

## Belarus on the brink

As usual in Belarus, the 9 August presidential election was marred by fraud, repression and state violence against the opposition. As expected, the long-standing President, Aleksander Lukashenko, claimed a landslide victory. What was unusual this time, however, was the scale of Belarusians' disappointment: peaceful protests and strikes spread throughout the entire country in response to the stolen election, despite brutal crackdowns. What started as a national crisis now represents a wider struggle between truth and lies, democracy and autocracy, raising the stakes for both Minsk and Moscow, whose nervousness has spilled over into mounting aggression.

### Background: Just another rigged election?

Belarus is situated at the heart of Europe, but its election standards and poor human rights record have left the country as a 'black hole' on the European map. This has soured EU-Belarus relations, although [ties](#) have improved somewhat since the [crisis](#) in Ukraine and Minsk's 2015 [release](#) of political prisoners, culminating in the entry [into force](#) of a visa facilitation and readmission agreement in July 2020. Given previous unfree and unfair elections in Belarus, it came as no surprise that the country's president since 1994, Aleksander Lukashenko, declared his sixth consecutive overwhelming victory in the 9 August presidential election. Officially, he received [80 %](#) of the vote, and his closest rival, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, 10 %. Lukashenko treated assertions of [election fraud](#) as business as usual, despite the [punitive](#) police violence towards opposition supporters, arrests of journalists and activists, internet [shutdowns](#), 'disappeared' citizens and widespread accusations of torture. This time, however, his harsh response – adding to [discontent](#) over the economic crisis and his mishandling of the coronavirus crisis – fuelled the [largest protests](#) in the history of independent Belarus and mounting calls for him to resign. Tikhanovskaya, who rejected the official results and claims to have received 60-70 % of votes, [called](#) on authorities to 'think about peaceful ways to hand over power'. As violence grew in intensity, she [fled](#) to Lithuania on 11 August.

Despite the brutal crackdowns – so far leaving at least [four people](#) dead, hundreds injured and over 6 700 arrested during protests – protests have escalated. Thousands of workers at state-run factories across the country have gone on strike. On 17 August, workers at the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant [booed](#) Lukashenko and chanted 'leave', to which he responded: 'Until you kill me, there will be no other election'. On the same day, staff from the Belarusian State Television and Radio Company (BT) went on strike in protest against censorship and election fraud. Several TV anchors had already [resigned](#), along with [staff](#) at other state-owned news companies. On 18 August, 'specialists' were [flown in](#) from Russia to get BT back up and running. On 18 August, workers at the Minsk Tractor Works – which employs over 16 000 people – [limited](#) a strike over fear they could be fined and dismissed. On the same day, Belarus' ambassador to Slovakia [resigned](#) after having voiced solidarity with the protesters. On 23 August, more than [100 000](#) Belarusians marched peacefully through Minsk – the highest turnout thus far in these unprecedented protests – [demanding](#) Lukashenko's resignation, despite a massive police presence and warnings from the military.

### The National Coordination Council of Belarus

Ahead of the 19 August emergency European Council meeting, the Belarusian opposition leader and presidential candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, in a [video appeal](#) to the European Council posted on YouTube, urged EU leaders to 'support the awakening' of the Belarusian people and not to recognise the 'fraudulent elections'. She also announced the [establishment](#) of a new [Coordination Council](#) (CC) of Belarus to organise a peaceful transfer of power through dialogue, and to call for new fair and democratic presidential elections in the country. Lukashenko referred to this move as a 'coup'. Moreover, the Belarusian Prosecutor General's office opened a criminal inquiry against the members of the CC on the grounds of a violation of the constitution, arguing that 'the creation and the activities of the CC are aimed at seizing power and inflicting damage to the national security'. On 24 August, two members of the CC were [detained](#), accused of organising unauthorised mass events. A third CC member was summoned to the Belarusian Investigative Committee headquarters for questioning.

## Putin's perspective and preliminary response

The protesters in Belarus have no geopolitical motivation; they just want [free elections](#). The Belarusian opposition is not aiming to sever ties with Russia; Tikhonovskaya's associate, Maria Kolesnikova, has underlined that 'all existing agreements must be respected'. Thus, the protests are not anti-Moscow. At the same time, however, a successful bottom-up regime change in Belarus could serve as encouragement for [simmering](#) protests in south-eastern Russia. Here, protesters have been using the same white-red-white flag of Belarus – banned under Lukashenko – that the Belarusian protesters have been using. Russian President Vladimir Putin's response will impact on his future ties with Minsk, Brussels and the Russian people. Putin's popularity has sunk to a [record low](#) amid the coronavirus pandemic and the evolving economic crisis. Recent constitutional changes, which could allow him to stay in power until 2036, have further challenged Russians' patience. The suspected [poisoning](#) of Russian opposition leader, Alexei Navalny – who was hospitalised on 20 August and airlifted to Germany for treatment and [protection](#) on 21 August, following an emergency [ruling](#) by the European Court of Human Rights – further fuels criticism of Putin's toxic toolbox.

### A 'frenemy' in need: Shifting the blame from Russia to the EU

The Kremlin has key strategic and tactical interests in Belarus. Despite wobbly ties with Lukashenko (who used anti-Russian rhetoric for the first time in his 2020 campaign and [arrested](#) alleged Russian mercenaries in July, accusing them of 'plotting terrorism', which the Kremlin denied), the status quo in Minsk was seen as the [lesser evil](#) for Moscow, at least until Lukashenko lost [all public support](#). A weak Lukashenko who has burnt all bridges to the EU would be even more dependent on Moscow. Putin has consistently pushed for a Union State with Belarus despite Lukashenko's reluctance. Putin repeated his call in a telegram to Lukashenko on 10 August, as the Belarusian opposition's calls for a power transfer grew. Days later, Lukashenko asked Putin to [intervene](#), moved [paratroopers](#) from the Russian to the Polish border, and ordered the military to monitor NATO troops in Poland and Lithuania. He thus shifted the blame away from Moscow, framing the crisis as Western interference, perhaps to justify – or threaten – Russian intervention.

On 16 August, Putin [confirmed](#) Russia's 'readiness to provide necessary assistance in ironing out emerging problems', 'if necessary' through the [Collective Security Treaty Organization](#) military alliance of six former Soviet states. There is reportedly increased military [movement](#) – with columns of unmarked trucks – on Russia's side of the Belarusian border. Perhaps somewhat ironically, in separate conversations on 18 August with German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, French President, Emmanuel Macron, and European Council President, Charles Michel, Putin repeatedly [underlined](#) the 'inadmissibility' of foreign 'interference' in Belarus, warning it could lead to 'further escalations'. On 20 August, Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, [alleged](#) that the EU is on the verge of intervening in Belarus, [claiming](#) that 'this is about geopolitics, the fight for the post-Soviet space'. Lukashenko interpreted the Minsk–Moscow [line](#) on 23 August as follows: 'Putin and I agreed: Belarus is first, Russia is [next in line](#)', [adding](#): 'This is a springboard, and we must destroy it'.

## Position of the European Union and the European Parliament

EU leaders, on the other hand, have explicitly focused on the wishes of the Belarusian people. At a 19 August emergency European Council meeting, EU leaders [concluded](#) that 'the elections were neither free nor fair, therefore we do not recognise the results', underlining that Belarusians 'have a right to determine their future'. They called for a full investigation into all alleged abuses and announced sanctions against individuals responsible for violence, repression and election fraud. Charles Michel [stated](#) clearly that the 'protests in Belarus are not about geopolitics', adding that any resolution of the crisis 'must be found in Belarus, not in Brussels or in Moscow'. The Commission will mobilise an additional [€53 million](#) in support of Belarusian civil society, media and the health sector. EU leaders support the [idea](#) of letting the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [mediate](#), and France and Germany have also offered that the EU play such a role. Lukashenko has so far not spoken to EU leaders about the crisis. In his [opening speech](#) to the European Council meeting, the European Parliament's President, David Sassoli, said: 'Our task is clear: support the calls made by the people of Belarus for new elections to be held as soon as possible'. On 17 August, Members from major political groups [called](#) for new and free elections in Belarus, and strongly condemned the violence and torture perpetrated against peaceful protesters. Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs will hold an [extraordinary meeting](#) on 25 August to discuss the situation in Belarus.

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