

2024 Parliamentary Elections in Belarus: Ending the Democratic Illusion and Formalizing Personalized Authoritarianism

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Executive Summary

The elections on February 25 were the first to be held after the 2020 developments, which shook the Belarusian authoritarian regime to the core. Regular elections have been an important feature of the democratic façade. This time the authorities did not bother to make the elections appear even superficially legitimate. Knowing they may no longer count on the population's resigned acceptance; the regime instead openly relies on intimidation and fear to ensure prevalence of the political status quo. The electoral process took place in a context of indiscriminate repression. The number of political prisoners is growing daily. It is more pertinent than ever to keep Belarus on the agenda and to engage the Belarusian society. To this end it is imperative that international actors find ways to support activists and initiatives working to reinforce, revive, or reinvent the culture of political participation and civic engagement of 2020 also beyond the 'official representatives' of the democratic forces.

Removing of the Democratic Façade

On the one hand the "Single Voting Day" in Belarus on February 25 2024 was very much business as usual. As expected, EU stated that "conditions for free and fair elections were not met". No election since Lukashenka came to power in 1994 has complied with international standards. On the other hand, something changed. These elections did not even meet the minimum standards of inclusion, pluralism, competition, and openness traditionally used to provide the regime's democratic illusion with credibility. For the first time, OSCE was not invited to monitor the elections, which further highlights this change.

The ruling elite always ultimately controlled developments, but the authoritarian elections in Belarus were usually not *entirely* window dressing, something vividly illustrated by the 2020 presidential electoral process. Clearly, the regime wanted to be absolutely certain the 2020 scenario did not repeat itself in 2024. Huge effort went into ensuring the non-competitiveness of every aspect of the electoral process – candidates, voters, voting, and results.

None of the opposition parties managed to keep their legal status after having to re-register in 2023. Only four (pro-regime) parties remained on the ballot. Voting took place in an atmosphere of fear. Lukashenka ordered armed police to patrol the streets. Security inside and around the polling stations was enhanced. Voter integrity was further compromised by the removal of curtains from the voting booths.

Anticipating that those who took part in the mass mobilization against Lukashenka's re-election might not willingly head to the polls this time the authorities abolished the turnout threshold. Early voting at a record high also seem to confirm how worried they were about participation. Even without the threshold they took no chances. The final turnout was reportedly 78 percent.

Citizens outside the country were deprived the opportunity to vote at their embassies. Their only option was to travel to Minsk to cast their ballot at one designated polling station – not a particularly appealing option for those who fear persecution in Belarus.

The effort that went into making these elections not matter seems excessive. The rubberstamp parliament has limited, if any, political influence, and the local councils even less. Besides the fear of 'another 2020', it seems these elections needed to be smooth because of what comes next: an institutional restructuring that vests more formal power in Lukashenka's leadership and strengthens the authoritarian regime.

Formalizing Lukashenka's Personalized Authoritarian Regime

The All-Belarusian People's Assembly used to be Lukashenka supporters sometimes convening for public "national support". A section of the constitution added last year gives this Assembly massive authority over all branches of government. It will be able, for example, to introduce martial law, initiate impeachment, elect and remove judges of the Supreme and Constitutional Court and dismiss the results of presidential elections. The appointment of its members will be conducted by the regional and national deputies (s)elected in February.

Theoretically, the new role of the Assembly changes the power structure. In practice, it serves to formalize Lukashenka's personalized authoritarian regime making him not only informally but constitutionally powerful. He will be the chairman of the Assembly. The amendment is written in such a way that he (personally) can be both President of Belarus and head of the Assembly until 2035.

Repression to Keep Control

Possibly Lukashenka's urge to formalize his power was inspired by the protest movement – depicting him as a president who was no longer popular and even disgusted the population. 2020 also showed he could no longer even rely on his previous core supporters. To take control of the situation the regime launched a campaign of mass intimidation. Four years later it continues to be their only efficient tool to ensure obedience.

Elections have traditionally been the one time in Belarus when those who want change can make their voices heard. This time public activism, electoral or other, inside the country was simply too dangerous. Previously, as long as Belarusians stayed out of the “dirty field of politics” they could feel safe and, importantly, relatively free. Now repression has not only reached unprecedented levels. It is getting increasingly harsher and more indiscriminate – in a sense it is the ‘new normal’.

Many repressive measures have gone into eradicating any form of civil self-organization. The post-2020 period has seen as purge of civil society. Over 1500 institutionalized NGOs have either been liquidated or have self-liquidated due to external pressure. This includes a wide range of organizations, such as sports clubs, trade union, charity groups and many more. No part of civil society is safe. No matter how apolitical their work they face the threat of various types of intimidation, detention, arrest, or even physical attacks.

The repression has largely ‘worked’. Belarusians again appear depoliticized. The general surge in civic activism has been replaced with apathy and atomization. At the same time, already in 2020, many Belarusians were appalled by the level of violence and surprised their president would do to this against his own citizens. Even though there is no data to support it currently it would be surprising if the current wave of repression is winning the regime more hearts and minds.

Finding Ways to Support Belarusian Society

After coincidentally becoming the heroine of the 2020 revolution Tsikhanouskaya is currently seen as the leader of Belarus democratic forces. In this capacity she receives financial and political support from the EU as well as national governments. She is frequently invited to discuss the future of Belarus with major Western leaders and policymakers. It is crucial to remember that even though she is recognized by international actors as the “the legitimate representative of the people” this does not necessarily reflect the views of those in Belarusian society.

Before 2020 a lot of them neither supported nor trusted political opposition. That Tsikhanouskaya is now very much a part of an institutionalized oppositional structure could be off-putting to those who supported her candidacy precisely because she was not ‘oppositional’ in the conventional sense. That the Belarusian democratic movement in exile is focusing all efforts on lobbying to the West, lacking possibility to impact the domestic situation, also risks making it seem more symbolic than relevant. Both literally and figuratively it is therefore important to support a variety of democratic actors.

Both civil society organizations who have relocated, or been established, abroad and the few ones still operating in Belarus are experiencing lack of support. They need financial assistance, but also express a need for help in other areas, such as accessing legal and psychological offline services. It might not be an easy task, neither administratively nor practically, but it is imperative to allow as much flexibility as possible in funding terms and grant administration to support their work.

Conclusion

It is easy to despair and conclude that the 2020 failure to change the regime was the start of a downward spiral. The political situation was bad before but is even worse now. With any electoral uncertainty removed and all power formally in the hands of Lukashenka, Belarus seems on path to truly becoming “Europe’s last dictatorship”.

However, a more positive note to end on is that the pure magnitude of mobilization of previously ‘apolitical citizens’ in 2020 seems to indicate that, at some level, status quo changed already there and then. In fact, research has shown that despite the dire situation there is still a demand for association, collective actions, and solidarity among Belarusians. International actors need to capitalize on this and seek creative ways to strengthen society’s resilience. This should not only be by backing the official oppositional structures, but also by actively looking for measures that give moral and physical support to other actors in civil society and independent media, who will have to continue to inspire a culture of civic engagement and participation, push the limits of independent discourse, and promote critical thinking despite the worst of odds.

Recommendations for the International Community

- Explore any possibilities to facilitate a release of political prisoners. Provide extensive assistance to those who get released, including psychological assistance.
- Strive to support a wide range of democratic activists and initiatives, also beyond the official structures, and importantly those who work inside Belarus.
- Look for approaches and strategies that might be seen as less provocative by the regime.
- Allow creativity in programming and flexibility in funding terms and grant administration.



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