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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Belarus to Vote for President Dec. 19

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MINSK — The Belarussian parliament on Tuesday decided to set the nation's next presidential election for December, marking the start of a campaign that Russia will likely try to influence.

Belarus' fractured opposition has failed to agree on a single candidate to challenge President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus with an iron hand since 1994, stifling dissent and free media.

Lukashenko, however, is now facing a new challenge in the Dec. 19 election — a widening rift with Belarus' main sponsor, Russia.

"Open confrontation between Lukashenko and the Kremlin could make it more difficult for Lukashenko to win the vote this time," said Alexander Klaskovsky, an independent Minsk-based political analyst.

Russia in June partially cut natural gas supplies to Belarus for three days over its debt for previous deliveries, finally forcing its neighbor to pay.

Klaskovsky and other analysts said public discontent over rising consumer prices could erode Lukashenko's support base and affect the vote.

In addition to that, Russian television stations recently have run several documentaries containing fierce criticism of Lukashenko and exposing his alleged abuses — a propaganda barrage that is likely to intensify in the coming months.

Russia has not yet cast its support behind any of the Belarussian opposition leaders, but observers expect the Kremlin to make its preferences clear later.

Lukashenko struck a conciliatory note Tuesday during a meeting with the Russian chief of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Moscow-dominated security grouping of ex-Soviet nations that includes Belarus. "Even though the Russian leadership has kept scratching us ... that hasn't enraged us against it," Lukashenko said, Itar-Tass reported.

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