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The iron hand of the state

Even if the result is already known: the scale of this weekend's elections in Belarus poses a serious challenge to the Lukashenko regime

Picture a country with simultaneous parliamentary and local elections. Just a few years ago, its population stood at 9.5 million inhabitants. Today, it is much smaller, as hundreds of thousands of people have fled the violence of the security forces.

As in most countries of the world, election commissions play a very important role here. In this 'super-election' year, a total of 57 233 members will be sent to the commissions, none of whom can even be suspected of being in any way close to the opposition. They are expected to be interested in a single, pre-determined election result and to remain anonymous wherever possible. Independent monitoring of their work? Unrealistic.

This is exactly what Belarus of 2024 will look like. Parliamentary and local elections in the country will be held on 25 February. These are the first such 'super-elections' in its history. At first glance, two elections, which usually mean almost nothing, are united. However, there are two aspects still to be taken into account.

The perfect 'anti-2020'

One of them concerns the extent to which it will be possible to get closer to the Belarusian ideal of 'calm elections' this time, because these elections are a rehearsal for the presidential election in 2025. The authorities need to prove that voting can be carried out in a different way compared to the summer of 2020 — the summer that changed Belarus. The calmer the elections are, the more chances the regime will have to return to 'normal life'.

It is understandable that, on the eve of a presidential election, every official is trying to avoid mistakes. And since stress can lead to mistakes, everything was done in advance to prevent it. Not a single opposition

member could even begin to collect signatures. Not only candidates but also their families are now being checked by the KGB. Although people have already been intimidated to such an extent in the past years that everyone realises the consequences of a signature for anyone critical of the authorities.

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For the chairman of the election commission, this is the first election. He has to present what he has been preparing for a long time: the perfect staging — the perfect 'anti-2020'. This time, after the electoral reform, only 12 514 mandates can be won in local elections. In parliamentary elections (only one house of parliament is actually elected, namely the House of Representatives), 265 people are eligible to run for 110 seats. In other words, a total of 12 624 puppets are being sought.

Of the 16 registered political parties in 2020 only four remain, and all are classified as 'pro-government'. The times when opposition parties could nominate anti-regime candidates are over. Even the conditionally independent cannot be found on the lists.

In 2019, more than half of the candidates were still represented by political parties, but this share has now fallen to 40 per cent. Thus, parties continue to be a formality. Indeed, this has always been the case in Belarus, and even Lukashenko's 'party purge' did not change anything. Non-party candidates are representatives of state-affiliated trade unions, state officials, people from the security services and propagandists. For instance, the current head of the presidential administration is also on the ballot and is likely to become the new head of the House of Representatives.

The democracy movement is plagued by internal fighting.

On the eve of the elections, the security forces again stepped up their repression. As they await polling day, they are signalling to the authorities: we will act decisively. The Minister of the Interior called for 'constant control of the situation'. Information on situations that occurred near the ballot boxes in 2020 was collected in advance, he said, and an algorithm of actions was drawn up in case of need. With all rigour, with surveillance cameras to be monitored in real time and a panic button at each polling station.

The OSCE observer mission was not even invited to the elections. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, it was still there. Now the political nature of the OSCE was named as the reason for the non-invitation. Also, Head of the Central Election Commission of Belarus Igor Karpenko questioned whether there was a need to invite anyone at all, 'if we hold elections primarily for ourselves'. That is, elections are a kind of civic routine.

The democracy movement and the question of 'legitimacy'

In the meantime, the democracy movement is plagued by internal fighting. The online election of its now third Coordination Council could have at least created a perception of democracy as an alternative to regime elections. Instead, frustration and arguments about how it should happen prevail. The election date is pushed further back each time. Consequently, the expected voter turnout is getting lower and lower.

On 9 February, the Coordination Council announced that it was planning direct closed-list elections on 25 May, based on a proportional system with no quota for organisations. The mandate of the previous, second council ended on 8 February. It had continued its mandate on its own, a move that led to the resignation of several leading members. Despite everything, there are still many in the democracy movement who do not want to lose hope and faith in the reform of the Coordination Council.

The main dilemma for the democracy movement lies elsewhere: what to do about the regime's elections? The question of 'legitimacy' is the second aspect of why it is worth paying attention to these elections.

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The media is now dominated by the idea of boycotting the elections, which is defended, in particular, by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. According to her, normal politics ceased to exist in Belarus in 2020 and will revive only when Lukashenko is gone. And the electoral process is so tightly controlled that there's no point in taking risks. Next year, this issue will be even more urgent. In this way, the government-in-exile can maintain the legitimacy of its symbolic figure – Tsikhanouskaya – and thus continue its own mandate.

There is also a view (with which I tend to agree) that calls for a boycott would only reinforce the apathy of a society that is already becoming increasingly depoliticised. In particular, political commentator Artyom Shraibman recently said that the political centres in exile must realise that they have no actual influence in the country as NGOs and bloggers, they have weight only internationally and for the diaspora. Under such circumstances, it should be time for new heroes, next year at the latest.

In its turn, the Honest People initiative, which proved the rigging of elections in 2020, encourages people to come to the polling stations and vote 'against all'. It explains how elections are held and how they are controlled by the regime, and tries to generate interest in politics among the population once again.

In addition, a separate group of people are trying to form secret alliances with more moderate candidates in local elections to initiate change at least at the local level. They can only act with the utmost caution. These people still exist underground. But their influence, if any, will obviously be very localised.

So, it is worth taking a closer look at the elections in Belarus. If the regime makes even the slightest mistake, it may give people some courage for the future. It is not excluded that the KGB missed something, and somewhere in the depths of the social networks of the already elected deputies, there may be critical comments about August 2020. If we learnt anything in 2020, it's that even small gusts of wind can cause big waves. But it's also true that in 2020, voters could still legally take pictures or gather at polling places. In 2024, the iron hand of the state seems to hold absolutely everything.



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