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David R. Marples

THE LUKASHENKA PHENOMENON

Elections, Propaganda, and the Foundations of Political Authority in Belarus

August 2007

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by

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Program on East European Cultures and Societies, Trondheim

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Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
August 2007

Note on transliteration

I have used the Belarusian form of transliteration throughout this monograph, except for names appearing in direct quotations that have been translated from Russian or for authors of works published in the Russian language.

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Introduction

English-language media and scholarly analyses of the Belarusian government under Alyaksandr Lukashenka, which came to power in the summer of 1994, are somewhat limited in scope. The question has become heavily politicized, and the perspectives linked on a global basis to dictatorships and tyrannical governments around the world. Over the past few years several phrases have been in vogue with regard to the Lukashenka regime: "The Cuba of Europe," "An Outpost of Tyranny," and "The Last Dictatorship of Europe" are the three that spring most readily to mind.[1] These epithets differ in their usefulness and applicability. The first can be dismissed summarily: there is no realistic analogy between Belarus, a central European nation, and the island of Cuba in the Caribbean in terms of history, customs, governmental structure, or state policies. The phrase "Outpost of Tyranny" seems to presuppose that other bastions of tyranny have been eradicated--presumably the reference signifies that Belarus is not a central point in world tyranny, but more of an irritant that detracts from democratic progress. Nevertheless, it will be argued that this phrase can legitimately be applied to Belarus in light of the changes taking place in countries neighboring it. Lastly, the phrase "Last Dictatorship of Europe" makes two basic assumptions: namely that the government of Lukashenka indeed constitutes a dictatorship, with all the prerequisites of that term, and links the regime inter alia with that of the late Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia. At least that link is plausible, since Lukashenka once offered Milosevic refuge in Belarus, having formerly invited his country to join the Russia-Belarus Union. One is drawn to the image of a line of dominos, all but one of which have fallen down, so that Belarus represents the last one standing, but with its fall imminent. Above all, the phrase seems designed to draw attention to a small state of less than 10 million people that otherwise would not be of much concern to outside observers.

[1] The phrase "The Cuba of Europe" was coined by former US ambassador to Belarus, Michael G. Kozak, on 9 June 2000; see *International League for Human Rights Update*, Vol. 3, No. 25, June 2000. The phrase "Outpost of Tyranny" derives from responses of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to the US Senate on 19 January 2005; *BBC News*, 19 January 2005. In May 2005, President George Bush, on a state visit to Lithuania, used the phrase "Last Dictatorship of Europe" in a speech on Lithuanian Television in Vilnius; *Associated Press*, 6 May 2005.

The problem of categorizing Belarus in simplistic fashion is that the country and its government defy easy analysis. Lukashenka has remained in power since the summer of 1994. Concerning this lengthy period of leadership several clear statements can be made about his government: it has succeeded in consolidating its power over the resistance of the democratic opposition, workers' and students' protests, and dissension at various levels within the administration of the president. It has not joined Russia, despite the longevity of the so-called Russia-Belarus Union, and at the time of writing serious--and it could be argued, potentially crippling or decisive--divisions have occurred between the governments in Minsk and Moscow. Belarus has not introduced economic reforms but despite a lack of natural resources, outdated factories and installations dating back to the Soviet period, and an agricultural system that is still based on collective and state farms, it was able to avoid serious economic problems throughout the first twelve of Lukashenka's years in office. According to its own version of events, it represents an economic success story of the post-Soviet era, in contrast to the problems experienced by its neighbors, particularly Ukraine and more recently Poland. Lukashenka successfully amended the Constitution (for the third time) in a referendum of October 2004 that permitted him to run for more than two terms in office, and went on to win the 2006 presidential election. Since then he has hinted that he intends to remain in office beyond the third term. He turned 53 in 2007, which is younger than Mikhail Gorbachev was when he was appointed General Secretary of the CC CPSU in March 1985. Unsurprisingly then, some analysts can hardly speak about Belarus without focusing on the person and personality of the president. Lukashenka's outlook has become the outlook and shape of modern-day Belarus.

However, the latter statement would seem contradictory and puzzling from a close observation of the republic in the 21st century. In many respects, Lukashenka, despite entering what one could respectfully call "middle age," seems like an anachronism, a reversion to the Soviet era who deliberately cultivates past images and memories. The older part of the population, particularly those people living in rural communities, who cherish memories such as those of the war years, are the president's most loyal supporters. Belarusian youth are well educated, well traveled, and often

multi-lingual. They may be deprived of a free media, but they can access the Internet, create blog pages, form discussion groups, and maintain close contacts with their peers in Russia and Ukraine. They are urbanized and have demonstrated, at least in part, a desire for change in the country. Neither they nor their parents have any memories of the "Great Patriotic War" and the period of Stalin. Some remember the death of the popular Communist leader Pyotr Masherau in a tragic car crash in 1980, following a period when the otherwise hard-line Communist figure had defied the corrupt Brezhnev leadership by refusing to bow to its practices. Lukashenka acknowledged that issue indirectly by changing the name of the main street linked to central Minsk that bore Masherau's name.[2] Yet even Masherau is a fading memory. It should not be forgotten that it was as a result of the widespread corruption among Masherau's successors that Lukashenka, a rank outsider, came to power in a popular wave in 1994.

On a personal level, Lukashenka constitutes a rather unusual model for young people, as presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin pointed out in one of his 30-minute television slots prior to the March 2006 presidential election. Lukashenka's wife has remained on a farm in Mahileu region. She is never seen in Minsk. The president is believed to have fathered a child through a mistress. His two sons by his marriage have been promoted in a nepotistic manner reminiscent of that of the Brezhnev period.[3] Even as an athlete intent on displaying his physical prowess to the nation, the president is somewhat lacking, since his ice hockey games are carefully scripted. The president is never physically checked or impeded, and his team is always victorious, as his "number one" shirt would appear to dictate. In 2005, when all of Minsk's regular activities were halted for the 60th anniversary commemoration of the end of the Second World War, Lukashenka stood on a podium with his leading generals in full military regalia. To the shock of many actual and television observers, the president could not maintain the salute for the duration of the parade and quickly dropped his hand, confining himself to a look of fierce pride, but clearly displeasing the officers standing beside him. His opponents,

[2] *SB Belarus' segodnya*, 10 May 2005.
[3] Lukashenka's eldest son Viktor began his career with the Foreign Ministry but is currently a prominent figure in the Security Services. For an example of his early career, see http://www.open.by/belarus-now/cont/1998/1020/news/8.html. Notably he was heavily involved in the crackdown against protesters that followed the 2006 presidential elections.

real and imagined, have been systematically removed or eliminated. Kazulin is currently serving a five-year prison sentence. Zyanon Paznyak, the main opposition leader until 1993, fled abroad in 1996. Lukashenka's constitutional successor of 1999--the end of the first legal term as president--was the chairman of Parliament, Syamon Sharetsky, who fled to Lithuania in the summer of that year. His deputy, Viktar Hanchar, disappeared in September 1999, together with businessman Anatoly Krasouski. Former Interior Minister Yury Zakharenka, with whom they were closely linked, also vanished in this same period. These disappearances or kidnappings have never been satisfactorily explained. There is a consensus that the men were executed on the president's orders, but an investigation into the case ended without result in 2003.

These examples are simply to illustrate that many younger residents of Belarus might find it difficult to identify closely, if at all, with the *person* of the president or see him as an object for admiration. However, they have been encouraged recently to take a new pride in the formation and progress of the Belarusian state. Why has Lukashenka suddenly reversed his past emphasis on a close partnership or union with Russia and begun to support the continued sovereignty and independence of Belarus? Several immediate anomalies seem to be present, such as a leadership that has gone so far as to undermine the Belarusian language and culture by promoting Russian to the status of a state language (1995), and using it almost exclusively as the language of government business and communication, as well as closing Belarusian language schools and institutes and persecuting organizations that seek ostensibly to promote the native culture. After thirteen years it is difficult to define what the Lukashenka regime stands for, although it is easy to say what it opposes: the encroachments of NATO, which has expanded so that its member states now border on Belarus;[4] US and European support for the Belarusian opposition parties and youth movements, allegedly to the extent of funding their activities in an attempt to remove the Lukashenka regime; bans on travel to Europe or United States for Lukashenka and his key ministers that isolate the regime; and

[4] In early July 2007, Lukashenka stated that the Belarus's position had become less secure because of the expansion of NATO and the US intention to establish an anti-missile defense shield in Poland. He declared that an essential key to security was the patriotism of the Belarusian people and the strengthening of the armed forces. His strategic goal was "to build a strong and prosperous Belarus." *Belorusskie novosti*, 6 July 2007.

the demands of Gazprom to end energy subsidies in Belarus as well as for control over profitable Belarusian companies.

This monograph examines the Belarusian election campaigns of 1994 and 2006, and the referendum of 2004, before offering an assessment of the key aspects of Lukashenka's electoral success, including the so-called "economic miracle" and the question whether there is any clearly defined strategy in the recent steps taken to distance Belarus from Russia and to emphasize that its current sovereignty is sacrosanct. It is posited that although there have been many recent articles that analyze the personality and policies of the current leader, very few have examined the election campaign that first brought him to power, that of 1994, a time when he was obliged to cite some sort of platform. What were Lukashenka's policies at that time? How was he able to attain success as a relatively unknown politician in the face of what seemed like overwhelming backing of the Prime Minister, Vyacheslau Kebich? To this analysis we have added examinations of the referendum and election that followed in 2004 and 2006 respectively. What were the features of these campaigns and how was Lukashenka able to persuade the electorate to vote for him? How did the opposition respond and why has it remained divided? What were the main issues at that time and how have they changed today? It is kept in mind here that election campaigns mark the peak of political activity in Belarus and that they reveal perhaps more than any other event the nature of the ruling regime.

Chapter 5 puts these elections in perspective by examining the main features of the presidential campaign in each case. These are divided into state authoritarianism, proclaimed economic achievements, and new patriotism. Economic success is tied mainly in official circles to the rise in GDP and the state's ability to increase wages and pensions, initially to keep pace with inflation, but more recently to permit residents to attain a modest prosperity, according to the government's assessment. These questions have been complicated by relations with Russia, and in particular the matter of energy. The rapid rise in world prices for oil and gas has had fairly dramatic repercussions in Belarus, particularly in terms of relations with the Russian state-owned company, Gazprom. As will be shown, Belarus enjoyed a highly privileged position in terms of reduced energy

prices which, up to and including the time of the 2006 presidential election, allowed the president to make considerable electoral gains. It is worth stating a truism: the Belarusian electorate is more concerned with economic well-being than it is with the introduction of more democracy into society. Indeed, as long as the government can promise that the economic picture remains bright--at least by Belarusian standards--then the regime is not unduly threatened. However, if the rosy depiction of life under Lukashenka is shown to be illusory or rapidly changing for the worse, then the president's position is no longer so solid. Hence Belarus's relations with Gazprom (and also with companies such as Lukoil, which is privately owned) have become critical to the smooth functioning of the state apparatus.

The third issue, which is also dealt with in Chapter 5, concerns the question whether Belarus has embarked on a conscious policy to promote a new form of Belarusian patriotism, the focal point of several recent scholarly articles.[5] Three clear choices have been delineated in a recent paper by Grigory Ioffe: that of traditional nationalism, perhaps as embraced by the Belarusian Popular Front in the early years and by the United Democratic opposition today; the liberal, pro-Russian position, embraced among others by Alyaksandr Kazulin, leader of the Social Democratic Party in the presidential elections of 2006; and lastly, the position of so-called Creole nationalism as represented by the current regime, which is defined as a state that differentiates itself from the other--in this case, Russia--and stands for an individualistic or exclusively Belarusian road as an independent state.[6] This point of view argues that Belarus is currently building a nation, albeit a very different one from what might have been envisaged in 1991, or for that matter in 1996 when the relationship with Russia began a

[5] See, for example, Steven M. Eke and Taras Kuzio, "Sultanism in Eastern Europe: the Social-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus," *Europe-Asia* Studies, Vol. 52, No. 3 (May 2000): 523-547; Pavel Tereshkovich, "The Belarusian Road to Modernity," *International Journal of* Sociology, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Fall 2001): 78-93; David R. Marples, "Europe's Last Dictatorship: the Roots and Perspectives of Authoritarianism in 'White Russia'," *Europe-Asia* Studies, Vol. 57, No. 6 (September 2005): 895-908; Natalia Leshchenko, "A Fine Instrument: Two Nation-Building Strategies in Post-Soviet Belarus," *Nations and Nationalism*, No. 10 (2004): 333-352; Grigory Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus: Belarusian Identity," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 8 (December 2003): 1241-1272; and Roy Allison, Stephen White, and Margot Light, "Belarus Between East and West," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (December 2005): 487-511.

[6] Grigory Ioffe, "Unfinished Nation-Building in Belarus and the 2006 Presidential Elections," *Eurasian Geography & Economics*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 1 (January-February 2007): 37-58.

process designed to achieve a Russia-Belarus Union, which has recently been shelved by the Lukashenka regime on the grounds that Russia is not treating Belarus as an equal partner. In this work, the overriding question is the following: since Lukashenka currently can be said to embody political outlook and thought in Belarus in its official form, to what extent is Lukashenka himself engaged in state strengthening or consolidation? Clearly he has no interest in cultural or language issues, and he rarely speaks in his native language (at least in public). Hence what is the goal behind his embracement of the Belarusian state and the official slogan "For an independent Belarus"?

This monograph does not enter into the discussion of whether actual nation building is taking place in Belarus, since such a debate seems premature. Rather, it focuses on the ways in which, having placed itself firmly in power, elevated the presidency over the legislature and Constitutional Court, and eliminated or cowed its perceived enemies the president has begun to consolidate the present state and promote its values. It argues that the political career of Lukashenka has been focused on expanding his personal power without a realistic vision of the state he runs or a clear perception of its past that goes beyond the confines of the Soviet period and the Second World War. It maintains that such an attitude at the top of the hierarchical structure also to some extent explains the sometimes strained attempts to define contemporary Belarusian society using the rhetoric associated with nation building. In order to take such a step, the president has had to contradict many of the assertions he has made in the past, such as that Russia is the best friend of Belarus and that the latter cannot advance without a close union with its powerful neighbor. He has managed this policy switch by declaring that Russia has betrayed its mission to advance in partnership.

Essentially, Lukashenka's public statements have maintained that countries such as Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have a common past, and all benefited from the Soviet period. However, Russia is now claiming to be the sole heir of this dissolved empire, and has exploited natural resources that were explored and developed initially by all peoples of the Soviet Union.[7] Thus the change of policy, allegedly, has occurred in

[7] See *SB Belarus' Segodnya*, 2 August 2007.

Russia rather than Belarus, and originated with the presidency of Vladimir Putin in 2000. Lukashenka sometimes still sees Putin as a Soviet figure (this is considered a compliment) and one who, like himself, looks on the USSR with favor. After all, both worked for the KGB, though in very different spheres (Lukashenka from the lowly position of a border guard). In this way, the Belarusian leader tries to convey the impression of consistency, honesty, and loyalty in his views and relationships. In reality, Russia's move away from its Soviet past was very dramatic and dates from the beginning of 1992 when shock therapy was first introduced. The Russia that Lukashenka liked to depict in his early speeches was really a figment of his imagination. Now that Lukashenka has been made to realize this fact by Putin's *realpolitik* and Gazprom's increasing economic demands on Belarus, Lukashenka has fallen back on his only source of power: the Belarusian state.

1. How Lukashenka Came to Power: A Re-Examination of the 1994 Elections

The Belarusian government propagates regularly a simple thesis. Before Lukashenka became president, the republic was facing an economic crisis and a dramatic drop in living standards under the leadership of parliamentary chairman Stanislau Shushkevich in 1991-93. Under the popular Lukashenka presidency, conversely, factories have been brought back to full employment, impressive economic growth rates have been attained, and the average worker lives in the security of a regular wage and a guaranteed pension. There is indeed some wisdom in this propaganda, in that economic security is possibly the key element in the thinking of the electorate in any presidential or parliamentary election. Further, a survey conducted by Eridan and the sociological research company Prognoz-93 in May 1993 reveals that over 53% of those surveyed considered the economy to be "bad" or "very bad" and only 2.5% by contrast thought that it was "good" or "very good."[8] According to Shushkevich himself, however, writing during this same period, the economic crisis was a result in part of the high prices Belarus was being asked to pay for Russian raw materials and a rift in Parliament between deputies who were trying to analyze everything as professional politicians and those who repeated "senseless and ignorant slogans" denouncing the Bela Vezha accords that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[9] In other words, the large majority of former members of the Communist Party of Belarus impeded any attempts to reform the economy and would have preferred to turn the clock backward. There was little indication in the early 1990s that Belarus proposed to advance toward a market economy or the ways of the West.

This same point is illustrated by events in November 1993. Thus in the early part of the month, about 500 demonstrators gathered outside Parliament with placards stating "Down with the Pro-Russian Government!"[10] The protesters were referring to plans of the then Prime Minister Vyacheslau Kebich to promote a military and security union with Russia. Shushkevich supported these protests and called for the privatization of at least two-thirds of the economy, which had remained heavily state controlled.

[8] *Belorusskiy rynok*, No. 15, July 1993.
[9] *Interfax*, 10 December 1993.
[10] *Reuters*, 9 November 1993.

However, Shushkevich had no political backing, and was not in a position to enforce his policies through Parliament. One of the dilemmas of Belarus in this period was that of dual power. On paper, Shushkevich was the most important figure as the chairman of Parliament. In reality, the Cabinet of Ministers led by Kebich had the key role. This is one reason why the new Constitution of Belarus, issued in the spring of 1994 sought a way out of a constitutional dilemma by supporting the public demand that Belarus should opt for a presidential system. Shushkevich had found his path blocked regularly by the conservative majority in Parliament. The list of those criticized by the chairman as backing the controversial security agreement with Russia, thus threatening directly the independence of Belarus, included Kebich, Foreign Minister Pyotr Krauchanka, Defense Minister Paval Kazlouski, and several conservative deputies, including Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Myacheslau Hryb.[11] Pressure was put on Shushkevich to sign the CIS Collective Security Treaty, but the Chairman continued to maintain that the treaty violated the terms under which Belarus acquired independence.

Deputy Lukashenka, a former state farm chairman raised in the village of Shklou, Mahileu region, was a virtual nonentity among political leaders until entrusted with a parliamentary commission to deal with corruption. He responded to this task by issuing a series of accusations that encompassed the highest officials in the land of corruption, including both Kebich and Shushkevich. The latter, lacking support and having narrowly survived an earlier vote of non-confidence was accused of using state labor and materials to improve his home and dacha. The accusation was leveled by Lukashenka during a gathering of the Parliament of the 13th session, and evidently led to the collapse and hospitalization of Shushkevich from nervous tension. Though both leaders faced a vote of confidence on 26 January 1994, Kebich was able to muster enough support to survive, whereas Shushevich was defeated convincingly by 209 votes to 36, though the assembly was little more than half full. He was replaced as chairman by Hryb, who defeated two other contenders, Mikhail Marynich and Viktar Hanchar, both subsequent victims of the Lukashenka crackdown. By this time, Belarus was in such deep

[11] See Ustina Markus, "Conservatives Remove Belarusian Leader," draft research paper, OSI Archives, Budapest, Hungary, 9 February 1994.

economic difficulties that trade unions and political parties had threatened a nationwide general strike unless Kebich stepped down. His government was accused of being corrupt, pro-Communist, and hard-set against introducing free market reforms. By mid-February, Hryb managed to assuage the protests of some 3,000 demonstrators with a promise of early presidential elections. Plans for a mass national strike, masterminded by the unofficial trade union association led by Syarhey Antonchik, did not materialize.[12] However, the key question, given what was to follow, is what was the focus of public discontent? To what should one attribute the economic and political problems facing Belarus on the eve of the first presidential election? The country was clearly split as to the way forward. One school of thought favored a close association with Russia and adherence to the existing tight state control over the economy. Another maintained that the only way forward was belatedly to introduce the sort of reforms tried out in Russia and Poland, with a radical overhaul of the existing structure. Underlying this public rift was a general perception that corruption was rife and spreading, and thus at the heart of the economic predicament.

Another point is worth making at this juncture. The official opposition from 1990 to 1993 was the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) headed by Zyanon Paznyak. The BPF had held its Extraordinary Founding Congress in Vilnius in June 1989, which elected a ruling Soym and its administration. At that time, the BPF advocated the support of the "better forces of the CPSU" to bring about radical changes in all areas of public life. It thus supported Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of Perestroika, to improve society based on the principles of democracy, humanism, and social improvement, along with the "revival of the Leninist principles of national policy," and the real sovereignty of Belarus according to the constitution of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). The BPF supported radical economic reforms, economic independence, and full republican self-accounting. Another conference on 30 June and 1 July 1990 was held in Minsk, and agreed to adopt anti-Communism as a basic policy along with support for the state independence of Belarus. The Front advocated a complete takeover of former Party bases, and the end to the Communist monopoly over political activity. It also supported the

[12] Ibid, AP, 11 February 1994, and AFP, 15 February 1994.

development of the Belarusian language as the only official language of the future state, and focus on the victims of the Stalin period as well as the ramifications in Belarus of the Chernobyl disaster of April 1986.[13] The BPF to some extent mirrored Popular Fronts founded in other republics--especially the Baltic States--and advocated a clear alternative to the Communist platform. The government outlawed the Front from the outset, making reference to a history of nationalist collaboration with the German occupants during the Second World War and accusing it of anti-Russian or Russo-phobic sentiments. The results of this campaign would be evident later when the BPF formally became a political party in 1993.

By March 1994, the Hryb government had resolved to establish a presidential republic. Hryb maintained that if the motion to establish a presidency was blocked by the Parliament he would submit the question to a national referendum.[14] According to Viktar Hanchar, of the 346 elected deputies in the Parliament, 296 received ballots, and 288 took part in the vote on the question of issuing a new Constitution for Belarus. Overall, 266 voted to support the motion, 16 were opposed, and 6 deputies abstained.[15] Since the Constitution mandated a new executive presidency, then one must conclude that the new system had the backing of 2 out of 3 parliamentary deputies. This total was roughly in line with national opinion, as in the earlier poll cited from May 1993, almost 60% of respondents felt that the post of president must be introduced, 35.7% were opposed (much higher than the proportion of parliamentary deputies), and 4.8% did not respond. In that poll also, a narrow majority considered that it was not necessary to add the post of Vice-President, and 60.6% thought that the president should be elected by direct voting in secret ballots.[16] The new Constitution stipulated that the new head of state must be at least 35 years of age, a resident of Belarus for at least the preceding ten years, and would be elected for five years, but for no longer than two successive terms. A candidate could be nominated by a group of 70 deputies or 100,000 signatures from the general public. Parliament was given responsibility for announcing and holding presidential elections,

[13] *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, Nos. 4, 8, 9, 1990, and Nos. 1, 3, 4, 6, 1991.
[14] *Ostankino*, 2 March 1994.
[15] *Radyefakt*, 2 March 1994.
[16] *Belorusskiy Rynok*, No. 15, July 1993.

which "must be carried out" five years and two months after the incumbent president's term in office. For the elections to be valid the turnout had to be more than 50%, and that same figure was the criterion for outright victory. If the 50% was not acquired in the first round, then a second-round runoff was required involving the first and second-placed candidates. The president would form a government as the chief executive, but the dismissal of the Prime Minister and his deputies or the heads of the major ministries could not be undertaken without the approval of Parliament.[17]

Following the establishment of an executive presidency, the next question was who would run for the office. An earlier poll, with an unspecified number of respondents, and conducted in the immediate aftermath of the vote that removed Shushkevich for alleged corruption, came up with the following results to the question: Which leader could best extricate the country from its crisis?[18]

10.3%--Kebich
6.8%--Lukashenka
4.2%--Hryb
3.4%--Paznyak
0.8%--Shushkevich

It should be noted that these responses were provided before it was known that a new Constitution backing an executive presidency would be accepted, and at a time when Kebich had established the new position in the Cabinet of Ministers of State Secretary for National Security. About one-third of the respondents to this poll felt that the crisis could be overcome by intensifying the struggle against corruption and "mafia" elements. Hence the sudden emergence of the parliamentary deputy most associated with this campaign is not surprising. The question was whether such momentum could be sustained given the lack of other issues on this future candidate's agenda. The campaign to elect candidates provides little enlightenment on this question. Early candidates touted included

[17] *Interfax*, 3 March 1994.
[18] *Interfax*, 16 February 1994.

Shushkevich and Henadz Karpenka, leader of the People's Accord Party, mayor of Molodechna, who had been offered the post of Vice Premier with responsibility for economic reforms by Kebich in 1993. The Belarusian Scientific and Industrial Congress proposed the candidacy of Alyaksandr Sanchukouski, manager of the Horizont firm that produced color TV sets. The Popular Front appeared uncertain in early March whether to advance Paznyak as a candidate or to support Shushkevich in a "united democratic" vote. Lukashenka declared that he was ready to run if he could secure the backing of strong political forces. Initially it appeared he might have the support of the Popular Movement of Belarus, which consisted of 26 socialist-leaning political organizations led by Viktor Chikin, a leader of the Belarusian Communist Party.[19]

Just over a week later, it was reported that the largest parliamentary faction "Belarus" was prepared to support Sanchukouski, who claimed to embrace a centrist political position, supporting private property, economic integration with Russia, and "balanced and socially oriented reforms." By this time Lukashenka had jumped into the race officially. Dzmitry Bulakhou, chairman of the parliamentary commission on legislation was said to be the choice for Chairman of Parliament in the event of a Lukashenka victory, while the choice for Prime Minister would be Viktar Hanchar. Bulakhou announced that the Lukashenka campaign would steer clear from the political extremism of both the Communists and the BPF, but would back reforms that would bring about a "socially oriented *market economy*" in Belarus, taking advantage of its useful central geographical position. Rather than base his candidacy on the support of parliamentary deputies, Lukashenka would gather the 100,000 required signatures.[20] This bold pronouncement appeared to place Lukashenka in the market reforms camp. At this same time, a survey published by Interfax had revealed that over 50% of Belarusians supported the restoration of the Soviet Union, and 63.3% favored the reunion of Belarus with Russia, while 66% considered that Russian should be advanced to the position of second state language of Belarus. Whereas 31% supported a capitalist system, 41% preferred socialism. However, in response to another question, 54% wanted a market

[19] *Interfax*, 5 March 1994.
[20] *Interfax*, 14 March 1994.

economy, while 43% thought that a state-planned economic system was better.[21] The survey is useful in demonstrating that Lukashenka's somewhat ambivalent stance appeared to reflect the wishes of a majority of the population. Popular nostalgia for the Soviet past was combined with recognition that an improvement in living standards clearly required some commitment to change.

Meanwhile the Lukashenka camp wasted little time in smearing its rivals as mired in corruption. Ministers such as Koslouski and Krauchenka, who were earlier associated with Lukashenka as conservative elements, now denounced the "unprecedented lies, accusations, and slander" directed against them by Lukashenka. The statement, signed by several Cabinet members, is quite revealing:

> For a long time, the chairman of the provisional parliamentary commission against corruption, Aleksandr Lukashenko, has been intriguing the public by providing sensational exposures of several high-ranking officials. We find it quite logical that Lukashenko is planning to "open his bags" just before the beginning of the campaign for the election of the first Belarusian president.[22]

There was little to suggest, however, that the opportunistic election platform or the smear campaign would have an undue effect on the leading candidate in the elections, Vyacheslau Kebich. Indeed, Kebich appeared to have widespread support at all levels of society. On 18 April, the Confederation of Belarusian Manufacturers (CBM) announced that it would support Kebich, following a similar decision by the People's Movement, which embraced about thirty leftist parties and groups. The CBM united about 80% of government-controlled and private manufacturing firms. CIS Executive Secretary Ivan Korotchenka declared that he would not run for the presidency and that the "best man" for the position was clearly Kebich. By early May, Kebich had succeeded in gaining enough backing to run from both inside and outside Parliament, with over 100,000 signatures and over 150 deputies, more than double the figure required.[23] A

[21] *AFP*, 20 March 1994.
[22] *Interfax*, 29 March 1994.
[23] *Interfax*, 6 and 18 April, and 3 May 1994.

spokesperson for Shushkevich maintained that although each candidate was officially allotted 2.5 hours of time on TV and a further 2.5 hours on radio, along with a single report on the program in a republican newspaper, Kebich was already monopolizing both radio and television for his presidential campaign. Journalists working in these media ran the risk of losing their jobs if they ran programs supporting rival candidates for office. Though Hryb countered that a number of candidates, including Lukashenka, were using the Parliamentary podium for the same purpose, such a platform could hardly reach the same audience.[24] The question remains how Lukashenka could have convinced a clearly skeptical electorate that he was the best candidate to take over the country in a crisis situation, especially given his minimal experience and almost total lack of a viable campaign platform.

By the end of May, six out of the original nineteen contenders had been registered by the Central Election Commission. They can be ranked in order of votes gathered as followers:

1. Vyacheslau Kebich, 371,967 signatures and 203 deputies
2. Zyanon Paznyak, 216,855 signatures
3. Vasily Navikau (Communist Party), 183,834
4. Alyaksandr Lukashenka, 156,391
5. Stanislau Shushkevich, 123,552
6. Alyaksandr Dubka, 116,693

One of the interesting features of the campaign to collect signatures is that the democratic candidates, Paznyak and Shushkevich, had fared surprisingly well given the oppressive climate and the Kebich administration's virtual stranglehold on election coverage in the media. Indeed their combined total rivaled that of the Prime Minister, giving rise to questions what might have happened had the two candidates opted to unite their campaigns. An analysis published at this same time suggested that their programs were virtually identical: both candidates supported the full state sovereignty of Belarus; an

[24] *Interfax*, 29 April 1994.

economic (but not political or security) union with Russia; the rebirth of Belarusian culture; and the creation of a socially oriented market economy in the republic. However, according to this same analyst, both candidates had a significant disadvantage. In the case of Paznyak, it was his depiction in the media--particularly in Communist sources--as an extreme nationalist and even a Fascist; whereas in the case of Shushkevich, it was his recent ejection from office, despite the fact that in all other respects he was the most suitable and qualified candidate for the post of president. Lukashenka, on the other hand, relied on "cheap Populism" and though technically he was one of the three opposition candidates, he belonged more to what were termed "red landowners" than the national opposition.[25]

Every aspect of the campaign continued to favor Kebich. By mid-May he had amassed the sort of figures that would become routine during the presidential elections held later by Lukashenka. Over 400,000 people now supported his nomination, along with more than 200 deputies. Sanchukouski, with industrial backing and the largest parliamentary faction behind him, had opted to become Kebich's chief campaign manager. Running second was Zyanon Paznyak, whose team had gathered 230,000 signatures. Lukashenka was third with 177,000, but his support appeared to be evaporating. One report declared that 400 members of the Belaya Rus Slavic Assembly had withdrawn their support from this challenger because Lukashenka and his team had been talking about their opposition to policies of integration with Russia and a monetary union with Moscow. This was clearly at odds with Belarusian public opinion of the time, as a reported 68.5% in late May 1994 felt that the new president should support the agreement to unify the monetary systems of Russia and Belarus.[26] As this was the basic electoral platform of Kebich it appeared logical that the population would back him during the election. In late May and early June, understandably, the attention of the Kebich team was focused on Paznyak, as the closest rival and one with a completely antithetical platform. In other words, it could be portrayed as a quest to capture the hearts and minds

[25] Tadeush Skibinskiy, "Oshibka i izbranii prezidenta ravnosil'na samoubiystvu," *Nessi*, No. 20 (June 1994): 6.
[26] *Interfax*, 11 May, 18 May, and 24 May. Subsequently the figure of 400,000 was reduced to 371,957, and a total of 203 parliamentary deputies. Nevertheless, it was far in excess of other candidates.

of the Belarusian people through offering two very different roads for Belarus. Paznyak wished to look toward the West and away from the Communist past. Kebich preferred to turn to the traditional partner Russia, so it was critical that first, the position of Paznyak had to be undermined.

Thus Kebich alerted the public to the dangers allegedly posed by the leader of the Belarusian Popular Front. Belarus under Paznyak, he stated would be a country facing war and bloodshed because of territorial claims made on Russia, Lithuania, and Poland. "God save Belarus from the election of Zenon Poznyak [Zyanon Paznyak] to the post of president!" he declared.[27] An opinion poll released at the beginning of June indicated that Kebich had an overwhelming lead. By this time, Paznyak's chances of victory were said to be receding, as his share of popular opinion had declined to 4%. Lukashenka, Navikau, and Dubna were on the rise, but all hovering around that same mark. Shushkevich had dropped from an original figure of 9.8 to 7.1%. Kebich outlined by far the clearest electoral platform with five basic principles. These were as follows: a union with Russia that would be to the advantage of both states; the construction of an independent state through economic recovery and the "restoration of broken ties" (implicitly with Ukraine, Russia, and other former Soviet republics); market relations through reforms using producers rather than brokers; a merciless struggle against crime and corruption; and the dissemination of Christian and Belarusian moral values such as mutual respect and restraint. He noted that the elimination of customs duties with Russia carried out under his leadership had already dropped the prices of consumer goods by 15-20%, and from 1 June, custom-free bilateral trade had reduced the tariffs on fuel from Russia. Subsequently he called for the introduction of two state languages in the country: Belarusian and Russian, and considered that the issue would be best resolved by a national referendum.[28] Belarus had remained stable as an independent state because, it was reported, the Prime Minister had curbed all manifestations of nationalism. This triad of goals was the basis of his program: two state languages, monetary union with Russia,

[27] *Interfax*, 1 June 1994.
[28] On 26 January 1990, the 4th Session of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet accepted the law on languages of the Belarusian SSR, elevating Belarusian to the position of the sole state language. See Leanid Lych and Uladzimir Navitski, *Historyya kul'tury Belarusi* (Minsk: VP 'Ekaperspektyva', 1997), p. 438.

and eventual integration of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.[29]

Given the state of the campaign in June 1994, the question arises how one month later Lukashenka was to emerge as an overwhelming victor. The answer is unclear but there is one disarmingly simple possibility: Lukashenka purloined the Kebich platform, changed his own policies on union with Russia, and included in his campaign the issue of restoring law and order at the higher echelons of the state to supplement his reputation as the candidate intent on removing corruption from the ruling structures. Thus one finds Lukashenka in mid-May addressing the Russian Parliament, and calling on the parliaments of the three Slavic countries of the former USSR to issue a document that will unite their countries. This should have been done, he declared, at the Bela Vezha meeting of December 1991.[30] One can see also that the early policies of Lukashenka as president were based directly on the program offered by Kebich during the election, including a referendum that included the advancement of Russian as a state language. Did Lukashenka feel strongly about this issue? If so, he remained remarkably silent, but the key point is his awareness that the electorate would support such a proposal. His statement about Bela Vezha flies in the face of his future declaration that he was the only parliamentary deputy to vote against the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Lukashenka's alleged populism thus could be defined more precisely as a willingness to amend his beliefs--such as they were and are--to those supported by a majority of the electorate in order to win the election Still, the results of the first round of voting are instructive in other ways. They are shown in Table 1, Dubka having dropped out of the contest in the later stages:

Table 1: Official Results of the First Round of the 1994 Presidential Election[31]

Candidate	Percentage of Vote
Kebich	17.33
Lukashenka	44.82
Navikau	4.29
Paznyak	12.82
Shushkevich	9.91

[29] *Interfax*, 3 June 1994.
[30] *Interfax*, 18 May 1994.
[31] *Radyefakt*, 1 July 1994, 0700.

In the second round, a direct runoff between Lukashenka and Kebich, the results were released according to oblast:

Table 2: Official Results of the Second Round of the 1994 Presidential Election (percentages)[32]

Oblast	*Lukashenka*	*Kebich*
Mahileu	86.5	11.8
Brest	84.7	10.3
Minsk (Oblast)	82.4	12.2
Vitsebsk	80.0	15.0
Hrodna	78.1	12.6
Homel'	77.3	18.1
Minsk (city)	69.9	19.8

Notably in the first round the combined vote for the two democratic candidates (over 22%) would have put one of them into the runoff, thereby perhaps allowing a candidate from the future perennial opposition access to the official media for the following ten days. Kebich's demise was as complete as it was sudden. Not a single poll had predicted it and there has been no logical explanation of his fall other than references to the corruption of his government. Again, the answer that suggests itself is that the Kebich campaign lost its appeal as soon as Lukashenka took its program as his own, abandoning his earlier, "opposition" platforms such as the refusal to form a closer union and friendship with Russia. Paradoxically, policies that would later be identified exclusively with Lukashenka, such as focus on the Russian language and evolution toward rather than away from Russia did not originate with him. He even took credit for the cheaper energy prices and removal of tariffs that had been negotiated by Kebich toward the end of his tenure.

The 1994 presidential election was the only such election in the history of independent Belarus to take place on a democratic basis, albeit with some irregularities. It ended the political career of Kebich and heralded the presidency of an unknown outsider from the lower echelons of the former structure of Communist Belarus. As noted, the

[32] Ibid.

winner entered the contest with only a single issue at hand, namely that of eliminating corruption, and he used that subject to denounce virtually everyone of note in the government from Kebich to Shushkevich. Largely through insinuations that were never proven, he brought about the removal of Shushkevich from office, thereby reducing his chances of winning a vote as a candidate for the new presidency. He or his campaign team also surmised correctly what policies would be feasible and appealing, and gradually changed his platform to accommodate public interests, essentially by adopting most facets of the Kebich platform as his own. That he would do so suggests the primacy of expediency and desire for power over committed policies. When placed alongside the Prime Minister in a run-off, the electorate could hardly perceive two different visions for the future. They had become identical, and logically they opted for the political figure untainted with time in office and a period of economic hardship, namely Lukashenka. Even the democratic opposition, still led at least informally by the Belarusian Popular Front, was initially uncertain how to respond to the new president, and offered him a 100-day grace period to develop his policies without undue criticism. Lukashenka succeeded through policies of pragmatism and promises to establish a strict new order. He had evinced sufficient nostalgia for the past to appeal to the electorate and had avoided close association with the first post-independence regime. These facets of his rule--strong leadership and denunciation of the brief experiment of 1991-94--would remain in place for the next decade but would be accompanied by a third one: the negative experience of neighboring states who had experimented with liberalization and transition to a market economy (usually through shock therapy). Belarus could thus offer an alternative route to the future; one of close state control over all aspects of the economy.

Comparative Analysis

The political situation in the former USSR in the mid-1990s needs to be taken into consideration. Looking in particular at the three Slavic neighbors, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, certain features of their landscapes may be compared fruitfully. In the first place, all three countries had suffered a sharp downturn in the standard of living, associated in

the minds of many with the efforts--particularly in Russia--to adopt a shock therapy program to transform the economy. In each country, the popularity of the leader decreased accordingly. In Russia, by the middle of the decade, Boris Yeltsin's popularity had fallen to the point that few analysts expected him to be reelected in 1996. Ultimately he was to be rescued with the assistance and financial input of powerful oligarchs who had a vested interest in the longevity of his lax and increasingly corrupt regime and in 1996 he defeated a strong challenge from Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov.[33] In Ukraine, first president and former Secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine for ideology, Leonid Kravchuk, was defeated in the second round run-off by challenger Leonid Kuchma, the manager of an armaments factory. There was a regional dimension to this contest: Kravchuk, a Western Ukrainian lost a contest to a contender from the industrialized east that had been powerful in the Soviet era.[34] Thus in Belarus, the defeat of both former leaders, Shushkevich and Kebich, was hardly surprising. Shushkevich took the blame (at least in the eyes of the electorate) for the economic decline in the country and Kebich was identified with corrupt elements in the higher reaches of the Communist Party. Kuchma and Lukashenka were not associated to the same degree with the party leadership, though the former's previous position was much more powerful than that of his Belarusian counterpart, a state farm chairman and onetime KGB border guard.

These changes can be contrasted with the political situation in Central Asia and Kazakhstan, where the Soviet-era appointees generally remained in place until their death or designation of successor, often from their family. In Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev originally took over the political leadership in 1989, won the presidential election of 1991, and has been reelected with overwhelming margins in subsequent elections. As with Lukashenka in Belarus, he is now at liberty to run in an indefinite number of elections in the future. He has amassed great personal wealth, built himself a new capital in Astana and his state is regarded by monitoring agency Transparency International as "corrupt" with a 2006 rating of 2.6 (compared to 2.5 in Russia and 2.2 in

[33] See, for example, Chrystia Freeland, *Sale of the Century: Russia's Wild Ride from Communism to Capitalism* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 201-04.
[34] See, for example, Serhy Yekelchyk, *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 201-02.

Belarus where 5.0 is the minimum level at which a state is considered non-corrupt).[35] In later years, the analogies between Nazarbayev and Lukashenka have grown, though their countries are regarded very differently by Western powers. Nazarbayev is a welcome visitor to the Bush administration in Washington (visiting for example in September 2006), whereas Lukashenka and his chief officials are banned from traveling to the EU or the United States.[36] The ostensible reason for this phenomenon is Lukashenka's initial pro-Russian policy and openly anti-American stance. The United States has been depicted as an aggressive and dangerous power that plots against Belarus and wishes to engineer the downfall of its president. Lukashenka took careful note of the way Central Asian leaders consolidated and enhanced their power and to some extent applied the same procedures in Belarus. They include the promotion of a cult of personality around the person of a president, near total monopoly of the media, amendments to the Constitution, and the harassment, detention, and even physical elimination of political opponents. In this way, electoral successes need not be identified with economic, social, or political achievements but were dependent rather on the personal authority of the leader.

[35] http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781359.html. This report is mild compared with the 2005 report by Freedom House, which declared that "Although corruption is rampant at all levels of society, it has reached staggering proportions at the top of the hierarchy...." It noted also that Nazarbayev has used increased prosperity to "consolidate his authoritarian rule." See Jeannette Goehring and Amanda Schnetzer, eds. *Nations in Transit 2005* (New York, Washington, DC, and Budapest, 2005), pp. 305, 308.

[36] The original travel ban on Lukashenka by the EU was imposed in November 2002 by all members except Portugal. See *BBC* News, 19 November 2002. After the 2006 presidential elections, the US issued a travel ban on Lukashenka and other members of his government. See *RFE/RL Newsline*, 16 May 2006.

2. The Referendum of October 2004

Introduction

For ten years, the Lukashenka regime had remained firmly in place. The president extended his original five-year term in office by holding a referendum after a confrontation with Parliament in 1996. That referendum expanded the authority of the president while reducing Parliament (officially called the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus) from 260 deputies to a rump body of 110 members and establishing an upper chamber called the Council of the Republic with 64 members. In the spring of 1999, the opposition held a mock presidential election to draw attention to the fact that the term of Lukashenka's original mandate had now expired. Subsequently, the regime eliminated many of its more prominent opponents. Henadz Karpenka, chairman of the United Civic Party, died in mysterious circumstances in April 1999.[37] Another party leader and former Defense Minister Yury Zakharenka disappeared the following month. In September, former deputy chairman of the now dissolved Parliament of the 13th session, Viktar Hanchar (together with businessman Anatol Krasouski), was kidnapped on the streets of Minsk and has never been seen again. Other leaders had fled the country: Zyanon Paznyak had received political asylum in the United States in 1996; and the chairman of the former Parliament Syamon Sharetsky, legally the interim president had the president been impeached, made his way to Lithuania. The president ran for election again on 9 September 2001 (an event that received relatively little publicity because of the attack on the World Trade Center two days later). Though most polls suggested Lukashenka had a comfortable lead over his nearest challenger, Uladzimir Hancharyk, most international observers remained skeptical about his alleged total of over 75% of the votes in what the president described as a "beautiful and elegant victory."[38]

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[37] Karpenka's death has been regarded as a suspicious one in many opposition circles. See Charter 97, 15 March 2005 [www.charter 97.org].

[38] *SB-Belarus' Segodnya*, 11 September 2001. For a detailed account of these elections, see Uladzimir Padhol and David R. Marples, "The Dynamics of the 2001 Presidential Election," in Stephen White, Elena Korostoleva, and John Loewenhardt, ed. *Post-Communist Belarus* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), pp. 93-109.

Certain features of that campaign are worth noting since they are evident in subsequent campaigns. One was the holding of a popular assembly, called the "Second All-Belarusian Popular Congress" in Minsk on 18 May 2001, which sanctioned a program for the social and economic development of the country for the period 2001-2005. The first such congress had been held in 1996 before the November referendum by which Lukashenka amended the Constitution to strengthen his position. AS at that time, the role of the assembly was to illustrate that the regime would continue in power and had a popular mandate. The president gave a lengthy speech in which he announced impressive growth targets and a future average monthly salary of $250. In future election campaigns, the holding of the congress would be closer to the election date but as in 2001 its delegates would be selected by the authorities. Other notable aspects of the 2001 campaign were the opposition's success in accepting a united candidate, and Uladzimir Hancharyk's surprising success in the city of Minsk where even according to official figures he obtained 30.53% of the vote, compared to Lukashenka's 57.32%. Overall Hancharyk received 15.39% and was thus a distant second.[39] Though there are grounds to believe that the opposition remained at its strongest in the capital city, it would never again be permitted to receive such a high portion of the vote in any single region. On 13 September, the opposition staged a protest against the alleged falsification of elections results, attended by 5,000 people, and held in October Square,[40] which would be the focal point for the mass protests after the election of March 2006. After the election, Lukashenka thanked Putin for his support, but aside from Russia, none of the major industrial countries worldwide recognized the election as free and fair.

According to the Constitution (even in its amended form of late 1996), the president could not run for a third term. On 20 July 2004, however, Lukashenka gave the

[39] The president's alleged percentage of the vote was announced in *SB Belarus' Segodnya* on 11 September 2001. The overall totals for each candidate can be found in *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 11 September 2001. The breakdown of votes between regions and candidates was released by the Belarusian Embassy in the United States:
http://www.belarusembassay.org/elections2001, 10 September 2001.

[40] *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 13 September 2001. The editorial that accompanied these results declared that even if Hancharyk had won 75% of the votes, the Election Commission would still have reported a convincing victory for Lukashenka.

strongest hint that he might amend the Constitution again in order to seek a third term in office. He commented that working in the office of president was tiring, but that it was in this same role that he envisaged his future. He also expressed his hope that the new parliament would be limited to his supporters, signaling the eclipse of the small parliamentary opposition known as the Respublika group, which had already dwindled from an original 11 deputies to 5.[41] The key question for most analysts was not whether there would be a new referendum, but when. Thus on 7 September, Lukashenka announced that a referendum would be held on 17 October, the date of the parliamentary elections. Though many analysts had predicted such a decision, its timing was uncertain. Lukashenka's announcement coincided with two international events that have monopolized world attention: the hostage taking at the school in Beslan and the third anniversary of 9-11 in the United States. Further, these events were co-opted as reasons behind a decision that had in reality been long in the making. Addressing the public at a staged rally in Independence Square, the president revealed that the referendum question was to be worded as follows:

> Do you allow the first President of the Republic of Belarus, Aleksandr Grigoryevich Lukashenko to participate in the presidential election as a candidate for the post of the President of the Republic of Belarus and do you accept Part 1 of Article 81 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus in the wording that follows: 'The President shall be elected directly by the people of the Republic of Belarus for a term of five years by universal, free, equal, direct and secret ballot?'[42]

In short, the president had decided to alter the current Constitution (already substantially amended to enhance his powers according to a previous referendum in November 1996).

Following his announcement of a referendum on 7 September, Lukashenka proceeded to paint a picture of a republic with a revived and thriving economy, rising wages and living standards—"all of Belarus looks like an enormous construction site"—and secure from the sort of terrorist horrors that had plagued neighboring Russia. In ten years, he added, no Belarusian had been a victim of a terrorist act or military

[41] It was removed altogether after the 2004 parliamentary elections.
[42] Charter 97, 7 September 2004 [www.charter97.org].

conflict. Lukashenka declared that he was afraid of dropping the "fragile vessel" of Belarus that he had looked after so carefully. The announcement was immediately given backing on Belarusian television stations. Chair of the Central Election Committee, Lidziya Yarmoshyna stated that "Lukashenka's question" was "legitimate and it does not contradict either the Electoral Code or the Constitution."[43] On Belarusian Television, a Russian cosmonaut, Svetlana Savitskaya, commented, "The people of Belarus will decide everything for themselves no matter what different politicians, first and foremost American politicians and senators, will say in the mass media. They don't like anything: they don't like Belarus, they don't like Russia; and they don't like the fact that we want to be closer and create a union state."[44] Plainly, however, the decision had received very mixed and often negative reaction in the country. The crowd in the Independence Square notably failed to applaud the announcement. Political analyst Alyaksandr Feduta remarked on the nebulousness of the question, i.e. that there are really two questions in one, and people might answer "yes" to the first question and "no" to the second. He added that the Constitution specifically prohibits a referendum on presidential elections and that the first step should have been a referendum to change the article in the Constitution.[45]

Yet the joint parliamentary election and referendum campaign in Belarus was well under way. In mid September, the president outlined his platform to students at the Brest State Technical University. He had developed three main themes for the campaign: the nature of the presidency; the economic performance of Belarus under his leadership; and the so-called "Belarusian path" of close cooperation and partnership with Russia according to principles devised in the Soviet era. According to official accounts, the president spoke with the students for 4.5 hours rather than the designated two. It was pointed out that the talk had been arranged more than a year ago, and that the president had already spoken this year at the main universities in Minsk. Lukashenka declared in his speech that the result of the referendum "would be the best and most objective appraisal" of the work of his government, and that "only the people" and not the

[43] *ONT*, 2100, 9 September 2004.
[44] *Belarusian Television*, 2200, 9 September 2004.
[45] *Komsomol'skaya pravda v Belorussii*, 9 September 2004.

opposition parties could properly appraise the results.[46] The referendum, therefore, in the view of the president, was less about amending the Constitution than assessing the ten-year record of his government. It was in effect a trial presidential election.

If he was to be supported in the referendum, stated the president, then he would work with "redoubled energy" prior to the presidential elections. As for his position, he added, it should not be seen as that of an emperor (tsar), but as exhausting and very severe work, the "most difficult in the state." If another candidate should run for the post and understands this situation, then that would be good, but if the person was to be more concerned with his own ambitions, not comprehending what would await him, then this would be unfortunate.[47] It was not difficult to deduce from such a comment that potential contenders for the position were being dismissed as incompetent even at this early stage. The president elaborated his "Belarusian model" of development, which arose not from Cabinet discussions but from the "experience of Belarusian life" and the creation of the independent state. Ten years ago, he noted, the average wage was $20-$30 per month and inflation had reached a yearly level of 2,000%. There were protests in the street, and children did not have enough food to eat. Corruption, privatization, and the division of people's property were in evidence everywhere. Today, on the other hand, the economy had practically recovered—90% of Belarusian factories were working "normally." The economy was also one practically without external debts, observed the president, and real income in 2003 exceeded that of 1995 by three times. By the end of 2004, the average monthly wage would be $250, and by 2010, it would have risen to $750. Pensions and grants had also risen by three times during the present year.

Concerning state policy, Lukashenka pointed out that Belarus to date had not turned toward Europe because "Belarus was never part of Western culture and the Western lifestyle." Ten years ago, he maintained, the electorate overwhelmingly voted him into office to protect the Belarusian way of life and to support the union with Russia. In his view, there was no other choice, since if Belarus turned away from Russia it would

[46] *SB-Belarus' Segodnya*, 24 September 2004.
[47] http://www.president.gov.by, 23 September 2004, & ff.

be cut off from its sources of raw material and the country with which it was most closely linked during the existence of the USSR. Even then, it was obvious that if he was to be permitted to run for president, he would likely achieve electoral and referenda success by monopolizing the media, anathematizing the opposition, and harassing and persecuting opponents as he had done in the past. However, his decision to make his announcement on 7 September appeared to be both premature and calculated. First, there was a significant gap between official figures on improved living standards and the reality, particularly outside the city of Minsk. Second, the exploitation of Beslan demonstrated above all that the president lacked a legitimate reason to continue in office.

The Opposition's Situation

The opposition had, somewhat typically, split into two main camps to contest the parliamentary elections of fall 2004. The largest group, formed mainly on the initiative of Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party UCP), called 5-Plus combined five opposition parties: the UCP, the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), the Social Democratic Party led by Stanislau Shushkevich, the Party of Labor (officially defunct but continuing to operate), and the Party of Communists, as well as over 200 NGOs and smaller groups. The 5 Plus would contest every seat in the scheduled parliamentary election, but was still not well known on a national level. Mikalay Statkevich, leader of the Social Democratic Party "Naradnaya Hramada" headed a Euro-Coalition that perceived Belarus's future as a member of the EU (recently the United Civic Party also embraced an EU future for Belarus as had consistently the BNF). The survey conducted by the Minsk-based Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies in June 2004 (NISEPI) did suggest that there was a new pool of contenders for the Belarusian presidency. However, at that point, the electorate had remained unconvinced that any of the individual challengers could mount a realistic alternative to the incumbent president.

The poll, part of a quarterly series, indicated that the population of Belarus was uninterested in issues such as the independence of the country and the collapse of the

"national culture," or relative threats from Russia or the United States, and was preoccupied with material issues, such as the rising costs of living, unemployment, crime, and law and order. Thus to the question: which was more important: the improvement of the economic situation or the country's independence; 73.7% opted for the former issue, and only 19.2% the latter. However, the questions pertaining to political views provide interesting and in some respects contradictory results. A clear majority (50.9%) opposed the initiative of the president to hold a referendum on a third term. One response indicated that if there were a candidate who could run against Lukashenka in the next presidential election and win, then 56.4% of the respondents would vote for such a candidate. Yet respondents were unconvinced that any of the candidates who were likely to step forward in 2004 could pose a serious challenge. These potential candidates were significantly different from those of September 2001. At that time, the candidates included initially Syamon Domash, Uladzimir Hancharyk, and the Liberal Democratic Party leader, Syarhey Haydukevich. Hancharyk's candidacy led to the withdrawal of Domash and the non-candidacy of leading opposition activists, such as Vintsuk Vyachorka, leader of the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front; Stanislau Shushkevich, former parliamentary chairman and leader of the Social Democratic Party, and Anatoly Lyabedzka, chairman of the United Civic Party. Now several new names had come to the fore.

To the question "For which of the potential candidates for president of Belarus would you vote, and which would you oppose?" the results were as shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Results of the NISEPI Poll of June 2004 (percentages)

Candidate	*For*	*Against*	*Don't Know*
A. Lukashenka	37.0	47.2	15.8
A. Klimau	18.2	53.5	28.3
A. Lyabedzka	15.5	53.5	31.0
M. Marinich	15.0	55.4	29.6
A. Vaytovich	14.6	53.6	31.8
V. Frolau	12.0	55.6	32.4
N. Statkevich	11.8	54.7	33.5
V. Lyavonau	10.4	60.6	29.0
A. Tozik	8.1	62.3	29.0

The main conclusion to be drawn from the table above was the relatively poor showing of potential candidates from traditional political parties. Only Lyabedzka of the United Civic Party appeared to be a viable candidate. Others, such as Shushkevich, Vyachorka or the exiled leader of the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, Zyanon Paznyak, did not figure at all. Similarly, from the Respublika group of deputies in the Parliament, only Frolau appeared on the list. Aside from Klimau, most of the leading candidates were very senior members or former members of the ruling structure. Who were these new people? Marinich (aged 64), who had recently been arrested, was a career diplomat who had served as Belarus ambassador in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland, as well as president of an association called Business Initiative. Vaytovich (aged 66) was a former president of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences and the current chairman of the Council of the Republic. Like Shushkevich, he was a renowned and decorated physicist. Tozik (aged 55) had the background of an historian, as well as a major general in the army. He had served as Chairman of the Committee for State Control since 2000. Lyavonau (Leonov) (aged 66), was a former Minister of Agriculture and Food Production, who had received several public reprimands from Lukashenka during his term of office and had been then arrested on charges of theft in 1999, but served only one year of his term of 4 years' confinement. Klimau, aged 38, represented a different generation, and had been a fierce opponent of Lukashenka for several years. A businessman and deputy of the Parliament of the 13th session, he had been arrested and severely beaten for his opposition to the referendum of November 1996, and arrested again in 2000 (his 7-year term was reduced by an amnesty in 2002), and freed last year. Earlier, he served in the Ministry of Internal Affairs (1983-91).

The survey measured each candidate individually against Lukashenka in a potential run-off election for president. While support for the incumbent president was relatively stable between 34 and 36%, the candidates fared as follows:

Klimau	18.5 %
Marinich	15.8 %
Vaytovich	14.9 %
Lyavonau	11.8 %
Tozik	8.3 %

Curiously no survey was taken of the potential runoff support for Lyabedzka. However, one message seemed plain. The public was unlikely to support any of the so-called traditional opposition candidates, long maligned by the official media. Support for the president, while strong, was not particularly stable. On the whole, however, the electorate would tend to support the incumbent figure in order to ensure that a relatively secure environment persisted in Belarus. Lukashenka had learned his lessons well from previous elections, and indeed his intent was to exploit these events to consolidate further his power. His policy was not precisely "divide and conquer" but it was certainly in his interests to keep the opposition divided. The plethora of small political parties seemed to ensure that splits rather than any kind of united front would prevail.

On the other hand, Lukashenka's referendum announcement served to unite the opposition. On 8 September, in a declaration signed by all opposition party leaders in Belarus, the opposition announced the uniting of "democratic forces of Belarus" against the cynical decision of the president to exploit popular grief at the events in Russia. The statement asserted that further rule by Lukashenka beyond 2006 would lead to the worsening of economic conditions and complete international isolation of the republic. It pointed out also that "the absolute majority of citizens of Belarus" were opposed to an extension of the president's term of office,[48] making reference to a poll by the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys in May, which revealed that 51% of respondents opposed changes to the Constitution. From 6 to 16 September there was a frantic period of activity in Belarus as candidates applied to the Central Election Commission to be registered for the 17 October election campaign to the House of Representatives. Though all opposition parties except for the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front had decided to enter the contest, in contrast to the situation in 2000, many key opposition figures failed to get registered because of technicalities while others were subjected to harassment and intimidation. The participation of the opposition parties nonetheless changed the nature of the election campaign. In Brest region, which had the second largest number of candidates for seats, 15 candidates were from the Liberal Democratic Party, 11 from the Social Democrats (Naradnaya Hramada), 10 from the Belarusian

[48] *Narodnaya volya*, 10 September 2004.

Popular Front, and 8 from the Party of Communists.[49] The social index of the candidates indicated a high proportion of white-collar workers and professionals. Over 100 entrepreneurs and businessmen submitted applications, along with over 150 representatives from public health, social services, education, and culture. Sixty-four candidates were described as "young contenders."[50]

However, very few oppositionists managed to be appointed to the Commission itself—-not one of 473 candidates to the CEC from the United Civic Party, for example, was accepted.[51] Also, there were various reports suggesting that the campaign had not been conducted fairly. In Hrodna district, Tadeusz Gavin, founder of the Union of Poles in Belarus, maintained that members of the local council, the district electoral commission, and a militiaman disseminated information to discredit his candidacy and prevented him from acquiring the necessary number of signatures.[52] The Belarusian Popular Front maintained that three of its candidates had been dismissed from their jobs, two schoolteachers and a sanatorium worker. Militia in Zhlobin confiscated the computer belonging to the head of the election campaign of Marat Afanasyev (United Civic Party), on the grounds that it was a "stolen computer." On 14 September, militiamen broke into the office of parliamentary deputy and Respublika activist Syarhey Skrebets, confiscating about 1,000 copies of a report on his activities as a deputy.[53] The authorities also took steps to ensure that several prominent opponents of President Lukashenka would not run in this campaign. A well-known television commentator, Zinaida Bandarenka, was not registered because she had submitted information that listed her pension as 20 rubles (less than one cent) lower than the reality. Former Chairman of the Supreme Soviet (12th session) Myacheslau Hryb failed to be registered because he did not mention his shares in the Minsk Watch Factory, even though no profits had been accrued in the past decade. Skrebets reportedly failed to mention that he had been a founder of two companies, neither of which has been in business for several years.[54]

[49] *Svobodnye novosti*, 16-22 September 2004.
[50] *Respublika*, 14 September 2004.
[51] http://www.ucpb.org, 9 September 2004.
[52] *Svobodnye novosti*, 16-22 September 2004.
[53] *Narodnaya volya*, 16 September 2004.
[54] *Komsomol'skaya pravda v Belarusi*, 18 September 2004.

Even seasoned campaigners found their path to the election barred. Former parliamentary leader Stanislau Shushkevich was rejected by the CEC when it was found that the headquarters of his party were located not in Pushkin electoral district, as he had stated, but in Masyukov district. Deputy leader of the BNF, Yury Khadyka, was turned down because his party headquarters reportedly did not send documents to the Commission in response to an inquiry. The Department of Justice then carried out an investigation and found other problems with his candidacy. The Central Election Commission claimed that the figures cited for military pension and deputy's salary of General Valery Frolau, head of Respublika, were misreported. Frolau declared that he would sue those who brought him "moral harm" and that he intended to return to Hrodna and collect the documents again.[55] Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party compared the removal of candidates from his party from the campaign as like chopping off a limb without an anesthetic, noting that his party had suffered "enormous losses" of its brightest candidates. Of 59 potential candidates put forward by the party, 32 were rejected, and in the majority of cases, according to the party's web site, for "absurd" reasons.[56] By 17 September, with the closure of registration, almost 50% of the declared deputies had been refused registration, including Alyaksandr Bukhvostau, head of the disbanded Belarusian Labor Party, Shushkevich, Khadyka, Fralou, Uladzimir Parfenovich, former Olympic champion and Respublika member, and many others.[57] The authorities thus responded to the unprecedented interest of the opposition in an election campaign by eliminating many of the serious contenders at the registration stage. Belarusian Television reported on September 17 that 359 candidates would contest the 110 seats, of which 38 were from the Liberal Democratic Party, 26 from the United Civic Party, 21 from the Communists, 24 from the BPF, and 21 from the Social Democratic Party.[58] The authorities continue to insist that the parliamentary election was "a free expression of the people's will."[59] They ensured, however, that the choice that the electorate would have on October 17 would be much more limited than it should be.

[55] *Minskiy kur'yer*, 18 September 2004.
[56] *Narodnaya Volya*, 18 September 2004 and http://ucpb.org, 17 September 2004.
[57] http://www.charter97.org, 17 September 2004.
[58] *Belarusian Television ("Panarama"),* 17 September 2004.
[59] *SB-Belarus' segodnya*, 16 September 2004.

Meanwhile, not everything went according to plan for Lukashenka either. In early October 2004, one of his most bitter rivals, General Fralou, initially refused registration as a candidate for a parliamentary seat, had the decision overturned and announced that he would run in Minsk as a candidate for the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Naradnaya Hramada) (BSDP-NH).[60] Several candidates emphasized the link between the parliamentary election and the referendum. M.V. Statkevich, for example, leader of the BSDP-NH, published his program as a potential deputy and noted that the two-term rule for president had been used by Western democracies with good reason: every president must understand that after 10 years he must step down again and "become one of us." He stressed that every candidate should state his/her position on the referendum. If a candidate would not give a direct answer to such a question, then he/she should not be trusted.[61]

The Public Response

By all accounts, the Belarusian public received the announcement of the referendum skeptically. According to one account, it had divided society. Whereas official propaganda painted an image of a republic "glowing with joy and happiness" the reality was very different. The First Secretary of the Party of Communists of Belarus, Syarhey Kalyakin, thus commented: "The referendum must be constitutional, i.e. it is necessary [for President Lukashenka] to obtain support of more than 50% of all Belarusian residents who are eligible to vote. This is more than seven million people. It is clear that neither Lukashenka nor the power he carries enjoy such popularity among the voters." Kalyakin maintained that Lukashenka could not win such an election honestly because he lacked public support, but he was afraid to lose as it would signify the end of his political career. Syarhey Alfer, a deputy chairman of the United Civic Party, considered the announcement of the referendum tantamount to spitting in the eye of the Belarusian people and in violation of a number of laws. The president was declaring that he would

[60] *Narodnaya volya*, 28 September 2004.
[61] *Minskiy kur'yer*, 5 October 2004.

rule for as long as he wished.[62] The regime bolstered its announcement with a poll taken by a hitherto unknown analytical centre called "Ekoom." Respondents were asked for whom they would vote if a presidential election were to be held in August 2004, to which 66.5% declared they would back Lukashenka, 3.5% stated "another candidate," 2.5% would be against all candidates, and 25.9% were undecided. A second question, clearly framed to deride the opposition, was "What awaits the country if a representative of the opposition should be elected president," to which the possible alternatives and responses were:[63]

I am uncertain:	38.0 %
Political chaos:	35.4 %
Collapse and corruption of the economy:	23.0 %
Prosperity:	2.1 %
Nothing will change:	1.5 %

The timing of this survey with the decision announcing a referendum appeared suspicious to many observers. In an article entitled "For whom do the Ekoom analysts work?" Dr. Leonid Mikheichik pointed out that the figures provided by the Novak and Gallup organizations were completely different from those publicized by Ekoom. Novak indicated that 53% of all potential voters opposed the question concerning the annulment of the limitations to the president's term of office. The Novak organization's reliability, in his view, was confirmed by standard questions about the economic situation in Belarus (46.2% considered it satisfactory, 32.4% poor or very poor) and the political situation (61.8% placid, 20.3% tense), which were obviously accurate. Ekoom was thus "another unattractive phenomenon in our society," i.e. an organization that had been established by the government to support its position.[64] In an article of early October 2004, Elena Novikova provided the results of a survey conducted by the Russian Analytical Centre, run by Yury Levada. To the question: "Do you allow the first president of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka to participate as a candidate in the presidential elections and do you accept Article 82 of the Constitution in the revised formulation," only 47.5% answered "yes," 37% said "no," 9.7% found it "difficult to say," and 5.8% refused to

[62] Cited in *Svobodnye novosti*, 16-22 September 2004, pp. 1 and 3.
[63] *Komsomol'skaya pravda v Belorussii*, 15 September 2004, p. 19.
[64] *Belorusskiy rynok*, 27 September 2004, p. A6.

answer. Further only 39% declared that they would vote for Lukashenka if the elections were held that day. To Novikova, these results were ominous for the incumbent president since he required some 75-80% of backing from those who actually voted in order to gather 50% of support from voters on the lists. Over 40% of those polled felt that new politicians must come to power in the country.[65]

The Staging of the Referendum

One of the features of the referendum of October 2004 was that it was held concomitantly with a parliamentary election. The importance of this factor can hardly be overestimated in that the elections were regarded as a forerunner to the presidential elections that would be held subsequently (the date was not known at this time). Alleged infringements of electoral procedure were reported from the outset of the 2004 referendum process. Although the early voting on 12 October was intended only for those who would not be able to participate on the 17th, radio, television, and even public transport carried demands for people to vote early. One account indicated that on bus routes in Minsk, a voice informed passengers over the public speaker system that "anyone could take part" in pre-term voting.[66] Parents received invitations to schools from harassed teachers, where they were informed that it was necessary to vote ahead of time. The teachers themselves supervised the voting. A teacher in Leninskiy Raion (Minsk) commented that she would lose 50% of her bonus if at least half of all the parents of children in her class did not vote.[67] Evidently, a very large proportion of the electorate cast its vote in the advance poll rather than on 17 October.

An observer from Azerbaijan revealed that, on the day of the election, portraits of Lukashenka were prominent in the polling stations and that Belarusian Television constantly played reels demanding that voters support the referendum motion, without any reference whatsoever to the possibility of a “No” vote. The Chairman of the United Civic Party, Anatol Lyabedzka, visited Polling Station 4 in Minsk and noted that elderly

[65] *Narodnaya volya*, 6 October 2004.
[66] *Komsomol'skaya pravda v Belorussii*, 12 October 2004.
[67] Ibid, 15 October 2004.

citizens who came to the station to vote early were given ballot papers on which a "Yes" vote was already marked.[68] Belarusian Television constantly denounced opposition leaders during the campaign. It commented, for example, that Andrei Sannikou, who headed the Charter 97 agency, was a close associate of Zbigniew Brzezinski and that his patrons had assigned him the same role as his "friends and colleagues" Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia and Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine. "But there will be no revolution in Belarus."[69] The Soviet theme emerged again on Belarusian Television with an attack on the December 1991 Bela Vezha agreement as one that destroyed the army leaving 240,000 troops demoralized and, leaving society confused and disoriented. During this program, opposition leader Stanislau Shushkevich was featured as the person responsible for this situation. During his time, it was pointed out, people were ashamed to wear a uniform, but now "it is [once again] a great honor." The Union with Russia, implicitly a continuation of the Soviet legacy, is "the guarantee of our life,"[70] against the threat of NATO on the western border.

These then were the themes with which Lukashenka intended to win the 17 October referendum. The electorate was asked to set aside constitutional issues and accept the referendum as the most democratic form of decision-making. Moreover, it was advised to vote less on the issue of a third term for Lukashenka than the government's alleged record, bearing in mind that alternative candidates were likely to restore the "chaos" of a previous era and move the country away from its Russian links. The speech to the students, however, illustrated above all the president's static political outlook. The Belarusian population, by contrast, had evolved from one nostalgic for the Soviet Union in 1993 (a 55% positive rating) to one that was clearly negative toward it by the summer of 2004 (a 39.5% positive rating).[71] The issue of union with Russia and the form it might take by then had elicited strong doubts as to the wisdom of such a path. Yet the nature of the Lukashenka regime had isolated the republic and left him with few alternatives.

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[68] http://www.charter97.org, 17 October 2004.
[69] *Belarusian Television*, 9 October 2004.
[70] *CTV, RenTV,* 24 September 2004.
[71] http://www.iiseps.by, June 2004.

In early October 2004, Lukashenka's position nonetheless seemed strong. The Center of Sociological and Political Studies at the Belarusian State University, headed by the respected sociologist David Rotman, conducted a survey in 70 towns and villages, which revealed that 68% of citizens felt that Lukashenka should be allowed to run for a third term with 17.8% opposed.[72] At this same time, even more optimistic figures were provided by the hitherto unknown but clearly government-backed organization, "Ekoom," and government supporters were increasingly citing these statistics to counter more gloomy surveys.[73] Yet one week later, Minsk analysts saw that Lukashenka was in danger of losing the October referendum. There were several claims from journalists that Lukashenka could not win the referendum by honest means. In this same period, another experienced analyst, Pavel Sheremet, noted the receding demographic basis of Lukashenka's support, "The percentage of Lukashenka's support among the older sectors of society is about five times more than the 18-35 year group." He concluded that the less educated the voter, the more likely he/she was to vote for the incumbent president. Lukashenka "represented the past." He also believed that Russian President Vladimir Putin would not forgive Lukashenka for the indiscretion of exploiting the Beslan tragedy to justify the decision to hold the referendum.[74] Despite these pre-referendum speculations, the official results of the polls on 17 October provided the president with a resounding victory. Quite naturally, aside from representatives of state structures, few people accepted them as valid. According to official reports, the turnout for the election was 89.7% (beer and sausages were provided to voters at cut-rate prices); and 77.3% voted to allow Lukashenka to run again, in effect, removing limitations on his tenure in office. The sensation that some people wanted, stated Dmitriy Kryat in *Belarus' Segodnya*, "has not occurred."[75] The Chair of the Election Commission, Lidziya Yarmoshyna, referred to the result as "an elegant victory,"[76] echoing Lukashenka's own comment after his victory in the presidential election of 2001.

The result of the referendum belied almost every opinion poll, whether

[72] *Respublika*, 25 September 2004.
[73] *Belorusskaya gazeta*, 27 September 2004.
[74] *Narodnaya volya*, 2 October 2004.
[75] *SB-Belarus' Segodnya*, 19 October 2004.
[76] http://www.charter97.org, 16 October 2004.

conducted by the authorities or by organizations from outside Belarus. In a survey conducted in late September, the Levada Center in Moscow found that no more than 37% of those polled intended to back the changes to the constitution, yet the president required the support of more than 50% of the entire electorate for victory. At the time, only 60% of the electorate declared its intention to participate in the referendum. An exit poll by the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys suggested a "yes" vote of 48.4%.[77] Most analysts concluded that the authorities had largely engineered the results of the referendum. Commenting on the website of Charter 97, Aleh Manayeu, director of the Independent Institute for Social, Economic, and Political Studies, stated that the exit poll carried out by the Gallup Baltic Service on 12-17 October interviewed almost 19,000 people and that the margin of error could not have exceeded one percentage point. That poll, as noted, indicated that only 48.4% of all eligible voters supported the referendum motion to allow Alyaksandr Lukashenka to run for a third term as president (the official result was 77.3%).[78] Rarely in the past had the gap between the official and exit poll results been so wide. Similarly, the parliamentary races, which saw the election of 108 out of 110 deputies, were also conducted amid violations. One account indicated the presence of police officers in the voting rooms, the availability of cheap alcohol, and students being forced to vote in early polls. In one Homel' region, polling station chairs announced the results only after conferring with the district administration chief.[79] The referendum, however, was more critical for the future of the country. Lukashenka could now prepare for the 2006 election, having once again amended the constitution, but having convinced few people that he had a genuine mandate.

[77] *Associated Press*, 18 October 2004.
[78] http://www.charter97.org, 5 November 2004.
[79] *Interfax*, 22 October 2004.

3. The Opposition between the Referendum and the 2006 Elections

The national and international consternation (only some CIS countries and Russia declared the results “fair and "transparent") over the improbable victory of Lukashenka on the October referendum overshadowed the parliamentary election campaign, the official results of which were finalized only on 22 October. Not a single opposition figure won a seat in the new parliament, with 107 deputies out of 110 elected. Forty-seven had served in the previous assembly. Of the 107 deputies, only 12 were representatives of political parties: eight from the Communist Party, three from the Agrarian Party, and one Liberal-Democrat. Two districts held a second round of voting on 31 October, and in one--Hrodna District 52–-there was a repeat election as neither candidate could muster sufficient votes.[80] The referendum was followed by several days of public protests by the opposition in central Minsk. Opposition leaders suggested different strategies to adopt in the wake of the election and the international reaction to it. Several analysts suspected that the parliamentary results had been contrived. The most prominent deputy was Syarhey Haidukevich, a presidential candidate in 2001 and the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, one of the largest parties in Belarus. He had changed his allegiance openly. He received the backing of the pro-government newspaper *Minskiy kuryer* and made an open appeal to the electorate to support Lukashenka at the referendum. A former member of the United Civic Party, Uladzimir Kruk, suspended his membership before winning a seat.[81] Olga Abramova, head of the Belarusian "Yabloko" party was an independent voice, but she had always steered clear of the opposition. She was also a member of the former parliament.

After initial public protests, several opposition politicians provided their views on future strategy. Alyaksandr Dabravolsky, deputy chairman of the United Civic Party, announced the beginning of a civic campaign to nominate a single candidate for the presidential election of 2006, and maintained that the 5-Plus group would continue to operate and attract other organizations. Similarly, Alyaksandr Vaitovich of the civic

[80] *SB-Belarus Segodnya*, 19 October 2004.
[81] *Belorusskiy rynok*, 25-31 October 2004.

initiative "For Fair Elections" believed that the regime would start to act more ruthlessly against opponents after the referendum, citing the brutal assault on journalist Pavel Sheremet, and that the opposition must unite and elaborate a common strategy. Political analyst Andrei Kazakevich maintained that the regime's legitimacy had been undermined and that political campaigns should be continued, but without resorting to public demonstrations on the streets. Zyanon Paznyak, the exiled leader of the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, stated that the violations of the law should be compiled and given to international organizations. He declared that whereas the regime should be isolated, Belarus as a whole should not be so treated. He also believed, as his party's boycott of the elections demonstrated, "a struggle that uses elections is finished forever."[82] The masses also responded to the situation. Events in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan (the “color revolutions”) clearly affected the traditional "Independence Day" demonstration in Minsk on 25 March, when the Belarusian authorities reacted with a fearsome display of force and intimidation along the central street of the capital city. The march, dubbed the "Day of Freedom," was organized by former parliamentary deputy (Supreme Soviet of the 13th session) and former political prisoner Andrei Klimau. His initial plan was to hold a demonstration that would attract up to 500,000 people in the main October Square in Minsk, which holds the buildings of the parliament and Minsk city council. The authorities had prohibited public demonstrations around government buildings, such as this square and the area around the president's residence.

Initially, however, only several hundred people arrived in the square, which was immediately surrounded by OMON troops in full riot gear. The troops ordered the demonstrators to disperse with the warning: "Physical force will be applied if participants do not obey these orders!" Those with flags (mainly the white-red-white "national" flag that was removed as the national flag following a referendum in April 1995 and was now banned, but also EU flags) and leaflets urging an end to the Lukashenka regime were quickly removed and the demonstrators were forced out of the square and onto the main thoroughfare of Skaryna Avenue.[83] Here the demonstration reportedly increased in size

[82] *Nasha niva*, 22 October 2004.
[83] *Narodnaya volya*, 26 March 2005.

to around 2,000 people, and the situation became violent at times. About ten protesters were initially arrested, later the number rose to over 20. Along Skaryna Avenue, troops lined both sides of the road from October Square to the GUM department store, forcing the protesters into narrow swathes that blocked the entrances to several stores, including the central McDonald's. The crowd shouted, "Long live Belarus!" "Freedom!" and "Down with Lukashenka!"[84] On Lenin Street, troops attacked some individuals, beating them with rubber truncheons, apparently after several demonstrators started to throw snowballs at them. Incensed by this response, the troops charged the crowd, hitting people with rubber batons. In nearby Svaboda Park, Klimau finally delivered a brief speech, demanding an end to the detention of political prisoners, and he reminded the assembled of those who had disappeared at the hands of the authorities, particularly the former deputy chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Viktar Hanchar, the former Interior Minister Yury Zakharenka, businessman Anatol Krasouski, and cameraman Dzmitry Zavadski. The troops dispersed this meeting after some ten minutes. The last of the demonstrators reassembled near the Sports Palace, mingling with a crowd that was to attend a wrestling tournament. Altogether, the 25 March protests lasted about two hours.

The main opposition newspaper, *Narodnaya volya*, carried two appeals to the population on the following day. One was from Ivonka Survilla, head of the Rada of the "government-in-exile," who resided in Quebec, Canada. She called for the creation of a free and democratic Belarus. The other appeal, from the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada, outlined the historical ideals of the Belarusian Social Democrats and demanded that 25 March become a state holiday.[85] This demonstration needs to be put into perspective. On the one hand, given the dramatic events of the previous day in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, the turnout in Minsk was not impressive. The supporters of democracy in Belarus were not yet in a position to mount a credible threat to the Lukashenka administration. On the other hand, the 25 March 2005 protest was the largest in Belarus for some time, and the reaction of the authorities indicated the government's uncertainty. The official reason given by the authorities was that a rumored march by neo-Nazis was

[84] http://www.charter97.org, 25 March 2005, and ff.
[85] *Narodnaya volya*, 26 March 2005. In 2007, the authorities evidently heeded this call and chose to commemorate this date for the first time.

likely to cause a confrontation on the streets of the capital,[86] but this threat, if it ever existed, never materialized. The government then began legal actions against some of the ringleaders of the opposition citing earlier "transgressions." The ex-chairman of the Young Front, Paval Sevyarynets, and former Social Democratic leader Mikalay Statkevich were charged under Article 342 of the Criminal Code for organizing meetings protesting the results of the 17 October 2004, referendum. And just prior to the 25 March event, a Minsk regional court issued criminal charges against Klimau for, inter alia, publicly insulting the president in his books *Uprising, Obvious Truths*, and *I Made My Choice*.[87]

The opposition then began to prepare for the annual Chernobyl March on 26 April, hoping that the turnout would be higher. Traditionally, the youth groups Zubr (Bison) and Young Front had played a large role in that demonstration. They tried to draw attention from the 9 May (Victory Day) celebration of the 60th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany, when Lukashenka attended the parade in Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who had long regarded his Belarusian counterpart as a troublesome necessity, was clearly concerned by the sudden regime changes in the Near Abroad. In Minsk, however, no changes were imminent, as popular protests, while growing, were not yet a significant threat to the government. In mid 2005, the question of nominating a single candidate from the opposition forces to face Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the prospective 2006 presidential election had elicited serious debate. Plainly there was a lack of consensus about the procedure and the choice of potential candidates. The Belarusian opposition was noted for its divisions. In 2001, the united candidate, Uladzimir Hancharyk, had been selected too late to have a serious impact on the election. This time an Organizing Committee (the Permanent Council of Pro-Democracy Forces) was formed to carry out a National Congress of Democratic Forces from 1 September to 1 October. Its head was Alyaksandr Bukhvostau and his deputies were Alyaksandr Dabravolsky (United Civic Party) and Viktar Ivashkevich (Belarusian Popular Front). On

[86] *NTV*, 25 March 2005.
[87] *Prima News*, 22 March 2005.

15 June, meetings were held to nominate some 900 delegates to the Congress.[88]

On paper, the situation thus looked promising. The government had stepped up its pressure on leading opposition figures, a sign of its nervousness. Polls conducted in the spring of 2005 indicated that among the Belarusian elite (policymakers, scientists, mass media, and businessmen), 43% believed that the prospects for the development of the country would become worse if Lukashenka should win the next election, whereas only 7% believed that they would improve.[89] Citing a NISEPI poll from the same period, one academic noted that the response to the question: "If you knew of a person who could compete successfully with Lukashenka in the next presidential election, would you vote for him or Lukashenka?" was 38.2% in favor of such a candidate, while only 28.4% declared that they would vote for Lukashenka.[90] The question, however, was where and how to find such a leader. The various political parties were making their choices. Several candidates announced their intention to run, but there was criticism that the process was being dominated by party structures that lacked popular support and prevented a broader choice from the community at large. Two critiques in particular merit citation.

The former agricultural minister of Belarus, and chairman of the Fund "For a New Belarus," Vasily Leonau, wrote a letter to the Organizing Committee that maintained that the strategy based exclusively on the mechanism of nominating a single candidate for the presidency would not result in a victory over Lukashenka. Rather, the broad masses of the population, in his view, needed to be involved in the process. He proposed an All-Belarusian Congress of Democratic Forces (rather than a national one, i.e. beyond the purview of the democratic opposition) that would begin by introducing changes in the Electoral Code, annulling decrees that infringe on civil rights, releasing political prisoners, renewing the work of the two closed universities (European Humanities and the National Humanitarian Lyceum), providing equal rights to all mass media, and initiating a "Belarus without Lukashenka" movement. Rather than nominating a single candidate, Leonau proposed the formation of teams of leaders based on a majority of

[88] http://www.charter97.org, 14 June 2005.
[89] *Svobodnye novosti plus*, 2-9 March 2005.
[90] *Narodnaya volya*, 11 June 2005.

votes nationwide. He would even invite representatives of the authorities to the Congress. In similar fashion, Professor Vyacheslau Orhish believed that what was happening behind the curtains of the political organizations was incomprehensible to the electoral masses of Belarus. The latter perceived the process as geared toward the political ambitions of individuals. Those not affiliated with a political party had been placed at a disadvantage, even though the non-party group might be stronger. On the one hand there was the Five Plus organization, and on the other the "Ten"—the unregistered Congress of Democratic Forces that also included some civic initiatives. One contender, Alyaksandr Vaitovich, former chairman of the Council of the Republic, was cited as commenting: "We are on the same side of the barricades but we are not together." If the political elite could elect the single candidate, Orhish noted, it would signify that the choice was made by a narrow layer no larger than 5,000-7,000 people. Yet the rating of political parties in Belarus in 2005 was lower than it had been in 2001.[91]

In fairness, some prominent opposition leaders had consistently demonstrated a willingness to put aside personal ambitions in favor of a single candidate -- most notably Anatol Lyabedzka of the United Civic Party (who intended to run as a candidate) and Vintsuk Vyachorka of the Popular Front (who did not). Others declared their intention to run despite limited chances of success, such as Stanislau Shushkevich and Mikalay Statkevich, representing different branches of the Social Democrats. But under the contemporary Electoral Code and the circumstances of almost total state control over the mass media, even a genuinely popular candidate could not hope to defeat the incumbent president. There were thus two key questions to be resolved at that time: first, the necessity of changing the current political conditions in order to ensure a free and fair election; and second, the need to choose a candidate with the potential to attract support from a broad spectrum of the electorate. Both questions had surfaced at the 2001 election and ultimately neither had been resolved. Yet clearly time was running out for the 2006 campaign as well. The apocalyptic phrase "last summer of the opposition" was the title of an article by Dmitry Drigailo (Dzmitry Drihailo), which prognosticated that after the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus, the political opposition would cease to exist.

[91] *Narodnaya volya*, 11 June 2005.

Either it would come to power or "it will be taken to the prosecutor's office" in the event that current president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, was reelected to office.[92] The summer of 2005 was notable for the inability of the national organizational committee to obtain permission to use a building in September that could accommodate at least 700 delegates for the purpose of electing an alternative candidate to Lukashenka at the all-Belarusian Congress of Democratic Forces. The urgency of the convocation of this forum was evident, given that the date of the next presidential elections was to be announced in January 2006. The chairman of the organizing committee, Bukhvostau, noted that 80 out of 143 planned meetings had been held to elect delegates, the majority of which were nonparty people, while the United Civic Party occupied the second place. The two leading candidates to emerge -- and the almost certain contenders -- were Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Anatol Lyabedzka.[93]

Of the two, Lyabedzka was much more familiar to the Belarusian public. Aged 44, he was chairman of the United Civic Party and a native of Minsk region, and he had been a strong critic of the Lukashenka administration for some ten years. He incensed the government by denouncing it at meetings in the United States (October 1999), and by leading demonstrations. In late August 2004 he attended a conference in Poland devoted to the 25th anniversary of the Solidarity trade union and was detained by the authorities upon his return, and materials gathered at the conference confiscated from him.[94] Milinkevich was a 57-year old physics professor from the Hrodna region, with no party affiliation, though he had been proposed by the Soim of the Belarusian Popular Front the previous February, and nominated by the Belarusian Green Party at this same time. He had been a member of the Hrodna city council for six years and spoke five languages.[95] An important role was also played by the fringe candidates such as Syarhey Kalyakin of the Communists and Shushkevich of the Social Democrats, who had to decide to whom to give their support. Before the 2006 election campaign began, neither Lyabedzka nor Milinkevich was expected to fare well in a straight contest with Lukashenka. Of the two

[92] *Belorusskaya gazeta*, 26 August 2005.
[93] *Belorusskiy rynok*, 8 August 2005.
[94] *Narodnaya volya*, 3 September 2004.
[95] http://www.charter97.org, 14 February 2005.

Lyabedzka had a slightly higher rating--but both were below 2% according to a May 2005 survey by NISEPI. Other surveys suggested that the president had the support of about 40% of the electorate, but an opposition candidate could expect to receive 23-25%.[96] Most critical thus seemed to be the unity of the opposition. The election process required the partial sacrifice of party "sovereignty" for the formation of a supra-party opposition bloc. Milinkevich had maintained that if a single candidate were not chosen, then the coalition would be destroyed, but he remained optimistic that this outcome was unlikely.[97] Nevertheless, the Congress had already required several compromises from both the Five Plus and broader Group of Ten opposition parties and organizations. It was a bold venture with numerous potential pitfalls.

The vote took place at a National Convention in late 2004. It was conducted by a political council, which included the leaders of the national political parties and active public organizations, and the Council in turn created a National Executive Committee (Shadow Cabinet).[98] The next stage of the process–-the location of a building for the forum–-was problematic. The organizers had sent some fifty applications signed by the leaders of the five registered political parties (the Popular Front, the Women's Party, the Social Democrats, the United Civic Party, and the Party of Communists) to different organs of executive power, but none had received approval. The response from Babruisk region was typical: it declared that that several concerts were planned for the month of September, and that the rental of the hall would cost 62.2 Euros per hour![99] General Valery Fralou, an opposition deputy in the House of Representatives, commented, "If the opposition is not provided with a place to meet, it is one more sign of the sort of system we have."[100] Conceivably, the forum could have been held in the Palace of the Republic in Minsk or even outside the country--both Smolensk and Kyiv were cited as possible alternative venues, though both might have given rise to government accusations of trying to "import revolution," which was the rallying cry in the organs issued by the

[96] *Svobodnye Novosti Plus*, 10-17 August 2005.
[97] *Belorusy i rynok*, 29 August 2005.
[98] *Narodnaya volya*, 19 August 2005.
[99] Ibid., 17 August 2005.
[100] Ibid., 1 September 2005.

official structures in this period.[101] At the same time, it was doubtful then that the holding of the forum would bring success. Relatively small attendances at some meetings had been brought about by fear of official recriminations, especially dismissal from employment for participation -- the exception to this general picture was the city of Minsk. There had also been instances of preventive arrests of delegates, detention by border guards, and infiltration of meetings by members of the police.[102]

On 2 October about 1,000 delegates attending the Congress of Democratic Forces of Belarus, meeting at the Palace of Culture of the Minsk Automobile Factory, elected Milinkevich as the single candidate for the presidential elections of 2006. He received 399 votes, defeating his closest challenger, Lyabedzka, by just eight votes. Other candidates, such as leader of the Party of Communists of Belarus Kalyakin and Social Democrat and former parliamentary chairman Shushkevich withdrew.[103] Ostensibly Milinkevich then had the support of all major opposition parties and public associations in the country. His election surprised some analysts, as Lyabedzka, though much younger, was a more experienced campaigner with a well-developed organizational structure behind him in the United Civic Party. In addition to his impressive credentials, Milinkevich was firmly oriented toward Poland, both through ancestral ties and through his interest in ethnography. Polish President Alyaksandr Kwasniewski had taken a particular interest in his campaign, and it was through support from Poland that Belarus had the best chances of leaving the Russian orbit and joining the EU. Publicly, Milinkevich expressed his belief in the possibility of winning the 2006 elections in the event of a "normal" campaign. In that event, he would restore the country to the democratic path and return the authority to the legislature that it possessed from the 1994 Constitution, subsequently amended by Lukashenka.

In private, however, Milinkevich took a more realistic view. In a penetrating analysis of Milinkevich's chances for victory, Yaroslav Shimov noted that the electoral support for Lukashenka hovered around 40%, while no opposition leader to date could

[101] See, for example, *Narodnaya volya*, 19 August 2005.
[102] *Belorusskaya gazeta*, 26 August 2006.
[103] *Itar-TASS*, 2 October 2005.

muster more than 3%. In a direct contest that situation was likely to change -- the opposition leader had won more than 15% of the vote in 2001, and around 30% in the city of Minsk -- nevertheless, given the state monopoly over the media, new laws preventing outside financial support for the opposition, and the conditions of a personal dictatorship, the chances for an opposition electoral victory remained remote. That situation led some opposition leaders (Andrei Klimau, Zyanon Paznyak) to stay clear of the Congress and to prefer the policy of boycotting the election. Shimov cited Milinkevich as being well aware of this situation and favoring a "Maidan" situation similar to that in Ukraine in 2004, when a popular uprising forced an overturning of official election results. However the situation in Belarus was dissimilar to that of Ukraine: Belarusians in general adhered to the values of the Soviet era -- stability, a provincial perspective, the absence of wide contrasts in standards of living and salaries. The president had worked well into his propaganda the contrast between peaceful Belarus, with its lack of ethnic conflict, absence of terrorism, and distance from "great power conflicts" and its neighbors. In this sense, it was perceived as a typically East European country oriented toward Russia, whereas the Polish and Czech neighbors were more inclined toward the West. [104]

The key issue for Milinkevich was to be able to campaign overtly and publicly in the face of official harassment and propaganda that would depict him as a nationalist extremist supported by Poland and the West. His attitude to Russia was also notable -- one of his initial slogans supported entry into the EU alongside Russia. More important, however, was his advocacy of neutrality, signifying an end to the path of a union with Russia. It was a campaign to win the hearts and minds of people reconciled to the Lukashenka dictatorship and often convinced by state media that they had the best of several possible alternatives. Following the election of Milinkevich, the Belarusian opposition began to elaborate its tactics for the anticipated elections in the summer of 2006. The Political Council created after the Convention immediately approved the strategy for the Milinkevich campaign, which had four key directions. First: the nomination of a single candidate and a campaign to achieve the support of 50% of the

[104] http://www.gazeta.ru, 3 October 2005.

electorate. Emphasis was placed on creating a positive image of the candidate and broadening the campaign. Second: the mobilization of the public and the need to put strong pressure on the authorities not to falsify the election results. Third, according to Alyaksandr Dabravolsky, it was necessary to create a "broad movement of the majority," a statement that assumed that the silent majority did not support Lukashenka. Milinkevich himself also stated a fourth task: the importance of involving public associations in the broad coalition that the opposition hoped to create.[105] This latter goal was also expressed at a roundtable on "The Third Sector in Belarus in 2006: Its Place and Functions," held in Minsk and moderated by Tatsyana Pashevalova, the head of the Center for Social Innovations. The roundtable was attended by 20 non-governmental organizations, including Rada, Ekodom, and Post, as well as Viktar Korneyenka, a representative of Milinkevich's headquarters, who was attending, in his words, "to look for supporters."[106]

Though the Milinkevich campaign started well, the omens were rather mixed, according to a poll conducted in October by the National Institute for Social-Economic and Political Research under Aleh Manayeu, which was now operating officially from Vilnius. The poll was based on 1,504 respondents in Belarus over the age of 18 on a variety of issues in face-to-face interviews. In general, the respondents revealed a trust in official institutions; first and foremost the Orthodox Church, followed by the army, and then the state media and the president. The index of trust in the president had risen considerably between October and June 2005. Least trusted were organs of state power like the Central Election Commission, the courts, and the parliament, but ranking dead last were the Belarusian opposition political parties. However, somewhat undermining the validity of these responses, 50% declared that many or all people were afraid to express their views, particularly outside Minsk.[107] In terms of the presidential contest, 47.5% stated their intention to vote for Lukashenka and 25.5% for an opposition leader--even though at the time of the poll, the results of the Democratic Convention were not yet known. Lukashenka's personal rating had risen to 47% (compared to 41.7% in

[105] *Belorusy i rynok*, 31 October 2005.
[106] *BDG Delovaya gazeta*, 25 October 2005.
[107] Ibid.

May), which Manayeu attributed in part to an aggressive propaganda campaign and the international self-isolation of Belarus. During an election, 45% declared their readiness to reelect Lukashenka, while 45% felt it would be preferable to give an opportunity to an alternative candidate. In general the more affluent among the respondents were more likely to oppose the president. Over 70% believed that Lukashenka would win, 15% felt he could be removed by a democratic "color revolution," and 15.5% were ready to take to the streets in protest if the results were falsified (76% declared they would not do so). Lastly only around 13% favored the integration of Belarus into the Russian Federation, whereas 20% had supported this three years earlier.[108]

Since these responses preceded the emergence of Milinkevich, they seemed to give rise to some hope for a serious challenge for the presidency. If one were to summarize the overall picture from the survey, one could state that overall the president remained popular, but his support was not overwhelming--nothing like the 79.42% he claimed to have received during the October 2004 referendum[109]--and a substantial percentage would support an alternative candidate while a heavy majority favored the retention of independence, a key factor in the Milinkevich campaign. Another crucial question was: to what extent was the opposition truly united? Leaders of the Conservative Christian Party of the BPF (CCP BPF) denounced the Democratic Convention as a "noisy show of the anti-Belarusian pseudo opposition." It accused the Convention leaders of making regular trips to Moscow to exchange information with the Russian secret services, and claimed that Russian and German secret services had created the united opposition at the end of the 1990s by means of splitting and eliminating the BPF "Aradzhenne" formed a decade earlier. The alleged goal of the Congress, according to CCP BBF leaders, was to distract attention from the only true candidate of Belarusian national democracy and the Belarusian people, Zyanon Paznyak.[110] This outburst demonstrated the depth of enmity among some opposition groups, and the exiled Paznyak's antagonism toward Milinkevich. The CCP BPF opposed any strategy that was conciliatory toward Russia and preferred to

[108] *Narodnaya volya*, 26 October 2005.
[109] The official results can be found at http://www.rec.gov.by/refer/refer2004itogi.html.
[110] *Belorusy i rynok*, 24 October 2005.

boycott any official election or referendum campaigns. Such squabbling only benefited the regime and the incumbent president, and it undermined the claim of Milinkevich to speak on behalf of a united opposition.

Lastly, the Milinkevich campaign was undermined by the announcement by the new leader of the United Social Democratic Party (April 2005), Alyaksandr Kazulin, that he also intended to run for president. A relative latecomer to the party, Kazulin was the former Rector of the Belarusian State University and formerly a close ally of Lukashenka for whom he had also served as Minister of Education. In 2003, following a scandal over a business enterprise involving Kazulin, the president dismissed him from his post. Two years later, Kazulin created a movement called "Will of the People," which advocated that the country should end its program of enforced isolation. It was purported that Kazulin had close ties in Russia, and that his candidacy might have received the approval of the Kremlin. Initially it was unclear as to whether Kazulin would offer a campaign that attempted to steer away from that of Milinkevich. His policies advocated a more democratic and pro-European environment but also one that put the needs of the Belarusian workers' foremost. As a politician and academic who neither knew nor spoke his native language, Kazulin in many ways seemed closer to the traditional authorities than to the opposition.[111] Nevertheless, his strong opposition to Lukashenka suggested that he constituted a second opposition candidate, and he was to prove an impulsive, defiant, and combative figure that clearly incensed the authorities, who in turn singled him out for harsh treatment. As in 1994, however, there were now two "democratic" candidates, which ultimately could only be to the advantage of the incumbent president.

[111] See, for example, "Alyaksandr Kazulin: Former 'President's Man'," *RFE/RL Special Report* (undated): http://www.rferl.org/specials/belarus_votes/bios/Kazulin.aspx.

4. The Presidential Election Campaign of 2006

The Pre-election Campaign

Another blow to the opposition was yet to come. On 16 December, deputies of the Belarusian House of Representatives agreed unanimously that the date of the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus would be 19 March. The date took many people by surprise, because it had been widely anticipated both within and outside the country that the election would take place at the end of Lukashenka's current term, in mid-July. But by moving the date forward, the candidates had just one week to gather a list of members of their initiative groups and deliver it to the Central Commission for Elections and Republican Referendums (CCERR). There was no consensus within Belarus why the earlier date had been chosen. United Civic Party Chairman Anatol Lyabedzka speculated that the Lukashenka regime calculated that the international community would be preoccupied in March with the parliamentary elections in Ukraine.[112] The announcement followed directly a reportedly successful meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Lukashenka at Sochi on 15 December.[113] Russia was taking up the chair of the Group of Eight industrialized countries and would not wish to do this during a summer Belarusian election that might distract the other G-8 members. Lukashenka stated that the decision had been made by parliament and supported by some opposition deputies.[114]

Elections in Belarus have rarely been on an equal playing field. Lukashenka, as president, has had virtually sole access to the media for the entire period in between elections, and all but a few segments during the campaigns themselves. His campaign manager was Viktar Sheiman, who had been the head of the presidential administration prior to the election announcement. Around this same time, Dzmitry Paulichenka, head of the notorious Special Forces, usually brought to the streets during opposition demonstrations, was promoted to the rank of colonel. He would later play a pivotal role in the harsh treatment of opposition demonstrators in the post-election protests in central

[112] *Narodnaya volya*, 29 December 2005.
[113] *SB Belarus' Segodnya*, 4 January 2006.
[114] Ibid., 29 December 2005.

Minsk. His elevation was a sign that the authorities were nervous about the outcome of the elections, but also that they had resolved to use harsh tactics, despite the fact that this particular election was receiving significant international attention. According to surveys by NISEPI, Lukashenka's rating in later December was around 52% and that of his closest rival Milinkevich, only 6.6%. Other sources provided a different story. Thus one maintained that Milinkevich's rating after the announcement of the election was 18.1%.[115] The president started with a big lead, and his supporters dominated both the territorial commissions and the CCERR. On the other hand, recent events in neighboring republics, in which so-called “color revolutions” had occurred—significant waves of popular opposition—suggested that the regime should take nothing for granted.

Meanwhile the campaign to collect signatures for the remaining seven candidates in the Belarusian election (Alyaksandr Vaytovich dropped out of the contest) was in full swing. Each candidate needed to gather at least 100,000 signatures of support to be eligible for the 19 March vote. The Belarusian authorities, however, had adopted a dual strategy: on the one hand they were warning the electorate of a Western-backed campaign to foment a "color revolution" and overthrow President Alyaksandr Lukashenka; and on the other they were obstructing the campaigns of rival candidates. Evidence of the former was an article in the country's largest daily newspaper, *SB--Belarus' Segodnya*, by Vladimir Gurin (Uladzimir Hurin), a political scientist affiliated with the Institute of Social-Political Research at the Presidential Administration. Through the "orange virus," he wrote, chaos was brought to countries of Western Europe (Germany, Belgium, and France are cited), and with certain modifications, Ukraine and Georgia. To bring about the transformation of states, it was necessary to seize control over public opinion and bring about what the author terms "a media-cratic dictatorship" that was more totalitarian than the worst sort of administrative-police dictatorship.[116] The author maintained that in the cases of Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia, there occurred a combination of intervention by the leadership of the United States and "European bureaucracies" on the one hand, and specific initiatives of "sponsors" such as George

[115] *Nasha niva*, 23 December 2005.
[116] *SB--Belarus' segodnya*, 18 January 2006.

Soros, interested in overthrowing the authorities for various personal reasons, on the other. In the case of Belarus, however -- and here the author cited the deputy director of the Institute of the CIS Countries, Vladimir Zharikhin--a change of regime could not be achieved by democratic means because the majority of the population supported Lukashenka.

The image of outside forces seeking to subvert Belarus had been a useful presidential ploy in the past two presidential elections, as well as the 2004 referendum. Since the Lukashenka forces had a complete monopoly over the media (delivery of the main opposition newspaper from Smolensk was regularly being held up at the border), the barrage of propaganda was quite effective. In addition, a series of measures had already been deployed to complicate rival candidates' efforts to collect signatures. Thus Uladzimir Laubkovich, who worked for the group backing opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, commented that every day the militia detained about ten members of initiative groups. Another activist for the same camp revealed that many people were afraid to sign his list because they did not wish to be in trouble with the authorities. One of the campaigners supporting the Social Democratic candidate, Alyaksandr Kazulin, was not permitted to enter hostels in Hrodna to collect signatures. Staff on duty reportedly complied with a regulation issued by the Central Election Commission (CEC) that an individual could only enter a hostel if invited to do so by a resident. The invited person had then to remain in the room of the resident and not knock on other doors. In other words, the large communities living in such places were off limits to candidates from the opposition.[117]

The editorial office of *Narodnaya volya* constantly received telephone calls from people declaring that they were being forced to provide signatures in support of Lukashenka. At one large self-service store, employees were given two lists to sign: one to prove that they had received their salaries and another supporting Lukashenka. Those who refused to sign were warned that they might not be paid. One visitor to the editorial office checked into a local clinic, and his doctor asked him to sign a list supporting the

[117] *Belorusy i rynok*, 9 January 2006.

president. The doctor told the patient that she had orders to collect signatures in this way. Students at the Belarusian Institute of Law (a non-state institution) were informed that in order to gain course credits they also must provide signatures to support Lukashenka. Voters were also confused. In theory one person could provide signatures for different candidates, but the Lukashenka team evidently had been telling signatories that they may only sign in support of a single candidate.[118] Myacheslau Hryb, who was running Kazulin's initiative group, submitted four complaints to the CEC and to the Prosecutor's office concerning the actions of the authorities in Vitsebsk region. Here, the authorities obtained the list of names supporting this candidate and threatened to dismiss these people from their jobs. Similarly a woman collecting signatures for Milinkevich was detained in Brest region, the lists were confiscated, and she was ordered not to continue with her campaign. The lists were only returned to her several days later.[119] Opposition candidates were also incensed by the announcement of the "Third All-Belarusian People's Congress" for 2-3 March in Minsk, because the previous congresses had been little more than propaganda mouthpieces for the president as well as the obvious similarity between such hand-picked assemblies and the former Communist Party congresses. Kazulin called for a Congress with delegates from all political parties, independent trade unions, and public organizations to discuss the system of power in the country.[120]

The Lukashenka team was essentially the government of Belarus leadership, and it adopted a clear strategy that might be summarized in four points: project an image of stability and contentment among the citizens of the republic; maintain tight control over all aspects of the campaign; deploy harsh repressions against opposition structures; and provide almost blanket coverage of the president's working activities on television, radio, and the official media. It was anticipated that, despite a much more watchful attitude on the part of the EU than hitherto, and some ambivalence toward the Lukashenka regime on the part of Putin's Russia, these factors would be enough to ensure a third term in office for the incumbent president. Thus on 18 February, the main government newspaper cited an opinion poll conducted by the Institute of Sociology,

[118] *Narodnaya volya,* 16 January 2006.
[119] *Belorusy i rynok*, 16 January 2006.
[120] *Narodnaya volya,* 16 January 2006.

Belarusian Academy of Sciences, using more than 9,000 respondents from all parts of the country, and under the direction of Institute director, Hryhory Evelkin. The poll's results purported to show a notable rise in positive feelings about the political situation in Belarus from 29.02% in 2002, to 55.45% at the end of 2005. Not less than 76% of citizens expressed their readiness to support Lukashenka in the presidential campaign, with figures of around 3-4% for opposition candidates. Evelkin declared that the results indicated strong support for state policies.[121] The popularity of the president and his regime aside, the election results were virtually preordained by the composition of the CEC and the territorial commissions. Uladzimir Labkovich, who headed the legal office of the Milinkevich campaign, remarked that "the gravest violations" of the legal code were to be found in these commissions. The United Civic Party, for example, nominated around 800 people for the election commissions, many of which had experience as state officials, in the parliament, and organs of local government. However, only one member made it through to acceptance. In the Zavadsky district of Minsk, representatives of the UCP were informed that the commissions had been formed prior to the submission of names.[122]

To ensure that the opposition candidates could not mount a sustained campaign, the regime clamped down on their activity from the first days of the campaign. By then two parties had reached the stage of "second warning" from the Ministry of Justice, meaning that they were on the verge of official dissolution. The Party of Communists of Belarus received such a warning in early February after its leader, Syarhey Kalyakin, appealed to leaders of local governments to ensure that opposition candidates were included in the territorial commissions. The Party of the Belarusian Popular Front received a similar warning shortly afterward because of alleged invalid addresses of party headquarters in the Hrodna and Homel' regions. Officially a party could not be dissolved during an election campaign, but such warnings serve to curtail freedom of activity.[123] Kalyakin had a dual role as the leader of the headquarters of the Milinkevich campaign. In that capacity he criticized strongly the enforced gathering of signatures for the

[121] *SB Belarus' segodnya*, 18 February 2006.
[122] http://www.charter97.org, 15 February 15, 2006; Narodnaya volya, 13-14 February 2006.
[123] Narodnaya volya, 2-4 and 6-7 February 2006.

Lukashenka campaign in the organs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the office of the State Prosecutor. In return he was accused of libel and of "denigrating the president of Belarus" and ordered to report to the Prosecutor's office. On 11 February, the chairman of the executive committee of Democratic Forces, Anatol Lyabedzka, was detained in Salihorsk while local militia checked his identity.[124]

During the campaign, both opposition candidates (as well as the pro-Lukashenka candidate and leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party, Syarhey Haidukevich), were permitted to air two television broadcasts of around 30 minutes -- in reality they were somewhat briefer because several items in the second speeches of both speakers were censored. Though these broadcasts were aired at inconvenient times, as people were returning home from work, they represented the first instances of public criticism of Lukashenka and his policies (and even his family and social life) since his first election in 1994. Though giving some concessions in such areas, the regime had struck back in others. Belarusian TV several times cited exit poll bulletins allegedly issued by the Vilnius office of the Gallup sociological service. These were clearly fabricated. It claimed that these bulletins were confiscated from the offices of the unregistered organization "Partnerstva" and that they were dated 19 March. They purported to show that, according to data in 107 election precincts, Milinkevich had gathered 53.7% of the vote, Lukashenka 41.3%, Kazulin 3.8%, and Syarhey Haidukevich, 1.2%. The director of the Gallup Baltic Bureau, Rasa Alisauskene, denied any knowledge of the bulletins. Aspects of their contents suggest that the government issued them to discredit the opposition, and, as one observer pointed out, no election poll would ever add up so neatly to 100%. Lukashenka had also maintained that Kazulin had tried to make a deal to attain the position of prime minister, and he had accused the Americans and Czechs in particular of overtly backing the opposition and trying to effect regime change.

By the election date, the few remaining media and Internet outlets for the two opposition candidates had been curtailed. *Narodnaya volya* ceased printing after its distribution centers had been persuaded to stop production. Websites, such as those of

[124] *Belorusy i rynok*, 13 February 2006.

Charter-97 and Zubr, shut down. The news agency Belapan was also affected. Thus not a single source of impartial reporting remained in the country on 19 March. The Lukashenka regime kept up a barrage of propaganda against the opposition candidates, while arresting hundreds of their campaign team, including every major official in both camps other than the candidates themselves. Lukashenka responded to an opposition call for a public demonstration on Monday, 20 March, in October Square, by declaring that those joining the protest would be regarded as terrorists and that anyone who tried to seize power would have his neck broken like a "duckling."[125] Throughout the campaign he deployed the KGB and the Special Forces to intimidate his opponents. Also, whereas, as noted, the other candidates had two radio and TV addresses of less than 30 minutes, the president, who had opted not to campaign, appeared constantly on TV and also made two lengthy addresses: the first at the so-called All-Belarusian Congress, which was attended by carefully screened delegates, and a second on Belarusian Television on 18 March. His themes were repetitive: current economic stability contrasted with potential chaos under candidates who represented foreign interests, specifically of countries hostile to Belarus. The government mission was to steer the campaign away from issues such as introducing more democratic procedures into the country or questioning the legality of several aspects of the Lukashenka campaign and toward the fundamental issue of daily living, wages, pensions, and domestic stability in the peaceful state that was under the seasoned guidance of the long-term leader. In this way, the president could offer himself as the protector of the nation in line with his image as "bat'ka" or little father.

The regime also deployed violence and provocations on a wide scale to ensure that there were no surprises on 19 March. The violence began on 17 February, registration day for presidential candidates. A scuffle broke out when guards refused to allow candidate Kazulin to enter the National Press Center building. One of the guards

[125] This phrase, used on the day of the election immediately after the announcement of the results of state-operated exit polls, is cited by Valentinas Mite, "Belarus Opposition Will Not Recognize Vote Results," *RFE/RL*, 19 March 2006. On at least two occasions, Lukashenka has used similar expressions. Thus he declared that he would "wring their necks" with reference to those responsible for the disappearance of cameraman Dzmitry Zavadsky on 7 July 2000, even though Belarusian security forces acting on his orders were widely believed to be responsible for Zavadsky's fate. See *ILHR Belarus Update*, 21 July 2000. In early January 2006 Lukashenka vowed to "wring the necks of those instigating these acts"--referring to potential protests against the final election results--on *Belarusian Television*, 27 January 2006.

sprayed a liquid into the face of the main lawyer at Kazulin's headquarters, Aleh Volchak, who was temporarily blinded. A series of dramatic events again occurred in the early days of March. On the initiative of the government and in conformity with past practices, an all-Belarusian People's Assembly was held at the Palace of Sport and Culture of the railroad workers in Minsk on 2 March. At 9 am, Kazulin tried to enter the building with a request that he be registered as a delegate to the assembly, which was essentially a forum for Lukashenka to announce his policy for an anticipated third term in office. The Belarusian Special Forces, headed by Dzmitry Paulichenka, the commander believed to be responsible for the deaths of several opposition leaders, detained and severely beat the 50-year old Kazulin, the former Rector of Belarusian State University. The authorities then confiscated issues of *Narodnaya volya*, which had run a special edition of 250,000 copies, including many photographs of the beating of Kazulin, (these also appeared on the web pages of Zubr and Charter-97) shortly after the truck transporting them crossed the border from Smolensk, Russia, into Belarus. Numerous criminal cases were concocted against opposition activists, particularly those from youth organizations (principally Zubr and the Young Front) for daubing graffiti in various places (specifically "Dostal," which has been translated literally as "fed up"). In Hrodna, criminal cases had reached a mass scale, with investigations, searches, and the confiscation of computers and various political writings. In one case, Ivan Kruk of Hrodna Oblast destroyed his computer in order to avoid its confiscation by the militia.

The Belarusian authorities also exacerbated the tension surrounding the election campaign by declaring that the opposition planned an uprising on day of the election. KGB chief Stsyapan Sukharenka[126] had warned that any demonstrations would be regarded as acts of terrorism. Participants could theoretically be imprisoned for 25 years, jailed for life, or even face the death penalty for appearing in public on the day of the vote. He cited a false exit poll allegedly confiscated from the Partnerstva group as well as potential Georgian involvement in an uprising. The plot thickened daily.

[126] On 17 July 2007, Lukashenka dismissed Sukharenka, replacing him with a former deputy minister of internal affairs, Yury Zhadobin. For an account of the possible reasons behind the firing, see David Marples, "Lukashenka Removes KGB Chief," *Eurasian Daily Monitor* (The Jamestown Foundation), Vol. 4, Issue 40, 19 July 2007 at:
http://jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=420&issue_id=4181&article_id=2372302

Belarusian TV announced the confiscation of a large supply of tents, military goods, and clothing at the Latvian border, which had reportedly come from the United States and was allegedly intended for the "color revolution" in the streets of Minsk.[127] On 15 March, the Belarusian police established an emergency headquarters, began to monitor all polling stations, and placed personnel on a high alert. Lukashenka had claimed that foreign hooligans from Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia were prepared to enter the country to participate in an attempt to unseat his government. That a call was made for a public demonstration on Sunday evening in October Square is now well known. The two opposition candidates made separate appeals for a peaceful display -- Milinkevich's was timed for 8 pm; and Kazulin's for 9 pm.[128] The early election results from closed stations, hospitals, and military bases were anticipated by 9 pm, but subsequently, Yarmoshyna announced that the first preliminary results would not to be known until 2 am on 20 March. Thus the protests could not be timed to coincide with the declaration of the election results.

Belarusian TV also focused on the United States and its political goals to a remarkable degree, offering an analysis of the outlook and activities of the last three ambassadors and purporting to show that U.S. diplomats had consistently met with the opposition and refused to meet with government representatives, even when such was the ostensible reason for their travel. A host of claims were made about outside interference in the elections, most often directed at Poland and Latvia (and to a lesser extent, Ukraine). Clearly, whatever his lead in the race, Lukashenka was obsessed with the notion that he could fall from power. This was not very likely on paper, though the campaign of Milinkevich had made good progress, and in one case at least, an audience of more than 6,000 people came to hear him speak. During the time available for the campaign, however, he managed to visit and speak with only about one-third of the electorate. The campaign of Kazulin, like that of Milinkevich, had been marred by the arrests, detention, and physical abuse of team leaders. On 9 March, Kazulin proposed to Milinkevich that they withdraw their candidacies as a form of protest, leaving the field to Lukashenka and

[127] The statement was made by Sukharenka on Belarusian Television, 1400 and 1700 hours, 16 March 2006. It was also repeated on the Russian RTR network at 1400 on this same day.
[128] *Narodnaya volya*, 11-12 March 2006.

Syarhey Haidukevich. Withdrawal from the campaign at that stage would have required a candidate to reimburse the state for monies spent on publishing materials for the campaign. In any event, Milinkevich declared that he would remain in the race to the end.[129] Kazulin's motives were open to question, though he had enlivened the campaign with sensational speeches and clashes with the authorities. That he was not charged for his alleged offenses at that stage doubtless reflected the government's desire to deal with opposition leaders in its own way once the campaign was over.

Why was Lukashenka so anxious? Most polls had put his popularity in the region of 50-60%, far ahead of his three rivals. Milinkevich's standing was somewhere between 6 and 17% but rising. For the president, this constituted a serious problem. A man who had decried his rivals as foreign agents, "scum," and potential terrorists could hardly be satisfied with a vote total that hovered around the 50% mark. Theoretically that could have resulted in a second round, which for Lukashenka would have been a moral defeat. Milinkevich had stated, "If the elections are fair, a second round is inevitable." On the other hand, an official announcement of a Lukashenka victory in the region of 75-80%, with his three challengers together receiving less than 20%, was tantamount to an admission of a rigged election. And that tally would raise the number of people who would participate in street demonstrations. It is clear nonetheless that a second round, from Lukashenka's perspective, was simply unacceptable. It would demonstrate vulnerability and provide an opposition candidate--most likely Milinkevich--with a new opportunity to sway the electorate, including better access to the media. Despite the arrests and harassments, which had encompassed all three major party leaders on the Milinkevich team--Vyachorka (Popular Front), Lyabedzka (United Civic Party), and Kalyakin (Party of Communists)--there were increasing signs that the fear factor, the main source of Lukashenka's entrenchment, had been partially overcome.

Thus at this point, it seemed that while the democratic opposition would not win the 2006 election, it had made significant inroads toward undermining and weakening the Lukashenka regime. The president could not resolve the dilemma of how

[129] *Belorusy i rynok*, 13 March 2006.

best to announce the final results. Street violence, principally in Minsk, was very likely, and the aftermath of the campaign might prove more important than the actual results of the election. Lidziya Yarmoshyna continued her editorials on the political environment by declaring that the election was "absolutely wonderful," presumably because the results reportedly favored her patron, the president of Belarus who had received 800,000 more votes than in the elections of 2001. The official results of the 2006 election are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Official Results of the 2006 Presidential Election Campaign[130]

Candidate	***Number of Votes*** **(millions)**	***Percentage***
A. Lukashenka	5.460	82.6
A. Milinkevich	0.400	6.0
S. Haidukevich	0.250	3.5
A. Kazulin	0.154	2.3

The official turnout was 92.6%. Yarmoshyna commented that Kazulin's low vote was a result of his rowdy campaign, a reflection perhaps of the arbitrary nature of the final tally. Though accurate polling was almost impossible during the campaign, due to the oppressive conditions imposed by the government, available surveys suggested that Lukashenka's standing was somewhere between 50% and 60%. However, some 30% of the electorate voted at advance polls, meaning that often there were few people actually at polling stations on 19 March. Lukashenka's results may have been raised upward by some 22-25% (subsequently he was quoted as saying that indeed the results had been fabricated, because his actual totals were much higher than reported).[131] In turn the combined total of 11.8% for the three other candidates appeared very low, certainly when compared with the sort of figures that Hancharyk had amassed for his very brief campaign in 2001.

There followed a sustained protest in October Square, the event that received

[130] *SB Belarus' Segodnya*, 21 March 2006.

[131] In November 2006, Lukashenka stated that the 2006 presidential elections results were fabricated because in reality, he had received not 83% as reported, but 93.5%. He went on to say that this was not a "European result" and thus could not be publicized officially. Cited by AFN, 29 November 2006: http://www.afn.by/news/news.asp?d=24&m=11&y=2006&newsid=80816#data.

most international attention during the 2006 elections. Taking part in it were the most prominent of the opposition youth movements: Chopic (Enough), the Young Front, Zubr, Chas (Time), and 3 Slach (the Third Way). The protesters behaved with dignity, even when severely provoked by representatives of the authorities. To some observers, it seemed plausible that Belarus could experience the same sort of response to obviously fabricated results as had occurred in Kyiv in late 2004. Others were more sanguine. The government alternated between restraint and brutality. Troublesome opponents were detained and jailed for short periods. The editor of *Nasha niva* newspaper, for example, Andrei Dynko, received a 10-day sentence for the usual transgression: "petty hooliganism." Dozens of activists had suffered under the same law, including the leader of the Popular Front, Vintsuk Vyachorka. The deputy leader of Milinkevich's staff, Viktar Korniyenka, was beaten up outside his apartment building by two assailants and was reportedly in serious condition in hospital. The viciousness and the all-out assault on the demonstrators had been carefully concealed from the public eye.

Despite the violence, the regime had succeeded in “winning” yet another election and the attempt to instigate a “color revolution” in the Belarusian capital had failed. One reason was that the position of the Belarusian opposition was significantly weaker than that in Ukraine. There was no claim to have won the election. Rather, the unified democratic candidate, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, made two statements: first, that the election results had been fabricated because Lukashenka did not win 82.4% of the vote. He stated that "various sources" indicated his total was 31% and that of Lukashenka 42%. It was difficult to discern how such figures had been ascertained, as all the major polling agencies found it too problematic to conduct polls in the oppressive atmosphere of the election. Second, Milinkevich maintained that there should be a rerun of the election without Lukashenka's participation. This demand complemented that of his detained ally, Lyabedzka, who had appealed to the Constitutional Court on these same grounds, i.e. that the president should not be allowed to run for a third term, and that the 2004 referendum was neither democratic nor legal. In addition, Milinkevich hoped to use the 25 March commemoration of the short-lived independent state of 1918 for a final mass demonstration. In this regard he elected, together with his supporters, to remain on

the square, to the chagrin of the other opposition candidate, Alyaksandr Kazulin, who claimed that Milinkevich had reneged on an agreement to end the protests. Milinkevich in turn stated that he was not leading the demonstration but was rather a participant and that the protesters had opted to stay. It was a risky position in that he was unequivocally the opposition leader, around which those who supported regime change in Belarus became united.

The authorities arrested more than 250 people between 20 and 22 March, and administered beatings to many others, and in the early hours of 24 March, hundreds of riot police stormed the campsite. How significant was the protest and what conclusions can be drawn from the authorities' actions? There were some similarities between the "Denim" or "Jeans" protest in central Minsk and those in other republics, most notably Ukraine in late 2004. There was a strong youth element, music, numerous tents (there were declared to be over 30), and a defiant refusal to leave the square despite adverse weather conditions, a lack of sanitary facilities, and other handicaps. However, there were also some critical differences. Though the numbers were unprecedented for Belarus under Lukashenka, they did not match those in Kyiv, even allowing for the smaller population in the northern republic. Between 10,000 and 15,000 gathered on 19 March. Subsequently, the numbers dwindled to 2,000-5,000, and fell away during the nights to a few hundred or less. Though the mass demonstration was much weaker than its Orange counterpart in Ukraine, there were signs that the Lukashenka regime faced a dilemma. Its opponents were denounced in the most derisory fashion, but thousands of citizens of the capital had witnessed a sustained protest, the likes of which had never been seen until 2006 in Lukashenka's Minsk. Russia accepted the victory of Lukashenka, but remained notably restrained over the protest period. Lukashenka seemed to prefer that international attention be refocused elsewhere and perplexed by the sustained international interest. He could not have ordered a new election under the terms demanded by Milinkevich.

Overall, Lukashenka had been tested. He had attained a pyrrhic victory, but faced new uncertainties and doubts. The opposition was not yet powerful enough to remove him, but its threat had grown. The contrived turnout and vote count, as well as

the over-reaction to the opposition campaigns, were in retrospect a blunder by the authorities that served to revive a long dormant civic society in Belarus. The end game--a massive assault on the small group that chose to stay for a further night on the square--was predictable. The "Jeans Revolution" (the name given by opposition leaders to the pro-democracy protests in Belarus at this time) might have failed, but it marked the first sustained attempt by the opposition to resist the Lukashenka dictatorship. It is a truism that Belarus was different from its western neighbors, such as the Baltic States and Ukraine; that national consciousness (including the use of the native language) lagged well behind that of these other states, and that the outlook of its president was not alien to large sectors of the population. Milinkevich's appeal had been to the intelligentsia, the urban elite, and above all to young activists who did not see a future for their country within a post-Soviet and authoritarian regime, ostensibly under the permanent presidency of a quasi-dictator with little to offer other than platitudes about stability, close partnership with Russia, and a system of internal terror.

The quest for the hearts and minds of the people--a frequently used phrase of Milinkevich--had just begun. But it cannot be measured adequately from the perspective of an election so closely controlled by the government, with a leader who indulged in and used the threat of violence and oppression to get his way. This was a disgraceful election in many aspects, but one that revealed starkly and accurately the true nature of the Lukashenka regime. The reported results were meaningless. The culmination of the anti-government protests occurred on 25 March. Riot police under Special Forces chief Colonel Dzmitry Paulichenka used tear gas and mock grenades to disperse the crowd. Mass arrests resulted later in the day, including that of Social Democratic leader and presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin, as well as hundreds of others, including the well-known Russian TV reporter Pavel Sheremet (who was handcuffed and blindfolded), and French-Canadian reporter Frederick Lavoie whose visa had expired.[132] The Belarusian Interior Ministry offered the following version of events. At noon on 25 March, "opposition-minded citizens" made another effort to enter October Square. Some 2,500 gathered near the McDonalds on Independence (Skaryna) Avenue, whereupon

[132] *Canadian Journalists for Free Expression*, media release, 28 March 2006.

"police officers began carrying out explanatory work among those present about the inadmissibility of their unlawful behavior and the illegal character of their activities." The protesters subsequently gathered in Yanka Kupala Park and held a rally. Kazulin called on people to proceed to the remand center to release those sentenced for participating in unauthorized events earlier in the week. A clash with interior troops took place near a railway bridge in Dzerzhinsky Avenue and Kazulin smashed a video camera belonging to police officers.[133]

Kazulin and the United Democratic candidate Milinkevich clearly adopted different approaches to the day's activities. Milinkevich's goal was to use the march for two purposes: first to demand the release of those arrested--but without provoking a direct confrontation; and second, to create a new movement for the liberation of Belarus. Kazulin's idea was to create an alternative government of democratic unity. According to an eyewitness, about 10,000 people took part in the initial march to the center of town, including Milinkevich and Kazulin, and about half that number later decided to head for the prison. On Belarusian TV, Interior Minister Uladzimir Navumau reduced the figure to "about 2,000."[134] At Dzerzhinsky Avenue, the troops seemed to raise force to a new level. Photographs that appeared on the Charter-97 website showed scenes of brutal violence, usually young people being beaten and clubbed by several riot police. The site also suggested that guns were used, and that one person may have died from the violent attacks. Kazulin, assaulted on 2 March during the election campaign, was again beaten and detained, and for several hours his whereabouts were unknown. His wife eventually located him at the Zhodzina police station. The number of people beaten, according to the same eyewitness, was in the "dozens" and "hundreds" were arrested. Another account, from Russian Television, stated that Kazulin had tried to speak with troops near the detention center but was knocked down and detained.[135]

What happened subsequently escalated the situation considerably. Riot police reportedly cruised around the city of Minsk arresting people at random. According to

[133] *Belapan*, 26 March 2006.
[134] *Belarusian Television*, 25 March 2006.
[135] *NTV News*, 25 March 2006.

Sheremet, whose mother lives in Minsk, he was simply walking in the center of the city, when a minibus containing five people stopped. Five people emerged from the vehicle and one of them informed the journalist that he was from the criminal investigation department. Sheremet was handcuffed with his hands behind his back, driven around the city for 20 minutes, and beaten up. He was informed that he had been using foul language and had insulted police. Sheremet was not permitted to call the Russian Embassy. His entire ordeal was reported on Russia's Channel One the following day. Milinkevich later visited the police station in Zhodzina to demand Kazulin's release, expressing his moral support for a colleague, even while disagreeing with his actions. The United Democratic leader also made it clear that peaceful mass protests would continue in the capital, and that he and his supporters refused to wait another five years to free themselves from people who had lost the moral right to rule.[136] He then intended to create a broad movement for a change of regime, with the next protest demonstration being scheduled to coincide with the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster on 26 April. The March 25 events raised the stakes in Belarus and exposed the crude violence of the Lukashenka regime. The return of Paulichenka with an evident order to disperse demonstrators was also ominous, particularly given his alleged role in the disappearance of former deputy chairman of Parliament Viktar Hanchar and others nearly seven years earlier.

Post-Election Events

The united opposition campaign during the 2006 Belarusian presidential election was a creditable effort, particularly in the weeks leading up to the vote as well during the protests afterward in October Square. Though hundreds were arrested, and the crackdown by the authorities continued, there was a genuine sentiment of new unity. As a result, the youth group Zubr announced its self-dissolution in order to combine its efforts with others in the movement "For Freedom!"[137] However, there had been some disturbing signs that this unity, attained with great difficulty under the most adverse conditions,

[136] http://www.charter97.org, 26 March 2006.
[137] *Narodnaya volya*, 12 May 2006.

might be weakening. The main issue was how to maintain the momentum generated during the presidential campaign now that Lukashenka had been firmly reconsolidated in power (the manipulation of the vote count notwithstanding). Viktar Karneenka, a member of the Political Council of the united opposition, commented that the opposition had to emerge from its "ghetto" and go to the people. It could not, in his view, become distracted by bureaucratic issues; such as questions concerning how its executive committee was supposed to function.[138] However, there was as yet no clear commitment among the opposition to pursuing another united campaign. Thus Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party, and the candidate narrowly defeated for the united leadership by Milinkevich, attended a meeting of the Political Council of the democratic forces, but refused to vote for a new two-year strategy to bring democracy to Belarus. Lyabedzka proposed instead another full-scale Congress that would presumably vote on a new leader. Other members of the Political Council considered this notion a waste of time and the proposal was initially rejected. Political scientist Uladzimir Matskevich maintained that the campaign "For Freedom" was little more than a play on words, lacking in concepts. The people who gathered in the square, in his view, could not be fooled by political mottos and did not believe "either Lyabedzka or Milinkevich."[139]

Thereafter the opposition candidates reverted to party issues. Lyabedzka was reelected chairman of the United Civic Party at its 10th Congress in late May, receiving 138 votes from a possible 164. During his speech on this occasion, in which he again appealed for another democratic congress, he declared that the supporters of jailed presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin should also be invited as well as participants from the October Square tent camp. His party's priorities for the future, he stated then, would embrace a campaign to release political detainees as well as an international public tribunal for the Lukashenka regime.[140] Meanwhile within the Social Democratic camp, rivalries and dissensions remained. Politicians such as Mikhail Statkevich (a former leader and, like Kazulin, still in prison) opposed any sort of agreement with the united opposition, according to deputy chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party

[138] *Belorusy i rynok*, 29 May 2006.
[139] Ibid; *Narodnaya volya*, 30 May 2006.
[140] *Belapan*, 28 May 2006.

(Hramada), Anatol Lyaukovich. A common strategy of action, in Lyaukovich's view, had to be founded on "common values" but not on personal political interests. The first step in his view must be the release from prison of Kazulin. However, the united pro-democracy forces were not actively involved in the campaign for Kazulin's release. Only 218 signatures were gathered on a petition, and of the united democratic camp, only Lyabedzka had signed it.[141] The Milinkevich team was somewhat reticent in its support for Kazulin, a man with whom it had mixed relations during the election campaign. The other major leader in the united democratic campaign, Syarhey Kalyakin, leader of the Party of Communists of Belarus, had his own problem--a state-engineered campaign to unite the two branches of the Communist Party at a congress scheduled for 15 July, which would effectively oust him from authority and create a potential party of power should the president opt to move in that direction. In such a situation, Kalyakin intended to form a new party.[142] Meanwhile yet another democratic leader, the exiled Zyanon Paznyak, was reelected as the leader of the Conservative Christian Party of the BPF by 94 votes to 2 at the party's 7th congress, held at the Palace of Culture of the Minsk Tractor factory on 27 May.[143]

To what extent had real unity been acquired within the united opposition? There were several key issues. In the first place, there was a danger that Milinkevich might be perceived by the more radical elements in society as too passive and out of touch. For example, the For Freedom campaign was vague, too sweeping, and lacking in any immediate and attainable goals according to some critics. Second, Lyabedzka's disaffection, as well as the various party congresses, reflected an alarming tendency to allow party politics to supersede the urgent need to maintain unity, form a common strategy, and to encompass all democratic forces within Belarus--from Kazulin, to Kalyakin, and even Paznyak, who had yet to support any of the common platforms of the opposition movement. On 14 January 2007, voters in Belarus again went to the polls to

[141] Ibid., 1 June 2006.
[142] Ibid., 5 June 2006. In late July, a Union of Left Parties applied to the Ministry of Justice for official registration, made up of the Party of Communists of Belarus, the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada, and the Women's Party "Nadzeya," having held a founding congress in Minsk on 13 July. Kalyakin was elected as the chief executive of the Central Council. See *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 27 July 2007.
[143] Ibid., 27 May 2006.

elect local governments. The opposition, including the United Democratic Forces (UDF) movement, was debating the wisdom of participating in another election that was little more than a façade. A majority, encouraged by supporters outside the country, had opted to do so. However, there was a groundswell of informed opinion that suggested that a boycott of elections in which equal access to the media and election commissions had been denied to the opposition was a more logical policy.

Conditions were again heavily weighted in favor of the regime. In at least two of the six regional commissions organizing these elections (Mahileu and Brest), there was not a single representative of the opposition, once again illustrating the regime's ability to control elections at this initial stage. This was reportedly the case also with the commission formed in the city of Minsk. On 12 October, the Central Election Commission, chaired again by the president's close ally, Yarmoshyna, announced that the process of nominating representatives to the territorial election commissions would end within five days. That decision limited the possibility of many opposition delegates submitting their documents in time. The election rules, amended by the government according to Presidential Decree No. 607, require a single round based on a first-past-the post system. The opposition had fewer problems with the timeline for running as deputies. This stage began on 5 November and ended one month later. It was anticipated that some 700-900 opposition candidates would run for the 22,641 seats. They were led by the United Civic Party (203 members running for local councils), the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front (about 180), the Party of Communists (130), and the Social-Democratic Party (100) led by the imprisoned former presidential candidate Kazulin, who had embarked on a well-publicized hunger strike to protest his sentence. UDF leader Milinkevich did not run personally but was serving as the supporter of a large group of candidates.

Not only was the opposition divided as to its attitude toward the municipal elections, it also continued to debate the wisdom of continuing with Milinkevich as the UDF candidate. In an article in *Narodnaya volya* newspaper, Lyabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party, suggested that the UDF should hold a Congress of Democratic Forces

and combine it with a discussion about the strategy for electing delegates to local councils. Lyabedzka had for some time tried to pressure Milinkevich, who appeared again in the role of rival rather than partner, to hold such a Congress. But there was little time to develop a strategy for a meaningful election campaign. Critiques of the opposition and its readiness to run in another election were manifest. Writing in *Narodnaya volya*, Dr. Vyachaslau Orhish noted then that it would be a small miracle if the local councils contained more than fifty democrats after the January elections. He commented that opposition leaders were banging their heads against a brick wall. After every election, he remarked, they simply rushed into the next one without taking any steps to try to establish equal conditions for the campaign participants. They had no access to the state TV, radio, or the press, and the election commissions were oriented toward the promotion of pro-government candidates. "Under such circumstances," he wrote, "it is not possible to realize the democratic alternative through elections." Orhish was particularly critical of Milinkevich, a man "who claims to be" the leader of the political opposition, and who participated in the elections because they provided an opportunity to present democratic ideas to the Belarusian people. The implication was that the United Democratic Forces could have limited public impact under the unequal conditions. Elections thus bolstered rather than weakened the authoritarian regime of Lukashenka.[144]

This opinion found resonance with at least two opposition groups: the Conservative Christian Party of the BPF, led by the exiled Zyanon Paznyak, maintained that it was senseless to take part in elections under the present circumstances. To participate in them was to mislead themselves and the voters. The leader of the Social Democratic Hramada, Stanislau Shushkevich, likewise maintained that the opposition should stop playing into the hands of the regime. The new Electoral Code, in his view, left little chance for the opposition to succeed in the January elections in which "only fools may participate." Kazulin, despite the decision of his party to participate, made similar comments in September, but his party evidently ignored his advice. The arguments against a boycott were that the elections, however rigged, offered opportunities to mobilize democratic forces. Yet participation followed by inevitable

[144] *Narodnaya volya*, 20 October 2006.

defeat, it was believed, would not only help to solidify the Lukashenka regime, but also might convey the impression that the democrats' cause was hopeless. Hans-Georg Wieck, former head of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus, asserted that Lukashenka was facing a crisis (a "dead-end road"), but no such predicament was evident to the Belarusian electorate. The UDF performed creditably in the presidential election, but it did not unite all democratic forces, nor did it succeed in altering significantly the conditions under which elections were held. It lost in part because it failed to convince the electorate that democratic change was more important than (perceived) economic security. Thus the democratic opposition was forced to rethink its strategies rather than simply respond to initiatives of the regime, including elections under constantly changing rules that ensured "elegant" presidential victories.

The Opposition Regroups

In November 2006, there were indications that the opposition had resolved to preserve its hard-won unity. Alyaksandr Milinkevich signed an agreement with the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front. According to the leader of the initiative group for the formation of the movement "For Freedom," Viktar Karnienka, the agreement was intended to dispel rumors of differences between the two sides and to emphasize the common goal of conducting free and democratic elections in Belarus. Milinkevich planned in the near future to sign similar agreements with other political structures, including the Social Democratic “Hramada” led by Stanislau Shushkevich, the unregistered "Party of Freedom and Progress" of Uladzimir Navasyad, the unregistered "Young Front," and with the supporters of the former leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada, Mikalay Statkevich.[145] The move came two weeks after the UDF's executive committee had announced the beginning of a door-to-door pre-election information campaign. The objective of the campaign was to encourage people to think about the situation in the country and to come to the correct choice, reported Viktar Ivashkevich, deputy chairman of the BPF. Specifically, the information campaign began by issuing stickers containing brief comments about the political and socioeconomic situation in Belarus. Thirty-two

[145] *Belorusskie novosti*, 20 November 2006.

different statements appeared on the stickers, such as "Belarus is found in 67th place in the UN rating of socioeconomic development. Our country lags behind Estonia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Russia" and "According to business climate, Belarus occupies 106th place among 155 countries, [whereas] Kazakhstan is 86th, Russia 79th, Lithuania 15th, and Estonia 16th."[146]

Clearly the intention was to counter official proclamations of economic success under President Lukashenka, which had been the key electoral platform of the regime in past presidential and parliamentary elections. The UDF stepped up activities to coincide with the period of campaigning for local elections in Belarus. Leaders were less interested in seeking votes than using the occasion for renewed attempts to counter official propaganda. Altogether 15,846 initiative groups were registered to be allowed to nominate candidates for local council deputies and collected the requisite signatures. However, the role of political parties in the campaign was meager. The pro-government Communist Party had 181 initiative groups and the figures were almost identical for the opposition parties: Party of the BPF (138); United Civic Party (135); and Party of Communists of Belarus.[147] The impact of opposition political parties on the 2007 elections was thus meager.

For UDF leader Milinkevich, the situation appeared complex. Despite his impressive, though abortive, campaign in the 2006 presidential election, the UDF was also using the local elections to gather signatures to nominate delegates to a new Convention of Democratic Forces to be held in the spring of 2007. Delegates needed at least 300 signatures in order to attend the congress, and these would be verified by an "alternative Central Election Commission." It was evident, at that point, to both the UDF leader and other analysts that this mode of selecting delegates to a Democratic Convention was slanted in favor of existing political parties to the detriment of non-party activists, as well as those parties that opted to boycott the local elections, such as the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front. Milinkevich's movement

[146] *BelGazeta*, 13 November 2006.
[147] Belorusy i rynok, 20-27 November 2006.

"For Freedom" was also criticized for embracing a fundamentally Western concept that did not hold the same attraction to the Belarusian electorate as it did in EU countries or the United States, and thus appeared weaker and less enticing than his former electoral slogan "Freedom, Truth, and Justice."[148] Analysts wondered why it was necessary to hold a new Convention of Democratic Forces so soon after its predecessor,[149] which elected Milinkevich in the second round over his close rival, Lyabedzka. Speaking in Warsaw on November 10, Milinkevich stressed the need for the UDF to maintain unity, "a single fist." He also expressed his concern for the thousands of operatives suffering arrest, harassment, and lost jobs and positions, as well as for student supporters who had been expelled from their institutions. Yet he avoided addressing the critical issue, which is surely the ambition of individual party leaders who question his leadership and insist on a new round of voting that may divide rather than unite the UDF.

When the Congress was held on 26-27 May 2007, Milinkevich lost his position as the single leader of the UDF despite having a larger number of delegates than any other group. Instead a National Roundtable program was announced to deal with an anticipated economic crisis, as well as a Political Council consisting of 44 members and four co-chairpersons (Milinkevich would have been the fifth but refused to participate in the new structure), consisting of the main opposition leaders: Lyabedzka, Kalyakin, Vyachorka, and Lyaukovich. The Congress expressed a wish to engage in a new dialogue with the government. However, more significant was the breakup of the UDF so soon after the 2006 elections. At the time of writing the opposition again appeared to be divided. Leaving aside the group associated with the jailed Kazulin, both Milinkevich's "For Freedom" movement and Mikalay Statkevich's European Coalition movement disassociated themselves from the new structure and decided to go separate ways. In June 2007, Statkevich announced his intention to create a pro-European alliance of opposition members that would be led by Milinkevich,[150] though there was no indication whether the latter would agree to this new role, particularly given his commitment to street

[148] Kirill Poznyak [Kiril Paznyak] in Belapan, 2 and 14 November 2006.
[149] At a meeting of opposition leaders in Vilnius on 11-12 April 2007, the Second Convention was officially scheduled to be held on an unspecified date in May. See *Belorusskie novosti*, 13 April 2007.
[150] *Belorusskie novosti*, 5 June 2007.

protests using the "For Freedom" movement and his experience during the 2006 presidential election. Whatever the outcome, the position of the Lukashenka regime appeared to be strengthened rather than weakened by the Second Convention of the UDF, which lost some of the momentum gained through the post-election protests.

International Response to the Elections of 2004 and 2006

Since the announcement of the referendum and parliamentary election of 2004, commentators outside Belarus have shown a great interest in the question of the viability and future of the Lukashenka presidency. Writing in *Narodnaya volya* in early September 2004, Sergey Karaganov, Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign Defense Policy of Russia, predicted that the referendum would lead to the loss by Lukashenka of any remaining legitimacy in the international community, observing that the economic success of Belarus in recent years was attributable almost solely to the fact that the majority of Russia's oil refining system was located on Belarusian territory.[151] The frequent criticism of Belarus for democracy violations was bolstered by direct actions. Before the 2004 referendum on September 27, the United States and the EU banned four Belarusian leaders from their countries for their alleged role in the disappearance of opposition members: Uladzimir Navumau, Minister of Internal Affairs; Procurator General Viktor Sheiman; Minister of Sport Yury Sivakou; and the commander of the rapid-reaction forces, Dzmitry Paulichenka.[152] The passage of the Belarus Democracy Act by the U.S. Congress in 2004, together with this ban, heightened the feeling of isolation in Minsk. Lukashenka's response to this news was, "They are getting more and more crazy!"[153] Lukashenka declared also that the West was ready to make an attempt on his life, a ploy that he had already used in the 1994 presidential election. Syarhey Antonchik, leader of the independent trade union, commented that it was necessary for the president to create an internal and external threat in order to achieve success in the referendum. He noted that the government had accused him, the leader of 6,500 workers, of trying to create a terrorist organization. Lyabedzka commented that the "image of a

[151] *Narodnaya volya*, 10 September 2004.
[152] *Belorusskiy rynok*, 4-10 October 2004.
[153] *NTV*, 6 October 2004.

victim...can seduce part of the population, but not the majority."[154]

The OSCE in Europe, which had refused to monitor the October referendum, issued strong criticism of the election campaign for "unrestrained bias and unregulated intrusion into polling stations." The European Union, OSCE, and Council of Europe also refused to recognize the results of the referendum and parliamentary elections. The EU stated that it would continue to assist "all democratic forces" in Belarus. Former head of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus, Ambassador Hans Georg Wieck, observed that the "policies of careful rapprochement do not work" and that it was necessary to put pressure on the Lukashenka regime by means of establishing a radio station and supporting civic society.[155] The Lithuanian parliament adopted a resolution on the elections and referendum in Belarus, in which the key statement read, "The extension of the presidential office indefinitely is regarded as an evident violation of European democratic traditions."[156]

Faced with almost unanimous condemnation of the votes on 17 October 2004 (the exception was Russia, though opinion in that country appeared to be mixed), the Lukashenka regime made some outrageous comments on the lack of validity of the U.S. elections, while the president carefully hedged his bets on the likely results in Ukraine, pointing out--with an implicit swipe at Vladimir Putin--that he had not intruded in that campaign despite his presence in Kyiv for the war commemoration, and that he had very friendly relations with Viktor Yushchenko, but also liked Viktor Yanukovych, a man of Belarusian ancestry. He made it plain, however, that he expected Yushchenko to win.[157] The inference was clear. Lukashenka's relations with Putin remained somewhat distant, and he was anxious to be on good terms with Ukraine, no matter what the outcome of the election there. As before he was looking toward the East, but the East for the time being was no longer such friendly territory. In the West, both the United States and the EU had taken more interest in Belarus than hitherto, during the 2006 election campaign, imposing

[154] *Belorusskiy rynok*, 4-10 October 2004.
[155] *Svobodnye Novosti Plus*, 27 October - 3 November 2006.
[156] *Interfax*, 3 November 2006.
[157] Ibid., 4 November 2006.

further sanctions, on government officials, restricting their travel to their countries, and denouncing Lukashenka for his abuses of human rights. They were actively engaged in developing and expanding TV and radio broadcasts into the country to counter official propaganda.[158]

The EU paid particular attention to the 2006 election, and the Milinkevich campaign in particular. In 2005 Milinkevich met the French foreign minister, the Polish president, the German chancellor, and the head of the European Commission, and was given a rostrum in the Polish Sejm, the European Parliament, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He also, together with Kazulin, visited Russia, though not at an official level.[159] Russian President Vladimir Putin, in turn, declared that his meetings with the Belarusian president could be explained by his support for the fraternal Belarusian people.[160] However, the Lukashenka regime was aware of the limits to foreign intervention in the campaign and thus rarely saw it as a threat to his regime. Quite obviously, the official results of the 2006 presidential election and victory of Lukashenka failed manifestly to convince the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Belarus's western neighbors, and the United States that the process was free and fair. Moreover, the Belarusian elite, especially in Minsk, became politicized and was no longer swayed by the fear factor as in the past.

Western agencies universally condemned the 2006 campaign. A press release from the OSCE, which had over 500 international observers from 38 countries representing its two agencies, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Parliamentary Assembly, stated that the election failed to meet OSCE commitments. According to Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, head of the long-term observation mission, "A positive assessment of this election was impossible." The EU debated further sanctions on Belarus. The EU encouraged the Belarusian opposition by awarding Milinkevich its highest honor--the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought--as

[158] *Pravda*, 3 October 2006. At the time of writing, in April 2007, Poland announced that a TV channel would be available for Belarusian audiences from Warsaw.
[159] *Narodnaya volya*, 10-11 February 2006.
[160] *Belarusian Television*, 31 January 2006.

well as offering a policy paper on what the EU could bring to Belarus if it chose to reform and hold fair elections, establish a free press, release political prisoners, investigate kidnapped and missing persons, allow workers to join non-government trade unions, and create an independent judiciary.[161] The EU paper coincided, quite deliberately, with a time of Belarusian tension with Russia over prices for gas in 2007, which it was postulated could rise from $46.68 per thousand cubic meters to $230--ultimately the increase was staggered over five years and tied to future Russian control over the Belarusian transit company, Beltransgaz. Belarusians were asked to pay double the previous price for Russia gas: $100 per thousand cubic meters.

Conducting of Election Campaigns in Belarus

The Lukashenka regime has not fought a democratic election since the 1994 campaign. It is possible to discern certain characteristics of the subsequent contests that have served the regime well and by 2006 had been perfected into a smooth, albeit very violent operation. In the first place, the organizational tactics are evident. Elections are announced at times of real or perceived threats to the security of the country.[162] These threats could be from a foreign power or an international crisis, or from within with the backing of a hostile state. An image was perpetuated from 2001 onward of a country surrounded by enemies that was somewhat reminiscent of the way Stalin portrayed the Soviet Union in the 1930s. However, although these concerns were ostensibly the reasons behind the calling of an election, they were never the main feature of the campaigns themselves. The president over time has campaigned less and less. In 2006, he decided not to alter his daily schedule but rather to be depicted going about his duties, as though the fate of the country rested on his remaining in his office. This attitude also served to belittle his opponents whose campaigning was regarded officially as little more than a temporary nuisance to the steady progress of the government. It was always made clear that were any other candidate to come to power, then the country would face economic

[161] *Europaworld*, 3 November 2006; *EU Observer*, 20 November 2006.
[162] This not to deny that elections ordinarily are held at five-year intervals for the presidency and four-year intervals for the House of Representatives. However, that still leaves some leeway for the specific date of the announcement. Thus I am suggesting that the regime selects a date that coincides with the announcement of a real or imagined international crisis that in some way affects the Republic of Belarus.

and social chaos. Belarusians were advised to be happy with the existing state of affairs and to be fearful of change. The payment of regular salaries and pensions was cited, and allusions made to the problems in neighboring states that had embarked on reform programs.

Second, the authorities have monopolized procedures to make it daunting for any candidate to step forward to oppose Lukashenka. The Central Election Commission is always presided over by Lyudmila Yarmoshyna, an ardent supporter of the president. The gathering of signatures for candidates had become less and less voluntary in the case of Lukashenka: students were threatened with expulsion from higher educational institutions; teachers and managers faced dismissal; and many workers did not receive wages until they add their names to the list of signatures. Such methods reached a peak in 2006, when the president received almost two million signatures (only 100,000 are required), or about one-third of the entire electorate. Again the goal seems to have been to induce a sense of hopelessness among "pretenders" to the presidency, and to render the election less a contest than a mass approval ceremony in the Communist tradition. However, the regime has also resorted to outright brutality to ensure victory: arresting and beating candidates and their supporters; imprisoning people--generally for short terms--at key moments, controlling the media (especially the three Belarusian television stations); and using official propaganda on public transit and even at polling stations, where portraits of the president often hang. There have been increasing cases of mass voting in rural communities and the final results have been shown to be distorted, often by very large amounts.[163] Thus Lukashenka's final 2006 count of 83% of the vote did not tally with more reliable opinion polls that indicated he would receive between 48 and 60%. Likewise Milinkevich's total of 6% was probably about one-third of his overall total. In the fashion of Central Asian leaders, Lukashenka has become preoccupied with the margin of victory and also the need to avoid a humiliating runoff should he receive less than 50%. Though some analysts have posited that Lukashenka is a highly popular (and populist president) and thus his electoral figures are unsurprising, the reality is that the

[163] Some interesting examples are to be found in the 2007 documentary film *Ploshcha*, directed by Yury Chashchevatsky, which focuses on the 2006 presidential elections and their aftermath in Minsk. See http://ploshcha.wolnabialorus.org/.

results reflect the extent and totality of his authoritarian control over Belarus.

Yet for obvious reasons, elections have become the main points of activity for the opposition too. In 2001, the concept of the united candidate was begun--though arguably at too late a point to have a significant impact--and it was furthered in 2006 when Milinkevich was accepted by five major political parties, though not by the Social Democrats backing Kazulin. The Belarusian regime became somewhat obsessed with the threat of a color revolution and foreign intrusions into Belarus. Allegations in 2006 included the then KGB chief Sukharenka stating that rats had been placed into the water supply to poison the population, and there were regular references to the activity of the United States, as well as agents from Georgia and Ukraine (two of the states in which color revolutions took place), as well as from the Baltic States. The opposition has been generally portrayed as being in league or close liaison with these foreign agencies, to the detriment of Lukashenka's Belarus. Reports are issued that opposition leaders are being funded by foreign powers and thus they have betrayed their loyalty to Belarus. Fears of foreign activity could be combined with official propaganda about Belarus being threatened by hostile countries as well as NATO's expansion to the western and northern borders, and the campaign from the government's perspective was boosted also by the support of the Russian government, which as earlier recognized the campaign as free and fair, even when violations of procedure reached a new level.

Elections are not the only means for consolidation of the Lukashenka regime. Indeed the period in between elections can be considered more critical in terms of changes of personnel, strengthening of the militia, and official propaganda devoted to the cult of Lukashenka and--recently--an attempt to forge a direct connection between the security and progress of Belarus and the person of the president. There is no clearly demarcated successor to Lukashenka, though the power of his son Viktor, a 31-year old, has been evident among the security forces, where he appears to be engaged in a contest

with the State Secretary of the Security Council, Viktar Sheiman.[164] In general, the coterie around the president is rotated rather than hired and dismissed. Officials who are loyal do not fall far. On the other hand, those who occupy positions of secondary importance who prove to be "disloyal" are often ostracized and persecuted and their careers and livelihood destroyed. Even these periods, however, see activity that is directed toward future elections, whether presidential, parliamentary, or municipal. Nothing can be left to chance. Above all, the key role is assigned to television. One of the president's most loyal and notorious supporters is the chairperson of the Belarusian Teleradio Company, Alyaksandr Zimouski, who was appointed in late 2005 and formerly had directed several propaganda films that were shown on this channel. Zimouski's predecessor, Uladzimir Matveychuk, became the Minister of Culture.[165] Television--at least until very recently--has enabled the regime an exclusive access to the electorate and is without doubt the chief instrument of the development of the Lukashenka phenomenon and myth.

[164] In his interview with *Le Monde*, Lukashenka stated that Viktor has no political ambitions and that neither of his sons had ambitions to be president. Viktor, however, was competent and assisted the president in making decisions. Cited in *SB Belarus' Segodnya*, 2 August 2007.
[165] See, for example, http://www.charter97.org, 22 December 2005.

5. The Foundations of Lukashenka's Electoral Victories

Clearly there are now new schools of thought on the Lukashenka presidency, especially given the declining relations with Russia since 2002, and in particular the impasse over the prices of imported oil and gas, which has led Belarus to make new overtures toward the European Union, suggesting a reorientation of state policy away from Russia. Under these circumstances, some analysts perceive a conscious form of state patriotism, to promote the values of Lukashenka's Belarus and laud its achievements. This state, it is alleged, is based on economic prosperity, job and pension security, the unpopularity of the perspectives of the political opposition, and recognition of the attainments of the Soviet past, but also of specifically Belarusian goals. It has been alleged that the Lukashenka regime is not unduly harsh and that it is genuinely popular, having attained successes in all subsequent elections. It is alleged also that Lukashenka is "wildly popular" in Russia.[166] The most frequently repeated adage is that in the event of a free and democratic election, there is no question that Lukashenka would win a convincing majority. Such statements appear to miss the point, which is that the regime has perfected the process of winning elections. Let us examine briefly the foundations of the president's electoral victories since 2001. There appear to be three particular aspects and they will be dealt with in turn:

1) Empowerment of the presidency and repression of political opponents, which I have termed for convenience "state authoritarianism"
2) The state's propagation of "economic prosperity"
3) New patriotism

State Authoritarianism

There seems no need here to provide a lengthy description of how Lukashenka changed the nature of the Belarusian state from one of an executive presidency to a presidential state through two referendums in 1995 and 1996, which in the process eliminated the

[166] Ioffe, "Unfinished Nation Building in Belarus," pp. 46-47.

authority of the Parliament, changed the national flag and symbols, and elevated Russian to a state language since it has been covered before.[167] At this same time, he exerted control over the media, introduced a ruling elite that featured members of the security forces (often of Russian origin), albeit with quite a high turnover of personnel. The pattern has not been repeated in Ukraine, whereas in Russia, though the president is also in a position of strength, it has been brought about in alliance with a party of power in the Russian Duma. During all presidential and parliamentary elections that have taken place in the 21st century, Belarus has had no alternative sources of power outside the office of the presidency. There are no powerful oligarchs and very limited privatization of industry. The president's authority over his opponents--and enemies, for that term is probably appropriate--has been achieved in a Stalinist manner reminiscent of the 1920s in the Soviet Union, namely in stages, but very thoroughly. In this way the maneuvers from the Red House often evade public and international attention. There are two types of opponents of the regime: the official opposition and the internal opposition, i.e. members or former members of the ruling structure. Both have been dealt with in the most meticulous and ruthless manner. As a result, analyses of the nature of the regime have varied from "dictatorship," to "Sultanism," to some form of democratic centralism, or simply the perception of "Lukashism" as an authoritarian regime that is more about images than anything of substance.

The democratic opposition has not posed any serious problems to the regime since the election of 1994, other than the protests that followed the 2006 presidential election, which for a brief time solicited world attention when the small tent city was established in Minsk's October Square. Lukashenka avoided an immediate election in 1999 by amending the Constitution, and was able to ensure that his political opponents no longer posed a threat to him. Paznyak, as noted above, fled abroad in 1996, while Shushkevich has remained in opposition, eventually losing his seat in Parliament and becoming involved in fractious disputes among rival Social Democratic parties. Other opposition leaders have been subjected to periodic imprisonment and regular harassment.

[167] I deal with these issues in David R. Marples, *Belarus: a Denationalized Nation* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), pp. 69-99.

Their newspapers and web pages appear with difficulty, and not a single figure, young or old, has been free to pursue a political career freely in opposition to the incumbent government. Demeaned and lampooned in the official media, the opposition leaders in general lack credibility among the general public. Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the erstwhile leader of the United Democratic opposition is better known in EU countries than in Belarus. A few of these leaders are treated harshly--Mikalay Statkevich and Alyaksandr Kazulin of the Social Democrats are two such cases--others suffer what can be termed "petty violations" of their freedom of movement and speech, but are constantly monitored. Lukashenka has succeeded in spreading an image that the opposition is a small, divided group, in the pay of a hostile American government, as well as NATO and other outside forces that would like to have promoted a color revolution in Belarus in the spring of 2006. Perhaps in the latter count too lies the explanation for the harsh treatment of members of the various youth movements of Belarus and the incarceration of figures like Paval Sevyarinets and Zmitser Dashkevich.[168]

Toward another section of the opposition, however, the attitude is even more vindictive. This statement refers to former members of the ruling structures that have been dismissed and who are now alienated from the Lukashenka regime. Some have been eliminated, such as Lukashenka's one-time ally, former Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Viktar Hanchar and former Minister of Defense Yuryi Zakharenka. Elimination of opponents in a central European state attracts too much attention, however, so such policies are selective. Figures such as former Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir, or the former ambassador to Latvia, Mikhail Marynich, and perhaps also former Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Sannikau, are considered the most dangerous opponents because they have inside knowledge of the workings--and thereby weaknesses--of the government. To some extent, Kazulin and Shushkevich, as former Rector and Vice-Rector respectively of the Belarusian State University, also fit into this category. Suffice it to say that the political careers of every overt or potential opponent to Lukashenka in the past three elections (1994, 2001 and 2006) have been destroyed or severely weakened. The method

[168] See, for example, www.charter97.org, 15 March 2007 and International League for Human Rights, "Belarus Update," July 29-August 4, 2004, [http://www.ilhr.org].

of persecution of both opposition sectors may vary from arrests, auditing by the KGB, curtailment of careers, telephone and other surveillance, refusal of rights to travel, confiscation of personal property, such as computers and printed papers, and the like. Physical beatings are rarer but quite commonplace. At the same time the regime has adopted a siege mentality of being surrounded by enemies--such a policy is facilitated by the travel bans on its leading figures by the EU and the United States. It has not, however, adopted any hard-line position on its foreign critics in recent months because it prefers to leave the option of future accommodation with Europe open.

Repressive actions against its opponents--perhaps together with violations of the Constitution and manipulation of elections--have been the most monitored aspect of the Lukashenka regime. There is no suggestion here that they are unimportant; rather that they have become to some degree self-evident. Frequent conferences have been held in Poland and the Baltic States to debate whether there is any possibility of bringing democratization to Belarus.[169] The Belarusian authorities have been absent from such gatherings, at least in an official capacity. Together with the travel bans on government officials, the implication is that democratic states have practically lost hope of any real possibility for democratic change from the Lukashenka regime. Therefore many international statespersons, politicians, and analysts have denounced official Belarus in no uncertain terms to the point that the phrase "last dictatorship in Europe" has become something of a worn epithet. Lukashenka in turn has not suffered unduly from such adverse criticism, and at times has been able to turn it to his advantage, particularly with regard to his responses to military actions taken by Western countries in former Yugoslavia in the late 1990s and in recent times in Iraq. It can be argued that the litany of admonishments toward the Belarusian leader have brought about a certain familiarity with his methods of rule. More attention is focused on the harsh regimen being introduced within the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that elections in Belarus have been won first and foremost by the state's almost total control over all levers of power (the army, militia, KGB, television, the press, election commissions, and latterly even opinion polls). However, there are other factors too.

[169] This author has attended several such gatherings since 2003, in Latvia, Poland, and other countries.

Economic "Prosperity"

A debate on the relative economic prosperity of Belarus and how it has been achieved has been offered elsewhere recently.[170] Ironically, as noted there by this author, the propagation of economic successes[171]--so reminiscent of the late Soviet era--has been developed at a time when health standards and a sharp population decline have raised questions about the future of the Belarusian state. Part of the problem lies in the high proportion of pensioners, who incidentally are among the most significant supporters of the president. Lukashenka has claimed that pensioners are the most conscientious part of the population and form the foundations for the present stability in the country.[172] In the summer of 2005 it was reported that there are 2.5 million pensioners in the republic, or about 26% of the total population. By 2025, it is forecast, that figure will rise to 32%. Currently 40% of pensioners live in the countryside, where they constitute a much higher proportion of the rural population.[173] This fact, together with the annual decline of the population since 1994 by about 50,000, serves to contradict the official picture of a healthy and prosperous society. Moreover, the lamentable conditions in Belarusian villages contrast with the situation in cities like Minsk, upon which the regime focuses attention as the model for the country as a whole.

Occasionally, this anxiety about the demographic situation has occupied official or scientific attention,[174] but for the most part it is confined to opposition outlets. Thus writing in *Narodnaya volya* in early August 2005, Aleh Drabchyk remarked that society was in a profound crisis to which no one was paying attention. Every year the country was losing--through a surplus of mortalities over births--the equivalent of an entire

[170] See the exchange of views between this author and Grigorii Ioffe in *Eurasian Geography & Economics*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 1 (2007): 37-72.
[171] According to the president's website, Prime Minister Sidorsky reported in late 2005 that the GDP had risen twofold over the period 1996-2005. The government had set itself the task to triple the indicator compared to 1996.
http://www.president.gov.by/en/press15957.html
[172] *Belorusskiy rynok*, 8 August 2005.
[173] *CTV* (Minsk), 11 August 2005.
[174] It was the subject of a doctors' conference in 1998, for example.

district (rayon) of people. Part of the problem, in his view, was that 23% of families consisted of single parents, 37% of families had no children, and 23.5% had just one child.[175] The following month, Iosif Seredich (Syaredzich) drew attention to the same problem. The number of people was being reduced by "dozens of thousands" every day, he wrote, and the average lifespan of a Belarusian male was twenty years less than his Japanese counterpart. He asked: isn't it true that the majority of villages is dying out, and that the rural areas are full of homeless and jobless drunkards?[176] Continuing in October, the newspaper drew attention to a UN report on "Population in 2005," which maintained that by the year 2050, there would only be 7 million people in Belarus, hence a loss of 1.8 million over the next 45 years. Life expectancy for males was 62.8 (74.3 for women), thirteen years less than in France or Germany.[177]

Such figures are hardly welcome to the Lukashenka government because they do not fit in with the official portrayal of a thriving country. The president has consistently raised wages and pensions, and official reports proclaim the recovery and growth of industrial enterprises since 1994 when he came into office. The most successful enterprises have been in the oil refining sector and in agriculture.[178] In the latter case, exports to Russia of foodstuffs have been quite profitable. On the other hand, the bright reports on Belarusian Television do not always correspond with the data from the Belarusian Ministry of Statistics. Thus in January 2005, 3,599 enterprises (34% of the total) were operating at a loss according to reports by the latter agency. The percentages varied as follows: 39.1% in transportation, 36.7% in construction, 35.6% in trade and public catering, 35.6% in agriculture, and 37.9% in housing and the communal economy. Even in the most successful economic area--the city of Minsk, almost 23% of enterprises were losing money. The report suggested that those firms that were successful depended

[175] *Narodnaya volya*, 4 August 2005, p. 1.
[176] Ibid, 30 September 2005.
[177] Ibid., 20 October 2005.
[178] The state spent over $13 million on the rehabilitation of territories contaminated by the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in the year 2005 alone. On the 20th anniversary of that accident, Lukashenka spent a week-long holiday in the affected areas to illustrate that it was safe for habitation. The program for rehabilitation and the output of ecologically clean products has been under way since 2002. Products raised in this area are sold in Belarus and, especially, in Russia, where there is a high demand for Belarusian butter, cheese, milk, and meat, However, products from the Chernobyl region delivered elsewhere have no special markings to indicate their origin. *Belarus Today*, 26 April-2 May 2005.

on the active support of the state, which in turn had abandoned those that were not profitable. "Hundreds of enterprises" were on the verge of bankruptcy because the country only used state rather than outside investments, and there was not enough funding to cover all factories.[179] Moreover, the successful companies had exploited the lax border controls and subsidized goods from Russia, with many of the latter being resold at higher prices abroad.

The spring 2007 request for a $1.5 billion loan from Russia[180] as well as the failure of Belarus to meet the first trenchant of its payment to Gazprom in the summer of this same year,[181] illustrate the almost total dependence of the state-run economy hitherto on cheap energy goods from Russia, as well as the resale of subsidized Russian products elsewhere for large profits. Lukashenka in this respect did not follow Kebich's program to establish a market economy. Indeed the economy has been left largely under state control, as has agriculture, which still depends on collective and state farms for the most part. The recent dispute with Russia over gas and oil prices brought to light starkly the one-dimensional nature of the Lukashenka economy and its essentially fragile nature. The prosperity touted by some scholars would be a great surprise to residents of some rural regions of Vitsebsk or Homel', for example. Rather the dictum once applied by the president would seem more appropriate: namely that Belarusians do not live well, but they do not live for long. Nevertheless it is on such a precarious basis--the proclaimed economic success of Lukashenka's Belarus--that the current reputation of the regime in the minds of the public is based. The benefits the state had derived from the partnership with Russia are well illustrated by the situation with gas imports prior to the 2006 presidential election.

Gas talks took place under the auspices of the Union State (the Russia-Belarus Union or RBU), which originated on 2 April 1996, but which is still lacking a ratified

[179] *Svobodnye novosti plus*. 13-20 April 2005.
[180] *RIA Novosti*, 23 March 2007. A further request for up to $2 billion was made by Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorsky in July, but rejected by the Russian side. *Kommersant*, 2 August 2007.
[181] Belarus missed the 23 July 2007 deadline to pay its $450 million gas bill to Gazprom for supplied delivered during the first half of the year. See *Kommersant'*, 24 July 2007 and *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 25 July 2007. In early August, Lukashenka agreed to make the payment by dipping into the state's reserves. *Reuters*, 2 August 2007.

constitution and has been the subject of projected wrangling between the governments of Putin and Lukashenka. The Belarusian president adheres to the wishful view that the two sides must operate on an equal basis in such a union and this view has been rejected bluntly by Putin. Negotiations to establish the Russian ruble as the common currency of both countries have continued endlessly without results as has the concept of a customs union. Belarus's perspective has been that Russia is permitted certain privileges in Belarus, such as military bases and the conduit pipeline for Russian gas to European customers. It is also a fraternal state and the close relationship developed during the Soviet period should be permitted to continue. Hence Belarus should not be paying prices for Russian natural resources that are higher than those of nearby Russian cities, such as Smolensk and Bryansk. In late 2005, on the eve of the Belarusian presidential election, there appeared to be some reasons for alarm, as the Russian Board of the Federal Service on Tariffs announced that from 1 January 2006, Russian customers would face an 11% annual rise in the price of gas.[182] Belarus was concerned that the price should remain at $46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters. Prime Minister Sidorsky was thus sent to Moscow to ensure that Belarus would be exempted from this general price rise, and that Russia would adhere to an agreement made between Putin and Lukashenka at Sochi (April 2005) that gas prices could remain static for another year.[183]

However, Gazprom from this time began to add conditions for the continuing transmission of cheap gas. The position of Belarus also stood out as being much more favorable than that of other neighbors of Russia. Ukraine, for example, was asked to pay $150-160 per thousand cubic meters in 2006 which, according to one writer, constituted Russia's revenge for the success of the 2004 uprising that led to the victory of Viktor Yushchenko in his presidential election against Viktor Yanukovych. However, the price that Belarus was receiving after price rises went into effect in the Russian Federation was even lower than in the Smolensk and Bryansk regions singled out by Lukashenka as points of comparison. Arguably, Russia did not wish to put Lukashenka in a difficult position prior to the election and then witness the success of another "color revolution."

[182] *Narodnaya volya*, 26 November 2005.
[183] *Belorusy i rynok*, 12 December 2005.

But Russia did begin to insist on the establishment of a joint venture in place of the current transit company Beltransgaz. Aleksandr Medvedev, executive chairman of the Board of Gazprom, insisted that the joint venture should be created "within 2-3 months."[184] Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the united opposition candidate, remarked that the president was ready to relinquish control over the Belarusian gas system in exchange for political support during the elections. On the other hand, it was plain that he was loath to give away Beltransgaz. Milinkevich's view was not dissimilar to that of Lukashenka. He felt that Belarus was of great military-strategic importance for Russia, as well as for transit to Kaliningrad. Thus although Belarus's price to be paid to Gazprom was relatively low, it was part of a mutually beneficial package. Like Lukashenka also, he felt that the state should retain control over its largest and most valuable enterprises.[185]

It was clear, however, that the Russian side wished to exploit its advantage of resources to gain a stronger political position. Gazprom itself maintained that when the gas prices for 2006 were decided, it was in the knowledge that Russia and Belarus were in the process of creating a Union State. Such a state signified that there would be common standards while forming the financial and economic indices of the two countries. The 2005 documents were also prepared by the Russian side in the expectation that Gazprom would be the owner of the Belarusian section of the Yamal-Europe pipeline, the land of which was currently rented by the company. Lastly, if Beltransgaz insisted on controlling the Belarusian energy transportation system, there would be a joint venture in place of the Belarusian state company. This development "would guarantee its significant development and increase the stability of deliveries of Russian gas to Europe through the territory of Belarus," according to Gazprom official representative Sergei Kupriyanov, speaking in January 2006.[186] The idea of such a venture originated in 2002, but it had been shelved since then. Thus very stringent conditions were attached to the cheap gas prices that virtually ensured that Lukashenka would remain president and begin a third term, and these stipulations demanded that the Russian company would gain at least partial control of one of Belarus's most lucrative economic assets. Put another way,

[184] *Narodnaya volya*, 15 December 2005; and *Belorusy i rynok*, 26 December 2005.
[185] *Narodnaya volya*, 28 December 2005.
[186] *Belorusy i rynok*,16 January 2006.

Lukashenka could be said to be securing power by selling off valuable state resources to Russia. It would prove a very high price to pay.

Once Lukashenka's victory was ensured, then Gazprom began to make further demands on Belarus, suggesting in April 2006 that the 2007 price for gas would be in the region of $200 per thousand cubic meters. Lukashenka, who seemed physically weaker after the very tough election campaign, responded angrily that such a price violated the conditions of the Union State. Gradually he was forced to back down and to accept that the joint venture must go ahead in order to keep gas prices at a manageable level. While discussions were taking place over these prices, the two sides signed a protocol at the end of 2006. The Belarusian representatives at the negotiations in Moscow tried vainly to keep the price for gas in 2007 down to $75 per thousand cubic meters. However, the final agreement brought no such solace to Lukashenka. The price of $100 was established for 2007, but would then rise in stages, so that it attained 67% of the rate paid by European countries ($167.50) in 2008; 80% ($200) in 2009; and 90% ($225) in 2010. By 2011, Belarus would be paying the full world price for its gas. Using a Dutch intermediary, the two sides evaluated Beltransgaz at $5 billion and Gazprom agreed to purchase shares worth $2.5 billion over the next four years until its ownership of the enterprise reached 50%. The transit rate for Russian gas also rose in 2007 from 75 cents to $1.45 for 1,000 cubic meters of gas over 100 kilometers.[187] The options for the Belarusian side were now limited and it was to face similar harsh realities early in 2007 when negotiating the price for supplies of Russian oil.[188] Russia also turned down Belarus's request for a loan on the grounds that Minsk could use the $500,000 in payments for 2007 toward the joint venture to meet the increased cost for gas. In fact, Belarus opted not to use the funds for that purpose and ran into another cash crisis in the summer of 2007 that threatened to raise the problems for the regime to a new level.

[187] *Belorusskoe telegrafnoe agenstvo*, 30 December 2006 and 1 January 2007.

[188] The oil dispute was resolved on 12 January, when Russia and Belarus signed an agreement that Belarus would pay a tax of $53 per ton on imported Russian oil, as well as a tariff on exports of products from Belarusian refineries that are produced with Russian oil. While the discussions were taking place, the Druzhba pipeline, which carries Russian oil to Europe through Belarus, was closed for three days. *BBC News*, 13 January 2007.

Recently, Belarus has introduced plans to construct a domestic nuclear power plant in Mahileu region,[189] a true sign of desperation in the country still plagued by the long-term radiation fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of April 1986. In early 1999, a Government Commission imposed a ten-year moratorium on the construction of any nuclear reactors in the country.[190] However, the problems with Russia over oil and gas payments brought the question of a Belarusian nuclear power station to the fore. On 1 December 2006, Mikhail Myasnikovich, chairman of the National Academy of Sciences, announced at an energy security meeting, which was attended by the president, that Belarus would commence constructing its own station without further delay. Lukashenka then subsequently made a speech in which he stated that nuclear power was the obvious solution to Belarus's energy difficulties. He asked that the proposal be forwarded to the Security Council. A plan drafted in May 2006 anticipates that the country will build a station based on VVER-1000 reactors of either Russian or French design, with the first reactor brought on line in 2015, or--if a more rapid schedule can be maintained--by 2013. Each reactor would cost between $1.3 and $1.7 billion, and this figure does not include the costs of decommissioning the reactors once their life cycles are ended. It was noted that the operation of the two reactors would allow Belarus to cut its dependence on Russian energy by 24% and, within the next 15 years, the share of nuclear power in the country's energy balance could reach 20%.[191]

Where would the nuclear plant be located? Several sites were prospected but the one selected was at Krasnopol'le, Chavusy region in Mahileu oblast. This location is 25 miles southeast of the city of Mahileu and 40 miles from the Russian border. More worrying, it is within a swathe of land still contaminated with radioactive cesium from the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. The state faces significant opposition not merely to the location of the station, but also to the nuclear power industry in general. Yet state officials have been adamant that the project will go ahead as planned. At the 10th Congress on

[189] The announcement was made by president of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, Mikhail Myasnikovich, on 1 December 2006. See *Belorusskoe telegrafnoe agenstvo*, 1 and 4 December 2006.
[190] At the final meeting, 26 of the 34 commission members were in attendance: 19 voted in favor of the moratorium and 7 were opposed. See:
http://www.open.by/belarus-now/cont/1999/0119/economics/5.html.
[191] *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 1 December 2006; *Belorusskie novosti*, 1 December 2006.

energy and ecology in October 2005 (i.e. shortly before Myasnikovich's statement), First Deputy Premier Uladzimir Syamashka remarked that a nuclear plant was the most beneficial form of energy. The authorities did not react to critics' demands that a final decision on whether to go ahead with the station should be subject to a national referendum.[192] Lukashenka expressed his support of nuclear power early in 2005, when he pointed out that there remained widespread fear of radiation among the population, but such fears were irrational if directed against the construction of a domestic plant. Belarus was in fact surrounded by nuclear plants: Ignalina in Lithuania, Smolensk in Russia, and several stations in Ukraine. Europe already had a program in place for building such stations, he noted, and its example needed to be followed.[193]

Perhaps there are solid arguments for Belarus to return to the nuclear power option (it was building a nuclear power and heating station in the 1980s that was abandoned after the Chernobyl accident). But in several respects this alternative seems to have as many drawbacks as advantages. Logically the fuel for such a station would come from Russia--and as noted the likelihood is that the reactors themselves would come from the same source. The station would thus place Belarus in further debt to Russia and ensure that it was dependent on that country for supplies of various parts. Therefore the nuclear option as a means from liberating Belarus from over-reliance on Russia seems somewhat limited. A possible exit from this dilemma would be the improvement of relations with the EU and the use of European technology. But the president has made little attempt to make a genuine move in this direction and the EU would be unlikely to respond positively without some evidence that the authorities were relaxing their tight control over the media and releasing political prisoners. Once again it seems that the economic position of Belarus in recent times has been severely weakened by official policies.

There have also been reports that Belarus intends to increase its consumption of fuel oil in order to reduce the need for Russian gas. The energy crisis developed with

[192] *Narodnaya volya*, 8 October 2005.
[193] *Belorusy i rynok*, 10 October 2005.

renewed force in 2007 and shows every sign of seriously weakening the Belarusian economy. It seems clear above all that the government is suffering from a profound cash shortage and would be prepared to accept loans from any source. Thus while Lukashenka has tried for thirteen years to convince the electorate that his government has brought economic stability, it is manifest that this is no longer the case.[194] In May 2007, he did not increase pensions as promised (they average around $75 per month), and he cut transportation benefits for pensioners and students. The government *has* brought about cosmetic improvements, such as the cleaning of building and streets (especially in Minsk), the dismantling of eyesores, the opening of a new National Library, and even the removal of foreign billboards depicting French models. However, the relative prosperity of Belarusians has been dependent on maintaining existing arrangements with Russia. Lukashenka has been unable to accomplish this particular task in recent months and he has complained that Russia's real goal is to privatize all Belarus,[195] which could see the most profitable enterprises fall into the hands of Russian oligarchs or directly into the hands of the Russian state through Gazprom. His frustration is apparent, but it signals the end of the working relationship with Russia that has permitted the so-called economic miracle in Belarus. In turn, this situation signifies that the president has lost one of his main electoral strategies, thus weakening his position for the election of 2011.

New Patriotism

Various terms have been deployed to help comprehend the current state of new patriotism and state consolidation in Belarus. Such endeavors are not without merit. However, they may attribute a degree of uniformity and consistency to the policies of the present government that simply does not exist. The president's vision of his country has always been nebulous. One Belarusian scholar has summarized it as a combination of Soviet

[194] The critical nature of the government's cash flow dilemma is not being hidden from the public and constituted the main news in the presidential organ *SB Belarus' Segodnya*, on 6 August 2007. In the newspaper's editorial, the author cited Lukashenka's statement that Belarus would never sell its most important assets to Russian oligarchs.
[195] *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 2 August 2007.

Belarusian patriotism and anti-Western rhetoric.[196] Lukashenka seemed threatened by traditional Belarusian nationalists of the Belarusian Popular Front and he has long regarded the native language as an element of subversion, for example. Thus Belarusian elementary education has been virtually eliminated from the capital city of Minsk, only one in five students receives instruction in the Belarusian language according to official figures, advanced language institutes have been closed, and the pure form of the Belarusian language--as opposed to the muddled "trasyanka"--is clearly spoken by only a minority of the residents of Belarus today.[197] In turn, Lukashenka has elected to reject historical symbols of a national past, or indeed any past at all that did not emanate directly from the Soviet victory in the Second World War. Though the president has only belatedly turned attention to the topic of writing history,[198] he has long made it plain that as a former history teacher himself, his outlook is limited to the Soviet period, and within that time, prime space is allotted to the "Great Patriotic War" of 1941-1945. Perceived through such a perspective, the history of Belarus omits not only the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania or Polish rule, but also many of the revelations about the Stalin period.

The Great Patriotic War has been pivotal to the Lukashenka regime. Though he was born nine years after the war ended, he has identified himself with its successes and commemorations. Monuments and museums abound in Minsk (designated a Hero City in the Brezhnev era) and other cities, and the president has visited the Brest Fortress, the defenders of which all died in defending it against the German invasion of late June 1941. Victory Day (9 May) is a key event in Belarus. From the Belarusian perspective, the focus has been largely on the Partisan movement that was centered in Belarus. Official sites for tourists include Khatyn, a village in which the German occupants reportedly killed all 149 inhabitants except for a man and a child, a statue of which marks the entrance, some 50 kilometers from Minsk; Glory Mound between the city of Minsk and

[196] Vitalii Silitski in his article for the 2004 Country Report of Freedom House: http://www.open.by/belarus-now/cont/1998/1020/news/8.html.
[197] *Belorusy i rynok*, 4 September 2006.
[198] In June 2006, Lukashenka opened the new public library in the eastern suburbs of Minsk. At the opening ceremony he demanded the publication of a new version of Belarusian history that would provide revised and "more accurate"--implicitly complimentary--interpretations of the role of Lenin and Stalin in Belarusian history. *SB Belarus' segodnya*, 17 June 2006.

its international airport, and various sites in the capital itself, including Victory Square and an elaborate Museum of the Great Patriotic War. Recently, the official veneration of Stalin has increased and a non-government site--known as the Stalin Line--has been created as an outdoor military museum. This locale features a large bust of Stalin at the entrance and pillboxes (some of which are outside the official boundaries) that are claimed erroneously to have been part of the original line defending the border from the encroaching powers of Poland (until September 1939) and Nazi Germany.[199] Lukashenka, who has a private mansion along the route to the museum, has attended some of the depicted war games, most notably with Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. To the Second World War relics have been added tanks and guns from the Cold War era, including some of modern design.

Such manifestations of historical culture and memory do not really distinguish Belarus from Russia. In fact the two countries, together with Ukraine, might jointly be said to have borne the brunt of the fighting in the war and thus to have developed a common perspective. In Ukraine, however, there have been some significant recent attempts to focus on Stalin's crimes and the victimization of the population at the hands of the Soviet authorities as well as to memorialize Ukrainians who resisted the Red Army.[200] There have been similar efforts in Belarus,[201] but to date they have been unsuccessful, not least because the Lukashenka regime has identified revelations about--for example--the NKVD's massacres in Belarus as part of an opposition campaign to discredit the Soviet regime. Like his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, Lukashenka

[199] Historian Ihar Kuznetsau points out that defensive constructions along the western border of the USSR were never given the name "Stalin's Line." Also the defensive fortifications that were in place were dismantled and the garrisons demanded in early October 1939, following the Soviet annexation of Eastern Poland (Western Belarus and Western Ukraine). This was one reason why the initial German drive through Belarus in the summer of 1941 was so successful. See *Narodnaya volya*, 2 July 2005.

[200] This development has been most notable with the Famine of 1932-33, which is officially designated as an act of genocide by the Soviet regime against Ukrainians on 28 November 2006. See, for example, http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2006-11/2006-11-28-voa52.cfm?CFID=107806991&CFTOKEN=14507466.
Most of the memorials erected to anti-Soviet figues have been in Western Ukraine, which was only annexed by the USSR in September 1939.

[201] One focus has been the mass burial site of NKVD victims at Kurapaty, in the northern suburbs of Minsk. Not only did the authorities refuse to recognize Kurapaty as a commemorative site, but the ordered the extension of a ring road around Minsk in 2001 that destroyed some of the graves. The Belarusian Popular Front attempted to organize a round-the-clock vigil to protect the graves. For more information, see http://pages.prodigy.net/dr_fission/bpf/news2001f.htm.

outwardly remarks that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a modern tragedy. As a union republic within the USSR, Belarus achieved economic successes and was able to rebuild after the massive losses of the war period. It did so alongside Russia, its older brother and friend. Consequently, the Soviet phase of Belarusian history has been the sole preoccupation of the Lukashenka regime and officially regarded as a progressive era. Earlier periods are either ignored or regarded as times of exploitation of Belarusians by foreign powers, such as Poles, Lithuanians, or Germans. All developing nations require a past and an established chronicle of events. In Ukraine, the historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky authored a history that identified a common thread from the medieval principality of Kyivan Rus' to the modern Ukrainian state. In Belarus, despite some attempts by historians and writers to provide something similar in the 1920s, such chronologies are largely absent. As noted below, there have recently been some belated efforts to develop links with earlier fruitful historical periods that can be connected with the birth of a Belarusian national self-awareness, but for most of the Lukashenka period, only the Soviet era has been regarded as significant for such a development, and then only in conjunction with Russia.

So what is the real evidence for the construction of a distinctive form of patriotism in tune with the interests of the residents of Belarus? What should one make of opinion polls that reveal Belarusians to prefer their own independent state today to a union with Russia, or for that matter membership in the European Union? What sort of state do Belarusians want, and to what extent does Lukashenka fulfill their wishes? Lukashenka has often been referred to as a populist president, but what that term really signifies is the desire to create a state in his image, with the president in the role of a father figure protecting his people. Thus Lukashenka has referred to “people power” or popular authority since the 2006 presidential elections, suggesting that in Belarus there is a commonality of interests that centers on his government and is manifested in election results and opinion polls. People power, according to the president's "state of the nation address" of May 2006, signifies that there is an informal working agreement between the Belarusian government and a large section of the population, namely official trade unions councils of deputies, and youth and veterans' organizations. One could add to this list the

local councils after the one-sided municipal elections that occurred in early 2007, in which no deputies were elected from the opposition parties, some of which boycotted the election. In his speech, Lukashenka declared that his state had to focus on two major issues: rising energy prices and "preposterous measures" against his country on the part of the EU and the United States. To circumvent such pressure, he proposed the establishment of new centers of power, which would include China, India, and certain parts of Latin America (Venezuela is regarded as a close friend at present).[202] Such conceptions on the part of the Belarusian president are combined with its membership since 1998 in the Nonaligned Movement and a campaign to ensure that the United Nations serves the interests of all countries, "not just those of the United States."[203]

But does Belarus really have any alternative but to go its own way given its international isolation and the loss of the warm relationship with Russia, on which Lukashenka staked his presidency in emulation of the Kebich model? Put another way: if a model is in place, then theoretically one could eventually see the departure of Lukashenka from power and continue the process of state consolidation. A Belarusian blueprint for society might develop and the country could advance with clearly definable goals. The reality seems otherwise. Without Lukashenka, Belarus would be very unlikely to develop in any coherent fashion. Various groups would emerge to contest power, though the likelihood is that some figure or group from the ruling structure would, as before, have distinct advantages. The contest would be bitter and divisive, because that is surely the legacy that the present leader would be obliged to leave. There is no separate power base in the country because the president—-and there can only be one president—-has not permitted one to develop. After Lukashenka, the political climate in Belarus might return to the situation of 1993-94, with the additional problem that a more powerful and confident Russia will wish to regain its place as the closest ally and partner. The reason for this situation is straightforward: Lukashenka has not been a “creationist”

[202] Ostensibly the enunciation of "people power" explained why the president had not created a "party of power." People power signified the resolution of important matters through popular participation in elections, referendums, and the all-Belarusian assemblies, and according to the president is expressed through labor collectives, public associations, and trade unions. *Belapan*, 23 May 2006.
[203] Address by A.G. Lukashenko to the 14th Nonaligned Movement Summit, 1 August 2006, http://www.president.gov.by/en/press43750.html.

leader; rather he has been the arbiter of the direction that Belarus must take in response to external events.

Such a statement can be illustrated by the 2006 election. Lukashenka chose not to campaign (though he was always seen on television as very busy and diligent with day-to-day affairs), thus neglecting to offer a path to the future for Belarusians. Thus after twelve years in office, he had nothing to offer, no conception of a 21st century state. His public pronouncements were invariably negative: about the interference of the West, the dangers of a color revolution, and the like. The two democratic candidates put forward platforms with a detailed program and a vision for the future. Evidently the president realized he could win the election without campaigning—-though his aides gathered a record number of signatures for him—-and therefore there was no need to outline his ideas for society. On the other hand it is plausible that he has no ideas other than the propagation of his public image as a defender of his people from foreign dangers. His public statements following the gas crisis of the winter of 2006-07 are illustrative of this nihilistic approach. They are contradictory, meandering, and often make no sense. The only substantial benefit of his presidency has been exploitation of the partnership with Russia to avoid paying world prices for energy, as well as to re-export valuable goods. That benefit has been ended abruptly but there is nothing with which to replace it. The emperor, in short, is seen to be bereft of any clothing. At present he can sustain himself in power through brutality, control over the media, propaganda, and the removal in various forms of his opponents. There will not be a presidential election until 2011 by which time, he may hope, the government of Russia is under the control of a more amenable leader or ruling faction and Vladimir Putin has moved on to other things. The weakened Lukashenka has said recently that he is prepared to establish normal relations with the United States,[204] thereby rejecting one of his main lifetime slogans that the US attitude toward Belarus has been uniformly negative and intrusive.

There are, however, several alternative views from analysts of the Belarusian

[204] See Lukashenka's interview with Al Jazeera, 1 March 2006, cited at http://www.president.gov.by/en/press40501.html.

scene. First, there is the suggestion that Lukashenka is promoting "Soviet nationalism" in Belarus. A lucid delineation of this theory was offered in 2003 by editor-in-chief of *Nasha niva* newspaper, Andrei Dynko. Dynko maintained that the Belarusian government sought some conception that united society. In this model, Lukashenka has presided over the "Belarusization" of the political elite that supports him, some of which moved to Belarus within the last two decades. He has also integrated successfully national minorities, particularly ethnic Russians. Dynko maintains also the value of the Belarusian language to the new elite, but the authorities make favorable references to the Soviet past in order to produce a "mass person" who is loyal to Lukashenka's regime. By the same token, alongside the goal of strengthening the Belarusian state must also be advanced the notion of integration with Russia since the president recognizes that stopping such a step would be tantamount to his political suicide. This author perceives Belarusian society as divided, but less politically than a division based on "cultural and civilizational preferences." Opposing the pro-Russian sector are people who see their country as one that should be part of European structures on a democratic basis. On the other hand, even cultural leaders are to some extent content to follow Lukashenka's example of a Soviet Belarusian cultural discourse.[205] This article suggests that the president is a conscious builder of a society, in other words, that is based on the past Soviet model, but incorporates facets that relate more closely to contemporary society, and that many are prepared to accept such a model, including members of the cultural elite. It is not clear, however, that any real construction is taking place. Rather the leadership wishes to appeal to different sectors of society and recognizes that for many citizens, the Soviet period remains almost sacred, even to the point of venerating leaders like Stalin. One aspect of this interview with Dynko could be explored further, namely the question of how Lukashenka could maintain such policies were Belarus to be fully integrated with Russia.

The French scholar, Alexandra Goujon, has offered a more convincing interpretation of the Lukashenka phenomenon. She notes that the regime perceives itself as the embodiment of popular will and is thus reluctant to embrace any form of

[205] Jan Maksymiuk, "Dynko: Soviet Nationalism as Lukashenka's Strategy of Survival," 2003; http://www.pravapis.org/art_soviet_nationalism.asp.

representative democracy. Using the tool of the referendum, which has twice been conducted simultaneously with a parliamentary election (1995 and 2004), the president claims to have created a direct link with the Belarusian people, and portrayed the government as pursuing the legitimate interests of the Belarusian state, i.e. unity as opposed to the diversity of its opponents. The image of the president may take the form of a Slavic front,[206] and has some facets that were familiar in the Soviet period, not least the convocation of the "All Belarusian People's Assembly" during presidential elections, a body reminiscent of a Communist Party Congress. Thus, she asserts, political diversity in Belarus is a symbol of chaos and disorder. Instead, the government offers a patriotic image through the Belarusian Republican Union of Youth (modeled on the Komsomol) and Pioneers. The referendum campaign of 2004 embraced the slogan "For an Independent Belarus," but the goal was less to create some new form of the state than to keep such slogans away from their chief advocate, the political opposition. In this way, the opposition, already deprived of all normal institutional channels of political activity, has been reduced to a resistance movement operating through street demonstrations. In the 2006 presidential elections, its leaders were described as internal enemies seeking a coup d'etat and even as potential terrorists or agents of foreign powers.[207] Yet again, the theory suggests that the Lukashenka administration is not offering any positive or creationist platforms, but is intent on using such images to stay in power.

Ioffe, Dynko, and others have tried to provide models that encapsulate the political strategy of the Lukashenka regime. These models help simplify some complex processes but the problem in providing such models has been that the president has not remained static, but has frequently changed his outlook and views depending on circumstances. We have posited that the key to his authority today has been the skill and ruthlessness with which he has conducted the elections and referenda that followed his original success in 1994. Recently, however, he appears to have entered a more dangerous

[206] This refers mainly to the war years, as discussed earlier, and the partnership between Belarus and Russia at this critical period. The implication is that the three East Slavic nations--Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus--had common roots in the Kyivan Rus' state founded in the 10th century, as cited regularly in Soviet historical works.

[207] Alexandra Goujon, "Political Representation in Ukraine and Belarus," paper presented at the 12th annual convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, The Harriman Institute, New York, 14 April 2007.

period for his presidency: prolonged disputes with Russia over the prices for imported oil and gas; the sale of 50% of the important transit company Beltransgaz to the Russian giant Gazprom; and (as noted above) the failure to meet the first installment of payments to the latter for gas at the price of $100 per 1,000 cubic meters, more than double the rate for the period 2004-06. At the time of writing, the situation had not deteriorated to the extent that it was having an adverse impact on the Belarusian economy. Nevertheless, such an outcome is already implicit and the relatively problem-free period regarding economic issues for the Lukashenka regime appears to be over. Under these circumstances--and with roots that date back to 2002--the government has consciously embraced a "new patriotism" with vows to preserve the sovereignty and independence of Belarus in the face of foreign adversaries that now include Russia.

On 3 July 2007, Belarus officially commemorated Independence Day with the usual military display and the month also marked the seventeenth anniversary of the declaration of sovereignty in the late Soviet era. In contrast to previous years, the authorities were now offering a new form of patriotism: the promotion of local culture and pride in being Belarusian was combined with a new movement in support of the Lukashenka government and celebrating what was described as the economic success of the past decade and the flourishing of the current state. The creation of a new public association called "Belaya Rus'," a pro-government organization formed in several centers simultaneously, could prove decisive in forthcoming elections to the Belarusian Parliament or municipal elections. The date of 3 July was initially chosen as Independence Day to sustain the link with the events of the Second World War, specifically the liberation of Minsk from German occupation in 1944. Over the years of Lukashenka's leadership, this has always been the principal ceremonial occasion of the year. However, in 2007 there was an initiative from the government to continue the cultural action "For Belarus!" which was associated with the reelection of Lukashenka in March 2006. It was followed by the president's speech advocating a bond with the people through public associations, official trade unions, and the like. On 25 March, the Lukashenka government commemorated the anniversary of the 1918 national republic for the first time, though the events scheduled were separated carefully from the traditional

demonstration and speeches by opposition leaders.[208]

The new propaganda campaign is now well under way. Aleh Praleskouski, head of the main ideological section with the Presidential Administration of Belarus, noted that the public and cultural program "For an Independent Belarus!" began on 25 March with a concert at the Minsk domestic airport. The most significant factor, he added was "the feeling of patriotism and unity in displaying love for Belarus and national pride." He acknowledged the ideological basis of the movement.[209] On 29 June, Uladzimir Rylatka, First Deputy Minister of Culture, reported that some 30,000 people would take part in a gala concert of the national public and cultural action "For an Independent Belarus!" on 3 July.[210] The results were quite impressive, with the main concert in Minsk attended by Lukashenka, after some 200,000 people had watched a military parade down Masherau Avenue. Altogether, about 450,000 took part in official celebrations in Minsk, which included a concert featuring Belarusian and Russian singers, and a fireworks display that was preceded by the singing of the national anthem. Similar events took place in different cities, many several weeks earlier, including concerts in Homel (4 and 8 June) and Zhlobin (9 June).[211] Simultaneously, the public association Belaya Rus' was formed after a series of founding congresses in Hrodna, Minsk, and other cities. The Minsk city public association declared two basic goals: assistance in the construction of a strong and flourishing Belarus; and assistance in creating the conditions for uniting the progressive forces of society on the basis of the ideology of the Belarusian state in order to procure political and social stability, and the dynamic economic and spiritual-moral development

[208] According to the Minsk political analyst Uladzimir Padhol, independence for Lukashenka and his followers signifies the defeat of the "Fascists" in the Second World War; the resurrection of Stalin's repressive tactics; the absolute independence of the authority of the dictator Lukashenka over his own people, as well as from European civilization, and latterly from Russia; and at the same time a striving for reduced energy costs or preferential terms for goods from these two sources. The existing regime *simulates* all civilized norms and institutions. He notes that "Lukashenko regularly affirms that we have no less freedom and democracy than in the European countries, that the opposition press has equal opportunities with presidential outlets, that we do not have political prisoners, and that we have a market economy." Such imitation of Western-style democracy, in his view resembles the situation in the former Soviet Union. Yet, he notes, the Lukashenka government has on separate occasions publicly admitted to the murders of Hanchar and Zakharenka, and to manipulating the 2006 election results, as well as those of the 2004 parliamentary elections. Uladzimir Padhol, communication with the author, 14 August 2007.

[209] http://www.belta.by, 4 July 2007.

[210] http://www.news.tut.by, 30 June 2007.

[211] *Belorusskie novosti*, 7 July 2007; http://www.belta.by, 4 July 2007; and www.homel-region.by, 9 June 2007.

of society. The associations include prominent government and parliamentary personnel, university rectors, and acclaimed sportspersons and cultural figures.[212]

What is one to make of these events? Two conclusions can be drawn. First of all, the Lukashenka regime is evidently considering seriously the formation of a "party of power," recognizing that a besieged and isolated regime requires strong public support from within. Belaya Rus' officially is not a political party but clearly has the potential to become one. This development marks a radical change from the past where there was only one discernible center of power, namely the office of the president. However, such a party would be under close governmental control. Second, the two phrases "For Belarus!" and "For an Independent Belarus!" offer seemingly harmless calls to support the existing post-Soviet state while concealing an obvious question: where do the threats to this state come from? One observer, Yaroslav Romanchuk, has pointed out that although the president has never stated it explicitly, it is plain that the two slogans are offered to distance Belarus from Russia while extolling the achievements of the present regime: "Lukashenka is trying to convince the population that the tsar is good."[213] Along with the "new patriotism" should be placed the transformation of the national capital Minsk into a model city, including the futuristic new library adorned with a statue of the 16th century scholar Frantsishak Skaryna,[214] new shopping centers, and plush new buildings occupied by banks and foreign car manufacturers.

Belarusian citizens are hardly immune to radical changes, but they have been made aware that the period of economic stability is rapidly coming to an end. Under these circumstances, it is perhaps unnecessary to question the sincerity of the official campaign "For an Independent Belarus!" or the formation of the new public association, Belaya Rus'. The government that has repressed opponents and manipulated elections and referendums now wishes to persuade the public that it has the best interests of Belarus at

[212] *Belorusskie novosti*, 122 June and 2 July 2007.
[213] *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 6 July 2007.
[214] The erection of a statue to Skaryna is a significant departure from past practices which, among other things, have seen the raising of a new statue of Feliks Dzerzhinski, founder of the Cheka and thereby the modern KGB. It suggests that the Lukashenka regime has begun to turn attention to cultural leaders beyond the events of the Soviet period for the first time.

heart; and a leader who once regarded the native language as subversive and a tool of the opposition has reinvented himself as a closet patriot. However, the entire campaign is intended to bolster the Lukashenka regime and shore up support against an ostensible threat to the independence of Belarus, and thereby to the authority of the "president for life." The scope of the new propaganda indicates also that the regime has recognized that it faces a stern test and may be unable to survive simply on the basis of its past policies and the cult of Lukashenka. In other words, the Lukashenka "phenomenon" is based on official propaganda, which has shifted over the course of thirteen years from a close partner of Russia now forced by circumstances to adopt a new strategy emphasizing the significance of sovereignty and independence. It need hardly be added that this latter strategy has also served to undermine the opposition's traditional position that the president was a virtual stooge of the Russian government in Moscow.

Conclusion

This essay has focused on Lukashenka's election campaigns as well as the referendum of 2004 to demonstrate how he has managed to maintain and strengthen his regime over a lengthy period. He has been the only president of Belarus to date and there are no immediate prospects of there being a successor. We have shown that there are certain aspects of these campaigns that recur each time and that the authorities have deployed certain measures repeatedly to ensure success. Of all the elections the 2006 one provided the most problems for the president because of the fear of a color uprising in the streets of Minsk. The three major policies, in this author's view, have been state authoritarianism, which has reached extreme forms of late; the propagation of Belarus as an economically secure and stable country; and the use of patriotic slogans and devices to equate the office of the president with the Belarusian state. All these devices succeeded in part, but none can be said to be completely satisfactory or to have succeeded completely. The reasons are straightforward: the opposition has been treated harshly but it has not disappeared and youth movements in particular have been persistent. The economic stability as shown is no longer present and the regime is facing the most serious problems since Lukashenka came to office, notably in the sphere of energy and the lack of ready cash. This is connected with the third issue--Belarusian patriotism--which has been invoked in part to denote a new path for the Lukashenka regime: away from Russia and forging its own path in the world. However, this goal, as well as recent pronouncements from the president's office, suggests a feeling of desperation. It is not difficult for the public to discern that the movement toward an independent Belarus has coincided with demands of Gazprom and other Russian companies for higher prices for imported energy products.

This monograph has not dealt with the issue of nation building, which would require a separate treatment. It can be stated succinctly, nonetheless, that the Lukashenka regime has not embarked on that process, partly because it may be incapable of defining what that nation should be. Belarus under Lukashenka is a peculiar and ill-defined phenomenon. Its borders were demarcated in the Soviet era, a time when it was urbanized and later--in terms of language at least--Russified. The new patriotism at times seems as

false as the open-air museum dedicated to the Stalin Line. Residents who have been informed for years that Russia is the friend and NATO and the United States are hostile powers must now accept that this is no longer the case. In order to do so, they must also treat favorably the president's argument that Russia, through Gazprom in particular, is acting harshly and has succumbed to the influence of powerful oligarchs. In reality it is the Russian state that has given up on Lukashenka and grown weary of his maneuvers to benefit from Russian largesse in the form of cheap prices and subsidies. Why Russia has changed its attitude to Lukashenka is debatable. There have been signs that Putin would like a more amenable figure in power in Minsk, and that Russia's relations with relatively friendly Western countries such as France and Germany could be adversely affected by its continuing subsidies to Lukashenka's authoritarian state. Perhaps above all, Russia would like to ensure the smooth transit of its valuable resources to its main customers in Western Europe, and such links would be smoother if Russian companies gained ownership of the pipelines and refineries in Belarus.

We have titled this work *The Lukashenka Phenomenon* in light of the fact that his regime persists (and ostensibly flourishes) thirteen years after he came to power as a clear outsider in the 1994 elections campaign. While neighbors like Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania have become part of the EU, and Ukraine has experienced the social upheaval termed the Orange Revolution, Belarus remains alone in Europe as "an outpost of tyranny." In its authoritarianism the obvious point of comparison is Central Asia, but Russia, which is experiencing an economic resurgence has belatedly has begun to adopt some policies that lead analysts to place it in the category of an authoritarian state. Nevertheless, there has been no indication that Vladimir Putin intends to manipulate the Constitution to run for a third and more terms, as Lukashenka has done in Belarus. Thus it may be fair to say, as we noted at the start of this essay, that the phrase "outpost of tyranny" is an apt one. Undoubtedly there are elements of tyranny in the way Lukashenka rules. He has eliminated or persecuted those perceived as threats or enemies, he controls the media, and he has consistently manipulated elections at all levels to the extent that it is now inconceivable for any change of regime to occur under existing circumstances. Beyond that, what has he achieved and what can be considered the hallmark of his

regime?

It has been posited that the attempts by Belarusian and Western scholars to find consistency in official policy in Belarus are limited by the nature of the Lukashenka presidency. The latter was founded on an election campaign in 1994 notable for two things: the vindictiveness of the candidate toward members of the ruling elite; and the lack of any clear policies or vision for the state he wished to preside over. Though Lukashenka's policies and statements have fluctuated wildly over the past thirteen years, it remains difficult to discern any vision, either short or long term, which guides his leadership. To be sure, there is clearly a ruling group in place but it is one that has largely adapted itself to the whims of the president. It is reasonable to believe that most residents of Belarus do not accept the post-1991 nationalist vision of society as embraced by a Paznyak or even a Vyachorka. Belarusians appear to have very mixed feelings about joining their state to the EU or to Russia. About half of the electorate would have voted for Lukashenka had there been an election in early 2007, so there is little need to question his popularity.[215] Such sentiments indicate not that Belarusians are placing their hopes on a particular path to the future, but that they may have recognized that the alternatives offered to the Lukashenka regime in past elections were unlikely to bring about an improvement in living standards or a lifestyle and culture with which they feel comfortable. To that mix must be added the element of fear and intimidation, as well as the pervasive government-dominated media and the silencing of the political opposition during the election campaigns. Lukashenka's genius lies less in his populism than in his manipulation of various aspects of the ruling structure to consolidate his authority. The opposition's weakness has been its failure to offer appealing alternatives that embrace a broad section of the electorate. Arguably the concept of "freedom" is far less appealing to Belarusians than security and prosperity. Lukashenka comprehends the outlook of the electorate better than the opposition.

On the other hand, Lukashenka's outlook is still a primitive combination of

[215] The comment is based on the January 2007 poll undertaken by the Independent Institute for Social-Economic and Political Research in Belarus that was released recently: http://www.iiseps.org/opros45.html.

Soviet memory and depiction of foreign enemies that threaten the country. There is a lack of consistency beyond the general tenet that Belarus must stand firm against ill-wishers in the West and against the NATO military alliance in particular. The issue of partnership with Russia is now a focus for new debate. Much will depend how the current impasse over energy prices and the intrusive role of Gazprom in the Belarusian economy is resolved in the coming months. The president, notably, has floundered in the face of this new challenge, uncertain how to respond, and at times he has seemed quite desperate in his appeals for help, particularly to EU countries.[216] Perhaps this is to be expected. In presenting himself as a cult figure or dictator, his obvious weakness is the lack of real power behind his government. His penchant for military displays or for using the power of his special forces may give the impression of strength, but the country lacks the valuable natural resources that would render it more significant in the eyes of its neighbors. Landlocked, with a high ratio of imports over exports, and seemingly reliant completely on the backing of Russia, Belarus is not in an enviable geographical position. Its rapidly declining population is also a negative factor in the officially projected image. Small states can survive comfortably with strong economies but rarely without a private or mixed sector of the economy. But Lukashenka cannot initiate reforms because they will weaken his power base. Nor can he democratize the country for the same reason.

The chief characteristic of the Lukashenka administration can be described as negativism or nihilism. Lukashenka now advocates the preservation of Belarusian sovereignty under his leadership, yet realistically he appears in the role of a *Belarusian* president only insofar as he presides over a geographical entity that is called Belarus, a country that officially has been separated from its past (however one perceives that past) and unavoidably even from many aspects of its Soviet legacy other than the war years. On the other hand the Lukashenka regime has not constructed any real alternative society or conception of a state with a particular history, mindset, or outlook. What is occurring is less a form of protecting the country from "external enemies" but rather a recipe for survival and the continuation and strengthening of the personal rule of a single figure,

[216] See, for example, his almost sycophantic remarks about France in his July 2007 interview with *Le Monde*, cited in *SB Belarus' Segodnya*, 2 August 2007.

one whose epithet might be "president for life" but in fact may leave the political scene just as suddenly as he entered it, leaving remarkably little behind. Perhaps the real tragedy is not that Lukashenka has no vision, but that no alternative conceptions have been formulated by the opposition that would appeal to a wide sector of the population. Until that happens, the president may continue to exploit election campaigns and play on the anxieties--real and imagined--of a population that considers him to be the best of several, not very satisfactory, alternatives.

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