

BULLETIN

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Election Without Choice: The Pre-election Situation in Belarus

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The campaign in the run up to the parliamentary elections scheduled for 23 September in Belarus highlighted the lack of dialogue between the authorities and society. It also underlined the problems of the Belarusian opposition, i.e., the internal divisions and the lack of resources required to conduct political agitation. Despite the weakness of independent Belarusian society, Poland and other EU countries should support all initiatives aimed at developing that nation's civil society, which could result in increasing Belarusians' political participation and raise awareness of the need for change.

The Marginal Importance of the Parliamentary Campaign. The 110-seat parliament (House of Representatives), elected every four years, has no significant role in the Belarusian political system. The president is still the main centre of power, and parliament's political insignificance is evidenced by the fact that, by the end of their terms of office, members of parliament used their right of legislative initiative only three times, and only in cases of minor importance. Political parties, labour collectives and ordinary citizens, who collect at least 10 signatures, can put forward parliamentary candidates.

The Belarusian authorities have attached no particular importance to the parliamentary campaign, and the activity of pro-government candidates was negligible. Airtime devoted to the candidates was limited, there was no debate among candidates, and the campaign did not raise any special interest among the Belarusian state-owned media. Neither, despite earlier declarations that he would do so, did the president establish a so-called ruling party. During the campaign there was no rational discussion about the situation of the country, the deteriorating economy (since the beginning of the year inflation has exceeded 12%), or the problems that this has caused for ordinary Belarusians (such as the decrease of the purchasing power of the ruble, and low wages—the average salary is the equivalent of 330 euro).

The Organisation of Elections. The Central Election Commission (CEC) in Belarus has registered 365 candidates out of 494 applicants, which is exactly the same as in 2008. Among them were dozens of opposition figures, including members of the United Civic Party, the Belarusian Left Party "Fair World", the Belarusian National Front, and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada". The CEC registered primarily politicians who declared at the beginning of the campaign they would withdraw from the election on the eve of the vote. The CEC refused to include several opposition candidates; among these were Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the leader of the movement "For Freedom", and Mikhail Paskhievitsh, representative of the movement "Tell the truth!", who were determined to leave their names on the electoral lists. The Commission cited the lack of a signature, incorrect identity information, or uncertainties regarding tax returns, as the main reasons for refusing to add them to the list.

Even the registered opposition candidates were exposed to attempts by the administration to restrict their political activities. Their access to public radio and television was restricted, as the Central Electoral Commission did not agree, for example, to the broadcast of electoral materials of candidates who called for a boycott of the election. The opposition also had limited opportunity to submit their representatives for membership of the election committee, thereby automatically reducing the possibility of independent monitoring of the vote. And the voting system itself, especially

in respect to early voting, which allows the substitution of votes which have already been cast, raises serious controversy and doubts about the fairness of the process of counting the votes.

The Opposition's Problems. The parliamentary election campaign highlighted the Belarusian opposition's major problems. These include a lack of unified action, a shortage of resources with which to run the campaign, and the small number of activists who were able to reach the electorate with an independent message. Also, internal divisions were not conducive to the opposition's cause. Some members of the opposition suggested that, as there are still political prisoners in Belarus, standing for election would only legitimise the regime. Others have recognised the campaign as necessary, but withdrew a week before the vote due to the lack of a fair count. Still others stuck to the view that the opposition should not give up during any part of the electoral process, and must participate in the elections to the end. As a result, no party has prepared a comprehensive electoral programme.

Neither did the timing of the election favour the opposition. President Alexander Lukashenko called the election for the last day allowed by law, and the campaign coincided with the peak of summer and beginning of autumn, when interest in politics among the public is negligible. Also, the economic crisis put the need to secure a livelihood at the forefront of the minds of citizens, which did not help the commitment of the electorate to take part in the election. Independent public opinion polls show that the majority of society thinks that neither the state nor the opposition politicians can help them solve everyday problems. Many Belarusians also lack sufficient knowledge about the role of parliament in the country's political system, which contributes to the institution's marginal social acceptance.

Recommendations for Poland and the European Union. By creating a consistent and long-term programme of support for Belarus, the European Union will have a greater opportunity to influence this country. So far, EU action has been dominated only by temporary measures in reaction to the policies of the Belarusian authorities. Such measures include the ban on entering the Schengen area and the recent economic sanctions, associated in particular with entrepreneurs of the Belarusian regime. At the same time, there is a lack of long-term initiatives aimed at Belarusian authorities. These could take the form of a "road map for Belarus", which would be a continuation of the "dialogue for modernisation". Such a road map should indicate the most important problems of the country, and offer concrete support, both financial and technical, to resolve them. Belarus could receive assistance in accordance with the principle of "more for more, less for less", i.e., more resources in return for the implementation of concrete economic and political reforms, and suspension of these resources in the absence of change. However, the start of any talks with the Belarusian authorities should be strictly dependent on their fulfilment of initial conditions, of which the most important is the release of political prisoners.

EU Member States should continue to support activities addressed primarily to Belarusian society, i.e., the activities of independent journalists, social activists, researchers preparing political and economic development plans for Belarus, and entrepreneurs. One of the most important tasks of the aid programmes should be to provide support for small and medium businesses, which will, in the future, be able to push for the liberalisation of the economic system. An area particularly worth mentioning is the creation of cooperatives and financial institutions, the main task of which will be to provide microfinance to entrepreneurs. Economic cooperation and the actions of the EU should generate more economic ties with Belarus. Support for small and medium-sized enterprises will also contribute to the development of the Belarusian middle class, and thus can enhance interest in changing the socio-political system.

Bearing in mind the need to increase the political activity of Belarusians, the EU should support every kind of effort which increases people-to-people contacts. That is why it is worth introducing a large-scale exchange programme for civil servants, and to train them not only in the management of the state, but also in the decision-making that is related to reforms and governance during economic and political transformation. A wide range of scholarships aimed at pupils, teachers, and students, which should be the basis of the development of their knowledge about the democratic state and its institutions, will also be an important tool. Liberalisation of the visa regime for Belarus should be linked with these activities.