

EU demands integration of opposition parties into Belarusian regime

Alex Lantier**20 August 2020**

Yesterday, the European Council of European Union (EU) heads of state held an extraordinary emergency meeting by video conference to discuss the political crisis in Belarus. After disputed presidential elections on August 9 and a violent police crackdown on protests against President Aleksandr Lukashenko, strikes have erupted across the country. The emergence of a movement in the working class in the former Soviet republic has stunned not only the Lukashenko regime and the EU-backed Belarusian opposition, but the EU itself.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen later delivered brief remarks at a press conference on the European Council meeting. Stating that the EU is “impressed by the courage of the people of Belarus” and rejecting the election results, she said the council had decided to send “three clear messages.”

She announced €53 million in funding to “stand by the people of Belarus, who want freedom and democracy,” including €50 million in medical aid for the COVID-19 pandemic. She also vowed financial sanctions on “those responsible for violence, repression and the falsification of the results of the election” and initiatives for a “peaceful democratic transition of power.” She said the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) could help oversee this transition: “We support the opening of dialogue between authorities and the opposition.”

Von der Leyen also was at pains to signal that, for now at least, the EU is seeking cooperation with Moscow in Belarus. She said, “the demonstrations in Belarus are not against any neighboring country or entity. ... Only an inclusive dialogue will find solutions.”

A class gulf separates the EU from workers mobilized against the Lukashenko regime, its brutal riot police and its murderous “herd immunity” policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Facing an unexpected threat from below, the EU heads of state are holding back, for now at

least, from a direct attempt at regime change along the lines of the 2014 NATO-backed putsch in Ukraine. There, a fascist-led assault on a Russian-backed regime in Kiev led to regime change, the installation of a far-right regime and Ukraine’s descent into civil war.

Instead, the EU aims to give the Belarusian regime a new public face by integrating into it opposition parties who backed rival presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.

Anger at Lukashenko’s regime and the police repression of protests has brought out workers at Belarusian auto and tractor factories, potash mines, chemical plants, Minsk public transit and hospitals on strike. Yesterday, the Belarusian Health Ministry confirmed the death of Gennady Shutov, a 43-year-old protester shot in the head with live ammunition by police during a protest against the elections. Two other victims of the Belarusian police have been identified: Alexander Vikhor, aged 25, and Alexander Taraikovsky, 34.

The upsurge of the working class is only beginning, however, and the EU aims to exploit the fact that what has predominated within it have been vague democratic slogans, provided by Tikhanovskaya’s camp, calling to oust Lukashenko. Under cover of these slogans, the EU aims to use the Tikhanovskaya opposition to trap the movement in the dead end of support for rival factions of the Lukashenko regime. It can easily agree to removing Lukashenko and installing top officials more favorable to EU, as opposed to Russian, foreign policy interests.

The EU cannot tolerate, however, workers’ opposition to police repression, poverty wages and the botched handling of the pandemic. It carried out the same bankrupt policies and fears working class opposition in Europe. Since 2018, this has erupted into mass protests like France’s “yellow vest” movement, Portuguese nurses strikes organized on social media and last year’s national teachers strike in nearby Poland. The EU is determined to

divide the working class and prevent opposition among workers in Belarus from joining hands with the international upsurge of the class struggle.

The EU, which dedicated the bulk of its aid package to medical aid for the pandemic, is well aware of the social roots of workers' anger. However, the piddling sum it allocated to fighting the pandemic—€50 million, when it is handing over €2 trillion in bank and corporate bailouts to the financial aristocracy—shows that it has no real intention of helping fight the virus or improving conditions in Belarus. Its aim is to preserve the police-state apparatus while strengthening its own political and strategic influence in Belarus.

The critical question facing workers in Belarus is the need for a political struggle against both the Lukashenko regime and the EU-backed opposition.

Lukashenko is a corrupt strongman who emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy's restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union in 1991 and the economic disintegration provoked by the bureaucracy's plunder of state assets. He rules over a brutal, kleptocratic capitalist regime similar to a number of post-Stalinist regimes in former Soviet republics, including President Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia.

The opposition parties only represent different factions of the same corrupt political establishment, however, and depend on their close links to the EU powers. Tikhanovskaya fled to Lithuania shortly after the elections and is working there under the protection of the EU and of the NATO military alliance. Yesterday, shortly before the European Council summit began, she called on the EU to not recognize the August 9 election result but instead back what she called the "awakening of Belarus."

The opposition also unveiled a "coordination council" consisting largely of artists, intellectuals and right-wing parties, which it claims should take over power from Lukashenko. Its presidium includes Maria Kolesnikova, the coordinator of banker Viktor Babariko's 2020 election campaign; Olga Kovalkova, the co-chair of the Belarusian Christian Democracy; former Belarusian Culture Minister Pavel Latushko; and Nobel literature prizewinner Svetlana Alexievich.

Lukashenko denounced the formation of the committee as a power grab and, at a meeting yesterday of Belarus' Security Council, announced the mobilization of troops on the country's western border. He reportedly told the council that the protests were "not spontaneous," and that the situation would escalate further. Afterwards, he placed a phone call to Putin.

The Belarusian Defense Ministry invited attachés from Germany, Britain, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine to warn them about planned responses to "threats against Belarus' national security."

Apparently acting to defuse growing military tensions, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper called Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to discuss "confidence-building measures and transparency in order to prevent incidents in the course of the parties' military activities."

Even amid explosive anger at his repression of the election protests, Lukashenko is planning a crackdown on strikers. Reports emerged last night that an OMON police special forces unit raided the Minsk Tractor Factory (MTZ) and arrested strikers in front of the plant. While strikes are continuing at the Schlobin steel plant and the Grodno Azot chemical plant, workers have reportedly largely returned to work at the Belaruskali potash plant.

Workers at multiple plants are reporting that employers are threatening to fire anyone who does not return to work. "Our foremen have also been called in. They have been told to calm people down, otherwise action will be taken," Andrei, a worker at the Belaruskali plant, told German news magazine *Der Spiegel*.

The struggle between the working class and the Belarusian regime is only beginning, and the official EU-backed opposition no less than Lukashenko faces it as a determined enemy. The only way to obtain the necessary resources to fight the pandemic and halt mounting police and military violence is for the working class to mount a direct struggle for power, as part of an international struggle for socialism. This means taking up a political struggle against the entire capitalist regime that emerged from the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, and a turn to the Trotskyist movement's Marxist internationalist opposition to Stalinism.



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