

How the U.S. Government Should Respond to the Protests in Belarus

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Belarus is in the midst of a national struggle that will determine its geopolitical future, especially after its likely rigged presidential election in early August.

Belarusians protesting the outcome represent the idea that European countries have the sovereignty to determine their path, not Russia.

The U.S. must make it clear that it will never recognize anything but an independent and sovereign Belarus, and work with allies as the situation develops.

Belarus is in the midst of a national struggle that will determine its future geopolitical orientation: the Euro-Atlantic community or Moscow. The anti-government protesters in Belarus represent the idea in Europe that each country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path and to decide with whom it has relations and how and by whom it is governed. Belarus, one of two remaining autocracies in Europe (the other being Russia under Vladimir Putin), recently held its presidential election. Long-time Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has been in power since 1996 thanks to rigged elections, claimed victory, with opposition candidate Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya coming in a distant second. The elections were neither free nor fair. Mass protests have erupted across Belarus as a result. Russia considers Belarus in its sphere of influence, a concept that is anathema in 21st-century Europe, and believes it unlikely for Belarus to move away from that sphere.

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As the situation develops, the U.S. must coordinate closely with European allies, especially Poland and Lithuania; continue the nomination process for an Ambassador to Belarus; make it clear that it will never recognize anything but an independent and sovereign Belarus; and help the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and regional countries prepare to bolster regional defensive capabilities and a possible influx of refugees if Russia were to intervene militarily.

The Current Situation

Belarus held its presidential election on August 9. In the few weeks before the election, Belarus witnessed a vast change in its political climate. Formerly a full-time stay-at-home mother, Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya became the main opposition candidate against Belarusian President Lukashenko after her husband, opposition blogger Siarhei Tikhanousky, was arrested for organizing pro-democracy protests. Support for Tikhanouskaya grew exponentially since mid-July when she announced her candidacy. Tens of thousands attended her rallies.¹

Unsurprisingly, due to Belarus' track record of rigged votes, the Lukashenko government claimed that the incumbent won a landslide victory with approximately 80 percent of the vote.² There were many accusations of electoral rigging on social media. When the polls closed on August 9, Belarusians poured into the streets of Minsk to protest the supposed election result that Lukashenko had won.³ Daily mass protests across Belarus have occurred since then. In retaliation, riot police and members of the armed forces have violently cracked down on the protestors.⁴ At least two protestors have been killed, many have been injured, and at the time of this writing, more than 6,000 have been arrested.⁵ On August 14, Belarus' Interior Ministry revealed that it released more than 2,000 protestors who had been detained,⁶ but the majority remain in custody.

Immediately after the election, Tikhanouskaya fled to Lithuania after facing pressure to evacuate from Belarusian authorities. On August 17, Tikhanouskaya declared that she was ready to take over as Belarus' national leader.⁷ Both Tikhanouskaya and the general Belarusian population have demanded that Lukashenko resign.⁸ Lukashenko, however, is fighting to remain in power. He has ruled out a repeat vote⁹ and rejected foreign offers of mediation.¹⁰ On August 17, Lukashenko visited a tractor factory in an attempt to rally support, but the workers responded with boos and heckling.¹¹

The Trump Administration's Diplomatic Engagement with Belarus

Over the past year, the Trump Administration has increasingly engaged diplomatically with Belarus, breaking with years of U.S. foreign policy. In August 2019, then–National Security Advisor John Bolton visited Minsk. His visit was significant because it was the first by a senior U.S. official in more than 18 years.¹² In February 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also visited the Belarusian capital, marking a significant U.S. shift toward Belarus, since it was the second visit by a senior U.S. official in just six months.

In April 2020, the U.S. nominated its first Ambassador to Belarus in more than 11 years.¹³ This followed a decision by Minsk to lift its restriction on U.S. diplomats in Belarus.¹⁴ In May 2020, the U.S. began to sell oil to Belarus.¹⁵ According to Secretary Pompeo at the time, “This competitive deal... strengthens Belarusian sovereignty and independence,” and “demonstrates that the United States is ready to deliver trade opportunities for American companies interested in entering the Belarusian market.”¹⁶ Based on what occurs in the coming weeks, the U.S.’s decision to export oil could change, according to Secretary Pompeo.¹⁷

How Vladimir Putin Is Involved

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus and Russia have remained close. In 1999, the two countries signed a document constituting their joining as a union-state. Belarus and Russia still have not fully integrated their union-state, but the treaty remains.¹⁸ Stemming from this treaty, Lukashenka and Putin share close relations and communicate often.

Regarding the current state of affairs in Belarus, Putin is only increasing his involvement. On August 15, Lukashenka reportedly told Putin that the ongoing protests pose a threat not only to Belarus, but also to Russia.¹⁹ The following day, the Kremlin revealed that Russia is prepared to assist Belarus militarily. And, Russia could likely intervene, because the protests in Belarus continue to grow each day. Belarusians ranging from television presenters and journalists²⁰ to law enforcement and military personnel²¹ have come out in protest against Lukashenka. It is likely that Russia will not allow an outcome to the crisis that does not continue to guarantee Minsk’s subservient role to Moscow—especially if it means that Belarus could become closer to the Euro-Atlantic

community. One need only look at what happened to Georgia in 2008 (after NATO declared that Georgia would someday become a member) and Ukraine in 2014 (after Ukraine signed an association agreement with the European Union) to see that Russia is willing to use military force to protect its national interests.

How the U.S. Should Respond

Ultimately, it is up to the people of Belarus to decide how and by whom they are governed. Their protesting is quickly becoming their revolution. Due to the geopolitical and domestic situation in Belarus and the region, the United States is limited in what it can do at this point. However, there are some prudent steps that the U.S. can take as the situation continues to develop. The Administration and Congress should:

1. **Continue the nomination process for the U.S. Ambassador to Belarus.** The U.S. Senate should continue the nomination process for Julie Fisher, even if the situation on the ground in Minsk means that she must be temporarily resident in a nearby country, such as Lithuania. A U.S. diplomatic presence in Belarus is crucial for re-normalizing bilateral relations, despite the current political unrest there, especially as the new political landscape is developing.
2. **Consider implementing Magnitsky Act sanctions on relevant Belarusian authorities.** In December 2017, President Donald Trump issued an executive order that broadened the definition of the Magnitsky Act.²² The order blocks the property of persons involved in serious human rights abuses or corruption. Based on how the Belarusian authorities are violently punishing protestors, including with tear gas, rubber bullets, and beatings, the U.S. should contemplate instituting Magnitsky sanctions on those authorities.
3. **Reject the notion of a union-state between Belarus and Russia by issuing a Welles-like declaration if Russia moves to annex Belarus.** In 1940, acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles issued a statement declaring that the U.S. would never recognize the legitimacy of Soviet occupation of the Baltic states. In 2018, the Trump Administration issued a similar declaration stating that the U.S. will never recognize the legitimacy of Russian claims to annex Crimea.²³ This would indicate that the United States would

not ever recognize Belarus as Russian. Since 1991, Belarus has been an independent nation, and the U.S. should continue to recognize it as such.

4. **Lead NATO in planning for increasing defenses in case of a fully integrated union between Belarus and Russia.** In the event that Russia might fully integrate its union-state with Belarus, the U.S. should lead NATO in planning for increasing its defenses. Currently, Belarus borders three NATO members—Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. If Belarus and Russia were to fully integrate, the military situation in northeastern Europe would be fundamentally changed. As a defensive alliance, NATO would need to bolster its capabilities in the region. Planning for this should start now, and not after Belarus and Russia join as a union.
5. **Work closely with Europe, especially with Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, regarding the events in Belarus.** Because Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland border Belarus, they know the country best. The three nations have taken on an informal leadership role already.²⁴ The U.S. should work with these countries to strategize about what course of action to take regarding Belarus.
6. **Assess the impact of potential Belarusian refugees in Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine.** If Russia does end up intervening militarily in Belarus and fighting breaks out, many Belarusians could become internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees, just like many Ukrainians and Georgians have due to Russian aggression. If the fighting were to escalate, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine could face an influx of Belarusian refugees. Destabilizing in normal times, dealing with large numbers of refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic would be even worse. The U.S. should discuss with these nations the potential impact this could have on their infrastructures and security, and how to best plan for this possibility before it becomes a reality.

Conclusion

The situation in Belarus is changing by the day. If the protests continue, Russia could intervene militarily. This could have consequences for the region that would affect NATO, the U.S., and its allies and partners. While

the future direction of Belarus will rest in large part on the shoulders of Belarusians themselves, it is in America's interest that Europe remain stable and free of Russian meddling and aggression.

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