



Weekly Briefing

**Latvia external relations briefing:
Belarusian Presidential Elections as an important foreign policy issue
for Latvia
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Belarusian Presidential Elections as an important foreign policy issue for Latvia

Introduction

While the international system continues to work on mitigating the consequences of the Covid-19, the recent Presidential election in Belarus has now become the most important and discussed issue in Europe. The official preliminary results confirmed that Alexander Lukashenko won the election, however, the outcome has been widely disputed regarding opposition accusations of vote-rigging. As the situation has escalated in violations and protests in the whole country, Latvia together with other EU Member States has expressed the solidarity and the necessity to hold a new election. Latvia as a neighbouring country of Belarus, fully supports the deep desire of Belarusian people to live in an independent, free and democratic Belarus governed by the rule of law. Following the situation in the neighbouring country, Latvia has expressed its support and solidarity in various ways.

Presidential elections in Belarus – Latvia's statement

The Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes that the presidential elections in Belarus on 9 August have not been held in conformity with the standards of Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Incumbent Alexander Lukashenko was re-elected to a sixth term in office, with about 80% of all votes in his favour according to official results, having won every presidential election since 1994. Opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya declared herself the winner of the elections and called on Lukashenko to start negotiations, meanwhile, her campaign team stated that they were ready to hold "long-term protests" against the official results.¹ Latvia calls on the Belarusian Government and law enforcement authorities to respect civil liberties of Belarusian people and their rights to freely express their political opinion. The use of force against peaceful protesters is unacceptable. Furthermore, Latvia calls for an immediate release of the detained participants of protests and regrets that international observers from the OSCE and the Council of Europe have not been able to participate in monitoring of the elections. The work of the mass media in covering the election process has

¹ <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/aktualitates/zinas/66388-e-rinkevics-uzsver-nepieciesamibu-sniegt-atbalstu-baltkrievijas-pilsoniskajai-sabiedribai>

also been restricted. Latvian representatives have also emphasized that it is deplorable that several presidential candidates had been denied the possibility of registering their candidacy for the election. A positive development of relations between the EU and Belarus is only possible through observing fundamental democratic rights and freedoms. Latvia, being a neighbour to Belarus, is interested in such development.

The president of Latvia discusses the issue of Belarus with the Presidents of neighbouring countries

President of Latvia Egils Levits, took part in the video call together with Presidents of Lithuania, Estonia and Poland. All the presidents came to a joint agreement that elections are needed. These elections should respect the basic principles of democratic elections and ensure the monitoring of international observers, however, none of these aspects were perceived.² The presidents also agreed that a European Council meeting should be convened as soon as possible to decide on sanctions against Belarusian officials who repressed members of the public or participated in the change of election results. All the Presidents emphasized the important role of the UN Security Council and other international organizations in this situation. It is important step that all these countries show a common position towards this issue.

Latvia's ambassador to Belarus: situation is very tense

Latvia's ambassador to the country Einars Semanis says that the situation in Belarus is very tense and stressed that the wide protests, especially among young people, broke out after presidential elections. Semanis believes that Latvia's government and other EU member states have taken an active and responsible stance.³ Preparations are being made for the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels, where the situation in Belarus will be one of the topics discussed. Ambassador emphasized that prior to presidential elections, Latvia and Belarus maintained an active dialogue, also – it was planned that President of Latvia and Lukashenko meets in the end of August, however, due to the current events, it is not clear whether the scheduled meeting will happen or not. Semanis noted that Latvia is worried as the country wants Belarus to be independent, sovereign, successful and democratic. Furthermore, it is clear that the situation can be escalated in different ways, and for Latvia - it is important to stay focused on

² <https://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/levits-ar-kaiminvalstu-prezidentiem-parruna-baltkrievijas-jautajumu.d?id=52385113>

³ <https://bnn-news.com/latvias-ambassador-situation-in-belarus-is-very-tense-216084>

the ongoing actions. Analysing the position from the ambassador's view, it is clear, that the tension in Belarus can escalate in different ways, however, for Latvia, it is vital to maintain politically diplomatic position.

Latvia will allocate financial support to Belarusian civil society

According to Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior, Latvia is prepared to accept political asylum seekers.⁴ However, currently a large flow of refugees is not predicted and Latvia has not received requests for political asylum from Belarusian citizens. All the measures could change depending on the development of the situation, therefore, Latvia is following the situation very closely. Latvian Government has also agreed to strengthen Belarusian civil society by allocating €150,000. Commenting on the allocation of money, Latvian representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will meet with non-governmental organizations and will discuss the strands of possible projects related to the funding. It is said that one of the directions is the provision of legal aid to those in administrative or criminal proceedings, as well as to support the media. The support and solidarity towards Belarus prove that this is an important foreign policy issue for Latvia.

In solidarity with efforts of the Belarusian people fighting for freedom and democracy, Latvians as well as residents of Latvia are invited to the historic Baltic Way – Freedom for Belarus, which took place on 23rd of August.

Latvian Parliament adopts a statement on the presidential election in Belarus

The Parliament of Latvia adopted a Statement on the presidential election in Belarus, urging to hold a new presidential election in line with internationally recognised standards, while providing the opposition with equal access to all state-controlled mass media and allowing the opposition to participate in the election on equal footing. In the Statement, the Parliament expresses concern about the repressions and violence against representatives of civil society and independent mass media before, during, and after the presidential election in Belarus. Moreover, the Statement underlines that the right to participate in free elections is a fundamental value of democracy, that the freedom of speech and assembly is a basic human right, and also that current actions of the Belarusian authorities violate internationally

⁴ <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/latvia-will-allocate-150-000-to-belarusian-civil-society.a370820/>

recognised human rights norms and principles of democracy. According to the Statement of Latvian Parliament, social dialogue and reforms will improve the development of Belarus by promoting good neighbourly relations in our region and re-establishing successful relations with the European Union. In addition, the Latvian Parliament calls on the government of Latvia to support the introduction of EU sanctions against the Belarusian officials responsible for the violations of human rights and tampering with election results. The Statement also urges the government of Latvia and institutions of the European Union to provide support to the Belarusian society, including financial support aimed at the development of Belarusian civil society and independent mass media.

Conclusion

Covid-19 crisis remains as one of the top priorities and challenges for Latvia. However, the presidential elections in Belarus have significantly exacerbated the situation not only in the whole country but has also raised concerns at the international level. Latvia, together with other EU Member States has expressed its solidarity and fully supports the deep desire of Belarusian people to live in an independent, free and democratic Belarus. Latvia calls on the Belarusian Government and law enforcement authorities to respect civil liberties of Belarusian people and their rights to freely express their political opinion. Furthermore, Latvia agrees that that a positive development of relations between the EU and Belarus is only possible through observing fundamental democratic rights and freedoms. The support and solidarity towards Belarus prove that this is an important foreign policy issue for Latvia. Latvian Parliament has also made the Statement and calls on the government of Latvia to support the introduction of EU sanctions against the Belarusian officials responsible for the violations of human rights and tampering with election results.