

had been anticipated by the PRD during the election campaign and denied by Medina. The president's popularity, however, remained high one year after the election: according to a May 2013 poll for the media group Corripio, three out of four Dominicans were satisfied or very satisfied with Medina's election (Newlink Research, 2013).

The PLD victory in this election has left meagre powers for the other parties, notably for the country's two other traditional forces, PRD and PRSC. As a consequence of their poor election results, these parties saw a reduction of state funds to finance their activities, which could even jeopardise their existence in the medium term.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2013.07.005>

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# The parliamentary elections in Belarus, September 2012

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 7 November 2012

Accepted 4 July 2013

## 1. Background

On 23 September 2012, Belarusians voted in their fifth post-Soviet parliamentary elections, held on schedule at the end of a full term. All elections to the legislature have taken place under the increasingly authoritarian rule of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka, frequently deprecated in the West as the last dictator in Europe, and these were the first national elections to be held since Lukashenka's own disputed re-election for a fourth term in December 2010 (Padhol and Marples, 2011; Potocki, 2011).

The bicameral National Assembly was created in 1996 to replace the unicameral Supreme Soviet following a controversial national referendum which extended the powers of the presidency at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches. The upper house, the Council of the Republic, is made up of nominees from the regions of Belarus and personal appointments by the president. In the directly elected lower chamber, the House of Representatives, deputies are almost entirely 'non-party' candidates who can be relied upon to be loyal to the authorities. No genuine opposition to Lukashenka has sat in parliament since 2004 and the House of Representatives has been

rendered a rubber-stamp body which rarely initiates its own legislation.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Electoral system

The constitution formally enshrines free, equal and direct elections by secret ballot based on universal suffrage for all citizens over the age of 18. Citizens over the age of 21 may stand for election and can be nominated by public associations (which include political parties), labour collectives or individuals. The 110 deputies in the House of Representatives represent single-mandate constituencies who are elected under a majoritarian system for four-year terms. According to the electoral code, candidates are successfully elected in the first round if they have secured more than half the ballots cast and if more than half the eligible voters have participated. If necessary, a run-off is held within two weeks between the two leading candidates, with a lower turnout requirement of 25%. In 2008, all deputies were elected in the first round.

Despite minor amendments to the electoral code in 2010, which improved access to state media during election campaigns and allowed candidates legally to use their own

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<sup>1</sup> Between 2008 and 2012, parliament itself initiated and drafted only one law: On the Protection of Animals.

funding for campaigning in addition to financing from the state budget, there are still provisions open to potential abuse by the authorities. Previous parliamentary elections in 2004 (White and Korosteleva-Polglase, 2006) and 2008 (Silitski, 2009) have demonstrated that registration procedures, the conduct of the campaign and vote counting are not guaranteed to be free, fair or transparent. Furthermore, new amendments to the Law on Political Parties, the Criminal Code and the Law on Mass Events introduced in 2011 hamper the ability of opposition candidates to call public meetings or to accept foreign contributions.

### 3. Parties

In the wake of a campaign of arrests, imprisonment and harassment of politicians and activists by the authorities in the aftermath of the 2010 presidential poll, there was a lively debate about the nature of the opposition's participation in these elections. The creation of a Coalition of the Six was intended to formulate a joint plan of action between the leading opposition movements: the Belarusian Left Party (BLP) 'Fair World',<sup>2</sup> the civic initiatives Tell the Truth and Movement 'For Freedom', the United Civic Party (UCP), the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and the unregistered party Belarusian Christian Democracy (BCD). However no common platform was agreed. As in 2004 and 2008, the opposition pursued a variety of strategies.

An important step in the electoral process in Belarus is the formation of election commissions, who conduct the vote count and tabulate results. Changes to the electoral code in 2010 specified that one third of the representatives should come from political parties or NGOs. On the 6301 commissions at the all-important first-tier precinct level, opposition parties were almost completely excluded. Out of 68,945 positions available nationwide, only 61 nominees from opposition parties were selected (Central Election Commission of Belarus, 2012). The precinct election commissions were dominated by pro-government bodies such as the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) and public association Belaya Rus, as well as loyal parties including the Communist Party of Belarus (CPB), Republican Party of Labour and Justice (RPLJ) and Belarusian Agrarian Party (BAP).

Of the 15 political parties officially registered in Belarus, nine succeeded in getting candidates onto the ballot papers. The largest number (69) came from the misleadingly named Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Although it styles itself as an opposition party, it does not work with other opposition groups and is tolerated by the authorities in order to provide the semblance of competition. Thirty-one candidates from four broadly pro-government parties also stood in the election, as detailed in Table 1.

The number of candidates from opposition parties who succeeded in registering increased significantly compared to 2008, almost doubling to over 100. This can be attributed

in part to a simplification in nomination procedures permitting parties to propose candidates in constituencies even where the party did not maintain its own regional offices. Nevertheless, almost a fifth of the candidates nominated by opposition parties were not registered by the authorities, often for trivial reasons. These included accusations of invalid signatures from those seeking nomination through citizen initiative groups or minor irregularities on income declaration forms.

The BCD, the civic initiative European Belarus, a number of youth organisations and some smaller opposition parties<sup>3</sup> urged an active boycott of the election from the outset, arguing it was morally wrong to put forward candidates while there were still a dozen political prisoners in Belarusian jails. Meanwhile the BPF and UCP nominated 66 candidates between them and sought to take advantage of the opportunity to campaign, but agreed to withdraw their candidates at the last minute to protest the unfair election process and the detainment of political prisoners.

Other parties, such as the BLP 'Fair World' and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) (BSDP(H)), chose to participate fully in the election. The public association Movement 'For Freedom' lent its support to several independent candidates as well as to other individuals standing on party platforms which shared the movement's goals. Initially, the leadership of the civic initiative Tell the Truth advocated a boycott, but 13 of their activists in the regions opted nonetheless to stand for election as independents.

As at previous elections, the largest group of candidates (over 150) were those not affiliated to any party, the majority of whom could be relied on to be loyal to the government. These candidates were often nominated by labour collectives and supported through signature collection, as well as being members of pro-government bodies such as Belaya Rus. After the withdrawal of opposition candidates late in the campaign, 16 of the 110 constituencies saw a single candidate contest the election unopposed.

### 4. Campaign

The election campaign itself was extremely quiet and practically invisible in most of the country. National news was dominated by the technicalities of the election and its smooth administration. The Central Election Commission (CEC) itself received more coverage than any actual candidates, who were all but ignored. The CEC chose to censor any opposition materials or broadcasts advocating a boycott of the elections. Several opposition candidates found that they were denied the access to local broadcast and print media to which they were legally entitled. Those who could record broadcasts had no way of knowing when they would actually be shown. The authorities briefly detained the administrators of several social media groups in Belarus, threatening the online space in which the opposition was usually relatively free to function. Some public

<sup>2</sup> Until it changed its name in 2009, the Belarusian Left Party 'Fair World' was called the Party of Communists of Belarus (PCB). This is not to be confused with the pro-government Communist Party of Belarus (CPB).

<sup>3</sup> These were the Conservative Christian Party-Belarusian Popular Front (CCP-BPD), the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada (BDSH) and the Greens.

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