



Belarus Warning Update: Belarusian Opposition Leader Directs Protesters to Employ Force against Lukashenko

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By George Barros

Lithuania-based opposition leader Svitlana Tikhanouskaya called on Belarusian protesters to employ force against self-proclaimed Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko for the first time on November 13, 2020. Tikhanouskaya called on Belarusians to physically capture Lukashenko, regime officials, and security forces responsible for carrying out Lukashenko's orders so they can stand trial at an upcoming "People's Tribunal."¹ Tikhanouskaya promised amnesty for protesters who help capture these targets.²

Tikhanouskaya's call to employ force against Belarusian officials is unprecedented and a significant escalation in the opposition leadership's efforts to direct the protests. Protesters' tactics have been overwhelming peaceful since the protests began in August despite militarized police crackdowns. It is unclear whether protesters will act on Tikhanouskaya's directions. Belarusian protesters have not previously demonstrated a willingness to undertake opposition leadership calls for more radical protest actions, such as creating parallel state structures, including self-protection forces, for example.³

Tikhanouskaya may seek to leverage a high-profile Belarusian martyr to catalyze protest escalation. Roman Bondarenko, a 31-year-old protester and military veteran, died on November 12 after plainclothes Belarusian security forces beat him into a coma near his home in Minsk.⁴ Bondarenko has become a martyr for the opposition and his death is a rallying point that could trigger a significant change in protester sentiment or tactics. Tikhanouskaya may have issued directions for protesters to use force against Lukashenko on November 13 to capitalize on any possible shifts in protester sentiment following Bondarenko's death on November 12. Protesters do not rhetorically seek to avenge Bondarenko as of this writing.

Belarusians are protesting in greater numbers than normal for weekday protests due to the Bondarenko's killing. Several thousand Belarusians held a peaceful vigil for Bondarenko on November 12.⁵ Several hundred Belarusians conducted solidarity and memorial protests across Belarus on November 13.⁶ The tone of these demonstrations focuses on mourning and solidarity but could shift to target Lukashenko in line with Tikhanouskaya's effort to capture regime officials.

The Lukashenko regime has continued to control protests. Belarusian Police preemptively disrupted the Saturday women's march for the first time on November 7. Preemptively deployed police stymied the march by detaining a few dozen women that met to begin the march.⁷ The Lukashenko regime is raiding bank accounts of Belarusians who are receiving financial aid from protester and striker solidarity funds.⁸ The regime continues to detain strikers at state-owned enterprises.⁹ The Belarusian parliament is considering a bill that would effectively allow the government to strip Belarusian nationals of Belarusian citizenship for participating in protests.¹⁰ ISW previously assessed Lukashenko can likely outlast the opposition protesters barring major changes in the opposition's strategy or tactics.¹¹

Tikhanouskaya is planning the opposition's largest protest yet for December 20. Tikhanouskaya said the opposition will conduct their largest march yet and release a tribunal statement on December 20.¹² Tikhanouskaya likely hopes that this protest will exceed 200,000 participants.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://t.me/tsikhanouskaya/421>

² <https://t.me/tsikhanouskaya/421>

³ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-nexta-strategy-create-grassroots-organization-belarus-likely>

⁴ <https://belarusfeed.com/unknown-white-red-white-ribbons-beat-coma/>; <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/candles-and-condemnation-as-thousands-mourn-death-of-belarus-protester/>

⁵ <https://www.rfi.fr/ru/%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B0/20201113-%D0%B2-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B5-%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%80-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B1%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%8B%D0%B9-%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%85%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BC-%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD-%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D1%82%D1%8B%D1%81%D1%8F%D1%87%D0%B8-%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BA-%D0%B2%D1%8B%D1%88%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8E-%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%BC%D1%8F%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%89%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD>

⁶ <https://news.tut.by/economics/707708.html>

⁷ <https://gazetaby.com/post/zaderzhaniya-na-marshe-medikov-pusk-aes-cto-prois/170595/>; <https://ont.by/news/ocherednoj-zhenskij-marsh-sobytie-kotorogo-fakticheski-ne-bylo>; <https://people.onliner.by/2020/11/07/cto-proisxodit-7-noyabrya>

⁸ <https://www.dw.com/ru/u-postradavshih-aktivistov-vlasti-belarusi-zabirajut-dengi/a-55573955>

⁹ <https://www.ukrinform.com/rubric-world/3135858-v-kosovo-zaderzali-bolse-50-stackomovcev-belaruskalia.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30946116.html>

¹¹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-intensifies-russian-belarusian-military-integration>

¹² <https://t.me/tsikhanouskaya/421>