



# The Farce of the 2025 Belarusian Elections: Power, Repression, and the Struggle for Legitimacy

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## Executive Summary

In an authoritarian state like Belarus, elections are not a democratic exercise—they are a calculated performance designed to help an authoritarian ruler to maintain an iron grip on power. As the Lukashenka regime prepares for the January 2025 presidential elections, it is crucial to examine the true purpose and broader implications of these elections in a system where political competition is either crushed or carefully orchestrated. Elections in authoritarian regimes serve multiple functions: they signal invincibility, gather intelligence, and establish both domestic and international legitimacy. The regime's strategies leading up to the 2025 elections include tactics of repression, manipulation of political competition, and efforts to create the illusion of legitimacy. The high level of repression and deep fear within the society makes it unlikely that Belarusians would risk their safety to protest the fraudulent 2025 elections under these conditions.

At the same time, the political future of Belarus is inextricably linked to the resilience of Russia's regime as Lukashenka's survival is largely dependent on the support of the Kremlin. If Russian backing weakens, whether due to significant shifts in the war with Ukraine or political instability within Russia itself, it could create an opportunity for political change in Belarus. The upcoming elections in Belarus also provide a crucial opportunity for the Belarusian democratic forces to delegitimize the process through their campaign and raise awareness of the ongoing repression in Belarus by engaging in active international advocacy. The Western response to the elections in Belarus has been one of strong condemnation, with international actors denouncing the lack of political freedoms, the suppression of opposition, and the absence of fair electoral conditions, while reaffirming their support for the Belarusian people's struggle for democracy.

## Introduction

The long-standing rule of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who has held power in Belarus since 1994, has created a political system characterized by the suppression of opposition, the restriction of fundamental freedoms, and the manipulation of electoral processes. Over the years, the Belarusian regime has perfected the art of orchestrating elections that appear to follow democratic procedures but are, in reality, tightly controlled, with opposition figures silenced, media access restricted, and dissent violently suppressed. The 2025 elections are not an exception, and they are critical for Lukashenka to demonstrate his unchallenged control both within Belarus and on the international stage. By framing these elections as a symbol of stability, the Lukashenka regime aims to send a message to both domestic and foreign audiences that it remains firmly in charge, regardless of the widespread repression and systemic flaws within the electoral system.

At the same time, these elections represent a significant opportunity for the exiled Belarusian democratic forces to raise global awareness of the ongoing human rights abuses in Belarus and to galvanize international support for their cause. By leveraging the electoral process as a platform for active advocacy, the democratic forces aim to reinforce their calls for democratic change and strengthen their position on the international stage, further isolating the Lukashenka regime and highlighting its undemocratic nature.

Thus, the 2025 elections serve as a key moment for both the regime and the democratic opposition, as they navigate the difficult terrain of a heavily manipulated political landscape, all while the international community watches closely for signs of change or resistance. This raises critical questions about the true purpose of the elections in an authoritarian context: How do these elections function to reinforce the regime's control, and to what extent can they legitimize an undemocratic system both domestically and internationally? What strategies are being employed by the democratic opposition to delegitimize the electoral process, and how might international actors respond to the lack of fairness in Belarus? Additionally, with the ongoing war in Ukraine and the interconnected political dynamics in Russia, what are the prospects for political change and potential protests in Belarus? Understanding these key issues is vital for assessing the future of Belarus and the prospects for its long-suppressed aspirations for democratic reform.

## Functions of Elections in Autocracies

Belarus represents a consolidated authoritarian regime where the president is the main locus of power. In such authoritarian regimes, elections are not only a political formality, but an important political ritual, providing the ruling regime with various strategic advantages. Academic scholarship suggests that autocracies with elections are generally more durable than those without them, as these elections help reinforce the regime's hold on power.

1. **Signaling Invincibility and Control:** One of the primary functions of elections is to signal the invincibility of the dictatorship. By holding elections, the regime sends a strong message to both society and the political opposition that it is unchallenged and that it can withstand external and internal pressure. In Belarus, for instance, the government aims to demonstrate that the electoral process is entirely under its control and that any attempts to challenge its authority are futile. Elections serve as a kind of "stress test," showcasing the regime's strength and the illusion of political normalcy.

2. **Gathering Political Intelligence:** Elections in authoritarian regimes also help the ruling elite collect politically relevant information. Through the electoral process, the government can assess the loyalty of various segments of society, monitor public sentiment, and assess the strength and strategies of the opposition. This information is crucial for the regime, as it enables it to adjust its policies, tactics, and repressive measures in order to maintain control. By observing how different sectors of the population react to electoral processes, the regime learns which groups might pose a threat in the future and can take preemptive steps to mitigate potential challenges. In this sense, elections become tools of resilience, allowing the regime to adapt to shifting political dynamics and reinforce its dominance.
3. **Establishing Legitimacy:** A key function of elections in authoritarian systems is to establish and maintain both domestic and international legitimacy. Domestically, elections serve as a mechanism to solidify the regime's connection with its loyal base, reinforcing the notion that the regime enjoys popular support, even if that support is manufactured. Internationally, while Western democracies will typically reject the legitimacy of these elections due to widespread suppression of opposition, other authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states will view them more favorably. For these countries, the elections signal that the regime remains stable, effectively managing its internal challenges, and thus continues to be a reliable partner in diplomatic or economic engagements. Thus, the regime uses the elections as a stage to send signals to its allies that the situation in the country is under control and that the authoritarian system is functioning effectively.

Thus, for the Lukashenka regime, the January 2025 elections are not merely a procedural requirement—they are an essential tool for maintaining power, projecting strength, and signaling to both domestic and international audiences that his grip on Belarus remains unchallenged.

## Belarusian Regime's Playbook: Strategies in the Lead-Up to Belarus' 2025 Elections

In the lead-up to the 2025 presidential elections, the Lukashenka regime has been employing a range of strategies to secure its dominance and maintain control over the electoral process. These strategies reflect the regime's focus on ensuring the elections occur within a tightly controlled and manipulated environment.

- **Heightened Security Measures:** In preparation for any potential dissent or unrest, the Lukashenka regime has ramped up security measures across the country. Police forces, internal troops, and special units have been placed on high alert, with the aim of stifling opposition activities and preventing protests. This militarization of everyday life creates an atmosphere of fear and surveillance, limiting citizens' ability to freely express political opinions. According to the [Human Rights Center Viasna](#), in 2024 alone, at least 2,000 people were held accountable under extremist charges. By January 2025, [15 new individuals](#) had been recognized as political prisoners in Belarus. Additionally, Belarusians continue to face prosecution for their involvement in the 2020 protests, including for providing online donations to victims of repression.

This systemic crackdown extends to every corner of society, creating a climate where even small acts of solidarity or dissent can lead to severe consequences.

- **Illusion of Competition:** This time, the Central Election Commission has registered only candidates loyal to the regime. In total, five candidates have been approved, two of whom are running as independents—Lukashenka himself and Hanna Kanapatskaya, a pro-regime female candidate. The other three candidates represent regime-friendly political parties, including the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus, and the Republican Party of Labour and Justice. This tightly controlled field of candidates leaves little room for genuine competition, and it effectively guarantees Lukashenka's dominance. Spoiler candidates play an important role by creating the illusion of political competition while ensuring that the ruling authority remains in power. Their presence helps to reinforce the narrative of a multi-party system and offers a façade of electoral choice.
- **Appeasing the Elites:** Another key strategy involves securing the loyalty of elites who are integral to the regime's survival. In particular, Lukashenka has sought to placate the security forces and influential figures within his inner circle by offering them high-status roles in the financial sector. Notably, former security personnel [have been placed](#) in positions of power as bankers, consolidating Lukashenka's control over both the political and economic spheres. This move helps ensure that influential figures remain loyal to the regime, further cementing its dominance and reducing the likelihood of elite defections that could challenge his rule.
- **Selective Release of Prisoners:** In a bid to improve its international image, the Belarusian regime has initiated the release of a number of political prisoners (overall, 247 individuals since July 2024. The most recent release happened on the 18th of January). This step, however, should not be seen as a genuine concession toward democratization but rather as a [calculated maneuver](#) to reduce pressure from both domestic and international actors. By selectively releasing prisoners, the regime seeks to create the appearance of political liberalization, hoping to deflect criticism while retaining full control over political life in Belarus.
- **Unity Marathon:** A key part of the regime's efforts to reinforce its narrative as a unifying force is the "Unity Marathon"—a nationwide series of social and cultural events that began in September 2024 and lasted until the elections. This initiative included a wide range of activities, such as exhibitions, concerts, and public forums, all designed to promote the government's vision of stability and progress. The central theme of the marathon is to portray the state as a force for stability and growth, while depicting the opposition as a destabilizing force threatening the country's future. In parallel, Lukashenka has worked to further solidify his image as a defender of Belarus's sovereignty, particularly in relation to the ongoing war in Ukraine. By carefully curating a narrative that presents Belarus as a neutral party in the conflict, Lukashenka aims to project himself as the protector of Belarusian independence, distancing himself from Russia's actions while reinforcing his grip on power.

Through these activities, the Belarusian regime aims to consolidate domestic support, intimidate critics, and present a facade of popular legitimacy, despite the widespread suppression of political freedoms and the absence of genuine electoral competition. By controlling both the



narrative and the mechanisms of power, the regime is determined to ensure that the election is anything but free and fair.

## Is There a Possibility of Protests or Political Transition After the So-Called Elections?

The political situation in Belarus is deeply intertwined with developments in Russia, as the Belarusian regime relies heavily on the Kremlin's support. If this backing weakens, the regime in Minsk would also face significant challenges. Should there be major shifts in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine—particularly if Ukraine gains a decisive advantage on the battlefield, Russia's political landscape begins to shift, and Putin's regime weakens—this could create a potential window for change in Belarus. A Ukrainian victory and Russian defeat could inspire Belarusians to push for political change within their own country, emboldening protest movements.

Another scenario that could revive the protest spirit in Belarus involves internal shifts within the political system. If Lukashenka were to pass away, it could trigger a process of political transformation, as the loss of a leader in a personalist dictatorship often marks a stress test for the system and could catalyze significant changes.

However, if the political climate inside Belarus and the broader regional context remains unchanged—particularly if the war in Ukraine continues to stall or the regime in Russia stays resilient—the prospects for protests in Belarus are minimal. The level of repression remains extremely high, and fear runs deep within society. Under these conditions, it is unlikely that Belarusians would risk their safety and lives to protest the fraudulent 2025 elections.

According to the latest [opinion poll](#) conducted by Chatham House between December 9, 2024, and January 15, 2025, the majority of Belarusians—except for those who support the government—believe that the upcoming elections will not be conducted fairly. While nearly 90% of respondents agree that it is important for votes to be counted honestly, only about half as many believe that an honest count is possible under the current conditions.

[Chatham House analysis](#) shows that opinions on the election results are divided. Many people in the pro-democratic segment feel that the outcome of the election is predetermined and does not reflect the will of the voters (77%). Others (in the pro-government segment) disagree with this assumption (37%). Against the backdrop of widespread anti-war sentiment in Belarus ([over 90% of Belarusians](#) are against involvement in the war), Lukashenka has worked to project an image as a leader striving to keep Belarus out of the military conflict following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, he enjoys strong support primarily only from the pro-government faction.

At the same time, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the current situation in Belarus (67% in pro-democratic segment and 18% in pro-government segment of society). Many respondents have expressed frustration with the economic conditions, corruption, migration policies, and the government's domestic and foreign policies. A significant portion of the population favors a political "thaw" after the elections (over 50 % of respondents), calling for improved relations with the West and a reduction in domestic repression. Even some pro-government groups support this shift, believing that Belarus has historically been open to international cooperation and that repression has already reached its limits. However, despite this widespread support for a potential easing of tensions, the majority of Belarusians are skeptical that such changes will occur after the election (less than 10 %).

## Strategies of the Belarusian Democratic Forces and Tsikhanouskaya's Mandate as President-elect in Exile

In contrast to the Lukashenka regime's efforts to maintain control, the Belarusian democratic forces are actively working to delegitimize the elections and draw international attention to the ongoing human rights violations in the country.

- **Delegitimizing the Elections:** The democratic opposition is focusing on highlighting the lack of free and fair conditions, the imprisonment of opposition candidates, and the broader suppression of political freedoms. By emphasizing these issues, the opposition aims to undermine the credibility of the elections and rally international support for their cause.
- **March "Not my choice" in Poland:** To further galvanize support for democratic change, the Belarusian democratic forces are organizing a "March of Freedom" in Warsaw on election day. This demonstration will serve as a powerful symbol of solidarity with the people of Belarus and as a protest against the illegitimate elections and repression in the country.
- **Conference "Belarusians Deserve Better" and International Advocacy:** Another key event is the conference titled "Belarusians Deserve Better," which will bring together activists, politicians, and international partners to discuss the future of Belarus and the need for democratic reforms.

Through these strategies, the Belarusian democratic forces are striving to maintain momentum for change while applying international pressure on the regime, highlighting its undemocratic actions, and emphasizing the need for accountability. However, a critical challenge facing the Belarusian democratic movement is the weakening link between the diaspora and those within Belarus. While the opposition abroad remains active and vocal, the connection with the population inside the country has become increasingly strained. The Belarusian democratic forces [are exploring the ways](#) to strengthen this link but more can and should be done to ensure that this connection becomes strong and sustainable in the future.

Amid this undemocratic environment in Belarus, some members of the Belarusian democratic movement in exile have suggested the need for elections to choose new leadership. However, this perspective does not reflect the views of the majority within the democratic movement. At the [New Belarus Conference](#) in Vilnius in August 2024, key documents were adopted which affirmed Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's position as the leader of the Belarusian democratic forces. They reflect the collective will of the opposition, declaring:

"Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya won the 2020 presidential elections and will serve as national leader until free and fair elections are held in Belarus or until she decides to end her leadership."

This reaffirmation of Tsikhanouskaya's mandate underscores her status as the legitimate leader of the Belarusian opposition, a position that remains valid until democratic elections are possible. The calls for new elections to choose a different leader represent a minority viewpoint within the opposition and are seen as divisive. In the current context, holding new leadership elections would likely weaken, rather than strengthen, the unity of the Belarusian democratic forces. Such a move could deepen internal divisions and undermine the cohesive effort needed to challenge Lukashenka's regime. For now, Tsikhanouskaya's leadership is seen as crucial for maintaining the momentum of the opposition movement and its unified push for democratic change in Belarus.

## Western Response to the Belarusian Elections

The international community has strongly condemned the undemocratic nature of the upcoming Belarusian presidential elections. The Western response highlights the systematic repression of political opposition, the absence of fair electoral conditions, and the regime's ongoing human rights violations.

- **Absence of OSCE Observers:** The Belarusian government's [refusal to invite](#) the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to observe the presidential elections on January 26, 2025, is a critical sign of the regime's lack of commitment to transparent and free elections. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) expressed regret over this decision, emphasizing that the absence of independent observers undermines the legitimacy of the electoral process. Without impartial monitoring, the ability to assess the election's fairness is severely compromised, highlighting the regime's intent to stifle international scrutiny.
- **Resolutions by the Czech, Polish and European Parliaments:** In response to the undemocratic conditions surrounding the elections, both [the Polish Parliament](#) and the Czech Parliament have [adopted resolutions](#) condemning the electoral process in Belarus. The resolution stresses that the elections cannot be regarded as legitimate due to the ongoing imprisonment of opposition leaders and the broader repressions against Belarusians by the Lukashenka regime. Similarly, the European Parliament has adopted [a resolution condemning](#) the lack of electoral fairness in Belarus. The resolution reaffirmed the EU's commitment to supporting the Belarusian people's desire for free, fair, and transparent elections and aims to hold the Belarusian authorities accountable for their actions, reinforcing the EU's position on the need for democratic reforms and respect for fundamental rights in Belarus.

These responses underscore a unified message of support for the Belarusian opposition and the country's long-standing struggle for democratic reforms. By condemning the lack of fairness in the election process and highlighting the regime's ongoing human rights violations, the West seeks to hold Lukashenka's government accountable while voicing its continued solidarity with the Belarusian people's aspirations for a democratic future.

## Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The Belarusian presidential elections scheduled for January 26, 2025, will not reflect the will of the Belarusian people, but rather serve as another tool for the Lukashenka regime to maintain its grip on power. The international community must remain firm in its support for democratic forces in Belarus and ensure that Lukashenka's actions are met with increased pressure and isolation. The key to advancing democratic change in Belarus lies in continued international solidarity, support for civil society, and a steadfast commitment to holding the Belarusian regime accountable for its actions.



## Policy recommendations

- 1. Increase Diplomatic Pressure on Belarus and Russia:** Western governments should ramp up diplomatic efforts to exert pressure on both the Lukashenka regime and the Kremlin, ensuring that Belarus's actions during the 2025 elections are met with stronger sanctions. This should include targeted measures against key regime officials and Russian entities that support Lukashenka, sending a clear message that the international community will not tolerate the continued repression of democratic aspirations in Belarus.
- 2. Support Belarusian Democratic Forces and Civil Society:** The international community, particularly the European Union and the United States, should continue to provide robust support for Belarusian civil society, human rights groups, and the exiled opposition. This includes financial support, political backing, and platforms for raising awareness about the ongoing repression, ensuring that Belarusian democratic forces are not isolated and can maintain momentum for change.
- 3. Engage in Active Advocacy and Raise Awareness:** International actors should work to increase global awareness of the undemocratic nature of the 2025 elections. This could involve high-profile campaigns and advocacy in major international forums such as the United Nations, as well as mobilizing support from other authoritarian regimes and international organizations to delegitimize the electoral process.
- 4. Expand Humanitarian Aid and Support for Political Prisoners:** Western nations should provide expanded humanitarian assistance to Belarusians affected by the regime's repression, particularly political prisoners and their families. Offering asylum and visa opportunities for dissidents, along with providing legal and financial support for those in detention, can help mitigate the regime's crackdown and demonstrate international solidarity with the Belarusian people.
- 5. Prepare for Post-Election Scenarios and Facilitate Transition:** International stakeholders should develop a comprehensive strategy for responding to the potential post-election scenarios in Belarus, whether they involve widespread protests or further consolidation of Lukashenka's power. This includes plans for facilitating a peaceful transition to democracy in Belarus, offering clear support for the establishment of a transitional government, and providing technical assistance for organizing free and fair elections once conditions allow.



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