



BRIEFING PAPER

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Belarus: where next?

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1. The 2020 election

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 incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko, 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.

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

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

Many in the international community – including the UK Government – have declared the elections to be neither free nor fair and have rejected the result. The [EU is considering sanctions](#) against “those who violated democratic values or abused human rights”.

In the weeks since the election thousands of protesters have taken to the streets and Ms Tikhanovskaya has fled to neighbouring Lithuania.

In early September mass protests continued, with police arresting a further 633 people on Sunday 7 September. The following day one of the opposition leaders, Maria Kolesnikova, was [reportedly kidnapped](#) by masked men in Minsk.

This paper can be read in conjunction with [Belarus: 2020 presidential election](#), which provides information about the political background in Belarus and about the campaign and outcome.

2. The main actors

2.1 Belarus Government

In the last weeks it has become clear that Lukashenko has decided to dig in.

With increasingly firm support from the Kremlin, officials have shown no signs of considering a negotiated change of leadership.

Perhaps the most important factor, medium-term at least, is the loyalty of the armed forces and the police. There have been isolated instances of police and military personnel showing support for the protestors or resigning, but in general the security forces have so far remained loyal to the regime.

That could change. One analyst for the Atlantic Council argues that the peaceful nature of the protests makes security force defections more likely.¹ So far, the military has not been deployed (the Belarusian military has little experience of domestic repression). But Lukashenko has begun to hint at a military solution and has several times warned of foreign intervention (with little evidence). If the military is deployed to the street, junior officers could be more likely to defect.

2.2 The opposition

Workers in Belarus's state-run factories came out on strike. That was crucial in giving the protest movement momentum and is remarkable in a country where the politics and the economy are so tightly controlled. There have been signs that the strikes will not be sustained, however, as leaders are prosecuted and participants threatened with the sack, calling into question the movement's staying power.

The protest does still appear to have overwhelming public support, but a lack of political leadership has left it struggling to move beyond street mobilisation.

Some opposition activists have [announced the creation of a new party](#), "Together". Some fear it could divert the movement from the main goal of ousting Lukashenko. The main leadership figure, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, said that a new party is a good idea but perhaps it was not the right time.

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¹ Keith Jones, [Belarus crisis: Will the army remain loyal to Lukashenko?](#), Atlantic Council, 23 August 2020

2.3 Russia

Belarus is viewed in Moscow as a client state, dependent on Russian subsidies and loans, and the strategy remains to deepen the “Union State” integration between the Russian Federation and Belarus.

The Kremlin has offered military support if Belarus is threatened from outside,² but at first showed little enthusiasm for propping up Lukashenko in person. Association with a president who has lost credibility among a generally pro-Russian populace could risk Putin’s popularity at home. It could also turn Belarusians against Russia; Russian intervention in Ukraine caused [Ukrainians’ opinions about Russia](#) to decline, while opinions about Putin deteriorated even more.

Russia has moved military forces closer to the Belarus border, however. And on 27 August, with the protests proving resilient, Russian President Putin said he had formed a [reserve of law enforcement officers](#) for Belarus. But he said that he and President Lukashenko had agreed that the special force would not be necessary unless protests turned violent.

On 3 September, Russian PM Mikhail Mishustin [visited Minsk](#) for talks with Lukashenko, in another sign of firming support. The price for this support may be further integration of the Union State.

2.4 The EU

On 30 August the EU’s foreign policy chief [Josep Borell called for new elections](#): the “best solution would be to replay the match under the control of the OSCE”. Meanwhile, [German Chancellor Angela Merkel said](#) at her annual summer press conference that Belarusians have the right to demonstrate, and that she hoped that the Russian troops would not be deployed.

But the main lever available to the EU is sanctions (see below).

2.5 The OSCE

Belarus is a member of the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and has undertaken to [uphold democracy and human rights](#).

Albania is chairing the OSCE at present and has proposed an official OSCE visit in conjunction with the forthcoming country chair, Sweden. On 28 August Edi Rama, Albanian Prime Minister [offered OSCE mediation](#): offered OSCE mediation: “I am proposing that the OSCE becomes a facilitator of the necessary dialogue, to help Belarus out of this situation”. “Let us learn lessons from failure”, he added, referring to the response to the Ukraine crisis in 2014.

2.6 Council of Europe

The Council of Europe (CoE) plays an important role in mediating disputes and upholding human rights in Europe. Belarus is not a

² [‘No good options for Putin as protests rage in Belarus’](#), *Financial Times*, 17 August 2020

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member but CoE policy is for Belarus to join the organisation in due course but the special guest status in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, seen as a first step to membership, was suspended in 1997. Meanwhile, the two sides implement a co-operation [Action Plan](#).

Opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya recently made one of her first international speeches to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), suggesting that a reformed Belarus would aim to become a full member:

The Belarusians are now fighting for the values that this organisation defends. I very much hope that Belarus, the new Belarus, will very soon be able to retake its rightful place among other countries that respect human rights and dignity.³

She asked for PACE to find ways to support dialogue in Belarus.

The President of the PACE [saluted the courage of the people of Belarus](#), especially women, and called on the authorities to respect human rights and the rule of law.

2.7 The US

On 20 August Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that he supported international inquiries into the election and human rights abuses:

We support international efforts to independently look into Belarus' electoral irregularities, the human rights abuses surrounding the election, and the crackdown that has followed.⁴

Pompeo proposed urged the Belarus Government to accept OSCE mediation, but there was no mention of sanctionssanction in the statement.

On 2 September the State Department official responsible for Belarus policy said at a conference in Washington that there would be a [tough response](#) from the US and its allies if Russia intervenes in Belarus.

James Nixey of Chatham House calls on the EU and the West to get tougher on Belarus. He argues that the EU has allowed Lukashenko to play the EU and Russia off against each other, and calls for swift, co-ordinated sanctions:

Sanctions are a much-touted first step and they have been proven to change the calculus, if not the character, of a regime. The EU, the UK and the US should act decisively and in unison to impose them immediately. Included in this would be the immediate halting of direct EU support to state entities.⁵

He also calls for the EU to end [Belarus's Eastern Partnership agreement](#), which is intended to be conditional on respect for human rights and good governance. Mr Nixey also says that Belarus should be expelled from the [OSCE](#), the IMF and the World Bank.

³ [Svetlana Tikhanovskaya address](#), PACE, 8 September 2020

⁴ ['Supporting the Aspirations of the Belarusian People'](#) Department of State press notice, 20 August 2020

⁵ James Nixey, [Belarus Policy: Time to Play Hardball](#), Chatham House, 12 August 2020

On 31 August the *Financial Times* likewise called for a tougher line from the EU, including immediate sanctions on Belarusian officials who falsified the election and ordered violence against the protesters.

3. What happens next?

3.1 Sanctions

In 2016, the EU ([including the UK](#)) [lifted sanctions on 170 individuals](#) and three companies, in what was [seen as a reward](#) for an election that was not followed by violent repression, and for the release from prison of a previous opposition presidential candidate. An arms embargo was maintained, as were some individual sanctions.

The reward for a 'good' election will now be reversed; the EU has already started to prepare a list of individuals for sanctioning. On 19 August the EU said that the [bloc would shortly impose sanctions](#) against a "substantial number of individuals responsible for violence, repression and the falsification of election results".

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic [Raab said on 17 August](#) that the UK would work with international partners to "sanction those responsible, and hold the Belarusian authorities to account". The method and extent of UK collaboration with the EU over Belarus sanctions will be an interesting test of the [UK's post-Brexit sanctions regime](#).

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Responding to the FT editorial, Tony Brenton, British Ambassador to Russia from 2004-2008, disagreed:

We should be talking to them quietly (as the French and Germans very likely are) about finding an agreed way out. As for the sanctions you (once again) advocate, this is turning into an addiction. Seventy-five years' experience of sanctions against Russia (ie, since the second world war) shows they never work. The present lot have simply bolstered Russian inflexibility, reinforced domestic support for Putin, and landed the west with the huge political problem of unwinding them when the time comes (as it surely will) to fix relations with Russia. When you are in a hole, stop digging.

⁶ James Nixey, [Belarus Policy: Time to Play Hardball](#), Chatham House, 12 August 2020

3.2 Military co-operation

On 3 September the UK Government announced that it had stopped training Belarusian armed forces:

The UK and Belarus have shared a cooperative defence relationship which aims to promote mutual learning and understanding through events such as winter survival training, language training and peacekeeping training.

However, in light of recent events we have decided to suspend our defence engagement programme with Belarus and will keep this under close review.⁷

Mutual training had been taking place over several years. In March 2020, for example, [members of 42 Commando joined Belarusian troops](#) to conduct cold weather training on the two-week exercise in Belarus.

3.3 International criminal proceedings

Crimes allegedly committed against opposition demonstrators include torture and threats of rape. Some have called for an international effort to gather and preserve evidence of these incidents to facilitate any legal action.⁸

One commentator argues that a move could be made to refer the allegations to the International Criminal Court (ICC).⁹ Belarus is not a signatory to the Rome Statute, the founding treaty of the ICC, so a referral would have to be agreed by the UN Security Council, where Russia would veto it. But the move could have an important symbolic impact and the Belarus opposition movement supports it.

There is also the principle of [universal jurisdiction](#), whereby serious crimes including torture can be investigated and prosecuted in countries other than where the crimes took place. These prosecutions are not common.

Individuals can also go to the UN with complaints of abuse, under the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) and the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#).

3.4 Diplomatic sanctions

The [Eastern Partnership](#) is the EU programme for developing relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Describing [the EU's relationship with Belarus](#), the bloc says that participation in the Eastern Partnership depends on respect for rights:

The level of Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership depends on the overall development of EU-Belarus relations in the context of the respect of international law and human rights.

⁷ [PO 82147, 3 September 2020](#)

⁸ Lotte Leicht, '[Belarus: How EU states can help protesters get justice](#)', *EUObserver*,

⁹ Katarina Busol, '[Can the International Criminal Court Help Belarus?](#)', Chatham House, 26 August 2020

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Some commentators have called for Belarus to have its Eastern partnership terminated or the associated trade benefits downgraded.¹⁰

Belarus could be expelled from the OSCE, which also has human rights requirements for member states.

Belarus is also a [NATO Partner for Peace](#) and contributes to the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. NATO encourages member states and partners to observe democratic norms and particularly to set up proper democratic control of armed forces. Belarus's association with NATO could be downgraded, but as NATO was already arguing before this year's election, that might be counterproductive:

...NATO Allies believe that keeping open channels of communication, practical cooperation and dialogue is in the best interest of regional security.

¹⁰ James Nixey, [Belarus Policy: Time to Play Hardball](#), Chatham House, 12 August 2020

4. Outlook

Many observers argue that the legitimacy of Lukashenko's presidency is exhausted, and Lukashenko will never regain significant support.

Russian analyst Dmitri Trenin argues that the Kremlin's best option is to persuade Lukashenko to retire and go into exile, and to manage the handover to a leadership that would be more acceptable to Belarusians and keeps Belarus as a reliable partner for Russia.¹¹

Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former British Foreign Secretary, argues that a democratic Belarus would be a threat to Vladimir Putin's rule and that the West should concentrate on dissuading Putin from intervening.¹²

4.1 Like Ukraine?

Belarus is probably not heading for a situation like Ukraine's. Belarus is already in a "Union State" with Russia, with freedom of movement, some military integration and a mutual defence commitment.

Furthermore, demonstrators have not been pushing for EU membership or a Westward realignment in general, and there is less anti-Russian sentiment in Belarus than Ukraine. As one Moscow-based analyst puts it: "This makes the Belarusian protests much freer of geopolitical meaning."¹³ This means that the Russian Government is probably less likely to intervene as forcefully as it did in Ukraine.¹⁴

While Russian support for Lukashenko is not guaranteed, the Kremlin is still concerned about Belarus, as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made clear:

What is happening in Belarus worries us very much ... No one is making a secret of the fact that this is about geopolitics, the fight for the post-Soviet space.¹⁵

4.2 Like Armenia?

Some commentators have likened the situation to the 2018 unrest in Armenia, where demonstrations brought down the Government. In that case Russia did not intervene, welcoming Armenia's "peaceful transition"; new Prime Minister Nicol Pashinyan did not decisively realign Armenia towards the West, despite cultivating stronger EU ties than his predecessor.¹⁶

¹¹ Dmitri Trenin, [Game Over for Lukashenko: the Kremlin's Next Move](#), Carnegie Moscow Center, 17 August 2020

¹² Malcol Rifkind, [Belarus: No Easy Answers](#), Royal United Services Institute, 14 August 2020

¹³ Alexander Baunov, [Belarus's Fight for Freedom](#), Carnegie Moscow Center,

¹⁴ For more on the present situation in Ukraine see the Commons Briefing Paper [Eastern Ukraine: dashed hopes?](#), 25 June 2020

¹⁵ ['Putin prepares for a controlled succession in Belarus'](#), *Financial Times*, 20 August 2020

¹⁶ ['No good options for Putin as protests rage in Belarus'](#), *Financial Times*, 17 August 2020

4.3 Staying power?

A Moscow-based analyst argues that the opposition in Belarus is quite weak; unlike Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, Belarus does not have powerful oligarchs with the money and media capacity to challenge the present regime.¹⁷

Nevertheless, at the time of writing the opposition demonstrations were continuing. For her part, opposition figurehead Svetlana Tikhanovskaya said the demonstrations would continue: "I know that this will not stop. You should understand ... we woke up ... we will not accept him anymore."¹⁸

¹⁷ Maxim Samorukov, [Can Russia-West Divide Save "Europe's Last Dictator" in Belarus?](#), Carnegie Moscow Centre, 10 August 2020

¹⁸ ['Belarus opposition leader: Dozens disappeared after protests'](#), *Politico*, 1 September 2020

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