

# BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

## Pre-election Coverage in the Belarusian Media Bulletin 1

(1 March – 1 July 2008)

*The 2008 Parliamentary Election Coverage in the Belarusian Media* monitoring aims to find out how exhaustively the Belarusian media have covered the election and the work of the subjects involved (both individuals and institutions), as well as the degree to which media contributions meet the key principles of journalistic ethics and professional standards of covering elections. The present bulletin focuses on the pre-election situation and aims to reveal the general mood in which it was covered in the Belarusian media.

The objects to be monitored have been as follows: *Nashi Novosti* news programme (ONT), *Panorama Nedeli* weekly analytical programme (the 1<sup>st</sup> National Channel), *Radiofact* (the 1<sup>st</sup> National Radio Channel), *Belarus Segodnya*, *Respublika* and *Belorusy i Rynok* papers, as well as [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by) and [www.tut.by](http://www.tut.by) on-line media and [www.euroradio.fm](http://www.euroradio.fm), the on-line version of the European Radio for Belarus. The time span for both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the pre-election situation coverage is four months, *from 1 March to 1 July 2008*.

The situation is described in terms of four major subjects: *The Parliamentary Election*, *Belarus-Russia Relations*, *Belarus-EU Relations* and *Inflation and the Prevailing Mood in the Society/Social Groups* as represented in the above-mentioned media.

### **1. Main Findings and Some Conclusions**

*Belarusian state-owned media have covered the upcoming election much more extensively than they covered the 2004 parliamentary election.*

*Although the state-owned media have presented the Belarusian opposition in a highly negative light, they have reported the government's intention to hold a more open election, with a wider representation of the opposition parties. The same refers to western election observers' participation. However, some Belarusian human rights NGOs that have announced they are going to monitor the election have been facing the government's pressure.*

*At the same time, the Belarusian opposition (political parties) has not received any noticeable coverage of its pre-election activities, except for negative propaganda items on the Belarusian Television.*

*The European Union has shown a considerable interest in the election. Its officials have stressed that a democratic election in Belarus might provide good grounds to bring back to normal and further develop the EU-Belarus relations. As for Russia, the Belarusian media have not manifested that it might have any interest in the election.*

*The Belarusian government is likely to use the election in order to improve its international image and strengthen the regime's legitimacy on the European political scene.*

*Just like the government, the official Belarusian media have preserved their rhetoric as to the 'union state' with Russia. However, it is prices of energy resources that have made the real essence of the Belarus-Russia relations. The Belarusian party's most important task is to keep them low.*

*It is quite possible that Russia is going to continue keeping favourable energy prices, on condition that Belarus makes certain concessions. Within the framework of a public discussion of the energy prices Russian Ambassador to Belarus A. Surikov made a symptomatic statement about the possibility of locating Russian anti-missile systems in Belarus.*

*This year's election is concurrent with a 'new phase' in the EU-Belarus relations. It is essentially about developing pragmatic economic links, which is of particular interest to Belarus, alongside attracting western investments, as well as developing democratic institutions in Belarus and 'neighbourhood policy,' which is of particular interest to the EU.*

*As for Belarus's priorities in foreign policy, they are revealed both through quantitative and qualitative indicators. They were particularly vivid in the pro-presidential Belarus Segodnya during the initial monitoring stage, i. e. In March and April it published 16 articles on the 'Belarus-EU Relations' and only 12 articles on the 'Belarus-Russia Relations.' The space given to each of these subjects just makes the tendency even more distinct: the former got 4,104 cm<sup>2</sup>, whereas the latter nearly twice as little. It is also noticeable that all the contributions on Europe proper and its relations with Belarus were absolutely positive, which would have been impossible in the past.*

*Both state-owned and independent media have featured the social situation in the country mainly from the perspective of inflation, viewed as a rise in prices on goods and services. They have pointed out that the country enjoys stability. However, the monitoring findings show that the Belarusian economy has 'reacted' to the last year's rise in energy prices in a way that was unexpected for the government.*

*At the same time, the previously cancelled privileges to pensioners have been partially or almost fully reinstated. Individually targeted welfare has increased. Thus, it may be assumed that the wellbeing of some low-income groups has decreased, even though just a little. It is also worth mentioning that, unlike Respublika and independent media, Belarus Segodnya has avoided covering acute social problems.*

*At the end of the monitored period the state-run media drew attention to pay-rises to doctors, increased social benefits and students' scholarships, as well as to the prospects of doubling salaries and wages in 2009-2011.*

*In covering social problems and inflation, rises in energy prices and pay-rises, the independent media have tended to quote experts' opinions.*

*Further on, the monitoring findings are more precisely outlined and some more information on the pre-election media coverage is given, providing the grounds for final conclusions.*

## 1.2 The Upcoming Parliamentary Election

On 24 June 2008 Alaksandar Lukashenka signed a decree to hold a parliamentary election to the Chamber of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly on 28 September 2008, which officially signified the beginning of the election campaign.

Although during the first three months of monitoring the upcoming election was not an important subject for the Belarusian media, it was still mentioned once in a while, both directly and indirectly. Thus, Central Election Commission Secretary Mikalaj Lazavik, who attended the Russian presidential election as an observer, called upon the Belarusian opposition *'to learn to lose, not only to win.'* According to Lazavik, political figures in Russia, unlike Belarus, *'have accepted the leader's victory and do not intend to destabilise the country's social and economic situation.'* ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/03/03/ic\\_news\\_113\\_286801/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/03/03/ic_news_113_286801/)) The Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk welcomed the government's intention to invite international observers. He said that the Belarusian government had taken *'a highly important political decision to invite international observers without any restrictions.'* ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/03/18/ic\\_news\\_112\\_287682/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/03/18/ic_news_112_287682/))

But the last month of the monitoring period saw both a considerable rise in the number of election-related contributions and the media's growing interest in the election. As compared to the 2004 parliamentary election, when *'state-owned electronic and printed media did not give much attention to the election'*<sup>1</sup>, the upcoming election enjoys considerably more attention from the media. The office holders' and the country leader's statements show that the government wants to give it more political weight. Thus, about a month before the election day was announced, CEC Secretary Mikalaj Lazavik said the CEC was going to come up with the proposal that the President should sign a decree to allow political parties' representatives to participate in the CEC activities in an advisory capacity. Besides, he called upon the opposition to take an active part in the election and gave it advice to join its efforts: *'if the opposition participates in the election as a united front, such an option would be more fruitful for it.'* ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/05/26/ic\\_articles\\_112\\_157251/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/05/26/ic_articles_112_157251/)) In her turn, the Head of the CEC Lidzija Jarmosyna said the CEC would work towards the election results being recognised by the international community. ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/06/27/ic\\_articles\\_112\\_157798/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/06/27/ic_articles_112_157798/))

Finally, after declaring the election day, Alaksandar Lukashenka said, *'We want to hold the election in an open and democratic way, so that we are not criticised afterwards.'* ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/06/24/ic\\_articles\\_112\\_292618/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/06/24/ic_articles_112_292618/)) A week later he pointed out, *'The political parties' and the opposition's extended rights will become an essentially new aspect of the election.'* ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/07/02/ic\\_articles\\_112\\_293102/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/07/02/ic_articles_112_293102/))

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<sup>1</sup> Media Monitoring in Belarus: 'The 2004 Parliamentary Election in the Belarusian Media'. (Nevskiy Prostor, March 2005, p. 21)

The EU representatives have shown a considerable interest in the election. For example, Head of the Department of Eastern Policy of the Polish Foreign Office Mariusz Maszkiewicz supposes that ‘the parliamentary election in Belarus scheduled for September this year can become a signal to start a thaw in the Brussels-Minsk relations.’ (<http://news.tut.by/politics/111819.html>) Ambassador for the Netherlands **Marnix Krop** said even more unequivocally, ‘*We are preparing for the parliamentary election in Belarus, scheduled for 28 September. The EU has once again confirmed its terms: if you hold a free democratic election, we will start cooperating.*’ (<http://news.tut.by/politics/111878.html>)

At the same time, before the official election campaign the Belarusian Television draw its attention to the opposition, traditionally representing it as a destructive and extremist force, relying on American foundations for financial support (BT, the 1<sup>st</sup> National Channel, *Panorama Nedeli*, 01/06/2008, 08/06/2008). According to *Nasha Niva* paper (26/06/2008), ‘*the next day after the press-conference, in which human rights organisations’ spokespersons announced they were going to join their efforts to monitor the parliamentary election, they were visited by tax inspectors.*’ The same newspaper said that it is not only the heads of these organisations but also their relatives who are obliged to file an income-tax return.

### **1.3 Belarus-Russia Relations**

The official media has continued to describe the Belarus-Russia relations as ‘a union state building’ process. However, the Belarusian party has undoubtedly sought unilateral privileges, subsidies and low energy prices, which have been interpreted as allies’ relations.

What determined the mode in which the subject was covered in the media at the beginning of the monitoring period were such events as the talks on gas prices, the presidential election in Russia and the new Russian President’s visit to Belarus. In his congratulation to Dmitry Medvedev on being elected the President of Russia Alaksandar Lukashenka, however, did not mention the ‘union state.’ (*President Congratulates Dmitry Medvedev on Winning the Election*, Belarus Segodnya, 04/03/2008) None of Russian leaders, in their turn, congratulated the Belarusian President or the nation on the Belarus-Russia Nations’ Unity Day. A number of articles may have appeared in the press to mark the day (*Everyone’s Holiday, Congratulation, Friends*, Belarus Segodnya, 02/04/2008, *Nations’ Union Symbol, It Is Sounder to Go Together, Congratulatory Address*, Respublika, 02/04/2008), but they were deprived of any precise meaning. This is to signify that the idea of a union state is nothing other than a political ritual, to which both part are still willing to pay lip service. This was further confirmed during President Medvedev’s visit to Belarus. It is worth mentioning that the two presidents had their summit in Brest on 22 June, the place and the day Nazi Germany began the war against the USSR. Thus, the summit accentuated the symbolic rather than real dimension. It is evident that neither side is ready or willing to change anything in the two countries’ relations. For this reason, following the summit Alaksandar Lukashenka but cited Dmitry Medvedev, ‘The union state exists, it just needs filling with some real meaning’ (*Presidents’ Summit*, Belarus Segodnya, 24/06/2008); ‘Since we have not adopted a Constitution Act of the Union State, we will be guided by the treaty,’ said Alaksandar Lukashenka, quoting his colleague. ‘Dmitry Medvedev proposed centring on a dozen or so burning issues

rather than putting forward some major integration goals; once these have been dealt with, people will see how useful the union state is.' (*President's Working Day*, Belarus Segodnya, 25/06/2008)

Yet, the prices on gas and other energy resources made a very important component of the two countries' relations. Just as before, Belarus still relies on privileged terms in energy dealings. Thus, a union state official Vasil Chrol sticks to an opinion that the gas price for Belarus should not exceed \$80 and the two countries' '*alliance must weigh more than certain businesses' short-term financial interests.*' ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/03/08/ic\\_news\\_113\\_288346/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/03/08/ic_news_113_288346/))

The pause awaiting the announcement of the new gas prices about 20 March (\$128 per 1000 m<sup>3</sup>) was characterised by some tension and uncertainty. To a certain extent, 'expanding further military cooperation with Russia' and an agreement signed with *Sistema*, the CIS' largest Russian corporation, closely collaborating with the Russian state institutions and investing in a number of industries, can be viewed as an attempt to guarantee Belarus a desirable solution to the gas issue. ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/03/13/ic\\_articles\\_113\\_156043/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/03/13/ic_articles_113_156043/))

In its turn, Russia has insisted on increasing its economic presence in Belarus. The expansion of Russian capital, though not unhindered, seems to be going on quite successfully. The following news items speak for themselves: *Russian Company LUKOIL to Spend \$400 m on Opening a Chain of Petrol Stations of Olympic Standard, Including Belarus* (<http://www.euroradio.fm/by/523/news/?tpl=135#>), *Another GAZPROM Representative Included in BELTRANSGAZ Supervisory Board* (<http://www.euroradio.fm/by/523/news/?tpl=135#>). No less conspicuous are Russia's regrets concerning 20 essential obstacles to the advancement of Russian goods on the Belarusian market (*New Government's Old Problems*, Belorusy i Rynok, 24/03/2008). The regrets imply that Russia is calculating its strategic moves.

After the gas agreement was signed, the focus was once again on Belarusian independence, '*The way proposed by Russia is unacceptable for us. We cannot merge into any state, not only Russia*' (*Lukashenka Will Not Give Away His Titbit in the Centre of Europe*, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/04/26/ic\\_articles\\_112\\_156828/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/04/26/ic_articles_112_156828/)). On 30 April the country leader declared he was ready to establish good relations with the West (*Lukashenka: Belarus Does Not Trade Its Sovereignty*, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/04/30/ic\\_media\\_112\\_1880/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/04/30/ic_media_112_1880/)). If we put aside ritualistic pieces on the presidential election in Russia and the Unity Day, published by the state-run nationwide papers *Belarus Segodnya* and *Respublika*, in March and April Russia was virtually non-existent in the official Belarusian media as an important subject for Belarusian geopolitics.

During the next two months, the Belarusian media covered the Belarus-Russia relations within the same framework: at their summit in Brest, both parties declared their commitment to the union state (the Russian President, however, stressed the bilateral strategic relations). (*Panorama Nedeli*, the 1<sup>st</sup> National TV Channel, 22/06/2008) From early June, the gas prices were once again brought into the focus of attention, '*The Union State Council Of Ministers to Discuss the Gas Prices for Belarus on 27 June*'

[http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/06/03/ic\\_news\\_113\\_291556/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/06/03/ic_news_113_291556/)) Before the meeting, Minister of Economy Zajcanka aired certain concerns that if the gas price exceeded \$140, it could affect the macroeconomic indicators. He stated that the 10-12% GDP growth in 2009 had been projected on the accounts of the gas price of \$140. ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/06/26/ic\\_news\\_113\\_292747/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/06/26/ic_news_113_292747/)) In its turn, Russia reprimanded Belarus for its liability for gas (*Zubkov: Belarus and Ukraine Must Pay to GAZPROM*, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/06/27/ic\\_news\\_113\\_292844/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/06/27/ic_news_113_292844/)). Meanwhile, the Union State Secretary 'pushed' integration by saying that Belarus and Russia could have introduced a common currency by the end of the current year ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/06/27/ic\\_news\\_112\\_292800/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/06/27/ic_news_112_292800/)). Finally, in his interview to *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi* Alaksandar Lukashenka said that Russia violated the equity principle in that issue (<http://news.tut.by/daynews/>). Thus the dynamic equilibrium in the Belarus-Russia relations was brought back again. At the same time, the political and economic dimensions of the Belarus-Russia relations seem to be getting more and more incompatible.

It is worth drawing attention to the fact that Belarus can achieve the projected gas prices for 2009 through another set of concessions. Thus, in the framework of the public discussion of energy prices, Russian Ambassador Surikov mentioned the possibility of Russian anti-missile systems being located in Belarus (<http://news.tut.by/politics/110641.html>).

#### **1.4. Belarus-EU Relations**

The true priorities in foreign policy are revealed through both qualitative and quantitative analysis. They are really vivid in the pro-presidential *Belarus Segodnya* daily, which during the initial monitoring period (March – April) published 16 pieces on the Belarus-EU relations and only 12 pieces on the Belarus-Russia relations. The tendency is further underlined by the space allotted to each subject, the former receiving 4,104 cm<sup>2</sup>, the latter only 2,482 cm<sup>2</sup>, i. e. nearly twice as little. Moreover, all the *Belarus Segodnya* contributions on Europe proper and its relations with Belarus are totally positive, which would have been unfathomable in the past.

The trend is particularly evident in a series of articles on the Council of Europe and the latest session of the PACE by *BS* reporter I. Kolcanka. Each taking up a whole page, they were published in four issues of *Belarus Segodnya: Europe: Counselling or an Ultimatum, Europe Does Not Stop on the Buh River, Europe as Our Common Home and PACE Photo-session* (*Belarus Segodnya*, 15, 16, 17, 18/04/2008). One of the reasons for such attention to the Council of Europe may have been given in the article *CE as an EU Visa* (*Respublika*, 02/04/2008), which argued that the right to be present on the European market has to be gained through the Council of Europe's trust in the first place.

The facts that the European Commission has opened its office in Belarus (*Neighbourhood Policy*, *Belarus Segodnya*, 01/03/2008), Alaksandar Lukashenka met a group of English businessmen (*Warranty*, *Belarus Segodnya*, 01/03/2008) and had a talk with Sir Timothy Bell, a member of the House of Lords, to discuss the ways to improve Belarus's international image (*Image Making*, *Belarus Segodnya*, 14/03/2008) prove that the Belarusian government has launched a 'large-scale

offensive' on Europe in order to conquer first and foremost economic strongholds, with political ones to follow. This is well illustrated by the statement of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in connection with the sanctions imposed by the USA on Belarusian oil refineries, 'The USA are violating the established course of action to bring back to normal Belarus's relations with the EU and other states.' (*No-Rules Game*, Respublika, 11/03/2008) Apparently, the Belarusian government is worried about the American sanctions mainly as a hindrance to establishing normal relations with the EU.

Yet, at this stage the EU and Belarus have outlined different priorities. The EU is interested in the promotion of democratic values and a wide range of political and humanitarian problems, whereas Belarus centres exclusively on pragmatic economic goals. The Belarusian leader soon dealt with the 'misunderstanding', '*Belarusian democracy is the same as in Austria, they are as like as two peas. Democratic values in Belarus are as high as in any other European country... So what is missing in Belarus's democratic picture? What else does Europe require from Belarus?*' ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/03/20/ic\\_news\\_112\\_287817/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/03/20/ic_news_112_287817/)). He also accused the EU of lacking independence and being guided by the USA. According to Alaksandar Lukashenka, for this reason, the western pressure on Belarus will result in its still closer contacts with Russia.

Thus, the relations between Belarus and Russia, on the one hand, and Belarus and the EU, on the other, may be defined as an attempt to balance between the West and the East, sticking to the pragmatic goal of preserving the current regime's *status quo*, its control over the society and the economic reform. Belarus seems to be willing to turn its relations with the EU into a real factor of its foreign policy.

However, during the last two months of monitoring, the Belarus-EU relations received a bit different 'orchestration'. Neither side made any resounding or categorical statements. The EU was working on different scenarios of step-by-step development of certain institutions to influence the Belarusian government, i.e. through agreements on the EU observers' presence at the parliamentary election in September, as well as possible economic deals and investments. The Belarusian government went on saying it was ready to engage in a dialogue with the EU. Meanwhile, the usually polemical style in its dealings with the West became much more moderate, '*The leaders of these institutions realise that Belarus cannot be kept in isolation. But we keep telling them that it won't do if they continue putting forward new requirements as soon as the old ones have been met without making any reciprocal steps,*' (Head of the House of Representatives Vadzim Papou's interview to *Radiofact*, 30/05/2008), '*The Parliamentary Assembly stressed that it was interested in cooperation based on mutual respect. No further accusations or initiatives were put forward,*' (MP Anatol Krasucki on the talks with the PACE in his interview to *Radiofact*, 26/05/2008). It is also worth quoting Alaksandar Lukashenka's phrase pronounced at his meeting with the newly appointed ambassadors, '*European powers do not quite understand our substantial contribution to international stability,*' (*Radiofact*, 28/05/2008). The 'new' stage in the Belarus-EU relations was underlined by the visit of the Holy See's Secretary of State Torcizio Bertone. It is interesting that it was timed to virtually coincide with Dmitry Medvedev's visit.

Torcisio Bertone's visit received an extensive and highly positive coverage in the printed media. *Belarus Segodnya* even placed a big photo of Alaksandar Lukashenka and Torcisio Bertone's meeting on its front page. The president said at the meeting that *Belarus was ready to participate in strengthening security on the continent (Common Values, Belarus Segodnya, 21/06/2008)*. Torcisio Bertone replied that *The Catholic Church recognises Belarus's mission as a bridge between the East and the West and is ready to assist in developing these relations (ibid.)* But what the state-owned press quoted most often was the following phrase said by Bertone, *'The Vatican supports each nation's right to choose its own way of development and opposes any embargo or economic sanctions, which harm the general public in the first place.'* (*The Pope of Rome Loves Belarus, Respublika, 24/06/2008*).

However, the state-owned media, in line with their tradition, have given some negative information on the EU countries. Thus, *Radiofact* featured the clashes in the Polish government (03/06/2008), 'peasants' rebellion' in Latvia (12/06/2008), pensioners' problems in Riga (19/06/2008) and inflation in the eurozone (05/06/2008). But this negative coverage was not systemic, unlike it used to be in the past.

#### **1.4 Inflation and the Society's Prevailing Mood**

According to *Belarus Segodnya* and *Respublika*, the country enjoys social, political and economic stability. Prime Minister Siarhiej Sidorski said, *'In January and February this year the GDP grew by 9.9 per cent,' (Steady Economic Growth, Respublika, 14/03/2008)*, whereas *'individuals' bank savings since the beginning of the year have grown by 626,7 billion roubles and exceeded 11 trillion' (Trust, Belarus Segodnya, 14/03/2008)*.

The social progress is indirectly confirmed by the Secretary General of the International Union of Electrocommunications' widely quoted statements, *'Belarus has the CIS's highest percentage (89%) of its territory covered by mobile phone companies' (Bridging Digital Gaps, Respublika, 16/04/2008)*, and *'According to the recent information, over 7 million people in Belarus use mobile phones and nearly 3 million people (30 per cent of the total population) use the Internet' (Connecting, Belarus Segodnya, 22/04/2008)*.

However, some articles of the monitored period have revealed certain problems. The most acute one is inflation, which the Belarusian government successfully accounts for, but is unable to stop. In his report to the president Prime Minister Sidorski said, *'In January – March the inflation rate was 4.1%, whereas it made 4.8% in Russia and 9% in Ukraine.'* (*Report, Belarus Segodnya, 11/04/2008*). Late in April Andrej Kabiakou said, *'In the first quarter, the inflation rate was 4.1 per cent, i.e. 1.3 per cent a month, though it was projected at 0.5-0.6 per cent a month'* ([http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/04/25/ic\\_news\\_113\\_289777/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2008/04/25/ic_news_113_289777/)). Thus, it is evident that the Belarusian economy has 'reacted' to the last year's rise in energy prices in a way that was unexpected for the government.

Apart from inflation, Siarhiej Sidorski considers the lack of investment as a major problem (*Investment Calm Contra-Indicated, Respublika, 17/04/2008*). It must have been the key factor that made Alaksandar Lukashenka withdraw 'the golden share',

thus opening good opportunities for attracting foreign investment (*Worth Its Weight in Gold*, *Belarus Segodnya*, 06/03/2008).

*Respublika* paper in its article *Eager to Work* (14/03/2008) has formulated another problem in both social and economic dimensions: the number of vacancies has exceeded the number of unemployed. At the same time, one third of the working age population is not registered as employed.

In general, the social situation may have been characterised by a certain tension while the announcement of the new gas prices was being awaited and due to the inflation rate that exceeded the projected figures, but it has still remained stable.

The period analysed also saw a partial reinstatement of the previously cancelled privileges. So it can be assumed that the wellbeing of some low-income groups and families has worsened. It should be pointed out that unlike *Respublika* and the independent media, *Belarus Segodnya* avoided touching upon or analysing social problems, unless they could have been presented as editorial policy rhetoric. In May and June the paper published just three pieces only indirectly dealing with social issues. Instead, *Belarus Segodnya*, like other state-owned media, centred on the prospects of increasing salaries and wages. Articles published in *Respublika* show that at present the government is faced with two major issues: investment and privatisation. Closely interconnected, they make one big problem, the solution of which is going to determine the society's mood, the country's development and first and foremost the stability of the regime.

The facts that the military, who constitute the regime's main support, have got back their previously cancelled privileges and pensioners, who make an important part of Lukashenka's support base, have partially got back their subsidised public transport fares prove that the regime's self-consolidation still remains one of its core political aims.

Before the beginning of the election, it was announced that doctors' salaries, social benefits and students' scholarships would be increased (*Nashi Novosti*, ONT, 13/08/2008; *All Scholarships Increased*, *Nashi Novosti*, ONT, 18/06/2008).

However, it should be pointed out that the government did not expect such a rise in the inflation rate. It could signify a growth in systemic contradictions within the Belarusian economic model, a slight increase in the energy and raw material prices being sufficient to upset its balance.

## **2. Conclusions**

The more extensive election coverage and the Belarusian office holders' statements indicate that this year's election is given more political prominence than the previous ones.

Although the Belarus-Russia relations seem to stick to their 'allied' rhetoric, they are going to develop on purely pragmatic grounds: Belarus will be interested in low energy prices and Russian markets, whereas Russia's core interest lies in strategic

control over Belarus, which it is going to try to achieve through Belarus's military and economic concessions.

The EU is gradually distancing itself from its previously declared 12 conditions in its relations with Belarus and moving on to a step-by-step strategy to build up its relations with the Belarusian government. For this purpose the EU seems to be implementing a more pragmatic approach, based on increasing economic cooperation. In its turn, Belarus seems to be willing to turn its relations with the EU into a real factor of its foreign policy.

The Belarusian media have characterised the social and economic situation as relatively stable. However, the state-run media have not drawn any special attention to this, as compared to the presidential election.

The facts that the military, who constitute the regime's main support, have got back their previously cancelled privileges and pensioners, who make an important part of Lukashenka's support base, have partially got back their subsidised public transport fares prove that the regime's self-consolidation still remains one of its core political aims.

It can also be assumed that the relations between the government and some social groups (the earlier social contracts) have started to change towards a bigger dynamic imbalance (social tensions in the future). As inflation and privatisation processes increase, this trend is going to become more and more manifest. But it is not going to be a major influence during this year's election.

Some part of the official elite (the Belarusian government in particular) shows a growing awareness of the possible threats to the Belarusian economy and the country's social stability. The main threats are posed by inflation and lack of reforms in the Belarusian economy.

It can be argued that in all likelihood the above-mentioned processes are going to influence the election and its coverage in the media.