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Belarus: the presidential election is a farce

Kamil Kłysiński

According to incomplete data from the Central Election Commission (CEC), Alyaksandr Lukashenka secured nearly 87% of the votes in the so-called presidential election on 26 January, while support for the 'rival candidates' – Hanna Kanapatskaya, Siarhei Syrankou, Aleh Haidukevich, and Alyaksandr Khizhnyak – ranged between 1% and 3.5%. The overall turnout across all voting days (with voting commencing on Tuesday) was reported to be 85.7%. As in the 2022 referendum, citizens residing outside Belarus were unable to participate in the election.

The United States, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia had already announced they would not recognise the 'election' results. The European Parliament adopted a special resolution in the same vein, while Ukraine also expressed a critical stance on the matter. On election day, Lukashenka accused the West of lacking the will for dialogue, specifically highlighting what he described as Poland's "most aggressive" policy, allegedly preparing to annex western regions of Belarus and Ukraine.

Lukashenka's re-election in the first round was a foregone conclusion. The only uncertainty was the level of support he would demand from the Central Election Commission this time – 87% marks his 'best result' in all elections to date. The campaign was conducted entirely under his control, in violation of all democratic principles and human rights. All 'rival candidates' came from circles loyal to Lukashenka, while citizens, intimidated by repression, refrained from any acts of protest.

Commentary

- **The 'election' was a staged operation typical of totalitarian regimes.** Both the campaign and the voting took place under completely different conditions than in 2020, when mass demonstrations erupted. The consistent and brutal repression since then has deterred citizens from expressing dissent. The combined parliamentary and local council elections held on 25 February 2024 served as a test for Lukashenka's sixth re-election. This was the first time that no genuine opposition candidates from democratic circles or independent observers were involved (see '*Voting with no alternative. Parliamentary and local 'elections' in Belarus*'). Given the higher status of the election, however, intensive state propaganda was accompanied by a wave of heightened repression, pre-emptively targeting even socially inactive participants in the 2020 protests.
- **All of Lukashenka's 'rival candidates' were controlled by the regime.** They made no effort to simulate a political debate, instead demonstrating loyalty and promoting the narrative of the incumbent leader's indisputable achievements. The invited observers,

representing organisations such as the CIS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, reported no violations either before or during the voting process. Meanwhile, the OSCE received an invitation to send an observation mission just ten days before voting ended – an obvious provocation rather than a genuine gesture of goodwill from Minsk.

- **The regime's primary objective was to create the illusion of mass support for Lukashenka.** It was essential to portray a united Belarusian public who had supposedly reflected on their mistakes since 2020 and rallied once again around their leader. To reinforce this narrative, the Unity Marathon took place from 17 September 2024 (the date has been celebrated as National Unity Day since 2021) until 24 January this year – a long series of cultural and educational events across the country showcasing the authorities' achievements. To further strengthen the message of 'national reconciliation', Lukashenka has granted amnesty to small groups of political prisoners on nine occasions since July last year, releasing a total of nearly 300 people under the pretext of humanitarian considerations. At the same time, law enforcement officials assured their full readiness to counter any provocations, allegedly expected from both the opposition and external enemies, including Poland. In this context, the 'election' should be seen as a demonstration of the regime's ability to maintain complete control over the country.
- **The regime is using the 'election' as a means of propaganda in contacts with the West.** It is possible that Minsk will attempt to stage a pretence of a fresh start by arguing that the electoral process was supposedly peaceful – when in reality, it was enforced through repression. However, the regime's consistently confrontational rhetoric and ongoing crackdowns, with more than 1,200 political prisoners still behind bars, indicate that Lukashenka has no genuine interest in improving relations with the EU or the US. The authorities' sole aim is disinformation and propaganda, shifting blame onto the West for the dire state of relations.
- **Lukashenka's re-election marks the final stage in the restructuring of the political system that has been underway since 2020.** The dictator begins his seventh term not only as president but also as the chairman of the Presidium of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA), a new governing body introduced into the constitution through the February 2022 referendum, intended to simulate political reform (see '*The propagandist congress of Lukashenka's supporters: putting the formal finishing touches to the new system*'). As a result, Lukashenka has further tightened his control over both the elites and society, which remain under constant intimidation and surveillance by the law enforcement security apparatus.