



## The Situation of the Belarusian Opposition

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On 14 August, the candidate in the presidential elections in Belarus, Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, announced the formation of a coordination council. This was the first attempt in years to consolidate the opposition, which, under the authoritarian political system of Belarus, finds it very difficult to operate. Given the growing number of people involved in the work of the council, it has the chance to become a long-term political project capable of developing reform plans for the country.

**The State of the Belarusian Opposition.** President Alexander Lukashenka's negative attitude towards independent circles means the Belarusian authorities are consistently pursuing a policy aimed at preventing opposition parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that deal with political and labour issues from carrying out their missions, especially organisations defending human rights and trade unions. Their activity is systematically limited, for example, by refusal of registration or procedures that take years. Moreover, those acting without registration may be fined. Belarusian NGOs are also obliged to register income from foreign grants, but the authorities may delay the process or refuse to accept it. However, if the organisation accepts such support, it also risks being accused of financial embezzlement, among other charges. At the same time, the government creates the appearance of political pluralism by supporting theoretically independent organisations but which are still connected to the political elites, such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union or the Belarusian Union of Women.

Repression has been used against the opposition for years. So far, the worst recorded actions took place after the presidential election in 2010 when most of Lukashenka's opponents were arrested and some, including Mikola Statkevich and Andrei Sannikov, received multi-year prison sentences. After the [presidential election in 2015](#), there were no protests, both because of the weakness of the opposition and the international situation. There was widespread fear of a repeat of the Ukraine scenario—Russian aggression if the events in Belarus even suggest possible pro-Western changes.

At the same time, the Belarusian opposition is very divided. In 2010, 2015, and 2020, it was unable to select a joint candidate in the presidential election, and in 2016 and 2019, no joint list of candidates for parliament was created. The divisions, apart from the difficult conditions in which the opposition is functioning, are the result of accusations against each other by the opposition parties of accepting money from Russia, acting on its behalf or the Belarusian authorities, and to a much lesser extent, because of ideological issues.

Regardless of the weakness of the Belarusian opposition, it has not had a chance to win any presidential or parliamentary elections, as they are neither free nor fair. The Central Election Commission (CEC) removes opposition candidates from election lists and presents the official results. In [2019, no representative of any opposition party entered parliament](#) while in the 2016-2019 term, the opposition was represented by only two deputies.

**Composition and Significance of the Council.** In response to the public protests and demands for political changes, Tikhonovskaya, who for security reasons is living in Lithuania, decided to appoint a coordination council. This is the first attempt in years to consolidate the broad opposition. The aim is to develop a coherent programme of a peaceful transfer of power and securing the independence and sovereignty of Belarus. It is also an attempt to put the protests into a political framework. In organising this body, Tikhonovskaya has relied on people involved in her campaign.

The council's most important proposals include the cessation of political persecution of Belarusian citizens, the release of political prisoners, declaring the last [presidential election](#) invalid, holding new elections in line with international standards and afterward, changing the composition of electoral commissions at all levels, especially the CEC. The council stresses that discussions with the authorities will be necessary to achieve these goals. At the same time, its members find it unacceptable for Russia to intervene in Belarus with any kind of force. They also stressed that the council would not accept any foreign aid.

The council—numbering now 4,100 people—includes representatives from a wide range of professional circles, including scientists, journalists, economists, political scientists, lawyers, human rights defenders, employees of the largest Belarusian state-owned enterprises and the IT sector, as well as members of opposition parties and movements. The body's board was formed by Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Pavel Latushko, a former minister of culture, Maksim Znak, a lawyer, Liliya Vlasova, a lawyer and international mediator, Siarhei Dyleuski, a representative of the Minsk Tractor Works, Volha Kavalkova, Tikhanovskaya's authorised representative, and Maria Kalesnikava, the first coordinator of Viktor Babaryka's and then Tikhanovskaya's campaign.

The Belarusian prosecutor's office has already started proceedings against members of the council under the penal code, allegedly for calling for actions aimed at harming the national security of Belarus. The maximum sentence for such activities involving the use of mass media and the internet is five years in prison. Moreover, on 25 August, Kavalkova and Dyleuski were sentenced to 10 days in jail for participating in a protest at the tractor factory, and Vlasova was detained on 31 August. By investigating and possibly bringing charges, the Belarusian authorities want to paralyse the work of the council, which may play an important role in, for example, the process of changing the constitution and new elections, both announced by Lukashenka.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** The establishment of the council is highly significant to the process of political transformation in Belarus. It gives hope for the development of a comprehensive programme of reforms, taking into account the political, economic, and social issues. However, for now it is difficult to determine whether this programme will be oriented towards Euro-Atlantic integration or a continuation of close cooperation with Russia. The work of

the council is not only threatened by the actions of the Belarusian government but also may be weakened by internal divisions in the opposition. There are already allegations from some opposition circles that the council lacks legitimacy.

The massive scale of the post-election protests has revealed the level of public discontent caused by 26 years of Lukashenka's rule. This has created fertile ground for the opposition to act. However, due to the lack of independent polls, it is difficult to assess the public support of independent initiatives such as the coordination council. Nevertheless, the consolidation of representatives of very different circles in this structure indicates that it may be high. In turn, the uncoordinated protests at Belarusian state-owned enterprises has revealed the weakness of independent trade unions, which could have an impact on the political processes taking place in the state if they had the possibility of carrying out a broad strike action. However, taking into account the current policy of the Belarusian authorities, it can be expected that any attempts to do this will be subject to repression by the state apparatus.

So far, the opposition has not been treated by Lukashenka as a partner in talks on introducing reforms; therefore, it will be very important for the European Union to declare that the participation of representatives of the democratic opposition is a necessary element of the political dialogue in Belarus, if its results—especially in the next elections—are to be recognised by the EU. Support for those circles that may become the driving force behind the democratisation of Belarus is in the EU's interest and is consistent with its values.

The EU and its Member States can also offer independent civil society organisations not only financial but also expert support (including internships, scholarships, trainings). In turn, to help the opposition groups, political parties operating within the European Parliament may get involved, and in the activities of independent trade unions, analogous organisations operating in EU countries could lend support. Although EU aid will be blocked by the Belarusian authorities, it is worth setting up a special fund, perhaps as part of the European Endowment for Democracy, to support opposition activists repressed by the Belarusian authorities. Using the actions of the Baltic states, the EU may also declare that people responsible for repression, at the request of Belarusian human rights organisations, will be included on the sanctions list.