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THE LONG SHADOW OF THE BELARUS PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

PROCEDURES, RESULTS AND POLITICAL FALL-OUT

Stephan Malerius

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Europe has rarely seen elections as disastrous as the Presidential elections held in Belarus on December 19, 2010. This is not because of President Alexander Lukashenko's landslide victory in the so-called elections. After his 16 years in office, no-one seriously believed that the votes would actually be counted or that the authorities would not rig the elections to suit Lukashenko. The real disaster lies in the brutality used to break up the peaceful demonstration on election night and the repression which followed over the next few weeks – something which even the worst pessimists had not foreseen. Indeed, the election campaign itself had been surprisingly liberal.

The 2010 Presidential elections in Belarus have produced only losers: the opposition has lost out because it was unable to come up with a joint manifesto or a joint candidate and after the elections most of its political leaders ended up in jail. Europe has lost out because all the hard work done to build closer ties with Belarus and to strengthen pro-European parties has been wiped out overnight. Russia has lost out because it recognized Lukashenko's dubious re-election, failed to condemn the repressive measures and once again has shown that its attitude towards basic democratic principles is very different to that of the rest of Europe. And Lukashenko has also lost out because the demonstrations in front of the government building and subsequent repression have forced the formerly street-smart rulers into a blind alley. Perhaps the most astonishing thing about these elections is the way Lukashenko has, at

a stroke, dropped the “multi-vector foreign policy” which he worked so hard on and returned to his self-imposed political isolation.

So who was calling the shots on election night? And why, after three months of free campaigning, did it only take a few hours for violence to escalate? Was Lukashenko manipulated, and if so, by whom? Or was it Lukashenko himself who ordered the peaceful protests to be crushed upon finding out that the actual election results would mean a second ballot? These are the questions which must be asked if Europe is now going to build a new strategy towards Belarus.

THE LOCAL ELECTIONS AS A DRESS REHEARSAL

As political co-determination is practically non-existent in authoritarian Belarus, the people have very few opportunities in everyday life to feel that they can actually change things, even if this is somewhat illusory. The five-yearly Presidential elections present such an opportunity for political momentum, and so they are hotly anticipated well before election day. The local elections held on April 25, nine months before the main event, were something of a dress rehearsal. They were the first elections to be held since the changes to electoral law which came into force in January 2010 and which had taken into account the recommendations of the OSCE and independent local experts. These changes were seen internationally as a step in the right direction, although they did not go far enough to really prevent electoral fraud. Still, it was hoped the April elections would show whether the new laws would at least make Belarusian elections a little fairer, freer and more transparent.

The local elections held nine months before the Presidential elections were something of a dress rehearsal. Changes to electoral law were seen internationally as a step in the right direction.

These hopes were soon dashed: of the 21,293 local councillors elected, only nine represented democratic parties. None of the candidates from the Movement for Freedom, the United Civic Party or the Belarusian Popular Front succeeded in winning a seat on any of the local councils. The elections were no different from all previous elections over the last fourteen years. Indeed,

it was amazing how little effort the officials made to hide their vote-rigging. They used all their usual tricks when confirming the election results – in almost every case where a democratic candidate was standing against a government representative, there were considerable differences between the results of early voting and the votes cast on April 25. Around 30 per cent of the voters had voted early. And before the elections there were once again arrests of independent candidates, house searches and, on election day itself, there was rigging and government-organised voting within companies, closed constituencies (barracks) and student halls of residence. No pretence was made to count the votes more transparently than during the 2008 Parliamentary elections.

The fact that 80 per cent of the population believe the work of local councillors has no effect on their lives throws doubts on the claimed turnout of 79.5 per cent. The election organisers also seem to have treated the elections on April 25 as a dress rehearsal. At a Minsk press conference after the elections, Lidija Yermoshina, head of the Electoral Commission, declared that "Elections are never sterile". It's true that there were several small-scale aberrations, but no really serious irregularities.

Lukashenko seemed to want to use the election to make it clear that he is not prepared to make concessions to his democratic opponents nor to bow to demands from Europe to make democratic and constitutional changes in the country. As a result, all observers assumed that

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the Presidential elections would follow the same pattern – the regime would produce its rigged election results, with the election itself being staged with greater or lesser success to give the illusion of legitimacy. At the same time Lukashenko was losing his political room for manoeuvre. It was becoming increasingly clear that not only the EU but Russia was losing patience and that Moscow was perhaps no longer prepared to support him in another term, unlike in 2006. On top of this there was the unrest in Kyrgyzstan, which Lukashenko also interpreted as a warning shot across his bows. He publicly drew parallels with the events in Bishkek: "If something like this were to happen in my country and if anyone were to dare to try

leading the people into a storm of violence, our response would not be weak. A government which does not know how to defend itself is worthless.” In mid-April, Lukashenko offered his protection to deposed Kyrgyz President Bakiyev and granted him political asylum in Belarus.

ECONOMIC DISPUTES, MEDIA WAR: DETERIORATING RELATIONS BETWEEN MINSK AND MOSCOW

Although the Kremlin has up till now been remarkably restrained in its remarks on the Belarusian Presidential elections,¹ Russia is still the region’s central player and it is important to look at the changing relationship between Minsk and Moscow in order to assess the events on and around December 19. However, it is difficult to come to any conclusions beyond mere speculation due to the fact that most official contacts between the two neighbours take place behind closed doors. But it is a fact that relations between Lukashenko and the Medvedev/Putin pairing came to a head in summer 2010, to the extent that one political commentator in Minsk wrote that it was no longer possible to talk about the deteriorating relationship of Belarus and Russia as there was no longer a relationship. As so often in recent years, the catalyst for this was an economic dispute. On January 1, 2010, Russia began levying export duties on Russian oil supplied to Belarusian refineries in Novopolatzk and Mozyr. This decision was another attempt to gradually provide a pragmatic economic basis for its relations with its western neighbour. Belarus had for many years been making handsome profits by using cheap Russian crude oil to sell on oil products to the West at world market prices. Moscow has long been demanding its share of the pie, but in January Minsk argued that raising duties on oil was against the terms of the customs union agreed at the end of 2009 between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. The case went before the Economic Court of the CIS, which in late summer called on both sides to settle the matter out-of-court. While they were still trying to settle

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1 | “We have to respect the choice of the Belarusian people. I am not prepared to talk about what happened during the elections. That is something that needs to be looked at in detail”, said Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on December 29, 2010. Quoted from http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2010/12/29/ic_news_112_358358 (accessed January 31, 2011).

the oil duty row by legal means, in June 2010 the tensions spilled over to the political sphere: Gazprom gave Belarus an ultimatum to pay its gas debts, which had supposedly been mounting up for months, and for a few days it reduced gas supplies to its neighbours by up to 80 per cent. The conflict seemed to be aimed at putting Lukashenko under pressure. Lukashenko replied by publicly going on the offensive for the first time in an open letter to *Pravda* and to Russia's top business leaders. In this letter, he gave his view of the gas conflict and compared Gazprom's demands on Belarus to Nazi Germany's offensive against the Soviet Union.

Over the summer things escalated still further. From early July to mid-August the biggest Russian TV channel, *NTV*, showed a prime-time three-part documentary on Lukashenko, which claimed that he was responsible for the disappearance of political opponents in 1999/2000 and which described him as the head of a criminal ring which has been systematically plundering the country. These programmes were blocked from airing on TV in Belarus, but they could be viewed on the internet. By the end of August at least a third of the population had seen the documentaries. Lukashenko responded by sending a camera team to Tiflis to interview Russia's "Public Enemy No. 1", the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, and shortly afterwards he denounced a Molotov

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cocktail attack on the Russian Embassy in Minsk as the work of Russian provocateurs, a claim which the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov immediately rebutted, calling it "blasphemy". At the beginning of October Lukashenko invited a group of journalists from Russia's regions to Minsk and gave a four-hour press conference. He accused high-ranking Russian officials of orchestrating a smear campaign against him, called Russia's policies towards Belarus "half-cocked" and "brainless" and described his relationship with Medvedev and Putin as "bad, to put it mildly". Two days later Medvedev accused Lukashenko in a video blog on his Kremlin website of wanting to base his election campaign solely on anti-Russian statements and warned him not to interfere in Russia's internal affairs. After a declaration by Medvedev's spokeswoman that relations between Belarus and Russia would never recover to where they were before

under President Lukashenko, there was public speculation whether Moscow would use the Presidential elections in Belarus to get rid of Lukashenko. But there was no clear evidence of what this “Russian scenario” would be.

So it was all the more surprising when Lukashenko travelled to Moscow on December 8 to take part in the summit meetings of the Eurasian Economic Community and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. He spent an hour and a half in private discussions with Medvedev as though nothing had happened. Russia showed that it was prepared to withdraw the export duty on oil from the beginning of 2011, and in return Lukashenko signed 17 agreements designed to advance the planned single market for Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. Not a word was said about the Presidential elections.

THE CAMPAIGN: UNEXPECTED FREEDOM AND NEW EXPERIENCES

As soon as the summer break was over, and in the middle of the escalating conflict between Lukashenko and the Kremlin, the date for the Belarusian Presidential elections was set. On September 14 an extraordinary sitting of the House of Representatives in Minsk announced the elections would be held on December 19. The electoral procedure was officially set out: potential candidates had to name action groups by September 24 who then had a month from September 30 to collect the signatures of 100,000 supporters. In mid-November the Central Electoral Commission would announce the officially-registered candidates and then campaigning could begin.

In parallel, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry made it known that interested parties (OSCE, CIS) were invited to an unrestricted election monitoring.

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The first surprise for the country’s people, and also for international experts, was the previously-unknown freedom granted during the first phase of campaigning for the primaries. At the beginning of October, while the action groups were collecting signatures for their candidates across the country, a 30-year old woman spoke of a totally new atmosphere: “There was a rally in the centre of

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Minsk, the historic white and red flags were being waved and no one intervened, no police, no arrests. I've never known this before in all my life." A whole generation of people had the feeling that they could demonstrate freely, something they had never before experienced in Belarus during 14 years of repressive authoritarian rule. And there was another mood among the people, a feeling that after 16 years they were tired of Lukashenko and were not afraid to express their support for other candidates. Everywhere people were saying "I will support anyone, as long as it's not Lukashenko."

This atmosphere remained during the critical phase of campaigning. First of all, anyone who had collected more than 100,000 signatures was officially registered as a candidate, meaning that the 2010 elections had more opposition candidates than ever before. But on closer inspection this seems to have all been part of an orchestrated game. A local observer who was present at the local Electoral Commission's random checking of the signatures reported that almost every candidate's list of signatures (including Lukashenko's) was forged: "The signatures of a hundred or more supporters had clearly been written by one person, without even taking the trouble to disguise the writing. The Electoral Commission's liberal attitude was obviously being tested, and in fact all these forged signatures were declared valid." So it seems that the decision to register ten candidates was taken from above and was politically-motivated – the more candidates who stood against Lukashenko, the better his chances.

But there was no doubt that change was taking root in the country. As in most countries, gatherings in public places were forbidden, but the authorities reacted quite differently to violations of this rule compared to 2006. When two Presidential candidates called on their supporters to gather for an illegal demonstration on November 24 in Minsk's October Square more than 1,000 people turned up, but the protest was not broken up by the authorities and there were no arrests. The instigators received a warning from the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Central Electoral Commission, but nothing more.

It was also remarkable that in the next stages of campaigning the state-controlled electronic media were for the first time cautiously opened up. All the Presidential candidates were allowed two 30-minute slots on both TV and radio in order to present their manifestos or to talk about the country's situation. The slots were broadcast live, so they could not be censored or otherwise manipulated. Nearly every candidate took advantage of this opportunity, particularly as a way of settling old scores with Lukashenko, who had largely denied them all access to a wider public since 1996. In his broadcast, the Social Democrat Nikolai Statkevich demanded that Lukashenko give back the stolen elections: "Fair elections depend on you and you alone, and not on the clowns in the so-called Parliament or the so-called Electoral Commission." But otherwise nothing had changed in the electronic media: all news programmes were still dominated by Lukashenko to such an extent that he saw no need to present his manifesto once again on TV. He also refused to take part in the first televised debates between the candidates.

This is why political scientist Yuri Chausov talked about a kind of "invisible liberalisation". The regime had promised to give the people free elections and was now trying to play this out. But liberalisation was not to be confused

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with democracy. According to Chausov, the Parliamentary elections of 2008 served as an example. Candidate registration and campaigning had been relatively free, but the end result was a totally sterile Parliament without a single independent representative. Chausov thought the results of the 2010 Presidential elections were totally predictable: "President Lukashenko has kept away from the official announcement of candidates for good reason. He wants to show that he is not one of the actors in these elections, but rather the director."²

Despite the orchestrated election campaign, the people felt that the new liberal atmosphere within the country was a positive change. For the first time since 1994 they could experience plurality, which still did not bring the chance of fair elections but which at least allowed the public airing

2 | Quoted from http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2010/11/18/ic_articles_623_171295 (accessed January 31, 2011).

of different opinions. But many observers took a sceptical view of how long this surprising freedom would last. How far would Lukashenko go in his attempt to get Western countries to recognize the election results?

THE CANDIDATES

Campaigning for the Belarusian Presidential elections also promised to be a strange political event because of its unusual range of candidates. Closer inspection reveals the following three different groups.

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To begin with, Lukashenko was faced by two candidates who either had never stood for office before (Dmitri Uss) or who acted as kind of guaranteed opposition candidates (Vladimir Tereshtshenko) in the event that the opposition announced a boycott and it was necessary to give the illusion of an election. Tereshtshenko at least was expected to follow the instructions of the President's administration or its officials.

The second group consisted of five relatively high-profile candidates belonging to the democratic opposition: Jaroslav Romanchuk (United Civic Party), a liberal economist; Vitali Rymasheuski, a Christian Democrat; Grogori Kostusev and Ales Michalevich, long-time members of the Belarusian Popular Front, the driving force in the popular movement which resulted in Belarus leaving the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s. They both stood for a patriotic, pro-European orientation for Belarus, and Michalevich focused his campaign on the need to modernise the economy and society. Nicolai Statkievich carried the flag for the Social Democrats.

The third group of candidates consisted of two governors who at least on the face of it were Lukashenko's main competition: Vladimir Neklyayev and Andrei Sannikov, who had unusually large amounts of money to spend on their campaigns and who were obviously acting on behalf of unnamed foreign powers. Many people are still wondering what Neklyayev and Sannikov were trying to achieve and who was backing them. Few are convinced that they really believed in their campaign slogans "Tell the

truth" (Neklyayev) and "European Belarus" (Sannikov). In 2008 Sannikov had called for a boycott of the Parliamentary elections, criticising them as a farce. Now he was himself standing as a candidate although nothing had changed. The democratic opposition was weakened by this deliberate lack of transparency and the swirling speculation: are they Russian candidates? Are they being funded by the Russian oligarch Boris Beresowski, currently living in exile in London? Are they part of a Lukashenko master plan? During their campaigns, the two candidates sowed the seeds of yet more mistrust in an already tangled situation, making it even more difficult for the democratic parties to make a united stand. Lukashenko's political strategy seemed to have paid off – a split opposition and a large number of candidates would make it easier for him to make his re-election appear relatively democratic.

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On top of this, Alexander Milinkevich, who had stood against Lukashenko as the democratic opposition's unity candidate in 2006, announced in September that he would not stand for the 2010 elections. After his withdrawal many people felt they were left with no one to vote for. But the "Anyone but Lukashenko" attitude was so strong in large sections of the population that the other candidates found that people listened to their manifestos and for the first time came to the conclusion that there were other serious and much more interesting political offerings than "Batka" Lukashenko.

VOTING, ELECTION NIGHT AND INCITEMENT TO RIOT

In the week before the elections the country became more and more nervous and the idea of a *Ploscha* (Square) was brought into play. This alludes to October Square in the centre of Minsk which, similar to the Maidan in Kiev, has been a symbol of democratic protest against fraudulent elections ever since the Presidential elections of 2006. On December 11 Vladimir Makei, Head of the Presidential Administration, declared that the opposition just wanted to use the election night demonstration to stir up trouble: "It's quite clear that they do not want a peaceful demonstration", he said on RTR, the Belarusian state television.

“Fighters” were getting themselves ready, stocking up on warm clothing, pyrotechnic supplies and explosives. The opposition’s main aim was to provide western TV viewers with images showing the cruelty of the ruling powers and their brutality towards the voters. But Makei also made it clear that the government had sufficient forces and means to calmly and appropriately handle the situation.³ The opposition were not slow to respond, with several candidates dismissing Makei’s comments as an attempt at intimidation. They urged their supporters to ignore it and to join a peaceful demonstration on the evening of the election.

One of the keys to assessing the events of election night is a meeting held on December 15, where Lukashenko talked about various scenarios which could play out. The meeting was attended by commanders of the police and special forces, and parts of it were broadcast on state television.⁴ Makei did not attend. Lukashenko said they must not allow themselves to be provoked during protests: “On no account respond to provocation. Because they [the opposition, author’s note] want pictures so that they can say ‘Look at this undemocratic regime – once again Lukashenko has used bloodshed to hold onto power’”.

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The most important thing was that “nothing must happen to the people, for God’s sake. We have to protect the people.” He went on to add that he was not expecting protests because the opposition were not capable of organising them. There would not be a *Ploscha* because no one would show up. At the end of the meeting Lukashenko

3 | The interview can be seen on *Youtube* at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=HP8qd2rQR0U> (accessed January 31, 2011). Makei’s predictions proved to be unfounded: it was not the opposition which stirred up trouble, and the security forces certainly did not react in a calm and appropriate manner. Some commentators thought Makei’s words were meant as a warning and an indirect challenge to the opposition to be alert and prepared for trouble from the security forces. Makei was considered to be a moderate within the regime.

4 | I.a. Leonid Maltsev (Head of the Security Council), Anatoly Kuleshov (Minister of Internal Affairs), Yuriy Zhadobin (Defence Minister), Alexander Radkov (Head of Lukashenko’s election team), Vadim Zaicev (Head of the KGB), Viktor Lukashenko and Viktor Scheiman. Excerpts of the meeting can be viewed on the internet at http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2010/12/15/ic_articles_623_171684 (accessed January 31, 2011).

repeated his instruction: "The Presidential elections must not be tarnished by any kind of clashes or protests. If the fly wants to fly, let it fly, no one will stop it. Nowadays the Government's solidarity is so strong that we have no need of extraordinary measures". The opposition failed to take this prophecy of doom seriously and also did not expect any violence on election night. One of the opposition candidates said on the day before the elections that talk of trouble on election evening was a joke. The regime was showing weakness and – just like during the 2006 elections – was trying to intimidate the people. But this would not happen because the population had lost its fear.

Election day itself went off quietly. 23.1 per cent of the population had already cast their votes over the preceding five days, 8 per cent less than in 2006. But reports were coming in from all over the country of how people were being pressurised to vote early. But this had been expected. The crucial question was what would happen on election night? The opposition had come together to call on their supporters to gather in October Square during the evening to wait for the election results and to protest against the anticipated vote-rigging. Voting on election day itself appeared to go off without a hitch, and by early evening no verdict could be given on the vote counting process because the polls did not close until eight o'clock.

The opposition had called on their supporters to gather in October Square during the evening to wait for the election results and to protest against the anticipated vote-rigging.

A huge skating rink was erected on October Square with loudspeakers blaring out Russian pop music, so the candidates' first statements could not be heard. It was also turning very cold and it seemed likely that the crowd of several thousands would start to break up after one or two hours. It seemed clear that none of the opposition candidates had a strategic plan for the *Ploscha*.

Trouble first broke out around 7.30 pm, when Vladimir Neklyayev was beaten while on his way to the demonstration. Pictures of the unconscious opposition candidate flew around the world.⁵ Neklyayev was responsible for the PA system to be used for the candidates' speeches.

5 | The incident can be viewed on *Youtube* at: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=trcsJ50jGWk> (accessed January 31, 2011).

Around 8.40 pm the crowd unexpectedly started moving from October Square towards Independence Square. Presidential candidate Kostusev later reported that they just wanted to go over to Lukashenko's Presidential offices. But the police separated the opposition candidates from the crowd, which continued onwards along Independence Street, swelling in numbers as it went. It is not clear who led the crowd on this route. By 9.30 around 20,000 people had gathered in Independence Square to continue the demonstration. Loudspeakers were set up, candidates made speeches, and the crowd continually chanted their demands for new elections to be held without Lukashenko. By 10.30 the majority of demonstrators had gone home,

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but a group of around 15 protesters began trying to batter down the doors to the government building, which was set back slightly from the Square. Shortly afterwards the security forces were deployed, using violence to break up the demonstration.

This ended up with people being chased right across the centre of Minsk. There were more than 600 arrests, among them eight of nine candidates. None of the protesters who had battered down the doors was immediately arrested, although they were kettled by the riot police at the scene. Their faces were even clearly shown that evening on state TV coverage of the riots.

Events on the street threw the election results themselves into the shade. Around five o'clock the next morning Yermoshina announced the preliminary results, with Lukashenko winning 79.67 of the vote, Andrei Sannikov 2.56 per cent and all other candidates less than 2 per cent. According to this, 6.47 per cent of people had voted against all candidates.

The OSCE/ODHIR observer mission made a provisional statement on the Monday in which it declared that the Belarus elections had not met democratic standards: "Yesterday's Presidential elections have shown that Belarus still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments, although certain specific improvements have been made."⁶ The voting process had generally gone

6 | OSCE/ODHIR, "International election observation, Republic of Belarus – Presidential Election, 19 December 2010, ▶

smoothly, but the situation deteriorated significantly during the vote count. The mission classified the vote count procedure in almost half of all polling stations visited as very bad.⁷ In contrast, the CIS observer mission described the elections as free, open and transparent.⁸ The mission's head, Sergey Lebedev, even went so far as to attack the ODHIR/OSCE mission a few days later, saying that "their opinion before the elections was completely different to their view afterwards", and pointing out that many OSCE observers had made positive statements beforehand. "And then on the day after the elections – this is true not only of Belarus but of other CIS countries – for no good reason we hear that there is a negative assessment and that the general conclusion is that the elections do not meet democratic standards and principles."⁹

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THE CONSEQUENCES: REPRESSION AND SANCTIONS

Election night set in motion a level of repression which is unprecedented in Belarus, even under Lukashenko's regime. In this respect, the KGB are taking the leading role. The majority of those arrested on election night were sentenced to 10 to 15 days in prison, and as at the middle of January 20 people remain imprisoned. Another eleven people are being investigated under Paragraph 293 of the Belarus Criminal Code (Organisation of Mass Riots), which could lead to prison sentences of between 5 and 15 years.

Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions", in: <http://osce.org/odihr/74638>, 1 (accessed January 25, 2011).

- 7 | "While the overall voting process was assessed as good, the process deteriorated significantly during the vote count undermining the steps taken to improve the election. Observers assessed the vote count as bad and very bad in almost half of all observed polling stations. The count was largely conducted in a non-transparent manner, generally in silence, which undermined its credibility. In many cases, observers were restricted and did not have a real opportunity to observe the counting."
- 8 | "We believe that these elections were transparent and met the requirements of the election legislation and common democratic norms," CIS Executive Secretary Sergei Lebedev told reporters in Minsk." Quote courtesy of the Russian news agency *RIA Novosti*, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20101220/161854376.html> (accessed January 31, 2011).
- 9 | Quoted from http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2010/12/25/ic_news_623_358119 (accessed January 31, 2011).

The exact condition of Vladimir Neklyayev and Andrei Sannikov, who were beaten on December 19, remains unknown. Nikolai Statkievich has gone on hunger strike. Grogori Kostusev lodged an appeal against the election reports on behalf of all the opposition candidates, but it was

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thrown out as being without cause. After the arrests, during the holiday period (Catholic Christmas, New Year, Orthodox Christmas) representatives of the democratic opposition, human rights organisations, political parties, independent newspapers and journalists were subjected to house and office searches, right across the country. Dozens of computers, notebooks and data carriers were confiscated. At the same time, scores of people were interrogated by the KGB, charged or imprisoned. The victims' lawyers also soon found themselves in the Justice Ministry's firing line and were threatened with having their licenses withdrawn. The whole of January saw the forces of democracy being subjected to constant terror.¹⁰ Belarus abruptly began to isolate itself, not just through its repressive measures but also on the diplomatic front. On December 31 a Foreign Ministry spokesperson announced in Minsk that the OSCE mandate in Belarus which expired at the end of the year would not be extended, saying there was no justification for having OSCE representatives in the country, the OSCE mission was fulfilled and they should no longer have a presence.

The international community was quick to comment on the vote-rigging, the election night protests and the subsequent repression, along with the closing down of OSCE representation. In an article in the *New York Times* published on December 23, the Foreign Ministers of Germany, Sweden, Poland and the Czech Republic stated that Lukashenko had made his choice, a choice which went against everything the European Union stood for.¹¹ Many governments in Western and Central Europe

10 | At present it is not possible to predict further domestic developments. More detailed information on the election campaign, the elections themselves and the subsequent repression can be viewed on the election blog of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Belarus office under <http://kas.de/belaruswahl>.

11 | Carl Bildt, Karel Schwarzenberg, Radek Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle, "Lukashenko the Loser," in: *New York Times*, December 23, 2010, <http://nytimes.com/2010/12/24/opinion/24iht-edbildt24.html> (accessed January 31, 2011).

called for the immediate release of those imprisoned and punishment for those responsible. In contrast, Russia congratulated Lukashenko on his re-election, claiming the circumstances surrounding the vote were Belarus's own affair. Other post-Soviet countries such as Georgia and the Ukraine took a similar line. On January 31, the EU Foreign Ministers in Brussels agreed to ban a total of 158 people who were responsible for the vote-rigging and repressions which followed the elections from entering the EU and to freeze their bank accounts within the EU. They declared that the list was open and could be changed at any time. The Foreign Ministers stressed that the EU was keen to continue talks with Belarus, but with the basic prerequisite that the Belarus government would adhere to principles of democracy and the rule of law and respect basic human rights. At the donor conference in Warsaw on February 2, the EU and its member states announced that 87 million euros would be made available over the next two years to support civil society in Belarus. Some of Belarus's EU neighbours have abolished visa charges for ordinary Belarusian citizens.

WHO WAS BEHIND THE RIOTS?

Certain commentators have accused Europe of achieving nothing over the last two years in its attempts to carry on a dialogue with the regime and convert Belarus's weak liberalisation into a sustainable democratic process. These accusations are unfair, as they suggest that the events of December 19 could have been foreseen, and they make no mention of what Europe should have done to prevent the riots. However, it cannot be denied that Europe now needs a whole new strategy for Belarus. Questions need to be asked in order to understand what really happened on election night: what caused the protests to escalate? Who staged them? And what was the desired outcome?

Europe now needs a whole new strategy for Belarus. Questions need to be asked in order to understand what really happened on election night.

Outlined below are three different propositions which could explain what happened on December 19. They are not so much speculations about who was behind the protests as an attempt to clarify the challenges facing Europe over the next few months in relation to Belarus.

It became clear how hard it was for Lukashenko to deal with the openness of the campaigning and to allow the opposition to voice criticism without shutting them down.

First: In Lukashenko, Europe has to deal with an unpredictable and out-of-control autocrat who lacks the mental and intellectual capacity to accept democratic changes in his country, let alone implement them, and who is only concerned with maintaining his grip on power. The decision to use violence against the protestors on December 19 came from Lukashenko. During the “liberal election campaign” it repeatedly became clear how hard it was for him to deal with the openness of the campaigning and to allow the opposition to voice criticism without shutting them down. These three months did not sit well with the authoritarian mentality which he had nurtured over the previous 14 years. At one point Lukashenko was surprised by his own patience and thought his country was already so democratic that all its neighbours “would be afraid of so much democracy”. He had entered into this strategy with great reluctance in order to gain international legitimacy for his fourth term. Lukashenko had had to grit his teeth for three long months in order to stomach this controlled liberalisation. Then on election day he was faced with two pieces of information which threw him totally off-balance. While the official, sham results were being announced by the Central Electoral Commission on election night, votes were actually being counted in the local Electoral Commissions. Only a few insiders know the actual result of the vote, but it was not good for Lukashenko, with his vote probably being in the region of 44 to just over 50 per cent. This was the first shock for him on election night. Then he saw the masses of protestors making their way along Independence Street – 20,000 to 30,000 people who were openly and fearlessly demanding new elections without his participation. Shock turned into blind rage and he gave the momentous command to his henchmen, who were only too happy to oblige.

Secondly: Europe has to deal with a Mafia-like economic clique which uses its enormous criminal energies to restrict foreign – particularly European – political and economic influence. In this scenario, the riots were designed to make it impossible for the West to recognize the election results and to destroy the weak ties that Belarus has with the EU. Many representatives of Belarus’s present-day elite were and are not interested in any changes to the status quo.

They have watched with alarm the gradual rapprochement which has taken place between Belarus and Europe since 2008. Any transformation or modernisation of the country in line with European standards would not only threaten their very existence, but privatisation, transparency and European competition would also rob them of the opportunity to grab the juiciest morsels of their own economy at very special prices.¹² Privatisations are inevitable over the next few years; otherwise Belarus will be unable to service its huge debt, which is due for repayment from 2012. The question is just whether it will be an elite-dominated privatisation as happened in Russia or the Ukraine or whether the country will follow the path taken by its Central European neighbours during the 1990s.

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There are many indications that the riots which broke out in front of the government building had been carefully planned over several weeks. One of these is the delivery van which was found packed full of Molotov cocktails in plastic bottles, stun guns and gas bottles, which had allegedly been prepared by the Opposition and which was shown on state television on election day. The deployment of special forces on election night also bears all the traces of a well-organised, tried-and-tested action. One thing is sure: the organisers were members of Lukashenko's close circle. They knew exactly how and when they needed to feed him information in order to provoke the impulsive reaction which materialised on election night. In her analysis of the meeting on December 15, Svetlana Kalinkina writes: "Whoever had Lukashenko wrapped round their little finger, wrecking the plans to gain international recognition of his fourth term as President, was at the meeting on December 15. We can only speculate on their motivation, whether it was due to stupidity, ideology, revenge or fear."¹³

12 | In this respect we must ask why Presidential candidate Ales Mikalevich is still in prison when there is no evidence that he took part in the election night protests and he avoided making any attacks on Lukashenko during the election campaign. Obviously his programme of modernisation (and Europeanisation) was considered to be more dangerous than the Christian fundamentalism of Rymahewski, for example.

13 | Quoted from Svetlana Kalinkina, "Sobstvennoe okruschenie obvelo Lukaschenko wokrug palca" (Lukashenko's own people had him wrapped round their little finger), in: <http://udf.by/news/sobytie/37406-sobstvennoe-okruzhenie-obvelo-lukashenko-vokrug-palca.html> (accessed January 31, 2011).

Thirdly: Europe finds itself faced with a Russia which still views the territory of Belarus as canonic, which is opposed to the country moving closer to Europe and which is using economic ties to promote a creeping integration of Belarus into the Russian Federation's sphere. Former economic adviser to the Russian President, Andrei Illarionov, gave his own version of the events in Minsk during an interview on the *Echo Moskwy* radio station. He claimed that Russia had instigated a riot on December 19 as an "imitation of the Orange Revolution", with a second riot being planned by the Belarusian KGB as an "imitation of storming the government building". According to Illarionov it is to be assumed that both scenarios were closely coordinated and that the secret services knew what the other side was planning.

Former economic adviser to the Russian President, Andrei Illarionov, claimed that Russia had instigated a riot on December 19 as an "imitation of the Orange Revolution".

Illarionov thinks the Russian action went ahead. It was designed to incite a reaction from the Belarusian regime which would result in the country's links to Europe being broken and its return to the Russian influence from which it had been struggling to free itself over the last two years. The Belarusian secret service then jumped on the bandwagon and used the protests for their own ends, i.e. crushing the country's democratic opposition and a complete political clear-out. This also proved successful and is still ongoing.

For Illarionov, the Minsk protests go far beyond the local and the domestic: "I think these difficult, tragic, dramatic events are a bitter lesson for Belarus society, but also for Russian society and the societies of other authoritarian states. Just when people are fighting to have a voice, to create a democratic society, to develop the rule of law in their own country, then they have to constantly bear in mind the powers that are ranged against them and the nature of this authoritarian regime. They have to anticipate how not only their own regime, but also other foreign regimes, are planning to incite unrest and the methods and tools they are prepared to use to achieve their goals."¹⁴

14 | Excerpts from the interview at <http://belaruspartizan.org/bp-forte/?page=100&news=73938> (accessed January 31, 2011).

SOLIDARITY WITH DEMOCRATS IN BELARUS

Since the events of December 19, there has arisen a wave of solidarity with those being persecuted. Before Christmas the offices of the Belarus Popular Front were swamped with aid packages and donations for the 600+ prisoners. "The people are queuing up to help", said one of the coordinators. This desire to help shows how the country's mood has changed: Lukashenko's regime no longer has the backing of the people. Lukashenko finally lost them by his brutality, and it is clear that his victory on December 19 was a Pyrrhic one.

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This could also be an opportunity for Europe to work with the country's people to bring about real change in Belarus. Three things are now needed:

1. The ban of a wide-ranging group of people who are responsible for the vote-rigging, riots and repressive measures from travelling to EU countries must be followed by an easing of travel restrictions to the EU for Belarus citizens. This includes consulate procedures and visa charges.
2. The EU Commission must massively and sustainably increase its support for Belarusian civil society. It is important to not only step-up the programme but also to make it more flexible. Posts in Brussels and delegations in Kiev and Minsk need to be filled by competent people who clearly understand the conditions which govern civil society in Belarus.
3. The EU must make it even clearer to Russia that it considers Belarus to be an independent, sovereign state and that it is taking a positive interest in its democratic development. At the same time Europe must also begin to understand that Belarus is a country with a long European history and tradition which in the past has been unfairly treated as either a blank space or as a tiresome addendum to its foreign policy agenda.