

Belarusian presidential election will take place on December 19, 2010

✘ On September 14, Belarusian Chamber of Representatives has set the date of the presidential election in the country. All present 108 MPs unanimously voted for this date.

It is noteworthy how the debate on the date of the election in the Chamber of Representatives was taking place. According to [charter97.org*](http://charter97.org), MP Anatoly Hlaz offered to hold the election on February 6, but his proposal was not supported by anyone. MP Uladzimir Zdanovich immediately started agitating for Alyaksandr Lukashenka. He offered all MPs to tell at the local level how good the life is under the current regime. He finished his speech with the words: "What for do we need somebody else?"

According to the Belarusian Constitution, the presidential election is set by the Chamber of Representatives earlier than 2 months before the expiry of the term of the current president. The presidential term of Lukashenka finishes on April 6, 2011.

Prospective presidential candidates are to file applications for registration of initiative groups on September 24 at the latest.

VB

American media on Russia-Belarus information war



Recent Russia-Belarus information conflict is still attracting attention of leading international media outlets. The latest dispute broke out in June when Russia and Belarus tussled over natural gas prices, and continued when Mr. Lukashenko nearly scuttled a planned customs union between his country, Russia and Kazakhstan that had been a pet project of Vladimir V. Putin, Russia's prime minister and pre-eminent leader.

Michael Schwartz of The New York Times^{*} reflects on the mudslinging, which has played out in both countries' government-controlled media in recent weeks.

In Information War, Documentary Is Latest Salvo

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

The New York Times

Published: July 31, 2010

MOSCOW – A new documentary film about the Belarussian president, Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, portrays him as a bumbling tyrant enamored of Hitler and Stalin. He has political opponents killed, journalists silenced and elections rigged in the film, all while keeping his faltering country locked in a Soviet time warp.

For years, human rights groups and Western governments have been leveling similar accusations. But the latest salvo against Mr. Lukashenko comes from an unlikely source: Russia's government-controlled television.

The documentary is part of an all-out propaganda war that has

erupted between Russia and neighboring Belarus, two former Soviet republics that were once so close they had been on track to reunite. When the documentary, titled “Godfather,” was aired this month on Russia’s NTV television, it seemed to signal that the marriage was officially off.

VB

[Read the full story.](#)

Economist: It Takes One to Know One



The Economist reports on the media war broken out between Belarus and Russia.

One good thing about what is going on is that for the first time the public in Belarus and Russia can hear basically the truth about the neighbour’s government. Belarusians can get truthful stories about problems with freedom of speech in today’s Russia (see a report by the Belarusian TV channel STV [here](#)). On the other side, Russian TV tells the truth about Aliaksandr Lukashenka in its scandalous documentary [The Godfather](#).

Truth is such a rare thing for state media in authoritarian states like Russia and Belarus. Let’s hope we’ll see more of it as the conflict escalates.

RUSSIA and Belarus are unlikely champions of democracy and freedom of speech. But a postmodernist approach to politics can yield odd results in the post-Soviet world. In recent weeks these authoritarian regimes have denounced each other's authoritarianism and deployed state-controlled media to attack each other's lack of media freedom. Bizarrely, this war of words has been waged in the name of brotherly ties and economic union.

Hostilities broke out three weeks ago when Moscow and Minsk sparred over gas prices and Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Belarus's president, nearly reneged on a customs union between his country, Russia and Kazakhstan, which was finally signed on July 5th. A day earlier NTV, a television channel controlled by Gazprom, Russia's gas monopoly, aired "Godfather", a documentary that portrayed Mr Lukashenka, long backed by Russia, as a brutal election-rigging, opposition-repressing tyrant.

[Read the full article](#)

AČ

U.S. sanctions against Lukashenka regime extended

U.S. President Barack Obama extended for another year sanctions imposed against certain Belarusian high-ranking officials on June 16, 2006. "The actions and policies of certain members of the Government of Belarus and other persons continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.

Accordingly, the national emergency declared on June 16, 2006, and the measures adopted on that date to deal with that emergency, must continue in effect beyond June 16, 2010.

Therefore, in accordance with [...] the National Emergencies Act [...] I am continuing for 1 year the national emergency," says the Notice* from Barack Obama to the U.S. Congress released on June 8. According to the U.S. president, despite the release of internationally recognized political prisoners in 2008 and the U.S.'s continuing efforts to press for democratic reforms in Belarus, serious challenges remain.

According to RFE/RL's Belarus Service*, Belarus has called continued U.S. sanctions against it "pointless" and "confrontational." Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrey Savinnykh said the extension signaled the United States' lack of political readiness to normalize relations with Belarus. "The abolition of all types of sanctions is a fundamental precondition for the renewal of dialogue," Savinnykh said. But David Kramer, a former U.S. State Department official, said any improvement in ties was in Minsk's hands. Kramer served during the George W. Bush administration as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, responsible for a region that included Belarus.

"Belarus and the Lukashenka regime know what they need to do if they want to improve relations with the United States and with the West," Kramer told RFE/RL. "And that is to stop cracking down on people's rights [and] liberalize their society. But I fear the situation is only going to get worse as Belarus approaches a presidential election [in 2011]."

VB

Walking in Bakiyev's Shoes



There is one thing many commentators on Belarus fail to understand. Alexander Lukashenko has no geopolitical preferences. The Belarusian president will be friends with whomever is ready to support the survival and longevity of his regime. Some want to read in his oil dealings with Venezuela a signal to Moscow. But the notion that Belarus is going to replace Russian oil with Venezuelan oil is ridiculous.

Similarly, giving asylum to the ousted Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev is similarly seen as a challenge to Kremlin. Although such events may stimulate prolific political analysts they have little serious implications. Moscow has nothing to lose from Bakiyev's stay in Belarus. Not only the Russians helped Bakiyev to flee Kyrgyzstan, but he can now be used as an additional tool to influence power struggle in that unstable Central Asian country. For Lukashenko personally, protecting Bakiyev, a former president-turned-dictator is very symbolic. A Russia-supported revolt is a very realistic scenario for overthrow of Belarusian president who wants to express solidarity with Bakiyev. He will bash Russia not because he is anti-Russian but because he does not want to end up walking in Bakiyev's shoes.

Perhaps the Belarusian president hopes that if this scenario comes true there will be a friendly dictator who would be willing to accept him and his sons. Being a true Russian ally standing up against both the corrupt elite of Russia and the greedy West is the name of the game Belarusian president is playing. Taking the words and gestures of Lukashenko seriously is like trusting an experienced actor on the stage of the Bolshoi Theatre.

Bakiyev Praised for the Bishkek Massacre and Offered Political Asylum in Belarus

✘ Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the ousted President of Kyrgyzstan, declined the offer of political asylum in Belarus. Speaking to his supporters in the south of his country Bakiyev shared his decision and the news that President Lukashenka was on his side. The Belarus president condemned the “anti-state and anti-constitutional coup d’état” as well as the Russian and United States policy towards the recent Kyrgyzstan events by calling it “very bad and shortsighted”.

At the same time, Lukashenka supported the use of firearms against the Kyrgyz opposition: “There is no reason to blame Bakiyev that the authorities used force to defend themselves. If the authorities cannot defend themselves and their people – what kind of authorities are those?”

Perhaps by “their people” he meant Bakiyev’s son Maksim widely known for embezzling state funds and leading lavish life in an impoverished Central Asian republic. “Their people” also meant other relatives Bakiyev put into key positions in Kyrgyzstan such as his brother Janysh Bakiyev who served as a high-ranked security official and reportedly ordered to open fire against the crowd.

Although Lukashenko has no brothers, he also has “his people” to take care of, including three sons. One of them, Victor Lukashenko, is already one of the most influential businessmen in Belarus and serves as his security adviser.

Bakiyev killed scores of demonstrators in Bishkek and still

had to resign. Ironically, just a few years ago he was one of opposition demonstrators himself when the Tulip revolution brought him to power in 2005. “Strong” presidents is a curse not only for Belarus and Kyrgyzstan but for virtually all post-Soviet countries.

The exceptions are Ukraine and Moldova which are parliamentary republics. They are far from perfect, but at least there are no political killings or political prisoners. Authorities in those countries have to rely on the ballot box, not guns to defend themselves. Perhaps changing constitutions to get rid of strong presidential posts is something other countries in the region should seriously consider.

YK

Belarus Talks to Rothschild to Put Something Big on its Privatization Plate



For those who are still not sure about Belarus privatization plans, there is another sign that the Government is serious about it.

Moscow Times reports that President Lukashenka invited the Rothschild Group to advise the government on evaluation of enterprises. Apparently, Belarus would not have invited the Rothschild Group to privatize small state-owned companies. Rothschild has been at the center of the world's financial

markets for over 200 years. It provides Investment Banking, Corporate Banking and Private Banking & Trust services to governments, corporations and individuals.

The Rothschild talks suggest that we may see something big on the privatization plate in the near future. Belarus authorities already have experience working with Rothschild. In 2009, Rothschild was involved in sale of one of the leading Belarus banks – BPS Bank, which was acquired by Russian Sberbank for \$280,7 million. Moscow Times reports:

“We not only want to receive your [price] estimates of privatized companies, we would like to learn a lot from you,” Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said at a meeting with top executive of the financial services group. “It would suit us very well to work with your specialists. If you agreed we could soon delegate several projects and work on them seriously.”

Read the piece at moscowtimes.com.

U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing “Advancing U.S. Interests in the OSCE Region”

✘ Excerpts on Belarus from the US Helsinki Commission hearing held on October 28, 2009 in Washington, D.C.:

Present: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs; Alexander Vershbow, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs.

Michael H. Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

REP. CHRIS SMITH (R-NJ):

...Mr. Chairman (referring Sen. Benjamin Cardin – D-MD), you and I visited Belarus this past July along with other members of the Commission. And we had, as I think most people know certainly in this room, had a private meeting with Alexander Lukashenka.

Lukashenka was aggressive in that meeting demanding that our government revoke certain sanctions put on his government by the Belarus Democracy Act, which first became into law back in 2004 and was reauthorized in 2007 and major provisions of it which were adopted into this year's State Department authorization bill. I know from countless meetings with the Belarusian democratic reformers and human rights activists how these sanctions sustain them against the dictator both materially and morally.

And we saw with our own eyes that the sanctions are a big factor in the dictator's thinking. He wants them removed. And so they have to say – if they're going to have it removed, there needs to be substantial progress in the realm of human rights and they must treat those dissidents with respect and not the scorn, and really much worse than scorn, with which Lukashenka and his thugs have done so in the past...

REP. SMITH:

...Secondly, I'd like to raise – and if you want to comment on that in a second, I appreciate if you would – on Belarus. Our chairman led us to Minsk. We had an excellent meeting. We had more than a dozen members in a face-off friendly but firm with Lukashenka. And I know, Mr. Gordon, I think on the 14th of August, you met with Lukashenka as well. I believe that was the date, whatever date it was.

MR. GORDON: I didn't actually meet with Lukashenka –

REP. SMITH: Okay, but it seemed as if he wants to obviously see a reversal or a amelioration of those sanctions. My hope is not until we have real deeds and not promises or even minor deeds. We need some substantial deeds from this event. And again, that's the message we heard from our friends in the dissident community. If you could speak to that. ...

MR. GORDON:

... On Belarus, indeed I appreciated the opportunity we had to compare notes on this after your trip and before mine. To clarify, I spent some time with the Belarusian leaders, but didn't meet with President Lukashenka. That could happen at some other time, but we felt this time it was appropriate to do business at a different level. And the business was what we discussed. And I think we had very much the same message, which is that as the Administration has mentioned in other cases, we are open to dialogue and engagement. And we have noticed a couple of signs, not nearly enough, but enough from Belarus to merit talking further about this. And I went to Minsk with a very clear message. And I was the most senior official to go to Minsk for 10 years from the State Department. And we wanted them to notice that as well. And the message was that if they want a better relationship with the United States and certainly if they want any scope for lifting the sanctions that have been put on them, then they need to go about their democracy and human rights practices differently. And that's the core of the issue.

There're other things we care about, like getting our embassy fully staffed. We welcome the fact that they released an American citizen, Mr. Zeltser, thanks in part to your good work. We took that as a sign that they might want to different and better relationship. And some other modest steps that they had taken about registering NGOs and media. But I made clear to them that they still have a very long way to go and that

there was linkage between the two things. So we'll see what comes of that. I think it was a good thing that you all went. I think it was appropriate for me to go and let them know the different future that could be available if they do different things at home, but also that there won't be a different future if they don't. And we'll see what comes of that. From our point of view, we're going to sustain this approach, but we will need to see results from them before there's a significant change in our policy.

We're also, I should add, working very close with the Europeans on this, who I think have a similar approach. They also have sanctions on Belarus. They also focus on democracy and human rights. And we're more powerful when we work on this together because if one of us slips, then you lose the leverage of the entire West pushing them on the issues that we care about. ...

For full hearing transcript go to www.csce.gov.

Foreign Policy: An Unwanted Guest



Irina Krasovskaya and David Kramer published a piece in Foreign Policy on the European Union's recent overtures to Belarus.

David Kramer was most recently Assistant Secretary of State for democracy, human rights and labor and, before that, a deputy assistant secretary of state responsible for Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, in the George W. Bush administration. Irina Krasovskaya is president of the We Remember Foundation.

They argue that the European Union's policy of engaging the Belarusian regime is counterproductive, because so far it has only led to deterioration of human rights situation in Belarus. Here is what they conclude:

The Lukashenko regime continues to engage in human rights abuses even as relations with the West warm up... Lukashenko is a master at playing Russia and the West off of each other, delivering little to neither... Further Western engagement with Belarus makes sense, but only so long as the Lukashenko government takes more positive steps in the area of human rights. It takes two to tango.

Read the full text at Foreignpolicy.com

New York Times: Electoral Rot Nearby? The Russians Don't See It

✘ ZHODINO, Belarus – The voting monitor began his rounds on election day here at Polling Place No. 7. “Issues? Violations?” he asked the poll workers, glancing around like a casual sightseer. They said no, so he left.

The monitor, Kholnazar Makhmadaliyev, breezed from one polling site (“What’s up? Things O.K.?”) to another (“Everything fine here?”), shaking a lot of hands, offering abundant compliments and drinking brandy with this city’s mayor.

Such went Mr. Makhmadaliyev’s stint on a large observer mission led by the Kremlin that concluded that Belarus, a former Soviet republic and an ally of Russia, had conducted a

“free, open and democratic” parliamentary election in late September.

The Kremlin monitors’ version of reality, though, clashed with the one described by a European security group, whose own monitors dismissed the election as a sham tainted by numerous shortcomings, not the least of which was vote rigging. The monitors dispatched by the Kremlin did not report anything like that. Nor did they raise concerns about Belarus’s security service, still called the K.G.B., which had exerted harsh pressure on the opposition, imprisoning several of its leaders over the last year and thwarting their campaigns. Or about state-controlled television broadcasts repeatedly branding opposition leaders as traitors.

Or, for that matter, about the final results: a sweep of every seat in the 110-member Parliament by supporters of President Alexander Lukashenko, often described as Europe’s last dictator.

The Kremlin under Vladimir Putin has sought to bolster authoritarian governments in the region that remain loyal, and these election monitoring teams – 400 strong in Belarus alone – are one of its newer innovations. They demonstrate the lengths to which the Kremlin will go to create the illusion of political freedom in Russia and other former Soviet republics, even though their structures of democracy have been hollowed out..

Read the [full text](#) of this article in New York Times.