



BULLETIN

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Presidential Campaign in Belarus

by Anna Maria Dyner

The campaign preceding the 19 December presidential poll will be unlike anything seen in Belarus before, with President Lukashenka no longer enjoying traditional support from Russia, whose authorities have in recent months tenaciously sought to undermine his position. Neither are there any chances for a consolidation of the opposition around a single candidate, the way things were in 2006. But victory for Alexander Lukashenka, painstakingly promoted by the Belarusian government and state-owned media during the campaign, is a foregone conclusion.

Under the Belarusian Constitution, a presidential election must be held between five and two months prior to the end of a presidential term, and the current term ends on 6 April 2011. This translates into a polling date between 6 November 2010 and 6 February 2011. Initially representatives of the Belarusian government said that the elections will be scheduled at the very latest constitutional term, which is 6 February 2011, but finally on an extraordinary session on September 14, deputies unanimously appointed election day on 19 December. The campaign's main issue will be deteriorating relations with Russia, the poor condition of state finances and the weakness of the opposition talking the back seat.

Relations with Russia. In view of bilateral political ties and Belarus' considerable economic dependence on Russia, relations with that country will heavily impact on the campaign. And unlike in previous campaigns, the Russian authorities will this time try hard to undermine Lukashenka's position.

Actually, the poor condition of relations with Russia and the need to negotiate the terms and prices of energy shipments from that country were the most important factors underpinning the decision to bring forward the initially suggested polling date. During the campaign the Belarusian government will have to hold talks on gas prices in 2011 and on an increase in duty-free oil quota. The ongoing campaign wouldn't lead the Russian government to a compromise which will take into account the Belarusian expectations, whether on bringing down the price of gas (according to Gazprom's initial pronouncements, it is going to grow from the current \$196 to \$250 per 1,000 cu.m.) or on increasing the present annual oil quota of 6.3 million tons. At the same time, Russia will be seeking to take over key Belarusian companies, especially in the petrochemical sector, offering in exchange preferential prices for energy sources. But in a situation where President Lukashenka is portraying himself as the sole defender of Belarusian interests, there is very little likelihood for the Russian demands to be met during the campaign. Bringing forward the election date was intended to strengthen Lukashenka's bargaining position so that he can conduct the final stage of the negotiations as a newly re-elected president. As a result, if faced with an impending fiasco, he may find it easier to risk an oil-and-gas crisis—an option he will seek to avoid at any price in the course of the campaign.

Tense relations with Russia will also have the effect of prolonging an information war between the two countries, waged since last June, during which Russia is expected to go on piling up charges against the Lukashenka regime for the capture of state property, abuse of power, and disappearances of Lukashenka's political opponents in 1999–2000, and also to take up the mysterious death of Belarusian opposition reporter Aleh Biabenin (whose body was discovered at his home outside Minsk on 3 September). Furthermore, drawing on Belarus' economic problems, the Russians will regularly be undermining President Lukashenka's position in the expectation that he will yield

and cease opposing Russian capital's entry in the Belarusian economy's strategic sectors. And Belarus, in its turn, may play up the threat of its economy's being bought up by Russia, using this as a leverage to beef up President Lukashenka's position as the only guarantor of sovereignty.

Domestic Affairs: The December 2010 date for the election also reflects the growing financial problems of the government, and especially the authorities' apprehension that the long-announced pay raises in the state sector will in the long run produce adverse consequences for public finances. Proclaimed by the government to an order from President Lukashenka, public sector pay increases bring most benefits to teachers and physicians—yet the lowest paid workers in the sector. And according to Prime Minister Sergei Sikorsky, minimum pay in the public sector should equal \$200 and average pay should reach \$500 by the end of 2010. The government has also increased science scholarships and—in line with society's expectations—Lukashenka promised not to raise the retirement age. However these measure could never prove neutral for state finances.

Given the deteriorating condition of the economy—the growing budget deficit and foreign debt and a swelling balance of payments of the state - the December slot for the election is a is comfortable for Lukashenka. As the newly re-elected president he will have a greater possibility of taking, at the beginning of 2011, socially unpopular measures such as cuts in public welfare-oriented subsidies or a devaluation of the rouble.

Opposition. As for the chances of opposition candidates, the change in the election date will produce no major impact. The state-owned media will continue to promote only the incumbent president, ignoring or criticising his opponents. Intensification of the state's harassment and persecution of opposition figures should also be expected.

Moreover, there is no charismatic opposition leader who would be able to consolidate it and what's more the desire to participate in the elections reported so far eight people. Only a few of them can expect to collect the required 100 000 signatures, including Vladimir Neklyayev, who has spearheaded a public campaign "Speak the Truth!" Jaroslav Romanchuk, vice-president of the United Civic Party (and member of the independent Union of Poles in Belarus); or Andrei Sannikau, head of the "European Belarus" civic campaign. None of them are recording support over 3–5% in opinion surveys. What's more, the opposition leader in the 2006 election, Alexander Milinkevich Chairman of the Movement for Freedom, has quit running this year.

In these circumstances, and given President Lukashenka's approval rating (45.6 % in a July poll by the independent agency NISEPI), the opposition will pose no threat for the incumbent head of state. Voting for Lukashenka will also be spurred by fears of possible consequences which supporting another candidate may bring about, such as job loss or being thrown out of college/university (the most frequent forms of pressure), and another factor is the support of the *nomenklatura*, apprehensive of any change in government.

Recommendations. The campaign will provide a test for Belarus-EU relations, and a challenge for the head of the European Union's representation in Minsk, whose appointment will be announced on 1 November. Belarusian authorities, expecting the recognition of the elections indeed invited observers from the OSCE, although the experience of all previous campaigns shows that presidential election won't be free and fair. Both Poland other EU countries should therefore insightfully observe the election campaign and react to any violations of the freedom of speech or freedom of assembly, and discrimination of opposition candidates or independent media. The EU should press to amend the electoral law, which would ensure real access to representatives of the opposition to the electoral commissions, and for the abolishment of Article 193.1 of the country's Penal Code, according to which the person acting on behalf of an unregistered organization is punished by detention for up to six months or imprisonment up to two years. And the EU member states should emphasise a linkage between the course of the election process and the degree of future project-financing under the Eastern Partnership programme and programmes of the European Investment Bank, which financing is currently suspended because of the failure of the human rights in Belarus.