



Belarus Warning Update: Putin Likely Disrupts Lukashenko's Plan for Defusing Protests

October 23, 4:45 pm EDT
By George Barros

The Kremlin likely sent a senior intelligence director to Belarus to disrupt self-proclaimed President Alexander Lukashenko's planned announcement of steps to defuse the protest crisis. Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergey Naryshkin flew to Minsk on October 22. Naryshkin's visit is the latest in an observed pattern of senior Russian intelligence officials' visits to Minsk.¹ Each of these visits has coincided with key developments in the Kremlin's hybrid war in Belarus, usually also marking changes in Lukashenko's behavior.²

Lukashenko was likely preparing to announce a suite of putative concessions aimed at placating anti-government demonstrators without fully ceding Moscow's demands. Lukashenko likely seeks to use a constitutional amendment process to broker a compromise with protesters to end the crisis.³ New reporting from October 20 revealed Lukashenko told jailed opposition leaders in an October 10 meeting that he would not seek another presidential term and that he is considering introducing a constitutional amendment on presidential term limits.⁴ A promise from Lukashenko to retire would be a significant development in his efforts to offer protesters concessions to end the crisis. Lukashenko set October 25 as the deadline for submissions "from the people" of Belarusian constitutional amendments on October 3.

The Kremlin sent SVR Director Sergei Naryshkin to meet Lukashenko in Minsk on October 22 ostensibly to discuss Union State "security issues."⁵ The Kremlin likely anticipated a risk that Lukashenko may successfully defuse the protests without consolidating Russian suzerainty over Belarus via the Union State.

Naryshkin's statements after meeting Lukashenko suggest Kremlin dissatisfaction with Lukashenko's constitutional amendments. Naryshkin said Lukashenko's amendments are only "one of the answers" to the protest movement that poses "many questions" to Lukashenko's regime, indicating the amendments are insufficient for Russian President Vladimir Putin's desired end state. Putin said Belarusian constitutional amendments could be a "way out of the current situation" at the annual Valdai Discussion Club meeting on October 22.⁶

Lukashenko cancelled a large pro-regime rally planned for October 25 after meeting with Naryshkin. Lukashenko reversed his support for the pro-government rally that he claims would have brought in 250,000-300,000 demonstrators.⁷ Lukashenko likely intended to use this rally as a culmination point to announce his concessions to protesters. He had reportedly begun planning pro-government rallies for October 18-25 on October 18.⁸ Naryshkin may have pressured Lukashenko not to make his planned announcement, depriving the rally of its purpose. He may also have pressed Lukashenko to cancel the rally itself, stripping the announcement of concessions of the trappings of popular support and success. ISW has no evidence that Naryshkin spoke to Lukashenko along these lines, but the pattern of events suggests that the concessions and the rally were discussed.

Naryshkin's visit coincided with the announcement of plans to create a new openly pro-Union State party that could pressure Lukashenko to make concessions to Moscow he has been resisting. A previously unknown pro-Union State integration Belarusian NGO called "Union" announced plans to create a political party at an unspecified future time on October 19.⁹ Union seeks to deeply integrate Belarus into Russia via the Union State, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).¹⁰ Several of Union's presidium members are linked to the Kremlin and most openly expose views that closely aligned with the Kremlin on a myriad of foreign policy issues.¹¹ Union explicitly supports Belarusian constitutional reform and early presidential elections as "a way out the crisis."¹² ISW has no evidence that the Kremlin created Union, but the timing of Union's announcement to create a party on October 19 in relation to Naryshkin's visit on October 22 to Minsk suggests some sort of coordination.¹³

Lukashenko is likely preparing to crack down on NEXTA and its users, if necessary. A Belarusian court expanded the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs' (MVD) ability to target protesters by designating NEXTA material as "extremist" on October 20.¹⁴ The MVD promptly threatened to arrest anyone who subscribes to or reposts content from NEXTA on October 20 and claimed the protest movement is developing into a terrorist threat on October 22.¹⁵ AI Telekom – an Austrian mobile network operator with services in Belarus – briefly blocked access to Telegram in Belarus on October 22.¹⁶ AI Telekom unblocked access to Telegram the same day following online backlash.¹⁷ Lukashenko may anticipate a need to intensify crackdowns against NEXTA users, possibly in regards to intensified protests following the October 25 ultimatum.¹⁸

The Kremlin may have used a Rosgvardia deployment – framed as participation in a preplanned sporting tournament – to pressure Lukashenko in September. Elements of two Russian National Guard units deployed to Minsk, Belarus, on September 28 – October 3 for a small arms military sports tournament that was effectively a series tactical exercises with Belarusian special forces.¹⁹ The Belarusian Ministry of Defense framed the tournament as a regular annual event.²⁰ Both Rosgvardia units that deployed to Belarus have experience operating in Ukraine.²¹

This deployment may have been part of Putin's military pressure campaign against Lukashenko given it occurred between two Russian conventional military deployments for the Slavic Brotherhood and Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises and during a period of unprecedented Russian Western Military District exercises near Belarus.²² The branding of this deployment as a regular preplanned activity is consistent with Russian hybrid warfare informational tactics used to obscure Russian conventional military deployments to Belarus.²³

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>

² <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>

³ http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko_19.html

⁴ <https://lenta dot ru/news/2020/10/20/lukashenko/>

⁵ <https://www.belta dot by/society/view/naryshkin-rasskazal-o-podrobnostjakh-vstrechi-s-lukashenko-412203-2020>; <https://www.belta dot by/politics/view/naryshkin-o-belarusi-sohranenie-stabilnosti-krajne-vazhnoe-uslovie-dlja-razvitija-gosudarstva-412207-2020>

⁶ <https://ria dot ru/20201022/belorusiya-1581092884.html>; <https://news dot ru/politics/putin-schitaet-belorusiyu-demokratichnee-mnogih-stran/>

⁷ <https://finance.tut dot by/news705167.html>; https://t dot me/pul_1/1766; <https://finance.tut dot by/news705137.html>

⁸ https://t dot me/tutby_official/17539

⁹ <http://rosbelsoyuz dot su/2020/10/19/%D0%B2-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%8F%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%81%D1%8F-%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%8E%D0%B7-%D0%B2%D1%8B%D1%81/>

¹⁰ <https://souyz dot by/?fbclid=IwARoKJVCAEQen996uyWLK6ES4Goz8PJUFoMjj62rgTV5ZKAoco4c7DGgZWJc>

¹¹ <https://www.ritmearasia dot org/news--2020-10-21--v-belarusi-pojavitsja-partija-sojuz-vystupajuschaja-za-belorussko-rossijskuju-integraciju-5151I>; https://naviny dot media/article/20201019/1603123526-prorossiyskaya-struktura-hochet-zaregistrovat-v-belarusi-partiyu; blr dot rs dot gov dot ru/ru/news/847?category_id=12; <https://www dot bbc.com/russian/news-39300792>; <https://survincity dot com/2010/11/russia-is-destined-for-greatness-it-is-her-fate-if/>; <https://politring dot com/country/30530-sergeev-predlozhil-otdat-belarusi-tri-oblasti-rossii-esli-ona-voydet-v-sostav-rf-kak-avtonomnyy-okrug.html>; <https://zatulin dot ru/institut-stran-sn>; <https://politring dot com/mir/29589-prezident-rf-putin-nagrabil-medalyu-pushkina-belorusskogo-politologa-sergeeva.html>

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https://minsk_dot_gov.by/ru/freepage/other/70_let_osvobojudeniya_inf_o_khode_vypolneniya_plana.shtml; https://riadagestan_dot_ru/news/the_people_s_assembly/kerimkhan_umakhanov_obsudil_s_predstavatelyami_belarusi_voprosy_udevovecheniya_pamyati_geroev_vov/; http://xn---8sbgbezuatp7j_dot_xn-p1ai/2019/12/02/delegacija-iz-respubliki-belarus-na-mezhdunarodnom-patrioticheskom-forume/; https://www.facebook_dot_com/groups/dorogislavy/; https://www.facebook_dot_com/MIDRussia/posts/818159458283497/;

¹² https://souyz_dot_by/?fbclid=IwARoKJVCaEQen996uyWlK6ES4Goz8PJUFoMjj62rgTV5ZKAoco4c7DGgZWJc

¹³ Union was likely founded in January 2020 given its first news articles are from February 2020 and its Facebook page was registered in January 2020. http://rosbelsoyuz_dot_su/category/general/page/5/; https://www.facebook_dot_com/initiatesouyz/

¹⁴ https://belsat_dot_eu/en/news/authorities-put-nexta-logo-and-its-live-channel-on-list-of-extremist-materials/

¹⁵ https://www.interfax_dot_ru/world/732348; https://t_dot_me/pressmvd/2275

¹⁶ https://twitter_dot_com/HannaLiubakova/status/1319308605741535233

¹⁷ https://twitter_dot_com/aibelarus/status/1319343295315795969; https://twitter_dot_com/franakviacorka/status/1319323097762324492; https://twitter_dot_com/franakviacorka/status/1319364577969213441

¹⁸ http://www.iswresearch_dot_org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko_19.html

¹⁹ https://informnapalm_dot_org/en/national-guard-of-russia-is-practicing-training-and-combat-operations-in-belarus/; https://rg_dot_ru/2020/10/07/pod-minskom-proshli-sorevnovaniia-podrazdelenij-belorusskogo-i-rossijskogo-specnaza.html; https://www.tvr_dot_by/news/obshchestvo/sorevnovaniya_posvyashchennye_30_letiyu_spetspodrazdeleniya_almaz/; https://www.tvr_dot_by/news/obshchestvo/sorevnovaniya_posvyashchennye_30_letiyu_spetspodrazdeleniya_almaz/; https://reform_dot_by/167661-belarusskij-i-rossijskij-specnaz-sorevnuetsja-v-strelbe

²⁰ https://archive_dot_is/9YMXU

²¹ https://www.ukrinform_dot_ru/rubric-regions/2089441-na-donbass-perebrosili-specvojska-iz-moskovskoj-oblasti-razvedka.html; https://apostrophe_dot_ua/news/world/ex-ussr/2016-05-02/razvedka-uznala-o-pribyitii-na-donbass-spetsotryada-putinskoy-natsgvardii/57678; https://archive_dot_is/k5sw8

²² http://www.iswresearch_dot_org/2020/10/russias-unprecedentedly-expansive.html

²³ http://www.iswresearch_dot_org/2020/10/russias-unprecedentedly-expansive.html