

Belarus Election Countdown

Presidential elections in Belarus take place on March 19. As of today, **four candidates** remain in the race having collected and submitted the necessary number of signatures.



Alexander Lukashenko,
the incumbent

Alexander Milinkevich,
the candidate of the unified
democratic forces

Alexander Kozulin,
former rector of
the State University

Sergei Gaidukevich,
leader of the officially
accepted Liberal Democratic
Party of Belarus

According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), Lukashenko collected 1,905,631 signatures in his support, Milinkevich collected 198,559, Kozulin collected 165,618 and Gaidukevich collected 150,319. Candidates need a minimum of 100,000 fully verified signatures to contest the elections.

Calendar of the election process

- By **February 6** the individual election commissions must verify the authenticity of the signatures submitted to them
- By **February 11** the signatures must be transferred to the Central Election Commission
- By **February 12** the candidates must submit to the CEC documents necessary for registration, including detailed income declarations
- From **February 12 to February 21** the CEC will decide which candidates have fulfilled the necessary criteria for registration to run in the March 19 election.

Chronicle of recent events

Monday, February 6

Following an invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, issued on 19 January, the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission started its work. The mission, headed by Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens of Germany, consists of 12 international staff based in Minsk and 40 long-term observers deployed in the regions.

Sunday, February 5

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said at a conference in Munich he has no doubt that Alexander Lukashenko is the most popular politician in Belarus and that he will win the presidential elections. Mr. Ivanov, who also holds the post of vice premier, said that Russia would react negatively to attempts to organize public disturbances in Belarus.

Saturday, February 4

Alexander Lukashenko took part in the opening of the 'Pre-Olympic Week', a sporting event that was widely covered by the state-controlled mass media.

Friday, February 3

Alexander Kozulin, one of the presidential candidates, said he appreciated the importance of Alexander Milinkevich's European contacts but said that support from "other places" also matters.

It was announced that there are 6,627 individual election commissions (including 41 abroad).

Thursday, February 2

Alexander Milinkevich met in Berlin with German Chancellor Angela Merkel who offered words of support for the united opposition forces. He also met with Christoph Heusgen, Ms. Merkel's foreign-policy advisor, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, as well as other officials and lawmakers. In addition, he delivered a speech at an international conference on human rights and the war against terrorism.

Wednesday, February 1

Alexander Milinkevich had a meeting with the head of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso. Mr. Barroso welcomed the unification of the democratic forces of Belarus and expressed hope that Belarus would become a free and democratic country this year. The head of the European Commission also stated that he would propose that European institutions formulate a special approach towards Belarus as a country where basic rights and freedoms are violated. Milinkevich also met Yulia Tymoshenko, former Prime Minister of Ukraine.

Alexander Lukashenko went on a working visit to Moscow to take part in the celebration of Boris Yeltsin's 75th birthday.

Tuesday, January 31

Alexander Milinkevich delivered a speech at a session of the European Parliaments' Committee on Foreign Affairs. He drew the attention of European politicians to the reality of unity among the democratic forces in Belarus, made an assessment of the election campaign in Belarus and underlined that the united democratic forces are prepared for the possibility that the authorities could refuse to register his candidacy. He also invited those who were present to come to Minsk to observe the elections.

Press secretary of the MFA of Belarus Andrei Papou commented on the meetings of Alexander Milinkevich at the EU: "We did not expect such an approach from the EU. Moreover, at present the terms of a visit to Minsk by high-ranking officials of the EU Council General Secretariat are being discussed."

Alexander Lukashenko handed out diplomas to professors and doctors of science. The event was widely covered by Belarusian television. Lukashenko also had a meeting with Mikhail Gutseriev, head of the Russian oil company "RussNeft" that was also shown on television.

Monday, January 30

Alexander Milinkevich met EU foreign ministers. The EU General Affairs and External Affairs Council welcomed the invitation offered by the Belarusian authorities to the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission but reiterated its deep concern at the deteriorating situation in respect of democracy, human rights and political freedoms in Belarus. It urged the authorities to hold a free and fair presidential election in line with the country's commitments in the OSCE warning that, otherwise, sanctions could follow.

Milinkevich met European Parliament President Josep Borrell, EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana. Mr. Borrell stressed the importance of unity among Belarusian pro-democratic forces. He also said that the European Parliament plans to send a team of observers to monitor the situation in the country ahead of the election. Milinkevich also met William Hague, the former leader of Britain's Conservative Party.

Belarusian state controlled media didn't say a word about the European tour of A.Milinkevich.

Uladzimir Kanapleu, speaker of the Chamber of Representatives, announced that members of the Russian State Duma will visit Belarus to campaign in favor of Alexander Lukashenko.

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