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Belarus: 2020 presidential election

By Nigel Walker
and Tim Robinson

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Map: House of Commons Library

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Summary

Belarus held a presidential election on Sunday 9 August 2020, with early voting taking place from 4 - 8 August.

In the weeks leading up to the election there were large rallies against the incumbent president, despite an increasing crackdown on the opposition and several arrests.

Leading rival candidates such as Viktor Babaryko, Sergei Tikhanovsky and Valery Tsepkalo were all eventually banned or prevented from running bids.

Their wives then decided to stand for election instead, with Svetlana Tikhanovskaya becoming the face of the opposition movement.

President Alexander Lukashenko was declared the winner by election authorities, securing a sixth term in office; a position he has held since 1994 when the current presidential system of government was first adopted.

There have been allegations of widespread vote-rigging and the opposition has disputed the results, with supporters of Ms Tikhanovskaya insisting she won.

Since the election thousands of protesters have taken to the streets and Ms Tikhanovskaya has fled to neighbouring Lithuania, while many in the international community – including the UK Government – have declared the elections to be neither free nor fair and have rejected the result.

Analysis of post-election events and the ongoing unrest in Belarus is available in Commons Briefing Paper CBP-9002, [Belarus: where next?](#) (8 September 2020).

1. Background

The office of the President of Belarus was created in 1994, three years after the country declared independence from the Soviet Union, with the passing of the Constitution of Belarus (subsequently amended) by the Supreme Soviet of Belarus.

Elections are held every five years using a two-round system. However, the election due for 1999 was postponed until 2001 because a referendum held in 1996 extended Alexander Lukashenko's term by two years.¹

In a later referendum in 2004, a proposal to eliminate presidential two-term limits was won by Lukashenko, allowing him to stand again in 2006 and all subsequent elections to date.²

Since the creation of the Office of the President of Belarus in 1994, Lukashenko has won all presidential elections - 2001, 2006, 2010, 2015 and 2020 - with all but the first election attracting international criticism over concerns with vote-rigging and the democratic process.³

The date of the 2020 presidential election was set by the Belarus Parliament on 8 May 2020.

¹ [‘Lukashenko poised for new term’](#), *BBC News*, 8 September 2001

² [‘Boss of Belarus Seems to Win Referendum, as Expected’](#), *New York Times*, 18 October 2004

³ [‘Who is making sure Belarus’ presidential election is free and fair?’](#), *Euronews*, 10 August 2020

2. 2020 presidential election

2.1 Candidates

According to the Official Website of the Republic of Belarus, the Central Election Commission of Belarus registered five candidates to run for the office of president:

- Sergei Cherechen (Chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly)
- Andrei Dmitriyev (Co-chairman of the political movement "Tell the Truth")
- Anna Kanopatskaya (Member of Parliament)
- Alexander Lukashenko (Incumbent president of Belarus)
- Svetlana Tikhanovskaya (Wife of blogger and activist Sergei Tikhanovsky)⁴

Two of Lukashenko's main rivals were barred from registering. Viktor Babaryko was barred due to alleged financial irregularities and reports that his campaign was being funded by foreign sources. He was arrested on 18 June and is currently being held in a Belarusian security service (KGB) detention centre in the capital Minsk.⁵ Valery Tsepkalo was barred from registering because he allegedly did not receive the necessary 100,000 or more supporting signatures needed to register,⁶ and because the income and assets declaration of his wife allegedly contained inaccuracies.⁷

A third rival, activist and YouTube star Sergei Tikhanovsky, was arrested on charges of incitement to violence against the police and remains in custody.⁸ His wife, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, decided to run for president in his place.

On 16 July 2020, Ms Tikhanovskaya was joined in her campaign by Valery Tsepkalo's wife, Veronika Tsepkalo, and Viktor Babaryko's election agent, Maria Kolesnikova.

2.2 Profiles of incumbent president and leading opposition candidate

Alexander Lukashenko

Alexander Lukashenko was born on 31 August 1954 in Kopy, Vitebsk oblast, Belorussia, USSR (now in Belarus) and has been President of Belarus since 1994.

He is married to Halina Radzivonawna Lukashenka and they have two adult sons: Viktor and Dzmitryy. Lukashenko told an interviewer in May

⁴ [Five presidential candidates registered in Belarus](#), Official Website of the Republic of Belarus, 14 July 2020

⁵ ['Victor Babariko, main rival of Alexander Lukashenko, barred from Belarus presidential election'](#), *Euronews*, 14 July 2020

⁶ ['Belarus presidential election: Key challenger Valery Tsepkalo barred as Lukashenko rivals trimmed'](#), *Euronews*, 1 July 2020

⁷ ['Presidential election 2020 in Belarus'](#), *Belarus.by*, 14 July 2020

⁸ [Belarus: Crackdown on Political Activists, Journalists](#), Human Rights Watch press notice, 30 July 2020

2015 that he had no intention of divorcing Halina although they have not lived together for over 30 years.⁹

Lukashenko's third son – Mikalay – was born in 2004, to Irina Abelskaya, Lukashenko's personal doctor.

A graduate of the Mogilyov Teaching Institute and the Belarusian Agricultural Academy, in the mid-1970s Lukashenko became an instructor in political affairs and also spent five years in the army. He later held minor posts in the Komsomol (communist youth organisation) and in local party organisations.

From 1982-90 Lukashenko held management and party posts at collective and state farms and at a construction materials combine. He was elected to the parliament of the Belorussian SSR in 1990.

In parliament Lukashenko created a faction called Communists for Democracy and was the only deputy to oppose the December 1991 agreement that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He maintained a close association with conservative communist factions in independent Belarus and had links with similar groups in Russia. In 1994 he addressed the Russian State Duma in Moscow with an appeal for the formation of a new union of Slavic states, and he promoted closer ties with Russia in the succeeding years.

Alexander Lukashenko was first elected President of Belarus in 1994, when the position was established, has remained in power ever since, often being referred to as "Europe's last dictator".

Several of his election wins have been made easier by opposition candidates being barred from standing, with some candidates fleeing, disappearing or being imprisoned.

Referendums during Lukashenko's time in office have provided him with greatly increased powers at the expense of parliament, and allowed him to cement his grip on the country.

Svetlana Tikhonovskaya

Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, 37, is a former teacher and was a stay-at-home mother before entering the presidential race after her husband Sergei Tikhonovsky was arrested and blocked from running for office.

Ms Tikhonovskaya grew up in Mikashevichi, a town south of Minsk and near to the Chernobyl fallout zone.

In the mid-1990s, aged 12, Ms Tikhonovskaya spent the summer in rural Ireland, one of thousands of children that charities brought to Ireland in the years following the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. She subsequently spent over a decade of summers in the country. With a good knowledge of English, she used her language skills to help interpret for others.

⁹ 'Biography: Alyaksandr Ryhoravich Lukashenka', *BBC Monitoring*, 16 August 2020

Ms Tikhanovskaya's time in Ireland allowed her to hone her English skills and earn money for school, later going on to study teaching at Mozyr State Pedagogical University in Belarus.

She eventually left work to concentrate on being a stay-at-home mother to her two children: a son (aged ten) and a daughter (five).

Ms Tikhanovskaya's son was born nearly deaf and much of her attention went to his care. The family moved from Minsk to the south eastern city of Gomel so their son could receive special care and, eventually, a cochlear implant that vastly improved his hearing.

During the election campaign, Ms Tikhanovskaya became the surprise face of change in Belarus and joined forces with Veronika Tsepkalo and Maria Kolesnikova.

2.3 Election campaign

On 8 May 2020 the Belarus Parliament set the date of the 2020 presidential election as 9 August. Throughout the election campaign, Belarusian authorities intensified their crackdown on opposition candidates, activists and journalists.

Belarusian law requires self-nominating presidential candidates to collect at least 100,000 signatures within a tight deadline in order to stand. Since the beginning of the campaign, thousands of Belarusians have signalled their support for opposition candidates and some have faced reprisals.

Many Belarusians joined large rallies against the incumbent president and, in the first month of the election campaign, more than a hundred protesters and journalists were arrested.

Courts handed down jail sentences of up to 25 days on charges of "participation in unsanctioned public gatherings". Tanya Lokshina of Human Rights Watch argues this means a higher risk of Covid-19 infection.

The new wave of arbitrary arrests in Belarus is particularly disturbing in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Belarusian authorities should not be arresting people for peaceful protests, but to expose them to higher risk of a deadly infection is unacceptable.¹⁰

On 9 June 2020, Freedom House issued a statement in response to the detention and harassment of activists and candidates ahead of the presidential election:

Over the recent weeks, more than a hundred activists, journalists, and signature collectors for presidential candidates have been detained, and many others have been harassed during peaceful gatherings. We have seen repressive tactics used repeatedly ahead of presidential elections in Belarus over the last 15 years. This year, the developing crackdown is particularly cynical due to the government's denial of the COVID-19 pandemic and its blatant disregard for public health safeguards. We call on the Belarusian

¹⁰ [Belarus: Activists, Journalists Jailed as Election Looms](#), Human Rights Watch press notice, 22 May 2020

authorities to immediately cease all intimidation, harassment, and detentions of peaceful activists, campaign workers, and journalists, and to implement the recommendations of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights on ensuring free and fair elections.¹¹

Two of the main opposition candidates were also arrested and a third was prevented from registering. Their wives joined forces to oppose the incumbent president.

At the end of July, Belarus authorities detained 33 alleged Russian mercenaries near Minsk, accusing them of preparing a terrorist attack to destabilise the country ahead of the presidential elections. Belarus claimed the men were mercenaries employed by the Russian private military company Wagner (linked to an ally of Vladimir Putin) and had fought in armed conflict in Ukraine, Syria and countries in Africa.¹²

In the days leading up to election day, tens of thousands of people gathered in Minsk for the largest opposition rally in the country since the start of the election campaign.

On election day, after casting his vote, President Lukashenko told reporters that the unrest would not escalate:

Nothing will spiral out of control. I guarantee that. This is the main objective for the ruling government, not only the President. You should not have any doubts about it, no matter what certain people are planning here and other things.¹³

Lukashenko also spoke dismissively of his main challenger, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya:

I have four main challengers. I do not see this person [Tikhanovskaya] as my main rival. It was you [the international media] who made her, poor girl, the main rival, and she sincerely admitted that she does not understand where she has ended up, why, and what to do next.¹⁴

2.4 International reaction

United Kingdom

Soon after the Belarus presidential election was called, the UK government expressed its concern about the arrests and detention of over 100 people, including independent journalists, social media actors, human rights defenders and peaceful environmental demonstrators.¹⁵

¹¹ [Belarus: Presidential Election Campaign Marred by Repressive Tactics](#), Freedom House, 9 June 2020

¹² [‘Belarus says detained Russian mercenaries were plotting terror attack’](#), *The Guardian*, 20 July 2020

¹³ [Aleksandr Lukashenko casts his ballot in Belarus’ presidential election](#), President of the Republic of Belarus, 9 August 2020

¹⁴ ‘Belarus opposition ‘unworthy’ of repression – president’, *BBC Monitoring quoting web portal tut.by*, 9 August 2020

¹⁵ [Arrest and detention of journalists and demonstrators in Belarus: UK statement](#), UK Government, 21 May 2020

On 4 June, the Missions of the United States, the UK and the European Union in Minsk issued a joint statement urging the Belarusian authorities to take the measures to:¹⁶

- ensure a safe, free and fair election
- protect fundamental freedoms
- invite election monitors from the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

In a statement issued on 2 July, the UK Government again expressed concern that the Belarus presidential election would not be free or fair and was critical of the Belarusian authorities detaining journalists.¹⁷

On 23 July, the UK government expressed concern that there would be no OSCE or Council of Europe mission to monitor the election because an invitation had not been issued in time. The Government again noted the number of detentions and arrests of those citizens who were protesting peacefully. The statement closed:

We are now less than three weeks away from the election, and it is important that candidates are given the opportunity to campaign without the fear of detention or persecution of themselves, their teams, or their supporters.¹⁸

United States

In a press release issued to mark Belarus National Day on 3 July 2020, the US Secretary of State urged the government of Belarus “to do everything in its power to ensure the upcoming elections are free and fair”, adding:

This includes the right of a diverse range of candidates to participate in the campaign, the right of citizens to assemble peacefully and speak freely, and open and fair ballot counting. All of these fundamental freedoms are necessary to ensure the continued independence and sovereignty of Belarus.¹⁹

European Union

In a statement issued early in the election campaign, the European Union strongly urged the Belarusian authorities “to ensure a meaningful and competitive political contest” and that “no potential candidate should be prevented from fulfilling the registration procedure due to politically motivated restrictive measures.”²⁰

The statement continued:

The Belarusian authorities must respect fundamental freedoms and human rights, in line with Belarus’ international commitments. They must refrain from any restrictions of the rights of potential candidates, avoid any detentions of peaceful

¹⁶ [Joint statement on the presidential elections in Belarus](#), British Embassy Minsk, 4 June 2020

¹⁷ [Presidential elections in Belarus: UK statement to the OSCE Permanent Council](#), UK Delegation to the OSCE, 2 July 2020

¹⁸ [Presidential elections in Belarus: UK statement](#), UK Delegation to the OSCE, 23 July 2020

¹⁹ [Belarus National Day](#), US Department of State, 3 July 2020

²⁰ [Belarus: Statement by the Spokesperson on recent developments](#), Delegation of the European Union to Belarus, 19 June 2020

protesters, and immediately release all arbitrarily detained activists. Reported cases of ill-treatment of persons detained for their involvement in peaceful protests, including Pavel Severinets, are extremely worrying.

In mid-July, the EU expressed concern at the lack of transparency in the process of verification of the signatures supporting the presidential candidates and said it expected “Belarus to respect the Belarusian citizens’ rights of freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly in the weeks leading up to the elections.”²¹

The following week saw an ad hoc meeting of EU and Belarus officials. Following the meeting the EU delegation issued a press release providing an outline of the discussions.²²

Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

In a press release issued on 15 July, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions (ODIHR) said that it was unable to observe the election as it had not received an invitation:

The lack of a timely invitation more than two months after the announcement of the election has prevented ODIHR from observing key aspects of the electoral process. These include areas we have noted in recent observation reports as requiring improvement in Belarus, such as the formation of election commissions and registration of candidates. It is clear from the outcomes of these processes that the authorities have not taken any steps to improve their inclusiveness.

2.5 Election results

On 14 August 2020 the Central Election Commission of Belarus (CEC) published the finalised voting figures.²³

The CEC reported a total of 5,818,955 voters cast their ballots – representing a turnout of 84.28 per cent – with incumbent president Alexander Lukashenko securing a sixth term in office.

Candidate	% of votes
Alexander Lukashenko	80.10
Svetlana Tikhanovskaya	10.12
Anna Kanopatskaya	1.68
Anderi Dmitriyev	1.21
Sergei Cherechen	1.14

²¹ [Belarus: Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell on the non-registration of presidential candidates](#), Delegation of the European Union to Belarus, 14 July 2020

²² [Belarus: Ad hoc meeting of EU and Belarus senior officials](#), Delegation of the European Union to Belarus, 23 July 2020

²³ [Belarus presidential election results finalized](#), Official Website of the Republic of Belarus, 14 August 2020

There were allegations of widespread vote-rigging and many commentators and opposition leaders disputed these results.

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's press secretary, Anna Krasulina, rejected the results:

The election results announced by the Central Electoral Commission do not correspond to reality and completely contradict common sense.²⁴

Ms Tikhanovskaya later filed a complaint with the Belarus Central Election Commission, saying she did not accept the result of the poll and insisting ballots be recounted because of alleged multiple violations during the count.²⁵

Since the election there have been growing protests and many in the international community – including the UK government – have declared the elections to be neither free nor fair and have rejected the result.

For analysis of post-election events and the ongoing unrest in Belarus, see Commons Briefing Paper CBP-9002, [Belarus: where next?](#) (8 September 2020).

²⁴ 'Belarus candidate 'does not recognise' official election data', *BBC Monitoring translation of Interfax News Agency article*, 10 August 2020

²⁵ '[Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in a complaint to the CEC demands a recount of votes](#)', *European Radio for Belarus*, 10 August 2020

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