

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Europe Is Where Belarus Belongs

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After violently crushing the 2020 protests, dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko tightened his grip on power, outlawed all forms of opposition, and backed Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The prospects for a democratic future in Belarus hinge on Europe's continued support for the fight against Russian imperialism. Interview with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the exiled leader of Belarus' democratic opposition.

Green European Journal: On 25 February, elections will be held in Belarus for the first time since the rigged presidential vote of 2020 that sparked the revolution. Does this election hold any democratic value?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: The Belarusian parliament is nothing but a farce, a circus. The regime speaks of elections, but they have nothing to do with democracy. Opposition party leaders are in prison, half a million people had to flee the country because of government repression, there are thousands of political prisoners, no free media, NGOs are on their knees, and an illegitimate government controls everything with brutality and terror. In such a reality, how can you talk about elections?

We call on our international partners not to give any legitimacy to this vote, and we call on people in Belarus not to participate. However, in case Belarusian people are forced to participate, as is often the case in a dictatorship, we ask them to vote against everybody. But we also call on Belarusians not to organise any rallies or uprisings because these elections will not change anything.

What goal is Lukashenko trying to achieve by establishing the so-called People's Assembly, which he referred to as "the highest body of democracy"?

Lukashenko is afraid for his power. He knows that he doesn't have legitimacy among the Belarusian people and that he is a pariah in the political world. But he still wants to hold on to power. So he is probably preparing for the presidential elections, in case they will be held in 2025. As chair of the new assembly, it will be easier for him to continue to rule the country no matter what happens. In Kazakhstan, [the dictator] Nursultan Nazarbayev ruled for three decades [between 1991 and 2019], then suddenly lost everything. I suppose Lukashenko is trying to avoid that scenario.

Since 2020, the repression against any form of dissent has intensified in Belarus. Does any kind of opposition still exist within the country?

There is no political opposition inside Belarus. Most people oppose the regime, but they are ordinary people, not a political party with aspirations to govern. Belarusians inside Belarus hate this regime. They can't be vocal about it at the moment, but they're still there. I communicate with people in Belarus via Telegram, via phone calls, I talk to NGOs and media organisations that have journalists and workers on the ground, and they tell me, "We want to save ourselves for the right moment". People are still building initiatives and organising in small communities, but they can't speak openly about it because the level of repression is awful.

Lukashenko has been a staunch ally of Putin in his aggression against Ukraine. But at the same time, a lot of Belarusians have shown solidarity with Ukraine, even joining its army as volunteers. Are the future of Ukraine and that of Belarus connected?

Belarusians and Ukrainians are facing the same enemy: the imperialistic ambitions of Russia. Russia sees neither Ukraine nor Belarus as separate states that have the right to choose their own future. Belarusian people want to be part of the European family, just like Ukrainians. Russia looks at us as naughty children who want to break away from its empire, but it is our right to do so; we are separate peoples, separate nations.

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Ukraine's victory is vital for Belarus. It will weaken Putin, of course, and a weak Putin means a weak Lukashenko, because power in Belarus is based on Putin's support, repression, and economic corruption. We believe that the focus of the democratic world should remain on Ukraine, and that everything should be given to Ukraine so that it can win the war. But we are also trying to convince our democratic allies that Belarus shouldn't be overlooked, that it shouldn't be forgotten.

Do you know what people in Belarus are afraid of? That when negotiations will take place, Belarus could be on the table, but not at the table. That the Belarusian voice will not be heard; that Belarus will be given to Putin as a consolation prize. This is why we are reminding our democratic partners that Belarus should be part of these negotiations and that its voice should be heard.

This year, important elections will be held in both the EU and the US. Does their outcome matter for Belarus?

In recent years, we have seen an almost absolute consensus among European countries about their policy towards Belarus: they are convinced that a democratic, free, independent Belarus is in the interest of the whole region.

If we now allow Russia to conquer Ukraine, then Russia will also knock on your door – what will you do then?

In the US, we talk to both the ruling Democrats and the Republican opposition. Both understand the importance of a free Belarus. Of course, there is the fear that Trump will return to power and end support for an independent Ukraine and a free Belarus. Ultimately, in democracies, it is the people who decide. But I believe – I want to believe – that the democratic society will not allow the person who comes to power to change the policy towards Ukraine. In the West, Russian propaganda is seeding the narrative that “this is not your war, it is their war”, and if you accept this narrative, then why should you make sacrifices for someone else's war?

Our task is to explain that if we now allow Russia to conquer Ukraine, then Russia will also knock on

your door – what will you do then? There is already talk of possible Russian provocations on the border with the Baltic countries and Finland. The world has to be prepared. It must show no appeasement towards dictators.

What role can the Belarusian diaspora play in keeping international attention on the country's situation?

The Belarusian diaspora united for the first time in 2020. Before that, it was made up of citizens who had left Belarus in different waves and lived all over the world, without communicating much with each other. Now people are organising, they are setting up new initiatives such as the so-called People's Embassies of Belarus. We feel more empowered to speak, to act together. So, of course, the role of the diaspora will be crucial, just like that of the media which currently operate in exile.

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My role is to help the diaspora coordinate, and offer it a platform. For example, every time I pay an official visit to a country, I try to invite members of the Belarusian diaspora, because my task is to open doors, but Belarusians need to be able to keep them open and continue to talk to governments and parliaments. And I think that the diaspora has already achieved a lot. We haven't had such an experience before, so we're also learning by doing; but we are learning very fast and very effectively.

The Belarusian revolution of 2020 had women as protagonists, both at the leadership and grassroots level. Do you think the end of Lukashenko's dictatorship will coincide with a feminist turn?

I think Belarusian society is ripe for a democratic change. And when this change happens, there will be no doubt about gender balance, about the role of women. We, Belarusian women, have already shown that we can be perhaps even more powerful than men. For example, Belarusian women lead many organisations, and they do so by arguing less among themselves compared to men. It's easier for us to find an agreement; we have a different way of doing politics. So I believe that [when the dictatorship ends] we will live up to all the standards of European and democratic societies.

Where do you wish to see Belarus ten years from now?

I really want to believe – and we are fighting for it – that Belarus will be free, independent, with strong democratic institutions, and on its path to EU membership. We are already working with the Council of Europe as a first step towards the European Union. And we are seeding among Europeans the understanding that Belarus is part of Europe. Throughout our history, we have belonged to Europe, excluding the two centuries of Russian rule [between 1795 and 1991]. Europe needs to realise this. And I believe that the European project will not be complete until Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova are fully part of it.



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