



## Belarusian Presidential Election: Towards Dependence on Russia

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On post-election night, the Belarusian authorities brutally pacified the country's largest protests in over 20 years, which expressed opposition to the falsification of election results and dissatisfaction of Belarusians with the current president. According to preliminary official results, Alexander Lukashenka received over 80% of the vote, while his main opponent, Svetlana Cichanouska, got only 9.9%. The pacification of the protests means that dialogue with the EU and the U.S. is likely to stop, which in turn will weaken the Belarusian position towards Russia, threatening to further undermine Belarusian independence.

On the night of 9–10 August, after the vote, thousands of people in many Belarusian cities gathered on the streets to protest against the rigged elections. In many places, most notably in Minsk (where the main forces of the police and internal troops were concentrated), demonstrations were brutally pacified. Many people were injured and detained, and there are also reports that at least one died. Moreover, Internet access was blocked during the night. The suppression of the protests will fuel public reluctance towards the authorities. Thus, further anti-government demonstrations and an escalation of violence against the protesters can be expected.

**The Course of the Campaign.** This [year's presidential campaign](#) was distinguished by the significant participation of Belarusians collecting signatures for opposition candidates, as well as in protests against the failure of the authorities to register some of those candidates and attending election rallies of the opposition candidate Svetlana Cichanouska. The Central Election Commission (CEC) registered only five candidates: Svetlana Cichanouska, Siarhei Cherachan, Andrey Dzmitryeu, Hanna Kanapatskaya, and Alexander Lukashenka. Viktor Babaryka, and Valeryj Capkala, each considered Lukashenka's most significant rivals, were not registered.

Since 18 June, Babaryka has been in custody pending proceedings in relation to alleged embezzlement.

A significant portion of the signatures collected in support of Capkala were questioned. Fearing arrest, he fled to Russia.

After the CEC's decision, the staffs of both candidates decided to support Cichanouska's election campaign. Thousands of people took part in meetings with her. Her main demand was to hold a new presidential election within six months.

In contrast, the incumbent president conducted almost no election campaign. In his address on 4 August, he merely indicated that although Russia remains an allied state for Belarus, his country will look for alternative sources of energy resources. He emphasised his willingness to cooperate with China, the EU and the United States. He also announced a number of reforms (of pensions, agriculture and the armed forces) and the implementation of regional development programmes.

**The Social Context of the Election.** Social protests resulted from society's fatigue with the current regime, with Lukashenka having been in power for 26 years. GDP measured year on year decreased in the first half of 2020 by 1.7%, and national income, derived mainly from the sale of petroleum products in the period January to May, fell by 17.4%. Moreover, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the sharp decline in global demand for petroleum products, the state's economy has suffered significant losses. In many factories, the working week was shortened, and

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entrepreneurs who suffered as a result of the pandemic (mainly those in industries such as tourism, gastronomy and transport) could not count on state aid. For the first time in years, Belarus also recorded a budget deficit. In the first half of this year, it amounted to 1.8 billion roubles (1.3% of GDP).

During the election campaign, the government [was partially reshuffled](#), which was supposed to be a response to the worsening public mood. However, this change did not bring the intended effects. Belarusians are aware that the council of ministers does not exercise real power, and that the president and his administration are the decisive centre.

**The Importance of External Players.** The course of the campaign was also influenced by relations with Russia and Western countries. On 14 July, further negotiations between Russia and Belarus were held in Moscow. The talks covered economic cooperation, including prices for energy resources. On 17 July, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin visited Minsk for the meeting of the Eurasian Economic Union. In exchange for lowering prices for hydrocarbons, Russia proposed a return to negotiations of the plan of deepened integration and the creation of a common tax system [that would be unfavourable to Belarus](#). Belarus refused to sign the plan. The prime ministers only signed an agreement on the terms of Russian oil supplies, which will be in force until the end of this year. This means that the newly-elected president will have to start further negotiations with Russia at the end of the year.

On 29 July, the KGB announced the detention of 33 Russian citizens who were to be mercenaries working for a [Russian private military company](#), known as a Wagner group. Although the reported version that they were preparing terrorist attacks in Belarus is unlikely, the Belarusian authorities have used this to increase control over the rallies of opposition candidates. In his message to the nation, Lukashenka used those mercenaries as an example of a hybrid war being waged against Belarus. Russia, apart from verbally defending the detained mercenaries and claiming provocation by the Ukrainian secret services, did not comment on the allegations of interference in the course of the campaign. President Vladimir Putin was also one of the first leaders to congratulate Lukashenka on winning the election, although he also used his message to stress the need to deepen the integration between both countries. Although many civil rights violations had occurred during the

campaign, the EU and the U.S. voiced no criticism. The EU limited itself to a short debate in the European Parliament and the statements of High Representative Josep Borrell, who emphasised that the EU expects that the Belarusian authorities will respect human rights. After the election, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, made a similar appeal.

**Conclusions and Prospects.** Despite appeals for non-violence by representatives of EU countries (including Poland, Germany and France), and by the presidents of Poland and Lithuania, the Belarusian authorities brutally suppressed the post-election protests. In response to the pacification of the protests, the Polish prime minister, in a letter to the president of the Council of Europe and the president of the European Commission, called for an extraordinary summit of the European Council on the events in Belarus. If this does happen, and if sanctions are discussed, it would be worthwhile for Poland to support imposing them only on those representatives of the Belarusian regime responsible for violating human rights. The suspension of financial cooperation by institutions such as the European Investment Bank should not be automatic. The maintenance of support for infrastructure projects that positively affect the lives of Belarusian citizens or the natural environment should be considered.

The course of the campaign also showed the importance of the institutions from the third sector, mainly those which defend human rights. That is why the EU and its Member States, through their aid institutions, should increase their support for those organisations that will enable Belarusian civil society to develop further.

Poland, as after the 2006 and 2011 presidential campaigns, should consider offering Belarusians expelled from universities for participating in protests the possibility of completing their education at Polish universities.

Russia will use the growing isolation of Belarus to re-propose a [project to deepen integration](#), but on worse terms than last year. This will be favoured by growing misunderstandings over hydrocarbon prices, contracts for gas and crude oil supplies that are ending this year, and Belarus's inability to obtain energy from alternative sources. The acceptance of the Russian proposals by the Belarusian authorities will mean a progressive loss of the state's independence.