

# Protests, crackdown follow Belarus elections

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12 August 2020

Protests have broken out in Belarus after state officials declared incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko the winner in Sunday's election with 80 percent of the vote. In cities around the country, thousands of mostly young demonstrators have gathered to denounce the results as fraudulent and demand Lukashenko's removal. The government has cracked down with tear gas and arrests, with 3,000 jailed and one demonstrator killed.

Lukashenko is a Stalinist turned post-Soviet autocrat who has ruled over Belarus for 26 years and amassed, according to one 2009 estimate, a personal fortune of \$9 billion. He has described coronavirus as a "psychosis" and counseled the population to drink vodka as a preventive measure. Lukashenko was challenged by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the 37-year-old wife of an opposition blogger who was arrested and prevented from running in the elections. State officials report that she received 10.9 percent of the vote.

Tikhanovskaya, portrayed as a devoted wife speaking out in defense of her husband and "the people," ran a campaign with no political demands other than "free and fair elections" and "democracy." She was backed by two other oppositionists—Viktar Babaryka and Valery Tsepkalo—wealthy champions of private property and the free market. Up until recently, they had long held positions in wings of the Belarusian state.

After lodging a complaint on Monday with the Central Election Commission to contest the outcome, Tikhanovskaya disappeared from public view for several hours, possibly detained by government authorities, although what happened remains unclear.

Tikhanovskaya then recorded video appeals expressing personal disillusionment in the campaign and calling on people not to protest and to accept the election results. She then fled to Lithuania, the neighboring country to which she had previously sent her children for their safety. Tikhanovskaya's video

statements were released shortly after.

The Lukashenko government's police crackdown has been coupled with other authoritarian measures intended to prevent people from using social media to organize further protests. Twitter has been censored and the internet throttled, as the president works to contain widespread disillusionment with his rule, which in recent months has been exacerbated by his criminal refusal to take any measures against the spread of COVID-19.

Tikhanovskaya, promoted by Belarus' pro-Western and right-wing opposition, has predictably been supported by the EU and the United States. Both are hostile to Lukashenko, a longtime ally of Moscow, and have been seeking to pull Minsk into their orbit in order to intensify Russia's political isolation.

Following the crackdown on the election protests, the Trump administration—which has been busy jailing, beating and kidnapping protesters on US streets for the past three months—condemned the actions of the Lukashenko government.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the United States was "deeply concerned" over the "severe restrictions on ballot access for candidates, prohibition of local independent observers at polling stations, intimidation tactics employed against opposition candidates, and the detentions of peaceful protesters and journalists." Pompeo speaks on behalf of a president who has made clear that he is unlikely to recognize the results of the upcoming elections in the US should the vote not go in his favor and is prepared to resort to violence to crush popular opposition.

German government spokesperson Steffen Seibert likewise criticized the elections and government violence, stating that Germany "condemns the many arrests and violence against peaceful protesters."

The Western imperialist countries have long labeled Lukashenko "Europe's last dictator," not because of

his authoritarian policies, but because of his close ties to Russia and failure to “liberalize” Belarus’ economy—in other words, open it up for extreme exploitation by foreign capital. By some estimates, 70 percent of the Belarusian economy is state-owned. According to the EU, 49.2 percent of the country’s foreign trade is with Russia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin was the first head of state to congratulate Lukashenko on his win and stated that he hoped for “mutually beneficial Russian-Belarusian relations in all areas.” Putin also called for Belarus to continue efforts to create a political-economic union with Russia, which, despite a 1997 agreement between the two countries, has failed to come to fruition.

The relationship between Moscow and Minsk has been under extreme strain in the recent period, with conflicts erupting over energy supplies coming from Russia and, most recently, alleged Kremlin interference in Belarusian politics. Just prior to Sunday’s election, the Lukashenko government arrested 33 Russian military contractors and accused them of plotting terrorist activities within the country.

At the center of the growing tensions with Moscow is Washington’s increasing political presence in Minsk. After making the first official visit to Belarus by an American diplomat in more than 25 years, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared in February that the United States would be happy to supply Belarus with “all the oil it needs.”

While Lukashenko has signaled that he is open to a closer relationship with Washington, he also fears a Western-backed “Maidan revolution,” similar to what took place in Ukraine in 2014.

At that time, Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, deemed by Washington and Brussels as insufficiently anti-Russian, was removed through the mobilization of far-right groups that initially sought to cover themselves under the banner of popular opposition. A NATO-friendly, nationalist government was installed in Kiev, which promptly initiated a civil war against pro-Russian breakaway regions in Ukraine’s east, resulting in a mass refugee crisis and the deaths of thousands. Ukraine’s economy, under the control of the International Monetary Fund, Western financiers, and local oligarchs, is in tatters. The population is impoverished.

Following the outbreak of protests on Sunday, Lukashenko stated, “I warned that there will be no Maidan, no matter how much someone wants it.” He warned the population, “for the third time, I am telling parents to check where their child is, so it won’t hurt later.”

Western imperialism hopes to use the protests in Belarus and the candidacy of Tikhanovskaya for reactionary purposes—above all, undermining the economic and geopolitical position of Russia in preparation for an open conflict with Moscow. There will be no “democracy,” no “free and fair elections,” and no prosperity for the Belarusian working class coming from the country’s so-called “opposition,” aided by these forces.

For its part, the Lukashenko government is willing to reach a deal with Washington and Brussels if it would allow it to continue its rule and its enrichment off of the exploitation of the Belarusian working class. Relying on violence to stay in power, it will resort to more if necessary, as it tacks this way and that in an effort to survive within the context of the conflict between Russia and the United States.

Only a revolutionary movement of the working class within Belarus, united with its class brothers and sisters to the east and west, can challenge both imperialism and the post-Soviet oligarchy.



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