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Lukashenko's Task

By Konstantin Sonin

The presidential election in Belarus this Sunday pits the hard-line incumbent Alexander Lukashenko against two opposition candidates, Alexander Kozulin and Alexander Milinkevich. At first glance, the opposition would seem to stand little chance of derailing Lukashenko's bid for another term. Modest but significant economic growth -- albeit based on Russian energy subsidies and a fortunate absence of major catastrophes -- would have given the current president an excellent chance of winning re-election even if Belarus had an independent press and the opposition had unrestricted access to the airwaves.

Kozulin and Milinkevich still have a shot, however, and the reason is Lukashenko himself. The president has been acting as though the race were still wide open. Although Lukashenko would almost certainly win in any case, his closest associates seem intent on undermining the legitimacy of his victory. To be fair, however, the Stalins and Saddams of the world would never have agreed to run in an election that was even remotely free and fair for the simple reason that they wouldn't have had the slightest chance of coming first.

Lukashenko's concerns are understandable. In the absence of a free press and independent polling agencies, he has no reliable way to gauge his own popularity. It may in fact be extremely high, but Lukashenko understands perfectly well that if his numbers were to dip for any reason, his inner circle would cover up the decline at all costs.

Having kicked out most of the foreign press corps and frightened most Belarussian journalists into submission, Lukashenko can't know for certain if the opposition actually is planning to stage a violent coup d'etat if he comes first in the voting on Sunday. Last week, the Belarussian KGB uncovered a conspiracy ostensibly aimed at paralyzing the state, but even the television journalists didn't seem particularly convinced by what they were putting on the air. Security agents who specialize in cooking up phony conspiracies probably wouldn't be of much use in preventing a real coup attempt. They'd assume it had been concocted by spooks working for the competition.

The loyalty of the Belarussian siloviki, the election commission and state television is not the issue, either. Their loyalty will depend on the number of votes Lukashenko actually receives on Sunday, regardless of what the official tally is. It's one thing to beat up an opposition presidential candidate on orders from a leader who enjoys the support of more than half the population, but it's another thing entirely to break out the billy clubs on orders from someone who lacks a strong mandate from the voters.

Lukashenko therefore faces a complicated task in the run-up to the election: to convince the Belarussian electorate that his policies are leading the country in the right direction, and in so doing to convince the bureaucrats.

For President Vladimir Putin, Sunday's election is a no-brainer. His plan of action on the Belarussian front should be simple and straightforward. If the vote is free and fair, he should recognize the result and congratulate the victor, whoever that might be. If the vote is obviously rigged, Putin should refuse to recognize the official result and call for a new election. What's so hard about that?

Konstantin Sonin is a professor at the New Economic School/CEFIR.