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## BELARUSIAN REGIME RESOLUTELY DASHES ANY HOPES FOR DEMOCRATIC LIBERALIZATION

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Hints of any democratic progress in Belarus came to a screeching halt on December 19, 2010, in the aftermath of the country’s most recent electoral exercise, the latest in a long line of fundamentally flawed elections. The brutal and bloody election-night crackdown against political opposition supporters, including mass arrests of demonstrators, as well as candidates, who challenged the 16-year rule of Alexander Lukashenka, was unprecedented. Even the prospects of inducements from the EU and others failed to restrain a regime bent on maintaining power. The strong-arm tactics employed on election night, and since, confirm the nature of Lukashenka’s rule – one that perpetuates a pervasive, albeit subtle, climate of fear to squelch dissent.

The OSCE Election Observation Mission (EOM) post-election [statement](#), issued on December 20, concluded that “Belarus still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments, although some specific improvements were made. Election night was marred by detentions of most presidential candidates, and hundreds of activists, journalists and civil society representatives.” The [Helsinki Commission](#), the U.S. and European governments, as well as Western NGOs, condemned the regime’s violent campaign of repression and called for the

release of jailed opposition presidential candidates, hundreds of peaceful protestors, and some two dozen journalists covering the demonstrations. Moreover, cyber police shut down numerous internet and social networking sites. Repressive actions have continued, including raids on opposition party offices, NGOs, individual residences of activists and journalists, and independent media outlets by police and the KGB.

Displaying his displeasure with the OSCE’s negative assessment of the elections, Lukashenka refused to extend the expiring mandate of the organization’s office in Minsk, effectively ousting the OSCE. The only other leader to order such an expulsion was Slobodan Milosevic. The development comes as neighboring Lithuania assumes the chairmanship of the Vienna-based 56-nation organization.

Helsinki Commission staff were part of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly’s contingent to the EOM, headed by Tony Lloyd, a member of the British Parliament. We observed the balloting and vote count in Minsk and Polotsk, a historic city located 120 miles north of the capital. Our election-day observations were consistent with those of the 450 other OSCE observers representing 44 participating States deployed throughout the country. The voting process was assessed as ‘good’ or ‘very good’ in the vast majority of observed polling stations, while the critical vote count was judged as ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ in nearly half of the precincts observed, giving fresh currency to an adage attributed to Soviet leader Joseph Stalin: “It is not the votes that count, but who counts the votes.”

The vote count in Novopolotsk was decidedly non-transparent as both international and domestic observers (virtually all of the latter appeared to be so-called GONGOs, or government organized non-governmental organizations) were kept far enough away from the table on which the votes were being counted, making it impossible to see how the ballots were marked. When queried several times by Commission staff as to the reason, the precinct chairman politely insisted that it was a decision that he and other members of the election commission had made on the pretext of preventing observers from “interfering” in the counting process. Meanwhile, at a polling station in Minsk, staff were allowed closer access to the vote

count, though were prevented from seeing what was written on each ballot. With an ambiguous way of counting votes, those in attendance had little clue as to how the chairman of the election commission counted ballots. An outspoken domestic observer was subsequently voted out of the polling station by election commissioners because he was a “nuisance to the vote count.”

While the run-up to the election had shown some procedural improvements and an easing of restrictions on normal political activity, the electoral machinery at every level remained firmly under the regime’s control. There were greater opportunities than in previous elections for candidates to speak on live television, and candidates were for the most part able to more freely meet with voters. This, however, did not translate into a level playing field for all candidates as the state-controlled media disproportionately favored Lukashenka. Very telling was the fact that only 0.26 percent of all precinct electoral commission members and 0.70 percent of territorial election commission members were from opposition political parties.

Clearly, even the limited improvements did not lead to a free and fair outcome, with only the margin of Lukashenka’s victory to be announced. A December 20 [statement](#) issued by the White House, citing the critical OSCE assessment, stressed: “The United States cannot accept as legitimate the results of the presidential election announced by the Belarusian Central Election Commission” issued earlier the day. Even regime-sponsored exit polls contradicted the official CEC results, giving a lower percentage of the vote to Lukashenka and higher percentages to Andrei Sannikau and Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu, the leading opposition candidates who were victims of violence by the authorities and remain incarcerated along with several other contenders. Independent pollsters and analysts also gave Lukashenka far less of the vote than the nearly 80 percent he officially garnered, with some giving him less than the 50 percent of votes needed to avoid a second round against a single opposition candidate.

Given the unconscionable crackdown and fraudulent elections, hopes and expectations for even limited progress with respect to democracy and human rights have been thwarted. Through his repressive and undemocratic actions, Lukashenka has shown that he will not tolerate meaningful reform and that he will do whatever it takes to maintain absolute power. This overarching imperative clearly trumps improved relations with the United States and especially the European Union which were in the offing prior to election day, and could have resulted in badly needed financial assistance.

In a rambling two-and-a-half hour televised press conference the day after the election, Lukashenka belittled what he termed “mindless democracy” while boldly declaring his lack of fear. Despite his bravado, clearly the Belarusian leader fears the prospect of submitting to a vote in a genuinely free and fair electoral contest. Against the backdrop of a decade of rigged presidential and parliamentary elections and an illegal referendum, Belarus is regrettably no closer to restoring legitimacy to executive and legislative structures, and the prospects for meaningful change appear remote. To the detriment of the Belarusian people, the Lukashenka regime has, yet again, chosen the path of self-imposed isolation.