

European
Elections monitor

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ANALYSIS
1 month before
the poll

Presidential «Election» in Belarus, 19th December 2010

On 14th September the delegates of the Chamber of Representatives of Belarus (Palata pretsaviteley) voted by a wide majority (108 of 110 representatives) in support of a "presidential election" on 19th December next. In all likelihood the present holder of the post, Aleksander Lukashenko in office since 20th July 1994, is due to be reconfirmed to office at the end of the year and probably this will take place in the first round as it usually does in Belarus!

Aleksander Lukashenko may however find it a bit more difficult to win even though the opposition forces, qualified by him as enemies of the people do not believe in the organisation of free, transparent elections in a dictatorial regime.

The "electoral" parody is taking place three months early. The main reason for this is the present tension between Belarus and Russia. Moscow is accusing Minsk of not having honoured its promise as it has refused to acknowledge the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and of having granted asylum to Kurmanbek Bakiev. At the beginning of September Aleksander Lukashenko accused Russia of having organised a Molotov cocktail attack against its embassy in order to discredit the Belarus regime.

"The electoral campaign has been built around anti-Russian themes and direct accusations against Moscow. With what he has said not only has Aleksander Lukashenko infringed diplomatic norms but he has also transgressed those of human decency," declared Russian President Dmitri Medvedev (United Russia, ER). "The Belarus authorities are known for continually working to create an enemy to present to the people. Now it is Russia which is being promoted as Minsk's main enemy," he added. He was quick to point out Lukashenko's domestic problems asking him to bring to court several affairs of disappearances (or suspicious deaths) that have taken place in the country over the last few years. The most recent is that of 36 year old Oleg Bebenine, the founding journalist and leader of the biggest Belarus opposition internet site Charter97.org, who was found hanged in its dacha near Minsk on 3rd September last. In reaction to these accusations at the end of September Lukashenko accused Dmitri

Medvedev's administration of "orchestrating a flood of shameful lies, absurdities and disinformation about Belarus."

In this battle between the two countries Moscow has a weapon of size: its mineral wealth. Indeed Dmitri Medvedev recalled his Belarus "counterpart" that his country provided Minsk with oil and gas at preferential prices (185\$ per 1,000 m³ of gas) for 4 billion \$ per year. Russia may therefore review its gas prices upwards (1,000 m³ may rise to 200 \$).

Aleksander Lukashenko, who promised to raise the average salary (bringing it up from 430 to 500\$), perceived possible discontent amongst the population if gas tariffs went up (this usually happens at the end of the year and would cancel out the effects of any salary rises). It has therefore become urgent for him to organise a pseudo-election as quickly as possible.

The Presidential Function

Belarus has been living under an authoritarian regime in which Aleksander Lukashenko holds all the power. Nostalgic of the Soviet era and an adept of its repressive methods he reigns over a country which he governs with an iron fist.

The Belarus regime controls the political parties – many political opponents are imprisoned – the unions, associations, media – all of the administration and fi-

nally society. The country holds the sad record of the greatest number of European Parliament resolutions condemning the action undertaken by its authorities. Shunned by the international community for its infringements of Human Rights, Aleksander Lukashenko is prohibited from travelling and staying in both the EU and the USA – he has closed Belarus which he has isolated from the rest of the world – having established there a State ideology taught in secondary schools and higher education establishments as well as in companies.

In November 1996 two years after his accession to the presidency (20th July 1994) Aleksander Lukashenko organised a referendum which enabled him to extend his mandate by a further two years and also his prerogatives – and this came whilst the electoral law prohibited any modification to the country's Constitution by referendum. He was then re-elected to the supreme office for a five year mandate on 9th September 2001 in the first round of voting with 75.6% of the vote against 15.65% for his main adversary, opposition candidate, Vladimir Goncharik. This election was acknowledged as valid by OSCE observers but was vigorously challenged by the opposition.

On 17th October 2004 when general "elections" were organised and denounced as fraudulent by observers in charge of monitoring the election since the Constitution prohibited him from standing a third time, Lukashenko organised another popular consultation whereby he achieved the adoption of an amendment to the Constitution removing the limit on the number of elections of the same person as President. Lukashenko is therefore running for the fourth consecutive time.

Candidates running in the Election

10 people are standing to date (the deadline for candidacy is set for 23rd November):

- Aleksander Lukashenko,
- Vladimir Neklyhiaiev, 64 years old, leader of the "Tell the Truth" movement, seen as the only true adversary. Allied to Aleksander Lukashenko in his first term in office he then went into exile abroad and for five years lived in Finland and then Poland. "I am there to bring you victory" is his chosen slogan saying that he has decided to take part in the election because of the lack of perspectives for opponents to Lukashenko;

- Rylhor Kastusyow, chairman of the People's Front;
- Dmitri Us, director of the Tryvium company;
- Nikolai Statkevich, co-founder of the Social Democratic Party;
- Jaroslav Romantchouk, a 44 year-old economist and deputy chair of the Civil Unity Party;
- Vitali Rimachevski, co-chair of the Christian Democratic Party;
- Andrei Sannikov, leader of European Belarus, a movement created in 2008 to promote the cause of Minsk's accession to the EU;
- Alexei Mikhalevich, lawyer and member of the Modernisation Union;
- Viktor Terechtchenko, former head of the international management institute of Minsk, chairman of the Council of the Association of SME's, the unfortunate candidate in the previous elections in 1994 and 2001. Anyone wanting to take part in the "election" has to collate an obligatory 100,000 signatures to be registered officially.

Aleksander Milinkevich, chair of the Freedom Movement, the only democratic opposition candidate in the election on 19th March 2006 (officially he won 6% of the vote but always maintained that he won 18%), chose not to stand. "I do not want just to be a stand-in and I cannot take part in elections that are not transparent," declared the man to whom European Parliament awarded the Sakharov Prize for the Freedom of Expression in 2006 and who, by refusing to participate, wants to highlight the illegitimacy of the election.

Aleksander Milinkevich believes that the 2010 election is very different from the one in 2006. "In 2006 power was greater and there was no conflict with Russia. Today Aleksander Lukashenko is weaker than ever, the economy is on the edge of the abyss and there is an information war on with Russia," he stresses.

He regrets the division of the opposition which in his opinion has lost its influence since 2007 the year when the internal fighting started. "The opposition's disunion is the main reason why I refused to take part in the presidential election. The Belarusians see this negatively which means that we shall not succeed in motivating the electorate," he declared.

Aleksander Milinkevich is expecting Aleksander Lukashenko's victory on 19th December next which he has already qualified as illegitimate. He will support the

candidate he thinks the most committed to a rapprochement between Belarus and the European Union.

At the beginning of November Guido Westerwelle (Liberal Democratic Party, FDP) and Radoslaw Sikorski (Civic Platform, PO) respectively the Foreign Ministers of Germany and Poland travelled to Minsk and met Aleksander Lukashenko. *"Belarus's path to the EU entails the holding of an honest, free presidential election,"* they declared. *"We see that there are no conditions for democratic elections in Belarus,"* indicated Ronald Pofalla, Head of the German Chancellorship.

However Lukashenko re-iterated his determination to cooperate with Europe saying that his country needed Europe and that Europe also needed Belarus. *"The steps taken by the EU do not help in making rapid improvements to relations, I'm talking of sanctions and economic restrictions,"* he indicated. Brussels relaxed restrictions with regard to visas for several Belarus personalities in October.

The behaviour of the Belarus authorities, caught between the tension with their Russian neighbour and

their need for international recognition has relaxed its attitude with regard to the opposition. Hence candidates did not encounter any specific problems to collate the vital signatures for their registration with the Central Electoral Commission. In addition to this the latter adopted a resolution on 5th November authorising candidates to raise funds for their campaign. The money they have will be used to buy air time on TV or the radio, space in newspapers, to rent offices, pay for transport costs or for equipment etc ...

The opposition parties which are greatly divided do not enjoy great support amongst the public who see in Lukashenko an element of stability which is vital for the country. On 25th April last local elections took place. Amongst the 25,035 people standing only 240 were opposition candidates. None were elected.

Just one month before the election no one is forecasting that Lukashenko will not be confirmed as head of Belarus on 19th December next.

Reminder of the "Election" Results on 19th March 2006 in Belarus

Turnout: 92.6%

Candidates	% of votes won
Aleksander Lukashenko	82.6
Aleksander Milinkevich (Unified Democratic Forces)	6
Serguey Gaydukevich (Democratic Liberal Party)	3.5
Aleksander Kazuline (Social Democratic Party)	2.3

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