



The presidential election in Belarus, October 2015



Charles Crabtree^a, Christopher J. Fariss^{a,*}, Paul Schuler^b

^a Department of Political Science, Pennsylvania State University, USA

^b University of Arizona, USA

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1. Background

Belarus emerged as an independent state in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 (Zaprudnik, 1993). In March 1994, it became a presidential state when the Belarusian legislature passed the national constitution (Marples, 1996). It then became an authoritarian state after its first presidential election (Dawisha and Parrott, 1997). In that election, Alexander Lukashenko, a former collective farm supervisor and a member of the Belarusian parliament, won an emphatic second-round victory over Vyachaslau Kebich, the Prime Minister (Marples, 1999).

This was the last free presidential election held in Belarus, a state now tightly controlled by Lukashenko's personalistic regime. In 1995 and again in 1996, Lukashenko used popular referenda to broaden his power, removing presidential term limits, and dramatically extending executive control over the legislature (Korosteleva et al., 2003). With his authority expanded, Lukashenko implemented vast social welfare programs that are designed to purchase public support (Way, 2005). He also built up a security apparatus, the largest in Europe, which is used to repress and ultimately deter the opposition (Silitski, 2005). In order to further sway public opinion, he consolidated state control over major media, such as television, radio, and print outlets. These tactics coupled with high-levels of electoral fraud helped Lukashenko win re-election in 2000, 2005, and 2010 (White, 2003; White et al., 2005; Marples, 2004; Silitski, 2006; Wilson, 2011). His smallest

margin of victory across these elections was still greater than 60 percentage points. He entered the 2015 presidential election as the longest-serving leader among post-Soviet heads of state (Wesolowsky, 2015).

1.1. Election timeline

The 2015 presidential election was held on October 11 (Belta, 2015a). The Belarusian House of Representatives scheduled this date in accordance with the constitution (Belta, 2015a). According to the law, the presidential election needs to occur at least two months before January 21, 2016, the date that Lukashenko's fourth term in office ends (Belta, 2015b). The election date was announced on June 30, 2015 (Belta, 2015b).

The announcement of the election date marked the official beginning of the election campaign. There are several stages to presidential election campaigns in Belarus (Belarus in Focus, 2015a). In the initial stage, which occurred from June 30 to July 22, initiative groups that represented presidential candidates registered with the Central Election Commission (CEC) so that they could begin collecting signatures of support. Eight initiative groups, including one representing the incumbent, registered. In the next stage, which occurred from July 23 to August 21, these groups attempted to collect 100,00 signatures for their candidates, the minimum necessary to be officially listed on the ballot. Of the eight candidates who collected signatures, only 4 succeeded in securing the necessary number (see Table 3 in the online appendix for signature counts). From August 22 to September 5, the CEC verified submitted signatures, candidate declarations of property and income, and candidate biographies. On September 10, registered candidates could begin their campaigns. A month later, on October 6, early voting began.

1.2. Election laws

There were several minor changes in election laws from the 2010 election. First, the cap on the electoral fund that candidates can use for campaign activities was increased three-fold, from approximately \$35,000 to \$105,000 (Belta, 2015b). Second, presidential candidates can now donate to their own electoral funds (Belta, 2015b). Third, there were minor changes to the rules governing candidate media time. While candidates were provided the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: cjf0006@gmail.com (C.J. Fariss).

same amount of time on state-run media as in previous presidential campaigns, they could schedule this time over four weeks rather than two (*Belarus In Focus*, 2015b).

2. Substance

2.1. Candidates

Four candidates campaigned for election: Alexander Lukashenko, Sergei Gaidukevich of the Liberal Democratic Party, Tatiana Korotkevich of the People's Referendum Coalition, and Nikolai Ulakhovich of the Belarusian Patriotic Party. Lukashenko's three opponents, often referred to as the 'freaks' in Belarusian social media, are minor figures on the Belarusian political stage (*Radzina*, 2015). Though they are the official candidates of political parties, parties do not play an important role in Belarusian politics and have little support among voters (*Wilson*, 2011). Gaidukevich and Ulakhovich were widely viewed as 'shadow' candidates, who ran only to create the illusion of political competition (*Wilson*, 2015). As a result, the election was primarily a contest between Lukashenko and Korotkevich, the first ever female presidential candidate (*Liubakova*, 2015).¹

To say that the election was a contest, however, suggests that the two candidates campaigned against each other. This was not the case. Korotkevich, supported by the "Tell the Truth" campaign, engaged in traditional campaign activities, such as organizing speeches and rallies and distributing campaign materials. Lukashenko, on the other hand, limited his official campaign activities to a minimum (*Luhn*, 2015). For instance, he refused to make campaign addresses through the state media, citing important domestic and international obligations. He also did not attend the candidate debate.²

His actions fit reports from independent media elites and monitoring organizations that there was a governmental policy to decrease the salience of the election (*Kudrytski*, 2015). The regime seemed to hope that the event would pass without much notice and, therefore, without the violent protests that marked the 2010 election. The concern for the regime was that public protests would signal Lukashenko's weakness to observers in both the West and Russia. Residents attest that official notices and announcements related to the election were less prominent than in previous elections.

The coverage the media did provide, however, heavily favored Lukashenko, the man commonly referred to as 'Batka,' or father (*Wesolowsky*, 2015). This is because the media devoted a large percentage of all news items to Lukashenko's actions as president, which were consistently placed in a positive light (*Belarus Helsinki Committee*, 2015). As required by law, the media provided some coverage of the opposition candidates but this coverage was short and often negatively portrayed the candidates, though some neutral coverage did occur (*Belarusian Association of Journalists*, 2015).

2.2. Campaign issues

Lukashenko's campaign focused primarily on two issues. One was national autonomy. Reacting to heightened public concerns over Russian interference in Belarusian affairs, Lukashenko has repeatedly attempted to chart an independent course (*Martyniuk*, 2015).³ Despite pressure from the Kremlin, he has not officially recognized the annexation of Crimea (*Al Jazeera*, 2015). He also publicly refuted a claim by President Vladimir Putin that Belarus had agreed to let Russia construct a military air base in Belarusian territory (*Wesolowsky*, 2015). Recent attempts to break away from Russia's orbit are associated with many recent concessions to the West, which occurred during the election period. For example, he freed all remaining political prisoners and began efforts to liberalize the economy (*Ayers*, 2015).⁴

Another prominent campaign issue was stability. While emphasizing his independence from Moscow, Lukashenko also helped stoke public fears that Ukraine's chaotic situation might become Belarus' future (*Wesolowsky*, 2015). To do so, Lukashenko made frequent reference in public speeches to the crisis in Ukraine. Simultaneously, the state-run media, likely at the behest of Lukashenko, emphasized events in Ukraine during the election period as well.

This focus on Ukraine likely increased public support for Lukashenko in two ways. First, it contrasted the relative safety and stability experienced by everyday Belarusians to the conflict and hardships experienced by Ukrainians (*Barushka*, 2015). Second, and perhaps more importantly, events in Ukraine demonstrated the dangers of protesting against, and ultimately removing leaders loyal to Putin (*Seddon*, 2015).

The fear of possible inference or even intervention by Russia not only affected the general public but also the strategies of the anti-regime elites. Many of the civil society leaders that the authors spoke with in the months leading up to the election suggested that they were undecided as to the extent that they would support opposition candidates. While these individuals are well known, vocal critics of the regime, they worried that in the unlikely event that a challenger won more votes than Lukashenko, Putin would intervene either to support Lukashenko or to install a satrap more loyal to the Kremlin. In previous elections, the opposition feared another Lukashenko victory, while in this election a greater fear for at least some opposition members was a Lukashenko defeat (*Seddon*, 2015).

This fear might have played a role in the development of Korotkevich's campaign strategy. Unlike Lukashenko's previous opponent, Korotkevich pushed an agenda of moderate reform and rarely attacked Lukashenko as directly or virulently as candidates in previous elections (*Seddon*, 2015). The policy focus of her campaign was the dilapidated state of the Belarusian economy (*Euroradio*, 2015). In her criticisms of the regime, she pointed to many worrying economic trends. For instance, as a result of the fiscal and political volatility in neighboring states, the Belarusian ruble had lost more than 30% of its value since the beginning of 2015, leading to substantial inflation and increasing hardship. In addition, the Belarusian economy, which has long surprised skeptics with its steady growth rate, has been contracting since 2013 (*Foy*, 2015).⁵

¹ Well-known opposition figures, such as Mikalay Statkevich, did not campaign. Most of them had either been jailed or fled the country after the state violence that followed the 2010 presidential election. While their omission from the race deprived the opposition of leaders with experience and name recognition, none of the former opposition candidates for president had come close to defeating Lukashenko in prior elections and they would have been unlikely to defeat him in 2015 (*Kulakevich*, 2015).

² While Lukashenko did not campaign publicly, members of the opposition have alleged that he used government resources to either increase voter turnout or increase his public profile (*Viasna*, 2015).

³ Another possible reason for the change in Lukashenko's new-found independence is because of decreasing Russian largesse.

⁴ These attempts to court the West appear to have been effective, as the day after the election the European Union (EU) lifted sanctions against Belarus for four months (*Emmott and Macdonald*, 2015).

⁵ One of the primary causes of this decline has been the recent and dramatic decrease in financial support from Russia.

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