

# Choice in favour of practicality

Amendments to election legislation should be reasonable and to the benefit of the Belarusian people, notes President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko, at a session dedicated to the improvements to election legislation

By Vasily Kharitonov

Mr. Lukashenko reminded those present at the government meeting that, since 2000, Belarus has enjoyed four parliamentary election campaigns and a national referendum, as well as three presidential elections and elections of deputies of local councils, under the current Electoral Code. "Despite the criticisms of our opponents, the elections were carried out in accordance with the Electoral Code and were fair and open, allowing the Belarusian people to express their will. This indicates that, in general, we have developed a legal mechanism for the organisation and conduct of elections which works quite effectively," the Head of the State emphasised.

At the same time, the President believes that, like any mechanism, it must keep up to date. However, he notes, "Its improvement should not harm existing, stable institutions." Mr. Lukashenko discussed the issue with the Chairman of the Constitutional Court before the meeting, saying, "Not single legal act can exist forever without revision, since life changes dynamically. Regulations must keep pace with the rapidly changing flow of our lives. Acknowledging some change in the electoral process, we must decide whether we need particular reforms, which problems exist and how we can best tackle them."

Mr. Lukashenko gave a simple example, commenting, "Some say that we need to give public organisations the right to nominate parliamentary candidates. Firstly, we have thousands of non-governmental organisations. Secondly, we must ask what purpose this would serve. Do we have a shortage of candidates for the role of deputy? Do we lack enough candidates? In fact, we have plenty, so why make such a suggestion? Is there an ulterior motive?"

According to the President, improvements to electoral legislation should aim to ensure full realisation



New proposals taken into account at session dedicated to improving election legislation

of citizens' voting rights while resisting attempts to disrupt elections. The President believes that the current Electoral Code meets these requirements, asserting, "Our elections are held at the highest level. We should ignore biased assessments from our opponents and look at the real picture: from well-wishers and neutral observers. Some are jealous, as so many not only note the seriousness of our elections but praise the 'holiday' atmosphere on those occasions."

He continued, "We can look at the OSCE recommendations, based on its observation of the 2012 parliamentary elections. However, this does not mean that we agree with all the OSCE's approaches. We are well aware of what the OSCE wants from us, having practical experience. There are some sane comments but we need to see the subtext behind its proposals."

The President stressed that we must remember that, in Belarus, 'national legislation is improved on the basis of the interests of Belarusian society' rather than at 'someone else's order'. He added, "Traditional Belarusian wisdom states that we should 'listen to others but think with our

own brain!"

The meeting debated the future of electoral legislation, discussing proposals from the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus (CEC) and recommendations from international institutions, including the OSCE. CEC Chair Lidia Yermoshina presented her views, as did the Head of the Presidential Administration, Andrei Kobaykov, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Makei. Also contributing their opinions were the Chairman of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly, Vladimir Andreichenko, the Secretary of the Security Council, Leonid Maltsev, and the Governor of the Minsk Region, Boris Batura, among others.

Prior to the meeting with the President, improvements to electoral legislation were discussed by most of the same group of people, without a common position reached on many issues, necessitating the bringing of the debate before the Head of State. All proposals to improve electoral legislation were discussed thoroughly, with participants agreeing on the need for additional study of some issues and the preparation of

a package of documents, with draft amendments to the Electoral Code of Belarus at the centre.

Mr. Lukashenko instructed the Presidential Administration to develop co-ordinated proposals, taking into account the outcomes of the meeting, and asked the heads of Parliament to become actively involved in this process.

"We aren't aiming to change anything today, only discussing the improvement of legislation — as I promised to do after the last elections. We'll look through the suggestions and, if they suit our current needs, we'll accept them; if they don't, we won't. Some suggestions look agreeable and maybe there'll be some new ones," the President added.

Of the main issues under discussion, most participants did not support an initiative to give Republican public institutions the right to nominate parliamentary candidates. Other CEC initiatives were, in general, supported. In particular, transition to the principle of relative majority in the first round of parliamentary elections may be carried through, since this would help simplify campaigns and reduce costs. Another proposal

covered the permitted amount of personal funds for use by candidates in their campaign and establishment of funds by local parliamentary candidates.

Several proposals were connected with the election campaign, including those relating to 'boycotting', which participants agreed aims to disrupt elections. They hope to see this removed from electoral legislation. The Convention on the Standards of Democratic Elections, Electoral Rights and Freedoms in CIS Member States already prohibits the boycott of elections.

Another proposal receiving visible approval related to the production of leaflets and posters for campaigning, which it was agreed should be paid for by candidates themselves, rather than from the budget. However, electoral commissions are to pass general information to voters, so that they can understand the background of each candidate; this follows citizens' complaints about insufficient information on the eve of the election. In addition, there may be changes to local election procedures for the Council of Deputies, requiring some amendment of legislation.

## Explicit amendments made to economic legislation

**Range of economic bills to take prime place on agenda of autumn session of House of Representatives**

The meeting will be the first for the 'new' deputies to pass laws on next year's budget, explains Vladimir Andreichenko, the Chairman of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly. Speaking at a session of the House of Representatives' Council, he noted, "The second session of the convocation saw positive results and the third session will be no less busy. Economic issues will be our main priority."

In all, 52 documents await

Parliamentary consideration. The Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, Victor Guminsky, tells us that the third session includes 45 of them, with nine being considered by the Standing Committee on National Security. He notes that complex changes to the Electoral Code are expected and that, in December, amendments are likely to the Labour Code, at its second reading. Amendments are also likely relating to pricing policies and other trade issues. A draft law on energy saving is being withdrawn at the Council of Ministers' request, due to lack of time, while late

November will see parliamentary hearings on improving legislation governing the national education system.

The Council will also consider how best to prepare for the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belarus from Nazi invaders. The Ministry for Labour and Social Protection has already begun preparing a draft decree on financial assistance for veterans of the Great Patriotic War, and for certain categories of people affected by the war: about 24,000 veterans would benefit, alongside over 16,000 people with disabilities (including some war veterans).

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