Commentary
January 30, 2025

Belarus's "Calmest Elections" Hold Potential to Pave the Way for De-Escalation with the West

Yauheni Preiherman

Originally published in the Eurasia Daily Monitor

Summary

Alyaksandr Lukashenka has won the seventh consecutive presidential term. The election received an overwhelmingly negative response from Western states, except the United States, where the Trump administration has not issued any official statement yet. Minsk, on its part, makes its interest in unfreezing cooperation with the West emphatically clear. Both Belarus and the West should consider reality-checking their relations and possible ways forward after five years of free fall.

On 26 January, Belarus held the seventh presidential election in its sovereign history. For the seventh consecutive time, the Central Election Commission (CEC) has named the incumbent, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the winner. This prolongs his already thirty-year-long presidential tenure by another five years.

According to the preliminary official results of the national ballot, Lukashenka celebrated a landslide victory with 86.82 percent of the votes. The other four candidates received 8.83 percent, with the Communist Party representative, Siarhei Syrankou, in second place at 3.21 percent. Another 3.6 percent of the voters cast their ballots against all candidates. Voter turnout was registered at 85.7 percent. The CEC plans to announce the final election results on 3 February.

By all accounts, this campaign starkly contrasted with the mass protests and heightened global attention of the previous presidential election in 2020. It is hard to disagree with the Belarusian Minister of Internal Affairs Ivan Kubrakou, who called it the "calmest election in Belarus's history". The police have not reported a single serious election-

related incident anywhere across the country, and only minor administrative offenses were recorded. The CEC Chairman, Ihar Karpenka, stated that no complaints had been filed by either observers or individual citizens.

> These official Belarusian assessments notwithstanding, most Western states and institutions refuse to recognize the election as free, fair, and in line with international standards.

Some, including the governments of Poland, Estonia, and the European Parliament, announced their non-recognition position even before the vote started. A day after the election, the European Union, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom issued a joint statement calling the election a "sham". They asserted that the vote took place "in a climate of ongoing repression, marked by a clampdown on civil society, arbitrary detentions, and restrictions on genuine political participation," inferring the illegitimacy of the results.

The joint statement also accused Minsk of violating its international commitments by inviting the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE ODIHR) to observe the election only 10 days before the vote. OSCE ODIHR has decision-making and logistical procedures "that [commence] several months before election day," making it nearly impossible to appoint and deploy a mission of international observers at such short notice. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, however, claims that OSCE ODIHR declined the invitation on political, rather than logistical, grounds and "under the influence of some of [the joint statement's] co-signers". Additionally, Minsk accused the co-signers of "deliberately twist[ing] the facts and [not taking] into account the objective reality in Belarus and the world."

> Notably, the joint statement did not include a signature from the United States.

Just days before leaving office, then Secretary of State Anthony Blinken denounced the still-to-come vote, stating that Washington "joins many of European allies in assessing that elections cannot be credible" under the existing circumstances. The Trump administration, however, has not yet issued any public statements on the election results. One potential explanation may be the necessity for the State Department to address certain other priorities while it is in the transition phase. In this case, a

statement on the outcomes of the Belarusian presidential election may not be expected until acting officials are less pressed for time as they focus on achieving urgent priorities.

An alternative hypothesis for the absence of a statement on the Belarusian presidential elections may be connected to the release of a U.S. citizen from Belarusian prison and remarks made by Lukashenka on election day during a press conference for over four hours while voting was still underway. In his remarks, Lukashenka reiterated the official line that the series of recent releases of inmates, whom Western states qualify as political prisoners, does not aim to send any signals to the West about Minsk's willingness to de-escalate tensions and start diplomatic engagement. He also mentioned, however, that several foreign governments had contacted Minsk with requests regarding their imprisoned nationals. In Lukashenka's words, the Belarusian government "hears them" and is ready to conduct a direct dialogue and find solutions. At the same time, Lukashenka inferred that the United States should simply abstain from issuing any statements on the election.

Several hours later, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that U.S. citizen Anastasia Nuhfer had been released from Belarusian prison after being detained in December 2024. This announcement was issued as a post on X crediting "[t]hanks to [U.S. President Donald Trump's] leadership" and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Christopher W. Smith for securing Nuhfer's release. Rubio underlined that Minsk made the move unilaterally. Hence, it appears likely that during the behind-the-scenes contacts, Minsk may have agreed to free the U.S. citizen in exchange for Washington's silence on the Belarusian vote.

Whether this initial discreet engagement between Minsk and the Trump administration can help pave the way for further de-escalatory steps in West-Belarus relations remains to be seen. Lukashenka made Belarus's interest in unfreezing cooperation with the West emphatically clear. Similarly, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry stressed that the normalization of relations "could be beneficial ... to solve common problems in the European region and the world". They conditioned any future engagement, however, by the need to stop interfering in each other's domestic affairs.

Many Western governments will likely disagree with the methodology that the Belarusian offer implies. There is growing understanding in both Minsk and Western capitals, however, that the confrontational spiral that has shaped their relations in recent years does not serve anyone's interests and only creates unintended consequences.

> Therefore, irrespective of how fundamentally Belarus and the West disagree on the outcomes of the latest election or other issues, both are interested in reality-checking their relations and possible ways forward after five years of free fall.

It is therefore important to acknowledge possible assumptions in Belarusian state behaviour, which may or may not adjust, positively or negatively, under the continuing Lukashenka government in response to new realities in the international environment.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations