Belarus election: "severely flawed" according to election monitors

The European Parliament has called for sanctions against Belarus after presidential elections there were deemed to be seriously flawed. "The Belarusian people deserve better", was the verdict delivered by European election observers following the controversial re-election of Alexander Lukashenko as President of Belarus. Official results of the election give Mr Lukashenko over 82% of the vote with the main opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich receiving just 6%.

This result has been denounced by the opposition who branded it a "farce" and demanded a re-run.

A delegation of European Parliament members were barred from entering Belarus just prior to the election when the regime refused to grant them visas - while issuing an ominous warning that they would "act against" those who tried to get into the country.

In a statement issued after the election the group, led by Polish Conservative MEP Bogdan Klich, said that "the vote took place in an atmosphere of fear and threat, against a background of the Belarusian authorities threatening violence against peaceful demonstrators and death sentences for those manifesting their freedom of expression and assembly...We therefore claim that Mr Lukashenko can not be recognized as legitimate president".

The President of the European Parliament Josep Borrell said that "the failure to respect international electoral standards in combination with a steadily deteriorating political situation, - and persistent violations of the civil and fundamental rights of the Belarusian people will not remain without consequences for the relations between the EU and Belarus." MEPs want to put in place sanctions such as a travel ban for high-ranking officials, so as not to hit the civilian population.

Climate of intimidation
The body charged with leading the monitoring of the elections - the OSCE - said in a statement that "the Belarusian presidential election on 19 March failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections... Arbitrary use of state power and widespread detentions showed a disregard for the basic rights of freedom of assembly, association and expression..."

Elmar Brok MEP, the German Conservative who leads the Parliament's foreign affairs committee, condemned the election as "a fake" - reminding him of the "40's, 50's and 60's in eastern Europe". This was echoed by Ursula Plassnik, foreign minister of Austria, holders of the EU's rotating Presidency, who said the vote was marked by a "climate of intimidation"

The atmosphere leading up to the election had been tense. No doubt fearful of an "Orange Revolution" after a similarly controversial election outcome in neighbouring Ukraine in 2004, President Lukashenko had threatened to "break the neck" of anyone
who tried "a coup". A statement from the security services prior to the election associated the opposition and civil society with terrorists. This considerably added to the "climate of intimidation" said the OSCE. Election day itself was notable for the heavy presence of the security services and restrictions placed on movement around the country to prevent organised protest.

Critics of the regime have loudly complained that they lacked access of the state-controlled media while dozens of political activists have been arrested in the lead up to the poll. Just last year the last truly independent newspaper - "Narodnaya Volya" - was closed down. Last September a resolution by the European Parliament condemned the Lukashenko regime for the closure in recent years of "several political parties, 22 newspapers and more than 50 pro-democracy NGOs...for criticising the President and his policies". In recognition of this suppression of the media, in 2004 the European Parliament awarded the Belarus Association of journalists the Sakharov prize for freedom of thought. The US has also condemned the regime, calling Mr Lukashenko "Europe's last Dictator".