

You Cannot be Serious: The Belarus Saga exposes the Hollowness of the West's support for Democracy

By [Neil Clark](#)

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

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When is an election not considered free and fair by the west? Answer: when it delivers victory to a government that rejects neoliberal orthodoxy and refuses to orientate its foreign policy towards Washington or Brussels. There is no other conclusion one can come to after both the US and the EU announced swingeing sanctions on Belarus after the re-election of President Lukashenko.

Many may believe the sanctions deserved – after all, the election has been condemned by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the country's human-rights record has been attacked by Amnesty International. But even if we believe the worst about Lukashenko (and it is widely accepted by opponents that he has majority support in Belarus), the democratic failings of the former Soviet republic pale into insignificance compared with those of other governments that the west, far from penalising, has rewarded generously.

There is no talk of sanctions on Egypt, despite sweeping restrictions placed on opposition candidates, its thousands of political prisoners and widespread use of torture; on the contrary, Hosni Mubarak's country is the second-largest recipient of US foreign aid. And while Condoleezza Rice quotes with approval OSCE reports on Belarus, she seems less keen to respond to its verdict on central Asian states such as Turkmenistan – a country that an OSCE official, Hrair Baliyan, has described as lacking even a “semblance of pluralism”. The US and its European allies have long used the smokescreen of democracy and human rights to undermine regimes of which they do not approve, while turning a blind eye to undemocratic practices and rights abuses in countries that do their bidding. A succession of governments have been labelled undemocratic by the US despite holding free elections: Guatemala in the 50s, Chile in the 70s, Nicaragua in the 80s, the rump Yugoslavia in the 90s. Pro-western dictatorships such as the Shah's Iran, Pinochet's Chile and Suharto's Indonesia have been generously bankrolled.

Even winning three democratic elections in a country where 21 parties operated freely, and there was a thriving opposition-run media, is no guarantee you won't be labelled a dictator by the west, as Slobodan Milosevic found out. The reason Slobodan was so labelled was not because he ran a one-party state or even because of his role in the Yugoslav wars, but because he represented the “unreformed” Yugoslav Socialist party, of which the west did not approve.

The west has the same problem with Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Although Chávez was backed by 58% of Venezuelans in a referendum endorsed by the former US president Jimmy

Carter, Tony Blair called on him to “abide by the rules of the international community”. The “rules” seem to be shorthand for accepting the social and economic template the west insists on imposing throughout the world.

The 83% vote for Lukashenko is said to be far too high to be taken seriously; yet there was no such western incredulity when the pro-Nato and pro-EU Mikhail Saakashvili polled 97% in Georgia’s 2004 presidential elections. When Georgian civil-society leaders protested about the authoritarian direction in which the country was heading, the west stayed silent.

In Ukraine, the scene of elections this weekend, the western-backed orange revolution of just over a year ago has also left a bitter taste for many. For all its talk of spreading democracy, respecting the rights of independent peoples to choose whichever social and economic arrangements they wish really is the last thing the west wants.

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