

Belarus Leader Hits Out as U.S., U.K. Levy New Sanctions

By [AFP](#)

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Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has ruled the ex-Soviet state since 1994. [president.gov.by](#)

Belarus leader Alexander Lukashenko on Monday denounced Western sanctions as Washington and London levied new penalties against his authoritarian regime that has sought to snuff out all dissent in the ex-Soviet country a year after historic protests.

In power since 1994, the moustachioed strongman has waged a brutal crackdown since mass demonstrations erupted after elections last August that many observers say were rigged.

Western governments have punished his regime with waves of sanctions, and on Monday Britain and the United States slapped new penalties on Belarus one year after the vote.

The U.K. government said it will prevent Belarusian air carriers from flying over or landing in Britain and broadened a litany of financial sanctions because of "the continued undermining of democracy and human rights violations."

The White House said it would target key institutions and supporters of Lukashenko including the Belarusian National Olympic Committee, headed by Lukashenko's son, over the "assault against the democratic aspirations and human rights of the Belarusian people."

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But the 66-year-old Belarusian leader vowed to resist international pressure, insisting he won a "totally transparent" vote and saying "we will never get on our knees."

"You will choke on these sanctions in the United Kingdom," Lukashenko said at his annual press conference, a marathon event that lasts for hours.

"You are risking starting World War III," he added. "Is that what you are trying to push us and the Russians to?"

Amnesty International said Monday that thousands in Belarus had been detained, forced into exile or left to live in fear since protests erupted.

"What repression?" Lukashenko asked. "Have I shot anyone? Have I killed anyone?"

He denied widespread reports of torture in Belarusian prisons. Local rights groups say Belarus has over 600 political prisoners and have recorded testimonies of torture.

He also said his country's KGB had nothing to do with the death of 26-year-old Belarusian activist Vitaly Shishov, who was found hanged in a Kiev park last week.

EU sanctions coming

After the death, Ukraine said it would step up security for Belarusian political exiles on its territory.

"He was a nobody for us. We have enough people to deal with without Shishov," Lukashenko said, adding that the death had strained relations with Ukraine.

He then accused runner Krystsina Tsimanouskaya — who claimed the Belarus team tried to forcibly bring her home from the Tokyo Olympics and has since sought refuge in Poland — of being "controlled" by Warsaw.

He denied that that Belarus's political leadership tried to force the athlete onto a plane to Minsk, claiming there was "not a single" KGB agent at the Tokyo Olympics.

Lukashenko — who claims to have won more than 80 percent of the 2020 vote — accused the opposition of trying to stage a "coup" last year.

"Some were preparing for fair and honest elections, while others were calling for a coup d'etat," he told officials and journalists.

The opposition believes Svetlana Tikhanovskaya — who had stood in the election in the place of her jailed husband and now lives in exile — to be the real winner.

Tikhanovskaya has been rallying Western support and recently met U.S. President Joe Biden and U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Lukashenko, who is backed by Moscow, has strived to present the crisis as part of strained relations between the West and Russia.

Tikhanovskaya, who now lives in neighboring EU member Lithuania, is planning to lead a rally in Vilnius to mark the anniversary.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell warned last month that EU member states are also drawing up stronger sanctions, which could be approved at a meeting of EU ministers next month.

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