

Belarus: imperialist intervention in presidential election

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In the presidential election being held Sunday, March 19, in the former Soviet republic of Belarus, incumbent Alexander Lukashenko faces three rival candidates.

Lukashenko has been president since 1994 and is expected to win the poll. Elections in 2004 were marked by violence against protesters in the country's capital, Minsk. When thousands gathered to denounce the result of a referendum that allowed Lukashenko to stand for a third term, police in riot gear attacked and arrested demonstrators.

Such blatantly antidemocratic actions are being used by Washington and the European Union to justify moves against Lukashenko—not out of any concern for the rights of the people of Belarus but because the regime, as one of the last and closest allies of Russian president Vladimir Putin, is seen as an impediment to their geopolitical manoeuvring vis-à-vis Moscow.

Addressing a NATO conference in Lithuania last year, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice set out US imperialism's intentions towards Belarus. Speaking a few months after the so-called "Orange revolution" in Ukraine brought a more pro-US regime into power, Rice stated that Belarus was "the last true dictatorship" in central Europe and that it was "time for change to come to Belarus."

In one of her first speeches as secretary of state, Rice had listed Belarus as an "outpost of tyranny" along with other likely targets of US aggression—Iran, Cuba, Burma and Zimbabwe.

Washington had already unsuccessfully attempted to fix a Belarus election in its favour when in 2001 it launched a concerted attempt to secure victory for opposition presidential candidate Vladimir Goncharik. Organised by the US ambassador in Minsk, Michael Kozak, the anti-Lukashenko campaign had funds for opposition groups provided by the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the US State Department, USAid and billionaire George Soros's Open Society Institute.

Kozak, a diplomat who cut his teeth in the 1980s during US interventions in Central America, especially Nicaragua, arranged that members of Zubr, an oppositional Belarus student movement, meet with representatives of the Serbian group Otpor, the pro-imperialist student outfit utilised by Washington

to assist its coup d'état against Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic in 2000.

Despite accusations of the 2001 Belarus presidential election and the 2004 referendum being rigged, Washington acknowledged that the Belarus president's position was less shaky than that of other figures such as Ukraine's Kuchma and Georgia's Shevardnadze, who were judged to be easier candidates for removal. However, the US has continued to funnel money into various free-market, pro-US opposition groups.

In October 2004, the US Congress passed the "Democracy in Belarus" Act that increased US support for opposition groups, placed trade and financial restraints on Belarus and sanctioned spying operations against members of the government.

The European Union (EU) has also attempted to make its presence felt in Belarus. The EU is eager to expand its influence in the country both to increase its bargaining power with Moscow and to facilitate the exploitation of the Belarus working class, which represents a skilled and low-wage workforce that is untapped by European big business.

The EU is also acting in response to America's increasing belligerence towards Belarus. After tentative moves to improve relations with the Lukashenko government in 2004, the EU introduced limited sanctions against Minsk last year.

In August 2005, external relations commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner announced that the EU would contribute approximately €2 million a year to pay a German-led consortium to broadcast radio and television into Belarus. She added that the EU was willing to "go further" if necessary.

The main opposition candidate in Sunday's poll, Alexander Milinkevich, has been fêted by the EU in recent months. In January, he was invited to several high-level meetings in Brussels, including with Ferrero-Waldner, principal EU foreign policy advisor Javier Solana and European Parliament President Josep Borrell.

Milinkevich, a former academic who was chosen as a compromise candidate by various opposition groups, also attended a meeting of the 25 EU members' foreign ministers before holding discussions with major European NGOs.

However, the EU has been reluctant to throw its weight fully behind Milinkevich. Reliant on Russia for much of its oil and

gas—huge quantities of which are piped westwards through Belarus—the EU, and Germany in particular, are anxious not to damage relations with Moscow by coming out too strongly against its ally in Minsk.

The recent row between Russia and Ukraine over gas prices caused serious concern in western Europe about the stability of its energy supplies from Russia. The then social democratic-Green coalition government in Germany was wary of the US-backed “Orange revolution” because of the likelihood that it would create huge tensions with Moscow that could threaten the supply of oil and gas through Ukraine.

For similar reasons the EU is taking a more cautious approach to “regime change” in Belarus, concerned that should a pro-US regime come to power in Belarus via another “colour revolution,” it would render Europe’s energy supplies even more precarious.

As was the case with Ukraine in 2004, the EU feels the only response it can make to American interference in Belarus is to adapt to it by sponsoring its own NGOs and media outlets while funding and courting Belarusian oppositionists should they be propelled into power.

True to form, the ex-Stalinist eastern members of the EU find their attitude towards Belarus much closer to the bellicosity of Washington than the half-hearted EU protestations directed at Minsk.

There have been numerous reports that funds for pro-Western opposition groups in Belarus have originated in or have been channelled through the neighbouring countries of Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, which have also provided political support to oppositionists.

Lithuania hosts the European Humanities University, a foreign-financed private institution for Belarusian students that was established in Minsk in 1992 to promote nationalism and free-market ideology but which was closed down by Lukashenko in 2004. The re-opening of the university in February 2006 in Lithuania follows a campaign by the far-right Lithuanian Homeland Union, which has closely echoed Washington’s threats against Belarus and sees the university as a training ground for personnel needed to replace the Lukashenko government.

Poland has led the European campaign against Lukashenko’s regime. Sharing a border with Belarus and with a substantial Polish-speaking minority in the country, Warsaw has frequently denounced its neighbour as an autocratic society that oppresses the Polish minority.

Poland and Belarus have exchanged a number of diplomatic broadsides, with the situation between the two becoming especially tense since Rice’s “last dictatorship” speech.

Poland has condemned Belarus for the political interference with and suppression of the Belarus Union of Poles (SPB), which Lukashenko claimed was being used as a front operation for the Polish state. The SPB, with a membership of more than 10,000, purports to represent the nearly 400,000-strong Polish

minority, which lives mainly in Hrodna Oblast in the northwest of the country.

Following Lukashenko’s forced replacement of most of the leading members of the SPB with his own appointees, Poland withdrew its ambassador to Minsk. The Polish president at the time, Aleksander Kwasniewski, criticised the EU’s lack of pressure on Belarus, saying that Europe lacked a “bold policy, free from double standards.”

Lech Walesa, the former leader of the Solidarity movement in Poland who went on to become the country’s president, was blunter. Echoing the US position towards the Lukashenko regime, he told the BBC in August 2005 that he would support a “people’s revolution” in Belarus similar to those in Georgia and Ukraine.

Poland has openly backed Alexander Milinkevich in the presidential race, recently allowing him to address a cheering Polish parliament. It has also established a radio station to broadcast into Belarus.

Hoping to ameliorate its weakness relative to its neighbours Germany and Russia, the Polish elite harbour ambitions to be Washington’s chief lieutenant in central Europe, hosting the main military bases for NATO and orchestrating the smaller ex-Stalinist states in the region.

Poland sees US-funded regime change in Minsk as a means of increasing its geopolitical weight in the region. Though this would be primarily at the expense of Russia, Warsaw also hopes that strong Polish influence over a new regime in Minsk would increase its clout in relation to Germany.

In the likely event of a Lukashenko victory in Sunday’s election, the US and the EU—especially Germany and Poland—will act to further destabilise Belarus and the entire region as they vie with each other and with Russia for geopolitical advantage.

These manoeuvrings of the imperialist powers and their local proxies are reanimating the centuries-old national rivalries that have plagued central Europe, posing a growing threat of new conflicts in the region.



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