

U.S. Elections Undermine America in Eastern Europe

By Nat Parry | December 3, 2004

On Election Day, I caught a glimpse of how America's moral leadership is eroding in the eyes of Eastern Europeans. I was working with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a regional security organization stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The U.S. is one of the OSCE's 55 participating states, and through it has pressed for democratization in Europe's formerly Communist nations since the Cold War.

Secretary of State Colin Powell invited the OSCE to observe the 2004 election. I served as a program officer in the Election Observation Mission, and in that capacity escorted about a dozen members of parliament from Turkey, Italy, Belgium, Romania, Albania, and Belarus to Northern Virginia polling stations on Nov. 2.

Some of the Eastern European parliamentarians were accustomed to the U.S. observing their own elections and exerting political pressure to expand democracy. It was a new role for them to do a similar job here. One Albanian told me she had struggled for democracy for much of her life and suffered beatings by state security forces for speaking out for freedom in her country. During those dark days, the U.S., with its democratic traditions, was an inspiration to keep fighting, she said.

Now, observing our elections in America, she was learning about voter intimidation and other irregularities during a briefing at the Election Protection Coalition's national call center in Arlington, Virginia.

Her voice shook as she recounted reports of black voters being challenged by Republican lawyers at polling places, of minorities asked for two forms of identification when only one was needed, of polling places in precincts with large minority populations being moved to police stations, of hundreds of electronic voting malfunctions, and of polling stations lacking enough provisional ballots.

The Albanian lawmaker, flipping through page after page of her notes, was stunned by the disenfranchisement of minority voters. "How could this happen here?" she asked me. "How could this happen in America?"

She said these incidents reminded her of anti-democratic tactics in Albania, and pointed out that when these abuses happen in the U.S., they encourage anti-democratic forces everywhere.

The delegation from Belarus, one of Europe's least democratic countries, didn't miss this lesson. As I heard from numerous sources, the primary reason the Belarusians were so interested in observing the U.S. election was so they could cite American electoral flaws to excuse their own corrupt practices.

For months, Belarus had been making statements at the OSCE's Permanent Council in Vienna condemning the U.S. for its lack of democracy and its failure to respect human rights.

When the New York Police Department arrested 1,821 protesters at the Republican National Convention, Belarus cited it as proof the Bush administration didn't respect fundamental freedoms, particularly free speech and the right to assemble.

On Oct. 21, the Belarusian representative to the OSCE issued a harsh statement about the U.S. electoral system, asserting that it "does not meet present-day requirements" and "does not guarantee the holding of genuinely democratic elections." The Belarusian pointed out that the widely used electronic voting machines were open to manipulation, and concluded that "basic international obligations regarding elections are being violated in the United States."

The Belarusian criticism may have more to do with posturing than a concern for democracy. But by raising legitimate concerns about the U.S. electoral system, Belarus deflected criticism of its own system.

Under President Aleksandr Lukashenko, Belarus has been criticized by the U.S., the EU, the OSCE, and the UN for its human rights record and undemocratic tendencies. After abolishing the elected parliament in 1994 and suppressing political opposition since then, Belarus has assumed the role of Europe's black sheep. It has spurned Western Europe, ignored calls for democratization, and pursued close relations with Russia, its primary international backer.

The United Nations passed a resolution in April calling on Belarus to cease its persecution of independent journalists, civil society organizations, and peaceful political opponents. Unmoved, Belarus held a referendum in October—widely believed to be rigged—which abolished presidential term limits in Belarus and stripped the opposition of its four seats in the 110-member parliament. Following the election, the government violently broke up pro-democracy demonstrations in the capital, Minsk.

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The Bush administration implemented sanctions against Belarus, which were intended to bring down the Lukashenko government. The representative of the U.S. at the OSCE expressed dismay over the referendum, which effectively established Lukashenko as president for life. The Bush administration condemned it as an “undemocratic election.”

But as irregularities in the U.S. election come to light, those words have less impact than they once might have. While Belarus’ criticisms of U.S. democracy might be little more than hypocritical posturing, America’s criticisms increasingly appear to be self-serving and hypocritical as well.

U.S. demands that Lukashenko respect democracy ring hollow as information regarding Nov. 2 comes into focus. Suspicions of vote fraud in Election 2004 are fueled by reports of mysterious anomalies, such as 3,893 extra votes being added to Bush’s total in Franklin County, Ohio. In sworn testimony in Columbus, frustrated voters offered personal accounts of waiting in line more than five hours to vote, being intimidated at the polls, and attempting to vote on broken machines. Some voters have complained that when they tried to vote for John Kerry on electronic machines, the screens “jumped” to a vote for George W. Bush.

In response to irregularities in Ohio, Green Party presidential candidate David Cobb and Libertarian candidate Michael Badnarik have filed for recounts of the presidential vote in that state as well as New Mexico and Nevada. Although Kerry has already conceded the election to Bush, and has offered no indication that he intends to challenge the results, the Ohio recount could lead to further controversy and calls for a new vote altogether. Already, there have been protests across the country demanding an investigation into the electoral problems. Some are calling the election “the coup, part two.”

While the integrity of this election is of most importance to Americans, the fact that leaders in Europe’s “emerging democracies” are questioning the U.S. democratic process should sound alarm bells.

Through the 1990s, many Eastern Europeans considered the U.S. a model to follow, as an example of how success-

ful nations can be when they embrace free-market economic policies and enshrine respect for individual liberties and civil rights.

Whether that perception was deserved is up for debate, but what is clear is that America’s role in Europe is fundamentally changing, at least partially due to undemocratic tendencies within the U.S. As America’s moral credibility disappears so does its ability to pressure nations to conform to democratic principles. And as the U.S. surrenders this role, it loses relevance in Eastern European politics, leaving a void for other countries and institutions to fill.

While other nations step up to fill that role, the U.S. further loses relevance and solidifies its image as a rogue superpower that contributes little of value to international affairs. As that perception spreads, the U.S. can only grow more isolated from its traditional allies, who will pursue progressive policies independently of the U.S., and frequently in opposition to Washington.

Countering this trend would require a drastic change of course and deep political will on the part of the Bush administration. To re-establish credibility within the international community, a concerted effort must be made to conform with international law abroad and with international standards for elections at home.

A good start might be to heed some of the OSCE Election Observation Mission’s recommendations, such as codifying voter registration criteria and procedures, developing a system for verifying and counting provisional ballots, and standardizing voter identification requirements.

If the U.S. ever expects its recommendations or dictates to be taken seriously in Eastern Europe, perhaps it is time to demonstrate America’s own willingness to heed the recommendations of the international community.

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p. 2

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