

# Elections Without Winners

The 2012 parliamentary campaign election campaign ended in defeat of all political actors in Belarus.

On the one hand, the Belarusian opposition was unable to mobilise society. On the other hand, the authorities received the expected results from a made up "political depression" which they have themselves created – indeed, very few people turned up at the polling stations.

It was clear from the very beginning that the authorities would not allow any opposition members into the House of Representatives. The Belarusian Parliament will continue to serve as a puppet in Lukashenka's hands rather than a venue for public discussion. After the depressing events which followed the 2010 presidential elections, the only hope for Belarusians was that democratic forces would be able to conduct an effective campaign to lead society out of political depression.

However, these hopes failed to materialise. Instead of taking decisive actions, many opposition party activists focused on political struggle between themselves. This year's election will be remembered not by the common mass protests of the opposition, but because Tell the Truth member Aleksandr Fyaduta publicly kicked Belarusian Christian Democracy Co-Chairman Vital Rymasheuski, or because Charter'97 Editor-in-Chief Natallia Radzina called those opposition activists who ran in the election "partners in crime" with the authorities.

The main success of Belarusian pro-democracy forces is the evidence of very low voter turnout. Although the Central Election Committee boasts that the turnout was over 74 per cent, very few people believe it. Observers from the Belarusian Christian Democrats say that the real turnout

was around 35 per cent. However, the opposition boycott campaign hardly contributed to this.

A tectonic shift in Belarusian society became apparent: most Belarusians do not believe in the fairness of such elections. They think it makes no sense to participate in voting. The independent observation campaign did indeed achieve outstanding results, and low voter turnout became the focus of this year's elections.

The Belarusian opposition managed to use the growth of online and social media really well. Today it is an important tool to combat Lukashenka's regime. However, real Belarusian politics takes place offline rather than online. Until now, the only successful example of taking the people to the streets via the internet was the silent actions last summer, although there have been many ideas of similar actions circulated on social networks now and then.

Further, we have good news from some polling stations, where the authorities could not falsify the results and independent candidates received a good result. For example, independent candidate Vital Karatysh took 58 per cent of votes in Kazhan-Haradok, but the results the authorities released at other polling stations in his constituency were more disappointing.

### **Election campaign staged according to the official scenario**

The parliamentary campaign took place in accordance with the most desirable scenario for the government and the worst-case scenario for Belarusians. Democratic politicians have not just failed to unite, but quarrelled and divided into two evermore mutually hostile camps. One camp nominating their representatives for participation in the elections included Movement for Freedom, Tell the Truth and Just World.

On the other side there were Belarusian Christian Democracy, Young Front and European Belarus who announced their boycott in advance. United Civic Party and the BNF Party eventually

joined this group by withdrawing their candidates a week before the main election day.

In such circumstances, Belarusian politicians failed to deliver the overall message to the voters and proved themselves unable to agree. Lack of a common tactic led to a sad conclusion: the opposition failed to increase its popularity among Belarusians.

A new feature of Belarusian political life is the lack of confidence among the opposition members themselves. It is no secret that most of the opposition during the criminal investigation concerning the 2010 elections decided to cooperate with the secret services.

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It is known for sure that Ales Mikhalevich, a presidential candidate, and Uladzimir Kobets, a chairman of the electoral headquarters of Andrei Sannikau, signed papers on cooperation with the Committee of State Security during torture sessions in prison. They declared it publicly after being released from prison, thus breaking their relations with the security services. Today they both live in political exile and are unable to return to Belarus. On the other hand, many of those who stayed in Belarus suspect each other in cooperation with the Belarusian security services.

### **OSCE dissatisfied with officials, officials dissatisfied with OSCE**

Certainly, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was not surprised by the election results and the atmosphere in which the elections were conducted. Matteo Meccaci, the head of the OSCE short-term observers mission and Antonio Milososki, the head of the OSCE / ODIHR observation mission, at Monday afternoon's press conference concluded that

the elections were not in any way free and democratic. OSCE observers reported that in their opinion the vote-counting procedure in Belarus was not neutral, which undermines the credibility of the government.

Michał Szczerba, an OSCE observer and a secretary of Belarusian group in the Polish Sejm admitted on his Facebook page:

*This was the most painful of my experiences as an OSCE observer. The election commission in Minsk falsified the elections results right in front of my eyes. I could not scream, I could only cry inside, suppressing the anger about the way this usurped power treats Belarusian society.*

Lidzija Yarmoshyna, the chairperson of the Central Electoral Committee, said after the OSCE press conference that the OSCE saw what they wanted to see, and that the elections were held according to Belarusian legislation.

Even before the main election day the authorities seemed the indisputable winner of these elections. However, low voter turnout proved that Belarusians have less and less trust towards the authorities. Independent observers, including observers from the OSCE, have documented a very low turnout at most polling stations.

Belarus authorities were forced to respond to the boycott campaign. However, they failed to realise that this approach towards the elections happened to be shared by half of the Belarusian people. As a result, the authorities even had to admit the election results were not valid at some polling stations.

Lukashenka's regime has achieved its main goal – the Belarusian Parliament is now completely "sterile", that is, devoid of opposition. However, the authorities are currently trying to figure out how to deal with society's distrust

towards the elections, a fact proved by this campaign.

### **Will there be a change in Belarus?**

It has to be admitted that the Belarusian opposition has no future if it retains its current format. Disagreements within the democratic camp will prevent proper coordination of joint activities. Old ideas and weak impulses of politicians suggest that changes will occur not too soon. It is normal, that different political parties have different views and it is difficult to expect that they will all be united. In Belarus the opposition struggles even to coordinate its efforts, let alone to unite.

Some politicians are not quite right saying that without being united Belarusian opposition cannot exist

Some politicians are not quite right when they say that without being united the Belarusian opposition cannot exist. Today's opposition needs decisive actions, not unity. Coalitions arise during activity, not inaction. For instance, Belarusian right-centrist organisations created the Belarusian Pro-Independence Block before the 2010 election. The block had an aim to conduct the electoral campaign of Alyaksandr Milinkevich. When it became clear that Milinkevich would not run for presidency, the block disappeared by itself.

Paradoxically time is ripe for the opposition. More and more people in Belarus are tired of Lukashenka and crave change. The research of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies showed that 77.3 per cent of Belarusians want change in the country. Thus, the Belarusian opposition must solve its internal problems and introduce a positive alternative to Lukashenka. In this case changes in Belarus might really happen.

*Ryhor Astapenia*

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# Opposition Groups Call Not to Vote – Parliamentary Elections Digest

As early voting continues police targets both opposition groups which actively take part in elections and those who call to boycott the elections. A number of opposition parties withdraw their candidates and urge not to participate in elections.

[Opposition groups call not to vote.](#) Several major opposition political groups called on people not to vote in parliamentary elections. They include the United Civic Party, Belarusian Popular Front, Young Front, Belarusian Christian Democrats and Independent Trade Union of the Radioelectronic Industry. They stated as a [reason](#) for their decision the presence of political prisoners in Belarus, a lack of legislative framework for fair elections, an absence of control over vote counting and persistent repression against opposition groups.

[Two opposition parties withdraw their candidates.](#) The Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and the United Civic Party (UCP) decided to withdraw their parliamentary candidates (31 and 38 representatives respectively), explaining that the election process was not transparent and democratic, and authorities were ignoring their demands to release political prisoners.

[Early voting begins in House of Representatives elections.](#) Polling stations opened in Belarus on September 18 for early voting in the elections for the House of Representatives. The

main voting day in the elections is September 23.

**Police seize printed material from office of «Tell the Truth!» movement.** Police seized a large amount of printed material from the office of the "Tell the Truth!" movement in Minsk on September 6. The officers raided the office, located in an apartment building, when many members of the opposition movement were staying there to watch a television address by a parliamentary candidate.

**Minsk court convicts Zmena activists.** Minsk Frunzenski District Court has considered the administrative charges brought against activists of the Zmena movement (youth wing of the Tell the Truth campaign), who were brutally detained during an election picket on September 18. Hanna Kurlovich was sentenced to a fine of 2 million rubles; Yahor Viniatski to 7 days of arrest; Aliaksandr Artsybashau to 10 days of arrest; Pavel Vinahradau to 12 days of arrest.

**Police break up demonstration for election boycott in Minsk.** Police in civilian clothes broke up a demonstration for an election boycott in Minsk on September 18, violently grabbing opposition activists and journalists who were covering the event.

**Election contest of #electby.** Resource of the people election monitoring #electby jointly with the project "Election Observation: Theory and Practice" announce a contest for the best photos and videos for the parliamentary elections in Belarus. Among the nominations there are best photo, dedicated to the campaign; best video of/about the candidate. The competition prizes – camera, smartphone, e-book – will go those who will collect the largest number of "likes" in social media and at the website [electby.org](http://electby.org).

Analytics

**Report of Early Voting Observation Results.** 200 short-term and 95 long-term observers of the "Human Rights Defenders for Free

Elections” campaign carry out everyday monitoring of the early voting at 150 polling stations all over Belarus. They note the number of early voters, evidence of compulsion to vote early and obstacles created for observers to count the number of early voters. The recent diagrams reflects information from over 120 polling stations, the reports from which were processed as of September 19, 10 p.m.

[Typical young candidate.](#) Alternative Youth Platform has examined all the young people registered as candidates to the parliamentary elections, and compiled a portrait of a typical candidate. There are 38 candidates at the age of 18 to 31 years. A typical candidate is a resident of Minsk. 89 percent of them are male. Most of them do not belong to any party, the second and the third largest group are representatives of the Liberal Democratic Party and Belarusian Popular Front.

[EU Poised to Extend Sanctions Against Belarus After Elections](#) (for subscribers only) – The European Voice reports that the EU will be watching parliamentary elections in Belarus on Sunday (23 September) with a sense of uncertainty about how to adjust its policy towards its eastern neighbour after another year of clashes with the regime of Aleksandr Lukashenka. The EV also gives reference to the think-tanks Carnegie Europe, IISEPS and BISS quoting their vision of the current situation, as well as, mentions the Brussels-based ODB burglary.

[The Belarusian Opposition on the Eve of the Election Day](#) – the Analytical Belarusian Centre presents an analytical overview which is described the Belarusian opposition on the eve of the election day. The issue is dedicated to the existing situation among opposition parties on the eve of the main polling day. The experts predict the results of the parliamentary elections and possible alliances among the opposition.

[Elections from Belarus: a view from Poland.](#) The monthly

bulletin of the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) is dedicated to Belarus, specifically to pre-election situation and named "Election without choices". The experts note that the campaign running up to the parliamentary elections highlighted the lack of dialogue between the authorities and society. It also underlined the problems of the Belarusian opposition, i.e., the internal divisions and the lack of resources required to conduct political agitation.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*

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## **Minsk's "Election" Message to the West**

Belarusian authorities do not allow even a minimal level of electoral competition and openly censor opposition candidates in the ongoing parliamentary election campaign. The campaign looks like a staged show in which the incumbent regime only needs to make sure that not even the slightest destabilisation occurs. On 15 September two major Belarusian opposition parties – the United Civic Party and the Belarusian Popular Front Party – decided to withdraw their candidates from the race.

Last Friday the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) Election Observation Mission published its initial overview of the ongoing parliamentary campaign in

Belarus. The report mentions various violations but does not state the obvious – that the OSCE will not recognise the election results as legitimate. The Belarusian authorities simply do not leave any hope for a different conclusion but still hope to normalise relations with the West.

The authorities are trying to convey the following message to the West: we are gradually moving towards systemic modernization but all attempts to pressure us are counterproductive, therefore, you'd better appreciate our progress. Minsk wants such a notification of progress in order to have a chance for a rapprochement with the EU ahead of a new wave of crises which is likely to hit the Belarusian economy soon.

### **Appointed MPs and Censorship**

According to several credible government sources, all the 110 future parliamentary deputies were “appointed” by the Presidential Administration several months ago. And now the authorities only have to dress these appointments as the will of the voters.

However, in the era of information technologies it is impossible to hide such massive-scale rigging from the public eye. The OSCE Interim Report does not make any judgments on the campaign so far but lists the most egregious examples of irregularities.

For instance, a large number of candidates were denied registration on the grounds of minor inaccuracies in their income statement or invalidation of signatures. The official signature verification process was completely non-transparent. In some cases the Central Election Commission and the Supreme Court resorted to strange arguments when denying registration to nominee candidates.

The most ridiculous example was when the authorities refused

to register non-partisan Alexander Solop on the grounds of morality: because such a person “should not be a lawmaker”. The head of the Central Election Commission Lidzia Yarmoshyna publicly admitted that Mr. Solop had an expunged conviction and, therefore, had the legal right to run, but she emphasised that the Central Election Commission decided to make a political decision in his case.

The Central Election Commission openly introduced the censorship of candidates’ appearances in the state-owned media. Candidates who use unwanted words like “boycott” or “for fair elections without Lukashenka” in the majority of cases are denied the right to address their electorate.

The composition of precinct and district election commissions is another area of concern. Out of all the members of the district commissions only 3.5% represent opposition parties. Precinct commissions include only 0.09% opposition representatives.

### **Why Invite OSCE Observers?**

The OSCE Interim report of 14 September also notes a number of other irregularities. And it is already quite obvious that the election will not be recognised as free and fair according to the Copenhagen criteria that the OSCE adheres to.

It is also clear that the other major international observation group – the Commonwealth of Independent States – will take an opposing view. Its observers will not notice any gross violations of the Belarusian Electoral Code.

A logical question arises: why invite OSCE observers if their negative conclusions can be predicted long in advance? Would it not be easier for the Belarusian government to invite only loyal observers from the CIS?

Two factors play in favour of still extending an invitation to the “hostile” OSCE. Most importantly, proper international

observers are needed for [domestic consumption](#). The authoritarian Belarusian state needs the majority of its own citizens to believe that the election is in full conformity with all laws and standards. By inviting "biased" international observers the government wants to demonstrate that it has nothing to hide from critics.

But it also feels like the authorities are looking beyond the parliamentary campaign. According to the National Bank's chairwoman Nadzeya Yarmakova, in October Belarus plans to resume negotiations about a new loan with the IMF. She emphasised that the "political factor" remains the major obstacle in the negotiations.

This obstacle can only be removed if the EU and USA soften their hard positions on Belarus. Overall, the ongoing parliamentary campaign is so rigged that it cannot be conducive to a thaw with the West. However, if the OSCE observers mention some progress in how the election is organised the Belarusian government will be in a better negotiating position in October. And if the authorities additionally release political prisoners at the end of the year they can have a real chance for a new IMF loan.

### **Promise of Gradual Change**

This explains why the authorities are being so nice and cooperative with the OSCE mission.

In order to get observers on their side the authorities employ a simple argument: the Belarusian political system will definitely transform, but *gradually*. They stress that the civil society and political parties have failed to keep pace with the modernization of the state. That is why, they say, it will take time to consolidate a working party system. But this transformation, they assure, is in progress.

To show progress, they point to the newly acquired ability of political parties to nominate candidates in all

constituencies regardless of whether they maintain regional structures in a given district. As a result in this election a significantly higher number of candidates were nominated by political parties than in 2008. It was 264 this year and in 2008 it was 58.

The authorities also hint that soon after the elections the Republican Public Association *Belaya Rus* will be transformed into a fully-fledged political party. Given that it now supports 70 pro-government candidates, who will most probably get into the House of Representatives, the new party will have an absolute majority there. This will, in the opinion of *Belaya Rus* representatives, create new opportunities for party politics in the country.

In fact, if such a transformation really takes place Belarus will get a new political system. The governing party will gradually dissolve the uniqueness of President Lukashenka in the country's political life. But it can only happen if Lukashenka himself agrees to the scenario.

Time will show how the West will respond to the election message from Belarusian authorities.

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## **Is there Meaning in Belarus's**

# Parliamentary Elections?

In about a month, Belarusians will vote in parliamentary elections.

Although parliamentary elections have become a mere formality since the late 1990s, each time they arise the Belarusian opposition actively discusses whether it makes sense to participate in them. The Belarusian opposition has tried both options. The outcome was the same: massive falsification and no opposition presence in the parliament.

Two years ago, the authorities changed the electoral legislation. For the first time, candidates will participate in short debates broadcast in state-owned media and are officially allowed to use more funds for their campaigns. Otherwise, the course of the campaign promises a *deja-vu*.

Lukashenka likes to underline his understanding of the elections' significance: "We have learnt to hold elections as a festival for the Belarusian people." Last month the United Civic Party proposed abolishing the anyway fake elections and appointing deputies. Does it makes sense to participate in the September 2012 elections in a dictatorship?

## **Who Will (Not) Count the Votes?**

Very few representatives of the opposition and civil society have managed to enter the election commissions. The authorities particularly strictly control the formation of commissions of the first level – where the votes are actually being stolen. Out of 233 candidates proposed by the Party of Belarusian People's Front (PBNF) to join such ground-level commissions, only 13 have been included. The situation is the same with other opposition parties and organisations.

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previous elections who found themselves on the EU black list

On the other hand, the authorities have got rid of the commission chairmen from previous elections who found themselves on the EU black list. The regime demonstrated a more relaxed approach in formation of the higher, second-level commissions which are not engaged in vote counting. Yet even in these toothless commissions, representatives of the opposition make up less than 1 per cent.

Old stooges fill the commissions – the majority make up the delegates of the regime's party [Belaya Rus'](#), state-affiliated trade unions and the Red Cross Society. The Belarusian ruler has not hidden his control over the election results and has publicly demanded that a third of deputies in the new parliament should be MPs from the previous one.

### **Disunity Among Opposition**

The opposition is not united in its stance towards the elections. The PBNF and Milinkevich's For Freedom movement are going to participate in the process. Other opposition politicians – like the still-unregistered Christian Democrats – have chosen to [boycott](#) the elections because they see them as a show staged by the authorities which should not be legitimised by opposition participation.

Of course, even those who want to participate have declared that their main aim is not to be elected. Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the 2006 presidential candidate and the leader of the For the Freedom movement, stated: “The main goal is to remind Alexander Lukashenka that there are no honest elections. We have set a task to show the people that there is a positive alternative [proposed by opposition].”

Imprisoned former presidential candidate Mikola Statkevich also urged participation in the elections. In May 2011 the regime sentenced the Social Democrat politician to six years of imprisonment. He remains the only 2010

presidential candidate still in prison.

According to Statkevich, "The task of the participation of the democratic forces in the parliamentary election shall be use of the legal opportunities for a national outreach campaign, holding coordinated protests throughout the country in the form of meeting with voters and collection of proof of falsification. Lack of participation of the opposition in the elections is not grounds for their non-acceptance by the international community, nor is participation grounds for their acceptance."

The leader of the United Civic Party Anatol Lyabedzka talking recently to the Radio of Liberty emphasised that the opposition should prepare for the 2015 presidential elections.

The opposition parties use the election campaign to meet voters or collect signatures for petitions to release political prisoners. Following their registration, the candidates will have access to state-controlled media – something rare in Belarusian politics since the late 1990s. They get five minutes on TV and radio to participate in short debates, as well as an opportunity to publish their programmes in national and regional newspapers. For the first time the candidates may legally use their own funds to finance the campaign.

Of course, the role of these elections is limited also because of the parliament's function. It is a rubber-stamp institution. As political scientist Andrei Yahorau notes, over the last four years the parliament has initiated and drafted only one law: On Protection of Animals.

### **Lukashenka Cares about the Elections Illusion**

Despite numerous cases of fraud and falsifications most Belarusians still participate in elections

Despite numerous cases of fraud and falsification, most Belarusians still participate in elections. According to the NISEPI June survey, more than a half of Belarusians are willing to vote, about 20 per cent declare that they will not participate, and just 14 per cent support the boycott proposed by the radical opposition. Perhaps they see it at one of very few ways to somehow participate in political decision-making. Facing rigged electoral procedures, people see the regime's lie.

Lukashenka cares about the forthcoming elections. He often mentions them and urges state officials to pay attention to this event. History shows that even in authoritarian regimes, rigged elections may provoke people's rage simply through their scale. As political analyst Valery Karbalevich noted, "any elections are a challenge to the authorities, as in a certain way they create a legitimacy crisis".

The regime refers to the level of participation in elections as a proof of its legitimacy. Officially, in 2004, 90.14 per cent of eligible voters voted in the parliamentary elections; in 2008, 76.7 per cent. The authorities used pressure to get these figures, forcing vulnerable groups to vote, such as students in dormitories or people employed in state organisations. One of the most efficient pressure mechanism was pre-election day voting, which enables the regime both to control participation and stuff the boxes with falsified ballots. In the five days before the actual election date in 2008, 26.3 per cent of voters cast their ballots.

## **Opposition as Carnival**

Opposition politicians should go to the local level and systematically work with people's grievances. That means showing people how their problems are linked to the dictatorship and which solutions the democratic opposition proposes. A good example is the campaign organised by the Tell the Truth movement [against the Chinese industrial park](#).

At the same time, only the hardcore opposition supporters will be attracted by unrealistic calls and campaigns such as For Fair Elections Without Lukashenka. The United Civic Party organised this two weeks ago in Barysau. The authorities punished the organisers and created a picture of persecution. The action, however, hardly had any effect on mobilising Belarusians against dictatorship.

Unfortunately, in recent years the struggle against the regime has too often ended in some postmodernist performances – like [the scandal action of Ukrainian FEMEN](#) in Minsk and [Swedish teddy-bears bombing](#). Opposition and international media enthusiastically covered these artistic performances. But in reality such artistic undertakings may look exciting but will never topple any regime. They may easily become a justification to avoid working with ordinary people.

But in order to achieve change the people should see the link between their everyday problems – unemployment, rising prices – and the lack of freedom. This is where the opposition politicians should come into play and patiently explain their own solutions to the people of Belarus, not just to foreign journalists.

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## **Why Does the “Last Dictatorship in Europe” Hold Elections?**

Two things are already certain about the September 2012 parliamentary election in Belarus. First, the ballot will once again be rigged so that the “right” candidates are elected. Second, the West will not recognise the elections as free and

fair.

The logical question, then, is why the Belarusian authorities still bother to organise elections and invite foreign observers to monitor them. Would it not be easier and cheaper to abandon elections altogether? Or at least, as the Head of the Central Election Commission Lidziya Yarmoshyna proposed a couple of weeks ago, not to invite "biased" observers from the EU and USA. This is unlikely to happen because Belarusian elections play a crucial role for the internal legitimacy of Lukashenka's regime.

### **A Beautiful Beginning**

The electoral history of independent Belarus began in **1994**. The first round of the first ever Belarusian presidential elections took place on 23 June 1994. None of the presidential hopefuls received more than 50 per cent of the votes, and in the run-off a director of a collective farm and parliamentarian, Alexander Lukashenka, fought the then Prime Minister Vyachaslau Kebich. After an impressive landslide victory in the second round Lukashenka was sworn in as the first president of the Republic of Belarus.

All major political forces within the country and the international community recognised the results of the first presidential election as legitimate. So far this has been the only case of free and fair elections in Belarus.

### **On the Way to Authoritarian Consolidation**

All subsequent elections were marred by serious campaign irregularities and voting fraud. In **1995**, the young president Lukashenka decided to hold his first referendum and ask the population four questions about the status of the Russian language, economic integration with Russia, the President's right to dismiss Parliament and the introduction of new state symbols. The referendum was combined with parliamentary

elections. According to official results, the President's proposals were supported and the Parliament (that Lukashenka wanted to weaken) was formed. The Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) observers declared that the government had violated international election standards.

In **1996** Alexander Lukashenka initiated another referendum to consolidate his authoritarian rule. He proposed amending the Constitution, essentially to secure his political monopoly. In response, the parliamentary opposition initiated impeachment proceedings. Days prior to the vote, Belarus was on the edge of civil unrest and Russia interfered as a mediator.

Russia's mediation did not prevent Lukashenka from carrying out his initial plan. As a result, the Belarusian opposition and the West called the referendum a *coup d'état*. It formally turned Belarus into a dictatorship. As a sign of that, Lukashenka immediately dissolved the parliament and appointed a new puppet legislature.

From that moment, elections in Belarus lost any significance because the whole political system was placed under the president's full control. However, the country continued to conduct elections, at least formally.

### **No More Election Intrigue**

According to the OSCE, the **2000** parliamentary and **2001** presidential campaigns failed to meet Belarus' commitments to democratic elections. Their results were formally recognised by Russia and other CIS nations, but not by the West. Interestingly, in the 2000 elections several critics of the regime managed to get elected.

The parliamentary elections of **2004** were again combined with a referendum. This time Alexander Lukashenka asked the nation to allow him to run for an unlimited number of presidential tenures. According to the Central Election Committee of Belarus, the President's proposition received overwhelming

support. As for the parliamentary elections – not a single opposition candidate was elected. The OSCE Election Observation Mission held a different opinion: the elections and referendum fell significantly short of the OSCE commitments.

In **2006** the Belarusians elected a president for the third time. Now that Lukashenka had secured a formal right to run again, there was little doubt about the outcome of the campaign. Officially, he got about 83 per cent of the votes. But the massive protests that followed questioned that result.

The **2008** elections to the parliament took place in the context of a rapprochement of Belarus with the EU and USA. The Belarusian authorities even unofficially promised to let three opposition representatives into the parliament. However, they did not keep their word. The OSCE concluded that the elections were undemocratic and the work of international observers was seriously hindered.

Finally, the **2010** presidential elections also coincided with a period of thaw in Belarus's relations with the West. Until the very polling day on 19 December the campaign looked untypically democratic (at least by Belarusian standards). However, the eventual massive rigging of the voting and unprecedented crackdown on the demonstrators eliminated all the progress of the campaign.

### **Why Organise Elections and Invite External Observers?**

The electoral track record of the Belarusian regime leaves no doubt that the 2012 parliamentary campaign will fall short of national and international standards. Central and local authorities across the country will again have to strain themselves in order to produce the results ordered by the top ruler. While pursuing that goal they will resort to all possible measures, including violent pressure on the opposition. In the end, lots of state resources and

bureaucrats' efforts will be wasted just to have the official results not recognised by the West.

In this situation it would definitely be easier for the government not to have any elections at all, or at least not to invite external observers. But the important function of the elections in today's Belarus is to sustain the internal legitimacy of the incumbent political elite. Each electoral campaign is supposed to unite the nation around its leader and to demonstrate how miserable his opponents are.

For that purpose the government needs to create a picture of openness and transparent democratic procedures. The presence of multiple observers, including those from Western countries, is a minimal requirement for that. That is why the regime continues to extend invitations even to "biased" monitoring missions from the EU and USA. It remains to be seen whether the ongoing diplomatic war with the European Union will change this.