

# Lukashenka's War on the Belarusian People Calls for a Strong EU Response

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It was to be another elegant victory for Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the Belarusian strongman who has been in power for 26 years. Instead, it turned into a massacre among his people. As polling stations closed on Sunday and another phony “victory” was announced for him, tens of thousands of Belarusians across the country have risen in peaceful protest to defend their vote. They are being met with police brutality that is unprecedentedly harsh, even by the miserable standards of this East European dictatorship. Lukashenka has openly declared war on his country's people. Yet it is a war that he has already lost, whatever the course, human cost, and final outcome of the ongoing protests.

Over the last months, Belarusian society has gone through a remarkable transformation. It first found the strength to self-organize in response to the coronavirus pandemic, which Lukashenka denounced as a psychosis. In the absence of state guidance and support, citizens mobilized to provide information, collect money and equipment, and assist vulnerable groups and medical workers. In so doing, they also cut their reliance on a paternalistic state and shattered the image of the benevolent father of the nation that Lukashenka aims to project.

With the onset of the electoral campaign, Belarusians were presented, for the first time in many years, with several credible alternatives. Popular blogger Syarhei Tsikhanouski made inroads with Lukashenka's core electorate, the residents of Belarus' impoverished regions. Former banker Viktor Babaryka and ex-diplomat Valery Tsapkala convincingly appealed to urban voters and elites. All three were barred from running in the elections, with the former two arrested and the latter exiled. Yet their emergence signaled to citizens that real and better options were available to them. All of a sudden, Lukashenka was not indispensable any longer.

Eventually, it fell to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to lead the challenge against Lukashenka. When her blogger-husband was arrested, she stepped in with her own candidacy and, within weeks, joined forces with Tsapkala's wife Veranika and Babaryka's campaign chief Maryia Kalesnikava. A complete novelty in male-dominated Belarus, this female trio campaigned with an ingenious “love, fight, and win” imagery. This modern, human, and emotional tone struck a chord with many Belarusians. What is more, the three women made Lukashenka and his regime look plainly anachronistic.

This shift in political consciousness only broadened among Belarusians as the electoral campaign wore on. It translated into an unprecedented mobilization of voters, from long-time opposition supporters to erstwhile Lukashenka backers to previously passive citizens. Across the country, people turned out at rallies in numbers

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unseen in decades, peaking at 60,000 in Minsk. Although eventually, the regime prevented further mass gatherings, citizens understood that a clear majority of them favored political change. Lukashenka had obviously lost any legitimacy.

It was in open contradiction to this public mood that the regime announced its vote “results” on election night. Putting Lukashenka at 80 percent and Tsikhanouskaya at under 10 percent flew in the face of what Belarusians felt politically and had witnessed. Some confirmation of the absurd extent of vote rigging came when dozens of polling stations published real results. These showed effectively the inverse of the official count, giving an overwhelming victory to the challenger.

This stolen election has triggered massive protests with tens of thousands of people taking to the streets peacefully in Minsk and 32 regional towns. The security apparatus instantly escalated the situation. Clearly hoping to put down protests swiftly, its shock-and-awe approach has included the use of stun grenades, tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons, alongside the deployment of thousands of riot police, interior ministry troops, and the army. By the end of the first night of protests, some 3,000 arrests and dozens of hospitalized protesters had been recorded. This scenario repeats itself as, at the time of writing, Belarus sees the second night of mass protests and police crackdowns. Nothing could demonstrate more clearly that by now, Lukashenka’s power fully depends on his praetorians.

This may well be enough to buy Lukashenka a few more days, months, or even years in power. Yet he will not be able to dial back the political awakening that has taken place among a majority of Belarusians. It is this deeper shift, the emancipation and now rebellion of society against the state, that marks out the current dynamics from previous protests. And this urgently needs a proper response, beyond the condemnations already voiced, from the European Union.

First, the EU must end its geopoliticking in Belarus. Rather than pretending that its recent warming of ties with the Lukashenko regime has bolstered the country’s sovereignty, the EU must return to putting its fundamental values front and center. For as long as democracy and human rights are trampled by the government in Minsk, there can be no continued, much less deepened, political engagement.

Second, Europe must immediately demonstrate its solidarity with the people of Belarus. Thousands have fallen victim to political repression and police violence. They urgently need legal assistance, material and medical help, and rehabilitation. A generous solidarity package for Belarusian democrats, civil society, independent media, and engaged citizens should be launched instantly.

Third, the EU should strategically direct its assistance at Belarusian society. Long-term programs to support young people and students, European education, independent media, free entrepreneurship, women political engagement, civil-society development, and cross-border contacts are needed.

By contrast, finally, cooperation with Lukashenka’s regime must be reduced to a minimum. Direct EU support to state structures cannot continue for as long as that very state violently represses its citizens. In addition, individual sanctions need to be rolled out against those in charge of electoral fraud and violence.

Europe, ideally in concert with the United States, can and must take a clear stance in support of Belarusian democrats now. Their fight against a criminal regime deserves it more than ever.

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