

No Surprise: Lukashenko Wins Belarus Presidential Race

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MINSK — In a development that surprised no one, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko on Monday was declared the winner of a fifth term following an election campaign boycotted by the opposition.

Lukashenko won 83.5 percent of Sunday's vote in the former Soviet republic, according to Lidia Yermoshina, chairwoman of the Belarussian Central Election Commission. She said Lukashenko's closest contender, Tatyana Korotkevich, had captured less than 5 percent of the vote.

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Belarus, a nation of 10 million in central Europe, is heavily dependent on Russia's cheap energy supplies, but is trying to distance itself from Moscow after Russia annexed Ukraine's

Crimean Peninsula last year and backed separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine.

Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said Belarus didn't fulfill its democratic commitments in holding its vote but stopped short of the sweeping criticisms that previous elections in Belarus have received.

Kent Harstedt, the leader of the OSCE's mission in Belarus, told reporters Monday that observers were disappointed by shortcomings during the counting. Harstedt also said Belarussian authorities created "an uneven playing field for campaigning," blurring the line between Lukashenko's candidacy and the interests of the state.

Harstedt, however, praised Belarussian authorities for allowing "all candidates to campaign throughout the country."

About 100 opposition supporters held a peaceful protest march after polls closed Sunday to show their discontent with the ballot. Opposition activists also cast doubt on the high turnout, which election officials said was over 87 percent.

"The election commissions made up the results as they wished," opposition leader Anatoly Lebedko said. "I'm amazed by the scale. They made up a staggering turnout, with half-empty polling stations."

Valentin Stefanovich of the human rights group Vesna said some polling stations had 50 percent of their ballots cast early.

Yermoshina explained the high turnout by saying many people — about 36 percent — had opted for early voting. She said all the ballots had been counted inside Belarus but those cast at embassies abroad have yet to be counted.

Russian President Vladimir Putin promptly called to congratulate the 61-year-old Lukashenko. The Kremlin said the results of the vote "showed wide support for Lukashenko from Belarussian public."

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the two leaders also discussed Russia's plans to set up an air base in Belarus, an idea that seems to have irked both Lukashenko and the opposition in Belarus.

Western leaders were only mildly critical of the election.

"The support for Lukashenko does not come as a surprise, nor does the level of the support," German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said. "As far as we could observe from Berlin, there has also not been the level of repression around the time of the elections that we have seen in the past."

Steinmeier also lauded Lukashenko for releasing political prisoners before the vote.

Speaking to election observers from former Soviet republics, Lukashenko said on Monday that as a head of the state he "did his best" to guarantee a fair election.

"I had to say it out loud yesterday: We went to such lengths to make sure the West finally sees

elements of democracy in Belarus," Lukashenko said. "And, to be honest, they certainly did."

The European Union and the United States first imposed sanctions on Lukashenko and other Belarussian officials in 2006 when he jailed one presidential candidate. Then, after the 2010 vote, he jailed eight more presidential candidates.

An EU official told The Associated Press last week that the EU may suspend sanctions against Belarus by the end of the month. The official, who wasn't authorized to issue public statements, spoke on condition of anonymity.

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