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 "biassed" 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 Vyacheslav 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 "biassed" monitoring missions from the EU and USA. It remains to be seen whether the ongoing diplomatic war with the European Union will change this.