

Parliamentary election in Belarus. A democratic choice?

The recent release of political prisoners gave rise to the hope that there may also be an improvement in the electoral environment in Belarus. However the non-registration of candidates, following on from earlier harassment of prospective candidates means that the situation remains unchanged in practice from earlier elections. While there is a slight hope that a few opposition people may enter Parliament, there is virtually no remaining doubt that candidates could be freely elected.

In spite of the promising sign from the authorities in the release of the political prisoners, it appears that no similar progress can be expected for the Parliamentary elections. While the majority (76) of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) candidates were registered, 20 candidates who successfully submitted signatures or party nominations were not registered. Although this is a small improvement on 2004 when only around half the opposition candidates were registered, it is a clear sign that the Belarusian authorities are only making minor changes regarding the openness of the election process.

The most significant trend has been the non-registration of regional and young candidates who have run strong local campaigns. Examples of this include Sergey Salash and Dmitry Kukhley in two regional towns of Borisov and Mosty where the opposition has been particularly active in recent times. Both were seen as potentially strong candidates, with Salash only being denied a seat in local elections after an enforced re-count in 2003. Amongst other non-registered candidates were Yury Karetnikov and Ales Lahviniets (who was running as an independent). These are two of the most active young opposition figures in Minsk who have developed a name for their

work on a continuous basis with their local electorate. It appears that as a result they were seen as a threat by the authorities and thus were denied registration – also perhaps as their activity and engagement with the local population came as a contrast to the ageing and increasingly inactive leadership of the political parties in Minsk.

The reasons given for the non-registration of the candidates were invalid signatures, or problems with invalid income declarations. The registration process, especially regarding income declarations is unduly complicated and the Belarusian authorities have jumped on every mistake not to register the candidates. Overall the authorities do not seem to have followed a consistent approach and have chosen different tactics in different electoral districts, with some opposition party leaders (e.g. Lebedko and Kalyakin) and prominent regional activists still being registered. In 12 of 110 districts, the non-registration of the opposition candidate means that the candidate of the authorities will now be elected unopposed.

The key people who were not registered are all from the right wing side of the opposition, which increases the chance of a divided opposition response. The Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) has decided to withdraw its candidates five days ahead of the main September 28 voting day in response to the registration of only 20 of its 25 candidates, arguing that the poll could not be recognised as free and fair. Those denied registration include BPF Deputy Chairmen Vintsuk Viachorka and Viktor Ivashkevich. The UDF as a whole will make a final decision on the participation of the opposition on September 21, one week before Election Day. Currently there is a split between the Communists and United Civic Party who wish to stay in the election to the end and BPF and the Christian Democrats who argue

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for a withdrawal. As a result it appears that a consolidated position of all the opposition parties is unlikely.

The opposition feel they are in a "lose-lose" situation. If they pull out of the election it would simply be a present to Lukashenka, as it would allow him to count the votes openly without any danger of his critics being elected. Furthermore, he would inevitably announce that the opposition had pulled out of the election as they are not popular and were afraid of showing this to their Western donors, a sentiment which may find sympathy with many people in Belarus where the opposition are unable to access media and are regularly portrayed in this way. Such a step might also, especially if followed by relatively open vote-counting, strengthen the hand of those in the West who consider the opposition irrelevant and pave the way for a significant improvement in relations with the Lukashenka authorities.

Alternatively, if the opposition stay in the race to the end, they see themselves participating in a farce run according to the scenario developed by Lukashenka, playing a role in legitimising the election even though they are highly unlikely to win (or be allowed to win) a seat. They see themselves being portrayed again as losers, and again being in the situation of explaining to their electorate how the election was stolen from them. Yet staying in the election race provides them with their only real hope to change the status quo to their advantage, especially against the background of pressure from the West to allow opposition members to be elected to parliament.

The indecisiveness on the boycott has overshadowed the whole opposition campaign thus far, especially as there has been no campaign on issues of direct relevance to the average voter in Belarus. Even discussion in the independent or pro-opposition media has been dominated by the boycott, instead of using this media to convey other messages, especially at a time when this media is having a bigger reach in Belarus. Indeed one party leader when asked in an on-line chat about the party's policy on education referred the person to the party's website, rather than actually outlining how

they would wish to change the situation in Belarus. This has illustrated how much the opposition has come to live in their own ghetto and is not focussing on the concerns of the average voter in Belarus, faced as they must with their own challenges to survive as opponents to the authorities.

Perhaps inevitably the opposition remains divided. Young activists such as Young Front have been campaigning for a boycott since the start of the election – although some critics have argued that it is easier for them to post stickers around town (which has been the most visible sign of the campaign so far) than actually go door to door and engage with voters on why they need to vote for change in Belarus.

On the other hand, Milinkevich has come out strongly against a boycott, arguing that there is no sense in lying on the sofa and the opposition needs to throw off the apathy and run in the election to show that they are alive. Indeed Milinkevich has been the one opposition leader who has taken the chance – even though he is not running in this election himself – to travel out around the regions, hold public meetings to talk about local issues in places such as bazaars or in front of cinemas. In this he has been working directly with some of the most active local candidates who have been engaged in civic campaigning on local issues, for example the signature collection against the construction of a nuclear power plant near Gorki, which was so effective that it forced the local administration to hold a public meeting. This also exemplifies a trend, where some regional structures are both more active and grounded than the Minsk central opposition parties.

This election campaign finally shows the impact of the UDF Congress of May 2007 when the opposition failed to agree on a leadership figure. While a united leader may have helped pull the campaign together and provide a focus and a message and a motivation to take it to the population, this has not been the case. Instead the election campaign thus far has been a missed opportunity with Lukashenka again coming out on top.