

The Emerging Civil Society in Independent Belarus 2006-2010

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The publication of the Sociological Survey 2006-2010 coincides with one of the most tragic experiences that Independent Belarus has gone through since its establishment in 1991: In the evening of the presidential elections on December 19 2010, the ruling President smashed with brutal force the peaceful demonstration of citizens and presidential candidates on Independence Square. They had gathered in order to protest against the apparent massive manipulation of the elections by the official Election Commission – as done already on the presidential elections in 2001 and 2006.

In December 2010, Lukashenko realized that he had lost the support of large sections of the population. His regime was now confronted with a disenchanting population and a broad political opposition seeking to open up for Belarus the road to the European Union. Neighbouring countries such as Poland, Lithuania and Latvia were already members of the European Union. Ukraine is in the process of signing a Free Trade Agreement with the European Union.

Whenever Alexander Lukashenka senses a threat to his all embracing power position he reacts violently in order to eliminate brutally the emerging threat and to remind everyone of his unbending determination to hold on to power and to take revenge against his current opponents . The list of the victims of his brutal rule is long. Let me recall the tragic circumstances of the sudden death of the potential democratic candidate for the presidency in 1999, Gennady Karpenko. The former Prime Minister Michel Chigir was prosecuted in several court proceedings. The former Minister of the Interior, Jury Zakharenko, the leading opposition politician Victor Gonchar and his business friend Anatoly Krasovsky were made disappear in 1999, so was the camera man Dimitry Savadski in 2000. On the occasion of the presidential elections in 2001 the former Minister of Trade Michael Marinich and on the

occasion of the presidential elections in 2006 the former Rector of the Minsk State University, Alexander Kasulin were put into prison and treated very badly. Now, more than thirty Belarusians, among them the presidential candidates Vladimir Nekljaev, Andrej Sannikov, Nicolai Statkevich, Vitaly Rymashevski and Grigory Kostusev as well as the leading politician Anatoly Lebedko are held in the KGB prison. They face legal charges of preparing mass riots according to article 293 of the Belarusian Penal Code that means possibly a verdict of fifteen years in prison. The European Union and the USA demand immediate release of these politicians and of other demonstrators in the evening of December 19, 2010. On that evening government agents acted as rioters forcing their way into the government buildings thus providing purposefully the needed circumstances for mass arrests.

This governmental operation was undertaken in order to dismiss all hopes of the Belarusian nation for a gradual opening of the country towards the democratic value system of Europe, of the European Union in particular. Lukashenko is determined to hold the nation in the firm grip of his authoritarian power. Thus, he slapped the door to Europe, to freedom and economic development. However, it may turn out to be a Pyrrhus-victory, and Russia may not be so generous as to finance his dictatorship – and the nation at large may revolt en masses against the abuse of power to the detriment of the interests of the country.

The European Union and member states will continue to support civil society in Belarus and will help the nation to overcome the serious political set back suffered by the events on December 19, 2010 and the brutal suppression of democratic forces in the country.

The survey of developments in Belarus 2005-2010 as offered by the International Institute for Social and Political Studies provides the reader with a broad range of reliable information about the emerging diversification of opinions, expectations and hopes – in particular within the younger generation of Belarusians. Given the openly repressive nature of the ruling system the desire to leave the country will certainly grow among the population, certainly the younger ones. They have left already by the hundred thousands.

Little was known about the country and its inhabitants some ten and more years ago. That is different today – not the least thanks to the surveys and opinion polls undertaken systematically by the Institute for Social and Political Studies, guided by Professor Oleg Manaev. The activities of the Institute within Belarus are hampered in many ways by the Lukashenko regime, but continue to be undertaken with great zeal. In spite of the prevailing

dictatorial system in Minsk the country continues to be an integral part of the international community of free and independent sociological and political science research and studies.

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