

How to Help Belarusian Democrats

The people of Belarus continue to protest the blatant stealing of another election by Alexander Lukashenka and his regime's harsh repression. As it has done for more than 30 years, the **Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE)** stands in solidarity with the people of Belarus and calls on all democratic governments, legislatures and organizations supporting freedom to do the same.

It is a myth that Belarusians only now are waking up to oppose dictatorship. Thirty years ago, hundreds of thousands also demonstrated against Soviet rule. Under the banner of the Belarus Popular Front, they demanded an end to Communist Party hegemony, free elections and adoption of the red and white flag of a free Belarus. Many independent organizations, trade unions and political parties were established. Yet, the people's hopes for freedom were rebuffed by an entrenched Communist establishment, while Western countries effectively ceded Belarus to Russia's sphere of influence and an anti-democratic model of post-Soviet governance. After Lukashenka rose to power in 1994, society's resistance to an increasingly dictatorial regime was met with murder, violence, imprisonment, dismissals, and other reprisals, weakening the strength of all opposition groups. Yet, the society continued to resist and at times showed its strength, as after the unfree and unfair 2006 and 2010 elections, only to be brutally suppressed.

Western democracies were silent as the regime prepared to hold yet another fraudulent election. Now the courage of the Belarusian people inspires the world. They demonstrate in the streets and organize strikes despite the great danger of unrestrained state violence. All Western governments should now declare both the *non*-recognition of the regime's fraudulent election and the *illegitimacy* of Lukashenka's presidency. The US, UK, and EU countries should announce that significant sanctions will be imposed if demands of the people are not met, especially that all prisoners be released and that negotiations be undertaken with genuine representatives of Belarusian society for a transition of power leading to free elections. Clear warnings of definite and severe consequences must be issued to the Russian government not to intervene to keep Lukashenka in power nor to impose another Russian-backed ruler, either through use of armed forces or by other means.

No Western government should talk with Russian and Belarusian governments proposing solutions that place limits on the sovereignty of an independent Belarus. Given their record of passivity, ineffective democracy assistance, and recent policies of capitulation, Western democracies should stand down and listen to the courageous people of Belarus. They are the ones who bravely confront a brutal dictatorship and it is only them who must be allowed to decide freely about their form of government and the future of Belarus. The Western democracies and pro-democracy allies should be guarantors of a peaceful transition and pledge to stand with and by the people of Belarus, not instead of them.

Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe
Irena Lasota, President • Eric Chenoweth, Director

