

# A Test of Opportunity for Ukraine and Belarus: Elections in 2012

The two largest states on the EU's eastern borders, Ukraine and Belarus, will be holding parliamentary elections this autumn. They are being held at a particularly low point in relations with the EU.

Few are optimistic about the outcome. Nonetheless, the elections present an opportunity for governments, opposition groups and EU actors to re-engage positively. EU policymakers have long puzzled over how best to deal with these eastern neighbours. Policy has been constrained by not wanting to upset Russia and the inability to offer the incentive of EU membership that transformed Central Europe. The countries in question have themselves often proven unreliable partners and unable to adhere to basic democratic standards.

Just two years ago, however, there seemed reason to be cautiously optimistic.

In Belarus, Alexander Lukashenka softened his isolationism with a period of reengagement with the EU, leading to a more open election campaign (by Belarusian standards) in 2010. That same year, the new Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, was cautiously welcomed as a more pragmatic and stable partner. He made Brussels his first international visit, suggesting a commitment to a European path of development.

Both presidents then went out of their way to prove their critics right. In Belarus, opposition candidates were detained and allegedly tortured, demonstrations forcefully dispersed and activists jailed. The EU responded with visa bans on over 100 officials.

The Ukrainian authorities, meanwhile, have been jailing opposition leaders, attacking independent media and making unilateral constitutional changes in their favour. As a result, the long-negotiated Association Agreement with the EU remains unsigned. The clampdowns seem irrational in countries where the opposition was already weak and it is hard to see what benefits have been gained.

The EU has been alienated while Russia has increased its economic dominance, particularly over energy assets. In the process, the delicate balance that Minsk and Kiev have tried to maintain between East and West since independence has been upset.

This autumn, Belarusians and Ukrainians will vote in parliamentary elections. They will be the first elections in either countries since the Arab Spring and last autumn's return of real political activity to Russia.

Recent Belarusian and Ukrainian elections have traditionally had the ability to mobilise voters to campaign, debate and demonstrate on the streets. For the EU, elections are concrete measurables of the democratic reforms and norms it seeks to promote in its neighbourhood and it is expected to monitor both closely. There is good cause to be sceptical about this year's polls.

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The opposition groups appear weak and parliamentary elections in any case do not receive the same amount of attention as the presidentials: the Belarusian parliament has little say on policy; in Ukraine many MPs have taken bribes to change positions, in both power really lies with the president. And new confidence in their economies make the governments less likely to want to seek compromise.

Following a catastrophic year in 2011 for Belarus, economists now predict slight growth and few problems in discharging liabilities for servicing external debt (thanks to Russian support). In Ukraine there are government plans to increase pensions, even though the IMF has frozen its assistance package. If there was a reason to worry, it seems to have passed these presidents by.

Nonetheless, despite the difficulties imposed on them, the elections present a real opportunity for opposition groups to present themselves as credible alternatives to the wider population. In Belarus, independent polling has found Lukashenka's support to be half what it was a year ago.

This has not, however, translated into support for the opposition. Similarly, Ukrainian support for Yanukovich and his party has plummeted since his inauguration, but again without a corresponding increase in support for the main opposition.

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There is clearly a need for a political alternative which the current opposition is failing to meet. The opposition must end its internal squabbles and widen its focus from the issue of political persecution so as to also address the issues that matter most to the wider population. Political prisoners cannot and must not be forgotten, of course. But their release will not improve falling living standards or increasing corruption.

More substantial debate on domestic policy is the only way to make opposition groups credible. Engaging in every outreach opportunity the election campaigns will provide is the only option: a threatened boycott in Belarus can achieve nothing but invisibility, and opposition leaders need to be seen to be

believed.

Although many forecast Belarus and Ukraine defaulting to Russian dominance, among their populations there is clear popular support for closer ties with the EU. In Belarus, as many support integration with the EU as with Russia (39-41 per cent). In Ukraine, considerably more now favour integration with the EU over integration with Russia.

However, for all the debate on the effectiveness of Europe's response to the political tension in Belarus and Ukraine, there remains a need for a clearer, more proactive and more consistent approach. It is often misunderstood what the EU can offer as well as what changes it actually requires: both messages must be better prepared by the EU and better conveyed to all groups in society.

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Although at present unable to offer a membership perspective, the EU can offer many tangible benefits, be it the eventual introduction of visa-free travel or far greater trade and business opportunities. Meanwhile many do not understand the reasons for appearing on a visa ban list, which in any case is hardly consistent in its implementation, or why the Association Agreement has been effectively shelved for now, for what Ukrainian Prime Minister Azarov called "far-fetched reasons".

EU foreign ministers have called the Ukrainian elections a 'litmus test' that will determine the future of association with the EU. For the test to be effective in either country the EU must be unambiguous in its message, and pro-active in getting it across.

Governments in Minsk and Kiev remain acutely aware of the

ultimate need for better relations with the rest of Europe so they may yet come to see this as their opportunity; meanwhile, opposition groups could yet benefit by taking advantage of the political space to begin looking like an alternative. This autumn's parliamentary elections are an opportunity not to be wasted, like so many before.

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