

The west should not hold its breath in expecting real change to emerge from the 2015 presidential election in Belarus

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Belarus will hold a presidential election on 11 October, with the incumbent President, Alexander Lukashenko, looking to remain in power more than 20 years after his first election victory in 1994. [Yaraslau Kryvoi](#) argues that with serious obstacles limiting the ability of opposition politicians to campaign against Lukashenko, there is little prospect of the elections producing real change. Nevertheless, with the ties between Russia and Belarus weakened by Russia's economic downturn, there is an opportunity for the EU to pursue closer cooperation with the country.



On 21 August the Central Elections Committee of Belarus announced that five presidential candidates had submitted enough signatures to run in elections scheduled for 11 October this year. In the 2010 presidential elections, the authorities saw the Belarusian opposition as the main threat and crushed protests, putting several presidential candidates in jail. After the recent events in Ukraine the authorities seem to view Russia as a more serious threat although they would not publically admit it.

Belarus only had real elections during a brief period of competitive politics in the early 1990s, prior to the election of current President Alexander Lukashenko in 1994. This is why for many Belarusians, particularly older generations, elections are not an opportunity to change their leadership but something of an old ritual.

As in the Soviet times, on election day they would go to a local election polling station – usually located in a secondary school – to vote and enjoy heavily subsidised food, beer and vodka. In the 2014 local elections, one US dollar was enough to buy a shot of vodka and a sandwich with ham. Another element of the tradition is that in Soviet times it did not matter how people voted because the authorities knew the result in advance.

Although plenty of billboards remind citizens of the election date, beyond this it is hard to detect signs of an election campaign taking place in Belarus. State-owned media dominates the media landscape with the opposition almost unseen on TV. Independent information is available on the internet, but the vast majority of people receive their news on television where the opposition is not welcome.



This year the authorities registered only one opposition candidate and the interest in elections will be lower than in 2010, when there were eight. However, the majority of Belarusians still seem willing to vote. According to a poll conducted in June 2015 by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, nearly 35 per cent of respondents said they would definitely participate in the elections and around 37 per cent said they would likely participate.

The authorities: independence instead of prosperity

In the 2010 presidential elections, Lukashenko's main concern was the opposition. Then the authorities highlighted the economic success of Belarus, explained largely by Russian subsidies. Billboards with the motto "For a prosperous and strong Belarus" were all over the country.

This time, however, the authorities have focused on the independence of Belarus with the billboards changed to "For the Future of Independent Belarus". Indeed, with the sharp decline in value of the Belarusian rouble and falling exports to Russia, independence despite economic hardship seems like a more attractive platform.

To show they are in control, the authorities have mobilised their resources from the early stages of the campaign. According to the Central Elections Committee, the incumbent President collected 1.7 million signatures over a one month period. Belarus has around 7.4 million eligible voters, which means that nearly one quarter of voters supported Lukashenko even before the elections had started. Local authorities, managers of state enterprises, and directors of schools were obliged to collect signatures for Lukashenko to demonstrate their loyalty. This year the number of collected signatures exceeds the tally collected in 2010 by a third.

The authorities also decided to add three pro-government candidates, beyond Lukashenko himself. They include a Cossack general, who is also a minor government official. Although none of the pro-government candidates even bothered to create a campaign website they curiously still managed to collect more than the 100 thousand signatures necessary for their registration. These candidates will use most of their airtime on Belarusian television to criticise the opposition rather than Lukashenko.

The election result will not bring any surprises because the authorities are firmly in control of the vote count. Giving a real number would mean giving a lower number, which may appear as a sign of weakness which the authorities cannot afford. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the opposition's nominees to election committees were rejected on technicalities. In 2010, the share of representatives of the opposition parties constituted only 0.25 per cent of the total number of election committees. None of the opposition parties are represented in the Central Elections Committee.

The Russian elephant in the room

This year the main preoccupation for the authorities is not the opposition. Although Lukashenko often brags about swift punishment to hypothetical forces threatening Belarusian sovereignty and territorial integrity, in reality Belarus remains highly vulnerable to the repeat of the Crimea scenario. The economy is tightly linked to Russian markets, where Belarusian goods can compete, often with the help of subsidies via Russia energy resources. More worrisome for the authorities is the fact that to get information about politics most Belarusians watch better funded and more professional Russian TV channels.

Given the aggressive propaganda on Russian television, it is unsurprising that the majority think the Crimean annexation was justified and that many view the events in Ukraine as an American conspiracy. Belarusians know much more about Russian history and Putin's officials than about their own. Ironically, Lukashenko supplying military equipment to Ukraine, speaking in favour of its territorial integrity and sending his foreign minister to meetings with Petro Poroshenko and Mikheil Saakashvili in Ukraine looks more pro-Western than the majority of his electorate.

The Belarusian army has been chronically underfunded, with Russia refusing to supply modern military equipment for Belarus, desiring instead their own bases in the country. The security services have excelled in monitoring the opposition and business people, but may prove completely ineffective against less soft targets. More importantly, it is unclear with whom the loyalty of generals of the Belarusian army and security services lie. Many in the leadership were born and educated in Russia and since Soviet times have been used to taking orders from Moscow.

A long-term strategy for Belarus

Falling energy prices and Russia's economic downturn will inevitably result in less subsidies for the Belarusian

authorities, who will be increasingly looking to the West for money and support. The [release](#) of political prisoners on 22 August is clearly a step in this direction.

However, western politicians should not hold their breath in hoping for a quick leadership change. Instead of just reacting to the actions of the country's authorities, the West needs a pro-active long-term strategy focused on building links between the European Union and Belarus at all levels, while strengthening Belarusian statehood and civic identity. In this process it is important to engage not only the country's civil society, but also the Belarusian bureaucracy, which in the absence of real elections remains the most powerful force in the country.

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