



Belarus Warning Update: Protests in Kyrgyzstan May Fuel Intensified Kremlin Action in Belarus

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By George Barros

Self-proclaimed President Alexander Lukashenko revealed that he and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the situation in Kyrgyzstan in an October 7 phone call.¹ Lukashenko offered no additional details, leaving his purpose in mentioning the conversation unclear. Putin did not provide a readout from this call as of this writing, potentially indicating Putin may not have wanted this phone call to be publicly known. The Kremlin usually promptly publishes readouts from such meetings.

The NEXTA Telegram channel may encourage Belarusian protesters to replicate violent protest tactics in Kyrgyzstan to storm government buildings in Belarus. NEXTA favorably reposted footage from protests in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, showing Kyrgyz protesters occupying the Kyrgyz parliament and presidential administration building on October 5.² NEXTA praised the way Kyrgyz protesters achieved “revolution in one day.”³ NEXTA has not issued explicit directions for Belarusian protesters to replicate Kyrgyz protest tactics yet. NEXTA’s positive coverage of the Kyrgyz protests may indicate that NEXTA will revive its previous calls for more radical protest tactics, such as storming government buildings—escalatory protest actions that Belarusian protesters have not demonstrated willingness for yet. NEXTA has encouraged more radical forms of protest before without success. NEXTA encouraged but did not convince Belarusian protesters to create parallel state structures, including self-protection forces, for example.⁴

NEXTA’s coverage of protests in Kyrgyzstan, regardless of NEXTA’s intent, could increase the likelihood of a Russian intervention into Belarus. NEXTA’s favorable coverage of Kyrgyz protesters may embolden Belarusian protesters to adopt more radical tactics – such as occupying government buildings – without explicit directions from NEXTA. Fear (or claimed fear) that a new wave of “color revolutions” could spread from Kyrgyzstan could also change Putin’s calculus, causing him to send Russian forces into Belarus to end the ongoing protest movement before it can become more serious.

The Kremlin likely rejects Lithuania-based Belarusian opposition leader Svitlana Tikhanouskaya as a viable replacement for Lukashenko. The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs added Tikhanouskaya to its international wanted list for an unspecified criminal charge on October 7.⁵

Russia will likely open its border with Belarus soon—a development that could help provide Russia cover to transport equipment and personnel in Belarus. Putin and Lukashenko had a phone call on October 7 in which a Lukashenko claimed they discussed fully reopening the Russian-Belarusian border.⁶ Russia partially closed its border with Belarus in March 2020 as part of Russia’s COVID-19 response.⁷ The resumption of full cross-border traffic could provide Russia enhanced cover to infiltrate personnel and/or equipment from Russia to Belarus.

Armenia withdrew from the upcoming multinational Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises in Belarus on October 5.⁸ Armenia's defense minister announced Armenia's withdrawal from the exercises planned for October 12-16 in Belarus likely because of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Armenian defense minister also announced that two unrelated annual CSTO exercises—a rapid response forces exercise called “Interaction 2020” and a reconnaissance exercise called “Search 2020”—originally planned to occur in Armenia in October 2020 are postponed indefinitely.⁹

Putin may leverage Armenia's withdrawal from Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises to repurpose those exercises on short notice. ISW assesses Putin likely repurposed the Slavic Brotherhood 2020 exercises in Belarus by increasing the exercises' planned duration and scope after Serbia withdrew its participation.¹⁰ Putin may attempt to similarly modify Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises given Armenia's withdrawal. It is unclear whether Kyrgyz forces will participate in Unbreakable Brotherhood given intensifying protests in Bishkek.¹¹ A Kyrgyz withdrawal from Unbreakable Brotherhood would likely grant the Kremlin greater opportunity to repurpose the exercises.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/telefonnyj-razgovor-s-prezidentom-rossii-vladimirom-putiny-m-24670/

² https://t.me/nexta_live/11565; https://t.me/nexta_live/11564; https://t.me/nexta_live/11563; https://t.me/nexta_live/11567; https://t.me/nexta_live/11571; https://t.me/nexta_live/11575; https://t.me/nexta_live/11584; https://t.me/nexta_tv/5990

³ https://t.me/nexta_live/11565; https://t.me/nexta_live/11564; https://t.me/nexta_live/11563; https://t.me/nexta_live/11567; https://t.me/nexta_live/11571; https://t.me/nexta_live/11575; https://t.me/nexta_live/11584; https://t.me/nexta_tv/5990

⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-nexta-strategy-create-grassroots-organization-belarus-likely>

⁵ <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20201007/tikhanovskaya-1578663502.html>

⁶ http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/telefonnyj-razgovor-s-prezidentom-rossii-vladimirom-putiny-m-24670/

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-51904909>

⁸ <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9637937>; <https://nsn.fm/policy/armeniya-propustit-ucheniya-odkb-nerushimoe-bratstvo-2020>

⁹ <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9637937>; <https://nsn.fm/policy/armeniya-propustit-ucheniya-odkb-nerushimoe-bratstvo-2020>

¹⁰ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian-military-exercises-occurring-western-military>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian-military-exercises-occurring-western-military>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/06/world/europe/kyrgyzstan-protests-election-parliament.html>;

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/07/asia/kyrgyzstan-protesters-clashes-intl-hnk/index.html>