

## Wave of protest in Belarus, Europe's “last dictatorship”

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published by **Generation for Rights Over the World**

October 2020

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### Abstract

*For more than a month, Belarus has experienced a wave of protests against its president, Alexander Lukashenka, in power since 1994 and fraudulently re-elected for the sixth time with 80% of the vote. In cities across the country, thousands of demonstrators are protesting against government law enforcement, in the name of democracy, and are calling for real elections.*



The Republic of Belarus is a country in Eastern Europe. As a former member of the USSR, the country became independent in 1991, in the hope of joining the club of democratic countries. But today, Belarus is known to be “Europe's last dictatorship”<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, Belarus is as of now the only country in Europe, and in the former Soviet Union, to carry out death penalty. In addition, many NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Oxfam, denounce the strong discrimination to which minority groups, such as the Roma community and LGBTQIA + people, are exposed. However, every five years, presidential elections are held there, the most recent of which took place on August 9, 2020. This is the sixth election in the country's history. Among the previous ones, only the 1994 elections were deemed free and democratic, those of 2001, 2006, 2010<sup>2</sup> and 2015 having been marred by electoral fraud and government repression.

In early May 2020, when the elections were announced, Belarusians expected the 2015 election scenario to happen again. That year, Alexander Lukashenka, in power in Belarus since 1994, ran against a number of little-known opponents who posed no threats to his re-election.

However, in the last election, a wave of candidates from outside the established opposition, which is mostly limited to identity politics and aims to culturally draw closer to Russia and move away from the Western world, upsets the debates and puts Lukashenka in difficulty. These new figures are banker Viktor Babaryka, YouTube blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski and ex-diplomat Valery Tsapkala. These three candidates were ultimately all eliminated from the race by the state's repressive machinery. Babaryka and Tsikhanouski were arrested on questionable charges. As for Tsapkala, the Central Election Commission announced on June 30, 2020 that of the 160,000 signatures collected by the candidate, 70,000 were not admissible, yet a minimum of 100,000 signatures is required to participate in the election. Thus, the three main competitors of Alexander Lukashenka were ultimately not registered as official candidates. However, this is a violation of the first article of the UN Charter of Human Rights and Elections, regarding the holding of democratic elections<sup>3</sup>.

However, an unexpected turnaround changed the course of things: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the wife of the detained blogger, decided to run for president in place of her husband and was ultimately registered as a candidate. Indeed, because of the prevalent sexism in Belarus, many did not expect that a woman, much less a housewife, could pose a real challenge to the incumbent president in this election. On July 14, 2020, the Central Election Commission registered Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaïa among the five candidates for the presidency. Two days later, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaïa joined forces with campaign supporters from Babaryka and Tsapkala. On social media, many Belarusians were quick to respond to Tsikhanouskaya's candidacy - and her openly feminist campaign, accompanied by other female politicians.

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<sup>1</sup> According to political journalist Ariane Nicolas.

<sup>2</sup> The ballot was to take place no later than March 2011, i.e. five years after the 2006 elections were held. But an extraordinary session of the National Assembly (*Palata pretsaviteley*), on September 14, 2010, took place. advance the date to promote the election of the outgoing president. Alexander Lukashenko was proclaimed the winner with 79.65% of the vote. These official results were contested by the opposition.

<sup>3</sup> “*Truly democratic elections expressing the will of the people are essential for establishing the legitimate authority of governments and the promotion and protection of human rights.*”

At the end of July 2020, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team toured Belarus, gathering a massive crowd of supporters - up to 70,000 in Minsk and up to 20,000 in regional cities. This is an unprecedented level of political mobilization in Belarus over the past decades.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaïa's electoral program essentially focuses on three points: freeing all political prisoners; holding a referendum on the return to the 1994 Constitution that would bring back the checks and balances to the political system; and hold a new presidential election within six months.

The Belarusian authorities resorted to the usual tactics: they disrupted the events of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's campaign, arrested protesters, and declared the 41.7% turnout in the five days of early voting (a method of rigging in order to discourage the opposition voter from going to vote). Political opinion polls are prohibited in Belarus, so it is impossible to know the electoral sentiment. But based on widespread enthusiasm for candidate Tsikhanouskaya, it appears that incumbent President Lukachenka would not get more than 20-25% of the vote, if not less, mainly from loyalists and the Siloviki (military). In a free and fair election, Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya would likely win, making her the first female ruler of her country. However, following the results announced by the Central Election Commission, Alexander Lukashenka was declared the winner of the election with almost 80% of the votes. The European Union did not recognize Lukashenka's re-election, deeming it fraudulent. On the other hand, countries such as Russia or China recognized this re-election.

In reaction to this fraudulent election, thousands of people gathered in various towns across the country in peaceful protests, encouraged by numerous non-governmental human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International. In order to limit these groupings, the Belarusian government has restricted Internet use across the country, blaming Western states<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, it was thanks to social networks that Belarusians kept abreast of the places of protests against the ruling power. Belarusian police, meanwhile, continues to use tear gas canisters, rubber bullets and batons to separate crowds of protesters.

On his Twitter account, Belarusian journalist and analyst Franak Viacorka denounces police violence and the abuse of the use of force by government-sent soldiers. Many of its leaders and foreign representatives have condemned these practices that go against human rights. "We are on the side of the demonstrators", said Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany<sup>5</sup>. Many protesters and opponents of Lukashenka's re-election were arrested and forcibly held in cells for a few days. However, the arrest of political opponents is also a violation of article 18 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)<sup>6</sup>. It is also interesting to note that Belarus is the only country on the European continent not to be a signatory to the ECHR.

Since the re-election of Alexander Lukashenka, Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has gone into exile in Vilnius, Lithuania, as a political refugee, in order to escape abuses by the Lukashenka government. Since the fall of the USSR in 1991, the country has never seen such large demonstrations involving so many Belarusians. For many of them, this wave of opposition to the order in force since 1994

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<sup>4</sup> Access to several media sites close to the opposition, those of some NGOs, social networks and the electoral commission were blocked.

<sup>5</sup> Angela Merkel spoke on Wednesday August 19, 2020 from Berlin to express her support for the protests that took place in Belarus following the re-election of Alexander Lukashenka.

<sup>6</sup> Article 18 provides that any limitation of rights (such as imprisonment or arrest) provided for by the ECHR can only be used for the purpose for which it was defined. However, political arrest is not included, and is even a violation of Article 9 of the ECHR on the freedom of thought.

marks the approach of the end of an era of corruption and despotism, and especially the end of the last dictatorship in Europe.

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### To quote the article:

BELACHE, Y. (2020). Wave of protest in Belarus, Europe's "last dictatorship". Generation for Rights Over the World. *growthinktank.org*. [online] Oct. 2020.