

Election Stakes High for Lukashenko

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Lukashenko presenting director Emir Kusturica with a special award as part of a film festival in Minsk on Tuesday. **Nikolai Petrov**

MINSK — Alexander Lukashenko knows he will win a fourth term as president of Belarus when voters cast their ballots next month. He also knows that this election will be the pivot — or the pothole — that defines his rule.

After more than a decade quashing political opposition and maintaining many elements of the Soviet planned economy, Lukashenko, 56, has lost the patronage of his traditional allies in Moscow without yet earning the respect of Europe.

Now, opponents say, Lukashenko faces greater pressure than ever before to hold a transparent and fair election. Otherwise, they say, he faces the prospect of a Moscow-backed political challenge coupled with tighter restrictions on the cheap Russian oil that fuels the Belarussian economy.

“Much will depend upon one man, who must clarify whether he is in the modernization camp

or in the stagnation camp,” said Yaroslavl Romanchuk, a Belarussian economist who will challenge Lukashenko in the Dec. 19 poll.

Speaking at last week's Minsk Forum, an annual forum for politicians and businessmen to discuss investment, Romanchuk was clear that he did not expect to win.

“What will come after the first of January? It will be the second of January,” Romanchuk said with a resigned smile, referring to the day when results of the presidential election are announced.

Romanchuk, 44, is one of 10 candidates still in the running — some of whom are likely to miss the ballot when the Central Election Commission on Sunday announces who will run.

One candidate, businessman Vladimir Provalsky, was removed last week because most of the 100,000 signatures he collected were forged, commission secretary Nikolai Lozovik told RIA-Novosti.

Romanchuk, former deputy foreign minister Andrei Sannikov and poet Vladimir Neklyayev have the most support, according to a poll by the Ukraine-based Socium research center.

None is expected to come close to defeating Lukashenko, who still has wide support in rural parts of the country. But they do expect less electioneering.

“Europe is giving the signal that if Lukashenko conducts elections in a significantly freer way, they will deal with him, because they want to drive him away from Moscow,” prominent opposition politician Pavel Severinets told The Moscow Times.

Lukashenko, whose government Washington has called “the last dictatorship in Europe,” still faces regular accusations of suppressing dissent and jailing opponents.

The most recent scandal was the death of opposition journalist Oleg Bebenin, who was found hanged at his home outside Minsk in September. Police initially called the death a suicide, but his friends and relatives say he was killed.

Lukashenko promised to investigate Bebenin's death and even invited foreign criminal experts to assist in the investigation.

The real danger to Lukashenko, however, is not coming from internal challenges, analysts and Belarussian politicians said.

Belarus had already been drifting toward Europe when its relationship with Russia nosedived in 2008. Lukashenko angered the Kremlin by refusing to support Russia in its recognition of Georgia's breakaway provinces Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

The ensuing economic crisis led to more harsh words as Moscow demanded fealty in exchange for cheap loans and subsidized oil, which Belarussian factories refine and then resell at a big profit. Russian political analysts say Lukashenko's relationship with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has become strained, while he has never found as much common ground with the more liberal President Dmitry Medvedev.

From July through October, the Gazprom-owned NTV television station has aired a four-part documentary series attacking Lukashenko and accusing him political repression. Medvedev wrote in a blog post last month that Lukashenko was failing to maintain "basic human dignity" in his policy.

The anti-Lukashenko documentaries, banned in Belarus but available online, did not have the intended effect among Belarussians, said Sergei Musiyenko, head of the Belarussian EcooM think tank, a Lukashenko adviser.

"When the leader of your country is insulted by outsiders, his support increases, regardless of what you think about him. It's support for the country," Musiyenko told The Moscow Times.

Others believe that the criticism has been a message to Lukashenko, warning him that Moscow may seek to break off its relationship with him after the elections.

"Moscow most probably now feels it's very important that there's another president instead of Lukashenko who would be ready or open to put the country fully under Russian control," Alexander Milinkevich, the main opposition candidate in the 2006 presidential elections, told Bloomberg on Friday.

The Kremlin's first move may be a refusal to recognize the results of the upcoming vote, a landmark change from previous policy of accepting the outcome of Belarussian elections despite criticism by Western observers, said Konstantin Zatulin, first deputy chairman of the State Duma's CIS Affairs and Relations with Russian Nationals Abroad Committee.

"While Belarus has gotten used to the Western attitude toward the elections, Russia not recognizing them would be a shocking move," Zatulin told The Moscow Times.

But even that attack may backfire if the results are recognized by Western observers, said Musiyenko, of the EcooM think tank. A politically based refusal to recognize the vote would put the the Kremlin in a "stupid situation," he said.

Lukashenko appears to recognize the threat and said Friday that his country would not "insist" on Russia recognizing the elections.

"By our legislation, we need no recognition," he said in comments to German media, Interfax reported. Europe has also "denied the very existence of Belarus for 15 years when talking about our elections. So what? Did I die of that?" he said.

Lukashenko went far enough in softening his stance on opposition to even praise his bitter political enemy, nationalist leader Zenon Posdnyak, who was forced to emigrate in 1996. "We respected each other and found common ground," he told Polish media last week.

He also won a bit of praise from Serbian director Emir Kusturica, who called him a "strong leader" during a press conference earlier this week in Minsk for a local film festival. "I'm glad there is a country that has its own vision, independent from others. Democracy in Belarus couldn't be the same as democracy in Holland," he told reporters.

European politicians have also been suggesting that the West could support Lukashenko in a more democratic Belarus. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and his Polish

counterpart, Radoslaw Sikorski, attended the Minsk Forum and secured from Lukashenko a promise to hold a fair vote.

Lithuania's president, Dalia Grybauskaite, was cited Friday as saying a victory for Alexander Lukashenko would safeguard stability and limit Russian influence in the country, Reuters reported.

“These elections will be life-changing. After Europe has understood that isolating us is a useless thing, they will be more careful,” said Musiyenko, the Lukashenko adviser.

Relations with Russia “will never be the same,” he said, referring to the Kremlin's toughening stance on oil and gas transit through Belarus.

Lukashenko said he plans to get crude from other markets including Venezuela to cut Russian crude to less than 50 percent of his country's needs next year.

If ties to the West improve, the Belarussian state may slowly start to release its grip on the economy.

Western businesses have signaled interest in helping privatize state assets, but the program is moving slowly because the government is reluctant to give up control over key property — at least, cheaply.

“We don't have natural resources, but we have property and we need to sell this property more effectively,” Andrei Tur, a deputy economy minister, said during a Minsk Forum panel.

Tur even started a heated but amiable debate with presidential candidate Romanchuk, calling his plans to create 1 million new jobs in the country of nearly 10 million “romantic.”

The debate, an integral element of the democratization expected by the West, was closed to general public, however. All Belarussians can expect in the current campaign are two 30-minute televised addresses to be delivered by each candidate.

The time cannot be split into shorter segments and no opponent may be invited, which candidates say is a calculated move to prevent them from impressing the voters.

“You might be the brightest speaker, but who would listen to a talking head?” Romanchuk said.

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