

# 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?

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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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