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Lukashenko Accuses Moscow of Meddling

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Belarussian soldiers displaying their skills at a Minsk base on Saturday. **Vasily Fedosenko**

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko accused Russian authorities of putting pressure on him ahead of a bid to seek re-election and blamed them for his failure to recognize Georgia's separatist regions as independent states.

Lukashenko, long at odds with the West but lately quarreling with Moscow, also said he wanted better ties with the United States.

The United States and European Union have criticized Belarus for not holding free or fair elections since Lukashenko came to power in 1994. The veteran leader, last re-elected in 2006, plans to seek another term within the next six months.

Lukashenko accused Russia of putting pressure on him ahead of the election, a date for which has yet to be set.

"America keeps its position, but Russia has sharply changed its stance, trying to bring the

president of Belarus to heel before well-known political events," Lukashenko said Friday during a visit to Belarus' central Minsk region.

"But you have known me for ages — it is impossible to bend me, and trying to do so is useless," he said, state media reported.

Lukashenko blamed Moscow for failing to provide incentives to Belarus that would offset any negative consequences of recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two pro-Russian separatist regions in Georgia that Russia recognized after a five-day war with Georgia in August 2008.

The Kremlin fired back Saturday, threatening to publish the transcript of a meeting of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization where Lukashenko expressed a willingness to recognize the independence of the rebel regions.

"We can publish this and other statements by Alexander Lukashenko that would be of interest to public opinion in both Belarus and internationally," said the Kremlin's top foreign policy aide, Sergei Prikhodko, RIA-Novosti reported.

Lukashenko on Friday also said Moscow could lose a lucrative contract to build Belarus' first nuclear power plant. "We are not writing off other investors. In the near future, we will decide who will build our nuclear plant," he said.

Building its own nuclear power plant has been on Belarus' agenda since 2007, after sharp price increases for Russian energy. A third of Belarus was contaminated with radiation when a reactor at Chernobyl in Ukraine blew up in 1986.

Lukashenko has released inmates considered by the West to have been political prisoners and has taken other steps to appease the EU and Washington as his relations with Moscow sank to new lows amid various economic and political disputes.

"We can, and we would like to, normalize relations with America, and we do not hide this," Lukashenko said Friday.

"We have many themes for negotiations. We have proposals from our side as well as proposals from the American side. I believe these issues can be resolved," he said.

(MT, Reuters)

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