



## **Focus Group Report**

### **National Democratic Institute for International Affairs**

#### Belarusian public opinion: the political and economic situation prior to and after the 2010 presidential elections

The National Democratic Institute organized focus groups in Belarus from February 8 to March 5, 2011. A total of seven focus groups were organized in Minsk, Mahilou and Orsha. Fifty five people participated, including 27 men and 28 women. Minsk focus groups were divided into five groups by socio-economic status (pensioners, state employees, workers, students and entrepreneurs). Orsha and Mahilou focus groups were mixed age and socio-economic groups.

The purpose of the focus groups was to explore public sentiment regarding the Belarusian presidential elections of 2010, and the post election crackdown on democratic activists, as well as public expectations for the future and reactions to economic and political developments in Belarus. The insights from the 55 focus group discussants provide an enlightening look at the political and economic perceptions of Belarusians in the “quiet” period following the crackdown against democratic forces but prior to the beginning of the full scale devaluation of the Belarusian ruble and the economic crisis currently engulfing Belarus. Focus groups provide valuable, qualitative insights about public attitudes. They should not be confused with public opinion polls, which provide more quantitative information.

#### Summary of Findings and Conclusions:

Focus group results reveal dissatisfaction with the status quo and anxiety regarding the direction Belarus was heading even prior to the recent economic meltdown. The findings suggest there were significant levels of distrust and fatigue with Lukashenko and his regime. There was an openness to alternative ideas and solutions, though there was little faith or support in the democratic candidates as real alternatives to the regime.

The level of discontent continued to grow following the presidential election and discussants shared a common belief that their living standards were deteriorating even prior to the recent economic issues in Belarus. Based on the focus group results we can assume citizens are primarily blaming the regime for their economic problems and that government political and economic propaganda is failing to resonate with the public.

Despite the increased economic anxiety demonstrated in the focus groups, the probability of open and sustained protests will likely remain low, absent major economic shocks that are felt throughout the system. Long-term but steady decline will likely be tolerated by the population but over time it too could subvert the quality of life demands of citizens enough to push them towards demanding change. The focus groups show that there is significant interest in and demand for alternative political ideas and even new political leadership. Two thirds of discussants say they did not vote for Lukashenko. This

does not translate into immediate demands for his departure, but the population feels insecure and believes that there is no qualified alternative to run the country. Despite the democratic opposition's difficulties, including the low levels of support they currently enjoy from the public, there is no question that tremendous opportunities exist for any democratic personality or force able to engage citizens and outline a clear, low risk and believable path towards change.

If Belarusian democrats are to take advantage of the opportunities they must deliver persuasive messages that both demonstrate the failures of the regime and offer credible alternative solutions. These contrasting messages must be built around important issues that affect the lives of ordinary citizens, such as quality of life or economic development of the country. Discussants' comments demonstrate that attacking Lukashenko without offering positive alternatives may drive voters away from him, but it does not necessarily drive voters to the democratic candidates. Other recommendations that can be made to the democratic forces based on these focus group results are:

- Maximize use of alternative sources of media. The public is skeptical of traditional media and is looking for more reliable sources of information. Utilize the internet to the degree possible but also develop grassroots networks of communicators. Focus group results suggest citizens trust their friends, families and acquaintances more than any other news source.
- Increase and sustain the level of communication with citizens and focus on issues of direct interest to the target audience (primarily economic). Party, issue and candidate promotion only during election season is insufficient to reach and persuade the necessary electoral audiences.
- Democratic forces must focus on solutions to problems, not political processes or explanations of how the regime inhibits their performance. The public understands the repression but has little sympathy for the democratic forces. Belarusians have high standards and expect solutions, not excuses.
- Belarusians have a more sophisticated understanding of the level of fraud occurring in their country than many suppose. They understand their elections are rigged but many do not see a connection between better elections and improving their lives. Alerting citizens to the existence of electoral fraud is not sufficient. To impact public opinion and build demands for electoral integrity, democratic forces should focus messages to explain 1) why elections matter and 2) how fraud and the stolen elections connect to Belarusian quality of life.
- Economics and politics seem to be viewed as two separate and disconnected spheres. Economics is real and serious while politics is perceived as a "show." To build support for political change in the country democratic forces must demonstrate to citizens that the two spheres are inextricably linked and that democratic leaders have credible solutions to the economic problems in Belarus.

## **1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS BY TOPIC**

### Summary: 2010 Elections and Candidates

The 2010 elections were not seen as an opportunity for real change and the overwhelming expectation in society was that Lukashenko would remain in power after the elections. The increased political space

prior to the election, an effect of Lukashenko's liberalization policy, was noted by the participants but it was generally discounted as not serious. The elections themselves were seen as false and participants were able to reference specific examples of fraud and electoral pressure occurring in their communities. There was, however, little outrage or anger among the participants in the focus groups.

While almost all participants expressed a belief that Lukashenko would remain in power they were also strongly receptive to alternative ideas and alternative leadership in Belarus. A significant portion of the focus group discussants said they did not vote for Lukashenko in the recent elections. Even among those who claimed to have voted for Lukashenko, only a minority said they did so because they truly supported him. Others voted for him because they felt there were no other options or because they feared the possibility of change. This lack of active support for Lukashenko demonstrates an opportunity for democratic forces to win support from a highly dissatisfied electorate if they can demonstrate credible leadership and solutions.

Discussants may be dissatisfied with the status quo but they were hardly enamored with the democratic opposition candidates during the election period, and they remain unenthusiastic about the opposition following the elections. The candidates were seen as unqualified and unprepared. Discussants recognized the difficulties candidates faced in promoting themselves but were unsympathetic to the candidates' inability to present themselves and their ideas more clearly. Citizens recognize the challenges, understand the limitations of the system and yet still expect the democratic opposition to meet their high expectations for political leadership.

#### Summary: December 19<sup>th</sup> Crackdown

The majority of discussants evaluated the December 19 demonstration as an act of spontaneous political expression and condemned the repressive actions by the authorities.

Despite aggressive efforts by the government to impose its own version of events, the discussants demonstrated remarkable scepticism toward official information they received via government controlled mass media. Instead, discussants actively sought out alternative information online and from friends and family. First-person networks were without question they most trusted sources of information.

There was a pervasive belief among discussants that the demonstrations began as a genuine peaceful grassroots protest that was manipulated and turned into an excuse for a "provocation" by the government and/or the opposition. The vast majority of discussants saw the "provocation" as being initiated by the government, but a sizable minority blamed democratic forces at least equally. Regardless of who was seen as to blame for the provocations on the square the discussants initial reaction to the crackdown that began on December 19<sup>th</sup> was shock and disgust. Discussants felt the authority's response was an excessively violent and a cruel overreaction to a clearly peaceful demonstration. Many participants in the focus groups felt the crackdown was designed not to simply disburse a crowd on December 19th but to intimidate the population from participating in similar events in the future.

The December 19 demonstration in Minsk was seen by most discussants as a dramatic, one-time event, but ultimately not one with long term consequences. . Many discussants felt repression would weaken and there would be a gradual normalization of the political situation. Prisoners were expected to receive short sentences or to be traded for economic concessions from the West. In comparison to

other events around the world, such as the Egyptian protests, the Belarusian demonstration was seen as minor. It was also seen as less important than concerns about the economy and other social issues.

#### Summary: Post Election Economic Outlook

The mood of discussants regarding the post election economic situation in Belarus was overwhelmingly negative. The results of the focus group show that as of March, 2011, prior to the Belarusian currency crisis, there was a sharp increase in popular discontent with the economic situation and the outlook for the future. We can assume that as the ruble went into free fall, industries began to suffer and prices continued to rise, the economic anxiety has only increased.

Discussants were clear in their belief that the quality of life for Belarusians had deteriorated since the 2010 presidential elections. Purchasing power was down and many saw Lukashenko’s pre-election promises and pay raises as hollow gestures inadequate to address rising prices. Even employees working for the state, normally a group insulated from major economic crisis, were nervous about the economic situation and the possibility of government layoffs.

#### Summary: Potential for Citizen Activism

The blame for the deteriorating situation and negative outlook was most often placed on the authorities. Focus group participants clearly felt the quality of their lives had deteriorated but not to the point where discontent would lead to mass action against the government. Based on discussant responses it seems the “protest mood” amongst the population was low in March for a number of reasons. Many discussants believed the regime could still right itself and continue to maintain standards of living in return for political quiescence, preserving the “social contract.” Moreover, discussants saw few viable options to the regime, and as explained further below, faith in the opposition was limited. Finally, there was pervasive cynicism about elections and even political protest as self serving and empty exercises, termed “a show” by many.

## **2. BASIC PARAMETERS OF RESEARCH**

The purpose of the research was to gauge public perceptions regarding:

- the 2010 presidential elections;
- the December 19<sup>th</sup> crackdown; and
- the outlook for the political and economic future of Belarus.

Group	Number of Participants	Date and Place	Nature of Participants
1.	8 people: 4 men, 4 women	2/8/11, Minsk	Pensioners, aged 53-74
2.	7 people: 2 men, 5 women	2/10/11, Minsk	State employees, aged 29-55
3.	8 people: 5 men, 3 women	2/18/11, Minsk	Workers, aged 26-47
4.	8 people: 4 men, 4 women	2/22/11, Minsk	Students, aged 17-24
5.	8 people: 4 men, 4 women	2/25/11, Minsk	Entrepreneurs, aged 26-46
6.	8 people: 4 men, 4 women	3/3/11, Mahilou	Mahilou residents (mixed), aged 20-62
7.	8 people: 4 men, 4 women	3/5/11, Orsha	Orsha residents (mixed), aged 22-64

### 3. DETAIL OF FINDINGS BY TOPIC

#### A. Pre-Election Period – Evaluation and Expectations from the Elections

Discussants recognized the 2010 pre-election period as different and more open than past Belarusian elections. Observed differences from past elections included the large number of candidates participating in the elections; increased candidate access to media; greater opportunities for candidates to conduct pre-election activities (pickets, leafleting etc...) and the lack of Russian support for Lukashenko during the campaign period. A minority of discussants expressed their hope that the new election environment might equate to an opportunity for change.

*“There was some hope that elections would be honest. Actually, before elections my friends and I expected that there will at least be a second round. Because there was a large number of candidates and somebody honestly getting over 50 percent was improbable.”*

*Male student, Minsk*

The optimist minority was, however, challenged by the majority of the FG discussants who had no special expectations for the elections and were confident that Lukashenko would remain in power.

*“I understood that these are elections without a choice. I didn’t come to elections and I didn’t vote.”*

*Male student, Mahilou*

*“I conducted an experiment. In June, I asked for “Narodnaya Volya” (“People’s Will”) in the kiosk. I was told they didn’t sell such newspapers. That they didn’t even know about such newspapers. Before elections, I asked for “Narodnaya Volya” again in the kiosk. They gave it to me at once and named the price. They didn’t just say they had it, but said the price at once. It is about a newspaper which was forbidden for sale four months before. It says that everything changed before elections to show that we’ve got democracy and everything is going well. Just like holding down prices before elections. I don’t know how it is going to turn out now, I haven’t asked for “Narodnaya Volya” in a kiosk yet.”*

*Male entrepreneur, Mahilou*

Distrust of the electoral system was pervasive amongst focus group participants. They noted the poor organization of the electoral process as well as blatant falsifications they witnessed or heard of from friends. Electoral problems included:

- unprofessional work of election commissions;
- mistakes in voter lists;
- cases of voting without a passport;
- absence or inefficient work of independent observers at polling stations;
- early voting which allowed authorities to manipulate results; and
- precinct protocols that were generally false - drawn up in advance of the elections and requiring only the signature of the precinct commission chair

*My husband and I voted twice. The thing is, we are registered in one place and live in another. We voted in both places, and nowhere did they ask for our passport. This is probably how 102 percent voted in Mahilou region.”*

*Female, Mahilou*

*"Are you sure all people voted for him? I believe there are lots of dark spots in these elections. There were cases when people didn't come to elections because they left or chose not to come, and a signature was next to their names in the lists. Many friends and neighbors told me about it."*

*Female teacher, Orsha*

*"A guy I know observed the elections, and they weren't allowed to watch the vote count."*

*Male entrepreneur, Mahilou*

*"Early voting regularly takes away some 17 percent. These are your votes stolen."*

*Male retiree, Minsk*

*"Well, it's not important who voted for whom. It depends how everyone counted. I've got a friend working in one organization, I'm not going to say which one, so it's the end, 8 PM, a bit later, girls are counting votes, then people from central election commission come and give them a voting protocol with numbers for signature. They say: "What, aren't you finished yet?" – "We are not going to sign anything." The girls were adamant and said they won't sign anything until they finish counting. And they didn't and counted until 2 AM. Then they were really scolded for that."*

*Male entrepreneurs, Minsk*

*"I've got a person I know who counted. Everything was as described. The elections hadn't finished yet, but the protocol was already signed."*

*Male entrepreneurs, Minsk*

Distrust of the election process was compounded by the blatant examples of pressure and intimidation used by the authorities to force citizens to participate in the elections. Many discussants referenced personal experiences of the experiences of friends and family who were pressured to vote or to sign signature papers for Lukashenko, particularly those susceptible to loss of employment or expulsion because they were working or studying at state institutions.

*"We said we won't sign the sheets, but still sign them because our bosses made us."*

*Female state funded employee, Minsk*

*"And when they come up to you and tell you to sign, you tell them you won't and you don't like this policy, and then they tell you: 'Will you need kindergarten for your child?' And that's all, a person signs. And then they are afraid to change their opinion."*

*Female state funded employee, Minsk*

*"I've got a friend, he's a sophomore in the Economic University – they came to their dorm and told them to vote, or they'll have no place to live."*

*Male student, Minsk*

*"A fool can't do anything right and our officials as well. I've got a friend teaching in a college (railroad technical school). He signed a document in his organization that he won't participate in anything, in any opposition's manifestations."*

*Male, Mahilou*

While discussants were not surprised that Lukashenko remained President after December 19th they did express serious doubts about the voter turnout numbers and the election results released by the Central Election Commission. Doubts were fueled by their impressions of the flawed electoral process as well as their personal interactions. The dominant perspective of the discussants was that Lukashenko could not have received so many votes.

*“And one more interesting thing: first presidential elections in Belarus – they said how each city voted; second presidential elections in Belarus – they listed all regional centers except Minsk; third presidential elections in Belarus – a total figure for all regions, not a single regional center; the most recent presidential elections in Belarus – a splendid figure, “75 percent is enough for me”, we all remember that. We all grew up in the USSR and we all remember that plan is fulfilled 104 percent! In total we’ve got 79 percent and a little something.”*

*Male state funded employee, Minsk*

*“He (Lukashenko) won himself... maybe not with such percentage... I believe fewer people voted for him.”*

*Female, Mahilou*

*“We laughed at elections, especially at the percentage of those who voted. We didn’t vote, but they announced that 98 percent of Mahilou residents did. I know a huge number of people who didn’t come to elections.”*

*Female, Mahilou*

*“Well, let’s see, for example, how the Elections went. Some said that A. Lukashenko got 70 percent of the votes, others that he got 80 percent, based on all the informal data. My friend was in the office of the CEC, when they counted votes, and they were only getting 30-40 percent for him.”*

*Male, student, Minsk*

Despite rejecting government propaganda regarding the elections and being generally skeptical and negative towards the election process and the election results, there was little sense of outrage among the focus group participants regarding what they saw as a clearly fraudulent election. The discussants were not happy with the elections but they seemed to grudgingly accept the situation as example of standard operating procedure in Belarus.

## B. Evaluation of presidential candidates

At the start of the campaign all of the candidates were relatively unknown to voters. Focus group participants were able to form opinions regarding the democratic candidates despite the limited information available. The main sources of information about candidates were pre-election speeches on state TV channels, leaflets distributed by the opposition, and for some, the internet. The internet was an important source of alternative information, but it was not comparable in reach to television. The opinions formed regarding the candidates are of course limited by unfair campaign conditions and it can be assumed opinions would have been different under fairer conditions

A major complaint of discussants was that democratic candidates did not present themselves as adequate alternatives. Discussants wanted more concrete ideas and policy programs from the candidates, well as more information about their personal backgrounds and professional achievements. Discussants recognized the difficulties democratic candidates faced in promoting themselves but did not believe these justified poor performances and a lack of seriousness by the democratic candidates.

The desire for more from the democratic candidates was evident in the discussants’ analysis of candidate speeches on TV (which the majority of discussants watched). These speeches were poorly rated on the whole and the candidates were criticized for demagoguery, populism, unrealistic promises and making “unfounded” criticisms of the president without offering vivid and clear ideas for the

development of Belarus. Participants also criticized the quality of the candidate presentations and in some cases were turned off by what they saw as “aggressive” behavior.

*"I listened attentively to the speeches of all presidential candidates and have found no sensible things in them. Lukashenko may be bad, but he was the only one to offer a more or less realistic program suitable for all groups, for different people."*

*Male pensioner, Mahilou*

*"I found it unpleasant when Neklyayev turned his back and left the debate as a sign of protest."*

*Male worker, Minsk*

Discussant opinions of the democratic candidates as a bloc were not particularly high, though there were a variety of opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of individual candidates. Democratic candidates were viewed in comparison to Lukashenko and not on their merits alone or in comparison to one another. Every aspect of the democratic candidates was scrutinized by the discussants, consciously or subconsciously, through the comparative prism of Lukashenko. This suggests that in every aspect of campaigning and candidate presentation, candidates need to draw a clear contrast with Lukashenko if they are to be successful in motivating support. The below table summarizes discussants’ responses in regard to qualities voters might look for in an ideal candidate and demonstrates how the democratic “front runner” candidates matched up to Lukashenko.

Comparative table of presidential candidates’ evaluations (an empty cell means there were no responses on those characteristics of the candidate)

Qualities of an ideal political leader	A. Lukashenko	Sannikov	Neklyayev	Romanchuk
<b>Personal</b>				
Charisma	Able to express his ideas in a simple and understandable form and engage wide audience with them			
Public speaking skills	Able to speak in a persuasive manner		Figurative speaking style. Speaks well but thinks in abstract categories.	Generates ideas
Intelligence	Has natural intelligence, mostly based on common sense and initiative			
<b>Social</b>				
Proximity to people	"Batska" ("father"), stands up for the interests of the people, fights against corruption			
Stability, consistency in actions	unpredictable	Sensible, moderate		



Decisiveness	Makes decisions independently. Sticks with what he starts until the end			
Flexibility of intellect, inclination to compromise	Inflexible, reluctant to compromise			Consistent

**Professional**

Education, knowledge	Low cultural level	Intelligent, speaks foreign languages	Intelligent	
Education, professional experience useful for politics	Experience in managing kolkhoz is not well suited to politics, political knowledge is lacking	Work experience in state and international institutions	Poet, a profession which has little applicability to politics	Economist

Poor impressions of Lukashenko (two thirds of the FGD participants said they did not vote for Lukashenko) did not translate into democratic support. The idea of being against Lukashenko resonated more than being for a particular democratic candidate. A corollary was that, the rationale behind choosing an opposition candidate to support was often shallow and arbitrary.

*“I voted for Sannikov. He was the first I came across. The main thing is that I didn’t vote for Lukashenko.”*  
*Male student, Mahilou*

*“I chose using my hunch. It’s just a last name I liked the most. But it was not important. The main thing is I didn’t vote for Lukashenko.”*  
*Male student, Minsk*

*The thing was not that there were no worthy candidates, but that they started to promote themselves too late. Too late, indeed. But the fact is that under such a regime as here, no worthy candidate can appear. You start getting up, and you just get ... And though I did not quite agree with what the candidates stated, yet it was still possible to vote for someone, even not against all. In my view, it is necessary to change the President, even for the worst. The main thing is a change, so that we can grow later. We can find someone among the 10 million people, even if it takes five years. And now we’ll have another 30 years of stable sitting.*  
*Male student, Minsk*

Essentially, discussants’ choice to vote for a democratic opposition candidate was made only after choosing not to vote for Lukashenko.

Of the democratic candidates, Sannikov was seen as the most qualified to serve as president based on his past work experience. Romanchuk and Neklyayev were rated lower. Romanchuk was seen as an idea generator, intellectual and economist and he was popular among students (a target audience of United Civic Party). Neklyayev was seen as sophisticated and an intellectual, but at least some discussants responded negatively to the idea of a “poet president.”

*"I voted for the economist, Romanchuk. He has also said nothing special. But he's not a poet at least. He's an economist, he might know the situation."*

*Female, Mahilou*

Approximately one third of the focus group participants stated they voted for Lukashenko. They attributed their decision to support Lukashenko to:

- support for current authorities and a positive evaluation of Lukashenko's achievements;
- lack of worthy alternative ;
- fear of changes for the worse (fear of reforms initiated by new authorities and change in external policy course)

Discussant support for Lukashenko demonstrates a significant opportunity for democratic candidates to win support with effective, distinctive, messages. Only a portion of the Lukashenko voters support him based on his own merits and achievements. The other reasons to vote for Lukashenko were based on fear of the unknown and a lack of a credible alternative. These "because there is nothing better" supporters of Lukashenko are tenuous at best and if engaged and shown a clear alternative path, they might be turned into democratic voters.

### C. Evaluation of the December 19 Events– the Demonstration at the Square in Minsk

The December 19<sup>th</sup> events meant different things to different people. The discussant interpretation of the events on the square can be broken into three categories:

- those who evaluated the demonstration as an act of spontaneous citizen expression and condemned the repressive actions by the authorities (majority of discussants);
- those who evaluated the demonstration as hooliganism, paid for by sponsors, and supported the actions of the authorities to restore order; and
- Those who have little interest in the events and attach a bit of blame to both the government and the opposition.

There was little correlation between how people interpreted the events on and age, place of residence, gender or socioeconomic status.

In spite of an active information campaign, the authorities did not manage to impose their own narrative about the demonstration on the focus group participants. The discussants were skeptical of information received from official government media. The information on state media was described as false, distorted, and incomplete.

*"I've got satellite TV, and if you compare what is shown on those channels and on Belarus TV and in Belarus media in general... Freedom of information and brainwashing in Belarusian media are different things."*

*Male student, Minsk*

*"Everything that our state Belarusian TV shows us is a lie, especially when you compare it with online videos over the Internet. It's just lies on top of more lies."*

*"We see only what Belarusian TV shows us, we don't see anything more. We don't know and don't see the rest."*

*Male entrepreneur, Mahilou*

The lack of good information from official sources drove citizens to look for alternative information. The internet was mentioned as an important source for alternative information but the information presented there by the opposition or the "independent" media was also not universally trusted. Discussants were most likely to trust the information they received directly from friends, family, acquaintances and witnesses of the event. This suggests that the development of grassroots influencers who understand the issues of the democratic opposition and can communicate these issues to citizens in their community should be an important part of voter contact or voter education campaigns.

The majority of FDG participants insisted the actions on the square represented a spontaneous, unorganized, emotional but peaceful effort by ordinary citizens seeking to show their discontent with dishonest elections. This group evoked compassion and sincere respect from the majority of discussants.

*"It is totally normal when after elections people gather in some big place...That is why people expressing their discontent choose the Square."*

*Male state employee, Minsk*

*It seems to me that it was a desperate attempt of people who had already lost any hope for justice, for the victory of truth, because there was no other choice."*

*Female, entrepreneur, Minsk*

*People, even though they may understand that it can threaten them in some way, still go for the sake of their children's future."*

*Male student, Minsk*

*"I don't remember exactly how many people there were at the square – between 10 and 15 thousand, and what is interesting – each time more and more people come. And it's not just because: a certain part of the population starts to understand something."*

*Male student Minsk*

Curious people who wanted to see the events with their own eyes were seen as another large piece of the overall crowd on December 19<sup>th</sup>. Focus group participants felt government provocateurs (the window smashers) and some number of paid apolitical youth (no clear position on how many youth or who paid them) were described as Square participants. The last group thought to be on the Square were representatives of the democratic opposition parties and their ideological supporters. According to discussants, such party members accounted for only a fraction of the participants. Discussants generally dismissed the idea that the protests were mass actions organized and controlled by the opposition as they doubted the opposition's ability to motivate and organize so many people.

*"If the opposition was up to something, they wouldn't have gone to the government building. It is the rule – post, wire, railway stations and only then Smolny."*

*Male state funded employee, Minsk*

Discussants also rejected the Belarusian government's official version of events that the majority of the participants were drunk.

Most discussants thought the crackdown on the protestors was a planned provocation by the authorities as a means of discrediting the opposition candidates and campaigns, demonstrating the strength of the government and intimidating the public.

*"It's a provocation of our state to picture candidates as bandits and criminals."*

*Male Student, Minsk*

Many also noted how prepared the authorities were for the event and how they seemed to be allowing the crowd to build up, even directing the crowd to where they wanted it, only to provide a context for suppressing and dispersing the gathering. Other explanations for the government crackdown expressed by multiple discussants included distracting protestors from the vote count and responding proactively, lest the crowd grow out of control and become a real threat.

*"Everything was silent until the vote count began. When the vote count started they (authorities) started shouting we've got terrorists everywhere. And our brave police got rid of them."*

*Male worker, Minsk*

*The authorities were afraid. Lidia Yermoshina (Chair of CEC) was afraid for some reason. It turns out that the crowd could change something. There was a statement: "what could two thousand policemen change against 50 thousand people in the crowd?"*

*Female entrepreneur, Minsk*

The democratic opposition was also seen by some discussants as trying to manipulate the crowd for their own benefit. Those discussants who gave at least partial blame to the opposition for provocation stated the opposition's goals were to demonstrate mass objection to the election results and the regime and to demonstrate to donors the success of their projects.

*It's advertising...They (opposition) wanted to show that they were strong and dangerous... They (opposition) were allowed (by the authorities) to protest...I've got a feeling that the opposition is funded and they are presented to the people in such a form. The country cannot be considered democratic if it doesn't have opposition, if everything is suppressed like it is here."*

*Female student, 23, Mahilou*

*"It also seemed to me that it was a performance from the side of the opposition. They also provoked it. Milinkevich and the rest of the candidates were also given money – where would they get the money for pre-election campaign? And they had to report about this money – which work they conducted and what they did. They had to. Therefore, there were provocations from their side as well. So we've got two main characters here, our state and opposition. And there were some 30 percent who simply came to the Square in a peaceful way and found themselves in a tight corner."*

*Female state funded employee, Minsk*

Regardless of who was seen as to blame for the provocations, the discussants' initial reaction to the crackdown that began on December 19<sup>th</sup> was shock and disgust. The disruption and disbursement of the crowd was in and of itself predictable to many respondents, but the form and violence by which the crowd was dispersed was a surprise. Focus group participants noted the actions of the authorities were too well rehearsed not to have been part of a premeditated plan.

Discussants noted that the goals of the crackdown were different than in past events. Normally, the expected behaviour would be to disrupt the event and disperse the crowd. In the case of December 19<sup>th</sup>, however, discussants saw excessive force and a follow-on campaign of repression as having a long-term focus on influencing the population. In short, many participants in the focus groups felt the crackdown was designed not to simply disperse a crowd on December 19<sup>th</sup> but to inhibit the population from participating in similar events in the future.

Discussants had only fragmentary information about the reaction of the international community to the events on December 19<sup>th</sup>. Many discussants positively rated the sharp protests of democratic countries over the conduct of the elections and their aftermath. In the opinion of discussants, it will provide moral support to both oppositional forces and citizens striving to further stand up for their rights.

A portion of discussants expressed their conviction that foreign countries should not intervene in internal affairs of sovereign countries, noting that in Western democratic countries, force is used to disrupt protests. In the opinion of many discussants, the measures taken by democratic countries are mostly declarative and won't impact the situation in the country in a significant way.

The concept of a "show" was commonly used by discussants. In fact the word "show" competes with the word "provocation" as a descriptor of the events.

*It was a show so that those who created it would get paid more. Those who went there got hammered.*  
Male, Orsha

*It is a circus to stand in the square with flags. No opposition will be successful without the support from law-enforcement agencies. If for each 5000 people at least one military department would support the opposition, in this case you could have some hope.*

Male entrepreneur, Minsk

The demonstration and its aftermath were compared with other major world events such as the Arab Spring protests in Cairo and the Reichstag Fire in Nazi Germany. Discussants agreed with comparisons with the Reichstag fire, a provocation by the authorities with a particular goal in mind. Discussants saw the protests in Egypt and the protests in Minsk as distinct from one another. The Egyptian protests were considered very serious, an opportunity for real change, whereas the activities of December 19<sup>th</sup> were a "show" with little chance of influencing events in Belarus. In backing up their arguments about the distinction between Egypt and Belarus, the discussants pointed to the higher levels of commitment and resistance demonstrated by Egyptian protestors.

*All those regimes have a provocative nature. Hitler put the Reichstag on fire. Another one shot a certain Ferdinand. For the serious analysts (not for those who just listen to the radio) it was obvious that that had been a common operation of our and Russian special forces. There are no doubts about it. And the reasons for it were that we came too close to Europe and there could have been the second round. They had to do something really urgent.*

Male Pensioner, Minsk

*If it was not a provocation [but a real attempt to change the power], in this case a crowd of young people would understand that the power is being changed, you can crash everything [without punishment]. But those young people did not touch anything; they did not stop cars or buses. There are photos where you can see a lot of cars and a bus next to the square. No one was breaking lamps; no one was crashing showcases in shops of the Capital Mall. As far as I know no other building were hurt.*

*Male student, Minsk*

*A male from Minsk: And we saw the recent events in Egypt, everything was broken there – equipment, buildings. You cannot compare their situation with ours. A few persons just touched windows, windows were broken and that was it.*

*Male student, Minsk*

December 19 was seen by most discussants as a dramatic event, but not one with significant long-term repercussions. In comparison to other events around the world, such as the Egyptian protests, it was seen as incomparable and minor. It was also seen by discussants as a blip on the screen in comparison to concerns about the economy and other socioeconomic issues.

#### D. Evaluation of the Post Election Environment - Economic Environment

The mood of discussants regarding the post-election economic situation in Belarus was overwhelmingly negative.

*"I just don't know what will happen next. You're standing now, but you're not sure that in a month or in a year everything will stay the same way. The future of children is unclear. I'm afraid."*

*Female entrepreneurs, Minsk*

*"After elections we, the whole country is as if we buried someone, there are no free and open faces. Everyone is just like after the funeral. Their eyes are dull, they are irritated and suspicious..."*

*Male retiree, Minsk*

The majority of discussants believed the quality of life for Belarusians had deteriorated since the elections, primarily due to the diminished purchasing power in comparison to rapidly rising prices. Discussants blamed the authorities for failing to live up to the promises made during the elections. Positive improvements, such as pre-election salary increases, were seen as false or simply inadequate to match the price increases occurring throughout the country.

*"They increased salaries in January, and in February they said: 'Sorry we have to recalculate.' And they cut them down again; everything is the way it was before (the elections)."*

*Female student, Orsha*

Discussants provided numerous examples showing how real salaries were on the decline while prices for food, utilities, household goods, luxury items, university and real estate were all on the rise.

*"They started from heating, now I saw from the corner of my eye that all utility fees will grow by about 5 USD."*

*Female state funded employee, Minsk*

*"I am waiting for June 1 when car prices will take off. By five times."*

*Male entrepreneur, Minsk*

*"By the New Year the real estate had taken off, the apartments became more expensive..."*

*Male entrepreneur, Minsk*

Students, parents and the elderly expressed particularly strong concerns regarding rapid price increases and their diminished purchasing power. Parents and students were concerned with their ability to pay for university where as the elderly feared for their ability to simply purchase the necessities of life.

*"The prices have really grown by 30 percent. And the salary for retiree, as I know from the sources, has even decreased by 2 percent."*

*Male student, Minsk*

*"I was thinking, why do I need digging in the ground, why do I need all of that. I wanted to plant grass where I used to have potatoes and buy a power block not to depend on neighbors... And you say that potatoes cost 3000... I planted my own potatoes."*

*Male retiree, Minsk*

*"It's the same with me! I prepared everything for the lawn. I dreamed of planting grass in spring. Now I dream of planting early potatoes in spring."*

*Female retiree, Minsk*

*"I pay for my studies, and it happened that they raised tuition after elections. The first semester was for one price, and now you have to pay a totally different sum. They raised tuition by 30 percent. And not only in my university but in all of them."*

*Female student, Minsk*

*"I can also say that I pay for my kid's college, and they raised annual tuition by 900,000 rubles. That is, this is the third year, and if at first we used to pay 3 million rubles, now it's 5 million rubles and something."*

*Female budget employees, Minsk*

*"They also raised tuition here by 30 percent, and it significantly hit everyone. Everyone is frustrated and discontented, they want to leave. You can feel it in the university."*

*Male student, Minsk*

Even employees working for the state, normally a group insulated from major economic crisis, were nervous about the economic situation and the possibility of government layoffs.

*"It's fine, soon they'll have 10 or 15 percent less of us. You haven't read the decision of the Minister of Finance that teachers and doctors are a great burden, and they have to reduce their number to economize on budget."*

*"It's expensive to keep us. As our head doctor said: 'Remember that the policy of our state is that we are lice on the body of workers. We do not produce anything. And you have to kill lice from time to time. It's probably right.'"*

*Male budget employees*

Looking ahead discussants were concerned that the economic situation would continue to get worse. The blame for the deteriorating situation and negative outlook was placed on the authorities by most discussants. Focus group participants cited the lack of resources in Belarus, overdependence on loans, increased energy prices and inefficiency of the economy as the major factors contributing to the economic crisis. Additional factors contributing to the country's economic problems included Belarus' deteriorating relationship between Russia and the West.

*There are no inflows of foreign currency, budget deficit is 10 billion, it's a nightmare..."*

*Male retiree, Minsk*

*"International Monetary Fund said that they won't give anything more to Belarus. How much should they give to the same person?"*

*Female state funded employees, Minsk*

*"I don't know if there is an analytical center attached to the presidential administration, they have to calculate the consequences. And they 'calculated' them so well that we are not friends anymore either with Russia or with the West..."*

*Male state funded employee, Minsk*

*"How did he make it this year, in 2010? It's thanks to loans. And we forget that we've got 20 billion of them and we have to start paying them back in 2012. You have to give back 500 million worth of loan repayments monthly. Where will he get the money from? Well, he'll sell something."*

*Male retiree, Minsk*

*"Belarus has taken so many loans? How is it going to pay them back? We do not supply anything, we've got nothing."*

*Male worker, Minsk*

#### E. Response to Economic Problems

The results of the focus group show that as of March, 2011, prior to the Belarusian currency crisis, there was a sharp increase in popular discontent with the economic situation and the outlook for the future. Focus group participants clearly felt the quality of their lives deteriorated but not to the point where discontent would lead to mass action against the government

Entrepreneurs, for example, were relatively content with their working environment. The discussants did not complain about the decrease of revenues, high taxes or abuse from officials – though price increases were mentioned by all. It is worth noting that not one of respondent's entrepreneurs expressed a wish to close down the business and leave the country. Other sectors such as those dependent on the state budget, retirees and workers were continuing to set their hopes on the government's ability to turn the economy around as they see themselves as vested in and dependent on the system.

Focus group results show that the majority of discussants judged the economic situation through the lens of their personal experiences and expectations rather than a macroeconomic perspective. As of March, 2011, it seemed the social contract between Lukashenko and the population was relatively intact, though frayed.

The majority of discussants still seem to estimate their welfare according to Soviet or past experiences and there was a reluctance to strive for more if it meant risking what they have now. Analysis of the discussants' responses suggests that Belarusians will seek to adapt to a deteriorating economic situation, accepting decreased standards of living for some time.

Open discontent, mass protests and serious demands for structural reform are likely to occur with a dramatic worsening of the quality of life - mass unemployment or inability to guarantee minimal living standards, for example power, heating and water cutoffs.

Discussants attribute the Belarusian tolerance of the deteriorating conditions and high threshold for protesting to a combination of fear and a self-deprecating assessment of the Belarusian mentality. The discussants described Belarusians as overly patient, indecisive, lacking initiative and unable to stand up for their interests.



*"People are not ready to stand up for themselves. If there's a problem, they go and drink. And all problems are solved at the table."*

*Female state funded employee, Minsk*

Fear is also seen as a deterring factor to change in Belarus. Discussants described fear of change and an unwillingness to rock the boat on the one hand and on the other hand they described a fear of direct repression if they voiced too much discontent. Discussants described the average person in Belarus as unwilling to openly express his opinion or voice a protest because of fear of losing a job and sole source of income.

#### F. Post-Election Politics and Repression

The discussion of the continuation of repression and the ongoing fallout of the December 19<sup>th</sup> crackdown was of much less interest to discussants than the economic outlook for the future. As described earlier in this document, many discussants saw December 19 as an isolated and orchestrated, though tragic, event that would not have long standing consequences – especially in comparison to the deteriorating economic situation. Many discussants felt repression would weaken and there would be a gradual normalization of the political situation. Prisoners were expected to receive short sentences or to be released in return for economic concessions from the West.

*"He will let them all go – you'll see. Everyone will be released before the end of the year. They won't send the child to orphanage and they won't jail a wife..."*

*Female state funded employee, Minsk*

*"But it seems to me that nobody now should greatly increase repressions. Until the new elections everything will be as it used to be the previous five years."*

*Male student, Minsk*

*"As soon as economic conditions get worse, repressions will start. The same scenario has gone on for 16 years."*

*Male retiree, Minsk*

*"I think there's no use for him to be any stricter. You just, during the whole political force – a bit of toughness and then he immediately let us go. He shuffles the ministers from post to post. At first he dismisses a person - they lost their job, lost income, and then the President can forgive."*

*Female state funded employee, Minsk*

*"You know what I think? There'll be trading with Europe, and they'll let them go. As it was with capital punishment, we abolished it and received a loan. Now again Lukashenko will need a loan and he'll let Neklyayev and all the others go. He'll tell them to be good, and Europe will give money."*

*Male worker, Minsk*

*"They showed the people that the opposition is not good. And now they'll let them go. Europe introduced sanctions, and then Europe will lift them off. And Lukashenko will again go to Czech Republic or wherever to ski. Everything will be alright."*

*Female state funded employee, Minsk*

*"I think they won't sit in prison for 20 years because of upheaval, because Lukashenko won't resort to that, he doesn't need it. No one will overturn him anyway. They'll sit in prison for a year or so. So pretty."*

*He'll get concessions for Belarus, and the elections will be recognized and everything will be okay.  
Twenty years – he just wasn't thinking what he was saying.”  
Male worker, Minsk*

These cynical observations accord with the frequent comment that the December 19th, elections and Belarusian politics in general are a “circus” or “show” rather than a meaningful exercise. Looking beyond particular political events, though, the focus groups paint a picture of a population that is frustrated, fed up with the status quo and looking for new ideas. Unfortunately the research also points to little faith in the democratic candidates to deliver these new ideas and solutions.