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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Lukashenko Challenger Makes 'Difficult Decision' to Leave Belarus

By Tatiana Kalinovskaya for AFP

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Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. **Tatyana Zenkovich / EPA / TASS**

The main challenger in Belarus's disputed presidential election said Tuesday she had left the country after two nights of clashes between police and opposition supporters left a protester dead.

The European Union condemned the polls as "neither free nor fair" and threatened to impose sanctions on those responsible for "violence, unjustified arrests, and falsification of election results."

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who claimed victory over authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko in Sunday's vote, said she had left the country out of concern for her children.

The political novice who has energized Belarus's opposition crossed the border in the early hours and Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius told AFP she was "safe" in the EU

member country.

"I have made a very difficult decision," a distressed-looking Tikhanovskaya said in a video statement.

"Children are the most important thing we have in life," said the 37-year-old, whose five-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son had earlier been taken out of the country for their safety.

Embed:

> Tikhanovskaya posts a video to YouTube where she says she left Belarus for the sake of her children.
>
> God forbid any of you are forced with the choice that I was," she said. "Not one life is worth what is happening right now. Children are the most important thing in our lives." pic.twitter.com/oN7maF3AW8
>
> — max seddon (@maxseddon) August 11, 2020

Tikhanovskaya decided to run for president after the authorities jailed her husband, popular blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky, and barred him from contesting the election. He remains in prison in Belarus.

"I know that many will understand me, many will judge me, and many will begin to hate me," Tikhanovskaya said. "But God forbid anyone face the choice I had."

Belarusian state media released a second video where Tikhanovskaya urged supporters not to protest, apparently reading from a script.

Maria Kolesnikova, one of Tikhanovskaya's campaign partners, said "we think this video was recorded under pressure from law enforcement authorities."

Embed:

> Situation gets weirder: In video apparently recorded before she left Belarus, reading from script, Tikhanovskaya calls on Belarusians to accept Lukashenko's "victory" and stop protesting. We know she was held incommunicado at election commission yday. Seems this happened there. pic.twitter.com/eWb93Vcxap
>
> — Christopher Miller (@ChristopherJM) August 11, 2020

Belarus on Monday declared long-serving leader Lukashenko had secured a sixth term with

80% of the vote, prompting a second night of protests and mass detentions by riot police.

Tikhanovskaya came second with 10% according to the official count but protesters are backing her claim to have won the election.

Her second campaign partner, Veronika Tsepkalo, on Tuesday released a video statement urging the international community to "recognize Svetlana as the only lawfully elected president."

On Tuesday evening, riot police patrolled Minsk and began detaining pedestrians and cyclists in the area that saw clashes the previous night.

Broadband and mobile internet were cut off, a reporter in Minsk said, while residents have had difficulties connecting to opposition-linked websites and social media since Sunday.

Related article: One Killed in Second Night of Protests Against 'Rigged' Belarus Election

Police used rubber bullets, stun grenades and tear gas to disperse the previous days' demonstrations, though protesters fought back with stones and fireworks and built makeshift barricades, AFP reporters, protesters and witnesses said.

The interior ministry said it detained more than 5,000 protesters.

The chaotic scenes of defiance with protesters fighting back against police in full riot gear were highly unusual in the authoritarian country.

Protesters said Tikhanovskaya's departure would not stop their movement.

"Our goal is to overthrow the Lukashenko regime," Yakov, a 51-year-old engineer, told AFP in Minsk.

"That Tikhanovskaya has left for Lithuania is even better, she is safe there."

Dozens of people have been injured in the violence and the first fatality was confirmed on Monday when police said a man died after an explosive device went off in his hand.

On Tuesday, people laid flowers and white ribbons and candles at the spot where the protester died and passing drivers honked their horns.

'Europe's last dictator'

The health ministry said more than 200 protesters were in hospital with wounds including chest and head injuries.

Tikhanovskaya's campaign galvanized the opposition, presenting the strongest challenge yet to former collective farm director Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, brooking no dissent and earning the nickname of "Europe's last dictator."

Western governments have condemned the police crackdown and the EU statement came after German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said the EU could "very quickly" reimpose harsh

sanctions on Lukashenko.

The White House said it was "deeply concerned" by the violence.

Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz said Warsaw was "ready to act as a mediator" between Lukashenko and the opposition after between Lukashenko and the opposition after calling for an emergency EU summit.

Lukashenko on Monday defiantly vowed he would not allow Belarus to be "torn apart" and dismissed the protesters as pawns of foreign powers.

"We recorded calls from abroad. There were calls from Poland, Britain and the Czech Republic, they were directing our — forgive me — sheep," he said.

The Belarusian foreign ministry on Tuesday it had "irrefutable" evidence of "interference from abroad."

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