



In Brief: Belarus- election and dissent

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- Belarus has been described as the “last European dictatorship”. The country became independent in 1991, at the collapse of the Soviet Union. Alexander Lukashenko has been the president since 1994, and during that time there has been no election that international observers described as “free and fair”.
 - Some were surprised that independence was chosen in 1991, rather than integration with Russia, and the country’s national identity remains weak with the majority of Belarusians speak Russian. In 2007, there were reports that a full merger with Russia was imminent, but Lukashenko’s demand for a merger of equals did not match Russian President Putin’s vision of something closer to an annexation.
 - More recently, the Russian and Belarusian leaderships have distanced themselves from the notion of reunification as relations have cooled. In summer 2010 there was a dispute as Belarus declined to join the proposed customs union with Russia and Kazakhstan. Russia subsequently cut energy supplies and demanded repayment of the \$228 million owed by Belarus to the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom. For the most recent presidential election, Russia is alleged to have abandoned its former policy of supporting Lukashenko; unfavourable broadcasts were aired on Russian state television in the run up to the 2010 presidential election.
 - Belarus is said to be one of the last bastions of Soviet-style economics, described as “market socialism” by Lukashenko. Lukashenko re-nationalised several companies on coming to power. State enterprises are over-staffed; wages are low, while the official unemployment figure is below 1%. The economy is heavily dependent on subsidised Russian oil and gas, but the terms of the trade have been tightened recently by Russia, showing Belarusian vulnerability.
 - There has been something of a thaw in relations between Belarus and the West. The EU in 2010 suspended a travel ban on Mr Lukashenko and top officials, organised high-level visits to the capital, Minsk, and moved to include Belarus in its "Eastern Partnership" policy, with Belarusian representatives taking part in EU-led talks on anti-corruption, energy security, borders and environmental protection. In December 2010 Lukashenko also promised to give up Belarus’s uranium stockpile. Opposition candidates, more numerous than in previous elections and allowed more coverage on state-controlled media, still complained of harassment. Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe observers were invited to attend. The EU denounced the 2006 election and

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offered £2.5 billion in aid if Belarus held a fair election in 2010.

- The Westward drift in Lukashenko's policy may have been halted by Russia's decision in December 2010 to scrap export duties on oil destined for Belarus.
- About 30 opposition activists were arrested over the election weekend, and the government decided to flood the main square to turn it into an "ice-rink", as the centre of the capital was filled with extra police.
- Opposition parties failed to unite around a single candidate, but said that Lukashenko was heading towards failure in the first round according to independent polling that put his support at around 38%. The official election commission's preliminary count showed that Lukashenko was set to win 79% of the vote.
- On Sunday 19 December 2010, the biggest demonstration in Belarus since Lukashenko came to power brought some 40,000 protesters onto the streets of Minsk, despite threatening comments from the government that dissent would be treated harshly. The demonstration was dispersed by police and some 400 were arrested, according to a local human rights organisation.
- Seven of the nine candidates opposing Lukashenko were arrested on the Sunday, including one who is said to have been beaten by government forces, then dragged from his hospital bed by men in plain clothes.
- The OSCE observers described the conduct of the election as "bad or very bad" in half the country's electoral districts. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said, "it's not acceptable to harass, beat or arrest opposition candidates and their supporters who want to exert their right to freedom of expression."
- Some might see Minsk's courting of the EU as a chance to detach Belarus from Russian influence. However, NATO and EU membership are not on the cards, and Belarusian dependence on Russian energy combined with its cultural ties with Russia and lack of a tradition as a democratic state make a change in alignment unlikely.

