the enrichment of the ruling elite who now have enough cash to spend on the acquisition of state assets.

The government seeks to improve relations with the West

Until recently, the Lukashenka regime's relations with the West hinged on the nature of the relationship with Russia. In response to pressure from Russia, Lukashenka would usually make overtures to the EU and the United States, calling for stronger ties. When Russia made concessions in an effort to cool tensions with Belarus, Lukashenka reaffirmed Minsk's commitment to the alliance with Moscow and raised concerns about threats coming from the West. For quite a long time, the Lukashenka regime did not worry about the frozen high-level political contacts with the West, taking comfort in expanding trade and economic cooperation.

In 2008, the Belarusian leader declared his willingness to make concessions to the West. The question is whether Minsk has a genuine desire to mend fences or it is just trying to manoeuvre between Russia and the West.

In August 2008, Minsk stopped treating its relationship with the West as secondary to ties with Russia. It has become a relatively independent foreign policy priority. Foreign policy objectives and efforts directed toward the West are no longer seen in the context of relations with Russia.

It is beyond doubt that if the West accepts the key conditions put forward by Minsk (a dialogue without the involvement of the opposition and that considerable political concessions by Lukashenka will not be part of the discussion), the government will make a real effort to boost ties with the West under the current circumstances.

There are three reasons for that.

Now or never

For the first time since 1996, when nuclear weapons were removed from the territory of Belarus, the country has found itself the focus of the West's attention. Belarus had been "a shelved issue" for longer than a decade.

Other CIS nations were in the spotlight of the United States — countries in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Ukraine. The EU was preoccupied with European integration, occasionally reacting to developments in Ukraine when necessary.

Russia's invasion of Georgia highlighted the issue of a future "buffer zone" between Russia and the West. Politicians in the EU probably realised that Russia will not passively wait until the EU sorts out all internal integration problems and turns its attention to the East.

Reports indicating that Russia may employ the Abkhazia (South Ossetia)[20] scenario in Ukraine's Crimea may prompt the West to consider the possibility of creating a buffer zone. But this is only a supposition. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev says that Russia is not pushing for a new cold war with the West.

Therefore, one can never be sure that the West will be willing to engage with Lukashenka in the future in the same way as it does now. The authorities have a reason to fear that the West may turn its back on Belarus when it comes under heavy pressure from Russia. The EU has a slow bureaucratic machine. Unlike the United States, it more often than not has given reason to question the consistency of its policies with regard to former Soviet republics.

The authorities appear to realise that it is worth trying to change relations with the West, now that the country has some leverage in negotiations. In different circumstances, Minsk might have to make greater concessions or even find it hard to draw the West's attention towards Belarus.

The Lukashenka regime may never have another opportunity like this.

The threat from Russia

At present, the Belarusian leader is quite happy with his relationship with Russia. Russia considerably increased economic support for its only ally shortly before NATO's Bucharest Summit, held from April 2 to 4, 2008. Minsk hopes that Russia, concerned about the Belarusian government's overtures to the West, will keep paying a good price to have Belarus play the role of its shield or "outpost" vis-à-vis NATO.

However, politicians in Minsk realise that a thaw in the country's relations with Russia will not last long. Russia has many problems to deal with other than Belarus. Its attention is currently focused on Georgia and Ukraine. After it has achieved its foreign policy objectives in these countries, it will shift its focus to Belarus.

[20] According to some reports, about 30 Crimea residents hold Russian passports.

Russia needs firm guarantees that Belarus will keep playing the role of its shield from the West. To tighten its grip on Belarus, Russia is pressing for a sequence of integrating steps.

One is the sale of controlling stakes in major Belarusian enterprises to Russian businesses. Another is a monetary union. Third is the adoption of the Kremlin's version of the so-called Union State Constitutional Act. These steps are to be followed by Russia's military build-up in Belarus[21] and deeper military integration.

Russia has removed Step 1 from the agenda of its relations with Belarus for an indefinite period[22]. Judging by statements made by Lukashenka and other officials, they know the reasons for this delay perfectly well, and are aware that after Belarus has taken Step 1 in its integration, the Kremlin will push for more steps in that direction.

Most importantly, they know that after making the first step, they will be puppets completely dependent on the Kremlin. The Kremlin will be able to replace them with more pliant figures. They would be nonentities for Russia.

Lukashenka came to realise long ago that the tempting opportunity for him to take over the Russian presidency in 1996-1999 was a setup aimed at incorporating Belarus into Russia. In a move indicative of the opinion of the Russian political elite and public, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on 14 June 2002 that the most comprehensible option for integration of Belarus and Russia would be the accession of Belarus to Russia as a federation subject. Unlike his attitude to the West, which minds its own business to a point, Lukashenka is mindful of Putin's offers.

Likewise, Belarusian government officials will never forget about their humiliating treatment at the hands of Gazprom executives during tough gas talks in Moscow in December 2006. They see Russia's attempt to regain its predominant influence in Belarus as a grave threat to their interests and status.

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[21] Russia has two military bases in Belarus — the Volga missile-attack early-warning radar station in the vicinity of Baranavichy, Brest region, and a submarine communication centre near the town of Vileyka, Minsk region.

[22] The Kremlin conditioned its recognition of the official results of the 2001 presidential election in Belarus on the sale of controlling stakes in the top 30 Belarusian companies. Having realised that Minsk fell short of its expectations, Russia cut off gas supplies to Belarus on 24 January 2004. The Kremlin made another attempt to pressure Lukashenka into making concessions in December 2006. It managed to clinch a deal for Gazprom to acquire a 50-percent interest in Belarus' gas pipeline system, Beltranshaz, within four years.

Belarus needs to make its economy more competitive and energy efficient to be able to resist pressure from Russia, amongst other goals. The government does not have enough money to cope with this huge task on its own. It is wary of turning to Russian businesses for support, realising that Russia's stronger economic position in Belarus would eventually translate into more political clout. Based on first-hand experience, particularly in cooperation with Austrian companies, officials know that western businesses play by the rules, unlike the Russians. Western companies make more beneficial and safer partners.

The *nomenklatura*'s interests

Most trade and services enterprises have been privatised in Belarus. Now, members of the ruling elite openly express their desire to acquire stakes in banks and big manufacturing enterprises.

The ruling elite have amassed rather large financial resources. They show off their wealth. High-priced vehicles are no longer a big deal, just like villas worth more than $1 million. Officials would like to be free to invest their money in Belarus and make higher profits. The *nomenklatura*'s cash already flows to the country under the guise of Cypriot or Arab investment. But they want their capital completely legalised.

The *nomenklatura* would benefit from closer ties between Belarus and the West and a greater presence of western businesses in the country.

Firstly, it would take advantage of the economic liberalisation needed to attract foreign investment.

Secondly, cooperation with western companies would make it easier to upgrade enterprises, in which officials will hold stakes, in order to make them more profitable.

Thirdly, cooperation with western companies would enable the *nomenklatura* to make money safely. Unlike Russian businesses which are heavily reliant on criminal methods, western companies are civilised partners.

At present, the authorities are not expected to swing the door wide open to western businesses. Western companies are likely to be offered controlling stakes in ailing Belarusian enterprises and encouraged to put their money in promising large-scale projects that require huge investment.

The government defines the conditions and subjects of a dialogue with the EU

The authorities' declarations and actions

Since the 2008 parliamentary elections, Lukashenka has said and done enough to make it clear to the West on what conditions the authorities are ready to conduct a dialogue and what subjects they are prepared to discuss.

He assured Anne-Marie Lizin, vice president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and special coordinator of the OSCE's short-term observer mission for Belarus' September 23-28 House of Representatives elections, of the government's willingness to build closer ties with the EU and make concessions. "If in this cooperation, political or economic, Europe makes two steps, we will make three steps to meet halfway (...). We will think about, analyse and certainly correct our mistakes."

On October 3, he gave his consent to Austria's ATEC Holding expanding its business in Belarus, in a move indicative of his interest in an increased presence of western companies in Belarus.

On October 6, Lukashenka sacked Colonel Dzmitry Pawlichenka, commander of an elite police unit accused by the West and Belarusian opposition of involvement in the abduction and murder of high-profile opposition figures in 1999.

On the same day, the Belarusian leader met with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, but stopped short of making a promise to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

On October 7, Lukashenka signed an edict to move the Great Patriotic War Museum from central Minsk to the city's outskirts.

On the same day, he met with Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, then chairman-in-office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In exchange for Stubb's remark, "What we are starting to see is the first steps in the right direction," he noted "I've already said that if Europe makes two steps toward us, we are ready to make five. (...) In gratitude for what you have just said, we are ready to vote for you to be chairman of the OSCE for life." He expressed regret that the EU sets its objectives with regard to Belarus based solely on the viewpoint of the Belarusian opposition.

Later the same day, he said in an address to KGB staff, "The recent parliamentary elections proved our system transparent and democratic to a maxi-

mum degree, and the people committed to the government-selected course (...). To let them [the opposition, observers] count votes means humiliating the Belarusian people (...). The situation is completely controllable."

In November 2008, the authorities made another conciliatory gesture toward the West. Uladzimir Makey, head of the Presidential Administration, unexpectedly accepted an invitation to take part in the Minsk Forum (officials of lower ranks had attended the event before). Makey made a surprise promise that the authorities would give unspecified independent (opposition) newspapers access to state-controlled distribution networks. Later the same month, *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva* signed distribution contracts with Belposhta and Belsayuzdruk. The authorities had kept their promise.

Dialogue conditions for the West

The authorities are willing to improve relations with the West, but they may withdraw from the dialogue if the West fails to meet conditions of fundamental importance to the Lukashenka regime:

1. Lukashenka will not talk to the West if it insists that the opposition take part in the negotiations.

2. Serious political concessions on the part of Lukashenka will not be under discussion.

Lukashenka will not make political concessions. One of the reasons is that he sees himself as president for life. The slip of the tongue he made at the meeting with Finnish Foreign Minister Stubb was not coincidental.

The release of political prisoners was the first and last political demand by the EU that the authorities considered possible to satisfy. The authorities also agreed to let two independent periodicals be distributed through the state-controlled chain. But this decision does not mean that the authorities will stop harassing the independent media. By all appearances, they will keep using official warnings to punish independent periodicals for alleged legal violations, and continue confiscating newspaper print-runs and equipment. On November 27, Lukashenka told AFP that a controversial article that penalises defamation of the president may be abolished if the European Union and the United States offer Belarus something in return. "If the European Union and the Americans want this so much and are ready to offer us something, then... we'll cancel the defamation article," AFP quoted him as saying. The au-

thorities have used the article on many occasions to jail journalists and opponents of the government.

The regime is very unlikely to make other meaningful political concessions. Incidentally, Lukashenka told Finnish Foreign Minister Stubb that Belarus is ready for any relations with the European Union. "In exchange, we only ask you to respect our sovereignty, our traditions and not to require what we cannot do."

Dialogue conditions for the regime

Steps taken by Lukashenka after the parliamentary elections indicate that the authorities have adopted a certain platform for negotiating with the West and more concessions are not likely to follow.

1. Belarus does not recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states.

2. The government will is limiting itself to making public statements denouncing the deployment of the US Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) elements in Poland and the Czech Republic, and the entry of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. It is not taking any real steps in response. For instance, it is not allowing Russia to set up military bases on the country's territory[23].

3. Belarus does not have political prisoners.

4. The government is offering stakes in state enterprises to western businesses and taking a tough position on the sale of controlling interests to Russian companies.

5. The government is making steps aimed at economic liberalisation.

6. The Belarusian leader has dismissed the most controversial figures who could have hampered the dialogue with the West.

7. Officials and the state-controlled media have toned down their anti-Western rhetoric. The state-controlled media is advertising opportunities for "a constructive dialogue and cooperation" between Belarus and the West. Re-

[23] Lukashenka said in October 2008 that Belarus is considering buying Iskander short-range missiles from Russia. On November 27, he said that the move will be part of a scheduled upgrade of the Belarusian Armed Forces and does not come in response to the US plan to site BMD interceptors in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic. Some Russian generals repeatedly indicated that Russia should deploy an Iskander missile brigade in Belarus, and cautioned against selling the Iskander or other state-of-the-art weapons to Belarus. Many politicians in Russia are suspicious of Lukashenka. They are not confident that the Belarusian Army will not target its missiles at Moscow one day.

ports about the United States have changed in the same direction, although not as fast as coverage of the EU.

8. The state media has stopped propagandising "the unity of Slavic peoples." The government is selling the electorate a perception of Belarus' past, present and future that is more in line with national interests and more conducive to cooperation with the West.

Topics of the dialogue

Lukashenka has made it clear to the West that he is willing to discuss expanded trade and economic ties. The government is seeking to attract western technology and investment.

Lukashenka seems to mean it when he says that he does not hope for political concessions from the West. The government does not anticipate a change in the West's attitude to Belarus' political system, elections etc.

Conclusions

For the time being, the main task of the government is political and economic modernisation of the authoritarian regime. The government is set to continue with economic liberalisation and launch a privatisation programme, aimed to benefit the *nomenklatura*. Officials are becoming personally interested in a higher profitability of Belarusian enterprises. The government will keep trying to build stronger ties with the West in order to take advantage of its advanced technologies and investment.

The current dialogue between the government and the West may lead to closer trade and economic ties in the first place. The Lukashenka regime is likely to adopt a more cautious rhetoric on integration with Russia. Groups which may call in the future for a liberalisation of the political regime in Belarus will play an increasingly powerful role within the ruling elite.

This is nearly all that the West can achieve in Belarus at the moment. The government would not make considerable political concessions.

If the West fails to make attractive offers during negotiations, Minsk will keep playing off the East against the West. It will frighten the West with the prospect of Russia seeking to control a vast territory from the Kamchatka Pe-

ninsula to Brest, and Russia with NATO bases located just 400 kilometres west of Moscow[24]. Lukashenka will wait for more attractive offers and a more favourable situation.

Measures designed to ensure the survival of the authoritarian regime -- the legalisation of the *nomenklatura*'s income and the sale of state assets — will create long-term conditions for political liberalisation and democratisation in Belarus.

At present, the ruling elite have their sights set on state assets. They are wary of strong competitors — western businesses and especially Russian companies with ties to criminals. The ruling elite need to establish rules to have an advantage over rivals during the distribution of state property. They are opposed to immediate democratisation but are in favour of an economic liberalisation process that can give them access to western technologies and investment. The Belarusian side will respect contracts signed with western investors who invest their money in the country.

However, the authoritarian regime cannot offer members of the ruling elite complete guarantees of ownership rights to privatised property. The ownership rights will be fully guaranteed only when Belarus becomes a genuine democracy, in which the Constitution and laws are respected by those in power and ordinary people alike.

Democracy-oriented changes will take place faster if:

1. **The West expands its economic presence in Belarus as much as possible.** It might offer loans to the Belarusian government conditional on the sale of enterprises to western companies.

2. **Western politicians, business leaders and prominent figures[25] seize opportunities for contacts with "Crown Prince" Viktar Lukashenka and the technocrats.** This is necessary to send a message to the Belarusian elite that it does not matter to the West who is behind democratic reform. It might as well be Viktar Lukashenka or Syarhey Sidorski.

[24] Lukashenka has been exploiting such scares throughout 14 years of his rule. On the one hand, neither the West nor Russia believes that his threats are real, while on the other the threats are useful because they keep the West from imposing tough economic sanctions on "the last dictatorship in Europe" for fear of pushing Belarus too far into Russia's orbit. Meanwhile, Russia has increased economic support for its ally.

[25] Incidentally, during his meeting with Michel Platini, president of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), in Minsk on April 1, 2008, the Belarusian leader said, "I've met my idol." "You are a figure too high for me to equal; I remember the goals you scored," he added.

The West should make it clear that it will not press for the criminal prosecution of Alyaksandr Lukashenka or a redistribution of property in Belarus[26].

3. **The West expands student exchange and internship programmes involving universities and companies.**

4. **The EU simplifies visa formalities for Belarusian citizens.**

5. **The West stops treating every opponent of Lukashenka as a pro-democracy activist.** The practice hampers progress toward the attainment of the objectives of the West in Belarus. Changes should be made in the way the West supports the Belarusian opposition to encourage change within the opposition so that it will not disappoint voters and turn off the authorities. The opposition needs to forge a real pro-democracy coalition capable of being a partner in a dialogue between society and the authorities.

[26] Some politicians in the EU say that the West should not deal with problems of the opposition in its relations with the authorities because it cannot interfere in internal affairs. But the opposition coalition, called United Pro-democratic Forces (UPF), is currently not positioned to make any articulate proposals to the public and the authorities. The West must clearly outline its position in its relations with the authorities because this is crucial for future change in Belarus.

BELARUS' CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE CONTEXT OF DIALOGUE WITH THE EU

Yury Chavusau

A strong and independent NGO sector is one of the basic elements of the European model of communication and interaction between the state and the public. Legal guarantees of freedom of association enable citizens to form organisations independent of the government, influence public politics, set tasks for government agencies, articulate the opinions of groups of interests based on diverse views and respect for the rights of minorities, employ volunteers and civil society activists for addressing social problems directly without help from the state, and draw public attention to areas where the state government may be ineffective or there is a great chance of power abuse. Effective guarantees of freedom of association are a tool for building a civil society infrastructure and a rule-of-law state.

Although the laws of European countries which govern civil society institutions may differ, all of the acts are based on European standards of freedom of association which guarantee non-governmental organisations an appropriate legal status. At the moment, the European countries' standards are not only in line with international law in the framework of the United Nations Organisation, but are even better, offering more solid guarantees of freedom and independence to civil society organisations.

European laws governing non-governmental organisations are based on the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights. Article 11 of the convention states that, "Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests." The article plays a large role

in the day-to-day operation of the European Court of Human Rights, which is instrumental in enforcing the right to freedom of association. The practices of the Strasbourg-based court reflect the modern European approach to the issue of cooperation between government agencies and civil society organisations. In 2007, member states of the Council of Europe passed recommendations concerning the legal status of non-governmental organisations in Europe. These instruments taken together form the basis of Europe's legal framework for the establishment and operation of non-governmental organisations.

The European Union has been pushing Belarus to adopt and respect European standards of freedom of association. Observers assess the current state of Belarus' civil society sector as unsatisfactory, citing the Belarusian government's repressive and lawless policies. In November 2006, the EU issued the non-paper, "What the European Union could bring to Belarus" calling on the Belarusian authorities to respect the rights of non-governmental organisations. Since then, European standards and approaches have been seen as a gauge for measuring the Belarusian government's progress in improving conditions for civil society organisations.

Civil society evolution in Belarus

Grassroots civil society elements — political clubs, societies of owners, consumer cooperatives and organisations for assistance to farmers and workers — emerged in Belarus in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the early 20th century, these organisations evolved institutionally, just like similar organisations in other European countries. Non-governmental organisations played an important socio-political role in Western Belarus in the 1920s and 1930s. However, the natural evolution of the non-governmental sector was disrupted by Soviet rule in Eastern Belarus after the Bolshevik revolution and in Western Belarus after 1939. Associations stopped developing in the same way as non-governmental organisations elsewhere in Europe. For decades the Soviet authorities used associations as a tool to exercise political control over the spontaneous activities of the masses. It should be noted that few elements of the pre-Soviet civil society have been left in Belarus at present. On the contrary, relics of the Soviet "civil society," namely government-controlled organisations of youths and veterans, corporate organisations, enjoy preferential treatment in

present-day independent Belarus. In the grand scheme of things, Belarus' civil society began to thrive during the decline of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, when a large number of underground and legal "non-establishment" groups cropped up in the country. These groups formed the base of the growing civil society sector in Belarus in the 1990s.

The community of non-governmental organisations went through several phases of evolution. The sector mushroomed in the early and mid-1990s after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union. The number of registered non-governmental organisations rose from 24 in 1990 to 1,000 at the end of 1995. Civil society organisations grew in number and strength. For instance, a typical area that had one or two associations independent of the government (mostly chapters of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) "Adradzhenne" and the Francisak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society) in 1990, had dozens of local NGOs, branches of national associations, and local environmental, local lore, youth and social groups two or three years later.

At the beginning of this evolution process, most civil society groups were involved in a nationwide effort establish democracy in Belarus and secure the country's independence, but many organisations later distanced themselves from politics and functioned as NGOs do in any democratic and pluralistic society. A democratic and free atmosphere in the society of the time contributed to the growth of the third sector as the nation made its transition from totalitarianism to democracy. Even pseudo-NGOs set up during the Soviet era functioned independently of the government, because otherwise they could lose their membership base and would not survive.

But as the political environment became more and more oppressive under Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rule, non-governmental organisations found it difficult to perform their functions. The president's high-handed style of governance and attacks on civil society necessitated the renewed politicisation of NGOs and their active participation in resisting authoritarianism. The starting point of this new period in the evolution of Belarus' civil society sector was the 1996 constitutional referendum that gave Lukashenka sweeping powers. Most non-governmental organisations had no option but to engage in political activities to stop the country's slide towards totalitarianism. At the beginning of that period, many new non-governmental organisations were established to promote democratic change and work towards creating socio-political conditions for returning Belarus onto a democratic path. Most of these

NGOs relied on grants from foreign donors. Resource centres cropped up and played an instrumental role in the development of the pro-democracy community. Non-governmental organisations expanded in terms of their organisation; they took on specific tasks and grew in number. Belarus had as many as 2,191 NGOs (1,061 national and international associations and 1,130 local ones) on 1 April 1998. This number does not include trade unions or political parties and their branches. In addition, many civil society groups were working without being registered with the authorities.

Since the organisations sought to influence social and political processes, they established close cooperation with political parties. Some groups of NGOs functioned under the patronage of political parties. In general, in that period, non-governmental organisations began to play an independent political role, working toward the country's democratisation. Two national umbrella organisations were formed at the time, namely the Assembly of Non-Governmental Pro-democracy Organisations and the Belarusian Association of Resource Centres. Both associations advocated democracy, free market economy, respect for human rights and the independence of Belarus. Belarusian civil society sector was extremely politicised at this time, united by the common goal of democratisation.

Politicisation could not escape the attention of the authoritarian government and a large-scale campaign was launched to stifle non-governmental organisations. In reaction to third sector consolidation, the government announced the compulsory re-registration of NGOs in 1999. It sought to purge the third sector of its most active political groups in the lead-up to the 2000 parliamentary and 2001 presidential elections. The re-registration drive took a heavy toll on the sector. In all, 1,537 associations, or 63.2 percent of the total number, applied for re-registration but only 1,326 managed to complete all formalities. Many prominent and respected organisations lost their legal status. The government also took their first steps to taking control of NGOs' financial support. In 2001, the Belarusian leader issued Edict No. 8, requiring NGOs to obtain approval from the authorities for every foreign grant.

However, these was not the most repressive and ruthless tactics employed by the authorities against pro-democracy groups — the worst was yet to come. Non-governmental organisations could still function relatively freely. The registration authority had limited tools to intervene in their activities. The authorities largely abided by the laws and regulations governing the sector. Non-

registered groups continued to operate without problems, although a clause had been introduced into the Administrative Offenses Code stipulating penalties for acting on behalf of non-registered organisations. In general, relations between NGOs and governmental agencies were strained to a certain point before 2003, but it was still far from a large-scale war. The sides could still organise joint events, and continued to cooperate and communicate. Some organisations independent of the government could even boast successful cooperation with government institutions.

Non-governmental organisations played a key role in the 2001 presidential campaign of opposition candidate Uladzimir Hancharyk against Alyaksandr Lukashenka. In fact, they functioned as part of the political opposition and had an equal place alongside political parties. The Assembly of Pro-democracy Non-Governmental Organisations was admitted as a fully-fledged member to the Coordinating Council of Pro-democracy Forces. The Belarusian Association of Resource Centres worked closely with groups that pursued political ends. The Charter-97 human rights group saw its political influence increase. Finally, the opposition challenger signed an agreement with a broad civic coalition outlining the mutual obligations of the candidate and NGOs during and after the presidential campaign. These facts suggest that there was no fundamental functional difference between NGOs and political parties within the pro-democracy coalition.

The presidential campaign put an enormous strain on Belarus' civil society. It was the final act of the country's third sector. It employed all available methods and tools, but failed to achieve the goal of democratising Belarus. Non-governmental organisations kept trying to operate legally between 2001 and 2003, but it was clear that the autocratic regime would not tolerate the existence of independent and democratically-minded organisations for much longer.

As the government geared up for a new referendum, held on 17 October 2004, on whether to abolish the two-term limit for presidents, it launched a massive assault on pro-democracy NGOs in 2003. The crackdown continued throughout 2004 and 2005. Many organisations were closed down, while it was virtually impossible to register a new NGO. In 2005, the government enacted new laws governing associations and foundations, announced the re-registration of foundations, and ordered that non-governmental organisations introduce changes to their internal regulations. The NGOs were required to

re-register their internal rules after bringing them into line with the new requirements specified by the authorities. The limited opportunities for NGOs to raise funds in Belarus were further restricted by presidential acts concerning internal sponsorship. The presidential edict on sponsorship aid included a short list of purposes for which donated funds could be used. The government also limited the opportunities for receiving foreign technical assistance from the UN and the European Union; for staging seminars, conferences and other events at the expense of foreign partners; and for accepting humanitarian aid. It introduced penalties for failure to comply with these regulations. The government also established a legal framework for the launching of rival government-funded organisations. The few remaining human rights groups were stripped of the right to defend people in court. Some members of non-registered NGOs were fined or sentenced to imprisonment for terms of up to 15 days. In late 2005, months before the presidential election, the authorities enacted a criminal article carrying harsher penalties for involvement in non-registered groups.

After the crackdown, it was quite clear that Belarus' third sector would never be as strong as it was in the run-up to the 2001 presidential election. The civil society landscape changed dramatically in the period between the 2001 and 2006 presidential elections. During the 2001 presidential campaign, the civil society sector represented a powerful and expanded network capable of conducting nationwide awareness campaigns. It consisted of hundreds of legal pro-democracy groups that could form coalitions and pursue their ambitions to play first fiddle in the pro-democracy orchestra. By the run-up to the 2006 presidential election, it had become a weak network of non-governmental organisations and initiatives, divided along political lines or depoliticised for fear of repercussions. Many organisations went underground and many were subordinate to other political entities. Activists worked in constant fear of criminal persecution. The sector was weak, cowering under the weight of the security services.

Thus, as the authoritarian regime tightened its grip, NGOs operated almost underground between 2003 and 2006. Let us examine in more detail how relations took shap between NGOs and the authorities, and how the government's repressive mechanism functioned.

Measures to stop civic groups' involvement in politics

The algorithm of pressure on civil society

At present the government takes a rather hostile attitude to NGOs. Its policies with regard to civil society organisations are part of a broader effort targeting any dissent as a potential threat to the foundation of the regime. The government has pursued repressive policies throughout Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rule, increasing the level of intimidation in the run-up to elections and referenda. Clearly, harassment and closures of civil society organisations could from time to time be part of a short-term campaign aimed, for instance, at outlawing groups that could use their legal status to influence the political process. But in the grand scheme of things, the government's policies were directed against alternative views that could, the authorities feared, spread in society. By fighting non-governmental organisations, the government attempted to eradicate the way of thinking implanted by these groups.

The authorities took a step-by-step approach in their campaign to weaken the third sector. In the run-up to elections and referenda, the government targeted NGOs suspected of dissent, sought to destroy the institutional foundation of civil society and establish a legal framework for stifling dissent.

For instance, one year before the 2000 elections for the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly, the authorities ordered the re-registration of all NGOs and political parties to purge the political landscape of their most critical and vehement opponents. The government used tools that seemed legal on the surface, in particular relying on lawsuits and legal persecution methods, the adoption of new discriminatory laws, and the limiting of legal opportunities for civic and political activity deemed dangerous by the authorities.

In the next phase, as the political campaign unfolded, the authorities employed illegal measures without even trying to justify the repressive moves by the adoption of appropriate laws. The authorities usually stepped up harassment measures by conducting raids on NGO offices, seizing equipment, leaflets and newspapers, jailing activists and using other acts of intimidation.

During election campaigns and in the lead-up to referenda, the authorities did not have time to draft and enact legislation to justify their actions.

The regime needed to react immediately, therefore it acted quickly and boldly without any legal grounds. In addition, periods of major political campaigning put Belarus into the international spotlight, and the adoption of new repressive regulations could enrage the international community. During this phase, the authorities also relied on illegal methods to neutralise major opposition candidates.

When an election or a referendum was over, the authorities took actions that appeared to be intended to punish activists and organisations for their role in the recent campaign. Activists lost their jobs and faced persecution, and groups that were instrumental in the anti-regime campaign were outlawed. In the aftermath of the campaign, the authorities were out for revenge, seeking to complete what they had failed to do during the preparation period by an oversight or because of excessive liberalism. Step by step, the authorities legalised their repressive policies, issuing new discriminatory laws, especially as a new election cycle drew closer. The repressive mechanism functioned the same way before, during and after every major political campaign.

As has already been noted, the Belarusian regime has always taken a hostile attitude to independent civic groups, trying to make it difficult for them to operate. The government launched a major assault on NGOs in early 2003, almost immediately after the local elections. Following the 2001 presidential election, the authorities acted selectively, targeting mostly those organisations that had played a prominent role in the opposition challenger's campaign. The government closed down the Association of Belarusian Students, the Youth Information Centre, the Vezha Center for Support of Regional Initiatives in Brest and other groups. It moved to take control of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB), which formed the backbone of Uladzimir Hancharyk's presidential campaign. But the Year 2002 was relatively peaceful — it was the third phase of a repressive cycle and persecution of dissidents was only part of a short-term effort to punish those who had angered the authorities during the previous year's campaign.

The major assault began after Alyaksandr Lukashenka held a seminar on matters of ideology at his Presidential Administration in March 2003. During the discussion, the Belarusian leader actually called for a large-scale campaign targeting civil society. To a large extent, the anti-opposition drive was linked to the 2004 referendum which removed the two-term limit on presidents, and the next presidential election held in 2006. One of the items on

the government's agenda was to 'discipline' the non-governmental organisations, and it immediately put this plan into action.

NGO closures

It should be noted that Belarus has the most repressive legislation governing non-governmental organisations as compared to other CIS countries, including countries in Central Asia. The authorities have imposed new and increasing restrictions on freedom of association. In 2003, the government began a large-scale campaign to eliminate the most prominent NGOs that were at the core of Belarus' civil society. In April 2003, one month after the aforementioned seminar on ideology, the Ministry of Justice brought closure suits against Ratusha, a regional NGO resource centre in Hrodna, Varuta, a regional development agency, the Homel-based Civil Initiatives organisation and the Youth Christian Social Union. The move kicked off what civic activists later described as the "purge" operation that resulted in the closure of several dozen pro-democracy NGOs all over Belarus.

The criteria used by the justice ministry's departments for selecting targets for liquidation included: involvement in opposition election campaigns and election observation efforts; personal connections with political parties; an active role in creating local NGO networks; and participation in human rights campaigns. The prime targets were groups that were likely to play an active role during the next political campaign. Later, starting in 2004, the authorities turned their fire to analysis centres and think tanks that offered alternative visions of Belarus' future to the public. The authorities also closed down several phantom organisations like the Association of Young Entrepreneurs, which were not active but could be used by the opposition as "reserve bases." Obviously, the Ministry of Justice and its departments did not need substantial legal grounds to file closure suits — both the Ministry of Justice, which filed the lawsuits, and the judges who consistently ruled against the NGOs, simply carried out decisions which had been made at higher levels of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government. The repressive mechanism would not work properly without the approval of the Prosecutor General's Office. The Presidential Administration and ideology officers on the ground supervised the cleansing operation.

Alongside closures of NGOs, the authorities also employed other tools to intimidate and harass civil society groups. In 2003, the Ministry of Justice di-

rected that NGOs must submit annual reports detailing their activities, events and members for official examination. In 2005, the requirement was encoded in a new version of the law governing non-governmental organisations. The new law also included a provision that allows the authorities to suspend NGOs for six months.

Complicated procedures make it difficult for activists to register new organisations that could replace the outlawed ones. Applications for registration are carefully screened, and groups that seem suspicious are rejected over petty irregularities or on spurious grounds. The methods of the registration authorities — the Ministry of Justice and its regional justice departments — can be said to comprise political censorship.

Cutting off funding

Cutting off NGO funding from donors in Belarus and abroad is one of the most powerful tools for exerting pressure on civil society. Opportunities for obtaining funds from local non-profit organisations were already quite limited previously, because of the authorities' belligerent attitude to such groups, while receiving financial support from Belarusian businesses has been out of the question since 1999.

In March 2001, the Belarusian leader issued Presidential Decree No. 8 concerning the use of foreign financial aid. This was a major effort to cut off foreign grants to NGOs. The decree required non-governmental organisations to obtain permission from the Presidential Administration's Humanitarian Activity Office for accepting and deploying any foreign financial aid. Most pro-democracy groups within the third sector refused to obey. To enforce the decree, authorities seized equipment and other property from NGOs, and sued activists.

Angered by the fact that many organisations kept using foreign grants in defiance of the decree, the government in 2003 enacted legal acts to tighten enforcement procedures and introduce severe penalties for the "illegal" use of foreign aid. The new regulation empowered the authorities to close down NGOs and political parties caught using foreign grants and deport foreigners involved in financing opposition and civil society groups.

The authorities immediately began to apply the new law. The blacklist of foreigners banned from entering Belarus was expanded and deportations of

foreign citizens became routine in 2003, whereas such incidents had previously created a sensation. The same year, the authorities also ordered the closure of the Minsk offices of the US organisations IREX/ProMedia and Internews Network, which supported local media. The move followed the state-controlled media's mud-slinging campaign against the two organisations. In 2004, the government refused to extend the accreditation of Counterpart, a US non-profit organisation that provided assistance to local NGOs in Belarus. In early 2004, authorities brought tax evasion charges against the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC), the Belarusian Alliance of Youth and Children's Associations "Rada" and the Slonim-based NGO Volya da Razvitsya, organisations funded in the framework of the European Commission's Technical Assistance to the CIS programme, approved by the Belarusian government. An agreement between the Belarusian government and the European Commission had given tax-exemption to financial assistance provided for government-approved projects. Although the economic courts ruled in favour of the NGOs, observers say that the authorities only backed down after the European Commission threatened to withhold €16 million earmarked for the Belarusian-Polish border infrastructure programme and stop funding other projects in Belarus. Nevertheless, the tax authorities kept pressing charges against the Belarusian Helsinki Committee even after the case was dismissed in the Supreme Economic Court, while a huge fine imposed on the Belarusian Alliance of Youth and Children's Associations "Rada" was revoked only after the organisation's closure by a court order.

Lukashenka-style civil society

All measures undertaken to stifle the 'uncontrollable' third sector went hand-in-hand with the establishment of government-controlled and government-friendly non-governmental organisations. The process of creating an artificial civil society took several directions. On the one hand, the government sponsored the establishment of so-called state public associations, designed to bring people together to carry out government-set tasks. On the other, to take the place of outlawed groups, the government orchestrated the formation of pseudo-NGOs. For instance, allegedly independent business associations cropped up all over the country in 2002 and 2003. In fact, executive authorities were coordinating and using these groups to quell protests by small

business owners. Later, a pro-presidential Union of Writers was set up to take on the role of the independent Union of Belarusian Writers. The government also moved to "nationalise" major associations. The process began with Lukashenka's election as chairman of the National Olympic Committee. Later, senior government officials took over leading positions in all sports associations and federations. Finally, in 2005 the authorities installed government-friendly leaderships at the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus and the Union of Poles in Belarus.

Incidentally, apart from these new organisations, the government revived and funded organisations that had been inactive after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2002, it sponsored the formation of the Belarusian National Youth Union, which declared itself an ideological and functional legal successor to the Leninist Young Communist League (Komsomol). In fact, the government expected the new organisations to govern the civil society sector. These pro-government organisations routinely used various tools of compulsion to boost their membership. Not surprisingly, this relatively large segment of civil society is an integral part of the government system.

In the run-up to the 2004 parliamentary elections and referendum, the authorities also set up umbrella organisations for pseudo-NGOs such as the National Council of the Leaders of Political Parties and Associations. Similar organisations were set up in the regions. The government also established a youth umbrella organisation led by the Belarusian National Youth Union (BNYU). It should be noted that these umbrella associations attracted, amongst others, independent grassroots groups specialising in studying local lore and history or organising hiking tours. The independent grassroots NGOs had been the natural allies of pro-democracy groups in the past, whereas now they are increasingly leaning toward the BNYU. Later, the umbrella organisations were involved in canvassing support for the president as part of Lukashenka's presidential campaign, and helped conduct exit polls controlled by the authorities.

In 2007 and 2008, the authorities supported the formation of Belaya Rus, a national association designed to fulfil the role of the country's main pro-government political organisation.

Did the government's large-scale and multi-direction assault achieve its objectives? Did the authorities succeed in stifling civil society? Many of the outlawed NGOs continue to function. Some even have a certain legal status. It

appears that the Belarusian ruler and his advisers made the same mistake as other dictators. Fighting manifestations rather than causes, they failed to root out dissent, but only suppressed some of its external forms. Dictatorships tend to deal with effects rather than causes, thus speeding up their own downfall.

Criminal persecution: A threat to NGOs

Realising that court orders could not curb NGOs, the authorities took more severe measures to crush civil society. The task of suppressing civic activism was on the government's agenda in the run-up to the 2006 presidential election. The authorities employed the standard tools used by dictators — intimidation, threats and blackmail.

On 26 January 1999, Lukashenka issued Presidential Decree No. 2, prohibiting non-governmental and religious organisations from working without official registration. Belarus was the first former Soviet republic to impose the ban, followed by Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries. The charge of involvement in a non-registered organisation carried a fine or a jail sentence of up to 15 days. The authorities mainly used the measure against activists involved in politics. But this individual intimidation tool proved ineffective and insufficient because opposition activists were prepared to spend 15 days in jail for their cause. The authorities began working on legislation to introduce harsher penalties.

The government made changes to the Criminal Code, introducing criminal punishment for some civic and political activities. On 2 December 2005, the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly passed changes to the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code that specified punishment "for actions against individual and public security." The bill was introduced by the president on November 23 and rushed through parliament. It drew fire from the Belarusian opposition and the international community. Even some members of the lower chamber, which was fully controlled by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, voiced concern about the tough measures, but the bill was approved under pressure from the Presidential Administration and the Committee for State Security (KGB), which had drafted the legislation. Shortly before the legislation was to be debated, House members were handed a booklet explaining the need for tough action against "revolutionaries" and listing more than 30 foreign and international non-profit organisations allegedly support-

ing the political opposition to the Belarusian regime. The list included the US non-profit organisations National Endowment for Democracy, National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, the Poland-based East European Democratic Center and Stefan Batory Foundation, the Polish-US Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe and the Pontis Foundation, based in Bratislava. Officials admitted that the bill targeted specific individuals.

Article 193-1 was added to the Criminal Code, introducing more severe punishment for "the illegal organisation of the activities of an association, religious organisation or foundation, or involvement in their activities." For the crimes of running an organisation or participating in the activities of an organisation closed down by court, the article carries possible punishments of a fine, an arrest sentence of up to six months, or a prison sentence of up to two years. At the time, many NGOs operated without official registration and did not have the remotest chance of obtaining permission for legal operation. Therefore, the new provision threatened thousands of activists with criminal prosecution. The bill stipulated that those who voluntarily left the outlawed NGOs and informed the authorities of this action would not be prosecuted unless they had committed other offenses.

An amendment introduced into the Criminal Procedure Code allowed investigators to detain individuals for up to ten days without charges on suspicion of involvement in acts of terrorism and "malicious hooliganism."

The law enforcement agencies immediately began using the new legislation against opposition supporters. In February 2006, one month before the March 2006 presidential election, KGB officers arrested and brought criminal changes against four members of Partnerstva, an election observation group, frustrating the opposition's effort to establish a national parallel vote tabulation network. Criminal proceedings were later brought against members of Malady Front, Hart and other groups.

In 2007, the authorities used the article mainly to intimidate members of unregistered groups and force activists to abandon politics. Criminal charges were brought against members of political organisations and scare tactics employed against other outlawed NGOs. In 2007, prosecutors warned activists of the Association of Belarusian Students and the For A Clean Barysaw group against acting on behalf of non-registered organisations. In 2008, the same warning was issued to leaders of the Association for Freedom of Enterprise, registered in Ukraine.

Experts estimate the number of non-registered groups at around 2,000. About the same number of NGOs currently have official registration. Every member of a non-registered organisation can potentially face criminal charges and a prison sentence. This threat discourages many youths from joining non-registered groups.

In 2007, eight members of Malady Front were convicted of acting on behalf of the outlawed group and ordered to pay fines or cautioned. Three other members — Andrey Tsyanyuta in Homel, Kiryla Atamanchyk in Zhlobin and Arsen Yehorchanka in Mazyr -- were charged with the same offence. Investigations against them were suspended, but the cases were later reopened. In 2008, a judge in Polatsk imposed a fine of 1,750,000 rubles ($820) on Katsyaryna Salauyova, a 20-year old member of Malady Front. Dozens of Malady Front members have been interrogated in connection with their activities in the organisation.

The total number of convictions rose in 2007 compared to 2006, when Article 193-1 took effect. In all, six members of Malady Front and Partnerstva were convicted in 2006, five received prison or "restricted freedom" sentences and one was fined. Several other criminal cases are known to have been opened in 2006, but the files were closed before trial. Nine members of two non-registered groups were convicted in 2007. Only one was given a "restricted freedom" sentence, while the others got away with fines and cautions. Not a single activist was acquitted. The law enforcement agencies continued to use the article in 2007 and 2008 to harass Malady Front members. Those prosecuted include Zmitser Fedaruk, Barys Haretski, Nasta Palazhanka, Aleh Korban, Alyaksey Yanusheuski, Nasta Azarka, Yan Shyla, Yaraslau Hryshchenya.

Conclusions

Summarising recent changes in the government's policies regarding NGOs, one should note a shift from brutal and overtly illegal methods to more subtle mechanisms for controlling civil society. Still, criminal prosecution remains the greatest threat to non-registered groups, especially those involved in politics. The repressive laws force many other organisations to distance themselves from politics.

The authorities continue their efforts to set up pro-government NGOs and have them replace groups opposed to the government, where possible. Most

NGOs come across many obstacles in their day-to-day operation, but face unconcealed repression only in rare instances. It is only possible to register new NGOs if the founders pass a vetting process. People linked to the opposition or critics of the government are usually rejected.

While legal barriers to the establishment and operation of NGOs remain in place (complicated registration procedures, forced closure), practical legal measures have not been employed significantly more or less often than before. Thus, the general situation with regard to freedom of association and non-governmental organisations in Belarus remains stable, but unsatisfactory. Although no escalations have been observed lately, the current legal framework considerably restricts freedom of association, while political opponents of the government have been deprived of the opportunity to exercise their right to freedom of association almost completely. The government's steps to lower the barrier to registration and simplify registration procedures should not be seen as a steady trend, because it has not become easier to register a new NGO. The problem of arbitrary refusals of registration and arbitrary decisions to close down NGOs is still topical for Belarusian society.

However, Belarusian civil society's agenda is dominated by the need to decriminalise people's involvement in activities of non-registered NGOs, political parties, religious groups and foundations. Repealing the controversial Article 193-1, which specifies punishment for "the illegal organisation of the activities of an association, religious organisation or foundation, or involvement in their activities," and lifting a ban on the operation of non-registered NGOs would be viewed as a meaningful step towards guaranteeing freedom of association. This is the minimum requirement for brining Belarus closer to European standards of freedom of association.

I'M LOVIN' IT! BELARUSIAN YOUTH AND EUROPE

Iryna Vidanava

Today's Belarus has a love-hate relationship with Europe. The small democratic opposition speaks proudly of Belarus' European past and future, while Alexander Lukashenka describes Belarusians and Russians as "one people" and has signed a treaty to create a Russia-Belarus Union. Due to its authoritarian government and poor human rights record, Belarus is the only country in Europe that is not part of the Council of Europe; it is one of the most active members of the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States. Nostalgic for Soviet times, more Belarusians would rather be part of Russia than the European Union. But due to higher energy costs and the world financial crisis, the Lukashenka regime is seeking increased European trade and investment while trying not to alienate its Russian big brother. The only part of Belarusian society that does not display this schizophrenia about Europe is the country's youth.

Looking West

Despite the government's anti-western propaganda, Soviet-style curricula, Russophile cultural policies, travel restrictions, Soviet heritage and self-imposed isolation, the majority of Belarusian youths firmly believe that Belarus should be part of the European Union. This fact is all the more remarkable when one considers that most Belarusian youths have never travelled to the West, and those who call for "Belarus in Europe" are often beaten, arrested, imprisoned, expelled from school, drafted into the army or fired from

their jobs. There is no doubt that the Belarusian youth is more pro-Europe and pro-democracy. While to many observers, Belarus seems to be a museum of all things Soviet, young Belarusians today belong to both worlds, East and West. Increasing numbers are studying in Europe and young people travel more to the EU than any other segment of the population. The majority of young Belarusians see their future in Europe.

This is not a recent trend. More than ten years ago, surveys had already indicated that young Belarusians had no "nostalgia for Soviet times… and would prefer to see the West European model" established in Belarus. In a 1997 national poll, more than 54 percent of young respondents favoured a European-style democracy, while only 42 percent of the total sample did. Among college students, support for democracy was 81 percent. The statistics are not very different today. A 2004 nationwide survey indicated that the pro-European orientation of 18-25 year olds was twice as high as that of the older population. Of young respondents, 51 percent said that it would be better for Belarus to be in the EU, as opposed to 34 percent who favoured a union with Russia. Of those 26 and older, 27 percent were for the EU and 52 percent preferred Russia.

More recent studies indicate that the trend has not changed much since then. A recent poll confirms that, in a choice between joining a union with the EU or Russia, young people overwhelmingly choose Brussels over Moscow. According to an October 2008 survey conducted by the Novak Laboratory, 43 percent of young Belarusians are partial to the EU, while 32 percent lean towards Russia. The older the respondents are, the higher the percentage of those who favour a union with Russia (50 percent of 35-44 year olds, 62 percent of 55-64 year olds and 73 percent of over-65s). These figures are encouraging, given Belarus' demographic realities and the general rule that the geopolitical orientation of each generation tends to stay the same throughout their lifetime.

There is, however, one statistic that could have two interpretations, one positive and one negative. There are a rising number of respondents who find it hard to make a choice between the EU and Russia. In 2004, 15 percent of respondents chose this category in a survey; two years later the number had climbed to 25 percent. On the one hand, this finding may reflect young people who are moving away from a pro-Russian stance but are not yet ready to side with Europe. On the other hand, it could reflect the impact of the regime's

anti-western actions and the country's isolation. According to Laima Andrikiene, a Member of the European Parliament, only 26 percent of Belarusians have visited an EU country at least once and 60 percent have not met a foreigner in the last three years. A lack of objective information, as well as language and visa barriers, sow confusion in the minds of young Belarusians. Recent research indicates that young people tend to blame western embassies and not Belarusian foreign policy for the country's isolation.

Lacking personal experience and knowledge of life in the "promised land," many young Belarusians have not yet developed a comparative mentality. Worried about the quality of their education as well as the competitiveness and demands of Western society, young Belarusians are unsure about their chances of fitting into the European community. They praise the personal and economic freedoms of democratic societies but, adopting clichés pushed by state propaganda, are afraid that "the EU will enslave us" or "turn independent Belarus into a puppet state." And yet, they are dissatisfied with life in Belarus and are willing to try their luck somewhere else. According to the Ministry of Statistics, Belarusians aged 16-30 make up 40 percent of all emigrants over each of the last three years (3,804 out of 9,749 people in 2007).

Bad Examples

What is it about the European Union that appeals to young people in Belarus? For them, Europe means "the West" and, since Soviet times, "the West" has stood for freedom, individuality, creativity, quality and vibrancy. Before 1991, everything beyond the Soviet bloc was considered to be bigger, better and brighter. In this respect, not much has changed. Like kids everywhere else, young Belarusians are crazy about the Internet, popular culture, alternative lifestyles, countercultures and subcultures. But unlike in the West, where all of this is readily available, in Belarus the government attempts to control anything smacking of independence. Young political activists are repressed and forced into exile. Independent schools have been closed down, youth NGOs dissolved, youth publications seized and alternative bands banned.

The Lukashenka regime seeks to control practically every aspect of youth life because it fears any free ideas, whether home-grown or from the West. A "state ideology" course is taught during early school years and is required for

all college freshmen. All state employees must take a special ideology exam as a part of hiring procedures. A recent regulation requires that all college applicants wanting to study journalism, international relations and law must obtain letters of recommendation from their local authorities. Students must obtain a special permit from the Ministry of Education if they want to travel during the academic year or spend a semester studying abroad. The Ministry of Culture decides what kind of music private FM radio stations should play and the Ministry of Education sets the official guidelines for youth fashion.

The authorities can try to restrict, impose, threaten and repress, but in actual fact they cannot determine what young people wear, listen to, read or watch. As was the case in the Soviet bloc with jazz in the 1950s and jeans in the 1960s, what is forbidden in today's Belarus has become even more fashionable and desirable. For youth, western popular culture is attractive precisely because it is excluded and exotic. Young Belarusians are no different to other youths who respond to restrictions and regulations with creative forms of dissent. Europe is still seen as a primary source of and inspiration for freedom of thought and expression.

Thanks to the regime, youth counterculture is alive and well in Belarus. When peaceful meetings are broken up, young activists stage street performances that ridicule the absurd practices of the government. When there is no officially approved venue for their works, young artists, photographers and designers exhibit in alternative art galleries and post their works online. When concerts are banned, youngsters go to underground night clubs and outdoor festivals to listen to their blacklisted bands. Independent writers and journalists publish underground newspapers and magazines, create online communities, and spread information through blogs and home-made documentary films and videos. "New media" are becoming more and more popular in a country that finds itself near the bottom of every ranking of freedom of expression. Many forms of free expression employed by young Belarusians, such as flash mobs and stencilling, have been borrowed from Europe's creative youth.

Rockin' in the Free World

In terms of independent culture, the strongest connection between Belarus and Europe is in music. Due to its greater cultural freedom, young Belaru-

sians were travelling to Central Europe even before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Music has played an important role in this cross-border traffic. The oldest Belarusian rock festival, "Basoviszcza," has been held in Haradok, in eastern Poland, every summer since 1990. Basoviszcza is a two-day concert and contest for young bands (http://www.basowiszcza.org). Many legendary Belarusian singers and groups played the early festivals, and it jump-started the careers of many young bands which later gained popularity.

The trend of "going to Europe" by both bands and fans accelerated after 2004. That year, a number of rockers played a concert protesting the 10th anniversary of Lukashenka's presidency. As a result, certain leading lights were not allowed to perform in state-run concert halls or appear on state radio and TV. Later, the list of banned bands was expanded to include almost all independent bands, even those which came together much later than the infamous 2004 concert. Festivals and concerts organised abroad became the only opportunity for many Belarusian musicians and thousands of their fans to meet in big fields and on concert stages.

As the situation in Belarus deteriorated, European NGOs began organising concerts of solidarity with Belarus. Just before the country's September 2006 presidential elections, the Polish NGO "Free Belarus" organised a concert in Warsaw's Castle Square (http://wolnabialorus.pl/main.php). A year later, the Poles invited Belarusian bands to perform Bob Marley's protest songs in Belarusian on March 25th, the 89th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic. In March 2008, the concert in Warsaw was broadcast live on the Polish television channel TVP Info and via the Belarusian satellite television channel BelSat.

In August 2007, a music festival promoting closer ties between Belarusians and Europe was organised in Lithuania, literally 100 meters from the two countries' common border. Unlike Basoviszcza, with its focus on presenting and promoting new Belarusian music, the "Be2Gether" festival was designed as an international music festival with several stages and international headliners (http://www.b2g.lt/2008/en). While still focused on promoting European-Belarusian solidarity, the 2008 edition of Be2Gether featured transatlantic stars as well as Belarusian bands. Belarusian bands have also played at the Bazant Pohoda Festival in Slovakia, the Pepsi Sziget Festival in Hungary, and the GOOD —BY ("BY" is the international abbreviation for Belarus) in Berlin, Germany.

It would be wrong to assume that Belarusian music is the only aspect of culture being celebrated and shared with Europe. A number of New Member States, including Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and the Czech Republic, have organised a plethora of events celebrating Belarusian art, film, poetry, graphic arts and theatre. Most of these events include a generous number of works by young creative Belarusians. The fourth annual Festival of Belarusian Culture (2007) in Wroclaw, for example, included the presentation of an anthology of young Belarusian poets, translated into Polish. Belarus' "Free Theatre," organised and performed mostly by young people, has toured in cities throughout Europe (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belarus_Free_Theatre). Regularly repressed in Belarus, the Free Theatre has been praised and supported by Vaclav Havel, Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter, and has won several European awards.

Although they make it possible to bring together audiences of thousands, popularise Belarusian independent culture abroad, and also simultaneously make a political statement, these events have been praised by some and criticised by others. Critics say that these events mainly target foreigners rather than Belarusian society itself. Some claim that these events, which are quite expensive to organise, attract only the same narrow circle of Belarusian creative people and fans and do not broaden the audience for independent culture or bring new people into the democratic movement. Many raise concerns about the effectiveness of the events in Europe, given the problems with obtaining Schengen visas by Belarusian participants and audiences. But it is certainly true that these events reinforce the notion that Europe is a champion of free culture and a sanctuary for repressed Belarusian creativity.

Better Over There

Europe is also a beacon to young Belarusians because the situation at home is so desperate. The dramatic outburst of youth activism and the appearance of so many new faces following the demonstrations of spring 2006 raised the hopes of many domestic and foreign observers. But by summer 2006, it was already obvious that most of the new political or civic youth initiatives which had appeared during the protests had proved incapable of establishing strong and effective structures. Flash-mobbing, the best known of the post-election youth activities, was also a brief phenomenon, at least on a mass scale. While

inspired by winds of change, the majority of the March youth lost their enthusiasm when they realised that a quick victory was not possible. They turned away from political and civic battles and returned to normal life. Also, after being expelled from schools or fired from jobs, many of the country's best and brightest left the country, mostly for Europe, in search of better opportunities (80 percent of those who leave Belarus are students).

Although the scale of activities may have declined, the in-your-face attitude remains. While there is some proof that young people are turning into supporters of the current regime, this trend is not on a mass scale. The real impact of the regime's propaganda, mandatory state ideology classes, and repression seems overestimated. Lukashenka has centred his youth policy on the Belarusian Republican Union of Youth (BRSM), a state-controlled, mass-organised movement modelled on the old Communist Youth League (Komsomol). The BRSM has branches in all high schools and universities, monopolises state activities involving students, operates a radio station and a travel agency, and organises youth labour brigades. Despite state pressure to join and attractive benefits, the BRSM does not seem to have many active adherents. In a recent student survey, 70 percent of respondents knew about the organisation but only 26 percent admitted to being members. Some members were ashamed to acknowledge their status, while others claimed that they had been "enrolled" without their knowledge.

Clearly the regime's policies have not succeeded in winning over the youth. Lukashenka has criticised the state's other mass youth organisations, including the old Leninist Pioneers, for their "mistakes." In a leaked state survey of Gomel university students, only 17 percent of respondents indicated that it was important to be "patriotic." In a fall 2006 focus group, young people who took part in the March events but were not affiliated with any political party or NGO made it clear that their motivations for protesting were limitations on their everyday personal freedom, disgust with state propaganda, and anxiety about their own futures and the future of the country.

Being Different

Despite the government's heavy hand, only a tiny percentage of youths play an active role in the democratic movement or collaborate with the regime. Ten years ago, a national survey of youths found that only 6 percent of

respondents actually took part in protests. Not much has changed. A recent survey found that just 10 percent of students can be considered to be "active." More than 50 percent of respondents believe that their classmates are passive. Three quarters of the students surveyed had never collected signatures for a candidate (the least risky political activity), 56 percent had never participated in a demonstration, and 50 percent had never been involved in a charity event. But while only a small part of the youth is ready for open protest, a significant number is dissatisfied with the current situation in the country. To the question "what would you change if you were elected president of Belarus?" 16 percent of a group of non-active students answered "Everything."

The majority of young people in Belarus occupy a "grey area" of activism somewhere between the extremes of opposition and support for the regime, often unknown and unseen by internal and external observers. While most young people are politically passive, many are not apathetic. They are presently focused inwards, on activities promoting self-realisation. More than 37 percent of students surveyed declared that the main value for them is "to be themselves," and another 32 percent cited "internal harmony." Young people are participating in a broad range of independent activities, many of which are anti-establishment but not overtly political, such as underground publishing, environmental initiatives, local Internet radio, social networking, open air music festivals, street soccer tournaments, poetry societies, book clubs, live-action role-playing games, alternative religions, historical re-enactments and amateur film-making. While innocent enough, these youth initiatives are perceived as a threat in Belarus, where any independently organised activity is considered dangerous.

For this active segment of youth, who make up Belarus' pro-democracy, pro-Europe elite and inspire other youngsters, the European choice is not an abstract concept. By travelling, studying and participating in the European experience, these young leaders are able to absorb and adapt some of it to Belarus' specific conditions, use it to develop concrete programmes, and plan future reforms. This is Belarus' "Generation Y," born in the 1980s and 90s. They are today's university and graduate students, young professionals, teachers, journalists, artists, designers and "new media" practitioners, as well as witnesses of European integration. "Like their peers around the world, Belarusian 'Y's have a sharp sense of their own personal freedom, are keen about new technologies, tend to be well-educated, and have a practical attitude towards life. "The only difference," says a founder of Generation.By, one of the most popu-

lar youth web portals, "is that Belarus' Generation Y was born at a time of political and social turmoil. These young people are used to living in and adjusting to a constantly changing environment. These people want to be successful and are positive and optimistic. They set concrete goals and achieve them."

Restless Youth

Belarusian youth activism came of age in 2006 when young people emerged as the most active part of opposition society. In describing the demonstrations after the rigged March presidential elections, one parent explained: "our children led us onto the streets." Of more than 1,000 people arrested, the overwhelming majority were youths, including many who had never before been active in opposition circles. These youngsters not only protested against the regime's electoral shenanigans, they also pushed the opposition leadership to be more confrontational. The struggle didn't end with the destruction of the "tent city" in October Square. The upsurge in youth activities scared the regime, which retaliated by detaining, arresting, expelling and firing hundreds more for their political activities. The repressive atmosphere of 2006 was eloquently captured by a photograph of a Belarusian mother outside a detention centre holding a handmade sign that read "looking for my son."

If 2006 was, according to Belarus' leading human rights group, "defined by the severe harassment of youth activists," 2007 was no different. The EU, OSCE, Amnesty International and other international human rights groups have criticised the ongoing repression of the youth. Regularly denouncing them as terrorists, the regime fears young activists more than any other segment of the opposition and has put them squarely in its crosshairs. In September 2007 alone, more than 100 young activists were detained and dozens imprisoned. The regime continues to use "anonymous tips" of hidden bodies, rape, explosives, drugs, and trafficking to harass young activists, as well as trumped-up charges of obscene language and other types of "indecent behaviour" and "malicious hooliganism" to jail them.

Pro-Euro Criminals

The regime understands the lure and danger of pro-European sentiments among Belarus' activist youth. It therefore uses repressive measures to damp-

en demonstrations or calls for European values. While it might be difficult to believe, even trying to celebrate popular European holidays such as Halloween and St. Valentine's Day can be quite risky in Belarus. In 1997, the Young Front, one of Belarus' oldest and largest youth organisations, began a public campaign based on the theme "Belarus to Europe." Several thousand young people gathered for a peaceful march to celebrate St. Valentine's Day and visited the Minsk embassies of European countries to hand out Valentine's Day cards. By 2000, similar marches and performances were taking place in 12 Belarusian cities. Last year, a broad range of events was organised under the common title "Love. Freedom. Changes." in 32 cities and towns. Most recently, on February 14th, 2008, the Young Front launched a three-month nationwide civic campaign, again entitled "Belarus to Europe," to demonstrate that young Belarusians are against unification with Russia and for European integration. In response, five youth activists were sentenced to five days in prison for placing a "We Love Belarus" banner on the City Administration Building and handing out Valentine's Day cards to people on the streets of Salihorsk. Two days earlier three people had been detained for distributing EU informational materials in Minsk.

The Young Front, together with "Jeans for Freedom," another youth initiative, joined the "European Coalition," which was founded in 2007 by a group of pro-democracy organisations. Youth are the most active implementers and participants in the coalition's "European Belarus" civic campaign. For these benign activities, they are regularly questioned by KGB, have problems at their educational institutions and are harassed, fined and arrested. In the end, the Belarusian authorities rarely ever charge youth activists specifically for their pro-European activities. They usually are detained and convicted under different pretexts, such as the use of improper language or hooliganism. But sometimes the regime's actions are more obvious, as during this year's May 1st demonstration, when police seized and destroyed EU flags carried by members of the European Coalition, even though these flags are flying over Minsk from the embassies representing EU states. Or when a young female activist was sentenced in July to five days in prison after the police stopped her on the street and found an EU flag in her backpack. But despite these risks, one foreign observer has commented that there is more pro-European sentiment among the youth, and that more EU flags are carried by young people at demonstrations, in Minsk than anywhere else in Europe.

One would think that this pro-European attitude would be considered a good thing. And it is in most countries. But in Belarus it can cause serious problems. As a "reward" for being the first Belarusian to be elected to the Board of the European Students' Union, Tatsiana Khoma was expelled from the Belarusian State Economic University in 2005, during her final year. It was not the first expulsion in Belarus on political grounds, but it was the first for the "crime" of being a part of Europe. In this case, young activists did not just accept the unjust verdict. The Belarusian Students Association and Generation. BY, a popular independent student web portal, launched a solidarity campaign to support Ms. Khoma. It became the first domestic and international campaign in Belarus for a student unjustly expelled, and it was conducted by youth-led "new media." Due to the efforts of student volunteers, who wrote about Ms. Khoma in their blogs, translated information about her case into foreign languages, and reached out to media abroad, her case became headline news in Belarusian, Ukrainian, Russian and a number of European media.

This virtual information campaign had a very real impact. Students in Belarus collected signatures in support of Ms. Khoma and international organisations sent hundreds of letters to the University's rector. Ms. Khoma was not reinstated nor was the wave of repression against active students halted. But the University was excluded from the European University Association, subservient bureaucrats learned that violations of laws will not go unnoticed, and Belarusian students were encouraged to keep fighting the good fight. In April 2006, the University's students refused to participate in the public repentance demanded by the rector for students who had taken part in the March 2006 demonstrations. In March 2008, Austrian students picketed a conference where the school's rector took part and Dr. Shymau was forced to publicly explain why he had expelled Ms. Khoma before he could move on to his presentation on economic cooperation and political dialogue between Belarus and Europe. In April 2008, Rector Shymau changed his mind and chose not to expel Mauliuda Akulava, a third-year student and Young Front activist, after 150 students signed a petition in her support.

Today Tatsiana Khoma continues her studies abroad and is a prominent international student advocate. Approximately 500 students expelled from Belarusian universities for their political and civic activities are continuing their education in Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Estonia, Romania, Latvia, France and the Czech Republic.

Crossing Borders

The regime has not been content with just persecuting individual youth activists. Since 2002, it has consistently repressed and closed down youth organisations involved in fostering cooperation with European youth. In the wake of the manipulated presidential elections of 2001, the regime realised that independent youth NGOs were in the forefront of organising get-out-and-vote programmes that were perceived by Lukashenka as anti-government. The authorities closed down the Belarusian Students' Association (BSA), one of the country's oldest NGOs, and the Youth Information Centre (YIC). The former had extensive ties with European student organisations and the latter was responsible for issuing the EURO<26 card in Belarus.

In December 2005, Belarus' Supreme Court issued a ruling to close down the Rada (Council), an umbrella organisation of Belarusian children and youth NGOs and one of the most active participants in European youth projects. The Ministry of Justice, which brought the lawsuit against the Rada, accused the organisation of engaging in politics and interfering in the internal affairs of government agencies. It described as unacceptable the Rada's proposal for designing an alternative youth policy based on the European model. Like most other youth organisations that have lost their legal registration, the BSA, YIC and Rada continue their work in the underground. Despite the hardships and risks of operating as unregistered organisations, they continue to maintain contacts with their European counterparts and promote civic activism among young people in Belarus.

Other important youth groups that have been repressed have been forced to seek sanctuary in Europe. Zubr (Bison), which was the Belarusian youth group best known to Europeans, was dissolved in 2006 after years of heavy repression. Several of its leaders are living in exile in Europe. Third Way, which was the first youth NGO to be criminally prosecuted by the regime in Belarus, is now operating in exile from Europe. Its informational and analytical web portal remains popular among Belarusian youths, despite being run from outside of the country. Many exiled youth activists continue to be active by organising international solidarity campaigns with Belarus.

Due to the government's fear of, and disdain for, the West, NGOs continue to play an important role in linking young Belarusians to Europe. Though learning about Europe is becoming more popular among students, for exam-

ple, European studies are not encouraged by state universities and research centres. While it is a member of the Eurasia University Association and has a Chinese Studies Centre, the Belarusian State University has no special European Studies programme. Most of the research on Europe is being done by young scholars at independent think tanks, like the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (http://www.belinstitute.eu) and the "New Europe" portal (http://www.n-europe.eu).

Studying "Over There"

While young people around Europe have benefited from a plethora of opportunities to study abroad and participate in cultural exchanges on EU-sponsored programmes, Belarusian youths have generally found themselves on the sidelines. Only a limited number of EU programmes have been available for Belarusian citizens, who were often unaware of their very existence. But over the last few years, several major projects funded by the EU and its member states have opened up new windows of opportunity for hundreds of young Belarusians to travel and study abroad. These projects have also attracted the attention of the broader Belarusian public to the positive role of EU activities in the educational and cultural fields.

The European Humanities University (EHU) is perhaps the most significant and best known example (http://en.ehu.lt). Founded in Minsk as a private university in 1992, EHU was closed down by the Lukashenka regime in 2004. Re-established a year later in Vilnius, Lithuania, it is today a Belarusian university in exile. Thanks to European support, EHU is the only Belarusian higher education institution free from government control, ideology and censorship. The University has made a significant contribution to forming a new generation of well-educated young professionals. While it operated in Belarus, EHU actively pursued a strategy of cross-border cooperation with other universities, foundations, governments and educational institutions. It launched a number of international student- and faculty-exchange programmes with Europe and initiated efforts to bring Belarus into Europe's common sphere of higher education by joining the Campus Europae international consortium of universities. The overarching aim was to speed up the process of attaining the goals of the Bologna Declaration. EHU's acceptance into the Campus Euro-

pae demonstrated the European quality of its programmes and values. It became the first university in Belarus to pattern its doctoral programmes along the lines of those in Western Europe. But in summer 2004, EHU was closed by the Belarusian authorities.

EHU's renewal and continued existence in Vilnius is possible only due to support from the European Commission, the Nordic Council of Ministers, Sweden and Finland within the framework of the Belarus Higher Education and Human Rights programme. This European support allows more than 300 Belarusian students to study either at EHU or several universities in Ukraine. In April 2008, the European Commission allocated €1 million to support EHU through *the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights*.

This year, EHU became the first Belarusian university to receive an Erasmus University Charter, which allows students and faculties to participate in exchange programmes launched by the European Commission, European universities and other educational institutions. EHU also takes part in the Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window Mobility Programme, which is designed for BA, MA and PhD students, as well as post-doctoral researchers and faculties. Despite all the hardships involved in "studying abroad" in Vilnius and the discouraging fact that its diplomas are not recognised in Belarus, EHU remains a popular option for Belarusian university applicants. The EHU's European curricula and teaching methods, high quality education, extensive international ties, and the opportunity to live and study in the EU, are highly appealing to Belarus' most active, creative and adventurous youths. EHU is a mecca for students who want more than a post-Soviet university in Belarus and a sanctuary for those who were expelled from Belarusian institutions due to their political and civic activities. EHU is a unique meeting point where academic freedom, democratic activism, European values and European studies come together. It is one small part of Belarus that has succeeded in joining the European Union.

While EHU is a truly European effort, the Polish government has taken the individual country lead in assisting hundreds of repressed young activists to continue their education in Poland after being expelled from universities in Belarus in the aftermath of the March 2006 demonstrations. Since 2006, the Kalinousky Programme, named after a 19th century Belarusian-Polish patriot, has offered scholarships, free tuition, stipends, room and board and lan-

guage programmes at Polish universities (www.salidarnasc.org). In 2008, Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs allocated €1.2 million for the programme. Thanks to this programme, more than 300 Belarusian students are currently studying in Poland. In June 2008, 70 more students were accepted to the programme's third year.

At this moment, it is hard to say what will be the long-term impact of the Programme on those who have left to study abroad, the democratic movement, and the country as a whole. Over the last decade, thousands of young Belarusians have gone abroad to work or study, and most are yet to return. Compared to these numbers, 300 students temporarily studying outside of the country are but a drop in the emigration stream. Nevertheless, the Kalinousky Programme has become synonymous with "brain drain." This stereotype has persevered in part because of the regime's aggressive propaganda but also because of the democratic movement's fears that it will lose some of the most active leaders of the young generation. But Ina Kuley, head of the Committee for the Defence of the Repressed "Salidarnasc" and one of the advisors to the Programme, is convinced that it only helps to strengthen the pro-democratic mood of society. She says that students now smile while facing the police during demonstrations because they are no longer afraid. Young people know that someone is watching their back.

While debates over such European programmes continue, as does the regime's repression of activist students, it is important to remember that studying abroad is not always a personal choice for young Belarusians. It is an unfortunate reality in the social and political life of authoritarian Belarus. Yet EHU, the Kalinouski Programme and other European initiatives help young Belarusians to gain a higher education, experience Europe, overcome fear and become integrated into an international community of students while remaining relatively close to their own country. For many, a trip back home is less than four hours by bus. Most students frequently return to Belarus and many continue their civic activities back home. Some have become active in civil society in their new host countries, including with NGOs working across the border with Belarus. In Poland, for example, some Kalinousky Programme students are working as correspondents and technicians for the Belsat satellite television channel and the European Radio for Belarus, two media entities broadcasting from Poland into Belarus.

Come a Little Closer

Since 1994, NGOs from "New Europe" have played a crucial role in helping to promote democracy in Belarus. Sharing similar memories from the communist period, they understand well the specific conditions in Belarus and are able to adapt their transition experience and programmes to the needs of their Belarusian partners. A number focus specifically on assisting young activists. The Warsaw-based Polish-Czech-Slovak Solidarity Foundation, for example, improves the desktop publishing skills of independent NGOs and media through training and internships. Dozens of young Belarusian journalists and activists have attended its "Free Word Technique" courses over the last decade. Its programmes allow Belarusian participants to study the history of Polish underground publishing, learn from prominent editors and journalists who began their careers in the Solidarity underground and are now working for European newspapers, improve the quality of their publications at home, and also build a better network of independent media partners in Belarus.

The East European Democratic Center (formerly the Institute of Democracy in Eastern Europe — Poland) has implemented a number of democracy-building and publishing programmes for young Belarusians, which has significantly contributed to the development and growth of civil society. One can say that the EEDC has helped to develop a new generation of young regional leaders. Many of these "new faces" of the Belarusian opposition were elected to local government positions in 2003, played leading roles in the 2006 events, and ran the most successful campaigns during the 2008 parliamentary elections. The Education for Democracy Foundation (Poland) has brought hundreds of Belarusian students to Poland through its "Study Tours" programme and helped to educate thousands of Belarusian school children about democracy and freedom via extensive training programmes for teachers on new civic education curricula and methods of teaching. The Foundation also administrates the Region in Transition programme (RITA) of the Polish-American Freedom Foundation, which supports democratic transitions in Belarus and the former Soviet bloc by preparing a new generation of intellectual, economic, and political leaders open to western values, trained and able to work towards the establishment of democracy, a market economy, and civil society.

Czech NGOs, especially the People in Need Foundation, Civic Belarus and Association for International Affairs, are very active in promoting human

rights and democratic change in Belarus, as well as organising study visits so that young civil society activists can learn from the Czech Republic's transition experiences. It is unfortunate, however, that more of these activities are not being supported by the EU. Most of the support for civil society programmes in Belarus, as well as cross-border democracy-building efforts conducted in partnership with Central European NGOs, are funded by U.S. organisations.

The geographical proximity of Central Europe to the "last dictatorship in Europe" makes the New Member States a true meeting point for those promoting democracy inside Belarus and those supporting the movement from outside. Vilnius and Warsaw have become second homes for Belarusian democracy activists, since it is almost impossible to organise independent events inside Belarus without them being closed down. Since 2007, thanks to the joint efforts of a number of EU and US organisations, Belarusians have their own "island of liberty" in Lithuania, called the Vilnius Human Rights House. It regularly hosts events for young people, including meetings with EHU students, human rights schools, seminars and cultural events.

Breaking the Barrier

Belarus borders three members of the European Union. Vilnius is closer to Minsk than any Belarusian regional capital. Warsaw is closer to Belarus' capital than is Moscow, and Riga can be reached overnight by train or bus. So close, yet so far, Europe remains *terra incognita* for the majority of Belarus' youth, which makes up 24 percent of the country's population. Why is Europe often seen as a bridge too far? The Lukashenka regime is not interested in letting young people travel freely, become familiar with the European community, critically compare systems, and become infected with the spirit of freedom. In addition, young Belarusians lack foreign language skills, limiting their mobility. While all school children are obliged to study a foreign language (according to official statistics, 69,000 pupils were studying English in 2007), less than 30 percent of adult respondents in a 2007 survey said that they can speak a foreign language (13 % English, 7 % German and 2 % French). The products of a post-Soviet educational system still based on lecturing, memorisation and recitation, most students also lack the confidence, self-initiative and knowledge of available opportunities to look beyond Belarus' borders.

Many young focus group participants also complained about not having the financial resources to travel abroad. Visa costs and requirements, as well as long lines at the consular sections of European embassies, are often seen as the primary barriers to entering the free world. Belarusian youth organisations interested in cooperating with European groups often lack the skills, experience and formal requirements to comply with the EU's bureaucratic procedures, even if they actually qualify for a programme. Finally, most Belarusian pro-European initiatives and campaigns tend to employ empty slogans and clichés (i.e. "Belarus to Europe") instead of focusing on really educating the population about the concrete benefits of Belarus joining the EU and what it takes to achieve this goal.

It will take a long-term effort to bring Belarus back into the European family of states, where it belonged for centuries. A variety of diverse strategies, approaches and programmes will be needed to help young Belarusians join the ranks of Europe's youth community. But some steps to help this process can be taken immediately. While the conditions put forward by the European Union during the "Dialogue Process" are crucial for changing the political climate in Belarus, it is important to continue and expand democracy assistance programmes. It is important that the EU realises that efforts at democracy promotion are more effective when channelled through and towards civil society. Government-to-government programmes simply do not work well when a regime is not really interested in undertaking reforms.

The EU and international community should continue to monitor violations of student rights and repression against youth activists, even if these issues are only indirectly covered by the five points being evaluated during the six-month Dialogue Period. It is important that Brussels remembers that, since 2006, the single most repressed segment of Belarusian civil society has been the youth. No other group has had as many of its activists harassed, detained, arrested, fined or imprisoned. No other group has had so many special procedures used against it, such as expulsion from schools, being drafted into the army, or forced work placements in the Chernobyl Zone. Therefore, although most regime officials were removed from the list of those banned from travelling to the EU, it would be wrong to permit university officials directly implicated in the persecution of student activists to participate in EU-Belarus educational programmes and exchanges. To do so would send the wrong signals and undermine students' belief in the principles of morality and ethics promoted by European educational charters.

Some European youth programmes have been designed to take into account the peculiarities of working with Belarus. Young Belarusians are eligible to participate in two of five actions of the European Commission's "Youth in Action" programme: "Youth for Europe" and "European Voluntary Service". "Youth for Europe" encourages young people's active citizenship, participation and creativity through youth exchanges, youth initiatives and youth democracy projects. Young Belarusians, including representatives of youth groups and private individuals of 6-25 years of age, can apply directly to the programme or participate in exchanges organised by other international initiatives. Applicants should propose an idea for an exchange, study trip or seminar, which addresses an issue relevant to youth from different countries, and find foreign partners with whom to work. The EC grants cover accommodation, meals and 70 percent of travel expenses for all participants. Each partner organisation also receives €400 to partially cover administrative costs.

The "European Voluntary Service" programme helps young people to develop their sense of solidarity by participating, either individually or in groups, in non-profit, unpaid voluntary activities abroad. Individual volunteers are responsible for finding a host organisation, which is possible via numerous websites and electronic resources, while the European Commission will cover accommodation, insurance and transportation costs for a period from three to twelve months.

While these European programmes are sometimes criticised for being too "touristy" and having a weak focus on fostering pro-democracy activism, they are easily accessible for young Belarusians, less bureaucratic than other EU programmes, stimulate self-initiative, allow Belarusians to meet their peers from other countries and debate issues of common concern, which often alters the outlook of all participants, not just the Belarusians. The design and organisational principles of these programmes, which encourage creativity and permit partners' flexibility, should be applied in other programmes more directly related to democracy-building. EU programmes with less bureaucracy, free-of-charge visas, and a focus on expanding the number of exchanges for young Belarusians will help to open the minds and borders not only of individuals but also of the entire country.

THE EU IN THE PLATFORMS OF BELARUS' POLITICAL PARTIES

Ihar Lyalkou

Belarus' Ministry of Justice currently has 15 political parties on its register.

The parties can be categorised in different ways, but given the current regime in Belarus, it seems better to classify them based on their attitude to the government.

Thus, the pro-government (or more accurately, pro-presidential, taking into account the nature of the current regime) parties are the following:

- the Belarusian Agrarian Party (BAP) established in 1992 and currently led by Mikhail Rusy;
- the Belarusian Patriotic Party (BPP), 1994, Mikalay Ulakhovich;
- the Belarusian Socialist Sport Party (BSSP), 1994, Uladzimir Aleksandrovich;
- the Communist Party of Belarus (CPB), 1996, Tatsyana Holubeva;
- the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), 1994, Syarhey Haydukevich;
- the Republican Party (RP), 1994, Uladzimir Belazor;
- the Republican Party of Labor and Justice (RPLJ), 1993, Vasil Zadnyaprany;
- the Social Democratic Party of People's Concord (SDPPC), 1997, Syarhey Yarmak.

It is necessary to note the distinctive positions of the Liberal Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Party of People's Concord. The former officially describes itself as "a constructive opposition to the current government," while the former calls for "a unity of all sensible public and political forces,

and a coalition of Belarusian society", without division into the pro-government and opposition camps. But in real-life politics, both parties always take the government's position on all key socio-political issues. Therefore they do not fall into a separate category.

Seven of Belarus' registered political parties are in opposition to the Alyaksandr Lukashenka government:

- the United Civic Party (UCP) formed in 1995 as a result of a merger of the United Democratic Party of Belarus, established in 1990, and the Civic Party, established in 1994. The UCP is led by Anatol Lyabedzka.
- the Belarusian Green Party, 1994, Aleh Novikau;
- the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada (BSDH), 1998, Stanislau Shushkevich;
- the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada" (BSDP "Hramada"), 1996, Anatol Lyaukovich;
- the Conservative Christian Party BPF (CCP-BPF), 1999, Zyanon Paznyak;
- the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) established in 1993 as a political wing of the Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhenne" formed in 1988, Lyavon Barshcheuski;
- Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC), 1991, Syarhey Kalyakin.

Several opposition political parties — the Belarusian Party of Women "Nadzeya" led by Alena Yaskova, the Belarusian Party of Labour, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Narodnaya Hramada" chaired by Mikalay Statkevich and the Belarusian Christian Democracy co-chaired by Mikalay Artsyukhou, Heorhi Dmitruk, Vital Rymasheuski, Paval Sevyarynets and Alyaksey Shein, and the Party of Labour and Progress led by Uladzimir Navasyad — continue to function despite the fact that the former two were struck off the register by Supreme Court rulings, while the latter three have had their applications for registration turned down repeatedly.

It is difficult to classify these parties based on their ideologies, the main principle used for identifying political parties in most other countries, because the criterion does not properly work in Belarus' specific conditions. For example, despite a stark contrast in ideology, the Liberal Democratic Party pursues policies that are more characteristic of the Communist Party of Belarus rather than of the liberal United Civic Party, for instance, whereas the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada takes the same position as the Belarusian Popu-

lar Front on most basic issues and it has nothing in common with the Social Democratic Party of People's Concord.

It is much more important to distinguish the parties that engage in real activities, have real members (not just on paper) and a certain influence in society, from 'dummy' political parties whose activities are limited to occasional statements by their leaders and symbolic involvement in election campaigns. Of the pro-presidential political parties, only the Communist Party of Belarus and the Liberal Democratic Party fall into the category of "living" parties. In the opposition camp, the UCP, the BPF, the BPC and the BSDP "Hramada" have the largest numbers of active members and functioning local chapters.

Before beginning an analysis of the role that EU-related issues play in the platforms of Belarusian political parties, it should be noted that most manifestos say little about foreign policy. This is characteristic of both opposition and pro-presidential parties. Most party programmes describe foreign policy priorities in very general terms. A classic example in this sense is the following statement, set forth in the programme of the Republican Party: "In international politics, the Republican Party advocates (...) closer cooperation with the former USSR republics, with countries on all continents, their alliances and communities, and international organisations."[1] Nevertheless, even the short statements found in various official documents give a clue as to what foreign policy priorities and options these parties offer to the Belarusian people.

As far as pro-government groups are concerned, their "Appeal to the Russian Public", published in November 2004, is indicative of their pro-Russian stance. The leaders of the Belarusian Agrarian Party, Belarusian Socialist Sport Party, Belarusian Patriotic Party, Republican Party, Republican Party of Labour and Justice and Communist Party of Belarus put their signatures to the following statement: "The prospect of the unity of Belarus and the Russian Federation meets with opposition from those forces in the West that have not abandoned their plans to eternalise the split among the eastern Slavs and turn Russia into an uncontrollable and fragmented territory. That is why attempts have never stopped to discredit both the Republic of Belarus and its efforts to build the Union State (...). Belarus, steady in its allegiance to its ally, its blood relationship and spiritual unity with the Russian people, defends the interests of Russia on the western border of the Union State. For this particular reason it has come under pressure and attack from the West and its po-

[1] http://rprb.narod.ru/program.htm

litical mercenaries inside the republic (…). Under current conditions, where the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus are allies loyal to each other and truly brotherly states, it is necessary to clearly realise that we — Belaya Rus and Great Russia — are part of one eastern Slavic world, and therefore in defending Belarus we are defending Russia, and in defending Russia we are defending Belarus. So, let us work together to strengthen the unity of brotherly nations and put up a vigorous resistance against attempts to break it up!"[2] As it is clear from the statement, these political parties have made an unequivocal foreign policy choice, and there is no room for the European Union in their platforms.

Not surprisingly, not a single pro-presidential party mentions the EU in its manifesto. For instance, the Communist Party of Belarus describes its foreign policy priorities as follows, "To achieve the goal of putting Belarusian society back on track for building socialism, the Communist Party of Belarus considers it necessary (…), while developing Belarusian statehood, to work toward a stronger and closer Belarusian-Russian Union State and the gradual restoration of an upgraded Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on a voluntary basis, as well as to enhance its political and economic independence by reasserting its traditional interests and position in the world."[3] The phantom Republican Party of Labour and Justice expresses itself in the same vein. "The party will support actions by the country's political leadership aimed at strengthening and developing union ties with the Russian Federation."[4] The Belarusian Patriotic Party, formed by former members of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's presidential campaign team, says that its goals include "working toward the reestablishment of an upgraded union of brotherly people, of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine in the first place."

The Liberal Democratic Party has a somewhat different stance on international issues, judging by its basic documents. Incidentally, its leader did not subscribe to the above-mentioned "Appeal to the Russian Public." The party's objectives, declared in its programme, include "reform of the electoral system of the Republic of Belarus in accordance with European standards" and "reform of the Constitution based on democratic European standards." As far as foreign policy priorities are concerned, the programme states that: "Special priority is given to the development of equal relations with the nearest neigh-

[2] http://www.businesspress.ru/newspaper/article_mId_43_aId_322253.html
[3] http://comparty.by/programma.php
[4] http://rpts.by/ustav.php

bours — the Russian Federation, Ukraine, the Baltic countries and Poland." One of the party's foreign policy tasks is "to reinvigorate relations with all European countries and the leading European institutions such as the EU, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, etc. with the purpose of Belarus' involvement in general European integration processes."[5] But to determine the party's real foreign policy standing, it is necessary to turn to other material beyond its "politically correct" manifesto. For instance, "The Election Platform of Haydukevich S.V., a Candidate for the Presidency of the Republic of Belarus" adopted in 2006 said "Belarus' should give priority to efforts to deepen integration within the Commonwealth of Independent States, including in the framework of the Common Economic Space and the Eurasian Economic Community."[6] In 2005, in a keynote interview published under the eye-catching headline "We, the Russians and Belarusians have our own viewpoint on democracy" Syarhey Haydukevich made an overtly pro-Russian remark, "Today, we have approached the logical point where the formation of the Union State should be successfully completed (...). I believe that Vladimir Putin with his great intellect and huge political baggage, — I say again, Russia is lucky — will be able to get to the bottom of the current situation."[7] The excerpts give a better idea of what the Liberal Democratic Party leader really thinks about international policy. Although the party's platform includes clauses calling for closer ties with the EU, its leader prioritises relations with Russia like the other pro-presidential parties and is ready to support all initiatives by the current regime to build a stronger alliance with the Russian Federation, which would inevitably weaken the country's ties with the EU.

The opposition political parties set an absolutely different tone regarding relations with the European Union and Russia in their electoral platforms. The opposition Belarusian Party of Communists seems to be less pro-EU than other political groups. Its programme includes the following statements on the party's foreign policy objectives: "the active participation of the Republic in collective efforts by progressive forces of the world community to counter the hegemonic and expansionist plans of the NATO alliance, the striking force of world imperialism" and "the real advancement of integration processes involving, above all, the Russian Federation and Ukraine."[8] The party programme gives only a

[5] http://www.ldpb.net/programm.htm
[6] http://www.ldpb.net/programm%20svg.html
[7] http://www.ldpb.net/press.htm
[8] http://www.ucpb.info/rus/library/alterprog/2-7.shtml

vague idea of how the opposition communists view future relations between Belarus and the EU. But one sentence offers a hint, "The restoration of fully-fledged mutually beneficial relations with other countries and interstate organisations." Therefore, in fact, the BPC's foreign policy objectives as outlined in its manifesto do not substantially differ from the declarations of pro-presidential political parties. But to be fair, it should be noted that, theoretically, the opposition Belarusian Party of Communists should follow the principles set out in the platform of the opposition coalition United Pro-democratic Forces (UPF), of which it is a member. The UPF platform calls for maintaining reliable and mutually beneficial cooperation with Russia, Ukraine and other CIS countries, establishing a real free trade zone, entering into the World Trade Organisation and the European Free Trade Area, signing a partnership agreement with the European Union and joining the European Neighbourhood Policy.[9]

The Conservative Christian Party BPF has a peculiar view on Belarus' role in Europe. On the one hand, its programme states that "European politics is an unquestionable priority of the Belarusian state because the key values that inspire our people to carry out historical change — freedom, justice, solidarity and the national state — are shaped on the spiritual and political soil of the European context, European history and European culture." One the other hand, the manifesto makes no mention of the European Union. The Conservatives note only that "History and developments have once again proved the need to develop the Western vector of Belarusian politics and cooperate with European political and economic organisations." In the section focussing on foreign policy, the CCP BPF stresses the need for cooperation with neighbouring countries, including members of the European Union. "Belarus should have good relations with its neighbours above all. We believe that East European countries located between the Baltic and Black Seas have the same interests in the West and the same problems in the East. These are countries with a similar history, while Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine have a common history. They are located in the same European culture zone and have similar economic interests. We believe that this solidarity should translate into a Baltic-Black Sea Cooperation (BBSC) among nations. This would help to better coordinate economic, trade and customs ties between our own countries and also our relations with the East and the West."[10] Alongside the party programme, the CCP BPF also has a short-

[9] http://svaboda.info/about/values/
[10] http://www.pbpf.org/art.php?cat=0&art=4

term action plan called the Programme of Immediate Steps. This paper mentions the EU (but what is unusual about it is that the Belarusian Conservatives list the European Union and the European Parliament in a sequence divided by a comma, as if these are items of the same category): "It will be necessary (…) to step up international activity, normalise relations with the countries of the Euro-Atlantic alliance, re-establish cooperation with the European Union, European Parliament, the IMF and other international organisations."[11]

As we can see, the CCP BPF stops short of explaining in its basic documents how the party views Belarus' role in the process of European integration and whether the country should join the EU. However, Belarus has political parties that clearly give priority to integration into the EU. One of them, in my opinion, is the United Civic Party, although its party programme also makes no mention of the EU. At the same time, "The United Civic Party's Address to Citizens, Businesses and the State" adopted in May 2008 unequivocally declares, "We stand up for a free, democratic and European Belarus (…). The UCP's choice for Belarusian politics is entry into the Council of Europe within a year after presidential and parliamentary elections, and preparations for Belarus' entry into the European Union. The latter is quite realistic, if we set this goal. It was a realistic goal for our neighbours, Poland and Lithuania, which, according to international assessments, had worse initial conditions than Belarus. To achieve this goal, it will not be necessary to proffer a begging bow — under the Copenhagen agreements, a country that honours EU principles and meets its standards cannot be denied admission to the EU (…). As far as European standards are concerned, does Belarus have less chance than Bulgaria or Romania? If the nation seeks membership of the European Union, and takes steps in this direction, membership of the EU is quite a feasible goal."[12]

Another liberal party, the non-registered Party of Freedom and Progress, is positive about the idea of European integration for Belarus, but it does not elaborate on possible EU-membership and does not even mention the bloc. "We, liberals, are in favour of a well-considered integration into common European organisations on the condition that priority is given to good relations and cooperation with all neighbours. While advocating European integration, we attribute a great importance to the development of friendly, good-neighbourly relations with Russia and Ukraine."[13]

[11] ibid
[12] http://www.ucpb.org/index.php?page=documents&open=365
[13] http://www.cf-by.org/static-programma.html

The Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada" expresses its vision of Belarus' relations with the Europe Union in a succinct but accurate statement, "We want Belarus to become a fully-fledged and respected entity of the European Union. We believe that Belarus' membership of the enlarged European family — where intellectual, economic, financial and technological resources are concentrated, where the cultural distinctions of every nation are preserved and secured, where high standards are ensured in all spheres of human life — is in the deep interests of the Belarusian people."[14] It should be noted that the non-registered Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Narodnaya Hramada," whose former members formed the BSDP "Hramada," has an almost identical platform. Their section concerning EU membership includes exactly the same statement. But it is followed by a quite interesting idea that cannot be found in the manifestos of other Belarusian parties. "Belarus should provide all-round support for the movement of Russia, Ukraine and Moldova into the European Union."[15]

The Belarusian Popular Front, the first party in Belarus (2002) to advocate EU membership, offers in its basic documents the most detailed description of its views on the prospect of Belarus' integration into the European Union. The programme of the BPF "Adradzhenne" adopted at the party's fourth conference held on 1 December 2002 states that, "We see Belarus' future in the European Union. For us this means guarantees of national security, well-being, respect for national interests and values. An independent, democratic Belarus can make its own economic, cultural and value contribution to the common European home. We advocate unity and diversity, 'a Europe of Fatherlands' as the founding principle of European integration. Together with other like-minded people across Europe, we stand up for the traditional moral values of European civilisation. The BPF "Adradzhenne" seeks Belarus' inclusion in the European Union's expansion strategy and views the move as an incentive for democratic change and market-oriented reform in our country. Our practical goal is to ensure that Belarus meets all political, legal and economic criteria for EU membership as soon as possible to speed up the process." The BPF platform also stresses "the need to unify Belarusian legislation with the legislation of European community countries." On national security, the platform says that "Belarus should join NATO and participate in the Eu-

[14] http://bsdp.org/?q=be/node/30
[15] http://www.bsdpng.info/modules.php?name=Articles&file=view&articles_id=61

ropean Union's effort to build the European security architecture." The last chapter, entitled "The Platform's Time Limits", states that, "The basic principles of this programme should guide the BPF "Adradzhenne" until a democratic and independent Belarus has been admitted to the European Union and NATO, which would ensure that our independent statehood is irreversible, guarantee security and well-being to our people, and legally codify the final and irreversible return of Belarus to Europe."[16]

Alongside the manifesto, the BPF party is guided by the Strategic Platform, which was also adopted in 2002. It contains most of the quotes from the above-mentioned manifesto of the BPF "Adradzhenne," but among the party's methods it mentions the following, "To conduct active international policies aimed to inform our Euro-Atlantic partners about the will of a considerable part of the Belarusian people to have independent statehood, and join the European Union and NATO."[17]

Thus, a summary of this brief analysis of the platforms of 20 political parties (both registered and non-registered) gives the following picture: the European Union and/or European integration is mentioned in the basic acts of seven of 20 political parties (the Liberal Democratic Party, the Conservative Christian Party BPF, the United Civic Party, the Party of Freedom and Progress, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada," the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Narodnaya Hramada," and the Belarusian Popular Front). It is symptomatic that the list includes nearly all of the right-wing and liberal parties that operate in the country and only two of the many left-wing parties (which were, moreover, one party until recently). It is also symptomatic that nearly all opposition parties mention Belarus' large neighbour, the European Union, in their manifestos, while the pro-government forces seem to ignore the issue of relations with the EU. The LDP stands out in this context. Its Chairman Syarhey Haydukevich even served as the Belarusian foreign minister's special envoy to the European Union in 2006 and 2007. But an analysis of other basic documents of this party, other than the manifesto, suggests that despite a positive treatment of the EU in its official programme, the party gives more foreign policy weight to closer ties with Russia and its position does not significantly differ from the stance of other pro-government organisations.

[16] http://pbnf.org/doc/pragrama_adradjene.doc
[17] http://pbnf.org/statut.html

Based on the party programmes and other basic acts, one may draw the conclusion that the BPF, the BSDP "Hramada" and the BSDP "Narodnaya Hramada" are the staunchest and most consistent in their support for the possible entry of the Republic of Belarus into the European Union. The United Civic Party and the Party of Freedom and Progress also take a strongly pro-EU stance.