

Belarus cracks down on opposition in wake of presidential vote

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The regime of President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus has brutally cracked down on opposition political parties and mass protests following the December 19 presidential elections.

The European powers and Washington have responded to events with mild rebukes of the Lukashenko administration, in a decision aimed at not aggravating relations with Russia, the principal ally of the regime in Minsk.

The presidential poll in Belarus, widely condemned as failing to meet basic electoral standards, gave incumbent Lukashenko nearly 80 percent of the vote. Lukashenko has ruled the ex-Soviet republic since 1994.

As part of ongoing negotiations between the Lukashenko government and the European powers, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was given access to monitor the vote.

The OSCE stated that the voting process was “very bad” in many areas that it inspected. OSCE mission chief in the country, Tony Lloyd, told the press the day after the election that the vote had “failed to give Belarus the new start it needed.”

A mass demonstration of around 10,000 anti-government protestors gathered in the capital, Minsk, following the vote. Heavily armed police dispersed the crowd, arresting some 600 people, including opposition politicians. Some demonstrators attempted to occupy a government building but were repulsed by riot police.

Eyewitnesses reported many protestors being beaten with batons by police, with some receiving serious injuries.

European Union foreign policy representative Catherine Ashton and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a relatively mild rebuke of the latest presidential election and the post-election violence against protestors and political opponents. In addition to general calls to respect human rights and civil society, their joint December 23 statement reads:

“The European Union and the United States recognise the serious problems with the electoral process and the vote count as reported by the OSCE election observation mission

and urge the Government of Belarus to meet its commitments to the OSCE to substantially reform the electoral process.”

Four opposition leaders were charged December 30 with organising “riots”. One of them, Vladimir Neklyaev, who ran against Lukashenko in the presidential vote, was admitted to hospital for treatment as a result of being beaten by police on the day of the election.

Neklyaev, like the other six candidates challenging Lukashenko in the December 19 election, failed to garner more than 3 percent of ballots.

There have also been reports of Belarusian secret police raiding the homes of oppositionists and journalists from non-government-controlled media. The international media rights group Reporters Without Borders condemned the raids, claiming that a large amount of documentary evidence of police attacks on demonstrators and vote-rigging had been seized.

While the Lukashenko administration readily employs police state measures against opposition groups, it does retain some support, especially in the rural regions, as a result of the continuing existence of remnants of the Soviet-era welfare state. While most of the former republics of the USSR imposed economic “shock therapy” in the 1990s, Belarus retained a high degree of state ownership of industry, mitigating job losses and retaining many of the previous subsidies and benefits to workers.

Nonetheless, the Lukashenko regime and its allies in Belarus’s national elite view the threat of growing opposition from below very seriously. While the current opposition parties enjoy limited popular support, most being associated with free market “reforms” or the influence of foreign powers, the crisis of global capitalism threatens to increase mass opposition to the ruling clique in Minsk.

Global price rises for commodities such as fuel and grain threaten to increase costs for a working class in Belarus that already earns some of the lowest wages in Europe.

Especially since the “Orange Revolution” victory of Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine’s disputed 2004 presidential

election, the Lukashenko regime has taken draconian steps to suppress any anti-government demonstrations. Following elections in 2006, Lukashenko jailed several opposition leaders, and riot police brutally attacked relatively small gatherings of anti-government youth.

The European Union and the United States instituted a travel ban against Lukashenko and his top aides following the 2006 poll, which saw Lukashenko win with a reported 83 percent of the vote against 6 percent for Alexander Milinkevich, whose campaign was heavily backed by the Western powers.

The complaints flowing from the State Department in Washington and various European capitals in the wake of the latest elections are far less vociferous now than they were four years ago. They have little to do with actual concerns for democratic rights in Belarus.

Rather, the European powers and the United States want to increase their influence in Belarus without aggravating Minsk's traditional ally, Russia.

In the present geo-political climate, the US has decided to avoid any repetition in Belarus of the American-backed "Orange Revolution" that took place in Ukraine in 2004. The transfer of power in Kiev to a pro-Western section of the ruling elite placed huge strain on relations between Moscow, the traditional dominant power in the country, and the West.

While at that time Washington was to use so-called "colour revolutions" to roll back the influence of its Russia in eastern Europe, presently the US is pursuing a tactical shift aimed at securing Moscow's support for the US-led war in Afghanistan and sanctions against the Iranian regime. The Obama administration is also intent on limiting the growing security cooperation between Russia and China.

The European powers are also seeking to shore up relations with Moscow. The EU receives a large portion of its natural gas supply from Russia, including via pipelines running through Belarus and Ukraine.

Germany, in particular, is concerned with patching up Western relations with Russia in the aftermath of the Bush administration. Berlin relies heavily on Russia for energy supplies, and German big business has developed major partnerships with the Russian elite. The recently completed North Stream undersea natural gas pipeline, connecting the Russian port of Vyborg with Greifswald in Germany, is one of the first joint projects ever developed between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Italian energy company Eni is working with Russia's nominally state-owned giant Gazprom to build the South Stream pipeline that will transport natural gas from the Black Sea coast, via Bulgaria, to Southern Italy and the Baumgarten gas hub in Austria. This network is due for completion in 2015.

Leading the way in attempts to sweep allegations of electoral fraud and violence under the carpet, the government of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy has called for renewed "dialogue" with Minsk rather than a fresh round of sanctions.

While the EU is unwilling to destabilise relations with Moscow over Lukashenko's authoritarian rule, the European powers do want to gain greater influence in Belarus. To this end, the EU has taken a "carrot and stick" approach to Minsk, offering inducements to Lukashenko, while holding out the possibility of sanctions and backing some opposition figures.

The Lukashenko administration has in recent years clashed repeatedly with Moscow over the price of natural gas exports, with Gazprom demanding increased payments from Belarus for the highly discounted gas that kept prices in place since the end of the Soviet Union.

In response to these disputes with the Kremlin, Minsk has sought to improve relations with the EU, offering promises of electoral reform and loosening restrictions on media and oppositions as tokens of good faith.

Seeing the opportunity to win influence with the Lukashenko regime at the expense of Moscow, EU leaders declared that there had been a "thaw" in Minsk and lifted limited sanctions in 2008.

This rapprochement continued right up until the eve of the presidential vote, with Germany's foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, with his Polish counterpart, Radoslaw Sikorski, visiting Minsk in November to offer €3.5 billion in EU aid in exchange for evidence of "free and fair" presidential elections.



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