

Wagging the dog in Belarus

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On March 19, elections were held in Belarus in which the incumbent president, Alexander Lukashenko, was reelected. Since Lukashenko was declared the winner, public officials and media pundits in the US and western Europe have launched a major public offensive to brand the election results “fraudulent” and “illegitimate.”

While it is likely that the Belarus authorities engaged in electoral fraud to minimize the vote tally of the opposition, most informed analysts believe that the Lukashenko forces probably received a clear majority of the vote. This does not testify to the popularity of the regime, but rather to the limited support for the opposition whose espousal of “democratic” and pro-market “reforms” inspires little confidence among broad sections of the populations. They have little reason to believe—given the experience of every other east European state—that they would benefit from the implementation of such a program.

At any rate, the angry response of the US government and media to the Belarus election has little to do with election protocols, or even with the authoritarian characteristics of the Lukashenko regime. All that is nothing more than a pretext for geopolitical and economic concerns of far greater magnitude. The United States has during the past several months expressed growing alarm over indications that the Putin government is determined to defend Russian national interests in a manner that conflicts with Washington’s world strategy.

The Belarus election has provided an opportunity for the United States, together with an increasingly belligerent European bourgeoisie, to ratchet up pressure against Russia.

That is why relatively small demonstrations in Minsk have been seized upon by the American (and, to a lesser extent, the European) media as events of world historical dimensions. Like a touring comic operetta, the cast of characters and props that previously performed with great effect in Tblisi and Kiev have taken up residence in Minsk. With only minor alterations in the script and with new extras recruited from the local population, the Washington impresarios have been hoping to stage the same sort of political smash-hit that they achieved in Ukraine and Georgia. But the first indications are that the plot line has become somewhat too familiar, and that the show is failing to pull in the crowds that were anticipated.

Only a few hundred people could be assembled to stage a pro-democracy protest in Minsk for the benefit of the American media in the aftermath of Lukashenko’s reelection. No matter: when the protesters were arrested, the White House had what it needed to escalate its rhetoric. A government spokesman declared that “the United States has condemned the actions of the Belarus security forces in the early morning hours, in which they seized and detained Belarus citizens who were peacefully protesting a fraudulent election.”

C.J. Chivers of the *New York Times* denounced the government of Belarus as a “police state” and a “Soviet anachronism,” and reiterated his hopes that the US-backed candidate Milinkevich could bring “civil society” and “human rights.”

In fact, the ongoing propaganda offensive against Belarus was very carefully worked out well before the March 19 elections. On March 9, 2006, a report by Celeste Wallander, director and senior fellow of the

Russia and Eurasia Program, was published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). The report outlined the “implications of upcoming elections in Belarus for our national interests.” Wallander above all stressed the need to “act decisively if, as many expect, the elections on March 19 do not meet clear and widely accepted international standards for free and fair elections [i.e., if Lukashenko is reelected].”

Wallander’s recommendations for the US diplomatic response were, fundamentally, simply to not “recognize the results as the expression of Belarusian citizens,” thereby not recognizing Lukashenko “as the legitimate head of state of the Republic of Belarus.”

Her report cites the Ukrainian elections of 2004 as a precedent, where the US also refused to recognize the victory of Victor Yanukovich—the candidate favored by Russia—and instead recognized Victor Yushchenko, a client of the US.

Wallander also recommended the imposition of economic and diplomatic sanctions against Belarus, many of which have already been threatened or implemented in the past week. She even included the following provision: “If the regime uses force against peaceful demonstrators protesting fraudulent elections, the international community should be prepared to lay the groundwork for an international tribunal that would someday hold the guilty officials accountable for any orders to harm citizens exercising their rights under European and international law.”

Wallander’s statement is in line with another new report from the US Council on Foreign Relations, *Russia’s Wrong Direction: What the US Can and Should Do*. This 92-page statement outlines the real grievances with Russia that have led to the rapid deterioration of relations between the two countries and the conflicts over the former republics.

“In 2005, Russian officials sought to curtail access by the United States and NATO to Central Asian Airbases—even though these were still being used to support military and humanitarian operations in Afghanistan, an effort that Russia ostensibly supported. For the first time since 2001, Moscow prepared to throw up obstacles to Western policy, not because it now disagreed with the goal of fighting terrorism, but because it subordinated this goal to a different, geopolitical concern. Acting in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (whose other members are Central Asian states), Russia and China saw an opportunity to reverse the growing American presence in the region.”

“American hopes for expanded energy cooperation also encountered a series of disappointments: the revocation of long-standing ExxonMobil licenses for Sakhalin natural gas fields; the destruction of Russia’s largest and best-managed oil company, YUKOS, as part of the reassertion of state control over the oil sector; the enunciation of new policies to limit Western investment in Russian energy development; the delay and near-collapse of the Murmansk pipeline project; and the cutoff of gas to the Ukraine and beyond to the rest of Europe, as part of a counterattack against Kiev’s pro-Western orientation [following the seizure of power of Yushchenko]. Under the cumulative impact of these developments, the ‘strategic energy dialogue’ came to a standstill.”

In other words, it is Russia’s refusal to cooperate fully in the Bush administration’s “war on terror” and, more importantly, to cooperate with

the interests of the American oil industry that have touched off this recent “human rights” campaign in Belarus.

Beginning directly after the liquidation of the Soviet Union, when the US was backing Chechen separatists operating inside Russia, the US and the centers of power in western Europe have sought to expand their influence in the outlying former Soviet territories.

More recently, through the so-called “Rose Revolution” in Georgia and the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, the US has sought to isolate Russia from Europe by financing and mobilizing sympathetic pro-market, anticommunist forces in the former Soviet republics. For the populations of these republics, these made-in-America “revolutions” have brought nothing but disaster.

Poland under Lech Kaczynski has also moved over to the side of the US and Europe, dispatching troops to participate in the invasion of Iraq. More recently, following the election of Angela Merkel in Europe, the European bourgeoisie has signaled its willingness to cooperate more fully with the US, further isolating Russia.

Russia under Putin has also ruffled a few diplomatic feathers in Washington by selling arms to Iran, by entering into negotiations with Hamas, and by staging joint military exercises with China.

The US, with its recent propaganda offensive, has signaled to Russia that its next move will be Belarus, and that it will stop at nothing to acquire it—even if it means destabilizing the entire region and Russia internally.

As the American web site Stratfor (which has close ties with US intelligence) recognized on November 19 of last year in an article called “America Unplugged,” when it comes to Russia, “the United States is playing for keeps.”

“The Soviet Union was one of only three states that have ever directly threatened the United States—the other two being the British Empire and Mexico. The Soviet Union also came as close as any power ever has to uniting Eurasia into a single integrated, continental power—the only external development that might be able to end the United States’ superpower status. These little factoids are items that policymakers neither forget nor take lightly. So while U.S. policy toward China is to delay its rise, and U.S. policy toward Venezuela is geared toward containment, U.S. policy toward Russia is as simple as it is final: dissolution.”

On this note, Condoleezza Rice, whose name also appears in the aforementioned CSIS document, recently claimed on CNN’s “Late Edition” that she suspects Russia of turning over military intelligence on American troop deployments to Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq prior to the invasion.

“Any implication that there were those from a foreign government who may have been passing information to the Iraqis prior to the invasion would be, of course, very worrying,” she said. Even if this is true, the choice to notify the press of this now is deliberately calculated to coincide with the Belarus diplomatic offensive.

The evidence points to Secretary of State Rice, elements of the Democratic Party (including John Edwards, one of the authors of the Council on Foreign Affairs report), former Secretary of State Powell, and sections of the State Department as the prime movers behind the offensive on Russia. This group has increasingly come into conflict with the Republican Party and Department of Defense, a more powerful faction whose major figures include Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, which has its gaze fixated on the Middle East.

The claims repeated *ad nauseam* in the media that the latest series of diplomatic moves against Lukashenko have anything to do with democracy are simply not to be taken seriously. Consider, by way of example, the *New York Times*’s coverage of the events in Minsk.

The March 21 issue of the *New York Times*, which has featured front-page news on Belarus ever since, carried a 30-paragraph article by C.J. Chivers heralding the 300 student demonstrators as champions of freedom

and democracy. Meanwhile, nationwide demonstrations and strikes in France against the CPE and the government involving hundreds of thousands of workers and students received six paragraphs. Tens of thousands of Indians in Ecuador protesting “free trade” talks with the US received a one-paragraph brief. Likewise, thousands of Asian workers in Dubai walking off their jobs in protest of the sweatshop conditions at construction sites also received one paragraph.

There is nothing so much as resembling serious journalism or critical analysis in the coverage—only hand-wringing, sensationalism, and sentimentalism. The reader does not come away knowing anything new about the background to the central geopolitical issues in Belarus. For a flavor of the tone of Chivers’s articles, consider the following passage:

“After midnight, they occupied a portion of Belarus, a country of 10 million people the size of Kansas, that was no larger than a 50-yard square.

“It was a country within. They danced on its cold stone. They handed out tea. They said they would not give it up.

“ ‘We consider this camp to be the only means to defend our position,’ Vitaly Korotysh, 22, one of the coordinators of the rally, said at 3:30 a.m. ‘If necessary it will stand for years. And if they break it up, I think on the next day the people will be back.’”

“It is too soon to know whether this is foolishness or resolve.”

Chivers waxes poetic about how the “core of Belarus’ public opposition assumed its shape in the darkness,” then denounces without any evidence the “rigged” election of Lukashenko, and describes the numerous bureaucratic obstacles in the way of parties in opposition to Lukashenko’s.

From Chivers’s tone, one is inclined to conclude that an opposition party in the US enjoys easy access to the ballot, public funds to conduct campaigns, and a public forum to discuss its platform! Of course, none of this is true. It is also worth pointing out that during the last Republican convention in New York, masses of protesters were illegally rounded up and arrested.

Regardless, the sole purpose of the media coverage of the Belarus situation is to evoke sympathy for the small group of students assembled in the square and animosity toward the Lukashenko administration—the formula is as simple as it is familiar: the students are protesting for more freedoms, and the decrepit totalitarian government is cracking down.

The *Times*’s assumption of the mantle of human and democratic rights is thoroughly hypocritical. When it comes to Egypt under Hosni Mubarak, or the US-installed puppet governments of Iraq and Afghanistan, which have become notorious for brutal police crackdowns on protests, torture, disappearances and arbitrary arrests, the *Times* has nothing but apologies and sympathy for the difficulties facing “fledgling democracies.” If the kind of election that took place in Belarus had taken place in Egypt, the *Times* would have published an editorial congratulating the Mubarak regime on its great progress towards “free and fair elections”!

Certainly, neither of the factions engaged in the dirty tug-of-war in Belarus will advance the interests of ordinary Belarusian people.

On the one hand, there is the right-wing Lukashenko administration, which consists of all of the worst elements of the old Stalinist bureaucracy. These ex-bureaucrats have profited immensely from the liquidation of the Soviet Union, and seek to defend and expand their newly conquered social position by ruthlessly suppressing any and all political opposition. They have allied themselves with the Putin regime in Russia, and in return for its allegiance, Russia demands the sale of goods from Belarus at below-market prices—a cost transferred onto the shoulders of the working people of Belarus.

The students at the rally this past week, most young men between the ages of 18 and 21, supported the minority candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich of the Unified Democratic Forces, who received 6 percent of the vote in last year’s elections. These largely petty-bourgeois youth have

adopted denim as the “color” for their revolution and wear it as a uniform—signaling their support for the US-backed right-wing coups in Ukraine and Georgia.

The elements that Milinkevich has been able to rally to his banner are generally of right-wing, nationalist character. These are people who opposed the Soviet Union not for its corrupt bureaucracy, but because its institutions stood in the way of their own personal enrichment—that is, they were not critics from the left, but from the right.

Milinkevich enjoys the full support of the Bush administration and its allies in the media, the governments of the major European powers, as well as the right-wing Polish president Kaczynski—all of whom stand to directly benefit from a reduction of Russia’s influence in eastern Europe.

Despite the claims by the US state department that Milinkevich won the March 19 elections, Milinkevich’s following is actually very small. Chivers of the *New York Times* admits, perhaps unintentionally, the 200 arrested were the “core” of Milinkevich’s movement, which means the protest scheduled for Saturday will not go forward. Does this sound like a party that received the majority of votes in a country of 10 million people?

The *Financial Times* of London, though supportive of Washington’s line, conceded that Lukashenko probably gathered somewhere between 50 and 60 percent of the vote. Why then the need for voter fraud? The answer lies in the fact that Lukashenko knows that every opposition vote facilitates the US effort to destabilize his government.



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