

Top Belarus Opposition Leader Won't Run

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A man napping near a national emblem made from vegetables during a folk festival Friday in Liaskovichi, Belarus. **Vasily Fedosenko**

MINSK — Belarussian leader Alexander Lukashenko's closest challenger in a disputed 2006 presidential vote said he would not run in a December election because he believes that it will be rigged.

Alexander Milinkevich was supported by most of the country's beleaguered opposition in the 2006 election and led street protests following the vote, which international observers said was undemocratic.

Lukashenko, in power since 1994, has suggested that he will seek a new five-year term in the Dec. 19 vote.

"I don't want to participate in a play which has only one director-screenwriter," Milinkevich told reporters Friday. "We do not have elections, only an election campaign."

He said he would support other opposition candidates favoring closer ties with Europe. The EU and United States have long shunned Lukashenko, accusing him of maintaining power through illegitimate elections and harshly suppressing dissent.

Opposition leaders disputed the official vote count in 2006, which gave Lukashenko more than 82 percent and Milinkevich 6 percent. Police forcibly broke up protests over the vote.

The fractured opposition has not united behind a single candidate for the December vote.

But hostility from Russia and a sharp slowdown in the economy, which the International Monetary Fund said grew by 0.2 percent in 2009 after showing 10 percent growth a year earlier, could make it hard for Lukashenko to repeat his landslide 2006 victory.

"Lukashenko has never been as weak as he is now," Milinkevich said.

But analysts say Lukashenko, who remains popular and whose government controls most media, will likely have little trouble winning re-election.

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