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**REPORT ON
THE BELARUSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

**June 23, 1994
and
July 10, 1994**

**A Report Prepared by the Staff
of the
U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
July 1994**

This report is based on a Helsinki Commission staff delegation visit to Belarus to observe the first round, on June 23, 1994, of the presidential election.

In addition to Minsk, the capital, Commission Senior Advisor David Evans and Staff Advisor John Finerty observed the election in the Vitebsk region and in several smaller towns in the northwest and south of Minsk region. Commission staff also met with party representatives, election officials, Belarusian political activists and media representatives.

The Helsinki Commission appreciates the support and assistance provided by Charge d'Affairs George Kroll and the staff of the U.S. Embassy in Minsk.

Sources of background information on the election include: Radio Free Europe Daily Reports and Research Reports; the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS); written materials or interviews with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the CSCE Parliamentary Assembly; and numerous domestic and foreign press sources.

SUMMARY

On June 23, 1994 Belarus held its first multi-party presidential elections since achieving independence in August 1991, with a runoff between the two highest votergetters on on July 10. The victor, by an unexpected and large margin, was Aleksandr Lukashenka, a former Communist Party official and former head of the parliament's "Anti-Corruption Committee."

The results indicated deep dissatisfaction with what many saw as the corrupt, incompetent and grasping administration of Prime Minister Vyacheslau Kebich, who had been expected by most observers to emerge victorious.

The election took place against the backdrop of Belarus' planned economic union with Russia, and what some claimed would be the eventual loss of Belarusian statehood. In January 1994, Belarus' moderate but pro-statehood president, Stanislaus Shushkevich had been removed from his position by conservative forces closely associated with Moscow.

- While the winner, Aleksandr Lukashenka, has been strongly pro-Russian, his subsequent appointments and policies have slowed down the momentum for economic union between Belarus and Russia.

- The Commission believes the elections were generally conducted in conformance with international practices and that the results reflect the freely expressed will of the electorate. The Commission recommends removing any obstacles, such as the two-day notification regulation, to reasonable access by observers to polling stations.

- Immediately after the elections, the Belarusian government issued a report containing positive appraisals by international experts. Nevertheless, the Belarus Prosecutors office subsequently charged that "...there were numerous facts of ignoring the law during the election campaign and on the election day...", and that urgent changes in the relevant legislation were necessary.

- The rejection by Belrusian voters of the old line *nomenklatura* leadership, even for an unknown quality like Lukashenka, appears to provide a small, first step toward more pluralistic democracy and a free market system, especially in view of Lukashenka's immediate appointments and policies following his election

BACKGROUND

Belarus, with an area of over 80,000 square miles, is located in east central Europe, between Latvia, Lithuania and Poland on the West and Northwest, with Russia on the East and Northeast, and Ukraine to the South. Of the approximately 10.3 million population, 78 percent are Belarusian, 13 percent Russian, 4 percent Polish, and 3 percent Ukrainian. A small Lithuanian population is concentrated near the Lithuanian border. Part of the Russian Empire since the second and third partitions of Poland in the latter half of the 18th century, Belarus enjoyed brief independence following the Bolshevik revolution. In November 1918, the Red Army entered Minsk and established the Belarussian SSR. During the Cold War era, Belarus was a quiescent, almost completely Russified Soviet republic.

Popular discontent was stirred up in 1986 by the radioactive winds of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster in neighboring Ukraine and Moscow's incompetence in dealing with the crisis. A year later, exposure of the mass graves of Stalin's victims at Kuropaty added to anti-Moscow feelings. Unexpected and uncharacteristic mass strikes and public protests met President Gorbachev's April 1991 prices increases -- only a month after the March 1991 "Referendum on the Union," in which 83 percent of Belarusian voters favored preservation of the USSR.

After the abortive coup attempt in Moscow, independence was declared on August 25, 1991 by the Belarus Supreme Soviet. Soon after the declaration of independence, Belarus declared its intention to become a non-nuclear state. The removal of Soviet era SS-25s from its soil under the provisions of the START agreement is proceeding according to schedule

and it is expected that the missiles will be completely removed by 1998. During his January 1994 visit to Minsk, President Clinton praised Belarus' denuclearization progress and pledged additional U.S. assistance for the program.

Recent Political Events

The Supreme Soviet was elected in March 1990 and is dominated by former Communist Party *apparatchiks* grouped around the status quo "Belarus" faction. About 35 deputies from the reform-oriented Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), led by Zenon Pozniak, and perhaps 50-60 BPF sympathizers comprise the opposition. In the Spring of 1992, a successful petition drive (approximately 447,000 signatures, 30,000 over the legal requirement) led by the Popular Front called for new parliamentary elections. The Supreme Soviet ignored the appeal, but grudgingly agreed to move the elections up a year to March 1994 from the projected 1995 date. In the fall of 1993, threatened mass demonstrations by labor unions caused an alarmed parliament to call in army troops and equipment to protect the parliament building.

The moderate chairman of the Supreme Soviet, physicist Stanislau Shushkevich, tried to walk a narrow line between economic reform and independent statehood on one side, and appeasing the pro-Russian, collectivist-oriented parliamentary majority on the other. In following this policy, Shushkevich managed to estrange himself from both the Popular Front and the old guard. After resisting two previous unsuccessful attempts, he was removed from his chairmanship by the parliament in January 1994. Thereupon, the government of Prime Minister Vyacheslau Kebich proceeded to move forward with its projected "economic

union" with Russia.

Meanwhile, most of the press remained subsidized by the government, or at the very least printed on state-run printing facilities; moreover, when opposition media has become too critical, the government has attempted to shut them down, as occurred in June 1994 with the newspaper *Svoboda* and two popular radio programs.

In late May 1994, financier George Soros announced that he was reducing philanthropic donations to Belarus because Belarus "was failing to implement economic and democratic reforms." In addition, the local Minsk branch of the Soros Foundation, a non-partisan organization that promotes development of an open society, had become a target of suspicion by government officials.

RUNUP TO THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Despite the conservative policies of the parliament and government, popular opinion was moving against the old guard. The dismissal of Shushkevich energized reform elements to organize strike committees throughout Belarus and a demonstration in Minsk in February 1994 to demand the government's resignation and new parliamentary elections. Public discontent with the crumbling economy and general desire for "things to get better" -- as typified by the petition drive for new parliamentary elections -- made it difficult for the Soviet-era Supreme Soviet to delay a presidential election, when neighboring Ukraine, for instance, was already planning its second presidential election since independence. On March 1, 1994 parliament voted, as a provision of the draft constitution, to create the post of president, with the election to be held no later than June 26, 1994. The constitution itself

passed by a margin of four votes in the parliament two weeks later.

Nevertheless, Prime Minister Kebich, seemingly opposed only by a minority-faction Popular Front and marginalized Shushkevich supporters, appeared to have a good chance to secure nationwide approval of his leadership. For all the growing popular discontent, most observers expected that the combined weight of *nomenklatura* influence, old-line kolkhoz and factory leadership of a basically conservative populace, and the trend in post-Soviet states toward turning ex-communists back into office, would probably carry the day for the *ancien regime*. In this political deck, however, there was a wild card that few could have foreseen as little as six months earlier -- a populist, anti-corruption crusader with "simple solutions to complex problems."

THE CANDIDATES

Nineteen persons had announced their intention to run, but ultimately only six candidates qualified for the ballot: The election law stipulated that a candidate must be a citizen of Belarus 35 years of age or older, with ten years residence in Belarus.

-- Prime Minister Vyacheslau Kebich, who relied on his strength in the "apparat," ran a campaign promoting his leadership on the domestic and international front, and attempted to stay above the fray. As election day approached, polls indicated that Kebich's popularity had declined in response to his heavy-handed saturation of the media, and he was running neck-and-neck with Alexandr Lukashenka.

-- Former Supreme Soviet chairman Stanislau Shushkevich, who stressed his reliance on educated technocrats in a plan to extricate Belarus from its economic doldrums. He

emphasized his role in achieving Belarusian independence and accomplishing what he could in the face of neo-communist opposition in the Supreme Soviet: "I did more than I could, but not as much as I wanted."

-- Aleksandr Lukashenka, former head of the parliament's anti-corruption committee and the only member of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet to vote against the December 1991 Belovezhsk agreement ending the Soviet Union and creating the Commonwealth of Independent States. Lukashenka, whose anti-corruption crusade was instrumental in the removal of Shushkevich from the chairmanship of the Supreme Soviet, played a strong populist card, castigating the "mafia" and speculators, and pledging to arrest corrupt government officials and legislators.

-- Zenon Pozniak, chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front. Pozniak, the strongest advocate of free-market economics and Belarusian cultural and linguistic primacy, fervently rejected economic and cultural *entente* with Russia, and was accused by his enemies of being too nationalistic. Toward the end of the campaign, Pozniak tempered his approach and issued a position paper, "What Zenon will not do," seeking to reassure non-Belarusians about his policies if elected.

-- Vasil Novikau, chairman of the Belarusian Communist Party. Novikau ran on an old-style collectivist platform extolling the virtues of the communist past and promised, among other things, to reverse the already slow-paced voucher privatization taking place in Belarus.

-- Aleksandr Dubko, chairman of the Union of Collective Farms. Dubko also appealed to collectivist values, and presented himself as a friend and supporter of rural agrarian interests and the peasantry.

ISSUES

The issues in the Belarusian presidential campaign essentially came down to "Quo vadis, Belarus?" Two candidates, Pozniak and Shushkevich, stood for Belarusian statehood and reduced state control of the economy, with Shushkevich taking a somewhat slower approach in the economic sphere, and less outspoken on cultural and linguistic issues. The four other candidates relied on old prescriptions and closer association with Russia. Lukashenka's high-profile running feud with the Kebich administration, however, eliminated any chance of a common language between the two, whatever the similarity of their economic views.

ELECTION LAW AND PROCEDURES

In order to get on the ballot, a candidate had to collect the signatures of 100,000 voters or 70 legislators in the Supreme Soviet. As part of its mandate, the election law, the Central Election Commission (see below), issued 20 million rubles to each candidate for campaigning and 10 million for aides salaries; outside funding was prohibited. In order for the election to be considered valid, more than 50 percent of the eligible voters had to vote. To win, a candidate required a plurality of more than 50 percent; otherwise the two highest votegetters would face each other in a runoff. The ballot contained the names of the six

candidates; the name of the candidate favored by the voter was left untouched while the other five were to be crossed off.

One of the features of the law that concerned some election observers, foreign and domestic, was the provision allowing voters to case their ballot up to ten days before election day. During this time, the ballot boxes were to be kept under lock and key, and guarded overnight to thwart possible tampering. Persons who cast their vote during this runup period signed the registration books as they would have on election day.

Another disturbing feature of the Belarusian election law was a provision requiring two-day previous notification of an observer's intention to be present at a polling station. While such a provision may be convenient for precinct commissions to prepare for the presence of local observers, adherence to this provision is unrealistic for widely travelling international observers, and would obviously defeat the purpose of election observations.

ADMINISTERING THE ELECTIONS

The election was administered by a four-tier hierarchy of election commissions. At the top is the Central Election Commission (CEC), appointed by the parliament and serving for five years. The main functions of the CEC are to monitor compliance with the election law; establish election districts and the over-all budget for the conduct of elections; adjudicate complaints about alleged violations of the election law, with "assistance, if necessary from the parliament; for presidential elections, to certify candidates for ballot status, and to determine the date for a runoff election, if necessary. Nation-wide totals are calculated and announced by the CEC.

The CEC's reliance upon the Supreme Soviet for assistance in interpreting the election law prompted one international organization specializing in election procedures to comment that "it was clear that decisions of the CEC will be invalidated or overturned by Parliament any time lawmakers will not approve of their actions."¹

Regional election commissions are responsible for monitoring election procedures in the electoral districts within the oblast. They distribute monetary resources to district committees for technical and material support of the elections, examine complaints against district commissions, and monitor signature collection within the oblast.

District commissions provide physical support and guidance to precinct commissions at polling stations within their respective districts. For parliamentary elections, district commissions are responsible for certifying candidates within their districts. On election day, precinct commissions at individual polling places report their totals to the district commission, which in turn report them to the oblast commissions, which in turn communicate them to the CEC.

Precinct commissions are the election workers at the polling stations. They compile voter lists in their respective precincts, set up the polling stations, and conduct the elections on election day. They are also responsible for accepting and safekeeping ballots of those voters who vote early.

Belarus is divided into 6 oblasts and 122 election districts, with approximately 6,700 separate polling stations.

¹. *Preliminary Pre-Election Report on Preparations for the Elections in Belarus*, International Foundation for Electoral Systems, Linda Edgeworth, Richard Messick, Jan Zaprudnik, March 1994. Washington, D.C.

IRREGULARITIES AND CHARGES OF ELECTION LAW VIOLATIONS

To reduce the possibility of election fraud by the *apparat*, supporters of Pozniak, Lukashenka, Shushkevich, and Dubko -- despite their diametrically divergent views on a number of issues -- formed a "Citizens' Control Commission" to monitor the campaign and provide election observers.

There were few charges of outright fraud or manipulation. According to the "Citizens' Control Commission," one man claimed that while he intended to work for one candidate, he found himself listed on the Kebich "initiative group" without his consent. Lukashenka was accused of having material prepared illegally for him outside the country, and there was speculation that he would be ruled off the ballot by the Central Election Commission. In the event, the CEC cleared him of the charges.

Controversy accompanied Lukashenka throughout the campaign. At one point, he claimed that an assassination attempt was made on his life, a charge rejected by the Belarusian KGB. He was accused in the press of petty theft during an aircraft flight abroad, but the charge did not significantly affect his standing with the voters. The Kebich campaign, meanwhile, distributed a negative assessment of Lukashenka that allegedly appeared in a Dutch newspaper and was reprinted by a Moscow newspaper. Investigation showed that the Dutch newspaper did not exist and the Moscow newspaper denied printing the material. The Kebich forces emerged looking not only dishonest but incompetently so.

Kebich's opponents charged that government control of the state-supported (directly or indirectly) media allowed the Prime Minister to dominate the air waves and gain greater public recognition. According to a Western press report, local wits had nicknamed Kebich

public recognition. According to a Western press report, local wits had nicknamed Kebich "Uncle Kebich," comparing him to the ubiquitous "Uncle Ben's Rice" advertisements on Moscow television. Such overkill was considered by many the reason for Kebich's unexpectedly poor showing.

While by law candidates themselves were granted equal time *specifically for campaign purposes* -- 2 1/2 hours on both radio and on television, and "generous" (in the words of a representative of the European Media Institute) allocations of space in the major newspapers -- one member of the Popular Front claimed that the national radio network had an "undesirables black list" of persons whom the government would not permit to address listeners.

During the ten-day pre-election voting period, police in the region of Stolin arrested a citizen for pouring battery acid into a ballot box and ruining 55 ballots. He stated that he was angry at the government for not providing adequate medical treatment for his son, who had died recently.

Following the first round of voting *Interfax* and *Agence France Press* reported that a grenade was thrown at the Belarusian secretary for national security. Around the same time, a Belarusian newspaper photographer was reportedly kidnapped and beaten by his abductors.

ELECTION DAY OBSERVATIONS

Minsk

A Helsinki Commission observer was at the opening of two polling stations in

downtown Minsk and a third station shortly thereafter. A handful of voters had already voted during the ten-day runup period, and their signatures were entered in the registration book. There did not appear to be any obvious similarity of signatures that would indicate that anyone but the signer had cast the ballot. With regard to security of the "pre-election ballots" the chairmen at each station assured the observer that they had been under supervision during the day and armed guard overnight, one box at the regional election commission office, the other at a nearby defense industry facility. Local observers from the Citizens' Control Commission were on hand (in this case, supporters of Pozniak and Shushkevich), who told the observer that they were not worried about any improprieties in Minsk, but that "it's out in the country where there might be problems."

Northwest and south of Minsk Region:

When a Commission observer visited a polling station in Radashkovich, 25 percent of the registered 1,235 voters had cast their ballots by 10:00 a.m. Nineteen voters had voted during the 10-day advance period. No problems were observed, but some voters started to fill in their ballot on the table in front of precinct commission members, while others were uncertain whether or not to vote in one of the two curtained-off booths. (In the Soviet era, the closed booth existed, but was rarely used, as voters did not wish to appear hesitant about endorsing the Communist Party's choice, the only candidate on the ballot.) Asked about his choice, one elderly voter stated, "I won't tell you whom I voted for, but I can tell you I would have voted for Zhirinovskiy if he had been on the ballot, in order to get rid of the mafia."

At the military garrison in the village of Krasnae, 419 voters were on the registration books, about half of whom had voted by 10:45 a.m., and 21 of whom had voted earlier in the week. Entrance to the base was granted to Commission staff by the duty officer at the main gate with little problem. At a polling station in the village of Maladzechna, several families were observed voting together in booths. A police officer was standing by, his presence explained as guarding the ballot box containing the "pre-election" ballots.

In the resort town of Narach, 390 "extra voters" had signed up on the supplemental registration book. They had come to Narach before the 10-day advance period, and therefore could not vote at their residences of record.

The Commission observer was well-received everywhere, and only once was requested to show his official observer credentials. An accompanying local U.S. Embassy employee (technically not certified as an official observer) was also welcomed. In all cases, the local precinct chairperson was helpful and courteous, offering refreshments, and agreeing to have photos taken. All polling stations were well-decorated, voting booths were curtained, ballot boxes sealed, and precinct officials appeared to be well prepared and efficient.

In Minsk, observers from the above-mentioned "Citizens Control Commission" were well-represented at polling stations. In the rural areas, there was a dearth of observers, and those in attendance were either from local government bodies or "social organizations" such as veterans and labor groups.

Vitebsk Region

A Helsinki Commission observer visited several villages between Minsk and the city

of Vitebsk, as well as two polling stations in Vitebsk itself. Access was granted in all cases; in one village, Bacheikauski, entrance was granted to the observer after clearance was obtained by telephone from the regional district election commission.

At the kolkhoz village of Chareishchina, the 130 voters requesting the "mobile box" (i.e., the ballot box carried by precinct commission officials to residences, hospitals, senior citizens facilities, etc.) appeared to be an unusually large proportion of the total 489 registered voters -- especially compared to other rural villages where voters, even elderly citizens who might have been expected to wait for the mobile box, were determined to show up personally and cast their ballot.

In Bacheikauski, precinct workers allowed some voters whom they recognized to sign in without presenting their passports, but in all other cases the requirement to present passports was assiduously adhered to. As noted above, local precinct election officials were courteous and generally well-informed. All stations were well-lighted, voting booths were curtained, and ballot boxes sealed. Some polling stations featured the standard biographical placards of candidates, others did not.

Although Helsinki Commission observers were not denied access, at least one international observer subsequently reported that "we were thrown out" of one polling station, after an official at the Central Election Commission told the precinct chairman over the phone to deny access on the grounds that the observer had not informed the precinct commission two days prior to the visit. International observers had informed the CEC before election day that such a requirement was unrealistic and not in conformity with generally accepted standards for monitoring by international observers. The observers had

understood from the CEC that the two-day requirement would not apply in their case, but apparently someone at the CEC had not been informed.

THE RESULTS

The results of the first round of voting on June 23 represented a serious and unexpected defeat for the Kebich administration, the *nomenklatura*, and business-as-usual in Belarus. Specifically: Lukashenka polled 44.82 percent of the over 7,000,000 votes cast; Kebich, 17.33 percent; Pozniak, 12.82 percent; Shushkevich, 9.91 percent; Dubko, 5.98 percent; and Novikaw, 4.29 percent. In all, approximately 80 percent of the eligible voters (7,326,550) turned out for the first round. Almost four percent, or 279,938 voters, cast their ballots during the ten-day runup period.

In the second round of voting on July 10, the turnout was about ten percent lower, with Lukashenko crushing Kebich by an 80-14 percent margin.

Pre-election prognostication by various polling organizations was not particularly accurate. However, a public opinion poll taken by the *Eridan* polling firm had been very close to predicting the results of the first round...with one notable exception. A week before the election, Dubko and Novikau trailed all contenders with between four and six percent, Shushkevich was at 9.9 percent, Pozniak at 11.6 percent, Kebich at 17.3 percent, and Lukashenka leading with 21 percent. In the cases of Shushkevich and Kebich, the predictions were right on target, the others only a few percentage points off. Clearly, a large number of undecided voters either moved *en masse* into the Lukashenka column in the final

days of the campaign, or, having made up their minds earlier, declined to state their preference to pollsters.

FREE AND FAIR DETERMINATION

On July 13, 1994 the Belarusian government distributed a press release quoting the majority of foreign observers (over 100) as saying that "there were no serious violations during the voting." The final report of the CSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights stated that "complaints...were infrequent; assertions of fraud were negligible," and that the "Belarus election was a well-planned smoothly executed operation..." The ODIHR did, however, make the following recommendations for future elections:

- Observers should be present during the ballot count at central election headquarters, not just at polling places
- There should be stricter controls of voters lists
- The practice of allowing voters to cast ballots ten days before election day should be reviewed
- Observers should accompany militia and poll workers when they take the mobile ballot box around to aged or invalid voters
- Non-voting family members should not be allowed in the voting booth with a voter
- Meal breaks should be staggered to keep polling places open at all times

Three weeks after the Belarusian government's upbeat press release on the conduct of the elections the state prosecutor announced that "...there were numerous facts of ignoring the law during the election campaign and on the election day..."² The prosecutor claimed that on the day of the runoff, 13,000 partially filled out ballots were found dumped in the Minsk, and that in the Dribinsky district, "well-wishers (as translated)," including the precinct commission chairman crossed out Lukashenka's name from ballots when the boxes were unsealed. The prosecutor claimed that the Kebich campaign also printed up leaflets whose costs exceeded the 20 million rubles appropriated for each candidate. The prosecutor's report called for making urgent changes in the relevant legislation, since it allegedly promotes violations.

Based on observations on election day by Commission staff, the Helsinki Commission generally concurs with the favorable assessments of the conduct of the election and believes that voters were able freely to express their view, it recommends closer coordination between the Central Election Committee and district committee, so that incidents of denying foreign observers admission to polling stations be avoided. Artificial "notification regimes" on observers should be removed from the legislation.

OUTLOOK

Lukashenka's victory has significance for both Belarus itself and the Commonwealth of Independent States. Domestically, it is clear that a large number of voters were

². ITAR-TASS, August 5, 1994, quoting BELINFORM correspondent, reported in FBIS-SOV-94-152, August 8, 1994