

# Belarus Local Elections Update – One Month Until Election Day

On March 23 votes will be cast for over 20,000 seats in regional and local councils in Belarus.

These elections are unlikely to be any more free, fair or competitive than recent parliamentary and presidential elections, or the 2010 local elections in which only ten opposition activists, primarily in villages, were able to take council seats.

Belarusian authorities appear determined to undermine a competitive electoral process by denying opposition candidates access to the ballot, monopolising positions on election commissions, and creating an atmosphere of intolerance for dissenting political voices.

Within this context, the primary motivation of parties, movements and independent candidates participating in these elections is to use the legal opportunities provided by local elections to engage citizens, strengthen political structures, promote national platforms and push local advocacy efforts.

Campaigning also provides an opportunity to highlight limits on public participation in decision-making and the absence of free elections in the country.

Seven of Belarus' major political parties and movements, including Belarus Christian Democrats (BCD), Belarus Popular Front (BPF), Belarus Social Democrats-Gramoda (BSDPG), For Freedom Movement (FFM), Green Party, Party of Freedom and Progress (PFP) and Tell the Truth, have joined forces under a poll watching and observation campaign known as [Right to](#)

## Choose.

The Right to Choose campaign will seek to deploy a minimum of 1,000 observers in districts where independent candidates are running. They will observe the voting process and advocate against electoral fraud. Their campaign will also seek to educate the public about the true state of the elections and encourage greater citizen involvement in defending the vote.

Other organisations monitoring these elections include Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections, Election Observation Theory and Practice, Electby.org and observers from Just World, United Civic Party (UCP) and a number of other regional organisations. The monitoring efforts of these groups are strengthened through joint coordination and information sharing.

### **Ballot Access Restricted**

The candidate registration process closed on February 20. Belarusian opposition political parties and movements report large numbers of their candidates were denied registration and access to the ballot.

According to the poll-watching partnership Right to Choose, candidate disqualification was particularly high in districts where their candidates were planning to deploy election monitors. 109 of the 218 candidates participating in the observation effort (exactly 50%) were denied registration. According to Right to Choose representatives, most of their strongest candidates were refused ballot access.

In Homel, the authorities were particularly restrictive. Local authorities rejected 31 out of 36 Right to Choose candidates. In total, they rejected 61 candidates intending to run for city council. In addition, Homel authorities denied registration to grassroots activist and For Freedom parliamentary candidate Halina Kravchenko.

The official reason cited for Kravchenko's registration denial was falsified signatures. Kravchenko, who collected signatures herself, will appeal the decision. The Homel parliamentary seat has been vacant since 2012 due to a corruption scandal.

Reports from individual political organizations show that candidate registration ranged from 21% on the low end (Tell the Truth) to 74% on the high end (Just World).

Party	Registered	Applied for Registration	Percent of Candidates Registered
BCD	42	131	32%
BSDPG	52	99	52%
FFM	38	85	44%
Just World	89	120	74%
Tell the Truth	103	487	21%
UCP	91	126	72%

Candidates have until February 24 to appeal the district election commissions' decisions. Many political parties have announced plans to appeal (BCD – 20 appeals, FFM – 10 appeals, Just World – 11 appeals, and Tell the Truth – up to 200 appeals). Results of the appeal process will be announced by February 28.

### **Election Commission Formation**

As in previous elections, the majority of opposition parties' nominations to election commissions were rejected. Political parties Just World, BSDP-G, UCP, BPF, BSDPG nominated commissioners to Territorial Election Commissions (TECs) and District Election Commissions (DECs). Out of 42 commissioners nominated to TECs, only five were accepted; only eleven out of 185 were registered to DECs.

The seven political forces participating in Right to Choose

nominated 21 Precinct Election Commissioners; only eight were accepted. As a result, the vast majority of election commissions will operate without representation from opposition candidates and parties. In Minsk, for the first time, none of the democratic parties' commissioner nominees were included at any commission level.

### **Changes to the Election Code**

A distinguishing feature of these local elections is that they will be held in accordance with the newly revised Election Code. The new Election Code prohibits public funding for candidate leaflets. Instead, the commissions will now print informational brochures about each candidate and deliver them directly to the voters without any input by the candidates.

New provisions also allow registered candidates to set up private campaign funds and raise small amounts of money during the month between registration and Election Day.

In a small positive development, the Central Election Commission interpreted the new Election Code to allow national offices of parties and NGOs to nominate observers to serve at any polling place in the country. Previous interpretations suggested that the new Election Code would limit observers to monitor only their home districts.

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