

Police, Protesters Clash in Belarus Capital After Vote

By [Tatiana Kalinovskaya for AFP](#)

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Opposition supporters protest in Minsk after polls closed in Belarus' presidential election. **Sergei Gapon / AFP**

Police in Belarus broke up crowds of protesters with stun grenades and water cannon as long-time leader Alexander Lukashenko looked set to declare an overwhelming victory in a presidential poll his opponents say was rigged.

Thousands of protesters took to the streets of the capital Minsk after a state exit poll showed Lukashenko winning just under 80% in Sunday's election, with main challenger Svetlana Tikhanovskaya coming second with about 7%.

Tikhanovskaya, a 37-year-old stay-at-home mother and political novice, galvanized the opposition during the election campaign, attracting tens of thousands of supporters to the ex-Soviet country's biggest demonstrations in years.

In the capital Minsk protesters gathered near a central monument late Sunday where they faced off with hundreds of riot police with shields, an AFP journalist and witnesses said.

"I came out to protest because the country needs a change in power," said Alexander, a 35-year-old protester from Minsk. "This is a crime, a mockery of our people."

A live video feed provided by U.S.-funded Radio Liberty showed police firing stun grenades and advancing to disperse the crowd, with many fleeing. The channel posted images of young protesters with their faces covered in blood.

Embed:

☒☒ Люди выходят по всему Минску! pic.twitter.com/w7ttXCzIBs

— РБ головного мозга (@belamova) [August 9, 2020](#)

Opposition-linked media outlets reported clashes and showed a video of a police van running down a protester.

Videos posted on social media showed water cannon being used and there were reports of rubber bullets being fired.

After hours of chaos, state news agency Belta quoted the interior ministry as saying that "police are in control of the situation."

Ales Bialiatski, the head of prominent rights group Viasna, accused police of using excessive force against the mainly young protesters.

"The police responded with disproportionate harshness, using their full force," he told AFP.

The opposition had said it expected Lukashenko, in power since 1994, to rig the election, and in a press conference after polls closed Tikhonovskaya said she did not trust the results.

'Majority is with us'

"I believe my eyes, and I see that the majority is with us," she said. "We have already won, because we have overcome our fear, our apathy and our indifference."

Lukashenko, seeking a sixth term, warned the opposition he was not planning to give up his "beloved" Belarus as security was dramatically tightened in the capital.

Columns of military vehicles were seen on roads into Minsk, police carrying machine guns checked vehicles entering the city and government buildings were cordoned off.

Residents also reported internet shutdowns and widespread connection problems.

Tikhonovskaya, an English teacher by training, emerged as the symbol of a new protest

movement against Lukashenko's rule.

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

At polling stations on Sunday, many wore white bracelets that have become an emblem of the opposition. Tikhanovskaya wore one on each wrist.

Embed:

Вот так выглядит центр Минска вечером 9 августа.

Фото: Дмитрий Брушко, <https://t.co/SAPdczGoiG> pic.twitter.com/ffFVONgyF7

— TUT.BY (@tutby) [August 9, 2020](#)

Casting his vote, Lukashenko vowed to maintain order, suggesting his opponents may be planning unrest.

"Nothing will get out of control, I guarantee you... whatever certain people have planned," the strongman said.

Observers predicted Lukashenko would falsify the vote in the absence of international observers. He won over 83% at previous polls in 2015.

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

'Lukashenko's ruthlessness'

Nigel Gould-Davies, a former British ambassador to Belarus, said there was no doubt the polls would be falsified.

"The question is what happens then," Gould-Davies, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, told AFP.

In the past Lukashenko has crushed protests with riot police and hefty jail terms, prompting Western sanctions.

"Given Lukashenko's ruthlessness, anyone who is concerned about Belarus will worry, will fear for the Belarusian people in the days ahead."

Lukashenko has sought to boost his support by warning of outside threats and raising the spectre of violent mobs.

Authorities have detained 33 Russians, describing them as mercenaries sent to destabilise the vote.

The detentions sparked a political crisis with ally Russia. Moscow urged the men's release and President Vladimir Putin told Lukashenko he wants Belarus to stay "stable."

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