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Russia Says Belarus Sanctions 'Unacceptable'

By AFP

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Russian Foreign Ministry Press Office / TASS

Russia on Tuesday denounced sanctions against ally Belarus as "unacceptable" and voiced support for strongman Alexander Lukashenko's proposal of constitutional reforms.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Western countries were "delivering verdicts" on events in Belarus, following weeks of protests against Lukashenko's claim to have won a sixth presidential term in an August 9 election.

Moscow considers this "to be unacceptable in the modern world," Lavrov said in a televised address to students at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), one of the country's top schools.

"We are convinced that the Belarusian people have all the possibilities to solve this problem by themselves," he said.

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On Monday, EU members Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania banned Lukashenko and 29 other high-ranking officials over the election, which critics say was rigged, and a harsh crackdown on demonstrators.

The European Union as a whole is also drawing up a list of individuals to hit with asset freezes and travel bans.

Lavrov singled out Lithuania for particular criticism, accusing its government and Lukashenko's election rival Svetlana Tikhanovskaya of using "not quite democratic" political methods.

"In my opinion, our Lithuanian neighbors have gone beyond the pale," Lavrov said.

After the controversial election, Lithuania granted Tikhanovskaya refuge and has been a vocal supporter of Belarusian protesters.

Lavrov also expressed support for Lukashenko's proposal to discuss constitutional reforms, saying Belarusian civil society should be involved in dialogue.

"They themselves should show interest in this," he said.

Lukashenko, who has ruled the ex-Soviet state for 26 years, claimed re-election with 80 percent of the vote, sparking the largest protests of his rule.

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He has refused to give in to protesters' demands to quit. During the first days of demonstrations his security forces detained thousands of protesters, many of whom accused police of beatings and torture.

On Monday, Lukashenko acknowledged the country's "somewhat authoritarian system" and said it needed to work "without being tied to a personality."

Russian President Vladimir Putin has raised the possibility of sending military support if Belarus "starts to get out of control."

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