



Belarus Warning Update: Putin Will Increase Pressure on Lukashenko to Integrate Belarus in 2021

December 18, 2020, 7:45 pm EDT

By George Barros

Russian President Vladimir Putin has used the ongoing crisis in Belarus to increase his sway over self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has long stonewalled Moscow's persistent efforts to integrate Belarus into Russia. A sustained protest movement following Lukashenko's overt manipulation of Belarus' August 2020 presidential election has seriously degraded Lukashenko's ability to resist Russian pressure to integrate Belarus into Russia – a key Kremlin campaign ISW's Russia Team has analyzed extensively in over 70 published assessments in 2020.[1]

The Kremlin has achieved major milestones in its pressure campaign to subordinate Belarus' military to Russia since August 2020. Russian military units have been deploying to Belarus on a near-monthly basis under the rubric of "joint exercises" since August 2020. These exercises could support a sustained Russian deployment to Belarus.[2] The Kremlin leveraged the crisis in Belarus to test integrating Russian and Belarusian combat units at the battalion level for the first time in September 2020.[3] Russia and Belarus adopted a common military doctrine, announced the completed formation of Russian-Belarusian "regional grouping of forces," and began conducting negotiations for deeper cooperation between the countries' security services in October 2020.[4] Putin is also likely pressuring Lukashenko to create a unified advanced air defense system under Moscow's control, among other concessions.[5]

Putin continued prioritizing Russo-Belarusian military integration in December 2020. The Commonwealth of Independence States (CIS)—a known vehicle for expanding Kremlin control over former Soviet republics—approved a draft concept on closer military cooperation until 2025 on December 10.[6] Lukashenko approved a plan for the use of the new joint Russo-Belarusian "regional grouping of forces" on December 10.[7] Belarusian defense officials said the Russian General Staff participated in producing this plan. The Union State—a supranational structure that the Kremlin is using to subvert Belarus' sovereignty—must ratify this plan before it takes effect, and likely seeks to do so at a planned meeting in late December. Lukashenko may cancel Belarus' participation in this meeting to delay making such concessions.

Putin made more progress to integrate Belarus' government and economy into Russia's in December 2020. Lukashenko enacted a law on Russian-Belarusian visa recognition reciprocity on December 7.[8] Russia's and Belarus' education ministers expressed interest in creating a "unified educational space." [9] Russia's and Belarus' prime ministers discussed strengthening integration in the Union State framework and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)—the Kremlin-dominated customs union designed to integrate former Soviet states' economies—on December 8.[10] Lukashenko attended an EAEU meeting on December 11 in which the body discussed plans to create an integrated gas market and harmonize member states' oil market regulations.[11] The

Kremlin has exploited Belarus' economic structural dependency on Russian oil subsidies to pressure Lukashenko for Union State integration for years and will likely continue to do so.^[12]

Forecast for 2021

Most likely course of action (MLCOA): Lukashenko will remain in power, protests continue to lose momentum, and Belarus remains de facto sovereign—despite mounting Russian pressure to surrender to integration—by the end of 2021.

Street protests will likely not succeed in overthrowing Lukashenko in 2021. Belarusian protesters have demonstrated great bravery and moral courage in their sustained protests against Lukashenko's despotism, but Lukashenko, with Kremlin backing, has successfully mitigated the risk of protests deposing him. Lukashenko's regime has recovered stability from its lowest point on August 18, when regional security forces in western Belarus likely defected from Minsk—the key event that triggered the Kremlin's intervention to support Lukashenko.^[13] The protests' size and momentum has significantly diminished since their peak turnout in September. Lukashenko's security forces demonstrated proficiency in managing the September protests that were significantly larger and more forceful than current December protests. Lukashenko has arrested or expelled the opposition's main leaders, systematically harassed the opposition's secondary and tertiary tiers of leadership, and has cracked down on factory strike participants. Protests have consistently grown smaller since November and Lukashenko has increasingly driven the opposition underground.

Protests will likely continue in 2021. Lukashenko's efforts to end the protests with economic incentives and constitutional amendments in 2021 will likely fail. Lukashenko instructed his cabinet and national bank to enact price controls and attend "to the needs of the people" on December 7.^[14] Lukashenko reiterated his intention to redistribute powers to democratize Belarus—likely via constitutional amendments to be introduced in early 2021—on December 7.^[15] Enough protesters will likely reject these measures so that the crisis continues, though at a lower level of intensity.

Protesters in Minsk will likely develop decentralized local organizational leadership at the neighborhood level in 2021. The Poland-based NEXTA Telegram channel—the main driver of organized protests in Belarus—assumed a leadership role in organizing protest activities in the crisis. NEXTA likely launched a new campaign to spur the development of local opposition leadership in Belarus on November 20, to counteract Lukashenko's efforts to partition the opposition.^[16] This campaign is likely succeeding. Protesters in Minsk spontaneously gathered for organized protest on December 12 without directions from NEXTA. The development of local leadership has not changed the protesters' tactics, which remain peaceful as of this writing. Growth in sporadic organized protests in the absence of public calls to action from NEXTA would indicate the protesters in Minsk have developed local organization.

Lukashenko may succeed in undermining Lithuania-based opposition leader and former Belarusian presidential candidate Svitlana Tikhanouskaya's credibility inside Belarus. Tikhanouskaya is planning the opposition's largest protest yet for December 20 and likely hopes that this protest will exceed 200,000 participants.^[17] It is unclear whether protester attendance will exceed Tikhanouskaya's expectations given that her previous attempts to marshal protesters have been ineffective.^[18] Belarusian citizens will be increasingly unlikely to continue following Tikhanouskaya's leadership if her track record in marshalling protesters continues to worsen.

The protest movement will likely not threaten Lukashenko in the short term. Lukashenko maintains control over his security forces despite some defections. Protest participation continues to steadily decrease as protester fatigue and weather in Minsk worsen. Lukashenko's willingness to intensify political repression currently outweighs the protesters' willingness to embrace more radical tactics that would pose threats to his regime.

The Belarusian government will likely further increase its control over the situation by banning Belarusians from leaving Belarus starting on December 20.[19] The ban will likely augment security forces' policing capabilities by restricting Belarusian activist movement; hundreds of Belarusians have fled to Poland and Lithuania in search of political asylum since the crisis began in August.[20]

Belarus will likely remain a de facto sovereign state at the end of 2021 despite Putin's intensified efforts to subsume Belarus' military and governance structures via the Union State and other Kremlin-dominated international organizations. Lukashenko has demonstrated sophistication and skill in stonewalling major political concessions from Putin. The protests and Kremlin information operations have severely degraded but not destroyed Lukashenko's maneuvering space to resist Putin. Lukashenko will likely continue stalling many—but not all—Kremlin demands in 2021.

Lukashenko will likely resist Putin's intensified efforts to establish a permanent conventional Russian military presence inside Belarus. Lukashenko has successfully pushed back against Putin's multiple efforts to open a strategic Russian airbase in Belarus since at least 2015, for example.[21] Lukashenko likely could stall the ratification of the plan for the use of the Russo-Belarusian "regional grouping of forces" and other Kremlin integration initiatives.

Lukashenko will likely resist Putin's overarching efforts to gain control over Belarus' military in 2021. The Kremlin conducted an abnormally high number of exercises in and around Belarus in 2020.[22] The Kremlin will likely increase the size and frequency of its monthly military exercises with Belarus in 2021.[23] Russian influence will likely grow inside the Belarusian military, but Lukashenko will likely retain effective control over his armed forces. An increased rate of exercises between Belarusian and Russian units would indicate that the Kremlin is likely succeeding in its efforts to gain control over the Belarusian military. A reduction in Russian-Belarusian exercises' scope and/or frequency would indicate the Kremlin is likely facing setbacks.

Lukashenko will likely fail to resist Russian military deployments to Belarus in 2021—a key component of the larger effort to gain control over Belarus' military. Russia's and Belarus' defense ministers agreed to jointly conduct Russia's next annual capstone strategic readiness exercise—Zapad 2021—and signed resolutions on conducting "joint special exercises" to prepare for this exercise.[24] Russia's Western Military District (WMD) will likely conduct Zapad 2021 in western Russia and Belarus in September 2021.[25]

Conventional Russian forces likely will deploy to Belarus for Zapad 2021 on a significantly larger scale than they did for Zapad 2017. The Kremlin will likely use Zapad 2021 to deploy an unprecedented number of Russian military personnel into Belarus in September 2021. The Kremlin may choose to continue fielding Russian units in Belarus after the Zapad 2021 exercise officially ends. Moscow may also deploy forces to Belarus, possibly repeatedly, before the formal opening of Zapad on the pretext of making preparations for it or conducting rehearsals. The Kremlin will likely use the Zapad 2021 exercise to further integrate Russian and Belarusian military units at deep levels.

Putin may attempt to deploy Russian-controlled advanced air defense systems in Belarus in 2021. The Russian Defense Ministry claimed on December 11 a unified automated area defense control system will cover approximately 2,000 square kilometers of the WMD from St. Petersburg to Voronezh at an unspecified time in the future.[26] This network will receive targeting information on air and ground objects and coordinate WMD military responses in real-time. The Kremlin likely seeks to deploy Russian-controlled advanced air defense systems to Belarus and will likely attempt to integrate those systems into this automated WMD network.[27]

Putin will likely succeed in further integrating Belarus' and Russia's economies in 2021.

Putin will likely further integrate Belarus' and Russia's economies through Belarus' upcoming 2021 chairmanship of the Commonwealth of Independence States (CIS). Lukashenko said strengthening integration among former Soviet states via the CIS and EAEU is an "inevitable necessity" when discussing his priorities for

Belarus' upcoming 2021 chairmanship of the CIS.[28] The country-chair of the CIS changes annually and Belarus will assume that chairmanship on January 1, 2021. Belarus last chaired the CIS in 2014 and 2012.[29]

The Kremlin will likely continue using energy pressure to coerce Belarus into making integration concessions. Russia and Belarus began negotiating natural gas contracts for 2021 in November 2020.[30] The Kremlin historically has used similar last-minute energy-supply deals to coerce political concessions from other states.[31]

The Kremlin will likely sabotage or co-opt Lukashenko's upcoming constitutional amendments to prolong the crisis. The Belarusian government will likely hold the sixth All-Belarusian People's Assembly—a national forum including members from all of Belarus' social strata held every five years—on January 27-28, 2021.[32] Lukashenko suggested transferring some of his presidential powers to the assembly and stated he wants to elevate the assembly into a constitutional body.[33]

The Kremlin remains supportive of Lukashenko's constitutional amendments for now. Russia's ambassador to Belarus said Belarus' constitutional reforms will democratize Belarus and strengthen its sovereignty on December 12.[34] Putin expressed reserved optimism about the planned amendments in his annual press conference on December 17.[35] The Kremlin will likely interfere in Belarusian political processes if Moscow perceives a risk Lukashenko's amendments may end the crisis without further formalizing Belarus' integration with Russia.[36] Any unplanned senior Kremlin officials' visit to Minsk in close temporal proximity with Lukashenko's introduction of constitutional amendments would indicate Kremlin interference to subvert or leverage those amendments.

Lukashenko will likely remain in power by the end of 2021, albeit in a very vulnerable state. Lukashenko has no intention of abdicating before his term expires in 2025 and has the means to maintain his regime against the current state of the protests.

Lukashenko will likely intensify crackdowns on protest leadership in 2021. New Belarusian laws permitting the regime to strip Belarusians of their citizenship for participating in protests will come into effect in June 2021.[37] Lukashenko will likely attempt to use this power to dismantle the growing local opposition leadership.

The Kremlin may start grooming a Kremlin-preferable successor to replace Lukashenko. Lukashenko has said he does not intend to seek reelection after his current term expires in 2025.[38] Tikhanouskaya stated if she becomes president of Belarus, she intends to immediately conduct new, clean Belarusian presidential elections but not run in them herself, as she is not qualified to run the state.[39] The Kremlin will likely seek to ensure Lukashenko's eventual successor will support Belarus' integration with Russia. The Kremlin may support popular Kremlin-linked Belarusian opposition leaders who have spoken positively about reaching out to the Kremlin for mediation, such as Maria Kolesnikova, to become the next president.[40]

Most dangerous course of action (MDCOA): Putin succeeds in establishing a conventional Russian military presence inside Belarus permanently, with or without Lukashenko, de facto ending Belarusian sovereignty. Putin likely seeks to sustain a continuous Russian conventional military presence inside Belarus. Lukashenko's continued support for the Russian information operation framing the protests as an existential NATO-backed hybrid war against the Union State would indicate this MDCOA is more likely. An increased rate of WMD exercises in 2021 focusing on command and control, logistics, and signals activity would indicate this MDCOA is more likely.[41]

The Kremlin will likely seek to avoid an overt military intervention into Belarus but will do so if Putin deems it necessary. The Kremlin will likely intervene in Belarus under the pretext of defending the Union State if it perceives that protests might weaken Lukashenko enough to put his continued control at risk. This is an unlikely and extreme scenario that will be costly for Putin. The Kremlin likely seeks to avoid having to intervene in Belarus but will do so if Lukashenko appears likely to lose control over his security services. Increased defections from Belarusian security services or a fundamental shift in protester's tactics that threaten

Lukashenko's current control over the situation would indicate the MDCOA is more likely. A reframing from Lukashenko characterizing Russia's growing influence as unwelcome or subversive would indicate this MDCOA is less likely.

Putin's success in Belarus would pose significant security risks to the West. Putin's successful integration of Belarus into Russia would increase the Kremlin's strategic projection capabilities against NATO and Ukraine. Russia's total freedom of movement in Belarus would enhance Russian forces' ability to threaten the Suwalki Gap to geographically isolate NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia from the rest of the alliance.^[42] Russia's total freedom of movement in Belarus would also open new avenues of attack for the Kremlin to employ against Ukraine. Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, is only 95 kilometers from the Ukrainian-Belarusian border, and Ukraine's defense posture is unprepared for a threat from its northern border.^[43] If Putin gains even partial freedom of movement and operations in Belarus, he can significantly increase the risk to NATO and Ukraine. The West should support Belarus's full independence as a sovereign state and should not recognize any agreements subverting that sovereignty that Putin may coerce Lukashenko into. It must also couple full-throated support for complete Belarusian sovereignty with its already-articulated support for the protest movement.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

[1] See understandingwar.org.

[2] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-setting-conditions-long-term-continuous-russian-military>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-and-belarus-prepare-october-exercises-belarus>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia%E2%80%99s-western-military-district-prepares-october-exercises>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-likely-began-preparing-logistics-supply-lines-belarus>

[3] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-nexta-actively-encourages-belarusian-security-service-defections>

[4] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-intensifies-russian-belarusian-military-integration>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-will-likely-use-october-military-exercises-advance-its>

[5] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-intensifies-russian-belarusian-military-integration>

[6] <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/30994230.html>;

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Putin%27s%20Offset%20The%20Kremlin%27s%20Geopolitical%20Adaptations%20Since%202014.pdf>

[7] <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-odobril-plan-primenenija-regionalnoj-gruppirovki-vojsk-belarusi-i-rossii-419514-2020/>; <https://izdot.ru/1098125/2020-12-10/lukashenko-odobril-plan-primeneniiia-regionalnoi-gruppirovki-voisk-belorussii-i-rf>; <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/108509/>;

<https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-predstavili-pererabotannyj-plan-primenenija-sovmestnoj-gruppirovki-vojsk-belarusi-i-rossii-419498-2020>

[8] <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12000057&p1=1&p5=0>

[9] <https://www.belta.by/society/view/belarus-i-rossija-zainteresovany-v-edinom-obrazovatelnom-prostranstve-karpenko-420241-2020/>; <https://www.belta.by/society/view/zasedanie-kollegij-ministerstv-obrazovanija-belarusi-i-rossii-prohodit-v-minske-420225-2020/>

[10] <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/golovchenko-i-mishustin-obsudili-naraschivanie-sotrudnichestva-v-energetike-transporte-i-419200-2020>

[11] <https://www.belta.by/president/view/etot-god-stal-nastojaschim-ispytaniem-na-prochnost-glavnoe-iz-vystuplenija-lukashenko-na-sammite-eaes-419749-2020>; http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/uchastie

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[12] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russia-review-belarus-update-lukashenko-uses-oil-tariffs-delay-integration-russia>

[13] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-begins-security-forces-support-lukashenko-following>

[14] <https://www.interfax.ru/world/740221>

[15] http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/soveschanie-o-rabote-ekonomiki-v-2020-godu-i-proektax-prognoza-razvitija-strany-na-2021-j-25003/; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-pressures-lukashenko-implement-his-previous-integration>;
<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely-disrupts-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-plan-defusing-protests>

[16] <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1337780012573974530>;
<https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1337776172223115264>

[17] <https://t.me/tsikhanouskaya/421>

[18] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-police-detain-demonstrators-protests-escalate>; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/11/belarus-warning-update-belarusian.html>

[19] <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus--close-land-borders-covid--19-opposition-activists-movement-limited/30993827.html>

[20] <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-54209579>

[21] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-sends-airborne-troops-belarus-exercise%E2%80%94and-message>; <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/06/10/2015/5613ebe59a794769839c9e3f>; <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1501418>;
<https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2019/11/14/12811502.shtml>

[22] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russia%E2%80%99s-unprecedentedly-expansive-military-exercises-fall-2020-seek-recreate-soviet>

[23] <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian.html>;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/russias-unprecedentedly-expansive.html>

[24] <https://reform.by/175035-hrenin-nazval-uchenija-zapad-2021-glavnym-meroprijatiem-sledujushhego-goda>

[25] Russia's annual strategic joint-staff exercise usually occurs in September.

[26] https://function.mil.by/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12329701@egNews; https://iz.ru/1098336/anton-lavrov-roman-kretcul/shchit-s-upravleniem-zapad-rossii-prikroet-avtomatizirovannaja-sistema?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop

[27] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-and-kremlin-vie-control-over-future-russian-weapons>

[28] <https://www.belta.by/president/view/integratsija-neizbezhnaja-neobhodimost-lukashenko-ozvuchil-priority-predsedatelstva-belarusi-v-sng-420767-2020/>

[29] <http://www.cis.minsk.by/reestr/ru/index.html#reestr/view/text?doc=4807>; <http://www.cis.minsk.by/reestr/ru/index.html#reestr/view/text?doc=3617>

[30] <https://www.gazprom.com/press/news/2020/november/article517803/>

[31] <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/01/europe-cedes-opportunity-in-russia.html>

[32] <https://www.dw.com/ru/oppozicija-belarusi-zajavila-o-provedenii-v-janvare-vsebelorusskogo-narodnogo-sobranija/a-55621869>

[33] <https://www.interfax.ru/world/740380>

[34] <https://sputnik.by/politics/20201210/1046378756/Mezentsev-konstitucionnaya-reforma-posposobstvet-demokratizatsii-v-Belarusi.html>

[35] <https://eodaily.com/ru/news/2020/12/17/putin-vyrazil-soglasie-s-lukashenko-po-situacii-v-belorusii>;
<https://tass.ru/politika/10283283>

[36] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely-disrupts-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-plan-defusing-protests>

- [37] <https://newsbel dot by/12/17/v-belarusi-s-iyunya-2021-goda-nachnut-lishat-grazhdanstva-za-ekstremizm/>;
<https://pravo dot by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12000067&p1=1&p5=0>
- [38] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely-disrupts-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-plan-defusing-protests>
- [39] <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interview/sviatlana-tsikhanouskaya-is-overcoming-her-fears>
- [40] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-belarusian-opposition-reaches-out-kremlin>
- [41] <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-likely-began-preparing-logistics-supply-lines-belarus>
- [42] <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2020/08/why-future-belarus-matters-united-states/167627/>
- [43] Ukraine's armed forces have built up Ukraine's defenses against Russian forces in eastern and southern Ukraine.