

European
Elections monitorfrom **Corinne Deloy**
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7 days before
the pollPresidential «Election»
in Belarus,
a round up one week before the vote

The Belarusians are being called to vote on 19th December to appoint their "President"! Sixteen people were running but only ten managed to collate the necessary 100,000 signatures to be able to participate. These are:

- the present "title" holder, Aleksander Lukashenko, in office sine 20th July 1994;
- Vladimir Nekliaiev;
- Jaroslav Romantchouk, Vice-President of the Civilian Unity Party;
- Andreï Sannikov, leader of European Belarus;
- Viktor Tereshchenko, chairman of the council of the Small and Medium Sized Enterprise Association;
- Ryhor Kastusyow, chairman of the People's Front;
- Dmitri Us, Director of the company Tryvium;
- Nikolai Statkevich, co-founder of the Social Democratic Party;
- Vitali Rimachevski, co- chairman of the Christiane Democratic Party;
- Alexey Mikhalevich, lawyer and member of the Modernisation Union.

One thousand international observers are expected including 400 who belong to the OSCE led by Geert-Hinrich Ahrens. 5,000 Belarusians will also be observing the election. The rights of international observers have been extended since the Central Electoral Commission adopted a law whereby they may now attend the counting of the voting slips!

Another novelty is that from 22nd November to 3rd December each candidate had the opportunity to broadcast his programme on TV and on the radio for a 30 minute period. Lukashenko, omnipresent in the media, decided not to use his airtime! No arrests were recorded on 24th November when around 1,000 people representing an opposition party rallied in the Kastychnitskaya Square in Minsk to demand the holding of a real election in line with democratic rules. "We have come so that we can win," declared Vladimir Neklyaeu. Vitali Rimachevski and Nikolay Statkevich took part in the rally whilst Andreï Sannikov and Alexey Mikhalevich preferred not to. Nikolay Statkevich put forward the demonstrators' three demands: the right for each candidate to have a representative within the Electoral Commission (at present less than 1% of the local electoral commissions' managers belong to the opposition forces), the public counting of the votes and the abolition of the early vote which is being denounced

as a means to falsify the results! Indeed the electoral law enables the Belarus to fulfil their civic duty five days leading up to the election. This early vote was abolished in Ukraine and Georgia after their respective "coloured" revolutions. "I have a 70% approval rate whilst the opposition only has 1.5% why would I need to cheat?" repeats Aleksander Lukashenko.

The European Union has said it would grant Belarus 3 billion € if "the presidential election" was democratic. Facing Lukashenko is a divided opposition; the 9 other candidates offer different programmes. Jaroslav Romanchuk, who says he is the only professional economist with a team of professional reformers at his disposal, has promised to create one million jobs if he wins. He said that he would order an inquiry into the disappearance of opponents during Aleksander Lukashenko's time in office. Andreï Sannikov is promising many changes if he wins – the true separation of power, a modification to the electoral law, the organisation of free local elections, the independence of the legal and Parliamentary systems, an improvement in the private sector, an increase in the benefit given for the birth of a child, a decrease in housing prices, an increase in retirement pensions and the modernisation of the economy. He is promising Belarus' entry into the WTO within the next two years and

Presidential «Election» in Belarus, 19th December 2010

in the long run, membership of the EU. Andrey Sannikov is against his country joining NATO but hopes to reduce the length of military service to one year (at present it lasts 18 months, for university graduates service lasts 12 months). *"It is shameful that our country is qualified as the last dictatorship in Europe. We have an historic chance to rid ourselves of this odious regime and live in an independent European country,"* he said. He wants to do away with State ideology lessons taught in secondary and higher education and in companies. *"The country needs patriots and citizens more than obedient slaves,"* he stressed saying that he was certain that Aleksander Lukashenko would lose.

An interesting fact: Lukashenko's programme has been published in the State newspapers. But three of them refused to publish the programme put forward by Dmitri Us. He says that the electoral system is the same as that of Germany in the 1930's.

Vladimir Neklyayev and Andrey Sannikov said that they were going to form an electoral bloc to counter fraud. *"We shall do nothing against one another," stressed Vladimir Neklyayev who chose to enter politics "because poetry cannot change life just make it more beautiful, and I want to change and improve life. I know it can be done."* Vladimir Neklyayev has said that he would offer 19,000 € to families for the birth of a child and that he would devote his first law to SME's.

Aleksander Lukashenko continues to maintain that the opposition is being funded from abroad notably by France, Lithuania, Poland and Germany. *"We know that Andrey Sannikov and Vladimir Neklyayev are being funded by Russia,"* he declared in the French daily, *"Le Figaro"* on 29th November last.

Relations between Minsk and Moscow have been extremely tense over the last few months. *"Not only has Aleksander Lukashenko infringed all diplomatic norms but also those of human decency,"* declared Russian

President Dmitri Medvedev after the Belarus satrap accused Moscow of having organised a Molotov cocktail attack against the Minsk embassy in an attempt to discredit his regime. At the end of the September Aleksander Lukashenko said that Dmitri Medvedev's administration *"was orchestrating a flood of shameful lies, absurdities and disinformation about Belarus."*

Moscow demands the greatest loyalty of its closest neighbours and is accusing Minsk of not having honoured its promise since it refused to acknowledge the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; it also granted asylum to Kurmanbek Bakyev, the former President of Kirghizstan (2005-2010), who was forced to resign on 15th April last. The Russian authorities consider that the presence of autocratic leaders hostile to any reform in neighbouring countries reduces their own room to manoeuvre. However no one thinks that Moscow can question Aleksander Lukashenko's legitimacy if, as expected, he wins this so-called election. In addition to this Russia did not choose to support the opposition candidate. In the tense atmosphere that reigns at present both opposition candidates are standing as friends of Russia, since the Belarus population is traditionally very much in support of Russia.

Aleksander Lukashenko has no real challenger. The only real threat lies in turnout. He is extremely popular in rural areas of Belarus and amongst the elderly who are the greatest in number to vote. *"If Aleksander Lukashenko is in power it is because that when he makes a promise he keeps it whatever happens. People know this and appreciate it,"* maintains the dictator.

All of the polls forecast his victory on 19th December. Economist Yaroslav Romanchuk is due to come 2nd, followed by Andrey Sannikov then Vladimir Neklyayev according to a poll by the Ukrainian institute, Socium Research Centre.

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