

The 2020 presidential election in Belarus: Lukashenko's moment of reckoning?



Belarus will hold a presidential election on 9 August. As [Balki Begumhan Bayhan](#) explains, the election is shaping up to be more competitive than usual. She writes that despite several of the main opposition candidates facing obstacles to participating, the election could represent the first serious challenge to Alexander Lukashenko's power since he won the country's first post-independence presidential election in 1994.

An unprecedented campaign is currently taking place in Belarus ahead of the country's presidential election on 9 August. Potential challengers to incumbent Alexander Lukashenko, who has won every presidential election since the country became independent from the Soviet Union in the 1990s, have begun to emerge. While it remains most likely that Lukashenko will emerge victorious, the election is shaping up to be notably different from previous contests thanks to the presence of more serious opponents, a worsening economy and increased public dissatisfaction with the country's direction.

Alongside the usual opposition, the campaign has seen the emergence of several unexpected challengers who have proven highly adept at mobilising support. These opponents have been able to draw significant backing from the public, with unprecedented numbers turning up to each challenger's signature collection pickets (a candidate needs to gather at least 100,000 signatures to register). The crowds in these rallies have been remarkable compared to past elections, [with some lines stretching around 1 kilometre and people queuing for hours](#).

This sudden outpouring of enthusiasm is the result of a long search for an alternative opponent to Lukashenko. Belarusians have become exhausted with the traditional opposition, who typically serve merely as tokens in Lukashenko's game. The sudden emergence of multiple serious opponents has drawn widespread interest. It is still too early to tell if these alternative actors will perform better or worse than the usual opponents, but their advantage lies in their novelty and in the glimpse of hope they have provided.

New players

The new players include Syarhey Tsikhanouski, a YouTube vlogger with a large following, who had intended to launch a bid for the presidency. He has been associated with the prominent '[Stop the cockroach!](#)' campaign, symbolised by the carrying of slippers. Perhaps due to his popularity, Lukashenko has tried to keep him out of the election: his initiative group was prevented from registering and he has been detained, facing criminal charges. Yet, in a shrewd move, his spouse – Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya – has managed to become a candidate instead. Tsikhanouski has collected signatures on her behalf and their picket lines have proven extremely popular across the country.

Two figures closer to the establishment have also given the President cause for concern. Perhaps most prominently, there is Viktor Babaryka, the former head of Belgazprombank. Babaryka had kept a low profile prior to the election campaign, but since then has speedily gained popularity. He became the first potential candidate in the history of Belarus to [collect 435,000 signatures](#) for his nomination.

Also of note is Valery Tsepkalo, the former Ambassador to the United States and founder of 'Belarus Hi-Tech Park', the country's equivalent to Silicon Valley. The emergence of figures such as Babaryka and Tsepkalo hints at increasing levels of elite dissatisfaction with the regime and a desire to go in a new direction. This does not necessarily mean a future without Lukashenko, but perhaps a more modernised Belarus with a liberalised economy.

However, the threat of both Babaryka and Tsepkalo has been met with a predictable response from Lukashenko. Tsepkalo, who had been generating a great deal of enthusiasm, was disqualified from registering as a candidate after many of his nomination signatures were invalidated. Meanwhile, Babaryka's former employer, Belgazprombank, was raided on 11 June and several employees were detained. A criminal case was opened by the Financial Investigations Department and shortly after, Babaryka himself was arrested.



Alexander Lukashenko, Credit: [OSCE Parliamentary Assembly \(CC BY-SA 2.0\)](#)

The government has also [banned the conducting of online polls](#) covering the election, following poor ratings for Lukashenko in some polls published earlier in the campaign. Lukashenko dismissed his government in June, replacing his former Prime Minister, Syarhey Rumas, with the security officer Raman Halouchanka – a move that was widely read as an indication of Lukashenko's [readiness to get tough if necessary to hold on to power](#).

The crackdown drew some strong reactions from the public – especially the detainments of Tsikhanouski and Babaryka. There had already been a number of demonstrations against the arrest of Tsikhanouski, but after Babaryka's arrest on 18 June, this unrest intensified. Protests have occurred across Belarus, not only in large cities but also in small rural villages. Many people, including journalists, activists and supporters, have been arrested in the course of the demonstrations.

It is not uncommon for the regime to repress political activity in Belarus, however the extent of the crackdown that has taken place during this campaign is quite unusual. This perhaps hints at a growing nervousness on the part of the President. After all, the protests took place against the backdrop of a weakening Belarusian economy and an ongoing recession that is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Lukashenko's popularity has been declining for the last few years and he is widely considered to have responded poorly to the Covid-19 pandemic.

What next?

On 30 June, the Central Election Commission announced the number of signatures accepted for each potential candidate. Thousands of signatures for Tsepkalo and Babaryka had been rejected (more than 200,000 of Babaryka's and half of Tsepkalo's signatures). While Babaryka still had sufficient signatures to secure his candidacy, this reduced Tsepkalo to only 75,000 – below the 100,000 required to register. Tsikhanouskaya made it past the threshold, with around 104,000 signatures, as did several of the more traditional opposition candidates – though some expressed bemusement at having more signatures accepted than they submitted.

Lukashenko now seems set to face some genuine challengers, and if these candidates are not disqualified through some other means (which remains a possibility), there may even be a chance of the election going to the second round. Even in this scenario, however, there is a strong chance of Lukashenko winning, considering the other types of foul play which typically take place in the country's elections.

On the other hand, preventing high profile opponents from participating in the election could potentially pose another threat for Lukashenko. Given the rate of demonstrations occurring across Belarus up to this point, this could result in growing unrest – not to mention stripping away what little credibility Belarusian elections still have, impacting the regime's domestic and international legitimacy. Regardless of the outcome, this election period shows the increasing fragility of Lukashenko's position and demonstrates that even the most stable authoritarian regimes are still, to some extent, vulnerable to elections.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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