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Belarus to Vote After Irascible Disputes

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Belarussian soldiers leaving booths to cast their ballots during early voting at a polling station in Minsk this week. **Sergei Grits**

He has been lambasted by Russian state-controlled television, warned by European leaders and even targeted by bare-breasted Ukrainian feminists, yet Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko appears on course for another victory in presidential elections Sunday.

But this time, Lukashenko, dubbed Europe's last dictator, might not win outright in the first round after opinion polls found support for his re-election at only about 40 percent.

Those same polls, however, also put total support for all other candidates at less than 30 percent, and the opposition says it does not expect the vote to be fair.

"There will be too little control over the vote count, so don't expect this to be an election but a self-appointment," Yaroslav Romanchuk, one of nine candidates challenging the incumbent, told The Moscow Times.

Romanchuk and former Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Sannikov are seen as the front-runners among the opposition hopefuls.

Both have complained that the opposition has been marginalized in the country's state-controlled media, especially television.

That claim is supported by observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, which has 40 long-term monitors in the country and plans to send another 400 to observe Sunday's vote.

An OSCE interim report published earlier this month found that state television news coverage "is dominated by extensive reporting on the president's activities, while other candidates received marginal coverage.

European leaders have urged Lukashenko to make sure the vote is free and fair.

Lukashenko, who has ruled the country of about 10 million with an iron grip since 1994, has replied that no one should expect him to leave office.

"There will definitely be political changes ... but no change of power in Belarus," he told reporters in Moscow last week.

During his visit, he won a landmark deal to import oil tax-free from Russia by promising to hand back the duties Belarus gets from exporting oil products.

The agreement, signed Dec. 9, signals that Minsk can continue to refine cheap Russian oil and sell it to Europe at a profit. The practice has long lubricated Belarus' economy and allowed Lukashenko to leave much of it unreformed and offering Soviet-style state handouts.

Critics in Russia and Belarus have voiced fear that shadowy intermediaries could benefit from the oil deal, which Moscow has valued at $4 billion.

"Nobody knows how smooth the transfers to the Russian budget will work," Romanchuk said by telephone from Minsk.

But many observers agree that the Kremlin will continue to support Lukashenko because he is the only realistic candidate.

"Russia will continue to invest in President Lukashenko because there is no danger of a color revolution with him," said Sergei Markov, a State Duma deputy with United Russia.

"Moscow does not have its own candidate. Therefore, it made this concession to Lukashenko," Romanchuk said.

Belarus' relations with Russia, with whom the country is formally locked in a union state, fell to all-time lows in recent years after Lukashenko shifted his stance from promoting Soviet nostalgia to Belarussian national identity.

He angered the Kremlin by openly courting the European Union and boycotting institutions like the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization.

NTV television, which is owned by state-controlled Gazprom, aired a series of documentaries titled "Krestny Batka" (which can be translated as "The Belarussian Godfather") in recent months that accused Lukashenko of political repressions and sympathizing with Adolf Hitler, among other things.

Lukashenko retaliated with an interview broadcast on Belarussian state television with Russia's arch foe, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who came out in defense of Lukashenko.

President Dmitry Medvedev lashed out at Lukashenko this fall, accusing him of sowing hostility between Moscow and Minsk.

"President Lukashenko's statements are not just far removed from diplomatic rules but also from elementary human principles," Medvedev said in the video address published on his blog Oct. 3.

He was responding to allegations by Lukashenko just two days earlier that Russia was trying to depose him by covertly financing the Belarussian opposition.

But despite the disputes, Moscow largely continued to bankroll its western neighbor, which faced a real danger of insolvency during the economic crisis of 2008-09.

Both Russia and the International Monetary Fund have injected millions of dollars into Belarus, sending its foreign debt soaring. Minsk owed some $25.6 billion in October, while foreign currency reserves stood at just $2.8 billion on Dec. 1, according to the Belarussian central bank.

Meanwhile, Western observers are unconvinced that Belarus is moving closer to democracy.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2010, released earlier this week, identified Belarus as an "authoritarian regime," ranking it at 130, sandwiched between Gambia and Angola.

By comparison, the same report characterized Russia as a "hybrid regime" and ranked the country at 107, above Nepal but below Kyrgyzstan.

The protest over Lukashenko's rule reached Kiev on Wednesday, when Ukrainian women's group Femen staged a one-woman protest in front of the Belarussian Embassy. Photographs posted on the group's LiveJournal blog showed a female activist standing in the snow wearing nothing more than short-shorts and high heels and holding up a poster reading, "Drive Out Batska," in reference to the Ukrainian form of Lukashenko's nickname, Batka.

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