

Kremlin Says No Meddling in Belarus

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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A riot policeman chasing an opposition protester in central Minsk early Monday during a rally denouncing the results of the weekend presidential election. **Gleb Garanich**

President Dmitry Medvedev on Monday ignored outrage from European leaders over weekend Belarussian presidential elections by calling the vote and the ensuing violence in Minsk a "domestic affair."

"The elections ... and what is happening there definitely is an internal matter of our neighbor state," Medvedev [told reporters](#) after talks with Latvian President Valdis Zatlers.

Violence rocked the capital, Minsk, early Monday after early official results gave President Alexander Lukashenko a landslide victory of some 80 percent.

Riot police violently dispersed at least 10,000 protesters on the capital's Independence Square who claimed the vote was rigged and called for Lukashenko to step down. Seven of the nine opposition presidential candidates were taken into custody, two of them after being hospitalized with injuries.

Lukashenko said Monday that 639 people were arrested as they rallied and later attempted to break into the parliament building.

In contrast to Medvedev, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton condemned the beating of protesters and demanded the immediate release of those arrested.

"Last night's events do not reflect the relative progress we had noted so far in the pre-election period," Ashton said in a [statement](#).

Jerzy Buzek, president of the European Parliament, called the brutal beating of one of the presidential candidates, Vladimir Neklyayev, "disgraceful" and demanded that Lukashenko immediately halt his police forces.

"This incident sheds the worst possible light on the presidential elections," he said in a [statement](#).

Neklyayev, a front-runner of the nine opposition candidates, was severely beaten when he led a column of supporters to the protest. He was hospitalized, but aides later said plainclothes security agents carried him away from his hospital bed.

Lukashenko told reporters Monday that Neklyayev and opposition candidate Vitaly Rymashevsky, who was also injured, had been hiding from investigators in the hospital.

"They wanted to sit it out in the hospital," he said, Interfax reported.

The president also mocked the two men's beatings by police.

"They still wanted to become president. What president squeals to the world after being punched in the face? You must put up with that," he was quoted as saying.

Also beaten and arrested was opposition candidate Andrei Sannikov, who became the next-highest vote getter after Lukashenko, tallying 2.5 percent, according to official figures.

Sannikov's wife, journalist Irina Khalip, was pulled out of her car and beaten while she was speaking live on Ekho Moskvyy radio.

Among the other detained journalists was former Moscow Times reporter Maria Antonova. She was arrested as she tried to return to her hotel early Monday after covering the nighttime rallies for Agence France-Press.

She was released Monday afternoon after spending the night in detention, without being given an explanation for her arrest, AFP bureau chief Stuart Williamson said in e-mailed comments.

The violence throws into doubt a feeble rapprochement between Europe and Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus with an iron fist since 1994. The EU in 2008 suspended a travel ban on Belarussian officials, including Lukashenko, and accepted Minsk into the Eastern Partnership, a program for closer cooperation with the bloc's eastern neighbors.

Elmar Brok, a prominent member of the European Parliament for German Chancellor Angela

Merkel's Christian Democrats, called for Belarus to be suspended from the program.

"We cannot allow Minsk to slow down the process," he told *The Moscow Times*.

But Brok said it was too early to discuss other sanctions, like a renewal of the travel ban or the freezing of officials' bank accounts.

"We have to keep the door open," he said.

His comments were echoed by Andreas Gross, a Swiss Social Democrat lawmaker and member of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, who said the council should not close its information bureau in Minsk.

"Our presence can encourage the opposition and enables us to monitor events," he said by telephone from Bern.

Belarus is the only European country apart from the Vatican that is not member of the council, Europe's oldest human rights organization. The Council of Europe opened a so-called Information Point in Minsk in 2009, in the wake of Belarus' improving relations with Europe.

But Minsk rejected an offer from the council to send observers for the presidential elections. "They brusquely refused," Gross said.

The vote nevertheless pitted election monitors from the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States, or CIS, and the broader

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, against each other.

The CIS observers found that the vote was free and fair. "We declare the elections legitimate. Without any doubts," CIS executive secretary Sergei Lebedev told *Interfax*.

The OSCE observer mission's head, Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, said in a [statement](#) on the organization's web site that a positive assessment was impossible "in light of the flawed vote count and the authorities' heavy-handed response to yesterday's demonstrations."

But Konstantin Zatulin, a senior State Duma deputy for United Russia, said the elections were "more or less normal" and blamed the opposition for the violence.

"I expect that President Medvedev will soon congratulate his colleague Lukashenko for his victory," he told *The Moscow Times*.

Zatulin, who is first deputy chairman of the Duma's CIS Committee, was adamant that the protests should not be linked to the elections.

"They started after the election was over," he said, adding that the opposition made a grave mistake by letting the "aggressive" protests get violent.

It is hardly acceptable to attempt storming government buildings," he said

Zatulin said he did not think that Moscow's relations with Minsk, which fell to all-time lows during Lukashenko's recent rapprochement with Europe, would remain smooth. "This does

not mean that we are fully satisfied with our dialogue with Lukashenko," he said.

But Oleg Kozlovsky, a leading member of Russia's Solidarity opposition movement, who took part in the protests, said Lukashenko was losing a lot of public support.

"The fact that some 50,000 people took to the streets shows that Lukashenko does not have the popularity reflected in the official election results," he said by telephone.

Kozlovsky acknowledged that the protesters had started the violence and given police a reason to crack down. He said it was too early to say whether this happened "because of the work of agent provocateurs from the security services or because of hot-headed protesters."

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