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Gorbachev Backs Belarus Opposition Protesters

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The ex-Soviet leader commented on the anti-Lukashenko movement in an interview Thursday. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, voiced his support for the Belarusian opposition Thursday as the country continues to see mass protests against long-serving strongman Alexander Lukashenko.

His statement came the day after Lukashenko was sworn into office in a secret ceremony following more than a month of unprecedented protests against his disputed re-election on Aug. 9.

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"I respect the Republic [of Belarus] and love the Belarusian people...They have now shown their true strong character — that's very good," Gorbachev, 89, said in an interview with the Podyom media outlet.

The ex-Soviet leader said that he is closely following the developments in Belarus and described the mass arrests of protesters on the day of Lukashenko's secret inauguration as "devilish."

Gorbachev voiced hope that protesters' efforts will be rewarded, but acknowledged that there is still a lot of work left to do.

"There is a colossal amount of work ahead... All of it is for the current youth to take on."

The European Union, United States and Ukraine have said they recognize neither the Aug. 9 presidential election results nor Lukashenko's inauguration.

In turn, Lukashenko has been publicly backed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

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