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CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 15.12.2010 www.osw.waw.pl

The presidential campaign in Belarus

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Unlike the previous elections in 2006, during this year's presidential campaign the government of Belarus has clearly eased its policies towards the opposition, and created greater opportunities to conduct electoral canvassing. However, this political liberalisation is limited in nature, and has not addressed any of the key issues, such as monitoring the voting and the process of counting the votes. The appearance of democratisation is primarily a gesture towards foreign observers. The limited nature of the changes will not jeopardise the main aim of Alyaksandr Lukashenka – to get re-elected in the first round of elections on 19 December.

The relaxation of the policy towards the opposition during the presidential campaign is a deliberate game by Lukashenka, which results from the international context. On one hand, the EU has clearly made further cooperation with Belarus dependent on the conduct of the elections; on the other hand, Russia has been made impatient by the absence of the concessions it expected from Minsk, and has for the first time offered sharp criticism of the political situation in Belarus. In connection with this, the Belarusian president is counting on the fact that giving an impression of political pluralism and democratisation will meet the West's expectations, which will create conditions for further cooperation (including loan support from the IMF), and make it harder for Russian observers to criticise the vote. But despite some signs of liberalisation, the democratisation has only been limited in nature, and has not concerned the substance of the electoral process. Everything indicates that Lukashenka will win in the first round, with an official result of at least 70%. There is concern that as in previous elections, the real support for the current president (which is estimated at around 50%) will be enhanced through the use of pressure on the public, and by electoral manipulation. At the same time, the divided and weak opposition will not be able to protest the outcome of the vote effectively. <kam>