



# Belarus: Status quo at what price?

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After 26 years of rule, the autocrat Alyaksandr Lukashenka has lost the support of the Belarusian people. Even if the regime is able to stay in control, it will pay an incalculable price for its brutal enforcement of the status quo. Belarus expert Astrid Sahn talks to 'Osteuropa' about the events and what comes next.

**Osteuropa:** *The Belarusian regime clearly denies its citizens the right to change their government through elections. What do the current events tell us?*

**Astrid Sahn:** Lukashenka is proving that he and his apparatus are prepared to go to any length to stay in control of the country. The official election result, which had Lukashenka winning with over 80 percent of the vote, signals that he has no intention of a rapprochement with his political opponents. Otherwise he would have been satisfied with, say, 58 percent. His claim that the protests are driven from abroad is a denial of Belarusian citizens' capacity for independent thought or action.

*What should we make of the official result?*

There was obviously a large number of polling stations where the actual result differed significantly from the information provided by the Central Electoral Commission. On the day after the election, opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya claimed to have won in at least 250 districts – some by a clear margin. But it would be naive to imagine that Lukashenka would agree to a nationwide re-count or a re-election, or that he would negotiate with Tsikhanouskaya's staff. Likewise, the courts are also likely to reject the numerous complaints of independent election observers and voters.

Minsk, Belarus. 12th Aug, 2020. Women take part in an event in support of detained and injured participants in mass protests. Credit: [Natalia Fedosenko/TASS/Alamy Live News](#)

*What triggered violence on election night and the following day?*

The street protests on election night were definitely not Tsikhanouskaya's intention. Throughout the election campaign, her team had been fully committed to avoiding breaking any laws or regulations. For example, on 6 August, she cancelled a campaign event in Minsk after the city administration scheduled a concert at the same location.



There was not supposed to be any escalation. Instead, Tsikhanouskaya appealed to supporters to draw attention to potential voter fraud by using IT techniques and by wearing white armbands and folding ballot papers like concertinas – and to address complaints to the authorities.

She also made a strong pitch to the security forces and state representatives, announcing that should she win, any officials not guilty of offences would be left in office. During rallies, she regularly thanked the police for ensuring the safety of participants and called on them not to take action against their own people, so long as they were protesting peacefully. She thus sent a clear message that she was not calling for demonstrations on the Plošča (Independence Square, Minsk), but that Lukashenka himself was provoking them. However, her staff's strategy of appealing to the conscience of the security forces has failed so far.

*How did the extraordinary pre-election mobilisation come about?*

Belarusian society has undergone major changes in recent years. A new culture of protest has emerged. In 2017, there were nationwide protests against the so-called 'parasite tax'. The people won and the authorities abandoned plans for a tax on citizens of working age who did not pay social security contributions and were not registered unemployed. In Brest, people protested for several years against the construction of a battery factory. They succeeded in bringing work to a provisional halt. In June 2020, Lukashenka even held a meeting with the Brest activists and promised a new environmental assessment and a local referendum. The 'Mothers 328' initiative, an advocacy programme for young people sentenced to long prison terms for possession of drugs under Article 328 of the penal code, has also achieved a two-year reduction of the minimum sentence.

While laws on social engagement and the exercise of fundamental rights remain restrictive, demonstrators, independent journalists and opposition politicians were last year imprisoned in exceptional cases only. Fines tended to be imposed instead. Overall, the state showed itself increasingly open to dialogue: there were more public hearings, drafts of legislation were circulated for discussion, and experts from civil society were involved in the development of state programmes and strategies. This liberalising atmosphere awoke hopes of further reforms and strengthened society's confidence in its own strength.

*When were these hopes dashed?*

In March 2020, Lukashenka's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic shocked many Belarusians. He played down the danger of the virus and showed no compassion after the first deaths. This led to a massive loss of trust, even among his followers. Another catalyst was probably the fact that all travel abroad, including neighbouring countries and anywhere in the EU, suddenly became impossible. Many people who had previously kept out of politics now had no way of avoiding it and began working for change in their own country.

These people object to being objects of care and control by a paternalistic state. They want to exercise their legal rights to political participation in reality and without fear. And in view of the obvious economic stagnation, they want new prospects. Today,



comparisons tend to be drawn with the EU member states such as Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, rather than Ukraine or Russia. People are all too conscious that the relative wellbeing of the country's economy and social security system is largely due to subsidies from Russia - and therefore constantly at risk.

*Why did Lukashenka adopt this strategy for dealing with the pandemic?*

Because of the economic situation and Belarus's tense relations with Russia, Lukashenka's main interest was to avoid a lockdown. At the same time, he seemed not to have perceived the novelty and the danger of COVID-19. He dismissed reactions in other countries and in Belarus as 'psychosis' and refused to cancel major events or take other precautions. He never appeared in a facemask. Yet Lukashenka could have fought the pandemic in ways that would not have unduly damaged the economy. He could, like Turkey, have imposed a limited curfew at weekends; he could have cancelled church services at Easter. The global economic crisis triggered by the pandemic offered him an opportunity to divert attention from the homegrown causes of his country's economic problems. But he didn't take it.

*This was the first time that the regime resorted to repressions against opposition candidates in advance of elections. Possibilities for campaigning and monitoring elections were also restricted more heavily than on previous occasions. Why?*

In the 2015 elections, Lukashenka was seen by most Belarusians as a guarantor of stability and security. This was the year after Russia annexed Crimea, unleashing war in eastern Ukraine. At that time, he was offering an agenda of moderate reform. Lukashenka had a chance to redefine his role as head of state and initially seemed to be making use of it. However, in the parliamentary elections in November 2019, not a single independent candidate was elected; shortly after that there were staff changes within the presidential administration. That was when the growing influence of the security forces started to become apparent. However, it was still understood principally as a reaction to increasing tensions with Russia.

In early 2020, the state apparatus was counting on Lukashenka being seen as the guarantor of Belarusian state sovereignty and winning an undisputed victory in the elections. The social mobilisation triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic clearly caught the regime off-guard. The regime recalled how, in 2010, it had initially refrained from suppressing calls from opposition candidates to demonstrate 'on the square (Plošča)' on election day. Subsequent police violence and the arrest of several presidential candidates brought sanctions from the EU and other western states. This time around, the regime clearly decided to arrest key opponents at the outset. The calculation was probably that by preventing escalation, relations with the West would remain unchanged.

*That failed...*

Yes. In recent months, Lukashenka and his apparatus have proven incapable of developing a positive agenda and gaining support among voters. Instead, they have relied almost exclusively on intimidation and repression. The regime also stoked fears of a relapse into what people remember as the chaos of the mid-1990s and of Russian intervention and loss of national sovereignty. Instead of seeking direct dialogue with his



opponents, Lukashenka moved mainly in the circles of his apparatchiks and security forces. That prevented him from capitalising on the real policy successes of recent years among voters hoping for change.

Throughout the campaign, the picture was of a president stuck in the past. Preparations for the elections came more and more to resemble a military mobilisation. The Central Electoral Commission didn't even try to make the elections appear free and fair, and instead placed even heavier restrictions on independent observers than on previous occasions. Infection control, of all things, served as a pretext for measures preventing independent electoral observation at polling stations. This was after Lukashenka had already claimed victory over the COVID-19 pandemic.

*It is striking that three women have placed themselves at the head of the opposition coalition. How did this happen?*

That three women led the campaign of the first opposition coalition in a long time is due to various, partly random factors, for which the state has significant responsibility. If the Central Electoral Commission had not refused to register Valery Tsepkala as a candidate alongside Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the coalition may not have come about. A major trigger was also Lukashenka's frequent statements that the Belarusian Constitution, with its extensive presidential powers, was not designed for a woman, and that a woman could therefore not be elected head of state. This patriarchal attitude is widespread within the Belarusian state apparatus. Accordingly, the regime has generally refrained from harsh repressions against women. This was another reason for the formation of a female coalition.

*How did Tsikhanouskaya present herself?*

At first glance, she followed the classic template: an ordinary housewife who would rather be cooking for her family, and who was only leading an election campaign out of love for her imprisoned husband. Her promise to hold free and fair elections within six months signalled that she was not seeking personal power and that she saw herself as a transition candidate. This allowed voters from the very different political camps hoping for political change to identify with her. At the same time, particularly her co-campaigners Maryia Kalesnikava and Veronika Tsepkala emphasised that for them it was also about political equality for women. Strengthening the feminist agenda in Belarus could be a major consequence of these presidential elections, regardless of the eventual outcome.

*How will things unfold over the coming weeks and months?*

Currently, the situation is unpredictable. If the state and security apparatus keeps closed ranks, the protests are sooner or later likely end without success. The question, however, is what price the Belarusian regime will pay for its brutal preservation of the status quo. The economic renewal that is needed is hardly possible in a demoralised and polarised society – especially since the protests have not been confined to Minsk but have swept across the entire country. In terms of foreign policy, the regime's room for manoeuvre is also shrinking. In the medium term, Lukashenka will probably be forced to accept Moscow's proposals for integration. It is therefore still not completely impossible that



forces within the regime may coalesce to effect a change of course.

However, it should also be noted that the opposition does not share a common strategic outlook for what comes next. Maryia Kalesnikava, the chief-of-staff for the imprisoned Viktor Babaryka, has repeatedly said that her team has the stamina and is working for long-term change. But two of the three female opposition leaders – Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Veronika Tsepkala – have left the country to avoid arrest. The intentions of the opposition expressed so far, such as the establishment of a party or the initiation of a referendum on a return to the 1994 constitution, have been very vague and have little prospect of success – not least because the old constitution would be out of date. But given the current dynamics, new initiatives can be expected.

*How should the EU respond?*

The problem for the EU is that it has virtually no instruments beyond declarations and sanctions. Despite the gradual rapprochement in recent years, financial support for Belarus has been relatively low level. Any reductions here would primarily harm civil society and people in rural areas. Sanctions have also proven ineffective. However, the politically motivated arrests of the last few days have left the EU with little choice but to re-impose sanctions. In any case, it must drastically limit official relations.

The central questions for Belarus are which political actors can work to de-escalate the current situation, how real respect for fundamental rights can be ensured, and how the current polarization can be overcome. Ultimately, the reforms that large parts of the Belarusian population want are only possible through constructive relations between state and society. The EU must therefore pay more attention to the country and its citizens, and not settle for short-term and symbolic engagement.

*The conversation was conducted by Volker Weichsel on 11.8.2020. The full-length German original is [published by Osteuropa here](#).*

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