

# Stakeless General Elections in Belarus

**Corinne Deloy**

Translated by helen Levy

**Analysis**  
1 month before  
the poll

On 23<sup>rd</sup> September next the Belarusians are being called to ballot to renew the 110 members of the Chamber of Representatives, the lower chamber of Parliament. This general election will however be just a sham since Belarus has not seen free, transparent elections in over two decades. Hence 103 of the 110 members of the outgoing Chamber of Representatives are officially independent but in reality they obey the "President of the Republic", Aleksander Lukashenko. In any event the Belarusian parliament has no real power, since the laws all depend on what the head of State wants.

## The Last Dictatorship in Europe

Belarus has been under the iron rule of an authoritarian regime led by Aleksander Lukashenko since 1994 – he holds all of the power and controls all of the institutions, the civil service and society.

A former teacher of communist ideology in the Red Army, political border guard commissioner, Aleksander Lukashenko took over the management of a sovkhos in 1987. Elected an MP of the Supreme Soviet of Soviet Belarus in 1991 he was appointed chairman of parliament's anti-corruption committee two years later. On 20<sup>th</sup> July 1994, aged 39, he was elected President of the Republic for the very first time on the basis of a populist political programme that promised to reimburse the financial losses caused by the spiralling rise in inflation.

Since his rise to power as head of State Lukashenko has continued to maintain and extend his power over the country. His regime is typified by constant Human Rights infringements and the falsification of any elections that are held. He has introduced a State ideology that is taught in secondary schools and institutes of higher education and also in companies, whereby liberalism is "qualified as an ideology that symbolises social inequality between men, profit and individualism." The Belarus economy, which is extremely corrupt, is now at its lowest ebb. The trade deficit is immense, inflation totalled 109% in January and the Belarus rouble has depreciated by 65% since 2011.

The country, which enjoys rebates on its gas deliveries

recently received a third payment of 350 million € as part of a 3 billion \$ loan granted to it by neighbouring Russia and the Community of Independent States. Incidentally, Moscow is very interested by the acquisition of the very best elements of Belarus industry. At the end of 2011 Gazprom acquired Beltransgaz, an operation that was a condition set by Moscow for Minsk to be able to enjoy gas price reductions.

On 31<sup>st</sup> May last the Russian President Vladimir Putin (United Russia, ER) reserved Minsk as his first trip abroad as part of his new term in office.

## The Political System

In Belarus the candidates running in the elections, either national or local, almost always have no political experience and are appointed by the presidential administration. In the main the electoral committees traditionally comprise representatives of the ruling power. State company directors, the managers of kolkoz or sovkhos, soldiers, hospital directors, civil servants, local representatives, are all linked to the regime to whom they owe their position. Aleksander Lukashenko controls the political parties, the unions, associations and all of the institutions in civil society.

On 6<sup>th</sup> January 2012 the ruling power strengthened its hold over the internet network. An Operational and Analytical Centre (OAC), that answers to the presidency was created to monitor all content before its distribution on the worldwide web. Access providers must register with the Communication Ministry and all cybercafé users, with shared connections have to reveal

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their identity. Information about every connection is kept and recorded for one year. Further sanctions were introduced, access to foreign sites was restricted (companies must for example use national internet domains) and the control over internet users has been stepped up.

The Belarus parliament is bicameral. It comprises the Chamber of Representatives (*Palata pratsaviteley*), which has 110 members elected for four years by a majority vote within the same number of constituencies, and the Council of the Republic (*Natsionalnoye sobranie*), which rallies 64 members 56 of whom are elected by the Minsk soviets, and those of six of the country's regions. The eight other members are appointed by the "president of the Re-

public". In the elections for the Chamber of Representatives all candidates must be aged at least 21 and find a minimum of 1000 support signatures in order to be able to stand for election in the constituency of their choice. All companies with at least 300 employees, established in the constituency can also put a candidate forward. The Belarus parliament has almost no powers except that of approving the draft laws which are all drawn up by the "president of the Republic"

Most (103) of the 110 members of the Chamber of Representatives say they are independent, 6 are affiliated to the Communist Party (KPB) led by Tatiana Holubeva and the last belongs to the Farmers' Party (APB) led by Mikhail Shimanski. The latter two parties are controlled by Aleksander Lukashenko.

### Reminder of the General election results on 28th September 2008 in Belarus

Turnout: 76.7%

Political Parties	No. of seats won
Communist Party (KPB)	6
Farmers' Party (APB)	1
Independents	103

Source : Wolfram Nordsieck

The Republican Party for Labour and Justice (RPPS) which supports the "president", led by Vasil Zadnyapransy will be participating in the general elections on 23rd September next. It says it is against any "colour revolution" and is fighting for the introduction of an electoral system that would be a mix of the proportional and majority vote. Mikhail Shimanski's Farmers' Party, the Communist Party led by Tatiana Holubeva and Belaya Rus (BR), an association founded in 2007 led by the outgoing Education Minister Aleksander Radkov, all three of whom are pro-Aleksander Lukashenko, will be putting candidates forward.

### What is the state of play with the European Union?

Ostracized by the international community because of his constant human rights infringements, Aleksander Lukashenko is the only Head of State to be banned

from staying in the European Union and the USA, a measure which previously had only been applied to one other person – the former President of former Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic. Politically speaking, Belarus which is sometimes qualified as Europe's last dictatorship, is completely isolated.

In addition to the head of State, several of his official representatives are also banned from coming to the European Union. The list is regularly extended and now includes 243 people. On 28th February last Brussels adopted further sanctions against Minsk and decided to recall all of its ambassadors for consultation after the Belarus government's decision to dismiss the EU's ambassadors. The 27 EU countries also froze the countries assets and deprived 19 magistrates and 2 police chiefs of their visas, since they are believed to be responsible for the arrest and conviction of some of the regime's opponents. On 29th March last Brussels

approved further economic sanctions against the Belarus regime and froze the assets of 32 companies that are linked to it.

Before this, the last clash between Minsk and Brussels dated back to 1998. In that year Aleksander Lukashenko expelled several European ambassadors and their American counterparts from their residencies that lay near the "head of State's" own home in Drozdy (near Minsk). Work that was being undertaken at the presidential residency was the official reason quoted for the expulsion of the foreign representatives. After this the Belarus "President" and 130 of the country's leading personalities were banned from entering most EU States.

The US closed its embassy in Minsk in 2008 and is now represented there by a chargé d'affaires.

On 15th April last Andrey Sannikov, the regime's «enemy», co-founder of the Charter97 and candidate in the presidential election on 19th December 2010 (in which he came second just behind the outgoing Head of State, Aleksander Lukashenko) and his colleague Dmitri Bondarenko, leader of the Belarus European Civic Organisation were released from prison after spending 9 months there. The former was sentenced to five years in prison and the other 2 years.

13 political opponents are still behind bars including Ales Bialiatski, chairman of Vesna, a human rights defence organisation, sentenced in November 2011 to four and a half years in prison and detained in the gaol of Bobriusk, 150km east of Minsk, Dmitri Dashkevich, chairman of the Youth Front, his deputy, Oleg Lobov and leader of the Social Democratic Party Narodnaya Gromada, Nikolay Statkevich.

During the last presidential election on 19th December 2010, 700 people who demonstrated against the falsification of the election, were arrested.

The European Parliament, which is requesting the release of all political prisoners, indicated that "*dialogue between the 27 and Belarus will not move forwards as long as the political prisoners are not freed and their full rights re-established*". The European institutions continue to put pressure on Minsk, since the city is due to host the world ice-hockey championship in 2014.

On 4th July last a Swedish plane took off from Lithuania and released teddy bears over Belarus bearing messages about the infringement of freedom in the country. Aleksander Lukashenko immediately dismissed air defence head, Dmitir Pakhmelkine and the head of the border guards, General Igor Rachkovski. Two journalists were also arrested for having posed for a photo with the teddy bears. Moreover, on 3rd August, the "president of the Republic" expelled the Swedish Ambassador and several diplomats. Ambassador Stefan Eriksson, in office for the last seven years, is accused of having tried "*to destroy relations between Belarus and Sweden*." Sweden is one of the most active countries in democratic development in Belarus. In the past the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt qualified Aleksander Lukashenko as a "*little rogue*".

Stockholm refused to approve the new Belarus ambassador and has withdrawn the residence permit from two Belarus diplomats who were invited to leave Sweden. Minsk recalled its entire diplomatic staff and closed *sine die* its chancellery in Stockholm.

### The State of the Opposition Forces

In the opposition's opinion the real question is: should the general election be boycotted or not? The subject divides both parties and opponents. The boycott would of course deprive the election of all legitimacy, however taking part in the election, even if there were no chance of success, is a means of expressing one's claims.

Former candidates in the presidential election, Aleksander Kazuline (in 2006), Dmitri Us and Vitaly Rimashevski (in 2010), opposition members, Aleksander Atroshchankav and Viktor Ivashkevich and union leader, Henadz Fyadynich have signed an appeal for a boycott. "*What is clear in our opinion (electoral fraud) must be clear for the majority of the Belarus,*" they declared. "*People will not vote because they do not believe the elections will change anything,*" stressed Vladimir Nekliaev, chairman of "*Tell the truth*", an opposition movement created on 25th February 2010.

The United Civic Party recently asked to the government to abolish the general elections qualified by Anatol Liabedzka as "*pseudo-elections for a pseudo-parliament*". He is considering the possibility of boycotting the general election on 23rd September next. In

the past he considered standing for election but gave up the idea five days before the vote.

The most famous opponent, who is acknowledged internationally, Aleksander Milinkevich, winner of the Sakharov Prize awarded by the European Parliament in 2006, is standing in district 109 Uurushki. As leader of the freedom movement he has succeeded in acquiring the signatures required. *"We are going to try and show that the opposition has candidates who are prepared*

*to win the elections,"* indicated Yuras Hubarevitch, a member of Aleksander Milinkevich's support committee.

Just one month before the election there is only certainty: the Belarus general elections on 23<sup>rd</sup> September next will be falsified and as a result will not be acknowledged by any Western countries as having been free and transparent.

## In Belarus, the electoral farce took place as planned

### Results

On 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2012 the Belarusians "elected" the 100 members of the Chamber of Representatives, the lower chamber of parliament. This general election was nothing but a sham. The country, where the opposition forces have been absent from parliament since 1996, has not seen free, transparent elections in over two decades.

The MPs appointed on 23<sup>rd</sup> September are mainly "independents", i.e. they do not belong to any political party but owe their election the loyalty they show towards the authoritarian power of Aleksander Lukashenko. No candidate from the opposition was therefore elected. *"Aleksander Lukashenko has made the situation totally absurd, without even trying to build a facade of democracy. He already knows the names of the 110 MPs,"* declared Vitaly Rimachevski, the unfortunate candidate in the last presidential election on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

600 people were present to monitor the Belarusian general election, 330 of whom were from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The country's authorities refused to deliver visas to two observers, Marieluise Beck and Emanuelis Zingeris, as well as to several journalists. A photographer from the Associated Press was beaten by security officers as he covered a demonstration by four opponents and was briefly imprisoned with seven other journalists. Another journalist from the Australian TV channel SBS TV, Amos Roberts, was arrested by the authorities at Minsk airport. His camera, computer and all of the documents he had managed to collate were confiscated.

On 11<sup>th</sup> September last the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz (S&D, DE) expressed his *"extreme concern about the way human rights, the rule of*

*law and democratic values were continually infringed in Belarus."* The NGO Human Rights Watch has drawn up a list of Human Rights infringements in Belarus: the presence of political prisoners, lack of independence of the judicial system, arbitrary arrests of opponents to the regime, harassment and intimidation of independent journalists and human rights defenders, torture and poor treatment of prisoners. *"These practices, which have worsened over the last two years, have greatly weakened the opposition,"* indicated Yulia Gorbunova, a Belarus specialist at the NGO.

The only issue in the election was turnout, since most of the opposition forces had called for a boycott of the vote. Half of the electorate was due to turn out to ballot if the election was to be declared valid. According to the President of the Central Electoral Committee, Lidya Iyeremoshina, turnout totalled 74.3% (80% in the region of Vitebsk and 60%

in Minsk), i.e. -2.4 points in comparison with the last general election on 28th September 2008. One quarter of the Belarusians (25.9%) voted early i.e. -1 point in comparison with 2008; 109 MPs were elected, a second round will be have to organised in one constituency.

*"There was a boycott in almost all of the major towns. The electoral committee is lying quite blatantly since its figures differ radically from those delivered by the observers,"* (38%) declared Vitaly Rimachevski. The central electoral committee has already rejected the declarations that the OSCE is about to make about the general elections. *"The observers see their role not as helping but as a means to create difficult situations and then they refuse to acknowledge that these elections are legitimate,"* declared Lidya Iyermoshina.

*"Over the last four years the role of the MPs in the outgoing Chamber of Representatives has been limited to approving the choices made by the Belarus presidency. They adopted three laws in four years in office. And for the rest of the time they simply approved what came from the presidential administration,"* indicated Anatol Liabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party (opposition). He put a film on-line on "Youtube" calling for a boycott in which citizens could be seen going to pick mushrooms, reading in a park or playing chess. The message was as fol-

lows: *"chess is a fair game whilst the elections are unfair."* *"We call on the electorate to ignore and boycott this electoral farce. Honest people cannot take part in pseudo-elections to appoint an imposter parliament,"* added Anatol Liabedzka, who announced the withdrawal of his party's 38 candidates.

The leader of the Movement for Freedom, Aleksander Milinkevich also called for a boycott of the election in constituencies where the opposition was not putting a candidate forward. Originally he was standing in district 109 of Uurushki but the Central Electoral Committee refused to register him as a candidate saying that 99 of the signatures he had produced were invalid (every candidate has to collate a minimum of 1000 signatures of support to be able to stand).

*"Belarus can be compared to a fragment of the USSR that has stopped in time. If Aleksander Lukashenko has succeeded in staying power for nearly 20 years, it is notably because people feel that they are doing better in Belarus than in other former Soviet Republics which have transferred over to a market economy,"* says historian André Liebich. *"For a long time most of the population supported the authoritarian power. Today the latter hangs on simply by force and intimidation,"* stresses political analyst Valery Karbalevitch.

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