

# Belarus' Lukashenko Is a Shoo-In for His Seventh Election as President

The former collective farm manager has learned his lesson from the 2020 election and is expected to stand unopposed apart from a few handpicked strawmen.

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A woman walks past a poster showing presidential candidates in Minsk during the 2025 Belarusian presidential election. **Vladimir Smirnov / TASS**

Belarusians go to the polls this weekend to vote in a presidential election that is almost certain to see incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko returned to office for a seventh term.

The country was rocked by the largest mass protests since independence in the massively falsified previous elections in August 2020, where Lukashenko won by a landslide according to the official tally, but lost decisively to Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana

Tsikhanouskaya, according to the few rebel polling stations that released their actual vote tallies. The protest continued for the rest of the year, until the freezing winter weather reduced the size of the crowds to the point where Belarus' security services could finally reclaim control of the streets.

The former collective farm manager has learned his lesson and is expected to stand unopposed in these elections, other than a few handpicked strawmen to lend the election a veneer of legitimacy. The Lukashenko regime has been studiously running a [carrot-and-stick election campaign](#), boosting minimum wages and pensions for the employees of state-owned enterprises — Lukashenko's core supporters — but at the same time, cracking down and making a string of arrests of anyone in the country likely to protest at the fixed nature of the election.

Most of the opposition figures from the 2020 election have either been jailed or fled the country into self-imposed exile, including Tsikhanouskaya, who now lives in Lithuania with her children. Her husband Syarhey Tsikhanouski languishes in a Belarusian jail along with an estimated 1,300 other political prisoners, according to the Viasna Human Rights Center.

### **Farmer to president**

Lukashenko has now been in office for 30 years and was first elected in 1996, when he ran on an anti-corruption platform and won the election — a rare example of a change of guard amongst the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. In almost all of the 15 newly minted republics, the leadership was taken over in 1991 by whoever was running the former Soviet Socialist Republic at the time and in most countries that leader stayed on as president for the following decade or longer.

However, once in office Lukashenko rapidly consolidated his grip on power and later changed the 1996 constitution to remove the two-term time limit, effectively making himself president for life, if he should so choose.

He has talked of leaving his job, under Russian pressure to quit and hand over to fresh blood. Last year he beefed up the All-Belarusian People's Assembly ([ABPA](#)), a formerly purely consultative body, and gave it real constitutional powers. Analysts believe he may step down but take up leadership of this body as a way of fulfilling his pledge to leave, but in effect remain in power. He also appears to be grooming his son Kolya to take over from him when he eventually does retire.

### **Carrot campaign**

The state has been handing out benefits to loyal voters in the form of wage hikes and bigger pensions. The main beneficiaries are his ultra loyal security forces, high-ranking officials and state sector leadership, which the regime also uses as a political tool to monitor and control the population.

Just before the voting begins, Lukashenko ordered the release of another 23 political prisoners on the eve of the poll, according to a government press release on Jan. 18.

This was the ninth round of prisoner releases over the last year, in show of public leniency.

Altogether some 230 political prisoners have been released over the past year as part of an effort to paint Lukashenko as the benevolent leader, but none of the top opposition leaders that presented a real challenge to his rule in the 2020 elections — especially [Viktar Babaryka](#), [Siarhey Tsikhanouski](#) or [Maria Kalesnikava](#) — have been released.

One of the few pluses Lukashenko has to offer has been a consumer boom in the last three years, as the spill-over of the Kremlin's massive military spending leaks across the border to Belarus' myriad industrial factories.

The economy grew by 4% in 2024, while real disposable household incomes were up by 9.5% and real wages climbed by a whopping 12%. As of November 2024, the average wage exceeded 2,200 Belarusian rubles (\$673), a relatively high wage in the CIS. All in all, average wages are up by a quarter since the start of the war in Ukraine as salaries have been pushed up by the [same labor shortage that Russia is suffering from](#). Unlike Russia, inflation was a modest 5.2%, staying within the 6% cap set by the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus (NBRB). And exports to Russia are booming, expected to reach some \$50 billion for all of 2024.

While there is little in the way of private enterprise or domestic rags-to-riches stories (outside of the [once flourishing IT sector](#)), in a trade off, Lukashenko has managed to maintain stable Soviet-era “cradle-to-grave” support and services. This is the basis of his support amongst the working class factory workers.

However, the outlook for 2025 is not as good, as Russia's [economy is cooling](#) as the war distortions of the economy begin to take their toll, which will drag Belarus down with it. Belarus' economy remains heavily subsidized by access to cheap Russian energy.

## **Stick campaign**

The crushing repression that came into force following the 2020 demonstration has been increased and the unreformed KGB (Belarus is the only former Soviet country that has not renamed the Soviet-era security service) has been running a campaign of intimidation.

Following the mass protests, all of the independent press has been shuttered and what little tolerance for liberalism has been crushed. Since 2020, the regime has eliminated all but four loyal political parties and liquidated over 1,800 civil society organizations.

Lukashenko came very close to being ousted following a disastrous speech to blue-collar workers at the MZKT factory, which makes military trucks, in August 2020. Nominally his most loyal supporters, the truck factory workers booed and heckled an obviously disconcerted Lukashenko, who rapidly left the plant. It could have been his [Ceausescu moment](#) until Russian President Vladimir Putin intervened and said Russia would provide Minsk with “what it needs” to maintain order — widely understood as military force.

Since then, Lukashenko, who remains deeply unpopular, has relied almost entirely on the support of the security services to maintain his grip on power.

## **Candidates**

Early voting opened on Jan. 21 as students and government sector workers were bused to

polling stations. They have to choose between Lukashenko and the four other candidates — Aleh Haidukevich, Alexander Khizhnyak and Siarhei Syrankou — that have been granted permission to run in the race. International election observers such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) have not been invited to observe the election.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Rapporteur Ryszard Petru said the election lacks debate, a free choice and transparency and so “cannot and will not meet internationally recognised standards of fairness and legitimacy.”

A Chatham House Belarus Initiative poll suggests the number of people planning to vote in these elections has halved compared to 2020, The Kyiv Independent reports. The pro-government polls predict that 61% of respondents intend to participate in the Jan. 26 vote, whereas only 11% of the protest-oriented audience are willing to cast their votes.

In something of a political gamble, Lukashenko has allowed a fourth candidate, [Hanna Kanapatskaya](#), to be included on the ballot as the token “real” opposition candidate in an effort to allow those disillusioned with the Lukashenko regime to blow off some steam and to legitimise the elections.

Kanapatskaya continues to position herself as a proponent of “national-democratic values” and unexpectedly won the support of the democratic arm of the Belarusian Communist Party. However, while not a classic stool pigeon, she is also unlikely to become the epicenter of a political challenge to Lukashenko’s authority.

### **Opposition in exile powerless to act**

The opposition in exile has decided to not act in these elections, preferring to continue its campaign of putting pressure on European allies to step up the heat on Lukashenko’s regime. And his attempt to hang on to power has been made easier by [increased infighting](#) amongst the opposition leaders that has been growing all year.

Belarus’ opposition, led in exile by Tsikhanouskaya, are becoming increasingly frustrated by their lack of progress and have divided over what strategy is best to effect the release of political prisoners. Tsikhanouskaya wants to stick to the “all or none” tactics of getting Europe’s help in forcing Lukashenko’s hand.

Others prefer a “salami slicing” approach of trading sanctions relief in exchange for prisoner releases — something the Lukashenko regime has also been encouraging. Opposition veteran Zianon Pazniak has publicly condemned the approaches of Tsikhanouskaya’s cabinet towards isolating Lukashenko’s regime.

Infighting among exiled leaders has intensified to the point where Tsikhanouskaya’s role as leader has come into focus, but so far her prominence on the international stage has left her in charge. But supporters of de-escalation in relations with Lukashenko’s regime have been unable to form a stable alliance or mount a direct challenge to Tsikhanouskaya’s leadership.

While Tsikhanouskaya’s Coordination Council has successfully increased engagement with European partners, including the Council of Europe and Polish authorities which now heads

the Council, divisions persist over strategy. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk [promised to put Belarus at the top of the list](#) during [Poland's presidency of the EU](#) that started on Jan. 1.

The opposition was also hoping to undermine Lukashenko's legitimacy with its "New Belarus Passport" scheme, which was due to be launched this month, where the government in exile issues passports to exiles. But after no partner country was willing to recognize the passports, the scheme has failed and, together with the unseemly bickering, further weakened the opposition's creditability.

The European Parliament plans to adopt a special resolution regarding the 2025 elections that is expected to condemn the falsification of these elections and call for the use of International Criminal Court (ICC) mechanisms to hold Lukashenko accountable. It will also urge EU member states to support an investigation into the situation in Belarus by the ICC.

Similar resolutions are planned to be adopted by the Polish Senate on Jan. 23-24 and PACE on Jan. 27-31.

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