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## AN ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSES AND MEDIA STATEMENTS ON THE 2024 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN BELARUS: STRENGTHENING THE HEGEMONIC AUTHORITARIAN FAÇADE<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract.** After winning his first presidential term in 1994, Alexander Lukashenko laid the foundations of a hegemonic authoritarian regime in Belarus through which he controlled the country with an iron fist. Since 1995, three referendums have been held in this former Soviet republic. As a result, Belarusians have abandoned the national symbols adopted in 1991 in favor of those used during the Soviet era. They also voted for maintaining the death penalty and reducing the powers of the Parliament, which has since been controlled exclusively by the president. In 2022, following a new popular consultation, the Belarusian population granted Alexander Lukashenko the right to rule Belarus until 2035 and to lead the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, an institution that allows him new prerogatives at the expense of the Legislature. This paper examines the evolution of the 2024 Parliamentary elections, investigating the how the election process was conducted in this former Soviet republic. The study shows that the electoral process was uncompetitive and marked by the

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state repression, cooptation, intimidation, and fear, effectively dismantling the democratic façade and strengthening the stability of the current hegemonic authoritarian regime.

**Keywords:** Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, elections, authoritarianism, totalitarianism

## Introduction

The ability of people to elect their representatives in state institutions is considered an attribute that attests to the existence of a democratic regime. Therefore, holding fair elections has become extremely important. Today, regardless of their political system, popular elections are held regularly in almost all the countries of the world.<sup>3</sup>

The dissolution of the USSR produced wide-ranging changes in all the fifteen states that emerged in the international arena. Despite requests for the emergence of democracy, “hybrid regimes appeared as one of the ubiquitous political systems in Europe, Latin America, and Africa.”<sup>4</sup>

The literature identifies several types of authoritarian regimes. A closed autocracy is a regime in which the party controlled by the authorities possesses all the power in the state, including over the Parliament, where the party holds all the seats.<sup>5</sup> Although its officials allow the organization of elections, citizens face a dilemma when participating in them as they are forced to choose whether or not to vote in favor of political parties supported by the regime.<sup>6</sup> In order to gain unquestionable popular support<sup>7</sup> during these elections, the authorities use a series of mechanisms such as: repression (which involves resorting to threats and the use of force), co-optation (offering incentives to the population to ensure loyalty to the regime),

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<sup>3</sup> Sophie Bedford, “The Election Game: Authoritarian Consolidation Processes in Belarus,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25, no. 4 (2017): 381.

<sup>4</sup> Morje Howard and Philip G. Roessler, “Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2, (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00189.x>.

<sup>5</sup> Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139176040>.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Lueders, “Electoral Responsiveness in Closed Autocracies: Evidence from Petitions in the Former German Democratic Republic,” *The American Political Science Review* 116, no. 3 (2022): 827, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001386>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

mobilization, intimidation or electoral manipulation.<sup>8</sup> Obtaining it blocks any forms of dissent (manifested in the form of opposition protests), gives the regime more internal legitimacy (among its own citizens), as well as external legitimacy (among the international community), and strengthens its stability.<sup>9</sup> Today this type of regime exists in several countries around the world, such as: Cuba (led by Miguel Díaz-Canel), Nicaragua (led by Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo as co-president), Venezuela (ruled by Nicolás Maduro), North Korea (led by the Kim dynasty), or Belarus (led by Alexander Lukashenko).

Electoral authoritarianism is a regime in which elections are systematically organized and the opposition representatives can participate.<sup>10</sup> However, human rights and freedoms are regularly violated in this regime, and government critics are harassed and arrested.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the authorities control the central election commission and the judiciary, which ensures that they can remain in power.<sup>1</sup> Russia (led by Vladimir Putin), Hungary (under the Orbán government), and Ukraine (formerly led by Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich) are just three of the world's most prominent electoral autocracies.

Hegemonic authoritarianism is a regime type in which democratic institutions exist, but only serve as a façade.<sup>12</sup> In this type of regime, elections are so rigged that opposition leaders are forced to flee into exile to avoid imprisonment and torture.<sup>12</sup> Uzbekistan (led by Shavkat Mirziyoyev), Egypt (led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi), and Azerbaijan (under the Alyev dynasty) are three examples of countries classified as hegemonic autocracies.

So far, there is a rich body of literature on the Belarusian political regime. One of the most distinguished scholars, Valerii Karbalevich, has

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<sup>8</sup> Marie-Eve Reny, "Autocracies and the Control of Societal Organizations," *Government and Opposition* 56, no. 1 (2021): 39-40, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2019.7>.

<sup>9</sup> Isiksel Turkuler and Thomas Pepinsky, "Voting in Authoritarian Elections," *American Political Science Review* (2025): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055425000085>.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781353>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

examined the early years of Belarus as an independent state.<sup>13</sup> During this time Alexander Lukashenko established a hegemonic autocracy by organizing referendums, which allowed him to consolidate power. Karbalevich showed that the Belarusian regime violates the separation of powers principle, by relying solely on presidential authority to control all state institutions and preserve his power through force.<sup>14</sup> Examining the Belarusian political regime, Matthew Frear characterized it as an adaptive authoritarianism, showing that it was able to survive as a result of Lukashenko's implementation of subtle measures through which he maintained his power. In his work, the author demonstrated that in his first presidential term, the Belarusian president used the legal framework to acquire new powers to the detriment of the Parliament and other institutions, subordinated from then on, only to him.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Frear showed that in the following years the regime became highly personalized as a result of the direct control exercised by the president over the elites, the use of coercion, and the preservation of a social consensus based on promises of stability.<sup>16</sup>

Sophie Bedford has opted to examine the elections in this former Soviet republic in the twenty-first century, focusing her attention on the attempts of the Belarusian opposition to challenge Lukashenko's control over Belarus.<sup>17</sup> In her paper, she showed that the attempts of the opposition to remove the president from power failed, with the elections being falsified by the Central Election Committee, which consolidated Lukashenko's control over the regime, and led opposition leaders to flee into exile.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, few authors have examined the evolution of the Belarusian regime after the 2020 presidential elections. Following an analysis of constitutional reform plans initiated by Belarusian authorities

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<sup>13</sup> Valerii Karbalevich, "The Belarusian Model of Transformation: Aleksandr Lukashenka's Regime and the Nostalgia for the Soviet Past: An Attempt at Analysis," *International Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 4 (2001): 7–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15579336.2001.11770236>.

<sup>14</sup> Karbalevich, "The Belarusian Model of Transformation," 9.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka: Adaptive Authoritarianism*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 52.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–144.

<sup>17</sup> Bedford, "The Election Game," 381–405.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

in the spring of 2021, Fabian Burkhardt and Jan Matti Dollbaum showed that the authorities aimed to consolidate Lukashenko's power, not hold new presidential elections as the Belarusian citizens demanded during the protests in the summer of 2020.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, examining the results of an online poll, the authors suggested that Belarusians intended to reject all the amendments proposed for approval in the February 2022 referendum.

After Alexander Lukashenko won the 1994 presidential election, he established a regime through which he sought to control the entire country. Three referendums have been held in Belarus since 1995. Through these referendums, Belarussian citizens renounced their national identity for a Russian one. The referendums also maintained the death penalty, and extended the powers of the President, who has since controlled the most important institutions of the Belarusian state: the Parliament, the Central Election Commission, the National Bank, the Constitutional Court, and the Supreme Court of Justice. Moreover, in 2022, Belarusians augmented Alexander Lukashenko's prerogatives when they granted him the right to run the country for another decade and to lead the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, a new institution that would effectively re-legitimize him as leader at their expense.

In this context, the purpose of this article is to examine the evolution of the 2024 Parliamentary elections. The main research question that this article addresses is how the 2024 electoral process was conducted. The hypothesis of this study is that the process was non-competitive, marked by the authorities' use of repression, intimidation, and fear in order to strengthen the stability of the current hegemonic authoritarian regime.

To test this hypothesis, the author uses the authoritarian consolidation theory, postulated in Anglo-Saxon literature by Sophie Bedford and Johannes Gerschewski. In her study, Sophie Bedford showed that authoritarian regimes survive due to their citizens' indifference and resignation to the occurrence of a possible change.<sup>20</sup> Johannes Gerschewski argued that a

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<sup>19</sup> Fabian Burkhardt and Jan Matti Dollbaum, "Belarus vor dem Referendum 2022: Verfassungsreform und Protestbereitschaft" [Belarus Before the 2022 Referendum: Constitutional Reform and Willingness to Protest] *Belarus-Analysen*, no. 58, (2021): 7-15, <https://doi.org/10.31205/BA.058.01>.

<sup>20</sup> Sophie Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society," *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 5 (2021): 809, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.33>.

regime's stability is maintained through interdependencies between its leader (the president) and the population.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Bedford demonstrated that the authorities strengthen the regime's stability by using three strategies: repression (employing compulsion and threats), co-optation (providing benefits to certain people to persuade them not to question it), and legitimation (convincing the population to tolerate the regime).<sup>22</sup> Belarus is a hegemonic authoritarian regime. Its citizens tolerate it because they fear that the authorities would use repression against them; because the officials offer economic stability in exchange for loyalty; and because they understand that there is no real chance of changing the regime created by Alexander Lukashenko. Over time, this understanding has given the regime legitimacy.<sup>23</sup>

The hypothesis was tested using qualitative methods of social science research, specifically, document analysis, discourse analysis and press analysis. Content analysis was applied to the document and discourse analysis methods, including an analysis of the Belarusian Constitution and laws, such as the Electoral Code and the Law of the Republic of Belarus on the All-Belarusian People's Assembly. Additionally, the analysis included the electoral programs of political parties that participated in the 2024 Belarusian parliamentary elections, including Belaya Rus, the Republican Party of Labor and Justice, the Communist Party of Belarus, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus, as well as reports issued by the Central Election Committee after the election.

Furthermore, in order to emphasize the justifications of the Belarusian authorities in favor of strengthening the stability of the hegemonic authoritarian regime, through both democratic and undemocratic means, an analysis of the speeches and press statements of the most important officials was conducted. These include the statements of Interior Minister Ivan Kubrakov, of the Chairman of the Central Election Committee Igor Karpenko, and of Andrei Dapkiunas, Permanent Representative of Belarus to international organizations in Vienna. Leaders of the political parties

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<sup>21</sup> Johannes Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes," *Democratization* 20, no. 1, (2013): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738860>.

<sup>22</sup> Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus."

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

participating in the election campaign, Andrei Basak and Oleg Gaidukevich, and the President Alexander Lukashenko, are also analyzed, both from before and during the 2024 Belarusian parliamentary elections.

To analyze the speeches and the media statements of the Belarusian authorities, the author has used the Historical Discourse Approach (HDA), one of the main methodological approaches of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is a precise analysis of spoken and written discourse. The approach, postulated in the literature by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl, entails identifying speeches and press statements, and their discursive strategies and linguistic characteristics.<sup>24</sup> This approach covers five types of discursive strategy. One type is *nomination*, which involves identifying social actors, events, processes, and actions.<sup>25</sup> *Prediction* involves their positive or negative evaluation.<sup>26</sup> *Argumentation* refers justifying and questioning claims of truth and normative correctness.<sup>27</sup> *Perspectivization* deals with positioning the speaker's point of view and expressing involvement or distance.<sup>28</sup> *Intensification* or *attenuation* refers to the hardening or softening of an illocutionary force.<sup>29</sup>

The main criteria for source-selection was their relevance to the topic of this article. In the case of the analysis of official documents, laws and reports issued by the Central Election Committee covering the issue of the Belarusian parliamentary elections were selected. To examine the electoral process and the reactions of key figures in international politics (Belarusian democratic opposition leader in exile Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Russian President Vladimir Putin), the author has also conducted a qualitative analysis of the digital

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<sup>24</sup> Ruth Wodak, "Political Discourse Analysis - Distinguishing Frontstage and Backstage Contexts: A Discourse-historical Approach" in *Discourse in Context: Contemporary Applied Linguistics Volume 3*, ed. John Flowerdew (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 522-549; Martin Reisigl, "Argumentation Analysis and the Discourse-Historical Approach: A Methodological Framework" in *Contemporary Critical Discourse Studies*, eds. Christopher Hart and Piotr Cap, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014): 67-96.

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl, "The Discourse Historical Approach (DHA)" in *Methods of Discourse Studies*, eds. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: Sage, 2016), 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

media over the course of one-month, from January 2024 when the election campaign for the parliamentary elections in Belarus began, to February 2024, when the election results were published.

The material was not collected in a specific way, thus including both news-reporting and opinion piece articles. The articles were consulted online from ten major news outlets, Belarusian, Russian, and Western ones: *Zerkalo*, *Беларусь сегодня* (*Belarus Today*), *Belarus News*, *Belta*, *Kommersant*, *Interfax*, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *PBS*, *Carnegie* and *RTE News*. These media outlets were divided into three categories, based on the nature of their content: quality newspapers, hybrid newspapers, and news agencies. Regarding categorization by news type, the first category comprises quality newspapers, which offer analytical content, and a balanced point of view aimed at educated readers. The outlets that were assigned to this category are: *Zerkalo*, *Kommersant*, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *PBS*, *Carnegie* and *RTE News*. The second category comprises hybrid newspapers that combine both lurid and quality newspaper content. *Беларусь сегодня* (*Belarus Today*) and *Belarus News* were categorized as such. Finally, the last category involves the news agencies that create their own content. *Belta* and *Interfax* were included in this category. Selected speeches and newspaper articles in digital form were analyzed through several rounds of reading.

The study is structured in seven sections. The first two sections analyze the Belarusian electoral system and the context that led to the organization of the February 2024 Parliamentary elections. The last five sections examine how the election campaign and the vote were conducted, the influence of speeches and media statements by Belarusian officials on the election, the election results, and reactions from important figures in international politics.

### **The Belarusian Electoral System: Is It Democratic?**

The Belarusian electoral system is supposedly democratic. According to the Constitution of this former Soviet republic, the lower house of the Belarusian legislature is elected for a four-year term.<sup>30</sup> The House of

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<sup>30</sup> "Konstitucija Respubliki Belarus' 1994 goda (s izmenenijami i dopolnenijami, prinjatymi na respublikanskih referendumah 24 nojabrja 1996 g., 17 oktjabrja 2004 g. i 27 fevralja



Representatives is composed of 110 members elected by citizens aged eighteen and over in direct, free, and secret votes.<sup>31</sup>

The electoral law of this former Soviet republic regulates the organization of parliamentary elections. According to this law, the 110 members of the lower house of Belarus are elected in single-member constituencies during a single round of voting.<sup>32</sup>

However, the referendum organized on February 27, 2022, brought changes to the Belarusian electoral system as the citizens voted to election deputies to the House of Representatives and local councils on a single voting day. Thus, the IX section of the Constitution entitled "Final and transitional provisions," states:

"The elections of the deputies to the House of Representatives of the eighth convocation, the deputies to local councils, and deputies to the twenty-ninth convocation are held on a single voting day, which is the last Sunday of February 2024."<sup>33</sup>

## Background

New elections for the House of Representatives were held in Belarus on February 25, 2024. Although it was the first election campaign organized since the 2020 protests, it was an uninteresting one since the Belarusian authorities ceased to maintain the democratic façade of the regime, preferring instead to ensure the non-competitiveness of the electoral process and strengthen the stability of the hegemonic authoritarian regime.<sup>34</sup>

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2022 g. [Constitution of the Republic of Belarus of 1994 (with amendments and additions adopted in Republican referendums of November 24, 1996, October 17, 2004 and February 27, 2022)], "Nacional'nyj pravovoj Internet-portal Respubliki Belarus" accessed March 8, 2024, <https://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/normativnye-dokumenty/konstitutsiya-respubliki-belarus/>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Arkadiusz Czwołek and Julia Kołodziejska, "Belarusian Parliamentary Election in 2019," *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies*, no. 1, (2021): 81-93, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/CJPS.2021.004>.

<sup>33</sup> "Konstitucija Respubliki Belarus' 1994 goda [Constitution of the Republic of Belarus of 1994]."

<sup>34</sup> Artyom Shraibman, "Rehearsing Repression: Belarus Takes No Chances in First Vote Since 2020 Unrest," *Carnegie Politics*, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91840>.

After the February 2022 referendum, Belarusians augmented Alexander Lukashenko's prerogatives by granting him the right to govern the country for another decade, and to lead the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, a new institution that would re-legitimize him as a leader at their expense. Ironically called "the highest representative body of Belarusian democracy," it would follow to approve the domestic and foreign policy directions alongside the most important programmatic documents in the country, including the military doctrine, the national security concept, and the socio-economic development program.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly would not be composed of representatives of the Belarusian people elected every five years, but rather of 1,200 members of the Belarusian nomenklatura, including deputies, ministers, judges, and deputies of local councils, all loyal to Alexander Lukashenko.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, after the new electoral law took effect, Lukashenko argued that "the president's election by the people should be abolished, arguing that the election campaigns destabilize Belarusian society."<sup>37</sup> He suggested instead that the future head of state should be appointed by a majority vote of All-Belarusian People's Assembly delegations, referencing the Chinese political system, in which the National People's Congress elects the country's leader.<sup>38</sup>

A few months after the referendum on amending the Constitution, the Belarusian ministers started the process of harmonizing the legislation of this former Soviet republic, invoking the necessity to strengthen the stability of Belarus in the event of a supposed attack by neighboring states. In late August 2022, during a meeting chaired by Lukashenko, they adopted

<sup>35</sup> Forumpravo.by (online), "Zakon Respubliki Belarus' O Vsebelorusskom narodnom sobranii" [Law of the Republic of Belarus on the All-Belarusian People's Assembly] February 7, 2023, accessed March 8, 2024, [https://forumpravo.by/upload/pdf/proekt\\_zakona\\_sozdanie\\_VN\\_S\\_21102022.pdf](https://forumpravo.by/upload/pdf/proekt_zakona_sozdanie_VN_S_21102022.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Forumpravo.by (online), "Zakon Respubliki Belarus'" [Law of the Republic of Belarus].

<sup>37</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, "Soveščanie po voprosam formirovaniya Vsebelorusskogo narodnogo sobraniya i izmeneniya izbiratel'nogo zakonodatel'stva" [Meeting on the formation of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly and changes in electoral legislation] October 20, 2022, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://president.gov.by/f/ru/events/soveshchanie-po-voprosam-formirovaniya-vsebelorusskogo-narodnogo-sobraniya-i-izmeneniya-izbiratel'nogo-zakonodatelstva>.

<sup>38</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, "Soveščanie [Meetin]" October 20, 2022, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://president.gov.by/f/ru/events/soveshchanie-po-voprosam-formirovaniya-vsebelorusskogo-narodnogo-sobraniya-i-izmeneniya-izbiratel'nogo-zakonodatelstva>.

a new version of the electoral code that blocked the formation of new opposition parties by increasing the number of founding representatives from 1,000 to 5,000, and imposing the obligation to open branches in at least one-third of the state's oblasts.<sup>39</sup>

The Belarusian president continued to insist on combating the alleged security threats ahead of the parliamentary elections in October 2023 during a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. He accused the opposition in exile of trying to win support from the West to destabilize the country. The theme of destabilization was later used by other leaders of Belarusian parties who warned about the possibility of extending security threats to other former Soviet republics. For example, the president of the Liberal Democratic Party, Oleg Gaidukevich, claimed that, "Attempts at terrorist attacks and the organization of provocations on the eve of the presidential elections that will be held in Russia in March 2024 are not excluded."<sup>40</sup> He added, "I am convinced that there will be similar attempts in the Republic of Belarus on the eve of the election campaign."<sup>41</sup> To turn the parliamentary elections held earlier this year into ones devoid of any intrigue, Alexander Lukashenko ensured the non-competitiveness of every element of the electoral process – voters, candidates, voting, and results. He ordered the members of the executive and those of the Central Election Committee not to open polling stations in diplomatic missions abroad, to prevent Belarusian citizens from protesting in front of them after the elections. He also prohibited taking photos of ballot papers to prevent opposition activists from challenging the official election results.<sup>42</sup> However, in an attempt to justify such restrictions, the head of the institution that manages the organization of elections in Belarus has invoked reasons that seem at first glance legitimate in a

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<sup>39</sup> Forumpravo. (online), "Zakon Pespubliky Belarus" [Law of the Republic of Belarus], February 7, 2023, accessed March 8, 2024,

<sup>40</sup> EurAsia Daily (online), "V Belorussii ne isključajut terakty pered predstojašimi vyborami" [Belarus does not rule out terrorist attacks before the upcoming elections] December 7, 2023, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2023/12/07/v-belorussii-ne-isklyuchayut-terakty-pered-predstoyashchimi-vybarami>.

<sup>41</sup> EurAsia Daily (online), "V Belorussii" [Belarus].

<sup>42</sup> Forumpravo. by (online), "Zakon Pespubliky Belarus" [Law of the Republic of Belarus] accessed March 8, [https://forumpravo.by/upload/pdf/proekt\\_zakona\\_sozdanie\\_VNS\\_21102022.pdf](https://forumpravo.by/upload/pdf/proekt_zakona_sozdanie_VNS_21102022.pdf).

democracy, but are actually aimed at denying the right to vote to the Belarusian diaspora, isolating the opposition and blocking any attempts to protest against the outcome of the legislative elections. For example, in order to justify why the Central Election Committee did not open polling stations abroad, its president, Igor Karpenko, argued that:

“The refusal to open polling stations abroad arose as a result of the lack of security measures as well as the reduction in the number of Belarusian diplomats in some countries.”<sup>43</sup>

In addition, he claimed that: “In the previous presidential elections of 2020, only 0.3 percent of the entire number of voters included in the Belarusian electoral lists voted abroad.”<sup>44</sup>

Unlike in previous parliamentary elections, the Central Election Committee did not invite observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to monitor elections, although the OSCE routinely monitors elections, even in the most undemocratic states, including Turkmenistan.<sup>45</sup> Later, Andrei Dapkiunas, Belarus’s Permanent Representative to international organizations in Vienna, later cited the imposition of sanctions by the West on the Soviet republic as the main reason.<sup>46</sup> Instead, the Central Election Committee preferred to

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<sup>43</sup> Zerkalo.io (online) “Karpenko vnov’ rasskazal, počemu ne budet učastkov golosovaniija za rubežom, i soslalsja na starye dannye” [Karpenko once again explained why there will be no polling stations abroad, and referred to old data], January 12, 2025, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/88257.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Sb.by (online), “V CIK rasskazali, što proživajušie za rubežom belorusy smogut progolosovat’ na učastke v gimnazii № 75 v Minske” [The CEC said that Belarusians living abroad will be able to vote at the polling station in gymnasium No. 75 in Minsk], January 23, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://www.sb.by/articles/v-tsik-rasskazali-cto-prozhivayushchie-za-rubezom-belorusy-smogut-progolosovat-na-uchastke-v-gimna.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Zerkalo.io (online), “Lukašenko zajavil, što nabljudateli OBSE ne prosilis’ priehat’ na vybory. No politik sil’no lukavit” [Lukashenko said that OSCE observers were not asked to come to the elections. But the politician is very disingenuous] February 25, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/61980.html#c>.

<sup>46</sup> Belta.by (online), “Belarus’ vozderžitsja ot priglašeniija nabljudatelej OBSE na predstojašie vybory” [Belarus will refrain from inviting OSCE observers to the upcoming elections] January 8, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/belarus-vozderzhitsja-ot-priglasheniija-nabljudatelej-obse-na-predstojaschie-vybory-608856-2024/>.

invite members of anti-Western international organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Commonwealth of Independent States, to serve on the election commissions.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, last summer, the Belarusian Ministry of Justice liquidated all opposition parties, allowing only four pro-governmental factions to participate in the 2024 parliamentary elections.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Election Campaign: Four Pro-Regime Parties *versus* the AI Candidate Yas Gaspadar**

On January 29, 2024, during the summit of the State Council of the Union State, the Belarusian president informed his Russian counterpart that he had followed his example by organizing the election of deputies to the House of Representatives in a single voting day. He expressed confidence that the vote would proceed peacefully.<sup>49</sup> A few days later, under the pretext of maintaining order in the country, Alexander Lukashenko ensured that the vote would take place in an atmosphere of fear. That is why he called on law enforcement agencies to carry weapons and patrol the streets of Belarus during the parliamentary vote.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, according to the

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<sup>47</sup> *Rec.gov.by* (online), "Svedenija ob inostrannyh (meždunarodnyh) nabljudateljah, akkreditovannyh Central'noj izbiratel'noj komissiej Respubliki Belarus' pri provedenii vyborov deputatov v edinyi den' golosovaniya 25 fevralja 2024 g" [Information about foreign (international) observers accredited by the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus during the elections of deputies on a single voting day on February 25, 2024] accessed March 8, 2024, <https://rec.gov.by/uploads/files/Pdf/2024/i-nab.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, "Soveščanie po zakonoproektam, regulirujušim razvitie graždanskogo obščestva, rabotu partij i obščestvennyh ob"edinenij" [Meeting on bills regulating the development of civil society, the work of parties and public associations] August 30, 2022, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-po-zakonoproektam-reguliruyushchim-razvitie-grazhdanskogo-obshchestva-rabotu-partij-i-obshchestvennyh-obedineniy>.

<sup>49</sup> President of Russia, "Meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State," January 29, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73341>.

<sup>50</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, "Soveščanie s rukovodjašim sostavom gosudarstvennyh organov sistemy obespečeniya nacional'noj bezopasnosti" [Meeting with the leadership of government bodies of the national security system] February 20, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/rasshirenoe-soveshchanie-s-rukovodyashchim-sostavom-gosudarstvennyh-organov-sistemy-obespecheniya-nacionalnoy-bezopasnosti>.

authoritarian consolidation theory, the Belarusian president wanted to ensure once again that the reliability of the current regime ahead of the parliamentary elections rests on the use of two strategies, to get the people to tolerate it and to preserve their political apathy: repression, using compulsion and threats, and legitimation, getting the citizens of the country to acknowledge that there is no political alternative to the contemporary political system.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union did not affect the political parties in Belarus, as they remained uninvolved in the country's governance. At the same time, the Parliament of this former Soviet republic played a secondary role in the political system, leaving the president to exercise all the power.<sup>51</sup> However, Alexander Lukashenko feared that the creation of a "party of power" could challenge his control over Belarusian society.<sup>52</sup> However, this changed in 2024 when Lukashenko asked the Ministry of Justice to allow four political parties to register for the elections and thus participate in the electoral campaign to appoint the new composition of the House of Representatives. Among the four political formations, one stands out in particular, because it aims to position itself as a party of power in this former Soviet republic.

Initially, Belaya Rus was an organization made up of 200,000 people, drawn from state institutions. It turned into a political party only in March 2023, with the organization of its founding congress in Minsk. Following this, the members adopted the political program and unanimously elected Oleg Romanov, a supporter of the current Belarusian authoritarian-hegemonic regime, as president.<sup>53</sup> However, upon careful analysis of his electoral program, we note that Belaya Rus is not an anti-system party that opposes the president's control over the country, but a puppet party that openly supports Alexander Lukashenko. Furthermore, although its members mentioned the need to defend democracy and to respect the Belarusian citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms, they adopted a

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<sup>51</sup> Kamil Kłysiński, "Belarus: The Pro-regime Belaya Rus Party Holds Its Founding Congress," *OSW, Centre for Eastern Studies*, March 23, 2023, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-03-21/belarus-pro-regime-belaya-rus-party-holds-its-founding-congress>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

strong nationalist rhetoric. In the electoral program, they insisted on the need to develop the national identity discourse by imposing patriotic and spiritual education courses.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, Belaya Rus members campaigned in favor of creating an anti-Western foreign policy, reiterated the need to strengthen Belarus's relations with Russia and with international organizations such as the Union State, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.<sup>55</sup>

In an attempt to obtain as many votes as possible during the election campaign, the party leader focused his attention on meetings with citizens of all ages coming from the most important cities of the country. For example, during a reunion with students of the University of Minsk, Oleg Romanov tried to persuade them to go to the polls in large numbers and vote for Belaya Rus.<sup>56</sup> Beyond this attempt to mobilize a rather resigned and politically apathetic population to cast their vote during the parliamentary elections, the party president also attended meetings with older citizens and members of the work collectives of organizations and enterprises in Belarusian cities. During a reunion with representatives of workers from enterprises in Grodno, Oleg Romanov insisted on strengthening Belarus's relations with Russia, including by creating an autarchic economic system focused on producing goods within its borders.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, the leader of Belaya Rus promoted his electoral program with aplomb, and reiterated, in the same meeting, the need to develop a Pan-Slavic union

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<sup>54</sup> Partiya.by (online), "Programma Partii" [Party program] January 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://partiya.by/program>.

<sup>55</sup> Partiya.by (online), "Programma Partii."

<sup>56</sup> Partiya. by (online), "Čtoby vlast' byla narodnoj, ee dolžen vybrat' narod – Romanov vstretilsja so minskimi studentami" [For power to be popular, it must be chosen by the people – Romanov met with Minsk students] January 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://partiya.by/page42864122.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Partiya. by (online), "Predsedatel' Belorusskoj partii «Belaja Rus'» i odnoimennogo obščestvennogo ob edinenija Oleg Romanov, govorja ob itogah prošedšego Vysšego gosudarstvennogo soveta, vydělil dva, s ego točki zrenija, naibolee važnyh izmerenija" [Chairman of the Belarusian Party "White Rus'" and the public association of the same name Oleg Romanov, speaking about the results of the last Supreme State Council, highlighted two, from his point of view, the most important dimensions] January 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://partiya.by/page43237330.html>.

that would emphasize the historical ties between Belarus and Russia.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, during the election campaign, Oleg Romanov tried to contribute to improving Belarus's foreign policy. Proof of this was the reunion he had in Minsk with representatives of a post-totalitarian regime: the Cuban Ambassador to Belarus, Santiago Perez Benitez, and the leader of the Cuban Communist Party, Emilio Ratmir Losada Garcia.<sup>59</sup>

During the election campaign, representatives of the Belaya Rus party also attended meetings with members of election observation missions from pro-Russian international organizations, where they insisted on the need to strengthen unity and stability of the hegemonic-authoritarian regime, and to prevent the emergence of a color revolution after the parliamentary elections. Specifically, in one of the reunions with the representatives of the CIS observation mission, the vice president of the party, Andrei Basak, claimed that,

"Today, more than ever, it is important to strengthen unity in the country, to ensure the systematic and progressive development of the state. It is necessary to ensure forward movement, but without shocks and revolutions."<sup>60</sup>

The other three political formations that the Ministry of Justice allowed to enter the electoral race were spoiler parties, with no real chances of gaining the majority in the lower house of Parliament. The Republican Party of Labor and Justice was originally an organization that brought together visually impaired people. It turned into a political party in 1993, intending to represent the interests of people with disabilities in the country's political system. Although its members created the impression of establishing Social Democratic Party that would fight for a

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<sup>58</sup> Partiya. by (online), "Predsedatel'" [Chairman].

<sup>59</sup> Partiya. by (online), "Belorusskaja partija «Belaja Rus'» rasširjaet meždunarodnye svjazi" [The Belarusian party "Belaya Rus" expands international relations] February 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://partiya.by/page43978437.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Partiya.by (online), "Meždunarodnye nabljudateli ot MPA SNG vstretilis' s rukovodstvom Belorusskoj partii Belaja Rus'" [International observers from the IPA CIS met with the leadership of the Belarusian party White Rus'] February 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://partiya.by/page44209675.html>.



society of economic welfare and equal opportunities for citizens, a closer analysis of its electoral program reveals that it is nationalist and anti-Western. During the election campaign, the leader of the Republican Party of Labor and Justice Alexander Khizhnyak focused his attention on meetings with the residents of the Belarusian cities of Vitebsk, Brest, or Grodno.<sup>61</sup> During these meetings, he praised the legislative changes adopted by the Belarusian authorities to reduce the number of political parties, highlighting his position as the leader of a pro-regime party that supports the Belarusian hegemonic-authoritarian regime.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Alexander Khizhnyak adopted an extremist rhetoric, stating that he would fight to combat populist ideas, transform the party into an effective mediator between the state and the citizens, and adapt to the current security situation in which an alleged attack from the West threatens Belarus.<sup>63</sup>

The Communist Party of Belarus was reestablished in 1996 and has participated in every parliamentary election held in this former Soviet republic. Like the members of other Belarusian political formations, its representatives have also positioned themselves as associates of a nationalist and anti-Western party. During the election campaign, its leader, Alexei Sokal, insisted on strengthening Belarus's relations with Russia to defend the country against potential Western attacks. Unlike the other party affiliates, the president of the Communist Party of Belarus focused his attention on reunions with rural residents, including pensioners and agricultural workers.<sup>64</sup>

The last political party permitted to participate in elections by the Ministry of Justice was the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus, founded in 1994. Although its members ideologically positioned themselves as representatives of a center-right party that respects democratic principles,

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<sup>61</sup> *Rpts.by* (online), "Vstreča s izbirateljami" [Meeting with voters] February 5, 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://rpts.by/ru/news/vstrecha-s-izbiratelyami>.

<sup>62</sup> *Rpts.by* (online), "Dolžno byt' – èto ostalos' v prošlom" [It must be a thing of the past] February 7, 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://rpts.by/ru/news/dolzno-byt-eto-ostalos-v-proshlom>.

<sup>63</sup> *Rpts.by* (online), "Dolžno byt' – èto ostalos' v prošlom."

<sup>64</sup> Sergey Storkan, "Belorusy progolosovali za prodolženie prazdnika" [Belarusians voted to continue the holiday] *Kommersant*, February 27, 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6533437>.

they have been associated with an extremist, populist, and deeply anti-Western party.<sup>65</sup> During the 2024 election campaign, his president, Oleg Gaidukevich, held meetings with residents of various regions of Belarus. He expressed admiration for the legislative measures taken by the Belarusian authorities prior to the election and argued for strengthening Belarus's relations both with Russia and states in Asia and Africa whose authoritarian leaders, like Alexander Lukashenko, desire a multipolar world.<sup>66</sup> Like the leader of the Belaya Rus, Oleg Gaidukevich stood out in the election campaign with extremely harsh statements against the opposition advocates in exile. For example, during one of the meetings with Belarusian citizens, he characterized them as follows: "Traitors who are thinking about how to destroy the country."<sup>67</sup>

In response to the Belarusian authorities' refusal to allow the registration of any independent candidates and their approval of only four pro-regime parties with similar electoral programs, opposition leader, Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, used artificial intelligence. Specifically, during the electoral campaign, she and other opposition representatives in exile launched a virtual candidate created with the help of ChatGPT. Bearing the pseudonym of Kastus Kalinowski, the leader of the anti-Russian uprising of 1863-1864 and one of the most important representatives of Belarusian nationalism, "Yas Gaspadar" was created by a group of Irish IT specialists following a meeting between with Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya and members of the Coordination Council in Vilnius in 2023.<sup>68</sup> In a state where mass-media is strictly controlled, this Belarusian dissident and parliamentary candidate enabled the pro-democracy movement to communicate with people inside the country in a novel and risk-free way by explaining the most important measures of the electoral program, such as pardoning

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<sup>65</sup> *Ldpb* (online), "Programma LDPB" [LDPB program] January 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://ldpb.by/ru/programma-ldpb/>.

<sup>66</sup> *Ldpb* (online), "Programma LDPB."

<sup>67</sup> *Ldpb.by* (online), "Gajdukevič: Zapad popytaetsja destabilizirovat' Belarus' v hode vyborov" [Gaidukevich: The West will try to destabilize Belarus during the elections] January 26, 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://ldpb.by/ru/informatsiya/gajdukevich-zapad-popyt-aetsya-destabilizirovat-belarus-v-hode-vyborov/>.

<sup>68</sup> Dmitri Pankovets, "Apazycyja moža prapanavać Jasia Haspadara, virtualnaha kandydata ŭ deputaty" [The opposition could propose Yas Gaspadar, a possible candidate for the position of deputy] January 8, 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32765722.html>.

political prisoners, forbidding the import of atomic weapons, and the need to hold free elections.<sup>69</sup>

### The Vote: In Search of Internal Legitimacy

Despite taking all necessary measures to ensure the electoral process was noncompetitive, the Belarusian authorities remained nervous ahead of the vote. On Saturday, February 24, Svetlana Tsihanovskaya, the leader of the Belarusian opposition in exile, appeared in a video on the advertising screens of the Minsk metro, shopping centers and supermarkets. In the video, she asked citizens not to participate in the parliamentary elections.<sup>70</sup> The action, organized by Bel Pol, the Association of Belarusian security forces with the opposition, led to the arrest of employees who broadcast media and advertising on interactive screens. Thus, the officials' intention to strengthen the stability of the Belarusian hegemonic-authoritarian regime ahead of the elections was confirmed.<sup>71</sup>

Eager to gain as much internal legitimacy as possible and turn Belarusian citizens into a highly disciplined electoral mass, the authorities forced some of them to vote exclusively during early voting. Thus, between February 20 and 24, teachers, employees of state-owned enterprises, doctors, and police officers were threatened to be fired if they did not vote.<sup>72</sup> However, voting booths throughout Belarus lacked curtains, which undoubtedly affected the secrecy of the vote and, with it, the result of the elections during the early voting period, which exceeded, according to the Central Election Committee of this former Soviet republic, seventy per cent of the votes.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Kate McDonald, "The Belarusian leader with Irish ties using AI against a dictator", *RTE News*, February 28, 2024, accessed April 1, 2024, <https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2024/0228/1434921-belarus-opposition-ai/>.

<sup>70</sup> Storkan, "Belorusy."

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Zerkalo.io* (online), "Vplot' do uvol'nenija. Pogovorili s belorusami, kotoryh zastavili rogoosovat' dosročno" [Up to the point of dismissal, we talked to Belarusians who were forced to vote early] February 23, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/61773.html#c>.

<sup>73</sup> *Rec.gov.by* (online), "Svedeniia o hode dosročnogo golosovaniia," [Information about the process of direct voting] February 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://rec.gov.by/uploads/files/Pdf/2024/stat56-57.pdf>.

Just before the main voting day, special forces conducted training during which they simulated repressive measures that could be enforced upon Belarusian citizens who violated electoral legislation.<sup>74</sup> Despite their deployment, on February 25, the OMON troops arrested a voter for photographing a ballot paper and dispersed citizens gathered in front of a voting station.<sup>75</sup> Even though these incidents were minor and did not affect the electoral process in any way, they attest to the fact that, throughout the electoral process, the authorities used repression and fear against the population. Moreover, the Belarusian officials wanted to get the votes of pensioners, an extremely vulnerable part of the population. That is why, before voting, their representatives offered them money in exchange for their vote.<sup>76</sup>

### **Analysis of Discourses and Media Statements by Belarusian Officials on the 2024 Parliamentary Elections**

To examine the speeches and the media statements of the Belarusian authorities regarding the 2024 parliamentary elections, the author has used the DHA approach, an interdisciplinary method of critical discourse analysis (CDA), proposed by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl.<sup>82</sup> As it was mentioned in the introduction, this approach operates with five discursive strategies: nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification. To identify and explain each discursive strategy, extracts from the speeches and press statements of Belarusian officials before and during the elections were provided.

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<sup>74</sup> *Zerkalo.io* (online), "Siloviki pokazali, kogo i za čto budut zaderživat' na izbiratel'nyh učastkah vo vremja vyborov" [Security forces showed who will be detained at polling stations during the elections and for what] February 20, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024. <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/61597.html?c>.

<sup>75</sup> Viasna, "Belarusa aštrafavalı za fotazdymak svajgo vybarčaga bjuleťnja" [Belarus was fined for taking a photo of its ballot paper] *Telegram*, February 25, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://t.me/viasna96/24638>.

<sup>76</sup> Storkan, "Belorusy."

<sup>82</sup> Wodak and Reisigl, "The Discourse Historical," 33-61.

In his media statements ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections, Ivan Kubrakov highlighted the fear of alleged terrorist attacks by opposition leaders in exile supported by the West to destabilize Belarus as he stated: "We will do everything to ensure the stabilization of the situation. And for this, we will use all forces to protect public order."<sup>77</sup> In this passage, the discursive strategy of perspectivization was used to emphasize the involvement of the Belarusian Minister in the electoral campaign. By using the personal pronoun "we" twice, the official presented himself as a member of the government and as a representative of a collective body, directly responsible for protecting public order during the 2024 parliamentary elections. Additionally, in this quote, the discursive strategy of intensification was used through the discursive markers "everything," "all," and "forces," intended to highlight the efforts that the authorities were prepared to undertake to maintain the stability of the hegemonic authoritarian regime in Belarus.

In his speeches, the chairman of the Central Election Committee, Igor Karpenko, tried to isolate the opposition abroad by denying them the right to vote in the 2024 parliamentary elections through his decision to not open polling stations outside the country. Before the start of the election campaign, he claimed that:

"The refusal to open polling stations abroad arose as a result of the reduction in the number of employees of diplomatic missions and the difficult epidemiological situation following the Covid 19 pandemic."<sup>78</sup>

Also, he argued that: "In the previous presidential elections of 2020, only 0.3 percent of the entire number of voters included in the Belarusian electoral lists voted abroad."<sup>79</sup> In these passages, the discursive strategy of argumentation was used to legitimize the negative act that the Belarusian official was about to commit on the orders of Alexander Lukashenko. By invoking the threat of the pandemic and the small

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<sup>77</sup> *News.by* (online), "Kubrakov."

<sup>78</sup> Gronski, "Parlamentskie i Municipal'nye Vybory" [Parliamentary and Municipal Elections] 67-77.

<sup>79</sup> *Sb.by* (online), "V CIK rasskazali" [The CEC said].

percentage of voters who voted abroad, Igor Karpenko aimed to maintain the stability of the Belarusian regime.

During the election campaign, Andrei Dapkiunas, the permanent representative of Belarus to international organizations in Vienna, supported the decision of the Central Election Committee to not invite representatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, stating that:

“This decision was made as a result of the hostility of the collective West manifested by the introduction of unjustifiably harsh political and economic sanctions against the Central Election Commission and the parliament.”<sup>80</sup>

In this passage, the discursive strategy of nomination was used as the Belarusian official explicitly referred to a social actor that he directly identified by using the noun “the West.” In the same quote, there is another discursive strategy, namely predication, given that Andrei Dapkiunas characterized this social actor by using a negative label, visible in the text through the adjective “collective.” Employing this discursive strategy, the permanent representative of Belarus to international organizations in Vienna drew a demarcation between Belarus and the West, which he perceived as a fundamental threat to this former Soviet republic. In this fragment, the discursive strategy of intensification is visible through the use of the adverb “unjustifiably,” the adjective “harsh,” and the noun “sanctions.” Through these discursive marks, the Belarusian official wanted to challenge the sanctions imposed by Western leaders as a result of the support that Belarus offered to Russia in the war of aggression against Ukraine.

Ahead of the parliamentary vote, members of the parties participating in the 2024 Belarusian parliamentary elections attended the reunions with representatives of election observation missions from pro-Russian international organizations, during which they reiterated the need to preserve the stability of the current hegemonic-authoritarian regime. During such a meeting, Andrei Basak, vice-chairman of the Belaya Rus party stated that:

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<sup>80</sup> *Belta.by* (online), “Belarus’ vozderžitsa” [Belarus will refrain].

“Today, more than ever, it is important to strengthen unity in the country, to ensure the systematic and progressive development of the state. It is necessary to ensure forward movement, but without shocks and revolutions.”<sup>81</sup>

In this quote, the discursive strategy of intensification, visible through the use of the phrase “more than ever” and the repetition of the verb “to ensure,” was employed to emphasize the importance of the Belarusian élite’s cohesion in order to achieve one goal (maintaining stability in domestic politics) endangered by the possibility of the emergence of color revolutions that led to the establishment of democratic political regimes in some of the former Soviet republics.

The harshest statements on the election campaign belonged to the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus, Oleg Gaidukevich. During one of the reunions with the Belarusian pensioners, he characterized the members of the opposition in exile as “Traitors who are thinking about how to destroy the country.”<sup>82</sup> In this passage, the discursive strategy of nomination was used since his statement a social group marginalized by the state was targeted, which the president of the Belarusian political formation identified through the noun “traitors.”

The statements of the president of the Belarusian Liberal Democratic Party also targeted Western leaders, whom he accused of not giving up on changing the political regime through force. In one of his declarations, he claimed that,

“The Westerners will never abandon these attempts to destabilize Belarus, because they have never cared about the Belarusian people, about how they live. They have only one goal – to break us apart from Russia, to turn our country 180 degrees, and then transform it into an anti-Russian one.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *Partiya.by* (online), “Meždunarodnye nabljudateli” [International observers].

<sup>82</sup> *Ldpb.by* (online), “Gajdukevič: Zapad” [Gaidukevich: The West].

<sup>83</sup> Belarus News (online), “Oleg Gaidukevich: The West will not abandon attempts to turn Belarus into a second Ukraine” [Oleg Gajdukevič: Zapad ne ostavit popytok prevratit’ Belarus’ vo vtoruju Ukrainu] February 28, 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://news.myseldon.com/ru/news/index/308718685>.

Similarly to the other press statements, in this passage, the discursive strategy of nomination was employed as Oleg Gaidukevich explicitly referred to the Western leaders whom he identified as “the Westerners.” Unlike the previous passage, this strategy is reinforced by the repeated use of two discursive markers, the personal pronoun “they” and the possessive pronoun “our,” marking the Belarusian official’s effort to emphasize the civilizational gap between Belarus and the West.

On February 25, during a press conference he held after voting in the 2024 parliamentary elections, Alexander Lukashenko accused the opposition in exile of seeking to stage a *coup d’état* to seize power in the country. To prevent this scenario, the Belarusian leader has argued that he will run for a new term in office in the 2025 Presidential election: “I will go, I will go, I will go. Tell the opposition leaders that I will go. And the more difficult the situation becomes, the more actively they will agitate our society.”<sup>84</sup> In this passage, the discursive strategy of nomination was employed as Alexander Lukashenko used the first-person pronoun “I,” and the future tense of the verb “go” four times to strengthen his control over the hegemonic-authoritarian regime.

### The Results: The Emergence of a Decorative Parliament

The outcome of the Belarusian legislative elections organized on February 25, 2024 confirmed the decorative nature of the Parliament as its lower house continued to be composed only of faceless officials, reminiscent of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Although a new party, Belaya Rus, won 51 out of 110 seats, it did not hold the majority in the Parliament as another nineteen seats were distributed to the three spoiler parties: the Republican Party of Law and Justice, eight seats, the Communist Party, seven seats, and the Liberal Democratic Party, with four seats.<sup>85</sup> The remaining seats were filled by independent MPs who obtained forty seats.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Zerkalo.io (online), “U Lukašenko sprosili, budet li on učastvovat’ v prezidentskih vyborah 2025 goda. Vot čto skazal politik” [Lukashenko was asked whether he would participate in the 2025 presidential elections. Here is what the politician said] February 23, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/61978.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Rec.gov.by (online), “Svedeniya ob itogah vyborov deputatov Palaty predstavitelej” [Information on the results of elections of deputies of the House of Representatives] February 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://rec.gov.by/uploads/files/Pdf/2024/stat64.pdf>.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*



Admitting a large group of representatives from the Belarusian nomenklatura to Parliament reflects a change in the policy of Alexander Lukashenko. Until this moment, he had marginalized the group due to his fear of a party emerging in Belarusian politics that could represent an alternative for citizens of this former Soviet republic. Not only is Belaya Rus the preeminent group in the new legislature, it is also pro-Russian, thanks to the cooperation agreements it signed with United Russia before the elections and to the publicly expressed views of its president, Oleg Romanov, who acts as a regime propagandist in the media.<sup>87</sup>

Because of his regime's economic and political dependence of the Russian Federation, Alexander Lukashenko allowed pro-Russian parties to be represented in parliament. Simultaneously, he facilitated the entrance to the new legislature of the former head of the presidential administration, Igor Sergheienko. In March 2024, Sergheienko became the speaker of the House of Representatives.<sup>88</sup> From this new position, he has supervised the deputies to ensure they do not propose any draft laws that could accelerate the integration process of Belarus into the Union State. Sergheienko's role is to maintain Belarusian statehood without affecting Alexander Lukashenko's relations with Vladimir Putin, the only leader who guarantees the survival of the Belarusian hegemonic-authoritarian regime.

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<sup>87</sup> Er.ru (online), "Edinaja Rossiya i «Belaja Rus'» podpisali soglašenie o vzaimodejstvii i sotrudničestve" [United Russia and Belaya Rus have signed an agreement on cooperation and cooperation] February 15, 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://er.ru/activity/news/edinaya-rossiya-i-belaja-rus-podpisali-soglashenie-o-vzaimodejstvii-i-sotrudnichestve>; Anna Kurak, "Otnošenija Belarusi i Rossii služat obrazcom ravnopravnogo i vzaimovыgodnogo sotrudničestva – Romanov" [Belarus-Russia relations serve as a model of equal and mutually beneficial cooperation – Romanov] April 2, 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://www.sb.by/articles/otnošeniya-belarusi-i-rossii-sluzhat-obraztsoravnopravnogo-i-vzaimovыgodnogo-sotrudnichestva-roma.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Interfax.ru (online), "Èks-glava administracii prezidenta Belorussii izbran spikerom nižneǰpalaty parlamenta" [The former head of the presidential administration of Belarus was elected speaker of the lower house of Parliament] March 22, 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/951791>.

### Reactions: Condemnation versus Acceptance

As expected, the responses of key figures in international politics to the results of the 2024 Belarusian parliamentary elections were diverse. The heads of the Western Chancelleries criticized the authorities for the way they organized the elections, and expressed their regret at the fact that they did not allow opposition representatives to participate in the election campaign. The leader of the Belarusian opposition in exile, Svetlana Tsihanovskaya, continued to criticize the officials for the way they conducted the elections, claiming that

“There are no people on the ballot who would offer real changes because the regime has only allowed convenient puppets to participate. We are calling to boycott this senseless farce, to ignore this election without choice.”<sup>89</sup>

The United States Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, also condemned the elections, describing them as being “held in a climate of fear under which no electoral processes could be called democratic.”<sup>90</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin was the only one to congratulate Alexander Lukashenko on “the successful outcome of the single voting day and the confident victory achieved by the Belarusian patriotic forces,”<sup>91</sup> which he said helped to “strengthen internal political stability of the country.”<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the international community’s reaction to the parliamentary vote demonstrated that the Belarusian hegemonic-authoritarian regime continues to be diplomatically isolated by the West and is supported only by Vladimir Putin. After the 2020 elections, Alexander Lukashenko formed an axis of autocrats with Putin.

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<sup>89</sup> Yuras Karmanau, “Belarusian opposition leader calls for boycott of tightly controlled election,” PBS News (online), February 25, 2024, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/belarusian-opposition-leader-calls-for-boycott-of-tightly-controlled-election>.

<sup>90</sup> Matthew Miller, “Condemning Sham Parliamentary and Local Elections in Belarus,” U.S. Department of State, February 25, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/condemning-sham-parliamentary-and-local-elections-in-belarus/>.

<sup>91</sup> President of Russia, “Congratulations to President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko,” February 26, 2024, accessed March 8, 2024, <http://en.special.kremlin.ru/catalog/countries/BY/events/73547>.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusions

The 2024 Belarusian Parliamentary elections demonstrated that Alexander Lukashenko was not concerned with gaining legitimacy among the international community. Instead, he wanted to convince himself that the 2020 protests were just a deviation and that he would hold more power in this former Soviet republic.

Moreover, the 2024 legislative elections confirmed the noncompetitive nature of the electoral process. During the elections, the authorities used repression, intimidation and fear to strengthen the stability of the current Belarusian hegemonic authoritarian regime. Several restrictive measures taken by the President and other Belarusian officials demonstrate this fact. First, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly emerged, equivalent to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It will take over some of the powers held by the Belarusian Parliament, such as the right to initiate legislative proposals, organize referendums, and question the legitimacy of the elections. The second was the amendment of the electoral code, under the pretext of strengthening Belarus's stability in the event of a supposed attack by neighboring states. The amendment increased the number of founding representatives required to establish a new political party from 1,000 to 5,000 and imposed the obligation to open branches in at least one-third of the state's oblasts. With the third category of restrictive measures, the Belarusian authorities aimed to make the 2024 parliamentary elections as eventless as possible. To this end, they refused to open polling stations in diplomatic missions abroad, failed to publish the names of election committee members, and banned photographing ballot papers. Furthermore, officials refused to invite OSCE representatives to observe the elections and allowed the participation of four parties in the election campaign that openly supported Alexander Lukashenko. Last but not least, by using five discursive strategies in their speeches and media statements both before and during the elections, Belarusian officials distorted reality and strengthened the stability of the hegemonic authoritarian regime in this former Soviet republic.

The results of the Belarusian elections held on February 25, 2024, showed that the Parliament of this former Soviet republic remained a weak institution as the House of Representatives continued to be

composed only of deputies controlled by the president. Despite this fact, there was a change in its composition. For the first time in Belarus's post-independence history, Alexander Lukashenko allowed the pro-Russian party Belaya Rus to hold the largest number of seats in the lower house of the legislature, at the expense of the independent MPs. This shift in the Parliament dynamics is the result of his regime's growing political and economic subservience to Russia.