

Belarusian MFA on the conduct of the Presidential Elections in the Republic of Belarus

On December 19, 2010, the presidential elections took place in Belarus. The people of Belarus clearly and unequivocally opted for socio-economic and political changes geared toward consolidated statehood, stability and well-being of the society.

The campaign was preceded by a methodical effort to improve and prepare the election process with due account of the best international experience and relevant OSCE recommendations.

All presidential candidates enjoyed equal and favourable conditions for participation in the election, including the registration, signature-collection and campaigning stages. Their access to state media was considerably extended, and live broadcasts of the debates were organised. Political parties and civil society enjoyed more opportunities to take part in the elections. The conditions in the country were highly conducive for campaigning in a peaceful, calm and benevolent way.

Positive changes at virtually all stages of the electoral process were acknowledged by many international and domestic observers, and reflected in reports by OSCE and CIS observation missions. Even the most truculent opponents of the authorities started to talk of the conditions for an all-out rapprochement with the EU taking shape in Belarus.

At the same time, as further events demonstrated, the scenario was not suitable to some personalities, both in and outside the country. Various members of radical NGOs in Belarus expressed their concern about such prospects.

For instance, the leader of one of such NGOs made the following statement: *“The authorities are taking unprecedented steps to democratize the election process. Therefore, aggressive actions are needed that would provoke a crackdown by the police capable to draw public attention. Because actions as such, without any violence, are uninteresting and catch little attention”*.

There is a convincing evidence of the plans of the opposition to draw the police into a violent scenario that would include forcible takeover of the seats of the Central Election Commission and various government agencies, should the necessary number of protesters (over 50 thousand) fail to show up for the peaceful rally. The key goals of such a scenario were to invite tough international response condemning the “regime” in Belarus and derail the rapprochement between the authorities and the West. It was planned to make the authorities fully accountable for the possible bloodshed.

Lacking wide support in the society some candidates used their live TV and radio appearances to urge the voters, long before the election day, to gather

in Oktyabrskaya Square at 20.00 of 19 December for an unauthorized rally “to protest against the fraudulent vote”.

The candidates also called to actively support the rally during their numerous meetings with voters.

At the same time, some radical NGOs were recruiting at high fees militants for the violent action among persons that had little if anything to do with politics. Their training was co-financed from abroad and took place i.a. in the neighbouring countries.

This shows that violence was the only option to many opposition candidates and their supporters who did their best to make it happen.

According to some data, members of the diplomatic corps accredited to Belarus were aware of these plans of the radical NGOs. The diplomats, moreover, expressed concerns in this regard and considered informing the authorities. Eventually, however, they did nothing to prevent the violence and assumed the role of onlookers.

As part of the preparation for the massive protest rally, or, alternatively, riots (should the protesters not show up in sufficient numbers) on the night of 19 December, the opposition worked hard to compromise the vote and discredit its results.

In the course of the campaign, some opposition candidates organized so-called alternative observation which was to become the key instrument of pressure on the authorities, provocations and source of negative “facts” to shape the assessment of the campaign results by international community and voters. The “negative” information gathered by opposition observers was intended for the OSCE Observer Mission and foreign representatives.

The “electoral fraud evidence” was produced with the following methods.

1. Bribery of electoral commission members, as well as representatives of agencies accredited in Belarus to conduct exit polls.

2. Psychological pressure on and intimidation of, electoral commission members. For instance, cell phones and mail boxes of chairmen of some electoral commissions throughout the voting received threatening messages and calls.

3. Open interference with and attempted disruption of, the work of electoral commissions. At different polling stations across the country, individual domestic observers attempted to provoke conflicts with members of electoral commissions by making demands that went beyond the observers’ mandate, taking unauthorized pictures and videotaping the voting process.

4. Withholding of blank ballots, fabrication of forged ballots pre-ticked in favour of a specific candidate, their stuffing into ballot boxes by the candidate’s supporters during the vote as a testimony of electoral fraud or an alternative candidate’s “victory”.

5. Sending opposition activists (groups of 10 to 15 persons) to declare their support for alternative candidates to exit-pollers after visiting voting stations without casting ballots. The exit-polling was usually recorded on video.

6. Unauthorized exit-polls organized by opposition activists and publication of false polling results with reference to Russian or Ukrainian public opinion agencies. For instance, on 19 December 2010 opposition media reported exit-poll data as of 14.00 allegedly disclosed by the TNS-Ukraine marketing company. The company's head Mr. N.Churilov clearly denied any knowledge of the information afterwards, saying that no member of the TNS-Ukraine had made any comments, and it was himself alone who accumulated all the data. On the same day the Belarusian service of the "Radio Liberty" published exit-poll results with reference to the Russian "Inside" communications agency. The agency itself later overturned the information as it had not conducted any polls in Belarus.

7. Aggressive circulation through all available media "evidences" of alleged violations in the course of the campaign. For instance, the Charter-97 website informed on 19 December, that observers registered massive box stuffing by a single individual at the Novopolotsk polling station No 22. At the same time the Nasha Niva website hoaxed that a voter in station No 104 of Minsk found out on the election day that he was marked as already having early-voted three days ago. Both allegations were checked and found to be plain disinformation.

These facts show that those who initiated alternative observation and massive pressure on electoral commissions sought from the very beginning to supply the participants of the unauthorized opposition rally with "evidences" and fake proof to instigate a "vast outcry" following the vote and compromise its results internationally.

On the night of December 19, 2010, a number of presidential candidates defied the official warnings by the authorities and orchestrated the unauthorized rally in Minsk. Importantly, it had started even before the voting stations closed down and long before the first results of the ballot were made public.

The police who sought to defuse the riot confiscated ahead of it 150 metal rods, bars, pipes, pyrotechnical devices, including high-charge ones, smoke and gas bombs, 4 jerricans with gasoline, Molotov cocktails, wooden stakes, loudspeakers etc., that were transported in a minibus fiercely protected from the police by representatives of an opposition candidate.

Contrary to some candidates' assurances, the action of the opposition did not, unfortunately, take the form of a peaceful gathering. The massive riots led to attempted forcible takeover of the House of Government.

Importantly, the police demonstrated maximum restraint by not interfering with the opposition's rally in Oktyabrskaya Square. Its participants were also allowed to walk without any incidents all the way down the city's

main thoroughfare to Nezavisimosti Square, although this was not authorized, either. Nezavisimosti Square was the place where the protesters could have held a peaceful rally without any restrictions.

It is only when the militants started crashing the windows and breaking through the doors in an attempt to storm the House of Government, the police responded in order to suppress the violence.

In the end, it was the mob's extremely violent and aggressive behavior that forced the police to take action against the provocations staged by the riots' ringleaders.

All riot-related incidents will be soon carefully investigated and assessed in full conformity with the Belarusian law.

Following the violence, 123 people sought medical assistance, including 87 police officers.

The authorities possess a well-documented evidence supporting all aforementioned facts. It can be made available, if necessary, to the wide international community. Moreover, numerous Belarusian and foreign media covered extensively the events of 19 December 2010.

It should be noted that the violence instigated by individual presidential candidates was condemned by Messrs. Y.Romanchiuk, G.Kostusev, V.Tereshchenko, D.Uss, as well as representatives of several other candidates.