

Outcome of the European Council video-conference of 19 August 2020

The European Council video-conference meeting of 19 August 2020 was called by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, due to the increasingly worrying situation in Belarus after the recent national elections. As Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, [summarised](#), the European Council decided to convey three clear messages from the meeting: i) the EU stands with the Belarussian people; ii) the EU will place sanctions on all those responsible for violence, repression and the falsification of election results; and iii) the EU is ready to accompany the peaceful democratic transition of power in Belarus.

While mainly focusing on Belarus, the Heads of State or Government also discussed two further issues during the video-conference meeting. First, as regards the tense situation in the eastern Mediterranean as a result of increasingly hostile Turkish activity, the European Council expressed its full solidarity with Greece and Cyprus, recalling and reaffirming its previous conclusions on the illegal drilling activities, and called for de-escalation. Second, on the situation in Mali, EU leaders expressed their deep concern over the events in the country, which have a destabilising impact on the entire region and on the fight against terrorism, and called for an immediate release of prisoners and restoration of the rule of law.

The situation in Belarus

Background

Prior to the elections, the Belarussian opposition candidate, [Svetlana Tikhanovskaya](#), had managed to unite the opposition and to gather large crowds of supporters. After a strong performance on the campaign trail, she was expected to do well on election night (9 August). However, early results predicted a landslide victory for the incumbent President, Alexander Lukashenko, and the country's election commission [released results](#) stating that Lukashenko had won 80 % of the vote, leaving Tikhanovskaya with only 10 %. The outcome, widely interpreted as falsified, sparked mass protests and demonstrations, which [have now been going on](#) for more than two weeks. President Lukashenko has tried to crack down on demonstrations by detaining protestors, with as many as [7 000 people](#) reportedly arrested, and [reports](#) of widespread police and state authority brutality and abuse. Ahead of the European Council meeting, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya [called](#) on EU leaders not to recognise the fraudulent elections, and on all countries to respect the sovereignty of Belarus and the choice of the Belarussian people.

Earlier European reactions

On 13 August, the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, [expressed](#) his deep concern regarding 'the violence used by the state authorities against people peacefully demonstrating their desire for change', and called on Lukashenko to stop the repression, refrain from further violence, and to immediately release those who have been detained. In his view, 'the use of brutal force by the law enforcement services against its own people, resulting in death and injuries should have consequences according to international law, including targeted sanctions'.

On 14 August, EU foreign ministers [debated](#) the situation in Belarus following the presidential elections, and called on 'the Belarussian authorities to stop the disproportionate and unacceptable violence against peaceful protesters and to release those detained'. They also sent a strong signal of the EU's support to the Belarussian population in its desire for democratic change. Moreover, ministers reiterated that the elections had been neither free nor fair, and that, under those circumstances the EU did not recognise the election results. Ministers also agreed on the need to place sanctions on those responsible for violence, repression and the falsification of election results. The work on extending the list of targeted sanctions, notably against officials, beyond the already [existing framework](#) for Belarus will start immediately. This message was also stressed in a [statement](#) by the High Representative/Commission Vice-President, Josep Borrell.

As the situation in Belarus developed following the meeting of EU foreign ministers, the European Council President [invited](#) the Heads of State or Government for a video-conference meeting on 19 August, to discuss the EU's response to the evolving situation in Belarus. Subsequently, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, and Charles Michel discussed the situation with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin. Following that discussion, Charles Michel [expressed](#) the view that 'only peaceful and truly inclusive dialogue can resolve the crisis in Belarus'. President Putin also [had talks](#) with Alexander Lukashenko on the situation following the elections.

Ahead of the video-meeting of the European Council, the Visegrad countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) issued a [joint statement](#), indicating their support for 'the right of the people of Belarus to free, fair and democratic presidential elections' and called 'on any foreign actors to refrain from actions that would undermine Belarus's independence and sovereignty'.

European Council Presidency conclusions on Belarus

The Heads of State or Government [reiterated](#) the Foreign Ministers' message that the 9 August elections in Belarus had been neither free nor fair, and that the EU therefore does not recognise the results. They expressed their clear solidarity with the people of Belarus in their desire to exercise their fundamental democratic rights. Furthermore, they condemned the disproportionate and unacceptable violence used by the state authorities against peaceful protesters. 'Violence must be avoided and all those unlawfully detained must be immediately and unconditionally released. Civil society and opposition actors engaged in discussions of political transition must be protected from arbitrary arrests and violence. The EU expects a complete and transparent investigation into all alleged abuses'. The European Council unanimously [confirmed](#) that the EU would shortly impose additional targeted sanctions against a substantial number of individuals responsible for violence, repression and the falsification of election results. EU leaders called on the Belarusian authorities to find a way out of the crisis through an end to violence, de-escalation, and an inclusive national dialogue. Only a peaceful and democratic process, underpinned by independent and free media and a strong civil society, could provide sustainable solutions. All parties, including third countries, should support such a process. The European Council stressed that it would continue to follow the situation closely, and stood ready to contribute to efforts aimed at peacefully ending the crisis. The EU fully supports OSCE proposals for dialogue in Belarus, and is ready to provide assistance to further them.

Giving the opening speech at the video-conference meeting, David Sassoli relayed Parliament's deep concern regarding the violations of human rights in Belarus, and underlined that 'the only viable way ahead is that of dialogue involving all national and international stakeholders to secure a peaceful solution'. In his view, the European Union must have an active role in that dialogue, in the context of its Neighbourhood Policy. He indicated that the European Parliament was prepared to play its part in collaboration with the OSCE, drawing on its own structures and experience.

Situation in the eastern Mediterranean

The situation in the eastern Mediterranean is increasingly tense, with growing hostile Turkish activity. As a result, France [sent](#) two fighter jets and a naval frigate to monitor the situation in mid-August. The European Council expressed its full solidarity with Greece and Cyprus, and reaffirmed its previous conclusions on the illegal drilling activities (notably from [October 2019](#), [December 2019](#) and [April 2020](#)). As previously indicated by Charles Michel, the European Council will revert to this topic in detail during a special European Council meeting on 24-25 September 2020, 'where all options will be on the table'.

Situation in Mali

EU leaders also addressed the situation in Mali, where a [military coup](#) forced President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta to resign. The Heads of State or Government [expressed](#) their deep concern, and considered that the events in the country had a destabilising impact on the entire region and on the fight against terrorism. They called for an immediate release of prisoners, and the restoration of the rule of law. The European Council supports efforts by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to find a solution in line with the aspirations of the Malian people, and confirmed the EU's full coordination with African and international partners.

