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DID LUKASHENKA MANAGE TO CONSOLIDATE SUPPORT IN THE LOCAL ELECTIONS?

The first issue of this year's Bell is dedicated to discussing the local elections held in Belarus in March. According to independent observers, right from the start the elections were as usual fraught with violations. However, are the elections, which are of little interest to the population, a sign that their opinions have changed?

While the official recorded turnout was as high as 77 per cent, it is said that this number was inflated to demonstrate to the international community the support of the population for Lukashenka's regime. Despite the fact that several representatives of the opposition parties managed to win a few seats in local councils, in general the election outcomes were practically known in advance.

The first article in this issue by Ryhor Astapenia

reviews this year's local elections and wonders whether the results are the sign of something new. The author argues that Lukashenka fails to restore previously held support as he is failing to deliver his electoral promises. Therefore, although his influence rests on the shoulders of a loyal bureaucracy, the most influential officials acquire more and more power on his behalf.

The second article by Yauheni Dudkin covers difficulties encountered by opposition parties during elections. The author maintains that elections were as usual uninteresting and unattractive and that the opposition parties failed to mobilise for a common action. For this reason, the search for a common candidate for the presidential elections will take time.

Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor

WAS THE TURNOUT AT THE LOCAL ELECTIONS A SIGN OF SOMETHING NEW?

Ryhor Astapenia

Municipal elections in Belarus have been traditionally marked by violations and singular cases of independent candidates becoming local councillors. The authorities have left the democrats behind and significantly inflated the turnout by fraud and coercion to vote.

The authorities believe that the high turnout should prove that people still support Lukashenka's regime. However, the ratings show that trust in the leadership has not yet recovered since the economic crisis. The Belarusian leader is failing to fulfil his electoral promises; his starting position for the 2015 presidential campaign is weak.

As there are no changes in the opposition community, there might be a shift from within the regime. The level of public mistrust in Lukashenka might make him rely more on the establishment.

Unbelievably high turnout

According to the Central Electoral Committee

(CEC), a total of 77.4 per cent of Belarusians turned out to vote for the local elections on 23 March, this includes those who voted on the day itself and during early voting. Official data were slightly above the turnout at parliamentary elections in 2012 (74.61 per cent), but below that of local elections in 2010 and 2007 (79.5 and 79.2, respectively). The official turnout in Belarus was well above the turnout at local elections in Lithuania and Poland.

Local elections (country and year)	Turnout
Belarus 2014	77.4
Lithuania 2011	44.08
Poland 2010	47.32

However, the official results differ considerably from the findings of poll-watchers and sociologists. Independent observers claim that the turnout has been inflated at the majority of polling stations, with a difference of as many as 500 voters at some polling stations on the main voting day only. A regular polling station in Belarusian cities covers

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The Belarusian leader is failing to fulfil his electoral promises; his starting position for the 2015 presidential campaign is weak.

What could weaken his position further in 2015 is the fact that the Belarusian leader is failing to meet his pre-electoral promises.

They are still ready to breach the legislation for him, but the balance of power is changing between the President and the community of state officials.

about 1,800 voters. According to opinion polls of the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), just 44 per cent of Belarusians intended voting at the local elections. This shows that the electoral behaviour of Belarusians differs from that of Lithuanians or Poles only in CEC documents rather than in the reality.

Besides, many Belarusians turned out to vote only because of the proactive efforts of Lukashenka's regime. Authorities forced students and employees of state-run institutions to participate in early voting. They also sent almost all Belarusians text messages with an invitation to vote, made announcements in cinemas and public transportation, and organised concerts and sales of cheap alcohol at polling stations.

Certainly, these measures were the only motivation for some voters to turn out. Local councils have almost no impact on people's daily life in Belarus. The campaign was dull even by Belarusian standards, and some 20 per cent of the public do not believe the elections were fair.

What mattered most for the authorities was to create an impression of mass participation, amid the fact that the rating of trust in the regime and personally in Lukashenka has still not reached the pre-crisis 2011 level. As the authorities are used to landslide victories, a low turnout could be an indication of a decline in Lukashenka's authority.

	Sep 2009	Sep 2010	Sep 2011	Sep 2012	Sep 2013	Dec 2013
Lukashenka's trust rating (%)	49.2	49.7	24.5	38.5	46.7	37.7
Lukashenka's mistrust rating (%)	37.2	40.2	62	51.9	36.6	47.5
No answer (%)	13.6	10.1	13.5	9.6	16.7	14.8

Source: IISEPS

The campaign Lukashenka might lose

Ratings show that, though still quite strong, Lukashenka's position has weakened. What could weaken his position further in 2015 is the fact that the Belarusian leader is failing to meet his pre-electoral promises.

Lukashenka promised to construct 10 million sq. m. of housing per year; however, it now takes two

years for Belarus to build this amount of housing. Even as the leader was making statements about strengthening the national currency, the Belarusian rouble has been subject to an almost threefold devaluation since 2010. He promised a job for everyone, but hundreds of thousands of Belarusians had to leave for Russia to earn money. After repeated statements from Lukashenka about 100 big investment projects, even the future of the Chinese-Belarusian Industrial Park, a major economic project of Belarus, is still somewhat vague. Belarus was supposed to be in the top-30 of the best business environment countries; however, recent years have seen the nationalisation of several companies by the government. With just a year to go until the presidential campaign there are many more promises on Lukashenka's list that he is not delivering on.

So, Aliaksandr Lukashenka is not in the best of his shape. Few doubt that he will remain in power after 2015 as his charisma is evaporating. This is why good turnout indicators were crucial for the regime, as a sign of confidence in the system. However, even without manipulations, the turnout could well have been about 50 per cent, definitely a good result for insignificant elections and the authorities in a crisis of confidence.

The upcoming presidential campaign will be the battle of the weak. Both Lukashenka and the opposition look as vulnerable as ever. Democrats remain incapable of agreeing with each other even after a massive crackdown. The National Referendum coalition, the key alliance of opposition bodies today, promised a decision on a single candidate before the local elections; however, another six months from now looks like a more realistic deadline. Talaka, another unit of opposition, had to drop its plans to use the local elections as primaries because of pressure from the security services. Some politicians remain in exile, excluded from politics.

Lukashenka is no longer popular enough to generate a high turnout and support. He used to be the legitimising factor for the entire ruling class, but the situation has reversed. Now, the bureaucracy will have to ensure his victory in 2015, and the loyalty of functionaries will prove crucial. Today's high local turnout is an indication that bureaucrats remain loyal to Lukashenka. They are still ready to breach the legislation for him, but the balance of power is changing between the President and the community of state officials.

Remarkably, the opposition media reported pressure against activists seeking a chair in local councils at the stage of initiative group registration.

The information famine marked the whole campaign: pre-electoral posters were displayed a week before E-day.

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN BELARUS 2014: RESULTS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Yauheni Dudkin

Elections of local councils of the 27th convocation took place in Belarus on 23 March. According to **official data**, out of 22,784 candidacies nominated, 22,338 actual candidates **participated**. Of these, 14,931 were nominated by signature collection, 7,727 by labour communities, and 675 by political parties.

Out of all candidates nominated by Belarusian political parties, 35.7 per cent represented **officially registered opposition parties**. Among them, UCP and the Belarusian Left Party “Fair World” were the most active, delegating 28 and 30 per cent candidates, respectively, out of all opposition parties, and 12 and 13 per cent out of all parties. The organising committee of the Belarusian Christian Democracy (BCD) party was the most successful in nominating candidates: though signature collection was the only way available for them to nominate candidates, their 230 registered initiative groups managed to nominate 42 candidates, a rate 1.5 times higher than the BPF party, which could delegate candidates without signature collection by party decision. The Social Democratic Party “People’s Concord” nominated just three candidates, a mere 1 per cent of all opposition candidates.

Out of all political parties, the pro-regime Communist Party of Belarus delegated over a third of all candidates (38.5 per cent). The Liberal Democratic Party nominated almost one in five candidates (18.5 per cent).

Remarkably, the opposition media reported pressure against activists seeking a chair in local councils **at the stage of initiative group registration**. Predominantly these were young people, including young Christian Democrats. The pressure affected the registration outcomes, e.g. BCD activists submitted documents for collecting signatures for 29 representatives in Viciebsk (Vitebsk) Region, but only 6 were actually registered; in Minsk, 3 out of 21 were registered.

Different polling stations saw different **numbers of independent candidates**. At some polling stations, 3 out of 5 represented opposition parties or movements. Simultaneously, many polling stations in Minsk remained uncovered by independent candidates. More than 50 per cent of registered candidates for local

elections in Minsk belonged to some party. Therefore, efforts were not sufficient to create a consolidated campaign frontline.

On the contrary, independent candidates **in Mahiliou (Mogilev)** coordinated their work to avoid competition among themselves for voters of the same polling station. However, there was an incident against this agreement: a member of Tell the Truth civil campaign applied for participation at both city level and regional level, something that interfered with the activities of a BCD candidate and the whole architecture for cooperation of independent forces in the city.

Given the fact that many activists were likely to be denied registration, BCD used the electoral campaign for **self-promotion and reaching out for support**. Out of 230 initiative groups registered, some focused on the distribution of BCD leaflets and a platform to raise people’s awareness. Unfortunately, there are no other well-known examples of such efforts by other political actors.

The official turnout at the elections constituted 77.4 per cent of eligible voters. Notably, attempts of illegal ballot box stuffing were reported at the very beginning of early voting. For instance, violations during the calculation of voters who turned out were documented at polling station No. 71 in Mahiliou, resulting in formal complaints. The observer who did so was deprived of accreditation by the main voting day, so he was not allowed to monitor the final vote count.

According to independent observers, the **actual turnout constitutes 25 to 30 per cent of voters**. It is clear that the declarations of stability by the government make people indifferent both to parliamentary and local elections; they only have hopes about presidential ones. The stuffed ballots were counted as pro-government votes. According to official data, of those elected, 54.7 per cent are former councillors and 3.8 per cent are below 30-years of age. Representatives of the social welfare sector (28.9 per cent), agriculture (23.4) and civil servants (13.6) will dominate the new councils.

Strange as is it, **some opposition members have also become local council deputies**. Valery Bilibukha, a member of the organising committee of the Belarusian Christian Democracy party, was elected to the village council of Pieršamajskaja

No strong professional opposition actor has emerged to claim the leadership, so more time is required to choose a single candidate for presidential polls.

in Biaroza district (Brest Region). His campaign focused on defending public interests amid the government's effort to use the African swine fever argument for liquidating the back-yard holdings of farmers. Bilibukha won both at early voting, home voting, and on the day of elections. This is the only publicised case so far of an independent candidate's victory at the 2014 local elections.

The information famine marked the whole campaign: pre-electoral posters were displayed a week before E-day. Local state media only published very general information about the biography, property and incomes of candidates. In some cases in Mahiliou, journalists ignored invitations by a candidate to attend a meeting, even in a situation where coverage was possible (the youngest candidate; the most competitive polling station, etc.).

Electoral Code amendments slowed down some independent candidates. The printed production had to be paid for from formal electoral funds with a limit on donations of just below USD 30. This hindered the printing of literature, since costs are high in authorised state-run publishing houses. Radio statements were limited in impact, though they proved to be good for outreach.

To summarise the **key features of the 2014 electoral campaign**:

1. Candidates who were "too critical" during the 2012 parliamentary campaign were not registered as candidates in 2014;
2. At some levels, including local ones, opposition forces did not coordinate their work properly in choosing polling stations for candidates and observers (examples from Minsk and Mahiliou);
3. Many leaders of local branches of registered parties did not use the funds available, local knowledge or existing political technologies; in Mahiliou during the signature-collection, the head of a party

regional branch shared his CV with voters, indicating his administrative arrest by the authorities for political activism and US-funded studies, facts seen negatively by 75 per cent of potential supporters. This is a clear illustration of a lack of strategy at many regional branches to maximise benefits for their parties for years ahead;

4. No support for candidates by independent media and information famine;
5. Non-creative campaigns and a lack of application of foreign experience in Belarus; there was no information 'bomb' to catch the attention of voters.

The elections came as a social and political exam for many who participated in numerous seminars. Unfortunately, not all passed. Certain positive developments included:

1. Strong candidates, parties and players became more visible because of the number of candidates nominated and the PR campaign (BCD, UCP, Fair World);
2. Local cooperation of political parties and movements was strengthened and tested in the run-up to the 2015 presidential elections;
3. New young candidates were trained for roles of parliamentary candidates or observers of presidential elections.
4. Therefore, regardless of the limitations, the local electoral campaign proved fruitful in terms of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of Belarusian political players. No strong professional opposition actor has emerged to claim the leadership, so more time is required to choose a single candidate for presidential polls. In this regard, the local elections have served as a good platform for campaigns in 2018 and 2020, something to prepare for seriously as early as now.



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This publication has been produced with the financial support from the Nordic Council of Ministers. The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the coordinators of the study and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Nordic Council of Ministers, nor of the Eastern Europe Studies Centre.