

Voting under special supervision. The constitutional referendum in Belarus

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On 22–27 February a constitutional referendum was held in Belarus. The ballot concerned changes to the basic law that had been in force so far (for more see '[Transformation of Lukashenka's system of government: the draft of Belarus's new constitution](#)'); these have been developed in connection with the so-called constitutional reform announced after the rigged presidential elections in 2020. According to preliminary results, 65% of voters were in favour of the changes, and the turnout was almost 79%. However, these data do not reflect the real public mood. Based on independent online opinion polls (*nota bene*, these only include internet users), it can be concluded that at least 60% of citizens are critical of the regime and do not consider Lukashenka to be the country's legitimate president. The authorities took special precautions, including preventing citizens living abroad from voting, and not allowing representatives of civil society to participate in the work of the electoral committees or to observe the course of the referendum.

The émigré opposition leaders Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Paviel Latushka called for people to spoil their ballots and to transfer information via secure online applications to the civic initiative Honest People, in order to collect as much data as possible about the real results. In some cities (including Minsk, Hrodna and Mahiliou), several hundred people held demonstrations against Russian aggression, during which anti-war slogans were presented. The law enforcement authorities detained a total of over 800 people across the country.

Commentary

- Contrary to the authorities' official narrative, the changes to the constitution will in no way weaken the president's power, not to mention strengthening representative bodies such as the parliament or the All-Belarusian People's Assembly. The amendments to the constitution are only simulations of systemic reform, which will in fact leave the main powers in the hands of Lukashenka. The Assembly will be another sham forum for pluralism and democracy, together with the bicameral parliament. Only the Assembly's still-operating Presidium, headed by Lukashenka, will play an important role. This solution shows his desire to maintain power at all costs.
- The extensive repression has led to the far-reaching paralysis of Belarusian civil society and the political opposition. The authorities' actions were aimed at guaranteeing full control over the vote, and are another signal that the regime has evolved towards a totalitarian model. Most citizens refrained from publicly manifesting their dissatisfaction,

and the few protests concerned not so much the domestic situation as the war in Ukraine. These were the first street demonstrations since the beginning of 2021, but the majority of society is too intimidated to oppose the government *en masse*. As shown by the online opinion poll commissioned by Chatham House and conducted at the beginning of February this year, as many as 79% of respondents do not want Belarusian soldiers to die in the war in Ukraine; we may expect criticism of the regime to increase, in the light of this finding.

- Since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the constitutional referendum has gained additional significance as a manifestation of Belarus's supposed social and political stability. In view of the impossibility of resisting Russian pressure, as well as the deep social and economic crisis, which has been aggravated by Western sanctions, Minsk has been unsuccessfully trying to maintain elements of the narrative that it displays a peaceful attitude towards its neighbours, a line which it has presented for years. The West perceives Belarus as a participant in the aggression against Ukraine, as reflected in the fact that over 20 Belarusian legal entities and individuals have been subjected to EU and US sanctions in recent days. Further restrictions, which will directly affect the most profitable areas of Belarusian exports, have also been announced.