

ISSUE BRIEF

Biden and Belarus: A Strategy for the New Administration

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Introduction

US President Joseph R. Biden Jr. has an historic opportunity to bring Europe together and reverse the tide of dictatorship by building an international coalition to support democracy in Belarus. In 2020, Belarusians unexpectedly called Alyaksandr Lukashenka's legitimacy into question in the country's August presidential election. Lukashenka brazenly rigged the results, claiming that he took 80 percent of the vote, but neither the United States nor the European Union (EU) recognizes his victory. A months-long protest movement has coalesced that demands new elections under the supervision of the international community.

Opposition to Lukashenka unified around Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the likely winner of the August election. A former English teacher and a political rookie, initially chosen as a stand-in for her jailed husband, Syarhey Tsikhanouski, Tsikhanouskaya is growing on the job, has struck a chord with Western interlocutors, and has demonstrated an ability to rally the beleaguered people of Belarus. While forced to operate from exile in Lithuania, she has assembled a capable team under the banner of the Coordination Council.

Recent years have seen no better chance for US leadership to facilitate lasting positive change in Europe than the crisis in Belarus. But how to secure democratic change in Belarus is not simple given internal resistance and Moscow's determination to prevent another "color revolution."

Lukashenka is likely finished, unable to restore any authority or legitimacy. But he is seeking to hang on despite Moscow's efforts to arrange a pliable replacement who would preserve Minsk's pro-Russian orientation. Managing Moscow's efforts to prevent an aroused citizenry from choosing their own leader is no easy task. Russia remains the key geopolitical player in Belarus, often plays the long game, and may be willing to countenance military options that the United States cannot.

Perhaps the key fact is that Belarusians have made it amply clear that they want accountable leaders that they can choose and dismiss for themselves. More than thirty thousand peaceful protesters have been detained since August, more than three hundred and fifty police officers have defected, and ordinary Belarusians are no longer afraid to voice their opposition to the

The Eurasia Center's mission is to promote policies that encourage stability, democratic values, and prosperity in Eurasia. A democratic, prosperous, and stable Eurasia is a core interest for the United States and plays into the Atlantic Council's focus on great power competition.

regime.¹ Kremlin support for the ongoing repression risks turning the Belarusian people—historically friendly toward Russia—in a pro-European direction. These changes in Belarus are something that Moscow cannot ignore, and the United States and its allies must nourish and strengthen them in consistent ways that avoid and deter a Kremlin overreaction. Biden, with his long experience promoting US values and interests and his determination to strengthen transatlantic relations, is ideally situated to promote clear support for the people of Belarus that does not directly challenge Moscow's security interests.

This paper examines US interests, the domestic situation in Belarus, Moscow's dilemma, and the many ways the West can influence the situation. It closes with recommendations for the Biden administration.

US Interests in Belarus

The United States has fundamental interests in a peaceful, stable, prosperous, and democratic Europe. That is true in both Eastern as well as Western Europe. It is also consistent with US values. There is no significant conflict between the two since Europe is an overwhelmingly democratic continent.

Since 1990, the United States has advanced its interests and values in Europe by promoting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the newly liberated states and encouraging them to establish democracies and market economies governed by the rule of law.

This policy has been spectacularly successful. The exception to this has been Belarus, along with Russia, the two remaining dictatorships in Europe.

When Lukashenka seemed strong, the United States had interests that were partly in tension with each other. While Washington encouraged Minsk's independence from Moscow, it pushed Lukashenka to stop the most egregious of his authoritarian practices, especially human rights abuses, a policy that pushed him closer to Moscow.

Now the situation has changed. A strong, democratic opposition has emerged that is credibly challenging Lukashenka's rule. And Moscow is looking to eventually

replace him with a new authoritarian ruler rather than allow another case of regime change through popular revolt to be successful within the former Soviet space.

Yet, US interests remain the same: a truly independent and open Belarus, able to chart its own course in accordance with the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. If the opposition wins, we have that result. But it could also provoke a Kremlin reaction that would weaken, if not end, the country's independence, and the United States needs to be prepared to oppose such an eventuality.

Biden's dilemma is how to encourage and strengthen the opposition without sparking and permitting a successful Kremlin crackdown.

The Domestic Situation

What is happening?

Six months after Belarus held a fraudulent presidential election, an insurgent street protest movement shows few signs of letting up. Despite cold temperatures and a decline in the number of protesters, Lukashenka is still fighting for his political survival. On August 9, Tsikhanouskaya likely beat Lukashenka in the presidential election, according to most assessments.² Few expected such a result.

At least four factors paved the way for a strong protest movement to appear.³ First, Belarusians are exhausted with Lukashenka's twenty-six-year rule. Second, the former state farm boss first denied and then ignored COVID-19, doing nothing to protect the Belarusian people against the pandemic; ordinary people were forced to band together to gather personal protective equipment. Third, Lukashenka badly miscalculated: while disqualifying male candidates, he allowed Tsikhanouskaya to stand in her husband's place, thinking that no one would elect a woman; Tsikhanouskaya worked in tandem with two other charismatic women who toured the country and made a compelling case that change was within reach. Fourth, as hundreds of thousands of Belarusians came to the streets to oppose Lukashenka's stolen election results, he responded with excessive violence.

1 Lucy Ash, "A police officer with a conscience who left Belarus," BBC News, December 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-55135636>.

2 Kostya Manenkov and Daria Litvinova, "Belarus poll workers describe fraud in Aug. 9 election," Associated Press, September 1, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/international-news-ap-top-news-europe-72e43a8b9e4c56362d4c1d6393bd54fb>.

3 Tomas Tobé, *Belarus post-Lukashenko: Opportunities and Challenges for Democracy*, Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation, 2020, https://cdn.ungpd.com/252135ff-1adb-4496-a2b3-eba40c3bccb5/Documents/jhs_report_belarus_post-lukashenko.pdf.



Belarusian united opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya casts her ballot at a polling station during the presidential election in Minsk, Belarus August 9, 2020. REUTERS/Vasily Fedosenko.

Two days after the presidential election, Tsikhanouskaya was forced to depart for Vilnius, Lithuania, where she remains. There she has established an office and cabinet of representatives. She has met with numerous European political leaders. She has demanded that Belarus hold a new round of free and fair elections under the eye of the international community, and she recently said that she is ready to lead the country in the run-up to those elections.

In addition to Vilnius, three pockets of the opposition movement operate from Kyiv, Warsaw, and Riga. Most Belarusians in Kyiv are students who have fled to Ukraine because no visa is required to enter the country. Many have since moved to one of the other three locations. Warsaw is home to three of the seven board members of the Coordination Council, which is made up of fifty-five core members. The Center for New Ideas, one of the leading Belarusian think tanks, is also located in the Polish capital, as is a parallel network of human rights workers, students, and media. Several thousand Belarusians work in Warsaw now to support the democratic movement. The Belarusian House in Warsaw and the newly established Centre of Belarusian Solidarity help victims of repression

in Poland. ByPol, a union of security forces members who resigned and had to flee Belarus, was launched by Tsikhanouskaya during her visit to Warsaw in October.

The hub in Riga is focused on women's issues. A special fund was created to help Belarusian women who suffered from repression and received political asylum in Latvia. Vilnius remains the political-executive center, with one hundred and thirty people working there, including the international team, volunteers, and liaisons from Belarus-based organizations.

Massive protests continue on Sundays in Minsk and smaller cities. At the start, these protests were decentralized, making it impossible for the authorities to contain them. The democratic opposition continues to hone its tactics; in December, when the authorities tried to restrict a large protest in central Minsk, Belarusians held multiple protests across the city.

Since Belarus lacks a free media, the democratic movement relies on social media platforms to communicate and to coordinate protest plans. NEXTA

Live, the popular social media channel on Telegram, reaches millions daily. NEXTA is based in Warsaw. Other major Telegram channels, such as Belarus of the Brain and My Country Belarus, operate from Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital.

In Belarus, police continue to use excessive force against peaceful protesters, including women and the elderly. Torture and ill-treatment of detainees are well-documented; there are also credible reports of sexual abuse and rape.⁴ Since August, more than thirty thousand peaceful protesters have been detained.⁵

A growing worry is that the democratic movement will run out of money over the winter. Initially, Belarusians crowdfunded more than \$10 million through online platforms, but insiders tell us that resources are running low and Belarusian citizens cannot keep giving. International assistance cannot easily be moved to Belarus since bank accounts are monitored by the security services and the regime's closure of the borders has limited the ability of people to travel to another country to bring in cash. Those intimately involved in civil society work report that digital currencies are the best way to support the democratic movement, but few international aid organizations will be able to send large amounts of funding that way and satisfy their reporting requirements. Finding ways to move US assistance quickly and to those who need it most in Belarus will be one of the greatest challenges for the Biden administration.

It is important to avoid imposing a heavy bureaucratic burden and to provide emergency assistance as quickly as possible. The priority should be to preserve the infrastructure that Belarusian civil society was able to build in Belarus and to help those individuals and small businesses that were harmed by the regime.

Changing attitudes

Since independence, Belarus has had a complicated but close relationship with Russia. The vast majority of Belarusians speak Russian and are interconnected with

Russia through trade and family relations. However, that affection for Russia is diminishing quickly. Recent polling by the Belarus Analytical Workshop reveals that the number of Belarusians who favored an alliance with Russia had dropped 12 percent in two months.⁶ More Belarusians are starting to dislike Russian President Vladimir Putin and perceive him to be on the side of the authorities who have resorted to excessive violence since August 2020. Nevertheless, strong, positive feelings toward Russia remain among many Belarusians.

Other observers see an unexpected flowering of national identity. Throughout the twentieth century, Belarus's national aspirations never had a chance to grow, as the Soviet Union and Soviet legacy held them back. Former Swedish ambassador to Belarus, Stefan Eriksson, notes: "What we have observed in Belarus during the autumn is the belated rebirth or return of the Belarusian nation to the map of Europe."⁷ More people have started to intentionally speak the Belarusian language and the street protests have embraced the red-and-white Belarusian flag, which was the flag of the Belarusian state after the 1917 revolution and again after the collapse of the Soviet Union until 1995.⁸

Moscow's Dilemma in Belarus

In 2020, Moscow saw its position weaken in many countries of the "near abroad," a reminder that the breakup of the USSR is an ongoing process, not a onetime event.

In Belarus, Russia is increasingly facing the same dilemma as it faced in the "color revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia in the early 2000s. Moscow knows Lukashenka has lost all legitimacy, but it cannot accept the idea that the people of Belarus should be allowed to choose their own leader. Consequently, Moscow has made policy choices that have painted it into a corner.

The situation looked far less dangerous prior to the August election. Moscow had long been irritated by Lukashenka's flirtation with the West and had been trying to rein him in by cutting subsidies and pressing him to

4 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "UN human rights experts: Belarus must stop torturing protesters and prevent enforced disappearances," September 1, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26199&LangID=E>.

5 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "As Belarus Protests Enter Sixth Month, Lukashenka Repeats Vague Promise of Change," January 10, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/dozens-detained-in-belarus-as-opposition-stages-scattered-marches/30998528.html>.

6 Kommersant, "Белорусы отворачиваются от союза с Россией (Belarusians turn away from alliance with Russia)," November 22, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4583283>.

7 Tobé, *Belarus*.

8 Whitney Smith, "Flag of Belarus," *Britannica*, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/flag-of-Belarus>.

implement the Union State agreement. But Putin did not worry about Belarus pursuing EU or NATO membership. Russia was confident that the Belarusian people, while proud to be citizens of an independent state, did not dream of Euro-Atlantic integration and felt genuine kinship toward Russia.

Now all those assumptions have been thrown into doubt. Moscow has reacted to the protests in ways that could produce what it sees as a nightmare scenario like the Orange Revolution or Euromaidan in Ukraine. In the run-up to the August presidential election, Moscow was evidently as blind as Lukashenka to the growing popular discontent with his twenty-six-year rule. Russian leaders did not appreciate that the manipulation of the election process, both before and after the vote, was so brazen as to be roundly rejected by most Belarusians.

Putin may have let his obsession with preventing regime change through popular protests lead him to endorse the legitimacy of the “official” vote count. This closed off the possibility of an early rerun of the elections (as in Ukraine in 2004) that might have defused the situation.

Instead, Putin compounded this mistake by doubling down, refusing to engage with Tsikhanouskaya or the Coordination Council, and even repeating the claim that the opposition body was illegal. Moscow apparently shot down early mediation efforts by Belarusian religious leaders as well.

By torpedoing dialogue, Russia effectively condoned Lukashenka’s use of force and mass arrests to suppress the protests, enabling him to dig in.

Russia subsequently tried to distance itself from Lukashenka by creating an alternative path for his departure. This is to be based on an ill-defined constitutional reform that would provide the basis for new elections without Lukashenka’s participation. Putin even got Lukashenka to agree in their meeting in Sochi in mid-September to declare that he would not run again.

But Lukashenka is already trying to weasel out of this deal, and it is not clear that Moscow will be able to find a group of Russia-friendly opposition leaders who would have credibility with the Belarusian people comparable to that of the Coordination Council.

While Lukashenka hangs on to power, Moscow seems to be waiting for the Belarusian security services to

bring the protests to an end and stabilize the situation before moving to install a more pliable leader (such as the original presidential candidates Viktor Babariko or Valery Tsapkala). Thus far Moscow’s actual intervention has been limited to sending media propagandists to prop up Belarusian media. But these steps may not work; if the protests continue and lead to further violence by the regime, it will further alienate the population and provoke stronger anti-Russian sentiment, as well as increased public support for a Euro-Atlantic future, which is already being borne out in public opinion polls.

In short, the longer the situation continues without a turn toward dialogue with the real opposition and the holding of new elections, the more polarized things could become. This could leave Moscow (and Lukashenka) with fewer and fewer options other than brutal suppression of the protests by force—perhaps with the Russian military stepping in if the Belarusian services begin to falter.

Putin may feel he has no alternative since what started in Belarus will not necessarily stay in Belarus: Putin must fear that yielding to the protesters’ demands could spark new anti-regime protests in Russia itself. In this regard, it is not lost on Moscow that the protesters in Russia’s far-eastern city of Khabarovsk have been increasingly carrying the old red-and-white Belarusian flag.

Moreover, with the EU and the United States already moving to impose additional sanctions on Russia over Belarus and the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Putin may feel he has nothing more to lose. But, thus far, the sanctions have not been severe, and he certainly understands that a Russian military intervention could have nasty consequences.

Belarus’s Dependence on Russia

Within the Soviet Union, Belarus stood out as one of the most well-functioning and least corrupt republics, which remains true twenty-nine years after independence. Belarus is the last state-dominated Soviet economy with forty big state companies, mainly in heavy industry. They are still producing Soviet products with soft budget constraints. Agriculture remains collectivized. A significant private sector, including a promising computer programming sector, exists, but the big companies are state-owned.

The state-owned companies are old-fashioned and overstaffed, even if they produce the best Soviet products ever made. Because of its economic structure, Belarus



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka walk during their meeting in the Black sea resort of Sochi, Russia, February 7, 2020. Alexander Zemlianichenko/Pool via REUTERS.

is highly dependent on Russia for both its exports and imports. Its Soviet manufactures can only be sold to Russia because their quality is hardly sufficient for the West. At the same time, Belarus imports cheap oil and natural gas from Russia to produce petroleum and fertilizers, which account for two-thirds of its exports to the West. In 2018, 58 percent of Belarus's imports (mainly crude oil and gas) came from Russia, while Russia accounted for 38 percent of Belarusian exports (mainly manufactures).

At present, Belarus has two concrete economic problems. One is long-term. The Belarusian economy has not grown since 2012 because of its systemic problems.⁹ The other is short-term: Belarus only has international currency

reserves in cash for one month of imports. With an annual current account deficit of about \$2.5 billion and debt service of \$3 billion in 2021, it needs about \$6 billion in international financing in the coming year.¹⁰ Yet, the country's financial problems should not be exaggerated. Its total public debt amounts to only \$18 billion or 35 percent of GDP, according to the Ministry of Finance.¹¹ After a political thaw in 2016, all the international financial institutions returned to Belarus and are plugged in. Amazingly, in late June 2020, Belarus raised \$1.25 billion in Eurobonds on international financial markets.¹²

Given that Lukashenka controls the government and is not prepared to accept the conditions of the International Monetary Fund, Russia is the only plausible source of

9 International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Databases*, October 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/SPROLLS/world-economic-outlook-databases#sort=%40imfdate%20descending>.

10 International Monetary Fund, "Republic of Belarus: 2018 Article IV Consultation-Press Release," January 17, 2019, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2019/01/18/Republic-of-Belarus-2018-Article-IV-Consultation-Press-Release-Staff-Report-and-Statement-by-46526>.

11 Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, "Public Debt of the Republic of Belarus," accessed October 26, 2020, http://www.minfin.gov.by/en/public_debt/condition/.

12 Belta, "Belarus raises \$1.25bn from eurobond issue," June 25, 2020, <https://eng.belta.by/economics/view/belarus-raises-125bn-from-eurobond-issue-131281-2020/>.

financing. Nobody understands this better than Putin. On September 14, Lukashenka went begging to Putin, but the Russian president promised only \$1.5 billion of credits. For the rest, he suggested that Lukashenka had to look for private Russian money, hinting that two thousand five hundred Belarusian enterprises had Russian capital.¹³

The Putin-Lukashenka drama is like watching the same film again and again. The Kremlin appears to be repeating what it attempted in 2011, letting dubious Russian oligarchs take over the biggest and most valuable companies in Belarus for a pittance with the help of state bank credits. Belaruskali, the largest Belarusian company, produces one-fifth of all potash in the world.¹⁴ Belarus has also a big nitrate fertilizer company, Hrodno Azot. The big Russian potash producer Uralkali wants to take over Belaruskali and the Russian fertilizer company Uralchem wants to seize Hrodno Azot.¹⁵ Not accidentally, both Uralchem and Uralkali have been taken over by Dmitry Mazepin, a Belarusian with close links to the Kremlin and in billions of dollars of debt to Russia's two biggest state banks. He is also chairman of the Russia-Belarus Business Council. Mazepin has sacked the loyal CEOs of both Uralchem and Uralkali, while receiving even more state bank credits, arousing suspicions that he is preparing to send off his former CEOs to manage the corresponding Belarusian assets.

A similar plot appears to have been prepared for Belarus's two big oil refineries. In 2011, a Russian state oil company, Slavneft, became the dominant owner of the Naftan oil refinery. Now, Russian state oil companies are circling around the other big Belarusian oil refinery, Mozyr. The main operator here appears to be the Russian multibillionaire Mikhail Gutseriev, who used to manage Slavneft but whose private company is Safmar. The financing for these maneuvers is likely to come from the two big Russian state banks, Sberbank, whose CEO is Putin ally German Gref, and VTB.¹⁶ At present, Sberbank seems to be in the lead. If they succeed in these maneuvers, four Russian companies will control two-thirds of Belarus's exports to the West.

How the West Can Influence Belarus

What can the West do to strengthen the democratic movement and avoid a Kremlin crackdown? The most immediate objective is to ensure that Lukashenka leaves power.

The West cannot provide direct financial support to Belarus as long as the not-recognized Lukashenka controls the government. Instead, the West must place its bet on the country's future by financing civil society, including journalists, activists, and human rights defenders, and Belarusian students and scholars in the West. This takes advantage of the new determination of the people to choose their own future.

At the same time, the West needs to focus on the sources of power propping up the Belarusian dictator. The best way to do that is more sanctions. These should primarily be of three kinds: personal sanctions on violators of human rights and on people and entities that handle Lukashenka's personal finances, but also conditional sanctions on Russian companies and oligarchs that take over Belarusian companies at the behest of the Kremlin. Unlike previous sanctions, these sanctions should not be directed against Belarusian companies or the Belarusian economy because that would only make Belarus even more dependent on Russia economically. The exception is companies that handle the personal funds of the Lukashenka circle. Therefore, Western sanctions should not focus on Belarusian companies or the Belarusian economy. Instead, Russian companies that exploit Belarus's economic hardship to purchase Belarusian assets cheaply and the businessmen behind them should be sanctioned.

When it comes to personal sanctions, the three Baltic countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—have stood out as bold pioneers. As noted by Anders Åslund in his previous writings with the Atlantic Council, they listen carefully to Belarusian civil activists, who call for many human rights violators to be punished.¹⁷ Impatiently calling

13 President of Russia Executive Office, "Meeting with President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko," September 14, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/119/events/64031>.

14 Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Putin's Belarus intervention could be good for business," *UkraineAlert*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-belarus-intervention-could-be-good-for-business/>.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Anders Åslund, "The West finally imposes sanctions on Belarus," *UkraineAlert*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-west-finally-imposes-sanctions-on-belarus/>.

for joint EU action, they sanctioned thirty top Belarusians, including Lukashenka, on August 31, 2020.¹⁸ While the EU continued to delay a decision, the three Baltic countries sanctioned one hundred more Belarusian officials.¹⁹ These sanctions might be quite hurtful because many members of the Belarusian upper middle class have summer homes in the nearby Baltic seaside resorts, notably Jūrmala in Latvia and Palanga in Lithuania. Belarus has responded with countersanctions against three hundred Baltic officials.²⁰

On October 2, 2020, the EU finally adopted sanctions against forty citizens of Belarus because of Lukashenka's falsification of the result of the presidential election on August 9.²¹ As the EU put it, the Belarusians sanctioned were "identified as responsible for repression and intimidation against peaceful demonstrators, opposition members and journalists in the wake of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, as well as for misconduct of the electoral process."²² On December 18, the EU expanded its sanctions to twenty-nine more Belarusian officials, taking the total to sixty-nine.²³ The main sanctions are a travel ban and asset freeze. (It is worth noting that, in 2016, after Lukashenka had freed all political prisoners, the EU ended its sanctions from 2006 that had targeted many more people than covered by these new sanctions, no less than one hundred and seventy.)²⁴

On October 2, the United States expanded its 2016 sanctions on Belarus (first introduced in 2006) from

sixteen people to twenty-four people.²⁵ (Since 2016, the United States had maintained sanctions against sixteen individuals and nine big enterprises.²⁶) Three days earlier, the United Kingdom sanctioned eight Belarusians²⁷ and Canada eleven.²⁸ None recognize Lukashenka as president. On December 23, the United States added Belarusian Deputy Minister of the Interior and Chief of the Criminal Police Henadz Arkadzievich Kazakevich as well as four entities—the Central Election Commission, the Minsk Special Purpose Police Unit (Minsk OMON), the Main Internal Affairs Directorate of the Minsk City Executive Committee (Minsk GUVU), and KGB Alpha.²⁹

The difference in sanctions imposed by the United States and the EU is that the United States tends to target fewer people higher up. It has persistently sanctioned Lukashenka himself, as have the UK and Canada, while the EU has excluded him from sanctions. Instead, the EU tends to sanction many more people, sticking to the Nuremberg principle that officials are culpable if they obey unlawful orders. Similarly, the EU has sanctioned many more people than the United States because of Russian military aggression in Crimea and Donbas, but it has not sanctioned several of the top people the United States has punished.

In conclusion, the West has been slow and somewhat disjointed in its Belarus sanctions, but in the end, it has acted in a fairly complementary and sensible way.

18 Andrius Sytas, "Baltic states impose sanctions on Lukashenko and other Belarus officials," Reuters, August 31, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-sanctions/baltic-states-impose-sanctions-on-lukashenko-and-other-belarus-officials-idUSKBN25R0Z7>.

19 Agence France-Presse, "Baltic States Expand Sanctions on Belarus," Barron's, September 25, 2020, <https://www.barrons.com/news/baltic-states-expand-sanctions-on-belarus-01601039106>.

20 Reuters staff, "Belarus to sanction some 300 officials from Baltic states in tit-for-tat move: Belta," Reuters, September 29, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-sanctions/belarus-to-sanction-some-300-officials-from-baltic-states-in-tit-for-tat-move-belta-idUSKBN26K2F4>.

21 European Council, Belarus: EU imposes sanctions for repression and election falsification, press release, October 2, 2020, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/10/02/belarus-eu-imposes-sanctions-for-repression-and-election-falsification/?mc_cid=f9594bcb0e&mc_eid=c1b7085789#.

22 Ibid.

23 European Council, Belarus: EU imposes third round of sanctions over ongoing repression, press release, December 17, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/17/belarus-eu-imposes-third-round-of-sanctions-over-ongoing-repression/>.

24 Much of the information in this passage is drawn from prior written works of the authors, particularly Anders Åslund, and concerns well-documented sanctions announced by multiple Western governing bodies. To read Åslund's original sourcing, readers can refer to footnote 17.

25 US Department of Treasury, Treasury Sanctions Belarus Officials for Undermining Democracy, press release, October 2, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1143>.

26 Ibid.

27 United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and the Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP, Belarus: UK sanctions 8 members of regime, including Alexander Lukashenko, press release, September 29, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/belarus-uk-sanctions-eight-members-of-regime-including-alexander-lukashenko#:~:text=The%20UK%20has%20sanctioned%208,Belarus%20after%20the%20rigged%20elections.&text=Alexander%20Lukashenko%20is%20the%20first,which%20was%20introduced%20in%20July>.

28 Jason Douglas, "UK, Canada impose sanctions on Belarusian President Lukashenko," *Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-k-canada-impose-sanctions-on-belarusian-president-lukashenko-11601400152>.

29 US Department of the Treasury, Treasury Sanctions Additional Belarusian Regime Actors for Undermining Democracy, press release, December 23, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1222>.



People take part in a protest against the presidential election results demanding the resignation of Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the release of political prisoners, in Minsk, Belarus August 16, 2020. REUTERS/Vasily Fedosenko.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The ongoing protests in Belarus offer an immediate opportunity for Biden to seize and to show strong, transatlantic leadership. We urge the incoming administration to take the following actions as a tangible manifestation of US leadership, values, and commitment to democratic change in Europe.

To promote the growth of the democratic movement in Belarus, strengthen the current opposition leader, and weaken support for Lukashenka:

1. Biden should meet with Tsikhanouskaya within his first 100 days as President of the United States.
2. Biden should designate a senior official to coordinate sanctions with the EU, the UK, and Canada.
3. Biden should sign an executive order on Belarus that would sanction hundreds of Belarusian officials who violate human rights to serve as a deterrent against further escalation of repression. We can provide a list for consideration.
4. The United States should refer to Lukashenka as the former president of Belarus. US Ambassador to Belarus Julie Fisher should take up her post in Minsk and visit Vilnius as appropriate but not present her credentials to Lukashenka.
5. The United States should sanction companies that handle Lukashenka's private finances.
6. The United States should threaten Russian companies and businessmen with sanctions in case they take over Belarusian companies or support Lukashenka's regime financially or politically. The United States should also sanction Russian media and journalists participating in propaganda campaigns against the Belarus protest movement.
7. Congress should give specific guidance to the State Department that it spend no less than \$200 million annually on civil society and media support for Belarus.

8. Congress should double the budget of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL's) Belarus Service, which is overseen by the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM). In addition, Congress and the leadership of the USAGM and RFE/RL should speak out forcefully when RFE/RL journalists are detained in Belarus and demand their immediate release.
9. The secretary of state should designate a senior official to oversee all assistance to Belarus and report on it quarterly to Congress.
10. The United States (along with the EU) should send humanitarian assistance to the opposition by channels that actually reach them in Belarus.
11. The secretary of state should facilitate and encourage the unconditional release of and amnesty for all political prisoners, urge the cessation of violence, and insist on an inclusive national dialogue to solve the political crisis in Belarus and then hold free and fair elections.
12. The United States should use its power in international organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the UN, to ensure their active participation in solving the Belarus crisis by mediating the dialogue, creating additional pressure on the regime, and collecting evidence of crimes to eventually bring the perpetrators to justice.

To manage the Russian reaction to developments in Belarus with a view to preventing a Kremlin crackdown:

1. The Biden administration should privately caution the opposition to avoid any signal suggesting its interest in joining the EU or NATO and publicly explain its position in Belarus as only supporting the right of the people of Belarus to choose their own leader and future.
2. Along with the EU, the Biden administration should maintain regular diplomatic dialogue with Moscow, stressing that the ongoing protest movement is only

about Belarus's domestic politics, not geopolitics. The initial aims are an immediate end to the repression, release of prisoners, and the launch of a genuine, inclusive political dialogue that can lay the basis for new, internationally supervised elections.

3. The Biden administration should draw a clear line on conditional sanctions: Moscow should understand clearly that it will face additional sanctions if it sends security forces (overtly or covertly, including military or personnel support) to Belarus to prop up Lukashenka or crack down on Belarusian protesters.

These three recommendations are a package and must be carried out together. It would be disastrous to accommodate the Kremlin by discouraging Belarus from turning to the EU while not establishing clear redlines against Moscow's potential intervention in Belarus.

In conclusion, the changes in Belarusian society suggest that the future of the country is with Europe. The smart play for the West is to help ensure that the opposition and civil society survive this treacherous period and that the Kremlin does not crack down. Moscow hopes to ensure its interests by placing a pliable successor on the throne, and it is the people of Belarus who must respond to that challenge and demand a say in choosing their own leaders through a legitimate democratic process under credible international supervision. The United States must work clearly, but with finesse, to ensure that Belarus's real leaders and civil society are able to succeed.

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