

Belarus Brief:

Sunday March 19, 2006 (18.00 CET)

Updates

- **Atmosphere**

1) News outlets and observers describe the atmosphere as calm, which was a usual attribution of Soviet-time elections. "Feels like calm before the storm" an international observer told to Pontis.

2) More than 450 democratic activists have been repressed during the electoral campaign and around 160 activists fined.¹ By today the police arrested all heads of regional headquarters, different media outlets confirmed the arrests of the heads of the Vitebsk, Mogilov and Brest opposition headquarters. Altogether 9 out of 30 Milinkevich's official representatives have been arrested by now.²

3) Minsk talks about the reported phone call of Russian President Putin allegedly warning Lukashenka to prevent bloodshed.

4) According to the Minister of Justice's statement today following the elections Belarusian criminal legislation will be toughened, so authorities could react to "criminals".

- **Continuing Deportations**

5) Three Russian journalists were detained at polling stations in Soligorsk today and deported out of Belarus. MEPs Janusz Onyszkewich (Poland) and Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert (the Netherlands) were refused entry to Belarusian territory yesterday. Yesterday, Belarusian officials deported a member of Polish Parliament and OSCE observer Marek Sucki. According to unconfirmed reports, the Belarusian authorities today issued a warrant for the arrest of Steven Lee Myers of New York Times.

6) The Central Electoral Commission sees no violations of electoral law³.

- **Civil Society**

¹ <http://svaboda.org/articlesfeatures/politics/2006/03/ed33deb3-4e26-444c-91b8-8bad2765fde3.html>

² milinkevich.org

³ <http://pravo.by/news.asp?type=0#5>

7) One day before the presidential elections, Belarusian democratic activists organized a concert in Minsk under a message "Ja za svobodu!" (I am for freedom!). Famous Belarusian rock-groups (many of whom have been banned from performing in Belarus after they sang at opposition events) played on the stage. Despite cold weather around 10,000 people came to take part at the concert, which lasted for four hours. Reportedly there were no uniformed police at the Bangalor square yesterday, where the concert was organized. This suggests a possible conflict between police and special forces/KGB reported by some unexpected release of opposition activists in previous days (such as Anatolij Lebedko).

8) Special forces searching for exposures broke Sunday morning into the office of NGO Assembly, which organized yesterday's concert.

9) On Saturday clients of Velcom cell provider received text messages with the following text: "On March 19 in the evening at Oktiabrskaja Square provocateurs are preparing bloodshed. Safeguard your life and health".⁴ From yesterday activists of the Free Space campaign sent around a chain sms saying "Freedom is close as never before! We are in majority! Come to the Oktiabrskaja Square at 20.00 on March 19! Vote and protect! Send this out to your friends".

- **Preliminary Election Results and Exit Polls**

10) According to the Central Electoral Commission more than 80% of registered voters took part at the elections by 4pm⁵, while 31,3% of Belarusians voted at early voting from March 14 till March 18. To compare, during the 2001 presidential elections in Belarus only 14,3% voters took part at early voting⁶. For a week prior to the elections day Lukashenka's administration forced as many people as possible (especially students and workers at factories) to come and vote early – under the threat of expulsion from universities and dismissal from jobs.

11) Belarusian Television at 10am on Sunday made public the first results of **exit polls** allegedly conducted by the pro-government Belarusian Committee of Youth Organizations at nearly 3,000 polling stations. The state-controlled channel said that **83.5% of the voters supported the incumbent leader, Aleksandr Lukashenka**; 2.6% voted for Sergei Gaidukevich, 2.5% for opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and 2.1 percent for opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. Exit poll results might not be released before the polls' closure. The Komsomolaskaya Pravda in Belarus reported about the "sociological" methods of state funded ECOOM agency as ridiculous.⁷ Nevertheless the – **illegally** – aired exit polls results show the intention of the incumbent to "win" with at least 80% of the votes.

12) All **frontier troops** personnel have voted early and today in the morning. The votes have already been counted at 11 polling stations on the territory of military bases, **while 98% voted for Lukashenka**.

13) On Sunday at 4.30 pm, **Russian Sociology Center** of Yuriy Lavada **presented alternative results of exit polls**. According to these results, 47,4% of voters voted for Alexander Lukashenka and 25,6% - for Alexander Milinkevich.

14) According to the press release of the **Baltic Surveys / The Gallup Organization**, based in Vilnius, Lithuania in current situation in Belarus **it is impossible to implement independent and reliable exit poll, free of the Government pressure**. "Today (on

⁴ Belarus.partisan.org/force/1718html

⁵ official legal portal pravo.by

⁶ ucpb.org

⁷ http://minsk.kp.ru/2006/03/19/doc106985/

election day) two so-called sociological companies announced their 'exit poll' results before noon – while the voting in Belarus continues until late evening. One of them said that the interviewing was carried out in 2.8 thousand polling stations and 6638 voters were interviewed, that means less than 3 voters per polling station! Such activities, supported by Minsk officials, illustrate again the lack of understanding the very meaning of exit polling among these who are officially allowed to carry the 'exit poll'" states the press release.

- **So when the Official Election Results will be announced?**

15) The exact time of the announcement of the official election results are dubious currently. The head of the CEC reportedly said results will be announced at 2pm on March 20 (Monday), the time of OSCRE/ODIHR election mission press conference, instead of 9pm on March 19 (Sunday). Other diplomatic sources suggesting results will be announced around Sunday midnight.

16) According to civic activists in Minsk, from early afternoon police have blocked the main squares in the city center. The same news was reported from all major regional cities in Belarus.