



**Young People in Belarus:  
Next and/or the L. Generations**

**A Survey on Post-Election Development of the Youth Movement in Belarus**

**Note:** This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of the Pontis Foundation and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

## Introduction

In 2006 the Bratislava-based Pontis Foundation commissioned a survey of the trends and attitudes of young people in Belarus. Publication of the results of the survey was delayed several months for security reasons. The survey consisted of a report on representative youth organizations, structures and initiatives in order to provide an overview of youth activity in Belarus following the 2006 presidential elections. Coinciding qualitative research into four focus groups served to identify key themes and interests regarding the current political situation and social relations within Belarus. Special thanks go to Iryna Vidanova, civil society and media specialist from Belarus for her kind assistance.

The findings of the survey were shared with Belarusian youth organizations in late winter 2007 at a youth forum. To follow up, the Pontis Foundation has been making this report available to the international community in order to further focus attention on the unequal ideological battle facing young people in Belarus.

## Executive Summary

The survey and monitoring carried out by the Pontis Foundation revealed a number of significant tendencies particular to youth in Belarus. The first can be described as a movement toward official youth policy. The ideological work introduced by the government several years ago at education institutions along with the persecution of young pro-democratic activists seems to have yielded results, namely, the prevention of young people from active, open participation in policy-related activities that might threaten the current regime. Monitoring results indicated that support for Lukashenka seems to be growing among Belarusian youths, a demographic category with which the regime has not been particularly successful in the past. Victor Martinovich and Vladimir Matskevich note that "Belarusian youths now beginning to support the regime are proud that Belarus did not receive respect and a favorable attitude as a gift from anyone, but earned them, won them in a fight. It is this that makes this regime genuinely Belarusian in many people's eyes, a kind of leadership that nationalizes."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the next generation may support Lukashenka's new paradigm, persuaded by or drawn to the nationalist cause.

However, state policy also resulted in an opposing tendency - a search for new, more creative methods of political activity by young people in the midst of restrictive political conditions. The presidential campaign in 2006 mobilized young people, resulting in a new generation flooding the streets in numbers nobody could have predicted (March 19, 2006 in particular). This up and coming generation, as Belarusian political scientist Andrei Liakhovich argues,<sup>2</sup> saw in the 2006 presidential elections a chance to revolt against the regime. It may have seemed a short term solution, but this new generation, controlled neither by the regime, nor influenced by the opposition, attempted to forge an alternative path. The danger of course is that the drive for change might weaken as politically active youth are faced by traditional social responsibilities such as finding a job and establishing families of their own.

The qualitative survey revealed that the outlook of Belarusian youth is developing in two opposite directions: Cubanization and radicalization. The term 'Cubanization' describes the tendency to respond to political oppression by conforming to the status

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<sup>1</sup> See Ioffe, Grigoriy. *Belarus: A State, Not yet a Nation*. Conference presentation, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Liakhovich, Andrei. *Twelve Years of Lukashenka*. Bratislava: Pontis Foundation, publication forthcoming.

quo. There are discernible groups within this conformist group, for example those operating within the norms of the regime for personal gain or simply to maintain some sense of normalcy, while others conform more because they are in fact true believers in the regime. Radicalization, in contrast, is characterized by dissatisfaction with the norm that develops into hatred, resulting in Belarusian youth either leaving the country or staying to fight the regime. Importantly, the youth in general is “geopolitically” focused on Europe instead of Russia.

Limited youth participation in Belarusian civil society is due to the fear of legal ramifications, extreme danger and the fact that civic organizations are too political. The international reputation of Belarus as Europe’s last dictatorship does not appear to be a major concern to youth. Likewise, repression and the abuse of civil rights seem like ‘normal infringements’ and did not cause great indignation among the majority of survey participants. Generally, the notion of ‘civil society’ has no meaning while ecological concerns seem to hold more legitimacy and are seen in a less political light.

Nevertheless, the 2006 electoral campaign sparked the rise of several youth structures or initiatives, mostly politically oriented youth groups, including Young Front, former Zubr structures, Hopits! and several others. Importantly, the widespread electoral fraud, the post-election protest atmosphere (in Minsk) and the lack of advance planning among the democratic opposition allowed for the mobilization of new young people in the form of various independent resistance activities aimed at the regime.

A new stage in active youth political movement started with the ‘tent camp’ protest at Oktiabrskaja Square where young people came together to protect freedom of choice. More importantly, this protest attracted a reasonably high number of people who had never been engaged in any kind of political activity. The brutal dispersion of the tent camp only increased solidarity amongst youth, including many youth that were not directly involved in protests but remain sympathetic to the cause. This solidarity, along with the subsequent protest mood, resulted in numerous youth-led events around the country (especially at the end of March and in April 2006), increased virtual space debates and led to the creation of new youth initiatives such as Bunt! and *Inicyjatyva*. Initially, law-enforcement agencies seemed helpless to prevent wide-spread youth action. However, the wave of protests decreased in summer 2006 when students either left for vacations or went abroad for summer work-and-travel programs. The greatest decrease in public youth activities was caused by the departure of youth activists to study abroad within the framework of education programs offered by foreign universities to students excluded from Belarusian schools for political reasons (for example, the Kalinowski program, which provided 300 places in Polish universities). The significant drop in youth activity helped law-enforcement agencies to concentrate their efforts on separate events, to persecute and intimidate the most active participants and their families. From this situation, one of the most important questions begins to emerge: with the recent Belarus-Russia crisis in mind and Lukashenka’s persistent will to keep himself in power by playing upon nationalistic themes, how does the new generation take up an effective, meaningful political role in a Belarusian society overrun by strong state initiatives?

Apart from direct, active political engagement there is an on-going effort among young people in the form of groups and clubs offering different activities connected to creative thinking, the development of analytical skills or the sharing of similar interests (for example, CD Mag, studenty.by or the Third Way). Although their

members are often far from politically oriented and their activities tend to fall outside of state control mechanisms many have recently experienced administrative pressure to revise the format of their activities. The regime, as such, seems intent on predetermining youth directions, rather than fostering free and fair democratic organization at the grass roots level – a position that strikes as contrary to an outwardly pro-European stance.

Youth leaders began to step in to fill the leadership void that clearly exists in Belarus. However, with the exception of Third Way, Young Front, and to a lesser extent the assembly of NGOs, very little coordination exists between youth groups. The evolution of various new initiatives has resulted in a fragmented, but not entirely divisive youth community. The inability to communicate and collaborate effectively does not seem to be the result of any lack of willingness or desire to coordinate movements within the greater youth community. Instead, without examples demonstrating the benefits of coordination, there seems to be a general lack of awareness as to the potential associated with extensive networking.

Last, but not least, it is necessary to highlight Young Front, one of the oldest youth organizations in Belarus. This organization remains the most visible and maintains certain continuity for the youth movement community in Belarus. Further, despite two leaders jailed and other members facing administrative arrest, the leadership is still trying to register with the authorities, struggling to set an example for civil society in Belarus.

## **I. Youth Movement Report**

### **1. The Tent Camp: Starting the Wave**

One of the great surprises of the March 2006 protest wave was the erection of a tent city largely consisting of 17-25 year old activists. Most were students or young professionals. Only 10-15 percent of the tent camp participants represented other age groups, including school children and pensioners. Around half of the active participants of the tent camp protest came from outside of Minsk from small regional towns. There were also representatives from Ukraine, Russia and Poland.

Based on organizational symbols present at the tent camp representatives of Zubr, Young Front, Hopits! and *Volnaja Moladz* were clearly visible. Internet communities such as *minsk\_by* and *tut.by* forum were also notable with balloons of white and blue, as were representatives of *Poglyad*, anarchist movements, oppositional political parties and others with various other identification schemes. However, it is misleading to assess the number of representatives affiliated with particular organizations based solely on the number of people within the vicinity of visual symbols since people were constantly shifting positions, helping to hold flags and posters in different areas. Only the anarchists stayed in a single group holding their own flags. They did not take an active part in tent camp life but protected the tent camp by standing in a circle around the tents. Nevertheless, the majority of active participants did not belong to any opposition party or youth organization. Most people took part in a protest for the first time in their lives.

All participants had the same motivation: they were fed up with living in fear, they were ashamed for Belarus which for so many years seemed to be getting more and more isolated from Europe. For many young people it was important to feel that they could somehow influence the fate of the state after many years of feeling a small and insignificant part of it. There were only a few people who named dissatisfaction with

the economic situation as their main motivation. Around one-third mentioned a crisis of Belarusian culture and the need for its revival. Almost all participants were against on-going political repression, intensive brainwashing by the media and the associated information vacuum in the country.

Those who went through detention and 'sutki' (administrative arrest for up to 15 days) were unanimous in their opinion that the atmosphere at the tent camp was both positive and inspiring. Despite low-quality food and poor conditions people stood cheerfully, supported each other, created further plans, sang songs, etc. Many of the current youth projects were created in prison when tent camp activists served their 15-day sentences. All the new projects and the very positive memory of those days has helped to create a positive image of protest, an important means of further motivating present and prospective elements of the new generation to join youth movements.

## **2. Political Initiatives**

### *Young Front*

The oldest youth structure in the country, despite numerous disturbances, has continued to attract new, young members. Under the jailed Pavel Severynets the organization became independent from its senior partner, the Belarusian Popular Front, which previously established a new branch, Young BNF, in autumn 2006.

During the elections the policy of Young Front was to support Aliaksandar Milinkevich, so many of its members were engaged in political campaigning and went through the subsequent repressions of the regime. In spring 2006 Young Front members took active part in protests. Being one of the oldest and well-known active youth structures, Young Front became the main target for the authorities attempt to prevent the growth of youth protest movements. The authorities prosecuted Artur Finkevich, a Young Front member detained on January 30, for graffiti. The use of slogans such as "We Have Had Enough!" and "We Want New Life!" resulted in two years of 'correctional work' (prison) in May 2006. On September 19, 2006 the Court of Appeal refused to overturn the sentence. At different times in spring and summer 2006 several other Young Front members were accused of hooliganism and sentenced to short terms of imprisonment. There have been several cases where parents were fined for the political activity of their children.<sup>3</sup>

The repression of Young Front members increased even further with the approach of the local electoral campaign, where Young Front members traditionally take on an active role. In the beginning of October militia arrested Young Front activist Pavel Krasovski on charges alleging involvement in the organization of explosions last year in Vitebsk – charges that warrant the death sentence in Belarus. After 10 days imprisonment, during which he was under enormous pressure, Pavel Krasovski was released with no official charges. On September 15, authorities detained Young Front Chairman Dmitri Dashkevich, later accusing him of participation in an unregistered organization – the same charges applied to Partnership activists. Young Front activists Sergej Lisichonak and Oleg Korban were considered 'witnesses' (suspects) in the case. The court sentenced Dashkevich to two years of corrective labor, a sentence widely understood as an attempt to 'behead' the organization.

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<sup>3</sup> On September 7, 2006 the parents of Young Front member Denis Efimovich were fined for "persistent evasion of the education of their son." Denis was detained three times for disseminating leaflets and participation in March protests.

Escalating repression influenced Young Front activities considerably, for example leading to the addition of flash mob action. Young Front also disseminates information about imprisoned members and takes part in Solidarity action around the country. The most famous act, attracting large scale public attention, was the hunger strike of summer 2006 initiated primarily by under-aged Young Front members demanding the freedom of political prisoners. The hunger strike was started by only a handful of young activists in Soligorsk, but several days later activists from Young Front and other movements joined in. Due to the personal involvement of Alexander Milinkevich the young activists were persuaded to end their hunger strike.

### *Bunt!*

Bunt! activists insist that they are not affiliated with any particular political organization. They describe their movement as a means of non-violent protest within which all people concerned about the situation in Belarus, regardless of their party or position, can take part. The initiative was built upon the back of previous networking efforts. The main purpose was to mobilize people for mass street protests in a way that might act as the platform for political change. The majority of Bunt! participants are previously politically unengaged young people who came to Oktiabrskaja Square in March 2006 and decided to continue their activity after the dispersal of the tent camp. Most of the Bunt! participants went through detention and arrests following the March events in Minsk. They strengthened mutual contacts during their imprisonment. The activists who were released early assisted the families of those imprisoned and started work towards the informational engagement of youth protest groups which appeared following the March events.

Early on in spring 2006, following post-election protests, Bunt! was mostly an underground organization without a name and little message development. Throughout the spring, activists worked towards the maturation and spread of their network, setting up contacts with democratic structures and creating future plans. Bunt! took an active part in most of the political flash mobs organized in Minsk and other Belarusian towns. In early summer they came up with Bunt! as their main message, which shortly became recognizable all around Belarus. This, as well as a growing network of activists and the increasing organization of protest actions,<sup>4</sup> led to the enlarged attention of law enforcement agencies, and consequently, the repression of most active Bunt! members. Some Bunt! participants were detained on several occasions or sentenced to short prison terms. Currently, there are open criminal cases against Bunt! activists. Authorities continue to pressure family members and some activists have been fired from jobs or excluded from universities.

The creation of a stable network has been hindered by the fact that many students who actively participated in protest events left to study in Poland in the Kalinowski program. Remaining activists concentrated more on internet-based networking and the international community. But increased repression and the focus of security agencies on their main communication device, internet forums, has further added to the sharp decline and put the existence of this initiative into serious question.

### *Hopits!*

Hopits! (hopic.info) was a network of local young activists and civil society organizations aimed at exacerbating social discontent by contrasting day-to-day

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<sup>4</sup> During summer 2006 Bunt! organized several events in different Belarusian towns. In Minsk, Grodno, Vitebsk and Soligorsk, for example, activists painted graffiti, disseminated leaflets, hung flags and organized flash mobs. Bunt! activists went to St. Petersburg for the G8 summit to protest against Russia's support of the non-democratic regime in Belarus.

reality (local hidden unemployment, corrupt local administration, etc.) with that presented by official propaganda, thus stimulating people to think about the inherent contradictions. Initially, their main purpose was to conduct a negative campaign against the local administration and to focus on the regional elections in 2007. Nevertheless, Hopits! managed a relatively extensive information campaign for the 2006 presidential elections, including leaflets and bulletins against TV propaganda. In the end, however, campaign implementation lagged far behind original plans, although a few Hopits! activists took a serious part in the functioning of the tent camp protest. Following the presidential elections, Hopits! as a campaign disappeared, however the network behind it continued to aid in the preparation for local elections.

### *Zubr*

Zubr activists were engaged in electoral campaigning and helping representatives of democratic forces. They were at the roots of the Jeans/Solidarity 16 campaign, actively participated at post-election protests, including the tent camp, and further flash-mob events. One of the main domains of Zubr activism became increasing international solidarity with Belarus and the extension of external public relations for the movement. In the beginning of May 2006 Zubr declared that its main goal would be the concentrated movement of all democratic forces against the regime and dissolved itself.<sup>5</sup> However, only a small component of Zubr joined the ranks of organized opposition. The core group is still together, continuing the Jeans/Solidarity campaign, although almost exclusively in Minsk.

### *Regional Initiatives*

Apart from the above-mentioned initiatives, which are either of a national character or primarily involve people from Minsk, there are a number of youth organizations working within smaller cities and towns throughout Belarus. Many regional activists beyond Minsk have stayed connected with resistance-type initiatives and took part in the electoral campaign in March 2006. Some participated at the tent camp, create web pages dedicated to regional projects and run online forums to facilitate internet debates.

In Gomel, the second largest Belarusian city, former youth center Hart (liquidated by the authorities in 2003, now active at [hart.3dway.org](http://hart.3dway.org)) runs a number of youth projects ranging from the historical to the cultural, focusing on information dissemination to attract public attention to regional and national problems in Belarus and to encourage participation in Solidarity events. Hart members participated in numerous flash mobs in Gomel and organized youth events such as the campaign against Russian National Unity (RNE), a pro-fascist organization. Many members, active during the electoral campaign, were questioned by KGB agents and threatened with prosecution.

Among other regional youth initiatives it is possible to mention Brest Youth Club (*Dzedzich*) which works on a number of projects to increase civil awareness, knowledge and activity among youth. The activities of Seventh Side (*Vitebsk*) are more political, addressing topical problems in municipal areas while attempting to involve young activists in political campaigns. In Grodno, there are several small groups of activists who take an active part in civil and political life. For example, students of history from Grodno University tried to prevent the illegal destruction of 15<sup>th</sup> century historical remains in the city center by local authorities intending to construct a traffic junction. Activists tried to attract the attention of the general

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<sup>5</sup> See the Zubr statement on self-dissemination at <http://www.charter97.org/bel/news/2006/05/05/zubr>.

public, organized flash mobs, wrote letters to the administration and prepared protest events. One student even lied down under an excavator – and action for which many were arrested.

### 3. Internet Activity

During the 2006 March events the internet was basically the only source of information concerning on-going political events. The web pages of democratic presidential candidates - tut.by news portal, svaboda.org, charter97.org, spring96.org, 3dway.org, belaruspartisan.org, afn.by and some others – were particularly useful. Blog activity played a vital role after the election. Live Journal (livejournal.com) became a popular debate platform where people exchanged their opinions, created and discussed possible scenarios and posted recent news. The absence of alternative media and restricted access to independent or international newspapers made the internet especially valuable as the only source of real information and an important means of maintaining communication between individuals and groups. For the next generation, the internet has been nothing short of revolutionary in its diverse role as the definitive communication medium.

In the post-election climate online communities have become a platform for the mobilization of young activists. Virtual space, due to high accessibility and the relevant anonymity of users, became the place where young people planned and coordinated their events. During the tent camp protests internet communities were kept informed by coordinators on the ground who kept in contact via mobile text messaging with protesters at Oktiabrskaja Square and therefore could post the most recent information about events, as well as details on the location of militia patrols and their policy at the moment (releasing or detaining people in the tent camp, for example). However, due to the open and anonymous nature of internet forums it was also necessary for individuals and organizations to be aware of 'brigade guys' or KGB agents posing as activists online in order to disrupt or determine protest plans.

Following the March events activists who were previously active within several major online communities at Live Journal started creating their own web pages and communities: by\_politycs, by\_mob, plac\_2006 (a community dedicated to events at Oktiabrskaja Square), *pravakatary* (provocators), *supraciu* (resistance) and others. A great number of smaller web pages created by people who took part in the March protests and tried to describe what happened to them (for example, okrestina.org) appeared in a very short period of time. The main disadvantage of the use of web pages was the low number of people who worked on them and their relatively short-lived existence (the above mentioned okrestina.org is no longer updated).

Another efficient method of self-mobilization was the dissemination of information among the users of home networks.<sup>6</sup> As a result, home networks were declared illegal. The authorities organized a campaign calling for the 'cleaning' of apartment complexes – in other words, the removal of all network wires. Further, 'brigade guys' continued their activity, actively searching the forums and blogs for the most active people. At the same time internet providers report growing pressure from the administration to increase the price of internet access. Belarusian authorities are currently discussing the possibility of using internet filters. A leak from the Ministry

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<sup>6</sup> This was the case in Minsk, for example, where the majority of people live in large, densely populated apartment complexes.

of Statistics suggests that Belarus may have already bought such technology from China.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. The Flash Mob Phenomenon

Flash mobs proved to be a success in the post-election period. This method of organization was a dynamic element that motivated youth groups to become part of a cutting edge, popular form of civil protest. Further reasons for the success of the flash mob means include: spontaneous organization; flat, de-centered organization; unstructured space for the creative expression of ideas; democratic access; the general and immediate positive reaction of people in the streets; and difficulty for law-enforcement agencies to regulate or repress the technology. Flash-mob participants had several online platforms for the exchange of ideas and the announcement of upcoming events. Nevertheless, the main source of dissemination of information remained chain emails, home networks and personal communication between activists.

In late spring participants involved in internet communities by\_mob<sup>8</sup> and Live Journal blogs created their own movement named Initiative. There are about five permanent participants in the movement, but the number of regular visitors to the web page is much higher. The movement is based on anonymous visitors who take part in the announced flash mobs. The usual number of flash mob participants has been 10 to 50 with different people coming to different events. There is no consistent, unchanging group of participants for each and every event.

The flash mobs focus on various issues or topics. Sometimes they are clearly political. For example, the flash mob *Idejnyja Gramadziane* involved a number of young people 'watching news on TV', the news being a screen of Oktiabrskaja Square while the students eyes were covered. Sometimes, however, flash mobs are intended to be simply funny or sarcastic. The wave of political flash mobs has decreased since mid-summer 2006, yielding to predominantly humorous events in public places. The beginning of the new school year was marked by several flash mobs dedicated to problems associated with education, such as the protest against the teaching of Belarusian history in Russian language. One of the major problems of the flash mob movement is that it is chiefly Minsk-based. Regional or rural flash mobs are not common and they are usually organized by local activists not connected to Initiative. Authorities have reacted aggressively to flash mobs, detaining participants when able to do so, but as yet have not brought any charges.

#### 5. Youth Initiatives of Non-Political Character

##### *CDMag*

This initiative grew out of *Studentskaja Dumka*, which was banned by the Ministry of Justice in 2005. Some *Studentskaja Dumka* activists continued their work with youth in a new format of CD Magazine (previously available at [cdmagazine.org](http://cdmagazine.org)). They currently run several social and political orientation projects and work with youth that would like to engage in creative activity. Thus, the CD Magazine projects are implemented by and for young people with the main target group being youth up to 25 years of age. Most CD Magazine participants are from Minsk, or students from other regions studying in Minsk, however the initiative aims to maintain contact with youth in more rural areas of Belarus.

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://charter97.org/bel/news/2006/09/01/china>.

<sup>8</sup> See [www.community.livejournal.com/by\\_mob](http://www.community.livejournal.com/by_mob)

### *Third Way*

The concept behind Third Way movement underwent significant changes over the last year. Previously, Third Way was an intellectual club with an online platform at [3dway.org](http://3dway.org), but after the publication of cartoons featuring Lukashenka criminal charges were laid by the authorities. As such, Third Way activists had to rethink how to combine policy-related activity with the intellectual club framework.

During elections Third Way team provided assistance with web page maintenance to democratic candidates (both Aliaksandr Milinkevich and Aliaksandr Kozulin). At the same time Third Way was developing its own network of contacts and methods of gathering and publishing operative news. The initiative had a network of volunteers who provided up-to-date information to four administrators, who in their turn updated the web page round the clock. Third Way activists participated at Solidarity events for the imprisoned and disappeared, supported tent camp protesters by providing news coverage and bringing essential items to protesters. Third Way also organized monitoring of foreign media outlets and tried to direct the attention of Europeans to Belarusian issues.

Since the elections Third Way has been developing its reach through information and analysis. The initiative actively took part in an information campaign highlighting the problem of political prisoners in Belarus and assisted in creating a web page calling for the release of political prisoners (See <http://za.nashih.info>). As well, Third Way continues to engage young people in further analytical activity. The initiative is modernizing its web page and works to broaden the network of young analytical experts, as well as further developing online debate and discussion clubs.

### *Studenty.by*

This internet resource reflects the latest in student life. The distinct feature of the resource is their exclusive orientation toward the student community and people interested in student-style life. As well, the Belarusian language approach is unique. Using predominantly interactive methods [studenty.by](http://studenty.by) attract students who are interested in alternative news and a quality social life, aiming to further encourage more active participation in community events and the formation of an active civil culture. All participants can post e-news on the web page. In this way, students from all Belarusian regions can get involved in the work of the initiative, including organized events such as concerts, parties, flash mobs ([studenty.by](http://studenty.by) were among the first to start organizing flash mobs, but in the meantime have branched out into other areas), trips and meetings. [Studenty.by](http://studenty.by) stresses their apolitical character, however they do not prevent the members of their group from expressing their political position. During the last elections members of [studenty.by](http://studenty.by) helped democratic candidates with creative campaign work. Many participated in the tent camp - three were imprisoned. [Studenty.by](http://studenty.by) cooperates with other student groups and initiatives, actually and virtually, actively seeking to increase communication. In spring and summer 2006 members of [studenty.by](http://studenty.by) worked to engage young people with the organization of the annual music festival *Basovischa*. Other activities to attract the attention of students include the use of Belarusian language cartoons and the opening of new directories on their web page.

## **6. Official Youth Policy**

Following post-election protests, with a view to upcoming local elections, the administration began ideological work with young people through the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM). Officially, this organization unites high school and university students, however, authorities recently increased pressure on employees

at education establishments, especially high school teachers, to join the structure as well. BRSM advertising materials are posted in all education institutions and during the spring-summer period Belarusian media became more active in advertising BRSM. As BRSM membership is largely organized through a system of rewards and threats there are not many original supporters of official policy. Most BRSM members are politically passive or apathetic when entering BRSM. However, once part of the organization members undergo serious ideological brainwashing. In the majority of cases, this does not make them politically active in any direct way but certainly forms a pro-authority attitude that allows top-down political processes to proceed unquestioned. At the same time, BRSM leaders and activists who have proven their loyalty to the administration are actively engaged in a number of business projects and political activities. Authorities plan on having BRSM members run in local elections against young democratic leaders, with subsequent victories leading to further representation of loyal youth in local councils. Also, private sources report the engagement of BRSM members in a number of side activities. For example, according to unconfirmed sources, some BRSM members provided training for pro-fascist youth groups with BRSM money which was supposed to go to sport training. Such activity is of course not publicized but occurs seamlessly and silently alongside political activity and youth engagement.

## **7. Problems Ahead: Growing Persecution and the Immigration of Young Activists**

### *Persecution*

Long before the elections, Belarusian authorities made it clear that opposition activity might be regarded as terrorism. During elections, the KGB stated plainly that street protests would be considered terrorist acts. Currently, further amendments to laws regarding the fight against terrorism and extremism are being drafted which will allow the authorities to increase the scope of repression through persecution against any form of opposition, including participation in free media.

As discussed earlier, after dispersing the tent camp security structures concentrated on preventing youth activity. The measures applied against activists by the authorities have not significantly changed as compared to pre-election times: authorities widely use detention, personal humiliation, physical assault, expulsion from education establishments, dismissal from work and the intimidation of family members. However, the scale of repression has changed significantly. The authorities, obviously worried by the increasing wave of youth activism, made it clear that they would try to prevent any kind of public activity, political or otherwise. Assaults by shaved hooligans in mufti against young people wearing only badges stating *Za Svabodu!* in public places became alarmingly regular. Whenever possible, militia sought to detain participants in flash mobs such as 'Ice-Cream Fans' (featuring the public eating of ice-cream in the center of the city) or 'Smile' (consisting of flash mobbers smiling at people). Severe sentences against Partnership activists and arrests of the Young Front leaders usually ended in minor fines, but the general direction of the events served to confirm the administration's determination to work toward the further elimination of youth activism.

### *Programs of Support for Repressed Activists*

Following the wave of pre- and post-election repression against activists and a call from the Democratic Forces to support Belarusian fighters for democracy, a number of foreign governments set up stipends at their universities for students expelled from Belarusian schools for political activity. Democratic Forces set up the

Committee for the Defense of the Repressed, led by Milinkevich's wife Inna Kulej, which helped send repressed students to various foreign universities.

Stipends for the repressed students to study abroad were initiated in Austria, Poland, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Estonia, Germany, Netherlands, Lithuania, Latvia, France and Sweden. Some other countries proposed assistance for Belarusian students (Germany, France, Norway, Italy, Slovakia and Switzerland). European Humanities University (EHU), based in Vilnius, Lithuania, provided all Belarusian students enrolled in full-time programs with stipends, including living expenses for students who applied to EHU through the Committee for the Defense of the Repressed (later supported by the European Commission).

In the first two months of the Committee's work around 500 people applied for assistance. About half of these people were students persecuted for political activity. According to the Committee's records 70% of students looking for help were expelled from universities for political reasons, 30% of students were under threat of expulsion for their opinion and/or civil activity. There were also recent school graduates who were afraid that their political engagement (many of them were arrested during the March protests) could affect their chance to enter a Belarusian university. There were 10 graduates of the Belarusian Humanitarian Lyceum and 28 people who had problems continuing their graduate education. Fifteen people applied to the Committee for external study at EHU.

That 500 active young people attempted to enter foreign university programs revealed a serious weakness in Belarusian society: the 'brain drain' of political activists. The decrease in the youth protest movement and associated events by summer was to a great extent caused by the fact that many newly engaged youth activists left the country. Another problem concerned information about possible cases of the abuse of scholarships and programs. In particular, the *Kastus Kalinouski* program, proved contentious. There have been complaints that foreign education programs seem unable to accommodate the 'right' people all the time. As a result, the Committee for the Defense of the Repressed was subsequently blamed both for letting activists out of the country and for the poor selection of students.

As analysts at TOLBlog Belarus point out, confusion and mistakes were unavoidable. First of all, the number of scholarships is finite and not necessarily everyone could have been accommodated. Second, fraud is also a near-certainty and it does not need to have anything to do with the opposition. Opportunists abound regardless of political affiliation.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the program provided significant moral (and financial) support to young activists in Belarus and ensured that they were no longer afraid of expulsion from Belarusian universities.

## **8. Youth Activism and the Belarusian Diaspora**

The presidential elections of 2006 boosted the development of youth activism throughout the Belarusian diaspora. Youth activism generated energetic support during the days of the tent camp in Minsk that continues, not just domestically but also internationally, in the post-election period. The Belarusian Initiative in Minnesota, the Belarusian-American Civil Initiative *Poglyad*, the Belarusian Committee in Paris and others serve as examples. The main goal for these civil initiatives is the support of democratic processes inside Belarus and raising awareness of the situation in

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<sup>9</sup> Scholarship fund provocation, see <http://www.tolblogs.org/belarus/en/?m=200608>.

Belarus across the international community. In contrast to the older generation of diaspora activists, young Belarusians abroad mostly connect their activities with the direct effect on the processes inside Belarus rather than putting effort solely into the maintenance of a Belarusian national identity. This change in priorities has been met in part with the newly established Office for Democratic Belarus in Brussels, which serves to increase information and lobby governing bodies in the heart of the EU. Such a combination could reinvigorate the Belarusian diaspora both in Europe and the United States.

Youth activism abroad generally involves Belarusians picketing (mostly Belarusian Solidarity Days), conducting international solidarity campaigns and collecting signatures. The new wave of young activists can be characterized by efficient cooperation with initiatives and individuals inside Belarus, particularly via increasing use of the internet. A growing number of young Belarusian students volunteer for various internet projects focused on information distribution. Mailing lists were organized, for example, in the U.S. and Germany, and proved to be an efficient tool for the distribution of information about upcoming events and updates about the situation in Belarus. Since Belarusian diaspora activists increasingly tend to work more directly with their partners inside Belarus through virtual spaces, social cooperation and the diaspora community appears set to develop.

## II. Focus Group Survey: “Living - not dying”

The Pontis Foundation commissioned four focus groups in December 2006, each with 8-10 people and the following respective characteristics: regular, politically inactive youth, students, working youth and political activists (including pro-Lukashenka BRSM members).

The primary emotional disposition of Belarusian youth revealed was the feeling of mediocrity associated with existence - “Living – not dying” as Sergey of group two stated. Other problems exposed by the focus groups include:

- The necessity of work, job placement
- The impossibility of surviving without the help of parents
- The absence of a satisfactory salary
- Work experience, attaining employment without experience

The emotional suppression is tangible and in part explained by the lack of social life and the aggravation most young people experience when not able to vent their frustrations. “Everything became strict, no matter where you go, let’s say, to a football game, you can’t even drink a beer.” (Sergey) Interestingly, these sort of words come from young people who are not yet consciously aware of the purposeful implementation of policy and ideology aimed at the very restrictions against which they struggle.

### *Opposing Directions: Youth Disposition*

In reference to the modern disposition of youth in Belarus we can speak generally about the development of two diametrically opposed directions.

The first direction, **Cubanization** (or Lukashization), consists of adaptation to the existing regime. A segment of the youth population conforms or attempts to conform to the rules of the game set forth by the regime. They join BRSM, work within official structures (many educated young people work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and

establish a career accordingly. This tendency exhibits a significant aspect of the Belarusian national character, a sort of tolerance that often takes the readily available shape of conformism.

A second dynamically opposed direction common to many Belarusian youth is termed **radicalization**. The feeling of discontent and dissatisfaction with the regime has been slowly but surely strengthening among youth groups. This dissatisfaction leads to more and more radical displays of disaffection, regularly occurring in two forms: either leaving the country or fighting against the regime via new forms of youth protest (flash mobs, unregistered youth organizations and so on).

The difference in directions can be seen very clearly when comparing the post-election rallies in 2001 and 2006, respectively. The rallies after the elections in 2001 and 2006 were completely different. 2001 was a rally of the dissatisfied. 2006 was a rally supported by people who had lost their fear of authority. The shift in the social psychological constitution over the five year span is immense. The question of concern at this point in time is to which direction Belarusian society will turn in the near future – Cubanization or radicalization.

*The Official Youth (Belarusian Republican Youth Union)*

Fortunately, among the focus groups there were three former BRSM organizers that had acted as branch coordinators within the organization and thus knew the situation from the inside. The word that repeatedly came to the fore in their comments concerning BRSM was 'lie'.

Admission to BRSM is not voluntary. Yulia from group two reported: "I can say unambiguously that enrollment there is forced volunteerism. One social worker said, 'we are not forcing you, but it is necessary'. When you refuse to do something, they tell you that you might encounter some problems. Better sign up – fewer problems."

Members that toe the line are rewarded with leading positions. However, following and supporting the regime through organizational participation often involves reporting along ideological lines rather than from the collection of real data. This may mean misrepresenting actual membership numbers or forging documentation.

Lying, however, is the main characteristic of the official ideology of Lukashenka's regime in general and not particular to the youth component. This is one of the key findings that emerged directly from the focus groups and not an ideological twist of the findings. For example, Anna from group one states: "It happened that I was a secretary at BRSM. And we needed 25 people out of 30 to join the organization. And I had to make it happen. At some point they started putting pressure...I would have been in favor at BRSM if I'd somehow made it happen". To force the issue, they promise to help with admission to university, among other things, but nothing is done.

In terms of creating awareness among the general public BRSM has an obvious advantage. BRSM is the only youth organization represented in the state media of Belarus. But BRSM is not merely represented, but openly advertised. "The problem is that we don't know anything besides BRSM," said Yulia. Among the non-state youth organizations people know only of Zubr. Such organizations as Young Front and Partnership are barely known.

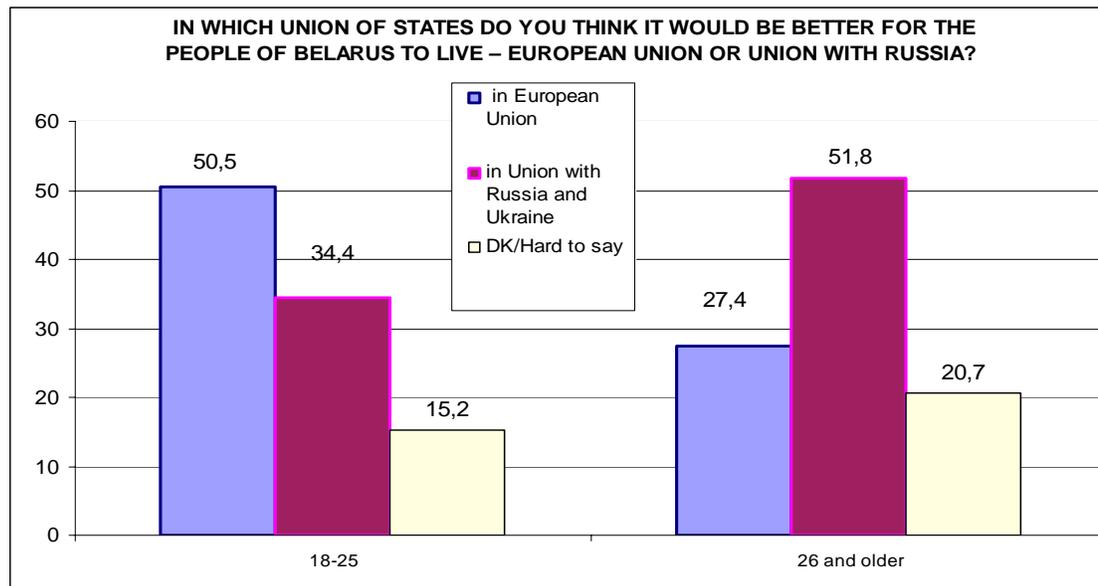
*Geopolitical Conceptions: Russia vs. the European Union*

In general the youth of Belarus are focused on Europe. If the choice is put, for example, between Russia and Europe youth almost unanimously opt for a more intense relationship with the European Union. From all the participants in the focus groups only one declared a preference for Russia.

Certainly there are conditions and assumptions in any consideration of geopolitical alliance, however. It is clear that Belarus is no exception and that state propaganda has seeped into youth consciousness. On the question “Should Belarus join the EU?” answers such as “it would be quite good. But depending on what conditions. If we will be enslaved – then no” (Dina, group two) or “if we give all to Europe, then why do we need that Europe” (Alexander, group two) were typical. There seems to be a lingering perception of Europe as a colonizing force and not merely an untainted or unquestionable means to a better future.

A negative image of Europe seemed to be largely associated with the prospect of a continually expanding European Union. A massive, pessimistic campaign illustrating the EU acceptance of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania and Bulgaria appears to have had an impact. Even if all Lithuanians were to drive golden Mercedes as a result of EU acceptance the mass media in Belarus would show them riding on carts. Nevertheless, there are fears associated with EU indifference - “nobody is waiting for us there.” A further concern rests upon economic insecurity – “If we join the EU gas will be sold to us for the same prices and we are non-competitive” (Yulia, group two). The fear of Russia is a more emotional stream rationalized by way of the ‘Russian brothel’, the criminal situation in Russia or the war in Chechnya.

Quantitative sociological research clearly demonstrates that the overall orientation toward Europe rests heavily upon the preference of the 18-25 age bracket.



One essential feature of dynamics of value systems is important here: the structure of value system of a person does not change within the life cycle of a person. Once formed, hierarchy of values of a person is preserved during all life of that person.

Borders of values do not lie within the life cycle of a person, but the watershed goes between generations. The geopolitical structure of generation is kept further on. Thus a layer of the pro-European geopolitical orientation is thickening.

#### *The Isolation of Belarus*

It is possible to say that young people in Belarus do not sufficiently realize the extent of the isolation of their country. Basically, they are not able to go to other countries. But young people frequently complain about western embassies in Belarus rather than the self-isolation carried out by the current regime. That fact that President Lukashenka himself cannot enter the majority of civilized countries in the world is surely indicative. As suggested by focus group comments, it is somewhere on the periphery of consciousness, but not perceived as something sharply abnormal.

The same can be said about the list of banned officials. Essentially, everyone knows about it, but it is not perceived as something particular to Belarus or construed as a clear difference between Belarus and the European Union. Belarusian youth do not effectively compare Belarus to other countries and as such Belarus is not perceived in a negative light. Here, again, the success of official propaganda is beyond doubt. "Our borders are not closed, goods arrive - there is no isolation." (Dina, group two)

#### *Ecology*

Young people in Belarus perceive NGOs of an ecological orientation as necessary. The function of these organizations is to renew the work of state bodies of a similar structure, "in order to push the authorities" (Alexander, group two). However, there is also a sense that state organizations do not have sufficient funding to carry out necessary reforms. "It is necessary to expand the outlook of authorities on the ecological situation. Somewhere it is necessary to add money, somewhere it is necessary to do something. To put problems before authority, so they would help, where, what." (Nikolay, group two).

#### *Human Rights*

There are at least two perspectives on the problem of the tolerance of human rights violations in Belarus. On the one hand, there seems to be a lack of sensitivity to the infringement of human rights. Many people, including youth, see or experience numerous infringements but perceive them as normal acts which have always existed. As such, there is little of the sharp rejection or extreme indignation that leads to open protest in the streets. On the other hand, there seems to be a serious lack of knowledge concerning human rights. "We have great problems to know our rights. Here people do not know them. So it seems to me, that they are being violated. Though I cannot really say that I know them well either." (Yulia, group two)

#### *Civil Society*

Few from the focus groups gave a clear definition of civil society. Civil society was defined as a certain condition of a society advanced in law and not as a part of society functioning beyond the control of the state. For example: "Civil society is a place where anybody can realize himself as a citizen or a person. This society, which is ready so that each person will realize himself." (Igor, group one) Or: "The civil society is a society in which human rights are observed. If the rights are not observed, then it is not such a civil society." (Anya, group one) Thus, in the youth community there is no precise definition of what civil society is. There is no single representation planted in the consciousness of young people in Belarus. This is one of the reasons for the state of affairs of civil society in Belarus today. The regime promotes the continuation of this sort of ambiguity because it encourages political

indecision or even apathy. In this way top-down authority is more easily maintained as the norm by which all abide.

#### *Forbidden Names, Musicians*

Young people in Belarus generally understand that performances at oppositional events are extremely dangerous for performers. “Those bands and musicians who participate in oppositional fests sign a verdict for themselves that they cannot participate in official actions.” (Dmitry, group one) The public reaction to such performances can be divided in two main ways. First, some see the events as far too political, with too many political statements taking away from the event as musical performance. Second, others see it merely as a party and the underlying purpose is altogether lost. Anya from group one summarizes: “The only thing that is possible is to come here to listen to a concert. There is a purpose for this meeting. It is oppositional political action. But here it takes on the character of a completely non-political event. On one side it is a political action, but from inside – simply a concert. Many people go there without political purpose, just to hang out.”

#### *Youth and Information*

There is an idea among many of the youth in Belarus that the internet is the key to information dissemination. As such, the internet is widely used by youth in Belarus. However, it must be noted that young people in Belarus tend to search mainly for non-political information. Even among frequent users interest is largely restricted to weather, study, work, entertainment and shopping (group 2). Thus, despite high levels of internet use among young people in Belarus there appears to be little or no correlation to increased political awareness.

#### *The Essence of Youth Apathy*

Following post-election demonstrations, youth activists were deeply disappointed by the failure of political and civic leaders to parlay the social and political momentum gained by oppositional forces into a sustained effort. “We are ready” say the young activists, “we are ready for the arrests, even. But we came ready for everything and we were told to calmly walk away.” It is necessary to understand youth apathy not only as a response to the senselessness of resistance to the regime, but as a reaction to the weakness of present oppositional leaders. Young activists were deeply disappointed by the failure of the political opposition to use the protests as leverage for political change after the presidential election. Instead, political leaders spent their time jockeying for position rather than capitalizing on the window of opportunity that so many young people had worked and fought for.