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Putin, Xi Hail Lukashenko's Victory Amid Western Condemnation

By AFP

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Chinese President Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. **Alexei Mayshev / photo-summit.brics-russia2024.ru**

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping congratulated Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko on Monday who claimed victory in an election that sealed a seventh term in office.

Official results showed the 70-year-old autocrat winning more than 86% of the vote, drawing condemnation in the West.

The Belarusian leader — who has imprisoned or exiled all his major opponents during his three-decade rule — has won every presidential election since 1994, in ballots that the opposition and human rights groups say are rigged.

Putin said Sunday's election showed he had the "undoubted" backing of the people.

"Your convincing victory in the elections clearly testifies to your high political authority and

the undoubted support of the population for the state policy Belarus is pursuing," Putin said, according to the Kremlin.

"You are always a welcome and dear guest on Russian soil. As agreed, I look forward to seeing you soon in Moscow," he continued.

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Chinese President Xi Jinping also sent a message of congratulations to Lukashenko, Chinese state media reported.

Beijing and Minsk have drawn closer over recent years, with Belarus — under Western sanctions — looking east to secure foreign investment.

Exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya called the election a "farce," while the European Union described it as a "sham."

Lukashenko, a staunch Putin ally, has been carrying out a ruthless crackdown on the opposition since 2020, when the presidential election triggered a wave of massive protests.

Rights groups say the country has jailed more than 1,200 political prisoners — with around 300 released in pre-vote pardons by Lukashenko.

This time, the candidates picked to run against him campaigned in his favor, while Lukashenko did not take part in debates and said he was not really following the campaign.

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