

Between Presidential and Parliamentary elections – which way in the EU-Belarus relations?

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

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Given the numerous acute problems that the EU must face at the moment – the refugee crisis, the security situation after the recent terrorist attacks, a war in Ukraine, and the threat of Brexit – Belarus is not the highest priority on the EU agenda. However, the country's current economic situation and the fact that it stands after the presidential elections (11th October 2015) and before the parliamentary ones (September 2016) opens a “window of opportunity” in EU relations with Belarus.

In August 2015, in an effort to improve relations with the EU, the authorities in Minsk fulfilled the EU's main condition for resuming dialogue by releasing all political prisoners before the Presidential election. Yet, the release took place after the candidates' registration deadline which made it impossible for the released to stand as candidates. This step, nevertheless, marked a certain opening in the EU–Belarus relations.

The presidential election was unsurprisingly won by the incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko with an overwhelming majority of votes (83.5 %). **The OSCE ODIHR mission reported numerous shortcomings during the conduct of the election and gave it a rather negative overall evaluation:**

“The 11 October election once again indicated that Belarus still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections. This underscores the need for the political will to engage in a comprehensive reform process. Some specific improvements and a welcoming attitude were noted. Significant problems, particularly during the counting of votes and tabulation of election results, undermined the integrity of the election. The campaign and election day were peaceful.”

With the last week's publication of the OSCE ODIHR final report many in the EU ask a question what should be the next step in dealing with “the last dictatorship in Europe”? Is it the right moment to resume the dialogue with Minsk? How can the democratic situation in the country be improved?

Minsk's decision to unfreeze relations with the EU was primarily motivated by the Belarus' poor economic situation and the need of financial support. Since 2011, the growth of Belarusian economy has slowed substantially. Russia – Belarus' old ally and main economic partner – is less likely to deliver help this time due to its own economic difficulties. Therefore, authorities in Minsk look for financial support elsewhere. Currently, Belarus is negotiating with IMF. If these negotiations turn out successful, it might also seeks support from the World Bank or even the EU.

The authorities' need to deal swiftly and efficiently with the economic hardships puts the EU in a favorable negotiating position. It is, however, important to convey a clear message that any support should be granted under clear conditions. Economic reforms are absolutely crucial, followed by reforms to electoral law, the improvement of legal environment for NGOs, and finally a moratorium on the execution of death penalty. **The key element to stress the importance of these objectives is to keep the sanctions in force until the parliamentary election in September.**



At the end of October 2015, the European Council extended the sanctions against Belarus until February 2016, while, at the same, time suspending them. The decision whether to lift or extend them will be met by the Foreign Affairs Council on 15th February and is going to be based on the findings of the [OSCE ODIHR report](#) which among others recommends a comprehensive legal reform of the electoral process:

“The Electoral Code should be amended to include substantial procedural safeguards that ensure integrity and transparency of all stages of the electoral process, in particular the composition of election commissions, the verification of support signatures, observers’ rights, the conduct of early and mobile voting as well as an honest counting and tabulation of votes.”

Contrary to 2010, the recent election was peaceful and free of massive demonstrations, also because there was no candidate capable of challenging the incumbent. But the shortcomings in the process of counting and tabulation of the votes gave rise to doubts as regards the reliability of the result.

Accordingly, the EU should demand reforms of the electoral law before the parliamentary election in 2016, which could ensure the opposition gets a chance to become represented in the newly elected Parliament.

The EU must aim high while remaining realistic. President Lukashenko tries to maintain a balance between the EU and Russia, while the Belarusian society fears the Ukrainian scenario. An important question is whether the continuation of sanctions counters or furthers the EU’s objectives towards Belarus.

The demands for a full democratization of the election process will not be met. But the approaching parliamentary election will be a chance for the authorities in Minsk to prove their commitment and implement at least the most necessary of reforms: (1) ensure a genuinely pluralistic composition of election commissions so that opposition representatives are present at all levels and (2) guarantee a transparent counting and tabulation of the votes.

Reasonable proposals of changes in regards to entrepreneurship and liberalization of economic policy in return for the opening of European markets and access to new technologies could be well received.

Lifting sanctions unconditionally before the evaluation of the upcoming parliamentary election by international observers, which should at least point to certain improvements following the presidential election, would be a mistake.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog nor of the London School of Economics

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