

Belarusian parliamentary elections: does everybody win?

On 11 September 2016 Belarus [held elections](#) to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly. In spite of the relatively insignificant role of the parliament in the Belarusian political system, these elections seem particularly important given the international situation and current economic crisis in Belarus.

Many experts expected deeper democratisation during the electoral campaign, such as introducing the OSCE's recommendations into legislation, as well as including several representatives from the opposition into the parliament. According to experts' views, such steps would demonstrate the authorities' willingness to continue their dialogue with the West and would guarantee further loans from the IMF.

However, the actual results appeared to be much more moderate than experts had expected.

Authorities Sing the Same Old Song

One needs to be a very attentive analyst in order to find any significant difference between the current elections and previous electoral campaigns. The authorities have certainly introduced a few of minor changes into the legislation to demonstrate their willingness to cooperate with the OSCE and the West in general. Simultaneously, they have launched an information campaign to demonstrate their inability at a constitutional level to implement the OSCE's main

recommendations.

As a result, all the flaws of the Belarusian electoral system, such as [abuses during early voting](#), strong administrative support for certain candidates, and a lack of control during votes counting have remained untouched.

96% of the candidates from 'Nasha Niva's list became MPs

Naturally, both international and domestic independent observers have called the results of the elections into question. Two month ago 'Nasha Niva', an opposition newspaper, published a forecast of the future members of parliament. The journalists based their assumption not on the candidates' programmes or on sociological surveys but on the candidates' relations with the authorities. As a result, 96% of the candidates from 'Nasha Niva's list became MPs.

Many experts consider early voting to be one of the main indicators of fraud during electoral campaigns in Belarus. The 2016 campaign has not been an exception – according to official data, early voting amounted for 31,29% of votes compared to 26% during the previous parliamentary elections in 2012 and to 36,05% during the presidential elections in 2015.

Since in 2006 early voting amounted to 31,3% of the vote, one would need to be quite an optimist to find any liberalisation in this practise during the current parliament elections. Only wide use of administrative resources could guarantee such high results.

When the Results Become More Interesting than the Process

Nevertheless, there has been one surprise during these elections. Two apparently non-establishment candidates won a

place in the parliament – a member of the oppositional United Civil Party (UCP), Hanna Kanapatskaya, and Aliona Anisim, a deputy head of the Belarusian Language Society. In this context, Dr. Andrey Kazakievich, one of the leading researchers of Belarusian elections, has stated that for the first time since 2000 the results of the current elections appear to be more interesting than the campaign itself.

□Some experts consider the two non-governmental MPs to be a sensational result of these elections

Some experts consider the two non-governmental MPs to [be a sensational result](#) of these elections and speculate on the possible changes in the parliament's future activities. Anyone acquainted with Aliaksandr Lukashenka's personal attitude to the very idea of non pro-governmental MPs understands the importance of this result.

During the previous electoral campaign numerous high-level officials in Belarus, including secretary of the Central Commission on Elections Mikalai Lazavik, made statements about the possibility of a few opposition MPs in the parliament. Such non-public discussion continued in the Presidential Administration.

Those officials and agencies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who supported this idea, pointed out the inability of such a small group (up to 10 MPs) to have any influence on the decision-making process. At the same time, their mere presence in the parliament would send positive signals to the West. However, the president rejected all such proposals.

Games with the West

One can doubt whether these two MPs are even truly members of the opposition as such. Aliona Anisim has publicly rejected

the "opposition" label. Her activities promoting the Belarusian language correspond to the authorities' latest trend of [soft belarusization](#).

Moreover, her presence could help Lukashenka in his negotiations with Moscow – the weak economic situation strengthens nationalistic forces, which could be potentially dangerous for Russia. The head of the Belarusian Language Society – the very well-known member of the opposition Aleh Trusau – was not elected.

The situation with Hanna Kanapatskaya is even more ambiguous. Her victory could force the UCP to recognise the results of the elections, which would mean internal legitimisation of Lukashenka's parliament. This makes conflicts inside the UCP, as well as among other opposition organisations, even more possible.

two MPs can do almost nothing within the strictly authoritarian Belarusian political system

Despite the expectations of certain experts, two MPs can do almost nothing within the strictly authoritarian Belarusian political system. Moreover, serious doubts exist about Kanapatskaya's and Anisim's intent to truly represent the opposition in parliament, let alone disturb the authorities with non-approved initiatives.

Almost no one doubts that the [West remains the main audience](#) for these elections' results. The OSCE, EU, and USA have already expressed doubts regarding the fairness of the Belarusian elections and have called for further reforms of electoral legislation. The artificial character of the campaign, as well as copious fraud remain an open secret. However, given the continuing conflict with Russia and the balancing position of Belarus nobody wants to antagonise Lukashenka.

Rumours exist that such 'liberalisation' should become a precondition for a new loan from the IMF, as well as to improve relations with the EU and particularly the USA. However, even if these rumours have nothing in common with the reality, the authorities lose nothing.

Does Everybody Win?

Thus, it seems that everybody wins as a result of these elections. The president maintains a completely loyal parliament which has no actual influence on the decision-making process in the country.

The West achieves 'apparent' steps towards democratisation and liberalisation in Belarus. The opposition had its 'minute of glory' and once again demonstrated to everybody, including foreign partners, its inability to propose any serious political alternative. The intensive cleansing of the political field in the country since 2010 has born fruit for the authorities.

Thus, in terms of economic and social development of the country, the new Belarusian parliament is shaping up to become as efficient as the previous one, which initiated only three laws during its four year term. Its main function this time around will be reintegrating and legitimising the current Belarusian government to the world.