

Stability is focal point

Alexander Lukashenko has cast his vote at the presidential elections, at polling station number 1, in Minsk's Tsentralny (Central) district

Over 20 observers were present, including those from abroad: the UK, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Russia and Azerbaijan. Speaking to international observers, Mr. Lukashenko stressed that Belarus has no intention of resorting to any means to gain international recognition of the presidential elections. "We won't beg for international recognition on our hands and knees," he said. "There's no need to constantly place conditions on us; we'll settle the issue independently. We feel good within the international community."

Mr. Lukashenko also confirmed his intention to develop partner relations with the West, though only on the basis of equal rights. "If one door is closed, we'll go to where another is open," he noted. He stressed the need to expand co-operation with Scandinavian states. "We aren't working at our full strength there. This vector should be obligatorily strengthened, since these countries are similar to Belarus."

The election campaign at polling station number 1 was covered by about 100 journalists, from almost 40 media from Belarus and abroad. Mr. Lukashenko answered their questions, commenting upon announcements previously made by his opponents. Regarding claims of falsification of vote counting, he stressed that such claims can only be made once elections are over.



Voting characterised by warm and friendly atmosphere — as confirmed by election observers

He believes that such statements by opposition candidates show their feelings of impotence.

Journalists asked Mr. Lukashenko to respond to the printed media's claims that he made a range of anti-Russia statements on meeting the Estonian Foreign Minister. In particular, they noted that he claimed Russia had provoked the war against Georgia. The Head of State stressed that he is always very cautious in his statements to foreign diplomats. "As regards foreign states — especially Western — I assure you that I'm extremely careful and cautious with them, even during confidential talks," he noted. Mr. Lukashenko also said that it's necessary to look at his original

words; he was apprehensive about delving into the matter but said, "I stress: nothing of the kind happened. Everything I said about South Ossetia and Abkhazia was open and frank. Everything I said regarding Russia I've said before — and even more."

Mr. Lukashenko expressed his confidence that, after the elections, Belarus will boast perfect relations with Russia and, at the very least, good relations with the USA. Speaking of whether an American Ambassador might return to Belarus, Mr. Lukashenko noted that this depends on the Ambassador personally. "This is their right: if they wish to return, let them return. If they don't, let them stay

in Washington; probably, it's more convenient for the Ambassador to work there," he added.

As regards relations between Belarus and the EU, Mr. Lukashenko noted that they'll be as positive as the EU wishes. "Many times already, we've spoken of our hopes for the European Union and for how we'd like relations to develop. Everything depends on how much the EU wishes this. If you want to have good and kind relations with us, you are welcome; we are ready to co-operate with you. If you don't desire this, as in previous years, we cannot push you," he said.

Answering a question from a Georgian journalist, Mr. Lukashenko said that Belarus is building

friendly relations with Georgia, stressing, "We have always had very good relations with Georgia. It's a very friendly republic and nation, with whom we have good relations. Believe me, we are not going to spoil these."

One of the questions dealt with dialogue with the opposition. The President noted that he is ready to co-operate with anyone who advocates stability and security in Belarus. Mr. Lukashenko stressed, "I'm ready to collaborate with anyone — with the opposition or otherwise; however, they must desire to live in their country and provide for its independence, so that our country remains calm and beautiful — as I wish." The President then added that it's important to ensure that foreign guests come to our country and co-operate with us, while also feeling free to stay and travel.

The Head of State noted that he has been confidently moving towards his participation in the elections, explaining that he feels great support from people. "If I hadn't felt this, I wouldn't have proposed my candidacy as President," he said, emphasising, "We have wonderful people. In difficult times, I go to the people. From their multitudinous opinions, many complicated solutions are found." The Head of State added that he has no plans to celebrate a presidential election win. "Those who consider that everything ends with the elections, know nothing about politics and the life of the state. For the President, work begins after the elections. If everything goes smoothly, tomorrow, I'll be thinking about the future of the country, not celebrating anything," Mr. Lukashenko asserted.

Foreign observers share their views

Opinions of many foreign states' representatives coincide in their positive vision

Georg Schirmbeck, a Bundestag member and OSCE Parliamentary Assembly observer, told journalists at polling station number 1, in Minsk's Tsentralny (Central) district that Belarus' elections were proceeding very well. He has been visiting Belarus since 2002. "Much has changed for the better since then," he added.

According to BelTA, a representative of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term observers' group in the Brest region, David Bern Heisel, stated during a visit to Brodnitsa village polling station number 7 (in the Ivanovo district, Brest region) that the presidential elections in Belarus were well organised.

The Honorary Consul of Belarus to Zurich (Switzerland), Athanasios Akrotas, worked in Mogilev as a foreign observer. He noted that the presidential campaign in Belarus has been well organ-

ised. The diplomat visited polling stations in Mogilev, talking to members of the election commissions, registered observers and voters. "I have the impression that the elections in Belarus are organised at a high level, under conditions of transparency and openness," he said. Speaking of the advantages of Belarusian legislation, he mentioned that elderly and disabled people can vote from home. Additionally, people can vote outside of their usual region, having notified their election commission. This positive experience could have been used in Switzerland.

The former Prime Minister of Lithuania and Chair of the Lithuanian Peasants and New Democratic Party Union — Kazimira Prunskienė — also observed the election campaign in Belarus. She praised its organisation, saying that Lithuania has similar rules of voters' registration, getting ballot papers and polling. "The secret ballot was achieved, being an essential principle



OSCE observers at a polling station

of democratic elections," she noted. "It is very important for people that Belarus' economic performance is stable, despite the economic crisis. Belarus has preserved and multiplied its achievements. This makes people choose stability," Ms. Prunskienė added. She liked that people came to polling stations in high-spirits; many of them even brought children.

An independent observer from France, Bernard Se, has previously visited Belarus. He sees great changes in

the country's development and in the democratisation of society. After visiting several polling stations during the presidential elections, he witnessed no pressure on voters. "I've noticed nothing negative. My impressions are shaped by the festive mood of people coming to vote and the possibility of freely voting for a favourite candidate," he stressed.

The 2010 presidential elections in Belarus could become a great step forward; this has been announced

by the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR observation mission, Geert Ahrens, after meeting the Head of the CIS observation mission, Sergei Lebedev.

Mr. Lebedev, in turn, stressed that many assessments by the two missions largely coincided — i.e. regarding early voting and voting on December 19th. In his words, the elections proceeded in a calm atmosphere, without any serious violations at polling stations.

Media given full access

Around 1,000 Belarusian and foreign journalists have been accredited to observe the presidential elections in Belarus

Over 330 journalists from the national media — employees of TV channels, periodical editions and news agencies — have been accredited to work at the Information Centre of the Central Commission for Elections and National Referenda, monitoring the presidential elections. Over 400 foreign journalists have been accredited at the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, in addition to 220 journalists with permanent accreditation. The Foreign Ministry's Press Secretary, Andrei Savinykh, noted that all journalists accredited at the Belarusian Foreign Ministry were allowed to work at the Central Election Commission's Information Centre. The accredited journalists included those from famous editions and TV stations, from the CIS, Europe and the USA. Among them were representatives from the BBC, Reuters, *The Guardian*, France-Presse, *The Financial Times*, The Associated Press, *Le Monde*, *La Repubblica*, *El Mundo*, and *Die Presse*.