

# Lost Civilization: The Thorough Repression of Civil Society in Belarus

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The status of civil society in Belarus? We don't have it here in Belarus; that's what we are fighting for. There is no freedom of speech and no independent judiciary—the two prerequisites for the existence of civil society.

Andrei Sannikov, former deputy foreign minister of Belarus<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Republic of Belarus has, without question, the least developed civil society in Europe. Although Belarus has failed to attract any significant Western attention for its human rights abuses and complete lack of democracy, the Belarusian regime led by Europe's last dictator, Alexander Lukashenko, has undertaken to suffocate and systematically destroy all elements of civil society—especially an independent judiciary, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and independent media.

Belarus is politically isolated to an extent comparable to only a handful of countries in the world and is one of the most militarized countries in Europe, with antagonistic relations with the United States, NATO, and the European Union. Still, most Western policymakers know almost nothing about the country, and Lukashenko has been able to continue his repression and assault on civil society and elicit virtually no response from the West. Civil society, as I use the term in this article, is the ability of a society to control and apply pressure to the government to ensure basic human rights and freedoms. In the following I will attempt to explain the historical and political factors that influenced civil society development in Belarus, and I will examine the current status of civil society in the country.

## Historical Obstacles Facing Civil Societal Development in Belarus

Recent academic works have correctly pointed out that the strength of civil society in post-Soviet countries just before the collapse of communism has proved to be of fundamental importance for a successful political and economic transformation, even more relevant than the history of the country and its experience with democracy.<sup>2</sup> Civil society in successful transition countries such as Lithuania and

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Hungary, for example, bred an alternative elite ready to take over from the old nomenklatura. In Belarus just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were few civic organizations, independent-minded media, or political movements that could have made a transition to a successful democracy and a viable civil society easier. That being said, there did exist organizations and movements in Belarus that provided a modest foundation on which to build a successful civil society; however, after Lukashenko's rise to power in 1994, that shaky foundation was systematically obliterated.

### **Civil Society in Belarus: Emerging from a Dark Forest**

Because Belarus was often regarded by the West (and even by Moscow) as the "most Soviet" of the fifteen republics in the Soviet Union, it is interesting to note that it was actually a Belarusian leader, Stanislau Shushkevich, along with Boris Yeltsin of Russia and Leonid Kravchuk of Ukraine, who signed the famous Belovezhskaya Accord (named after the forest in Belarus where the three met) that effectively dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991. Nevertheless, it is fairly evident that Belarus received its independence somewhat unwillingly and mostly by default. Even Shushkevich, far from being a champion for independence, has said that for over half of his life he was a man "thrilled with Soviet communism" and "felt no joy" when he signed the death warrant for the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup>

In Belarus in the late 1980s, there was no strong political movement for independence like that of Sajudis in neighboring Lithuania. The desire for independence in the Baltics or other Soviet republics often provided the impetus under glasnost for citizens to start political movements, civic organizations, and non-governmental organizations. Unlike the neighboring Baltic states, or many other Soviet republics for that matter, Belarus was by and large skeptical of independence. The lack of interest in independence was a major reason why an important pillar of civil society, NGOs, failed to develop in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

There did, however, exist a few seeds in Belarus before 1991 that provided a base for limited civil society development in the three years after achieving independence and before Lukashenko came to power in 1994. The most notable organization was perhaps the Belarusian Popular Front *Adradzhenne* (Revival), which was established on 24 July 1989 in Vilnius, Lithuania, and was the first political movement to oppose the Belarusian Communist Party.<sup>4</sup> There was also some semblance of activism associated with the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster in 1986, which affected Belarus more than any other Soviet republic or country in the world. The devastating effects of the accident sparked the formation of small environmental groups, albeit on a relatively minor scale.

Although the aforementioned organizations certainly can be seen as precursors for forming a civil society in independent Belarus, compared with other post-Soviet countries such as the Baltic states, where democracies and vibrant economies flourished due to strong independence movements and civic organizations, Belarus had nothing before the Soviet Union collapsed. That should not be overlooked in any analysis of why NGOs and independent news media were

slower to develop in Belarus between 1991 and 1994, compared with other post-Soviet countries, and why they were weak and therefore vulnerable to Lukashenko's assault after 1994.

### **Belarus's Lack of an Independent History: No Champagne or Fireworks**

Belarus had no real tradition of independence or democracy. For all practical purposes, we can ignore the fact that an independent People's Republic of Belarus existed tenuously for a few months in 1918. As Anne Applebaum, a former correspondent for *The Economist*, remarked when traveling through Belarus right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, "Lacking kings and rebel leaders Belarus had a history of occupation. Belarusians had never been independent, but what was worse, they had never tried to be independent."<sup>5</sup>

It is fairly easy to show that if a country has a strong history of independence or even short democratic periods, then it stands a much better chance of successfully implementing democratization after emerging from an authoritarian or undemocratic system. The recent democratic and economic success stories of Hungary, Poland, and Lithuania are good examples. The development of civil society in these countries after 1989 was aided by the fact that they had been independent only fifty years earlier. The seeds were sown for democracy and civil society to establish footholds in these countries after communism fell. In the Belarusian Soviet Socialistic Republic, however, there was by and large no real desire on the part of its citizens to become independent. It is telling that in the March 1991 Soviet referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union, 83 percent of Belarusians voted in favor of keeping (and remaining in) the union.

Hesitant and unconfident after gaining independence, Belarusian leaders had no tradition of independence, democracy, and civil society by which to orient itself. In fact, the incentive of many countries in Eastern Europe to establish independent states with functioning democracies was born out of nationalistic movements—something Belarus lacks probably more than any other country in Europe. It is even doubtful whether most Belarusians have a national identity at all. Most speak Russian on a day-to-day basis and have no memories of Belarus as an independent state.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, most Belarusians still celebrate New Year's Eve according to Moscow time, watching fireworks and popping champagne at 11 P.M. on 31 December.<sup>7</sup>

Most Belarusians express general support of, or at least apathy toward, their government's desire to form a unified state with Russia. Belarus was Russified, militarized, and incorporated into the Soviet state's planned central economy to a much greater extent than any other republic in the Soviet Union. The effect this had on Belarusian attitudes toward independence and establishing a viable democracy was immense.

### **Relating the State of Civil Society in Belarus: A Regional-Historical Comparison**

Since Belarus has no history of democracy or independence and had painfully few civic and political organizations with which to build a civil society after 1991,

some might be inclined to conclude that the country was simply destined for economic, democratic, and civil society failure. To do so, however, would be incorrect. Although the factors described above have obviously had a profound, it is largely the policies of one man—Alexander Lukashenko—that have obliterated civil society in Belarus .

### **Slavic Poker—Dealing with the Hand You’ve Been Dealt**

Belarus is not the only former Soviet republic lacking a strong history of independence or influential political and civic movements in the late 1980s. Ukraine, to the south of Belarus, is a good example. Even with a population that was much more nationalistic than that of Belarus, Ukraine faced most of the same historical obstacles that Belarus did; prior to 1991, it also had little to form a foundation for civil society.<sup>8</sup> Far from being a model, Ukraine has struggled greatly with building a viable civil society. However, the level of civil society and democracy in today’s Ukraine is far ahead of that in Belarus. Russia, for that matter, is also far ahead of Belarus in the area of civil society. This is a sobering statement. Again, it is not that Russia and Ukraine are ideal examples of civil society success. Far from it. But since 1994 the Belarusian leadership has done everything in its power to crush civil society. Thanks to that destructive policy, Belarus does not currently have a functioning civil society, whereas Russia and Ukraine, which carried much of the same historical baggage as Belarus prior to 1991, have functioning (albeit weak) civil societies.<sup>9</sup>

One could argue that after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Belarus was in the best position economically of any of the fifteen Soviet republics, including the Baltics. (During Soviet times, many of my Lithuanian friends living near the Belarusian border preferred to shop in Belarus, as it had more goods available to buy than Lithuania.) It was one of the richest republics, had only ten million people, benefited from a highly educated workforce with management skills, and was geographically the most western, with a pivotal role as a transportation corridor between Russia and Western Europe. Belarus squandered these advantages quickly after 1991, with a further downhill acceleration after Lukashenko’s rise to power. The country now stands as one of the poorest in Europe, with an economy that is a Soviet relic. It is only thanks to cheap energy subsidies from Russia that the Belarusian economy even remains afloat.<sup>10</sup>

### **Civil Engineering: A Brief History of Constructing Civil Society in Belarus, 1990–94**

The first multicandidate elections to the Belarusian parliament were imposed by Moscow in spring 1990, but they were not very democratic. The aforementioned Belarusian Popular Front won only 7.5 percent of the seats while the Communist Party garnered a very Soviet-sounding 86 percent. Notwithstanding that the Belarusian communist leaders backed the hardliners’ 1991 Moscow coup, most stayed in power in Minsk until 1994.<sup>11</sup> The hardline communists in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic tried to prevent many of the reforms that perestroika brought to most other republics in the Soviet Union after Gorbachev came

to power in the mid-1980s. It is telling that Nikolai Dementei, chairman of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet, supported the 1991 coup. Only after a close vote did the Belarusian Supreme Soviet move to ban the republic's Communist Party and affirm a resolution on independence.<sup>12</sup>

There was a very weak party system in Belarus after independence. Democratic forces were divided. More and more Belarusians felt the brunt of worsening economic conditions related to changes brought on by democratic forces; that is to be expected in a transitional economy. However, unlike neighboring Poland, where democratic forces were able to stay relatively united and push through painful reforms, Belarusian reformers were not able to effectively implement political and economic reforms, and the population, which was very conservative and did not want a shock-therapy solution for the economy, lost patience almost immediately. By 1992, less than one year after obtaining independence, democratic forces had already lost their popularity. This inability to mobilize the citizens that originally supported political change marginalized opposition political forces in Belarus.<sup>13</sup>

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Unlike Russia and Ukraine, neither democrats nor communists were in power in Belarus in 1992. Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich was not able to establish a party, and his support came from a group that was based not on formal party structures, but on corporate interests and personal contacts.<sup>14</sup> On paper, the party spectrum was filled with liberals, communists, pan-slavists, and Russian and Belarusian nationalists. However, the political system was so fragile that you could say that a political vacuum existed. That vacuum would set the stage for Lukashenko's meteoric rise to power in 1994.

In their haste to examine the Lukashenko regime and the destructive policies he implemented after coming to power in 1994, political analysts and scholars often overlook the three years directly after independence. However, any discussion of current Belarusian politics and civil society must include the underlying factors described above to explain how Lukashenko was able to burst onto the national political scene and consolidate power so quickly. Especially in light of the rigged and false parliamentary elections of 2000, his sham presidential election of 2001, his abysmal human rights record, and so on, it should not be forgotten that the political environment in the three years directly after independence played a key role in Lukashenko's original election in 1994, in an internationally recognized, free and fair runoff, with 80 percent of the vote.

Although the three years after independence were a time of political weakness, with no strong party or leadership, I must emphasize that the status of civil society improved dramatically, along with the human rights situation. The government

ended its monopoly on the media, allowed information in many forms and from various sources to circulate relatively freely, and stopped relying on repressive measures to suppress dissent. This in turn alleviated fear and self-censorship in the independent media. Consequently, Belarusians started openly expressing their views and ideas, and many founded or joined NGOs, independent media outlets, and similar institutions of civil society. In government, the Supreme Soviet became a forum for genuine discussion and compromise among parties with differing political platforms. The judiciary also began to function more independently.<sup>15</sup>

It would be fair to say that the three years before Lukashenko came to power were the heyday of civil society in Belarus. Although the development of civil society was still weak, a favorable atmosphere was created for independent media, NGOs, and an independent judiciary. Andrei Sannikov, a founding member of Charter '97, Belarus's most famous human rights NGO, summed up the period by saying,

We did have a short period in the early 1990's when the shoots of civil society started to emerge. Although in Belarus the power never actually left the hands of communists, there were elements that facilitated the introduction of necessary changes. There was a small but effective opposition in the parliament (mostly Belarusian Popular Front), it was possible to have open discussions on foreign and domestic policy issues in the press, and debates in the parliament were aired on TV. Ironically, this relative democratization was beneficial to Lukashenko who was elected fairly democratically using the general atmosphere of liberalization—in particular, state mass media. Today, even the limited democratic achievements of the early 1990's look quite impressive considering the present day situation.<sup>16</sup>

In those three years, Belarus also worked very closely with the United States to become a non-nuclear state by voluntarily removing from its territory nuclear missiles that were inherited from the Soviet Union. President Clinton even visited the country in January 1994 in a show of Western support. This was the high-water mark in the history of Belarusian-Western relations, and many political observers thought the country was on the right path to developing a viable democracy, albeit at a slower pace than almost all postcommunist transition countries in Europe.

Flush from the success of working with the Belarusian government to rid the country of nuclear weapons, no one in Washington (or even in Western or Eastern Europe, for that matter) had any inkling that a little-known, charismatic former collective farm boss named Alexander Lukashenko would capture the respect and votes of Belarusians and reverse the small but significant progress.

### **The Socioeconomic and Political Situation of the Early 1990s: Also Setting the Stage**

Belarusians are notoriously conservative. Belarusian scholars and political observers say this so often that it seems too simplistic or, at the very least, redundant, but it is true. Most Belarusians live in the countryside, and they abhor change. The average Belarusian is willing to experience a decrease in his standard of living if it means preserving stability.

Generally speaking, Belarusians adhere to patriarchal and traditional values—archaic conservatism, low demands, fear of competition and freedom,

incomprehension of representative institutions, loyalty to any center of authority, passivity, and compliance. This phenomenon might be explained by the country's traditional peasant lifestyle, the lack of civil society, a legacy of Soviet totalitarianism, the distance of the average citizen from centers of power, and complete devastation from two world wars.<sup>17</sup> I should mention that had Belarus been independent during World War II, it would have been the country that suffered the most during the war in terms of destruction and per capita population loss.

The majority of Belarusians want nothing to do with what they call the unstable crony capitalism of Ukraine and Russia, and during the early 1990s they certainly did not want their country to follow a path of harsh economic reforms or the shock therapy of neighboring Poland.<sup>18</sup> This would go against the very nature of the average Belarusian, who values economic and social stability (even if it means poverty and a low standard of living) to a degree that Western Europeans and Americans cannot appreciate. This is one of the many reasons why Poland cannot be used as an economic model for Belarus.

The Belarusian nomenklatura at the beginning of independence carried out economic reforms halfheartedly. They liberalized prices but did not pursue a strict monetary or privatization policy. The few semireforms that were enacted came at the expense of the general population, as they were mostly carried out to benefit the nomenklatura, who saw the presidency as an instrument that they could use to maintain the status quo. Therefore, the nomenklatura supported Lukashenko's run for president in 1994; he satisfied their requirements regarding economic policies for the state.<sup>19</sup>

Belarusian political scientist Viktor Chernov correctly distinguishes three reasons why the political elite of those days supported the establishment of a strong presidential institution (paving the way for Lukashenko's authoritarian rule). First, such an institution would support total state control over socioeconomic processes. Second, the nomenklatura was genuinely concerned that civil society and democratic forces were getting stronger, and it was worried about the threat democrats posed if they received a majority in parliament. Third, the elite of that time (and a majority of Belarusian citizens) wanted a strong central authority that would ensure stability during transition.<sup>20</sup>

During this time one of the most significant events in Belarus's short history of independence took place. On 15 March 1994, after nearly three years of deliberations, the Supreme Soviet (the elected parliament) adopted a new constitution that provided for a post of president and the legal basis of a "democratic, sovereign and independent state where the rule of law, division of powers, and supremacy of human rights and individual freedoms are guaranteed."<sup>21</sup> Because the constitution provided for a post of president—and hastily organized elections were to take place only four months later—the last piece of the puzzle was in place for Lukashenko.

### **Lukashenko's Rise and Civil Society's Fall**

Most of the scant attention that Belarus receives in world press focuses on the undemocratic and dictatorial ways of Lukashenko and his illegal efforts to consolidate power and falsify elections. His background is hardly ever mentioned and

is relatively unknown, but it provides insight into how he rose to power so quickly in 1994.

Lukashenko was raised without a father and had a fairly difficult childhood. He graduated with a degree in history but was unable to find employment in his field. Instead, he held a variety of jobs ranging from ideological officer in the Soviet Army to managing a collective farm in eastern Belarus. He entered politics and in 1990 was elected people's deputy of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus, where he focused mainly on fighting corruption. He developed something of a name for himself because of his ranting and colorful speeches and public tirades, in which he railed against supposedly corrupt individuals. Despite the fiery rhetoric of his speeches, which often turned into public spectacles, his actual accomplishments as a parliamentarian fighting corruption were quite modest. Lukashenko's only other claim to fame before running for president was that he was the only Belarusian parliamentarian to vote against dissolving the Soviet Union in 1991—something he played up heavily in his presidential campaign, as many Belarusians were already nostalgic about the “good old days” of the Soviet Union.

In his effective and efficient 1994 campaign, the charismatic Lukashenko ran as an independent and exploited the sociopolitical and economic situation in Belarus to his full advantage, even coining a campaign phrase that resembled something from a U.S. presidential race: “I am neither with the leftists nor with the rightists, I am with the people.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps most important, he cleverly played up his anti-corruption role in the parliament as a sign that he was fighting for the average Belarusian.<sup>23</sup> This resonated with voters, particularly the one-third of the voting population that is retired and therefore the most vulnerable during economic and political transition and also the most sensitive to allegations of widespread corruption. To say that Lukashenko campaigned as a populist would be an understatement.

Lukashenko's victory in July 1994 came as a complete shock to the West—not because of fear that he would reverse all progress but because of amazement at his overwhelming victory.<sup>24</sup> The formerly unknown collective farm boss garnered 80 percent of the vote in an election runoff that was internationally recognized as being free and fair. Lukashenko's charisma, plain-spoken manner, and professed hard stance on corruption were exactly what Belarusians were looking for.

### **Lukashenko at the Helm—Wasting No Time in Cracking Down on Independent Media**

It took only five months for the new president to start his assault on civil society. In accordance with Lukashenko's pre-election promise to fight corruption, Deputy Parliamentarian Sergei Antonchyk carried out an investigation of corruption in parliament. However, his report contained credible and compromising corruption charges against various high-ranking officials close to Lukashenko. The new government banned press coverage of the report, and as a protest the newspapers *Respublika*, *Sovetskaya Belarussiya*, and *Zvyazda* ran huge blank spaces in their 23 December 1994 editions, where the report was to have been printed. The same day, copies of the dailies *Narodnaya Gazeta* and *Gazeta Andriya*



*Klimova*, which had already printed Antonchuk's report, were not permitted to leave the state-owned printing house.

During this time, Lukashenko also consolidated total government control over the issuance of radio frequencies, cable television licenses, and the registration of radio stations and ensured that the country's only broadcast television station was state owned. This amounted to complete control of the broadcast media. In a February 1995 address to state television and radio employees, Lukashenko provided an ominous indication of what he had in store for the independent media by saying, "We have freedom of the press and a journalist has the right to support any opinions. I agree with that. . . . however, there is one 'no' here—you work for a state TV and radio company. I stress a state one, and this obliges you to do everything for the benefit of our state. . . . [J]ournalists should not get involved in the game of big politics."<sup>25</sup>

Not long after, the editor-in-chief of *Narodnaya Gazeta*, at the time the most widely read newspaper in Belarus and known for its criticism of Lukashenko, was dismissed for what Lukashenko said was his open promotion of "violence and civil confrontation," and the two other editors of the aforementioned newspapers, *Sovetskaya Belarussiya* and *Respublika*, were also dismissed under similarly flimsy pretexts.

### **Status of NGOs in Belarus before 1996: Granted a Stay of Execution**

Despite wasting no time in strangling independent media, until November 1996 the Belarusian authorities exerted only minimal pressure on political and nonpolitical organizations, the total number of which by that time was around 1,100. The regime did not yet prevent NGOs from receiving foreign grants, as public associations and political parties were granted the status of economic entities, which allowed them to obtain finances from any legal source. In July–October 1995, the government even set up a preferential tax system for money and property received by NGOs and economic entities associated with the International Science Foundation and the Belarusian Soros Foundation. Thanks to the measure, the Soros Foundation had by 1996 become the largest donor organization for Belarusian NGOs.<sup>26</sup>

The new government's security services, however, stepped up their monitoring of NGOs at that time, and Lukashenko also made sure that the government maintained influence over public associations, mainly through a registration process.<sup>27</sup> Many NGOs, distressed and wary about the government's crackdown on independent media, wanted to fully legalize their activities and eliminate their political aspects. They were encouraged to do so by large grant-makers, including the European Union's Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States Program and the Soros Foundation. Some independent NGOs even began cooperating with government agencies, although this was soon to change.

### **The 1996 Referendum: Belarus's Fall into Dictatorship**

To fully understand how Belarus has turned into a dictatorship with the worst status of civil society in Europe, one should closely examine Lukashenko's illegal referendum of 1996, as it marked the turning point for the country.

Two years after becoming president, Lukashenko had grown frustrated with the parliament because it was impeding his steady consolidation of all power in the presidential institution. In July 1996, the parliament refused Lukashenko's demands to extend his term and to curb the powers of the Constitutional Court by creating a second legislative chamber to be chosen by the president.<sup>28</sup> Lukashenko, irate, called for a nationwide referendum on proposals to amend the 1994 constitution to increase his power immensely. Parliament also put forth amendments, and the referendum was scheduled for 26 November 1996.

Three weeks prior to the scheduled referendum, the Constitutional Court ruled that the proposals from the parliament and president were not amendments but total-

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ly new constitutions, fundamentally changing the structure of government. The court also found that although amendments could be adopted by referendum, new constitutions could only be adopted by parliament. It determined that the referendum could proceed, but it would have no binding effect.

The regime made sure that the referendum did proceed

and, in an ominous sign of things to come, controlled printing, distribution, and counting of ballots, as well as all meaningful and influential media coverage of the event. According to the European Institute of Mass Media, more than 92 percent of air time on national television and radio allocated for coverage of referendum issues was devoted to the president's position, and only 8 percent was given for neutral information. The opposition did not receive a single minute of air time.<sup>29</sup> On 1 September 1996, the same day that Lukashenko's draft of a new constitution was scheduled for debate, the government shut down the only independent radio station in the Belarusian language, the popular Radio 101.2, saying that the radio station's transmitter was interfering with signals from government communications.

Once it became clear that the referendum was indeed going to take place, international organizations requested that they be allowed to send observers to monitor the proceedings. They were refused. During the referendum itself, the sealing of the voting ballots was not monitored by the Central Electoral Commission, which gave the executive branch wide latitude to falsify the results, which they did.

Under these conditions, the referendum passed. Lukashenko promptly disregarded the decision of the court and illegally declared the results of the referendum binding. He proceeded to oust the existing parliament, disband the Constitutional Court, and grant himself the start of a new five-year term in office. (The formation of the so-called National Assembly, composed of deputies loyal to Lukashenko, took place literally the day after the referendum.) Under

Lukashenko's amendments (effectively an entirely new constitution) he took absolute control over every aspect of government to a degree unparalleled anywhere else in Europe.

To illustrate the thoroughness with which Lukashenko consolidated power, it should be noted that he took total control of all of the following:

- the judiciary in the country (hiring and firing at will all military and district judges with no parliamentary check)
- the Constitutional Court (appointing six of twelve members, including the chairman)
- the lower house of parliament (personally selecting members without election)
- the upper house of parliament (having the power to appoint one-third of members at any time)
- all state income and expenditures
- all meaningful media

Perhaps most significant, the new constitution allowed the president to issue decrees having the force of law in circumstances of "specific necessity and urgency." Lukashenko has since interpreted this very broadly and has issued many decrees with the sole aim of preventing civil society and democracy in Belarus. I will discuss these decrees later.

The International League for Human Rights, one of the few Western organizations that closely monitors developments in Belarus, said of the illegal 1996 referendum, "[F]rom a legal perspective, it can be characterized as a coup d'etat, a virtual seizure of power."<sup>30</sup> No international organizations or Western countries recognized the referendum; they continued to regard the Thirteenth Supreme Soviet, which Lukashenko disbanded, as the rightful parliament. I cannot overstate the negative effect that the 1996 referendum had on Belarus's relations with the West. Lukashenko's total consolidation of power not only led the country into economic ruin and international isolation but provided one man the political power to commit gross violations of human rights and obliterate civil society in Belarus.

### **Civil Society in Belarus after the 1996 Referendum: The Beginning of the End**

Shortly after the referendum, existing civil society structures (most notably independent media organizations, NGOs, human rights groups, and civic organizations) protested against the unlawful nature of the referendum and Lukashenko's seizure of power. NGOs went no further than protests, however, as they were afraid of being closed down outright. Their fears were justified: the most visible and influential NGO in the country, the Open Society Institute's Belarusian Soros Foundation, faced constant harassment by government authorities, which included the expulsion of its director from the country, a presidential decree that undercut its tax-exempt status, and the freezing of bank accounts. Eventually, using a tactic that would prove useful in the future, tax authorities levied politically motivated fines totaling more than \$3 million against the organization. As a result, the Open Society Institute had to close operations in Belarus in September 1997.

In a terse statement announcing the closure, George Soros said, “[T]he Belarusian authorities have persisted in their efforts to destroy independent civil society to the detriment of the Belarusian people and of Belarus’s standing in the international community. Indeed, Belarus is the only country in the ex-Communist bloc where our foundation is closed.”<sup>31</sup> The foundation’s closing dealt civil society in Belarus an immense blow. The Belarusian Soros Foundation was the largest NGO in the country and the main philanthropic supporter of independent civil society in Belarus. It had spent over \$13 million since 1993 in support of a wide range of humanitarian, education, science, culture, health, mass media, and Internet-related projects. Most important, it was the main source of funding for many NGOs in the country. The government’s actions were an obvious and deliberate tactic on the part of Lukashenko to intimidate other NGOs, and they marked the start of his full-fledged assault on civil society.

Alarmed at the regime’s attack on the Soros Foundation, democratic NGOs made some desperate attempts to organize a system of collective defense against the government’s assault. In February–March 1997 a Belarusian human rights convention was convened, bringing together more than two hundred democratic political parties, trade unions, and NGOs. An assembly of nongovernmental organizations was also created, which included more than four hundred NGOs.<sup>32</sup> Although the independent NGOs were feisty in their own defense, this marked the last time that they would be strong enough to effectively mobilize together to try to fend off the government’s efforts to divide, weaken, and destroy them.

Recognizing the deteriorating situation in Belarus at the time, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) requested the Belarusian government to allow the opening of an OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) office in Minsk, with the intent of “assisting the Belarusian authorities and civil society in the development of democratic institutions of a European standard and to monitor the compliance of Belarus with OSCE commitments.”<sup>33</sup>

After protracted negotiations, the AMG office was finally allowed to open in August 1998. Although the mission could have been an effective mediator between the Presidential Administration and civil society structures (and theoretically still could be one), its hands have been tied by the regime’s disregard for any meaningful dialogue. This became apparent as early as a year and a half after the AMG opened when, after painstaking efforts by the OSCE to bring the regime, opposition groups, and NGOs together to resolve the ongoing political and constitutional crisis, Lukashenko withdrew from the process and opened a sham political dialogue with carefully selected proregime NGOs. The regime created puppet NGOs not only to pretend to have a dialogue with them, but to destabilize legitimate, independent NGOs. Pawel Kazanecki, coordinator of the Poland-based Belarusian Program of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe, described the tactic, which is still employed today:

The state sector aims to monopolize many spheres of activity of nongovernmental organizations through licensing and establishing monopolistic “pseudo-social” organizations, of which there are many. They include old, post-Soviet organizations which have survived all the political twists and turns in recent years and are still

being registered as social organizations, as well as state organizations created for the needs of the current regime, usually with a monopolistic character, seizing an entire given field of the third sector. These are typical government social pseudo-organizations, referred to as GONGOs—Governmental NGOs.

In this situation, the third sector is developing in opposition to the state sector. Rather than cooperate with the state, it must create a defense mechanism against it. This is the origin of the politicalization of the third sector in Belarus, for which it is unjustly blamed by many foreign organizations. These foreign organizations seem to forget the reasons for this situation and do not understand that this politicalization of social organizations cannot be eliminated without removing the cause, i.e., without changing the political situation in Belarus.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Regime's Policy on Education: Plagiarizing from Soviet Textbooks**

Lukashenko, using presidential decrees and all the power now available to him under the new constitution, started a campaign that was designed to quell and eliminate any groups in the country that he deemed opposition. The government, reverting to lessons learned in the Soviet era, concentrated on two key spheres—education and business. Quasi-NGOs were set up with the support and coordination of government ministries and committees. The full intent was to gain as much control as possible over businesses, charitable funds, and particularly youth organizations and make them subject to the government.

A good example of the government's new role in trying to subvert independent NGOs and other civic organizations was the establishment, at Lukashenko's initiative, of Belarusian Patriotic Union of Youth (BPSM) chapters at every institution of higher learning in the country. The youth organization is vigorously pro-presidential and is modeled after the Soviet-era *Komsomol*.<sup>35</sup> The Presidential Administration's goal in instituting the program was very straightforward: to indoctrinate young people with pro-regime propaganda and prevent them from getting involved in opposition politics. To facilitate this, BPSM members receive privileges as well as discounts on campus and in various stores around the country. Students choosing not to join the organization face various degrees of discrimination.

After the referendum the government also began to scrutinize research on controversial topics, recentralize academic decision making, and ban political activity on campuses. A systematic crackdown on political dissent began with the expulsion of outspoken students, even for political activity that might have taken place off campus. This repression continues today, and the U.S. State Department in its 2001 Human Rights Report for Belarus remarked that

university administrators target and strongly discourage research into politically sensitive subjects, such as the Belarusian independence movement during the Soviet era, a theme that is seen to challenge the State's policy of integration with Russia. On April 13, 2001, the regime ruled that, starting June 1, independent, non-state academic institutions would have to obtain special permission from the authorities to hold educational seminars or lectures. The regime continues to harass students engaged in anti-regime activities, such as demonstrations. More than 30 university students were expelled for their participation in street demonstrations during 2001 alone.<sup>36</sup>

### **Civil Society after the Referendum: Death and Taxes**

As the Belarusian Soros Foundation found out, the main weapon that Minsk used to fight independent civil society structures was tax inspections, which were conducted almost exclusively to intimidate—and ultimately close down—organizations that were not to the government's liking. NGOs especially felt the brunt of this tactic. In March 1997, the government notified the Belarusian Soros Foundation, along with the other two largest and most influential NGOs, the Fund for the Children of Chernobyl and the National Center for Strategic Research East-West, of forthcoming auditing checks. The audits resulted in stiff fines, which severely limited the scope of the organizations' activities and led to total closure of the Belarusian Soros Foundation.

Because civil society in Belarus was forced to rely on foreign funds, taxes proved to be Lukashenko's most effective weapon against NGOs, independent media, and civic organizations. Outrageous tax rates for NGOs, a head-spinning bureaucratic process for bringing financial activities in line with the law, and unending tax inspections led foreign grant donors to turn their backs on Belarus, just as Lukashenko had hoped. With the damages left by Chernobyl and with a weak NGO sector from the start, Belarus needed grant money more than any country in Eastern Europe, it quickly fell to last place on grant providers' lists. After seeing what the authorities did to the three largest NGOs in the country, Western donors wanted nothing to do with Belarus.

Recognizing the regime's attempts to clamp down on civil society, the European Union's European Commission, in December 1997, allocated approximately \$5 million for a program called "Development of a Civil Society in Belarus." The program comprised three sectors—support for independent media, training of teachers to educate businessmen at higher education institutions, and support for NGOs. All the Belarusian government had to do was agree to implement the projects to make the allocation of money possible. However, much to the European Union's surprise, Lukashenko did not consent, claiming that the implementation of the program could hamper "peace in society" and that the EU's grant distribution system was "biased."<sup>37</sup>

In late 1998, civil society and democracy advocates in Belarus were encouraged briefly when the largest trade unions in the country, which historically were completely loyal to the state, started protesting against deteriorating living standards. To Lukashenko's alarm, a process of dialogue and mergers among trade unions, NGOs, and political organizations began to take place. Hastening to stop this unsettling development, Lukashenko issued a presidential decree on 26 January 1999 titled, "Measures to Ensure Orderly Activities of Political Parties, Trade Unions and Other Public Associations." Lukashenko said the decree was a necessary measure to "maintain orderly activities of all public associations" and subject them to state control. It left open a wide interpretation of what "orderly activities" meant, thereby giving him the right to intervene in any situation involving NGOs that he saw fit. The decree also required all Belarusian NGOs to be reregistered by judicial bodies within five months. The government's harassment of NGOs was so thorough that after the reregistration process began, authorities

announced that the words “Belarus,” “Republic of Belarus,” “popular,” or “national” could not be used in their titles.

Because most NGOs and independent media around the world rely heavily on the Internet to network and access information on grant opportunities and the like, it should be noted that in August 1999 the highly respected and influential international NGO Reporters sans Frontiers described the Belarusian regime as an “enemy of the Internet” and reported that Belarusian citizens and NGOs were not free to explore the Internet independently, as the government controlled all Internet service providers, allowing the state to monitor practically all e-mail.<sup>38</sup> The regime focused special attention (and still does) on monitoring NGO correspondence and telephone conversations by using internal security services and intelligence agencies such as the Belarusian KGB. Not so coincidentally, Belarus has retained the name “KGB” for its intelligence service, whereas all other former Soviet republics have done away with that name and acronym.

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***“Lukashenko has not even tried to hide the fact that he has the judiciary of the country in the palm of his hand—he even flaunts his power over it.”***

At the end of 1999, Lukashenko signed new amendments to the law “On Press and Other Media.” The amendments ban the media from disseminating information on behalf of political parties, trade unions, and NGOs that are not registered with the Ministry of Justice. These amendments strengthened even further the regime’s power to censor and ban critical reporting.

### **The Judicial System in Belarus: Lukashenko’s Law of the Land**

Discussions on the history and status of civil society in a given country often focus solely on independent media and NGOs. However, one should not overlook that an independent judicial system is one of the most fundamental pillars of civil society. Since the 1996 referendum Lukashenko and his regime have consolidated complete control over all aspects of the judicial system. Put simply, there is no independent judiciary in Belarus, as the entire system (district courts, regional courts, military courts, and the Supreme Court) is made up of judges hand-picked by Lukashenko. Prosecutors are not independent and do not have the authority to bring charges against the president or Presidential Administration.

In May 1997, Lukashenko issued a presidential decree titled “Several Measures on Improving the Practice of Lawyers and Notaries,” which almost completely removed any independence that lawyers had from legal authorities. Unlike most of Lukashenko’s decrees, which are designed to be interpreted broadly, this decree is very specific in strictly controlling the licensing of lawyers and giving the Ministry of Justice much greater control of the bar association.

Lukashenko has not even tried to hide the fact that he has the judiciary of the

country in the palm of his hand—he even flaunts his power over it. During a government interagency commission meeting on crime in August 1999, Lukashenko said, “It is natural for the Head of State to exercise control over one criminal case or another . . . especially in our country where the Head of State controls all branches of power—legislative, executive and judicial.”<sup>39</sup>

The judicial system has also been used by the regime to settle old scores, as at least twelve deputies of the Thirteenth Supreme Soviet, which Lukashenko illegally disbanded in 1996, have been imprisoned, detained, fined, or harassed simply for their opposition to the president’s policies.<sup>40</sup> Not so coincidentally, all of the former parliamentarians that have had legal proceedings brought against them by the regime called on the Constitutional Court in 1996 to impeach Lukashenko for his illegal actions to alter the constitution. Now they are facing Lukashenko’s “justice” in a legal system in which the regime has total control from the ground up.

Laws against defamation and libel were also instituted after the referendum, with the sole aim of limiting freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Government officials have commonly used defamation laws to bring charges against newspapers that may have been only slightly critical (directly or indirectly) of a government official. The cases have often bordered on the ridiculous, but many times they have been successfully prosecuted. The law on defamation notably stipulates that public insults or libel against the president may be punished by as many as four years in prison, two years in a labor camp, or a large fine.

Since Belarus is a police state it has one of the lowest crime rates in Europe. Belarus has one of the highest numbers of police per capita in the world, with around 140,000 police and *milicia* personnel. On average, a Belarusian police officer makes three times the salary of an engineer.<sup>41</sup> Because regular and internal police are a very visible presence, I have never once felt anything but perfectly safe in Minsk (or outlying Belarusian cities and villages, for that matter) from the threat of being assaulted or robbed—even when walking late at night. Belarus ironically has the third-largest per-capita prison population in the world, after the United States and Russia.<sup>42</sup> This is largely due to the corrupt nature of a justice system in which political decisions and pressures from above take precedence over any sincere search for justice.

The local Belarusian office of the internationally acclaimed and respected Helsinki Committee, a human rights NGO, reported that in 1998 criminal charges were brought by prosecutors against 59,700 individuals. Of those, only 272—less than one half of 1 percent—were found to be not guilty.<sup>43</sup> This statistic may seem unbelievable, but it results from a judicial system that is completely controlled by an authoritarian state. An unbiased and apolitical legal system, one of the fundamental pillars of civil society in a country, does not exist in Belarus.

### **Civil Society in Belarus from the Year 2000 to the Present: Back in the USSR**

After the 1996 referendum, Lukashenko in effect added two more years onto the end of his original presidential term by starting a new five-year presidential term. Because no international organization recognized the referendum or his



subsequent actions and decrees as legitimate, most countries (with the notable exception of Russia) refused to regard Lukashenko as Belarus's legitimate president after July 1999. The opposition tried to organize a shadow presidential election at the time, but the regime publicly ignored the efforts and worked to undermine the process. With his legal presidential term expired, Lukashenko's already bad standing in the international community plummeted to new lows. Rather than trying to remedy the situation with the international community, the regime further hardened its stance. With Russia's continued political support and, most important, economic aid coming in the form of cheap energy subsidies, Lukashenko did not have to worry about his poor reputation in the international community. Belarus was already isolated from the West.

Lukashenko demonstrated his indifference to his reputation in the international community when he had internal police forces brutally crack down on a peaceful demonstration on 25 March 2000 in the center of Minsk. Over three hundred people were arrested, including three Polish parliamentary officials, thirty local and foreign journalists, and a U.S. diplomat working for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Advisory and Monitoring Group. The Polish Foreign Ministry issued a scathing protest to the government of Belarus, and images in the Polish and European press showed demonstrators, including women, being beaten and arrested.<sup>44</sup>

With Belarus almost totally isolated, the regime in effect looked on the incident as an opportunity to continue its campaign to root out civil society and close down independent electronic media and small newspapers before the October 2000 parliamentary elections. Rather than take action against the government, the OSCE AMG in Minsk spent much of 2000 preoccupied with fruitless negotiations between the government and opposition political parties over the political impasse regarding the parliamentary elections.

The parliamentary elections of October 2000 took place in an undemocratic atmosphere that was by now becoming standard in Belarus. Opposition political groups, frustrated with the regime's efforts to falsify the elections by denying them access to media outlets such as state TV, and alarmed over the arrests and show trials of leading opposition figures, decided to boycott the elections.

The regime severely restricted public participation on the electoral commissions, and unfair candidate registration procedures were drawn up specifically to prevent opposition candidates from getting on the ballots. During the elections, sketchy allowances for early voting, traveling voting stations for villages, and even procedures for counting votes and determining results fell far short of minimum OSCE transparency requirements. Because voter turnout in many districts was below the 50 percent required, electoral authorities falsified voter lists to raise turnout levels. Under these conditions, it should not be surprising that the regime claimed overwhelming victory. An OSCE technical assessment mission soon after described the entire process as "not meeting the minimum requirements for holding free, fair, equal, accountable and open elections."<sup>45</sup>

Not that the OSCE's assessment mattered much to Lukashenko. He was clearly not worried about international opinion other than maintaining his relations

with Moscow. After the (so-called) elections, the parliament remained purely a rubber stamp for the regime. Most important for Minsk, the one country that was indispensable in keeping the Belarusian economy alive—Russia—recognized the elections and continued its tepid support.

### **The 2001 Presidential Election—A Case Study in the Current Status of Civil Society in Belarus**

The current state of civil society in Belarus is evident as we analyze the presidential election of September 2001. Lukashenko did everything within his power to prevent civil society structures and democratic forces from establishing themselves and influencing the results of the election. The authorities stepped up their repressive activity by shutting down independent media outlets, issuing decrees aimed at quashing the opposition, closing NGOs, and otherwise using its total grip on state TV, newspapers, and radio to strangle the voice of the opposition. As if that weren't enough, Lukashenko made sure to falsify the election to guarantee victory.

From the very start of the election campaign it was apparent that the regime had no intention of allowing free and fair elections. Lukashenko in effect started off his presidential re-election campaign in March 2001 by issuing a presidential decree that prohibited any organization involved in civil society, democracy building, or election monitoring from receiving funds from abroad. This obviously had an immense impact on independent NGOs and media, whose main sources of funding were usually foreign. Lukashenko justified the decree by saying that foreign powers—he usually singled out the United States—wanted to overthrow him, and that the few remaining independent media outlets and NGOs were funded solely by foreign intelligence agencies aimed at infiltrating society, destabilizing the state, and ultimately toppling his government.

In May 2001, four months before the election, the youth opposition group *Zubr* (meaning “bison,” the national symbol of Belarus) organized a public street theater performance featuring costumed members of the organization wearing papiermâché masks of Lukashenko and acting as if the president had gone insane. The authorities, far from being amused, arrested thirty-five individuals in connection with the event, which eventually resulted in twenty-five trials. Among the thirty-five original detainees were several journalists. All of the detainees were beaten, and one young woman was rushed to the hospital with a concussion. Shortly thereafter, Lukashenko issued a decree banning all demonstrations by unregistered organizations, limiting participation in any demonstration to under one thousand people, and including a specific prohibition against the wearing of masks.<sup>46</sup> Although seemingly ridiculous, the regime's reaction to this youth gathering illustrates some important elements of Lukashenko's assault on civil society: intimidation of journalists, use of the NGO registration process for political purposes, sensitivity to the potential power of youth organizations, paranoia about the regime's image, and perhaps most important, reflexive issuing of presidential decrees (with the force of law) to prevent any opposition groups or civil society structures from influencing the political situation in Belarus.

Even though he remained fairly popular in the country and may very well have won the election had he allowed it to be democratic, Lukashenko left nothing to chance; he relied on the internal police to disrupt rallies and continued to close down independent media outlets.<sup>47</sup> A good example is the case of *Pahonia*, one of the few independent newspapers left in the country prior to the election. After a series of subtle and not-so-subtle warnings, the authorities froze its bank account, seized newsprint and computers, and eventually shut it down. Its management was charged with violating the law on the press, including publishing articles that were about unregistered organizations.

Right before the election the Presidential Administration confiscated many independent newspapers outright and pressed charges against those who distributed them—often youth. The regime also used the state TV channel to broadcast information showing Lukashenko in a positive light, often with propaganda that evoked the Soviet style to such an extent (Lukashenko as “a personification of goodness” and “a symbol of the East”) that it was comical. The OSCE reported that in the three weeks prior to election day, 68 percent of the election coverage on state-run TV was devoted to Lukashenko, with coverage always favorable or at least neutral. At the same time, the station gave his main opponent, trade union leader Vladimir Goncharik, only 20 percent air time, of which 60 percent was negative, often portraying him as a bumbling idiot who was unfit to lead the country, as well as an agent of the CIA.<sup>48</sup>

When Russian television, which is widely watched in Belarus (in part because state TV is so biased and blatantly controlled by the regime), broadcast documentaries on the mysterious disappearances and deaths of some of Lukashenko’s political opponents, making credible accusations of a presidential “death squad” to assassinate opposition members, the authorities in Minsk reacted by taking the broadcasts off the air for “technical reasons.”<sup>49</sup>

In a move that was perhaps the most significant in falsifying the election, Lukashenko loaded local and national electoral commissions with proregime hacks who simply would not have allowed an opposition victory even if it were possible.<sup>50</sup> The OSCE was allowed to monitor the election but was only granted permission at the last minute, seriously hindering its ability to organize an effective monitoring program. Under those circumstances it should not be surprising that Lukashenko declared victory with 76 percent of the vote, in an election that no international organization and only one major country (Russia) recognized. The OSCE refused to recognize the election and concluded simply that “the election process failed to meet the OSCE commitments for democratic elections.”<sup>51</sup>

Although the official vote total was certainly inflated because of voter fraud and Lukashenko’s total control of the electoral commissions, I must stress that had the election been free and fair, Lukashenko might very well have won anyway. This is one of the peculiarities of modern-day Belarus. Had Lukashenko allowed full and unobstructed participation of the international community (represented by the OSCE and its monitoring program), not skewed the election commissions so blatantly in his favor, and allowed even token independent and state media coverage of the opposition candidate, he may have been able to win the

election with, say, 54 percent of the vote, and therefore would have pretty much forced the international community to recognize the election. That would have put the West in a difficult position, because even if the election itself had been free in its execution, Lukashenko's systematic destruction of civil society structures such as an independent judiciary and free media before the election created an environment that was certainly not fair or democratic.

### **Current Status of Civil Society in Belarus: Quite Simply, Uncivil and the Worst in Europe**

Since the presidential election, the Lukashenko regime has, if anything, stepped up its efforts in making sure that elements of civil society fail to coalesce and develop. The independent press, in particular, has felt the brunt of this assault as Lukashenko has continued to close down even the smallest opposition newspapers and printing presses—often under the flimsiest of pretexts. The regime continues to systematically destroy independent print media in many ways, including all of the ways I have described: liberally using the libel laws, limiting foreign funding, detaining individuals for distributing opposition newspapers, pressuring businesses not to advertise with independent media, limiting access to newsprint, denying accreditation to journalists with a past history of criticism of the regime, censoring outright, restricting the import of media-related materials, and simply confiscating or destroying office equipment.

Radio is also compromised by the regime, as shown by the aforementioned example of the shutting down of the popular Belarusian-language radio station 101.2. Foreign TV and radio broadcasts are widely available, but they are also subject to the regime's interference. I should also mention that Belarus is by and large a rural and very poor country. The majority of citizens reside in the countryside, and many do not have televisions or easy access to newspapers.

One of the most significant civil societal structures that has been totally compromised by Lukashenko is the judicial system, which remains firmly in the hands of the regime. It is not at all impartial and continues to make legal decisions based on political pressures from above. Even if all other areas of civil society were allowed to develop in Belarus (certainly unlikely under the current regime), Lukashenko's control over the judiciary is so complete that civil society in the country could never be classified as anything better than poor.

Some truly independent newspapers do exist; mostly they are available only in Minsk and the larger cities and are printed once or twice a week. Publishers face the distinct disadvantage of having to print their newspapers in state printing houses and use a distribution system that is controlled by the state. Overall, their impact in terms of numbers and influence is practically negligible. The regime often points to these newspapers as a sign that independent news media exist in Belarus. However, any potential impact on democracy development and politics that the truly independent newspapers could offer is prevented by an authoritarian state in which the president rules by decree and uses his unlimited power to make sure that such media outlets do not affect political developments in Belarus.

The regime also tries to prove that civil society exists in Belarus by saying that

there are “2,025 NGOs in the country.”<sup>52</sup> This is a good opportunity to dispel a common myth about civil society that Lukashenko tries to exploit—that is, that the strength of civil society in a country is measured by the number and diversity of its NGOs. This is false. Although NGOs can be instrumental in creating political awareness, they are not necessarily a decisive factor in creating a democracy. For NGOs to be effective, minimum conditions such as an independent and impartial rule of law and respect for the individual must exist—elements totally lacking in Belarus. Despite the regime’s impressive-sounding statistic, there are only a few truly independent NGOs in Belarus—and, as I have described, they face constant harassment by the authorities.

Andrei Sannikov, former deputy foreign minister of Belarus and one of the most respected figures in the country, described the current status of civil society in Belarus by saying, “Lukashenko has created a system in which all legal and other instruments are used to put limits on any dissenting views and activities and keep the society within its limits. It doesn’t mean that there are no dissidents, opposition, or attempts to challenge the regime. It means that the system does not have anything within itself that could serve as any kind of support for civil society.”<sup>53</sup> In summary, present-day Belarus is a dictatorship ruled by a president who is totally committed to preventing civil society and democracy from emerging. A functioning civil society in Belarus does not exist.

### **Prospects for Civil Society in Belarus**

One positive development that came out of the presidential election campaign was that an opposition was able to coalesce around one candidate and unite to a certain extent in its desire to see Lukashenko voted out. Youth political organizations such as Malady Front and the aforementioned Zubr attracted and mobilized a significant portion of the youth, especially in Minsk.<sup>54</sup> This in turn led many Belarusians, especially students, to seek involvement in attempting to build civil society structures—for example, by starting grassroots activist civic organizations or by organizing protest groups on various issues such as the environment. A small number of truly independent NGOs, unrecognized and unregistered by the government, also sprang up to express political support for the opposition and rally around a specific cause.

These new and fragile NGOs are a promising development, but only the most optimistic person would point to them as evidence that Belarus has a functioning civil society. In fact, most of the NGOs that emerged during the presidential campaign have since disbanded or have simply receded, hoping for better conditions in which to operate in the future. This should not diminish their potential importance or take away from the fact that they represent a very positive step for the future of Belarus, as most of the activists for the NGOs and political groups are fairly young. If the regime were to fall or be voted out, or if Belarus were to experience other democratic changes, these NGOs and political organizations could have a very important role to play in developing civil society in Belarus. There is some hope that civil society may be able to emerge in Belarus after the current regime is gone.

However, Lukashenko has more than four years left in his presidential term (and a past history of granting himself extensions). That, the passivity of the Belarusian population, and Russia's continued lukewarm political support and heavily subsidized energy supplies to keep the Belarusian economy from total collapse make it seem unlikely that a major change in political leadership will happen any time soon. A functioning civil society will not exist in Belarus while the Lukashenko regime is in power.

#### NOTES

1. Andrei Sannikov, interview with author, 12 February 2002.
2. Most notably, this point was described and defended in Anders Aslund's recent book, *Building Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 445.
3. Cezary Golinski, "Stanislaw Szuszkiewicz: Ustrzelone imperium," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12 December 2001.
4. Tatiana Protko, "Problems of the Formation of a Civil Society in Belarus (1995–1999)," *Analytical Bulletin of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies*, March 1999.
5. Anne Applebaum, *Between East and West: Across the Borderlands of Europe* (London: Papermac, 1995), 158.
6. There are many conflicting statistics on the percentage of Belarusians who speak Belarusian on a day-to-day basis. Most figures indicate that it is about 25 percent. Interestingly, a formal grammar system for Belarusian was only established in the last century. Nobel Prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz, famous for his writings about Lithuanians, Poles, and Belarusians, has written, "I confess that Belarusians are still an enigma to me—a mass of people, spread over a large expanse of land, who have been constantly oppressed and speaking a language which you could characterize as a cross between Polish and Russian and having a grammar system that was only established in the 20th century." Czeslaw Milosz, "Rodzinna Europa," *Tworczość* 6 (1981).
7. Andrew Carpenter, political officer for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Advisory and Monitoring Group, interview with author, Minsk, 26 March 2001.
8. It could be argued that Ukraine was independent intermittently between 1918 and 1920 and that it differs from Belarus in that it had a strong nationalistic movement in western Ukraine. Although this point is valid, it must be said that Ukraine was independent in those two years in the same tenuous way that Belarus was, and by 1920 both eastern Ukraine and eastern Belarus had been absorbed by the Soviet Union, whereas both western Ukraine and western Belarus had become part of Poland. For the purposes of our discussion on civil society development and the historical disadvantages of not having an independent history, it is fair to compare Belarus and Ukraine in this context.
9. I have had many colorful debates on this topic with academics and diplomats (predominantly Scandinavians) who say that, with Russian president Putin's record of closing down independent media outlets such as NTV, and Ukrainian president Kuchma's antagonistic relationship with the media and possible role in the disappearance of Georgian journalist Georgy Gongadze, these countries are in fact no better in civil society development than Belarus. Although these are valid points, there is a far less threatening atmosphere toward human rights advocates, investigative journalists, and NGOs in Ukraine and Russia. Only a handful of independent Belarusian media outlets and truly independent NGOs even exist. Further, there is not even any semblance of an independent judiciary in Belarus. It should also be stressed that Russia and Ukraine have functioning (albeit fragile) electoral democracies. In present-day Belarus under Lukashenko, democracy simply does not exist.
10. Mark Lenzi, "Europe's Armory for Terrorism," *Washington Post*, 3 January 2002.

11. Kathleen Mihailisko, "Belarus: Retreat to Authoritarianism," *Democratic Changes and Authoritarian Reactions in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova* (1997).
12. Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 131.
13. Ramunas Davidonis, "The Challenge of Belarus and European Responses," *Western European Union Institute for Security Studies Occasional Papers*, July 2001.
14. D. E. Furman, *Bielorusija i Rosija: Obsesiva i Gosudarstva* (1997): 123.
15. See Human Rights Watch report, "Belarus: Crushing Civil Society," August 1997.
16. Andrei Sannikov, interview with author, 18 February 2002.
17. V. Chernov, "Autoritarnij Rezim v Belarusi: Charakter, Zapas Procnosti, Varianti Transformacii," *Adkrytae Gramatsva* (1998).
18. Grigory Hosid, interview with author, Grodno, Belarus, 21 March 2001. Author's note: Hosid is a Belarusian Jew, born in Polish-occupied Grodno, who survived the Holocaust by jumping from a train destined for the Treblinka gas chambers and who later fought the Nazis in the underground.
19. Ramunas Davidonis, "The Challenge of Belarus and European Responses," *Western European Union Institute for Security Studies Occasional Papers*, July 2001.
20. V. Chernov, "Priroda Politiceskovo Rezima v Belarusii i Perspektivi Evo Transformacii," *Belarus-Monitor. Demokratieskije Procesy v Belarusii: Osnovnyje Tendencii i Protivorejija* (1997).
21. Valery Tsepka, Belarusian ambassador to the United States, in *Presidents and Prime Ministers Magazine*, May–June 1998. Tsepka's description here of the constitution should be looked at closely because it is everything that Belarus has not developed into. It would not be a stretch to say that on every point in the quote, the exact opposite holds true in today's Belarus.
22. Furman, *Bielorusija i Rosija*, 125.
23. In Lukashenko's official biography, his work at this time is described in an almost humorous and utterly Soviet way: "When holding the post of chairman of the Supreme Council commission on the examination of the activities of commercial structures which had been set up under the organs of state administration (April 1993–July 1994) A.G. Lukashenko proved on the country's scale to be a bright tribune, an unbribable enemy of corruption, an independent deputy having his own position on the basic directions of reforms and democratization of the Belarusian society." See official Web site of the president of the Republic of Belarus, <[www.president.gov.by](http://www.president.gov.by)>.
24. Almost every Western political observer who followed events in Belarus thought that Prime Minister Kebich would win the election. Lukashenko was such an unknown, even after his victory, that a July 1994 U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe report on the election ends with following sentence: "[T]he rejection by the Belarusian electorate of the old line *nomenklatura*, even for an unknown quality like Lukashenko, would appear to provide a small, first step forward in terms of U.S. foreign policy interests in seeing democracy and free market economies established."
25. See Human Rights Watch report, "Belarus: Crushing Civil Society," August 1997.
26. Protko, "Problems of the Formation of a Civil Society in Belarus."
27. U.S. Department of State, "Belarus Human Rights Practices, 1995," March 1996.
28. International League for Human Rights, "Report of the Deputies of the 13th Supreme Soviet of Belarus," 2001.
29. Ramunas Davidonis, "The Challenge of Belarus and European Responses," *Western European Union Institute for Security Studies Occasional Papers*, July 2001.
30. International League for Human Rights, "Report of the Deputies."
31. Open Society Institute, "Belarus Government Forces Closure of Belarusian Soros Foundation," press release from 3 September 1997.
32. Protko, "Problems of the Formation of a Civil Society in Belarus."
33. See press release for the opening of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus, August 1998, <[www.osce.org.by](http://www.osce.org.by)>.

34. Pawel Kazanecki, "The Third Sector in Belarus," *Belarus—The Third Sector* (1998).
35. Human Rights Watch, "Republic of Belarus: Violations of Academic Freedom Report," July 1998.
36. U.S. Department of State, "Belarus Human Rights Practices, 2001," March 2002.
37. Protko, "Problems of the Formation of a Civil Society in Belarus."
38. See report from Reporters sans Frontiers, "Enemies of the Internet," August 1999.
39. U.S. Department of State, "Belarus Human Rights Practices, 2000," February 2001.
40. International League for Human Rights, "Report of the Deputies."
41. Peter Szyszlo, "Belarusian Paradoxes," *Central European Review*, 9 August 1999.
42. See British Home Office report on world incarceration rates, 19 February 1999. Also see United Nations Development Program incarceration and crime statistics for Belarus. The United Nations has additional noteworthy statistics on Belarus that provide some insight into present conditions in the country. For example, Belarus has twice as many doctors per capita as the United Kingdom and Ireland, and 1.5 times more doctors than Denmark. And yet the proportion of Belarusians not expected to survive to age sixty is 2.5 times higher than in Denmark and nearly three times higher than in Ireland and the United Kingdom. There are 1.4 times more women than men with higher education in Belarus. And yet women form the absolute majority of workers in the lowest paid professions and represent two-thirds of the country's unemployed. Belarus has the highest number of telephone lines per capita in the CIS, but its Internet connectivity rate is the lowest in the region—twelve times lower than in Russia, five times lower than in Ukraine, and sixty-six times lower than in Lithuania. See <[www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org)>.
43. U.S. Department of State, "Belarus Human Rights Practices, 2000," February 2001.
44. Cezary Golinski, "Oblawa na niepodleglosc," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 27 March 2000; Piotr Kosciński, "Palki i gaz w Dniu Niepodleglosci," *Rzeczpospolita*, 27 March 2000.
45. See OSCE, "Final Report on 2000 Parliamentary Elections," October 2000, <[www.osce.org.by](http://www.osce.org.by)>.
46. U.S. Department of State, "Belarus Human Rights Practices, 2001," March 2002.
47. Benjamin Smith, "In Belarus Election, Washington Provides Support, Training for Opposition," *Wall Street Journal Europe*, 3 September 2001.
48. Agata Szczuka, "Materialism and Ignorance," *Central European Review*, 3 December 2001.
49. "Autocracy in Belarus—Challenged, Feebly," *Economist*, 26 July 2001.
50. Mark Lenzi, "Numoti ranka i diktoriaus uzmojus butu trumparegiska," *Lietuvos Rytas* (Lithuania), 25 August 2001. Tomas Balkelis, a Lithuanian Fulbright Scholar teaching in Toronto, provided much assistance analyzing the 2001 Belarusian presidential election.
51. See OSCE, "Final Report for 9 September 2001 Presidential Election," September 2001.
52. Official Belarusian government statistics, available at <[www.president.gov.by](http://www.president.gov.by)>.
53. Andrei Sannikov, interview with author, 17 February 2002. Also providing insight on this point was a British diplomat in Vilnius, Alastair Rabagliati.
54. The fact that a sizable portion of the youth in Belarus expressed an active interest in the election is a potentially very important development for future politics in the country and should not be overlooked. Belarus is demographically a very old country—one-third of voters are retired, and the population of the country is declining and is now under ten million people. If an active and strong youth movement willing to attempt to shape and influence political developments in the country were to emerge, this could have a major impact on politics in Belarus after the current regime is out of power or, in the most optimistic scenario for the opposition, a strong youth movement could play a role in ousting the regime from power in the future.