Belarus Elections: Dictating Democracy?

Introduction

The Western media coverage of the September 9th presidential elections in Belarus posed the poll, in stark terms, as the struggle for democracy against the current leader, Alexander Lukashenka, billed as ‘the continent’s last hardline Communist dictator’.1 The press attention focused on the ‘reign of terror in a Soviet time warp’ with lurid allegations of mysterious ‘disappearances’ and the repression of the opposition, united for democracy behind Vladimir Goncharik.2 The Wall Street Journal Europe described the contest as ‘one of the last battles of the Cold War’.3 The Cold War rhetoric has been particularly played upon by leading United States politicians, US Secretary of State, Colin Powell describing the Belarus regime as ‘the lone remaining outlaw in Europe’.4 American ambassador to Belarus, Michael Kozak, was happy to draw parallels between his work there and his Cold War job under president Reagan, providing advice and assistance to the Contra opposition to the left-leaning Sandinista regime in Nicaragua: ‘As regards parallels between Nicaragua… and Belarus today, I plead guilty… Our objective and to some degree methodology are the same’.5

The United States has pumped around $50 million into funding the political opposition to Lukashenka over the past two years.6 The influential Washington–based Democratization Policy Institute argues that the US is right to help the ‘democratic opposition and civic forces’ in order to ‘decisively tip the balance…against the anachronistic regime’.7 In response, the Belarus government has accused the permanent mission of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Belarus of being the headquarters of the opposition forces attempting a Yugoslavia-style coup and views the Western election monitors as part of an international campaign of ‘spreading dirt over the elections’.8 Many Western commentators expected the opposition parties to hold mass protests against government attempts to fix the election results, following the Yugoslav scenario.9 Civil society movements claiming a broad base of support argued that ‘the most important moment is the next morning’ when mass protests were planned to topple the government.10

According to preliminary results, which do not include data from polling stations abroad, Lukashenka won 75.62% of the vote, the unified opposition candidate Vladimir Goncharik polled 15.39% and the Liberal Democratic Party leader Sergey Gaidukevich 2.48%.11 The opposition political parties and independent NGOs have called for the election results to be annulled citing ‘unprecedented falsification’ and ‘gross violations’.12 Meanwhile the United States and the European Union have made statements siding with the conclusions of the OSCE’s International Limited Election Observation Mission, representing Council of Europe, European Union and OSCE parliamentarians, that the election fell short of international democratic standards. In a statement adopted in Brussels on 14 September, the EU leaders expressed regret at the reported harassment of the political opposition, domestic observers, independent media and non-governmental organisations in Belarus.13
The experience of monitoring the elections in Belarus revealed a very different reality from that portrayed in the press accounts. There was little tension or controversy and little sign of either a dictatorship or of a planned Western-backed coup. I observed the count in Minsk, where the opposition had most support, at one of the only polling stations where the election committee was composed of Goncharik supporters from the Trade Union Federation. Domestic observers from the OSCE-sponsored Independent Observation group were genuinely disappointed that even at this polling station, where they argued there could have been no manipulation or fraud, the incumbent had received 61% against Goncharik’s 35%. This result, considering the much lower support for the opposition candidate outside Minsk, fitted with the results claimed by the Central Election Commission for the country as a whole.  

On the day there was a high turn-out of 83.85% and the OSCE monitors reported that the voting was orderly. Gerard Stoudmann, the head of the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, monitoring the elections, stated at the post election press conference on 10th September that the OSCE had no evidence of manipulation or fraud of the results on election day. The other major international body monitoring the elections in close co-operation with the OSCE, the Association of Central and East European Election Officials found the election ‘free and open, and in compliance with all universal democratic institutions’. Hrair Balian, the head of the OSCE monitoring mission similarly declined to criticise the procedures on the voting day itself.

The lack of evidence of election fraud or of any popular protest against Lukashenka, stood in sharp contrast to the exaggerated fears (or hopes) of Western commentators. The gap between reality and these high-blown expectations lay in the fact that the portrayal of the elections as an historic one of democracy against dictatorship was a misleading framework. Lukashenka is hardly an old-fashioned dictator and the opposition ‘democracy’ campaign had little to do with democracy.

**Dictatorship?**

Alexander Lukashenka may be seen in the West as an old communist but in fact he is neither old nor communist. At 47 years of age he is fifteen years younger than the main presidential challenger. He is also an opponent of the old Communist nomenklatura; in fact, the Communist Party of Belarus played a high profile role in the united opposition campaign to unseat him.

Lukashenka is very much a political pragmatist. With minimal foreign investment and restricted export opportunities to the West, he has been forced to play on the importance of trade links with Russia and to advocate a gradualist approach to economic reform. This approach has won widespread support within Belarus itself, particularly among those who rely on state subsidy, for example, pensioners, who make up nearly a third of the country’s population, rural workers and those reliant on public-sector employment. With access to Russian TV and press, Belarusians count themselves fortunate to have regularly paid wages, high levels of employment and state pensions and subsidies, as well as few social problems such as drugs or crime.
While it is true that Lukashenka maintains wide popular support, it would not be right to suggest that the election process is as free and open as in the West. Lukashenka has been reluctant to provide his political opponents with much assistance and only ceded the bare minimum of space for the contestation of political ideas. Limited state funding for the election campaign, approximately $12,500 per candidate, and restricted allocations of TV and media space for political candidates meant that the opposition was at a disadvantage. There was little evidence of a substantial campaign by either Lukashenka or the opposing candidates and little atmosphere of an election contest as the public display of election materials was limited to a small number of approved sites. Most of the election publicity was provided by the Central Election Commission through a substantial public information campaign with neutral posters and TV spots informing the electorate of the elections and voting procedures.

The OSCE has afforded Belarus ‘special attention’ over the last few years and sees the country as an exception to the more European integrationist trends in the rest of the region. Running on an opposition anti-corruption platform, Lukashenka won a shock landslide presidential election victory in 1994 with 82% of the votes in the second round. Following a popular referendum on constitutional reform, in 1996, Lukashenka’s presidential powers were extended and the influence of the Belarus parliament reduced. A number of MPs resigned from the new parliament, forming an alternative government. In 1997 the Council of Europe suspended the Republic’s guest status and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly took the decision to recognise the rebel MPs as the legitimate representatives of the Belarus parliament. The US similarly viewed the new parliament as illegitimate and refused to recognise the regime.

However, both the United States and the European Union are concerned that Belarus may shift away from a Western orbit. While treating the government as an international pariah, the State Department has followed a policy of ‘selective engagement’. State Department briefings make the point that the ‘key targets’ for this engagement were the independent media and the non-governmental sector in order to ‘provide a measure of support to those seeking democratic change and help to build constituencies for that change’. As part of this process, the Belarus government was pressurised into accepting the establishment of a permanent OSCE mission, the Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) in February 1998. Tasked with developing democracy and political pluralism, the OSCE programme is based on a strategy of ‘parallel but separate’ initiatives, arranging separate seminars, conferences and training for both government and state institutions and for parties and associations outside the government framework.

The ‘Single Democratic Candidate’?

The Western media coverage of a struggle between ‘democracy’ and ‘dictatorship’ had much to do with the fact that the Belarus opposition had united around a single ‘democracy candidate’. After the parliamentary elections of 2000, when some opposition parties boycotted while others participated, the OSCE Mission Chief, Hans-Georg Wieck, worked closely with the US Ambassador, Michael Kozak, to ensure that the opposition
put up a ‘unity’ candidate. Wieck laid out the OSCE strategy for ‘democratising’ the forthcoming presidential elections in an article at the end of 2000:

At the moment, it appears that there will be several candidates running in the presidential election, however, efforts are under way to seek consensus on one candidate from outside the party spectrum. A review of opinion polls tells us that non-participation in the recent [parliamentary] elections was motivated by many circumstances, notably frustration with the establishment and the absence of alternative candidates. That means: between the hard core support at both ends of the Belarus society, for the president and the parties of the right wing, there is a large percentage of voters who need to be attracted and forced into a specific voting decision.[my emphasis]

The strategy favoured by Wieck and Kozak was to attempt to emulate the Yugoslav scenario in which similar polling revealed that President Vojislav Kostunica was best placed to beat Milosevic in an election, and US diplomats then persuaded rival figures, such as Zoran Djindjic, the Serbian prime minister, to stand down. It was hoped that just as Kostunica had appealed to Milosevic’s Serb nationalist constituency and was able to deflect accusations of being unpatriotic or in the pay of the West, a similar role could be played by Vladimir Goncharik. Goncharik’s main support base was the centre-left coalition of trade unions and social-democratic parties and he was generally seen as an ‘establishment’ figure loyal to the authorities. Considered a ‘safer’ less radical option, it was hoped he would have the most success in winning support away from Lukashenka.

However, Wieck and Kozak did not find it easy to sell this strategy to the opposition parties. According to most opinion polls the most popular opposition candidate was Semyon Domash with the backing of centre-right forces, such as the moderately nationalist Belarusian Popular Front, the liberal Civic Party and some youth opposition groups. Many opposition parties saw Goncharik as an unlikely candidate to unseat Lukashenka; he had a low public profile and, at 61 years of age and in poor health, he hardly represented a dynamic alternative. Two days before the fragmented opposition agreed to unite behind Goncharik, its five main leaders were called to the US embassy where Kozak managed to ensure that Domash stood down and accepted a coalition. Even media commentators sympathetic to the opposition described Goncharik as ‘no Kostunica’: ‘He is not the most charismatic of candidates, does not share Lukashenka’s populist, man-of-the-people sense of humour, and the official, Soviet-style trade union he heads is not well-liked’.

The ‘assistance’ provided to the Belarus opposition parties by the OSCE’s permanent mission and the US State Department, did little to change the political climate in Belarus. There are probably several reasons for this:

Firstly, the opposition parties’ presidential campaign was over-clouded by the struggle to influence the international community to choose their candidate as the ‘unity’ candidate. The opposition coalition did not make public their choice of Goncharik as the single candidate until 21st July, just seven weeks before the elections. Once the candidate was
chosen, other political parties put less effort into campaigning and in collecting the 100,000 signatures needed to stand a candidate.  

Secondly, the fact that the opposition was receiving close support from the international community inevitably encouraged them to hope to win the elections by relying on international pressure rather than domestic support. From the start it was clear that the ‘democratic’ campaign was relying on getting the results of the ballot overturned and the international community refusing to recognise Lukashenka’s victory as legitimate. Rather than campaigning for the public vote the opposition campaign team focused attention on the Western media, quoting unconfirmed ‘reliable sources’ that the election would be rigged through the plan to replace early voting ballots with rigged votes for Lukashenka. This strategy was clear to see on the last day of campaigning, while the other presidential candidates were out on the stump mobilising votes, Goncharik spent the day at the Hotel Planeta with the parliamentary delegations from the OSCE, Council of Europe and the European Union.

As expected, at the pre-planned ‘victory’ rally held at the close of the polls on 9th September, Goncharik claimed that the results had been falsified and that an ‘independent count’ showed that Lukashenka had won only 46% of the vote while he had taken 40%. He called on the international community to pressure the government to hold a new round of elections. Goncharik did not claim any source for his figures and the Independent Observation network of domestic NGOs, which tried to organise a parallel count from 500 selected polling stations, issued a statement on the 10th September saying that they had not managed to obtain any ‘reliable results’.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the selection of a ‘democracy’ candidate meant that the government restrictions on political campaigning had a particularly dampening effect on the political climate during the elections. Despite the fact that the OSCE chose to talk-up the election as providing a ‘real choice’, the pressure to unite around Goncharik cut down the choice and the democratic discussion available to voters. The international decision to pressurise the opposition political parties to unite behind one candidate, in order to ‘force’ voters into a ‘specific voting position’, cut down the amount of air-time and press space for an opposition perspective as well as narrowing the choice at the ballot box. If five opposition candidates had stood in the first round they would have had then had five times the amount of airtime and five times the opportunity to discuss the problems of the current regimes’ policies. This internationally-enforced policy was particularly unfortunate because if Lukashenka won less than 50% of the votes the election would have gone to a second round and the opposition parties and their supporters would then have had the choice as to which candidate or platform to support. The OSCE and State Department policy of pushing for a ‘democracy’ candidate in fact disenfranchised Belarusian voters and further restricted democratic debate.

**The Democracy Movement?**

The Western coverage of the elections has been dominated not by the party campaigns but by coverage of the struggle of domestic non-governmental organisations (NGOs),
independent media organisations, civil society groups involved in the election campaign and associations of independent election observers. The OSCE viewed the non-governmental sector as of vital importance for democratisation in Belarus and the regulation of this sector has been a central source of conflict between the OSCE and the Belarus authorities. The head of the OSCE’s permanent mission in Belarus, Hans-Georg Wieck, argued that the ‘third sector’ was an important sphere of autonomy and independence from the Belarusian state:

The very nature of a non-governmental sector implies that the organizations that comprise it remain overwhelmingly free of state control in their formation and day-to-day existence. Government officials should not decide which non-state organizations may exist or may not, or choose the content of their program, or pick the names or symbols the organization may use... [T]he only limit to their activities should be the power of the ideas they propound.37

The OSCE views the development of the ‘third sector’ as one of the major gains of the work of the permanent mission in Belarus. Belarus election law does not allow foreign donations to individual political parties or campaigns, however aid for NGOs has allowed the OSCE and the US government to circumvent election rules and play a direct role in the domestic political process. The US government helps to fund 300 non-party ‘independent’ NGOs involved in ‘seeking political change’.38 This funding for ‘independent’ opposition to the government has meant that the activities of the domestic NGOs dominated the international media coverage. US and European support for independent press and civil society NGOs has given these small organisations an international standing unrelated to their domestic support. This lack of relationship between domestic NGOs, heavily involved in the political process, and the Belarusian people, has led to a large disparity between international perceptions and the situation on the ground in the country.

The Media

The Belarusian authorities have put pressure on the internationally-funded ‘independent’ media demanding tax information and restricting publications seen to be ‘printing inaccurate information’. The media restrictions make political discussion less free than in many Western states and the OSCE describes the strict interpretations of economic and electoral regulations, which restrict free speech, as ‘akin to censorship’ (although the OSCE pursues a similar censorious line in the elections, which it manages, in Bosnia-Herzegovina39).40 The independent media in fact have a lot more freedom than would appear to be the case from Western media stories. The leading example of the ‘repression’ of the media being the temporary closure, for several days, of the Magic printing house, a major producer of national and regional opposition press. From speaking to people in Minsk, intending to vote for the opposition, the impression they gave me was that the independent media’s high profile unsubstantiated allegations of ballot-rigging and corruption and fraud against Lukashenka and the government were not intended to be credible with the public. They thought that the intention was to force the authorities’ hand into the confiscation or censorship of material. Once the authorities
intervened, as they did over a special issue of *Rabochy*, then the question of election fraud was automatically raised. *Rabochy* editor Viktar Ivanshkevich telling the international press that ‘The authorities are acting not only from fear that the people will know the truth but because they are losing certainty that Lukashenka can honestly win the elections’.41

While the state media were dominated by positive coverage of Lukashenka, there was no shortage of ‘independent’ papers supporting the opposition candidate. Papers such as *Nasha svaboda, Rabochy, Belaruskaya maladzyozhnaya* and *Den* were all freely available in Minsk. While the regime imposes taxes on the independent press the substantial foreign subsidies meant that the ‘independent’ media could afford to hand out special election editions free of charge at Minsk metro stations, in contravention of the election laws.42 In fact the Belarusian authorities were fairly restrained in their dealings with the Western-funded media and most of the stories concerned threatened closures rather than actual ones. Rumours of closures or seizures were jumped on to make points of election manipulation, the editor of *Narodaya Volya*, for example, stating ‘[The authorities] know that under normal conditions the election will be in favor of the single candidate [of the opposition]. Therefore they are doing everything possible to derail the election.’43 However, ‘doing everything possible’ did not actually include preventing the publication of six different independent papers, hostile to the government, on that day alone.

*Civil Society*

The lack of political party campaigning contrasted sharply with the high-profile activity of civil society or third sector NGOs with public protests and ‘illegal’ poster and leaflet campaigns in support of the opposition. These ‘civil society’ campaigns have been strongly backed by the United States, the leading example being the youth ‘movement’, Zubr. In February this year, the US government-funded International Republican Institute brought the Serbian student leaders involved in Otpor, the Serbian youth movement, to Minsk and subsequently organised training for the leaders of Belarusian youth groups in Vilnius and Bratislava.44 Zubr has been established as a direct copy of Otpor, and follows the same activities of high-profile student pranks, stickers, T-shirts and even the same political slogans. As Zubr organiser Aleksei Shidlovsky states: ‘Otpor was the model for us… We have relations with the western embassies. We tell them what we’re doing and planning.’45

Most of Zubr’s activities have been for the benefit of the Western and ‘independent’ press, media stunts in the hope of public arrests to expose the heavy-handedness of the regime. One typical stunt, which resulted in arrests for defaming the President, involved four students dressing up as doctors chasing a fifth made up to look like Lukashenka and declaring ‘Have you seen our patient? He has escaped from a mental hospital?’46 The stunt took place at a cooperative farm formerly run by Lukashenka, in order to cause offence to the authorities rather than to catch the public eye. I spoke with some of the Zubr organisers the day before the elections and was surprised to find out that they had no formal membership, the 5,000 supporters they claim are those who have accepted the
Zubr (bison) badge. They were not involved in the OSCE network of election monitoring, focusing on putting up stickers around Minsk to build support for the ‘victory’ rally on the evening of the poll and planned mass protests the following day.

The NGOs, like Zubr, are able to mobilise some youth support, but nowhere near as much as the pro-government youth NGOs such as the Belarusian Patriotic Union of Youth. Zubr’s activities are not taken that seriously, even by the supporters of opposition parties, who see their stunts as attracting hotheads and troublemakers. The ‘victory’ rally was covered by the international media but the masses failed to materialise and the protest attracted only around 2,000 people, who soon went on their way. I attended and noticed that most of the people were looking on rather than participating, in fact the sound-system was so poor most people could not hear the speeches. Despite the concerns of riot police and water cannons, there was no police presence at the main square, although I did notice three policemen in a parked car two blocks away.

_Election Monitoring_

One of the main concerns expressed by the OSCE monitoring mission has been the harassment of domestic NGO election observers. Domestic NGOs had offices raided, equipment taken and accreditation withdrawn in what was seen as a concerted attempt to intimidate civil society representatives or, more ominously, as proof that the government was attempting to hide ballot-rigging. In fact, the role of domestic NGOs in observing the election process has been a highly politicised one from the start.

In line with the opposition campaign of attempting to have the international community condemn the election as illegitimate, the domestic NGOs were keen to use their ‘independent’ position to highlight ballot-rigging from the start of the campaign. Two main issues of contention came to the fore, the opposition claims that early voting would be manipulated fraudulently by the government and the attempt to organise a parallel count, managed by an umbrella group of NGOs sponsored by the OSCE permanent mission, the Belarus Initiative Independent Observation.

The ‘democracy’ campaign received a boost of support when Aaron Rhodes, the executive director of the International Helsinki Federation, an international NGO closely involved in the domestic NGO training process, argued that early voting would be used to falsify the election results. Mechyslau Hryb a coordinator of the monitoring network told journalists in the run-up to the polls that authorities were trying to pressurise some 50% of voters to vote early, ahead of the poll, with the intention of subsequently replacing their ballots with new ones. In the run-up to polling day the main issue of international coverage was the NGO allegations of fraud. These turned out to be either unfounded or of no influence on the final result. The final figures for early voting, released by the Central Election Commission on 8 September, were just under 15%. Although there was no evidence that these ballots were tampered with in any way, even if they had been Lukashenka would still have gained over 50% and won on the first ballot.
The negative international coverage based on the rumour-mill set in process by the internationally-supported ‘independent’ domestic NGOs, responsible for election monitoring, put the regime in a difficult situation. The government was even more concerned about the intention behind the ‘alternative count’ to be organised by the umbrella ‘Belarus Initiative -Independent Observation’ network of more than 10,000 domestic observers. Their intention was to conduct an independent ‘parallel vote tabulation’ or ‘alternative count’, with the intention of declaring the ‘genuine’ election results based on the observation of 500 polling station counts, judged to be scientifically representative of the country as a whole. The authorities saw this as an attempt to declare false results and cause instability, and in response acted against these associations. The OSCE parallel vote plan, by their own account produced ‘widespread misunderstanding… [and] led to open hostility on the part of the authorities’. The OSCE then complained when the authorities acted to confiscate the computers, which they had leased to the Club of Belarusian Voters, one of the NGOs involved in the network. The US State Department also complained that the government had restricted the election-related activities of ‘non-partisan’ NGOs, by taking US government-owned equipment. On the day before the election the accreditation of some 2,000 members of one of the NGOs involved, Viasna, was withdrawn. These instances were part of the background of intimidation alleged to invalidate the election results in the eyes of the US State Department and the OSCE Mission.

Conclusion

The OSCE was correct to argue that the openness and transparency of the election process was much lower than in the West, creating possibilities for fraud and disenfranchisement and limiting democratic debate. However, the OSCE’s decision to monitor these elections, rather than just send a technical observation team, as they did for the parliamentary elections in 2000, suggested that the OSCE saw the prevailing conditions, including the legal framework under which the elections were held, as potentially ‘free and fair’. The CIS states’ monitoring team, which had observed the entire election process, found that the elections met international standards. The OSCE’s monitoring team’s decision that the elections failed to meet international standards was largely based on the governments’ actions against the ‘independent’ media and ‘independent’ domestic NGOs, particularly those engaged in election monitoring. The OSCE report states that the LEOM (Limited Election Observation Mission) was: 

...deeply concerned about the level of harassment of political opposition and domestic monitoring groups. Specific incidents of seizure of office equipment and campaign materials, frequent tax inspections and detentions of those found in possession of materials deemed slanderous of the President were recorded. These incidents had a chilling effect on an already minimal level of public campaigning.

This judgement neglects the destabilising impact made by the intervention of the OSCE’s permanent mission in Belarus, the Advisory and Monitoring Group, which encouraged the domestic NGOs to play an openly political role in support of the ‘democracy’
campaign to unseat Lukashenka. In fact, the ‘atmosphere of fear that made a fair election impossible’ according to the head of the OSCE monitoring mission, Hrair Balian, had much to do with the OSCE permanent mission’s involvement in the political process. Rather than assist in establishing dialogue between opposition groups and the government in an attempt to free the political process from bureaucratic constraints, the OSCE permanent mission and the US State Department sought to bring the conflict to a head at the time when open dialogue was most important. With little support in Belarus society for the ‘independent’ NGOs and widespread suspicion of the motives of the OSCE, their influential external support and encouragement of radical criticism of the regime merely isolated these NGOs from the views of the Belarus public and set them up for government targeting.

The OSCE’s judgement also neglects the fact that probably the biggest ‘chilling effect’ on public campaigning was the OSCE permanent mission and US State Department strategy of ‘forcing’ the Belarus public into a ‘specific voting decision’. Clearly the public did not share the OSCE’s preference for Vladimir Goncharik, the imposed ‘democracy’ candidate. It is unfortunate that OSCE interference deprived the public of the broader political debate that would have been provided by five opposition candidates. The cutting down of opposition TV time and press coverage to a fifth of what it could have been was probably the major ‘chilling effect’ on democratic discussion and debate. The OSCE’s misjudged intervention prevented the Belarus public from making up their own minds on which party and leader would make the best opposition candidate. Unfortunately, in rejecting the OSCE’s ‘democratic’ choice, the voters of Belarus have probably only confirmed the OSCE in their view that they need more ‘assistance’ rather than less.

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