

# OSCE observers told to leave Belarus over election fraud claims

Belarus refuses to extend mandate for OSCE observers after president is accused of using fraudulent counting in election

Associated Press

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Riot police prepare as opposition supporters protest against what they see as large-scale vote-rigging. Photograph: Sergey Ponomarev/AP

Belarus has refused to extend the mandate of the Minsk office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe after its election observers accused President Alexander Lukashenko of using fraudulent counting during the 19 December election to win almost 80% of the vote. The government said the OSCE office had "fulfilled its mandate".

The closure is further evidence that the authoritarian president has turned his back on the west after modest efforts to improve relations.

Separately the Belarussian KGB raided homes and offices of journalists to seize documents and files related to coverage of the election and the mass opposition protest that followed.

Tens of thousands of opposition supporters marched through Minsk on election night to protest fraudulent vote counting. The demonstration was violently broken up by riot police, and about 700 people were arrested, including dozens of journalists and seven presidential candidates.

Yulia Doroshkevich, a photojournalist who works for the weekly newspaper *Nasha Niva*, said her cameras, computers and tape recorder were seized from her apartment on Friday. She said her husband, who is not a journalist but acknowledged to the KGB officers that he also had been at the protest, was taken in for questioning and was being held through the holiday weekend.

Earlier in the week, the KGB searched *Nasha Niva*'s editorial office, seizing 12 computers, hard disks and memory cards, and also seized a computer from the apartment of the newspaper's editor, *Reporters Without Borders* said.

In its statement on Thursday, *Reporters Without Borders* said that since 25 December, the KGB had searched the offices of three news outlets and an opposition party, the homes of two journalists, two human rights activists, two former presidential candidates and four of their advisers.

The homes of two more journalists were searched Friday, including those of Doroshkevich and a reporter for the independent television channel *Belsat*.

"Lukashenko is setting a world record in his attempts to destroy all dissent in Belarus," Doroshkevich said.

At least 10 of the journalists arrested on 19 December were still in custody; at least three of them could spend up to 15 years in prison on charges of organising public disorder. The seven candidates, five of whom remain in jail, face similar sentences. Most of the people arrested were sentenced to five to 15 days in jail.

The official election results, which international observers said were fraudulent, gave Lukashenko 80% of the vote.

Lukashenko, often called Europe's last dictator, has been in power in Belarus for more than 16 years. He exercises overwhelming control over the politics, industry and media in this nation of 10 million, which borders Russia, Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic nations.



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