

The Presidential Elections in Belarus in the context of the Ukrainian Crisis

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The results in the Belarusian presidential elections on 11 October 2015 are a foregone conclusion. But the elections are taking place against the background of a geopolitical drama in which the last vestiges of Belarus' independence are at stake. Aleksandr Lukashenko, the country's leader since 1994, will be re-elected – probably with a margin of about 80 per cent. As usual, the president has not officially campaigned for the election; rather he has relied on the use of administrative resources and control of the vote-counting process.

Meanwhile the political opposition is again weak and fragmented. Of the three contenders who will challenge the incumbent (compared to eight in the 2010 election), two are president-friendly. These are Nikolai Ulyakhovich, a Cossack hetman and chairman of the Belarusian Patriotic Party, and Sergei Gaidukevich, chairman of the Liberal-Democratic Party. The only candidate who comes from the opposition's ranks is Tatiana Korotkevich, who represents the campaign "Tell the Truth!" led by Vladimir Neklyayev, who ran in the 2010 presidential elections.

However, some even doubt the independence and intentions of Korotkevich. She quickly managed to collect the 100,000 signatures required for registration at the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), in contrast to better-known representatives of the opposition. Both Lukashenko and Lidia Yermoshina, the chairwoman of the CEC, have made conciliatory and encouraging statements about her and she has not been attacked in the Belarusian media. Therefore, some opposition leaders have openly questioned the authenticity of Korotkevich's signatures and called on her to withdraw from the race. They suspect that she has reached a deal with the authorities to run for the presidency and is being allowed to participate only in order to create an atmosphere of legitimacy for the election process.

The Maidan revolutionary events in neighbouring Ukraine have further restricted the opposition's room for manoeuvre. Polls from the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), based in Vilnius, show that the predominant majority of Belarusians tend to take the Russian view on the events in Ukraine. This is not strange given that Belarusian society is strongly influenced by Russian propaganda. Russia dominates the media in the country. The IISEPS polls further indicate that the share of the population who intend to protest at the Belarusian elections, even when they are obviously rigged, is less than 10 per cent – actually lower today than in many years. The majority of Belarusians take a negative attitude to the Maidan events in Ukraine and think that they have resulted in a "fascist" coup. They do not want the same to happen in Belarus. In addition, even some opponents of the current regime fear a "Maidan scenario" in Belarus, since this could give Russia a pretext to intervene in the same sort of way as it did in Ukraine.

In other words, winning the presidential elections is the least of Lukashenko's problems. What is worrying is the state of the Belarusian economy and the geopolitical setting of the elections. For the first time, presidential elections in Belarus are being held in a time of economic recession. The Western sanctions against Russia and the low world price of oil have led to a significant decline in Belarusian exports to the Russian market – this in spite of the fact that (as Russia has complained) papaya and seafood are being imported into Russia with Belarus as place of origin to circumvent the Russian unilateral import ban on a wide range of foodstuffs from the West. Usually Lukashenko has been able to raise wages before elections to keep voters in a good mood, but the scope for such populist measures is limited given that the Belarusian rouble has depreciated fivefold, unemployment has risen and wages are frozen.

The geopolitical setting of the elections is even more worrisome for the regime. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine have limited Lukashenko's ability to resist Russian influence and further increased Belarus' economic, security and energy dependence on Russia. In January 2015, the Russian president issued a decree allowing foreign nationals to serve in the Russian army. Immediately, Minsk responded by changing the wording of its military doctrine. It now appears to warn against Russian military intervention and states that the "sending of armed groups, irregular forces, or mercenary groups who use arms against Belarus will trigger a declaration of war". This is hard not to interpret as a direct reference to the "little green men" who appeared in Crimea prior to Russia's annexation.

The latest indicator of Russia's increasing dominance is the Kremlin's proposal for the establishment of a Russian military air base at the former Soviet airbase in Bobruysk. For many years, Russia has had radar installations and a navy communications facility in Belarus, but the airbase would be the first full-fledged military base in the country. Moscow started to press the issue in 2013, but so far Lukashenko has managed to resist. After the Ukraine crisis, though, Russia started to push its plans for a base with renewed zeal. If Lukashenko submits to Moscow's demands, it would cost Minsk its latitude for example concerning Ukraine. For Ukraine, it would mean the potential loss of the security of its northern border.

Some experts have raised a scenario whereby Russia would pursue a destabilization campaign in Belarus if Lukashenko continues to refuse to sign the base agreement. Moscow may try to delegitimize the presidential elections there and prepare for a similar kind of separatist movement as in eastern Ukraine to serve as a pretext for intervention in order to defend the constitutional order in Belarus. The fear of a "Maidan scenario", and Russia's response to that, is often brought up in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), in which both Russia and Belarus are members, for instance during the organization's top meeting in Tajikistan in September 2015.

As for this destabilization scenario, Lukashenko is bound to have noted that Russia's neo-imperialism in Ukraine has had the most impact in the regions where pro-Russian attitudes and Soviet-era nostalgia are most predominant – Crimea and Donbas. The mainstream attitudes in Belarus do not differ substantially from the attitudes in those parts of Ukraine.

Since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, Lukashenko has tried to balance the growing Russian influence with improved relations with the West. He has been holding a neutral position regarding the Ukrainian crisis and has not explicitly recognized the Russian annexation of Crimea. He has frequently used the release of political prisoners as a tool to manipulate and please the West. For instance in August 2015 he released six political prisoners, among them Nikolai Statkevich, who was imprisoned in 2011 for organizing the protests against Lukashenko's re-election in 2010. Although this policy has had some effect on the EU, which has started to ease the sanctions imposed on the Belarusian regime, it will not have a long-lasting effect on their relations. The West is both unwilling and unable to replace the massive economic support to Minsk coming from Moscow. Furthermore, Lukashenko will not take the road of political liberalization, which is a precondition for stronger Western support for Belarus, as this would endanger his power position.

Therefore, the further submission of Belarus to Russia's influence is the likely geopolitical result of the 11 October presidential elections. The question now is whether the Russian tightening of the noose around Belarus' neck will continue to be gradual and non-violent or turn chaotic. While the world is focused on Russia's military operation in Syria, this drama will unfold more or less unnoticed.

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