

# Six to-Do's for the EU Summit on Belarus

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In light of dramatic political, and increasingly geopolitical, developments in Belarus, the European Union will hold an extraordinary summit tomorrow, Wednesday August 19. Importantly, and different from last Friday's foreign ministers meeting, the summit will be exclusively dedicated to this Eastern neighbor of the union. It also elevates the discussion to the executive level among member states, a clear acknowledgement of the ramifications for the entire EU of the domestic and international developments in Belarus.

Over the last days, the situation in Belarus has reached an impasse. On the one hand, protests against the fraudulent August 9 presidential elections have continued and grown. Daily peaceful protests are held in virtually every city and many smaller communities, gathering as many as 200,000 people in Minsk last weekend. Strikes have been called, or are planned, at most significant enterprises across the country. State media have refused to continue government propaganda, state cultural and academic institutions have sided with protesters, and defections continue among state and security officials, albeit mostly at lower levels.

The regime, on the other hand, has dug in its heels and continues to refuse to bow to the principal demands of the protest movement. Alyaksandr Lukashenka has denied his defeat in the elections and rejected any proposals to engage in a dialogue with the opposition. The upper echelons of power have retained, so far and somewhat surprisingly, their cohesion. The extensive security apparatus has not lost, despite some restraint over the last days, its capacity to inflict violence and repressions on Belarusian citizens. At best, the regime is slow on the uptick and has not fully grasped the political sea of change that has taken place among the people. At worst, it is biding its time, sees a chance to ride out the protests, and plans to cling to power by all means.

Given this domestic standoff, it is clear that international impulses and initiatives are needed to pave the way forward in Belarus. Effectively, Lukashenka has himself acknowledged as much when he called for Russia to provide security assistance to his regime last weekend. The EU should use its upcoming summit to signal and specify its support to a direct neighbor in urgent need. There are six moves the EU could make to help Belarus find a peaceful exit to the current situation, reduce risks of escalation at home and abroad, and move toward the progress its citizens demand and deserve.

First, the EU summit's communique must reiterate its solidarity with the Belarusian people. It needs to clearly restate that the elections were illegitimate and police brutality is unacceptable, while appreciating the courage of peaceful Belarusian protesters and asserting their right to determine the leadership and future of their country. Moreover, the EU should acknowledge those in the Belarusian state apparatus who have begun to

18 August 2020

engage in a dialogue with the people, to provide truthful information about events in the country and, in the security structures, to show restraint toward citizens. At the same time, the EU must demand the release of thousands of recent detainees that remain in jail, and clarification on the whereabouts of dozens that remain unaccounted for. Humanitarian support to victims of recent political repressions, for legal assistance, medical and psychological rehabilitation, and financial support, must be sped and stepped up.

Second, the EU should resolutely counter Lukashenka's narrative of Western interference in Belarus. Over the last days, the defeated strongman has accused EU countries of plotting a 'color revolution' to topple him, and NATO of amassing troops along Belarus' Western borders to aggress the country. His clear intention is to mobilize Russia in his support, knowing full well that the specter of Western engagement and encroachment resonates strongly with many in the Kremlin. Instead allowing the dispute to be elevated to a geopolitical stage, the EU should underscore that Belarusian developments are entirely driven domestically. They are the clash between a society that demands respect and participation, and a patronizing and intransigent ruler and his regime. This is a homegrown contradiction that will not be resolved by turning it into an international conflict.

Instead, third, dialogue is needed between the regime, the political opposition, and civil society in Belarus. The idea has been floating around EU capitals for several days now to initiate such a dialogue under the auspices of the OSCE, Europe's election and democracy monitor. Belarusian opposition and civil society have already signaled their readiness to engage in this format, while Lukashenka has so far strictly rejected such offers. Not only should the EU itself throw its weight behind this initiative, but it should strongly encourage Russia to join it. The Kremlin, after initial surprise at Belarusian developments, is coming to understand that Lukashenka cannot be kept in power, nor is he needed for continued and close Belarus-Russia relations. A negotiated transition of power in Minsk is, hence, squarely in Moscow's interest.

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Fourth, some in Russia entertain ideas of unilateral interference or even invasion in Belarus. Such a scenario would likely have catastrophic consequences, devastating yet another post-Soviet republic, alienating Belarusians from Russians, and creating yet another hotspot in the shared neighborhood of the EU and Russia. It is imperative, therefore, that EU makes it clear that a single- and heavy-handed Russian approach to Belarus is not tolerable and will be met with an adequate and punitive European response.

Fifth, the EU should clearly demand a rerun of the presidential elections in Belarus. The recent poll cannot be fixed given the scale of manipulations reported by monitors. Against this experience, the rerun must be beyond doubt in process and outcome, so as to provide the next Belarusian president with unquestionable legitimacy, and Belarusians with confidence in their elections. In order to ensure such, the EU should commit to funding an extensive domestic and international monitoring effort.

Sixth, any new president and government will inherit a dire economic state in the country. The Belarusian economy has long been, and will be even more so once the current political turmoil subsides, in a very challenging situation. Substantial external debt is to be paid off this year, the coronavirus pandemic has triggered

a recession, Russian oil and gas deliveries need to be paid for, and structural reforms will need to be started in the Belarusian economy. Within months, Belarus will need substantial macrofinancial support. The EU should, even as political events are still unfolding, start to prepare a generous stability package that enables the next government, whoever and whenever succeeds Lukashenka, to steady the country economically as well as politically.

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