

Voting with no alternative. Parliamentary and local 'elections' in Belarus

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On 25 February, the parliamentary elections in Belarus were combined for the first time with local council elections as part of the so-called single voting day. Belarusians elected 110 deputies to the House of Representatives (out of a mere 265 candidates) and 12,514 deputies to regional, district, municipal and rural councils (out of 18,802 candidates). Based on data provided by the Central Election Commission, the turnout was just over 73%; up to 42% of the voters cast their ballots during the six days preceding 25 February. The high turnout was largely a result of pressure in educational and workplace settings, which was just one of many ways in which democratic voting principles were violated.

These were the first elections since 2020, when the rigged presidential elections had provoked hundreds of thousands of citizens to take to the streets across the country in protest against Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Fearing that public unrest might be rekindled, the regime had made thorough preparations in case of potential risks, such as the recent dismantling of opposition political parties and non-governmental organisations, as well as using unprecedented waves of repression to intimidate citizens. Consequently, both the electoral campaign and the voting process itself were fully controlled by the government in an atmosphere of imminent threat from 'hostile forces' created by law enforcement agencies, while the paralysed independent groups remained totally inactive.

An experiment in totalitarian elections

The mass post-election demonstrations in 2020 posed a serious challenge to the regime and came as a personal trauma for Lukashenka, who had to confront protests on such a large scale for the first time since he became president in 1994 (see '[Protest suspended – Belarusian society one year after the presidential elections](#)'). As a result, after the suppression of the public rebellion at the turn of 2021, Lukashenka began focussing not only on intensifying repression against the Belarusian public but also on taking all possible measures to safeguard the electoral process against any risk of public unrest being reactivated. The regime took advantage of the ambiguous provisions of the electoral law to postpone the local elections and combine them with the parliamentary ones on the so-called single voting day of 25 February.

At the same time, the government amended a series of legal regulations with an eye to the conclusions it made after the events four years ago. The option of voting outside the country was abolished so that the predominantly opposition-minded emigration could no longer actively boycott the elections (by destroying ballots or holding demonstrations near

polling stations). The names of the members of the electoral commissions were also kept secret to shield them from pressure from critics of the regime. Voters themselves were deprived of privacy while casting ballots; for example, they were prevented from photographing their ballots.

A major change was the complete absence of independent Belarusian observers and of the OSCE observer mission; for the first time Minsk did not even bother to invite it, deeming its presence 'pointless'. Furthermore, the government introduced mandatory re-registration for all political parties, thus excluding all the opposition groups which were outlawed in 2023. As a result, only four out of fifteen previously active parties remained on the ballots, and all of them are fully loyal to Lukashenka (see '[Towards a totalitarian state. Belarus cracks down on religious organisations](#)').

This is the first time when not only independent observers but also candidates in any way critical of the government were absent from the election campaign. Thus the parliamentary and local elections, which were held in the new combined format and under stricter legal frameworks, represented a kind of experimental attempt at voting in the conditions of a totalitarian state; they represented a crucial test for the system ahead of Lukashenka's next re-election, which is expected no later than mid-2025.

The 'wartime' mobilisation of the regime

The so-called parliamentary elections took place against the backdrop of the regime's narrative that Belarus was under threat from NATO countries, especially Poland, which since the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has allegedly been planning a military coup to remove Lukashenka and annex part of Belarusian territory. During a briefing with the heads of law enforcement agencies on 20 February, Lukashenka claimed that Belarus had found itself at the epicentre of a prolonged military-political crisis, associated with NATO expansion and Washington's ambitions to control Western Europe. He added that some representatives of Polish elites believed that the war in Ukraine 'offered an opportunity' to replace the Belarusian regime. He emphasised that the main threat was that the current election campaign could be used as preparation for a coup during the presidential election in 2025. Lukashenka's words prove that he is using a sense of existential threat to the 'sovereignty' of Belarus to legitimise his own regime.

This narrative translated into the unprecedented engagement of the security apparatus in 'protecting' the elections so it could effectively paralyse any potential manifestations of public protest. The electoral process could not be disrupted because repression against the political opposition, independent media and individuals expressing disobedience has been constantly employed since 2020 (currently, the number of political prisoners in Belarus exceeds 1500). Additionally, the Committee for State Security (KGB) checked the loyalty of candidates and their families before they could be put on the electoral lists.

Security forces were mobilised right up until the final days before the vote to ensure that nothing could disrupt the established election scenario. The level of their activity could be compared to a special military operation, since both law enforcement agencies and paramilitary formations were involved. The commander of the internal troops, Mikalai Karpiankou, stated that in case of attempts to disrupt the elections, the regime's forces would be supported by mercenaries from the former Wagner Group operating in Belarus. It was reported on 24 February that a tenth *spetsnaz* unit of the internal troops reporting to the

Ministry of Internal Affairs had been formed (the other nine were established after 2020), which proves that the role of the law enforcement structures in the country is still growing.

A new parliament for 'new' times

Belaya Rus, a party of the Belarusian *nomenklatura* loyal to the regime which was established in 2023, will have a substantial representation (51 seats) in the new House of Representatives, which comprises 110 seats (see '[Belarus: the pro-regime Belaya Rus party holds its founding congress](#)'). However, the other three parties participating in the elections received much smaller shares, from four to eight seats each. The remaining seats were filled by non-partisan candidates representing selected workplaces or social organisations.

The fact that such a significant group of deputies from one party has been admitted to parliament is proof of a change in Lukashenka's policy, since he has so far consistently marginalised political parties out of fear of the emergence of alternative centres of influence. Belaya Rus will not only be a key force in parliament, but could also (at least potentially) become a pro-Russian faction. Its pro-Kremlin orientation stems both from the cooperation agreements signed with United Russia in recent months and from the publicly expressed views of the party's leader, Aleh Ramanau, and its other representatives, including certain regime propagandists who are active in the media and who currently also serve as deputies, such as Vadim Hihin and Alyksandr Shpakouski.

Most likely, Lukashenka allowed clearly pro-Russian circles to be represented in parliament on such a large scale because of the regime's economic dependence on the Kremlin and its close political and military cooperation with Russia. At the same time, he decided to send to parliament the incumbent head of his presidential administration, General Ihar Serheyenko, who will most likely be nominated speaker of the House of Representatives and supervise its work, so that it does not propose any bills or political initiatives which, for example, might push too far-reaching proposals for Russian-Belarusian integration within the Union State.

It is worth noting that although the legislature plays a marginal role in the Belarusian regime and is subordinate to the main decision-making centre in the country, namely the Presidential Administration, since the country's constitution was amended in 2022 all the deputies will automatically become members of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA), a new body consisting of 1200 members, vested with greater competences and headed by Lukashenka himself (see '[Transformation of Lukashenka's system of government: the draft of Belarus's new constitution](#)').

According to preliminary information, the Assembly will be inaugurated in April this year. The current parliament will therefore function in a modified system, in which both elected deputies and ABPA delegates will (at least nominally) co-decide on the shape of the Belarusian policy. The presidential election next year will be the last element of the transformation of Belarus's political system, which will likely consolidate Lukashenka's power based on his holding the positions of both head of state and chairman of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly.