



CONTACT:

Alex Wooley, Director of Communications and Development
InterMedia Survey Institute
202.434.9332
wooleya@intermedia.org
www.intermedia.org

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Belarus: new survey shows that while Lukashenka on track to win easily in Sunday's elections, less than half of respondents believe elections will be free and fair; dissenting views have limited access to media

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Authoritarian Alexander Lukashenka will be re-elected president of Belarus, according to a survey InterMedia conducted in the days before Sunday's election. The results, released today, show 52.9 percent of the 1,085 Belarusians surveyed would vote for the incumbent, far ahead of his nearest rivals.

“Perhaps more telling than the fact Lukashenka will likely win the election—something taken for granted domestically and by international observers—is the number of people who said they don't know who they will vote for or refused to answer, 17.4 percent and 10.4 percent, respectively,” said Sarah Glacel, InterMedia's Belarus analyst. “Although some honestly do not know, many of those interviewed felt nervous about answering.”

Just 48.8 percent of all respondents believe the election will be free and fair. Not surprisingly, those planning to vote for Lukashenka were more likely to say the vote will be fair (78.8 percent).

InterMedia, a global media and public opinion research company based in Washington, D.C., found that opposition to Lukashenka is concentrated among the young and the educated, those typically concerned with issues of freedom and social justice, and those living in urban areas. Glacel discovered that Belarusians who use the internet, independent newspapers and international radio stations are more likely to support the opposition rather than Lukashenka.

“Independent information sources have historically had an effect on public opinion, providing people with diverse views and information,” she said. “Unfortunately, access to those sources is low and in some cases appears to be decreasing.” Only 9.7 percent of respondents report using the internet on a weekly basis and only 3.5 percent report following the elections on the internet. As Lukashenka has cracked down on independent newspapers, readership has fallen. In 2004, 26.5 percent of people said they had read the most popular independent paper, *Narodnaya Volya*, in the previous seven days. By 2005, that figure had fallen to 4.1 percent.

“Meanwhile, the support for Lukashenka likely stems from the fact that over the past five years, Belarusians are feeling increasingly satisfied with their economic position and more hopeful about the future,” added Glacel, who compared trend data from InterMedia surveys in Belarus from 2000 to 2005. On economic issues, Glacel found that in 2000 15.1 percent of people said they were satisfied with their own standard of living. By 2005, that number had jumped to 34.7 percent.

In total, InterMedia has conducted more than 20 surveys in Belarus, dating back to 1992.

Further reason for Lukashenka's appeal and the absence of a desire for change at the top may be the gloomy view many respondents hold of recent freedom movements in other countries of the former Soviet Union, where initial jubilation has increasingly been replaced by disappointment. The vast majority of Belarusian respondents did not feel the Orange Revolution (Ukraine) and Rose Revolution (Georgia) resulted in positive changes (9 percent feel the Rose Revolution resulted in positive changes and 10.8 percent felt the same about the Orange Revolution).

InterMedia is a leading international media research, public opinion, evaluation and consulting organization creatively equipping clients to understand their audiences, gauge their effectiveness and target their communications in transitional and developing societies worldwide. Based in Washington, D.C., and active year-round in more than 60 countries, InterMedia helps clients understand complex issues in challenging research environments. The company's strengths include its people—area experts skilled in scientifically-based research and focused on client solutions—its vast global network of local research partners and contacts and its rich data archive of close to 500 media and opinion surveys carried out over the past 15 years.

Survey note: The most recent InterMedia-sponsored survey was of 1,085 adults 18 and older and was conducted February 28 to March 4, 2006. Range of error with a 95 percent confidence interval is +/-2.98 percent.