

# 'This country will never be the same again': Understanding the protests in Belarus



*Following a disputed presidential election on 9 August, thousands of protesters have taken to the streets of Belarus demanding an end to Alexander Lukashenko's regime. [Oleg Chupryna](#) provides an insight on the views of the protesters, writing that while the outcome remains uncertain, the country is unlikely to ever be able to return to the status quo.*

Events over the last month in Belarus have suddenly thrown this nation of 9.5 million people into the spotlight of the international media. After presidential elections on 9 August, thousands of people took to the streets in many cities across the country, protesting broadly against perceived electoral fraud committed for the benefit of incumbent President, Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994.

Branded by western media as "Europe's last dictator", Lukashenko has concentrated power in his hands over the last twenty years, with elections appearing as little more than propaganda exercises to his opponents. He has based his appeal on the political and economic 'stability' of Belarus following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which stood in contrast to other post-Soviet countries. But in a certain sense, Belarus has remained frozen in time, retaining a predominantly state-owned economy, bureaucracy and omnipresent state security agency – still labelled the 'KGB'. It is telling that the country has yet to rename this notorious remnant of the Soviet era in an attempt to distance itself from the Communist regime.

The perceived stability of Belarus, which is a recurring theme in state-controlled media, allied with the fear that has been generated from previous attempts to suppress opposition, has allowed the regime to survive for such a long period. But times inevitably change. The internet, foreign travel and other features of modern life have made their mark on Belarus. A new generation of young and not so young Europeans have made it clear they no longer wish to tolerate the old ways of the past.

## The 2020 presidential election

At the start of this year's presidential campaign, several strong and potentially viable challengers to Lukashenko emerged. These included Viktor Babaryka, the former head of Belgazprombank, Syarhey Tsikhanouski, a popular YouTube vlogger, and Valery Tsepkalo, the former Ambassador to the United States. All three were denied the chance to participate in the elections. Babaryka and Tsikhanouski were jailed for alleged crimes, while Tsepkalo managed to escape arrest by leaving the country.

However, unexpectedly, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the wife of Tsikhanouski, managed to register as a presidential candidate, meeting the requirement to secure over 100,000 signatures. Those who had backed the other two potential candidates joined forces with Tikhanovskaya in the hope of defeating Lukashenko. This united opposition attracted tens of thousands of people to rallies in the leadup to the vote. Despite Lukashenko's propaganda machine working against Tikhanovskaya, she rapidly became the face of the new Belarus opposition. An overnight politician, she promised only three things: an end to the regime, the release of political prisoners, and new and free presidential elections to be held within six months.



**Protest in Minsk on 30 August, Credit: [Natalia Rak \(CC BY-NC 2.0\)](#)**

Although opinion polls are illegal in Belarus, some polls conducted via clandestine methods suggested real support for Lukashenko stood at less than 10 per cent, while over two-thirds of the population were said to back Tikhanovskaya. Independent exit polls on the day of the election also pointed to a similar split in support, while some polling stations where the members of the electoral commission dared to disobey orders made results publicly available, which also indicated a large majority of people had voted against Lukashenko. The official results nevertheless put the incumbent President at over 80 per cent. As Joseph Stalin once allegedly observed, “it does not matter how people vote, what matters is who counts the votes”.

On this occasion, however, the widespread accusations that electoral fraud had been committed by the authorities could not be silenced. Tens of thousands of citizens took to the streets across the country and among the diaspora, demanding a recount and the removal of Lukashenko from office.

### **Understanding the protests**

Before writing this article, I interviewed several Belarusians who all gave similar accounts when asked why this time the reaction has been so different. The first reason many cited was simply fatigue at Lukashenko’s time in power. Thanks to foreign travel and access to alternative information sources online, it is no secret among citizens that Belarus is a relatively backwards autocracy and many simply want a better chance in life.

Moreover, this year’s election, unlike previous contests, featured a candidate who many people perceived to be a genuine alternative to Lukashenko. Respondents were keen to emphasise that Belarus is a peaceful, quiet nation, lacking a rebellious spirit. Yet the President’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as offensive remarks toward his female rival in the election and disrespect toward her supporters – who he labelled a “herd of sheep” – had pushed ordinary people to their limits. The final straw being the apparent manipulation of the results. A common response was that citizens may have accepted the results if Tikhanovskaya had been awarded a more reasonable share of the vote, but the vast size of the official winning margin had driven people to the streets.

The regime has responded to the protests in a heavy-handed manner. Special police forces, fully equipped in anti-riot gear, have been viewed dispersing peaceful protesters in a manner unprecedented even for Belarus. Over a few days, there were reports of thousands of protesters being beaten, and in some cases killed, at the hands of police. Hundreds of people have been hospitalised with injuries. Reportedly, seven thousand protesters were arrested simply for participating. Those who were later released voiced allegations of abuse while in custody.

But these tactics have had the opposite effect of what was intended this time round. They have prompted more people to take to the streets, with an estimated 250,000 attending demonstrations in the capital, Minsk, and half a million estimated to have participated across the country as a whole. Several large companies announced strikes in their support for the demands of the protesters.

This prompted a change in tactics from the regime, but without giving in to the demands of the protesters. The police began to avoid direct interference in the protests, while some of those who had been arrested were released in the hope of calming the situation. Paradoxically, this simply brought the brutality they had been subjected to in custody into the public eye. After a short while, the police began quietly arresting some of the most active participants, as well as potential opposition leaders.

State propaganda has now resorted to the Soviet cliché of blaming the West for trying to 'destabilise' the country, but very few citizens seem willing to believe this. The crisis is ongoing and the outcome is still uncertain, but one thing is clear, Belarus will never be the same again.

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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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