In: IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2011, Baden-Baden 2012, pp. 87-105.

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Presidential Election in Belarus in 2010: The Winner Takes It All?

On 19 December 2010, a presidential election took place in Belarus. According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), the incumbent president Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has been in power since 1994, was re-elected with 79.65 per cent of votes.[1] The three opposition candidates who received the largest percentages of votes after Lukashenka were Andrey Sannikau, Yaraslau Ramanchuk, and Ryhor Kostuseu with just 2.43, 1.98, and 1.97 per cent, respectively.[2] The result of the election disappointed the Western observers, who had hoped that the wind of change was blowing and that this time the election in Belarus would be fairer and more democratic. But instead of a democratic shift, the election was followed by extremely harsh repression.

This article takes a closer look at the presidential election and its aftermath. The first section presents the domestic and foreign policy situation before the election, explaining why the Western actors hoped for a more democratic electoral process. Section two presents the election *per se* and the developments that followed, and speculates on the possible reasons behind Lukashenka's harsh repression. The third section considers the closure of the OSCE Office in Minsk as one of the subsequent reactions of the Belarusian authorities to the elections. Section four deals with the international reactions to the election. The last section provides an overview of developments in and around Belarus in the first half 2011 and draws conclusions about the prospects of the Lukashenka regime. While President Lukashenka emerged as the winner from this election, this article shows that his regime is weaker and more vulnerable than ever before.[3] It is primarily the geopolitical games around Belarus that help sustain his system.

Note: The author would like to thank Tatiana Biletskaya and Ina Shakhrai for their very helpful comments on this article. This contribution covers developments up to August 2011.

1 See *Cvedeniya o rezul'tatakh golosovaniya po vyboram Presidenta Respubliki Belarus' 19 dekabrya 2010 goda* [Results of the Belarusian Presidential Election of 19 December 2010] at the official website of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of the Republic of Belarus, at: http://www.rec.gov.by/sites/default/files/pdf/Elections-PRB-sved21.pdf.

2 See ibid.

3 While I realize that there are interest groups that stand behind Lukashenka, the current political regime in Belarus is strongly personalized and centralized. For more details see, e.g., Ethan S. Burger/Viktar Minchuk, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Consolidation of Power, in: Joerg Forbrig/David R. Marples/Pavol Demeš (eds), *Prospects for Democracy in Belarus*, Washington, DC, 2006, pp. 29-36; Rainer Lindner, The Lukashenka Phenomenon, in: Margarita M. Balmaceda/James I. Clem/Lisbeth L. Tarlow (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 77-108; Grigory Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark,* New York 2008.

Before the Election: 2010 – A Wind of Change?

While all elections in Belarus since 1994, when Alyaksandr Lukashenka was first elected president, were characterised by unfair, undemocratic, and repressive practices, in 2010 there was some – futile and unrealistic – hope in the West that this time President Lukashenka would make a greater effort to conduct the election in a way that would reflect the OSCE commitments to a greater extent than before. There were several reasons for these illusions: negative domestic economic developments in Belarus; deteriorating relations between Belarus and the Russian Federation; and Lukashenka's demonstration of interest in rapprochement with the EU.

To start with, by 2010 the economic situation in Belarus had deteriorated. In 2007, Belarus's GDP growth was 8.6 per cent. By 2010 this figure had dropped to 3.8 per cent.[4] Throughout the post-Soviet period, Belarus was a model of economic growth and stability in comparison to many former Soviet republics. While the latter were going through periods of painful reforms and instability and were seeking economic integration with Western markets, the secret of Belarus's so-called "economic miracle" was simple: The country was relying heavily on external subsidies – primarily Russia's cheap energy, but also Western loans and revenues from selling oil products to the West. The oil was bought from Russia at low prices and refined at Belarusian refineries. Instead of implementing difficult and socially painful long-term reforms, Lukashenka was investing the available financial resources in sectors such as agriculture, state-owned industries, and the public sector in general. In addition, a large enforcement apparatus (KGB, militia) was built up, on which the regime relies heavily. All these sectors, which were subsidized by the state, were unprofitable without reforms. These measures were aimed at securing Lukashenka public support in the election. As a result, the population in Belarus was paid salaries and pensions regularly while incomes fell and there were disruptions in social welfare payments in other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries.

Furthermore, in 2006, at the Third All-Belarusian Assembly, an unrealistic and politicized five-year social and economic development programme was adopted. On 30 December 2009, Lukashenka gave a "sacred" promise to continue to implement that plan: "Average wages must reach USD 500 within a year. This figure is sacred!"[5] Nevertheless, analysts were warning that even though the overall economic situation seemed to be stable, it was gradually deteriorating.[6] Thus, Lukashenka was continuing his short-sighted

4 See International Monetary Fund, Republic of Belarus, *Third Review Under the Stand-By Arrangement, and Request for Modification of Performance Criteria*, 11 December 2009, p. 18, at: http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2010/cr1031.pdf.

5 Alyaksandr Lukashenka, cited in: Sergey Nikolyuk, Presidential Election: Sociology of Electoral Stability, in: Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS), *Belarusian Yearbook 2010*, pp. 63-69, here: p. 66.

6 For more information on the development of Belarus's economic policy, see Patricia Brukoff, The Belarusian Economy: Is It Sustainable? In: Balmaceda/Clem/Tarlow (eds),

populist policies while the economy was in reality crying out for austerity measures and reforms.

In 2008, Belarus was hit by the global financial crisis. While the country was not as badly affected as some CIS countries, thanks to its relative economic isolation,[7] its domestic economic situation did worsened. This was due firstly to a decrease in external demand, mostly from Russia and the EU, Belarus's main trading partners, which led to weaker export performance and consequently to the current account deficit; secondly to the reversal of foreign direct investment; and finally to limited access to financial markets.[8] As a consequence, as Fyodor Zhakhov argues: "Since August 2010, the country's foreign trade deficit has expanded much faster than the year before. To make up for that gap, Belarus needs to borrow almost USD 1 billion from foreign sources on a monthly basis."[9] In 2010, Belarus's total foreign debt rose to reach 28,512 million US dollars or 52.2 per cent of national GDP by 1 January 2011.[10] Although some attempts at reform have been made in recent years, for example attempts at attracting foreign direct investment, they were mostly too small to have a real impact on the situation.[11]

One more reason for Belarus's worsening economic situation was the deterioration in relations with the Russian Federation. Elena Korosteleva even goes as far as to argue that rather than by the negative impact of the global financial crisis, Belarus was mainly affected by the negative character of its relations with Russia and the latter's "pragmatization" of its policy towards Belarus.[12] This process started with the election of Vladimir Putin as president in 2000, but since 2006 in particular, the relationship between the two countries has become even more difficult.[13] It was characterized by a

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cited above (Note 3), pp. 109-121; Leonid Zlotnikov, The Belarusian "economic miracle" – illusions and reality, in: Sabine Fischer (ed.), *Back from the cold? The EU and Belarus in 2009*, Chaillot Paper No. 119, Paris 2009, pp. 65-79.

7 Cf. Elena Korosteleva, Belarusian Foreign Policy in a Time of Crisis, in: *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 3-4/2011, pp. 566-586, here: pp. 567-568. For a comparative perspective on Belarus's economic indicators see also Irina Yeremeyeva, *The Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on Belarusian Economy*, Electronic Publications of Pan-European Institute 23/2009, at: http://www.tse.fi/FI/yksikot/erillislaitokset/pei/Documents/Julkaisut/yeremeyeva_economic_crisis_belarusian_economy_2309%20web.pdf.

8 Cf. Julia Korosteleva, The Global Recession and the Belarusian Economy: Revealing Cracks in the Model, in: *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* (3-4/2011, pp. 632-653, here: p. 633.

9 Fyodor Zhakhov, Everything for the Front, Everything for the Victory! Macroeconomics takes rest by the presidential election, in: Belorusskaya Gazeta, 8 November 2010, cited in: Vladimir Rovdo, Presidential Campaign, in: *Belarusian Yearbook 2010*, cited above (Note 5), pp. 52-62, here: p. 55.

10 Cf. Bitter Results of Belarusian "Authoritarian Modernization", 14 March 2011, in: *BelarusDigest*, at: http://belarusdigest.com/2011/03/13/bitter-results-of-belarusian-authoritarian-modernization.

11 Cf. Zlotnikov, cited above (Note 6), pp. 74-75.

12 Cf. Elena Korosteleva, cited above (Note 7), p. 568.

13 On the development of Russian-Belarusian relations, see Dmitri Trenin, Russia's Policy towards Belarus: A Tale of Two Presidents, in: Forbrig/Marples/Demeš (eds), cited above (Note 3); Anders Rudling, Belarus in the Lukashenka Era: National Identity and Relations

series of "micro-wars", which also took place during the pre-election period in 2009-2010. Korosteleva classifies these conflicts in three groups: 1. gas- and oil-related conflicts;[14] 2. transactional conflicts (e.g. "milk", "sugar", "machinery", "electricity" "wars"); 3. political conflicts (e.g. Belarus's non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, non-cooperation within the framework of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization/ CSTO, and temporary resistance to the Single Economic Space/SES, a Russian-led political-economic integration initiative).[15] She concludes that all these conflicts demonstrate the tense political relationship between the two partners and "a proactive role on Russia's part in these conflicts, which it seems to imitate each time it requires Belarus to act on specific issues".[16]

At the same time, Belarus often took provocative steps to demonstrate to Russia its independent and sovereign spirit and to the European Union (EU) its (temporary) preference for closer relations with the West. Thus, even though Russia, as the stronger partner, bears great responsibility for conflicts with its smaller, dependent neighbour, Belarus turned out to be a difficult, often unpredictable, and unreliable partner for Russia. Belarus, like some other post-Soviet countries, expects Russia to subsidize its economy while frequently offering Russia in return only short-term promises for its "subsidies", which it does not fulfil. In addition, economic and political relations are closely interlinked in both countries, and many problems arise from this linkage and behind-the-scenes deals between the governments and interest groups.

In 2009-2010, relations between Russia and Belarus worsened to an unprecedented level. Lukashenka's statements regarding Russian leaders President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin were coloured with negative emotions and critical overtones and vice versa. Most spectacu-

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with Russia, in: Oliver Schmidtke/Serhy Yekelchyk (eds), *Europe's Last Frontier? Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine between Russia and the European Union*, New York 2008, pp. 55-77; Arkady Moshes, Avenue of Independence. Will Russian-Belarusian Relations Take the Ukrainian Path? In: *Russia in Global Affairs* 2/2010; Thomas Ambrosio, The Political Success of Russia-Belarus Relations: Insulating Minsk from a Color Revolution, in: *Demokratizatsiya* 3/2006, pp. 407-434; Patricia Brukoff, Russia's Varied Roles in Belarus, in: Balmaceda/Clem/Tarlow (eds), cited above (Note 3), pp. 222-231; Nelly Bekus, *Struggle over identity: the official and the alternative "Belarusianness"*, Budapest 2010.

14 Belarus depends on Russia for 100 per cent of its gas and 92 per cent of its oil. Cf. Margarita M. Balmaceda, At a crossroads: the Belarusian-Russian energy-political model in crisis, in: Fischer (ed.), cited above (Note 6), pp. 79-91, here: p. 80. Twenty per cent of natural gas (45 billion cubic metres) and 30 per cent of oil (80 million tonnes) are transported via Belarus's territory. Cf. Wojciech Kononczuk, *Difficult Ally: Belarus in Russia's Foreign Policy*, CES Study No. 8, Warsaw, September 2008. See also, on energy relations between Russia and Belarus, Margarita M. Balmaceda, Russian Energy Companies in the New Eastern Europe: the Cases of Ukraine and Belarus, in: Jeronim Perovic/Robert Orttung/Andreas Wenger (eds), *Russian Business Power: The Role of Russian Business in Foreign and Security Relations,* New York 2006, pp. 67-87; Katja Yafimava, *Post-Soviet Russian-Belarussian Relationships. The Role of Gas Transit Pipelines*, Stuttgart 2007.

15 Cf. Elena Korosteleva, cited above (Note 7), pp. 570-571.

16 Ibid., p. 574.

larly, Russia launched a large-scale mass media "war" against Lukashenka: "Kryostny Bat'ka" (also known as "Godbatska"), a four-part critical documentary about the Belarusian president, was shown on the Russian television channel NTV, and news reports covered developments in Belarus and Lukashenka's behaviour in a very negative light. The Belarusian president, in turn, did not miss any opportunity to irritate and anger the Russian leaders. For instance, he gave President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia an interview opportunity on one of the Belarusian TV channels after the Russian-Georgian war, and continuously made very negative and provocative statements in relation to the Russian leadership.[17]

Under these conditions, Lukashenka started to show more of an interest in co-operating with the EU[18] as a whole and with its individual member states, while the EU was showing greater readiness to offer the country some "carrots" in order to promote free elections in Belarus and thereby its democratization.

Relations between the EU and Lukashenka's Belarus have been strained throughout the whole period of his presidency. The EU's closer relations with Belarus are contingent upon the democratization of the country. However, greater democratization could potentially endanger Lukashenka's re-election, his regime, and his power. As a result, the EU's attempts to offer "carrots" to Belarus (more engagement, co-operation) were usually changed to "sticks" (e.g. sanctions after the non-free and non-democratic elections, first introduced in 1997) and again to "carrots". At the same time, the EU continuously took steps to support civil society and the administrative, legal, and institutional reforms in the country.[19] But the extent to which both "carrots" and "sticks" have had the desired effect, if any, is questionable.[20]

17 On this subject see, e.g., Vladimir Kravchenko, Prevratnosti slavyanskoy lyubvi. Dmitry Medvedev i Aleksandr Lukashenko obyasnilis v chuvstvah drug k drugu [The Controversies of a Slavic Love. Dmitry Medvedev and Aleksandr Lukashenko Spoke of Their Feelings for Each Other], in: *Zerkalo Nedeli* No. 37, 9 October 2010.

18 On Belarus-EU relations see Fischer (ed.), cited above (Note 6); Forbrig/Marples/ Demeš (eds), cited above (Note 3); Tobias Hausotter, Die Belarus-Politik der EU. Handlungsspielräume und Politikoptionen, in: *Osteuropa* 7/2007, pp. 57-70; Ernst Piehl/Peter W. Schulze/Heinz Timmermann(eds), *Die offene Flanke der Europäischen Union. Russische Föderation, Belarus, Ukraine und Moldau*, Berlin 2005.

19 See, for instance, *Country Strategy Paper/National Indicative Programme: Belarus 2005-2006*, Adopted by the European Commission on 28 May 2004; European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument: *Belarus Country Strategy Paper 2007-13 and National Indicative Programme 2007-2010*, 2006.

20 For more information, see Giselle Bosse/Elena Korosteleva-Polglase, Changing Belarus? The Limits of EU Governance in Eastern Europe and the Promise of Partnership, in: *Cooperation and Conflict* 2/2009, pp. 143-165; Frank Schimmelfennig/Hanno Scholtz, EU Democracy Promotion in the European Neighbourhood: Political Conditionality, Economic Development and Transnational Exchange, in: *European Union Politics* 2/2008, pp. 187-215; Aser Babajew, *Demokratieförderung zwischen Annäherung und Sanktionen. Der US-amerikanische und deutsche Umgang mit dem Lukashenka-Regime in Belarus* [Democracy Promotion between Rapprochement and Sanctions. US and German Approaches to the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus], HSFK Report Nr. 3/2011, Frankfurt am Main.

In general, the influence of the EU and the USA on Belarus is only minor. The Belarusian market is very limited and has been dominated by Russian enterprises. Russia is the biggest trading partner for Belarus (48.2 per cent). The EU is in second place with 25.1 per cent, followed by Ukraine with 7.2 per cent, China with 3.2 per cent, and Venezuela with 1.8 per cent.[21] According to a recent survey, only about 20 per cent of Belarusians have visited an EU country.[22] As Roger Potocki notes, the flow of information is very restricted, and the EU visa regime (and that of the USA) is also an impediment for civil society. In addition to visa regulations with the longer-established EU members, a visa regime has been introduced with the new EU countries, Belarus's close neighbours.[23] Only 0.8 per cent of Belarus's trade is with the USA.[24] US policy towards Belarus has tended to be passive, characterized by "selective interaction".[25]

From 2008 to 2010, the EU treated Lukashenka as a "potential ally", pursuing the goal of the "geopolitical reorientation of Belarus" away from Russia.[26] The political dialogue between the EU and Belarus improved during this period: In 2008, Belarus and the EU signed an agreement on opening the Office of the European Commission in Minsk. In 2009, Belarus was invited to participate in the EU's European Partnership initiative, and discussions were held on the establishment of an EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue, intensified technical co-operation, and the active participation of Belarus in the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative. High-level official contacts between the EU, its individual member states, and Belarus were intensifying. In particular, several high-ranking EU politicians visited Belarus in October-November 2010 and met with the "last dictator" in Europe; these included Štefan Füle, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy; President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania; and the foreign ministers of Germany and Poland, who promised him "carrots" – loans, financial support, co-operation – if the elections were conducted in a free and fair way. Reuters even cited the opinion of President Grybauskaitė, allegedly expressed by her at an informal meeting: "The victory of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the coming presidential elections will provide for

21 See Belarus' Trade with Main Partners (2010), in: DG Trade Statistics, *Belarus. EU Bilateral Trade and Trade with the World*, 8 June 2011, at: http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113351.pdf.

22 See *Soyuz v tsifrakh. Opros pokazal: belorusy blizhe k Rossii, chem k Evrope* [The Union in Numbers: Poll Shows Belarusians Closer to Russia than Europe], 19 January 2012, at: http://www.rg.ru/2012/01/19/opros.html.

23 Cf. Rodger Potocki, Belarus: A Tale of Two Elections, in: *Journal of Democracy* 3/2011, pp. 49-63, here: p. 51.

24 See Belarus' Trade with Main Partners (2010), cited above (Note 21).

25 More on the USA's Belarus policy in: Andrey Fyodorov, Belarus-U.S.: From Dialogue to Sanctions, in: *Belarusian Yearbook 2010*, cited above (Note 5), pp. 87-93.

26 Grigory Ioffe, Belarus and the West: From Estrangement to Honeymoon, in: *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 2/2011, pp. 217-240, here: p. 217.

Belarus's stability and will weaken Russia's influence in this country."[27] The importance of the EU for Belarus is also seen in Lukashenka's hiring of PR companies based in the EU countries, whose task was to promote a better image for Belarus and demonstrate its liberalization.[28]

As a result, due to the negative economic developments in Belarus, its worsening relations with Russia, and its demonstration of interest in closer relations with the EU, EU politicians hoped that this time the wind of change really was blowing. At the same time, it was unwise to attribute too much importance to Lukashenka's seeming shift towards the EU, because such shifts in Belarus's foreign policy focus from Russia towards the EU and vice versa have happened before.[29] In fact, Lukashenka has often "played" both powers, successfully using these two vectors of his foreign policy to gain benefits from both sides at different times.

The geopolitical competition between Russia and the EU, which became especially prominent during and after EU enlargement in 2004, serves as a favourable condition for Lukashenka's attainment of his political and economic goals. Elena Korosteleva writes in this context: "The coincidence of Russian sanctions with Belarus's (even temporary) rapprochement with the West could only suggest a kind of a 'tug-of-war' between the greater neighbours."[30] She seems to imply that it is Russia which is responding to the EU's policies in a competitive way. As Grigory Ioffe, on the other hand, notes: "Since early 2007, signs that the West is waging a tug-of-war with Russia for Belarus's favours have been […] plentiful […]."[31] No matter who is primarily at fault, both Russia and the EU are to be blamed for this geopolitical competition in relation to Belarus and other post-Soviet countries, whose domestic developments and foreign policies are often treated as a zero-sum game with only one possible winner – either Russia or the West, generally speaking. Russia is afraid that Belarus could move towards the EU, leaving its own integration initiatives behind, which would further weaken Russia's influence in the CIS region. The EU, in turn, is afraid that excessive isolation of Belarus would push it closer towards Russia and distance it from the EU and its neighbourhood initiatives, which would not only put even

27 Citation from: Anton Khodasevich, Lukashenko menyaet vector vneshney politiki [Lukashenka is changing foreign policy vector], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 November 2010, at: http://www.ng.ru/printed/247708 (author's translation).

28 Cf. Gemma Pörzgen, Imagepflege für autoritäre Regimes. PR-Agenturen, der Journalismus und der Fall Belarus [Image Maintenance for Authoritarian Regimes. PR Agencies, Journalism, and the Case of Belarus], in: *Osteuropa* 12/2010, pp. 61-68.

29 On Belarus's foreign policy and identity being divided between Russia and the West, see David Rotman/Natalia Veremeeva, Belarus in the Context of the Neighbourhood Policy: Between the EU and Russia, in: *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 1/2011, pp. 73-98; Schmidtke/Yekelchyk (eds), cited above (Note 13); Stephen White/Ian McAllister/Valentina Feklyunina, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia: East or West? In: *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 3/2010, pp. 344-367.

30 Elena Korosteleva, cited above (Note 7), p. 574.

31 Ioffe, cited above (Note 26), p. 218.

more distance between Belarus and a democratic orientation, but would also strengthen Russia.

As a result, while Belarus is often treated as a pawn in this geopolitical game by its two large neighbours, Lukashenka has learned to use both the EU and Russia and their competition as an effective tool of his policies. To a large extent, it is this competition that has provided for the sustainability of the status quo in Belarus.

Elections and Their Aftermath: From "Democratic Thaw" to "Iron Fist"

One more reason for the optimism in the EU and the USA about the approaching election in Belarus in 2010 was the way the election campaign was developing. But in the end the West was disillusioned, probably more so than after previous elections, by Lukashenka's harshest repression of the opposition to date. Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election mission, admitted his disappointment after the election: "I had very much hoped that this time we would be able to make a more positive assessment. Unfortunately, this is not possible […]."[32]

Indeed, in a way this was the most liberal and democratic election in Belarus in recent years, even though it was still far below the ODIHR/OSCE election standards. There were many signs of the internal "democratic thaw": a total of ten candidates – many more than in previous years[33] – took part in the elections; all the candidates except for Alyaksandr Lukashenka presented their views and programmes in televised debates; mass meetings and different kinds of agitation campaigns and diverse activities were largely allowed;[34] the elections per se – their organization and the voting process – were classified as "good" to "very good" at 94 per cent of polling stations by the OSCE observers.[35] As Lukashenka said himself, "on the eve of the presidential election we have democratized to such an extent that it made not only you, but also me […] sick".[36] At the same time, according to the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, even though "the

32 Citation from: OSCE ODIHR, Press Release, *Belarus still has considerable way to go in meeting OSCE commitments, despite certain improvements, election observers say*, at: http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/74656.

33 To compare: in 2006 there were four candidates, in 2001 three candidates. Information is available at the official website of the CEC of the Republic of Belarus, at: http://www.rec.gov.by/Archive.

34 For more details, see OSCE ODIHR, *Republic of Belarus, Presidential Election, 19 December 2010, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*, Warsaw, 22 February 2011, at: http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/75713 (henceforth: OSCE/ODIHR Final Report).

35 Cf. ibid., p. 20.

36 Lukashenka o vyborakh: stolko bylo "demokratii", chto prosto toshnilo [Lukashenka about the Elections: there was so much democracy that it made sick], *Naviny.By*, 21 April 2011, at: http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2011/04/21/ic_media_video_623_5500 (author's translation).

campaign environment improved compared to recent elections", the campaign was characterized by "a lack of a level playing field between the incumbent and the other nine candidates, and was marked by instances of pressure, harassment and misuse of administrative resources to promote the incumbent".[37]

There were different forecasts with regard to the possible voting results, and contradictory statistics were cited in the mass media. For instance, according to the exit polls, which were conducted by the TNS Ukraine, a market research group registered with the Belarusian CEC, 42 per cent of those polled had voted for the incumbent, while the opposition candidates that came second and third to Lukashenka, Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu and Andrey Sannikau, received 17 and 13 per cent, respectively.[38] According to another exit poll, conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), Alyaksandr Lukashenka had the support of 58 per cent of voters, while Nyaklyaeu and Sannikau had the backing of 9.7 and seven per cent of voters, respectively.[39] These substantial differences between the opinion poll results published during the election period in Belarus demonstrate the lack of transparency and the fact that Belarus remains a closed country in many respects. Nevertheless, in spite of the disagreement among the data, the results of most of the opinion polls conducted by different independent socio-economic research agencies prior to the elections indicate that the percentage of votes attributed to Lukashenka by the CEC – almost 80 per cent – was highly exaggerated.

At the same time, the opinion polls conducted by different socio-economic research centres also showed continuity in that Lukashenka maintained a high degree of trust among the population: 49.7 per cent in September 2010 and an even higher proportion in some previous years, e.g. 60.3 per cent in November 2006.[40] As Sergey Nikolyuk notes, this "steadiness" of opinion among the Belarusian electorate is explained by the fact that the majority lacks "skills for survival without parental care of the state".[41] Lukashenka's populist policies and mass-media propaganda campaigns paid off in the form of his popularity ratings.

37 *OSCE/ODIHR Final Report*, cited above (Note 34), p. 2.

38 Data by TNS Ukraine, cited in: Michael Batiukov, Dictator Lukashenko Declared a War Against People of Belarus on December 19th 2010, 20 December 2010, in: *American Chronicle*, at: http://www.americanchronicle.com/articles/view/206250.

39 See Table 1, Distribution of answers to the question: "Who have you voted for at the presidential election on 19 December?", %, in: IISEPS, *Presidential Elections – 2010: "A Post-Battle Scene"*, at: http://www.iiseps.org/e12-10-01.html.

40 NISEPI, *Dinamika belorusskogo obshchestvennogo mneniya* [IISEPS, Dynamics of Belarusian Public Opinion], answer to the question: "Doveryaete li Vy presidenty Belarusyci?" ["Do you trust the President of Belarus?"], data from 2005 to 2011, at: http://iiseps.org/trend.html. It should be mentioned, however, that throughout 2011 the economic situation deteriorated further, and as a result the level of trust decreased to 35 per cent in June and even 24.5 per cent in September 2011 and only 30 per cent of those polled would have voted for Lukashenka again. See ibid. Lukashenka's repression of the opposition and civil society could have played a role here as well.

41 Nikolyuk, cited above (Note 5), p. 65.

One more reason for Lukashenka's victory is the weakness of the opposition. Its main problem remained its inability to unite, co-ordinate actions, and agree on a single candidate.[42] As Vladimir Rovdo observes: "Leaders of most political parties regarded participation in the presidential election as an opportunity to popularize themselves and increase visibility of organizations they represented."[43] Furthermore, the leaders of the opposition failed to offer alternative models of development. Alyaksandr Sinkevich writes that Belarusian society only cares about how to "consume, consume, and consume".[44] As Matthew Rojanski notes: "[…] Belarusian society itself is not prepared to participate in, support, and sustain effective democratic governance", and even if Lukashenka were removed, the Belarusians would find themselves "ruled by an equally authoritarian successor in the end".[45] Or, in the words of Balázs Jarábik: "[…] Belarus does not have a problem because it has Lukashenka as a president; Belarus has Lukashenka because the country itself has a problem."[46]

Even though these assessments are true, a few important reservations have to be made. In particular, as the opinion polls prior to the election demonstrated, the opposition candidates were able to attract a significant number of voters despite "restricted opportunities for effective campaigning" and "harassment and misuse of administrative resources to promote the incumbent".[47] Thus the society is awakening, and this is a very important change. As has been mentioned, the Belarusian economy had become more vulnerable by 2010. If the economic situation in Belarus continues to worsen, this awakening will be even stronger. Furthermore, even though the mass media are state-controlled, more people are accessing alternative information via the internet: The number of internet users has increased from 11,400 in 2006 to 1.8 million in January 2011.[48] Under the conditions of Belarus's current political system, it was impossible to expect free and fair elections that the opposition candidates would really have had a chance of winning. As a result, they were pursuing minimalist goals (making themselves known both at home and

42 On the state of the opposition in Belarus, see David R. Marples/Uladzimir Padhol, The Opposition in Belarus: History, Potential, and Perspectives, in: Balmaceda//Clem/Tarlow (eds), cited above (Note 3), pp. 55-75; Hans-Georg Wieck: Democratic Civil Society – An Alternative to the Autocratic Lukashenko Regime in Belarus, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2002*, Baden-Baden 2003, pp. 219-235; Astrid Sahm, Civil society and mass media in Belarus, in: Fischer (ed.), cited above (Note 6), pp. 49-64; Vitali Silitski, Belarus – a country in transition? The State, elections, and the opposition, in: ibid., pp. 25-36.

43 Rovdo, cited above (Note 9), p. 60.

44 Alyaksandr Sinkevich, *Sumerki Epohi. Belorusskaya Shahmatnaya Doska* [The Twilight of the Epoche. The Belarusian Chessboard], 4 August 2011, at: http://naviny.by/rubrics/opinion/2011/08/04/ic_articles_410_174625.

45 Matthew Rojansky, *Belarus: No Easy Answers, Commentary,* 16 May 2011, at: http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/05/16/belarus-no-easy-answers/30g3.

46 Balázs Jarábik, *Belarus beyond sanctions*, FRIDE Policy Brief No. 72, April 2011, p. 1.

47 *OSCE/ODIHR Final Report*, cited above (Note 34), p. 2.

48 Cf. Potocki, cited above (Note 23), p. 57.

abroad and getting more support) rather than the maximalist aim (winning the election). Thus, the minimalist goals were achieved.

Furthermore, in spite of the weaknesses of the opposition and civil society in general, the opposition candidates did manage to gather thousands of supporters in central Minsk – in Oktyabrskaya Square – to protest against an allegedly fraudulent election after the polls had closed on 19 December.[49] In 2001 and 2006, the opposition had also tried to mobilize mass street protests against the alleged falsification of the elections, but without much success.[50]

The protesters, however, lacked both clear goals and a collective vision when they gathered. Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu was not able to reach the square, as he was severely beaten up on the way. Five candidates and their supporters then moved to Nezavisimosti Square, where the parliament and the CEC are located. Apparently they hoped to negotiate with the authorities and exert influence on the CEC to count the votes fairly. While the protests were peaceful at first, it is not ultimately clear what happened next. There are various speculations about how events developed. On the one hand, some participants in the protests and observers (journalists) report that there was a small group of undercover instigators among the protesters. They started to storm the building where the CEC was working. This would also imply that it was Lukashenka and interest groups behind him who organized this attempted "coup d'état" in order to suppress or get rid of the opposition altogether. Other observers and participants in the events report that it was a small group of protesters who initiated violent action and that some candidates (Andrey Sannikau in particular) expressed their support for the idea of storming the government building. There is evidence – photos and videos – to support both viewpoints.

As a consequence, the protests were dispersed violently by OMON (the riot police), who used disproportionate force indiscriminately against peaceful demonstrators and observers as well as violent protestors. On 20 December, President Lukashenka announced that 639 people had been arrested, and confirmed that opposition candidates were interrogated in the KGB detention facilities.[51] Some of the detained activists were sentenced to pay administrative fines of various amounts or were incarcerated for ten to 15 days; some opposition presidential candidates were sentenced to five to six years' impris-

49 The description of these events is based primarily on the information available in: *OSCE/ODIHR Final Report*, cited above (Note 34), section XVI on "Post-Election Developments", pp. 22-24; AFN, *Spetsoperatsiya "Ploshchad'"* [Special Operation "Square"], 22 December 2010, at: http://afn.by/news/i/146025; Dzianis Melyantsou, *Square 2010: Scenario and Preliminary Results*, 13 January 2011, at: http://www.belinstitute.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=845%3Anone&catid=11%3Apolitics&Itemid=28&lang=en.

50 Cf. Silitski, cited above (Note 42), p. 27.

51 Cf. *20 dekabrya Aleksandr Lukashenko provel press-konferentsiyu dlya predstavitelei otechestvennykh i zarubezhnykh SMI* [On 19 December, Alexandr Lukashenko held a press conference for representatives of local and foreign media], Ofitsial'nyi Internet-Portal Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus' [Official internet portal of the President of Belarus], 20 December 2010, at: http://president.gov.by/press104951.html#doc.

onment.[52] The administrative courts worked in closed sessions in many cases, and there was a great deal of evidence that their decisions were neither fair nor free. Some of those arrested claimed that they were tortured.[53] A number of civil society activists have fled the country.

Because Lukashenka's government did not allow the OSCE fact-finding mission or any other international investigation of the events, it is difficult to draw a final conclusion on what exactly happened, and why the events developed from a peaceful meeting into a violent conflict. Nevertheless, what matters is the fact of the authorities' harsh and disproportionate reaction and repression of the opposition and civil society, which continued after the election.

What were the reasons for such a harsh reaction on the part of the regime? There are several opinions on this point.[54] In all likelihood, the reaction was predetermined by a number of factors. Most importantly, Lukashenka's regime became more vulnerable under the conditions of a worsening economy and more pragmatic policies on the part of Russia. In addition, this feeling of vulnerability might have been strengthened by the division among the ruling elites, that is between Belarusian *"siloviki"* and more liberal pragmatic forces. One sign of this could be the following sequence: on 24 December, the CEC announced the official results of the election, but on 27 December, the government resigned, and then, as early as 28 December, Lukashenka appointed a new prime minister and allocated other important posts.[55] Experts long ago pointed to the wrangling inside the ruling elite.[56] Besides, as already mentioned, society started to awaken, and the opposition was able for the first time to mobilize crowds for a meeting in central Minsk; this must have reminded Lukashenka of the threat to his regime represented by a potential "colour revolution". Lukashenka might have been concerned about the support the West was giving to the opposition in terms of funding, and "his aim may have been to create a situation that 'forced' him to react and gave him an excuse to attack the opposition".[57] Finally, foreign-policy and geopolitical grounds have played their part as well. Fyodor Lukyanov assumes that Lukashenka deliberately used "shock tactics" in order to revive Moscow's interest in Minsk: If Russia's interest grows, the EU – aiming to

52 On the fate of all nine opposition presidential candidates after the elections, see Ilya Azar, Nadezhda umerla [The hope has died], *Lenta.ru*, 28 September 2011, at: http://lenta.ru/articles/2011/05/27/statkevich/_Printed.htm.

53 See e.g. Amnesty International, *Belarus: Further information: Opposition activist tortured in detention*, at: http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR49/015/2010/en.

54 Cf. e.g. Joerg Forbrig/Rainer Lindner/David Marples/Arkady Moshes/Astrid Sahm, Der Fall Belarus. Analysen, Interpretationen, Konsequenzen, in: *Osteuropa* 12/2010, pp. 5-21.

55 Cf. Sidorskogo "ushli" po politicheskim prichinam [Sidorski "had to go" for political reasons], in: *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, 29 December 2010, at: http://bdg.by/news/politics/13340.html.

56 Cf. Andrei Liakhovich, Belarusian elites – change and authoritarian rule, in: Fischer (ed.), cited above (Note 6), pp. 37-48.

57 Jarábik, cited above (Note 46), p. 3.

prevent Belarus from coming under full Russian control – will come to Belarus to search for a compromise.[58]

In summary, contrary to Western hopes of a more democratic Belarus, Lukashenka ended the apparent "democratic thaw" by applying the "iron fist" with massive human rights violations and policies of intimidation and repression. As a consequence, Lukashenka got rid of the likely main opposition representatives for years to come and tightened the screws in an attempt to strengthen his regime. Nevertheless, if the earlier elections demonstrated the regime's strength and sustainability, "the events following the 2010 contest have exposed that same regime's vulnerability and precarious support today".[59]

The Closure of the OSCE Office in Minsk

One more subsequent reaction of the authorities was the closure of the OSCE Office in Minsk. The OSCE had been present in the country since 1998, first as the Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) established on the initiative of the OSCE in response to Lukashenka's dissolution of parliament (13th Verkhovny Soviet [Supreme Council]), which had been elected in a free and democratic way, and its replacement by a new hand-picked one. On 31 December 2001 the AMG was closed, and the OSCE Office in Minsk was established in its place from 1 January 2002 onwards with a new mandate.

The OSCE-Belarus relationship has not been easy.[60] There were shifts from more positive and co-operative to more negative tactics in Belarus's policy towards the OSCE field presences. At times, the Belarusian government was overloading the OSCE Office with project proposals, trying to focus the OSCE activities on the issues which were of interest to the Belarusian government and away from the problems in the area of democracy and human rights. Overall, the Belarusian government was trying to establish a controlling and veto power over the activities of the OSCE presences in the country, which are independent institutions and act on the basis of their mandates. To some extent, the shifts in Belarus's policy towards the OSCE field presences and the OSCE as a whole also reflect the shifts in Belarus's policy towards the West in general.

The mandate of the OSCE Office in Minsk was to be renewed annually by all 56 OSCE participating States. On 31 December 2010, the current man-

58 Fydor Lukyanov, Master of Intrigue, RIA Novosti, 13 January 2011, in: David Johnson's *Russia List* 9/2011.

59 Potocki, cited above (Note 23), p. 50.

60 Cf. Eberhard Heyken, Difficult relations: The OSCE and Belarus, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2006*, Baden-Baden 2007, pp. 141-152; Uta Zapf, Relations Running Hot and Cold: The Reopened OSCE Mission in Minsk and Its Political Prospects, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2003*, Baden-Baden 2004, pp. 139-148.

date expired but Belarus refused to prolong it. It explained its decision as follows: "[…] this is a conscious decision pre-determined by the lack of objective grounds for the OSCE Mission to stay in Belarus […] The assessment of the results of the Minsk-based OSCE Office shows that the Office's mandate has been fulfilled. As the Latvian, Estonian and Georgian experience indicates, where, in the recent years, similar field missions of the OSCE were closed by those countries following a period of their work, the OSCE project activities may be successfully and efficiently implemented in direct liaison with the OSCE institutions."[61]

The OSCE presences focused on the problems in the human dimension (human rights, democracy), but have also dealt with environmental and economic issues (since 2002). The OSCE's critical election assessments also played an important part in triggering the so-called "colour revolutions" in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine. Under the conditions of the ongoing harsh repressions and the vulnerable socio-economic situation, the Lukashenka government might have been aiming to get rid of one more potential source of destabilization for the current regime in Belarus by closing the OSCE Office. Furthermore, this step also helps the regime to cut off one more source of external support to the opposition and civil society, making them weaker.

In general, there are many discussions within the OSCE about its field operations, their effectiveness, and their future.[62] OSCE field missions are indeed often perceived as stigmas and as a sign that something is wrong with this or that state, not only by the CIS participating States of the OSCE, but also by Western countries. The question is whether the Western states would turn to the OSCE themselves if something went wrong there. Those states which have closed the OSCE field presences on their own territories have perceived this development as something normal and necessary to demonstrate that they have solved many problems that the OSCE presences were tackling and that they could proceed further on these issues by themselves. Even in the case of the Baltic states, it could be questioned whether the OSCE field presences have really completed their missions and whether all problems were solved. But in the case of Belarus, the OSCE Office was closed just when the domestic situation was acute and problems – especially in the areas of human rights, rule of law, and democracy – were substantial, when the weak civil society was in great need of international support, and unbiased "eyes and ears" were needed to clarify what had happened.

Since closing the OSCE Office in Minsk, Belarus has continued to co-operate both with the OSCE directly and within its framework. Between the closure of the OSCE Office and May 2011, the Belarusian government submitted almost 40 project proposals on further co-operation with the OSCE,

61 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, *Press Secretary Andrei Savinykh comments on Belarus decision not to extend the mandate of the Minsk-based OSCE office*, at: http://www.mfa.gov.by/en/press/news_mfa/ffbca02585447acc.html.

62 For more information, see Frank Evers, *Appropriate Ways of Developing OSCE Field Activities*, CORE Working Paper 22, Hamburg, April 2011.

thus demonstrating Belarus's further readiness to co-operate with the Organization as a whole. It is unclear, however, how this large number of projects is supposed to be implemented without an OSCE presence in the country.

International Reactions

This section focuses on international reactions to the election as well as subsequent events. It starts with Western reactions and then describes the position of the Russian Federation. To begin with, according to the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, "The presidential election indicated that Belarus has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic election."[63] The final report also took a very critical stance on the dispersion of the opposition meeting and the arrests, which also "undermined confidence in the election".[64] The OSCE's official response through its Chairmanship to the closure of the OSCE Office in Minsk was one of "deep regret" and hope of renewing the work of the Organization's field presence in the country after holding consultations with the Belarusian government.[65] Representatives of many Western governments expressed their regret and disappointment at this step from Belarus because "the mandate of the mission is not completed, as the OSCE's critical assessment of the presidential elections indicates".[66]

Neither the USA nor the EU recognized the results of the election, and on 21 January 2011, the day of Lukashenka's inauguration, ambassadors from the EU and the USA left the country.[67] In a joint statement, Catherine Ashton and Hillary Clinton concluded: "Taken together, the elections and their aftermath represent an unfortunate step backwards in the development of democratic governance and respect for human rights in Belarus."[68] In addition, foreign ministers from several EU countries – Carl Bildt, Karel Schwarzenberg, Radek Sikorski, and Guido Westerwelle – jointly issued a highly critical statement: "There can be no business-as-usual between the European Union and Belarus' president […] after what has happened since

63 *OSCE/ODIHR Final Report*, cited above (Note 34), p.1.
64 Ibid.
65 Cf. OSCE Chairmanship, Press Release, *OSCE Chairmanship starts consultations on continuing OSCE's work in Belarus*, Vilnius, 3 January 2011, at: http://www.osce.org/cio/74824.
66 *Statement by the Spokespersons of Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative, and Hillary Rodham Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State*, European Union, Brussels, 4 January 2011, A 003/11, at: http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/statements_belarus/spanish_statement_on_belarus_/index_en.htm.
67 Cf. Lukashenko i prestolonasledniki [Lukashenko and the heirs to the throne], *gazeta.ru*, 21 January 2011, at: http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2011/01/21_a_3499966.shtml.
68 *Joint Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on the post-Presidential Elections situation in Belarus*, Brussels, 23 December 2010, A 276/10, at: http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118697.pdf.

the presidential election […]. Continued positive engagement with Mr. Lukashenko at the moment seems to be a waste of time and money."[69] The EU discussed a range of very strict sanctions to be applied in relation to Belarus, although the list of sanctions finally adopted in 2011 looks much more modest.[70] The EU's position vacillates between the desire to punish the Lukashenka regime and him personally and support civil society, and the fear that the harsh sanctions could push Lukashenka closer to Russia. As a result, the EU is at a loss, not knowing how to influence Lukashenka.[71]

The position of the Russian Federation on the elections in Belarus has been controversial. According to the CIS election observers, "[…] these elections were transparent and met the requirements of the election legislation and common democratic norms".[72] The CIS recognized the elections as legitimate: "Our mission has not uncovered facts that would shed doubt on the legitimacy of these elections."[73] Russian president Dmitry Medvedev congratulated Lukashenka on his re-election.[74]

At the same time, the Russian mass media, even state-controlled channels, reported critically on the post-election events in Belarus. Even more importantly, high-level Russian officials have been emphasizing that the Russian interpretation of events in Belarus corresponds to that of the West. Arkady Dvorkovich from the Russian Presidential Administration made a clear statement that it was the presidential election that had led Belarus into the period of instability, while Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov condemned the sentences given to opposition activists.[75] Lavrov also stated: "What happened after the closure of the polls is unacceptable […] And Russia has spoken against it […] because the wave of arrests in general cannot but arouse appropriate emotions".[76] Thus, in general, Russia took a more critical position on the elections in Belarus and their aftermath than is usually the

69 Carl Bildt/Karel Schwarzenberg/Radek Sikorski/Guido Westerwelle, Lukashenka the Loser, in: *The New York Times*, 23 December 2010, at: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/24/opinion/24iht-edbildt24.html.

70 Compare *European Parliament Resolution of 20 January 2011 on the Situation in Belarus*, 21 January 2011, at: http://democraticbelarus.eu/node/11167, with *European Commission – Restrictive measures, European Union, Restrictive measures (sanctions) in force*, as of 16 October 2011, at: http://eeas.europa.eu/cfsp/sanctions/docs/measures_en.pdf.

71 Even those visa sanctions on which the EU agreed show "how little the EU knows about Belarus", as dozens of officials named on the list no longer hold their positions, were not responsible for the events, and one has even died. Cf. Jarábik, cited above (Note 46), p. 2.

72 CIS Executive Secretary Sergei Lebedev, cited in: CIS, OSCE observers say Belarus elections democratic, *RIA Novosti,* 20 December 2010, at: http://en.rian.ru/world/20101220/161854376.html.

73 CIS Executive Secretary Sergei Lebedev, cited in: ibid.

74 See Medvedev ofitsialno pozdravil Lukashenko s pobedoi [Medvedev officially congratulates Lukashenko on victory], *Lenta.ru*, 25 December 2010, at: http://lenta.ru/news/2010/12/25/okwin/.

75 Cf. Dzianis Melyantsou (ed.), *Belarus' Foreign Policy Index*, April-May 2011, p. 7, at: http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/BISS_Int_Monit_2_2011_en.pdf.

76 Sergei Lavrov, cited in: Russia does not support sanctions against Belarus but considers massive post-election arrests unacceptable, foreign minister says, in: *Belarus News*, 2 February 2011, at: http://naviny.by/rubrics/english/2011/02/02/ic_news_259_360623/.

case with elections in the CIS countries, which – contrary to OSCE/ODIHR reports – CIS observers and Russian official representatives claim are free and fair. At the same time, Russia still needs Belarus as a partner and transit country for its energy to the West. Furthermore, Russia relies on Belarus in its SES project. On 21 December 2010 Belarus ratified 18 documents on the formation of the SES, which includes customs union.[77] All in all, Russia tried to kill two birds with one stone: On the one hand, it made a deferential gesture to the West by criticizing the Belarusian elections; at the same time, it courted Lukashenka by legitimizing his regime, because Russia does not want to push Belarus towards the EU.

As far as the closure of the OSCE Office in Minsk is concerned, the Russian Federation itself closed the OSCE Assistance Group that was working in Chechnya in 1995-2002. This is why its position on this issue was that one should not over-dramatize the closure of the OSCE Office. The Russian Federation, together with Belarus and some other CIS countries, has criticized the OSCE presences for allegedly turning into a mechanism of control over the host state.[78] Thus, Russia in general supported the decision of the Belarusian government.[79]

To sum up, both Russia and the Western actors lack clear strategies in relation to Belarus. They simply do not know what to do about this country, and their policies depend not only on how the situation develops in Belarus per se, but also on each other's actions and the state of their bilateral relations.

Outlook

This section presents an overview of how the situation in Belarus developed in 2011 and considers the prospects of the Lukashenka regime. It also summarizes the main findings of this contribution. Belarus remains a very unpredictable country and a mystery. In recent years, many analysts have been stating that Lukashenka's room for manoeuvre in foreign policy "has shrunk dramatically".[80] His scope for manoeuvre has shrunk even more in 2011 due

77 Cf. Belarus ratifies single economic space documents, in: *The Voice of Russia*, 21 December 2010, at: http://english.ruvr.ru/2010/12/21/37399078.html.

78 See Permanent Delegations of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia, *Food-for-Thought Paper, On the Issue of Reform of the OSCE Field Activities,* PC.DEL/986/03, 4 September 2003; Permanent Delegations of Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, *Food-for-Thought Paper for the Corfu Process on Enhancing Effectiveness of the OSCE Field Operations*, PC.DEL/406/10/Corr.3, 2 July 2010. For more information, see Evers, cited above (Note 62).

79 This was also the case when 14 participating States tried to invoke the "Moscow Mechanism" in relation to Belarus, while the Russian Federation questioned its necessity. See Briefing by Alexei Sazonov, Deputy Director of the Press and Information Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 14 April 2011.

80 Grzegorz Gromadzki, Belarusian foreign policy – change or continuity? In: Fischer (ed.), cited above (Note 6), pp. 93-104, here: p. 102.

to the economic crisis, which continued to intensify, and as a result of the deterioration of relations with both Russia and the West. Even if Lukashenka tries to project power and confidence through his actions, the elections and their aftermath signify the weakness and vulnerability of his regime.

Both the Russian Federation and the Western actors adopted a more careful and pragmatic policy towards Belarus. They do not trust Lukashenka. While the Western countries have lost their last illusions regarding a more democratic Belarus under Lukashenka, it will be very difficult for Russian leaders to forget all the provocative statements Lukashenka made regarding them personally, and they know that he can cheat them again whenever he wants. Strict conditions apply not only to IMF loans, but also to those from Russia (via EURASEC), and the funding Belarus has received so far or could receive in the future via these two or other international channels will hardly help it to solve the economic crisis it is experiencing. All it does is patch the holes in the state budget, preventing the situation from escalating further in the short term. The myth of the Belarusian "economic miracle" has burst like a soap bubble. The question is how long Lukashenka will be able to sustain his regime nonetheless.

So far, Lukashenka has used his "traditional" means of sustaining his regime. While repression continued in 2011, he started to use political prisoners in his relations with the EU, trying to compel the latter to mitigate sanctions against him personally and the representatives of the ruling elites behind him. He is again trying to play the Russian card, hoping that the EU would not want Russia's influence over Belarus and in the post-Soviet space to strengthen. He is hoping to receive financial infusions from the West into the economy and thus into strengthening the political system. The Belarusian economy needs modernization, and in this sense it needs the EU more than Russia, as Russia itself looks to the EU for support in this area. The EU faces a challenge as it seeks to support civil society and punish Lukashenka and those behind him, but it does not know how to do this effectively in relation to a country that does not aspire to membership or close integration with it. Furthermore, Russia's policies have often counterbalanced the EU's efforts in the past.

In parallel to this policy towards the EU, Lukashenka started to make concessions to Russia, agreeing to take further steps in its integration initiatives (the customs union and SES integration in general). At the same time, Russia is now more concerned with its own domestic political developments and the parliamentary and presidential elections. It does not need destabilization on its borders, so it will probably continue to support Belarus, but only to the extent of not allowing the collapse of the regime. After the alternative transit energy routes – the Nord Stream and Baltic Pipeline System 2 (BTS-2) projects – become operational in 2011, Russia will be less dependent on Belarus in terms of energy. As a consequence, Lukashenka will lose one of his instruments for influencing Russia, and this will be one more trump card

in Russian policy towards Belarus. Nevertheless, Russia still needs Belarus's co-operation on the SES alongside other economic, political, and security issues, and it will therefore continue to support and legitimize Lukashenka's regime, but to a lesser – absolutely necessary and nothing more – extent. Much will also depend on the concessions Lukashenka is ready to make.

Meanwhile, Lukashenka is also trying to intensify co-operation with other international actors, in particular China, Venezuela, and some Middle East countries, who – in contrast to the EU – do not care about the state of Belarus's democracy. However, those states are pragmatic in their economic relationships. They will not subsidize Belarus's economy and Lukashenka's political regime for free. The problem is that Belarus has few lucrative investment opportunities to offer these countries, and this is why their interest in Belarus will remain marginal.

Even if Lukashenka's regime falls, and new government becomes possible, the question of what will change in the country remains. As the experience from neighbouring countries such as Ukraine demonstrates, even achievements of the democracy-oriented and pro-Western "orange revolution" have not brought many results: This can be attributed primarily to the inability of the former opposition leaders to unite, co-ordinate action, and co-operate. This problem exists in relation to Belarus as well.

In summary, Lukashenka is the official victor of the elections, and he is acting in a winner-takes-all manner, repressing the opposition and playing with Russia and the West. Nevertheless, the external factors influencing his domestic and foreign policies, as well as the domestic political and economic situation, have changed significantly. This means that Lukashenka's most recent victory is much less convincing than those of previous years, and consequently the status quo in Belarus no longer seems to be so stable and unchangeable.

Neither the Russian Federation nor the Western actors know what to do about Belarus. Neither does Lukashenka himself have a clear strategy for domestic and foreign policies; instead, he continues to gamble. As long as there is geopolitical competition between Russia and the West, his tactics of playing the East against the West have a chance of succeeding in the future as well, in spite of existing vulnerabilities.