



## Semblance of Democracy: Belarus Holds Parliamentary and Local Elections

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The end of the so-called One Vote Day in Belarus on 25 February saw deputies of the lower house of parliament and local authorities at all levels elected. The elections were intended to strengthen the regime's legitimacy, but took place under undemocratic conditions, including the lack of alternatives to regime candidates and independent media, and repression by the authorities against, among others, the families of opposition members. Continued international support is needed to maintain the Belarusian opposition-in-exile's initiatives, such as the Cabinet of Belarus in Exile.

On 26 February, the Central Election Commission of Belarus announced the results of the vote for the 110-seat House of Representatives. Officially, 51 seats were won by the openly pro-Alexander Lukashenka Belaya Rus party, 40 seats by non-partisan candidates, eight by the Republican Labour and Justice Party, seven by the Communist Party, and four by the Liberal Democratic Party (all of which are loyal to the government). The turnout was 73.09% (4% less than in [2019](#)), with 41.71% officially recorded during the early voting that started on 20 February. The newly elected House of Representatives will convene in session in the second half of March. During One Vote Day, Belarusians also formally elected 12,514 local authorities at various levels.

The Belarusian authorities did not invite observers from the OSCE. The conduct of the elections was condemned by, among others, Poland, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The leader of the democratic opposition Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya had earlier called One Vote Day an "electionless election", described it as a fraud and a farce, and called on Belarusian citizens to boycott it. At the same time, she encouraged Belarusians to vote online in the planned elections in the coming months for the third term of the Coordination Council in exile, which was established in 2020 following the fraudulent [presidential elections and subsequent crackdown](#).

**Election Context.** The inaugural One Vote Day was intended to serve three purposes. The first reason was to create

a semblance of democracy in which any candidate, regardless of political background, could become a member of the lower house of parliament or the local authorities, and become part of the government. Second, it was to test the electoral system ahead of the presidential elections scheduled for 2025. Third, they were to prove that Lukashenka is in full control of the state.

The Belarusian authorities' fear of a repetition of the 2020 protests meant that the elections were held under intensified repression. As a result, there are now, according to human rights organisation *Viasna*, 1,412 people with the status of political prisoners, with some of whom there has been no contact for more than a year. The authorities harassed the families of those imprisoned and political refugees residing abroad, including searching their homes in Belarus, summoning them for frequent interrogations, and arresting some. For the first time, Belarus did not open voting stations at diplomatic missions, making it impossible for the opposition abroad and others to vote.

Free media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) do not operate in Belarus. Moreover, in 2023, the Belarusian authorities ordered the re-registration of all political parties. Only four factions out of 15 previously registered were allowed to form, which were then the only parties to enlist candidates in the elections. Meanwhile, on 5 January, the Belarusian authorities decided to amend the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations, obliging

religious communities operating in Belarus to undergo re-registration as well.

**Facade of a Parliament.** The authorities' targeted actions against the opposition resulted in no protests recorded during the elections. Nevertheless, the elections will not have a significant impact on changing the balance of power within the regime. In the Belarusian political system, the institution of parliament is completely marginalised. Deputies very rarely use their legislative initiative, and the role of the session-based House of Representatives (the spring session is convened in April and the autumn session in October) is *de facto* reduced to accepting presidential decrees issued between the sessions. Parliament has no say in the formation of the government, which is appointed and dismissed, including the prime minister and ministers, by the president.

Despite the insignificance of the House of Representatives, the Belarusian authorities used these elections to show the alleged high support for Lukashenka, supposedly evidenced by the good official result of the Belaya Rus party. However, Belaya Rus should not be regarded as a classic party in power, rather just a grouping that is expected to play a pro-Russia role as Lukashenka's gesture of loyalty to the Russian authorities.

Even less important in the state system is the upper house, the Council of the Republic, although its chairman is to replace the president in the event of a vacancy. Of its 64 members, eight are appointed by the president and the rest by local government deputies, who are part of Lukashenka's subordinate system of government. These elections will be held on 4 April and it is not expected that anyone from outside the system will be elected to this chamber.

**ABPA—Fictitious Grassroots Democracy.** The portrayal of a bottom-up democratisation of the Belarusian political system was intended by the establishment of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA) as a constitutional body [two years ago](#) and the election of delegates (up to 1,200). In addition to some of the newly elected deputies of the House of Representatives, it will include the president of Belarus (formally also former presidents), representatives of the executive and judiciary, local councils of deputies and civil society, so in theory it will be a broad body. Nominations of delegates to the ABPA will begin on 12 March and continue until 31 March, while its first meeting is scheduled for 25 April at the latest.

Article 89 of the constitution defines the ABPA as the "highest representative organ of the people's power" and it has been granted a number of important competences. Formally, the ABPA is supposed to set the main directions of domestic, foreign, and security policy (it is supposed to,

among other things, approve the military doctrine and the concept of national security, and can also declare a state of emergency or martial law). It also has the power to carry out impeachment proceedings against the president. In theory, ABPA will be, next to the president, the most important state policymaking body, but its composition will ensure total loyalty to Lukashenka. One of the first major tasks of ABPA will be to approve Belarus' new war doctrine and no debate among the delegates on the subject is to be expected. It appears from the published draft that Poland, along with other NATO members, is listed in the group of unfriendly states.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** One Vote Day allowed the Belarusian authorities to test the electoral system and formally supported the regime's legitimacy. At the same time, the parliamentary elections and the expected appointment of ABPA in the spring will not change the way the Belarusian state functions, with the power structures continuing to be completely subordinated to Lukashenka. ABPA will be a facade, seemingly giving the Belarusian political system the character of a people's democracy. At the same time, the establishment of ABPA will further marginalise the parliament by depriving it of its already negligible powers to shape state policy, which is expected to indirectly limit Russia's ability to influence Belarus through this organ of power and certain pro-Russian MPs.

The repression that accompanied the elections, along with the militarisation of society and attempts to consolidate it in the face of imagined threats from NATO countries, will continue at the current scale at least until next year's presidential elections. The consequence of the intimidation of Belarusian society may be greater Russification and susceptibility to Russian actions, which in the long term may prove detrimental to the formation of Belarusian independence. Furthermore, the restriction of human rights and civil liberties, while strengthening the regime's control over society, has a negative impact on Belarus' relations with Western countries.

This is why it should be expected that the Belarusian authorities will maintain their confrontational policy towards NATO and the EU. The results of the elections will have no impact on relations between Belarus and Poland. It will therefore remain very important for Poland and the EU to maintain a double-track policy towards Belarus. On the one hand, it is necessary to maintain and expand sanctions against the authorities and state-owned enterprises, and on the other to continue support for the opposition. It will be very important to undertake all social and cultural initiatives aimed at forming and maintaining Belarusian national identity, especially among political refugees. It will also be necessary to help independent media operating outside Belarus.