

The Struggle for Belarus

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PRESIDENT BUSH'S new national security strategy makes the point that "though tyranny has few advocates, it needs more adversaries." The good news about Belarus's farcical presidential election Sunday is that dictator Alexander Lukashenko has acquired a few. To the long-standing enmity of the Bush administration can be added that of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, whose monitoring mission quickly judged the election as unfair and condemned the "arbitrary use of state power"; the Council of Europe, which called the ballot "a farce"; and the European Union, which said that new sanctions against Mr. Lukashenko and his regime were "very likely."

Most encouraging of all was the appearance in downtown Minsk on Sunday and again last night of thousands of opposition protesters, in spite of snow and a hail of threats by Mr. Lukashenko to break up demonstrations by force. The largest opposition gatherings in his 12 years of rule showed that there is a foundation for a Belarusian freedom movement, like those that eventually triumphed in neighboring Poland and Ukraine.

After years of tolerating a dictatorship on their borders, European countries finally are taking measures against Belarus. Visa sanctions have been applied against some officials of the regime; those now need to be extended to Mr. Lukashenko himself, and complemented with a freeze on bank accounts and other assets. The European Union has begun broadcasting objective news into the country, which could help to counter pervasive censorship. Neighbors such as Lithuania and Slovakia have been working with the opposition, which needs funding for communications and organizing.

All of this might have a decisive impact if not for the countervailing influence of Russia, which still prefers dictatorships in Europe. The new chairman of the Group of Eight -- that would be Russian President Vladimir Putin -- publicly congratulated Mr. Lukashenko yesterday, saying the election "highlighted voters' trust in your course." What of the massive manipulation witnessed by the international election observers? The Kremlin approves of it.

In fact, the G-8 chairman, who has been promoting "energy security" as a topic for discussion during the summit he will proudly host in St. Petersburg, is so pleased with Mr. Lukashenko's government that he is supplying it with gas at one-fifth the price he recently proposed to charge democratic Ukraine. That subsidy, and Russian purchases of the substandard goods of Belarusian state factories, prop up an economy barely changed from the Soviet model. The unambiguous policy of the G-8 chairman is to preserve

Russia's domination of its neighbor by backing a dictator who falsifies elections, has murdered leading opponents and enriches himself through arms sales to such countries as Iran and Sudan.

That presumably won't stop President Bush and the six other leaders of Western democracies from toasting their G-8 chairman in St. Petersburg this summer. Too bad the national security strategy seems not to extend that far; Mr. Putin's emerging autocracy also deserves some adversaries.

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