

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.

The authorities have given themselves time to enhance tactics for maintaining the electoral miasma.

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](#).

with the shrinking Russian economy, the regime will find it harder to maintain power and elite support

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.

Stephen Hall

Stephen is a PhD candidate at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London.