

BELARUS POLITICS AND SOCIETY AFTER THE ELECTION

On Monday, the 10th of August, the Eastern Europe Studies Centre, a think-tank in Vilnius, Lithuania, organised the discussion **'Belarus Politics and Society after the Election'**. It was aimed at discussing the events occurring before and during the August 9th presidential elections in Belarus, as well as their immediate aftermath.



The discussion featured the EESC's director **LINAS KOJALA** as moderator and the following participants:



ANDREI YAHORAU
Senior analyst of the
Centre for European
Transformation



SERGEY SHPILKIN
An independent
analyst, electoral
statistics expert. He
works on statistical
graphs based on the
official data from the
Central Election
Commission in
search of anomalies



JOERG FORBRIG
Senior Fellow and
Director for Central
and Eastern Europe,
The German
Marshall Fund of the
United States



VYTIS JURKONIS
Project Director,
Vilnius office,
Freedom House

ELECTIONS

As **Andrei Yahorau** put it, from the very beginning of the electoral campaign, the authorities generated an atmosphere of repression and the current events are the logical conclusion to the so-called elections. He points out that there's no way that the elections held on August 9 could be called free and fair, this being clear well ahead of the elections beginning.

Over this year, we have seen potential challengers to Alexander Lukashenko such as Viktor Babaryka and Siarhei Tsikhanouski imprisoned, while Valery Tsepkalo was forced to flee the country with his children in fear of persecution.

Arrests were employed not only against the leading figures, but also campaign staff at various points over the past few months.

Despite all the actions taken to repress and suppress the Belarussian people, **Mr Yahorau emphasises that there has been vast mobilisation of the public**, with citizens participating in volunteering efforts and other initiatives such as the platform The Voice, which was used for an alternative solution for vote counting. **Indeed, the numbers of people participating has been unprecedented in Belarussian history.**



Sergey Shpilkin, a leading election analyst from Russia, highlighted that based on data accumulated from some 250 precincts, we can see that the actual turnout for preliminary voting was around 13-17%, rather than the 42% claimed by the regime. This suggests that at least some 25% of the vote is fraudulent and, most likely, favours Lukashenko. Based on what data can be pieced together from the limited available outside the official tally, it appears that the election results in those areas stand at something more akin to 46% of the vote being in favour of Mrs Tsikhanouskaya and only 29% for Mr Lukashenko. While not enough for an outright victory for the opposition candidate, this indicates a wholly different dynamic.

This, unsurprisingly, is unlikely to be the actual vote tally. As **Joerg Forbrig** points out, while the officially announced results aren't unexpected, given the tampering that was bound to occur, a number of polling stations that did release their real vote counts paint a rather opposite picture of the situation, with Mrs Tsikhanouskaya winning by a vast margin. **While the opposition to Mr Lukashenko's rule may have consolidated behind S. Tsikhanouskaya,**

voter mobilisation and protests are decentralised, spanning the entire country, all the way up to regions that are distant from Minsk. This increases the difficulty of deploying forces in every location that flares up, particularly when Minsk demands particular attention. Such dispersion and the vast numbers of people involved could prove the protests incredibly hard to quell, particularly if industrial worker strikes like on at Seligorsk recently, begin flaring up.

According to **Vytis Jurkonis**, the events ongoing in Belarus have busted the myth of Lukashenko retaining popular support. Furthermore, it has been showed that the Belarussian people are not as passive as may have previously been believed, with engagement with the protests being visible across the age spectrum, ranging from youths to the elderly.

SUPPRESSION

Another myth that Mr Jurkonis highlights is that the regime retains a full control. Instead, he points out that it appears to be **panicking and employing the two so-called F's – force and falsification.**

Failing to reduce citizen mobilisation levels through changing the election date to August 9th, which is a typical holiday period and failing to employ “kompromat” against the key remaining candidates, the government has resorted to force and falsification as its final resorts.

On the falsification end, this can be seen in how the election results appear to have been tampered with. In terms of force, however, the approach is holistic. As Mr Forbrig explains, the **strategy in place seems to be to run a shock and awe campaign, intimidating the people from the get-go before the protests get any larger.** This is pursued by means of firstly a communications blackout with disruptions to cellular, internet and even landline phone communications, making it difficult to relay information both within Belarus and to the outside world, as well as to seek to organise any actions. **This has, however, had only limited success.**

On one hand, there appears to be difficulty in accessing information within Belarus, but enough filters out to beyond the country’s borders, to the point where there was a case of a German journalist having more comprehensive information and briefing the Tsikhanouskaya staff from abroad.

On the other hand, there is the use of various pieces of heavy suppressive equipment such as stun grenades (which were last seen after the 2006 elections, but were not used to this extent), rubber bullets, water and immediate resorting to the use of force, without any effort to de-escalate. There are even reports of police trucks ramming protesters. Even this has proven to have limited success, with the people of Pinsk and Baranovichi repelling police forces.

As Mr Jurkonis points out, the regime is mistakenly seeking the epicentre that generates energy for the protests, but this is not possible to find because the current events are not a case of some single individual directing everything. Furthermore, the heavy riot gear used by the forces sent against protesters serves as a time-limiting factor for the regime as the forces are left exhausted in the heavy gear they are forced to make use of in the currently scorching weather. In the end, the fundamental question that we must answer though is in how the West will react to the goings on in Belarus.

FUTURE AND THE EU’S RESPONSE

Mr Yahorau explains that **he is worried about a potential fast and strong reaction on the part of the EU in the**

shape of major sanctions on Belarus in the wake of the events of the past few days.

Instead, he believes that the EU and US should carefully review their policies in regard to Belarus. The Belarussian people definitely need support from the European side, he says, but sanctions must be measured with exceptional care, given the very poor economic and geopolitical situation in Belarus, as well as Russian pressure. A potential recommendation Mr Yahorau offers is to look to engage more with Belarussian civil society, rather than Lukashenko's regime.

According Mr Forbrig, as direct neighbours of Belarus, Lithuania and Poland must push for the events in Belarus to enter the EU's agenda immediately, especially given how, if not for a handful of MEPs, the matter would be receiving even less positioning on part of the EU.

He notes that the EU should let Minsk know that it is being watched so that it couldn't get the mistaken impression that it can get away with its current course. Immediate aid is also needed for those falling victim to the recent oppression, this is particularly urgent given that there are no support mechanisms in place for them whatsoever right now, only the contributions of private organisations and NGOs.

From legal assistance to medical assistance, there is little to none available. The core matter is that the people of Belarus should not be allowed to feel like they have been left all alone.

Mr Jurkonis states that the white and red flag of Belarus that is being flown by the protesters now has another meaning and while sanctions cannot be ruled out, they have to be very smart and very targeted.

According to him, the worst thing that could happen is that after a few days or weeks, the people of Belarus out in the streets, the ones who joined initiative groups, the ones gathering signatures and so on, that they would feel defeated, if not betrayed. We must shine a light on the situation and give a voice to the Belarussian people.

The head of the Freedom House Vilnius branch also asserts that politicians from the Baltic States could look to travel to Minsk, not just resorting to proclamations and instead displaying solidarity akin to what was done in Ukraine back in the year 2004. Anything less could leave the Belarussians feeling betrayed and the movement for change suppressed, which could disable it for a number of years again. In conclusion, he noted, there is a vast amount of work to be done and at this point, we need to not only seek for the violence to be ended, but also to help the Belarussians speak out so we see the full picture of what is happening on the ground.