

In Belarus, the electoral farce took place as planned

Corinne Deloy

Translated by helen Levy

Results

On 23rd September 2012 the Belarusians "elected" the 100 members of the Chamber of Representatives, the lower chamber of parliament. This general election was nothing but a sham. The country, where the opposition forces have been absent from parliament since 1996, has not seen free, transparent elections in over two decades.

The MPs appointed on 23rd September are mainly "independents", i.e. they do not belong to any political party but owe their election the loyalty they show towards the authoritarian power of Aleksander Lukashenko. No candidate from the opposition was therefore elected. "Aleksander Lukashenko has made the situation totally absurd, without even trying to build a facade of democracy. He already knows the names of the 110 MPs," declared Vitaly Rimachevski, the unfortunate candidate in the last presidential election on 19th December 2010.

600 people were present to monitor the Belarusian general election, 330 of whom were from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The country's authorities refused to deliver visas to two observers, Marieluise Beck and Emanuelis Zingeris, as well as to several journalists. A photographer from the Associated Press was beaten by security officers as he covered a demonstration by four opponents and was briefly imprisoned with seven other journalists. Another journalist from the Australian TV channel SBS TV, Amos Roberts, was arrested by the authorities at Minsk airport. His camera, computer and all of the documents he had managed to collate were confiscated.

On 11th September last the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz (S&D, DE) expressed his "extreme concern about the way human rights, the rule of law and democratic values were continually infringed in Belarus." The NGO Human Rights Watch has drawn up a list of Human Rights infringements in Belarus: the presence of political prisoners, lack of independence of the judicial system, arbitrary arrests of opponents to the regime, harassment and intimidation of independent journalists and human rights defenders, torture and poor treatment of prisoners. "These practices, which have worsened over the last two years, have greatly weakened the opposition," indicated Yulia Gorbunova, a Belarus specialist at the NGO.

The only issue in the election was turnout, since most of the opposition forces had called for a boycott of the vote. Half of the electorate was due to turn out to ballot if the election was to be declared valid. According to the President of the Central Electoral Committee, Lidya Iyeremoshina, turnout totalled 74.3% (80% in the region of Vitebsk and 60% in Minsk), i.e. -2.4 points in comparison with the last general election on 28th September 2008. One quarter of the Belarusians (25.9%) voted early i.e. -1 point in comparison with 2008; 109 MPs were elected, a second round will have to be organised in one constituency.

"There was a boycott in almost all of the major towns. The electoral committee is lying quite blatantly since its figures differ radically from those delivered by the observers," (38%) declared Vitaly Rimachevski. The central electoral committee has already rejected the declarations that the OSCE is about to make about the general elections. "The observers see their role not as helping but as a means to create difficult situations and then they refuse to acknowledge that these elections are legitimate," declared Lidya Iyeremoshina.

"Over the last four years the role of the MPs in the outgoing Chamber of Representatives has been limited to approving the choices made by the Belarus presidency. They adopted three laws in four years in office. And for the rest of the time they simply

approved what came from the presidential administration," indicated Anatol Liabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party (opposition). He put a film on-line on "Youtube" calling for a boycott in which citizens could be seen going to pick mushrooms, reading in a park or playing chess. The message was as follows: *"chess is a fair game whilst the elections are unfair."* *"We call on the electorate to ignore and boycott this electoral farce. Honest people cannot take part in pseudo-elections to appoint an imposter parliament,"* added Anatol Liabedzka, who announced the withdrawal of his party's 38 candidates.

The leader of the Movement for Freedom, Aleksander Milinkevich also called for a boycott of the election in constituencies where the opposition was not putting a candidate forward. Originally he was standing in district 109 of Uurushki but the Central

Electoral Committee refused to register him as a candidate saying that 99 of the signatures he had produced were invalid (every candidate has to collate a minimum of 1000 signatures of support to be able to stand).

"Belarus can be compared to a fragment of the USSR that has stopped in time. If Aleksander Lukashenko has succeeded in staying power for nearly 20 years, it is notably because people feel that they are doing better in Belarus than in other former Soviet Republics which have transferred over to a market economy," says historian André Liebich. *"For a long time most of the population supported the authoritarian power. Today the latter hangs on simply by force and intimidation,"* stresses political analyst Valery Karbalevitch.

See all of our publications on our site:
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing director : Pascale JOANNIN

THE ROBERT SCHUMAN FOUNDATION, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organization of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.