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Color revolutions: The Belarus case

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus and offers several explanations for the lack of regime change. It posits that the answers lie in the official interpretations of the historical past, the personal popularity of the president—acquired partly through his firm control over the media and persecution of his enemies—and the electorate's focus on economic rather than political issues or emphasis on democratic values. It notes also the importance of Russia as a player in Belarus, and Russia's ambivalent attitude toward the continuing dictatorship in Minsk.

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Introduction

Belarusian residents went to the polls on March 19 in the third presidential election since independence. The election had been bitter and contentious, and aside from Russia, world reaction was generally negative. Neither the United States, nor

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the EU, nor the OSCE recognized the election as free and fair. The opposition camps were depleted by arrests of leading figures, including, by late April, both of their presidential candidates and campaign managers. Altogether, in the election and its aftermath, the authorities arrested over 600 people for protesting the results. According to official figures issued on March 23, over 6.63 million people voted in the election out of an electorate of 7.1 million (93%). Of this figure, it was reported that 5,501,249 people (83%) voted for incumbent president Alyaksandr Lukashenka, 405,486 (6.1%) for Alyaksandr Milinkevich (united opposition candidate), 230,664 (3.5%) for Syarhey Haidukevich (Liberal Democratic Party), and 147,402 (2.2%) for Alyaksandr Kazulin (United Social Democratic Party) (*Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, March 24, 2006). The margin of victory for Lukashenka was clearly contrived. Though popular, no opinion poll taken prior to the election had provided him with much more than 60%, some considerably less. Conversely, the totals for the opposition candidates appeared abnormally low, particularly given the sort of returns for opposition candidate Uladzimir Hancharyk, after a brief and rather uninspired campaign in the 2001 election. The opposition called on its supporters to take to the streets on March 19, and there followed several days of protest that attracted world attention to Belarus, including a lead story on *BBC World News*. However, the protests did not succeed in bringing about a change of regime or a repeat election. The government was able to withstand international pressure and maintained the staunch backing of its closest ally, Russia. The main consequence of the protests appears to have been an eight-day delay in the inauguration of Lukashenka for a third term. On the other hand, the regime's over-reaction to the opposition campaigns was surprising, particularly for a seasoned campaigner such as Lukashenka (Forbrig et al., 2006).

This paper examines some reasons why to date there has been no color revolution in Belarus. It provides some comparisons with the situation in Ukraine and lists the main factors why the challenges to the Lukashenka administration thus far have been somewhat limited. It begins with an examination of the historical background of Belarus and demonstrates how the government has managed to manipulate historical traditions for contemporary purposes, that is, to perpetuate the myth that Belarus's ties to Russia are longstanding and even the key factor in Belarusian history. Critical to this perspective is the continued commemoration of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) as the pivotal and decisive event in the history of Belarus, just as in Russia. Equally important, it is conjectured, has been the depiction of Belarus as an oasis of economic stability under Lukashenka. Residents have generally been protected from dramatic changes, shock therapy, the presence of oligarchs, mass privatization, and high prices for amenities such as housing, heating, and food. In turn, Belarusians in general do not place high priority on the various facets of a democratic state, such as free elections, the right to assembly, a free press and an open media.

The importance of the Soviet legacy in defining such attitudes cannot be overestimated. In 1959, 12.5% of the population of Belarus (then the Byelorussian SSR) was of retirement age. The equivalent figure for 2004 (the date of the most recent survey) was 21.4%. Of those under the working age of 16 (youngsters and children), the

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