

Why did voters in Belarus reject the “Denim Revolution”?

By [British Helsinki Human Rights Group \(BHHRG\)](#)

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

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Executive Summary

In the presidential election held in Belarus on 19th March 2006 the incumbent Alexander Lukashenko won a convincing 82% victory. This result had been widely predicted as had the international community's hostile response – in the weeks leading up to the election the main observer mission, the OSCE, prejudged both the conduct and result of the poll, deeming it to be neither free nor fair before a vote was cast.

At first sight, the proportions of Mr Lukashenko's victory seem barely less grotesque than the stratospherical electoral triumphs of the West's favourites. Over the last 15 years, the Western-controlled OSCE observer missions have swallowed without demur a 97% victory for the “rose revolutionary” Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia in 2004 or a modest 89% from Kyrgyzstan's “tulip revolutionary” Kurmanbek Bakiev, or 92% for Georgia's Eduard Shevardnadze back in 1992 when he was still Washington's favourite reformer, or even Heydar Aliiev's 93% in Azerbaijan in 1993. Yet the same team which never raised an eyebrow about elections where one regime insider was endorsed as the successor of a predecessor whom the West had tired of could not conceive that 82% of Belarussians voted for Alexander Lukashenko.

The West, the EU in particular, threw its weight behind the candidature of Alexander Milinkevich, a little known former academic of Polish extraction, inviting him to Brussels in the pre-election period to be officially endorsed. 2 other opposition candidates were ignored by this august body. However, any candidate who stood on the West's familiar reform platform of privatization of both industry and public services was going to have an uphill struggle in Belarus where life has improved over the past ten years under Lukashenko led governments. A workable, social democratic model of the type once favoured by the EU now flourishes in Belarus where everyone is all too familiar with the costs of the reform agenda that has ravaged other post-Soviet republics.

BHHRG visited Belarus in the pre-election period returning three weeks later to observe the conduct of the poll. The Group has monitored elections in the country on a regular basis since 1994 when Lukashenko came to power. During the past 12 years its regular monitors have witnessed the vast improvements that have taken place in the republic's economy and standard of living as well as the stirrings of a genuine, home grown civil society. Yet, politicians and journalists in the West continue to refer to the country as a Stalinist outpost and economic basket case. However, the debacle in Iraq and the ignominious collapse of Ukraine's Orange revolution in 2005 have led some to begin to question these people's bona

fides when it comes to nation building. It is to be hoped that the Belarussian people can be left alone to sort out their own problems without yet more meddling from politicians and journalists discredited for their clumsy, failed interference in the affairs of others.

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