Belarus: we will not give up, says opposition leader after new arrests

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The Belarusian opposition leader [Svetlana Tikhanovskaya](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/26/belarus-svetlana-tikhanovskaya-unseat-alexander-lukashenko) has vowed that the country’s movement for democratic change will not give up, despite the arrest of two allies working for a peaceful transition of power.

Speaking to the European parliament’s foreign affairs committee from exile in Vilnius, Lithuania, Tikhanovskaya said the authorities had responded with threats and intimidation to the coordination council, set up by the opposition to bring about non-violent change. But, she insisted: “The intimidation didn’t work. We will not relent. We demand to respect our basic rights. We demand all political prisoners be free.”

Belarusian police [arrested the strike leader Sergei Dylevsky and Tikhanovskaya’s political aide Olga Kovalkova on Monday](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/24/two-opposition-leaders-arrested-in-belarus-after-day-of-protest) and summoned for questioning the Nobel prize-winning writer [Svetlana Alexievich](https://www.theguardian.com/books/svetlana-alexievich). All three are part of the seven-person coordination council. A judge sentenced Dylevsky to 10 days in jail on Tuesday.

As protests continue for a third week, it remains unclear whether the opposition will succeed in unseating Alexander Lukashenko, who claimed a landslide victory in a presidential election widely seen as neither free nor fair.

Tikhanovskaya, his main opponent, who fled to Lithuania as a violent crackdown began, said the opposition was willing to consider mediation from international organisations – an option Lukashenko has rebuffed.

She also said Belarus’s “revolution” had no geopolitical character and was neither for nor against either Russia or the European Union. “It is a democratic revolution. It is the striving of the nation to decide for itself.”

Her intervention came as Belarusian and international human rights organisations appealed for the United Nations to intervene after the [systematic mistreatment and abuse](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/13/belarusians-accuse-lukashenko-regime-of-beatings-and-torture) of Belarusians caught up in the crackdown since the vote.

In a [letter](https://www.omct.org/statements/belarus/2020/08/d26042/) to the UN special rapporteur on torture, Nils Melzer, human rights activists said they had collected evidence from more than 450 prisoners who were “beaten, humiliated and tortured by law enforcement personnel” in police stations and jails.

It said the torture included ritual beatings, some targeting the lower back to force involuntary urination or defecation, dozens of people being packed into cells meant for two, and reports of the rape of male and female prisoners with rubber truncheons.

The torture and ill-treatment was “widespread and endemic”, read the letter, which was co-signed by the Viasna Human Rights Centre, the Belarus Helsinki Committee (BHC), the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH).

“The current level of brutality and the scale of the abuse are unprecedented even for Belarus,” read the letter, which called on the UN to conduct a country visit to Belarus and urged the UN human rights council to call a special session to review the situation in Belarus.

Lawyers have said that [hundreds of victims are afraid](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/18/belarusians-seek-justice-for-brutal-beatings-by-riot-police) to come forward. “People are broken, afraid to leave the house even to go to the doctor,” one said.

In an interview, Gerald Staberock, the secretary general of OMCT, said: “The picture is grim. I think it underlines the systematic and widespread nature [of the abuse]. And we want the UN human rights system to get involved. It’s their task to deal with gross human rights violations and take action.”

The growing evidence of the scale of human rights abuses will be considered by EU foreign ministers who are meeting this week in Berlin to discuss the bloc’s response and could sanction between 15 and 20 people.

After a [virtual summit of EU leaders last week](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/19/belarus-crisis-eu-leaders-emergency-talks-lukashenko-protests), the European council president, Charles Michel, promised the EU would “shortly impose sanctions against a substantial number of individuals responsible for violence, repression and falsification of election results”.

EU foreign ministers are expected to endorse some names for the sanctions list when they meet on Thursday and Friday, pending formal legal agreement at a later stage. The head of the EU’s external action service, Helga Schmid, told MEPs that “the idea [on sanctions] is of course to take a decision on this very, very soon”.

Another senior EU official said: “There will be a proposal on sanctions, targeted sanctions to some individuals in the Lukashenko regime.” The person added: “Our sanctions are targeted either on people who participated in electoral fraud or in the repression.”

Some diplomats argued that acting too quickly to impose sanctions on Belarusian officials may drive them closer to Lukashenko, firming up his position.

“Keeping this kind of sword of Damocles above the heads of those responsible might help them to consider their options,” an EU diplomat said. “The threat of sanctions might in itself be effective.”

In comments that underscored the EU’s cautiousness about being depicted as meddling, Schmid said the protests in Belarus were “not about a binary choice between the west or Russia. There are no EU flags flying at the demonstrations and we must take this into account when we are considering what the EU can do.”