



Belarus: fear and isolation in Europe

International criticism may be nothing new for the regime of Alexander Lukashenko, the hard-line President of the former Soviet Republic of Belarus, but in the run-up to Presidential elections on 19 March his regime will come under unprecedented international scrutiny.

During his 12 years as President his government has been under fire from other governments, international organisations and human rights groups for violations of human rights and lack of political freedoms. Only the continued political support of Russia and cheap imports of her gas has kept it from total isolation.

Belarus's main opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich was recently at the European Parliament. Addressing the foreign affairs committee he said that "our society needs truth" and that although foreign help was welcome, ultimately "it is up to us to do the job". While in Brussels he also met Parliament President Josep Borrell, who assured Mr Milinkevich that the Parliament would "give its full backing to organise a free, democratic...ballot."

Polish MEP Bogdan Klich, head of the Parliament's delegation to Belarus, accused Mr Lukashenko of running "an old style, anti-democratic and authoritarian government". He is hoping that a group of MEPs will be in Minsk on polling day to supervise the election under the umbrella of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Legal crackdown

Mr Klich pointed out that Belarus had the dubious privilege of being the subject of the highest number of EP resolutions condemning its behaviour. The last one in September 2005 noted the closure over the last few years of "several political parties, 22 newspapers and more than 50 pro-democracy NGOs...for criticising the President and his policies". Against this background, in 2004 the Parliament awarded the Belarus Association of journalists the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought in recognition of the difficulties they faced. Also in response to this media crackdown the European Commission has contracted a German media group to broadcast independent news into Belarus via the internet and radio. A further €2 million was earmarked in September to increase this type of activity.

In anticipation of this year's election the Belarus government has prepared the ground well in advance. In 2004 a referendum was held to decide whether President Lukashenko could stand for a third term - the result, condemned as "fraudulent" by the EU gave a resounding "Yes". In December, the Belarusian Parliament passed a law which made it a criminal offence to "discredit" the Belarusian state - with a three year jail term for offenders. It is already illegal in Belarus to criticise President Lukashenko or other senior officials. In September 2005 the government closed the only independent daily newspaper - "Narodnaya Volya". Behind these measures is the regime's fear that

a Ukraine-style Orange people's revolution will erupt following the vote and force the President to concede power.

Measures like these have led to virtual political isolation from the west - in 2004 that isolation became a physical reality for certain senior officials who were indefinitely denied visa access to the EU for their direct involvement in fraudulent elections and a referendum in 2004, and for others who were implicated in "apparent obstruction of justice" into the investigation of the disappearance of three opposition figures and a journalist in 1999/2000. However, President Lukashenko can count on at least some friends - notably in the Kremlin. During last month's "gas dispute" between Russia and Ukraine, Moscow insisted in price increases for Ukraine but left the subsidised tariff for Belarus unchanged. This has played a major part in preventing the economic collapse of Belarus, while the large number of people employed by the Belarus state helps stifle protest.