

Opposition Withdraws From Belarussian Vote

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MINSK — Belarus's two main opposition parties said they would boycott a parliamentary election next Sunday, denouncing it as a fake exercise and calling on people to "go fishing or visit your parents" instead.

The poll for the 110-seat chamber takes place two years after police cracked down on street protests after a presidential election that installed hard-line President Alexander Lukashenko for a fourth term in power.

Scores of opposition activists were arrested in the December 2010 unrest. Many people, including several candidates who stood against Lukashenko, were given prison terms.

"Honest people can not take part in pseudo-elections to a fake parliament," Anatoly Lebedko, leader of the United Civic Party, said at a weekend rally where the party announced that it was withdrawing its 38 candidates from the election.

"I know I shall not be elected. And that is in no way because people will not vote for me," said

Grigoriy Kostusev, deputy head of the Belarussian People's Front, which also opted to pull its 31 candidates out of the poll.

The two parties appealed to voters to boycott the ballot, which they said could not be considered democratic because opposition activists remained in jail. Human rights agencies say there are about 15 political prisoners in the former Soviet republic.

"Go fishing. Visit your parents. Have some coffee with your friends. Don't take part in a farce," Lebedko said.

Authorities reacted sharply to the boycott call. "Those who do not want to take part in the elections and want to disrupt them have shown [by their action] that we need to perfect the law here. We need to make it much stricter. It seems that democracy is not to everybody's liking," Lidia Yermoshina, head of the central election commission, told Belarus-1 television.

Lukashenko, a former Soviet state farm chief described as Europe's last dictator by the last U.S. administration, has been in power for 18 years. Western monitoring agencies have not deemed an election in Belarus free and fair since 1995.

There is no organized opposition in the parliament, which essentially rubber-stamps Lukashenko's policy directives, and neither the United Civic Party nor the Belarussian People's Front are represented. The election is expected to have little impact on the political scene.

Despite U.S. and EU sanctions, which prevent Lukashenko and his inner core of officials from traveling to anywhere in the West, the small country of 9.5 million people has managed to weather a currency crisis that has drained it of dollars and caused two big devaluations of the national currency.

This was largely thanks to Russia, which provided about \$4.5 billion in loans and investments in exchange for access to industrial assets such as pipelines pumping Russian gas to Europe.

Senior opposition figures who have dropped out of sight following the government crackdown include Andrei Sannikov, a former deputy foreign minister, and Vladimir Neklyayev who heads the Tell the Truth movement. Both of them ran against Lukashenko in 2010 and subsequently spent time in jail.

Despite television debates this time among candidates — a novelty in Belarus — election campaigning has been unusually listless, something conceded by the authorities.

"If the candidates were fake, then so was the political campaigning," said election commission secretary Nikolai Lazovik. "There has been no effective competition, weakening the intensity of the political struggle."

Yelena, a 34-year-old voter asked for her views on the forthcoming election, said, "Well, in principle I know we have elections ... but nobody has come to me to ask for my support."

Sociologist Oleg Manayev said, "There will be many who say the elections were not democratic and open. But to expect that the outcome of these elections will be a factor in reviving political activity and bringing people out en masse on the square — that is not

realistic."

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