

February 2024

country report

Belarus Country Office



Elections as a “special operation”

With Lukashenka’s “single voting day” only a coup by the democratic forces is surprising

Jakob Wöllenstein

On February 25, 2024, the “single voting day” for the national parliament and local councils took place in Belarus. This was likely the least free election in the history of the nation. Politically sterile, with no opposition on the ballot or in the election commissions, Lukashenka is ushering in a process that the democratic opposition calls a “special operation.” Strictly guarded by a massive contingent of his repressive apparatus, the system is now to be restructured in the spring with a new super-committee in order to secure his authoritarian rule and personal power. From his point of view, the people are above all a threat following the peaceful pro-democratic mass protests of 2020. An action led by democratic forces produced a surprise on the eve of “Election Day.”

The fact that the “parliament” of Belarus consists solely of loyalists has been nothing new for a long time. The [“parliamentary elections” of 2019](#) had already ended a short experiment in which the regime had “permitted” two opposition MPs for the duration of one election period. However, four and a half years ago, 16 Belarusian parties were able to put forward candidates directly or indirectly. Some of these parties were actual democratic forces. Back then, they at least had the opportunity to legally carry out street campaigns, talk to people or promote their positions in state media.

But with the “traumatic” experience behind him of having the people who had overwhelmingly elected him as president almost 30 years ago turn away with a visible majority, long-term ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka fashioned a political **tabula rasa** prior to these “elections.” The registration of all democratic parties was withdrawn and the party system was fundamentally rebuilt based on the Russian model. Essentially, this happened through the elevation of the mass movement **Belaya Rus into the main system party**, which is flanked by three smaller “opposition parties” loyal to the government. Below the authoritarian surface,

however, a trend continues that was already seen in a milder form in the last “parliamentary elections”: the role of parties within the system was clearly strengthened. Nevertheless, in the last composition of the “parliament,” 81 percent of deputies were independent and non-party affiliated, while the candidates formally recruited through parties did not form any factions.

Who was (s)elected?

Officially, 265 candidates for 110 seats in the national parliament and 18,802 candidates for 12,514 seats in the local councils took part in the “elections” on February 25th. The ratio was therefore only 2.4 : 1 and 1.5 : 1, respectively. (For comparison, in the last federal election, around eight people ran for each seat.) All candidate lists for the “single voting day” went through a meticulous review process in advance and were ultimately approved by the presidential administration. According to Lukashenka, only “absolutely **reliable, sensible people**” who “understand the challenges facing our people” should stand for election. Even candidates loyal to the system are said to have been removed from the list if, for example, family members had commented positively on the 2020 protests. For

experts it was foreseeable who would ultimately enter parliament. A [forecast published earlier by the independent newspaper Nasha Niva](#) regarding the composition of the House of Representatives proved to be 97 percent accurate this time. Officially, the results are as follows:

- 51 seats – Belaya Rus
- 40 seats for non-party members
- 8 seats – Republican Party for Labor and Justice
- 7 seats – Communist Party
- 4 seats – Liberal Democratic Party

Although all parties and non-party members support the Lukashenka system, there are still some notable developments. As expected, the **role of system parties was significantly strengthened**. Belaya Rus immediately became by far the “strongest force” and yet remains below 50 percent, in contrast to the Russian State Duma, where the comparable state party United Russia has three quarters of the seats. The number of **non-party individuals, however, has more than halved**. The Communist Party lost four of eleven seats – even though they had sent 26 candidates into the race – and fell from first to third place among the system parties. The [Liberal Democrats, which some observers classify as right-wing extremists](#), have quadrupled in number, but are clearly falling short of their own expectations. They had nominated 37 candidates.

The list of [individuals](#) shows that Lukashenka used the “elections” to reward loyalists with positions who have served him faithfully in recent years. At the same time, other individuals have been shuffled in the system. The new MPs include many security guards, civil servants and propagandists, such as the previous head of the National Library Gigin and the uncle of the notorious television presenter Azaronak.

Who was (s)elected?

6.9 million people were officially registered on the voter lists. For the first time, it was not

possible for Belarusians abroad to vote at embassies there. The regime canceled this option “for security reasons” after many foreign missions presented the true and, therefore, embarrassing results for Lukashenka in the 2020 presidential elections. Cynically, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians, most of whom are abroad for political reasons, were offered the “opportunity” to vote at a special polling station in Minsk. This means that around five percent of all eligible voters were **effectively prevented** from voting. On the other hand, 96,000 Russian citizens who permanently reside in Belarus were able to vote in the local elections.

The official **voter turnout was 73.09 percent**, with a range from 77 percent in the Mogilev region to 61 percent in Minsk. Overall, this is more than double what independent experts believe is realistic based on previous polls on voting intentions. Lukashenka himself traditionally attaches great importance to a high voter turnout in order to demonstrate the breadth of his support. However, Belarusian analysts point out that “elections”, and therefore the voice of the people, have turned from an act of ritual confirmation of his power into a threat to his rule in a way that has been traumatic for him. While street protests in previous elections were limited to a few thousand people and were quickly “tamed” with special police batons, Belarusians voted him out in 2020 with a [documented majority](#).

The “single voting day” as the first ballot after the 2020 presidential election also had a special symbolic meaning. It was supposed to be “calm and orderly” and reminiscent of the “elections” of the Soviet era, which were celebrated as a “celebration of the system” in a nostalgic manner. However, the regime ensured the “quiet process” primarily through massive repression, which was further expanded in the run-up to the “single voting day.”¹ In addition to the police, militia and street patrols, Lukashenka even had his army and air force put on alert.

¹ See in detail the most recent [country report on the human rights situation in Belarus](#) (February 2024)

Since it was clear that there would be no major mobilization of the population, the so-called “**early voting**” played an even greater role than in previous years. At **41.71 percent**, more people are said to have used this option in this “election” for the first time than (were supposed to have) turned up at the polls on election Sunday. On the one hand, large parts of the civil service and security apparatus as well as employees of state-owned companies, students and members of state organizations are essentially “asked” collectively to vote early (with those involved speaking of coercion). On the other hand, experts point out that early voting is much easier to falsify and at the same time explains why voter turnout was so high in the end, even though there were no longer queues at the polling stations anywhere.

Who was observing?

However, there is hardly any verifiable information about this either. According to Lukashenka's Central Election Committee, **45,505 local election observers had been deployed**, of whom over 36,000 were nominated by the four pro-government parties and GONGOs. Another 4,000 were nominated through the workforce and an additional 5,000 through collecting signatures. As expected, everyone praised the “well-organized process and legal conduct of the elections.” For the first time, representatives of the opposition and the OSCE were not allowed to observe at all. There was, however, a 235-member observer mission from the COMMUNITY OF INDEPENDENT STATES, whose chairman Sergei Lebedev has been leading the CIS election observation in Belarus for many years. He too spoke of the “high level in a calm atmosphere.” As expected, he uncovered no violations. Another member of his mission even praised the elections as a model for Russia, as Lukashenka did not permit “foreign influences to come here.”

Another small delegation of international observers from authoritarian states came from the SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION. [23 individual “independent observers”](#) were also present, including a Berlin AfD MP and an Italian communist. Both praised the “democratic

standards” and the “exemplary nature of the Belarusian elections”.

Democratic resistance

In view of the regime's massive repression, the **democratic forces in forced exile** did not call on their supporters to take part in street protests so as not to send them into the open knife of the security forces. Instead, they were to boycott the “elections without a vote,” or, if they belonged to one of the groups of people who were forced to take part in the ballot, use the option (still) provided on the ballot paper to vote “against all candidates.” Accordingly, security forces reported few “incidents” on election day. In the Gomel region, a voter was arrested for attempting to photograph his ballot paper. In August 2020, the alternative vote counting based on photographed ballot papers was a core element of democracy activists' strategy. This time photography was strictly forbidden. An attempt to steal ballot papers was recorded at another polling station. Elsewhere, a man was arrested for allegedly trying to “place a hidden camera at the polling station.”

Above all, this time the democratic forces relied on an information campaign. As opposed to their compatriots, it consisted of a [virtual candidate](#) who, using artificial intelligence as a chatbot, answered questions about democracy and elections.

They relied on a combination of three central messages to international partners and asked them to include these in official statements or declarations:

- (1) the “elections” are thoroughly illegitimate, as is the regime that organizes them
- (2) Belarus is part of the European family and people want democracy
- (3) the nearly 1,500 political prisoners must not be forgotten and must be released.

The democratic forces also accomplished a **special “coup”** on the eve of “Election Sunday.” At exactly 3:00 p.m., hundreds of public television

screens across Belarus switched to a video address by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. With the help of the organization BelPol, it was possible to hack the system that regulates the content of up to 2,000 such screens – in department stores, bus stops, and subway stations. In the message, Tsikhanouskaya recalled the courageous nonviolent struggle against the dictatorship since the summer of 2020, as well as the resistance to the regime's complicity in Russia's attack on Ukraine. These elections are also a farce and she called on her compatriots to stand together against injustice. The following day, the regime arrested employees of the operating company Legion-104, who presumably had nothing to do with the hack.

International reaction

Depending on the (political) direction, the international reactions to election day were – as expected – vastly different. While the above-mentioned assessment of the CIS observation mission reflects the interpretation of the countries sending it and activists from the Serbian conservative movement Nashi applauded the “clean” vote, representatives of Western states condemned the farcical vote. A [statement from the U.S. Department of State](#) on Sunday spoke of “sham elections” that were held in a climate of fear without any democratic standards and praised the courage and perseverance of the democratic forces.

A number of Western officials and decision-makers, such as the members of the Belarus Friendship Group in the German Bundestag, published similar solidarity addresses. The chairman of the group “For a Democratic Belarus” of the Ukrainian Verhovna Rada, Oleksiy Honcharenko, also called the “elections” a “mockery of democracy and another instrument for the brazen expansion of power by a mustachioed dictator.”

In contrast to the past, this time some Western actors had already denied the “elections” any legitimacy in advance. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament published corresponding declarations.

Importance for the regime

For Lukashenka, the “unified election day” opens a longer political process that will last until the presidential elections the following year and serves to secure the authoritarian state system and his personal rule. The “parliamentary election” was to a certain extent a **“dress rehearsal” for next year's elections**, which was intended to prove that the wheels of the system and the repressive apparatus were meshing properly. From the regime's point of view, this worked by and large. Accordingly, representatives of the democratic forces did not speak of “elections”, but of a **“special political operation”**.

While Lukashenka had not commented on whether he would run for president again, he announced his renewed “candidacy” when he cast his vote on February 25. Some observers had still doubted this, given that in just a few weeks' time, the **political system of Belarus will be restructured in a major way**. This initiative dates back to the crisis of fall 2020 and will significantly change the political institutional setup within the Lukashenka system.

Back then, with his back to the wall, the beleaguered Belarusian ruler is said to have promised his Russian counterpart two things. First, in contrast to his political and financial support for suppressing the protests, he would carry out **constitutional reform** and restructure the highly personalized system in order to extend power to be distributed across several pillars, including institutions and parties loyal to the system. It is easier for the Kremlin to influence things in the country when there is not just one central – and in the case of Lukashenka, potentially “unruly” – center of power, but when it can play several off against each other. Second, he himself will **no longer run** in future presidential elections, clearing the way for a new (read from Putin's perspective, a more pro-Russian, more easily manageable) head of state.

With the constitutional change in February 2022, Lukashenka created a structural prerequisite for fulfilling his first promise. With the “ALL

BELARUSIAN PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY" a new super body was introduced consisting of around 1,200 loyalists and which has extensive powers, including recognizing a presidential election or removing the president. Observers assume that Lukashenka will be appointed chairman of this body after it is constituted in April.

The fact that he apparently no longer feels bound to his second promise and yet wants to run for president again shows, on the one hand, how little he trusts not only his people, but also other candidates from his inner circle. On the other hand, the relationship with Putin appears to have stabilized sufficiently. The war has brought the two closer together and from the Kremlin's perspective, Lukashenka "delivers": due to its deep complicity in the attack on Ukraine, the Republic of Belarus is more isolated than ever from all other neighbors and the West as a

whole, and the internal repression is robbing the country of its resilience, while cultural, educational and economic Russification is in full swing.

The people of Belarus once again were offered no choice and the majority is not represented politically by Mr. Lukashenka, but is suppressed with violence. It is all the more important for **partners in the West** to hear the other, democratic and "[European](#)" Belarus – represented, among other things, by the democratic forces – and, wherever possible, to support it, to give it a voice and to clearly communicate it to the people in the country in words and deeds to signal that they are neither forgotten nor left alone with the dictators.

Konrad Adenauer Foundation

Jakob Wöllenstein
Head of the Belarus Foreign Office
European and International Cooperation
www.kas.de/belarus

Info.Belarus@kas.de



This text is licensed under the terms and conditions from "Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International,"
CC BY-SA 4.0 (available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)