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The land of limited opportunities

Belarus' upcoming elections will once again offer a choice between Lukashenko and Lukashenko. Still, change may well be on the horizon

Banking on a black swan – an unforeseen occurrence with dramatic consequences – is rarely a recipe for success. In the Belarusian context, the use of tactical nuclear weapons, the sudden death of President Aleksandr Lukashenko or a Ukrainian invasion of southern Belarus would qualify as such an event.

The political leaders of the Belarusian pro-democracy movement, such a force in 2020, are now in exile hoping for this kind of black swan event. Given the severity with which the state has cracked down at home, they have little alternative. According to their most prominent figure, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, now is not the time to call for protests. But they still believe a 'window of opportunity' will present itself in the foreseeable future.

Limited choice

In the upcoming presidential election on 26 January, or 'non-elections' as Tsikhanouskaya calls them, representatives of the pro-democracy movement are, in any case, unable to stand. Electoral law has been deliberately tightened to make sure of that. For instance, candidates now need to have been resident in Belarus for 20 years and not have residency status in any other country. Tsikhanouskaya has recommended that her supporters choose the 'against all' option, assuming this will be a safe way to protest.

The local electoral commissions, which have been filled with loyal lieutenants, will in any case relay 'agreeable' figures to the leadership. There will be no OSCE observers, and this time, no overseas voting will be permitted, ensuring exiled regime critics will be unable to participate. It seems Lukashenko also conducted a pre-election trial blackout of YouTube and various social media platforms. And should things still go badly, the regime, which has become hypersensitive to any challenge since

2020, has also made preparations for any battles on the streets.

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Even if they had a realistic chance, the four opposition candidates Lukashenko has permitted to run still wouldn't represent a genuine alternative. Three of them, all heads of pro-Lukashenko bloc parties, don't even attempt to disguise their function as mere sparring partners. Sergei Syrankov, the radically Stalinist-sounding first secretary of the Communist Party, has talked about 'not running instead of, but together with' Lukashenko. The eccentric anti-European head of the Liberal Democrat Party, Oleg Gaidukevich, declared that he would be happy to congratulate Lukashenko on election day. And the leader of the Republican Party for Labour and Justice, Alexander Khizhnyak, described his opponent Lukashenko as 'the right choice'.

That leaves Hanna Kanapatskaya. For many years, Kanapatskaya was something of a rarity in the Belarusian parliament — a moderate opposition MP who was formerly a member of the United Civic Party, a liberal-conservative opposition party that, like every other pro-democracy party, is now banned. Today, she plays by the rules. She has strongly criticised the exiled political leaders of the pro-democracy movement and has remained very cautious in advocating for the rehabilitation of political prisoners and the return of exiled dissidents.

An opinion poll conducted ahead of the election by regime-friendly pollsters predicted an 82.5 per cent vote share for Lukashenko, with the other candidates combined gaining just 2.9 per cent. A further 7.9 per cent said they would vote 'against all', while 6.7 per cent stated they would definitely not be voting. It's likely that Lukashenko will actually exceed the projections of such government-commissioned polls.

Lukashenko's bargaining chip

The West's response will, first and foremost, be to continue with sanctions, primarily attempting to close loopholes in the existing sanctions regime. Despite that regime, the Russian market has allowed the Belarusian economy not just to stabilise but to even grow. The argument that sanctions have merely driven the regime further under Moscow's wing is factually not incorrect. It doesn't, however, take into

account the momentum generated in 2020, or that sanctions were imposed partly in response to such scarcely believable acts as the hijacking of a Ryanair flight and the deliberate abetting of illegal migration, acts that Brussels can no more allow to go unanswered than the widespread violence following the 2020 presidential elections or Belarus's role in the war of aggression in Ukraine. And yet, sanctions don't seem to have had much impact to date.

Diplomacy is necessary, if only to accelerate the release of political prisoners.

That's why diplomacy will also once again play a role. Of course, maintaining diplomatic relations with a regime whose leader you've been refusing to recognise as president for five years is not easy. The explicit refusal to recognise Lukashenko's victory in 2020 had far-reaching consequences and was perhaps a mistake, given that it made necessary communications more complicated. To recognise his presidency after the 2025 'non-elections' would, however, be equally wrong as it would signal that the West is willing to forget. Nonetheless, diplomacy is necessary, if only to accelerate the release of political prisoners.

Lukashenko is using this fact as a bargaining chip. There have now been nine rounds of amnesties, with phased releases of well over 200 recognised political prisoners; on the other hand, around 1 250 are still in jail. These are thus very much early stages, particularly given that the regime has actually stepped up its repressive measures during the election campaign. In a highly symbolic move, two of the most prominent political prisoners, Viktor Babariko and Maria Kolesnikova, were shown to the outside world for the first time in almost two years. Both looked emaciated but were at least still alive — not even that had been certain.

The regime now hopes to get something in return, which raises two key questions: what would have to happen to make that possible? And how far can the West go? A theoretically plausible maximum concession would be for the West to dispatch a number of ambassadors to Minsk — after all, Germany and others still have embassies in Moscow. On the other hand, new ambassadors would have to receive their accreditation fromaman whose presidency their country doesn't recognise, which presents something of a quandary.

Potential for change

Nonetheless, black swans aside, there is still the potential for change, even given five more years of 'Papa Lukashenko'.

Firstly, following his election victory, Lukashenko will want to use his subjective strength to maximise his room for manoeuvre *vis-à-vis* Moscow wherever possible. Diplomatically, he's then more likely than ever to make advances towards the West, while also intensifying attempts to bolster economic relations with Beijing. At the same time, he will continue to provide material and logistical support for Russia's war of aggression, that much is inevitable.

Secondly, the domestic threat to Lukashenko would seem to be lessening. In that context, it is at least conceivable that there could be a large raft of amnesties, and that this might potentially include some of the leading figures from the 2020 protests. 2024 wasn't the first time Belarus had used amnesties as a diplomatic lever, there is a certain tradition of this kind of thing. And this is surely the answer to the question of what needs to happen next. Given the seriousness of events in and after 2020, the reactions to such a move will likely still be muted, for the reasons outlined above. That's why the regime will still have a cost-benefit calculation to make. Thirdly, the number of migrants attempting to illegally enter the EU via Belarus will probably increase again as soon as warmer weather returns. In 2024, the regime invited EU representatives to attend a conference on the subject, though that invitation was almost universally rebuffed. If tentative steps towards rapprochement are forthcoming, however, this issue could soon be back on the agenda.

A new regional order could benefit Minsk too, helping to counter the threat of Russian expansionism.

Fourthly, the regime will seek to gain a seat at the table should negotiations take place on ending the war in Ukraine. A more realistic hope is that Minsk could at least play a part in a major peace summit. In the short term, however, an initial ceasefire is the more likely scenario and, in that event, there's nothing the West can offer. At the end of such a road, however, a new regional order could benefit Minsk too, helping to counter the threat of Russian expansionism.

With a nod to the hated US, the Belarusian leader recently referred to his country as a land of opportunities, but, under his rule, Belarus has been, at best, a land of limited opportunities. There will, of course, come a point when Lukashenko's departure becomes a possibility. He has even

made some effort to pass reforms that would safeguard his position in such an eventuality. He has, for instance, granted certain additional powers to the hitherto utterly toothless All-Belarusian People's Assembly, giving himself the option of becoming chair of that body should his presidency end. In addition, he has ensured that, on leaving office, he will enjoy full immunity as well as financial benefits, and he's also taken steps to safeguard his family's position. During recent election campaigning, he has made frequent references to a 'generational change'. On the other hand, Lukashenko has hinted at his potential resignation before, after the 2020 protests — yet he still has a firm hold of the reins.



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