

# Parliamentary Elections in Belarus, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2000

## INTRODUCTION

“Speaking at a function on the morning of 8<sup>th</sup> November in Minsk on the occasion of the [U.S. Presidential] election, the U.S. ambassador to Belarus, Michael Kozak, said that he hoped that the presidential elections in Belarus next year would be just as free and fair as the American elections.”

Belapan News Agency (8<sup>th</sup> November, 2000) [1]

Western states led by the United States of America have continued to be highly critical of the government of President Alexander Lukashenka of Belarus. Central to the Western critique of Belarus is the claim that democracy there fails to meet the standards set by the Organisation for Co-operation and Security in Europe (OSCE), especially in regard to the conduct of elections - standards which, by assumption, it is taken for granted that the Western states not only set but abide by implicitly.

The British Helsinki Human Rights Group (BHHRG) has sent observers to all the elections held in Belarus since 1994. Since 1996, Western governments led by the United States have boycotted observation of election day and the count in Belarus. Although other groups like the Council of Europe or some NGOs have observed some of the elections since 1994, none have been present as consistently as the BHHRG's observers. It is the BHHRG's unique experience in observing electoral processes in Belarus and in so many other OSCE states that is the background to this report.

Because the BHHRG's observers have wide experience of elections in other post-Soviet states, elsewhere in Eastern Europe as well as being banned from observing polls in countries as different as Yugoslavia (24<sup>th</sup> September, 2000) and Great Britain (Welsh referendum, 1997, Greater London elections, 2000), this report is not only a detailed account of what the observers saw in Belarus but is put in the context of electoral processes elsewhere.

Belarus held parliamentary elections on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2000 to provide replacements for deputies elected to the 13<sup>th</sup> Convocation of the Supreme Soviet in 1995, whose mandates had expired under either the 1996 Constitution (now in operation) or the pre-1996 constitutional arrangements established in Soviet times (the first multi-candidate elections were in 1990 in the still existing USSR). Unfortunately, the 15<sup>th</sup> October elections provided the occasion for a further degradation of relations between the Republic of Belarus and the West, especially the so-called Troika of organisations comprised of the European Parliament, the organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe. This Troika refused to observe the actual conduct of the poll, though it had a team in the country which attended an opposition demonstration calling for a boycott on the day before voting, and it issued a fierce condemnation of the proceedings the day afterwards. The Troika also further polarised matters by impugning the integrity of the 194 foreign observers who had actually visited polling stations and observed counts in Belarus on 15<sup>th</sup> October.

The opinions of the Troika gained disproportionate weight outside Belarus because the Western media reported their claims uncritically and ignored countervailing evidence. For instance, many Western news outlets reported the Troika's press conference held on 16<sup>th</sup> October without mentioning the fiercely critical questions raised by other observers (including those from its member organisations) and journalists.

## ONE-SIDED ELECTIONS OR PARTI-PRIS OBSERVERS?

The elections to the Belarusian parliament (the House of Representatives) are the first national elections since the referendum on constitutional change was held in November 1996. Although the overwhelming majority of Belarusians participated in that referendum and more than 70% voted in favour of the new constitution, Western governments led by the United

States, have refused to recognise the referendum's outcome. They continue to recognise the legitimacy only of the Supreme Soviet elected in October 1995: the Council of Europe parliamentary assembly, for instance, accepts only members of the Supreme Soviet as observer-delegates. This continued recognition of the Supreme Soviet which was dissolved without bloodshed and whose dissolution was subject to a referendum in which its representatives had their own questions on the ballot to match the President's, contrasts sharply with the West's acceptance, indeed applause for, for instance, the violent coup which overthrew the elected Georgian Parliament and President in the winter of 1991-92 or the tank-fire used to suppress the Russian Supreme Soviet in October, 1993, as well as the voting fraud now admitted to pass the new Russian Constitution in December, 1993.

In several of its member states, the OSCE and particularly its leading Western members like the USA and Great Britain have accepted both violent changes in the constitution and prolongation of presidential mandates, yet Belarus has been the subject of an unprecedented level of criticism for its constitutional changes which - whatever their debatable merits - have not led to one documented death.

Since 1996, the OSCE and the Republic of Belarus have been engaged in a series of negotiations over the conduct of future elections. On 30<sup>th</sup> August 2000, the OSCE decided that insufficient progress had been made towards meeting its demands and it therefore took the strange although not unprecedented decision not to send observers to the parliamentary elections. It justified this by saying that even the presence of its observers would legitimise an election process which it had already decided was unfair. It came as no surprise, therefore, that the Troika concluded on the day after the vote that "insufficient progress had been made ... to recognise the elections to be free and democratic." The OSCE/ODIHR technical mission concluded that "The 15<sup>th</sup> October parliamentary election process in Belarus failed to meet international standards for democratic elections."

This opinion was not shared by many of the 194 international observers who observed the poll independently of the OSCE. The Belgian and Italian delegations, as well as individual Scandinavian observers, for instance, made favourable remarks on the day after the poll. Indeed, one Member of the European Parliament who was one of the seven MEPs who observed the poll and reported their findings to the Troika also disagreed with the Troika's report but his dissenting voice was ignored. Ambassador Wieck of the OSCE Technical Mission demanded "Silence!" when he attempted to speak at the Troika's press conference.

**Although no mention of a domestic observer mission linked to the Troika and providing information to it was made at the press conference, subsequently in statements issued in Vienna by the OSCE/ODIHR the Troika's condemnation of the conduct of the poll was reinforced by appeals to these "observers."**

In its statement issued in Minsk the OSCE/ODIHR took the surprising step of accusing the other international observers of having been "manipulated" by the Belarusian government, of having been paid by it, and of having been given pre-prepared statements to sign. It is odd that the OSCE, which did not observe the vote, should seek to disqualify the findings of those observers who did by accusing them of being influenced by allegedly mercenary motives when it itself relied on the findings of people whose activities were funded and possibly even directed by member states of the OSCE the governments of which had already publicly condemned the Belarusian elections well in advance. In short, the OSCE/ODIHR produced no evidence of payments to foreign observers in Belarus and refused telephone requests on behalf of the BHHRG observers to state whether it included them in its vague charges. In practice, ironically, many of the OSCE's charges against the international observers simply showed that the Belarusian Central Election Commission had followed normal OSCE/ODIHR practice in organising election observation.

It is all the more striking therefore that at the OSCE meeting in Vienna to assess the elections the OSCE/ODIHR and Technical Mission claimed to base their criticisms of the conduct of the poll on the findings of local observers. These observers had in fact been organised for as much as two years by the so-called united opposition forces intending to boycott any Belarusian elections under the 1996 Constitution, something which the U.S.

Congressional Helsinki Commission was informed about in June, 1998. Then Professor Khadyka told them that he and other members of the rejectionist opposition in the same grouping had decided to forestall a proposal by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee to monitor forthcoming elections:

"I must stress that the Belarusian Helsinki Committee has nothing to do with politics in Belarus. It's an NGO and it's a human rights NGO. And when Professor Bogdankevich and I learned about this initiative of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, *which we learned here in the United States [emphasis added]*, we decided that we should urgently go to Ambassador Wieck and tell him that actually five *opposition parties have already formed a non-government, non-partisan [sic!] organization [emphasis added]* which has called for fair elections. The mission of this organization will be to teach and to prepare 21,000 monitors for the next elections, three monitors for each electoral precinct. And, I must stress that the Belarusian Helsinki Committee is not capable of preparing 21,000 monitors." [2]

If not a GONGO (Government-organised non-governmental organization), this monitoring organisation was certainly a PONGO (Party-organised non-governmental organisation), and could hardly be regarded as objective when it was set up by the leading boycotters (whatever the merits of their case for abstaining from the elections). Whoever passed on the alleged negative impressions of the domestic observers, it was striking to the BHHRG observers that the various observers from the PONGO, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, other NGOs and trades unions encountered in individual polling stations did not say they had seen any violations in their own polling stations.

As the testimony by Khadyka and Bogdankevich to the Congressional Committee in 1998 showed, there were serious splits inside the opposition and a great deal of mutual suspicion and antagonism. The rejectionists attacked any sign that the OSCE Technical Mission headed by Ambassador Wieck was talking to more moderate opponents of President Lukashenka. So far Western states have backed the hardline opposition and received only them. If the West does not back them financially, it is not for want of asking or hints to it. Professor Khadyka told the U.S. lawmakers in June 1998, that the 13<sup>th</sup> Supreme Soviet's continuing members "need financial support to pay rent, to pay per diem, to pay for travel expenses so that the deputies can come to Minsk." The Belarusian Popular Front is in the unusual position of being an "associate member" of both the Socialist International and the Christian Democratic International.

More bizarre still was the OSCE's condemnation of the Belarusian Central Election Commission for following the OSCE electoral observation procedures "*without permission!*" Some of these practices are deeply flawed and it is not clear that the CEC did in fact follow them. For instance, the alleged bussing of international election observers along a pre-arranged schedule of polling stations has been normal practice for OSCE and Council of Europe observers for many years. This practice certainly gives early warning to any potential fraudsters but the fact that OSCE/Council of Europe delegations have used it - not least in disputed elections which they have been happy to certify as free and fair when the right candidates won - suggests that the Troika's allegation was ill-advised, if not defamatory and hypocritical. (According to BBC Radio Four's *From Our Own Correspondent* on 19<sup>th</sup> November, election observers accredited to the OSCE-run elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina on 12th November were taken to their polling stations the day before and on schedule on election day!). In fact, the BHHRG observers did not meet any foreign observers who had been bussed around in the alleged manner. On the contrary, other observers like the BHHRG team chose their own routes and made random stops en route without consulting either the CEC or any Belarusian authorities.

The report forms handed out to foreign observers on behalf of the Central Election Commission mirrored the forms issued by the OSCE/ODIHR exactly. In polling stations, many election officials seemed aware of OSCE norms and applied them in conjunction with the local Belarusian law.

## **The Media and other aspects of the election campaign**

BHHRG despatched four observers to monitor the poll and to interview various participants in the campaign. Because of the ongoing argument over the legitimacy of the 1996 referendum, a part of the opposition, led by the Belarusian National Front, called for voters to boycott the vote completely. A total of eight opposition parties, including one of the two Communist Parties, the Liberal Democrat Party (the local wing of Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Russian nationalist party) and the Belarusian wing of the Yabloko party, rejected this call and took part.

It is often alleged against Belarus that the media is controlled by the government and that this makes any election campaign unfairly biased in its favour. It is certainly true that the television is deferential towards the government and the president, and that the conditions do not obtain for a proper exchange of views between different political forces outside election time. Nevertheless, for these parliamentary elections, the Belarusian electoral authorities' rules granted each candidate in the country 5 minutes time on national TV and radio - and this provision was respected. However, critics have argued that 5 minutes is not enough when access to the TV is barred outside election time. They have also pointed out that voters could not know in advance when their particular local candidate was going to speak. However, parties with many candidates such as Sergei Kalyakin's Communists had the chance to co-ordinate 75 nationwide five-minute broadcasts if they chose to. This is far more than any political party in Britain or Western Europe could hope for in a general election campaign, and of course vastly more than in the United States where the third party presidential candidate, Ralph Nader, held the balance of votes between George W. Bush and Al Gore but was not allowed to participate in the pre-election debates on U.S. television. [The U.S. Congressional Resolution of 25<sup>th</sup> October, 2000, condemning the Belarusian parliamentary elections misleadingly claims "the Lukashenko regime purposely denied the democratic opposition access to state-controlled media", whereas it gave opposition candidates far more time than they would receive in the West.]

Whatever the bias of Belarusian state television, it should be noted that Russian television is freely available in Belarus and that opposition politicians have little difficulty appearing on its channels. The widely-viewed NTV is openly hostile to President Lukashenka and other Russian channels do not portray him uncritically. Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian state television stations reflect their governments' hostile attitude to President Lukashenka as do those countries' private media which can be seen in many places in Belarus. Poland also houses Radio Free Belarus in Bialystok, a US-government-funded anti-Lukashenka channel broadcasting across Belarus. While the situation may not be ideal where the TV is concerned, it is wrong to conclude that Belarusian voters do not have ample access to opposition views about their country.

Local radio in Belarus is by no means as uniformly pro-government as widely reported in the Western media.

Western reporters writing about Belarus are usually based in Moscow. It is the opinion of pro-Lukashenka analysts in Belarus that much of the negative information about Belarus emanates from Russia. The BHHRG observers have the strong impression that some reports allegedly filed from Minsk after this year's elections were in fact written by journalists who had stayed in Moscow. A diplomat argued that the reason for this negative portrayal of President Lukashenka in Russia was due to his anti-corruption policies, whose effectiveness even Transparency International was forced to admit when it stated that Belarus was probably the least corrupt country among the CIS. (TI's rating is all the more extraordinary since it is partly sponsored by Mr George Soros, the US philanthropist who has repeatedly had bitter disputes with Minsk over the activities of his foundations in Belarus.) The diplomat suggested that Mr. Lukashenka tough line on corruption was very uncongenial to some in and around the Kremlin, since there are many people in Russia who would like him to be their president because of popular discontent at the interrelationship there between organised crime and high politics which has promoted economic decline and mass impoverishment on a scale far worse than anything seen in Belarus.

Where the press is concerned, however, the picture is highly pluralistic. Newspaper kiosks bristle with opposition and pro-government newspapers, as well as with the Russian papers which are generally hostile to the present government in Belarus. The six most radical opposition papers are very acerbic in their attacks on the government. The radical opposition newspaper, '*Nasha Svoboda*', is freely available, despite repeated claims in the Western press that it has been closed down by the Belarusian authorities. Its nominal address in Minsk turned out on inspection by BHHRG observers to be a legal fiction and '*Nasha Svoboda*' is actually edited and printed in Vilnius in Lithuania. A correspondent for the newspaper took part in the press conference held by the CEC chairwoman, Lidia Yermoshina on 13<sup>th</sup> October, and asked highly critical questions. On 14<sup>th</sup> October, the same bearded gentleman could be seen in the front row of the demonstration calling for a boycott. On 16<sup>th</sup> October, this journalist-boycotter sat on the podium next to Mrs. Yermoshina while he questioned her in detail about the results and his allegations of irregularities.

As far as BHHRG representatives were able to ascertain, opposition and Russian newspapers are freely available in the provinces as well. (Opposition newspapers were even distributed to passengers on incoming flights from Western Europe.) It is alleged that 75% of the newspapers distributed in the country are state-owned but this does not appear to mean that Belarusians are forced to buy them.

The Troika and OSCE/ODIHR have accused the government media of negative even "sardonic" criticism of the opposition but the opposition press is equally vitriolic. The choice of names for some of the opposition-orientated press is also provocative. For instance, the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* ("People's Will") has exactly the same title as the nineteenth century terrorist group whose bombs assassinated Alexander II in 1881 but also killed many people completely unconnected with the Tsarist regime. The choice of such a name carries sinister connotations. It carries highly critical articles and cartoons, some of which caricature the President as a snake to be strangled, for instance.

BHHRG representative interviewed one journalist from *Narodnaya Gazeta*. The state owns 70% of this paper's shares but the journalist, Georgiy Dudinov, insisted that this did not prevent the paper from attacking government policies. Mr. Dudinov distinguished between the constructive criticism proffered by his paper and the more radical approach of other papers like *Nasha Svoboda* – even if, on occasions and on certain matters, the former is more radical than the latter. It was clear that Mr. Dudinov found the extremism of some parts of the opposition, whose members he personally knows, to be quite unacceptable. Some of the more radical papers call for President Lukashenka to be killed, for instance, a stance which Mr. Dudinov says his paper would never adopt. He described the difference between his paper and others thus: "There are legal and illegal ways of gaining power. *Narodnaya Gazeta* supports the peaceful and legal change of power." This same difference obtains in the opposition parties, of which more later.

Another myth is that penalties apply in Belarus for speaking Belarusian. People who make this claim have obviously never been to Belarus since the news is read in Belarusian, signposts in the street are in Belarusian, all official documents including voting papers are in Belarusian, and Belarusian is obligatory in all schools in the republic. It is rather as if someone were to allege that it was illegal to speak French in Switzerland.

Other myths self-destructed during the course of the election campaign. At a press conference given by the Central Electoral Commission on Friday, 13<sup>th</sup> October, it was alleged by an opposition politician that there were no international observers present. BHHRG representatives, who were in the room at the time, listened with interest to this announcement of their non-existence, but there were also delegations from Western and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East. By the day after the polls, instead of denying their presence, the opposition media had taken up the ODIHR smear that these formerly non-existent observers were paid lackeys of the regime.

## The opposition

Because about 200 would be candidates refused to file the obligatory accurate financial statements they were excluded from the poll. Western critics have argued that it was an onerous burden on candidates to require them to produce such financial data, and that some candidates were excluded for trivial mistakes. However, given the common phenomenon of corrupt businessmen and mafiosi standing for election in other CIS states in order to gain parliamentary immunity and influence, some measure to prevent such people using elections for dishonest purposes is not without civic value.

Perhaps because of these exclusions, it was commonly reported in the Western media that only 55 oppositionists were standing for a total of 110 seats. Even these were frequently portrayed as “stooges” of the government. However, these figures seem to have been of independent candidates who sometimes broke with parties which conducted a boycott. Various parties opposed to President Lukashenka put up candidates, who included 75 from the Sergei Kalyakin’s Party of Communists of Belarus, 45 from the Communist Party of Belarus, 89 Liberal Democrats, 19 Agrarian Party candidates, 10 Belarusian Popular Party candidates, and others. In total, 568 candidates were listed.

BHHRG representatives interviewed various members of the opposition, both from those parties which participated in the elections and from those who boycotted it.

Mrs. Olga Abramova of the Yabloko party said that the election law had been very difficult in the last local elections but said that the law had been satisfactorily amended for these parliamentary ones. It was a “piece of candy” to get registered for the parliamentary elections. Because she and other parties had decided to participate in this poll, a “war” had broken out between them and those parts of the opposition which supported the boycott. Indeed, she alleged that the boycotters were objective allies of the government in its attempt to marginalize the opposition.

Mrs. Abramova gave some examples of the attacks on her from her pro-boycott opposition rivals. Anti-Semitic fly-leafs depicting Mrs. Abramova and her party boss in Russia, Grigoriy Yavlinsky, had been posted in public buses: the anti-Russian tenor of this leaflet and the style of its drawing are the strongest indication that it emanated from the pro-boycott opposition. She also alleged that the radical opposition newspaper, *Narodnaya Volya*, had published defamatory articles alleging that her party had offered bribes to people to take part in the elections. In addition she alleged that these defamatory articles were written with tiny and insignificant spelling mistakes in the names, which she interpreted as being a trick to prevent legal suits. “This is one of the numerous ways in which democrats are being attacked and prevented from standing in the elections,” she said.

She said she had also been virulently attacked in *Nasha Svaboda*, which she described as encouraging a strategy of illegality to win power. “For 12 years,” she said, “these senseless demonstrations have been going on” (i.e. against the authorities as such). “80% of the people want change but they are not interested in politics and are merely waiting passively for change.” Her participation in the elections is intended to offer a positive alternative.

Mrs. Abramova seemed happy with the overall conduct of the Belarusian authorities in the run-up to the poll. She explained how she had united with two other candidates in order to have 15 minutes on the television. “The government is allowing freedom in these elections,” she said. By contrast, she alleged that threats had been made against her son, that a member of her party, Mr. Feduta, had been violently attacked and had lost a tooth, and that her 78 year-old mother had been subjected to abusive telephone calls. All these attacks, she said, came from the pro-boycott opposition. (Mrs. Abramova was elected in the second round of voting.)

BHHRG representatives also interviewed Mr. Sergei Kalyakin, the First Secretary of the Party of Belarusian Communists, an off-shoot of the old Belarusian Communist Party. Mr. Kalyakin said that the opposition had a variety of means of access to the media. Although the

five minutes for each of his 75 candidates had been observed, Mr. Kalyakin said this was insufficient because there was no access to the TV outside of election time and five minutes were not sufficient to set out his stall. He then described various obstacles to the publication of electoral material, where fly-leaves had been rejected on what Mr. Kalyakin obviously thought were unfair technicalities, such as not being marked "Electoral Material" at the top. Some candidates were, he said, able to address university students only after some difficulty. (It is obvious from what the pro-boycott opposition said that students were a particular focus for the attentions of the various opposition parties.)

On the other hand, Mr. Kalyakin said that he was convinced that the only way to change things in the country was democratically and by due process. Less than 25% of the population supports the boycott, he said, and since there is usually an abstention rate of 15%, this means that more than 50% of the population supports participation in elections. He also made the same point as Mrs. Abramova had made, namely that the boycotters help the government. "Although the conditions in this country are not democratic," he said, "we must learn how to win in these conditions." Mr. Kalyakin made it clear that the real significance of the elections was as a dry-run for the presidential contest next year.

In addition to the political parties and prominent personalities taking part in the elections on the opposition side, there is also a rejectionist opposition movement which boycotts all political activities under the 1996 constitution. This rejectionist opposition holds fast to the 13<sup>th</sup> Supreme Soviet as the sole legitimate elected body in Belarus despite the severe flaws in the conduct of the polls in 1995.

### **The pro-boycott demonstration**

The pro-boycott demonstration which was held on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> October had been widely publicised in the Western media, which invariably gave the impression that "the" opposition supported the boycott. The reality was very different. The demonstration was poorly attended – some 2,000 people marched through the streets. This was sufficient for the Western TV cameras to focus in on the people in the front row but was far from a show of force in reality. Moreover, BHHRG observers did not encounter on polling day any evidence that the pro-boycott opposition had campaigned in the countryside: as Mr Khadyka the deputy leader of the Belarusian National Front confirmed to the BHHRG during the demonstration, his strategy is to concentrate on convincing diplomats in Minsk and international organisations of the rightness of their cause, not on convincing the Belarusian people.

The demonstration was notable for the complete absence of police and for the occasional violence of the demonstrators, who smashed windows in passing cars, scratched cars with their keys, and adopted a belligerent and menacing attitude towards the cars in the street which they stopped. The Belarusian authorities had evidently decided not to deploy any police in order to defuse what would otherwise have been an unpleasant situation: it was obvious that the demonstrators were spoiling for a fight. The consequence of the absence of police was that many inhabitants of Minsk were inconvenienced by a demonstration which departed from the permitted route and which was not properly marshalled by the public authorities.

The posters and banners carried by the demonstrators were in some cases highly inflammatory. One showed Slobodan Milošević being decapitated, and a sword poised to administer the same fate to President Alexander Lukashenka: their bodies were united as if the two men were a hydra. The so-called Yugoslav solution of simultaneous insurrection and elections was much discussed in Belarus especially by the rejectionist opposition. Whether Belarus has the kind of ex-para-militaries and mafia hard men who provided the muscle for the storming of the Yugoslav Parliament on 5<sup>th</sup> October is to be doubted. Nor is the political or economic situation exactly comparable. Whereas Serbs had seen their standing of living fall dramatically compared with its 1991 level - which was far higher than the USSR's - Belarusians on average have not seen their living standards fall nearly so far as in neighbouring Ukraine or Russia. Belarus has not been involved in the kind of civil wars which fostered the emergence of para-military and mafia groups who did much destabilise Serbia.

The violence of the demonstrators towards motorists and their threatening masked-mien is not yet of Balkan proportions. However, the pro-opposition newspaper, *Belarus Today*, carried an opinion poll asking the provocative question of how many of its survey's respondents would be willing to participate in "armed struggle" to overthrow the government: 6.7% were reported as saying they were ready for violence. Even if 79% opposed violence, any society with the historical experience of 1917 knows that revolutions do not necessarily need a broad popular base (as in February, 1917) to succeed. A ruthless and ideologically committed core can achieve their goals too (as in October, 1917). [3]

The pro-opposition Russian daily, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that Vintsuk Vychorka, one of the leaders of the Belarusian Popular Front, had paid a visit to Yugoslavia on the eve of the Minsk demonstration with the avowed purpose of learning from the Yugoslavian oppositionists how to provoke mass action.

An aspect of the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević was undoubtedly the decision of the various opposition parties in Serbia (with one important exception) to rally behind a single candidate. In Belarus the bitter mutual criticisms of the participating and boycotting opposition suggest that such unification is still some way off. After the elections, the misnamed Unified Opposition Forces expelled candidates like Nikolai Statkevich of the Social Democratic Hromada for taking part.

The provocative nature of the demonstrators' placards and banners - others showed liberty being strangled - resembled the tactics of the Bolshevik revolutionaries who deliberately sought to create conflict and therefore martyrs before 1917. However, as has been pointed out, the demonstrators were accorded absolute liberty in their march on this occasion despite departing from the pre-arranged route.

The use of children to hold banners was especially worrying. Many carried signs in English which they did not themselves understand: BHHRG representatives, many of whom speak Russian, addressed them in English to see if they spoke the language. They generally did not. When asked in Russian what their slogans meant, they did not know. It is a key principle of democracy that citizens should be free to make up their own minds, and therefore children below the age of reason should not be abused in this way by their elders.

Sadly, at a time when the international community has belatedly taken action to outlaw the employment of child soldiers, some international human rights NGOs defend the abuse of children as front-line warriors in political demonstrations - even those with an apparently deliberately provocative aspect. Both Amnesty International and the International League for Human Rights have condemned the dispersal by the police of a demonstration in Minsk by "mainly minors" on 12<sup>th</sup> November, 2000, insisting that "Belarus must learn that the blatant use of force against young people, *many of whom were almost children [emphasis added]*, does not improve the scandalous image of the country which it already has on the international arena..." [4] The day before the demonstration, the Communist leader, Sergei Kalyakin, remarked wryly to the observers that in his "long experience of organising demonstrations", very few participants had any idea what the demonstration was really about!

Another worrying aspect of the rally on 14<sup>th</sup> October was the fact that many student demonstrators were masked. The point of marching in a demonstration is that the marchers show their identity and influence public opinion by doing so. The use of masks makes one wonder what the demonstrators have to hide. It may however be that they wish to create a dramatic, if not deliberately threatening impression.

Certainly self-dramatisation, as victims played out their own scenario before a sympathetic audience from the Troika and Western media, could have been a part of what was happening on 14<sup>th</sup> October. Equally the leaders of the demonstration called on their supporters to applaud the Troika members present and Ambassador Wieck, saying, "Europe is with us."

Leaders of the 14<sup>th</sup> October march claimed that the absence of police was the equivalent of what the California-based 1960s protestologist, Herbert Marcuse, called repressive tolerance. Another example took place a few days earlier. Although the Belarusian government is



accused of intolerance, not only do regular demonstrations take place attacking it but even international gatherings to denounce it are held in the country. For instance, on 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2000, at the Congress of the Free Trades Unions of Belarus, Marc Blondel of the Brussels-based International Free Trades Unions placed Belarus as the second worst place in the world to be a trades unionist - after Columbia. No doubt the delegate from Vietnam - where only Communist-affiliated trades unions are permitted - applauded this insight into union freedom! [5]

### **Polling day**

BHHRG representatives visited a total of 28 polling stations including Minsk 296 and 297, Kirovsky 4 in Dzerzhinsk, Leninsky 5 in Dzerzhinsk, Leninsky 1 in Stolptsy, Castle Nesvij, Kopil' No. 15, Uzda No. 53, Kupalovsky No. 33 in Posolok Energetikov, and stations in Molodechno. Counts were observed in 4 stations in the greater Minsk area.

Voting was slack throughout the day in most of the places visited by the observers, but BHHRG data tallied with the turnout figures officially announced by the Central Electoral Commission the following day. The use of mobile ballot boxes, which had been greatly abused in the 1995 parliamentary elections, was limited: the highest number in any one polling station was 30 while the usual number was much lower. BHHRG observers witnessed how observers associated with the opposition were included in the teams accompanying such boxes on the outskirts of Minsk.

All the constituencies which BHHRG visited had opposition candidates, which puts into perspective the allegation that a large number of opposition candidates were disqualified on a technicality before the vote. There were also usually local NGO observers as well as the normal candidates' representatives who reported no problems.

The only serious complaint was received in Dzerzhinsk. A lady, Mrs. Tatyana Vladimirovna Vanina, of the Womens' Movement, told BHHRG representatives that she had been rejected as a candidate because a verse of poetry she had put into her c.v. had been judged subversive. BHHRG representatives were unable to ascertain why she wanted to put poetry in her c.v., however. The lady was an observer at the poll and she reported no problems. She alleged that the head of the local municipal authorities had called in all the bosses of the collective farms and factories and told them to get the voters out or risk the sack. She alleged that the town authorities were massively backing the candidacy of a Mr. Baravoy and she thought that the campaign had been unfairly biased in his favour. BHHRG representatives did indeed encounter one voter who openly stated his support for this candidate, on the grounds that he had done a lot for the town, e.g. by opening shops and so on. The man was evidently the local big businessman. Mrs. Vanina alleged that Mr. Baravoy needed to be in parliament to protect his business interests because all business was controlled by the government. She also alleged that the TV was massively biased in favour of the president.

These are all matters of concern. However, it should be noted that in this particular constituency, the "government" candidate appeared to be not Mr. Baravoy at all, but instead a senior serving army officer who works in the Institute for National Security.

In Minsk, it was alleged that in the polling station at the Pushkin Library (420/105) a representative of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee had been ejected after the chairman of the local election commission refused to register him as an observer. Two observers (from the Club of Voters and the Party of Communists of Belarus) both denied that such an incident had occurred, as did the Chairman. None of the members of the EC contradicted them. The ladies managing the buffet at the far end of the Library's entrance hall told the observers - out of earshot of the EC - that they had been there since an hour before the polls opened and they had seen no incident and would have witnessed it since they had a clear view of the whole hall from their vantage point. Probably, therefore, the report of the incident was just one of those unsubstantiated rumours which observers often come across - although everything is fine in the particular polling station under scrutiny, somewhere else awful things are said to be happening. For instance, in Minsk 309/102, Mr Chygyr's local observer said all was properly conducted there, but in six other places there were problems but he could not remember

exactly where they were, nor their names nor numbers. He had one point of some general value: although individual observers were moving about the room keeping everything under observation, the row of chairs set aside for them as a group in the long narrow room meant they had to strain to see everything if seated.

In general, the observers were placed at right-angles to the ECs with the polling booths and ballot boxes in a position clearly in view. Apart from the example cited above, observers did not complain of hindrance or intimidation. The relations between the observers and ECs seemed good.

Police were rarely in evidence inside the voting places though usually one or two policemen were assigned to a building with polling stations inside. There were no unidentified men hanging around inside polling stations.

Rygor Saroka, the director of the M.K. Aginsky Music College in Molodechno, was chairman of the election commission in An energetic man, associated with the late opposition Gennady Karpenka, Mr Saroka was in charge of a very well-run polling station inside a hall in his recently refurbished Music College.

Although a strong supporter of the opposition to President Lukashenka, Mr. Saroka seemed to be trying to be objective in his comments (and certainly seemed to run his election commission in an impartial manner). Despite his criticisms of the President's regime on many points, particularly for antagonising the West, Mr. Saroka credited President Lukashenka with two achievements: keeping out the Russian mafia which had corrupted public and business life much more in Russia than was the case in Belarus, and preserving Belarus's ability to feed itself.

The counts were all properly conducted; only departing from OSCE guidelines where commonsense ruled that its cumbersome procedures thwarted an accurate and rapid count. Observers and candidates' proxies were present and no one disputed the accuracy of the counts.

## Conclusion

The Parliamentary elections on 15<sup>th</sup> October showed further procedural improvement in the conduct of voting in Belarus. Already in 1996, BHHRG observers noted that many of the flaws so evident in the conduct of the elections for the Supreme Soviet in 1995 had disappeared. Attempts at plural voting were not witnessed. Additional lists were rarely used compared with the scores or even hundreds in the past.

This Group's observers believe that the practice of early voting should be discontinued, but have to admit that it is the norm in the United States of America, Germany and Sweden, all of which regard themselves as model democracies. Whether in the light of the serious flaws revealed in US voting procedures on 7<sup>th</sup> November, Belarus should be satisfied with following standards set by one of the country's fiercest critics must be doubted. It is not for foreign powers whose own elections are not above scrutiny and criticism to denounce failings in other countries unless they first set the same flaws right at home. .

Claims by the former Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Mechyslaw Hryb, that more than 5,000 violations had been observed, must be put in the context of his previous indifference to the much more serious flaws in procedure and evident manipulation in some parts of the elections to the Supreme Soviet in 1995. (Mr Hryb made his charges at the CEC press conference on 16<sup>th</sup> October and has repeated them since, e.g., on 31<sup>st</sup> October at meeting the Shadow Government set up by the 13<sup>th</sup> Supreme Soviet.) [6]

The double standards of international organisations and the representatives of the West outweigh any concerns about aspects of the political situation or elections in Belarus, however legitimate some informed criticism of specifics might be. The high-handed and intolerant behaviour of the so-called Troika, along with that of the OSCE Technical Mission, headed by the former President of the German Secret Services (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*),

Hans-Georg Wieck, damaged the reputation of more than these institutions in the eyes of Belarusians and other CIS observer. By acting on a prejudiced scenario that the elections were illegitimate and bound to be procedurally flawed, these bodies cast doubt on their sponsoring governments' commitment to dialogue and understanding. It hardly needs emphasising how insensitive and even hypocritical the willingness of the other members of the Troika to have Adrian Severin as their chairman must have seemed to Belarusians aware that Mr Severin had served under a President in Romania who had publicly thanked the Jiu Valley miners in 1990 after they marched on Bucharest and beat to death several pro-democracy demonstrators who had been calling for a boycott of elections!

When one MEP, the Frenchman Paul-Marie Coûteaux, dissented from the negative views expressed in the report, he was simply ignored and indeed brutally silenced during the press conference by Mr. Wieck. The West's own standards of pluralism, it seems, are far lower than those in Belarus, for in the Troika no dissenting view was allowed whatsoever. It was striking that whereas the parliamentary deputies from Russia and other CIS countries sat through the OSCE Troika's uproarious press conference on 16<sup>th</sup> October, the OSCE and Troika personnel boycotted their press conference which took place immediately afterwards in the same room. This discourtesy reflected the indifference of the OSCE Troika to other points of view. Russian deputies emphasised that they were not coming to Belarus as moral and political superiors to assess a lesser society, but on the contrary they were well aware of the flaws in their own elections (for instance, the violence in polling stations which has marred voting in specific places in Russia in 1993, 1995 and 1999). The modesty and self-criticism of the Russian and other CIS parliamentarians was a lesson in democratic attitudes that some in the West would do well to consider.

Given that the Western media have uniformly parroted the OSCE line, ignoring the favourable opinions of the Russian, Italian, French and other parliamentary observers, serious questions now need to be asked about the OSCE/ODIHR's commitment to the principles of pluralism and free speech. The Troika's report was a stitch-up, based on prejudice and report-rigging. It will do great damage to Belarus' diplomatic position in Europe, and yet the authors of the report are themselves un-elected and unaccountable. From a human rights perspective, the mechanisms by which the Belarus parliamentary elections were monitored were incompatible with the principles of pluralism and democratic accountability.

Sadly instead of promoting democracy, transparency and accountability across the OSCE-space, the ODIHR and Troika reports are more likely to promote polarisation and political antagonisms both inside Belarus and abroad.

### **NOTE ON "DISAPPEARANCES"**

One of the most controversial issues in Belarus is the disappearance of several leading public figures and a television journalist associated with the opposition. The government denies involvement. At least one, the "disappeared" Tamara Vinnikava, reappeared in London. Others are alleged to have been murdered. No irrefutable evidence exists on these issues. Rumours range from murder for political or economic reasons to self-staged "disappearance" for political reasons or to avoid financial difficulties.

The disappearances do not seem to have silenced public criticism of the government but nor have they encouraged a wave of emigration. One useful index of the human rights situation in any given country is the rate at which it exports would-be refugees to Western Europe. Belarus figures nowhere in the international league tables despite its media reputation as an unusually oppressive state. However, both Poland and Romania are on the UNHCR's top ten list of countries producing asylum seekers in Western Europe in 1999 (at places 9 and 10). The British Home Office has no special statistics on asylum-seekers from Belarus because there are so few. Poland and Romania, along with Lithuania, figure in the Home Office figures as separate suppliers of refugees despite their membership of the Council of Europe. In 1997, the Council of Europe stopped its monitoring of human rights in Romania despite the steady and increasing flow of refugees from Mr. Severin's home country. Although the US Committee for Refugees **could identify 2,900 people with refugee status**

**in Belarus in 1999, despite references to .... regime it cannot identify any specific number of refugees from Belarus referring only to “In recent years the political situation in Belarus has caused some Belarusians to seek asylum abroad.” [7]**

In fact, West European countries regularly voice **concern ....out Belarus as a transit country for asylum-seekers heading into Euroland rather** than as a source of persecuted would-be refugees of its own. The decision of the government in Minsk to remove the last vestiges of the Soviet-era “iron curtain” between it and Poland has caused EU governments to insist that Poland beef up its border controls to stop immigrants and asylum-seekers heading westwards. They have also complained to Belarus about its lifting of border controls. This attitude suggests deep hypocrisy on the part of EU governments who ignore the human rights records of allies like Romania who vote a consistent pro-EU line in international bodies and supply public servants like Mr. Severin to international bodies while decrying Belarus despite evidence that its failings are fewer than the favoured states’.

### **NOTES**

[1] As reported by the BBC’s *Summary of World Broadcasts* SU/3994 (10<sup>th</sup> November, 2000), D/3.

[2] See “Belarus Opposition Leaders” briefing for the Congressional Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Washington D.C. (19<sup>th</sup> June, 1998), 11.

[3] See “Boycott or national referendum?” in *Belarus Today* (10-16<sup>th</sup> October, 2000), 3.

[4] Quoted in the BBC’s *Summary of World Broadcasts* SU/4000 (17<sup>th</sup> November, 2000), D/4.

[5] See Belapan’s report as cited by the BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts* SU/3970 (13<sup>th</sup> October, 2000), D/4.

[6] See BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts* SU/3987 (2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2000), D/2.

[7] See <http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/europe/belarus.htm>