

The Crackdown on Freedom in Belarus

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Background

After winning in last Sunday's presidential elections which were rejected as neither free nor fair by a unanimous world community, Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko is facing the most severe challenge of his quarter of a century rule.

Since the election, Belarus is experiencing a widespread uprising. The first night of riots began with peaceful protests in the central parts of the capital, Minsk, and in other major cities around the country. The approach of the protesters was primarily to use other means of protesting than those customarily taken. Since meetings and rallies had de facto been banned by authorities around the country, the means of protesting was restricted to honking with cars, applauding loudly and marching around the city centre wearing the white colour of the opposition.

The response from authorities has been massive and violent. After several nights with no signs of diminishing protests, police and semi-official militia have cracked down hard on the protesters with the use of lethal weapons and ammunition. Several people have been killed and more than 6,000 have been detained. Several prominent bloggers, journalists and activists are missing. The Belarus authorities are now using empty school buildings as temporary jails since the jails in the country are full. There are currently no clear signs that the massive use of force by the police will diminish.

A Weakened Dictator

It is clear that Lukashenko has been weakened after the rigged election.

Neither the government nor the opposition movement itself expected the huge crowds of people attending the opposition's rallies throughout the summer. No one, including staff in the presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's own campaign team, could have expected that an unknown housewife in a few months' time could become the figurehead for the biggest opposition movement in Belarusian history, gathering more than 60,000 people in central Minsk on 30 July, according to the BBC.

The developments have made Lukashenko distressed and frustrated. Amidst speculations that he would rather downplay his own results in the elections he had won before it took place, the official numbers announced by the Central Election Commission declared that he had won the popular vote with 80 per cent. Practically no one believes this, and the altered numbers also show that Lukashenko's government is not at all in touch with reality. Furthermore, his extremely violent response to the protesters has swept away the last pieces of legitimacy he had among the broader population.

The situation in Belarus appears to grow even more violent and insecure. This has many reasons.

Firstly, President Lukashenko has no international allies or political friends in Europe. It is a well-known fact that Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin, however dependent on each other in a geopolitical sense, cannot stand one another.

Secondly, Lukashenko now lacks all legitimacy – when it comes to the declaration of his oversized victory as well as his forceful response to the peaceful protesters.

Third: Lukashenko has mishandled the economy. There has been no economic growth in Belarus since 2012. The country is largely dependent on subsidies from Russia in the energy sector. The level of foreign equity is severely low. With Lukashenko's harsh handling of the protesters, it will likely be harder for him to attract further foreign investments in the country. The national shutdown of internet access effective from 9 to 12 August – and after that with continuing difficulties for access – has stalled workplaces and the running of ordinary people businesses. On Wednesday 12 August, 300 CEOs of Belarusian IT companies and investors signed a letter addressed to Lukashenko demanding new elections to be held, to release political prisoners and to ensure future and stable access to information and the internet.

Signs of willingness to mobilize for strikes are also increasing on a daily basis. Since the first violent crackdown on protesters, large companies in the chemical and manufacturing industries have gone on strike. Belaz, the largest manufacturer of mining dump trucks and transport equipment with a vast export to Russia, declared on Thursday 13 August that they have joined the strike. A general strike has been called and more and more enterprises are expected to join. This poses an imminent threat to Lukashenko's legitimacy as well. This is undoubtedly a new phase in the post-election development.

Together, these three factors pose the largest threat that the dictatorship has experienced since 1994, and depicts how serious the situation is for the regime.

Need for a strong international response

The alternatives of action are extensive from a European and international perspective. It is time for Europe and the western world to act constructively:

- The European Union should immediately impose personal sanctions on the leadership in Belarus. The EU imposed sanctions on Belarusian officials after the violent crackdown on protests following the 2010 presidential elections. These were lifted in 2015-16, while the US government still has their sanctions in place. It is crucial that the EU now imposes new, targeted sanctions aimed at government officials and their families. The EU should also strongly consider imposing sanctions on regional decision-makers and others, such as local elections committee officials. The European arms embargo must be enforced and strengthened, especially since reports from Belarus indicate that Polish lethal ammunition has been used against protesters in Minsk.
- Radoslaw Sikorski, former minister for foreign affairs of Poland and now a member (EPP) of the European Parliament, declared this week that he wants to push for indictment of those responsible for the authoritarian violence to be prosecuted before the ICC. A lot of factors in his call remain to be discussed and elaborated, but his statement can work as another push of pressure towards the Lukashenko regime.
- The European Council should appoint an EU Special Representative for Belarus, to work together with EU27, the European Commission and the Delegation of the European Union to Belarus to monitor the situation and continuously report on the matter at the FAC and Council meetings. Since the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has declared this commission to be a geopolitical one, it would be necessary to follow that with real actions. The Eastern Partnership can play an important role as well as provide a revitalized arena of dialogue and enhanced cooperation with a democratic Belarus.
- Enhance digital freedom in Belarus. Since the major internet lockdown on Sunday 9 August, just a small share of the Belarusian population has been able to access internet. As internet

access is crucial for the democracy movement, the EU should work to amplify Belarus with long-range wireless internet to circumvent any future internet shutdowns. The internet shutdown has limited media consumption for most people to state-controlled media, which could spark further polarization within the Belarusian society.

- Support civil society, Belarusian diaspora and the growing women's revolution. Women protesters are generally treated somewhat better than protesting men in Belarus. Their detentions are shorter, the punishment less harsh and the willingness to use substantial violence is slightly lower. In recent days, the growing numbers of all-women protests has been rocketing. It is vital to have international support for the women of these particular protests.
- Further visa liberalization for Belarusian citizens should be put in place as soon as possible. This could work both as a European moral support for the Belarusian people but also has a direct effect in binding Belarus closer to Europe. One should not underestimate the importance of Belarusians being able to travel to Poland, Lithuania or other countries since this can show the Belarusian population what a free and democratic society, as an alternative to dictatorship, can provide them.

The situation in Belarus affects all of Europe, and the freedom movement is larger, more determined and stronger than ever before. It is now time for the international community and the rest of Europe to engage in order to enhance freedom, rule of law and democracy in Belarus, Europe's oldest dictatorship.