

BELARUS: THE OPPOSITION AND THE PRESIDENCY

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Introduction

In June 1994, Belarus held its first presidential election as mandated by the post-Soviet Constitution that had been adopted earlier that same year. In the first round of the election no candidate received more than 50% of the vote, but in the runoff in July, Alyaksander Lukashenka, a former state farm chairman from the Shklou district, Mahileu province, emerged as the clear winner over former prime minister Vyachaslau Kebich. The presidency of Lukashenka has been eventful and controversial. Most notably in the summer of 1996, when Belarus experienced a constitutional crisis and the president decided to organize a referendum on enhancing presidential powers while reducing those of the parliament and Constitutional Court. The referendum was duly held in November 1996. Although the electorate strongly supported all of Lukashenka's propositions, observers from both the West and the opposition believed the results to have been falsified. By the end of the year, the results of the referendum were made legally binding through amendments to the 1994 Constitution and at the same time the president declared his intention to start his term of office over, from the date of the referendum. Neither the West nor the Belarusian opposition has recognized the validity of this process and thus the question arose of what would happen in the country when the original five-year term of office for the president expired, on 20 July 1999.

The Pre-Election Campaign

In January the 13th Session of the Supreme Soviet, officially dissolved by the president in late 1996, but which has continued to hold sessions and is still chaired by Semyon Sharetsky, formed a Central Electoral Commission. On 16 January, Decree No. 7 of the Central Electoral Commission announced its intention to hold a presidential election on 16 May, to be organized by the Commission under Viktor

Hanchar.¹ The process of registering candidates and gathering a minimum of 100,000 signatures was identical to that of 1994 and followed the 1994 Constitution. The leaders of the opposition had one common goal, namely to mount an assault on President Lukashenka, noting that he had already been in power for five years and focusing on the sharp deterioration of living standards in that period. In turn, the opposition also had to make the case that it was capable of bringing about an improvement of the economic situation.

Among the leading players in this process, however, the goals varied. Hanchar was anxious to improve his standing among the electorate by creating an image of a man of great organizational ability who at the same time was selfless in his motives. Hanchar also wished to make political inroads into two power sectors, in order to establish a "party of the new power" that would support his political ambitions. These two sectors were the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), long recognized as the principal opposition party of Belarus, and part of the Lukashenka nomenklatura, which fears the implications of a change in the power structure and was perceived as willing to make compromises. Zyanon Paznyak, the leader of the BPF, has been living in exile since 1996, officially as a refugee in the United States but in fact he resides mainly in Poland. Paznyak, though assured of loyal support from his followers, was thus distanced from events in his homeland. Nonetheless, he decided to allow himself to be a presidential candidate (as he was also in 1994) to improve his standing in his native country and to attract more funding for his party.

Other potential candidates appeared briefly. Henadz Karpenka, one of the leaders of the Congress of Democratic Forces held in Minsk in late January and

¹See, for example, *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 15 February 1999, p. 1.

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a prominent member of the United Civic Party, held the view that the opposition elections would push the president into holding his own elections later in 1999; at that time, he intended to allow himself to be nominated as a rival. Moreover, Karpenka believed that Hanchar would use the May election to conduct various political tricks that would shed an unfavorable light on the process in the eyes of the electorate. Boris Berezovsky, then secretary of the CIS and once an important power broker in Russia, also played a part in the Belarusian campaign by supporting the candidacy of Chyhir. This move can be perceived as a reaction by Berezovsky to Lukashenka's outspoken opposition to the CIS while it remained under Berezovsky's leadership. Other possible candidates included S. Domash, Syarhey Haydukevich, N. Statkevich, and S. Kalyakin.

Domash proposed that several political leaders should meet and decide on a candidate to run in the elections, ostensibly with the hope that he personally would be that candidate. He gave the Minsk leaders an ultimatum that if they failed to form a united front, then the union of democratic forces would commence not in Minsk, but in his home base of Hrodna. Gennadiy Grushevoy (Henadz Hrushavy), the Chairman of the Belarusian Charitable Fund "For the Children of Chernobyl," the largest locally administered NGO in Belarus, elected not to run because of fears for his physical safety, but he considered a role as an organizer of a petition to gather signatures in support of a referendum on the question: Do you support the integration of Belarus into the European Union? All the potential candidates began the campaign with certain goals vis-à-vis the electorate: to preserve the voters' faith in them; to undermine the support of the electors for their rivals; and to attract apolitical voters.

The Position of President Lukashenka

During the election campaign and especially at the initial stages, Lukashenka competed with the opposition candidates for the support of the electorate. He sought to present an image of a president who fights against corruption and is the servant of the people. His opponents, meanwhile, were depicted as people who would side with the Western powers, who were corrupt and self-serving, and for whom power and money took precedence over the interests of the people. His speeches portrayed the opposition leaders as children. Lukashenka's main weakness was the sharp decline in the economy that had taken place since the fall of 1998.

The government laid the blame for the dramatic decline in the Belarusian standard of living first on Russian criminal elements, followed by local ministers and factory managers, the ramifications of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, and the opposition for "slandering" the regime in the West, with the result that Belarusian products could no longer find markets abroad.

During the election campaign, Lukashenka had several positive resources. He possessed the material assets of the state, control over the media, the ability to obtain information from opposition centers, and not least his own remarkable oratory and ability to discern the mood of the public. How popular is the president? Clearly, he is more popular and trusted by the older generation. This is evident from polls conducted by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies over the five years of the Lukashenka presidency (ending in March 1999), which show a pattern that is virtually unchanged, but for a slight fall in support for the president in 1999. Thus to the question: If the presidential elections were held tomorrow, whom would you choose as the candidate? (only one politician could be named), 75% of those over the age of 55 selected Lukashenka, 36.4% in the age group 16-19, and only 24.3% between the ages of 25-29. In the over 55 category two years ago, however, the corresponding figure was 81.8%.²

A survey conducted by the organization Novak, led by Andrey Vardamatsky, polled 1,094 Belarusians between 26 April and 3 May 1999 on the question: How do you appraise well known politicians?--allowing for both positive and negative responses. In the positive category, Lukashenka received 47.5%, followed by Jacques Chirac with 25.1%, Slobodan Milosevic with 17.9%, and Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton came at the bottom of the list with 12.3% and 11.4% respectively. The negative voting saw the same two world leaders well ahead of the field with 52.2% and 52.1%, Milosevic with 35.1%, and Lukashenka with 30%.³ The survey demonstrates two factors: first, Lukashenka remains the most popular politician within Belarus, but second, that support may be lukewarm and his negative ratings are quite high. Moreover, the obvious lack of faith in Yeltsin may reflect badly on Lukashenka's initiatives to form a union with Russia. Lukashenka's ratings in Minsk have consistently been

²*Belarus Today*, 4 May 1999.

³*Naviny*, 18 May 1999, p. 3.

up to ten percentage points lower than those in Belarus as a whole. Lukashenka, then, had significant positive forces at his disposal during the campaign.

On the negative side, he faced the process of the continual decline in living standards. In a survey published in the newspaper *Naviny* (25 May 1999), in an article entitled "How We Live," it was noted that 63% of the electorate consider that the economy of Belarus is "weak" or "very weak." In the early years of his presidency Lukashenka could successfully divert attention for economic problems to the government of his predecessors, Stanislau Shushkevich (1991 to January 1994) and Vyachaslau Kebich (January-June 1994). After five years in power, however, and with enhanced authority since November 1996 in what is virtually a presidential state, it is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid responsibility for Belarus's decline in living standards. By May 1999, according to a survey published in an opposition newspaper, the negative vote exceeded the positive (2.5 million to 1.5 million out of 7 million voters).⁴

The Opposition Campaign

The opposition campaign was well funded. Hanchar, as the chairman of the CEC, received about \$250,000 in funds, with potential for as much as \$5 million (though as will be observed, funding began to dry up as a result of internal disputes). It received sympathy from Russian media sources, which publicized the opposition campaign within Belarus. The election campaign was helped by a strong organizational team, the tacit support of the West, positive backing from some Russian leaders, and by the widespread structure of the BPF in all regions of Belarus. Ultimately, only two candidates took part in the campaign: Mikhail Chyhir, a former prime minister under Lukashenka; and Zyanon Paznyak, chairman of the BPF. A third group under Karpenka, supported by the Charter-97 group under the leadership of Alyaksander Sannikau, intended to mount a campaign later in the year against Lukashenka. This plan was ended abruptly with Karpenka's untimely death on 6 April.⁵

⁴ Oleg Manaev, writing in the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya*, 21 May 1999. The figures, however, seem suspect and the likelihood is that they pertained only to a certain phase of the election campaign.

⁵ An obituary of Karpenka appeared in *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 7 April 1999, p. 1.

Chyhir is a poor public speaker; indeed, his speeches attract ridicule rather than attention. In the election campaign he tried to present himself as a man of organizational ability who could reverse the trends in the economy. He advocated minimum wages of \$100 a month (in May 1999 they were on average about \$34) and pensions of \$50 a month. He had the support initially of the powerful former Minister of Internal Affairs Yuri Zakharenka and vowed to bring criminal charges against Lukashenka for corruption. His campaign thus focused on his creativity and initiative, and at the same time his ability to be a strong leader. Paznyak also declared his intention to form people's tribunals to investigate issues such as corruption, political repression, and Chernobyl-related problems. Paznyak and the BPF have also advocated closer contacts with Europe, as opposed to Russia, and ultimately the integration of Belarus into the European Union.

Paznyak, however, was limited by several factors. His directions to his subordinates came by facsimile from Poland, since he never crossed the border into Belarus. Eventually these constant faxes elicited laughter and irritation. In short, it proved impossible for Paznyak to obtain an accurate picture of what was happening in the campaign. His rating among the majority of voters remained negative, thanks in part to the regime's depiction of him and his family as "fascists" (despite the fact that he was born only in 1944 and that his father perished at the hands of Fascists during the war). His flight to the United States in 1996 was equated with cowardice by some voters, particularly when contrasted with those imprisoned recently in Belarus--eventually including Chyhir himself.

The Decline of Lukashenka

The opposition election placed reliance on the hope that as a result of the campaign, the electoral rating of Lukashenka would begin to fall significantly. Focus was also placed on the "lawlessness" of the regime. Lukashenka, in turn, emphasized his role as "protector" of Belarusians against threats from the West. This role could be said to have begun with the evictions of Western ambassadors from their residences at the Drazdy complex outside Minsk in June 1998. He has frequently changed his cabinet, illustrating his role as a leader who is prepared to develop new initiatives. In addition, however, his initial approach to the election was to denounce the opposition for trying to seize

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power, using as his instrument the State Prosecutor. This accusation undermined the credibility of the president among the public. In the eyes of the voters, the president appeared weak and even frightened, whereas the opposition seemed to have taken the initiative. After mass protests of workers in November 1998 in Salihorsk and Minsk, Lukashenka offered to give up his portfolio as president if the workers and collective farmers felt the need to punish him. This event was an earlier manifestation of the president's fear of losing power.

In turn, the policy of repressing opponents had the reverse effect to what was intended. Hanchar was summoned to the office of the KGB and warned not to continue the election campaign. Members of his committee were detained and then Hanchar himself was arrested in early March and jailed for ten days, and then force-fed after declaring a hunger strike. These events were highlighted on Russian Television, which is accessible to the vast majority of Belarusian residents, in addition to opposition newspapers. Hanchar became something of a hero to Belarusians, particularly during the hunger strike. He was seen as a man who was not even running as a candidate but was prepared to sacrifice himself for the goal of free elections. Lukashenka's credibility, on the other hand, continued to dissipate. The Russian media at this stage of the campaign began to highlight the activities of Chyhir and Hanchar, causing Paznyak to accuse Chyhir of being Moscow's protege. The government also threatened to close six opposition newspapers that continued to advertise the date of the elections.

The arrests and detentions, first of Hanchar for holding an unsanctioned meeting, and then Chyhir on 31 March, on a trumped-up charge of transferring \$1 million to a company in Canada while chairman of the board of the Belahrodprombank, created martyrs of these two opposition leaders. On 8 April Chyhir was charged with grand larceny and jailed for three months, thereby ensuring that he would be absent from the remainder of the presidential campaign.⁶ On 15 April the authorities prevented a press conference to have been held by Hanchar by turning off electricity and blocking off the entrance to the building. On 7 May, Zakharenka disappeared in the vicinity of his own

apartment building and has not been seen since.⁷ Each government action designed to thwart the elections and punish the candidates and organizers undermined its prestige. For a brief period it appeared that not only would the elections be conducted successfully, but that the fact of their being held at all constituted a serious threat to the Lukashenka presidency. Lukashenka's over-reaction and brute-force tactics appeared crude and unnecessary and demonstrated, above all, his trepidation at the turn of events. The first stage of the election campaign was thus a sweeping success for the opposition.

The Rise of Lukashenka

At this stage, Lukashenka's supporters in government came to his aid. Both Prime Minister Syarhey Linh and head of the presidential administration Mikhail Myasnikovich played prominent roles. Gradually during the campaign Lukashenka reestablished his position as a powerful and all-pervasive leader, while Linh receded into the background. Moreover, Linh was held responsible for the government's poor economic performance. Lukashenka was directly assisted in this transition by the two opposition candidates themselves, Chyhir and Paznyak, as the election campaign took on a bitter hue. Even prior to his arrest, Chyhir mounted an attack on Paznyak, while shortly afterward the latter tried to have Chyhir's wife Yulia and her colleague Tatyana Vanina expelled from the Soym (leadership body) of the BPF. A direct confrontation occurred between the BPF leader and Yulia Chyhir that served to discredit both presidential candidates and discouraged potential sponsors from investing further funds in the two opposition campaigns. Indeed, the critique of Paznyak in the democratic newspaper *Svobodnye novosti* (23-30 April 1999) exceeded in its venom anything directed formerly against President Lukashenka.

A second event played an important role in the change of fortunes for the president, namely NATO's

⁶ RFE/RL Newsline Daily Digest, 9 April 1999.

⁷ Disappearances of Lukashenka's opponents are becoming increasingly common in Belarus. The most notorious case is that of former chairperson of the National Bank, Tamara Vinnikava, who had been under house arrest for over two years and "disappeared" on the night of 7-8 April. Her Russian lawyer, Garri Pogonyaylo, believes that she may have been moved to a secret location to keep her concealed from public view. Others speculate that she may no longer be alive. *Belorusskaya gazeta*, 17 April 1999, pp. 2, 5.

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bombing attack on Yugoslavia. Lukashenka used "NATO aggression" as a means to undermine the campaigns of Paznyak and Chyhir. The mass media began to portray the president in several ways: as a man fearless of NATO attacks, who was willing to fly to Yugoslavia to meet with Milosevic in mid-April, despite there being no guarantees of his safety; as an integrator working toward the union of Russia, Belarus, and even Yugoslavia; and as a peacemaker, adopting the principles of protection of his citizens from aggression. Lukashenka's flight to Yugoslavia had two other consequences. First, it raised the possibility of the "accidental" removal of the president from the political scene by his flying through a war zone. Second, it presented to the world television pictures of Lukashenka and Milosevic as close friends. This development heightened the anti-western image of Lukashenka but it also served to perpetuate the view of Lukashenka as a ruthless politician who was willing to eliminate his enemies (such as Zakharenka and Tamara Vinnikava) and was on cordial terms with tyrants (Milosevic).

At this same time the death of Karpenka led to further ramifications for Chyhir's campaign. In several regional newspapers, articles appeared that accused former members of Karpenka's executive committee of deserting to Chyhir, a fact that Karpenka had considered a personal misfortune. Obituaries of Karpenka in the newspaper *Naviny* and other BPF publications dwelled on this event. One such article, entitled "Traitors in the camp of

Chyhir," was even broadcast on radio and television. As Chyhir's ratings began to fall, articles appeared in the mass circulation daily *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* creating an image of Lukashenka as a leader of genius. While *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* has long been a sycophantic newspaper in the president's camp, the timing of the new eulogies was significant. Ultimately, therefore, the death of Karpenka, which might have united the opposition, only divided it further, while permitting the president to solidify his own backing.

A slight setback for Lukashenka occurred with the visit to Minsk of former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev on 14-15 April to participate in an international round-table on the theme "Russia and Belarus in the New Europe."⁸ Lukashenka made a point

of appearing in public with Gorbachev, and made the unsolicited comment--to the delight of the BPF--that "we are all children of Gorbachev." Opinions of Gorbachev among the electorate are uniformly low. He is associated less with the ending of a totalitarian regime than as the man who destroyed the Soviet Union, in which Belarus had thrived, and as the man responsible for several bloody conflicts that ensued. The liberal opposition could thus present Lukashenka as a second Gorbachev, more devoted to chatter than any authentic reform. However, attention was diverted from this "electoral slip" of Lukashenka by a profound rift that occurred between Paznyak and Hanchar over the way in which the election was to be conducted.

For Hanchar, the organization of the elections was a formidable task. There were no official polling stations available and it appeared impossible to hold valid elections--i.e., in which at least 50% of the electorate participated--unless some other means were devised. His solution was to have members of the Central Electoral Commission carry the ballot boxes from one apartment building to another so that votes could be collected. This process necessitated the beginning of voting on 6 May rather than the official polling day of 16 May. Paznyak, who had already accused the Chyhir camp of falsifying signatures for its candidate's original registration, reacted with fury to this change of procedure. He called on the electorate to boycott the "pre-election" voting and accused Hanchar of arbitrarily overriding the law in ways similar to those used by the president in the November 1996 referendum.⁹ Further, on 11 May, Paznyak ordered those BPF members on the Central Electoral Commission to resign their posts and on 13 May, he declared that he would withdraw his own candidacy from the election.

In taking this stance, Paznyak split his own camp. Some of his deputies (S. Papkau, A. Krivorot) began telephoning regions and insisting that BPF members leave the commissions, communicating both with the headquarters of the BPF and with Hanchar. Another group felt that Paznyak had sabotaged the efforts of the opposition to hold the elections and began to assess the actions of their leader as treacherous. Deputy chairman Yuri Khadyka considered that Paznyak's action had destroyed the image of the BPF as a democratic party and claimed that Paznyak was using the campaign for

⁸*Belorusskaya gazeta*, 17 April 1999, p. 4.

⁹See, for example, *Belarus Today*, 11 May 1999.

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self-promotion rather than to promote the goals of his party and democracy.¹⁰ BPF leaders meanwhile held several press conferences that accused Hanchar of falsifying the election returns while members of the rank-and-file could only perceive such actions as furthering the interests of the Lukashenka government. Within the leadership of the BPF some members began to consider the removal of Paznyak as leader. The 13th Session of the Supreme Soviet, led by Sharetsky, rejected Paznyak's claims and declared that the voting procedure was legitimate. The main issue hitherto--the power and authority of Lukashenka--had been forgotten.

After the Elections

By the morning of 15 May the CEC reported that 3.6 million Belarusians had cast their votes, representing 48.7% of the electorate.¹¹ Four days later, a spokesperson for the Central Election Commission, Alyksander Koktysh, announced that by the end of the campaign, over 4 million people had taken part in voting, or 53.1% of eligible voters. In announcing such figures, the CEC claimed that the elections had been a success. Neither Koktysh nor Hanchar provided a breakdown of votes for individual candidates, however. Moreover, the alleged size of the turnout seemed very unlikely to most observers. In Minsk it was difficult to find people who had actually voted, and on 16 May, many potential voters had no idea where to vote. Ballot stations included the shell of an old bus in a Minsk suburb, for example. The announcements of 15 and 19 May, therefore, more than any other events of the tumultuous campaign, destroyed the faith of the opposition in Hanchar, as the chief organizer of the elections. Those in opposition were completely disillusioned by what appeared to them to be the falsification of the election results. Paznyak again overreacted by blaming Chyhir who was declared to be relaxing under comfortable conditions in prison!

Between the two camps a new battle commenced over the votes for the individual candidates. A BPF version of the results appeared on the Internet, and maintained that Paznyak had received 2.5 million votes to Chyhir's 1.5 million. Paradoxically, if correct, this would signify that most BPF members and

sympathizers had ignored Paznyak's demand that they boycott the elections. The newspaper *Pagonya* (20 May 1999) declared that Paznyak had received almost 500,000 votes in the Hrodna region alone. Other sources indicated a victory for Chyhir. Under these circumstances Lukashenka announced on television that the elections would not lead to a change of government. Though the president's ratings had fallen slightly as a result of the campaign, those of Paznyak and Hanchar had suffered a catastrophic decline. Chyhir's ratings were more stable since a portion of the electorate was resolutely opposed to his continuing detainment in jail.

Where do these events leave Sharetsky and Hanchar? For Sharetsky's own presidential ambitions it was useful that during the opposition presidential elections no candidate was elected. Hanchar, on the other hand, may hope that even negative publicity is good publicity in terms of keeping his name in the limelight. In the next stage of the presidential elections, which Sharetsky has declared his intention to hold, Hanchar plans to advance his nomination as a candidate for the presidency. His place as chairman of the CEC will be taken by Tarazevich, while in the background the real authority may be Boris Gyunter, a CEC secretary. Two years ago Sharetsky and Hanchar conducted an ideological war against one another, but recently the two have been in close contact and have held discussions on various issues. Hanchar has used the departure of numerous BPF members from the regional electoral commissions to ensure that these posts are filled with his own supporters. Hanchar, in short, is hardly fulfilling the role of a democratic or unselfish statesman. The question in the minds of the BPF, the OSCE, and other observers of the situation in Belarus is: How will Sharetsky respond to the machinations of Hanchar? Are they in the same camp? Will they continue to work together?¹²

¹⁰ Yuriy Khodyko, "BNF ne ozero dlya Nartsissa," *Naviny*, 18 May 1999, p. 3.

¹¹ *Belorusskaya gazeta*, 17 May 1999, p. 6.

¹² Since this article went to press, both politicians have been removed, temporarily or otherwise, from the Minsk political scene. On 20 July, fearing imminent arrest, Sharetsky fled to Vilnius, Lithuania, where he remained as of the end of September. See *RFE/RL Newslines*, Part II, 26 July 1999. On 16-17 September, Hanchar "disappeared" not far from his apartment and has not been in Minsk since. The authorities have claimed that he has left Belarus; other sources, including the OSCE and the US Department of State, suspecting foul play, have demanded an explanation from the authorities. See *The Jamestown Foundation Monitor Daily Report*, 23 September 1999.

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Sharetsky received a message from L. Barshcheuski and A. Krivorot, deputy chairman and secretary of the BPF respectively, on 30 May outlining the alleged falsification of the election results by Hanchar. At stake was the potential support of both the BPF and OSCE for Sharetsky and the 13th Session of the Supreme Soviet. On 16 May, at an OSCE meeting attended by Hanchar, Tarazevich, Gyunter and with Adrian Severin of the OSCE, Hanchar accused other OSCE representatives of providing an unobjective appraisal of the election campaign in Belarus. For his part, Severin anticipated that there were two possible scenarios for Belarus after 20 July. In the first, Sharetsky would assume the presidency after 20 July, supported by the EU and the United States, who would put pressure on Lukashenka to agree to new elections for president later in the year. Lukashenka and the opposition could then hold discussions (such discussions failed to get off the ground in 1997) and create a united commission for the election of president that would also incorporate the CEC. Elections would then occur under the control of international observers.

In Severin's second variant, Sharetsky would assume the presidency but Lukashenka would refuse the overtures of the West and refuse to hold elections. Then the OSCE would offer its own version of a presidential election in which only the opposition forces would participate. The OSCE also stressed the importance of continued pressure of the IMF and EBRD on Russia through the assignment of credits. Severin maintained that the departure of Primakov as Russian premier was linked to pressure on Yeltsin on the part of the United States. In turn, Russia would put pressure on Lukashenka to hold new elections this year for the presidency. However, the views of Western statesmen clearly may vary and there has been supposition that some leaders of the US government are not averse to seeing a continuation of the Lukashenka presidency, providing that it offers stability in the republic rather than a situation closer to civil war between the various parties.

The Belarusian Popular Front

An intensive debate within the BPF occurred after the election among those leaders who favor the replacement of Paznyak. The likely time for such an event was the summer Congress of the party (commencing 31 July). At the time of writing the potential candidates for BPF Chair were Viktor Ivashkevich and Vintsuk Vechorka. Khadyka was also

considering the position, particularly as Paznyak had openly demanded his removal from the deputy chairmanship. Another deputy chairman, Lyavon Barshcheuski, was to maintain his position of loyalty to Paznyak as long as the party did not submit itself to the re-registration procedures demanded by the government. If it was reregistered then Barshcheuski would support the replacement of Paznyak. As far as the beleaguered chair is concerned, there are two conflicting analyses. The first notes that Paznyak has a negative image among voters, most of whom perceive him as a fascist or an aggressive nationalist. The rating of Paznyak has collapsed and has no potential to rise, and thus Paznyak has no chance of succeeding against a popular figure such as Lukashenka, particularly when the incumbent president has all the machinery of the government at his disposal.

The alternative deduction, however, is that despite his negative qualities, Paznyak has positive potential as a candidate. He is well known and his name is practically synonymous with the BPF. If Paznyak were replaced, his successor would be unknown, and lacking adequate access to the mass media he would find it impossible to unravel the hard core of support for Lukashenka. Further, Paznyak is idolized by a section of the BPF, thus any attempt to replace him would cause a deep rift within the party. In the minds of supporters therefore, the removal of Paznyak would likely mean the extinction of the BPF as a political force. At the very least, however, Paznyak's actions during the campaign made him appear foolish to many voters.

The Future

Lukashenka can take heart from the failure of the opposition election campaign, despite making some elementary blunders at the outset by adopting heavy-handed tactics. The electoral ratings for all his rivals for the presidency have either plummeted (as in the case of Paznyak and Hanchar) or remain very low (Domash, Grushevoy, Sharetsky, Chyhir, Kalyakin, Haydukevich). The pro-Western platforms of leaders of the democratic opposition were deeply undercut by the NATO attack on Yugoslavia and even with the ending of this conflict may take several months to recover from these events. The president currently has a unique opportunity to combine new presidential elections with a referendum question that could be phrased to cover the spectrum of Europe and the world: Do you support the union of Belarus and Russia with

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the integration of Belarus into European and world society? This question would solidify the electoral program of Lukashenka and undercut the platform of opposition leaders who choose to oppose him.

The danger for Lukashenka comes from several quarters. Retired servicemen, for example, including those from Russia, voted solidly for Paznyak in the election (reportedly around 52% in Lida, the main military base). The trade unions are increasingly active and anti-government, though they in turn are experiencing a leadership struggle and competing for foreign funds. Catholics, the majority of whom live in the Hrodna region, are alienated from the Lukashenka government and a president self-described as an "Orthodox atheist." Lastly, the country is in a deep economic recession with no prospects for improvement in the near future. The president, as in the past, will need to make a distinction between a presidency which has as its main motivational factor the needs and interests of the people and a government composed, mainly, of incompetent bureaucrats. Significant changes in the Cabinet can thus be anticipated, and Prime Minister Linh's position must be considered very insecure. Ultimately Lukashenka must circumvent the fundamental question on the lips of voters: Who is to blame for the collapse of living standards?

Lukashenka, then, faces significant problems, but they pale beside those of an opposition whose tactics during the election have caused bewilderment among a population slowly becoming accustomed to the loss of Karpenka, one of the greatest forces for unity in the opposition. Sharetsky's direct association with the activities of Hanchar has done little to promote faith internationally in the Supreme Soviet of the 13th session. Paznyak's tactics, hectoring, and high-handedness from his rostrum abroad have cost him support and already elicited significant divisions within the BPF. Chyhir has little charisma and would be unlikely to succeed in a direct competition with Lukashenka. He has benefited from his imprisonment, which has brought protests both within and outside Belarus, but he would not pose a serious challenge without support from the BPF or Trade Unions, neither of which is likely to be forthcoming. Under these circumstances, Lukashenka has little to lose from calling new presidential elections that can be held

under international scrutiny.¹³ In so doing he may even be able to retain his revised Constitution and the revamped parliament and upper house. He will have satisfied the demands of the OSCE and can reopen a dialogue with the West as an alternative to the abortive discussions with Russia to bring reality to the Russia-Belarus Union.

The presidential elections held in May 1999 have thus provided a new opportunity for Lukashenka both to consolidate his power and take his place as a leader in the new Europe. For the democratic opposition, long struggling to make its voice heard in the West, it is difficult to imagine what greater disaster could have befallen it.

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¹³In mid-July 1999, Lukashenka reportedly agreed to hold presidential elections in the year 2000 in cooperation with the OSCE. *Reuters*, 17 July 1999.