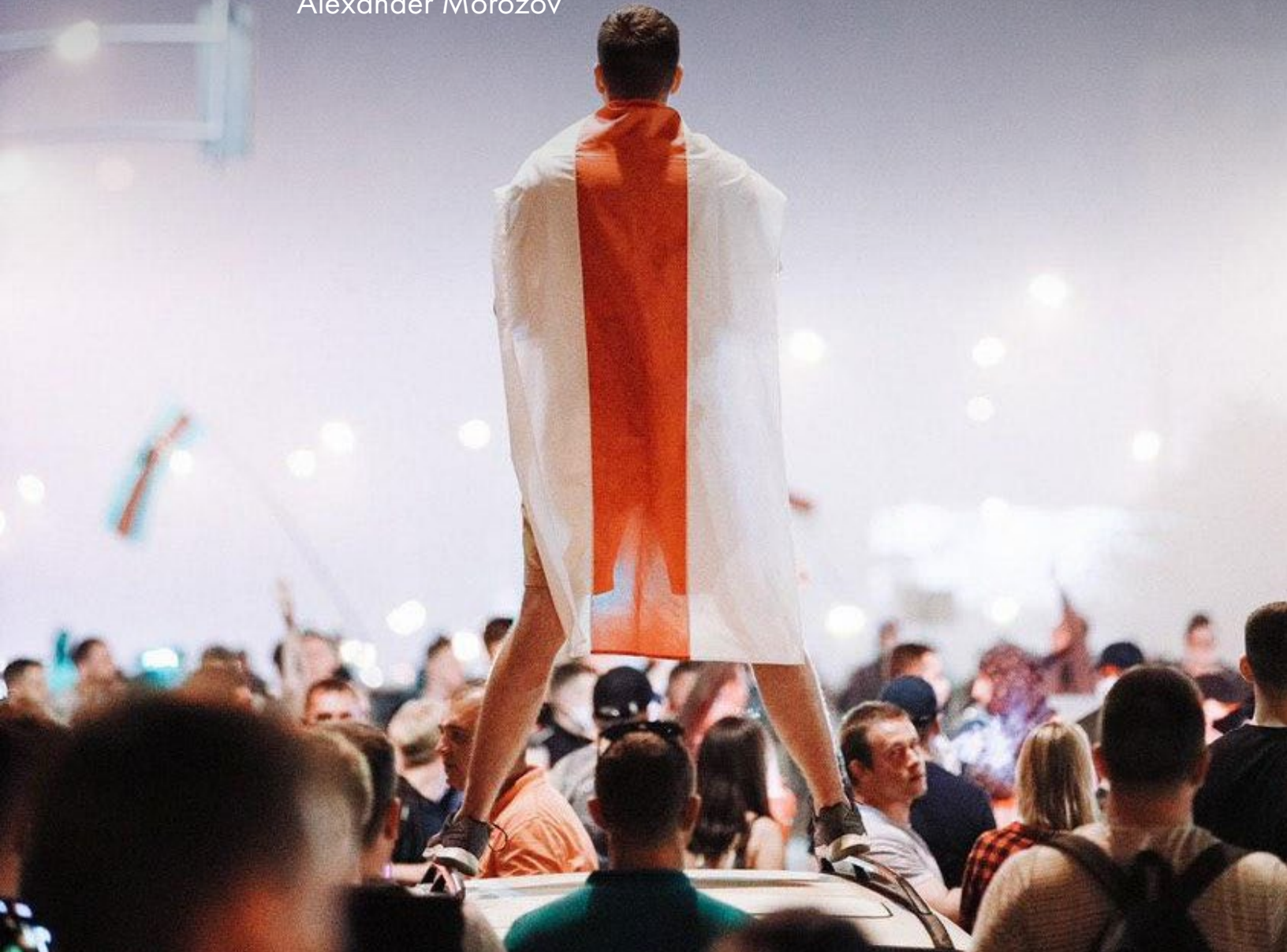


FREE  
RUSSIA



# POLITICAL CRISIS IN BELARUS

Alexander Morozov



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FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION

2020

Free Russia Foundation

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Materials from the experts' network iSANS were used in the  
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Photo: Telegram channel Photographers\_against

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# POLITICAL CRISIS IN BELARUS

Massive protests in Belarus in the aftermath of the presidential election of August 9, 2020 have now been sustained for more than a month. The Belarusian political crisis has profound ramifications for all member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as well as for Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and the European Union as a whole. Since the Kremlin's intervention is the main external factor in this crisis, the developments are also critical for all the countries of the G7, and above all for the US, Germany, and France.

This analysis delineates the positions of the main actors of this political crisis, offers a forecast, and articulates policy options for democratic countries and international organizations.

## THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND LUKASHENKA'S DEFEAT

The campaign for the 2020 presidential elections had been shaped, to a large extent, by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's protracted conflict with Moscow. As early as December 2019, the Kremlin was putting tremendous pressure on Minsk to force a "Union State". Lukashenka resisted and maneuvered. By the start of the election campaign the fundamental issues had still not been resolved. Lukashenka then proceeded to center his campaign narrative on the theme of threats to the sovereignty of Belarus posed by Moscow. He was careful to neutralize key challengers early — by removing from the race blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski and banker Viktor Babarika. In his campaign speeches Lukashenka continuously vilified Russian oligarchs for their purported plans to gobble up Belarusian enterprises. He also ordered the arrest of the 33 Wagner Group members— in a gesture of direct defiance to Moscow. Several days before the elections, Lukashenka sat down for a long interview with Ukrainian journalist Dmitry Gordon during which he indulged in a barrage of fairly insulting, arrogant statements about Putin.

The campaign period witnessed the rise of Viktor Babarika's camp uniting young progressive professionals from Minsk, mostly alumni from the TEDx creative youth festival in Belarus, the cultural hub of OK'19. The son of Viktor Babarika — Eduard — is the founder of a well-known Minsk IT startup. Maria Kalesnikava is a musician and creator of virtual musical education programs and also a member of TEDx. She became Babarika's Chief of Staff.

After both, Babarika senior and junior, had been arrested and denied registration as candidates (similarly to Tsikhanouski), and Valery Tsepkalo had left the country three weeks before the election, the Babarika and Tsepkalo camps announced that they were uniting behind Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

The female triumvirate of Maria Kalesnikava, Veranika Tsapkala, and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has emerged as a viral meme. This has become one of the most brilliant election campaigns in the post-Soviet space since 1991. A broad nationwide coalition has emerged around these three powerful women forced to step up as the election front-runners—their spouses— were locked away.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was not invited by official Minsk and was not able to monitor the elections.

On the evening of August 9, the Belarussian government issued an outrageous



Support Campaign for Presidential Candidate Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, July 2020. Photo: [t.me/Photographers\\_against](https://t.me/Photographers_against)

announcement on the outcome of the election. It is not certain exactly how many people had voted for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; the results of the election were crudely falsified. Already by that evening, mass protests had begun – the largest in the entire post-Soviet period and geography.

Between August 10 to 13, Lukashenka attempted to brutally suppress the protest. Numerous instances of brutality by the OMON forces against civilians, journalists and even innocent bystanders on the streets of Minsk, Brest, and Hrodna have been documented. The Akrescina (Okrestina) Prison in Minsk where protesters were brought by special forces became the symbol of unrestrained violence against people. **As of the time of writing this report, Belarusian human rights defenders are reporting the following statistics: 450 documented cases of torture; at least six persons who took part in protests missing; and over 1,100 people have suffered gunshot and shrapnel wounds.**

These crimes perpetrated in modern Europe demand investigation by a special international commission.

## COORDINATING COUNCIL

On August 14, the opposition formed its Coordinating Council (CC). For weeks, the protesters, with the participation of the CC and protest Telegram channels, have used numerous forms of peaceful protest with great inventiveness, trying to avoid a direct clash with Lukashenka's security forces. Every Saturday, there is a "women's march," and every Sunday, mass processions in the center of Minsk (from 100,000 to 200,000 participants), and between these two points of mass mobilization, the campaign staff and the protesters daily have created large, public actions.

The Coordinating Council is based on a short list of demands which can easily be picked up by any organization or anti-Lukashenka group: 1) free the prisoners; 2) punish those guilty of abuse August 10-13; 3) hold repeat elections.

The CC publicly advocates peaceful protest exclusively and has repeatedly announced that it does not support forceful takeovers of buildings and clashes with the OMON (riot police) on the streets. It does not have the goal of creating an "autono-

mous zone" in the center of the city.

The brutality of the authorities on August 10-13 provoked an enormous response in all segments of Belarusian society: more than 10 of the largest enterprises announced strikes; strike committees were created and a National Strike Committee; the position of Metropolitan Paval of Minsk and Zaslavl (the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church) led to his removal and transfer to a Kuban metropolitanate in Krasnodar; the head of the Belarusian Catholics, Bishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, was stripped of his passport by authorities and of the right to enter the country.

Lukashenka failed at his attempt at violent suppression on August 10-13. On August 14, he publicly appealed to Moscow for help. Simultaneously, he turned to the tactic of spot repressions (according to the model which Putin and his administration use during protests).

On August 12 during the second Sunday of mass protests in Minsk, Lukashenka staged a "defense of the Presidential Palace," posing with a weapon, and surrounded by soldiers supposedly defending his residence. This staging made the impression that Lukashenka was deeply out of touch with reality. On August 27, he made an announcement that he had managed to "disrupt the plan for Hrodna Region to join Poland". Lukashenka refuses a dialogue with the CC, does not recognize it, and is counting on Moscow's help in the event of a further escalation.

The CC has taken the correct position: violent escalation will not lead to the defeat of Lukashenka, but to the direct interference of Moscow; the protest will be crushed, and its participants accused of extremism.

Moreover, the European Union and neighboring countries cannot for their part provide serious support, since the format of "Union state" presupposes the possibility of Putin providing any type of support to Lukashenka.

The CC is maintaining the only possible effective strategy. It emphasizes that it is an apolitical organization and does not have its own "political choice". The leaders of the protest make statements, emphasizing that the movement today is not determining either a "European choice" or a "format for cooperation with Russia". The only goal is the departure of Lukashenka and repeat elections in the interests of the whole Belarusian people.

The strategic goal is the launch of a political process which will lead to free presidential elections, and then to the formation of a new parliament (the National Assembly) which will have the lawful powers to initiate further reforms. The CC does not express any specific ideas about further economic policy. Tsikhanouskaya has repeatedly emphasized that she considers herself a "transitional leader". Kalesnikava has publically refuted the defamation that supposedly the CC program has specific proposals about "Belarusification," about a policy in the area of language, history, and the church.

The CC strategy is entirely aimed at a maximally broad mobilization in favor of the idea of Lukashenka's departure at any price and repeat, free elections with the participation of international observers. Everything else must be decided democratically after the "transfer of power".

As of September 15, Lukashenka and his intelligence services continue apace to liquidate the CC. Out of the members of the presidium, only Nobel Literature Prize laureate Svetlana Alexievich remains free and inside the country. Without any lawful basis, first Olga Kovalkova (Volha Kavalkova) was deported, and then Anton Rodnenkov and Ivan Kravtsov. Maria Kalesnikava and Maxim Znak are in investigation-isolation cells, charged with "attempt to seize power".

## EUROPEAN UNION AND NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

At an emergency summit on August 19, the heads of European foreign ministries did not recognize the results of the elections. An agreement on sanctions was reached at the summit regarding those responsible for violence, repression, and falsification of the election results. Economic sanctions are not envisioned. Approval of the sanctions and preparation to pass them was underway at a rapid pace. The sanctions were expected to be passed on September 21, but Cyprus blocked the EU's plan. On August 31, three of the Baltic countries had already independently imposed sanctions against 30 high-ranking Belarusian officials, including Lukashenka.

On September 9, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) passed a decision that an international commission will be created to investigate the violence of August 10-13. On September 10, Lithuania's Sejm (parliament) acknowledged Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as the only elected leader of Belarus. Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Czech Republic announced various programs of support – an extended grants program for students, and support for the independent media. The Lithuanian and Polish governments announced that they are introducing a simplified regimen for crossing the border for those fleeing persecution in Belarus. Poland has formed a pool of support for Belarusian human rights organizations and independent media. The Belarusian community in Czech Republic is organizing programs of support for those who have suffered from police violence and for Belarusian students.

Lukashenka refuses contacts with the heads of the countries of the EU, including even telephone conversations with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Makey, the head of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry talked with the heads of the foreign ministries of Sweden and Finland, after which the Finnish president talked with Putin; however, this was without any substantive prospect for the settling of the crisis.

To date, Russia and some of its post-Soviet allies as well as Cuba, Eritrea, Syria, Turkey, and Vietnam acknowledged Lukashenka as president after he secretly inaugurated himself; the countries of the European Union, Iceland, Norway, Japan, Ukraine, Albania, North Macedonia, Canada, and the United States have not recognized the results of the elections.

The EU has created a strong starting position for further support of Belarusian society.

On September 15, the question of a response to the crisis in Belarus was debated at a session of the European Parliament. Speaking at the meeting, Spanish politician Joseph Borrel, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, once again confirmed the position formed during the EU foreign ministers' emergency summit: "President Lukashenka is not the lawful president of Belarus."

A second emergency EU summit on Belarus originally slated for September 21 has now been postponed to October 1-2 (European Council President Charles Michel was forced to go into quarantine after a security guard tested positive for the coronavirus).



# THE KREMLIN

After August 15, according to the results of the conversation between Lukashenka and Putin, the Kremlin decided on its position. Putin gave the go-ahead to restructure Minsk's debt to Moscow; thus, about one billion dollar remains in Lukashenka's hands. Putin also announced that at Lukashenka's request, a reserve was made up of Russian security forces which, as Putin explained, could be used in the event of mass street riots, seizure of buildings, and looting. This announcement sounded like a distinct gesture of support to Belarusian security forces who at the present time are possibly experiencing hesitations.

It must be emphasized: although throughout the election campaign, many suspicions were expressed regarding the Kremlin's support for candidates in opposition to Lukashenka, Putin in fact in the end completely supported Lukashenka.

After August 25, Kremlin spokespersons reiterated the same plan upon which Lukashenka insists: he remains president, there will be no repeat elections, the Coordinating Council will not be recognized as a political subject with which dialogue is possible, and as a solution to the problem, Lukashenka proposes constitutional reform, the content of which is not yet clear. Lukashenka's thesis is: "First, constitutional reform, then elections".

The Kremlin is interfering on a large scale in Belarus' internal affairs, providing direct support to Lukashenka. This support is being made along three lines:

*Financial support.* On September 10, it became known that Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin gave the order to state banks of the Russian Federation (Sberbank, VEB, and VTB) to provide support to Lukashenka through liquidity in the event if Minsk did not have sufficient reserves to maintain the exchange rate of the Belarusian ruble. Putin agreed to restructure Belarus' debt, thus providing Lukashenka with the opportunity not to pay a one-billion-dollar debt to Moscow this year.

*Media support.* The Kremlin's media sites were totally oriented toward a picture of events synchronized with Lukashenka's position. A large brigade of Russian journalists is working in Minsk, headed by the deputy of the editor-in-chief of Russia Today.

*Diplomatic support of Lukashenka's plan for constitutional reform.* Since Lukashenka is in communication with European leaders, evidently Putin will present the "settlement" plan to Macron and Merkel. Today, it can be said that this is the "Lukashenka-Putin Plan".

Putin's real strategy is formulated quite openly by Kremlin media. This narrative includes five basic points:

- Discredit any support of Belarusian society by the countries of the West. Work toward eliminating the topic of repeat elections from European diplomacy;
- Get changes in the composition of the Coordinating Council and its positions;
- Discredit the current leadership of the Coordinating Committee. Promote a group of pro-Russian politicians in Belarus, who can wage an active struggle in favor of the Kremlin, if Lukashenka's positions are badly shaken and the prospect emerges of his rapid departure.
- Continue to make Lukashenka a hopeless debtor to Moscow.
- Using the regimen of "fraternal support to Lukashenka," promote to Minsk a group of political consultants, media people, and specialists in cybersecurity to seize control of the Belarusian state apparatus.

It must be emphasized that support of Lukashenka by Putin is taking place against the background of a monstrous fact of political gangsterism – the attempt on the life of Alexey Navalny with the use of a chemical warfare agent. This event is at the same level of the murder of Sergei Magnitsky and Boris Nemtsov and the series of poisonings of other opponents or critics of the political regime. It must be emphasized that the Kremlin did not conduct an exhaustive investigation in a single one of the cases, ignoring the demands of the Russian and international public.

There is a direct parallel of many years between the actions of Lukashenka and the actions of Putin regarding the opposition; this is de facto the same set of means of authoritarian suppression of a civic movement, consisting of intimidation, bribery, political terror (attacks, murders, disappearance of people), forcible emigration and deportation.

On September 14, the meeting of Lukashenka with Putin took place in Sochi. Putin finally supported the plan proposed by Lukashenka. This is the plan for a so-called “settlement” through announced constitutional reform, after which Lukashenka promises to hold free elections for the president and the National Assembly. This plan is served up as a “plan of liberalization,” since it contains within it a removal of restrictions on the development of political parties, the transfer of part of the powers of the president to the parliament, and so on.

Understandably, Belarusian society is completely ready for both liberalization and a transition to parliamentary democracy, and for constitutional reform. But it is in reverse order, however. First, Lukashenka steps down, then there are free elections, including parliamentary elections, and only after that, constitutional reform. The plan is a crude deception; the package of reforms proposed by Lukashenka, when viewed from the West, may seem to someone like a “liberalization,” but in reality, it simply brings the Belarusian political system toward a Russian model – with fictitious powers of parliament, and with a system of loyalist (supposedly “opposition” parties). It is not a step toward real, inclusive politics, but a transition to a more sophisticated model of electoral authoritarianism.

The Kremlin completely supports this plan. Lukashenka has already presented it to the OSCE, and Putin will promote it in talks with Paris and Berlin. If the European countries agree with this plan, and it receives the support of the OSCE, this will be perceived by Belarusian society as a brutal betrayal.

Belarusian society will not agree to the scenarios for constitution reform which Lukashenka proposes.

## **BELARUSIAN SOCIETY**

The enormous public upsurge related to expectation of changes has not only been maintained for more than a month; during this time, new supporters have been attracted. After the CC formed a leadership group (the Presidium), it announced that the doors are open and anyone who wishes may join. Now more than 4,000 people are registered on the CC site – among them are many prominent figures in Belarus, middle managers, and professionals. The protest movement will not cease in the near future. It can be forecast that the conflict will continue actively at a minimum until the end of the year.

The conflict around the presidential elections revealed that in Belarus, there is a modern civil society capable of mass mobilization. A Solidarity Fund has been created which has collected more than two million dollars. The human rights organizations Viasna (Spring) and Pravovaya iniciativa (Rights Initiative) monitor violations of civil



Protests in Minsk, August 2020. Photo: t.me/Photographers\_against

rights; a site has opened in support of employees of law-enforcement agencies who refused to take part in violence against citizens; many professional groups – writers, designers – have spoken out with collective open letters. The position of prominent Belarusian figures in the country is playing a major role both at home and abroad. The famous theatrical producer Nikolai Khalezin, known in Europe; Prof. Yarik Kryvoi, legal scholar (London); Prof. Elena Gapova (Michigan, USA); theologian Natallia Vasilevich (Bonn, Germany); the well-known IT start-up founder Mikita Mikado (San Francisco); the former minister of culture of Belarus, Pavel Latushko; the Nobel Literature Prize laureate Svetlana Alexievich and many others are actively supporting the protesters.

## THE U.S. POSITION

Unfortunately, President Donald Trump has not made a clear statement that civil rights in Belarus should not be violated. The statement by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was perceived as insufficiently strong. The situation was corrected somewhat when Assistant Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, during his East European tour, met with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and spoke at the OSCE.

At the present time, the US is perceived in Central and Eastern Europe as a political power that has lost interest in the region. The position of the US is associated exclusively with the transfer of the military contingent from Germany to Poland and the opposition to Nord Stream 2. The citizens' anti-authoritarian mobilization in Belarus, the struggle of the Belarusian people for the future – this is the most major political event in the region, influencing the configuration of forces in the region as a whole.

The US previously consistently and concretely supported in the region the civil

societies of those countries that make efforts to get out of the zone of post-Soviet "authoritarianisms" in the direction of establishing republican political foundations. Now exactly such a struggle is underway in Belarus. The fate of a republic is being decided.

Just as had been the case in 2014 during the crisis in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin is making predatory exploitation of the situation in order to paralyze the development of a neighboring country. He is employing hybrid methods which are no less dangerous for the world than direct military intervention. The spread of these methods has long-term consequences, including for the US.

The crushing of the protests in Belarus is being accompanied by an aggressive demonstration of threats of sexual violence against the detainees, and a contemptuous attitude toward women; Lukashenka's macho rhetoric; and a demonstrative violation of the personal dignity of citizens.

We must remember that on November 10, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's powers as a president expire. An inauguration for a new term is expected. This is an important date that requires a reaction from the US and the countries of the EU.

It is anticipated that by that time, an international investigation of the violence in Minsk on August 10-13 will be initiated, and personal sanctions regarding a wide circle of persons will be imposed, close to what Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius has proposed.

It is important to emphasize: the crisis in Belarus will not be overcome in the next months, since the legitimacy of Alyaksandr Lukashenka is completely undermined; he and his administration cannot govern the country; and no police measures will lead Belarusians to be pacified, since Lukashenka's loss of the elections is the consequence of society's long-recorded exhaustion with him, and his unacceptability as head of the country.

The protest touches the deepest layers of Belarusian society; Lukashenka's violent actions touched many, many families. The democratic forces must now answer the question themselves: what will be their reaction to further arrests of the protest leaders, mass repression and the militarization of Belarus?

Belarusian society insists first free presidential elections, then parliamentary elections and in the future, constitutional reform, which will be conducted already under conditions of a broad and free participation of citizens in its discussion and in the vote. If Lukashenka manages to impose a reverse scenario with the support of the Kremlin, this will strike a blow not only to Belarus. This defeat of democratic forces will have consequences for all of global politics.

This is a fundamental factor: a mass perspective is building up of the ineffectiveness of sanctions, or a devaluation of them. The "betrayal by the West" is turning into a topic of historical significance. For the societies of the countries of the post-Soviet transition, the position of the democratic governments of the leading countries of the West is perceived as a compromise with authoritarian regimes, based on political selfishness. The events in Belarus and the poisoning of Navalny are undoubtedly critical points in the perception of this opportunism. Unquestionably, the possible reaction of the countries of the democratic world is limited by those institutional and legal capabilities at their disposal. We cannot expect actions that go beyond the bounds of what will be approved by the voters of these countries. It is obvious, however, that the reaction to the current situation cannot be left within the limits of "expansion of sanctions".

This means that the response of the US, EU, international organizations, and alliances of national governments in the current situation must be a response that leaves

the impression of a massive package that goes beyond the frameworks of previous actions.

In our view, this package must consist of the following steps:

**TRIBUNAL.** Creation of a special international tribunal to investigate the events of August 10-13 in Belarus.

**LIST OF ANNEXATION ACTORS.** Imposition of personal sanctions regarding a wide circle of persons taking part from the Russian side in Putin's plan regarding Belarus. The list should include both official operators as well as representatives of the Kremlin "proxies," actively working toward the annexation of Belarus to Russia.

**ACT ON HYBRID WAR.** The Kremlin's action regarding Minsk must be characterized as a "hybrid war". It must be emphasized that the "Lukashenka-Putin settlement plan" entails an intensive hybrid war of the Kremlin against Poland, the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and in the future against all those countries which have taken a hard position in the support of Belarusian society. Based on the results of events in 2020, an "Act on Hybrid War" should be passed at the level of the European Union, exhaustively characterizing the Kremlin's actions in Europe as an incessant strategy of interventions, destabilizations and inadmissible actions on the territories of the countries of the EU. Such an act will enable in the future to develop specific actions by the national governments of the EU countries, and to build up tools for responding to the Kremlin's toxic actions in Europe.

**ACT ON RT.** Since the Russian government media holding company Russia Today is appointed by the Kremlin as the chief news and political hub, creating content aimed at discrediting the protest movement in Belarus, its purposes, and the intentions of its leaders, it is impossible to overlook the blatant, cynical use of the Kremlin's media capacities not only with regard to Belarusians but regarding the real intentions of the EU governments. This is a direct use of RT in the Belarusian crisis – the best proof of the need for a separate package of measures regarding RT. The "Act on RT" must declare a clear, consolidated intention to paralyze any work of this media holding outside of Russia, as the result of the package of measures.

**ACT ON SUPPORT OF BELARUSIAN SOCIETY.** At the present time, in the EU, the governments of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Czech Republic and Slovakia have taken upon themselves the most responsibility to support Belarusian society. This is leading to an escalation of the conflict with Moscow. Such a situation cannot be contained for a long time. For further support of Belarusian society, a public confirmation of a wider alliance of leading countries around the Belarusian political crisis is required. This act must demonstrate the motivation of all the countries of the West to act in the direction of the democratization of Belarus and preservation of its sovereignty.

# NOTES

The most complete archive of video materials of actions of the special divisions (OMON or riot police) collected by the editors of the Telegram channel NEXTA.  
[https://t.me/s/nexta\\_tv](https://t.me/s/nexta_tv)

Current list of Belarusian political prisoners:  
<http://spring96.org/ru/news/49513>

What is the Kremlin's Plan for Belarus?  
<https://isans.org/articles-en/what-is-the-kremlins-plan-for-belarus.html?>

Interview of Vladimir Putin by Sergei Brilev on August 27, 2020, in which the Kremlin's position on Belarus is formulated.  
<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63951>

Chronicle of key events of mass protests prepared by the Belarusian media site tut.by:  
<https://news.tut.by/economics/699281.html?>

Program interview of Maria Kalesnikova by the Russian Service of the BBC  
<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-53974827?>

Lukashenka on the grounds of the Presidential Palace on the day of a mass protest march:  
[https://t.me/pul\\_1/1378?](https://t.me/pul_1/1378?)

iSANS memorandum about possible measures of the EU in connection with the political crisis in Belarus  
<https://isans.org/analysis-en/policy-papers-en/belarus-the-birth-of-a-nation-or-absorption-by-putins-empire.html>

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