

## Elections in Belarus

By Ryan Gallant  
Reporter

Belarusian elections held last week left the small nation in a state of civil insurgency as police arrested protesters who were contesting the passing of a constitutional amendment that will allow for President Alexander Lukashenko to run for office in the next presidential election.

The small Eastern European nation of 10.3 million declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 but has since been labeled a "Hermit kingdom", while Lukashenko is often referred to as "Europe's last dictator". His regime began in 1994 when he was elected on an anti-corruption platform. Since then, his government has cracked down on dissidents and is reportedly responsible for the disappearance of four members of the opposition, not to mention the incarceration of countless other opponents.

The referendum was held in conjunction with legislative elections, that saw the election of 110 members to the Parliament, or Natsionalnoye Sobranie, the overwhelming majority of whom are supporters of Lukashenko. The referendum asked citizens if they were for or against a constitutional amendment that would waive the traditional law that stated that Presidents have a two term limit in office. Lukashenko's term would have normally ended this year, had he not held a national referendum in 1996, extending his first term by two years. Prior to the vote this past week, it was evident that Lukashenko was short of the majority that was needed to pass the amendment, however the final result indicated about 77% for the 'yes', with about 90% of eligible voters turning out to vote in the election and on the referendum issue.

Controversy ensued, as opponents to the Lukashenko authoritarian-style government complained that Belarusian state television continued to broadcast exit polls throughout the day and ran pro-Lukashenko ads even as the voting continued, in violation of several election laws. Independent media sources also reported that some photographs appeared to indicate that some polling station officials were handing out ballots that were already marked 'yes' in favour of the constitutional amendment.

The country's opposition parties held a press conference following the vote, condemning the electoral misconduct of the election, and charging that some people were barred from the polling stations, while students, hospital patients and factory workers were forced to vote in favour of the President. Police intimidation was also commonplace at polling stations, as was the discounting of groceries and the distribution of free bread, coffee and beer in an apparent attempt to entice voters. "This is 100 per cent dictatorship," said one Belarusian, Vladimir Kuzuro was quoted as saying in *The Globe and Mail* this week. "He has created a situation where there's no alternative to him." During protests following the release of the results, at least 46 protesters, including two opposition leaders, were arrested or injured by police.

Both the United States and the European Union expressed concern and a lack of confidence in the Belarusian election process, stating before the vote that they doubted that it would be conducted fairly. In response this unease levied by these countries and neighboring Poland, Lukashenko was reported as saying "The West has been expressing its concern for 10 years. Turn to your own problems and resolve those." After US Congress passed the Belarus Democracy Act, aiming at funding opposition parties in Belarus, Lukashenko continued, saying that its members were "dumb asses".

The next presidential elections in Belarus are scheduled for September 2006.

### US Election Night at The Wave

The race for President of the United States continues to be a close affair with John Kerry and George Bush very close in most polls. The outcome of the election continues to be very much in doubt with just a week left before election day. The UPEI Political Studies Society invites everyone to come watch the United States Presidential Election coverage at the Wave on the evening of Tuesday, November 2nd.



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