

# Belarusian opposition leader Tikhanovskaya appeals to Washington for support

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Exiled Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has spent the last two weeks in the United States to meet with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and later President Joe Biden as part of her ongoing appeal to Western imperialism for support against the regime of President Alexander Lukashenko.

Tikhanovskaya, a former teacher, rose to prominence in August of 2020 after claiming victory in the Belarusian presidential elections against Lukashenko. According to the Belarusian government, President Alexander Lukashenko won by a landslide, garnering 80.10 percent of the vote, while Tikhanovskaya, came in second, with 10.12 percent of the ballot. Tikhanovskaya claimed to have won the presidency with between 60 to 70 percent of the vote.

Amid widespread claims of government ballot rigging, mass protests and strikes erupted. The mass anger was also driven by the government's criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Lukashenko regime harshly cracked down on strikes and protests. Several protesters were killed, thousands were imprisoned and there were numerous reports of cruel torture in prisons.

While the Western media focused its attention on so-called "pro-democracy" figures, such as Tikhanovskaya (who quickly went into exile), the crackdown was primarily motivated by a fear of working-class protests and strikes spreading throughout the country.

The pro-Western opposition and the Lukashenko regime have, in fact, been united in their opposition to the upsurge in working-class struggles. While the regime responded with harsh violence, the opposition sought to politically derail the strike movement.

As the protests have died down in recent months, divisions have emerged within the opposition, with Tikhanovskaya speaking for a wing that most openly appeals to the imperialist powers.

On the eve of her visit to Washington, she declared in

the *National Interest* that she no longer sought to claim the presidency in Belarus. Instead, she wanted to serve as a "moral authority." Underscoring her complete orientation to US imperialism, she said, "With Biden's help we will prevail."

Throughout her time in Washington, Tikhanovskaya had meetings with the State Department, the White House and the Senate. She also attended the launch of the Friends of Belarus Caucus in the House of Representatives.

While meeting State Department officials, including Secretary Antony Blinken last Monday, she begged the US to implement tough sanctions against the Belarusian economy, including the country's potash, oil, wood and steel sectors. She reportedly also gave the US government a list of officials who should be sanctioned.

Last Tuesday during a webinar coordinated by the rabidly anti-Russian think tank the Atlantic Council, Tikhanovskaya openly called for a more aggressive imperialist intervention into Belarusian politics, stating, "I think it's high time for democratic countries to unite and show their teeth."

Despite weeks-long pleading for a face-to-face meeting with President Joe Biden and several op-eds in the *Washington Post*, Tikhanovskaya was forced to wait over a week before a snap meeting occurred on Tuesday. Her White House visit conspicuously took place just as US and Russian officials were meeting in Geneva to follow up on Biden's June summit with Putin. At the summit, the Biden administration sought to ease tensions with Russia in the context of its war drive against China.

Following the meeting, Tikhanovskaya called her visit with Biden "an inspiration for our people" and "a message to the whole world that the greatest country in the world is with us." Biden tweeted, "The United States stands with the people of Belarus in their quest for democracy and universal human rights." However, no

information about any tangible results of the meeting were revealed.

In a stark display of her utter alienation of social reality in Belarus, Tikhanovskaya at no point during her comments in Washington even mentioned the ongoing pandemic that has had a devastating effect on the Belarusian health care system.

In addition to meeting with top US officials and President Biden, Tikhanovskaya has previously met with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and President Emmanuel Macron of France while attempting to drum up support for Western-sponsored regime change in Belarus.

Among her list of demands intended to cripple the Lukashenko presidency, she is also pleading with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to cancel a planned \$1 billion disbursement to Belarus, so far with little success.

While she has received no official answer to her demand for sanctions, Russia's TASS news agency reported that the US will announce new sanctions against Belarus in the coming weeks. "There were no promises given to her, no deadlines, because the US is working on sanctions regardless of her visit," a source told TASS.

Tikhanovskaya currently resides in Lithuania, a NATO member country, where she has received the support and backing of the government. The Lithuanian government granted her official diplomatic status in her attempt to drum up US and EU support against the Lukashenko regime.

Despite the ongoing campaign in the Western press over Tikhanovskaya, within Belarus she is far from the most popular opposition figure with polls showing that she would now fall into third or fourth place in hypothetical elections.

According to a poll of Belarusians by the London-based think tank Chatham House, Victor Babariko is, in fact, the most popular opposition figure with 34 respondents supporting him compared to 25 for Lukashenko and just 10 percent for Tikhanovskaya. Forty-two percent of respondents stated that they did not trust Tikhanovskaya.

Babariko previously worked as a prominent banker with Belgazprombank, a lender that is a subsidiary of Russia's state-owned Gazprom. He was widely seen as the biggest threat to Lukashenko and was arrested just prior to last year's presidential elections.

Unlike Tikhanovskaya, who has developed open ties with Western imperialism, Babariko has long-standing connections with Moscow due to his business dealings with Russian companies. He favors Belarus taking a

neutral status in the conflict between Russia and the West.

Babariko was recently sentenced to a 14-year prison sentence after Belarusian officials accused him of money laundering, bribery and tax evasion, suggesting that Lukashenko is moving further away from accepting a succession agreement negotiated by Moscow.

While the Kremlin initially backed Lukashenko following the eruption of mass strikes and protests with the open support of the imperialist powers for the opposition, Moscow is very wary of Lukashenko and has been pressuring him to step down for many months now.

Over the past year, Lukashenko has resorted to arresting over 35,000 people and imprisoning up to 400 political prisoners in a desperate bid to hang onto power which he has held for the past 27 years. Throughout the crisis Lukashenko has refused to undertake measures to stem the COVID-19 pandemic, dismissing it as a "mass psychosis."

Despite the availability of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, the government has effectively refused to undertake a vaccination campaign. Only 4 percent of its population of 9 million people are vaccinated, one of the lowest rates in Europe.

In addition to jailing journalists and opposition politicians, closing down NGOs and threatening to interrupt EU trade routes, the Lukashenko regime has turned to increasingly desperate attacks on the country's working class to maintain power. The Belarusian government has recently curtailed the already extremely limited right to strike. Any worker who participates in protests can now be immediately fired, and the raising of political demands during strikes has been banned altogether.

Last week, Lukashenko, who often blames nefarious "bandits" for undermining his authority, publicly railed against Belarusian workers, who are supposedly stealing diesel, fuel, milk and other products from state companies and are being blamed for threatening Belarus along with the mass media and NGOs.



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