



Belarus Warning Update: Lukashenko Attempts to De-escalate Protests Ahead of October 25 Opposition Ultimatum

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By George Barros

Self-declared Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko is intensifying efforts to de-escalate protests and degrade protester will in the runup to October 25. Lukashenko set October 25 as the deadline for submissions “from the people” of Belarusian constitutional amendments on October 3. He likely seeks to use this amendment process to broker a pretend compromise with protesters to end the crisis without actually ceding power.¹

Lithuania-based Belarusian opposition leader Svitlana Tikhanouskaya likely saw the danger that this ploy would succeed and countered by demanding on October 13 that Lukashenko resign by October 25. Tikhanouskaya is thus setting the stage for large-scale anti-Lukashenko protests to upstage his announcement of the next phase of his efforts to create an off-ramp from the protest movement.

Lukashenko is relaxing his protester suppression and detention campaigns after having increased their brutality last weekend, likely to set more positive conditions for whatever announcement he plans to make on October 25. Belarusian security forces’ response to weekend protests were not as intense as those that occurred the week of October 11.² Belarusian authorities detained 215 protesters on October 18—half as many detentions as on October 11.³

Lukashenko is also intensifying efforts to conduct pro-regime rallies rather than focusing only on suppressing anti-regime rallies as he has largely done for the past several weeks. Lukashenko reportedly planned multiple unspecified pro-government rallies in Minsk for the week of October 18-25.⁴ These rallies are likely meant to offset the negativity of the anti-government protests and create the basis for a narrative of popular support for whatever changes he offers.

Lukashenko freed seven jailed opposition leaders after meeting with some of them on October 10.⁵ Lukashenko freed seven Belarusian opposition leaders, including Maria Kolesnikova’s lawyer and Coordination Council member Lilia Vlasova, between October 14-16.⁶ News of the releases did not surface until October 19. Lukashenko continues to hold prisoner senior opposition leaders Viktor Babariko, Maria Kolesnikova, and Sergei Tikhanousky—Tikhanouskaya’s husband—as leverage as of this writing. Lukashenko likely released the seven opposition leaders to appear willing to engage in dialogue and concede to limited protester demands. Lukashenko will likely leverage his current detainees as hostages to deter protest escalation.

Lukashenko continues to successfully reduce the size of the weekend protests. Saturday protests in Minsk continued to be small with only 100 women and 150 students participating in protests on October 17.⁷ Approximately 50,000 protesters—which was the smallest size of Sunday protests since protests began in August—participated in the October 18 march.⁸ Saturday protests have steadily declined in size since early September. ISW previously forecasted that weekend protests would decline in size—and may increasingly only occur on Sundays—due to successful pressure by Lukashenko, a lack of emerging local leadership in Belarus, and worsening weather.⁹ Belarusian authorities’ October 12 threat to use lethal force to suppress protests “if necessary” likely also deterred some Belarusians from protesting on October 17-18.

Weekday protests are growing, but Lukashenko met them with pro-government protests rather than violence this week. Approximately 5,000 pensioners—significantly larger numbers than in this protest’s past two iterations—marched in Minsk on October 19.¹⁰ Belarusian authorities cracked down harshly on pensioners on October 12.¹¹ Security forces did not crack down on the pensioners’ march on October 19 despite significant growth in this protest over one week.¹² Approximately 2,000 pro-Lukashenko counterdemonstrators protested the pensioners’ march without violence.¹³

Protests may escalate on Sunday, October 25, despite Lukashenko’s preparations. Lukashenko is unlikely to resign. Weekday protests are growing. Belarusian authorities’ avoidance of the use of lethal force to suppress protests on October 17-18 may embolden protesters to turn out in greater numbers on October 25. Belarusian protesters may have used October 18 as a rest and preparation day for large October 25 protests.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-seeks-belarus%E2%80%99-integration-russia-belarusian>.

² <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-II.html>

³ http://belros_dot_tv/news/obschestvo/mvd-belarusi-v-protestakh-v-minske-prinyali-uchastie-do-7-tys-chelovek/;
<http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-II.html>

⁴ https://t_dot_me/tutby_official/17539

⁵ https://aif.by/dontknows/kto_iz_uchastnikov_vstrechi_s_lukashenko_v_sizo_kgb_uzhe_vyshel_na_svobodu

⁶ https://news.tut_dot_by/economics/704541.html; https://www.dw_dot_com/ru/lilija-vlasova-osvobozhdena-iz-sizo-kgb/a-55324066;
https://www.belrynok_dot_by/2020/10/19/polittechnolog-shklyarov-osvobozhden-iz-sizo/; https://www.newsru_dot_com/world/19oct2020/shklyarov_free.html

⁷ https://www.bfm_dot_ru/news/455828; https://ria_dot_ru/20201017/minsk-1580278324.html

⁸ <https://apnews.com/article/alexander-lukashenko-belarus-sviatlana-tsikhanouskaya-elections-minsk-0349a60292fe90f37ac91b72dbe73973>; https://www.themoscowtimes_dot_com/2020/10/18/tens-of-thousands-march-in-belarus-despite-police-threat-to-open-fire-a71785

⁹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-belarusian-protest-movement-likely-developing-local-organization>

¹⁰ https://belaruspartisan_dot_by/politic/515559/; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1318205881734017025>

¹¹ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-police-detain.html>

¹² <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-police-detain.html>

¹³ https://naviny_dot_media/new/20201019/1603112579-storonniki-lukashenko-poshli-vsled-za-uchastnikami-marsha-mudrosti;
https://news.tut_dot_by/society/704615.html; https://charter97_dot_org/ru/news/2020/10/19/397581/; https://www.rosbalt_dot_ru/world/2020/10/19/1868770.html; https://reform_dot_by/172676-tysjachi-pensionerov-vyshli-na-marsh-mudrosti-v-minske