

## #BerlinPerspectives

Analysing German European Policy

# After the Presidential Election in Belarus

Germany's role in formulating a united EU position defending human rights and the rule of law

by Katrin Böttger

- *The presidential elections in Belarus showed a surprising degree of political contestation, but also fraud and violence against protesters*
- *Germany's initial reaction was restrained*
- *In order to hold Alexander Lukashenka accountable, Germany should build a coalition of advocates of human rights, the rule of law and free and fair elections*
- *Its reaction should be firm, while avoiding to meddle too strongly in internal affairs*
- *At the same time, Germany should prepare for a possible deterioration of the situation.*

Belarus, which has been undergoing a political crisis since its presidential election on 9 August 2020, receives much less attention in Germany than its neighbours, Ukraine and Russia. Economically, as well as politically, it is heavily dependent on Russia. In Germany as elsewhere up to a few weeks before the election, everyone expected that, after having stopped any genuine challengers from running, Alexander Lukashenka – the autocratic leader who has been in power since 1994 – would “win” by the usual landslide. This would be due not only to a lack of alternatives but also to most of the electoral fraud taking place in the run-up to the vote rather than on polling day.

However, the pre-election period saw a surprising degree of political contestation in Belarus. First, Valery Tsapkala, Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Viktor Babaryka were not allowed to stand as candidates by the Central Electoral Commission, and were either subsequently detained or forced to leave the country. Then, three women close to them – Veronika Tsapkala (wife of Valery), Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (wife of Siarhei) and Maria Kalesnikava (Babaryka's campaign manager) – formed an alliance and campaigned all over the country, drawing unprecedentedly large crowds.

Immediately after Lukashenka was declared the winner with 80.2 per cent of the votes while Tsikhanouskaya received only 9.9 per cent, mass protests of a scale and kind previously unseen started in Minsk and soon spread all over the country. Many protesters were subjected to police violence, including through the use of rubber bullets and stun grenades by the OMON special-purpose police units, and there were mass arrests of demonstrators and journalists. By 16 August at least 250 protesters had been injured, three are confirmed dead and about 7,000 were arrested, 76 people are still missing. Most prisoners except 122 have since been released with many reporting, that they were tortured while in prison. Whereas the leaders of Russia, China, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Vietnam congratulated Lukashenka on his “victory”, neighbouring EU countries Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, alongside Ukraine, criticised the conduct of the election. Tsikhanouskaya was forced to flee to Lithuania. The ongoing protests do not only include public demonstrations but also strikes in state-owned companies and are organized in a decentralised manner. In a video statement Tsikhanouskaya said she was ready to lead the country and to pave the way to new, fair and free elections. She also proposed the establishment of a national coordination council comprising members from different branches of civil society to accompany the transition of power.

## Germany’s restrained reaction

While Germany offered some support in finding a joint position for the EU, it was slow to do so. Its approach appears to remain one of restraint. Several explanations for this are possible. Belarus is a lesser-known eastern neighbour of the EU and has remained mostly free from serious democratisation efforts, and therefore it has received little attention in German politics. Besides few long-standing contacts, the chancellery’s and the foreign office’s channels are patchy and the shutdown of the internet by Lukashenka aggravated this situation. German officials may also fear provoking further conflict with Russia over a country that, in comparison to Ukraine, is not as relevant in terms of the size of its economy and of its role as energy hub. Finally, the

combination of coronavirus-related restrictions and the summer holiday period might have contributed to Germany’s slow reaction. Two German members of the European Parliament were among those who issued a statement condemning the actions of the Belarusian government and demanding the EU should threaten sanctions if Lukashenka did not end the acts of repression.

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After some delay Germany’s government has condemned the violence by the Belarusian security forces and the mass arrests of protesters and bystanders. It has demanded the release of protesters as well as the adherence to the basic principles of free and fair elections. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas discussed the situation in Belarus with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov during a visit on 12 August 2020 in Moscow, when both requested from the Belarusian authorities the release of arrested journalists and peaceful protesters. On 14 August 2020, EU foreign ministers came to an agreement on imposing new sanctions on officials responsible for the violence and election manipulation in Belarus. The European External Action Service is working on a list of those to be sanctioned, which will include EU travel bans and asset freezes. In a subsequent telephone call with Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, Chancellor Angela Merkel reiterated that the Belarusian government should refrain from using violence against peaceful protesters, release political prisoners and enter into a national dialogue with the opposition and civil society to solve the crisis. Vice Chancellor and Finance Minister Olaf Scholz – who will be the Social Democratic Party candidate for chancellor in next years’ elections – reacted more forcefully. He said he was convinced that Lukashenka had no legitimacy left and would not be in office much longer if everything went according to democratic rules. He added that Germany would not

accept what is happening in Belarus.

An extraordinary EU summit was held on 19 August 2020 to discuss the crisis in Belarus. The summit conclusions stated that the EU did not recognise the election results, condemned the violence and would develop list containing a substantial number of individuals responsible for violence, repression and the falsification of election results to be submitted to asset freezes and travel bans. In addition, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised financial support of €53 million for Belarus, most of which for coronavirus relief aid, with €2 million for the victims of repression and €1 million for civil society and independent media.

## Germany's role

What are Germany's policy options with regard to the crisis in Belarus, especially given its current role as holder of the EU Council presidency and also its reputation as an important supporter of democratisation in the Eastern Partnership countries?

One option is for Germany to **continue holding back** and avoid provoking a Russian reaction. In comparison with the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine in 2013-14, the EU does not have a large place in the political goals and perspectives of Belarusian society, whose primary objective right now is Lukashenka leaving office. In addition, Russia has close military links to Belarus, which is why the Kremlin ordering a military intervention is a possible scenario. Finally, there is a risk of driving Belarus further into Russia's sphere of influence while cooperation had been possible at least on a small scale through the Eastern Partnership framework, even though Belarus never came close to signing a Partnership and Association Agreement with the EU.

Another option is for Germany to **intervene for a transition in Belarus** by recognising Tsikhanouskaya (as it has done with Juan Guaidó in Venezuela) as the legitimate winner of the election and supporting the holding of a new election. Furthermore, it could impose comprehensive economic sanctions. Germany is the fourth most important economic partner for Belarus

after Russia, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom, and as such it could exert considerable economic pressure this way. This, however, would most likely feed into Lukashenka's narrative of foreign interference, destabilisation and threats to the national sovereignty for Belarus.

A third, advisable, option is for Germany, with the EU Council presidency to back it up, to **establish a coalition of advocates of the rule of law and free elections** to keep the pressure on Lukashenka up. It should continue taking a leading role in formulating a joint EU position in close contact with the protesters and Belarusian civil society including local election observers. At the same time, it should keep channels to the Belarusian government and to Russia open. This should include contacts between parliamentarians as well as civil society actors, many of whom have been active from Lithuania or Poland. This would help back the peaceful protesters in their demand for free and fair elections. Furthermore, Germany should continue to **support targeted sanctions** within a limited framework, as discussed by EU foreign ministers and the European Council. Poland, Lithuania and Latvia have already offered to act as mediators in a dialogue between Lukashenka and the opposition and could be partners in the coalitions of advocates mentioned above.

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Furthermore, Germany should assist the EU in choosing the recipients for its financial support. In addition, Germany's government, parliamentarians and civil society should assist in the swift and targeted distribution of this financial support to prevent it from seeping into the wrong pockets or causing additional repercussions for the recipients. In this it should place special focus on women's groups as this might help keep the crisis non-violent. Germany should also support the

work of the newly created national coordination council to resolve the political situation in Belarus based on its own reunification experience and its support in the Central and Eastern European countries in the 1990s. This would help bring actors from both sides together to resolve the situation in Belarus peacefully and to discuss points for its future. At the same time, Germany should not appropriate what is essentially an inner-Belarusian affair or elevate it to a geopolitical dispute. However, even though the Belarusian authorities made minor concessions by releasing hundreds of protesters beginning from 14 August 2020, it is at this point unlikely that Lukashenka will accept talks with the opposition and protesters. So far, he has not even accepted a telephone call with Angela Merkel or other European heads of state or government. Therefore Germany should at the same time prepare for dynamic developments that could lead to more violent repression or regime change – or both – which would then have many implications for EU foreign policy. This could include the early setup of a structure similar to the Normandy format, which could be helpful in avoiding a military intervention by Russia.

*This #BerlinPerspectives reflects the author's views only.*

#### **About the author**

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