The Presidential Election in Belarus, October 2015

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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 (Dawish 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 personlistic 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, Lawson, and Marsh 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; 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).

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.

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 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).

Substance
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).[4]

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.[5]

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.

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[4] 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).

[5] 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).

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).

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.[6] 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).[7]

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 2014). 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).

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

[7] 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).

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).[8] The labor market had weakened substantially as well. For perhaps the first time since Lukashenko won election in 1994, unemployment has been a serious voter concern. These concerns are further heightened because the pronounced weakness of the Belarusian economy has seriously limited the president's ability to provide voters with material benefits.

While domestic circumstances might have seemed favorable to a change in leadership, public support for Lukashenko was much higher than it was before the 2006 and 2011 elections (Economist 2006; Seddon 2015). His approval rating among voters grew from 39% in July 2015 to 46% in September 2015 (Brown 2015). Another indication of public support is the relatively small size and paucity of pre-election protests (Charter'97 2015). This could partially be the result of public dissatisfaction with the alternatives (Ayers 2015). The opposition never rallied behind Korotkevich. In fact, several leaders of the opposition openly questioned whether she was actually acting in concert with the regime (Wilson 2015). They also argued that instead of supporting her, Belarusians should boycott the elections (Astapenia 2015). This infighting among opposition leaders, while common in past elections, might have further convinced voters that Lukashenko represented the only real choice for president.

Results

By noon on election day, voter turnout had eclipsed the 50% mark, ensuring that the election was valid under Belarusian law (Vybory 2015). Table 1 presents the voter turnout rates for Belarus' six regions and the city of Minsk. More than 87.2% of eligible voters eventually cast a ballot at one of 6,000 locations in or outside of Belarus.

Table 2 presents the election results. It shows that 83.49% of voters cast their ballots for Alexander Lukashenko, who easily won a fifth term in office.[9] Both Lukashenko's total level of support and margin of victory (79.07%) were larger than in any previous election. Having served in office for twenty-one years, Lukashenko will continue in his position for at least another five. The table also shows that Korotkevich finished with a meager 4.42% of the vote. More voters cast a ballot marked 'against all' candidates than for her or for the two other challengers.

These results were challenged by independent elections observers, human rights organizations, and civil society leaders both during and after the voting. Among other things, these monitoring groups alleged that ballots were incorrectly counted, that monitoring was obstructed, and that individuals were coerced into voting for Lukashenko

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

[9] Table 4 in the online appendix presents Lukashenko's vote share across regions.

(Anonymous 2015; BBC 2015; Right to Choose 2015). By the time the polls closed, Belarusians had registered approximately 1,000 reports about incidents of election fraud across the country (Electby 2015).[10]

While there is little doubt that the election results were manipulated to some extent, most Belarusian and international experts would agree that if free elections had been held, Lukaeshenko still would have won.[11] Despite this, a largely unorganized protest took place in Minsk shortly after the polls closed. Depending on the news source, the number of participants ranged from a few dozen to several hundred. The protesters chanted pro-Belarusian slogans and waved both EU flags and the white-red-white flags used by Belarus from 1991-1994. The protesters quickly dispersed, though, when confronted by the police. Only one protester was apprehended and he was subsequently released.[12] The presidential election ended about as tamely as it had begun.

Effects

The short-term effects of the election are minimal. Since Lukashenko retains his position, Belarusians should not expect major changes in domestic or international policy. Perhaps more importantly, they also should not expect immediate intervention from Russia. While the Kremlin would most likely prefer a more pliant partner in Belarus, they are unlikely to seriously oppose Lukashenko's rule so long as he continues his lukewarm relations with the West.

The long-term effects of the election are severe. The opposition lost another opportunity to unite against the incumbent leader, the public lost another opportunity to experience a free election, and Belarus lost another opportunity to change its course. Though perhaps not uncertain, the political future of the country is as hazy as ever.

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[10] Many complaints about the election focused on the early voting returns. A record 36% of all eligible voters cast their ballots before the official election date and Lukashenko's support among this group of voters was very high (Charnysh 2015). Critics of the regime allege that this is because it easy for the regime to manipulate the early voting process. For example, independent media reported that university administrators and supervisors at state-run companies pressured students and workers, respectively, to cast their ballot early and in favor of the incumbent. These anecdotes are in line with the larger literature on electoral fraud that suggests heavy manipulation of early voting in authoritarian regimes.

[11] See Simpser (2014) for a discussion of why a candidate might engage in fraud even if they are confident of winning, as Lukashenko seems to have been.

[12] In contrast, the protest that followed the 2010 presidential election drew thousands of participants, many of whom attempted to resist security forces (Radio Free Europe 2015). As a result, hundreds were arrested, including seven candidates for president (Kulakevich 2015).

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TABLES

Table 1: 2015 Presidential Election Voter Turnout

Location	Voter Turnout
Belarus	87.22%
City of Minsk	74.38%
Brest Region	90.39%
Gomel Region	90.44%
Grodno Region	88.48%
Mogilev Region	90.96%
Minsk Region	89.66%
Vitebsk Region	91.08%

Note: Voter turnout percentages come from the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus (CEC 2015). Data retrieved on October 11, 2015.

Table 2: Results of the 2015 Presidential Election in Belarus

Candidate	Votes	Vote Share
Alexander Lukashenko	5,102,478	83.47%
Tatiana Korotkevich	271,426	4.44%
Sergei Gaidukevich	201,945	3.30%
Nikolai Ulakhovich	102,131	1.67%
Against All	386,225	6.32%
Invalid Votes	48,808	0.80%
Total Votes	6,113,013	
Registered Electorate	7,008,682	
Turnout	87.22%	

Note: Election results come from the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus (Belta 2015c). Data retrieved on October 21, 2015.

APPENDIX

Table 3: Valid signatures for registered initiative groups

Candidate	Collected Signatures
Alexander Lukashenko	1,753,380
Sergei Gaidukevich	139,877
Sergey Kalyakin	0
Tatiana Korotkevich	105,278
Anatoly Lebedko	0
Zhanna Romanovskaya	0
Viktor Tereshchenko	6,699
Nikolai Ulakhovich	149,819

Note: Collected signature counts come from the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus (Belta 2015c). Data retrieved on October 12, 2015.

Table 4: Lukashenko Vote Share Across Regions

Location	Voter Turnout
Belarus	83.47%
City of Minsk	65.69%
Brest Region	86.22%
Gomel Region	87.79%
Grodno Region	85.89%
Mogilev Region	88.30%
Minsk Region	85.74%
Vitebsk Region	87.28%

Note: Voter turnout percentages come from the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus (CEC 2015). Data retrieved on October 27, 2015.