Commentary
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Belarus Prepares for a Transitional Election

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Summary

The upcoming Belarusian presidential election on 26 January 2025 will occur facing the aftershocks of the 2020 election, which disrupted domestic trends and triggered geopolitical shifts. The ongoing campaign looks interesting not because of any intrigue about its outcome, but rather because of President Lukashenka's messages regarding his strategic priorities.

On 26 January, Belarus will hold the next presidential election. Unlike the previous electoral campaign in the summer of 2020, this one has not attracted as much media and political attention inside the country and internationally. Many representatives of the Belarusian opposition and Western governments have already stated that they do not assess the current elections as satisfactorily competitive, free, and fair and, therefore, will not recognize their results.

On its part, the Belarusian government does not seem to be concerned about Western reactions to the election outcomes and the prospects for their international recognition. As of 16 January, Minsk has not extend an official invitation to observe the presidential campaign in the country to the key Western election observation body, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE ODIHR). In 2020, ODIHR did not deploy an observation mission to Belarus either, but it was the international body's own decision. Back then, the Belarusian government sent an official invitation, yet ODIHR declined, citing COVID-19 risks, as well as the fact that the invitation arrived too late.

> The presidential elections on 9 August 2020 became the most consequential electoral campaign in Belarus's history, which produced dramatic and lasting implications for the country's trajectory.

Most importantly, it disrupted the liberalizing trend that had progressed in domestic politics and civil society for half a decade before 2020. It also led to an unprecedented crisis in Belarus's relations with the West. The latter's policy of maximum political pressure and economic sanctions after the 2020 elections resulted in a logistical and economic semi-blockade of Belarus and the demolition of many business, cultural, humanitarian, and personal ties that had underpinned Belarusian-Western relations for a long time.

That, in turn, precipitated an even closer integration between Minsk and Moscow, which remained essentially the only geopolitical game in town for the Lukashenka government. Ukraine's and the West's denial to continue using Minsk as the venue for peace talks between Kyiv, Moscow, and Donbas separatists following the 2020 presidential elections additionally propelled the Belarusian-Russian integration process. To somehow diversify the country's foreign economic and diplomatic relations, Minsk started making concerted efforts to reorient its diplomatic and business activities toward the East, where China is now seen as the key strategic partner.

The 2025 presidential campaign is unfolding in the shadow of these lasting developments. Besides the geopolitical and domestic ramifications, the dramatic events following the August 2020 ballot appear to have decided the form and direction of the constitutional reforms in Belarus. The 26 January vote will become the first presidential election since the constitutional referendum of February 2022, which altered the Belarusian political system by introducing a new, highly powerful institution—the All-Belarusian People's Assembly. That constitutional novelty, in effect, launched the systemic transition from the super-presidential model of 1996–2022 to a potentially more decentralized one, which future developments will delineate.

> Belarus's ongoing transition and its long-term effects are not negated by incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka's continued position at the top of this system.

At the moment, some constitutional novelties—including the All-Belarusian People's Assembly—remain largely dormant, but they might start playing bigger roles depending on the policies the Lukashenka government will prioritize after election day. Therefore, the ongoing presidential campaign looks interesting not because of any intrigue about its outcome, which does not exist, but rather because of Lukashenka's messages regarding his strategic priorities while on the campaign trail.

At least four priorities appear to stand out, based on analyzing the speeches Lukashenka made over the last several weeks and his official election platform document. In the introduction to his election platform, Lukashenka proclaims the main achievement of his three-decade-long rule is that Belarus has successfully established and enrooted itself as a sovereign state. He then asserts that today's main goal is to prevent the country from "being torn apart." Sovereignty is also the central theme of his recent major speeches. In one of them, he declared that "our country will always be a sovereign state, irrespective of any developments and trends in the international arena" and promised to take steps to that end in the next five years.

His other three priority issues appear to be areas where he intends to make those steps. First among them is security. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Lukashenka has repeatedly opined that avoiding direct involvement in the hostilities between Russia and Ukraine should be Minsk's main strategy. Now he goes even further by saying that Belarus might collapse as a state if it is dragged into the war. He also stresses the need to ensure that Belarusians do not die for others' interests.

> The incumbent's other key and repetitive line regards a generational shift in Belarusian politics, which indicates the ongoing transition that Lukashenka intends to implement under his watch within his seventh, and likely last, presidential term.

If his latest statements can serve as a guide, he foresees a massive generational change at all levels of government, including in regional politics.

The final pressing matter that the incumbent underlines on the campaign trail is the unity of the Belarusian nation, which clearly became an existential challenge for the country in light of the 2020 elections and the protests that followed. Lukashenka's election platform promises to start "building the bridges of mutual understanding" with those Belarusians who hold opposing views. It also declares that "dialogue, not confrontation," should be a way forward.

Opposition circles and many in the West obviously do not believe that all these promises, especially the latter one, will come true any time soon. The increasingly difficult geopolitical realities around Belarus, however, give grounds to expect that Minsk will try to make at least some conciliatory moves toward its political opponents. Belarus and its people will only benefit if the government and opposition, as well as foreign actors, can treat Belarusian sovereignty, security, and political evolution strategically rather than focusing only on their insurmountable disagreements today.

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