



## Lukashenka fights for survival

by Charles Grant

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**There was never any doubt who would 'win' Belarus's presidential election. But the country is undergoing profound changes – which pose dilemmas for both Russia and the EU.**

Even by its own standards, the electoral fraud committed by the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka was breath-taking. The president claims to have won 80 per cent of the votes in the August 9th election, and that his chief opponent, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, took only about 10 per cent. In fact the true result – based on returns reported by the hundred-odd polling stations that refused to fiddle the figures – was probably 70-80 per cent for Tsikhanouskaya and around 10 per cent for the president.

Superficially, this presidential election looks like all the others during Lukashenka's 26-year reign. Every time, he wins easily and locks up his most significant opponents. But in fact this time was very different. In previous elections the president did not have to falsify the numbers enormously, because he was genuinely popular with large sections of society.

This time there were, initially, three serious opposition candidates – Valery Tsapkala, a former diplomat, Viktor Babaryka, a former banker, and Siarhey Tsikhanouski, an anti-corruption blogger. When there were [signs](#) of voters warming to them, Lukashenka turned to tried and tested methods of repression. But after the first of the three fled the country and the second and third were gaoled, Tsikhanouskaya – the wife of Tsikhanouski – emerged as a credible candidate, unifying the opposition forces.

The president is famously contemptuous of women's abilities, which is why he made the mistake of permitting her candidacy. Her honest and unpolitical campaign – she promised to rule for only six months, till fresh elections could enable the liberated opposition leaders to run – rallied large numbers of citizens to her cause.

The biggest change from previous elections is that Belarusian civil society has gained power and confidence this year. The population was already discontented, because of falling living standards. Then came COVID-19, which the president ignored, refusing to impose a lockdown. Citizens organised themselves to cope with the pandemic. Next, as the presidential election approached, the regime's brutal

repression stirred up citizens, hundreds of thousands of whom queued to sign nomination papers for opposition candidates. The leaderless protests of the past few days show that civil society remains strong.

Tsikhounskaya claimed, with good reason, to have been the true winner of this election. But on August 10th she was detained for seven hours, forced to record a video calling on her supporters to recognise the official result and effectively made to leave for Lithuania.

At the time of writing there have been four nights of clashes between protestors and riot police. The latter have used stun grenades, vicious beatings and rubber bullets (plus a few real ones) against demonstrators, who have responded occasionally with Molotov cocktails. The police have arrested nearly 10,000, hospitalised many dozens and killed a handful of protestors.

The regime controls the security forces and has no intention of ceding power any time soon. The longer term is much less certain, however, since the president has lost legitimacy, even among many of those who used to support him. He knows this, which is why the only election meetings he addressed involved audiences of policemen and soldiers. Tsikhounskaya mobilised rallies of more than 50,000 people, speaking as part of a triumvirate of women alongside the wife of Tsapkala and the campaign chief of Babaryka – until the government effectively banned opposition events in the final week of the campaign.

Regime change will not happen unless the people keep demonstrating and striking, week after week, and the elite splinters. So far there have been just a few minor splinters – the election officials who reported true voting figures, the policemen in provincial towns who have refused to sweep away demonstrators and the TV news readers who have resigned.

Outside forces can make a difference to what happens in the country. Vladimir Putin congratulated Lukashenka on his re-election (as did China's Xi Jinping), with a heavy hint that Belarus will have to accept more integration with Russia in order to maintain friendly relations. Putin and Lukashenka have a notoriously prickly relationship: the Belarusian has played every conceivable trick to avoid closer ties to Russia. But now he has run out of road and has nowhere to turn to for financial support except Russia. Putin is probably happy with the outcome of the presidential election: it leaves Lukashenka weaker and more dependent on Russia.

But if Lukashenka were to stumble, and some sort of colour revolution began in Belarus, Putin would be very concerned. He must already be worried by the long-running demonstrations in Khabarovsk in the Russian far east. Further manifestations of people power in Belarus – much closer to Moscow than Khabarovsk – could trigger new outbreaks in Russia. Putin is probably encouraging Lukashenka to quell the protests in Belarus before they gather momentum.

The Russian president will presumably try to avoid an overt military intervention, since the cost – in terms of reputation, treasure and perhaps blood – could be considerable. In any case there are plenty of levers that he can pull in order to influence the country without having to send in troops. For example, Russia can cut off or change the price of the energy supplies on which Belarus depends.

The EU has fewer effective levers for influencing the country. One reason it has acted so cautiously over Belarus is that it fears greater Russian involvement. The EU removed sanctions in 2016 because Lukashenka released political prisoners, and it subsequently engineered a rapprochement. It was happy to see Minsk move a little further away from Moscow. But Lukashenka has now destroyed that

rapprochement and the only questions are when the sanctions come and how severe they should be. Tough EU sanctions, however, would leave Lukashenka with little alternative but to beg Russia to sort out his economic and political problems.

The EU knows that it has to stay true to its principles of supporting democracy and the rule of law, even if there are geopolitical risks vis-à-vis Belarus's relationship with Russia. As Linus Linkevičius, Lithuania's foreign minister, told the BBC on the day after the election: "Preserving Belarus's independence must not come at the cost of the country's freedom". If the EU decided to maintain friendly relations with Lukashenka, for the sake of reducing Russia's options, it would betray its own principles and lose credibility, not only with Belarusians but also with many other people.

In light of the post-election violence, the EU has [warned](#) the Belarusian regime that it will review relations and may impose sanctions. EU foreign ministers will discuss the country by videoconference on August 14th. The EU will probably go for targeted visa and financial sanctions against the officials responsible for human rights abuse, and also against those guilty of electoral fraud. Such sanctions will hurt – members of the elite and their families love to shop in Vilnius and other Western cities.

The EU will try to avoid measures that would harm the people, such as suspending its recent visa facilitation agreement with Belarus, which makes it easier and cheaper for Belarusians to visit the Schengen area. And it will probably not pull the European Investment Bank out of Belarus, or push for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (in which it holds a majority of the shares) to leave, since they are both helping to modernise the economy. The EU gives only minimal amounts of money to the regime but will have to decide if it wants to keep Belarus in its Eastern Partnership, which enables the country to take part in several EU programmes.

What exactly the EU decides will depend on events in the coming days. Its August 11th statement calls on the country's leaders to engage in "a genuine and inclusive dialogue with broader society to avoid further violence". The more the regime thumbs its nose at the EU and escalates the use of force, the stronger the measures that the 27 will take.

The EU's measures will also reflect the range of opinions held by the 27 governments. Hungary's Viktor Orbán is chummy with his fellow strongman and when visiting Minsk in June declared his opposition to sanctions on Belarus. Yet Belarus's neighbour Poland, with which Hungary usually agrees on so many issues, is at the other end of the EU spectrum. It will probably lean on Hungary not to veto EU sanctions. The wheels of the EU's decision-making machinery move slowly, but it must not tarry over sanctions. Many Belarusians want the EU to act speedily, in order to incentivise the regime to behave better – and they would take the imposition of sanctions as an act of moral support, which is something they need at a difficult time.

EU measures will have more bite if co-ordinated with the US (and the UK). The US first imposed sanctions in 2006 and some of them remain in place. This year, however, the US has been more focused on pulling Belarus away from Russia than on complaining about human rights abuses in the country. It is upgrading its representation in Minsk to ambassador level, for the first time since Belarus forced out the US ambassador in 2008. In February 2020 Mike Pompeo paid the first visit to Minsk by a US Secretary of State since 1994, and in May American oil went to Belarus to make up for a cut in supplies from Russia.

Donald Trump may care little about human rights, but his press secretary and Pompeo have condemned the electoral fraud in strong language. Both the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Pompeo have floated the possibility of new sanctions – the latter saying that the US should confer with the Europeans and act “in a multilateral way”.

The UK also has also criticised the conduct of the Belarusian regime but has yet to mention sanctions. If the EU imposes targeted measures against Belarusian individuals, the UK must do the same for the remainder of the transition period (which ends on December 31st). When a member-state, the UK was often a key source of intelligence on the targeted individuals who faced sanctions; it is not clear whether the British will be willing to continue such exchanges of information. They will try to use the issue of sanctions to make their broader point that foreign policy co-operation can work well without structural links between the UK and the EU; and Brussels will use the example of sanctions to argue exactly the opposite. Nobody can be sure what will happen in Belarus. The situation could become much worse, with the state resorting to extreme violence. But there is also a more optimistic scenario, in which civil society continues to strengthen and elements of the regime agree to some sort of dialogue with the opposition, while doing their best to reassure Russia that they seek friendly relations with it (as Armenia did during its democratic transition in 2018).

Western powers could do more to promote reform in Belarus. They should apply strong and targeted sanctions quickly, to maximise the incentives for members of the elite to shift their position. They should step up existing efforts to provide people in Belarus with reliable sources of information. They should refuse to meet Lukashenka – his recent meetings with Pompeo, Orbàn and Austria’s Sebastian Kurz boosted his credibility – barring exceptional circumstances, such as the need to discuss how he might step down. They should spell out that they would provide significant financial support to any democratic government, to encourage long overdue economic reform. And they should target much more aid on support for civil society – the stronger that becomes, the more costly would be any Russian intervention.

Finally, Western powers must make clear to Russia through private diplomacy that any attempt to take over the country by military or more surreptitious means would lead to immediate, precise and significant measures against its political and economic elite. At the same time they should tell Russia that they do not intend to draw Belarus into Western-led security structures. Ultimately, change in Belarus will depend on the Belarusian people, but Europe and the US can do their bit to help.

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