



Belarus Warning Update: Lukashenko Accuses Poland of Preparing Catholic Sectarian Subversion

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By George Barros

Self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko intensified anti-NATO rhetoric by accusing Poland of using Belarusian Catholic clergy as an anti-Belarusian fifth column. Lukashenko said Polish influence through Belarusian Catholic clergy threatens the Belarusian state on November 2.¹ Lukashenko accused Poland of exploiting Belarus' lack of resources to train Catholic clergy as a tool to project subversive influence into Belarus by "inviting" Belarusian Catholics to Poland.² Lukashenko explicitly claimed Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, the head of the Catholic Church of Belarus, received directions from Poland on how to "destroy our country."³ Belarusian border guards stopped Kondrusiewicz from returning to Belarus from Poland on August 31 after he spoke out against Belarusian police brutality.⁴ ISW forecasted that Lukashenko and the Kremlin's information operations may falsely link Belarusian Catholics to NATO-sponsored activity in late August—the last time Lukashenko mentioned religious sectarianism in a prominent manner.⁵

The NEXTA Telegram channel issued abnormal directions for November 1 protests in Minsk. NEXTA explicitly compared Lukashenko's current repressions to Stalinist abuses and called for continued demonstrations "so that this never happens again."⁶ NEXTA called for protesters to march to a memorial to Belarusian victims of Soviet repressions approximately six miles from main protest sites in Minsk and linked this march to an annual tradition when Belarusians pay respects at their families' graves who perished in Stalinist repressions.⁷

NEXTA's attempt to marshal this special march was largely ineffective. An overwhelming majority of Belarusian protesters in Minsk did not participate in NEXTA's march.⁸ Large numbers of Belarusian security forces deployed to NEXTA's specified gathering site an hour before the protesters were to gather. A few thousand protesters congregated at NEXTA's gathering point, but security forces dispersed them quickly using rubber bullets and stun grenades.⁹ Police detained at least 313 protesters on November 1.¹⁰

The Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) likely detonated an "IED" in Minsk on November 1, likely as part of ongoing efforts to frame the opposition as terrorists. The MVD claimed protesters detonated an IED in Minsk on November 1.¹¹ The alleged IED, which was likely a MVD plant, was filmed in broad daylight, had a highly visible fuse, did not injure anyone, and detonated near a group of police officers who were seemingly aware of and unphased by the IED.¹² Nor was their observed behavior consistent with a team finding and defusing an IED or detonating it in place. Belarusian security services have intensified efforts to link the protests with terrorism since October 22.¹³ Belarusian security services may use this or similar other incidents to justify an intensified policing campaign, though there is no evidence they seek to do so at this time.

Lukashenko banned all foreigners from entering Belarus on November 1.¹⁴ Belarusian authorities claim this measure seeks to prevent the spread of COVID-19—an improbable justification since Belarusian authorities never

closed the country's borders during the initial lockdown in Spring 2020.¹⁵ Belarus closed all its borders—except its border with Russia—on October 29.¹⁶ Belarusian authorities never provided an explanation for why Russia was initially exempt from border closures.

Lukashenko is tightening control over the information space inside Belarus. Belarusian authorities effectively banned four non-state media outlets' print publications on October 31.¹⁷ Lukashenko's Kremlin-backed media campaign began suppressing print media in Belarus on August 19.¹⁸

Senior Lukashenko regime officials will meet representatives of Belarusian society throughout November as part of Lukashenko's efforts to defuse protests. Senior Belarusian officials reportedly will conduct meetings with "representatives" from Belarusian society from November 4-27.¹⁹ Lukashenko will likely use these engagements to demonstrate his willingness to talk to citizens and discuss the putative concessions he seeks to use to defuse the protests.²⁰

Lukashenko is setting conditions to intensify anti-protester crackdowns in January 2021. Belarusian MPs are reportedly preparing amendments to Belarusian criminal codes to increase penalties for participating in unauthorized mass events and using opposition symbols, such as "illegal" flags.²¹ These amendments reportedly will come into effect in January 2021.²²

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://news.tut.by/society/706267.html>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-gosudarstvo-vsegda-budet-priverzhenno-mezhkonfessionalnomu-miru-v-belarusi-413689-2020/>

² <https://news.tut.by/society/706267.html>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-gosudarstvo-vsegda-budet-priverzhenno-mezhkonfessionalnomu-miru-v-belarusi-413689-2020/>

³ <https://news.tut.by/society/706267.html>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-gosudarstvo-vsegda-budet-priverzhenno-mezhkonfessionalnomu-miru-v-belarusi-413689-2020/>

⁴ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>

⁵ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>

⁶ https://t.me/nexta_live/11954; https://t.me/nexta_live/11952

⁷ https://t.me/nexta_live/11954; https://t.me/nexta_live/11952

⁸ <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-ukraine-alexander-lukashenko-belarus-elections-e7111a0303b1a6bc93380b8b80de89e2>;

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/02/europe/belarus-protests-police-crackdown-intl/index.html>;

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/02/europe/belarus-protests-police-crackdown-intl/index.html>

⁹ <https://t.me/belsat/28214>; https://news.tut.by/economics/706172.html#ua:main_news~1; https://t.me/nexta_tv/8096;

https://t.me/nexta_tv/8095; https://t.me/nexta_tv/8100; <https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1322922081609228289>

¹⁰ <http://spring96.org/ru/news/100198>

¹¹ <https://interfax.by/news/policy/raznoe/1286211/>

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZI-eM4pG8w>

¹³ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely.html>; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-will.html>; <https://sputnik.by/incidents/20201026/1045992086/KGB-ryad-deystviy-protestuyuschikh-mozhno-kvalifitsirovat-kak-akt-terrorizma.html>

¹⁴ <https://gpk.gov.by/news/gpk/77911/>

¹⁵ http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko_29.html

¹⁶ http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko_29.html

¹⁷ <https://news.tut.by/society/706160.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-kremlin-backed.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.belta.by/society/view/rukovoditeli-gosorganov-provedut-v-nojabre-priemy-grazhdan-v-sovmine-413491-2020/>

²⁰ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-putin.html>

²¹ <https://news.tut.by/society/706085.html>

²² <https://news.tut.by/society/706085.html>