

The Parliamentary (Non)-Election in Belarus: A Look from the Inside

The predictable results of the parliamentary elections which took place in Belarus on September 28th, 2008 met with great surprise in the West and even in Belarus. Indeed, many signs had pointed to this ballot being markedly different to the usual routine exercise of validating the status quo, which is what elections in Belarus had become in the last twelve years. These signs included the release of political prisoners, scores of OSCE observers entering the country, many after years of being banned from doing so, European and US government representatives holding talks in the presidential administration, EU Secretary-General Javier Solana talking to the Belarusian president on the phone three days before the ballot, and even President Lukashenko himself hinting that a few opposition members might be elected. Yet despite all this, the results declared by the central election commission hours after the vote was closed brought Belarusian politics back to its old routine.

Overall context

The European Union and the United States set two conditions for the normalization of relations with Belarus by summer 2008: free and fair elections and the release of political prisoners. At the time, the West hoped that the normalization of relations with Belarus was at hand, and that meeting these conditions could promote meaningful political progress in Belarus, as well as in the election process. The government in Minsk appeared to be seeking ties with the West due to a growing uncertainty about its ability to uphold favourable treatment by Russia. This was especially the case in light of new negotiations over energy prices, as Moscow appeared to be pushing for price rises. The possible methods of avoiding steep price hikes included the privatization of key industries by Russian capital and/or authorizing closer political and monetary union with Russia. Both options, however, would have made a deep dent to Lukashenko's power and he was trying to keep his geopolitical options open. Economic anxieties caused by the world financial crisis added a new rationale for seeking engagement with the West: Russia could soon run into severe economic trouble, making it incapable of continuing to supply the necessary subsidies.

Lukashenko therefore faced the task of forcing the West to commit itself to normalizing ties with Belarus. His methods included the removal of visa and economic sanctions, improvement of the overall image of the country to give an appearance of greater respectability and identifying back-up solutions to potential brawls with Moscow. Moreover, the engagement had to proceed in a way which would not compromise the president's hold on power in any way. The Belarusian leader made a decision, as he later confirmed, 'to play on the West's own home turf' by creating the impression that the parliamentary elections were an area where political progress was indeed possible. He then made numerous promises to conduct the ballot in a free and fair manner and admitted OSCE long-term observers in a clear snub to Kremlin, which had declined entry to the observers to its own election the previous year.

Following the short Russia-Georgia war, the geopolitical situation changed rapidly and Russia reasserted its economic and military hegemony over Belarus. Russia pressurised Belarus to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, with the understanding that if Lukashenko agreed to this, it would seal Moscow's geopolitical hegemony over Belarus. It would also strip Lukashenko of the freedom of using foreign policy manoeuvres to withstand future economic and political pressure from Moscow. Moreover, the proposal to include South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the Russia-Belarus union could have been used to formally finalize the process of the absorption of Belarus by Russia. Lukashenko therefore delayed the recognition of the breakaway republics and was forced to make clear and identifiable moves that would be interpreted in the West as political progress. The release of the former presidential candidate Alexander Kazulin and two other political prisoners in mid-August,

following Russia's pressure to recognize the breakaway regions, was interpreted in the West as a clear sign from Lukashenko that he was ready for rapprochement. Even prior to this, Lukashenko made a ceremonial gesture by inviting the long-term observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in contrast to the Kremlin, which rejected OSCE observers the previous year.

The Chief of Foreign Security, Viktor Sheiman and his second in command were removed from the presidential administration of Henadz Nevyhlas, following the mysterious incident which took place in the centre of Minsk on July 4th, 2008 (which, depending on perspective, was deemed to either be a terrorist attack or an act of hooliganism). This was interpreted by most analysts as a strengthening of the position of Lukashenko's older son Viktor, who had been locked in a power fight with Sheiman for the last two years. A series of confrontations between different factions in the security agencies in 2007-2008 often spun out of control and hinted that Lukashenko's inner circle might split. The appointment of Vladimir Makey, a veteran advisor to Lukashenko senior and Viktor's long-time associate, as the new head of the presidential administration, marked, for many, the advance of a new generation of "technocrats" - more pragmatic, business-oriented, and potentially more open for dialogue with the West. Makey, with his long career in the security agencies, may be as good at creating illusionary impressions as his predecessors. Indeed, being well-educated and fluent in foreign languages, he stands out among Lukashenko's entourage as he has a better understanding of dealing with the West. It was presumably on his suggestion that Lukashenko agreed to release Alaksandr Kazulin to his wife's funeral in February. At the same time, it was Makey who, in 2004, lobbied most actively for the closure of the European Humanities University. At the very least, there is no evidence that the removal of Sheiman brought forth a body of soft liners in the presidential administration. However, the new coterie of associates was more keen to ration political repression and to avoid unnecessary excesses, and was prepared for more subtle methods of PR campaigning.

The West appeared to be coming to the conclusion that engagement with Lukashenko had to be given a chance as a possible tool of influencing the situation in the country. This was influenced by three sets of factors: firstly, there was a growing perception that Lukashenko was going to lose out as a result of continuing international isolation, and hence conditionality, which had previously proven to be ineffective, could work this time. Secondly, there was a certain Belarus fatigue in both the EU and the US: attempts of international isolation and investment in democracy promotion in the past proved to be counterproductive, while the US in particular faced a somewhat awkward situation with the introduction of sanctions against the Belnaftakhim Company. These ended with the near-expulsion of the US embassy from Minsk, while Belnaftakhim continued its exports to the US through slightly modified schemes. There was also a growing disappointment in the abilities of the Belarusian opposition to turn the country's situation around. Thirdly, there was growing interest in engaging on behalf of business interests, promoted by the partial economic liberalization that could be observed occurring in Belarus since 2007.

Overall, it has to be said that the parliamentary elections were an international rather than a domestic affair. Belarusian society remained largely uninformed about the exercise until immediately prior to the vote. The information available about the candidates and agendas was minimal: the authorities did increase the air time for candidates' broadcasts, but this was done on TV networks with the smallest audiences and minimal national coverage. The major issue for the politicized minority of society was the prospect of a change in Belarus's relations with the West (and, for that reason, with Russia) after the vote. In this situation, the major political players in the campaign were not the pro-government and opposition candidates but those who were not on the ballot: Lukashenko and his associates on the one hand, and European and US foreign officials and ambassadors on the other.

The West Engages: and Lowers the Stakes

As a result of Lukashenko's stance and new geopolitical realities, the West appeared to be lowering the threshold for engaging with him. The criteria for holding free and fair elections were reduced to sticking to somewhat better practices in this particular election campaign (slightly higher rates of registration of opposition candidates, greater representation of the opposition in the election commission, better conditions for the vote count). Individual governments and various European institutions failed to identify a clear and consistent set of benchmarks for political progress or a clear agenda for this election, with individual players each defining their own measure of progress. Apparently, some of the players intended to go for a 'quick fix' solution by negotiating the number of opposition representatives (the Belarusian authorities obviously encouraged this by dropping 'hints' that some opposition members would indeed be elected).

Moreover, it appeared that engagement with Lukashenko was underway regardless of the outcomes of the elections.

- The freeing of Alexander Kazulin was promptly followed by a visit to Minsk by the US Assistant Secretary of State, David Merkel, who on August 22nd 2008 declared that the US may lift sanctions against Belarus in the nearest future. The US Charge D'Affaires in Minsk, Jonathan Moore, spoke out against the opposition's strategy in the elections, warning it against a boycott. Some observers interpreted the rapid warming of US relations with Belarus as a sign that Washington was willing to compromise with the government in Minsk for practical reasons, including the non-recognition by Lukashenko of Abkhazia and Ossetia, and was ready to tone down its criticism of the election conduct.
- The Polish foreign minister, Radoslaw Sikorski paid a visit to Belarus on September 12th, 2008, in clear contradiction with EU rules which establish the deputy minister as the higher level of contact with the government in Minsk, with the exception of urgent circumstances. Upon arriving, Sikorski declared that it was time 'to recognise the positive changes in Belarusian politics and reply with positive initiatives to positive initiatives'. Sikorski's declaration was generally in line with the more accommodative approach to Belarus that Poland had recently pursued. His declaration was also seen as Poland's attempt to take a lead in the opening up of Belarus by the EU.
- Three days before the elections, president Lukashenko held a telephone conversation with Javier Solana, the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, which was interpreted by the majority of observers as the surest sign that Belarus and the EU could reach a deal to normalize relations, in exchange for improved conduct during parliamentary elections and the possibility of opposition representation. Some independent newspapers and online editions even floated the lists of opposition candidates apparently 'agreed' on by the regime and the EU for inclusion in the parliament.

Overall, the advance praise for the election could have been an attempt to encourage a positive change in Belarus which was manifested by the release of Kazulin. From mid-August, most Western players were convinced that the dialogue had indeed been successful. On behalf of the Belarusian authorities, however, the same could have been a sly calculation: the advance praise, received for those measures not connected to the elections per se, were used as a propaganda tool to convince society that the West gave the election a stamp of approval (even in the election field, the authorities made some 'concessions' that had no relation to the substance of the elections: for example, opposition members were admitted to the constituency - level election commission but not to the precinct-level ones, which actually counted the votes). Any subsequent criticism was interpreted as the application of double standards. Moreover, proponents of the dialogue eventually found

themselves in a hostage situation: in order to have officials talking to them, they had to silence the criticism of the negative aspects of the elections, thus ceding the authorities' information and PR initiatives even further.

During the final stage, sensing EU and US interest in normalizing relations and a willingness to avoid criticism of the irregularities which occurred during the early stages of the campaign, Lukashenko began to put forward his own conditions for dialogue. Just before the elections, he declared that dialogue would end should the West fail to recognize the elections. Since this declaration also hinted at a possibility of renewed political repression, the Western institutions found themselves in a difficult situation – their position could eventually hurt the Belarusian democrats.

In summary, the willingness to compromise and engage in dialogue was accepted by the government in Minsk as a sign of its counterpart's weakness and was masterfully manipulated, not only to silence any criticism of the election process, but also to weaken the West's moral ground. This was possible due to a fundamental difference in the understanding of dialogue between Western culture and the authoritarian society. In the former, dialogue is a tool of establishing common ground and finding solutions that benefit all parties. In the latter, dialogue is essentially a zero sum game in which there is only one winner. In such a game, the counterpart's willingness to compromise is treated as a weak point and used as the primary weapon. At the end of the day, the Belarusian authorities decided that the West's willingness to talk and engage would allow them get away with any election scenario they chose. The reality proved this calculation to not be far from the truth.

The Opposition: One More Step Towards Oblivion?

By the time of the parliamentary elections, the state of the opposition was characteristic of the whole crisis: isolated and reduced to a political subculture as a result of repression. The prospects of the opposition posing a credible challenge to the authorities, or providing a credible political alternative looked bleak. Apart from the issue of the availability and attractiveness of the political alternative, the gap between the opposition and society is deepened by the fact that the latter increasingly perceives political activism as something utterly irrational and irrelevant to their lives and interests. Initially, the opposition's performance during the campaign marked a significant improvement from previous years, as it succeeded in putting forward a united list of candidates representing the United Democratic Forces (even though another grouping, the European Coalition, ran its candidates separately). At the same time, the opposition was unable to even put out a nationwide message about the election campaign, thus failing to answer what this election was fundamentally about. The opposition was thus transforming into a predominantly external political player, whose impact on the domestic scene was limited to having the support of the Western players who were pressuring and negotiating with the government in Minsk.

The prospect of the elections being recognized without a meaningful improvement in their quality promoted internal frictions in the Belarusian opposition. As the negotiations between Lukashenko's government and various Western players progressed, the opposition (at least, its leadership) had almost entirely concentrated on the international dimensions of the campaign. The major issue for the opposition became whether or not it would be able to preserve its base of support in the West. For a proportion of the opposition at least, the dialogue with Lukashenko was a menacing sign. There were concerns that engaging with the government in Minsk could take place on unprincipled terms and could lead to a situation where the West would not only cut its assistance to civil society (as was the case in 2002), but could also begin ignoring human rights abuses in the country.

The boycott of the parliamentary elections was first declared by the Charter-97 human rights movement in spring, and was supported by the youth group 'Young Front' in May. By late August, the boycott initiative was joined by the oldest political party, the Belarusian Popular Front. However, the rest of the United Democratic Forces declined to support the initiative. Moreover, 15 out of 19 BPF candidates on the UDF list spoke out against the boycott and expressed a commitment to continue with the election campaign to the end. On September 11th, the UDF finally decided to abstain from the boycott, not least as a result of the pressure from US and European diplomats. Nevertheless, several candidates, including five candidates of the United Civil Party, withdrew from the race on an individual basis. The withdrawal was also a reaction to the presumed negotiations between Lukashenko's administration and the EU on the admission of the opposition to the parliament as the basis for recognising the elections. By engaging in such a move, the opposition attempted to avoid the situation in which Lukashenko could pick MPs from the opposition and by extension, appoint the opposition leadership as he wished.

While Charter-97 and BPF were not supported in their calls for a boycott by other opposition parties, new support came as a result of rumours that certain Western diplomats were negotiating the opposition's representation in the future House of Representatives. The opposition saw these negotiations as a threat that the regime would appoint the new leadership of the opposition according to its own agenda. In reply, the United Civil Party withdrew most of its candidates, leaving only its party chairman Anatol Liabedzka and its deputy chairman Yaroslav Romanchuk.

The boycott attempt was the attempt of a group of opposition radicals to reconfigure the entire opposition. These radicals were centred around Charter-97 and were represented by its leader, Andrei Sannikov, who reportedly aspired to become the chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front and possibly the united candidate of the opposition in the 2011 presidential elections. Having no political base of his own, Sannikov's faction apparently pressed for the boycott initiative in order to disorganize the opposition parties and to have the radicals controlling the nomination of the single opposition candidate two years later.

The Election Results: After All the Fuss, Same Old Story

The ahead of time voting, a procedure long criticized by the opposition as a tool of fixing the elections before the voting day proceeded according to the customary schedule. A total of 24% of the voters voted ahead of time, many mobilized by the local administrations. While voting on September 28th proceeded without major disturbance, most election observers noted that the vote count proceeded according to the old method, with members of the election commissions standing with their backs to the observers, who are required to stand at least several meters away. In doing so, the authorities failed to comply with what emerged in the run-up to the elections.

In the few hours after the polling stations were closed, the Central Election Commission declared that with a 75% turnout, the elections were valid in all 110 constituencies, and that all the MPs were elected in the first round with no opposition representation in the parliament. Most pro-government candidates got 10-15% of the vote with a maximum of 33%. Both Lukashenko and the head of the Central Election Commission Lidziya Yarmoshina declared that the result reflected society's deep distrust of the opposition, an opinion partly shared by many independent observers. Nevertheless, in one constituency in the Mahileu region, an opposition candidate was in the lead in each precinct where his supporters were in the election commissions – he nevertheless lost the overall ballot with 18%.

The opposition cried foul and staged a small protest rally in the centre of Minsk, which was attended by fewer than 1,000 participants. Overall, a relatively high turnout in the elections and little enthusiasm for the opposition protests revealed the opposition's major problem which goes beyond the unfairness of the voting process, namely its failure to agitate society. Thus, according to the poll released by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies, while approximately 52% of Belarusians want political and social changes in the country, approximately 51% still trust the president and 43% were going to vote for the representatives of the government in elections, whereas only 19% were going to vote for the opposition.

The election returned the most sterilised and controlled parliament in the last 18 years. Not only does it lack any opposition, it also lacks any potential troublemakers to occasionally criticize the government (such as the leader of the Belarusian Yabloko, Olga Abramova or Lukashenko's former aide Viktor Kuchynski, who also lost their seats). The candidates were all elected in the first round (even in 2004 there were two run-offs), and all with a similar percentage of votes. In terms of the process, the authorities turned a deaf ear to calls for clarity in two of the most controversial areas – early voting and the vote count.

Conclusions: Was the West Duped?

The results of the parliamentary elections, and, moreover, the lack of progress in the most critical election procedures, advance voting and the vote count, stunned international and domestic observers, especially those who were confident that a deal to let a small number of opposition members to take seats in the legislature would be achieved. The election results brought forth a predictable verdict of the OSCE observer mission, which, in its preliminary statement on September 29th declared that 'in spite of some improvements, the elections, in their final form, failed to meet OSCE criteria.' Such wording could have given the government in Minsk grounds to fulfil its threats of cutting dialogue. Nevertheless, it left room for interpretation and technically opens the road for some upgrading of relations. The glass, which was 'half empty', very soon became 'half full'. One day later, the EU commissioner Benita Ferrero Waldner declared that the elections had positive aspects 'with some negative indicators.' The US and EU governments declared their commitment to the dialogue 'to put the Belarusian authorities on the right track', whereas the European Parliament called for a six months suspension of the sanctions.

The Foreign Minister of Finland, Alexander Strubb, who holds the OSCE presidency, declared in the meeting with President Lukashenko on October 7th, that 'Belarus moves in the right direction.'

Such statements can be interpreted in several ways. To those convinced that Belarus and the EU made a deal well in advance of the elections, these assessments only proved them right. Others accepted such favourable statements as a sign that the proponents of dialogue simply cannot accept being defeated, or fooled by Lukashenko. The third line of argument is that the dialogue did work and that it achieved the minimum objectives, such as a relaxation of political repression, and that a breakthrough election performance by the Belarusian authorities had never been a realistic expectation. As a matter of fact, even after the elections, the government in Minsk continued to supply signs that a positive change in areas other than politics was possible. Thus, the government immediately declared a new privatization plan, the super-liberal personal income tax reform was adopted and Lukashenko himself announced new policies aimed at attracting foreign investment. In the non-economic sphere, the most striking sign was the removal of the notorious commander of the Minsk riot police unit, Dzmitry Paulichenka, suspected by the West of being involved in political kidnappings in 1999.

Change by engagement may indeed be working successfully to some extent. However, as a test of

Lukashenko's commitment to dialogue, the parliamentary elections showed the Belarusian leader's unwillingness to compromise his power for the sake of better ties with the West. Furthermore, the failure of the EU and the US to take their own benchmark seriously gave Lukashenko the confidence to ignore Western pressure and extract the concessions he needed without conceding much himself. On the home front, Lukashenko used the West's post-election attitude as a major propaganda tool. It is remarkable that immediately after talking to the OSCE chairman on October 7th, he met the leadership of the KGB (who, above all, were aware of how the election proceeded) to declare his treatment in the EU and the US statements was a clear sign that democracy was not the real issue of discord between himself and the West.

For the West, the major lesson from engaging with Lukashenko was that the voluntary loss of moral ground made ceding of the political ground inevitable. Engagement and dialogue were not a mistake, but confusion between bargaining and conditionality was. Since the dialogue is set to continue for some time, the EU and the US will face a challenge of reclaiming the moral ground by coming back to the conditionality approach which was compromised in the election campaign and following it. The real short-term agenda for dialogue may not be so much achieving new progress, as sustaining and institutionalizing the one already achieved. At the end of the day, political change will be almost impossible to achieve without opening up the repressive political system and relaxing the social atmosphere.

For the Belarusian opposition, the lesson of the parliamentary non-election should be straightforward: against the backdrop of irrelevant discussions, unnecessary divisions, and petty factionalism, its Western supporters will be forced to seek engagement with Minsk even if it will mean shifting from a bad policy to a worse one.

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