



BULLETIN

No. 89 (821), 8 October 2015 © PISM

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In the Shadow of Crises: The Presidential Campaign in Belarus

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The presidential election in Belarus, scheduled for 11 October, will be won by Alexander Lukashenka, who has held the position for 21 years. Although the outcome of the election is certain, how they are conducted will affect the future of relations between the European Union and Belarus. After the election, the EU countries should start a discussion on the further development of relations with Belarus, such as within the framework of the ongoing revision of European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership programme.

A Phoney Campaign. Belarus' Central Election Commission has named four people who have collected the required 100,000 signatures to be on the presidential ballot, including the incumbent, President Alexander Lukashenka, Tatsiana Karatkevich, who is a representative of the opposition movement "Tell the truth!," Sergei Gaidukevich, leader of the pro-Lukashenko Liberal Democratic Party, and Nikolai Ulakhovich, who is head of the Belarusian Patriotic Party and loyal to the Belarusian authorities. According to recent ISEPS polls, among people determined vote, Lukashenka can count on 45.7% of the votes, Karatkevich should garner 18%, Gaidukevich could get 11.4%, and Nikolai Ulakhovich may receive 3.6%.

Officially, Lukashenka has not conducted an election campaign but has intensively travelled around the country during this period, meeting with employees of numerous industrial enterprises. He also completed a number of important foreign visits, including to China and Russia and took part in a summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation in Tajikistan and a meeting of the UN General Assembly.

Among his rivals, the most active has been Karatkevich, who, despite having few resources for the campaign, toured almost all of Belarus, meeting with people in places such as markets and train and bus stations. On 3 October, Karatkevich and Gaidukevich also took part in a TV debate in which Ulakhovich was represented by his son Aleg.

Unlike in the past when the All Belarusian People's Assembly—a meeting of representatives of the Belarusian authorities at all levels and directors and employees of enterprises, as well as representatives of science and culture—met before the presidential elections, this year, the Assembly did not convene. This near compulsory element of previous campaigns was treated by Lukashenka as an opportunity to meet with local leaders to discuss the most important issues they face. The official reason for not calling the Assembly was financial problems, but it is clear that unofficially Lukashenka wanted to avoid a direct confrontation with delegates or to answer questions about the country's international situation and failure to meet his promises from the 2010 campaign when he announced that by 2015 the average monthly wage would reach \$1,000. Currently, the average monthly income of Belarusians is just \$400.

This year's campaign has proceeded calmly, although the opposition concentrated around public figures Uladzimir Nyaklyayew and Mikola Statkevich, decided to organise protests against such activities as the construction of a Russian air base on Belarusian territory. Moreover, in contrast to 2010, the opposition did not call people to mass protests on election day (although they have called for a march on Saturday, 10 October), and even instructed its activists to leave Minsk, due to the fear of possible provocations. At the same time, the pre-election period showed all the weaknesses of the opposition forces: it is still divided and remains without a single leader (some activists even criticised the only independent candidate), any idea how to conduct the campaign or a programme for Belarus, and it lacked even basic

support (other than Karatkevich, no one was able to collect the minimum number of signatures to be registered by the election committee).

An Economic Crisis and Unstable Situation in the Region. Unlike the previous campaign, the current one came amid a deepening economic crisis in Belarus. According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Belstat), from the beginning of this year prices rose by almost 8%, while incomes decreased by more than 5%. Financial problems also beset the state, with foreign exchange reserves falling to \$4.5 billion, or about \$3 billion less than three months' imports, an important financial safety benchmark. The situation is exacerbated by the economic crisis in Russia, which is not only Belarus' major trade partner (Belarusian exports fell by over 27% in January–August 2015 compared to the same period in 2014) but also its biggest investor and lender. The only support the Russians can afford now is to provide loans for Belarus to pay off previous commitments. A decision by Russia to grant a \$3.5 billion loan from the Eurasian Stabilisation Fund is still pending.

Belarusian authorities now increasingly count on a loan from the International Monetary Fund, and negotiations on the matter have been underway for several months. If the IMF grants the loan, it will expect Belarus to begin needed reforms, such as reducing subsidies for unprofitable enterprises and increasing municipal fees, measures which were not implemented after a previous loan in 2009 (the country has repaid that loan). Raising the retirement age is also considered, even though Belarus' authorities are aware of the lack of public acceptance of such a move. Paradoxically, the unstable situation in the region, mainly in Ukraine, may help the Belarusian government to take action ostensibly to avoid the problems seen in its southern neighbour.

For the first time since the 1990s, the security situation in Eastern Europe has started to be one of the main factors influencing the votes of Belarusians. The possible risk of destabilisation of the situation in Belarus is very important to the population: according to the latest ISSEPS pool, almost half of Belarusians say peace and stability are the most important elements influencing their vote, while democracy is important for only about 15% of them. This works in favour of the incumbent president, who is regarded as a guarantor of peace and stability. This also means that the problems associated with the economic crisis, such as the rise in prices, fall in wages, or the threat of unemployment, are treated as secondary issues. Thus, even though Belarus in recent years has experienced serious economic problems, the economy and finances will not be a factor that might reduce the current government's popularity.

What's Next in Relations between Belarus and the EU? It can be assumed with high probability that this year's election will be conducted peacefully. In Belarusian society there is no protest mood. On the contrary, Belarusians are very much afraid of the scenario that took place in 2014 in Ukraine. As a result, this year's election will be unlikely to see events similar to 2006 and 2010, when there were mass public protests, and which could force the authorities to take radical action.

At the same time, the Belarusian authorities really want to improve relations with Western countries. This is important not only from an economic point of view—Minsk hopes not only for financial support but also for political acceptance—to reduce the country's dependence on Russia. In August this year, Lukashenka released political prisoners whose imprisonment had been the main obstacle to the resumption of relations with the EU. This was met with a favourable response from the EU side, but the sanctions remain in place through the presidential election cycle. Although it should not be expected that the OSCE election observers, whose reports and post-election statements form the basis of EU institutions' positions, will recognise that the Belarusian election fully meets all democratic standards, they will certainly note progress in comparison to previous elections, especially if there are no unexpected events. Thus, the EU will be able to return to talks with Belarus at some point after the election.

Recommendations. The period after the presidential election will be the best moment for members of the European Union to review the bloc's current policy towards Belarus and to develop new patterns of cooperation with the country. The planned revision of European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership may be useful. However, the new strategy should take into account that the current Belarusian authorities are not interested in formal association, but seek other forms of cooperation, such as investment in infrastructure, economic and cross-border cooperation and entry to the Bologna Process. Poland should strongly support the last solution especially, because it will make it easier for young Belarusians to study in the EU.

To show Belarusians the EU's high level of interest in their country, it would be worth preparing once again a document presenting what Belarus can benefit from regular contact with the EU (it may refer to the non-paper from 2008, "What the EU could bring to Belarus?") or publicising materials already worked out in Brussels, such as the document called "29 steps towards Belarus." It is also important that the EU develop a coherent information policy that takes in the concerns of both the Belarusian public and the authorities. Steps of this type will be particularly important given that since 2011 the proportion of Belarusians against integration with the EU has continued to grow—from 30.5% in March 2011 to 51.9% in September this year.

The EU should also continue to support the independent political environment in Belarus—including NGOs and non-government media, and it should underline that these parts of society are an important element of EU expectations in its cooperation with all of its neighbours. To increase interpersonal contacts, it is necessary to introduce visa facilitation, as well as to expand the range of the MOST mobility program for Belarus.