



New wave of political repression in Belarus

Expert briefing

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BACKGROUND

Belarus will hold its presidential election on 9 August 2020. With the emergence of three strong opposition figures and a significant drop in the popularity of Alexander Lukashenko (the sitting president), this election campaign has already proved to be one of the most interesting in the country's history.

This briefing document provides a summary of the discussion hosted by UCL SSEES on 14 July 2020. Three experts assessed the ongoing crisis and discussed how the West should react to human rights violations by Lukashenko's regime.

BELARUSIAN CONTEXT

Ms Kaciaryna Šmacina – Political Analyst at the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies

KEY POINT The recent wave of political repression in Belarus is not a particularly new phenomenon. The country is tangled in a vicious cycle of unfair elections, protests, and violent suppressions.

1. It is largely incorrect to call the current events unprecedented. In fact, Belarus often finds itself in a "vicious cycle" of pro-democratic protests and their violent suppression before presidential

elections. While mass protests are banned in Belarus, the government relaxes restrictions on such mass gatherings during presidential campaign seasons. Yet, what may set 2020 apart from the 2010 or 2006 elections are the presidential candidates. The most popular independent candidates, Viktor Babariko, Valery Tsepkalo, and Svetlana Tikhanovskaya (who is running instead of her husband, Sergei Tikhanovsky – a popular Belarusian blogger – who was arrested and denied registration), are political outsiders who can, thus, appeal to a formerly politically-inactive middle-class audience.

2. Recently, however, the regime has eliminated Babariko and Tsepkalo from the presidential race. Perhaps most notably, Viktor Babariko was detained on charges of alleged tax evasion. His colleagues from Belgazprombank, owned by Russia's Gazprom, have also been subjected to repression and arrest. Valery Tsepkalo was disqualified from the race by the Central Electoral Committee.
3. Given that similar protests in the past have not provoked any decisive measures by the international community, we should remain reasonably sceptical in our expectation

of the Western response this year. While there could be some sanctions and criticism of Lukashenko's conduct, we can speculate that Belarus can later ease the international pressure through cooperation.

STRATEGIC CALCULATION

Andrew Wilson, Professor of Ukrainian Studies, UCL SSEES

KEY POINT Lukashenko's regime failed to pre-empt the ongoing crisis due to multiple miscalculations. The West faces a dilemma: repressions justify sanctions, but an isolated Belarus will be more vulnerable to Russian influence.

1. The late Vitali Silitski liked to [call](#) Belarus an example of "pre-emptive authoritarianism" – the authorities aim to nip any challenge to their power in the bud. Yet, this election cycle, Lukashenko underestimated the impact of recent changes within Belarus. The carefully managed election formula of past years that set fake candidates up against real opposition leaders no longer works in 2020. Or, with all but one of the major challengers now excluded, we have ended up with this scenario, but it is much less credible. At the same time, the dissatisfaction with Lukashenko's regime has risen, both amongst his "constituency" – working-class Belarusians – and the middle class.
2. The roots of the current protest can be traced back to the 2017 protests over the ill-judged "parasite tax" and the idea of "two Belaruses". The blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky represented the regional "left behind" Belarus; Tsepkala and Babariko the emerging new economy. While there are also speculations over Russia's external threat to the regime, we cannot reasonably confirm such allegations.

3. Ironically, the West has been trying to build linkage and leverage with Belarus since sanctions were last lifted in 2016. As this process is only beginning, sanctions would have a limited effect and could push Belarus to increase trade with Russia. Such measures could also have a negative effect on the country's developing IT industry that relies on Western markets, as well as on ordinary Belarusians. Since the war in Ukraine began in 2014, the West has been quietly supporting Belarusian sovereignty. This will be more difficult to sustain under a sanctions regime. Nevertheless, the scale of repression justifies a response.

UK RESPONSE

Mr Stewart McDonald – Member of Parliament and member of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee

KEY POINT Unfortunately, Belarus is not a popular subject within British political circles. Yet, with enough political will, the UK could influence the situation in the country through imposing direct sanctions on regime representatives or providing asylum to Belarusian dissidents.

1. The UK has a lot on its plate right now: from Brexit to the Hong Kong crisis, the Foreign Office has other priorities aside from the Belarusian question. And Belarus has never been particularly popular amongst the British political elites. Both of these factors, unfortunately, mean that the question of the 2020 presidential election is not getting as much attention as it deserves.
2. There are, however, two main ways in which the UK could influence the ongoing crisis in the country. First, Britain can impose individual sanctions on any Belarusian officials responsible for the ongoing wave of repressions.

The UK could also support such targeted sanctions through revoking the British citizenship of those Belarusian officials responsible for repression who currently hold British passports. Second, the UK could open its borders to Belarusian dissidents whose rights have been violated by the government. The 700 imprisoned activists could thereby find refuge from political oppression in the United Kingdom. While this move may go against the current administration's position on migration, it would support democratic voices within Belarus.

3. Our most important objective at the moment must be raising awareness of the ongoing wave of political repression in the country. It is important to put the country on the parliamentary agenda and promote active discussion of its issues.

POST-EVENT DEVELOPMENTS

On the day of the event (14 July), Belarus' Central Election Commission approved the bids of five presidential candidates: Andrei Dmitriev, Anna Kanopatskaya, Aleksandr Lukashenko, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, and Sergei Cherechen, thus barring Viktor Babariko and Valery Tsepalo from running.

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has, therefore, become the opposition frontrunner.

On 16 July, the campaign teams of Babariko and Tsepalo announced that they endorse the candidacy of Tikhanovskaya and offer her their full support. They also urged their supporters to take part in the election and register as observers to limit falsifications.