

# Presidential Belarus

# Election:

by Michael Curtis



Svetlana Tikhanovskaya

To say that the 2020 U.S. Presidential election is without furor is to ignore the realities of partisan politics. Charges, information and misinformation about the candidates abound. Political pundits deliver the message of what are some of the possible features: fraudulent, rigged, delayed, result changed, refusal to concede, mail-in voting that may produce massive fraud and abuse. A shiver is looking for a spine to run up. However, in spite of this gloom and doom, it is unlikely that the legitimacy of the result of the election will be challenged or that the losing candidate will refuse to concede.

The zealous pundits might remember the viability of the U.S. political system that has weathered political storms. Viewers

of the rap musical *Hamilton* will recall the scene when the House of Representatives in 1800 decided between rivals Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr who had tied in the election to be vice president. In 1828, Andrew Jackson had won more electoral votes and popular votes in some of the states but not a majority, and Congress choose his rival John Quincy Adams in a coalition arranged by Speaker Henry Clay. In 1876 Republican Rutherford B. Hayes lost the popular vote to the Democrat Samuel Tilden, but some of the results were disputed. By a comprise arrangement, Hayes was chosen as president in return for a policy by which the Republicans agreed to remove all federal troops from the south. In two instances in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the candidates, Richard Nixon in 1960 and Al Gore in 2000, after controversy, did not contest the final decision on the winner of the presidency.

However, in some countries the result of an election is not in doubt, indeed it is known before any balloting. The most recent example is in Belarus, where the campaign at the presidential election of August 1, 2020, has been generally regarded as fraudulent, and the official result, a landslide victory for the incumbent, has been challenged as a travesty. The result has been large demonstrations in the streets in Minsk, the capital, and other cities, with some protestors erecting barricades, and disproportionate state violence, while the police have used even tear gas, stun grenades, rubber bullets and water cannons, against the peaceful protestors of whom 6,000 have been detained.

Belarus is not unknown to Westerners. It was the birthplace of Marc Chagall, and it was for a short time the home of Lee Harvey Oswald, the presumed assassin of JFK, who lived in Minsk , the capital, in 1961-62 .The country of Belarus is strategically located between Russia, Ukraine and Poland. The country under a different name, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, was a founding republic of the Soviet Union in 1922. It declared its sovereignty in July 1990, and

its independence from the Soviet Union on August 25, 1991. Its name was changed to Belarus at that time. The two countries, Belarus and Russia, are linked by history, language and culture, and industrial ties. Belarus was a founding member of the Eurasian Economic Union, a key project of Russian President Vladimir Putin to integrate former Soviet republics. Lukashenko supported the attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991. He is a hockey player like Putin and they played together.

Lukashenko agreed with Russia in 1999 to allow citizens of each country to travel freely to and live in the other country. Belarus had access to Russian reserves and markets. But he was neutral over the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and differences have emerged over oil and gas supplies and other issues such as Russia's push for closer collaboration.

At present there is a flexible tug of war over Belarus between the U.S. and the EU on one hand and Russia. Something of a rapprochement and some cooperation has developed in recent years with the West, with the U.S. and the EU trying to create a buffer against Russian growing influence. Both sides remember that during the Second World II the country was occupied by the Nazis who killed 1.6 million. The once thriving Jewish community was liquidated in the Holocaust as 90% of the Jewish population, 800,000, were murdered.

The EU in February 2020 reached agreement with Belarus on cooperation in fighting drug abuse and drug trafficking. At that time, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in February offered to sell Belarus all the oil and gas it needed at competitive prices. In early 2000, the U.S. and EU put sanctions on the country, but lifted them for a time after Lukashenko agreed to free political prisoners. The U.S. and the EU have strongly condemned the conduct of the 2020 election.

Since its independence Belarus has been governed by Alexander

Lukashenko who has been president since June 1994. Lukashenko, brought up by a single mother and from a poor background, is Europe's longest serving ruler. His early experience was in the Soviet armed forces and as a state farm director while the area was under the control of the Soviet Union. He has been termed the last dictator in Europe, in charge of a largely state owned economy, responsible for unfair elections, virtually suppression of political opposition, imprisonment of critics, a judiciary lacking independence, a secret police even named KGB, a name ended in Russia. He regards opposition critics as sheep controlled from abroad. Critics in fact have left the country or disappeared. In macho fashion he is outspoken, proclaiming that to anyone joining an opposition protest group, "we will wring their necks as one might a duck."

In 1996 Lukashenko disbanded parliament which had tried to impeach him. In 2004 the referendum he organized ended the two term limit on presidents, this paving the way for him to rule indefinitely. He has described himself as being authoritarian, "a style of rule characteristic of me, and I have always admitted it. You need to control the country."

The presidential election on August 9, 2020, was between the 65 year-old incumbent President Lukashenko, eager for a sixth term in office, and his main opponent, the 37 year old Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. In spite of polls indicating the opposite, and the arbitrary detention of hundreds of people, estimated at 1,500, the official result was that the incumbent had received 80% of the vote and the challenger 10%, in a turnout of 84%. All objective commentators argue that the election was rigged. International observers were not allowed to monitor the election, but electoral irregularities were evident.

A number of would be challengers tried to contest the election, and they attracted large crowds at electoral meetings. But they were soon legally disqualified. One of

them was Sergei Tikhanovsky, a video blogger, who was arrested on May 29, 2020, by the authorities. His wife, Svetlana replaced him as a candidate.

The 37 year old Svetlana was a teacher of English who had spent some time in Ireland. Lukashenko said the country was not ready for a woman president, but Svetlana who leapt from being a stay at home mother to a role as immediate politician held mass rallies that attracted thousands. She condemned the official treatment of women opposition activists, and the threats to take children away from opposition figures. She was herself threatened.

The inexperienced Svetlana explained why she was a candidate, to free not only her husband from prison but all political prisoners in Belarus, to introduce democratic reforms, to lessen any union with Russia, to restore the two term limit for presidents, and to introduce free and fair elections. Despite the official result, she considered herself as the legitimate winner of the election.

The consequences are sobering. The day after the elections, Svetlana formally asked the election commission for a recount of the election result. This was denied but instead she was apparently threatened while there. She immediately, either voluntarily or by coercion, left the country, fleeing to neighboring Lithuania, saying it was for her own well-being and the welfare of her children, the "most important thing in our lives." But In a video, which is almost certainly a forced statement made under duress, Svetlana called for respect for the law and said that the people of Belarus had made their choice. She did not want blood or violence. Her political role appears to be over. But the role of women is not over. Noticeably, a large number of women, all dressed in white and carrying flowers, in a line of solidarity have protested against the regime. Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature condemned the police violence. She urged Lukashenko to go peacefully before he

threw people into the abyss of civil war.

Not unexpectedly, Russian has defended Lukashenko and the actions of the police by stating that unprecedented pressure was exerted on Belarus authorities by foreigners. In contrast, the EU is considering imposing new sanctions, a travel ban, freezing of assets, on Belarus because of the false election result and crackdown on protestors. The problem is that strong measures might push Belarus into arms of Putin. This remains a dilemma for the U.S. though Pompeo has expressed deep concern that the election was not free and fair, that there were undesirable features, restrictions on access for candidates, intimidation, no independent observers, and detaining of peaceful protestors. As an absolute minimum, there should be release of the detained prisoners.