

No “Regime Change” in Belarus. 2010 Election: a crushing defeat for Western policy

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

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As the US official in charge of financing ‘democracy promotion’ in Eastern Europe has admitted, the foreign-funded opposition in Belarus is a “surrealistic reality show”, which had no realistic hope of winning power through the ballot box.

The remarkable thing about recent Western policy on Belarus is not the barrage of condemnations and threats of intensified sanctions since December 19th, the day of the presidential election. That, as [noted](#) by *The Economist* magazine, was a “largely pro-forma international response”. Alleging voting outcomes as fixed and decrying repression against the opposition has long been the standard US and EU reaction to election results in Belarus; for *The Economist*, of course, “international” does not include Russia, China, and other Third World countries.

Rather, what was notable and different was the positive signals and statements from United States and European Union officials and politicians, and from Western media outlets, preceding the election date. As Ludmila Krytynskaia [observed](#) in a December 17th article in *Foreign Policy* magazine:

...in early November [2010], two E.U. envoys — the Polish foreign minister and the German foreign minister — traveled to Minsk to state that the European Union cared primarily about “the quality” rather than “the results” of the election, and was willing to recognize [President] Lukashenko’s reelection provided the election is held in accordance with democratic standards. While most observers believe there will be some voting irregularities in this election, it remains to be seen how extensive they will be and whether the European Union will recognize the election results as legitimate notwithstanding their imperfection.

Ms Krytynskaia noted that:

...a fresh veneer of political liberalization has indeed emerged during the current electoral campaign season in Belarus. At an informal meeting with local journalists earlier this month, Michael Scanlan, the U.S. charge d’affaires in Belarus, praised steps taken by the Belarusian government to facilitate greater freedom of association and electoral participation. Remarks like these from a U.S. diplomat would have been unthinkable just a few months ago.

Indeed, in a departure from past practices, there have been no widespread pre-election arrests of political activists this campaign season. To the contrary, public spaces have been made available for rallies, protests, and meetings with voters. Similarly, opposition presidential candidates have not been arbitrarily

disqualified from running against Lukashenko. As a result, nine candidates are running against him for the presidency, three of whom have run sophisticated campaigns and two of whom are reasonably well-funded.

BBC coverage during the run-up to the presidential election was also more favourable than usual. According to a December 18th [report](#):

...so far, a sudden blossoming of civic freedom in what is one of the world's most authoritarian political systems – Europe's "last dictatorship" as some call it – has caught a number of observers by surprise...

For the first time, state television also aired a debate among the nine candidates opposing Mr Lukashenko. Since Mr Lukashenko did not show up, the nine challengers used their air time to gang up on the Belarus leader.

And candidates have been able to make campaign broadcasts on national television openly attacking the government – although they have been limited to a paltry one hour each for the course of the campaign.

Nevertheless, the impression given by this and similar coverage was that the electoral system in Belarus, despite these improvements, is still vastly less democratic than that of the Western countries. But is that the case? Unlike in Belarus, under capitalist pluralism two or three parties or candidates receive almost all the media attention and funding during national election campaigns; but, with few exceptions, these are parties or candidates which (despite their differences) unanimously support the main aspects of the country's prevailing economic system and its international strategic alliances. Any political forces which might advocate leaving NATO and abolishing capitalism do not tend to find that they are either well-funded or accorded much broadcasting time on the main national TV networks.

However, the BBC acknowledged that President Lukashenko does enjoy mass support- the reason being that Belarus, unlike other former Soviet nations, has maintained key aspects of the socialist system:

Many believe Mr Lukashenko would prevail in an open vote. He remains popular with large portions of the population, having preserved the subsidies and full-employment of the Soviet system. More than 70% of the economy remains in state hands.

'The Minsk question'

The relatively friendly Western signals towards Belarus during the election campaign did not come out of the blue. They had been preceded during the previous two years by the beginnings of a gradual rapprochement, whose motivation on the EU and NATO side was the aim of reasserting Western influence, and countering Russian influence, in former Soviet Eastern Europe. The policy of isolating Belarus and imposing sanctions against it- aligned to the Western promotion of 'colour revolutions' in countries seen as being influenced by Russia, and explicit Western support of virulently anti-Russian governments, such as that in Georgia- was beginning to come unstuck.

Among the events which forced leaders of the NATO and EU countries to rethink their strategy were the dismal failure of the attempted 'denim revolution' in Belarus in March

2006 and the Russian military victory against Georgia in August 2008; further evidence of the futility of the previous policy was provided by the presidential election in Ukraine in February 2010, which removed the pro-Western government that had been installed by the 2005 'orange revolution' in Ukraine.

On his part, Alexander Lukashenko had never publically avowed himself to be an enemy of the West; his government always sought to attract Western finance and technology to improve its industries, and even stated that it was not opposed, in principle, to privatisation—so long as that was carried out in a way that would benefit the people. In practice, that has meant that the vast majority of the country's industries have stayed in public ownership.

While seeking to negotiate closer political and economic integration with Russia, Lukashenko has fiercely promoted the interests of his country against Russian policies which have conflicted with those of Belarus; for instance the increase in the prices of oil and gas imports from Russia, and Russia's imposition of customs duties on milk products from Belarus.

Thus the European Union eventually discarded most of its sanctions against Belarus, and considered welcoming the country to membership of its special club for former Soviet states, the EU Eastern Partnership. The USA's foreign broadcasting service RFE/RL [reported](#) in February 2009:

BRUSSELS — Next month, the EU is expected to offer six countries an upgrade of its European Neighborhood Policy in a new arrangement it is calling the Eastern Partnership, an initiative tailored as a response to growing Russian assertiveness in what EU officials used to call "the shared neighborhood."

After a meeting on February 23 in Brussels of EU foreign ministers, EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said Russia's recent spats with Georgia and Ukraine have forced the EU to react.

"I think that after the [Russian]-Georgian war and the Russia-Ukraine [gas] crisis we see that there is a clear imperative [of] stepping up our game in the eastern neighborhood and therefore we have a crucial interest in political and economic stability [there]," she said.

The Eastern Partnership targets six of the EU's immediate eastern neighbors — Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and, provisionally, Belarus.

Under the sub-heading 'The Minsk Question', the RFE/RL article noted that Belarus would be favoured for EU Eastern Partnership membership if it refrained from recognising the de-facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which had been removed from Georgian control by Russia during the 2008 war:

The question of whether to include Belarus promises to be the most controversial aspect of the launch of the Eastern Partnership...

Belarus continues to fall short of the democracy benchmarks set for the [European] Neighborhood Policy. But many officials and diplomats in Brussels believe any upgrade to the ENP aimed at counterbalancing growing Russian influence will fall flat if Minsk is not a participant...

Some EU officials have indicated that much will depend on whether Belarus will

bow to Russian pressure and recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries. Lukashenka told Solana the issue of recognition is a legislative matter, with the parliament scheduled to debate it in May — possibly after the meeting Prague.

Czech Foreign Minister Schwarzenberg also warned Minsk that were it to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the current consensus within the EU to include it in the Eastern Partnership could founder. “It is natural that Belarus [has] a sovereign parliament and the parliament of Belarus has its own decision [to make],” he said, “but if they would recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia it would create a very, very difficult situation for Belarus.”

Whether mindful of this warning or otherwise, the sovereign parliament of Belarus postponed (and has since kept postponing) its decision on whether to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Meanwhile the European Union made its decision. In an article entitled ‘Belarusian president in from the cold, but unrepentant’, RFE/RL [observed](#) on May 6th 2009:

The past year has seen a mind-boggling shift in the relationship between Europe and Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

The man once vilified by the Bush administration as presiding over “the last dictatorship in Europe” has been invited to join five other post-Soviet states in the European Union’s Eastern Partnership, due to be formally launched at a summit tomorrow in Prague.

Lukashenka has also emerged from his 13-year exile from the arena of European politics. Last year, no fewer than a dozen EU conditions stood between Lukashenka and his right to travel to Europe. Last week, the Belarusian leader was meeting at the Vatican with Pope Benedict XVI and enjoyed a sumptuous dinner with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi...

Belarus’s inclusion in the Eastern Partnership initiative highlights several intriguing aspects of the EU’s realpolitik in its dealings with troublesome leaders like Lukashenka.

The bloc’s desire to coax Belarus into the European fold — despite Minsk’s deplorable human rights record — underscores the urgent search in Brussels for an effective antidote to Russia’s political assertiveness after the Kremlin’s military intervention in Georgia in August.

Surrealistic reality show

On 6th December 2010, a revealing [article](#) was published in the magazine *Transitions Online* (TOL), a joint US-European journal devoted to the study of developments in former communist countries. The author of the article was Rodger Potocki, who according to the the magazine’s citation is “director for Europe at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, D.C., where he also oversees the NED’s Belarus program.” The magazine added: “TOL receives some grant funds from the NED.”

The National Endowment for Democracy is the body which channels United States government funds (\$118 million in 2009) to support foreign ‘pro-democracy’ groups and other ‘civil society’ organisations which are perceived as serving the interests of US foreign policy.

The article by Rodger Potocki is remarkable not only for its frankness in detailing the US-led Western interference in the political process in Belarus, but for its expression of bitter frustration at the inadequacies of the opposition groupings and leaders which the Western powers were seeking to utilise. Entitled 'Enemies of themselves' (a scathing reference to the Belarusian opposition), the article is savagely critical of the inability of the anti-Lukashenko groups to unite. Rodger Potocki also ridiculed their lack of coherent policies, bemoaned the poor quality of the opposition presidential candidates, and derided their failure to win significant credibility among the public in Belarus. Potocki remarked caustically:

Their programs span the social, political, and economic spectrums, and tend to be long on promises and short on specifics. The platforms presented via television and radio addresses include a mishmash of populist promises to "prevent Belarusians from becoming extinct," stop the penal system from turning people "into bandits," end "the stealing" in the Health Ministry, provide a house for every military officer, block a monastery from being converted into a "brothel," cease building ice hockey palaces, and bestow a "spoon, pot, and porridge in it" unto all. Two candidates have sworn to stop the killing of cats. There are, of course, also serious proposals on key issues such as privatization, geopolitical orientation, currency, demographic decline, state subsidies and benefits, and constitutional reform. But the multitude of wannabes and ideas is numbing. Karbalevich suggests that the electorate is "likely to be confused by the large number of contenders and will find it hard to remember who was speaking and what he promised." A single opposition program offered by a single opposition leader would have been more responsible and effective.

How did the opposition manage to get itself into this surrealistic reality show? The Achilles' heel of Belarus' democracy movement has always been its lack of unity and common effort.

In his article, Rodger Potocki asserted: "No unified opposition or single candidate is likely to emerge in Belarus without Western assistance." But in the recent period, this strategy had borne little fruit. Potocki made it clear that the US and other major Western forces were exasperated at their failure to mould the Belarusian opposition into a viable force for pro-Western policy; they had therefore reduced their funding for the dissident groups, and were instead placing more emphasis on improving relations with the Belarus government:

The [Belarus] regime's strategy has proved especially effective this year because the West has adopted a hands-off approach. In the past, foreign diplomats, donors, and groups active in Belarus have played a key role in smoothing over the divisions within democratic forces. In 2001, Western diplomats had to intercede and help negotiate the selection of Uladzimir Hancharyk as the common opposition candidate. Foreign groups worked closely with the opposition in brokering coalitions in 2004-2007, selection of a single opposition candidate [Alexander Milinkevich] in 2006, development of common opposition platforms, and creation of a common candidate list in 2008.

The outcome of the second opposition congress and withering away of the United Democratic Forces, however, have led to a decline in foreign interest in and support for a broad-based coalition. Dialogue with the EU and atomization of the opposition have resulted in closer Western ties to the regime and less faith in the opposition. In the run up to the 2010 election, changes in the assistance strategies of Western donors further reduced efforts and incentives

to foster unity. There was no Western backing or push for a unified candidate process.

Potocki noted also that Russia seemed to have started to play a role within the opposition forces, causing presidential candidates to plead with their Western 'partners' to provide more money on the condition that the opposition should get its act together:

At the same time, Russia apparently began supporting certain segments of the opposition. The inability of the democrats to come together and the lack of interest in Western partners to make it happen have produced some difficult moments in which candidates themselves have pleaded with foreign donors to force the issue.

Noting that "A June 2010 survey found that only 14 percent of respondents trusted opposition political parties, which ranked the lowest of 26 government and public institutions," the NED director remarked in his conclusion:

You can hear complaints to the effect that there are nine candidates and no one to vote for...

It's a safe bet that the opposition will emerge from this election weaker... the opposition [is] on course to hit rock bottom... For opposition figures, this election is about the future of leading the opposition, not about leading the country into the future.

Fiasco in the square

Yet barely two weeks later, from the evening of 19th December onwards, Western politicians and media sources blamed Lukashenko's overwhelming election victory on a 'rigged' election, and exclaimed with outrage at the beating and mass imprisonment of opposition activists.

Of course, it would not be normal in a liberal democracy for over 600 demonstrators, including most of the presidential candidates, to be detained by the police in the immediate aftermath of an election. But on the other hand, it is not the norm in Western countries for electoral candidates- before the result of the vote has even been announced- to summon thousands of their supporters to the centre of the capital city for an unauthorised demonstration, declare the collapse of the existing regime and the formation of a new 'government of national rescue', and encourage their activists to storm the House of Government, where the Electoral Commission is in session.

Given that some elements of the opposition in Belarus have since claimed that the storming of the House of Government in Minsk was a provocation staged by pro-government forces in order to provide an excuse to crack down on opposition supporters, and that this claim is being given some international [credence](#), including by the president of the EU Parliament; it is worth considering the blow-by-blow [account](#) of the fiasco in Independence Square which was published on the website of the main Belarusian 'pro-democracy' organisation, Charter 97:

8:20 pm Belarusian presidential candidates Andrei Sannikov, Yaraslau

Ramanchuk, Ryhor Kastusyou, Vital Rymasheuski, and Mikalai Statkevich came to the square.

8:23 pm Loudspeakers have been brought to the square. They are being installed now, so that the candidates can address the people. The number of demonstrators is constantly increasing.

8:35 pm Candidate Andrei Sannikov has spoken at the demonstration. In his speech, he has said the election had not been faire and transparent. The result is forged. "But the Belarusians are great people, we are ready to fight for freedom," he said.

8:42 pm All presidential candidates who address people on the square state that the electoral fraud is going on now.

8:50 pm Mikalai Statkevich says Lukashenka gained only 31% according to independent exit polls. The presidential candidate suggests that protesters should "go and ask Lukashenka to vacate his residence." The demonstrators welcome the suggestion. A huge crowd starts moving from the square in the direction of Lukashenka's administration.

9:39 pm Nezalezhnastsi Square is entirely filled with people. The number of demonstrators is estimated to be between 30 and 40 thousand people. Candidate Andrei Sannikov announced collapse of Lukashenka's regime and establishment of a new Government of National Rescue with other democratic candidates.

10:11 pm Andrei Sannikov announced the Government of National Rescue established today at Kastychnistkaya Square will hold negotiations in the Government residence.

10:19 pm Glass doors are broken, people inside the House of Government barricade themselves with cabinet units, but demonstrators break through.

10:23 pm Hundreds of strong men are crushing the furniture blocking the doorways and are about to enter the building! Dozens of people are standing by the Government residence chanting "Come on! Do it!" A huge crowd is encouraging them and chanting "We demand negotiations!".

10:30 pm Hundreds of riot policemen wearing helmets and carrying shields came out of the House of Government. They are banging their batons on the shields.

10:40 pm Tens of thousands of people demanded negotiations from the authorities and attempted to enter the Government building. In reply, special police forces used tear-gas against the demonstrators.

11:15 pm People refuse to go away from the House of Government. Military men are there. The military are pulled in there. Trucks with the military are standing around the perimeter of the square.

Such actions by an opposition movement would not be tolerated by the government of any country, and even in the liberal West one would expect a robust response by the authorities.

What were the opposition seeking to gain by announcing that it was establishing a 'Government of National Rescue' and attempting to storm the House of Government? While some of their more naive supporters, caught up in the moment, may have imagined that these moves – particularly had they succeeded in gaining control of the main government

building – could have established a political momentum which might have ended in the collapse of the government or the transfer of power to the opposition via negotiations, opposition leaders had a more realistic objective: to put Lukashenko's government into a position in which it would certainly react with a forceful crackdown; and thus derail the rapprochement which had begun to develop between Belarus and the West.

Andrei Sannikov- one of the two opposition presidential candidates whose campaigns were reportedly 'reasonably well funded'- set out his position in an [interview](#) with *Bloomberg News* published on 1st November 2010:

The European Union needs to take a harder line with Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko ahead of elections next month that are certain to be "a fraud," said a pro-EU and free markets opposition presidential candidate.

Lukashenko, 56, is vulnerable before the Dec. 19 vote because of the economic crisis "to which he has no answer" and the fact Russia's leaders no longer back him, Andrei Sannikov said in an interview in Berlin. Yet while Russia has shifted its stance, some in Europe are now courting the president, he said.

"Europe should proceed from the view that Lukashenko is the last dictatorship in Europe and nothing will change until he goes," Sannikov said on Oct. 27. Those politicians in the 27- nation EU who think they can "Europeanize" Lukashenko are pushing an "extremely stupid and extremely dangerous" policy...

Russia has changed its approach to Lukashenko, yet Europe has failed to do so, Sannikov said.

"Lukashenko is trying to sell his newly acquired status as Russia's enemy to Europe and not without success, I regret to say," Sannikov said. "There are some European politicians in Europe that are thinking of helping Lukashenko because he's becoming anti-Russian." Sannikov declined to name them.

While claiming he was "campaigning to win", Andrei Sannikov made it clear that his main focus would be on getting demonstrators out to protest against the eventual election result:

"Everybody in Belarus — not only the opposition but ordinary people — understand that votes are not counted," Sannikov said, speaking fluent English. He said his goal is to document the nation's flawed democracy to bring out opposition demonstrators. "People will be ready, more ready than in 2006, to go to the streets and protest the election results."

The other generously funded opposition candidate was Vladimir Niakliaev, a well-known poet and author. In the early part of the presidential campaign, Niakliaev's support surged to 17% according to one opinion poll, making him the clear front-runner among the anti-government candidates.

But as the election approached, Niakliaev's reputation suffered badly when it was revealed that most of the donations to his campaign had come from Russia, raising strong suspicions among the public that he was being used as a tool by the Russians to bring Belarus back into line. A *Transitions Online* (TOL) [article](#) by Reporters Without Borders correspondent Alyaksandr Yanusik, published on 10th December 2010, was devoted to a critique of the Niakliaev campaign; behind this critique was the concern that the massive finances which

Niakliaev had at his disposal were damaging to the opposition as a whole; not merely because these funds were used to lure a large proportion of activists away from the other anti-government candidates to work for Niakliaev's organisation, but because Niakliaev's funding sources and policies put the patriotism of the entire opposition into disrepute- the various anti-Lukashenko candidates could all be decried (with much justification) as representing foreign forces, either of the USA and the EU countries, or of Russia.

The TOL article by Alyaksandr Yanusik quoted Alexander Milinkevich, whose Western-backed presidential campaign in 2006 had failed to win power, but at least had united the opposition:

"Some politicians believe that the main objective is to remove Lukashenka with any partners, by any means and any money," said Milinkevich, the former UDF [United Democratic Forces] leader, about Niakliaev and Sannikov.

"I am not opposed to Moscow's support in the struggle for democracy. But I am not sure that anyone after Lukashenka will be better than Lukashenka, although I do not accept his regime, because he may be succeeded by someone who privatizes the Belarusian economy ... in favor of one country [ie, Russia]. In that case, the person will be worse than Lukashenka because the country's economy will be completely dependent."

Western politicians and donors view the movement with suspicion, Niakliaev told TOL, because of rumors that his campaign is funded by the Kremlin. "The authorities and our mainstream opposition have put me in some pro-Russian niche, spreading rumors ... that [Russian President Dmitry] Medvedev shoved money into one of my pockets and [Prime Minister Vladimir] Putin in the other," he told TOL at the end of November. Niakliaev said the pro-Russian label is also pinned on him by the Belarusian authorities, adding that he wants a "responsible neighborhood" with Russia and a fresh start for Belarus-EU relations (he says that any talk of EU membership now would be populism).

To dispel those fears, Niakliaev has said his campaign is backed by Belarusian-born business people mainly based in Russia and the CIS. When he headed the magazine *Krynitsa* between 1987 and 1999 he turned the state-funded periodical into a profitable business and made friends with enterprising people who later became successful, but moved their businesses to Russia and the West unhappy with what Niakliaev labeled "the criminal and corrupt Lukashenka regime."

The *Transitions Online* article also noted that Vladimir Niakliaev had promised to sell Belarus' petroleum refining industry to Russia in the event of his winning the election.

Spoiled ballot

Was the election fixed, as Western politicians and media are all now claiming? There is no particular reason to doubt the conclusion which can be drawn from the TOL articles by Potocki and Yanusik, or the inference which can be drawn from the *Bloomberg* interview with Andrei Sannikov- that the Belarusian anti-government political forces were such 'enemies of themselves', so demoralised by the tactical change of Western policy towards Belarus, and so fatally compromised in the eyes of the public by their exposure as tools of foreign powers, that they were doomed to receiving negligible support at the ballot box.

In their joint statement following the election, Carl Bildt, Karel Schwarzenberg and Radoslaw

Sikorski (the foreign ministers, respectively, of Sweden, the Czech Republic and Poland) based their [allegation](#) of ballot-rigging on the supposed findings of 'all independent exit polls':

"Mr. Lukashenko probably understood that he would not get the required 50 percent of the votes needed to avoid a humiliating second round against a single opposition candidate," they say. "All independent exit polls gave him significantly less than this. While the voting proceeded in an orderly fashion, the counting of the votes turned into a charade. The report of the independent observers assessed the counting as 'bad' or 'very bad' in nearly half the polling stations they could observe, and it is not unreasonable to assume that it was even worse in the others. It was obvious that there were orders not to count the votes, but to deliver a predetermined result."

[...] "The combination of vote rigging and outright repression makes what Slobodan Milosevic tried to do in Serbia in 2000 pale in comparison," they stress.

But it is untrue that 'all independent exit polls' reported that Lukashenko got less than 50% of the votes. TNS Ukraine, a branch of the major London-based [company](#) TNS Global Market Research, announced the [findings](#) of its exit polls as follows:

Alyaksandr Lukashenka has become the president of Republic of Belarus with 72.2% votes, TNS-Ukraine suggests

Second and third results shared by Sannikau and Nyaklyaeu [Sannikov and Niakliaev] with 6.1%. Romanchuk 3.3%.

1.5%-2% for Statkevich, Rymasheuski, Tereschenka, Kastuseu and Mihalevich

Surprisingly high rate for 'Against all' - 5.8%

The observer mission from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which comprises nine former Soviet countries, [declared](#) that the election results were transparent and legitimate, as did the observers from the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation.

On the other hand, the mission from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) denounced the election as 'flawed', and the vote counting as 'bad' or 'very bad' in nearly half the polling stations they could observe. The foreign ministers of Sweden, the Czech Republic and Poland attributed their claim of this 'bad' or 'very bad' vote count to the "report of the independent observers", but in fact this was a direct quote from the report of the OSCE mission in Belarus.

Were the OSCE officials merely 'independent observers' in Belarus? They were no more independent than the election monitoring mission from the CIS countries. The OSCE is a Western-dominated organisation; its election monitoring group in Belarus was headed by Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, a senior German diplomat who has amply demonstrated his loyalty and skill in promoting the interests of Germany, NATO and the EU. Ahrens played a key role for Germany and the European Union during the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and was head of the OSCE team in Ukraine during the 'Orange Revolution' of 2004-05.

Apart from Lukashenko's own showing of over 79% of the votes officially cast, the most spectacular aspect of the election result was the dramatic decline of the support accorded to Vladimir Niakliaev, who fell from being the opposition front-runner to a mere 1.78% of the final vote. Could such a drastic collapse in Niakliaev's support have really taken place? In considering this, one should take account not only that Vladimir Niakliaev laid himself open to charges of being a proxy for Russian economic and political interests- while Lukashenko ensured that he was perceived as the defender of the independence of Belarus, un beholden to East or West- but also that Niakliaev, in the end, did not even vote for himself, but instead spoilt his ballot paper.

This might be difficult to believe for a serious political leader anywhere except in the 'surrealistic reality show' which characterises the opposition movement in Belarus; nevertheless, the opposition Charter '97 website [reported](#) as the voting progressed:

Presidential candidate Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu deliberately spoiled his ballot.

He did it on December 19 at polling station #59 located in secondary school #54 in Minsk. Nyaklyaeu took a black marker and stroke off a name of Alyaksandr Lukashenka from the ballot paper in front of journalists' eyes. The candidate noted that any elections are non-free, unfair and invalid if Lukashenka run in them. He wrote "For new election" in his ballot and said nobody would persecute Alyaksandr Lukashenka if he voluntary resigned from his post.

Though his action appears bizarre, it was no doubt intended to discredit the voting process; and despite the tactical inadequacy of the opposition candidates as described by NED director Rodger Potocki, it is most unlikely that Niakliaev would have done this without indicating to his loyalists and other opposition supporters that they should also refrain from casting a valid vote.

Losers... and winners

It is clear who the losers were in Belarus' 2010 presidential contest. Leaders and activists of the country's opposition movement, having emerged as actors in a theatre of the absurd, are now being prosecuted for their part in the 'riot' in Minsk's Independence Square on December 19th. The policy of the NATO countries towards Belarus is in tatters, concealed only by the barrage of outrage by politicians and the media in the USA and EU. In its attempt to interfere in the Belarusian political process, Russia also got its fingers burnt. In terms of his image in the West, President Alexander Lukashenko can also be considered a 'loser'- vilified once again as an authoritarian dictator.

But who were the winners?

Protected so far by Lukashenko's wily balancing act between East and West, Belarus has enabled itself to preserve an economic and social system which, when compared to other East European countries and nations elsewhere with similar levels of technological development, delivers impressive results in terms of economic security and living standards for the vast majority of citizens.

The gap between rich and poor in Belarus is the lowest of any European country. The government's policy of maintaining nationalised industries has ensured the availability of

reasonably well-paid jobs, and Belarus has established a good market for its manufactured exports among the other post-Soviet countries.

But the entry on Belarus in the CIA World Factbook [complains](#) that the Belarusian government's policies do not accord with capitalist orthodoxy:

Belarus has seen limited structural reform since 1995, when President Lukashenko launched the country on the path of "market socialism." In keeping with this policy, Lukashenko reimposed administrative controls over prices and currency exchange rates and expanded the state's right to intervene in the management of private enterprises. Since 2005, the government has re-nationalized a number of private companies. In addition, businesses have been subjected to pressure by central and local governments, including arbitrary changes in regulations, numerous rigorous inspections, retroactive application of new business regulations, and arrests of "disruptive" businessmen and factory owners. Continued state control over economic operations hampers market entry for businesses, both domestic and foreign.

Due in large part to this state control over economic operations, the current unemployment rate in Belarus, as recorded in the CIA Factbook, is 1% of the workforce. That astonishingly low figure is predicted to rise to a mere 1.2% to 1.5% in 2011 as a result of the ongoing global recession. The level of acute multidimensional poverty in Belarus, according to the United Nations Development Programme, is 0.02%; also astonishingly low when compared to countries with similar or even considerably higher overall wealth.

A counter-example to Belarus is that of the former Soviet republic of Estonia, which receives high praise in the CIA World Factbook for its capitalist economic policies:

Estonia, a 2004 European Union entrant, has a modern market-based economy and one of the higher per capita income levels in Central Europe and the Baltic region. Estonia's successive governments have pursued a free market, pro-business economic agenda and have wavered little in their commitment to pro-market reforms. The current government has pursued relatively sound fiscal policies that have resulted in balanced budgets – at least up until 2009 – and low public debt. Tallinn's priority has been to sustain high growth rates – on average 8% per year from 2003 to 2007. The economy benefits from strong electronics and telecommunications sectors and strong trade ties with Finland, Sweden, and Germany. The government is on track to adopt the euro in 2011.

Unemployment in Estonia is currently 15.5%, and its rate of extreme poverty as defined in the Acute Multidimensional Poverty Index is 7.22%.

The USA and its European allies will of course be seeking to recover from their recent debacle in Belarus. The Russian authorities will also be reconsidering their tactics. But for now, the main beneficiaries of the fact that Belarus did not undergo a 'regime change' in December 2010 are the majority of the Belarusian people.

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