



EU to impose sanctions on Belarusian officials for election fraud, calls for a new vote

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The European Union announced plans to impose sanctions on Belarusian officials on Wednesday, with leaders of the 27 heads of state in agreement a new vote would be required following the contested re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko.

European Council President Charles Michel said in a video briefing that the bloc would soon impose sanctions on a “substantial number” of individuals responsible for violence, repression, and election fraud.

The bloc had previously described the vote as “neither free nor fair.”

“We stand firmly behind the right of the Belarusian people to determine their own fate,” Michel said, shortly after the conclusion of an emergency summit with EU leaders.

“I would like to address the people of Belarus directly, we stand by your side in your desire to exercise your fundamental democratic rights and in your desire for a peaceful, democratic and prosperous future,” he added.

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda said EU leaders had also formed a consensus that new elections in Belarus would be needed, Reuters reported.

‘Systemically brutal’

Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994, claimed a landslide victory in the August 9 presidential election after official results gave him his sixth term in office with 80% of the vote. The authoritarian leader has denied allegations of electoral fraud.

Opposition protesters have taken to the streets as anger grows over reports of police violence and allegations of vote-rigging.

Authorities have sought to stamp out the ongoing mass protests by using clubs, rubber bullets and stun grenades. Thousands of arrests have been made and at least two demonstrators have been killed.

Human Rights Watch, which noted most of the protests had been peaceful, described the police round-ups as “systemically brutal.”

Large state-owned factories, a traditional support base for Lukashenko, have gone on strike in solidarity with the demonstrators, and Belarusian authorities have reportedly acknowledged that some police officials have since quit their posts.

Lukashenko ordered the police to stop unrest in the country’s capital city of Minsk on Wednesday, according to the official Belta news agency, following more than a week-and-a-half of demonstrations against his leadership.

“People are tired. People demand peace and quiet,” Lukashenko was quoted as saying, insisting there should “no longer be any disorder in Minsk of any kind.”

Russia tensions

Regional experts have drawn comparisons between the current situation in Belarus with the political uprising in Ukraine six years ago. The latter resulted in Russian military intervention and a global geopolitical confrontation.

It is for this reason that external observers are closely monitoring Russia’s response to the crisis. A traditional ally of Belarus, Moscow has said it would be prepared to offer Lukashenko military support if necessary.

Andrei Illarionov, senior fellow at the Cato Institute’s Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, told CNBC via email that he does not believe Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready to intervene, but added that this was a “very cautious” expectation.

Putin “would like to replace Lukashenko with somebody else who would be much easier prey, who would be a much easier partner to fulfill his plan for unification,” Illarionov said.

“Putin definitely is very much interested in keeping Belarus in the Russian sphere of influence, but he’s not very interested in keeping exactly Lukashenko in power,” he added.

‘Respect the sovereignty of Belarus’

Ahead of the EU’s emergency summit, Belarus’ main opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya called on the bloc to recognize Lukashenko’s election victory as “fraudulent.”

The 37-year-old former English teacher claimed the country’s embattled authoritarian leader had “lost all the legitimacy in the eyes of our nation and the world.”

She urged the EU to “respect the sovereignty of Belarus and the choice of Belarusian people.”

Tikhanovskaya had initially been reluctant to challenge Lukashenko after her husband was barred from running and jailed by authorities.

She received around 10% of the vote, according to official results, and has since fled to Lithuania amid fears for her family’s safety.