

What you need to know about Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko

By [Claire Parker](#)

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The Olympics [are not supposed to be explicitly political](#). Yet they often become a stage for domestic and geopolitical battles. The latest example: Belarusian sprinter Krystsina Tsimanouskaya refused to fly back to her country Sunday, fearing for her safety after she criticized Belarusian Olympic officials.

Tsimanouskaya, 24, sought the protection of Japanese police at Tokyo's Haneda Airport Sunday night after she says Belarusian Olympic authorities tried to force her to leave the Tokyo Games early and return to Belarus. The standoff at the airport stirred international outrage and concern for the Belarusian sprinter, and European countries quickly jumped to her aid. Poland has [granted the athlete a humanitarian visa](#).

Belarus also drew international condemnation in recent months for forcing a commercial jet to land in May and arresting an opposition journalist onboard, and for allegedly weaponizing migrants to retaliate against European Union sanctions.

Tsimanouskaya told Belarusian sports news outlet [Tribuna](#) that the Belarus national team's head coach told her that pressure to remove her from the Games came from "a higher level." She told reporters she feared she would be put in jail if she returned to Belarus.

"I think that at the moment it is not safe for me in Belarus," she told Tribuna.

The alleged effort to coerce Tsimanouskaya to fly home brought renewed attention to the climate of repression cultivated by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, often called "Europe's last dictator."

Here is what you need to know about the Belarusian leader.

Who is Alexander Lukashenko?

Lukashenko, 66, held posts in the Soviet Army and the communist youth organization and party when Belarus was part of the Soviet Union. He was elected to parliament in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1990 and was the only deputy to oppose an agreement that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

He became the first president of the Republic of Belarus in 1994. His official website describes him as "a people's politician" and "president of the ordinary people." But his nearly three-decade rule has been marked by electoral irregularities, human rights abuses and moves to consolidate power.

In 1996, Lukashenko persuaded voters to approve constitutional amendments that expanded the authority of the presidency. When Western countries criticized the move, he temporarily expelled U.S. and European Union ambassadors.

Lukashenko has received significant financial and political [support](#) from Russia, which is a key ally in disputes with the West. But Belarus has [resisted](#) Russia's [push for a unified state](#).

How has he dealt with opposition?

The elections he has won have been marred by allegations of vote tampering. For most of his time in power, he was able to crush protests in response, which were often small and confined to Minsk, [Bloomberg News reported](#).

But the 2020 election roiled Belarus and brought fresh scrutiny to its autocratic leader. Lukashenko sought to keep rivals off the ballot ahead of the August vote, but opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who drew huge crowds at campaign rallies, was allowed to run.

Lukashenko [claimed he had won](#) a sixth term with 80 percent of the vote, an outcome many Western leaders dismissed as fraudulent. Lukashenko has insisted that no laws were broken during the election. Tikhanovskaya fled the country, and tens of thousands of Belarusians protested the outcome.

The demonstrations, fueled by a struggling economy and what critics called Lukashenko's mishandling of the [coronavirus](#) pandemic, marked the most significant threat to his hold on power since he took office. "Until you kill me, there will be no other elections," he told workers at the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant in August.

Thousands were arrested and at least three died "as a result of police actions" at the start of the protest movement in August, [according to Human Rights Watch](#). United Nations human rights experts received reports of [more than 450 cases](#) of torture and ill-treatment of detainees in the wake of the election.

Tikhanovskaya demanded that Lukashenko step down by late October. When he clung to power, tens of thousands of Belarusians [took to the streets](#). Many were violently dispersed by security forces, and thousands were arrested.

In November, Belarus placed Roman Protasevich, an opposition journalist, on a terrorist watch list, charging him with three protest-related crimes.

In May, Lukashenko sent a MiG-29 fighter jet to ground a commercial plane carrying Protasevich from Greece to Lithuania as it flew over Belarusian airspace in what President Biden called "a direct affront to international norms." Authorities then arrested Protasevich.

Lukashenko signed a law in May that protects police and security forces from responsibility for shooting at protesters.

He has deepened his crackdown since then, jailing journalists, activists and rights workers, and [even IT specialists](#). Belarusian authorities are also [shutting down](#) independent media outlets and dozens of NGOs.

More than 35,000 people have been arbitrarily detained in Belarus in the past year, [according to the United Nations](#). The wave of repression has sent many into self-imposed exile in nearby countries.

The incident involving the Olympic sprinter appeared to mark the latest move by Belarusian authorities to restrict critical speech.

The Belarusian Olympic Committee said in a statement that coaches decided to remove Tsimanouskaya from the Games on doctors' advice about her "emotional and psychological state." In an Instagram story Sunday, Tsimanouskaya said that was a lie.

She told reporters she had been removed from the team after she posted a video on Instagram criticizing Belarusian Olympic officials for allegedly deciding on short notice that she must run a race for which she had not trained.

Tsimanouskaya did not criticize Lukashenko or the government in the video. But the Belarusian National Olympic Committee is run by the president's eldest son, Viktor Lukashenko — despite the fact that the International Olympic Committee refused to recognize his election.

Tsimanouskaya had previously spoken out against post-election violence last year and called authorities' actions "illegal and unacceptable."

How has the West reacted?

Western countries have sanctioned Lukashenko's government at various points, and Lukashenko often criticizes the West for meddling in domestic affairs.

The United States levied travel restrictions and financial sanctions on individuals and state-owned entities after the 2006 election in Belarus, which the United States [criticized](#) as "neither free nor fair." Belarus retaliated to a tightening of sanctions in 2008 by expelling several dozen U.S. diplomats. Relations between Belarus and Western countries eased

somewhat in 2015 and 2016, and the United States and Belarus announced that they would exchange ambassadors again in 2019.

But after the 2020 election and subsequent protests in Belarus, the United States placed a new round of sanctions on officials there.

Europe, which also does not recognize the 2020 election results, imposed a new raft of sanctions on officials, including Lukashenko, in the fall. European leaders [reacted with shock and outrage](#) to the grounding of the Ryanair flight and Protasevich's arrest in May, [quickly barring E.U. airlines](#) from crossing Belarusian airspace and preventing Belavia, Belarus's national airline, from flying over or landing in E.U. territory.

The United States in May warned U.S. citizens not to travel to Belarus, and together with the European Union, Britain and Canada, imposed fresh sanctions in June in response to the forced diversion of the plane. They also placed asset freezes and travel bans on officials linked to Lukashenko's security crackdown. The E.U. announced further sanctions targeting key sectors of the Belarusian economy.

Belarus's close relationship with Russia may cushion the blow. Russian President Vladimir Putin has stood firmly behind his ally, and the Belarusian economy is more dependent on Russia than on Western Europe or the United States.

Still, Lukashenko said last week that the sanctions were the toughest his country has faced. In retaliation, European leaders say, his government has unleashed a wave of migrants into neighboring Lithuania. Lukashenko [warned](#) in late June that Belarus would no longer stop asylum seekers, drugs and nuclear materials from entering the European Union.

The number of immigrants crossing from Belarus to Lithuania skyrocketed in July, and Lithuanian authorities have accused the Belarusian government of "using the illegal migration as a state-sponsored weapon."

After Tsimanouskaya pleaded for help from the Tokyo airport Sunday, officials from Poland, Slovenia and the Czech Republic said she was welcome in their countries. French European Affairs Minister Clement Beaune told French radio station RFI that it would be an "honor" for Europe to grant Tsimanouskaya political asylum.

Julie Fisher, the U.S. ambassador to Belarus, praised the "quick action" of Japanese and Polish authorities in a tweet on Monday, crediting them with enabling the Belarusian sprinter to "evade the attempts of the Lukashenka regime to discredit and humiliate" her for expressing her views.

This report has been updated.