

Lukashenko Derides 'Cowards' During Parliamentary Vote

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Lukashenko and his son Nikolai leaving a Minsk voting booth Sunday. **Vasily Fedosenko**

MINSK — Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko called opposition leaders "cowards" after they urged people to go mushroom hunting rather than vote in parliamentary elections Sunday.

"They are cowards who have nothing to say to the people," Lukashenko said after casting his ballot, his 7-year-old son by his side, at a Minsk polling station where an orchestra turned out to play Sunday.

He also warned that calm would not last if the opposition mounted a protest.

"The main show here, as you understand, always begins after the elections, therefore anything can happen, although of course, God forbid that it does," he said. "All sorts of political nonsense always occurs here after the results are announced."

The opposition had hoped to use this election to fill 110 seats in parliament to build support, but 33 out of 35 candidates from the United Civil Party were barred from television, while the state-owned press refused to publish their election programs.

"We are calling on voters to ... ignore and boycott this electoral farce," said party leader Anatoly Lebedko. His party released a YouTube video suggesting voters could make better use of the day by hunting for mushrooms than voting.

The other party that boycotted the vote was the Belarussian Popular Front.

About 40 candidates from communist and leftist groups critical of Lukashenko still ran, but they weren't expected to make it into the parliament, which has been fully occupied by government loyalists since the last three opposition members lost their seats in 2004.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe fielded 330 observers for Sunday's vote, but two monitors from the OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly were denied entry to Belarus without explanation.

About 28 percent of eligible voters had cast their ballots during the week ahead of the election, taking part in early voting that was strongly promoted by the authorities.

An Australian television journalist was detained at the Minsk airport on Friday by authorities, who confiscated his camera, computer and all the material he had gathered during a week of reporting before the vote. The journalist, Amos Roberts of Australian SBS TV, left Belarus on Saturday, but he left behind his equipment and it was not known whether it would be returned.

(AP, Reuters)

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