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SOVIET-STYLE ELECTION HELD IN BELARUS

By Taras Kuzio

Belarus, a country that Freedom House, the New-York based human rights group, defines as a "presidential dictatorship," has been ruled by Soviet-Russophile Alyaksandr Lukashenka since 1994. [1] A November 1996 referendum judged unfair by Western organizations and governments extended Lukashenka's term in office from five to seven years. According to the 1994 constitution, which was abolished in 1996, Lukashenka's term expired on July 20, 1999.

The 1996 referendum also broadened Lukashenka's authoritarian grip over the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. Belarus' Latin American-style 'Sultanistic regime' [2] is dominated by a single man who is nostalgic for the Soviet past, sees Russia as his country's "elder brother," is vehemently anti-Western and restricts all civil liberties. Lukashenka's Soviet-Russophilism has led to an onslaught on the Belarusian language and culture that is reminiscent of the pre-1985 Soviet era.

On February 20 of this year the Minsk-based Vyasna human rights group presented a 170-page report on violations of human rights in the preceding year. The report surveyed the criminal persecution of political and official figures, disappearances, persecution of political parties and trade unions, as well as discrimination based on religion, nationality and language. Reacting to the growing abuse of human rights Radio Liberty doubled its broadcasts to Belarus in August.

EUROPE'S LAST DICTATOR AND HIS DEATH SQUAD

The human rights situation in Belarus progressively worsened during the second half of the 1990s. In the walk-up to the

September 9 presidential elections, the most serious allegations concerning human rights abuses involved the use of death squads to eliminate former members of the ruling elite who had turned against Lukashenka and joined the opposition. The existence of a death squad made Belarus even more reminiscent of former and current 'Sultanistic' regimes in Central and Latin America, where similar practices had existed and, in some cases, still exist.

Among the oppositionists who have disappeared are former Interior Minister Yury Zakharanka, former deputy chairman of the disbanded Supreme Soviet Viktor Hanchar, Hanchar's business colleague Anatol Krasovsky, opposition leader Henadz Karpenka and Russian Public Television cameraman Dmitry Zavadsky. The first news that leaked out about the existence of death squads with links to the executive came in November 2000, when Belapan, an independent news agency, received an anonymous letter from a Belarusian KGB officer outlining how a special unit (Zubr) of the Presidential Protective Service murdered at least some, or all, of those who had disappeared.

The Belarusian Helsinki Committee demanded the dismissal of Prosecutor-General Viktor Sheyman, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Yury Sivakou and Interior Minister Uladzimir Navumau. In scenes reminiscent of Argentina and Chile, family members of the disappeared demonstrated in Minsk during the presidential campaign, demanding information.

The existence of a death squad in Belarus is no longer in doubt. On August 22, Belarusskaya Delovaya Gazeta published an interview with the former warden of Minsk's death row prison, Aleh Alkayeu. He confirmed that Dmitry Pavlyuchenka, commander of the Belarus Interior Ministry's special police unit (SOBR), had borrowed the pistol used for executions on at least two occasions. Lukashenka's main presidential challenger, Uladzimir Hancharyk, head of the Belarusian Trade Union Federation, released a handwritten report during the elections that also outlined details of who gave orders to have certain opposition leaders executed.

This evidence of a Lukashenka-organized death squad continued to mount during the elections. Dmitry Petrushkevich and Aleh Sluchek, former police investigators who defected to the United States during the election campaign, disclosed other documents that outlined details of the death squad. The death squad was set up in 1997 and consists of ten people drawn from an elite antiterrorist unit that was allegedly responsible for the murder of thirty oppositionists. Ivan Tsitsyankou, former head of the Presidential Administrative Department and a close aide to Lukashenka, told the Minsk newspaper Den on July 9 that his information led him to conclude that "the complicity of the Belarusian leadership in

the disappearance of people is obvious."

Despite an abundance of such documentary evidence, the Prosecutor General's Office refused to open an investigation into the disappearances. Little wonder, since the unit operates under the direct control of Prosecutor General Viktor Sheyman, the former head of the National Security Council. After the U.S. State Department said that it believed the allegations, Lukashenka simply told the Americans to "mind their own business" and "not meddle in problems they don't understand."

#### THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

A serious rival to Lukashenka, Natalya Masherava, daughter of the popular Belarusian national communist Pyotr Masherau, withdrew from the race in July under pressure from the presidential administration. This despite the fact that 50,000 signatures had been collected for her registration as a candidate. By late July only four out of the original twenty-five candidates ultimately collected sufficient signatures to register as candidates--Lukashenka, Hancharyk, Syamyon Domash and Belarusian Liberal Democratic Party leader Syarhey Haidukevich. Domash withdrew in favor of opposition leader Hancharyk, leaving the electorate with a three-cornered choice between the incumbent, the "pragmatic centrist" opposition leader and a Russian nationalist. Some reports suggested that the latter was actually a Lukashenka ally who ran to attract voters who were disenchanted with Lukashenka but did not support the opposition.

The opposition bloc that backed Hancharyk consisted of center-right national democrats and "pragmatic centrists" from New Belarusian political parties and those with ties to the former Soviet Belarusian nomenklatura. Such an alliance existed in neighboring Ukraine, where it maintained an uneasy anticommunist derzhanyk alliance from 1992 until it disintegrated with the revelations in the "Kuchmagate" scandal after November 2000. "Kuchmagate" also revealed the existence of a death squad known as "Bilyi Orly" (White Eagles).

The elections featured a standard Soviet-style campaign against the opposition, who were depicted as being full of "malice and hatred" toward of Russia. As in Ukraine, the Belarus executive depicts those opposed to it as hell bent on instability, provoking ethnic conflict, and itself as the sole guarantor of stability and interethnic harmony. Such official campaigns are likely to fall on fertile ground in both countries. In April Lukashenka accused the opposition of planning a "Yugoslav scenario" for the presidential elections, in which OSCE election observers would be used to announce a victory by the opposition, which would then be

recognized by Western governments, who would encourage the opposition to take over official buildings.

On August 26, Belarus began a military exercise timed to coincide with the elections and a large NATO Partnership for Peace exercise in Lithuania. The "Nyomon-2001" exercise, the largest in Belarusian post-Soviet history, fielded nearly 10,000 troops, along with 1,600 military vehicles, heavy weapons, aircraft and armor. The exercise included mock combat between two imaginary states, one of which intervenes in Belarus in support of the opposition.

The leadership's paranoia about foreigners applies only to those from the West, on the assumption that they automatically support the opposition. In March, Belarusian KGB Chairman Leanid Yeryn pledged to intensify the surveillance of foreigners to prevent them from interfering in the country's internal affairs. International organizations and citizens, he alleged, "stir up the populations distrust in the current state system, the government, and the political, economic, and socioeconomic course" in Belarus. He described humanitarian assistance as "humanitarian intervention in our republic." That same month a decree regulating the use of "gratuitous foreign aid" banned the use of international assistance to be used in elections, rallies, strikes, seminars and propaganda.

A U.S. citizen, Robert Fielding, was deported in late August after being arrested in Hrodna. The KGB accused him of being an emissary of the AFL-CIO who had been sent to Belarus to support the opposition in the elections. An Italian was arrested and accused of espionage just four days before the elections. This echoed the traditional Soviet accusation that opposition activity could only be funded and organized from abroad. In April Lukashenka alleged that the West was planning to allot US\$500 million to candidates challenging him in the elections.

Early voting was a favorite tactic used to manipulate the outcome of the elections. Under Belarusian election law, anyone can vote up to five days ahead of the ballot, and 14 percent of the country's eligible voters putatively voted ahead of the elections. A massive official campaign encouraged voters to vote early. It is impossible to monitor early voting in order to ensure that ballots are not replaced. Opposition Communist Party leader Syarhey Kalyakin claimed that all raion administration heads were provided with 20,000 blank voting ballots to ensure a high vote for the incumbent.

Vote fraud was also made easy by the fact that territorial election commissions were staffed with presidential loyalists from the pro-Lukashenka Belarusian Communist Party, veteran's

organizations and the Komsomol-style Patriotic Youth Union. All 600 candidates for the commissions who were proposed by the opposition were rejected. The opposition accused the staff of these commissions of having already acquired experience in vote rigging during the 2000 election to the Chamber of Representatives.

Lukashenka's ratings have remained fairly consistent during the last two years, averaging between 33-47 percent. The Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies found in July that 48 percent were satisfied with his rule, with an equal number dissatisfied.

Opinion polls taken before the elections predicted that it would be impossible for Lukashenka to win outright in one round. It is unlikely that the official result of 75.62 percent for Lukashenka--and a 83.85 percent turnout--was achieved without massive fraud. The other two candidates, Hancharyk and Haidukevich, supposedly won only 15.39 percent and 2.48 percent, respectively. Hancharyk said the real result would have been closer to 46 percent for Lukashenka and 40 percent for himself, which would have meant a runoff in which the electorate would choose between the incumbent and a moderate member of the former Soviet Belarusan nomenklatura. Relations between the OSCE and Lukashenka remained strained throughout the election campaign. The OSCE had requested that the authorities invite fourteen long-term observers, who would arrive six weeks prior to the election, and 150 short-term observers, who would be present only during the campaign. Lukashenka and his Coordinating Council accused the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Minsk of attempting to destabilize Belarus with a "corps of 14,000-18,000 militants" disguised as election monitors.

In the end, the OSCE could not organize a fully fledged mission because it was not allowed into Belarus until mid-August. This prevented the OSCE from monitoring the earlier stages of the election campaign, during which abuses were more common.

#### FRAUDULENT ELECTIONS

The OSCE's election report concluded that the Belarusan election had "fundamental flaws" and failed to meet OSCE standards for democratic elections. The organization charged that the Belarus authorities did everything possible to block the opposition, failed to ensure the independence of election commissions, did not monitor early voting, obstructed and intimidated the media and NGO's, and conducted a smear campaign against the opposition and international observers.

Only 24 percent of the media coverage was devoted to Hancharyk, and 95 percent of that coverage was negative.

Nearly all the media coverage of Lukashenka was positive. The main official newspaper, Sovetskaya Belarussiya, published Lukashenka's election manifesto twice, doubling its usual circulation and sending a copy to every resident of Minsk. Official newspapers heavily censored Hancharyk's manifesto and opposition media were closed down or confiscated.

The U.S. State Department described the election as only a "facade" and said the outcome could therefore not be internationally recognized. In contrast to these findings, a monitoring mission from the Commonwealth of Independent States' Inter-Parliamentary Assembly described the election as "free and open, and in compliance with all universal democratic institutions."

Although the OSCE called upon the international community not to further isolate Belarus, its semi-isolation seems set to continue. EU Foreign and Security Policy Chief Javier Solana said the EU could not "normalize relations with a country which does not respect the freedom of an election."

#### CONTINUED INTERNATIONAL ISOLATION

Belarus' foreign policy is the polar opposite to that of the three Baltic republics, which never joined the CIS and have completely orientated themselves towards integrating into Trans-Atlantic and European structures. It is even radically different to Ukraine's multivector foreign policy, which seeks to balance between Russia and the West. The Belarusian opposition sought to bring the country's foreign policy closer to that of Ukraine and promised to adhere to Belarusian constitutional provisions on sovereignty, independence and neutrality, carry out a multivector foreign policy and ensure integration into European structures. [3]

Lukashenka has little interest in maintaining good relations with Western countries or organizations like NATO, the European Union, the Council of Europe or the OSCE. Like the Baltic republics, the foreign policy of Belarus is unipolar, but orientated exclusively towards Russia and the CIS rather than the West. He has succeeded in portraying the choice open to Russia in dealing with Belarus as a choice between his Soviet-Russophilism and the position of the opposition anti-Russian national democrats, who, like the Baltic states, would orientate the country exclusively towards the West. He understood from the situation in neighboring Ukraine that any high-ranking national democrats in office, such as former Ukrainian Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko, are seen as a major security threat to Russian national interests.

In order for Lukashenka to present Russia with a stark choice between his Soviet-Russophilism and the pro-Western stance of

the anti-Russian national democrats, he sought to destroy the political middle ground. In response, the Belarusian opposition tried to offer a "pragmatic center" like that associated with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. While his multivector foreign policy is not ideal in Russian eyes, it is the lesser of two evils when compared to a Ukraine or Belarus ruled by national democrats.

The Belarusian opposition's 'pragmatic centrist'—Trade Union leader Hancharyk—was an alternative to Lukashenka who could be acceptable to both Russia and the West. This explains why Lukashenka reserved his greatest venom for the "pragmatic center." Indeed, it is members of the "pragmatic center" from the former Soviet Belarusian elite who have fallen out of Lukashenka's favor who are believed to have been killed by the death squad.

However, the opposition's tactic of presenting itself as "pragmatic," not anti-Russian and similar to Kuchma in its multivectorism, failed. In early May, five of the then-opposition candidates visited Moscow in an attempt to persuade the Russian elites that the election of the opposition would not harm Russia's interests. Lukashenka, however, warned the Russians that the opposition was "pursuing an anti-Russian and pro-Western policy."

Russian President Vladimir Putin endorsed Lukashenka and, in doing so, effectively demonstrated that for Russia in the CIS, geopolitics is more important than reform. Russia reportedly subsidizes Belarus to the tune of US\$1 billion annually. Putin's endorsement of Lukashenka ignored both Hancharyk's appeal to Russia to support a free election and his support for integration with Russia. Russia refused to believe that there was anything other than a stark choice between the "pro-Russian" Lukashenka and the "anti-Russian" Popular Front. The grenade explosion at the Russian Embassy on May 31, on the eve of a CIS summit in Minsk, may have been designed to cast further aspersions on the opposition's attitudes towards Russia. The fact that the opposition's tactics failed also reflected Russia's perception of eastern Slavs as comprising one Russian nation. Viewed from this perspective, even "pragmatic centrists" like Hancharyk and Kuchma are seen as contradicting this commonly accepted view of Russian identity. This explains why virtually all of Russia's major political figures and forces—including the communists and nationalists, Yevgeny Primakov and Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, and even Mikhail Gorbachev—supported Lukashenka's reelection. Russian nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky wholeheartedly backed Lukashenka even though the Belarusian branch of Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party put forward its own leader, Haidukevich, as a presidential candidate. "Lukashenka's victory will be useful for us," Zhirinovsky said. The only exception was the Union of

Right-Wing Forces (SPS), which backed Hancharyk as someone who would take Belarus in the direction of Ukraine's "multivector" policy.

#### WHERE NOW?

Seven more years of Lukashenka ruling Belarus suits Russia's national interests in the CIS and Europe, particularly NATO's planned enlargement next year, and clearly reflects the priority it gives to geopolitics over reform. Whether discussions on Russia-Belarus integration will move beyond mere rhetoric is unlikely, given the each side defines the idea of a union differently. In Belarus, Lukashenka's continued rule means the perpetuation of Europe's last dictator and the only Sovietophile regime outside Central Asia.

1 See my analysis of 'Belarus' in Adrian Karatnycky, Alexander Motyl and Amanda Schnitzer eds., *Nations in Transit 2001. Civil Society, Democracy and Markets in East Central Europe and the Newly Independent States* (New York: Freedom House, 2001), pp.100-111. Also available on [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

2 See Stephen Eke and Taras Kuzio, 'Sultanism in Eastern Europe. The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3 (May 2000), pp. 523-547.

3 *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, 1 August 2001.

Taras Kuzio is a research associate with the Centre for International & Security Studies, York University.

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