



Belarus' Fight for a Democratic Future

By Max Bergmann and Claire Cappaert | September 3, 2020

The power of democracy is on display in Belarus.

Over the past decade, democracy has been in retreat around the world. Many liberal democracies have made illiberal turns; established democracies have elected right-wing populists; and autocratic strongman leadership has been in vogue. Such an environment should have meant that Belarus' president, Alexander Lukashenko, frequently referred to as “Europe's last dictator,” was assured of maintaining his hold on power.¹ But while liberal democracy may have lost some of its luster in the West, for those trapped in oppressive autocracies—whether in Cairo or Kiev, Damascus or Caracas, Hong Kong or Minsk—it remains an inspiration strong enough for which citizens will risk everything.

The recent presidential election in Belarus was clearly fraudulent, which led to protests and, subsequently, a violent crackdown by Lukashenko's security forces. The violence did not succeed in ending the protests, however; it just brought more and more people into the streets to demand Lukashenko's departure from office. So far, Lukashenko has refused to resign or accede to demands for new elections, and the country is now in the midst of a tense standoff between protestors and the security services of the Lukashenko regime.

With Belarus at a democratic crossroads, the United States and Europe must stand in support of the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people. Yet both should do so knowing that the Belarusians—not they—are the drivers of events. As such, Western allies should seek to use their clout to deter Belarusian officials and the Kremlin from acting violently to suppress the will of the Belarusian people. This issue brief provides background on Belarus' struggle for democracy and discusses how, for democracy to take hold, Belarusians will not only need to overcome Lukashenko but also Russian President Vladimir Putin's Kremlin. It also provides recommendations for how Belarus' Western allies can best support the goals of protestors.

Belarus' struggle for democracy

Since his initial election in 1994, former collective farm boss Lukashenko has maintained an authoritarian grip on Belarus. The freedoms of information, press, association, and assembly are severely restricted², and the United Nations special rapporteur

to Belarus has reported³ that there are ongoing cyclical and systematic human rights violations in the country. Elections have been held for show and have neither been free nor fair, with opposition candidates routinely jailed and suppressed.

Nevertheless, Belarus has felt compelled to hold elections. Yet elections, even sham elections, are risky bets for autocrats, as they can serve as a focal point for opponents of the regime.

This most recent election season began much the same as previous ones: Press were regularly detained⁴ while covering election events, and two major opposition candidates, Viktor Babariko and Sergei Tikhanovskaya, were barred from running and jailed.⁵ A third candidate, Valery Tsepkalo, fled to Moscow with a warrant out for his arrest.⁶

Yet, in a remarkable turn of events, the wives of Tikhanovskaya and Tsepkalo and the campaign manager for Babariko joined forces as a united opposition to Lukashenko.⁷ Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who headlined as the presidential candidate, ran on a platform of offering free and fair elections within six months.⁸ A normally politically apathetic Belarusian public responded strongly to the campaign.⁹ Despite a heavy police presence and a threat of a crackdown, the women drew large crowds to their rallies, one of which was attended by more than 60,000 people—then the largest in the country’s ex-Soviet history.¹⁰

Lukashenko, for his part, appeared ill before the election and had to postpone a speech. Although this wasn’t directly attributed to COVID-19, the fact that he had contracted the disease had become public just days prior. Lukashenko had previously dismissed the danger of COVID-19, saying that it could be addressed with vodka and saunas.¹¹ He may have been incapacitated before the vote, which possibly contributed to a somewhat passive response to the surging opposition.¹² He instead played down the influence of the opposition campaign, stating that “society hasn’t matured to the point to vote for a woman.”¹³

Immediately following the elections, the government declared Lukashenko the winner of the election with an impossible-to-believe tally of 80 percent of the vote, placing Tikhanovskaya at just 10 percent.¹⁴ Tikhanovskaya estimates that she won approximately 60 percent to 70 percent of the vote given the size of her rallies and indications from some of the polling sites where vote rigging was prevented.¹⁵ The public reaction to the results has also supported the claims of an opposition victory, with thousands heading to the streets to protest.¹⁶ An estimated 200,000 people attended a “Freedom March” a week after the election.¹⁷ The state has responded with violent crackdowns, detaining nearly 7,000 people in the week after the election.¹⁸ The protests, however, have yet to let up—and women are leading the way.

There are signs that the regime is starting to crack. Employees of the state media broadcaster BT have gone on strike in solidarity with the opposition, joining thousands of employees of other state-owned firms.¹⁹ The diplomatic elite have similarly begun to shift away from Lukashenko, with the Belarusian ambassador to Slovakia coming out in support of the protestors.²⁰ The ambassador, and at least four other diplomats, subsequently resigned from their positions.²¹ At least 50 members of the police have joined the side of the protestors.²²

After being heckled during his speech at a state-run tractor factory, Lukashenko suggested that he may be open to new elections following constitutional reform.²³ Although it appeared that his grip on power was starting to slip, Lukashenko has since hardened his stance. Claiming the protests are fueled by foreign agitators, he has made a point of carrying an assault rifle.²⁴ The security services have also remained largely loyal to the regime and are engaged in a continuous campaign to stymie the protests.

Still, Lukashenko's future as leader of Belarus is now in doubt. But his future and that of democracy in Belarus may not be determined in Minsk but in Moscow.

The Kremlin conundrum

Russia and Belarus share a complicated relationship. Belarus was formerly part of the Soviet Union and gained independence after the collapse of communism. In 1999, Lukashenko agreed to merge Belarus with Russia as part of a potential bid to replace then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin.²⁵ During Putin's 20-year tenure, tension in relations has ebbed and flowed, with constant quarrels over economic and political integration as well as Minsk's occasional efforts to curry favor with the West.²⁶ Lukashenko's refusal to recognize Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea has drawn the Kremlin's ire.²⁷ But this is a dangerous game for Lukashenko: Belarus is economically dependent on Russia²⁸ due to nearly \$2 billion a year in energy subsidies.²⁹ Putin's brief retaliation in December 2019 over disagreements on oil prices resulted in the supply being temporarily cut off and Belarus scrambling to find new sources.³⁰

During the most recent election season, Lukashenko warned of Russian interference in the election³¹ and of a possible coup against him.³² With less than two weeks before election day, Belarus detained 32 foreign military contractors, out of a group of nearly 200, who were later identified as Wagner mercenaries.³³ Wagner is a nominally private security firm run by a U.S.-sanctioned, Putin-connected oligarch known for carrying out Russia's foreign policy objectives in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. Russia has denied that the group was carrying out a campaign in Belarus.³⁴ Chatter in Russian security circles, however, suggests that there is great interest in installing a pro-Kremlin president in Belarus.³⁵

Nevertheless, Moscow sees Belarus as strategically vital to Russian security, as the country acts as a buffer state to NATO. If a union between Russia and Belarus was ever formalized—and Putin has been pressing Lukashenko to agree to such a union—NATO planners fear that Russia would be able to build up its military presence in Belarus, which would pose a direct threat to Poland and give Russia the capability to potentially cut off the Baltics by land from the rest of Europe.³⁶ The tensions between Putin and Lukashenko, heightened in the past year over Russia’s energy subsidies and Lukashenko’s growing nationalistic rhetoric, have nonetheless been a concern for Russia and their expensive foothold in Europe.³⁷ And the Kremlin, obsessed with geopolitics, would likely interpret a Belarus that seeks to align more closely with NATO and the EU, as Ukraine did, as a direct threat to Russian security.

Russia, along with China, therefore recognized Lukashenko as the winner of this month’s election. Lukashenko, meanwhile, has pivoted back toward Russia, going so far as to return the 32 mercenaries, and sought backing from the Kremlin.³⁸ Putin has, in turn, offered “comprehensive help” in accordance with the countries’ collective military agreement, with the Kremlin’s statement suggesting that the problems between the two countries will be “resolved soon.”³⁹

Fear of democracy

For Putin, the fundamental driver will likely not be the geopolitical threat of NATO or EU expansion, both of which the Kremlin likely understands are improbable and very distant prospects. The crucial factor, then, is regime survival and stability. It is impossible for Putin not to look at the events in Belarus and fear a similar uprising in Russia. Should the protests succeed in ousting Lukashenko and establishing a successful liberal democracy in Belarus, Putin would rightly worry that Russian citizens will ask themselves, “Why not us?” If a revolution is possible in Minsk, it must also be possible in Moscow.

Putin will therefore likely intervene to subvert Belarusian demands for democracy. How he will do so remains to be seen. The most dangerous course is to militarily intervene and install a new pro-Kremlin leader, along the lines of the Russian seizure of Ukrainian Crimea. Such an act would not only cause global condemnation but would also be incredibly costly and risky, as well as likely unpopular in Russia, especially compared with Crimea.

Another option is to back Lukashenko and urge him to crack down on the protests, promising diplomatic support and aid. The problem with this approach is that it may not succeed and could significantly turn Belarus’ population in an anti-Kremlin direction. Yet this appears to be the direction that the gun-toting Lukashenko is turning.⁴⁰ It is also doubtful that the regime can wait out the

protestors, who undoubtedly know they have crossed a line with the regime and that any return to normalcy could bring arrests and retribution weeks or months later. The security services have sought to intimidate protestors by visibly filming them.⁴¹ But such efforts will likely backfire and will only increase protestors' determination to oust Lukashenko; failing to do so would lead to retribution. An alternative strategy for Russia—and one with a positive potential outcome—is to relent by privately telling Lukashenko to resign and to support new elections. While such a path may seem improbable, the Kremlin may judge that its best bet to undermine moves toward Belarusian democracy is to do so covertly. Moscow could seek to replicate what it did in Ukraine after the Orange Revolution and Maidan Revolution—corrupt, subvert, and threaten the new democracy from the inside.⁴² In this scenario, Moscow would find an alternative candidate and devote its efforts to seeing that candidate succeed.

How the West should respond

For the United States and Europe, responding to the uprising will require precision. On the one hand, both need to demonstrate clear and vocal support for the protestors, for democracy, and for human rights. On the other hand, Russia and Lukashenko will want to advance a conspiracy theory that the protestors are the product of outside agitation, the CIA, or other Western intelligence agencies, as opposed to an organic movement of people who are sick of Lukashenko's corruption. Western leaders therefore must consider that signs of direct engagement can be seized on by the Kremlin. Yet this is often inevitable, as the Kremlin may ascribe Western meddling even when there is none.

The United States and Europe should take the following steps to support democracy in Belarus.

Be vocal in support of Belarusian democracy

Belarus' Western allies should let the Belarusian people lead the protests, while expressing support for their efforts and issuing warnings against internal human rights violations and external intervention.

Yet while European leaders have spoken out, President Donald Trump has been silent. The U.S. president has called the events a "terrible situation," neglecting to support protestors who are risking everything for democracy.⁴³ Although U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called the elections neither free nor fair, he has signaled that the United States will largely wait to see how Europe responds, taking a backseat until then.⁴⁴ The United States should instead be strong and vocal in its support of democracy and should do so in coordination with our European allies.

Call for and prepare to support free and fair elections

The United States and Europe should call for new elections and should be ready in case Lukashenko steps down. Should the protestors succeed, and new elections be called, the priority for the West should be ensuring free and fair elections, such as by deploying election monitors, as well as exposing Kremlin efforts to interfere. As with other democracy movements around the world, civil society organizations and activists can benefit from the solidarity and support of their allies in the form of technical assistance and training on how to build democratic institutions and advocacy strategies.⁴⁵ While election monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe were prevented from conducting their mission in Belarus for this round of elections, deploying election observers to the country would help ensure free and fair elections are held.⁴⁶ Journalists similarly would benefit from foreign support and protection, as many have been detained while reporting on the events at a time when internet and cell service within the country is limited to nonexistent, possibly due to a government shut-off.⁴⁷

Threaten sanctions to deter human rights abuses

The United States' response to Belarus has been lackluster compared with Europe's. All 27 of the EU's foreign ministers have agreed to begin the sanctions process,⁴⁸ but a recent statement from the U.S. State Department⁴⁹ did not threaten sanctions if the violent crackdown continued. In considering sanctions against Belarus, the United States and Europe should support the Belarusian public as the primary actors in determining the direction in which their country is going. Initial sanctions could target individuals committing human rights abuses such as members of the brutal riot police OMON and the government officials who have continued to prop up Lukashenko's regime.⁵⁰ The U.S. government should also consider using sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act.⁵¹

Hit pause on normalizing relations with Belarus

The Trump administration has been eager to renew its relationship with Belarus and to send a new diplomatic mission to Minsk—a reversal from 2008, when the United States withdrew its ambassador after a series of regime crackdowns.⁵² Lukashenko has reacted positively to this effort to normalize diplomatic relations in the past.⁵³ If the United States continues down this path, however, it would further enable Lukashenko and his authoritarian rule. Suspending the confirmation process of Julie Fisher, who Trump recently nominated to be the U.S. ambassador to Belarus, until the violent crackdowns are halted would send a signal to Lukashenko that he will be ostracized by the West if he refuses to step down or conduct new elections.

Warn Russia that direct intervention in Belarus will result in additional sanctions and increased isolation

The United States and Europe should be seeking to deter Russia from direct military intervention in Belarus. Western leaders should convey to the Kremlin that military intervention along the lines of that witnessed in Ukraine will result in harsh sanctions and diplomatic isolation. This may not deter Russia from ultimately acting, but it is the most significant leverage the West possesses.

Don't hesitate to call out Russian interference

In 2014, the United States hesitated to condemn Russia's insertion of "little green men" into Ukraine's Crimea. While it was clear these were Russian military forces that simply removed their Russian insignia, the State Department's response was to call for calm and restraint, which in effect urged Ukraine to stand down, resulting in a bloodless Russian takeover and possibly emboldening the Kremlin to attempt the same in eastern Ukraine.⁵⁴ If the United States has evidence that Russia is moving into Belarus either covertly or overtly, the United States should call it out.

Don't take EU and NATO membership off the table, but don't put it on the table either

The West should not pander to Putin by offering to take EU and NATO membership off the table for Belarus if Russia stays out of the country. Doing so would not only limit the ability of the Belarusian people to determine in the future if membership is something they want, but it would also legitimize Russia's claims of its broad sphere of influence over its neighboring countries. Furthermore, such a trade would likely be meaningless to Russia. The Kremlin knows that expansion of the EU and NATO into Belarus is extremely unlikely in the near future. A deal would also not stop Russia from trying to undermine Belarus' nascent democracy covertly or from more directly intervening if the Kremlin believes a successful democracy could threaten the survival of Putin's regime. Nevertheless, the EU and NATO should not trumpet potential membership or seek to make Belarus' fight for democracy about geopolitics. There is no reason to provoke Russia or give it an excuse to justify intervention. Hence, EU and NATO leaders should just state the obvious: Membership for Belarus isn't on the table and is a long way off from being considered.

Conclusion

Democracy has a real chance of taking hold in Belarus for the first time since the country's independence from the Soviet Union. Diplomatic support from abroad, as well as U.S. and European efforts to deter the authoritarian tendencies of Lukashenko and the irredentist and anti-democratic impulses of the Kremlin, will help democracy become a reality for the Belarusian people. But it is important that Western allies take their cues from the protestors. Establishing a liberal democracy in Belarus seemed impossible just a month ago, but the power of the Belarusian people—and of democracy—should not be underestimated.

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