



**BELARUSIAN CHALLENGE TO THE NEW EU
POLICY:
Ignorance equals Legitimation**

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Belarus has been in the periphery of the European interests and lacked constant attention from the European Union (hereinafter – the EU) and international community for several decades. While during the presidential elections in Belarus, this country is resoundingly referred to as an important subject of the EU's foreign policy¹ or even the matter of the EU's domestic policy², in reality, such approach is usually temporary and impedes the formulation of a coherent prospect of the EU policy towards Belarus.

After the enlargement of 2004, the EU partly realised that such problems as illegal migration, drug, arms and human trafficking, and other issues cannot be ignored, especially when they are present in a neighbouring country, bordering as many as three EU member states. The Eastern EU countries helped to transform this approach into the Eastern Partnership Initiative, which at least from the first glance was a drastic turn in the EU policy towards Belarus.

At the same time, these developments raise a number of fundamental questions and doubts. Does the dialogue with the EU voice the support for Alexander Lukashenko's domestic policy and the ongoing mass violations of human rights? Will the prospect of the co-operation with the EU be combined with certain conditions³ (at least 12 requirements listed in November 2006)? How much will the end of Belarus' international isolation improve the situation of opposition politicians and influence the changes of the political freeze? What can the EU offer to ordinary citizens of Belarus? How will this co-operation affect the development of the civil society? Will the relations of Belarus and its neighbours intensify? Finally, what role does the EU expect to play in Russia's "playground" and will the U.S., supporters of the firm policy, remain passive in this changing environment?

The review, prepared by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre, aims at answering at least some of these important questions. Vytis Jurkonis, expert of the Eastern Europe Studies Centre, will assess the political system in Belarus as the presidential election approaches and the development of the Belarusian civic society. Julia Narkevičiūtė, Olga Kondratjeva and Justinas Pimpė give some insights into Belarus' domestic policy. Finally, Živilė Dambrauskaitė and Vytautas Sirijus Gira, present the guidelines of Belarus' foreign and security policies.

¹ Pirkka Tapiola, advisor to the High Representative for the Common EU Foreign and Security Policy, *Rethinking the EU's Policy*, Report at the conference „The European Union and Belarus after the Presidential Elections. The Need for a New Strategic Approach“, Bratislava, April 25-26, 2006.

² Alexander Duleba, director of Slovak Foreign Policy Association, *Rethinking the EU's Policy*, Report at the conference „The European Union and Belarus after the Presidential Elections. The Need for a New Strategic Approach“, Bratislava, April 25-26, 2006

³ Non-Paper *What the European Union Could Bring to Belarus*
<http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/belarus/intro/non_paper_1106.pdf> [accessed on March 31, 2010 m.].

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1. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN BELARUS 2010

The 2010 presidential elections of Belarus are much more dynamic to compare with those that took place in 2006. However, the answer to the question who will become the next president of this country will be the same as it has been during the entire history of independent Belarus.

According to the data of the sociological survey, conducted on September 2-12⁴, 60% of the respondents confirmed their commitment to cast their ballots in the elections (for Belarus is it a relatively small number), another 25.6% of respondents say they would decide upon the participation in the elections after taking into account the political situation that unfolds during the election campaign.

The Belarusian democrats hailed the results of the opinion poll, which demonstrated that the approval rating of Alexander Lukashenka had plummeted. Yet in September, various sociological studies indicated that the approval rating of the current president of Belarus swings between 33%⁵ and 47% (the most loyal voters for Lukashenka are: women (52%), voters under 56 years (65%), and voters living of in small towns or villages (62%)⁶. Although Lukashenka is endorsed by at least one-third of the electorate, in theory, it does not guarantee an undisputed victory during the first election round.

Namely this naive and purely mechanical calculation has become the main source of hope for the Belarusian opposition. Such a prospect has become even more welcomed due to Russia's position towards Belarus that has been more extreme than usually. Traditional disputes over the prices and tariffs of gas and other energy resources, recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the issues of the Customs Union, were supplemented by active informational confrontation. Russia's NTV television produced three films ("Крестный батька", "Крестный батька-II" -and "Крестный батька-III") that revealed some facts from Lukashenka's political biography⁷ previously unknown to the public. In its turn, official Minsk also did not hesitate to make angry comments about Moscow, and even arranged an interview with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

The greater part of opposition and international political players observed such changes in the relations of long-standing allies from two different angles:

⁴ Data of a national opinion poll, conducted on September 2-12, 2010 <<http://www.iiseps.org/press11.html>>.

⁵ *Gallup Baltics* national opinion poll.

⁶ Presentation of the sociological survey at the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (EESC) on September 9.

⁷ "Крестный батька-2", <<http://charter97.org/ru/news/2010/7/16/30672>>.

1) as a possibility of political change in Belarus, based on the assumption that without Moscow's support Lukashenka's position is extremely vulnerable. The members of more radical opposition even hoped that Russia could refuse to recognize the results of the 19 December presidential elections.

2) as a geopolitical threat as intensifying Russian rhetoric may only be an introduction in order to discredit and replace Lukashenka with a more favourable and submissive protégé of the Kremlin⁸.

Both positions develop a similar election scenario, but assess it differently. However, both of them are false and misleading, as they miss several important aspects:

1.1. External Situation

Ambiguous and Inconsistent EU's Policy

As Dambrauskaitė's analysis shows, the EU's position towards Belarus has not been consistent. The thaw in the relations between Minsk and the EU, noticeable since 2008, has intensified with the approaching presidential elections and parallel to the mounting tension in Russian-Belarusian relations. In such a context, a certain dilemma occurred - efforts to cooperate with Minsk meant concessions (or at least apathy) in the spheres of democracy, rule of law and human rights. In 2010, Russia demonstrated aggressive position towards Belarus and such behaviour forced some EU member countries, led by the Lithuanian president, to take over Lukashenka's rhetoric and claim that it is the president of Belarus who guarantees the country's stability.

The members of the United Civil Party of Belarus (the largest opposition party) and experts said directly that the aim of the policies of some European countries has turned to "saving private Lukashenka from the Kremlin⁹". During their visit to Minsk, German and Polish foreign ministers Guido Westervelle and Radoslaw Sikorski argued that the EU is to accept the elections, and even provide financial assistance to Belarus, provided that the elections are free and transparent. Thus, not only Brussels, but also individual EU member states lack a consistent position.

⁸ Alexei Pikulik, "...And Now, the End is Near? Perspectives of Lukashenka's Political Survival and Beyond", <www.belinstitute.eu>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Dependence on Russia

The majority of Lithuania's foreign policy developers believed the sincerity of Minsk-Moscow's information war. However, as some experts¹⁰ have argued, this alleged conflict should have ended just before the presidential elections in Belarus and has been merely Russia's additional tool to press Lukashenka. The meeting of Belarusian and Russian presidents, that took place on the 9th of December, and agreements inked on oil tariffs (due to which Belarus, compared with previous years, will incur losses equalling 4 billion U.S. dollars per year¹¹) proved this assumption. In addition to this, Lukashenka has promised from January 1, 2011 to ratify the documents on launching the Common Free Market Area between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The latter fact, according to Russian experts, legitimates Lukashenka¹², and means that on the 19th of December Russia will not thwart the bid of Lukashenka to become the president for the fourth consecutive term.

As the analysis by Sirijos Gira reveals, Russia's influence on Belarus is inevitable, therefore any reflections on the ways to outsmart Russia are only illusions. Moreover, any concerns about Russia's intentions to overthrow Lukashenka should answer at least two questions. Firstly, how useful could it be for Moscow? Secondly, is there any better alternative?

Several arguments can be found in order to answer the first question. However, most of them, for example such as personal insults by Russian president or prime minister, tend to be more of emotional nature. Meanwhile, the second question is very pragmatic and typical of any authoritarian regime - in such countries there are usually no clear alternatives.

1.2. Domestic Political Situation

In search for alternatives to the current president of Belarus, the popularity of Lukashenka himself, as well as the chances of other potential presidential candidates, and finally - the election process and scenarios for a possible protest have to be inevitably discussed.

Public Support for the Belarusian President

While sociology in Belarus can be trusted only partially, the data of a national poll shows that 22% of the electorate¹³ have a negative opinion about Lukashenka. Taking into account the

¹⁰ Vytis Jurkonis, *Artėjantys Baltarusijos Prezidento rinkimai – žvilgsnis iš Lietuvos (Forthcoming presidential elections in Belarus – a look from Lithuania)*, discussion held on November 3, 2010.

¹¹ *The Kremlin Tandem Outsmarted Lukashenka*. <<http://ucpb.org/news/world-news/62375-2010-12-10-14-10-44>

¹² *Ratification of the documents of the Common Free Market Zone legitimates Lukashenka as President* <<http://www.regnum.ru/news/1355188.html>>.

¹³ Presentation of the social research at the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (EESC) on September 9, 2010.

results of different opinion polls, indicating the public support of 33% or 47% for the Belarusian president, it is possible to say that there are about 38% of Belarusians who are still undecided. Usually, as the elections approach, the support for the Belarusian leader grows, so the possibility for Lukashenka to lose the elections is very low. The key question then is how the 19th of December elections will be won.

While discussing the scenario of the Kremlin-backed candidate, it is obvious that two options exist: to look for a proper person among the current Belarusian nomenclature or to have a candidate or a few in the opposition. In the first case, there were rumours about Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky as a potential candidate, whose approval rating amounts to 45% and only 12% of Belarusians¹⁴ have negative opinion about him. However, even if this option has been considered, today it is possible to dismiss it as Sidorsky is not among the 10 registered candidates.

The Split of Opposition

Political split has always been the main problem of Belarus' opposition. However, in 2006, Alexander Milinkevich bowed to the pressure of political will and international community and became the unanimous presidential candidate of the democratic forces. Contrary to 2006 elections, this time opposition does not have a single candidate.

Until mid 2010, Milinkevich was undoubtedly the best-known opposition politician. On the other hand, now only 15% of Belarusians are positive about the former presidential candidate, 28% have no opinion and as many as 31% of respondents look at him critically¹⁵. Milinkevich, who discredited himself after the Square events (the demonstrations held in Minsk against the outcome of the presidential election) in 2006, having failed to consolidate the existing support of Democrats, announced that he had no intentions to participate in the presidential elections early in the election campaign.

In total, 16 candidates have expressed their willingness to participate in the 2010 presidential election. Eleven of them (including Lukashenka) submitted the required amount - 100,000 - signatures of voluntary voters to the Election Commission by the 29th of October. The opposition itself admits that only Vladimir Nekliayev, Andrei Sannikov and Yaroslav Romanchuk have been able to collect the required amount of signatures. To register all candidates, even those, who failed to collect the required amount of signatures, was a conscious government policy, as a large number of candidates creates the impression of a

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

democratic and transparent election process. On the other hand, this strategy is aimed at splitting up the lukewarm support for the opposition and encouraging internal competition. The trump chip of Russia was thrown in as well in order to sharpen the internal competition - all the mentioned main opposition candidates - Nekliayev, Sannikov and Romanchuk - have been accused and linked to the Kremlin's money and influence in public in one form or another. The narrative about Moscow's frontmen in Belarus is not a new one - in 2006, the same could be heard about Alexander Kozulin, previous presidential candidate. Later he was jailed for a few years. Although, neither specific facts nor evidence exist, the discourse of Russia's frontmen has become popular among many Western commentators and politicians. Despite the fact that gaining the support of the so-called opposition ghetto (i.e. 20% of the population) is quite a great challenge to any of these politicians, Nekliayev is regarded as the second most prominent candidate after Lukashenka. The leader of the civic campaign *Tell the Truth* that later evolved into a political one clearly had the most generous budget of all opposition candidates. Nekliayev's team has repeatedly called other opposition candidates to withdraw from the election race, but to no avail. Money that was poured into the election campaign without greater accountability, forced many to believe that Nekliayev is a Russian project. Others were against the business plan-based model of the *Tell the Truth* as a matter of principle. For yet others, particularly to the completely unknown politicians, the ultimate goal was to become official candidates in the presidential elections. In this context, even Nekliayev, who carried out the most active election campaign, performed the function of splitting the opposition. When the election marathon gained the momentum, Nekliayev disclosed an agreement with another opposition candidate Sannikov, but it was the only and quite delayed achievement in attempting to unite the opposition forces.

Sannikov is the former minister of foreign affairs of Belarus and long-time head of the most prominent independent Belarusian website www.charter97.org. His work experience in the ministry, contacts in the Belarusian bureaucracy apparatus, as well as good contacts both in Russia and the U. S. at least on the theoretical level suggest that Sannikov would be the best pragmatic candidate. However, as the election race began, no one seriously regarded him as an opponent to Lukashenka. In addition, it was argued that Sannikov's election team simply did not have enough money for a sustained electoral campaign, thus the tandem of Nekliayev and Sannikov was a logical consequence.

Romanchuk has long been known both as an independent expert and economist, and as one of the leaders of the United Civil Party of Belarus (the largest opposition party). The election campaign of the economist with liberal views was based on the slogan "Million new jobs in Belarus". Romanchuk's programme could be called the most consistent constructive

alternative for the current regime. However, its effectiveness was limited by the fact that for some time the possibility to go to the polls on one platform with Nekliayev was negotiated. When the latter rejected this idea, some planned financial resources were lost. Moreover, some party members began working at the *Tell the Truth* campaign for financial reasons.

Most of the other candidates have been fulfilling their own personal tasks - slightly increased their presence in public, participated in live debates on national television or just added a record in their curriculum vitae "candidate for the presidential elections." Their function was simply to create a proper *quasi* democratic background for the elections and imitate their dynamics.

To sum up, the abundance of candidates and manipulations with Russia's influence on the opposition candidates were typical means of the "divide and conquer" principle that were effectively exploited by the Belarusian government. None of the opposition candidates was capable of challenging Lukashenka in such circumstances (huge administrative resources of the official Minsk, minimal possibilities of the democrats to access to mass media, peculiarities of forming electoral commissions, etc.). As Nekliayev's case has shown, even a relatively good financial situation is not enough. Therefore, it becomes clear that even the Kremlin's chances of finding a successor for Lukashenka are very limited. Nevertheless, the Belarusian presidential election is clearly an extra argument and possible means of pressure for Moscow.

The Democracy of the Elections

Despite the mentioned more vivid scenario of Belarus presidential elections - even 10 candidates are registered, relatively active election campaign is under way- it is already safe to say that for today elections are not democratic.

It seems to be forgotten that Lukashenka's candidacy for a fourth consecutive term is itself illegal, since the referendum, which allowed the Belarusian president to be elected for more than two consecutive terms, was illegal.

In addition, opposition candidates have minimum access to live broadcasts and other means of mass media. The opposition candidates highlighted three most problematic aspects in organizing the elections:

- the formation of election commissions;
- the organization of early voting;
- the ballot counting procedure.

Despite the new electoral code, adopted on January 4, 2010, it is already clear that the representatives of the opposition will comprise only 0.7% of the territorial election commissions, and only 1.3% of the precinct election commissions. Just two outstanding issues remain – early voting process and transparency in vote counting. Vote counting procedure will actually be established only on the 19th of December, i.e., only on the election day.

All the main opposition candidates have already been warned about the organization of unsanctioned meetings and preventive (early) detentions of civil society activists (such as leader of the *Young Front* Zmitser Dashkevich) have begun.

The Square Scenario

In this situation, the only threat to Lukashenka's regime is a massive protest or, as the Belarusians themselves say, - the Square. Unlike 2006, when Milinkevich's election team was totally unprepared for massive protests even a month before the elections and practically had not considered the possibility of a mass meeting at all, this year almost everyone is talking about the Square. The opposition has only one condition - if there is no second round of the presidential elections, it will be assumed that the elections are falsified, and people will be invited to defend their choice in the streets.

On 2006's election night, 20,000 people, the majority of them was the youth, spontaneously gathered in the centre of Minsk. In contrast to the previous elections, this year the role of youth organizations and initiatives is barely visible. Nevertheless, the optimists hope for a massive protest of more than 100,000 people and the sceptics think that just a few thousand people will go in the streets. The opposition political parties have somewhat more than ten thousands activists at best, and even they would first have to be mobilized. According to sociologists, as many as 57% of Belarusians categorically reject the idea of participating in any mass campaign¹⁶, thus it would be naive to hope for more success than in 2006.

However, it is clear that the Square scenario is the only opportunity to change the *status quo* situation. The hopes that Russia will say its word in these elections, cherished for a long time, seem to be disappearing. Meanwhile, it looks like the EU will be inclined to be more indulgent and focus on the surface of the election progress and not on the shortcomings of the elections. For these reasons and realizing that the elections in Belarus are mainly imitated, opposition candidates construct three scenarios of the Square - revolution, negotiations and *status quo*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

There are not many assumptions for the revolution scenario. Firstly, it is unlikely, because the opposition is split. The *Tell the Truth* campaign is preparing to take the leading role, but it is unlikely that even after the announcement of the election results it will be capable of uniting democratic forces. Unlike in 2006, from the point of view of organization, this time questions of technical equipment, the organization of a concert and other details are being discussed. Lukashenka is also preparing for this scenario – the Belarusian government has already warned Nekliayev about criminal liability for the organization of unsanctioned meetings and, as a preventive strategy, arrests of possible organizers of the Square have been made. It is likely that Lukashenka may clinch a deal with Moscow and impose more repressive measures. Moreover, contrary to previous years, this time the EU's position is much more moderate.

The Square negotiation scenario is also unlikely as such situation requires that both Moscow and Brussels agree upon exerting external pressure on Belarus leader and offering something in return. This option, similar to the revolution scenario, anticipates the mass meeting in the Square, which is unlikely. What is more, Lukashenka himself has at least a couple of opportunities to neutralize the effect of the Square. In the first case, the Belarusian leader could simply declare his victory in the first round of the elections, but with no more than 60% advantage. Although this possibility is not very reasonable due to Lukashenka's personal traits, this decision would automatically refute most of the opposition claims, and, what is more important, would be very unexpected. In the second case, if the situation became uncontrolled (i.e., the Square prolonged for more than a couple of days), the best solution would be to stage a small provocation, and, under the cover of the argument of public security, disperse the protest. The reaction of the international community in this case would be minimal, because the majority of the Western world will be already focused on approaching Christmas and New Year celebrations.

Due to these outlined reasons, the *status quo* option is the most credible, because it satisfies the majority of internal and external players. The protest will take place, it will be moderate however and will not last long due to the lack of co-ordination, competition among leaders, harsh weather and, finally, celebratory mood, thus Lukashenka will be able to be a passive observer. It is no secret that many opposition members do not believe in the success of the Square and have already started talking about the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2012. To paraphrase Erich Maria Remarque, *all quiet on Belarus front*, except the imitation of a democratic country. This show could become even more entertaining by entitling the status of legitimate opposition to one of the projects of the West – Milinkevich or some other candidate, whom Lukashenka, in the context of the presidential elections, personally called

one of the few “normal” people in the opposition. Up to ten seats in the parliament would be a “painless” concession by the Belarusian leader that would bring huge dividends in the eyes of the EU. At the same time it would illegitimize more aggressive opposition parties and activists. Such developments would fully explain Milinkevich’s withdrawal from the electoral race in order to later return as the only and the best-known democrat of Belarus. Even from the moral point of view, many people would not condemn it, as it would be completely consistent with the concept of gradual democratization (and Europeanization) of Belarus, to be more precise – the imitation of it.

2. BELARUSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PROSPECTS OF ITS DEVELOPMENT

The so-called Colour Revolutions – the Rose revolution in Georgia and Orange revolution in Ukraine – made some assumptions about a new wave of democratization¹⁷. In the context of these events the political situation in Belarus and particularly the state of civic society and its development require close attention of researchers, and urges analyzing whether a similar scenario is feasible.

Specific situation in Belarus (limitations of sociological researches, unreliability of the indicators of country’s social and economic policies, etc.) causes many problems for experts in conducting in-depth researches and drawing reliable conclusions. Nevertheless, gaps of empirical data may be covered by analyzing the chronological development of events and providing illustrative examples from Belarusian daily life.

2.1. Culture and the (Non-) Identity

Some scientists think that the most dangerous feature of post-communist countries is nationalism and ethnic policy¹⁸, but Belarus’s case is specific. Although nationalism and patriotism were the key force in defeating the totalitarian Soviet empire¹⁹, in Belarus they were weak and rudimentary²⁰.

¹⁷ Mikheil Saakashvili, *Europe’s Third Wave of Liberation*, The Financial Times, December 20, 2004.

¹⁸ Leslie Holmes, *Post-Communism. An introduction*, Duke University Press: Durham, 1997, 267

¹⁹ Kuzio Taras, Eke M. Steven. „Sultanism in Eastern Europe: the Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus“, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 52(3), 2000, p. 528.

²⁰ Virgilijus Pugačiauskas, Gediminas Vitkus. *Baltarusijos paradoksai: įstrigusi transformacija ir regioninis saugumas*. Vilnius: Generolo Jono Žemaičio Lietuvos karo akademija, 2004, p. 28.

The lack of national idea is now identified as one of the reasons why Alexander Lukashenka came to power. It is no secret that Belarus had taken the leading position in the Soviet Union on a number of economic indicators; it was also the leader in the sphere of russification and development of “homo sovieticus”²¹. This prototype of a Soviet man is still being created by banning national symbols, reconstructing historical facts and marginalizing the Belarusian language. Finally, the national ideology became a matter for concern as its mission was to “provide the governing regime with additional legitimacy and return the lost socialist “illusions”²² that were destroyed during the years of “perestroika” to the people of Belarus”.

According to Robert A. Nisbet, “the community is the fusion of thinking and feeling, tradition and commitment, membership and will”²³. Despite the fact that the Belarusian society is quite homogeneous, the sense of community is not explicitly expressed. Even during the Tsarist times, the Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians were named the same - the Russians²⁴. One of the essential elements of ethnicity – the language - both in the Soviet times and during Lukashenka’s rule, has been consistently suppressed, thus the uniqueness of the Belarusian language has not become the basis for community. This is illustrated by the fact that even the president of Belarus mocked the Belarusian language and said that English and Russian are the only “great” languages in the world²⁵.

Another factor of no lesser importance - historical memory - also testifies the greater affection to the Soviet rather than independent past. It is clear that the idea of an independent state does not exist in the historical memory of Belarusians (not to mention a very brief period in the beginning of the interwar years), and for the majority of Belarusian people the past of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is not very important. Many Belarusians become swelled with greater pride while recalling the Soviet past, to be more precise - the victory over Nazi Germany. It is no secret that major disasters unite people, and Belarus had been in the front line for a long time, was devastated and lost one third of its population²⁶. What is more, the discourse of the country of the Second World War heroes is constantly explored in the Belarusian society.

²¹ Donatas Bedulskis et al. *Baltarusija: misija įmanoma*. Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2005, p. 19.

²² Pugačiauskas, Vitkus. p. 28.

²³ Nisbet A. Robert. *Sociologijos tradicija*. Vilnius: Pradai, 2000, p. 90.

²⁴ Kuzio, Eke. p. 525.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 525.

²⁶ Bedulskis et al. p.13.

Thus, neither the history, nor the language are essential elements of the Belarusian community. The independent thought has been suppressed since the years of Stalin, when the greater part of creative intelligentsia was destroyed²⁷.

The deconstruction of identity and the lack of a unifying idea were very favourable factors for the totalitarian regime aiming at atomizing the society as much as possible²⁸. According to Nisbet, “any social order (...) that undergoes convulsive changes, changes in values and suffers from spiritual uncertainty, inevitably encourages to take interest into, the community on the one hand, and fragmentation and alienation on the other²⁹.”

It is true that the disclose of the true facts of the circumstances of Chernobyl accident in 1985 and mass atrocities by Stalin’s regime in 1988 have greatly moved the Belarusian society³⁰, but it has been a resentment against the Soviet government rather than a clear breakthrough of national feelings. The fact that in Belarus it is possible to talk about the “negative identity”- the Belarusians are aware of what they are not, but do not fully understand what they are – supports the previous conclusion³¹.

2.2. Authority/Leader

The mentioned lack of a sense of community in the Belarusian society determines the fact that it is easily susceptible to the influence of authority. Unsurprisingly, the Belarusians felt lost after the collapse of the Soviet system – “when people become or feel excluded from traditional institutions, together with the ghost of the lost individual, the ghost of the lost authority appears³²”. This becomes the assumption of fear and anxiety.

It is obvious that “Lukashenka’s government is the logical outcome of society’s affection with the Soviet mentality and nostalgia for the relative prosperity and stability³³”. On the other hand, “in the traditional society the authority can hardly be recognized as having easily separable or even separate identity³⁴”, It seems that in case of Belarus, it is the personality of the president. The fact that in his country Lukashenka is referred to as “Daddy” supports this idea. Today there no alternatives for the president’s authority and the question “what would be the source and nature of the authority, capable of replacing the ordinary authority,

²⁷ Eke, Kuzio. p. 525.

²⁸ Dahrendorf Ralf. *Modernusis socialinis konfliktas: esė apie laisvės politiką*. Vilnius: Pradai, 1996, 134.

²⁹ Nisbet. p. 383.

³⁰ Taras. p. 526–530.

³¹ Bedulskis et al. p.11.

³² Nisbet. p.171.

³³ Kuzio Eke. p. 526.

³⁴ Nisbet. p.171.

withdrawing inherent anarchy, which, even in civilized societies at different times broke through the cracks of the law and morality?” is more than natural³⁵. For many Belarusians changes were not very attractive, especially when one of the key words in 2006 presidential election was “stability” and as the contrasts to it, poor people in the EU newcomer – Lithuania, and “orange tears” in Ukraine were shown.

In the absence of a strong community base it was quite easy for Lukashenka to occupy the position of the authority. As he has no other effective alternative, he was looking for other ways to maintain his power.

2.3. Status/Stability

“Status is individual’s position in the hierarchy of prestige and influence and this position is characteristic of any community or association³⁶”. Although the hierarchical ladder is not clearly expressed in the society, the Belarusian government has substantial economic and social power. Pensioners, as the most consistent supporters of the regime, get relatively big pensions, while the labour force is inseparable from the so-called “framework contracts”. This system regulates that each year the state has to renew the contract of employment with its officials. In practice it means that the regime may simply terminate the contract if, for example, specific citizens are not “obedient” enough to the regime. Similar rules apply to students – delinquent ones are removed from the universities, lose the opportunity to acquire higher education and find a better job in the future.

This situation indicates that in the state, where status in the society is determined rather by the opposition of “punishment” and “rewards” than by the system of qualifications and competence, motivating elements are fear and obedience, not innovations and initiatives. It is no wonder that people are passive, indecisive and ruled by distrust³⁷ – they prefer the system to resistance. In other words, Belarusians are quite practical and rational – “a bird in hand is better than two in the bush” - it is much better to have something that system can give; especially as in the current situation many do not see any alternatives.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 171.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 33.

³⁷ *Pontis Foundation Polling Memorandum*. Slovakia, 2005. <<http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/en/>>.

2.4. Alienation

The problem of alienation is the subject of many studies and is typical of most modern societies - it means the loss of community ties and the global human unification³⁸. Belarus is no exception in this case, and some aspects here are even more evident than in democratic countries.

Alienation manifests in the fact that a person is lonely, isolated from the community and performing purely mechanical roles; or the modern society becomes unattainable for a person because of its alienation, cumbersome structures and lack of sense resulting from its impersonal complexity³⁹.

It was mentioned that the idea of community in Belarus is very weak. The regime aiming at consolidating the authority of the leader suppresses the fostering of community. In order to maintain the social position and avoid punishment, the will of authority is obeyed and mechanical roles are considered sufficient. Not only the regime's control, but also the distrust in other community members (fear of KGB agents, information insecurity) defeats the initiative and the search for alternatives. The atmosphere of fear and distrust further strengthens the process of alienation and prevents the emergence of new community germs.

Conclusions

An impression is made that under such conditions sudden social changes in Belarus are unlikely, because suspicion and fear prevent many Belarusians from the necessary destruction⁴⁰ of everyday routine. On the other hand, Ralph Dahrendorf is right in noticing, that "there are no surprises in balance: as a result, social change is the phenomenon of imbalance."⁴¹

Of course, when considering the possibilities of revolution, it is necessary to understand the strong and weak points of totalitarian regime⁴². The discussed aspects of the totalitarian regime reveal that the cornerstone task of the regime is to maintain balance based on the lack of the community feeling in the Belarusian society, passivity of the Belarusians, fear and lack

³⁸ Nisbet. p. 386.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 384-385.

⁴⁰ Dahrendorf. p. 19.

⁴¹ Elster Jon. *Socialinių mokslų elementai*. Vilnius: Vaga, 2000, p. 147.

⁴² Sharp Gene. „Research Project on „Totalitarianism and Non-Violent Resistance“, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 3(2), 1959, p. 157.

of alternatives. Changes in these areas could move the foundation of the totalitarian structure and thus provide conditions for social changes.

“Totalitarianism tempted [...] those who stuck in the halfway between the old and the new, have found one, but did not find another, and, therefore, relied on a false promise to get the best from both.⁴³” Lukashenka’s promise of the “third way” between the Soviet dictatorship and the Western democracy is a successful example of Dahrendorf’s idea. Belarus, by choosing the path of authoritarianism, became an exception to the post-Soviet space, unlike many states, that turned democratic.

The fundamental obstacle to social change is the weakness of community that gives space for the authority’s (the dictator’s) development. Due to public alienation (mistrust, suspicion), and fear for changes in status (loss of job or place of study, repression), as well as the absence of additional motivation, the Belarusians themselves are unable to initiate social changes, and, what is more, try to avoid them. Society is more inclined to adapt to the current situation and believe in fostering the vision of stability rather than to take a radical change without clear alternatives and guaranties.

In the case of Belarus, in order to move the stagnation of society, it is necessary to work with the idea of community, which may effect the motivation of the Belarusians and reduce the tendencies of alienation. On the other hand, it is necessary to develop a clear alternative that would offset the conformism and fear of change. These are fundamental presumptions for social changes.

3. DOMESTIC SITUATION IN BELARUS

3.1. Municipal Elections: A Test of Lukashenka’s Policy of Democratization and of Western Consistency

Political analysts named the 2010 municipal elections the “litmus paper” - a test aimed at demonstrating how consistent could Alexander Lukashenka be in strengthening the Belarusian democratic institutions. These elections could be considered an indicator for several reasons:

⁴³ Dahrendorf. p. 130.

- 1) 2010 municipal elections were the first elections, which “tested” the amendments to the Belarusian Electoral Code that were supposed to at least nominally increase the transparency of the electoral process.
- 2) The municipal elections scenario (though to a lesser extent) provides the implications on how the presidential elections will be organized.
- 3) These local elections could have been an opportunity for the EU, which entered a new phase in the EU-Belarus’ relations, to make sure whether the expectations about the liberalization and democratization related to the convergence with Belarus are rational.

The process of municipal elections and amendments to the Electoral Code

During the municipal elections that took place on April 25, 2010, for the first time territorial election commissions and precinct election commissions were formed according to the new amendments to the Electoral Code. These amendments stipulate that in each commission one-third of the members must be members of political parties and public organizations and the number of members from state institutions should not exceed one-third of all members. Scarcely had the amendments to the Electoral Code come into force on January 4, 2010, legal experts voiced a lot of criticism:

- 1) Those amendments do not provide transparent criteria and mechanisms for appointing (and, in particular, for eliminating) nominees for commission members.
- 2) The word “opposition” is not mentioned in the Electoral Code and the term “public organization” is too vague, thus seats in the commissions of municipal elections secured for public organizations can quite easily be lost to pro-governmental public organizations.
- 3) The same could be said about the changes to the regulation of election monitoring. The amendments to the Electoral Code regulate that from now on the members of non-governmental organizations may become election observers (previously only members of political parties had the right to monitor elections). As it has already been mentioned, the term “public organization” does not necessarily mean that such an organization is independent from government’s funding and policies. Therefore, the seats of election observers, as well as the seats in election commissions can be shared between governmental public organizations as leaving non-governmental organizations without seats is not against the provisions of the Electoral Code.
- 4) Nominally increased opportunities to become members of election commissions or observers in the election do not necessarily guarantee the right to participate freely in observing vote counting, as neither the vote count procedure nor election monitoring process was changed.

The municipal elections of April 25, 2010 basically confirmed certain fears expressed by experts: although the formation of election commissions was in line with the mentioned provisions of the Electoral Code, the number of opposition members in commissions amounted to just 0.1% in the entire Belarus. It is more difficult to assess other amendments to the Electoral Code and their implementation in practice (other amendments stipulate simplified procedures of election campaign planning and their funding), as there is not enough systematic data on their application.

The process of municipal elections as an indicator of election process for upcoming presidential elections

The turnout of the municipal elections of April 25, 2010, was 79.1%. The highest turnout was in the Vitebsk area (90.9% of), the lowest – in Minsk City (58.7%). During the elections, certain irregularities that directly violated the principles of free and democratic elections were as usually observed:

- In most cases voters had to choose from a single candidate - it was possible to vote *for* or *against* him/her.
- Only 365 opposition members were registered on electoral lists and only six of them were elected. Eight candidates from the list received more votes *against* rather than *for* and did not win. In comparison, more than 21,000 representatives of various municipal levels were elected in these elections.
- The outrage of the Belarusian opposition and international organizations was caused by extremely high number of citizens who took part in early voting - about 30%. Early voting is one of the most nontransparent voting mechanisms (it is impossible to ensure effective monitoring during such voting). The greater part of the electoral votes cast in early voting, the greater possibility of electoral fraud. In addition to this, early voting results were not made public, and it was a grave violation of election law characteristic of the Belarus elections.
- The Belarusian Human Rights Centre *Viasna* (that carried out the election monitoring campaign) made a conclusion that the municipal elections this year were practically the same as the previous ones⁴⁴.

In conclusion, the amendments to the Electoral Code and formal conduct of procedures failed to improve the transparency and democracy of the Belarusian election process. Although the approval of the Belarusian government to welcome international observers has been interpreted as a “step forward”, it is worthwhile to note that international election monitoring

⁴⁴ Папярэднія высновы маніторынгу выбараў дэпутатаў мясцовых Саветаў дэпутатаў дваццаць шостага склікання: <<http://spring96.org/be/news/33885/>>.

is not an aim in itself and quite superficially disciplines the personnel responsible for the organization of elections. The principal function of the international election monitoring is to provide objective data for critical international evaluation.

The EU and international assessments of the election process

On March 24, members of the European Parliament expressed willingness to observe the municipal election in Belarus. Although this initiative had received positive response, the conditions that the Central Electoral Commission imposed on international observers weakened the possibilities to produce consistent data on election process. The right to monitor the elections was granted to foreign diplomats, but not to the members of international organizations. This deceitfully insignificant detail could have a substantial impact on the findings of election observation: international organizations, such as the OSCE (the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), apply a standardized and comprehensive methodology for election assessment, and also provides non-politicized assessment. Assessments by individual missions leave more freedom for interpretation. Nevertheless, the fact that Belarus, even if with such conditions, agreed to welcome international observers was taken positively.

Such an “agreement” between the EU and Belarus received criticism from the experts’ community, who called on the governments to assess the electoral process critically. The principal argument of their criticism was that the EU’s ambition to legitimate the “thaw” in the relations with Belarus by supposedly more liberal elections process encouraged the EU to turn a blind eye on the electoral violations and intentionally look for positive changes. For this reason, in principle, there was no genuine assessment of the elections. The statement about positive changes was also interpreted as an unsuccessful attempt to speed up the establishment of the EU Eastern Neighbourhood parliamentary forum *Euronest*.

The biggest problem, associated with limited and uncritical assessment of the municipal elections, is that the mentioned elections instead of becoming a serious test for Lukashenka and his policy of “liberalization” became a test for the EU patience. To put in other words, Lukashenka was indirectly ensured that the EU has no real political will to demand practical liberalization efforts and can be satisfied with formal changes. Such atmosphere of impunity is very detrimental for the approaching presidential elections in Belarus and for the future of the EU-Belarus relations in general.

3. 2. The economic situation in Belarus: international loans and dividends of the future economic recovery spent in advance.

Economists say that the forthcoming presidential elections may influence the country's economy more than the political life. Despite the relatively optimistic prognosis about the economic recovery in Belarus, some of the pre-election decisions may seriously impact the pace of the economic recovery and the chances for Belarus to get international loans on favourable terms in the future. According to experts, so far it is obvious that the Belarusian government tends to balance the flows of finances and budget deficit by borrowing in the international market rather than by implementing structural reforms. Without measures ensuring long-term economic growth this situation may result in yet another cycle of economic instability in the future.

One of the most unfounded decisions is the pre-election social and economic policy of the incumbent president: pensions were increased by 9.5% in October 2009 by the presidential decree. Since January 1, 2010, they were raised by 9% once again and the minimum wage was increased by 12%. The Belarusian presidential decree No 490, issued on September 27, 2010, in November-December, increased the minimal monthly wage by 400,000 Belarusian roubles (BYR) (130 USD) and the hourly wage – by 2360 Belarusian roubles⁴⁵. Thus, in comparison to the earlier monthly wage, the new minimum monthly wage hiked by 54.7% and the hourly wage surged by 54.2%⁴⁶. It should be added that the average monthly salary has also been growing in 2010. From January to September, the average wage rose from 345.9 USD (986,000 BYR⁴⁷) to 430.3 USD (1,296,000 BYR)⁴⁸, an increase of 31.5%. On the other hand, it is important to highlight that these are merely nominal sums of the real wage, the real wage (taking into account the changes of the minimum consumer budget) increased by only 13.1% over the same period.

In January 2010, the average pension amounted to 169.9 USD (486,000 BYR), and in September it reached 183 USD (552,000 BYR). Therefore, the nominal average pension increased by 13.6%. Nevertheless, the actual average pension, reflecting the current standard of living, actually fell by 2.11%.

⁴⁵ *Минимальная заработная плата*: <<http://www.mintrud.gov.by/ru/trud/norm3>>.

⁴⁶ *Belarus' minimum wage to increase 54.7% to Br400,000 in November*: <<http://www.butb.by/engl/index.php?page=49&id=25723>>.

⁴⁷ Calculations were made according to that month's exchange rate of USD and BYR. Data on exchange rates was taken from the archive of the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus.

⁴⁸ *Динамика среднемесячной заработной платы работающих в 2010 г.*, Независимый институт социально-экономических и политических исследований: <<http://www.iiseeps.org/zarplata10.html>>.

Even though such policy greatly increased budget costs, its positive effect on people is weak, since with an increase of nominal wages and pensions, the cost of living also rises, and as a result mitigates the effect of income growth. Although the inflation rate was quite moderate (in January-September inflation stood at 6.8%⁴⁹ and is not expected to exceed 8-10% in 2010), the prices of different goods experienced different trends of price jump. In January-September prices of potatoes, sugar, vegetables, alcohol, fuel, medicine and public transport services⁵⁰ jumped the most. Thus, given the pace of inflation and changes in the consumer budget, the real income of Belarusian people rose only insignificantly.

However, the Belarusian government pictures extremely positive view of the state's economy for the coming year: GDP growth of 9-10% is predicted⁵¹. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is more moderate in assessing the prospects of Belarus's economic growth – saying its GDP growth may reach 6.2%⁵². However, Lukashenka can still boast about successfully managing economic downturn and its consequences. The National Committee of Statistics of the Republic of Belarus reported that in January-August 2010, Belarusian GDP grew by 6.6% compared to the same period in 2009⁵³. According to the data of the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus, in January-August 2010, the Belarusian exports grew by 19.3% and imports hiked by 16.3% in nominal prices compared with January-August 2009⁵⁴. This means that the volume of export exceeded the pre-crisis level of 2008. Positive economic growth prospects encourage not only reckless social spending, but also international borrowing.

Independent economic experts are cautious in assessing both official statistics and bold predictions. In particular because of the GDP calculation methodology, which includes both sold goods and services and products that were manufactured over the analyzed period but not sold yet. Daring forecasts could be questioned, given that in 2009 the levels of gas consumption in Belarus dropped as much as 25%, electricity consumption and domestic cargo turnover shrank by 15%⁵⁵. These numbers indicate strict household savings and less

⁴⁹ *Belarus. Inflation in Belarus goes down this year*: <<http://www.blackseagrains.net/about-ukragroconsult/news-temp/belarus.-inflation-in-belarus-goes-down-this-year>>.

⁵⁰ *On Price Changes in September 2010*. National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus: <http://belstat.gov.by/homep/en/indicators/current_prices9_10.php>.

⁵¹ *Правительство Беларуси планирует обеспечить высокие темпы роста экономики страны в 2010 году*, <http://www.government.by/ru/rus_interview20091217.html>.

⁵² *Belarus Among Five Leading Countries in GDP Growth*, Office for a Democratic Belarus: <<http://democraticbelarus.eu/node/9986>>.

⁵³ *Belarus' GDP up 6,6% in January-September*. Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus: <http://www.government.by/en/eng_analytics440.html>.

⁵⁴ *Внешняя торговля*, <<http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/indicators/main1.php>>.

⁵⁵ А. Liakhovich *Развитие ситуации в Беларуси во второй половине февраля 2010 г.: основные события и комментарии*.

industrial production. Thus, even with the recovery of the foreign markets, sudden recovery of Belarus' economy is unlikely.

Since the beginning of 2010, Belarus' gross external debt increased by 5% and, according to the National Bank of Belarus, it totalled 23.1 billion USD in the beginning of July, comprising 45.5% of GDP⁵⁶. Despite negative consequences, the international financial crisis and poor relations with Russia positively encouraged Belarus to diversify the international credit package and develop international economic cooperation with other countries, i.e. to reduce the volume of loans and investments from Russia and somewhat distance itself from Moscow's political demands related to the investments in the Belarusian economy.

The agreement with Russia on oil supply and transit unfavourable to Belarus encouraged the country to ink a deal with Venezuela and Lithuania, under the terms of which Venezuela committed to supply 4 million tons of oil by the end of the year, and Lithuania agreed to mediate the transportation of oil from the port of Klaipėda to Belarus. In September, *Klaipėdos Nafta* unloaded the first tanker with 80,000 tones of Venezuelan oil, which was delivered to Belarus⁵⁷. Lukashenka assured that this scheme could go ahead in the future – an agreement with Venezuela on the supply of more than 30 million tons of oil over the next three years has already been inked and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez claimed that the oil refinery plants in Belarus “will not suffer from any lack of oil over the next 200 years⁵⁸”. However, experts think that the need for cooperation and its success will depend on the oil supply agreements that Russia proposes to Belarus. Striving to demonstrate even greater independence from Russia, Lukashenka said that liquefied gas terminals could help to apply a similar scheme to gas imports⁵⁹.

After Lukashenka's visit to China on October, several commercial agreements and credit contracts, worth about 3.5 billion USD, were inked with China. Bilateral agreements stipulate investments into large-scale economic projects in Belarus: Belarus-China industrial park, renovation of Belarus' road and rail system, acquisition of electric locomotives, construction of a chemical wood pulp plant and two new electric power plants, establishment of a hotel

⁵⁶ *Belarus' Gross External Debt Reaches 45.5% to GDP*. Office for a Democratic Belarus: <<http://democraticbelarus.eu/node/9771>>.

⁵⁷ *Kubilius wonders at the position of Belarusian president on Venezuelan oil loading*. <<http://www.15min.lt/naujiena/pinigai/lietuvos-naujienos/akubilius-stebisi-baltarusijos-prezidento-pozicija-del-venesuelos-naftos-krovos-194-120976>>.

⁵⁸ *Venezuela, Belarus in New Oil Deal*, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty: <http://www.rferl.org/content/Venezuela_Belarus_In_New_Oil_Deal/2192693.html>.

⁵⁹ *Belarus to buy less Russian oil and gas in 2011 says Lukashenko*, RiaNovosti: <<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20101112/161306393.html>>.

complex “Beijing” and modernization of Minsk’s airport⁶⁰. In December 2009, China approved the 5.7 billion USD loan to Belarus and promised to pour about 10 billion USD into the Belarusian economy. The total sum of the Chinese investments in Belarus amounts to about 15 billion USD⁶¹.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that Belarus is still retarding the fulfilment of credit-related commitments. In 2008, the IMF granted Belarus a 3.52 billion USD loan that was paid in quarterly instalments, evaluating the directions of money absorption and fulfilment of commitments before each payment. In 2010, the last instalment of 670 million USD was paid. The National Bank of the Republic of Belarus announced that the IMF loan helped to stabilize the state’ economy in 2009 and early 2010, maintain stability in the foreign exchange market and strengthen the national financial system but remained silent on the plans to fulfil the commitments related to the loan⁶². Under the agreement with the IMF, Belarus committed to pursue tighter monetary and fiscal policies: significantly reduce public spending, reduce wages of civil servants, adjust foreign exchange rates (devaluation of the rouble in Belarus) and carry out the privatization of state agencies⁶³. It is obvious that Lukashenka’s pre-election economic policy is contrary to the commitment to reduce public spending. However, perhaps the most sensitive issue is privatization. In June 2010, the Belarusian parliament ratified a law, allowing privatization of companies that previously exclusively belonged to the state⁶⁴. This is especially important in the context of privatization processes of *Belaruskalij* and pipeline enterprises. However, the actual privatization is not yet taking place.

3. 3. Control of Information Access

Despite the supposedly more liberal media policy, it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that the actual access to information of an average citizen is still limited, especially given the growth of importance of digital media. Today, the system functioning in Belarus effectively restricts the residents’ access to information alternative to state-run Belarusian press and television:

⁶⁰ *Беларусь и Китай заключили ряд коммерческих контрактов на 3,5 млрд. Долларов:* <<http://www.interfax.by/news/belarus/81166>>.

⁶¹ *China to invest \$10 billion in Belarusian economy:* <<http://en.rian.ru/exsoviet/20100326/158317695.html>>.

⁶² *Belarus obtains last \$670 mln. Loan tranche from IMF:* <<http://en.rian.ru/exsoviet/20100331/158376327.html>>.

⁶³ *Belarus receives \$2.5 billion IMF loan:* <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jan2009/bela-j22.shtml>>.

⁶⁴ *Совет республики одобрил законопроект, которым разрешается приватизация Беларуськалия и магистральных нефтепроводов* <<http://www.interfax.by/news/belarus/75256>>.

- The access to the Internet is expensive in Belarus, thus a popular way is to buy Internet access cards allowing to access it for a particular period of time (1 hr. from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. costs 0.5 USD). However, this price inadequately exceeds the average prices for Internet access in Europe.
- Moreover, the state provider separately charges for access to domestic and foreign IP addresses, the latter, respectively is significantly more expensive. For example, *Beltelecom* offers time-unlimited access to the Internet (using ADSL technology), the speed of which is 2048/512 kbps (receive/dispatch) for a monthly fee of 260 USD, excluding additional charges for the excess of the amount of data downloaded from the internal and external IP addresses⁶⁵.

State-controlled pricing policy allows for effective limitation of the search for information online, the Internet is rarely used to get information, browse, and search for the latest news. Usually the residents use of Internet is limited to virtual communication and entertainment:

- Only 38.2% of adult Belarusian population uses the Internet, just 15.3% use it on daily basis⁶⁶.
- The most active group of Internet consumers (40% of all Internet users) is residents of 18-24 years of age.
- Almost 70% of the Internet users live in cities. In comparison, according to the latest data, in Lithuania 55% of households have Internet access. 60% of all Lithuanians aged 16-74 use the Internet and among them 74% use the Internet on daily basis⁶⁷.

Not only the control of digital space enhances the propaganda possibilities, but it also allows more effective control over civil society. The most active Internet users are socially active Belarusians – in Belarus civic activities are namely concentrated in the digital space. Internet news portals, various media platforms (e.g. *budzma.org*, *Адукацыя.info*, *http://saligorsk.org/*, etc.) and personal blogs are not only a way to get alternative information in Belarus, they also serve as socializing factors encouraging participation in civic-social initiatives. The Internet has become the central location uniting the Belarusian opposition and civil society. As Lukashenko’s regime severely restricts civic space “offline”, formation of civic society, debates and information exchange take place in cyberspace. The 2010 presidential election campaign also partly relocated its activities from real space to virtual.

⁶⁵ <<http://www.beltelecom.by/services/internet/cart/description/>>.

⁶⁶ *Интернет в Беларуси*, <<http://belaruspartisan.org/bp-forte/?page=100&backPage=52&news=57977&newsPage=0>>.

⁶⁷ 58% of Lithuanian residents habitually use the Internet: <<http://www.itbaze.lt/ivairenybes/3023-internetu-lietuvoje-nuolat-naudojasi-58-proc-gyventoju>>.

This explains why on July 1, 2010, the president's decree "on national measures to improve the use of the Internet", regulating the Internet services supply, came into force. This law lays down the rules of trade and service supply for Belarusian and foreign companies on the Internet, consumer rights and copyrights in this area, the rules on the overall functioning of the public web pages and implements compulsory registration of information sources. The official principal objective of this decree is to expand the state's power in regulating the Internet use, "protect the interests of citizens, public and state in the field of information, improve the quality of Internet service and reduce its prices, provide further development of the national segment of the Internet⁶⁸." According to the Belarusian government, such regulation would help the citizens to get information about the state bodies and state organizations more easily.

However, experts say that the mentioned regulation will not only have the opposite effect, but also many other negative consequences: this new regulation grants the right for state agencies to monitor and control the access to the Internet of the individual users, online services provided and online correspondence, and stipulates the necessity to register personal web pages if relevant authorities decide that they can be regarded as an "information source". The first results of such "registration" are already evident: in line with the new "Internet segment development policy" the website of the newspaper *Vitebskij Courier* was closed down in early July. It was explained that the website was closed as it failed to meet the criteria necessary for compulsory registration⁶⁹.

From July 1, 2010, the Internet providers must identify the devices of the subscribed Internet users, collect data about them and the services provided. The Operational and Analytical Centre under the president's authority will be responsible for setting the rules of collecting and providing personal information of the Internet users and in the future should become a coordination body, controlling the use of the Internet. This centre already has the right to control citizens' online correspondence and monitor online activities of individual Internet users for security purposes⁷⁰.

Attempts to control the virtual space in Belarus are not new. About 1,200 legal acts governing the supply and use of the Internet were registered in the national register of legal acts by the

⁶⁸ Официальный интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь/1-7 февраля
<<http://www.president.gov.by/press83050.html>>.

⁶⁹ Website shut down in Belarus on the "censorial" order from Lukashenko for the first time.
<<http://www.lrytas.lt/-12785803111276762196-baltarusijoje-pirma-karta-isjungtas-tinklapis-remiantis-a-lukašenkos-cenzūrinu-įsaku.htm>>.

⁷⁰ Yuri Chausov *Soon There Will Be Less Privacy in Belarusian Internet?*, Bell, Issue 3 (13).

end of 2009 ⁷¹. Some of these allow the application of such measures as searches in the apartments and offices of journalists from the independent media. Most of those raids were carried out in 2008 when apartments and offices of independent journalists were searched all across Belarus. Journalists experienced similar oppressions in late March of 2010 when searches were carried at the homes of journalists from the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya*, online news portal *Charter97* and other independent media.

However, the pressure on media is not limited to the control of virtual information space. Since January 3, 2010, after the ruling of the Ministry of Justice, the Belarusian Association of Journalists has lost its right to provide legal assistance to journalists and had to revoke the member cards of the association, which can be acquired by those members who are not employed by the media institutions, and also prevent new ones from entering the circulation. This provision is related to the newly adopted law “on means of mass communication” where the term “journalist for mass communication media” is applied instead of “journalist”. Therefore, those who do not have a journalist’s diploma and permanent employment in a company of mass communication are left outside this law. Thus now basically no organisation protects their freedom of speech (not to mention the individual freedom of expression).

It is not a surprise that before the elections Lukashenka traditionally tightens the media policy. On the other hand, this year such policy is being ignored more than ever, in other words, this time the international community tends to keep silent about similar violations altogether.

4. EU POLICY ON BELARUS IN 2000-2010: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

This chapter is aimed at answering the following questions: how and why have the EU-Belarus relations been changing over the past decade? What are the fundamental problems in the EU policy on Belarus? What are the current prospects of the EU policy on Belarus - is it possible to externally accelerate the transformation of the present Belarus regime?

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

4.1. Dilemmas of the EU Policy on Belarus

1) *Lack of individual approach.* Prior to the EU enlargement in 2004, the EU was not making a distinguishment between the Eastern European countries that in 1990 had no prospects of the EU membership. It was highly expected that sooner or later Belarus would fall under the influence of the democratization wave that had surfed the region and a certain *a priori* “inclination towards democracy” was attributed to the regime and the society. After 2003-2004 revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the EU was hoping that the Belarusian society would also mobilize. Only after the enthusiasm of colour revolutions had faded and the Belarusian presidential elections in 2006 had shown that the Belarusian opposition had no such potential for transformation as Georgia and Ukraine did, the EU’s expectations for the “snowball” effect in the region tempered and the search for individual approaches was started.

2) *Institutional inertia.* In principle, the EU has never been developing specific tools for achieving stability, economic prosperity and democracy in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has emerged as the projection of the EU development tools to the outside, and the entire EU’s Eastern neighbourhood has been treated as a relatively homogeneous region. The shortcomings of such “economy of scale” were revealed as soon as the implementation of the ENP in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan started. This policy was especially unsuitable for Belarus. This “economy of scale” in the region, instead of fostering the competition of countries, complicated the searches for individual approaches and created the dilemma of double standards. It means, that for the EU it has become increasingly difficult to apply its tools for assistance and cooperation in a flexible manner, for example it is difficult to explain why Belarus (country that is not involved in the ENP and ruled by authoritarian regime) should be given privileges similar to those granted to the ENP countries trying to implement liberal reforms.

3) *The problem of the end-goal and the shortcomings of conditionality.* Over the past decade, the attitude towards the goals of the EU policy on Belarus has changed: from the isolation of Belarus’ problems in 1990’s to the expectations for radical regime changes in 2004, and finally - towards the gradual transformation of the regime. However, the toolbox remained the same. The today’s EU policy on Belarus is mainly method orientated; it means that the focus is on the creation of pre-conditions and the application of sanctions or benefits respectively. The biggest shortcoming of such policy is predetermined inconsistency and slow progress. The Belarusian political life consists of certain phases that determine the EU policy on Belarus: tightening of the media and civil society control prior to any elections *vs.* “turning towards Europe” every time the negotiations with Russia over energy prices take place;

integration with Russia as the EU expresses disappointment over the elections *vs.* obedient taking on commitments for liberalization while borrowing from international institutions; initiatives of dialogue with the regime *vs.* the dissatisfaction of the Belarusian opposition about the EU's contacts with the official Minsk, etc. One of the biggest challenges is the development of a consistent EU policy on Belarus and adoption of measures that would remain independent from mentioned Belarus' political phases.

4) *Geopolitical dilemma.* The EU's decisions on the Eastern Neighbourhood are always interrelated with Russia's "legitimate area of interest".

4. 2. The Dynamics of the EU policy on Belarus

1995 – 2004: the "defiance" of the Belarusian issue

One of the most pressing problems in the EU-Belarus relations is the lack of institutionalized partnership and the coherent EU policy on Belarus. These challenges have been raised from the political decisions taken back in 1990's. The dynamics of democratization of the post-Soviet countries after the end of the Cold War raised the hope that these processes would definitely affect Belarus. On the other hand, Belarus was "far away" from the EU, both geographically and politically - Belarus was not (and could not become in the near future) a direct EU neighbour or a candidate country, and therefore the political dynamics in Belarus "was not considered an EU issue".

The EU felt "deeply disappointed" by Belarus for the first time when the referendum in 1996 extended Lukashenka's presidential term of office until 2001. This referendum blocked the coming into force of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement⁷² that the EU and Belarus had negotiated in 1995. *This produced the institutional vacuum of political cooperation, which at that time, in the EU was seen as a solution rather than part of the problem.*

In 2000-2004, the undemocratic tendencies of political regime in Belarus were increasing: from the manifestation of direct repression to the undemocratic processes at all levels of electoral process and changes in the legislative framework governing the media and non-governmental organisations. In 2004, the EU imposed sanctions on the Belarusian regime, introducing a visa ban on the Belarusian officials, responsible for the holdout of the cases of missing persons (in 2006, the list of such officials was expanded and those responsible for the violations of international electoral standards were included). The EU chose the strategy

⁷² Margarita M. Balmaceda, Sabine Fischer, Grzegorz Gromadzki, Andrei Liakhovich, Astrid Sahn, Vitali Silitski and Leonid Zlotnikov, *Back from the cold? The EU and Belarus in 2009*, Institute for Security Studies, 2009, < <http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/cp119.pdf>>.

of isolating Belarus' political regime as it was hoping that the isolated Belarus' political system and economy would "overheat" itself.

There were two main problems of such policy: *Firstly, Belarus was isolated only in terms of the EU, but not Russia.* Not only Belarus was not left alone and lonely, such EU policy forced Lukashenka to search for support in the East. In 1995-2004, Belarus took part in all the initiatives of the Russian CIS: in 1995, Belarus and Russia inked the agreements on the Customs Union and military cooperation; in 1997, the treaty on the establishment of the Belarusian-Russian Union State was signed; in 2001, the establishment of the EurAzES - the Eurasian Economic Community; in 2002, the establishment of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, etc. *Secondly, the isolation of Belarus and the development of EU's relations with other countries of the Eastern neighbourhood in a way resulted in Belarus' isolation not only from the EU, but also from other countries in the region, thus the democratization processes of the Eastern Neighbourhood bypassed Belarus, which was becoming increasingly Russia dependent.*

2003/2004 – 2006. Towards the "Two-tier" Strategy

"Colour revolutions" that took place in Ukraine and Georgia in 2003-2004 raised expectations that perhaps this time Belarus would manage "to catch the train of democratization". The EU enlargement towards the East raised hopes for possible closer cooperation: at that time, the EU had not yet been affected by the global economic crisis and Euro-cooperation seemed lucrative. For the first time post-Soviet countries joined the EU and this boosted hopes for a successful collaboration with other post-Soviet countries – the new EU member states become the internal "advocates" of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. The EU's external border moved closer to Belarus, and the latter became a "matter" for Europe and at least minimal cooperation in ensuring stability in the EU's neighbourhood became a necessity.

Nevertheless, the decisions in the Belarusian domestic policy taken immediately after the initiation of the ENP precluded Belarus' inclusion in the format of the ENP, and the "revolution" in Belarus was crushed before it even started. The constitutional referendum in Belarus in 2004 that the international community denounced as illegal recognized the constitutional possibility for Lukashenka to remain in the presidential office for life. The 2006 presidential election in Belarus was denounced undemocratic⁷³. This prompted the EU to take further sanctions against the Belarusian regime: to freeze the assets of persons responsible for the unlawful elections in the EU member states. On the other hand, it became

⁷³ George Dura, *The EU's Limited Response to Belarus' Pseudo 'New Foreign Policy'*. CEPS, 2008. <<http://www.ceps.be/book/eus-limited-response-belarus-pseudo-new-foreign-policy>>.

clear that the existing EU instruments are not efficient enough to impact Belarus. *The EU-imposed “sanctions bearing human face” needed to gain a momentum* (the fundamental principle of the application of sanctions on Belarus was the need to ensure that the sanctions affect only the political regime, support for Belarus’ democratic forces and the development of civic society were foreseen alongside the isolation of the regime). Therefore, in 2005-2006, Belarus became the priority country of the European Democracy and Human Rights Initiative and the European Human Rights Instrument was applied to finance the non-registered Belarus’ non-governmental institutions⁷⁴ until 2007. Still there was a need to define clear conditions on *what* and *in return for what* the EU can offer the Belarusian political regime and the people. In December 2006, the European Commission prepared a political document where the privileges and support for the Belarusian citizens were defined, that would become available provided that the Belarusian political regime implemented the following conditions⁷⁵:

1. Ensure democratic and transparent electoral procedures,
2. Guarantee media freedom;
3. Safeguard civil liberties and civil activity freedom,
4. Release political prisoners;
5. Reopen cases of missing persons and achieve progress in investigations;
6. Protect rights of workers and trade unions;
7. Protect rights of private business;
8. Abolish death penalty;
9. Cooperate with international organizations.

This document has become the key document in defining the EU-Belarus relations and possible development of cooperation. However, this EU initiative to boost the Belarusian society to change the political regime internally had no effect: the Belarusian non-governmental organizations and the opposition have failed to transmit this message to the Belarusian society effectively and to mobilise the society, and the government of Belarus practically ignored this document. During this period, the concept of “two-tier” emerged: at least minimum contacts with the official Minsk became essential due to the EU enlargement, on the other hand, it was naive to expect any radical changes of the governing regime, thus the most logical approach was to apply the principle of pre-conditions and to try to force the regime to take liberal decisions meanwhile supporting Belarus’ civil society and democratic forces.

⁷⁴ European Commission, *EU-Belarus Relations 2003-2005*
<http://ec.europa.eu/world/where/belarus/index_en.htm>.

⁷⁵ European Commission *Non-Paper What the European Union could bring to Belarus*,
<http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/belarus/index_en.htm>.

The crisis in the Russian-Belarusian relations in 2006-2008 and Lukashenka's "turn" to Europe

In 2006-2007, as Russia started gradually reducing energy subsidies to Belarus, the Belarusian government formulated a "new foreign policy". Its main principles were:

1) *The diversification of the import of energy resources.* This direction of Lukashenka's new policy was designed primarily "for internal use", i.e., to show the public that the president personally started battling the problems of energy supplies. In 2007, Lukashenka actively developed bilateral relations with the countries that could offer alternatives for the energy supplies (Venezuela, Iran, Azerbaijan, Nigeria, Norway), the first discussions started on the need to build a nuclear power plant in Belarus and this way reduce the energy independence on Russia. However, the idea of alternative imports of energy sources remained difficult to achieve due to high prices and there were no opportunities to invest in energy infrastructure without Russia's financial assistance.

2) *Promotion of foreign investments and improvement of investment climate.* The crisis in relations with Russia awakened the administration of the Belarusian president from illusions of a perpetual country's "economic miracle" - it became evident that the centralized and closed economy of Belarus had very little prospects. In 2007, individual Belarusian ministries, agencies and state enterprises were required to submit proposals on the ways to improve Belarus' investment climate⁷⁶. One of the main objectives was attraction of foreign investment (especially from the EU member states) and technologies. The following measures were foreseen among the most important decisions: tax exemptions for investors, abolition of the "golden share" mechanism⁷⁷, "sell out" of unprofitable state-owned enterprises, exemptions to Belarusian enterprises that receiving credits abroad, and relaxing restrictions on enterprises' share trading. Parallel to these measures, a list of 519 state-owned enterprises that had to be reorganized over 2008-2010 was compiled. 147 state-owned enterprises had to be privatized over the next three years. Nonetheless, the liberalization of Belarus' economy was limited, affected just a few sectors of the economy, and in many cases - only individual companies⁷⁸. The new economic policy did not affect the normalization of labour conditions, and therefore, did not receive a positive response from the EU: in 2007, a

⁷⁶ George Dura *The EU's Limited Response to Belarus' Pseudo 'New Foreign Policy'*, CEPS, 2008, <<http://www.ceps.be/book/eus-limited-response-belarus-pseudo-new-foreign-policy>>.

⁷⁷ The given mechanism allowed the state to overtake control of an enterprise, irrespective of the share of stock that the state owns in that enterprise. Such a takeover was possible in case authorities decided that state interference was necessary due to unqualified management of an enterprise or a threat to the wellbeing of staff, unavoidable bankruptcy etc.

⁷⁸ Kamil Klysinski, Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, *Changes in the Political Elite, Economy and Society of Belarus. Appearances and reality.* Centre for Eastern Studies, 2009. <<http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00005819/>>.

commission of the International Labour Organization (ILO) reported on the poor relations of the official Minsk and trade unions in Belarus. Thus Belarus was removed from the EU's Generalised system of preferences (GSP) (this EU's decision costs Belarus some 400 million euro annually).

3) *Cooperation with the EU in the areas of common interest.* In 2007, the Belarusian government submitted a proposal to the EU on cooperation in energy (physical safety of oil and gas pipelines), and transport and fight with illegal migration. However, the EU rejected this proposal - despite cosmetic economic liberalization, there was no positive democratic dynamics in the internal policy of Belarus⁷⁹. In 2007, The EU clearly defined the framework of potential pressure means on Belarus, but could not win: Russia-Belarus relations were based on the simple "barter" exchange, i.e. support was granted in exchange for particular "services" from Belarus, permission to acquire strategic objects or ensure political support. It was provided quickly and in a way that the Belarusian regime could divert directly to solve domestic issues and thus take on the merits. Meanwhile, the advantages of the cooperation with the EU were indirect and disseminated, aimed at the economy and society in general. Such assistance leaves no chances for the governing regime to take all the credits. In addition to this, the preconditions given by the EU are not linked to specific political exchanges: the EU does not ask for Belarus' "services" in exchange for assistance, the EU calls for the changes of the Belarusian regime itself, therefore the cost of such cooperation is too high for Lukashenka's regime.

	Levers against Belarus	Limiting factors
Russia	<p>Political support for Lukashenka. Support for Lukashenka is important both on the international level and for ensuring support from domestic electorate.</p> <p>Energy subsidies. Despite gradually being cut, they are "replaced" with stabilization loans. For example, the boost of prices for energy resources for Belarus in 2007 costed 1.6 billion USD, but in the same year Russia granted Belarus with a 1.5 billion loan, which actually reimbursed the losses in exchange for the Belarusian consent (if necessary) to allow the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in the country's territory.</p>	<p>Russia's support for Lukashenka's regime does not always ensure the latter's loyalty and support for Russia's foreign policy goals. The reason for Belarus' policy of balancing is the avoidance of full commitment both to Russia and the EU.</p>

⁷⁹ George Dura, *The EU's Limited Response to Belarus' Pseudo 'New Foreign Policy'*. CEPS, 2008. <<http://www.ceps.be/book/eus-limited-response-belarus-pseudo-new-foreign-policy>>.

EU	Prospects for visa liberalization	The prospects for visa liberalization remain uncertain as there are no clear conditions when such a decision could be taken. On the other hand, the EU's visa policy has the strongest impact on ordinary citizens of Belarus, not on the regime's elite.
	Energy dialogue	The EU, unlike Russia, can guarantee Belarus neither the stability of energy prices nor the status of an important transit country. The EU's plans for the diversification of energy sources are focused on reducing the role of the Russian resources. Such policy actually undermines the importance of Belarus as a transit country.
	EU offers to "balance" Russia's role in Belarus' foreign policy	The volume of the EU-Belarus cooperation is so low that it can be called an "offset" for Russia only symbolically. The EU opposes the scheme of open competition with Russia in common neighbourhood and defines itself in terms of normative policy, rather than in geopolitical terms.
	The EU has a decisive voice in international financial institutions; EU's decisions define Belarus' chances to offset the financial impact from Russia.	
The EU - a potential source of investment, technology and trade diversification.		

Nevertheless, the need to modernize Belarus' economy and the Russian-Georgian military conflict encouraged Belarus to review the possible benefits of convergence with the EU.

2008 – 2010 - "thaw" of the EU-Belarus relations?

The years 2008-2009 are considered a breakthrough in the EU-Belarus relations: in 2008, the Belarusian government released the last political prisoners; the amendments to the Electoral Code adopted during 2006-2009 pulled the election provisions in Belarus closer to the international standards at least in theory: political parties and public organizations were allowed to participate in the activities of electoral commissions, the nomination procedure was simplified, the number of candidates from the governing regime limited; the candidates were allowed to use private funds for the election campaign, the early voting procedures were tightened formally, the rights of election observers were extended⁸⁰.

Given the fact that Lukashenka had implemented some provisions of 2006 policy document, the EU decided to grant Lukashenka's regime a certain "advance of confidence" , i.e. to demonstrate that the EU is ready to make flexible concessions for Belarus if the dynamics of

⁸⁰ <<http://www.belarus.by/en/government/belarus-elections/electoral-legislation-of-the-republic-of-belarus>>.

the Belarusian domestic policy remain positive. This decision essentially ended the period of isolation for Belarus' official governing regime.

Institutional approach:

- On September 2008, it was decided to revise the preconditions that the EU applied on Belarus, the provisions of the document compiled in 2006 were reformulated in a more flexible and streamlined way with a possibility of speeding up the cooperation in the case of any positive dynamics in Belarus' political regime. On October 2008, it was agreed to resume the political dialogue with the Belarusian government⁸¹.
- On October 2008, the EU lifted the first sanctions - visa ban on the Belarusian officials of the highest profile was suspended for 6 months with possible extension, thus the government of Belarus was given time to implement positive reforms⁸².
- In 2008, the three EU's "troika"⁸³ meetings with representatives of the Belarusian government took place; the European Commission launched technical consultations with the Belarusian state agencies on possible areas of cooperation.
- On May 2009, Belarus was invited to participate in the East Partnership Initiative; in June, the EU-Belarus dialogue on human rights issues was established.

Political approach:

- In February 2009, Javier Solana, EU high representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, visited Belarus.
- In April 2009, the President of Belarus visited Italy and held a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Pope Benedict XVI.
- In June 2009 EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner paid an official visit to Minsk.
- In September 2009, the president of Belarus visited Lithuania.
- In October 2010 Lithuanian president visited Minsk.
- In November 2010 the German and Polish ministers of foreign affairs paid a visit to president A. Lukashenka.

⁸¹ Margarita M. Balmaceda, Sabine Fischer, Grzegorz Gromadzki, Andrei Liakhovich, Astrid Sahn, Vitali Silitski and Leonid Zlotnikov, *Back from the cold? The EU and Belarus in 2009*. Institute for Security Studies, 2009. < <http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/cp119.pdf>>.

⁸² Nicu Popescu & Andrew Wilson, *The Limits of Enlargement -lite: European and Russian Power in the Troubled Neighbourhood*. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2009. <http://ecfr.3cdn.net/66e95c3cd50b72d59a_87m6y59xi.pdf>.

⁸³ The EU "troika": Foreign Minister of the presiding state of the EU Council, a representative of the EU foreign policy, the EU Commissioner for foreign relations.

Belarus during “trial period”. In 2010-2011, two elections were to take place in Belarus - municipal and presidential. Despite pro-active decisions of the EU, the forthcoming elections have already prompted the usual trends of regime strengthening and distancing from the EU's criticism. On February 2010, Lukashenka issued a presidential decree providing strengthened control of information dissemination via the Internet⁸⁴. On February 2010, Catherine Ashton, high representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, denounced the renewal of the Belarus' regime aggression against the Polish minority in Belarus (in 2010, during the protest in Minsk, a group of 40 activists representing the rights of the Polish ethnic minority was arrested⁸⁵). Belarus' refusal to satisfy the EU's conditions has complicated the implementation of the EU Eastern Partnership initiative: the first meeting of the Euronest⁸⁶ Parliamentary Assembly, scheduled for the 24 of March, had to be postponed until the end of the year due to the failure of the EU-Belarus negotiations on the composition of the Belarusian delegation⁸⁷.

At the moment, the EU is preparing to make a critical decision necessary in order to protect the EU Eastern Initiative from the changes in the EU-Belarus relations. In the near future, the European Parliament together with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Ashton and the European Commissioner for Enlargement Štefan Füle are to draw up the EU guidelines for the reforms in Belarus that will redefine the terms of the formal EU-Belarus cooperation⁸⁸. This document could for the first time formulate an individual EU policy on Belarus, that could be operating regardless of political cycles in Belarus. One of the key issues at the moment is whether it is possible to apply the EU preconditions more flexibly and effectively aiming at long-term results.

⁸⁴ *EU Calls Belarusian Internet Decree 'A Step In Wrong Direction'*, 2010.

<http://www.rferl.org/content/EU_Calls_Belarusian_Internet_Decree_A_Step_In_Wrong_Direction/1948755.html>.

⁸⁵ *Polish parliament condemns Belarusian policy on minority group*, 2010.

<<http://en.rian.ru/world/20100217/157918966.html>>.

⁸⁶ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly is a component of the Eastern Partnership Initiative, a format for the parliamentary co-operation of Eastern Partnership Initiative aimed at encouraging six countries of the Eastern Partnership Initiative (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) to promote closer institutional relations with the EU and experience sharing.

⁸⁷ As foreseen, Belarus should be represented by five members of the parliament and five members from opposition forces and non-governmental organizations in EURONEST. The official Minsk opposes such representation of Belarus in EURONEST proposed by the EU and seeks for Belarus to be represented by all 10 members of the Belarusian parliament members, despite the fact that the Belarusian parliament is the only one in Europe not to have any opposition representatives.

⁸⁸ *Eastern parliamentary assembly delayed but on track*, 2010. <<http://www.euractiv.com/en/east-mediterranean/eastern-parliamentary-assembly-delayed-track-news-376713>>.

4.3. Possibilities to encourage the transformation of the regime externally

Is it possible to promote the economic liberalization of the regime?

In 2008, the volume of the economic liberalization in Belarus from the point of view of market economy has been quite modest, but most experts agree that for Belarus it has been a fundamental step forward – Lukashenka’s regime has finally realized that the modernization and the restructurisation of economy is inevitable, and it is no good to rely on Russia, which is suffering from the same problems. Although Lukashenka’s regime has chosen the “Russian” model (partial opening for foreign investments and technologies without major structural reforms) for the modernization of economy and while the global financial crisis forced to slow the pace of privatization, the “hunger“ for foreign investments and technologies remains one of the most important potential levers in the hands of the EU. The changes in the Belarusian elite that have taken place together with mentioned reform allow predictions that the success of the partial liberalization of economy will ensure the need for deeper reforms in the future.

The changes in the Belarusian elite and in the EU-Russian guidelines

The year 2007 was significant for Belarus in the context of changes in the ruling elite. In Belarus, the oligarchic elite system does not exist in the classical sense - all elite groups are very strictly controlled directly by the president by constant reallocation of posts and overlapping jurisdictions of institutions. Until 2007, the nomenclature’s wealth and property had been directly associated with certain posts and appointments⁸⁹. In the sense of political influence the nomenclature of Belarus is only advisory, thus it makes no ideological competition for the president. Until 2007 -2008, the most influential group of elite in Belarus was the so called “siloviki“⁹⁰ - the heads of the power structures (Secretariat of the Security Council, the KGB, Ministry of the Interior) and the Mogiliov clan - the circle of Lukashenka closest friends and fellows. Both groups are highly pro-Russian and very conservative. The year 2007, however, brought some changes:

- By the president’s decree, Victar Lukashenka (president’s son) was appointed the member of the National Security Council. The expectations that Victar Lukashenka

⁸⁹ Kamil Klynski, Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, *Changes in the Political Elite, Economy and Society of Belarus. Appearances and reality*. Centre for Eastern Studies, 2009.

⁹⁰ The term “siloviki” (from Russian “silovye struktury” – structures of power) defines special elite groups in Belarus and Russia. They are top officials of the state security, law enforcement institutions and heads of the armed forces that are united by several features: most often “siloviki” have inherited their posts from the times of the Soviet Union, they have uniform world outlook, interests and cooperation in pursuance of their goals. The most significant features of their world outlook are the aspiration to consolidate and concentrate the power of the state, anti-western attitudes, aspiration to weaken the economic elites of the state, etc.

would succeed the current president commenced the formation of a new elite group - the active and “modern” young people gathering around Victor. This clan commonly known as the “youth group” or “family” has no ties with the clans of the old nomenclature. The members of the “youth group” are the representatives of the president’s administration, heads and officials of the public analytical institutions, Central Bank and border control institutions.

- The goal of the new force was a gradual take over of control of law enforcement and security authorities and thus ousts the old “siloviki” and the Mogiliov clan. In 2008, the reshuffle of posts and “cleansings” took place on the initiative of the president for the benefit of the “youth group”⁹¹.
- In 2008, the restructuring of the state enterprises and other decisions of the president made it possible for the nomenclature to acquire property and legalize their incomes. This enabled the strengthening of the position of another group (so far less influential) – “technocrats” (heads of large state-owned enterprises). Moreover, this granted the Belarusian elite so far non-existent economic freedom⁹².

What prospects do these changes open up for the EU policy? Unlike the “siloviki” and the Mogiliov clan, the arising elite are ideology free. The main task of these groups is to protect the Belarusian economy from bankruptcy whilst ensuring the sovereignty of the state, which determines their positions. For this reason, the new elites oppose the integration with Russia, especially since it is incapable of helping Belarus to implement the technological modernization. The new elite pay more attention to the prospects of cooperation with the West. It should be noted that these young leaders are more pro-West and pragmatic, but still undemocratic – their opportunities to strengthen their influence are inseparable from the consolidation of the regime. Therefore, the long-term changes in the Belarusian elite could mean a more pragmatic and more easily predictable partnership with Belarus for the EU, but not a European and democratic Belarus. To put it in other words, the need to promote gradual transformation of the regime remains. At the same time, the challenges concerning such transformation will remain relevant: searches for a leader alternative to Lukashenka, securing a peaceful power change, ensuring the sovereignty of Belarus during the transitional period. All these issues are critical to regional stability.

⁹¹ In 2007, Victor Sheiman (non-formal leader of Belarusian “siloviki”) was dismissed from the post of advisor to the president on security issues and Victor Lukashenka became the only counsel on the given issues. In 2008, the member of the Belarusian “siloviki” group, the head of the KGB general Sukharenko was dismissed due to his disapproval of the post reshuffle policy (appointment of a close Victor Lukashenka’s friend Ihar Rachkuskyy the head of the State Border Control Forces). Sukharenko was replaced by the head of the President’s Security Service Jurij Zhadobin. Thus the “siloviki” were divested of the control of two power structures and the possibility to shape the security policy. The decline of the “siloviki” clan continued in 2009 as well.

⁹² Kamil Klysinski, Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, *Changes in the Political Elite, Economy and Society of Belarus. Appearances and reality*. Centre for Eastern Studies, 2009.

The opposition and the society of Belarus: pillars or challenges of the new EU policy?

A paradox change in the EU-Belarus relations over the past decade is the fact that Belarusian democratic powers, perceived by the EU as the engine of possible changes, today are the greatest critics of the EU policy. Most of the representatives of the United Democratic Forces of Belarus believe that during the economic downturn the West should completely isolate Lukashenka's regime or to be strict in demanding democratic reforms and develop a dialogue with direct involvement of the opposition⁹³. The Eastern Partnership Initiative stipulates the latter format, but the opposition must undergo changes itself in order to turn the democratic forces into a credible partner of the EU in ensuring the democratic development of Belarus' regime,

Problems of the Belarusian opposition⁹⁴:

- *Disagreements over the end-goal* - a sudden regime change *vs.* the possibility of becoming a parliamentary and constitutional opposition and transform the regime gradually.
- *The fragmentation of the opposition*: the ideological differences between the parties are not a nondemocratic phenomenon *per se*, but disagreements preventing at least minimal cooperation are a fundamental problem that has contributed to the 2008 failure of democratic forces whilst preparing for the election campaign; yet another problem is the opposition of the “centre” and the “regions” due to different agendas and financial disagreements that complicate the process of mobilization.
- *The gap between the society and democratic forces* - democratic forces are not able to mobilize a wider public beyond the boundaries of permanent democratic electorate. Despite their efforts, in 2009, public support for Lukashenka amounted to 45%.
- *The opposition leaders lack experience* in policy shaping, coalition building and decision making and implementing. In other words, in Belarus, there is no required number of people beyond the regime with sufficient competence and experience for governing a democratic state.
- *Mutual distrust and Lukashenka's manipulations*: in 2008, Lukashenka's policy of the “regime softening” and selective consultations with some opposition powers brought even greater controversy among the democratic forces and provoked speculations that, following the Russian example, Lukashenka tried to create “loyal” opposition.
- Questionable “democracy” of the opposition itself⁹⁵.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

The participation in the official EU formats is one of the best ways to unite, mobilize and develop opposition capable of offering an alternative to Lukashenka's regime for a long term. Therefore, the participation of Belarus in the political formats of the Eastern Partnership Initiative and, especially, bringing the opposition into them is of critical importance. The option of removing Belarus from the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative or Euronest for let's say non-democratic election processes, should not be considered, as such a decision would only "gum up" the internal situation of Belarus for even a longer period. Such decisions only isolate the opposition, not A. Lukashenka.

5. FEATURES OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF BELARUS

Over the past decade, the development of the Belarusian foreign policy has been characterized by the so-called "pendulum effect" (Belarus flirting both with Russia and the West), and the main provisions of the Belarusian foreign policy are primarily concerned with the preservation of the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenka. It is possible to identify several general features of the Belarusian foreign policy of the recent decade:

Belarus maintains the closest bilateral relations with Russia. Strong economic and political ties between Belarus and Russia have been useful for both Minsk and Moscow in the pursuit to preserve Belarus as a unique totalitarian regime in the middle of Europe. Despite Russia's increasing economic and political pressure on Belarus, the process of forming incapable Russia-Belarus Union State that started in 1996, served as a "protector" against the processes of democratization from the outside (initiated by the EU and the U.S.). The isolation from the international environment has protected Belarus from the consequences of the processes of democratic development that have been taking place in the neighbouring countries, such as the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia in the end of 2004.

Belarus is ignored at the international level because of president Lukashenka's authoritarian regime, and this inflicts high domestic costs. In order to compensate for these costs Belarus is forced to increase economic, financial and energy dependence on Russia at the expense of country's sovereignty. The "pendulum policy" largely remains merely an illusion. On the other hand, the so-called "multi-track" foreign policy officially declared by the Belarusian government provides an opportunity for Belarus to treat itself as a unique bridge linking the East and the West and try to "break through" the international isolation by developing

⁹⁵ Vytis Jurkonis, *Lietuvos politika Baltarusijos atžvilgiu: ar žinome, ko siekiame?*. EESC, *Rytų Pulsas* Nr. 2 (30), 2010. <http://www.eesc.lt/public_files/file_1268745357.pdf>.

relationships with such Third World countries referred to as the members of “undemocratic countries’ club” as Iran, Cuba, Venezuela and others. It should be emphasized that often these relations with Third World countries create competition to analogical relations with Russia. For example, recently intensified relations between Belarus and Venezuela in energy sector⁹⁶ could be treated not only as Belarus’ unique attempts to reduce energy dependence on Russia, but also as a specific means of pressing on Russia⁹⁷.

Belarus’s dependence on Russia in the critical moments of bilateral relations leaves no other choice for Minsk but to look for an alternative in the West. At the same time “a closed circle” effect is produced: the reluctance of Belarus to implement democratic reforms results only in superficial bilateral relations with the West and painful sanctions from Russia that further increase the erosion of Belarus’ sovereignty. On the other hand, penalties in energy and financial sectors imposed on Belarus by Russia further push the country to embrace the West. Constant swinging/balancing of Belarus between Russia and the EU reflects Belarusian efforts to preserve Lukashenka’s authoritarian regime and avoid complete commitment either to Russia or the West at the same time. However, the Belarusian government is well aware that concessions to Russia do not lead to equal partnership, but only foster further the pressure from Russia, because Kremlin sees favours from Belarus as a sign of weakness of the Belarusian regime. It is obvious that conditions which Russia constantly applies on Belarus are more and more strongly associated with the Belarusian statehood issues. What is more, it should also be taken into account that, despite the increased opportunities for the West to try and bind Belarus through the development of the technical-sectoral co-operation within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, Russian presence in Belarus will be hard to beat. That is because Belarus’s energy dependence on Russia is more difficult to limit than the financial-economic one. Imports from Russia comprise 60% of total Belarusian import volume, 85% imported oil and nearly 100% natural gas also come from Russia. About 20% of all Russian natural gas supplies are exported to European countries via Belarus. The Belarusian industry, which accounts for 40% of the country’s GDP, depends on Russia as the supplier of raw materials and the market for export⁹⁸.

⁹⁶ On March 15, 2010 Belarus and Venezuela agreed upon the supply of Venezuelan oil to Belarus (80,000 barrels of oil per day). – *Kommersant.ru*, Александр Габуев „Александр Лукашенко отлучился на баррель-другой“. <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1337941&ThemesID=6>>.

⁹⁷ Belarus’ decision to choose Venezuela as a means of pressure on Russia was not accidental. Russia hails Venezuela as a strategic ally in the Latin America thus loud statements by Lukashenka about bilateral co-operation between Belarus and Venezuela or pragmatic development of such cooperation is one of the most realistic means of pressuring Russia. – *Kommersant.ru*, Александр Габуев „Александр Лукашенко отлучился на баррель-другой“. <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1337941&ThemesID=6>>.

⁹⁸ STRATFOR „Russia’s Expanding Influence, Part 1: The Necessities“. <www.stratfor.com/analysis/20100304_russia_0>.

The comparison of pressure measures that the West and Russia have on Lukashenka's regime clearly demonstrates that Russia's position in this case is more favourable. Moscow can always use the "energy chip" (threaten to raise the cost of gas supplies) which would essentially destroy the country's social and economic system. Until recently, Lukashenka was avoiding this scenario by allowing the Russian capital to privatize public-owned enterprises in strategic industry.

For example, in 2007, Russian natural gas company *Gazprom* inked an agreement with the Belarusian government on the transformation of state-owned company *Beltransgaz*, controlling the pipelines in Belarus and Russian gas transit to European countries, into a joint Russian-Belarusian company. Under this agreement, on March 30, *Gazprom* acquired 50% of the company's shares and paid 2.5 billion U.S. dollars for them. It is worth mentioning that Russian business structures have certain advantages in the processes of partial liberalization and privatization in Belarus over Western companies. For example, the administrative barriers, state-dominated economy and other similar factors are all easily recognisable for Russian capital which is well aware of such "domestic order" and has acquired certain political patronage. The volumes of Russian investment in Belarus illustrate that pretty well: in 2009, foreign investment in Belarus amounted to 9.3 billion U.S. dollars, 6.1 billion U.S. dollars of which accounted for the Russian investment⁹⁹. Russia is interested in the Belarusian energy, banking, construction, manufacturing, telecommunications and other extremely important sectors of the Belarusian economy¹⁰⁰.

The Framework of the Belarusian Military and Economic Security: Belarusian Position in the Russian Regional Schemes

Given that Russia may pressure the Belarusian regime in most areas of strategic importance (let us say, a threat to bring the cost of gas supplies to Belarus closer to European price, terminate orders for Belarusian production made exclusively for the markets of the CIS countries, etc.), these relations should have already taken the form of "metropolis" versus "province". However, it is too early to talk about anything similar in the bilateral relations between Russia and Belarus. The question is why. In search for the answer, it is worth discussing the elements comprising Belarus' "bargaining power" in relations with Russia. Perhaps the most important political lever of Belarus, which may be used to exert pressure on

⁹⁹ Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTA), „Russian investment in Belarus 2.8 times up in 2009“.
<<http://www.belta.by/en/news/econom?id=504118>>.

¹⁰⁰In autumn 2009, the Pan-European Institute at the Turku School of Economics (Finland) prepared analytical publication *Russia's Investment in Belarus*, analyzing foreign investment environment in Belarus and listing the sectors, into which the most active penetration of the Russian capital takes place. – Irina Yermeyeva, *Russian Investments in Belarus*. Electronic Publications of Pan-European Institute, 13/2009.
<<http://www.tse.fi/FI/yksikot/erillislaitokset/pei/Documents/Julkaisut/Yermeyeva%201309%20web.pdf>>.

Russia, is the sector of military cooperation. This sphere of bilateral relations is most consolidated and has already achieved the levels of military alliance integration.

Table 2. Belarusian-Russian Military Alliance

The Form of the Bilateral Belarusian-Russian Military Alliance	Belarus' Possibilities to Influence the Development of the Military Alliance
<p>There are two Russian military facilities of strategic importance in the territory of Belarus - the radar station at Baranovichi (for the early warning of ballistic missile launch, covering Europe and the regions of North Atlantic and Norwegian Sea) and the submarine control centre near Vileyka (for retransmission of signals to the Russian military ships and submarines located in the Central and North Atlantic). These two military facilities are the key elements of Russia's defence system. The radar station at Baranovichi is one of the objects belonging to the anti-missile "defence belt", which was supposed to encircle Russia back in the Soviet times (similar objects were built in Ukraine, the Caucasus and Russia's Krasnoyarsk region) and following the collapse of the Soviet Union has become more important for several reasons. Firstly, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the project of the "defence belt" was abandoned – the radar station in Latvia was unbuilt, radar stations in Ukraine and Caucasus were not completed. Only Belarus allowed Russia to complete the construction of the radar station and leased this station to Russia for 25 years. Secondly, construction of the radar station in Baranovichi, which began in the 1980s, was completed only in 2002. In other words, the radar station in Baranovichi is one of the most modern objects of the Russian anti-missile defence system. It should be noted that in addition to these two Russian military facilities in Belarus, Belarus also guards the Russian border with Estonia, Lithuania and Poland, thus Russia does not need to build infrastructure for nearly 1,000 kilometres of border line. Belarus as well performs the functions of Russia's air defence "shield" covering Moscow and Russia's central industrial districts (on February 3, 2009, Belarus and Russia signed an agreement on the creation of joint air defence system).</p>	<p>Russian experts fear that annually exacerbating tension in Belarus' disputes with Russia over the prices of natural gas and oil may eventually become the cause for confrontation in the field of Belarusian-Russian military cooperation. It is likely that in case of a conflict between Belarus and <i>Gazprom</i> in the energy sector, Lukashenka will use the opportunity to negotiate with Russia on bilateral military cooperation, by submitting several billion dollars "bill" for the lease of the above-mentioned Russian military facilities, and, at the worst scenario, by issuing an ultimatum on the nationalization or dismantling of these facilities. Under 1995 bilateral agreements, Russia does not pay Belarus for the lease of these two military facilities - the bilateral agreement on Baranovichi radar station in Belarus has written off Belarus' debt for Russian energy sources. Belarus also gets nothing for the lease of the submarine control centre near Vileyka which is registered as a Russian military institution and does not have the status of a military base. On the other hand, Lukashenka's abilities to negotiate with Russia are limited both by financial factors (dismantling of the radar station in Baranovichi would cost Belarus about 9 million U.S. dollars) and the U.S. plans for a new structure of the European security. It is worth reminding that on September 17, 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama's administration announced the U.S. plans to abandon plans for the deployment of the anti-missile defence system elements in Czech Republic and Poland and, as a result, "the front of military threat" for Russia moved from Central and Eastern Europe to South East Europe (Romania and Bulgaria, where the U.S. plans to deploy elements of anti-missile defence system in 2015).</p>

Source: Vytautas Sirijos Gira, *Kodėl Rusija negali perimti Baltarusijos kontrolės*, Rytų Europos studijų centras, Rytų Pulsas, Nr. 11 (26). <http://www.eesc.lt/public_files/file_1254317399.pdf>.

Having evaluated the above-mentioned factors of the Russian and Belarusian military integration, it is possible to say that the volume of possible impact of Belarus on Russia is determined by poor possibilities of Belarus' practical actions and the broader juncture of external international environment (for example, the Russian-U.S. relations).

On the other hand, Belarus' negotiating powers with respect to Russia are strengthened by the fact that the Belarusian-Russian military alliance is separate from other regional integration projects in the sphere of military security that are designed in the post-Soviet Russia, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). For example, in June 2009, Belarus, in response to Russia's sanctions against Belarusian dairy production, was boycotting the CSTO summit in Moscow and the creation of the CSTO rapid reaction force for almost half a year, however, already in September 2009, Belarus together with Russia organized one of the largest military exercises *Zapad 2009 (West 2009)*, which was aimed at demonstrating the potential of the Belarus-Russia military alliance.

In boycotting CSTO, Belarus used the possibility of asymmetric response - in return to the Russian barriers for the Belarusian dairy products in the Russian market, Belarus' actions weakened the entire CSTO (mentioned Belarus' actions encouraged the Central Asian states to step up relations with NATO)¹⁰¹. While Belarusian "revolts" with respect to Russia usually become possible due to "drawbacks"¹⁰² existing in Russian-dominated regional organizations, the Belarusian-Russian military alliance operates under its own internal logic and separate from joint integration projects in the field of military security of other CIS countries because:

- Belarus is not inclined to take serious commitments in respect of the CSTO because of profound differences between the interests of the CSTO countries and the fact that the security guaranties of each CSTO member are basically created not via the membership in the CSTO, but through bilateral relations with Russia (as in the case of Russia's and Belarus' military alliance).
- Basically, the CSTO Rapid Reaction Force creates no value added for Belarus (these forces are seen as the strengthening of Russian influence in the Central Asian countries) and Belarus' membership in the CSTO is based primarily on economic and political reasons, not on the grounds of military security.

¹⁰¹ Dzianis Melyantsou, *Collective Security and Individual Interests*. Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, BISS BLITZ, Nr. 29/2009. <<http://belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/bb292009en.pdf>>.

¹⁰² For example, the CSTO itself – although in the structure of Russian foreign and security policy the CSTO at the moment performs the function of a particular “locomotive”, that could move integration processes in the CIS, experts view this organization as an unsuccessful copy of NATO that lacks clear vision of the collective defence. The CSTO only technically unites the bilateral agreements on defence between Moscow and the CSTO member states. What is more, these agreements often violate the principles of the CSTO itself. – *Author's note*.

By agreeing to engage in deeper CSTO integration processes, Belarus succeeded in persuading Russia on the following issues:

- 1) Moscow will not press Minsk to officially recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia (it means that Minsk successfully neutralized one of Russia's means of pressure that had been previously actively used against Belarus).
- 2) If Belarus seeks to preserve the volume of military industry production (Russia is the main buyer of the Belarusian military production) and purchase Russian weaponry on favourable terms, Russia's main condition is Belarus' participation in the CSTO.
- 3) The participation of Belarus in the CSTO will be formal - as the CSTO membership does not create value added for Belarus, Belarus is not required to participate fully in the CSTO military operations (the Constitution of Belarus does not allow the deployment of armed forces beyond national borders)¹⁰³.

Belarus occupies a unique position not only in the sphere of the military cooperation with Russia, but also in the economic vision for the region that Russia is developing. For example, in June 2009, after 16 years of negotiations on accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Russia's refusal to negotiate further and unexpected statement that it will join the WTO only together with its partners in the Customs Union (Belarus and Kazakhstan), which is being created, spoke about Russia's distinctive motives:

- *Firstly*, during the global financial and economic crisis, Russia attempted to maintain its economic levers and protect the sectors of the raw materials industry (exports of raw materials account for 90% of all Russian exports) from liberalization, and at the same time to avoid wide opening of the energy sector and other strategically important spheres of the country's economy to foreign investors. It is obvious that Russia's intention to join the WTO together with Kazakhstan and Belarus delayed the prospect of membership of all three mentioned countries for an indefinite period of time due to their different pace of integration into the WTO. Prior to applying for WTO accession together with its Customs Union partners, Russia had already completed 95% of the WTO membership procedures, Kazakhstan – 70% and Belarus - 50 %¹⁰⁴. By postponing the process of integration, Russia aimed at escalating the possibility of “trade wars” (quite effective trade sanctions with certain political purposes) in order to apply it to smaller countries – in 2006, Russia imposed such

¹⁰³ Dzianis Melyantsou, *Collective Security and Individual Interests*. Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, BISS BLITZ, Nr. 29/2009. <<http://belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/bb292009en.pdf>>.

¹⁰⁴ The Voice of Russia, *Russia-WTO talks take a new format*. <<http://www.ruvr.ru/main.php?lng=eng&q=46842&cid=57&p=17.06.2009>>.

sanctions on wine from Georgia and Moldova, in 2007 - on Poland's meat, in 2008 - on Finland's wood imports, in 2009 - on Lithuania's and Belarus' dairy products.

- *Secondly*, Russia has the intention of speeding up the implementation of other regional projects (such as the Customs Union). Since Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan have established the Customs Union, which started operating on July 5, 2010, Belarus can no longer initiate trade agreements with its major trading partners (mainly the EU) separately. Not only this allows Russia to further accelerate Belarus' economic integration in the framework of the Union State but also to regulate the level and volume of Belarus' involvement into the EU Eastern Partnership initiative (in other words, to limit the EU's ability to apply economic means in order to liberalize and democratize Belarus). Belarus' integration into the Customs Union (which means the liberalization of trade between its members by applying common external tariffs to third parties) prohibits the diversification of its own trade policies with third parties. In addition, Belarus' accession to the Customs Union does not protect Minsk from certain bogus or real claims about anti-dumping by Russia. Paradoxically, Belarus' increasingly deepening economic integration with Russia poses more obstacles for the development of Belarusian economy, although it has been thought that it may facilitate this process. For example, before the Customs Union, Russia actually was subsidizing the Belarusian economy by supplying energy resources. In 2007-2010, Moscow committed Minsk to supply 20 million tons of oil annually with more than 65% tax exemption on oil export (in addition to this, Minsk was free to decide upon the use of the Russian oil). These discounts allowed Minsk to save about 2.5-3 billion U.S. dollars of the budget of Belarus annually (depending on the fluctuations of the global oil price) and to secure the stability of Lukashenka's authoritarian regime. Since 2010, the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan has become a certain obstacle to the early bilateral agreements between Russia and Belarus. By agreeing to participate in the Customs Union, Belarus hoped to "legitimize" the existing practice of bilateral relations with Russia on the economy (to fix subsidies for the Belarusian economy), but the results were contrary to those expected. In accordance with the provisions of the Customs Union, export taxes are not applied only on goods circulating inside the Customs Union, whereas single export tax that goes to the producing country is applied for goods exported beyond the Customs Union. Given that after the creation of the Customs Union Belarus has harmonized all custom tariffs with Russia, subsidizing of the Belarusian economy has sharply decreased and preconditions were created for Russia to gradually abandon various tax

exemptions, previously applied to Belarus¹⁰⁵. On the other hand, it is more and more evident that for Russia various institutional and legal factors are merely measures to increase the control of Belarusian economy.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned levers that Belarus has against Russia and Russia's special interests in Belarus, three probable approaches of the "Russian" strategy towards Belarus can be distinguished¹⁰⁶:

- *The nature of Russia's relations with Belarus can be interpreted solely on the basis of the interests of Russia's major state-owned companies, such as Gazprom.* To put it in other words, Russia's interest in Belarus is based purely on economic and financial benefits. The development of Russian business in Belarus should limit the powers of Lukashenka's regime and perhaps even foster liberalization at some point. This approach is idealistic and more popular among the Belarusian intellectuals who cultivate the idea of "democratization of Belarus via Russia". It may be noted that idea of "Belarusian democratization via Russia" became especially important for the Belarusian opposition parties in the light of the presidential elections scheduled for December 19, 2010. Despite that it remained unclear, why should Russia support transformation of the political and economic system in Belarus and risk losing its power levers to democratic Belarus. According to the Belarusian opposition parties¹⁰⁷, Russia may be interested in the democratization of Belarus for several reasons. Firstly, the democratic forces of Belarus want to change the existing "rules of the game", but have nothing against Russia. Secondly, democratization without Russia's consent is virtually impossible. Russia has very concrete interests in Belarus - joint enterprises with Belarus, transit of Russian energy resources and goods via Belarus and the Russian military objects on Belarusian ground. If authoritarian regime prevails in Belarus, the country will tend to feed Russia with empty promises and seek economic and political benefits. Only parliamentary form of government in Belarus would guarantee the protection of Russian interests in Belarus. To put it in other words, democratic Belarus would create no obstacles for "civilized business" interests that Russia has. That is, if that is the case.
- *Another scenario suggests that Russia's policy towards Belarus is based on the geopolitical interests.* Russia seeks keep its strategic ally Belarus attached by attributing the role of the Russian "shield" or "outpost" to it. To this end, Russia tries to forge

¹⁰⁵ *Rusijos energetinis spaudimas Baltarusijai tęsiasi.* Rytų Europos studijų centras, *Rytų Kaimynystės atspindžiai*, Nr. 1 (6) // 2010 02 07-02 17. <http://www.eesc.lt/public_files/file_1266567274.doc>.

¹⁰⁶ Vytautas Sirijos Gira, *Kodėl Rusija negali perimti Baltarusijos kontrolės*, Rytų Europos studijų centras, *Rytų Pulsas*, Nr. 11 (26). <http://www.eesc.lt/public_files/file_1254317399.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ Discussion at the European Information Bureau of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, *Belarus before the Presidential Elections*, 03-11-2010. <http://www.eesc.lt/public_files/file_1288955864.pdf>.

closer links between Russian and Belarusian enterprises, unify the monetary systems and the like. On the other hand, Russia does not plan full incorporation or integration of Belarus, as it realizes that such dramatic decision would painfully affect Russia's relations with the West and the CIS countries. Moscow is aware that Lukashenka's regime in fact has no real opportunities to open up for the West, nor start self-sufficient economic liberalization or political reforms. Thus Russia chooses a "wait and see" approach hoping that economically weak Belarus would sooner or later accept Russia's conditions: a) recognize the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; 2) open up to the Russian capital (Russia's participation in the privatization of Belarusian enterprises, etc.), 3) implement its obligations for the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and other conditions¹⁰⁸.

- Finally, *Russia's relations with Belarus are interpreted on the basis for a gradual "step-by-step integration strategy", applied by Russia in order to incorporate Belarus in the Russian Federation.* Starting with acquisition of control over strategic Belarusian companies, and then followed by unification of monetary systems. Later Russia could seek to increase its military contingent in Belarus and legalize full Belarusian and Russian integration in the military field. Each step would be echoed by minor changes within the ruling elite in Belarus. Eventually, Belarusian ruling elite would become closely intertwined with their "fellows" in Moscow. During such "natural" incorporation of Belarus with Russia the West would finally be forced to admit a lost battle over Belarus.

Regardless of the approach chosen by Russia, it is obvious that the power levers that Belarus has against Russia (suspension of military cooperation, public doubts on Russia's international prestige) are mostly associated with international law and interpretation of the provisions of bilateral treaties than real economic, military or political impact. Thus economically isolated and increasingly weakening Belarus will sooner or later fall under Russia's influence, unless Lukashenka implements at least partial, but structurally significant¹⁰⁹, reforms liberalizing the economy and develops a sustainable strategy of geopolitical, economic and energy independence.

¹⁰⁸ Discussion at the European Information Bureau of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania *Belarus before the Presidential Elections*, 03-11-2010. <http://www.eesc.lt/public_files/file_1288955864.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ The processes of privatization and liberalization of the economy that are taking place in Belarus (private sector in Belarus creates about 25-30% of GDP) are inconsistent and do not significantly influence the changes in the Belarusian economy. Lukashenka remains the initiator, arbitrator and decision maker of these processes (for example, all privatization contracts, made in 2007-2008, were signed with the consent of Lukashenka). – *Author's note.*