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Belarus Poll Challenger Asks Strongman Lukashenko to Cede Power

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Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. **Sergei Grits / AP / TASS**

The main challenger in Belarus's disputed election on Monday called on President Alexander Lukashenko to cede power but said she would not join demonstrations that have been brutally broken up by police, attracting widespread condemnation in Europe.

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, whose surprise candidacy posed the biggest challenge to the veteran leader in years, said Sunday's presidential vote had been rigged and accused authorities of resorting to force to cling to power.

"The voters made their choice but the authorities did not hear us," Tikhanovskaya told a press conference after police used stun grenades, water cannon and rubber bullets to disperse crowds in Minsk and other cities.

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"The authorities should think about how to peacefully hand over power to us," she said. "I consider myself the winner of this election."

There were calls on pro-opposition social media accounts for labour strikes and hundreds of protesters took to the streets in Minsk on Monday night.

Tikhanovskaya's spokeswoman said she would not join demonstrations.

"Authorities can create any provocative situation to detain her and we need her to be free," Anna Krasulina told AFP.

An AFP journalist in Minsk said the area near the war memorial where protesters had gathered on Sunday had been sealed off and several central subway stations closed.

Election officials confirmed Lukashenko's re-election to a sixth term on Monday morning, saying he had won more than 80% of the vote, with Tikhanovskaya coming second with 10%.

The 65-year-old former collective farm boss has ruled ex-Soviet Belarus since 1994, stamping out dissent and earning the nickname of "Europe's last dictator."

EU sanctions warning

European governments questioned the results, with Germany voicing "strong doubts" about the conduct of the vote and France urging restraint.

Britain said the election was "seriously flawed" and urged authorities to "refrain from further acts of violence," while Belarus's neighbor Poland called for an emergency EU summit on the situation.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said that after having previously lifted sanctions on Belarus, the EU should review "whether this can still be valid in the light of the past weeks and days."

But Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Lukashenko, a longtime ally, as did Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

Lukashenko was defiant, vowing he would not allow Belarus to be "torn apart" and denouncing the protesters as foreign pawns.

"We recorded calls from abroad. There were calls from Poland, Britain and the Czech Republic, they were directing our — forgive me — sheep," Lukashenko told the head of an election observation delegation from ex-Soviet countries.

Tikhanovskaya, a 37-year-old stay-at-home mother and political novice, attracted tens of thousands of supporters to the country's biggest demonstrations in years.

Thousands took to the streets of Minsk and other cities on Sunday night to denounce the vote, sparking clashes with members of law enforcement.

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Police said they detained some 3,000 people, around 1,000 of them in Minsk.

Shocking images released by pro-opposition media and posted online showed police firing stun grenades and rubber bullets into the crowds and a police van ramming into the demonstration and running down a protester.

Young protesters were seen covered in blood, lying immobile on the ground or being dragged away by police.

The interior ministry said 50 civilians and 39 police officers were injured in the capital, accusing some protesters of sparking confrontations.

It said protesters in Minsk had lit flares, erected barricades, scattered nails and spikes on roads and thrown objects including paving stones at police.

"No military weapons were used against the perpetrators," the ministry said.

'Ashamed' of security forces

It said there were no deaths in the unrest.

After announcing the death of one protester, prominent rights group Viasna later suggested the death was not confirmed, saying it was "concerned by reports" of at least one fatality.

The streets of Minsk were quiet during the day on Monday, with many residents saying they were shocked by the events of the day before.

"I am ashamed of what interior ministry forces did, I served in these forces," Sergei, a 45-year-old sheet metal worker, told AFP.

Tikhanovskaya decided to run for president after the authorities jailed her husband, popular blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky, and barred him from running.

Tikhanovskaya had said that if she won she would release political prisoners and call fresh elections to include the entire opposition.

She also accused Lukashenko of showing blatant disregard for his people during the coronavirus epidemic, which the strongman dismissed as a hoax.

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