

VIRTUAL OR REAL CHANGE? THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN BELARUS

Many Europeans had been cautiously optimistic that September's parliamentary elections in Belarus would help break the deadlock in EU-Belarusian relations. However, not a single opposition candidate was elected, and international observers declared that the elections fell short of international standards. Is Minsk serious about rapprochement with the West? And how can the European Union best encourage progress with its eastern neighbour?

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So far the European Union has not been very successful in its attempts to apply a strict positive conditionality approach towards Belarus. Since the parliamentary elections in 2000 - the first national elections after the controversial constitutional referendum of 1996 - Belarusian elections have been treated by the EU as a litmus test for the improvement of relations. The procedure was the same each time: the EU demand for free and fair elections as a precondition for ending the international isolation of Belarus was totally ignored by the Belarusian authorities. Consequently, the European Union was forced to introduce new sanctions against Belarus, like the enlarged visa ban for leading officials after the parliamentary elections in 2004. Belarus was not included in the European Neighbourhood Policy and therefore, among other things, in 2007 the visa costs for Belarusian citizens increased to €60, while Ukrainian and Russian citizens continued to get the cheaper visa of €35. In response, the Belarusian leadership accused the EU of developing double standards and declared that it would make no compromises in order to get privileges from the EU. The argument that 'nobody is waiting for us in the EU' was used to explain to the population that any attempt to change the direction of Belarusian foreign policy would not bring positive results. In other words, the EU-Belarusian relationship has been at a deadlock. The



A Belarusian woman casts her ballot paper at a polling station during parliamentary elections in Minsk, Belarus, 28 September 2008

question has therefore been, would the 30 September parliamentary elections bring about any change in this situation?

In summer 2007 the first political prisoners were released, one of the 12 demands of the EU's 2006 document 'What the European Union could bring to Belarus' as a precondition for the intensification of relations. However, the authorities hesitated to release the former presidential candidate Alexander

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Kazulin until August 2008. The releasing of political prisoners was the first time that the Belarusian leadership publicly admitted to fulfilling one of the EU demands in order to enlarge the possibilities of cooperation with the EU. Furthermore, President Alexander Lukashenka declared in summer 2008 that the parliamentary elections would be conducted in accordance with Western rules and that he could envisage some opposition members being represented in the parliament. In other words, for the first time, the authorities seemed to be genuinely interested in receiving international recognition for the country's elections. The main obstacle was that in the political arena the Belarusian leadership clearly wanted to avoid any substantial changes. However, being interested in a real improvement of relations with the EU, it could not totally ignore the demands articulated in the 2006 document, hence the pre-election gesture of releasing political prisoners.

Reorientation of foreign policy?

During the 1990s Lukashenko decided to pursue a course of unilateral orientation on Russia, aimed at assuaging post-Soviet nostalgia in large segments of the population. There were also economic reasons in the form of cheap energy resources and other benefits. In exchange he offered the Russian side his willingness to support the Russian reluctance for NATO enlargement and, thus, to become some kind of anti-Western outpost. The special relationship with Russia, formalised by the signing of contracts on the creation of a Union state, also allowed Lukashenko to ignore the Western critics of his increasing anti-democratic domestic policy, cumulating in the adoption of a new constitution by a controversial referendum at the end of 1996 giving nearly unlimited competences to the president.

Sporadic declarations made by Lukashenka during recent years that he would like to improve his country's relationship with the Western world were clearly caused by the deterioration of the relationship with Russia during the presidency of Vladimir Putin. These statements were principally aimed at threatening the Russian leadership with losing its closest ally, in order to ensure the continuation of cheap energy supplies and other privileges from Russia. Consequently, these announcements remained on a purely rhetorical level and were not accompanied by concrete steps to meet the preconditions for improved relations with the West. The increase of energy prices and the deal on selling shares of the company Beltransgaz to Russia's Gazprom – after 14 long years of difficult ne-

gotiations – finally marked the end of Lukashenka's virtual integration policy with Russia at the beginning of 2007. Simultaneously, after the short energy supply cut in January 2007, the EU for the first time recognised the importance of Belarus as a transit country.

Following this, both the Belarusian leadership and the European Commission cautiously tried to establish more direct contacts. The biggest achievement was the agreement on opening a Delegation of the European Commission to Belarus, signed by EU Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and Belarus Deputy Foreign Minister Valery Voronecki in March 2008. The main interest of the Belarusian authorities was to attract foreign investments in order to compensate for the economic impact of the increased energy prices and to ensure the necessary modernisation. Indeed, a large number of normative documents have been adopted aiming at the improvement of conditions for small and medium enterprises. According to the report 'Doing Business 2009', published by the World Bank and the International Financial Cooperation in 2008, Belarus moved from position 115 to position 85. However, the efforts of the Belarusian government to reduce the dramatic trade deficit by import substitution regulations were at odds with this soft economic liberalisation.

Invisible elections

There was ground for some hope that the parliamentary elections in 2008 would be different to previous elections. Indeed, there had been some improvements at the beginning of the election campaign: The Central Election Commission (CEC) actively cooperated with the election observation mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR). The CEC sessions were open and attended by accredited observers and media. For the first time, political parties nominating candidates were allowed to appoint advisory members to the CEC. Opposition members had also slightly increased access to District Election Commissions, though their percentage remained quite low. Of 98 nominated opposition candidates, 78 were registered compared with 47 registered candidates in 2004. No candidates were de-registered during the campaign by the election commissions. Some candidates noted progress in their ability to conduct meetings in authorised campaign activities without interference. In response to some critical remarks in the interim report of the OSCE observa-

tion mission the CEC even decided to repeat once the candidates' spots in regional branches of state television and radio during prime time.

However, there had been no substantial changes to the quite restrictive election law. Elections to the 110-member Chamber of Representatives have to be conducted on the basis of a two-round majoritarian system in 110 single-mandate constituencies. The registration rules for candidates are quite strict and registration can be refused for minor formal mistakes in the lists of collected voters' signatures or in income declaration. The CEC registered a total number of 285 candidates out of 365 candidate nominations. Due to some withdrawals only 263 of them finally contested the elections. That means an average of 2.4 candidates per constituency. In 15 constituencies only one candidate ran. Consequently, for the first time all deputies were elected in the first round – in 2004 a second round had to be conducted in at least one constituency. Thanks to the agitation of the authorities, 26% of the electorate participated in early voting compared with 17% in 2004. However, the majority of voters had no detailed information about their candidates because of the minimal presence of campaign materials. The campaign fund of c.US\$800 that every candidate was officially allowed to use made it impossible to conduct an active campaign. Consequently, the elections were barely visible and the result largely controlled by the authorities.

Mainly because of the problems of restricted campaign possibilities and the insufficient transparency of the vote count, the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission stated in its preliminary conclusion that despite some minor improvements the elections ultimately fell short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections. Besides that, no opposition candidate had been elected. Therefore, the 2008 elections repeated – in contrast to the promises made by the authorities in summer 2008 – the familiar pattern of previous elections. While the elections results, consequently, can not be treated as surprise, the moderate reaction of the Belarusian authorities to the OSCE/ODIHR assessment was significantly different from former times when the non-recognition of the elections regularly led to a strengthening of the anti-Western propaganda of the regime. This time, official comments exclusively focused on the positive aspects of the OSCE/ODIHR report and expressed the hope for an intensification of the relationship between Belarus and the EU. For the first time Belarusian TV showed live debates on the results of the

elections, where, among others, the Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Anne-Marie Lizin and opposition representative Vladimir Nistyuk participated.

Traditional oppositional conflicts

The failure of the political opposition in the elections cannot entirely be explained by the absence of conditions for fair and free elections. The main registered opposition parties continue to be the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), the Party of Belarusian Communists (PCB), the Belarusian Social Democratic Party *Hramada* (BSDP-H), and the United Civic Party (UCP). These opposition parties united in 2005 under an umbrella organisation entitled the United Democratic Front (UDF) and supported Alexander Milinkevich during the presidential elections of March 2006. Milinkevich was also supported by the European Coalition, a grouping of unregistered opposition parties with European integration as their main objective. However, after the presidential coalition new conflicts over the leadership arose among the UDF, and Milinkevich was replaced by a collective executive committee of the party leaders. During the parliamentary elections both the UDF and the European Coalition fielded their own candidates. Consequently, the split of the opposition forces was obvious to the population.

According to independent polls only 7.6% of the population could imagine participating in actions against the falsification of election results, although about one third of voters are convinced that the results are manipulated. A meeting organised by the opposition on the election night in the centre of Minsk was attended by only 500-1,000 people. Because of the expectations of the majority of voters that the main task of a parliamentary deputy is to solve the personal problems of the people living in his or her constituency, it is a more rational choice for them to vote for a representative of the executive structures, and not for an opposition candidate. The fact that some opposition forces supported the idea of a boycott or announced the withdrawal of their candidates on the eve of the elections was also not helpful in convincing voters of the reliability of the opposition.

One reason why the idea of a boycott was quite popular within the opposition was the wish to prevent the potential recognition of the parliamentary elections by the European Union. The cautious contacts of the EU with the Belarusian authorities were interpreted as disloyalty towards the opposition. This

position paradoxically found its reflection in the regime's propaganda, which blamed the opposition for preventing the rapprochement of Belarus and the EU. At the same time, the official media stated that the opposition itself does not follow European behaviour, because its leaders refuse to quit their party positions despite several election defeats. This would appear to be a powerful argument and indicates that the opposition needs to think about new strategies and personalities. In order to improve its public rating the opposition forces should, among other things, enable a more comprehensive performance by putting younger people in leading positions and developing ways to work intensively with the population in the period between elections.

Geopolitics or values?

Many opposition representatives have argued that EU policy towards Belarus has been determined by geopolitical arguments and not by democratic principles. The EU has welcomed the position of the Belarusian president in so far not recognising the unilateral independence declared by South Ossetia and Abkhazia despite pressure from Russia. However, the EU decision, adopted on 13 October, to lift the visa ban for Alexander Lukashenka and other Belarusian officials for a six-month period cannot only be explained by geopolitics. Taking this decision, the EU has demonstrated its readiness for a positive response to the steps undertaken by the Belarusian leadership in realising the EU demands for the release of political prisoners. Therefore, the latest EU decisions are of great importance in showing the Belarusian authorities that the EU is really open for the realisation of a step-by-step approach. Furthermore, the EU decision also promised additional activities for the further strengthening of civil society structures in Belarus. Unfortunately, at the same time the EU did not decide to reduce the visa fees

for ordinary Belarusian citizens and thus made it easy for the Belarusian opposition to criticise the unilateral abolishment of the visa ban for Alexander Lukashenka.

At the moment the EU's strict positive conditionality approach towards Belarus is the only promising strategy. It is now up to the Belarusian leadership to undertake further steps for the gradual normalisation of relations. The next six months will show whether the Belarusian leadership is ready for real reforms in order to create the precondition for the improvement of relations. There is a high risk that it will conduct only cosmetic changes and thus replace the virtual integration with Russia with a virtual approach to the EU. Additionally, the negotiations with Russia on energy prices for 2009 will create new pressure on Belarus to join the Russian monetary system. Therefore, a proactive EU policy is demanded in order to support the weak reform tendencies in Belarus.

In its policy towards Belarus the EU needs to keep the balance in addressing different target groups: the official structures, the opposition forces, the civil society and the passive population. The dialogue with the official structures should focus on concrete topics such as energy, transport, privatisation, social welfare and education, and involve not only the executive authorities, but also the newly elected parliament. The ENP would appear to be an optimal framework for the gradual improvement of the relations because, in contrast to Ukraine, the Belarusian leadership is not interested in getting an EU membership option. In addition, neighbouring Lithuania and Poland can play a very important role in promoting substantial change in Belarus. The reality is that substantial political change in Belarus is impossible without an evolution of its political culture. The best way to promote such change seems to be the intensification of multilevel contacts.

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