

# BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

## Foreign Policy Prospects of Belarus

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December 2007

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## FOREIGN POLICY PROSPECTS OF BELARUS

Fifteen years of independence brought Belarus little of independent foreign policy and the country, in more than one way, continues to operate in a similar mould as the Soviet satellites in Central Europe during the Cold War. Indeed, one can find manifold reasons to account for the country's limited sovereignty: Belarus lacks a modern civil society and the sense of nationhood remains underdeveloped. Furthermore, the Belarusian ruling elite and part of the opposition continue to lean towards Russia, as a natural center of power. In exchange, Moscow is to provide protection and legitimacy for the Belarusian government both at home and abroad. As was the case with former Central European satellites, Moscow's influence is facilitated through a series of military, political, and economic agreements as well as a wide range of informal channels, such as friendships forged during the school years or working relationships from Soviet institutions. These personal contacts have been utilized more than in any other former Soviet republic, as this was due mainly to the fact that Belarus has championed the Soviet identity rather than that of its own<sup>1</sup>. It can be argued that both the pre-Lukashenko era and the Lukashenko's subsequent reign saw the hijacking of foreign policy to play petty politics. Initially, attempting to expand his power base, President Lukashenko is now increasingly using foreign policy as a means to ensure his own political survival.

Members of the Belarusian elite as well as the majority of citizens find it difficult to identify themselves with the notion of an independent state and their tenuous link to the motherland is characterized by what one might term a nascent *Landespatriotismus*. This process is then intensified by increasing economic rivalry with Moscow, while at the same time the arrival of a new generation of Belarusians, not burdened by the Soviet legacy, heralds a new exciting chapter in the country's history.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the March 1991 survey by VCIOM, 69 per cent of Belarusians in the Belarus SSR considered themselves Soviet citizens, as opposed to just 24 per cent declaring themselves Belarusians (in Ukraine the ratio was 42:46 and 3:97 for Estonia). See: NIKOLYUK, Sergei: The Socio-Cultural Split in the Belarusian Society. In: Towards the new vision of Belarus – Conference materials.

<http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/towards%20new%20vision%20belarus%20articles%20en.pdf>

On Vladimir Putin becoming Russian President in 1999, the relations with Belarus took a turn for worse and Lukashenko's long-nurtured aspirations to succeed Yeltsin were effectively shattered. This was mainly a result of Putin's push for a more pragmatic course in Russia foreign policy driven by economic considerations as well as, to a lesser extent, by Putin's disdain of Lukashenko. This became especially evident during Putin's second term as conflicts over price hikes for Russian oil and gas, precipitated by Russia's move to acquire control of Belarusian gas transport monopoly Beltransgaz, began to overshadow the mutual agenda. As his enthusiasm for integration with Russia has begun to wane, Lukashenko has begun to promote Belarusian independence – a move which may have far reaching consequences for the country, where still people are more preoccupied with the country's overall economic wellbeing rather than their country's independence<sup>2</sup>. No sooner than Vladimir Putin made it clear in June 2002 that the only way for the unification was for Belarus to become part of the Russian Federation, Belarusian ruler realized that such a move would effectively put an end to his rule in Belarus. Lukashenko then went on to declare that Belarus would become neither a northeastern nor northwestern appendage of any country. And at the beginning of July 2002, Belarus received a new national anthem, which was a variation to the one used by the Belarus SSR, while being stripped of any reference to the Communist Party, Lenin, or Russia.

Addressing crowds on the Independence Day on 3 July 2002 - commemorating the liberation of Minsk by the Red Army in 1944 - in Belarusian, Lukashenko stated clearly: "Belarusian statehood has a great potential; the country draws its strength from the ancient Polock land and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the heroes of the battle of Grunwald." It is fair to say that Lukashenko was never really used to evoking older chapters of Belarusian history until quite recently. However, this has not prevented Lukashenko from maintaining that, "Belarusian statehood should be exclusively understood within the framework of Slavic fraternity, unity and cooperation among nations," and that, "the first truly Belarusian state was a Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic". "According to Lukashenko, the victims of the Second World War remind us why the themes of Independence, Sovereignty and Freedom remain

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<sup>2</sup> See: НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ОПРОС В СЕНТЯБРЕ 2007 г. (опрошено 1514 чел., ошибка репрезентативности 0.03)  
<http://www.iiseps.org/eopros47.html>

sacred to us.” In the speech, he only once brought up Russia and the Union State, while he did not mention the integration process at all.<sup>3</sup>

When speaking at a press conference after the meeting with Lukashenko in August 2002, Russian President proposed that the two countries should hold a referendum in March 2003 on the question of merging Russia and Belarus on the basis of the latter’s constitution. Furthermore, both countries were supposed to adopt the Russian ruble as a common currency by January 1, 2004 and elect a president of a new country in March 2004. This, however, met a strong opposition from Lukashenko as he called Putin’s proposal unacceptable and ordered Belarusian state TV to launch a systematic campaign to strengthen Belarusian sovereignty.

In 2002, for the fourth time since the demise of the Soviet Union, a new line of school textbooks had been introduced, in many ways, resembling the ones published between 1990 and 1994. The new more nationalistic tone was evident, for example, when describing the division of Poland, the authors of the textbooks were quick to emphasize that: “Belarusian towns were striped of their symbols, the Magdeburg Law defining municipal government rights, which had existed in Belarus from the fourth century, was revoked, and a new 25 year compulsory military service was introduced. The Orthodox Church became an official state church, whereas the Catholic Church lost most of its former position. After crushing the national uprising of 1830, Russian Czar decreed to ban the usage of terms such as Belarus and Latvia as well as religious ceremonies in Belarusian.<sup>4</sup>

In the early November 2002, Gazprom cut off gas supplies to Belarus claiming that Minsk re-exported the bulk of 2002 gas deliveries from Russia. Lukashenko was quick to condemn such a move as “unprecedented and disgraceful pressure tactics on the part of Kremlin” and ordered his government to look for alternative sources of energy supply. As a result of the continuing spat over the price for

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.president.gov.by/press18790.html#doc> , capitalized words as they appear in the original

<sup>4</sup> LESHCHENKO, Natalia: A fine instrument: two nation-building strategies in post-Soviet Belarus. In: *Nations and Nationalism* 10 (3), 2004, pp.343-344

Belarusian state company Beltranshas, an agreement on the delivery of Russian gas for 2004 fell through, with Russia subsequently moving to suspend gas deliveries on more than one occasion in January and February.

Nevertheless, Lukashenko kept his country in the process of integration with Russia and other CIS countries, although this was more the result of the lack of feasible alternative, rather than anything else. By the end of April, the lower house of the Belarusian Parliament ratified a treaty of the Common Economic Space signed by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine at the Yalta Summit in September 2003. It is noteworthy that Belarusian legislators were the last to approve the treaty. And despite Putin's initial interest in adopting a common currency as well as political pressure exerted on Belarus to this end, this leitmotiv of Belarus-Russian relations was finally put to rest in spring 2005. Meeting Lukashenko in Sochi, Russian President noted that "introducing a common currency is not on the agenda for the moment". Apparently, to further solidify his position as a leader of an independent Belarusian state, Lukashenko ordered in May 2005 to rename two main avenues in Minsk, along which Belarusian leader commutes between his residence and the presidential palace located in the former Central Committee headquarters of the Belarusian Communist Party. Thus, an avenue bearing the name of Francysk Skaryna, a translator of Belarusian Bible, was renamed Independence Avenue at Lukashenko's behest, and the street named after a long term soviet Belarusian leader and WW II guerrilla fighter Masherov became Victory Avenue.

Arguably, fearing the potential power of Russian TV in Belarus to influence the public opinion or even undermine his rule, Lukashenko sought to restrict Russian airwaves. During the 1990s, Russian TV was the main source of information for an average Belarusian –ORT was broadcasted all over the country, while RTR broadcasted to about two thirds of the country and NTV covered about one third.<sup>5</sup> Russian TV proved to be far more appealing to Belarusians as it offered more variety and quality as opposed to Belarusian state TV. As time went by, however, Russian TV programs have been either put off the air or

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<sup>5</sup> OWSIANNIK, Siergiej – STRIEŁKOWA Jelena: *Władza a społeczeństwo: Białoruś 1991-1998*. Presspublica – Centrum Stosunków międzynarodowych, Warszawa 1998, pp.165-166

subjected to strict censorship, thereby making Russian TV exclusively available only to the owners of satellite dishes.

Despite this seemingly uneasy relationship between Lukashenko's Belarus and its eastern neighbor, Russia has not ceased to provide the Belarusian regime with political backing and cheap gas even after Putin's ascendancy to power. In the international arena, Russia has faithfully adhered to its role of Belarus' protector as was demonstrated by Russia's acceptance of the outcome of the 2000 parliamentary election. Similarly, Moscow offered Minsk its support during the latter's spat with the OSCE mission in Belarus and continued to back Lukashenko in the wake of the October 2004 referendum – widely believed to be rigged – enabling Belarusian President to serve more than two consecutive terms. Last but not least, Belarus could rely on Russia during the presidential elections in fall 2001 and spring 2006.

Admission of former Soviet bloc countries reinvigorated the EU's policy towards Belarus. Campaigning by Polish and Latvian MEPs as well as by individual member states gave a much needed blood transfusion to the Union's lackluster policy toward Minsk, which until quite recently was limited to expressing moral indignations over human rights abuses and lack of democracy in the country. In September 2004, the EU denied entry to individuals implicated in the Pourgourides Report, including those held accountable for disappearance of regime's alleged enemies or those who failed to investigate such disappearances. After the November 2004 presidential election, the list of the Belarusians who could not travel to the EU was expanded. The list now includes 36 persons - some of whom have been added after the rigged referendum and the violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations in May 2006.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, for the EU the imposition of travel restrictions on the Belarusian officials is the only effective leverage the Union has over Lukashenko's regime. Especially the last extension of the travel ban proved particularly effective as it not only resonated with the Belarusian opposition and the Belarusian public but perhaps more importantly with the regime itself,

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<sup>6</sup> GAERC Press Release, 10 and 11 May, 2006

witness for example hysterical diatribes delivered by the pro-government trade union boss and other government officials.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps even more effective tool at the Union's disposal, however, turns out to be its visa policy, which has far reaching implications for the Belarusian people. The Union keeps maintaining that in its relations with Belarus it is very much interested in boosting people to people contacts. In this regard, the General Affairs and External Relations Council in May 2006 called for "intensifying and facilitating people to people contacts"<sup>8</sup>. In contrast, however, acting on the French proposal, the EU interior ministers agreed to increase a price for a Schengen visa from €35 to staggering €60 for a short term, one-entry visa. This will no doubt reduce the number of Belarusians traveling to the EU, even more so as the new EU member states enter the Schengen. In fact, the new EU member countries have a very relaxed visa policy insofar as they charge Belarusian visa applicants only a nominal price (Latvia, for instance, has even decided to issue visas for free). Already the number of Belarusns traveling to EU countries has been low – last year there were only 700 000 visas issued for a country with a population of 10 million; thus, only less than seven percent of Belarusians actually traveled to the EU. A number of Belarusian visa holders traveled to more than one EU country (more than 300 000 to Poland, 130 000 to Lithuania, 130 000 to Schengen countries, about 20 000 to the Czech Republic and Latvia, and almost 6000 to Slovakia).

In spite of the fierce anti-Western propaganda, between one third and one half of the Belarusian electorate remains to be in favor of joining the EU; this trend is, however, plummeting as the Belarusian economy continues to improve.<sup>9</sup> Of course, we have to take the validity of these findings with a pinch of salt, given the unique circumstances in the country and probably self-censorship displayed by some of

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<sup>7</sup> BELARUSIAN TRADE-UNION BOSS TO INQUIRE ABOUT EU VISA BAN. RFE/RL Newline Wednesday, 12 April 2006 Volume 10 Number 68 <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2006/04/3-CEE/cee-120406.asp>

<sup>8</sup> GAERC Press Release, 10 and 11 May, 2006

[http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/89219.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/89219.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> DRAKACHRUST, Jurij: Evropa v Belarusi i Belarus v Evropie: beloruskaja politika ES i otnošenje bielorusov k Evropie. In: MANAJEV, Oleg (ed.): Belarus i „bolšaja Evropa“: v poiskach geopolitičeskogo samoopredelenija. Novosibirsk 2007, pp.54-56



those polled. But at least, it reflects the general attitude of Belarusians. Interestingly, the regime's intense anti-Western and anti-European propaganda has not prevented the majority of Belarusians and members of the elite continue to wish for better relations with the West.<sup>10</sup> With Poland and two other Belarusian neighbors (i.e. Latvia and Lithuania) becoming EU members in 2004, one can expect that the EU might become an economic role-model, provided Belarusians are still able to travel there.

In spring 2006, Alexandr Lukashenko orchestrated his "reelection" with Moscow's blessing. Even before his inaugural ceremony, Russian state monopoly Gazprom announced that it would require Belarus pay the European price for gas, up to that point Belarus paid no more than \$47 USD per thousand cubic meter (tmc), while EU countries paid about \$230 USD tmc. During the following months, Lukashenko tried to maneuver his way out of selling strategically important transit pipelines owned by the state company Beltranshaz as well as to avoid any gas price hikes. Speaking to representatives of Russian regional media at a press conference in September, Lukashenko pointed out that accepting Gazprom demands for price hikes would inevitably led to complete disruption of relationship between Russia and Belarus. At the same time, Belarusian President made it clear that in a Union state there should not be different prices for gas. Furthermore, Lukashenko said that Belarus would never become part of Russia, and that he did not want to be the first and last Belarusian president.

Russian threatened to impose import tariffs on Belarusian goods. To pressure Minsk further, Moscow linked the question of selling Beltranshaz and the price for Russia gas with taxes levied on oil exported to Belarus. As a result, at two minutes to midnight on December 31, the agreement on gas delivery and transit costs for 2007 and 2011 was signed. For 2007, the price was to be more than doubled - \$100 per tmc. From 2007 onwards the gas price is set to gradually increase so as to reach Western European levels in 2011. At the same time, the transit fees charged for transport of Russian gas increased from \$0.75 to \$1.45 per tmb per 100 kilometers. In turn, Russian Gazprom should acquire over the period of next four years a 50 percent stake in Beltrashaz for \$2.5 billion.

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<sup>10</sup> BULHAKAU, Valer: Belarus: ni Europa, ni Rasieja. Mierkavanni bielaruskich elit. Vydaviectva „Arche“, Varšava 2006, (in Belarusian and Russian) <http://arche.bymedia.net/2007-knih/zmiest01.htm>

The intense dispute about oil deliveries and temporary closing down of oil pipeline Druzhba, which transports oil to the country, prompted Belarus to agree to pay Russia 70 percent of revenues from the export tax on petrochemical products; in two years time Russia is supposed to receive up to 85 per cent. By the end of January, Lukashenko argued that Belarus should make Russia pay rent for the land on which the Russian gas pipeline Yamal is built. Lukashenko ordered to implement energy saving measures and called for greater use of wood in heat generation. First Deputy Prime Minister Siamashka then pointed out that should Belarus spend \$15-30 million USD, the Novopolock refinery could start receiving in next two and a half years crude oil via a modernized oil pipeline from the Lithuanian port of Ventspils.

In his February interview for Reuters, Alexandr Lukashenko derided recent price hikes for Russian gas and oil as “a barbaric act”. Lukashenko also reiterated that he was still interested in building a union state with Russia; however, he made it clear that Belarus would never become part of Russia. According to the Belarusian leader, one can discern in Russia’s behavior a growing imperial tendency. At the same time, Lukashenko noted that he would like to sort out differences with the West, which in his view, is being complicated by the travel ban on Belarusian representatives. Lukashenko also dismissed any prospects of democratization in his country. When interviewed on Ekho Moskvyy radio station on February 12, he said that those who predicted a change in Belarusian foreign policy, after the oil and gas spat with Russia, were proven wrong.

Such proclamations notwithstanding, the Belarusian leadership has frantically sought ways to establish energy cooperation with countries other than Russia. Following this direction, Lukashenko, paradoxically, finds himself pursuing the foreign policy concept advocated by the Belarusian Popular Front in the early 1990s. Furthermore, to counter Russian influence, Belarus has been increasingly turning to China, which Lukashenko’s regime sees as “a strategic partner”<sup>11</sup>. Lukashenko supports China on the

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<sup>11</sup> Приоритеты и направления внешнеполитической деятельности.  
<http://mfa.gov.by/rus/index.php?d=policy/common&id=3>

international stage. In kickbacks, Belarusian President received a \$600 000 non-refundable loan<sup>12</sup> and China happily shares its internet-filtering software with Belarus. In energy sphere, Belarus seeks to advance its relations with Ukraine, Azerbaidza and even Venezuela.

In addition, Belarus in early 2007 proposed holding energy dialogue with the European Union. Although Lukashenko promises to resist “any pressure or dictate from the EU”, it is quite obvious that Minsk seeks to improve relations with the Union. By the end of April, the European Commission announced that it would open its office in the country’s capital as Belarus dropped its long standing opposition to such a move. In spring, Belarus officially declared its intension to forge energy cooperation with the Visegrad countries. Rapprochement between Belarus and the EU appears unlikely as unexplained disappearance of several opposition politicians and persisting human rights abuses continue to plague Belarus relations with the EU. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that the Belarusian regime would agree to release political prisoners and hold free and fair elections as it knows perfectly well that this would probably spell an end to the regime.

Apparent becomes Lukashenko’s effort to promote his country’s sovereignty as in April, for instance, he asserted that: “sovereignty and independence are worth more than cheap prices for Russian gas and oil”<sup>13</sup>. Before that, on the anniversary of the foundation of Belarusian People’s Republic - which is repudiated in much the same way as was the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) during the communist era – a massive propagandist campaign called “For Independent Belarus” was launched with Belarusian pop stars performing at open air concerts all across the country. The campaign culminated on the Independence Day on 3 July with a concert in the capital, Minsk. It is probable that this campaign was intended as indisputable follow-up to a “For Belarus” campaign, which took place in the run-up to the parliamentary elections and the referendum in 2004 and presidential elections in 2006.

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<sup>12</sup> MALAK, Kazimierz: *Polityka zagraniczna i bezpieczeństwa Białorusi*, Akademia Obrony Narodowej Warszawa 2003, p. 118

<sup>13</sup> RFE/RL NEWSLINE Vol. 11, No. 68, Part II, 13 April 2007

Lukashenko is probably well aware of his precarious position and tries to build a stable power base with an ideological undercurrent in the vein of the Soviet Communist Party or Putin's United Russia. Belarus has until now lacked a similar organization as the legitimacy of Belarus leader was largely based on the Soviet nostalgia and the promise of integration with Russia. Given that increasingly less people long for the return of Soviet times, albeit only because they simply do not remember the era, and the process of integration with Russia came to a standstill, Lukashenko's regimes feels a need to find a new *raison d'être*. Perhaps that is why in the mid May, they reactivated the White Russia movement initially established prior to the 2004 referendum, which is supposed bring together "patriots supporting President's course". Its ideology mantra centers on a quest to build an independent state on civic and national principles, while creating an image of Belarus as a besieged fortress as well as highlighting the uniqueness of Belarus model of development."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one can not even rule out that Lukashenko may try to strengthen the role of Belarusian language, witness for example a lunch Belarusian-language version of his website on 26 July 2007. This will inevitably move President closer to the national oriented opposition, thereby at least for a short time depriving them of part of their political platform, however, in the long run this could cause Lukashenko's downfall.

## OPPOSITION

In these days, we can see increasing activities of the opposition as a whole in the country and on the international stage. The opposition has for long failed to get on the radar screen of the international community, as it was gripped by internal feuds, petty politics, and personal rivalries. Worse still, the opposition was unable to find suitable individuals who could work effectively at diplomatic corridors as well as at European political level. This is pretty much true of representatives of the dispersed 23<sup>rd</sup> Supreme Soviet, who strived to continue their work even after their term expired in 2000. Despite the fact that they enjoyed some legitimacy stemming from their membership at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, they have, by and large, failed to achieve any tangible results in the international arena. Apparently, the reason for this is almost an exclusive orientation towards Moscow by left and center-left

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<sup>14</sup> For more information, see USAU, Paval: Ideology of Belarusian State: Propaganda Mechanisms. In: Belarusian society '2007. East European Democratic Centre, Warsaw-Minsk 2007, pp. 40-45 or RUDKOUSKI, Piotra: Belarusian National Ideology: Contemporary Utopia. *ibid.* pp.46-51

opposition groups who have little faith in a political change unless directly sanctioned by Kremlin. Therefore, they display little interest to do business with anyone but Moscow.

The first foreign head of state to publicly meet with members of Belarusian opposition after Alexander Lukashenko came to power was Václav Havel who met five representatives of Belarusian opposition parties and movements on 13 December 2000. The meeting was organized by the Czech NGO People in Need.<sup>15</sup> In the wake of presidential elections in September 2001, Havel met with by far the best known Belarusian writer in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a co-founder of Belarusian Popular Front Vasil Bykav. The Eastern Enlargement produced a significant improvement in the opposition's fortunes as the EU arrived at Belarus borders in spring 2004. But perhaps more important was the election of Aleksandr Milinkevich as a single candidate of the opposition for the presidential elections in 2006. And it was yet again Václav Havel, this time no-longer a president, who invited this former university teacher of physics from Grodna, Western Belarus, for a first foreign trip in his new capacity as a presidential candidate to Havel's Forum 2000 Conference held in Prague. Milinkevich was nominated as a presidential candidate by the Congress of Democratic Forces on 2 October, 2005. The new leader of opposition, in part thanks to his charisma, was able to attract young, pro-European people. All things considered, a French-speaking Milinkevich was warmly received by many European politicians, such as German Chancellor Merkel, Latvian President Adamkus, Polish President Kaczyński and President of the European Commission Barroso. After the February elections, in which according to the official poll results, he had gained 6 percent of the vote, whereas an independent vote count gave him between one fourth and one third of the votes cast, Milinkevich was received by then Chairman of the EU Council, Austrian Chancellor Schüssel. In addition, Milinkevich met with US President Bush, Prime Ministers of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Czech Republic and representatives from other European countries. In July 2006, thanks to the support from a number of American and Western European organizations, Belarusian opposition was able to open up its office in Brussels – Office for Democratic Belarus.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Former parliamentary speaker Shushkevich, BNF Chairman Viachorka and AHP Chairman Lebedka, human rights organization Viasna director Bielacki and Youth Information Center Chairman Michalevič

<sup>16</sup> for more, see <http://www.democraticbelarus.eu/>

Until the presidential election in February 2006, political parties had claimed foreign policy their political turf. Even though NGOs as well as various political groupings maintained ties with foreign entities, their impact on the politics in European countries was limited at best – with a sole exception of Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and to some extent Poland, where local NGOs in cooperation with their Belarusian counterparts helped shape government's policy towards Belarus. Having very limited room to communicate their ideas, opposition political parties find it difficult to win over the hearts and minds of the Belarusian public. Similarly, they are denied any say in political decision making, completely dominated by Lukashenko. To its own detriment, Belarusian opposition is immersed in petty disputes as well as personal rivalries while the membership base is limited to only a few hundreds individuals. The elections brought about far reaching changes to the opposition landscape as Alexander Milinkevich became the most influential voice of Belarusian opposition abroad.

As a result of leadership disputes in the United Democratic Forces, Milinkevich's dissatisfied supporters moved on to have founded a "For Freedom" movement, whose founding congress took place on 20 May, 2007 in Grodna, a western part of Belarus. This movement is strongly critical of other opposition parties with an ambition to unite those opposed to the regime on civic and non-partisan basis. Shortly after the founding congress, the second Congress of Democratic Forces disbanded the post of the Political Council Chairman of the Democratic Forces Coalition, hitherto held by Milinkevich, himself. The "For Freedom" movement strongly advocates integration of the country into the EU. It also commits itself to "facilitate dialogue on the role of NATO in the context of Belarusian interests."<sup>17</sup>

As far as traditional opposition parties are concerned, the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) stands out as the strongest proponent of the Euro-Atlantic course. Party's strategic manifesto sets out that Belarus' future lies in the EU and NATO. The European Union is seen as "a guarantee of security and prosperity, while preserving national interests and values". For relations with Russia, the BNF categorically demands that Russia respect Belarus as an independent European country. Furthermore, Minsk should "strive to reduce overwhelming political, military, and economic dependency on Russia". Immediately

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<sup>17</sup> Стратэгія Руху "За Свабоду". author's archive

after the restoration of democracy, the Front also wants to improve relations with Belarusian neighbors – Ukraine, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania.<sup>18</sup> The BNF signed cooperation agreements with a number of political parties in Europe, such as the Lithuanian conservative party (2003), Poland's Law and Justice Party (March 2004), Czech ODS (March 2005), Slovak's Party of Hungarian Coalition, Estonia's party Isamaaliit (spring 2006) and Latvia's Jaunais laiks (fall 2006). Since spring 2006, the BNF has been an observer with the European People's Party.

Rather precarious seems to be the position of United Civic Party (Abiadnana Hramadzianskaja Partija - AHP), which portrays itself as "liberal-conservative". Founded in 1995 by merging the United Democratic Party of Belarus and the Civic Party, the party brings together Russian-speaking political and economic elite leaning towards Moscow, especially in the economic sphere. Since April 2000, the AHP's leader has been Anatoly Lebedko, who initially supported Alexandr Lukashenko, as President's representative in parliament after the 1994 presidential elections, just only to part their ways few years later. After the 1995 elections, Lebedko became the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Belarusian Parliament. However, he fell out with President and became one of his fiercest critics. As long as Lukashenko ordered the dispersal of parliament, Lebedko struggled to continue his parliamentary work as a chairman of the foreign relations committee outside of the remit of President's loyal allies. In its party platform, the AHP argues that it is only logical and quite pertinent for the country to seek a nuclear-free status as well as an appropriate form of neutrality.<sup>19</sup> However, the party stops short of elaborating on relations with either Russia or Europe and NATO. It appears as though quite a few party members still clings to the notion of closer cooperation with Russia, or at least they see in Moscow their potential source of support in the case of regime change in the country. According to its website, the party pursues close working relations with Poland's Union of Freedom, Lithuania's Conservatives of V. Landsbergis, Estonia's Isamaaliit Party, Ukraine's Reform and Order Party, Russia' Union of Right

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<sup>18</sup> BNF Strategic Platform adopted during at the 6<sup>th</sup> party convention on 1 December 2002, <http://www.pbnf.org/index.php?index=3>

<sup>19</sup> AHP political platform, <http://www.ucpb.org/index.php?page=documents&open=5#8>

Forces, British Conservatives and International Republican Institute representing the US Republican Party.<sup>20</sup>

The situation surrounding Belarusian social democratic parties appears particularly perplexing, given that they continue to disintegrate and merge, with no end in sight, while various party elements constantly withdraw and reaffirm their recognition to each other. The Belarusian social democratic party "Narodnaja Hromada" at first called for preserving Belarusian neutrality, however, in the run-up to the 2004 parliamentary elections, its leader Mykola Statkevich initiated the European Coalition "Free Belarus", which promotes country's entry to the EU. Similarly, the political manifesto of the rival Social democratic party Hramada<sup>21</sup>, whose chairman has been since April 2005 Alexandr Kazulin, a former chairman of Komsomol at Belarusian state university in the first half of the 1980s and Lukashenko's loyal rector of the same university between 1996 and 2003, calls on Belarus to become a full-fledged and respected member of the European Union.<sup>22</sup> The document then goes on to state that Belarus should eventually become neutral. Relations with the Russian Federation are "considered to be vital" Belarusian social democrats see the relationship between Belarus and Russia as one between two sovereign states". Furthermore, they argue that Belarus should by all means aid Russia, Ukraine and Moldova on their road to the European Union". As far as the Russian military presence on the Belarusian soil is concerned, the social-democrats accept it as a geopolitical reality, in that they envisage for a temporary stay of Russian troops, provided that Russia will pay for the use of land, facilities, and communication lines. In addition, they demand that the Russia side provides for compensation for any damage to the Belarusian territory caused by Russian troops, including environment degradation."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.ucpb.org/index.php?page=about>

<sup>21</sup> The party was founded in 10 April 2005 by merging the Belarusian social democratic party (National Assembly) with the Belarussian Social Democratic Assembly. The new party was immediately dismissed as illegal by Chairman of Social Democratic Assembly and former parliament speaker Stanislau Šuškievič.

<sup>22</sup> Hramada's political platform. <http://bsd.org/?q=be/node/30>

<sup>23</sup> <http://bsd.org/?q=be/node/30>



The opposition Communist Party of Belarus advocates neutrality for the country while developing close ties with Russia within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Thus far, they do not seem to deviate much from Lukashenko's foreign policy course. The main reason for the communist to remain in opposition to the regime is therefore more to do with their disdain for Lukashenko rather than policy differences with the current government.

The above-mentioned political parties have been trying to work together within the framework of the United Democratic Forces coalition; despite the fact, that part of social democrats refused to back Alexander Milinkevich as a single opposition candidate for the presidential election and supported the candidacy of their chairman Kazulin. It took more than a year for all the parties to meet again after the election. At the second Congress of the Democratic Forces<sup>24</sup> in May 2007, they approved a strategic plan for the period until the first free elections will be held. Curiously, the plan barely touches on foreign policy issues insofar as it only underlines the need to secure support from both the West and Russia. For their campaign to persuade the government and the Belarusian public about the merits of democratic modernization to succeed, the parties argue it is necessary to get the international community and international organizations involved in the process.”<sup>25</sup> The fact that the United Democratic Forces had not included in their strategy the integration of Belarus into Europe was derided as early as June by Mykola Statkievich, Chairman of the European Coalition, who suggested that pro-European forces should unite. This is perhaps even more urgent, argues Statievich, given that the United Democratic Forces seem to be under the direct influence of the pro-communist majority favoring closer ties with Russia”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> At the congress the opposition groups were represented in the following way: Alexander Milinkevich's faction (201 delegates), the Communist Party of Belarus (124 delegates), the United Civic Forces (119 delegates), the BNF (98 delegates), the Labor Union (95 delegates), the Belarusian social democratic party Hormada (94 delegates), the European Coalition of M.Statkieviche and P. Severynce (50 delegates), and the Party of Freedom and Progress (28 delegates).

<sup>25</sup> СТРАТЕГИЯ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ ДЕМОКРАТИЧЕСКИХ СИЛ НА ПЕРИОД ДО ПЕРВЫХ СВОБОДНЫХ ВЫБОРОВ. Author's personal archive.

<sup>26</sup> Powstaje nowy ruch obywatelski na Białorusi. In: Wiadomości OSW, Numer 105 Wtorek, 5 czerwca 2007 r. <http://www.osw.waw.pl/news/06/070605.htm>

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

After the period of political dormancy, Belarus appears to be heading for further political changes. Alexander Lukashenko's position is becoming increasingly untenable as a result of rising prices for Russian gas and oil. Indeed, the importance of cheap energy for Belarusian economy should not be understated. It is apparent that the country is now in dire need of foreign investments. For Belarus, however, to attract any significant foreign investments, it will have to first implement economic reforms. Yet, the Belarusian leader is unlikely to push for sweeping economic reforms out of that this might generate discontent in the Belarusian society. This notwithstanding, Valery Karbalevich, among others, argues that there is in fact some room for economic reforms in Lukashenko's "populist dictatorship"<sup>27</sup>. Given Lukashenko's policy record for the last couple of years, one can hardly imagine any significant improvement in Belarus' relations with the West, even if Lukashenko genuinely committed himself to such a change. The conditions for the normalization of relations with Belarus, set out by the West, are pretty clear-cut: release of political prisoners, guarantee freedom of expression, providing for independent and unbiased courts, and give Belarusian people a right to elect their political representatives. Moreover, Western governments demand full investigation of the disappearance of regime alleged enemies in the late 1990s<sup>28</sup>. There is no doubt that meeting this condition from the point of Lukashenko's regime would be nothing short of political suicide. As Moscow support continues to wane, Alexander Lukashenko is becoming increasingly isolated with little room for maneuver left.

Considering changes in the Belarusian society during Lukashenko's more than 12-year rule, it looks as if the regime's very legitimacy is being questioned. Indeed, a new generation of those no longer remembering the Soviet times is coming of age. Not burdened by the Soviet past, they consider an independent Belarus their homeland. Moreover, they show little interest in integration with Russia, while they turn their eyes to Europe. The spread of information technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones, will pose a new challenge to Lukashenko's regime; testifying to this trend is an increasing

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<sup>27</sup> KARBALÉVICH, Valery: Is the authoritarian transformation possible in Belarus? In: Towards the new vision of Belarus – Conference materials.

<http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/towards%20new%20vision%20belarus%20articles%20en.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> "What the European Union could bring to Belarus" (November 2006)

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

number of cell phone users in the country— in 2006 it became a reality that more than one in two Belarusians had a cell phone. Until quite recently, the regime had based its legitimacy on the relatively successful economic record, glorious past exploits from the Soviet times (e.g. the victory in the Second World War), defense against allegedly aggressive NATO, and Slavic brotherhood. However, nowadays it is gradually becoming problematic for the regime to justify its existence in that way any longer. Each year there are fewer of those, as a former BNF parliamentarian and a 1990-1995 secretary of the parliamentary foreign relations committee Valancin Holubieu put it back in 2003, “who see, for various economic or to lesser extent political reasons, the unification with Russia as the only reasonable guarantee of the very existence of Belarusian state”.<sup>29</sup> The central plank of Lukashenko’s foreign policy to pursue unification with Russia, which was once lauded to provide for Belarusian economic boom, now turns out to be a significant burden on the president’s government instead, as energy prices continue to soar<sup>30</sup>. Years in preparation, a constitution draft for the proposed union state between Russia and Belarus, was eventually finalized in June 2006 and submitted for approval by a joint council of the two countries, comprising presidents, prime ministers, and legislators from Russia and Belarus.

Currently, Lukashenko’s campaign to promote Belarusian independence, including his latest bid to create a “patriotic movement” Byelaya Rus (White Rus), should be seen as an attempt to define a new ideological ground for his regime. It is conceivable that Lukashenko, trying to cling to power, will swap his current ideology for some sort of nation-building exercise in much the same way as was the case with communist party regional bosses in the last years of the USSR. However difficult it is to predict whether such an endeavor might find enough support among the Belarusian public, the fact remains that the identity of Belarusian nation is still being shaped and Lukashenko may well become part of this process. Even less likely to succeed is a scenario in which Lukashenko will try to rally the nation behind the image of Belarus as a besieged fortress. In fact, should the Schengen Visa System open up to

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<sup>29</sup> HOLUBIEU, Valancin: Polityczne elity Białorusi wobec wyborów kierunków polityki zagranicznej.

[http://www.bialorus.pl/index.php?pokaz=polityczne\\_elity\\_bialorusi&&Rozdzial=polityka](http://www.bialorus.pl/index.php?pokaz=polityczne_elity_bialorusi&&Rozdzial=polityka)

<sup>30</sup> According to the NISEPI survey from January 2007, the opponents of integration with Russia for the first time ever outnumbered those in favor. The September survey was only to confirm this trend, with 47.4 percent of Belarusians opposed while 33.8 percent supporting integration with Russia. see ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ ГОЛОВОЛОМКА.

<http://www.iiseps.org/press5.html>

Belarusians, especially when the three Belarus' neighbors become part of it in 2008, this fear-mongering on the part of the regime would most likely fall on the deaf ear. Notwithstanding the fact, that deepening the rift with Russia runs the risk of inadvertently bolstering national self-awareness among Belarusians. Another possibility to ensure his regime's survival might be to hand power over to his son Viktor, following the example of Central Asian rulers. Even though, Lukashenko appointed Viktor to the National Security Council in January 2007, this alternative remains unlikely to happen.

Lukashenko's future is no doubt going to be decided in Moscow as a new Russian president assumes office. In all probability, Moscow looks set to support a candidate other than Lukashenko in the presidential election in July 2011. In contrast to the current president, Russia's choice of a candidate is likely to come across as more liberal-minded and less implicated in Lukashenko's fraudulent regime, while at the same time promoting Russian strategic interests in the country.

Perhaps, it is possible that Moscow will pick Lukashenko's successor from the opposition camp, which is mired in the deepening rift between those seeking accommodation with Kremlin and those who advocate developing stronger ties with Europe. In fact, part of Belarusian opposition is already trying to enlist Moscow's support, hoping that they will receive Russia's backing in the event of a sudden economic or political crisis. Or else, they hope that Moscow will at least throw its weight behind them, should Lukashenko regime decide to start talking to the opposition. The saturation of the Belarusian opposition is going to be a long and onerous process, and will not come to fruition at least until the parliamentary elections due in fall 2008. In fact, the 2008 elections will be a litmus test on popularity of different opposition factions among the Belarusian public.

It goes without saying that Belarus should brace for changes in the near future. The course of future events, however, will not only be decided in Moscow but also in Brussels, should the EU decide to raise its stakes in Belarus. Apart from liberalizing its visa policy, the EU should become more persistent and effective in supporting democratic opposition. When push comes to shove for Belarus, the Union has to be ready to offer not only a political alternative, but perhaps more importantly, also an economic

alternative to the country's development. In this case, the pro-Western opposition, with Aleksander Milinkevich at its helm along with his young liberal-minded, national intelligentsia, is likely to triumph. Should another representative of the post-Soviet nomenclature climb to power with Soviet backing, however, one could expect the current foreign policy doctrine of "limited sovereignty" to remain unaltered. Or at best, a new regime might adopt a multi-vector policy in the vein of former Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma. Domestically, such a government would probably closely follow a script of Russia's managed democracy.

At any rate, the debate on country's future foreign policy orientation, as experienced in the early 1990s, is likely to resume. This time around, however, the proponents of pro-Western and pro-European course will definitely have a better chance to shape the debate. Nevertheless, the future remains rather uncertain in this regard. With Russia actively interfering, we can expect proposals being mulled to the effect of promoting neutrality (this time purportedly for real), building bridges and so on and so forth. Arguably, the pro-European course has a better chance of prevailing, should the regime change take place during the 2011 presidential election or shortly afterwards.

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