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DON'T EXPECT A MINSK SPRING

Michael Meyer-Resende, Democracy Reporting International

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After the war in Georgia last month, geopolitics is returning fast to the heart of foreign affairs in Europe. In this context Belarus' upcoming Parliamentary elections on 28 September have become more interesting than past elections under President Lukashenko, which were never remotely competitive.

Lukashenko appears to be interested in some warming of relations with the West, rather than relying exclusively on Russian backing. As a condition for better relations, the EU wants to see an improvement in the conduct of elections. They were encouraged when Lukashenko started the electoral process by pardoning three political prisoners in August, but this appears to have been the end rather than the beginning of an opening towards more democracy.

“Elections are not decided on election day only”, is what international observers rightly stress when monitoring elections around the world. The best election day is of little value if there has been no free campaigning, while the most competitive campaigning cannot make an election democratic if there is no transparent and honest accounting of votes, as recently demonstrated in Kenya and Nigeria.

Looking at the Belarusian election process until now, one wonders if it is not already spoilt. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), whose observation report will be keenly read by the EU, has published interim reports, which are anything but encouraging. An election may be taking place, but there is no visible competition going on. “Extremely low key throughout Belarus” is how the OSCE politely describes the campaign.

What it means concretely to silence an opposition, can be seen in the media monitoring data of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, state media has so far focused almost exclusively on the President and the work of the election commission. By 5 September, when the campaign was officially in full swing, State TV’s Nashi Nosti news programme had given only 2.7% of its coverage to “anonymous opposition and anonymous parties”. An opposition request to have televised debates was rejected. Candidates have the right to five minutes of free airtime, but this is broadcast when most people are at work. Private media, which are mainly internet-based, are more vibrant, but only reach few.

The suffocation of political life can also be seen in the numbers: On average less than three candidates are competing for a seat in parliament, and a fifth of nominated candidates have been rejected by the election administration. Some of these were considered to be promising opposition candidates. To this must be added a wide range of technical problems. For example, voters can cast their ballot in the five days prior to the official election day. Five days to stuff ballots, because the boxes are not sealed in this period and nobody records how many people voted each day.

Most worrying of all, no assurances have been given that observers can monitor the counting of votes or aggregation of results from different polling stations. As Stalin infamously noted about these vital aspects of the process: “It does not matter who votes. What matters is who counts.” The Belarusian authorities claim that there is more transparency, because the opposition has been allowed to appoint more poll workers than before. More maybe, but they are still only 0.06% of all polling station officials, according to the OSCE.

Nevertheless, it is possible that the opposition’s share of seats will increase, which is not difficult since it had none in the outgoing Parliament. However, any seats for the opposition will likely be a result of selection, rather than election, in order to give an image of greater pluralism. Lacking any transparency, the electoral arrangements are perfectly suited to produce any result that may be considered politically expedient.

The EU should resist the temptation to trade its soft power as a promoter of democracy for geopolitical short-term gains. It should not apply lower standards to a neighbouring country than to the rest of the world. A loss of the EU’s democratic credibility in the East would be worse than some more years of frosty relations with Belarus.