

The Presidential Elections in Belarus: Same same, but different!

On Sunday 19 December 2010, there will be presidential elections in Belarus, a former Soviet Republic of 9.5 million people. All the three previous post-Soviet elections, the first held in 1994, have ended up with the same winner – the incumbent president, Aleksandr Lukashenko. Often dubbed “Europe’s last dictator” in Western media, Lukashenko still holds a powerful grip on the country’s politics, economy and media.

The latest presidential elections of March 2006 officially gave Lukashenko a comfortable victory of 82.6 per cent. Later on, the president made a comment that the election result was rigged, surprisingly not in his own favour but in favour of his opponents in order to make the result “more acceptable to the Europeans”. This time around, Lukashenko has already stated that he would be satisfied with just 70 per cent of the votes.

Thus, on the surface, the situation in which the 2010 elections will be held is not very different from that surrounding the previous elections in 2006 or 2001, despite the facts that Belarus has enacted several electoral law reforms, and invited OSCE/ODIHR monitors into the country, and that viable candidates have appeared to contest the elections. Regardless of these developments, the expected outcome is a fourth term for the incumbent president, even if the slump in the Belarusian economy could mean a smaller margin of victory or a lower turnout than usual. Certainly, Lukashenko still enjoys high popularity in Belarus, especially in smaller towns, in the countryside and among elderly people.

In one respect, however, the circumstances in which the 2010 presidential elections will take place have changed dramatically compared to

the previous presidential elections in Belarus. This has to do with the change in Belarus’ foreign relations, and more specifically in its relations with Russia and the European Union.

For a long time, Belarus was Russia’s closest ally. Moscow gave Minsk subsidized prices on its energy imports in exchange for the policy of creating a Union State with Russia and a tightening of political, economic and military ties. In previous elections, Russia always backed Lukashenko, who was treated as a pariah in the West for his relentless crackdown on opposition and on independent media. During the 2006 elections, for instance, it was extremely important for Russia that Belarus did not follow the same path as its southern neighbour Ukraine, which had experienced its Orange Revolution less than two years before and, at that time, was developing a pro-Western policy with the goal of becoming a member of NATO and the EU.

Occasionally in the past, relations between Moscow and Minsk have worsened, usually due to disputes over gas prices or Moscow’s disappointment at Lukashenko’s breaking his promises on creating favourable conditions for Russian business in Belarus. In recent years, however, relations have deteriorated more seriously. To Russia’s disappointment, Belarus did not recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two breakaway regions for which Russia fought the war against Georgia in 2008. Lukashenko also gave refuge to Kyrgyzstan’s former president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who was ousted in April 2010 after bloody riots that Moscow seemed to encourage. The Russian propaganda war against Lukashenko peaked during the summer of 2010, when a Russian TV channel showed a documentary series that portrayed the Belarusian president as a mafia leader, responsible for the

disappearances and murders of political opponents over the years.

For a long time the EU shunned Lukashenko, whom it accused of maintaining power through illegitimate elections and harshly suppressing dissent. From 2004, the EU imposed a ban on the entry of Belarusian officials, covering at most 41 persons. A change in EU foreign policy, however, came around the time of the launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2008. That same year, the EU introduced a moratorium on sanctions on 36 of these 41 persons, including Lukashenko himself. Brussels hoped for a new opening in relations with Belarus and was keen to leave open the door to better relations with the post-Soviet state in order to protect its independence from Russia.

Thus, being in the worst rift with the Kremlin in his entire presidential career, and in order to counterbalance a massive defamation campaign by Moscow, Lukashenko urgently needed to mend fences with Brussels. But the EU made its future relations with Belarus conditional on the development of democracy in the country, as well as on the 19 December presidential elections being held in accordance with international standards. One month before the elections, Brussels sent a message to Lukashenko to the effect that if he held an election that Brussels could accept as democratic, the EU would disburse 3 billion euros to support his regime.

At least during the election campaign, Lukashenko seemed mostly to have behaved in line with Brussels' expectations. The Belarusian Central Election Commission registered as many as nine challengers to Lukashenko, instead of the usual two or three, even though some commentators raised objections as to whether all of them had actually collected the 100,000 signatures required for registrations. All the candidates also got two half-hours of uncensored air time on Belarusian state

television and state radio, respectively, to present their programmes and speak out against Lukashenko.

However, an election campaign is one thing, but the vote counting is another. In previous elections, for instance, there have been suspicions that especially the early voting system, which is difficult to monitor, has been used in a creative way to rig the election result.

The reactions of the EU and Russia to the outcome of the election will be important. Having invested much political capital in Belarus, how would the EU react to another rigged election? And how would Russia and the EU handle potential mass protests over a stolen election, especially if these protests were violently crushed by the law enforcement authorities, as happened after the 2006 presidential elections?

Where Russia is concerned, the answer may be found, at least partly, in the improvement in relations between the Belarusian president and the Kremlin that has been seen in the last few weeks. During Lukashenko's visit to Moscow of 8-10 December 2010, Russia agreed to abolish tariffs on crude oil supplied to Belarus in exchange for Lukashenko's signature on the agreement to create a single economic space within the Customs Union of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. Furthermore, the Russian defamation campaign against the Belarusian president has ended, leading to the conclusion that the Kremlin, at least, is not acting against Lukashenko and will accept his (likely) victory. Whether Lukashenko also gave any secret concessions to Moscow in order to get its support is also open for speculation.

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