

What to Expect from the 2015 Presidential Elections in Belarus?

The year 2015 will herald a new presidential election in Belarus, certainly by the fall, and perhaps as early as March. It will be the fifth presidential election since the introduction of a national Constitution in 1994, and will mark Alexander Lukashenka's 21st year in power.

Perceived Weaknesses of Lukashenka

Traditionally, elections are times when there are opportunities for the opposition to attract public attention, to use short spans on national TV and radio, and to make appearances at public venues. On paper at least for several reasons opposition leaders appear to have greater opportunities for support than in the past. They can be listed as follows, and not necessarily in order of significance.

First, as the president indicated in his meeting with journalists on 29 January, he is growing old—in fact he seems to have aged much faster physically than his equally seasoned counterparts such as Anatol Liabedzka of the United Civic Party or the still jailed Mikalai Statkevich of the Social Democrats. That fact seems to lead the president to talk about the possibility of retiring from office.

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Second, the country appears somewhat directionless. The president has no plan for the future, no clearly laid out scheme for economic reforms, or vision of where his state lies in the European and Eurasian geostrategic picture. The

question would seem critically important in view of the events taking place in neighbouring Ukraine, which have polarised much of the continent.

Third and related to the above is the increasingly gloomy economic picture brought about in part by the sharp decline of the currency and falling world oil prices. Though the president has not devalued the ruble officially, it has reached unprecedentedly low levels against the dollar and Euro. He has suggested refinancing the country's growing debt. But the usual escape route of foreign loans from Russia, or aid from the International Monetary Fund is no longer available, forcing the president to seek new partners who are unlikely to offer very favourable terms. China at the head.

Fourth, the opposition has had opportunities to learn from past mistakes. In 2001 campaigns to come up with a unified candidate took place too late to have a major impact (2001). In 2006, they were diluted by divisions that resulted in two competing candidates (Aleksandr Kazulin and Aleksandr Milinkevich in 2000). And, if one wishes to go back further, this also happened in 1994. In the 2010 campaign the plethora of candidates stymied any real possibilities of convincing the electorate that valid alternatives existed.

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Fifth, in 2010 at least three of the candidates made direct overtures for Russian support for their campaigns, and attained some success until a rapprochement between Lukashenka and President Dmitry Medvedev a little over a week before the vote took place in Belarus ended these hopes. Such moves presupposed that Russia was getting weary of Lukashenka. And today the rift between President Vladimir Putin and Lukashenka seems even wider. Some Russian leaders have expressed open frustration with the apparent lack of support from Minsk for

Russia's response to Ukraine's Euromaidan.

Despite these obstacles, which might daunt a president in a more democratic environment, Lukashenka is actually more popular today than he was in 2010. The ostensible dilemmas for the incumbent president are actually beneficial in terms of his reelection—admittedly, one is not speaking here of an open election on an equal platform. At the same time they weaken his rivals, who have struggled to find viable policies on which to mount a concerted and united campaign.

Lukashenka's Advantages

Let us take the five above "problems" in turn.

First, Lukashenka's age and time in office is translated in official parlance into valuable experience. Who else, he asks, could be entrusted with office at such a critical time in the state's short history? Of course, he might step aside, but only if he is critically ill or suffering from dementia? Besides, he adds, it is even necessary to raise the pensionable age because of the fall in numbers of the working age population. Moreover, to resign at a difficult time would lead, he states, to accusations of cowardice. Therefore Lukashenka must stay and fight on. What else could be expected?

Second, the directionlessness is actually advantageous. What could be more dangerous at the current time than a radical reform platform that would likely entail wage cuts, closure of unprofitable factories, and opening national industries to foreign control? Why must Belarus commit itself to the Eurasian Economic Union or European Union when it can remain on decent terms with both entities, its membership of the former merely token compliance to the wishes of Putin? Hasn't the policy of vacillation and flip-flops worked so far? Who can tell where Lukashenka will move next?

Lukashenka even suggests that Belarusians themselves are to blame for the crisis

Third, the country's economic plight can be blamed on world events and problems. It is simple to argue that they are external to Belarus. Though to some extent this attitude is partially offset by the recent firing of Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich and other officials, it remains in place. Lukashenka evades responsibility. He even suggests that Belarusians themselves are to blame for the crisis by abandoning their own currency and attempting to purchase dollars, a cowardly action deserving of scorn and condemnation.

Fourth, the opposition is neither united nor rejuvenated, despite repeated attempts to come up with a formula for unity. One reason for this is the thoroughness with which the state repressed opposition leaders—less directly after the 2010 presidential elections, which solicited international attention, than in 2011 and 2012 when it took extreme steps to ensure the eradication of its “enemies,” particularly among the young.

Fifth, there is no Russian route available today for the opposition, a time when a state-fostered national sentiment has come to the fore. Belarusians are unclear whether in the Donbas conflict they support the Ukrainian side or the Russian, but they are much more certain when it comes to the survival of their own country. The 23 years of the Republic of Belarus have come to mean something, however national identity might be defined. And like Ukraine's Leonid Kravchuk in 1991, to some extent, the president has purloined the opposition's insistence on the national integrity of Belarus, albeit alongside nebulous statements about the “sacredness” of the Russian people and their “oneness” with Belarusians.

Another Five Years?

The claim that under Lukashenka, Belarus has attained a form

of national integrity is false, but it has had some impact. At its height it has persuaded even some western observers to identify the nation directly with Lukashenka. It is a tunnel vision that overlooks his failings and ignores other aspects of Belarusian political and cultural life. It also conveys the image that he alone is standing, defiant, against imperialist and predatory Russia while the EU dithers.

The people see what they are meant to see, however narrow and distorted that vision may be. And it is why we have not seen the last of Alexander Lukashenka.

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Lukashenka Looking for a New Prime Minister?

On 23 March, Alexander Lukashenka asked journalists to send him their suggestions for a candidate for a new prime minister of Belarus.

For a long time the leader of the Belarusian has been intensifying his rhetoric about his dissatisfaction with the economic results of the government and replacing Mikhail Myasnikovich. Still, his resignation may happen only next year.

The Head of the Presidential Administration Andrei Kabiakou, chairman of the Development Bank Siarhei Rumas or the Speaker of the House of Representatives Uladzimir Andreichanka seem to

be the most likely candidates for the premiership. Lukashenka has limited choices and no candidate will make a real difference.

The prime minister in the Belarusian system is but a mere puppet of Lukashenka, unable to conduct deep economic reforms in the country.

Leisurely Premier's Retirement

On 23 March, [Alexander Lukashenka](#) confirmed that he is still considering removing the current government and is search of an official who could replace [Mikhail Miasnikovich](#) as a prime minister. The Belarusian head of state is looking for a new prime minister in the upper echelons of the state apparatus. According to him, there are about 35-40 people there under consideration.

Alexander Lukashenka is considering the resignation of the government due to the economic problems facing the country. In particular, the Belarusian leader is troubled by the warehouses filled with Belarusian products that nobody wants to buy. Simultaneously, Lukashenka reasonably states that this is partly due to the fact that the West and the East today lack a favourable economic common ground.

There is a real possibility that the current government will soon be sent packing. Its dismissal will likely take place in the coming months. The most likely scenario will have Lukashenka dismissing Miasnikovich ahead of the presidential election, pegging him with all the economic problems Belarus has faced the past few years.

The Belarusian economy, meanwhile, continues to deteriorate. This year Belarus is [trapped in a recession](#), and inflation continues to rise, despite the fact that in neighbouring countries, it is almost nonexistent. The prime minister does indeed appear to be unable to fix the economy.

Candidates for the Prime Minister's Chair

Although Lukashenka said that he would choose the future prime minister from a pool of 35-40 people, the media and experts have independently determined most likely successors to Myasnikovich. The leading candidates are:

✘ [Andrei Kabiakou](#), Head of the Presidential Administration, has a good personal relationship with the Belarusian head of state. He has served as vice-Prime Minister for 10 years and was the ambassador of Belarus to Russia. Although born in Moscow, [he received credibility](#) among managerial elites for his toughness in his negotiations with the Kremlin.

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[Siarhei Rumas](#), Head of the Development Bank, has long been considered as one of the supporters of liberal reforms in the Myasnikovich government. He is known as a man who can make things happen. He speaks several foreign languages and knows how to work with international institutions. At the age of 44, he remains one of the youngest officials in Belarus.

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[Uladzimir Andreichanka](#), Speaker of the House of Representatives, has been in power for a long time and has led the Vitebsk Regional Executive Committee for 14 years. He has led the House of Parliament since 2008. In a Belarusian context, this means that that he has been doing next to nothing. Lukashenka recently returned a few deputies to positions of real power, and Andreychenko may be the next in line.



[Uladzimir Makei](#), Minister of Foreign Affairs, has become known as the architect of the previous dialogue between Belarus and the EU. Previously, he was a member of the state security services, worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and [headed the presidential administration](#). Consequently, he lacks a deep understanding of economic matters, so his appointment as prime minister would come as a surprise.

[Siamion Shapira](#), head of the Minsk Regional Executive Committee, has long been considered as a liberal amongst the ruling elites, although lately he personally gave the order to fire scholar Andrei Charniakievich from his university position for a book about the history of Hrodna. Lukashenka invited Shapira to the government before, but he asked to stay on as governor.

While this list defines the potential candidates for the post of prime minister, Lukashenka may choose another person on purpose, one who is not particularly popular today.

Will There be Policy Change After a Change of Government?

The Belarusian political system is built in a way that it is of no consequence who occupies the post of prime minister. The government remains but an executioner of the president's will. It lacks any real authority and sometimes even acts as Lukashenka's whipping boy. During meetings with Lukashenka, Belarusian senior officials tend to look at the floor rather than directly in his eyes.

The fact, that Lukashenka remains reluctant to speed up the process of finding a replacement for the premiership after speaking about it for a few months, confirms he has

other designs. The appointment of a liberal in the government does not mean that the government's policy will be liberal as the PM that "runs" it. Rather, it will continue to follow the the direct orders of its populist master.

Belarus' problems are related not only to the worsening economic situation, but also to the structural deficiencies of the economy. However, the current authorities appear reluctant to liberalise the economy and privatise enterprises, so the long-term improvement of the Belarusian economy remains unrealistic. Last month, the [Minister of Agriculture and Food](#) presented a recovery plan for Belarusian villages. However, the plan lacks even basic private property rights.

In general, the head of the Belarusian state has a short list to choose from. Most capable managers left the ruling elite back in the 90s, and talented young people are not eager to join up. Although the authorities continue to declare their desire [to bring back](#) successful Belarusians from abroad, these statements fall on deaf ears. A personnel shortages remain one of the greatest problems for Belarus.

The search for a new prime minister appears to be little more than shuffling of an old deck of cards. Whatever card Lukashenka pulls, the result is already clear. Belarus needs someone truly new.

Belarusian Historians Struggle to Find Their Place

On 10 April, in an interview for Radio Svaboda Belarusian historian and a former lecturer at the European Humanities University Aleś Smalianchuk stated that Belarus did not have

its own historical policy.

His interview followed several politically-motivated dismissals at Hrodna State University. The dismissals prove that the authorities are afraid of alternative initiatives and thus, exclude them from the public sphere.

But the policy of the Belarusian authorities is far from consistent. On the one hand they ban the white-red-white flag of the 1918 Belarusian National Republic (BNR), while at the same time they permit a BNR public rally in the centre of Minsk. State media even organised a roundtable acknowledging the role of the BNR in Belarusian history. At the same time they dropped charges against Arche magazine where many Belarusian historians have published their work.

One thing is certain – the Belarusian authorities are aware of the power of pulling "cultural-historical" strings to reach their short-term political goals. Belarusian historians know it only too well.

Book on History of Hrodna Sparks Dismissals

The local authorities in Hrodna have a problem tolerating a different historical narrative, like the one published in a recent book on the history of Hrodna, a regional centre in the West of Belarus. The book called 'Hrodnaznaustva' came out in Poland in 2012 and immediately raised lots of controversy. As a result several contributors to this book could not continue their work and left the university. The authorities gradually, and efficiently, appear to have gotten rid of the authors – historians who no longer are permitted to teach at the university, or any other state university.

In September 2012, Andrej Czarniakevich, a historian who co-authored the book lost his job at Hrodna State University. It became clear that the region's governor, Siamon Shapiro, personally decided to dismiss the historian. The reason given was that the publication was published abroad using an

'unclear' source of financing.

Viachaslau Shved, another contributor to the book is a well-recognised professor who has been working at Hrodna State University for many years. At the end of March he lost his position as the dean of the Department of Belarusian Culture and Regional Tourism. Later on, Shved failed to win a new round of competition for his position as professor and as a result lost his job. He has since suggested that the procedure was politically motivated.

Another historian, Igor Kuzmin, left the same university in protest of the politics of the local officials who are clearly interested in maintaining control and censorship in the field of education.

A Roundtable with the Academics: the BNR Recognised

However, Belarusian authorities are not always tough on different interpretations of history. Proclamations made about the first Belarusian state founded on 25 March 1918 remain a bone of contention for those who adhere to the Soviet version of the history and those who oppose it. The authorities do not recognise 25th of March as a national holiday, while the opposition does.

Usually the authorities allow public rallies on that day. This year, while giving permission to hold the annual event, they stipulated that the organisers were not to bring white-red-white flags of the BNR to the event. Over a thousand people participated in the rally. Police arrested only seven people – a rather modest number by Belarusian standards.

A major Belarusian state newspaper used the anniversary of the BNR as an occasion to discuss its historical importance. The state newspaper 'Zviazda' organised a roundtable with the participation of scholars from the National Academy of Sciences. Historians and philosophers discussed the Belarusian National Republic and the role of

intellectuals in the process of forming national awareness amongst Belarusians. For Belarus, this was a very unusual event.

One of the participants, Mikalaj Smiakhovich from the National Academy of Sciences, highlighted the role of the Belarusian intelligentsia. In his opinion, historians perceive the BNR today as a national form of the Belarusian state: '95 years ago the Belarusian nation obtained the right to have its own state'. Aliaksandr Kavalenia, director of the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences, talked about the mission intellectuals for the further development of the Belarusian state.

Any Hope for Belarusian Historians?

Aleś Smalanchuk's interview for Radio Svaboda, mentioned above, gives a rather sad picture of the situation with Belarusian historians and historiography. The state suppresses alternative historical narratives, though occasionally it tolerates and allows some challenging initiatives. At the same time, no educational institutions in the country can seriously take responsibility for the promotion and support for the independent teaching of Belarusian history.

Commenting on the recent dismissals of historians in Hrodna, Smalanchuk also criticised the European Humanities University (EHU), a Belarusian university in exile. He noted that even at this university, which is supposed to support independent teaching and studies of Belarusian history, a number of prominent Belarusian historians such as Zakhar Shybieka and Valiantsin Holubeu have had to leave.

According to Smalanchuk, the university no longer admits new people to study history and political science and the administration is on the verge of demonstrating contempt for the Belarusian language and history with its current

policies.

In short, Belarusian historians are struggling to find a favourable working environment not only in their home country, but abroad as well.