

Belarusian President Attempts a Divisive National Ideology

In his annual parliamentary address last week, Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka stated the need for defining a post-soviet Belarusian identity. By a way of an answer, he offered curtailing of democratic freedoms and crackdown on dissent.

This echoed his New Year 2011 speech, when Lukashenka said that only those who had voted for him at the last election were worthy Belarusians, the opponent being outcast. Rather than seeking a substantial answer to the pertinent question of Belarusian national identity and that would unite the nation for the new century, Lukashenka started dividing the nation, and by force. Recent harsh sentences for opposition activists is yet another evidence of that.

Until recently, Lukashenka demonstrated a superbly sharp instinct for power, which helped him navigate many precarious situations in 17 years in power. That instinct led him to produce the ideology of independent Belarusian statehood. This ideology, applied with flexibility and skill, formed the corner stone of Lukashenka's power in Belarus, much more than cheap Russian energy. His regime did rely on coercion, but also to a great degree on consent about protecting Belarusian independence, the point to which even the opposition could not but subscribe.

By the end of the 2010s, however, the idea of Belarus independence got so entrenched and constitutionalised, that another ideological boost became necessary. With a firm statehood foundation, Belarusians continued to lack a cohesive and clear sense of their national identity. Neither the 19 century nor Soviet ideas about national values and attitudes seem to hold water twenty years into the post-soviet era.

Belarusians need a sense of themselves and their place in the present-day world. This, Lukashenka seems unable to offer.

It is very unlikely that purging "good" Belarusians from the "bad", will by itself yield Lukashenka the desired national identity. It may appear easier to preach to the converted, at the first sight, but one still needs to know what to say and what vision and goals to set to the audience, beyond further social policy spoils as the president has done so far. Not only Lukashenka's tactics time-delaying at most as regards social progress, it is also self-destructive. The approach of keeping unity but excluding dissent is unfruitful as it can eventually eliminate everyone out down to the last man.

A unifying ideology, instead, the one that finds place for diversity and dissent, can survive through the ages, and thrive in different economic conditions. Lukashenka does not seem comfortable with the idea though. Or perhaps he has reached his depth?

Implications

Four scenarios are likely to play out in Belarus in the short to medium term. The most likely one is the continued polarization of society and regime's increased reliance on coercion rather than consent. This would involve economic austerity, protectionism and parazyting on the country's transit status, under Lukashenka's continued grip.

Another possibility is the emergence of a credible opponent that would pick up where Lukashenka has left in ideological terms and offer the society a unifying concept of national identity. A quick regime change by popular pressure will ensue, most likely in a more democratic direction. The social basis for such an ideology is consolidating, it remains to be the question of the right individual with the right agenda coming to the fore without his activity being nipped in the bud by the current Belarusian authorities.

Yet another possibility is Lukashenka's concentrating and pulling out a credible – and unifying – national identity himself. Unless it has viable ways of incorporating dissent, however, the ideology would not last. The possibility is small, but should not be ruled out entirely. Lukashenka's ability to play this scenario will depend on his perception of the vulnerability of his position and having an intellectual range of available solutions at hand. In this case, Belarus would become a neutral state trading equally with Europe and Russia, with a more relaxed and relatively legitimate regime, though not a liberal democracy.

The final one is Russia's coming to buy up Belarus's family chest, which would not, however, result in the loss of political sovereignty but will forestall any meaningful economic reform and progress. This scenario may well combine with the first one.

As long as Lukashenka continues dividing Belarusians into the "proper" and "improper" ones, he is losing ground as a credible and genuine national leader. The more the balance of his power basis tilts from ideological consent to political coercion, the more vulnerable his hold over Belarus becomes.

Natalia Leshchenko

Natalia Leshchenko, PhD is an expert in political ideologies and national identity at the Institute for State Ideologies (INSTID) in London.

Blood on the Streets as

Belarus Authorities Announce Election Results



Between thirty and fifty thousand people gathered in the center of Minsk on Sunday to protest against the officially announced results of presidential elections. Despite the freezing cold, people gathered in the center of Minsk and marched towards the headquarters of the Central Elections Committee demanding fair elections. Tens of thousands of people were chanting "Go away!" to the incumbent president Alyaksandr Lukashenka who is running for the fourth turn.

After the protesters gathered at the Central Elections Committee on the Independence Square they started negotiations with the police. Then, as eye witnesses report, a group of people who looked like undercover security agents suddenly stormed a government building and smashed its glass doors. Vital Rymasheuski and other presidential candidates announced that those people had no affiliation with the protesters and were most likely sent by the authorities to create appearance of violent protests and thus justify using force against demonstrators.

Because of the cold temperature many people began to leave the main square. Their plan was to come back on the next day. Mr Rymasheuski was promised by the police that if the organizers remove the loudspeakers they would not use violence against the crowd. The organizers removed the loudspeakers but the police shortly thereafter started to beat and arrest the remaining people. Thousands of riot police personnel were

deployed to suppress the protesters.

According to multiple sources, police was using excessive violence, many protesters and journalists were heavily beaten and blood was seen on the protestors' faces and on the snow. There were no clashes because the protestors did not even try to resist the overwhelming police force. Earlier this Sunday, Vladimir Neklyayev, the most charismatic presidential candidate, had been attacked and knocked unconscious by a group of men apparently affiliated with the Belarus authorities. Vital Rymasheuski and Andrei Sannikau had also been severely beaten by the riot police. Most opposition presidential candidates are now under arrest. Hundreds of other protestors are also detained.

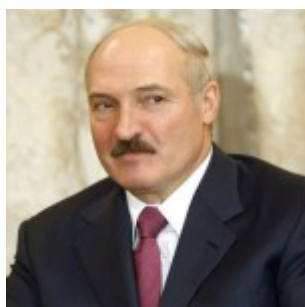
Although the protests are not yet over, the turnout of more than 50 thousand people despite years of intimidation and cold weather is truly remarkable. Belarus has not seen anything close to these figures since 1996. Apparently, the authorities were seriously concerned that the protest will turn into a true revolution. This is why they decided to use provocations and excessive force to ensure that the results they announced are not going to be questioned.



Although announcement of a very high percentage for the current president and serious election irregularities were expected, the police brutality had not been expected by most Belarus analysts. Most experts predicted that authorities would just wait until the protesters disappear because of very cold weather conditions. An appearance of more democratic elections could have won more friends for the Belarus regime in the West. This is unlikely to happen now.

It is already clear that the Belarus authorities will face the consequences of their brutality. Although the leverages against the Belarus regime are limited, more economic and political sanctions may follow. However, it is not clear whether the international community is going to increase support of media directed to Belarus and other civil society groups in the country. The high turnout of protesters suggests that changes in Belarus will come sooner rather than later.

Lukashenka Has Reached His Deal with the West



While some analysts are calculating whether the West/Europe can agree with Russian plans to change Belarusian regime or has already done so, there are reasons to assume another tacit deal. Between Western political leadership and Lukashenka. Without much noise, Western attitude to Belarus changed regarding the most important for Minsk point. Both EU and the US have given up their policies aimed at removing Lukashenka.

There were no official statements, of course. But relations between Belarus and EU (to a lesser extent also relations with the US) are drifting towards normality. Though this year brought no highest level visits but there are numerous contacts between officials which demonstrate a tendency to renounce earlier confrontation altogether. Thus, at the end of the recent visit by Czech senators to Minsk, one of them, Deputy Chairman of Foreign Affairs, Defense and Security Committee Tomáš Jirsa said,

*I am leaving with the opinion that also in the future there are no problems for Czech Republic to support Belarus either in the framework of bilateral relations or at the EU level.**

But that is nothing compared with another development concerning Western support for Belarusian opposition. These days, Belarusian political community accepted the sheer fact that at the near presidential elections there will be one candidate which is explicitly pro-Russian. The candidate from previous 2006 elections – Alyaksandar Milinkevich – did not manage to find money from the West this time.

Leading German expert on post-Soviet politics Alexander Rahr interviewed recently by Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe said,

*I expect the EU to study and analyze the conflict between Minsk and Moscow without deepening it or participating in it. The EU has no geopolitical grounds for it. At the same time the EU hopes that energy security on which depends our welfare in Europe, will not be threatened. From this viewpoint the European Union will offer Belarus the cooperation form which one time the Western Germany had offered the Soviet Union. Its essence – through trade and economics to try to cause political changes in Belarus.**

If true, then the EU and Lukashenka can work together, since the Belarusian leader principally is not against changes. The history of his political carrier shows him to be very flexible and even opportunistic in all points except for gaining and retaining personal power. Now, Lukashenka also is interested in changes. Earlier the EU wanted from him the changes that while liberalizing Belarusian politics unavoidably would have led Belarusian president to his doom. New messages on gradual change through cooperation sound not so dangerous for Minsk regime, moreover, they seem to be even promising in some respects. After all, there can be no eternal rule, and this is

a good exit option into political retirement.

But Belarusian regime can fare even better in the future if it persists longer in the face of Russian pressure and European engagement. Lukashenka clearly dreams of being accepted by the West as other doubtful regimes on the European borders are accepted – from Morocco to Kazakhstan – i.e. as friendly and geopolitically loyal enough neighbor. Not a part of Europe, yet a useful buffer to support European security and stability.

The key principle of stability of Belarusian regime is not to get too close neither to the Russia nor to the West. Now Belarusian leadership and government model built by him is equally unacceptable both in the West and the East. So, if Minsk becomes too dependent on any of these poles it will have to make its political model more compatible to Russian or Western standards. And that will result in political demise of Alyaksandar Lukashenka.

SB

US Politicians Better Informed about Belarus than a Top EU Official

Thanks to Representative Chris Smith of New Jersey Belarus was at the center of discussions at the hearing held by US Congress Helsinki Committee earlier this week. Joao Soares, the President of OSCE Parliamentary assembly shared his views on political



processes in Belarus with a group of US congressmen.

Joao Soares admitted that he did not follow what was happening in Belarus over the last months . His knowledge about Belarus was limited to a recollection of a meeting with Alexander Milinkevich and a general observation that Belarusian elections look fine the vote counting.

On the other hand, the US congressmen appeared much better informed about problems in Belarus. In particular, Rep. Smith, a long standing advocate of Belarus interests in Congress, shared his concern that China might provide Belarus technologies to censor internet. Representative Alcee Hastings mentioned that there would be a special hearing on the Belarusian issue this September.

Below are the excerpts from an unofficial transcript of the hearing.

Hearing :: Global Threats, European Security and Parliamentary Cooperation

CAPITOL VISITOR CENTER, WASHINGTON, D.C., [SEN. BENJAMIN CARDIN, CO-CHAIRMAN, CSCE], MODERATING

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 16, 2010

REP. SMITH: Mr. President, one last question, how would you assess our mission, the OSCE mission in Minsk? I've met with both groups of dissidents, men and women who have been in and out of prison within the last month, and they are very conceded about the accommodation mood that they think the Minsk mission has taken. Do you have any thoughts that you might want to share with us on that?

MR. STOARES: I have a good impression of the Minsk mission. Of course there are always human factors that we cannot control, absolutely, as you know better than me. But I remember the head of the – the previous head of the Minsk mission was a German diplomat and I remember the meeting that we have done there with – (inaudible) – who are responsible for the Belarusian dossier and I talked about it.

We made initiatives as far as Milinkevich is concerned and I think we played a good role and I think we can – I don't know how the changes. I don't have recent news from the last months after the changes took place there. But my evaluation as far as what I could have seen in the previous years is a positive evaluation.

Of course it's always difficult and sometimes I have seen in other places sometimes some diplomats that are sent in a seconded way. That's another problem. That's another problem that you should solve. Sometimes some diplomats tend to be too much in compromise with the power. I've seen it.

REP. SMITH: I do have one last question. Again, meeting with the opposition – (inaudible) – and some of the others in Belarus.

MR. STOARES: Milinkevich.

REP. SMITH: They've made it very clear at the Chinese government is assisting Lukashenko in developing a capability to use the Internet to repress the human rights and pro-democracy forces there. Have you gotten any information on that?

MR. STOARES: I know that the Chinese are very good experts in this kind of matters.

REP. SMITH: They are, right.

MR. STOARES: And they shouldn't be proud of that. But we have to find ways of – and of course of dealing with it and pressing them not to do these kind of problems. But there are many other countries in the OSCE area where we have these kinds of problems.

REP. HASTINGS: I met with those opposition leaders as well and Chairman, hopefully Robert McNamara was meeting in one of the meetings and I indicated that I thought what would be helpful is for us to have a hearing to deal with the Belarusian issue and to do so – I forget the date or time in September – Robert is nodding to me and I hope we can accomplish that. All right, thank you. I'm sorry.

MR. STOARES: Belarus is a very good case where of course there is an authoritarian system. That came, if we see the beginning of the president, it came on a democratic way but after it turned on some non-democratic matters.

But where there are credible and popular opposition, people, leaders – I personally like very much Milinkevich and the role I was there with Alcee when we had a very nice press conference saying clearly that the elections were not free and clear because they were not free and fair and it was among all of them where I've been – and I've been in more than 30 – it was the worst I have seen and I remember that specifically with Congressman, Republican from Illinois, during this mission around Minsk and I remember very well this mission and in the end.

During the day it was absolutely marvelous. You have been there, music, food, children in every polling station. But after the problem was the counting. The counting we could not see.

SEN. CARDIN: There's no question – there's no question of the problems in Belarus from the point of view of democratic institutions. We took a delegation there last year. So we

were in Minsk and had a chance to meet with the president.

We had an opportunity to bring home an American who was being held inappropriately in their prison and if there is any hope here for some progress, it's current desire to be more dependent from Russia, which might give an opportunity for some progress to be made. But there are certainly issues that Congressman Smith has raised on the human rights issues that are pretty egregious and we would like to see some positive steps.

We don't expect change overnight but we do expect progress and that's a country of great interest to us. We are not giving up on any country in the OSCE as far as meeting its commitments under the Helsinki Final Act. Mr. President, you've been extremely generous with your time.

Read the full text at <http://csce.gov>.

YK

Third opposition candidate for presidency



In his article for the Jamestown Foundation the known expert on Belarus David Marples portrays Andrei Sannikau who recently announced his willing to run for the presidency.

Sannikau Throws His Hat in the Ring The Jamestown Foundation

Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 7 Issue: 56 March 23, 2010 By: David Marples A key opposition leader in Belarus has declared his candidacy for the next presidential elections, scheduled for 2011. Andrei Sannikau, the leader of the civic movement European Belarus, held an interview with "bloggers" in mid-March to outline his policies and answer questions. His decision reflects long-term disillusionment with recent attempts by the United Democratic Forces (UDF) in particular to engage in dialogue with the Lukashenka regime and support Belarus's membership of the Eastern Partnership Project. Ironically, Sannikau is also the most overtly pro-European of all the candidates to date, though he wishes to replace the Lukashenka regime with a completely new administration and state structure.

Sannikau is the third opposition candidate to decide to run for the presidency, following earlier statements by Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Ales Mikhalevich. It is also anticipated that the UDF will choose its own candidate, which raises the question as to whether yet another candidate from the opposition will undermine the chances of the country gaining its second president since elections were first held almost 16 years ago. Sannikau was born in 1954 in Minsk and graduated from the prestigious Minsk State Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages (renamed as Minsk State Linguistic University) in 1977. He completed course work at the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR in Moscow in 1989, and holds the diplomatic rank of ambassador. From 1991 he worked in the Belarusian foreign ministry, rising to the post of deputy foreign minister, before resigning in November 1996, in protest against the controversial referendum that drastically amended the 1994 constitution in favor of greater presidential authority. Since then, he has been the coordinator of the civic initiative Charter-97, and he now also leads the European Belarus civic campaign (Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta, March 15). When it was formed in January 2008, European Belarus announced at a news

conference in Minsk a long-term campaign for the country to gain European Union membership, where its representatives were Sannikau, Viktor Ivashkevich, Mikola Statkevich, and Mikhail Marynich. Sannikau stated that their goal was to recruit volunteers to gather "hundreds of thousands" of signatures for an appeal to the governing bodies of the EU, leading to the integration of Belarus into European structures (European Radio for Belarus, January 24, 2008). On March 15, Sannikau summarized his proposed presidential policies through a question and answer session with Belarusian bloggers. His campaign will rely on his family, those who share his views, former classmates, and Belarusians. He describes his political stance as "right-centrist," and notes his experience as the head of the Belarusian delegation at the talks on conventional and nuclear disarmament that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of an independent Belarus. He is a firm believer in democracy as a system that offers the right of choice to all its citizens.

He supports a relationship with Moscow based on mutual understanding rather than petty conflicts. Concerning the current regime, he would refer the fate of "Citizen Lukashenka" to an independent court and rely on lawsuits from individual citizens. He would change the current national symbols and reduce special detachments of the militia, though not necessarily the army, which has been downsized in recent years (www.charter97.org, March 15). If elected, Sannikau intends to enact sweeping reforms of the entire political and economic systems. Regarding the latter, he would provide opportunities for small and medium businesses. With respect to political reforms, he plans to construct "a normal state" by restoring the principle of the division of powers, recreating a parliament with real authority and securing the independence of the courts.

His free society would also be dependent upon an independent media. Ultimately, he wishes to see Belarus develop a

“European level of life” within the briefest possible timescale, rather than have it regarded as a pipedream for the distant future (www.charter97.org, March 15). His campaign raises some important questions: foremost is whether the EU would be prepared to abandon its current dialogue with Lukashenka and embrace an opposition candidate who is firmly opposed to cooperation with the regime. Indeed, Sannikau and his wife, the well-known journalist Iryna Khalip, have been especially targeted in recent days. On March 5, they were detained on the Lithuanian border for three hours by the Belarusian border guards and had a laptop confiscated (www.charter97.org, March 6).

On March 16, the Sannikau household was subjected to a police search for about three hours, along with a raid of Charter 97’s headquarters and a confiscation of equipment (Narodnaya Volya, March 17). Despite reducing the chances of an opposition figure securing enough votes to enter a second round of presidential elections, the entry of Sannikau in the future contest can also be seen as a positive step. More than any other current candidate he is prepared to highlight and oppose the recent repression against opposition figures and the Union of Poles. He is a former “insider,” highly educated, and fluent in English and French, as well as Belarusian and Russian, and on close terms with many political leaders of the EU. He may need to explain how the wholesale leap into Europe, which he proposes will allow friendly relations with Russia (he is notably quiet on the issue of NATO membership), and its impact on negotiations over gas and oil imports in particular.

VB

Playing Chess with Belarus Dictator

In his newest blog entry Pavol Demeš of the Central and Eastern Europe program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States compares the last European dictator with tough chess player who frequently uses forbidden moves to win. "Despite opposition movements, Russian punishments, EU and U.S. sanctions, and color revolutions around him, he remains comfortably ensconced at his palace while European commissioners, patriarchs, popes, and other presidents have come and gone," says Demeš. The author reveals the secrets of Lukashenko's self-made practices in international relations through prism of recent crackdown on Belarus' Polish minority and upcoming presidential elections.

Belarus' Aleksander Lukashenko, European Chess-master *GMF Blog*
Posted on March 4, 2010 BRATISLAVA, Slovakia – When Aleksander Lukashenko, the authoritarian president of Belarus, began a recent campaign to intimidate and punish members of the country's disobedient Polish community, he opened a new front not only with neighboring Poland, but also with the EU as a whole that must now meet that challenge head on.

Lukashenko knows how to play and is an effective self-made practitioner in international relations. Having ruled with an iron fist over his country of 10 million since 1994, he is one of the longest-serving presidents in Europe and knows very well how to use internal and external conflicts to maintain his rule. As Lukashenko sees it, Belarusians love and need him as the guarantor of nationhood and stability. Despite opposition movements, Russian punishments, EU and U.S. sanctions, and color revolutions around him, he remains comfortably ensconced at his palace while European commissioners, patriarchs, popes, and other presidents have come and gone. But early 2011 will see a presidential election

in Belarus and, in some ways, the campaign has already begun. Of course, it will be a campaign that is specific to Belarus and a select group of other countries of the former Soviet Union, where leaders are hesitant to retire anytime before they die. This type of election campaign is hardly recognizable to voters or politicians in democratic countries where ballots are actually counted.

The chessmaster Lukashenko understands that he is living in an interdependent and multi-polar world hit by an economic crisis, and he will use the time before next year's election to test new means of maintaining power that would allow his five-year-old son Kolya (who accompanies him regularly on his domestic and foreign trips) to continue learning from his powerful father until the time that he will be old enough to lead. Indeed, the 55-year-old Belarusian president, while shaping his peculiar autocratic regime, has learned a great deal about different mechanisms for controlling his own people and limiting the capacity of the outside world to influence his power games.

The recent attacks by the police on the Union of Poles, a group representing the Polish minority (there are about 400,000 Poles living in Belarus, some loyal to the regime, others not) and their ramifications seem to be part of Lukashenko's skilful pre-election political engineering. The timing of his Polish crackdown coincides with the pre-presidential elections in Poland and allows him to simultaneously demonstrate his overwhelming power both at home and abroad. Paradoxically, neighboring Poland earlier played a key role in the EU's recent welcoming overtures toward a Belarus that it argued was undertaking political reforms seriously. But the recent persecution of Belarus' Polish minority outraged Polish public opinion; now Poland is engaged in a bitter bilateral diplomatic war and is talking about new sanctions, conditionality, and visa bans.

Polish President Lech Kaczynski and two potential presidential

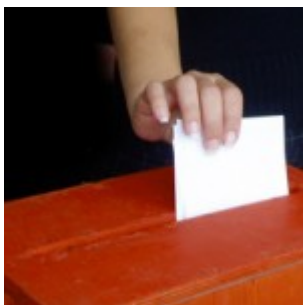
candidates – Bronisław Komorowski, marshal of the Polish Sejm, and Radosław Sikorski, the foreign minister, are all scrambling to find solutions. They have rightly called upon the institutions of the European Union for help. The EU, which is still working to define individual roles in the post-Lisbon period, reacted quickly. Jerzy Buzek, the new president of the European Parliament, who coincidentally happens to be from Poland, did his European best to answer Lukashenko's challenge by calling for a wider approach that doesn't look only at the issue of the Polish minority. Catherine Ashton, the EU's new high representative for foreign and security policy, said that Belarusian actions "undermined our efforts to strengthen relations between the European Union and Belarus." Lukashenko is at his chess game again – and winning. Top Western officials are writing him letters, negotiating, and asking him politely to do the things they would like him to do. Fact-finding missions are coming to Belarus to discover what they knew before. While Poland and the EU take the time to consider their next step, Lukashenko is already way ahead of them. Indeed, his plans likely include making a grand display of stopping the attacks and beginning a reconciliation process between Belarusians and Poles. But before he does that, he'll ask for further international financial assistance and other benefits from the very people and institutions who are now asking him to stop persecuting his country's minorities. And when that assistance arrives, he will use it to extend his control over domestic resistance and opposition before the new round of elections early next year. Lukashenko is a tough chess player who frequently uses forbidden moves (including removing pieces from the board) that throw his domestic and international opponents off-balance.

The new EU leaders should recognize that their peculiar neighbor will not respond to standard diplomatic warnings and pressure, does not care about EU membership, and is capable of creating the illusion of success for those who enter into negotiations with him. They must appreciate that he is fully

aware of the West's political and economic weaknesses and the increasingly process-driven mentality when it comes to democracy assistance and the protection of human rights. In short, the policy of engagement that replaced the strict isolation of Lukashenko's regime needs to be rethought and recalibrated. Instead of watching Lukashenko choose the strategy and create illusions, the attacks on the Polish minority in Belarus and Poland's consequent seeking of European solidarity should help us to rethink our values, commitments, and actions in respect to human rights and democracy, and to come up with real and effective cooperation strategies in this field. If we succeed in European Belarus, we will do much better in other parts of world. Pavol Demeš is the director of the Central and Eastern Europe program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

VB

Looking Back at Presidential Elections in Belarus



Next year, Belarusians will vote in the fourth presidential election in their history as an independent nation. Belarus has been led by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka since 1994. This blogpost provides a brief overview of the President's three electoral victories and may be helpful for anticipating the results of the upcoming 2011 elections.

2011 Election

So far, two oppositional candidates have announced running for

the Belarusian presidency. Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the leader of the Movement for Freedom, will run the second time. Ales Mikhalevich, the former Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front, said that he would participate, too. Mikhalevich was expelled from the Belarusian Popular Front for criticizing the party's leadership. He plans to campaign for the maintenance of Belarusian identity and culture, teaming up with Western-educated Belarusian professionals. There is a high probability that a third oppositional candidate will stand in the elections representing the United Democratic Forces (UDF). Even under the most democratic conditions, that considerably reduces the chances of any of them reaching a second round.

All political activity in the country is currently oriented toward April 25 local elections. All and sundry parties and movements are busy registering their representatives for participation in the electoral councils.

The latest poll findings by the Independent Institute for Social Economic and Political Research indicate that 42.5 % would vote for Lukashenka, 4.3 % for Milinkevich, and 2.4% for Alyaksandr Kazulin, opposition candidate in 2006 elections.

2006 Election

The Central Election Commission approved incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Alyaksandr Milinkevich (United Democratic Forces), Sergei Gaidukevich (Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus), Alyaksandr Kazulin (Belarusian Social Democratic Party) to run in 2006 election. Lukashenka was eligible to run again because of 2004 constitutional amendment abolishing presidential term limits. The amendment was supported by 77 to 48 % of voters, depending on the organization counting the votes. Before the elections, candidate Kazulin was arrested, beat up, and held in custody for eight hours. Many opposition activists were

arrested as well.

Milinkevich called the election the opposition's "last chance" and "last battle," and in a miraculous fit of political activism, 92.6% of Belarusians voted in 2006, according to the Central Election Commission. Lukashenka won by a landslide, getting 82.6% of the vote.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) declared that the election "failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections" and that Lukashenka "permitted State authority to be used in a manner which did not allow citizens to freely and fairly express their will at the ballot box, and a pattern of intimidation and the suppression of independent voices was evident." The United States did not "accept the results of the election" and "support[ed] the call for a new election." However, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) said the vote was open and transparent.

2001 Election

Lukashenka's original five-year term ran out in 1999. However, 1996 referendum extended presidential term to seven years. In 2001 Lukashenka ran against two candidates: Vladimir Goncharik, the chairman of the Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions, and a member of the parliament disbanded in 1996, and Sergei Gaidukevich, dubbed Belarusian Zhirinovskiy in some Western media and representing the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus.

On the Election Day, international websites covering elections had their IP addresses blocked and Belarusians could not access such websites as 'svaboda.org', 'charter97.org', 'racyja.pl', 'goncharik.org', and 'vybor.org', which covered Belarusian presidential elections. The media that were not hindered, accused the United States of launching a campaign to subvert the election and topple Lukashenka, following the

blueprint use to overthrow Yugoslavia's Slobodan Milosevic.

The OSCE international election observation mission reported that the Belarusian elections "failed to meet the OSCE commitments for democratic elections" and could not be internationally recognized. However, Lukashenka called his re-election "elegant and beautiful" in his victory speech. Russian observers also decreed Lukashenka's victory fair and democratic, applauding what they dubbed a convincing win.

1994 Election

Setting the stage for the next 15 years, Belarusian first presidential election was dominated by debates about the country's relations with Russia. The debate was not between those for and those against closer ties with Moscow, however. Both candidates – Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebic and populist director of a state farm Lukashenka – called for economic union with the Eastern neighbor and argued over who of them opposed the dissolution of the Soviet Union the most. A crusader against corruption and inflation, Lukashenka scored an overwhelming victory, winning 80 % of votes. Interestingly, he told reporters he was "afraid that the election results will be falsified" and that is why he "sent 20,000 observers to polling stations."

To read more about elections in Belarus visit:

["Belarusian Opposition Prepares for Local and Presidential Elections"](#) by David Marples.

Newsline of Belarus' local elections from the [special project by BelaPAN](#).

Q&A about Belarusian elections from 2008 in [BBCNews](#).

Belarusian Authorities Agreed to Extension of OSCE Mission



The OSCE Office in Minsk made Lukashenka's "nice list" last Christmas. As a result, it was given permission to extend its mandate for one more year, until Dec. 31, 2010. However, the mission's work has to abide by strict conditions. Were the Office to overstep the mandate and engage in "activities that go beyond the agreed parameters, the Belarusian side reserves the right to terminate the activities of the OSCE Office in Minsk" any time, as the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned.

The meaning of this decision – or rather its meaninglessness – is somewhat similar to that of the EU decision in December 2009 to extend sanctions while suspending their application. The OSCE mission is extended, but its actions are so restricted that its presence in Minsk makes little difference. The only difference is that – with or without the sanctions – the EU hardly has a say in Belarusian politics while the Belarusian authorities will continue to effectively dictate the OSCE what to do for years to come.

The decision to extend the mission was made at the session of the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna on Dec. 30, 2009. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry applauded the Office for cooperating with the Belarusian side in 2009. This is not surprising for there must be reasons why the Belarusian opposition and several OSCE member states complained over the actions and statements of the former head of the OSCE office, Hans Jochen Schmidt. Their complains led to Schmidt's early termination (his term was supposed to expire in February 2010) and appointment of German diplomat Benedikt Haller as his successor.

The OSCE Office in Minsk was established on 30 December 2002 following OSCE Permanent Council Decision No 526. Its objectives have been to work with the Belarusian government on the issues of institution building, consolidating the rule of law, developing relations with civil society, fostering economic and environmental activities. The Foreign Ministry said there were “no objective reasons today for the presence of the OSCE Office in Belarus.” Either the office has been so successful in achieving its objectives that there is nothing else to contribute, or the Belarusian government prefers that these objectives never be achieved.

The United States Mission to the OSCE on New Political Prisoners in Belarus



Today the United States Mission to the OSCE has released the following statement regarding the arrest of political prisoners in Belarus:

Madam Chairwoman,

The United States welcomed the August 2008 release of Belarusian political prisoners, including former Presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin. We also take note of additional steps the Belarusian authorities have taken, including granting permission for two independent newspapers to be distributed through state networks, the registration of the “For Freedom” movement, the formation of a public council through which to engage independent groups, and the

commitment by the government of Belarus, as Ambassador Sychov stated on January 30, 2009, to work closely with the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to rectify shortcomings in electoral laws and practices. These are all positive steps. But they are also limited in nature. We strongly encourage the Belarusian authorities to take further positive steps and ensure that progress is not reversed, and that follow-through is effective.

We share the concern of the European Union that in several important respects the Belarusian authorities have moved in a negative direction. Messrs. Yuri Leonov and Nikolay Avtukhovich, two former political prisoners, along with Mr. Vladimir Osipenko, face charges in connection with an alleged arson case from several years ago. We urge the Belarusian authorities to ensure that judicial proceedings with regard to these cases are conducted in a fair, open, and transparent manner. As the United States has made clear, a key condition for improvement in U.S.-Belarus relations is progress on respect for human rights and democracy in Belarus.

As reported in the February 19, 2009 OSCE Office in Minsk Spot Report and by the International Federation of Human Rights, police forcefully dispersed peaceful demonstrators protesting these arrests in central Minsk on February 14 and 16.

And as the OSCE Office in Minsk also reported, three youth activists Franak Vyachorka, Ivan Shyla, and Zmitser Fedaruk have been forcibly drafted into the military. We understand that Messrs. Vyachorka and Fedaruk both had medical exemptions from military service and that Mr. Fedaruk has in fact undergone surgery for his condition. We are particularly concerned about reports that Mr. Vyachorka was beaten on the day he was forcibly taken to army barracks.

Progress on respect for human rights and democracy would lead

to an improved relationship between the United States and Belarus.

Thank you Madam Chairwoman.

*As prepared for delivery by Chargé d’Affaires Kyle Scott
to the Permanent Council, Vienna*

March 5, 2009