

# Is Change on the Way for Lukashenko's Belarus?

By [Balazs Jarosik](#)

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Belarussians voted in a presidential election on Sunday, and, as expected, re-elected Alexander Lukashenko. Provocations by the regime that some feared before the elections did not materialize, but neither did hopes that it would deliver a more democratic election.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that these elections were simply a repeat of the same old story. Belarus's domestic situation and external environment have changed since the last elections in 2010. The 2015 electoral process shows us how the Belarussian regime is attempting to adapt to these changes, while trying to keep the Soviet-style state machinery going.

Despite the deteriorating economic situation, public support for Lukashenko gradually increased in the months leading up to the elections. That uptick was a reaction to the festering crisis in Ukraine and public support for Lukashenko's new foreign policy course. In a free and fair election, Lukashenko probably could have received around 60 percent of the vote, based on his pre-electoral rating and historical record of independent measuring of elections

results. But the fact that the Central Elections Commission declared his victory with a record 83.49 percent makes this election yet another farce.

The key unanswered question after this election is whether Lukashenko's regime will embark on the necessary reforms, which could accelerate the country's painfully slow pace of change.

Average Belarussians are bearing the brunt of the economic slowdown. They fear another currency devaluation, which looks increasingly likely as a consequence of the weakening of the Russian ruble. The government's current plan for fiscal management apparently is to let the currency depreciate gradually, suggesting that the regime has learned some lessons from its "big bang" devaluation in 2011. Both the public and the government are coping with rising unemployment, which is something that Belarus has not faced under Lukashenko's rule.

The regime also learned some lessons from the 2010 elections. It has developed a more conciliatory tone toward dissent and did not crack down on protesters. The government has relied instead on softer, preventive authoritarian tactics. Instead of being detained, political activists received warnings from law enforcement.

The government also allowed greater political space before the elections, and a certain level of pluralism of viewpoints was visible in political discussions even on state-controlled television. But this does not indicate a real change of the system: The regime clearly has the capacity and the will to return to repression at a time and place of its choosing.

In August Alexander Lukashenko granted amnesty to the country's six remaining political prisoners. However, this gesture had little impact on the opposition. The best the regime's opponents could muster was two gatherings of a few hundred demonstrators: to protest the planned Russian air base and to call for free and fair elections.

The release of political prisoners had an obvious external motive. For Lukashenko, the move was necessary to fulfill precondition for resuming relations with the West. Accordingly, the EU responded by announcing that its sanctions could be suspended. But Lukashenko's move was primarily aimed at Washington, and there he got little, if any attention.

Minsk probably underestimates just how low Belarus is on the priority list of Western policy-makers and has repeatedly misunderstood the muddled messages it receives from Europe. The EU should be clearer in its message that recognition of the Lukashenko regime could only occur as a result of holding free and fair elections.

Even if Minsk were to release the real election results, the West would still not be ready to accept the regime. Instead of recognition, the most that Lukashenko can hope for is slow-motion normalization.

The announcement that EU sanctions could be suspended for four months if there is no violence during the actual vote highlights changes in how Brussels thinks after the Ukraine crisis. It is focused more on avoiding conflict.

The election campaign did little to help Belarus's traditional opposition. However, it did cast the spotlight on the younger generation. The government did register Tatyana Korotkevich,

a 38-year old activist, as a candidate. She broke with the long-standing practice of the opposition of calling for regime change and instead promoted "peaceful change."

The "new opposition" chose to make a play for support beyond its traditional electoral base, by relying on moderate rhetoric and populist slogans. This points to a possible serious rift within the opposition as the traditional opposition could try to discredit the new generation. Some fear that in the run-up to next year's parliamentary elections, the new generation will turn out to be little more than a rather tame regime-sanctioned opposition movement.

The main question is what will happen after the elections. Instead of convening the usual All Belarussian Congress to brag about his achievements, Lukashenko issued a prayer for Belarus. This newfound solemnity underlines how times are changing, and with them Lukashenko's social contract is shifting from "Prosperity and Stability" to "Plain Old Sovereignty." The regime's new message is "We won't live too well, but at least we can ensure peace."

This should make reforms unavoidable, but there is little understanding about reforms among the elite. Even though Belarussians are well aware of the need for change, they don't like the idea of weakening the state. The government has pursued a conservative fiscal policy and taken some steps toward structural reforms. However, more reforms are needed to modernize the state apparatus and its services. There are some early but encouraging signs that this may be happening, as the government has been gradually reducing its role in the economy.

Due to unprecedented regional changes and instability, the government is forming a new foreign policy doctrine in an attempt to minimize the threat posed by the economic crisis and to counter new political risks in the region. Belarussians' current geopolitical orientation is neither toward Russia, nor toward the EU. The public's attitude can be summed up as "anything goes as long as there no war."

The elite continues to assume that Belarus' only geopolitical choice will be Russia, but at the same time it clearly has been shaken by Moscow's aggression in Ukraine. The regime's short-term plan is to keep its distance from its aggressive ally in the Kremlin while preventing Moscow from thinking that Minsk is trying to move toward the West.

The election week brought into the mainstream two dissenting female voices: the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature Svetlana Alexievich and Tatyana Korotkevich, the opposition candidate who against all odds ran a credible campaign. Their voices are a reminder that the biggest responsibility for reconciliation in society and reforming the state to serve its citizens lies with the "monarch" of Belarus. Europe's longest serving and unchangeable head of state will also benefit, if he allows more democracy.

*Balazs Jarabik is a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment. Dzianis Melyantsou is a senior analyst with the Belarussian Institute of Strategic Studies (BISS) in Minsk. This is an abridged version of a comment that originally appeared on [Carnegie Moscow's Eurasia Outlook blog](#).*

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