

Lukashenko Confident in Vote Result

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Belarussian soldier chopping firewood on Minsk's outskirts Friday as part of a local initiative to help the elderly. **Vasily Fedosenko**

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko poked fun on Friday at the idea that this month's presidential election could weaken his iron grip over his country.

Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, is widely expected to win his fourth term in the Dec. 19 vote.

When asked by a Kazakh reporter in the Kremlin about a possible change of power in the elections, Lukashenko quipped: "What political changes? What are you hinting at? You must be fed up with me."

"There will definitely be political changes. I am sure you meant political changes in general, but no change of power in Belarus," Lukashenko added.

The European Union and the United States have both urged Lukashenko, 55, to hold a fair election, though the 56-nation Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has never recognized an election in Belarus as free and fair.

Lukashenko was accused by vote observers of rigging his re-election in 2006, and his closest challenger pulled out of this year's vote, saying he believed the vote would be rigged.

But Lukashenko, speaking to reporters after a meeting of post-Soviet leaders including

President Dmitry Medvedev and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, joked about moves to allow observers greater access to the voting process.

"We have become such a democratic state, that I am afraid that some heads of states will avoid me, the major democrat," said Lukashenko, who was once described by the administration of former U.S. President George W. Bush as Europe's last dictator.

Election observers will be allowed for the first time since 1994 to participate in the vote count on Dec. 19, though an estimated 40 percent of the votes are likely to be cast early and thus counted without the participation of the observers.

"We have opened up our country, so everyone who wants to come is welcome, even those who were banned from entering our country for objective reasons," Lukashenko said. "Go and see the voting boxes."

Lukashenko is known for his colorful comments and appeared heartened by a landmark deal with Russia on Thursday over oil export duties. The deal could save Minsk up to \$4 billion and indicates Lukashenko — who has this year bickered publicly with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin — may have managed to repair stormy ties with the Kremlin.

When asked whether he had made peace with Medvedev, Lukashenko said, "Medvedev said at the dinner, 'Lovers' quarrels are soon mended.'"

"Our relations worsened unexpectedly and will improve unexpectedly," he said. "We'll find the time to reconcile even if we fall out."

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