



[Disputed Election Results Spark Mass Protests in Belarus](#)

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko declared victory in the country's elections this week, despite widespread reports of vote rigging and corruption. His competitor, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, fled to neighboring Lithuania amid suggestions her life was in danger from the Belarusian authorities. Lukashenko, often referred to as Europe's last dictator, claimed victory with over 80% of the vote according to state-run exit polls. When it became clear that Lukashenko would be continuing in office, thousands of Belarusians took to the streets in the capital of Minsk and around the country to protest against the government. The authorities have vowed to crush the demonstrations, and Lukashenko himself said the security forces would not allow the country to be "torn apart" by protesters demanding greater governmental accountability.

Alexander Lukashenko first came to power in Belarus when he won elections in 1994, which is also the last time Belarusian elections were free and legitimate. At the beginning of his reign, Lukashenko was generally popular as he preserved many aspects of Belarus' Soviet-era economy and avoided the rampant corruption and cronyism that was prevalent in other former Soviet satellite states. However, his popularity slipped as the country failed to adequately modernize and grow its economy. Recently, Lukashenko botched Belarus' response to the coronavirus and alienated his primary patron, President Vladimir Putin of Russia, when he arrested 33 Russians and accused them of interfering with the upcoming elections. As a result, Russia scaled back its economic commitment to Belarus by eliminating cut-price oil deals that were used to prop up the Belarusian economy. As the economy trended downward, so did Lukashenko's popularity which culminated in the most serious challenge to his reign in nearly two decades.

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya emerged as Lukashenko's greatest threat despite being a political novice with no experience in the workforce. Her husband, an opposition activist, had planned to run in the elections, but was arrested on trumped up charges and his candidacy was thrown out, so she ran in his place. Several members of her campaign were arrested by the authorities, including her campaign manager, which culminated in her fleeing to neighboring Lithuania. Tikhanovskaya herself temporarily disappeared, which drew out the worst fears about her fate, but Lithuania's foreign minister released a statement saying she was in the country and doing well. Tikhanovskaya also released what appeared to be a statement given under duress, urging protesters to stay off the streets and respect Lukashenko's "victory." However, this only served to rally her supporters further, who refused to be muzzled by Lukashenko's authoritarianism.

The international community has broadly condemned the electoral fraud committed by Lukashenko. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned the vote rigging and subsequent crackdown by Belarusian authorities, saying the United States would continue to fight for free and fair elections. The European Union also denounced the election, and Sweden's foreign minister confirmed that a forum of EU foreign ministers would urgently convene to discuss the next steps the bloc would take. Conversely, Vladimir Putin congratulated Lukashenko on his victory and said he hoped for greater integration between Russia and Belarus.