

LIBERTAS

Rights & Democracy's Newsletter

November 2011, Volume 21, Number 1

2011 John Humphrey Award

Ales Michalevic, candidate in the 2010 presidential election in Belarus and former political prisoner currently in exile, is the winner of Rights & Democracy's 2011 John Humphrey Award.



MY STORY

By Ales Michalevic

What happened on election day, December 19, 2010, cannot be described in rational terms.

From the moment I arrived at the post-election rally I saw many of its participants beaten and injured.

Hundreds of people who protested against the election result were arrested in the post-election crackdown. I was arrested by KGB troops later in the night at my campaign office and taken to the KGB prison.

Members of my campaign team were constantly being called to the KGB for interrogation, as were some of my relatives. Shortly before the New Year I was officially accused of organizing mass disorders. The events which followed these accusations were even more disturbing.

In the KGB prison I was subjected to torture. Unidentified men in black masks carried out personal searches of prisoners five or six times a day.

We were stretched naked, with our legs hooked up to a string. We could feel our ligaments tearing; by the end of this procedure, it was difficult to walk.

We were placed, naked, a meter from the wall with our hands stretched forward, propping up the wall in the room, where the temperature didn't exceed ten degrees. We were kept so for 40 minutes, until our hands swelled. Sometimes they made us prop up the walls with our palms up. Some prisoners with a poor health got faint during such "procedures."

But the men in masks did not stop.

They didn't turn off the fluorescent lamps at night but demanded we lie down under them, not even covering the face with a handkerchief. As a result, eye-sight began to deteriorate.

We were ordered to sleep in bed with our faces turned to the "eyes" in the doorway, the compliance of which was continually watched - if we turned while sleeping, they went in and woke us up, forcing us to lie down as ordered. In fact, it caused a complete absence of sleep.

Prisoners were denied their legal right to medical help. Lawyers were also not allowed to see prisoners. This was done deliberately to keep the prisoners silent about torture.

The KGB conducted questioning without lawyers, without protocol, violating procedural rules. They confiscated my diary with every-day records, made there; but it is impossible to erase from memory what happened behind those walls.

Cont'd on page 8 ...



**Droits et Démocratie
Rights & Democracy**

Centre international des droits de la personne et du développement démocratique
International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development

The International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (Rights & Democracy) was created by the Parliament of Canada in 1988. Its two-fold mission focuses on promoting democratic development and respect for human rights around the world. For more information, visit www.dd-rd.ca.



President's Message

Over 60 years have passed since John Humphrey drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and his important contribution to humankind continues to inspire defenders of democracy and rights around the world. We are proud to honour his memory with our annual award, which will be presented for the 20th time this year, the first where politicians or parliamentarians were eligible to be nominated.

Through this award, we have sought to not only recognize the important work of our laureates, but also encourage them to persevere. I cannot help but feel heartened when considering the further accomplishments of past laureates.

Our 2008 laureate, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, is currently spearheading a new mechanism to monitor court trials of rights defenders. In October, 2007 laureate Akbar Ganji joined other Iranian human rights leaders in publicly condemning religious persecution in their country. We felt joy and relief upon learning recently that 2006 laureate Su Su Nway was released from a Burmese prison, though it was dampened by the knowledge her compatriot and 1999 laureate Min Ko Naing remains imprisoned; both persevere in their fight for democracy. Our very first laureate, Peru's Instituto de Defensa Legal, is now in its 28th year of defending rights and democracy.

This year, we honour a champion of democracy from a country that has never truly known it, Belarus. We received over 100 worthy nominations, but our jury was particularly gripped by the courage demonstrated by Ales Michalevic. Persecuted, abused, and forced into exile for daring to run for the presidency of Belarus, Mr. Michalevic has, at great risk, spoken publicly about the regime's excesses and proposed concrete ways to improve the lives of his fellow citizens. He is among those who personify the hope that a brighter future lies ahead for that country, and for other disenfranchised peoples everywhere.

The global struggle for democracy is a long and arduous one. But there is progress, and for that we must thank people like Mr. Michalevic and the 19 laureates who preceded him, who embody humanity's potential to create the better world John Humphrey and others envisioned.

Mr. Gérard Latulippe, President
Rights & Democracy

RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY'S JOHN HUMPHREY AWARD

2011 marks the 20th year Rights & Democracy proudly presents the John Humphrey Award to an organization or individual from any country or region of the world, for exceptional achievement in the promotion of democratic development and respect for human rights. The Award consists of a grant of \$30,000, as well as a speaking tour of Canadian cities to help raise public awareness of the recipient's work. It is named in honour of the Canadian John Peters Humphrey, a human rights law professor who prepared the first draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The winner is selected by an international jury composed of five members of Rights & Democracy's Board of Directors. For further details, please visit www.dd-rd.ca.

Previous Winners

- 2010 – PROVEA (Venezuela)
- 2009 – LA'ONF: Iraqi Non-Violence Network (Iraq)
- 2008 – Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (Zimbabwe)
- 2007 – Akbar Ganji (Iran)
- 2006 – Su Su Nway (Burma)
- 2005 – Yan Christian Warinussy (West Papua)
- 2004 – Godeliève Mukasarasi (Rwanda)
- 2003 – Kimy Pernía Domicó (Colombia)/Angélica Mendoza de Ascarza (Peru)
- 2002 – Ayesha Imam (Nigeria)
- 2001 – Sima Samar (Afghanistan)
- 2000 – Reverend Timothy Njoya (Kenya)
- 1999 – Cynthia Maung and Min Ko Naing (Burma)
- 1998 – Palden Gyatso (Tibet)
- 1997 – Father Javier Giraldo (Colombia)
- 1996 – Sultana Kamal (Bangladesh)
- 1995 – Bishop Carlos F. X. Belo (East Timor)
- 1994 – Campaign for Democracy (Nigeria)/Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (Egypt)
- 1993 – La Plate-forme des organismes haïtiens de défense des droits humains (Haïti)
- 1992 – Instituto de Defensa Legal (Peru)

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PHOTO: Alex Zelenko

THE POST-ELECTION CRISIS IN BELARUS

By David Marples

President, North American Association for Belarusian Studies

Since the controversial elections of 19 December 2010, the Belarusian leadership has abandoned any pretences of support for a democratic society, pursuing its internal enemies with unprecedented determination.

That election, which resulted in a manipulated victory for President Alyaksandr Lukashenka (79.9%), was followed by a mass demonstration in October Square. Some of those present then decided to move the protest to Independence Square and to hold “talks” with government leaders. The main figures involved were the presidential candidates Andrey Sannikau, Vital Ryaksheuski, and Mikalay Statkevich.

In Independence Square, two men communicating by radio smashed the glass in the entrance to the Parliament. At once dozens of riot police appeared from a side entrance and attacked demonstrators.

There were over 700 arrests, including six of the nine presidential candidates who had opposed Lukashenka.

Subsequently, the regime conducted a crackdown on political activists, NGOs, and human rights organizations. The offices of Vyasna, the Free Belarusian Theater, Charter 97, and others were entered, and equipment confiscated. Presidential candidate Uladzimir Nyaklayeu was detained and beaten before he could reach the initial demonstration on October Square. In May, the courts sentenced Sannikau to five years in a penal colony; six for Statkevich. The KGB tortured detainees, according to testimony provided by another candidate Ales Michalevic, who fled to the Czech Republic in March.

The European Union and United States reacted with shock and anger to these events. A travel ban rescinded in October 2008 on Lukashenka and fellow leaders was reinstated and expanded to more than 35 state officials. The United States placed sanctions on several state-owned companies. Russia recognized the election results but condemned the violence—especially until the release of two detained Russian journalists.

Lukashenka’s problems, however, were compounded by a financial crisis exacerbated by the president raising wages by 50% as an election “gift” to the populace and a trade deficit of around \$9 billion, a result of the rising costs of import prices caused by the heightened cost of raw materials. Foreign reserves dwindled to

around \$4.3 billion and fell by \$700 million in January 2011 alone. At this same time the country’s foreign debt was about 50% of GDP. The government responded by devaluing the Belarusian ruble against the dollar by 40% in April. Foreign currency became impossible to find, inflation spiraled—it is expected to be over 65% in 2011—and basic goods disappeared from stores as a result of panic buying.

In September, the regime decided to float the ruble on the foreign exchange market after which its value promptly sank to BR8,600/\$1. Many analysts expect it to fall further. Lukashenka requested a \$3 billion loan from Russia and the Eurasian Economic Community in the spring. Russia maintained that Belarus must privatize its most profitable companies. Gazprom announced plans to buy out the gas transit company Beltransgaz, and the Urals Potash Company announced a bid for Belaruskali (Belarus Potash). Evidently Russia intends to make further loans conditional on the sale of Belarusian companies to Russian firms.

In June, Belarus approached the IMF for a loan of \$8 billion, but the IMF would first like to see serious economic reforms, a wage freeze, and financial stringency. In the fall China provided a \$1 billion loan; Iran agreed to a \$400 million loan in early October. But these are insufficient for Belarus’ needs, and experts maintain it requires a further \$3 billion by the end of the year to meet debt repayments. The emergency has had a critical impact on Lukashenka’s popularity. A large majority believes the president to be responsible for the crisis, and his personal standing, which was 55% last December, has dropped to 20.5%, according to the most recent survey by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research.

Lukashenka has made half-hearted attempts to conciliate the Europeans, and released several political prisoners in September and October. But the summer has seen severe crackdowns on any form of protest—including small groups of youngsters who simply clapped in unison—and new laws to empower the KGB and ban any public gatherings of more than three people. The regime intends to remain in power by force and repressions, and eke out the crisis through foreign loans rather than reforming the economy. The political opposition has been cowed and remains divided on the appropriate tactics. But Lukashenka has lost control over the situation for the first time in his 17 years in power and the future remains increasingly uncertain.



THE LAST GASPS OF EUROPE'S LAST DICTATOR?

In conversation with Ales Michalevic on the struggle for a democratic Belarus

by Pascal Zamprelli, Rights & Democracy

After a few weeks in prison, Ales Michalevic had a decision to make.

At first, he had refused to meet with the Belarusian counter-intelligence agents without his lawyer, but his jailers' willingness to use physical force left him no choice. The agents were convinced Michalevic was secretly working for some foreign government, given his numerous contacts abroad. When a lie-detector test proved otherwise, they figured why not make Michalevic *their* agent and put those contacts to use for President Lukashenka and the secret service. This, they told him, would be the price of his freedom.

"It was very difficult moral decision for me," Michalevic says. "I knew I could stay in prison longer; I was ready for it." Indeed, when approached with a first offer – release in exchange for publicly denouncing other candidates and supporting the official result – he had flatly answered that he would rather sit in jail.

But by the time this new offer was on the table, he and others had been through weeks of abuse, and he was one of the few people who might have a chance to get out and speak publicly. So, he agreed.

What he did next would leave his former captors stunned, in a way only an authoritarian regime blind to the fact it is starting to lose its iron grip could be. With help, he organized a press conference, and told the truth. He gave details of abuse and torture, his release, and the agreement to be a secret agent.

"Definitely," the 36-year old explains with a hint of satisfaction, "the KGB didn't expect it."

The effect was immediate: prisoners released later would confirm the torture stopped, government attempts to discredit Michalevic failed, and instead more came forward with similar stories – further blows to an increasingly perplexed regime. Michalevic deposited formal evidence of abuse with the prosecutor's office; the ball was squarely, and publicly, in President Lukashenka's court.

"They expected me to leave the country immediately after the press conference," Michalevic says, "but I demonstrated that I'm still here, I'm waiting for your answers, and I'm ready to speak."

By this point, the regime felt certain that Michalevic wasn't going to leave. Three weeks had passed since his press conference, the KGB still had his passport, and the polygraph proved he had no foreign passports. Dealing with his evidence was not an option, so it was back to old habits: they would simply arrest him again.

What Lukashenka's regime failed to grasp is that these old authoritarian habits aren't as effective in an increasingly informed and technologically-savvy world.

Friends working within the regime told Michalevic of the decision to re-arrest. "I had a feeling," he says with the air of someone stating the obvious, "that after I was put back my conditions would be much worse." As for the government's assumption he wouldn't or couldn't leave, wrong again.

Via Russia and Ukraine, Michalevic made it to the Czech Republic, where days later he would be granted political asylum.

Watching Lukashenka's rise

From a young age, Michalevic benefited from his educated, politically-aware household. In the mid-80s, his family was tuned to Radio Free Europe and Voice of America, the only sources for accurate information about Chernobyl, for instance, or the mass atrocities committed during Stalin's reign.

As a teenager, he watched the Soviet Union quickly collapse around him. "It was the times of Gorbachev's perestroika, and all of society was interested in politics," he says. "Politics was everywhere." People still weren't speaking publicly, but what had been off-limits even at family gatherings was now the topic of spirited conversation.

The discovery of a mass grave of Stalin's victims on the outskirts of Minsk added momentum to a burgeoning pro-democracy, pro-independence movement, which Michalevic joined. Known as the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), it soon crystallized as a political party dedicated to democratic reform and the revival of national symbols and the Belarusian language.

Belarus's first presidential election, in 1994, was also first in which a relatively obscure but charismatic Member of Parliament named Alyaksandr Lukashenka ran for and won the top job. While the BPF opposed him because of his staunchly pro-Russian platform, the election was encouragingly free and fair.

Lukashenka's attacks on democracy would come later, but not much. By 1996, there were worrying trends: police crackdowns on opposition members, paranoid accusations of foreign influence, Soviet-style executions, and new laws extending the president's term and powers.

"He was trying to consolidate power," says Michalevic. "He started to nominate regional leaders himself, and changed the constitution so that much more power was concentrated in the hands of the president."

Lukashenka was also lucky. The mid-90's represented for Belarus the beginning of an era of unprecedented prosperity, thanks largely to access to cheap Russian oil. "People started to think the system is not so bad," and there developed an "unwritten social contract," Michalevic says: the regime guarantees ever-better living standards and citizens never question its authority – a seemingly good deal for people who have fresh memories of something much worse.

"It was not Stalinist times where people were killed for speaking about something in their kitchen," Michalevic says. "So for many people, it was a relatively good situation."

Lukashenka was also skilled at scaring up support by "always finding some enemy in order to unify the population against it," Michalevic says, a favorite technique of despots. Over the next decade and a half, he was thus able to consolidate power, instill fear, and eventually falsify election results outright and violently crush dissent. The populist pro-Soviet politician had earned his new moniker, Europe's last dictator.

Toward the 2010 election

All the while, Michalevic's star was rising within opposition ranks. He continued to volunteer for the BPF, eventually becoming deputy chairman. In 2003 he was elected to a local council and fought to restore local governance in the wake of Lukashenka's efforts to centralize power.

As the 2010 campaign approached, the fractured opposition movement failed to unite behind a single candidate as it had done in 2006. Michalevic decided to run on a pro-reform platform, focused on new ideas that might win over some of those beginning to question Lukashenka's brand of stability.

"I was proposing ways to avoid an economic crisis, to build a competitive economy, to build democracy," Michalevic says. "I was promoting good governance, an active society, and economic growth."

The campaign itself, he says, was likely the most democratic since 1994, with public debates and access to state television for all candidates. "But everything changed immediately after the election, quickly and drastically."

"It's very difficult to explain it in a logical way," he says of the crackdown. He believes Lukashenka, despite "officially" garnering some 80% of votes, was surprised by how much even legitimate support he'd in fact lost, by the sheer number of people who took to the streets, and by the passion and anger they displayed. "It was very good time for him to organize elections," Michalevic says, given a relatively strong economy, "and still he failed. For the first time, he lost."

Authoritarian leaders often come to truly believe they are their country's only salvation, that they are loved and respected. To learn otherwise can be a massive blow to the uninhibited ego, with reactions swift and fierce.

By the next day Michalevic and hundreds of others were in jail.



Minsk Prison

Next steps

Now that he is free, Michalevic wants to help those still mired in Belarus's murky criminal justice system: other presidential candidates, opposition and youth movement leaders, journalists, and activists. Especially important, he says, is the case of Ales Bialiatsky, head of Belarus' Viasna Human Rights Centre, who was arrested on trumped-up tax evasion charges in August. He was subsequently short-listed for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Michalevic has also become more vocal in defense of Belarus's persecuted legal community, and has stressed the need to strengthen parliament's role and ensure judicial independence, both cornerstones of any truly democratic system.

"In terms of the legal system, of the constitution, and of our system of laws, we need to make very big changes," he says. "According to our constitution, there is no independence; we have only one power. In other words, the president is always right."

Major structural reforms to the constitution and judiciary, he believes, could lead to further progress on rights and democracy. Media, for instance, often resort to self-censorship for fear of reprisals in a biased court. "It's a question of the whole system," he explains. "With an independent judicial system, it would help to promote freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and media independence."

Despite the breadth of the work ahead, there are reasons for hope in Belarus. Technology is more prevalent and people are increasingly open to the world, while both Lukashenka's luck and his strategy are threatened by recent economic troubles.

"I'm very optimistic," Michalevic says about the future of Belarus, where social networks are exploding in popularity, enabling direct communication and information-sharing.

"Belarusian society is much more informed than it was ten years ago, so it will become very difficult for Lukashenka to control the situation."

"We can build very good country where everyone can earn money, and be sure about their future and the future of their children," Michalevic says as his voice fills with near-palpable confidence. "We will make all necessary reforms, and we will ensure that our country will be prosperous and democratic."

Lukashenka's grip is slipping, and the agents of change in Belarus refuse to be silenced. Their conviction is unshaken, regardless of the hell through which they have gone. When asked about continuing the struggle despite his ordeal, Michalevic's answer is immediate and unequivocal: "Yes, absolutely."

PHOTO: Dimitris Papazimouris

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS IN BELARUS

1918

The Red Army invades Belarus, which had recently proclaimed independence.

1930s

Stalin executes over 100,000 intellectuals and political opponents in Belarus.

1986

Belarus heavily affected by fall-out from Chernobyl nuclear explosion.

1990

Belarusian becomes the official state language.

1994

Alexander Lukashenka becomes president on pro-Russia platform.

1996

Economic union agreement signed with Russia. Lukashenka extends his term in office.

2001

Lukashenka re-elected. Observers claim elections unfair and undemocratic.

1922

The Belarusian SSR becomes founding member of the USSR.

1941

Nazi Germany invades during World War II. Over one million people killed.

1988

Belarusian Popular Front formed. Details emerge of executions during Stalin's reign.

1991

Belarus declares independence as Soviet Union dissolves.

1995

New flag similar to former Soviet republic; Russian restored as official language.

1997

Protesters sign pro-democracy manifesto 'Charter '97'.

2004

Authorities block investigation into disappearance of opposition figures.

CANADA-BELARUS RELATIONS



Canada limited its official relations with Belarus following the flawed 2006 presidential elections, which included the harassment and intimidation of the opposition, and the subsequent suppression of protests by Belarusian authorities. Official representation to Belarus was downgraded by suspending the accreditation process for two consecutive Ambassadors. In addition, Canada has restricted official contact with Belarusian authorities to the areas of consular relations, human rights and democratic development, and efforts related to international security. Belarus' most recent election, held December 19, 2010, was marred by a lack of transparency in the vote counting process, a violent crackdown on protestors, and the detention of most opposition presidential candidates.

December 19 2010: "The Government of Canada is very concerned by reports and images of violence perpetrated against opposition candidates, the media and demonstrators this evening in Minsk and urges Belarusian authorities to respect the peaceful expression of democratic rights."

December 21: "Canada is deeply disappointed by the Government of Belarus' conduct of the December 19 presidential election. We will work with other free and democratic societies in developing our response to this situation."

December 24: "Canada deplores the ongoing arbitrary detention of prominent opposition leaders in Belarus and demands their immediate release, as well as the release of other demonstrators who have been unjustly arrested, detained or convicted."

January 5 2011: "The closure of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office in Minsk is a further indication that we are witnessing a regrettable step backwards in Belarus."

February 3: "We remain concerned that the regime in Belarus continues to flagrantly violate the human rights of Belarusians and impede the country's democratic development."

February 18: "Canada deplores the Belarusian authorities' lack of respect for the fundamental rights of freedom of assembly and of expression. Canada urges Belarus to respect the rule of law and the principle of an independent judiciary and to end the harassment of political opponents, human rights activists and independent media."

May 16: "We urge Belarus to immediately stop all politically motivated trials, including those of other former presidential candidates."

July 8: "Canada is deeply disappointed that, once again, citizens of Belarus are being detained for exercising their fundamental rights of freedom of assembly and expression."

August 5: "The charges against Ales Bialiatsky are perceived as politically motivated. Canada calls on Belarus to immediately stop its campaign of opposition persecution."

Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Government of Canada.

2005

Parliament passes bill penalizing anti-government demonstrations and propaganda.

2007

Belarus fails in its bid to win a seat on UN Human Rights Council.

2008

The US and EU make release of political prisoners a condition for improving relations.

2010

Oleg Bebenin, founder of Charter '97, found hanged.

May 2011

Presidential candidate Andrey Sannikau and his wife, journalist Irina Khalip, sentenced to prison.

2011

Ales Michalevic given political refugee status by Czech Interior Ministry.

October 2011

Protesters in Minsk call for new elections as Belarus experiences worst financial crisis since fall of Soviet Union. New law increases powers of KGB, restricts right to protest, expands definition of treason. Poll shows Lukashenka's approval rating at all-time low of 20%.

2006

Lukashenka declared winner by landslide. Opposition leaders jailed.

2007

Lukashenka threatens to host Russian missiles if US puts bases in Poland and Czech Republic.

2008

Parliament passes new law restricting online reporting and private media funding.

2010

Lukashenka declared President. Mass protests in Minsk broken up by force, 600 arrests.

2011

Explosion hits busy metro station in Minsk, killing 11. Lukashenka alleges plot to destabilize country.

July 2011

Government blocks access to social media. Police attack peaceful protesters.

MY STORY

(Cont'd from page 1)

I refused to read a statement on television condemning the other candidates. Eventually, I was told the condition for my release was the signing of a "cooperation agreement." I deliberately took this step; it was not dictated by the pressure and torture, but by the desire to publicly convey information about what was happening to the prisoners.

Soon after I was released, I gave a press conference in which I described the conditions in the KGB prison and the torture taking place there.

I wanted people to know the truth about what is really going on to the political activists and former presidential candidates - that such things are possible in a European country in the centre of Minsk in the 21st century.

I wanted to show what the current regime is ready to do to remain in power, how it violates basic human rights and how it makes oppositional political activists agree to cooperate.

After two weeks of active campaigning to inform society about torture and conditions in KGB prison, I secretly left the country for fear of persecution by Belarusian authorities and possible new detainment by the KGB.

I have always advocated for peaceful evolutionary change of Belarus's political regime, and saw the 2010 presidential election as an opportunity to openly declare my views on the country's further political and economic development, and find possible avenues of cooperation between the authorities and civil society in Belarus.

I saw my presidential campaign as an opportunity to attract people who had never before actively participated in politics, but were willing to improve the economic and political image of the country without resorting to radical ideas, but rather by means of progressively reforming major spheres of the economic and political sectors

My electoral program consisted of three basic parts: economic growth, effective state, active society. I was also able to register "Union For Modernization," which promotes a transformation of the Belarusian state toward modern forms of economic, social, and cultural organization.

Beyond political repression, it is evident that the regime now faces one of the most serious economic crises to ever hit Belarus.

What is needed is serious economic, social and political modernization. But Lukashenka's regime is unlikely to start reforming itself.

The International Community Reacts...

"The Human Rights Council condemns the human rights violations occurring before, during and in the aftermath of the 19 December 2010 presidential elections, including the use of violence against, arbitrary arrest, detention and the politically motivated conviction of opposition candidates, their supporters, journalists and human rights defenders, as well as the abuses of due process rights, including the right to a fair trial."

From a resolution of the United Nations Human Rights Council

"We strongly condemn all violence, especially the disproportionate use of force against presidential candidates, political activists, representatives of civil society and journalists. Taken together, the elections and their aftermath represent an unfortunate step backwards in the development of democratic governance and respect for human rights in Belarus. The people of Belarus deserve better."

From a joint statement by European Union High Representative Catherine Ashton and US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton

"President Lukashenka has shown a total disregard for democratic values, the rule of law, and the human rights of his own people. The United States considers these candidates and the other courageous activists and candidates arrested and charged in conjunction with the crackdown on December 19 as political prisoners. In a major step backward for democracy in Belarus, their trials were clearly politically motivated and failed to meet even the most minimal standards required of a fair and independent judiciary."

US President Barack Obama

"Europe has not seen anything like this in years. The combination of vote-rigging and outright repression makes what Milosevic tried to do in Serbia in 2000 pale in comparison."

From a joint letter by Carl Bildt, Karel Schwarzenberg, Radek Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle, foreign ministers, respectively, of Sweden, the Czech Republic, Poland and Germany.

Russia Reacts...

"There is every reason to believe that the election has been held in conformity with universally-recognized standards, and its legitimacy is beyond any doubt."

Russian Foreign Ministry