

Belarus: elections to the opposition parliament

Kamil Kłysiński

Between 25 and 27 May the first elections were held to the Coordination Council (CC), a representative body of Belarusian civil society which has been operating (mainly in exile) in various formats since the presidential elections in 2020. Votes were cast online, using a specially developed application, Belarus ID, available only to Belarusians in exile. Citizens inside the country could use a website indicated by the organisers. Ultimately, 6723 voters cast their votes; these people were permitted to take part in the election based on data from Belarusian identity documents. 234 candidates from 11 electoral lists competed for 80 seats on the Council. The most support (28 seats) was garnered by a bloc led by Pavel Latushka, a former minister of culture and diplomat, who has served as the deputy head in the United Transitional Cabinet led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya since 2022.

The elections have provoked numerous controversies, including disputes over the candidacy of soldiers and commanders from the volunteer Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment, who have been fighting in Ukraine. Discussions were also sparked by the fact that the database containing the addresses of participants in the Pieramoha Plan, which is aimed at organising resistance against the Belarusian authorities, was used for electoral campaigning in favour of the Law and Justice bloc led by Alyaksandr Azarau, a former investigative officer at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus. The organisers of the voting were criticised for the delayed and heavily restricted information campaign in independent media, which actually began only a few days before the start of the elections.

The Belarusian regime's response to the elections has been undeniably negative. The Investigative Committee labelled the Coordination Council a "criminal group" and initiated proceedings against all candidates on charges of "conspiracy to seize power", which is defined as a crime in Article 357 of the Criminal Code of Belarus.

Commentary

- The election to the Coordination Council was the first attempt since the 2020 political crisis to establish a representative Belarusian political structure in exile through a vote. Therefore, the mere fact that the electoral process has taken place and the major political forces in exile have been involved in it, can be considered a success. However, the primary goal of the organisers was to ensure public legitimacy for the Coordination Council, which aspires to serve as a kind of proto-parliament, an alternative to the regime's House of Representatives which was elected in the fraudulent vote held in February this year. However, the modest number of voters (it is estimated that the

Belarusian emigration in EU countries alone could number 200,000–300,000 people as of 2020), suggests that Belarusians are not particularly interested in political life in exile.

- The major factor that discouraged residents of Belarus from participation in the voting was undoubtedly the fear of repression by the regime. As for the low turnout outside Belarus, this can be attributed to the poor information campaign, due to which full details of the event probably reached only a minimal number of users of independent Belarusian media.
- The government's firm response to the CC elections – despite their limited scope – is proof of the regime's determination to continue its policy of intimidating and discouraging any opposition activities, targeting not only citizens within the country but also activists in exile. The statement from the Investigative Committee clearly suggests that the assets of participants in the election campaign located in Belarus could be confiscated, as has happened to other opposition figures in recent years. Additionally, it cannot be ruled out that repression will be used against the families of émigré activists.