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Lukashenko's fake exercise in democracy

After the 'All-Belarusian People's Assembly' serious reform remains unlikely. But the democracy movement won't disappear

Nearly 35,000 people have been arrested since the presidential elections in Belarus last August. There are currently 246 political prisoners in the country. In the coming weeks and months, this number is likely to increase significantly with many cases still awaiting trial. And there's little hope that the 'All-Belarusian People's Assembly', held in Minsk a few days ago, could change this dramatic situation.

The assembly has been held in Belarus approximately every five years since 1996. In the beginning, Alexander Lukashenko launched it to simulate a dialogue with 'ordinary people'. In reality, the event has always just waved through decisions that had already been made – in particular the government's five-year plans.

Many observers were surprised that the sixth All-Belarusian People's Assembly had not been convened *before* the presidential elections. However, Lukashenko most likely wanted to present himself as a would-be triumphant leader over a weakened democracy movement – although the future of his regime is by no means secure.

Is reform likely?

2,400 handpicked delegates, taken largely from local authorities or state-owned companies, met in Minsk, along with 300 invited guests. Despite the pandemic, the Palace of the Republic was packed with attendees. There were only a few minutes of speaking time for a small number of delegates and a great deal of speaking time for the ruler, who the West deems illegitimate. The 'constructive' opposition, as it were, was represented by a single person: the rather insignificant presidential candidate Hanna Kanapatskaya. When she spoke, the broadcast of the proceedings was interrupted.
Almost no one ever believed that this assembly could adopt the already

drafted new constitution and perhaps even agree on a timetable for new elections, as Lukashenko suggested a few months ago. Optimistic voices from the opposition had at least hoped for a first step towards an amnesty for political prisoners. But Lukashenko dismissed this out of hand because, after all, there are no political prisoners in Belarus. And so, once again the focus was on a new five-year plan.

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According to a resolution of this All-Belarusian People's Assembly, a commission will now deal with a possible constitutional reform; it is to present detailed proposals, at earliest, by the end of the year. All final decisions will need to be in line with the Lukashenko's own preferences. But perhaps this might never happen. In recent months, he has broken many promises. In the end, the proposals are to be voted on in a referendum that could possibly coincide with local elections in early 2022. However, a further delay in the process wouldn't be surprising.

Ironically, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly could assume constitutional status after the reform. The president's power could be limited in certain ways, but he would still function as the state's strong man. Carefully, the system is also supposed to allow a larger role for parties. If at some point a new constitution were to pave the way for new elections, Lukashenko again promised to step down – provided there is a peaceful transition and security guarantees. Should the situation further calm down, however, we cannot rule out the possibility that he may change his mind again, in typical Lukashenko fashion. And even if he were to step down, he could have a Plan B prepared, with the intention of pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Lukashenko has survived the 'blitzkrieg'

The results of the assembly are many different options, but little in the way of concrete decisions. At the same time, Lukashenko's rhetoric was once again alarming. In his speech, the ruler quoted Lenin. He recalled positive conversations with Muammar al-Gaddafi and assured his audience that he would not end up like Gaddafi or Saddam Hussein. For him, the meeting was more like a therapy session in which he mostly talked about himself. He once again mused that he had nothing but Belarus.

With regard to the country's foreign policy, Foreign Minister Makej emphasised that Belarus still needs more than just a Russian 'vector'. On

the other hand, there was a proposal to remove neutrality in foreign policy from the constitution. At length, the mantra was repeated that there had been an invasion of Western powers, a kind of 'blitzkrieg', in the past few months. Again and again, speakers declared their willingness to take further steps towards integration in the context of the Union State of Russia and Belarus, but only if this does not conflict with national interests. There were no actual steps towards Russia.

Frigid winter cold, severe repression, and a lack of momentum have halted the mass protests for the moment.

Nevertheless, it was probably no coincidence that at the popular assembly, the newspaper *Kommersant* reported on a possible new Russian loan of up to USD 3.5bn. If this really does happen, it would constitute a clear signal from Moscow – despite the fact that Russia actually pushed for speedy constitutional reform and Lukashenko had promised Putin such a reform last September. But in that case, Lukashenko would have to take further steps towards Russia, which could hurt him domestically. But he doesn't really have any alternatives. If Russia were to abandon him, his days would be numbered. He plans to meet Putin in Sochi at the end of February.

The democracy movement won't disappear

Lukashenko believes that he has survived the 'blitzkrieg'. Nonetheless, he sees 2021 as a 'decisive' year for Belarus. The security forces' too expect things to heat up in the spring and are making preparations. On the sidelines of the meeting, word leaked out that the jailed Coordination Council members Maria Kalesnikava and Maxim Znak now face up to 12 years' imprisonment as a result of new allegations.

On 17 February, a trial against Viktar Babaryka is pending before the Supreme Court. As a result, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly could quickly disappear from memory because it could involve a long prison sentence for the man who, according to a recently published Chatham House poll, voters favour over Lukashenko. But there are other equally explosive trials on the way: for example, the one against Sergei Tikhanovsky, and the proceedings relating to the death of Roman Bondarenko.

Frigid winter cold, severe repression, and a lack of momentum have

halted the mass protests for the moment. Currently, there are only a few isolated actions. That could change again by 25 March. The 'Day of Freedom' is traditionally used for mass protests, even in unexceptional years. The democracy movement plans to reignite new momentum. Its goal continues to be the use of internal and international pressure to achieve a genuinely inclusive dialogue about substantial constitutional reform and free and fair new elections – without Lukashenko. Whether this can succeed remains to be seen.

One thing is clear though: the movement will not simply disappear. It has been too active and loud for too long. Lukashenko cannot rest easy if he wants to remain in power. He can rely only on the force of his largely loyal security apparatus. As a precaution, he has already put harsher penalties in place for protest actions.



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