

# Elections in Belarus: The Continuation of a New Model?

The parliamentary election campaign has begun in Belarus.

There was little protest during the 2015 presidential elections. Elections are not elections as such, but became more a self-appointment of Lukashenka through an electoral façade. Yet the elections were peaceful and the opposition called for concord during the elections.

Peaceful elections and a democratic façade allowed the EU to maintain the fiction that the Belarusian regime was changing. This coupled with the Ukraine situation allowed the EU to tolerate and work with the authorities. Will the 2016 parliamentary elections, on 11 September, continue this trend?

## The Economy Continues to Fall

The collapse of the oil price has caused [significant](#) repercussions in the Belarusian economy, creating a situation where the regime cannot maintain its social contract with the populace. [Belstat](#) showed that the economy is decreasing as exports fell by 20 percent in January 2016 compared with January 2015.

This belt tightening brought on by the limping economy saw a [seven percent reduction](#) in government spending. An Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies ([IISEPS](#)) poll emphasised public displeasure with the regime with 60 percent seeing Belarus as going in the wrong direction, 15 percent doubting that the situation will change and 47 percent blaming Lukashenka for the failure.

# Opposition United...or not?

The economic situation remains a reason why the Parliamentary elections could maintain the same changes as the 2015 Presidential elections. Another aspect concerns the opposition.

In early January 2016 centre-right parties and associations, such as the United Civil Party, Belarusian Christian Democracy and the For Freedom movement formed a coalition. This signifies a new phenomenon, namely that a part of the opposition has united on an ideological basis. Former presidential hopeful [Mikola Statkievič](#) has begun to organise an opposition congress too.

On 21 June opposition groups, such as the Belarusian Social Democratic Party – Hramada and the United Civil Party, from across the political spectrum agreed to coordinate some efforts. Under the agreement, signatures will be collected together; candidates nominated and the parties will work together at the electoral commissions to prevent fraud. 300 candidates will be put forward for elections.

Yet, [Tacciana Karatkievič](#) and her 'Tell the Truth' organisation are still ostracised by most of the opposition due to their alleged cosy relationship with the regime. The Belarusian Conservative Christian Party and its exiled leader [Zianon Pazniak](#) has not joined the alliance. It rejects engaging with the regime.

## Hugging the West at Arm's Length

With the Ukraine crisis and the decline of the Russian economy, the Belarusian authorities have been on the hunt for

new allies. The regime has promoted Belarusian national identity to [distance itself from Russia](#). The Belarusian authorities have looked to the European Union (EU) due to Ukraine and a weakening Russian economy. The EU has also welcomed a chance to isolate Russia.

This has led to a strange game of cat and mouse. The EU having ended sanctions on the Belarusian regime [cannot enforce them again](#) without losing face. At the same time the Belarusian regime cannot be seen to be making baby steps towards democratisation for fear of having sanctions reapplied and so has to provide a façade of democratisation. Both sides cannot afford to blink first.

Both sides decided that the nascent relationship is worth maintaining. While the Belarusian regime will not engage in a significant evolution towards EU values, both sides know that any affiliation is better than the nonentity that existed after 2010. The EU was less vocal in 2015 than in the past on electoral falsifications and potentially it could continue this approach in 2016.

## Regime Preparations

The authorities have been preparing for the elections, using them to maintain the democratic disguise, while preserving total control over the outcome. Two months is a long time and the opposition often fall out with one another. Mutual suspicion and competition for access to limited resources could end any unity.

Many predictions have been made that the Belarusian economy will collapse bringing about Lukashenka's fall. Lukashenka knows this, and as the juggler par excellence, has survived such scenarios before. Having won the Presidential election the regime is probably safe, but with a falling economy maintaining the social contract and using coercion becomes

that much harder to pay for. This weakens the regime.

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The authorities have given themselves time to enhance tactics for maintaining the electoral miasma. Currently, parliamentary candidates are registering. This will last until July 7. However, the central electoral commission has until August 10 to approve candidates. Enough time to weed out candidates too independent for the regime.

*Belaya Rus'* has been mobilised for its main task of [collecting signatures for pro-government candidates](#). With the help of administrative resources it will likely return 10 times the number of signatures required, so as to emphasise public support for regime applicants. Other GONGOS like the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU), the Federation of Labour-Unions of Belarus (FPB) and the unions of women and veterans have been mobilised to increase regime control.

## Important Elections?

In the 2015 presidential elections, the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies calculated that Lukashenka's actual [winning vote margin was 50.8 percent](#), somewhat different than the official 83.5 percent.

With a collapsing economy, the authorities will find it harder to maintain elite support. With lower rents from the economy the authorities may find it harder to pay security services personnel and give other elites access to rents. However, even such obvious fraud is unlikely to lead to possible protests and violence because people in Belarus are [scared of the repeat of the Ukraine post-revolution scenario](#).

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The regime has looked for associations with other states and international organisations away from Russia fearing a possible Crimean scenario. While unlikely any encroachment on Lukashenka's power is treated with suspicion.

However closer affiliation with the EU will mean that Belarus cannot support its economy as the EU cannot subsidise Belarus. The authorities are left with dependence on Russia. But if it stays with the shrinking Russian economy, the regime will find it harder to maintain power and elite support.

[Early voting](#) among state workers and students will be invoked. This will allow the authorities to falsify these votes ensuring the authorities of victory before the elections. However these elections are interesting for two reasons.

Firstly, to see if any opposition politicians get elected to Parliament, although such a scenario remains unlikely and secondly, to see how the regime squares the circle of maintaining proximity to Russia, while softening its stance with the EU. The juggler has yet another act to perform.

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## **Hunting Pedophiles in Belarus**

On 2 August, the "Occupy Pedophilia" group posted a new video online, which went viral on the Belarusian internet. In the video teenagers interrogated a potential pedophile, and in the

end poured urine on his head.

They call themselves “Occupy Pedophilia” or pedophile hunters, the group has become a significant phenomenon in post-Soviet nations. Autonomous groups under the guise of 15-year olds acquainted over the Internet with potential pedophiles who offer them sex. After that, the hunters meet with a potential pedophile and shoot a video of them.

A large part of society supports such vigilantes. Moreover, thanks to the hunters people have learned that there were more pedophiles in society than had originally been assumed. The authorities keep silent on the statistics of sexual offences against children, and the police appear less effective than the hunters in dealing with them.

Thus, through the fight against pedophiles, extreme right groups can get support in society, enlarge their structures and become more visible actors in the public life of Belarus. Vigilante justice can become a big threat to Belarusian society and have unexpected consequences. According to a police spokesman, a potential pedophile, shot on video by Minsk hunters, planned to commit suicide.

## **Pedophile Hunters**

Pedophile hunters operate in more than twenty cities in Russia. They also have imitators in Belarus and Ukraine. A Russian far-right activist with Belarusian roots, Maxim Martsinkievich, began to shoot videos with disclosures of pedophiles several years ago. Since then the idea spread throughout the post-Soviet space. The age of the hunters tends to be quite young. The leader of the Minsk hunters is only 17.

Hunters of pedophiles act as autonomous groups in their cities. Today the “Occupy Pedophilia” groups operate not only in Minsk, but also some small towns, for example Zhodzina, a town near Minsk. Last month, the majority of the independent

media resources published news about the pedophilia inclination of one of the activists of the pro-Lukashenka [Belarusian Republican Youth Union](#) (BRYU) Uladzimir Tsyukhai.

According to the published video and hunters' statement, the BRYU activist came to Zhodzina on a date with a 15-year-old boy. Before that, Tsyukhai wrote on the Internet to this boy about his sexual fantasies. In Zhodzina, a group of ultra-right young people met the BRYU activist in place of the expected 15-year-old boy.

They began to question the BRYU activist, mock and beat him, and then took him to the police. The police did not hold the young people accountable for vigilante justice, because their victim did not submit any complaints against the hunters.

Later, the police confirmed to the youths, that this person really was a prominent member of the BRYU. The Belarusian independent community has known Tsyukhai since 2008, when he brought about 30 students to the trial against the opposition activist Barazienka. As a result, students occupied every seat in the hall, and human rights activists and journalists could not attend the trial. Later, Barazienka's mother asked Tsyukhai if he had any conscience. In response, a member of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union strongly pushed the woman.

### **Pedophilia in Belarus**

The authorities suppressed the facts of pedophilia in Belarus for a long time. According to the news agency Interfax, the government does not publish full statistics of sexual violence against children, although they have such data.

The police reported that in 2011 they recorded about 30 rapes of under-aged individuals and about 40 in 2012. These figures do not look all that large as the hunters of pedophiles from Minsk have exposed five potential pedophiles in one month.

According to Interfax news agency, pedophilia in Belarus usually is characterised by seduction, not rape. For a long time a pedophile ran a section of a youth club for 10-14 year-old children. Police started a criminal case against the head of the section.

The police often remain ineffective in acting against pedophiles. In 2010 a Belarusian court failed to prosecute a pedophile on several cases that dated back to the 90s, because the statute of limitations had expired. The pedophile himself actually pleaded guilty to the judge, despite the status of the cases.

Under the Criminal Code of Belarus, adults can receive up to 15 years in prison for the rape of minors and up to 5 years in prison for having sex with a person under 16. Pedophiles fear not only being caught, but also other prisoners. Courts in Russia may condemn pedophiles to 20 years, and in Germany to 10 year sentences.

### **New Extreme Right Movement**

Hunting pedophiles has become a new niche for ultra-right groups in Post-Soviet countries. Although human rights activists call it vigilante justice, and lawyers bring up criminal responsibility, pedophile hunters can count on public support.

34% of visitors of the liberal Belarusian Radio Liberty support the actions of the hunters. This percentage would certainly be bigger among more conservative people. Thus, the far-right groups have become the norm for society, and even the defenders of the common good.

Belarusian lawyer Nastassia Lojka said that “from the point of view of human rights no one has the right to be a vigilante, for that there is a legitimate way. But, on the other hand, law enforcement agencies must be responsive to such manifestations, and not wait for the video to show up on

social networks. “

For Belarus, it is noteworthy that the new ultra rights are not based on ideological grounds. If a significant part of the far-right organisations in Belarus divide themselves into pro-Belarusian and pro-Russian, the new far-right groups avoid this division on ideological differences.

However, there comes a possibility that after such activities, supported by society, the new far-right will start to carry out the realisation of their more dangerous ideas.

The only way out is for law enforcement agencies to fight against pedophiles more assertively. It is the police that should protect children from pedophiles, not 17-year-old pedophile hunters.

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## Lukashenka's Youth

Last month ended the trial against former leader of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union Leanid Kavalyou.

Police caught Kavalyou with a major bribe. The sentence was harsh – seven years of imprisonment in a maximum security colony with property confiscation. The criminal case represents a telling example of how good the "new governing elite" in Belarus is.

In 2012 Lukashenka surpassed Brezhnev with regard to the term of reign. A new generation appeared in Belarus during this time period, the generation that does not remember the country being governed by someone else. Pro-government youth in Belarus is corrupt and opportunistic while opposition-minded young people have to work in extremely difficult

circumstances.

## **Two Ways To The Politics**

The overwhelming majority of Belarusian young people are not interested in politics or private business. Belarusian state started creating favourable conditions for the business and this has somewhat started to attract the youth there. But politics still remains an almost closed sphere. In today's Belarus, the youth politics has only two forms: pro-Lukashenka associations or opposition organisations, which function in the regime of permanent repressions. It is worth mentioning that neither of them influences the society much.

The consequences of membership in these organisations may be diametrically different. On the one hand, there's Usevalad Yancheuski. He used to be the First Secretary of the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union in the middle of the 90s. Today he works as the closest assistant of Lukashenka and is the youngest official who forms the state ideology in Belarus.

On the other hand, there's Paval Syevyarynets, who headed the opposition Young Front. Today, he is serving his second criminal term. The first one was for organisation of mass protests after the referendum-2004, when Lukashenka changed the Constitution and got the right to run for President for as many times as he liked. The second sentence was for the mass protest after the latest presidential election. At present, the politician is serving the punishment in the form of forcible hard labour – the prisoner is obliged to live in the special facility and to work at the enterprise appointed by the authorities.

## **The “For Lukashenka” Youth**

Authoritarian regimes often create youth organisations which do their best to support the regime and prepare new personnel. The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (Belarusian

abbreviation BRSM) performs this function in Belarus.

The BRSM was founded 10 years ago. Then the government decided to unite the two biggest pro-authoritative organisations. The first one was the Belarusian Youth Union, the successor of the Lenin Communist Union of Belarusian Youth, and the second one was the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union. It is worth mentioning that the BRYU is often called Lukamol in Belarus, as if to compare it with the old Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth).

Lukashenka pays the BRSM for the support open-handedly. For example, in 2011 the BRSM received 20.5 billion Belarusian roubles (approximately 6.6 million dollars). This makes 98% of all the finance which is provided to the youth politics in Belarus in total.

In the reality, the BRSM gets even more. On 13 January 2003 Lukashenka signed a decree which required that the BRSM local branches were financed by the local authorities' budget. The government was also responsible to repair the organisation's main office. It is obvious that the authorities created very favourable conditions for the development of a strong loyal youth organisation in Belarus.

However, there appeared no strong organisation, although half a million Belarusians are already members of the BRSM. A large number of members does not mean that all of them support the current regime. The majority of people signed up for the BRSM either forcibly or because it gave an opportunity to get a place in the hostel for the term of study in the university or technical school.

The BRSM also uses the so-called "secret recruitment". The mechanism is simple: an order comes "from the above" that new members should join the organisation. A head of a branch (usually this is a school employee who has even his own office at school) takes a list of school students and sign them all

up to the BRYU.

The BSU student Kryscina Karcheuskaya came across such situation when she found out that she had to pay the membership fee to the BRSM on graduation of the university, otherwise they would not give her the diploma. When these facts become known and Krystina demand to investigate the case, the BRSM refers to “technical problems” and hushed up the matter.

Despite the great financial support, administrative resource and half a million members, the BRSM failed to become a strong organisation. In the first place, it is connected with the lack of new ideas. The BRSM, as well as other branches of the regime, realises more and more that the social-economic model which Lukashenka’s regime praised for so long has no future. The second reason for the BRYU’s weakness is the absence of competition. The pro-Lukashenka youth lives in the conditions when the organisation exists by itself and has no contacts with other organisations or the independent media.

### **The “Against Lukashenka” Youth**

Although the Belarusian youth takes no genuine interest in the BRSM, it does not mean that the opposition movements are popular. On the whole, the Belarusian youth is not as opposing as many would think. Just think about administrative detentions, fines, expulsions from universities make the daily routine of the youth opposition activists, it becomes clear why the opposition youth movements are not so popular in Belarus.

For example, the Young Front activist Raman Vasilieu, has been detained many times during this year and has spent 69 days in the Akrestsina Street detention centre. Besides, Young Front is the only organisation in the country which can compete with the BRSM with regard to popularity.

However, the conditions in which the Young Front and the BRSM

conduct their activity are totally different. Several Young Front activists are serving criminal sentences today (including leader of the organisation [Zmitser Dashkevich](#)). Any activities on behalf of the organisation is banned by the Criminal Code because it was not registered. Activists do not have offices and often serve administrative detentions.

## **The Bleak Future**

The only thing that the Belarusian Republican Youth Union and the Young Front have in common is absence of new ideas. The Young Front is coming through a crisis, the same as the whole opposition, and cannot offer anything new to the society in order to attract new adherents.

Belarusian youth does not want to live in a country with no political and economic reforms and no long-term opportunities. They also do not believe that they can change anything in Belarus. For many the only way out is emigration. The research of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies showed that 65 % of young people want to leave the country. It is interesting that not only the democratic youth emigrates, but the officials' children as well.

*Ryhor Astapenia*