



Warning: Lukashenko Escalates Crackdown in Likely Response to Increased Risk of Kremlin Intervention

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By Mason Clark

Belarusian security forces violently confronted large groups of protesters for the first time since early August on October 11. Tens of thousands marched in Minsk on October 11 despite heavy rain.¹ Belarusian security forces directly confronted concentrated protesters using water cannons, stun grenades, and firearms.² Belarusian security forces have refrained from directly confronting large groups of protesters since early August. Security forces detained nearly 400 protesters and severely injured dozens.³ Security forces additionally detained over 40 foreign and domestic journalists.⁴ Nikolai Karpiankou, director of Belarus's anti-corruption bureau, and Dmitry Balaba, head of Minsk's OMON riot police, personally directed the crackdown in Minsk.⁵ Protests largely dispersed by 7pm local time, though small groups of protesters in the low hundreds re-gathered in Minsk around 10pm.⁶

The increased risk of a Kremlin intervention due to ongoing protests in Kyrgyzstan likely prompted self-proclaimed Belarusian President Lukashenko to accelerate his efforts to end protests. Lukashenko likely escalated his crackdown to both deter Belarusian protesters from following the example of Kyrgyz protesters and mitigate a heightened risk of Kremlin intervention. Lukashenko - and Putin - demonstrated a willingness to allow Sunday protests to continue without an escalation by security forces throughout September. ISW previously forecasted that fear (or claimed fear) of a new wave of "color revolutions" spreading from Kyrgyzstan could change Putin's calculus, causing him to send Russian forces into Belarus to end the ongoing protest movement before it can become more serious.⁷ Russian and CSTO forces are scheduled to deploy to Belarus on October 12 for the Unbreakable Brotherhood 2020 military exercise, including practicing riot control.⁸ Lukashenko likely escalated his crackdown on October 11 in part to demonstrate control over the situation and mitigate a potential Kremlin justification to deploy forces, potentially including Russian forces arriving in Belarus on Monday, to control the situation.

Lukashenko is successfully reducing the size of the Belarusian protest movement. Fewer than 100,000 protesters – which was the smallest size of Sunday protests from August through late September – participated in the October 11 march.⁹ Only a few hundred protesters participated in the October 10 women's march in Minsk.¹⁰ Saturday protests have steadily declined in size since early September. ISW previously forecasted that protests would decline in size – and may increasingly only occur on Sundays – due to successful pressure by Lukashenko, a lack of emerging local leadership in Belarus, and worsening weather.¹¹

Opposition leader Svetlana Tikanouskaya participated in a solidarity march in Vilnius, Lithuania, among several other international solidarity marches.¹² Tikanouskaya's outreach to European states and organization of solidarity protests is unlikely to bring Lukashenko to negotiations and is unlikely to sustain protest momentum in the face of an increasingly violent crackdown.

Lukashenko met with detained opposition leaders on October 10. Lukashenko met with detained opposition leaders in a Belarusian KGB detention facility for four and a half hours on October 10.¹³ Lukashenko met around a dozen opposition figures, including Kremlin-linked opposition candidate Viktor Babariko, his son, opposition lawyer Liliya Vlasova, unspecified members of the opposition Coordination Council and Babariko's campaign manager Yuri Voskresensky. Belarusian state media reported Lukashenko met the opposition leaders to "hear the opinions of everyone" and inform them that they "can't write a constitution on the street."

Lukashenko is likely accelerating his crackdown on protests, sidelining protest leaders, and attempting to reach a deal with potentially amenable opposition figures in a coordinated campaign. There is no report of Lukashenko meeting with opposition leader Kolesnikova or any opposition leaders previously active leading protests. Lukashenko refuses to enter negotiations with Tikanouskaya and likely views Kolesnikova as too strong a symbol of resistance to negotiate with directly. Lukashenko utterly rejects the protests as illegitimate challenges to his authority and is unlikely to enter negotiations with Tikanouskaya or Kolesnikova voluntarily.

Lukashenko elected instead to meet with the Kremlin-amenable Babariko, who has had no direct involvement in the ongoing protest movement, as well as select members of the Coordination Council. Lukashenko likely seeks to include opposition figures in his promised constitutional change process to further divide the opposition and posture as willing to reach out to political opposition. ISW previously forecasted Lukashenko might initiate a controlled constitutional change process to undermine protests while failing to give real concessions.¹⁴ Lukashenko announced an open period to propose constitutional amendments on October 3, with a deadline of October 25.¹⁵

Lukashenko seeks to carry out this campaign on his terms – rather than on Putin's terms. Lukashenko seeks to control the ongoing protest movement while avoiding integration pressure from the Kremlin.¹⁶ Lukashenko likely seeks to preempt the Kremlin's efforts to deploy forces into Belarus under the pretext of crushing protests by cracking down on protests himself. Lukashenko likely additionally seeks to preempt the Kremlin's ongoing effort to control potential constitutional changes in Belarus by making his own independent deal with an opposition leader of his choice on his terms.¹⁷ Lukashenko may seek to exploit the opportunity presented by the Kremlin's concurrent need to focus on Nagorno-Karabakh, Kyrgyzstan, and upcoming Ukrainian local elections.

¹ <https://news.tut.by/society/703601.html>.

² https://t.me/nexta_tv/6341; https://t.me/tutby_official/16855; https://t.me/tutby_official/16869.

³ <https://spring96.org/be/news/99908>; <https://news.tut.by/society/703601.html>.

⁴ https://t.me/tutby_official/16924; <https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1315339798383656963>

⁵ <https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1315339798383656963>.

⁶ <https://news.tut.by/society/703601.html>.

⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-protests-kyrgyzstan-may-fuel-intensified-kremlin-action-belarus>.

⁸ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-will-likely-use-october-military-exercises-advance-its>.

⁹ <https://twitter.com/bneeditor/status/1315277822915735553?s=20>; <https://news.tut.by/society/703601.html>.

¹⁰ <https://news.tut.by/society/703559.html>.

¹¹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-belarusian-protest-movement-likely-developing-local-organization>

¹² <https://news.tut.by/society/703559.html>.

¹³ https://t.me/pul_1/1719; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/konstitutsiju-na-ulitse-ne-napishesh-lukashenko-vstretilsja-v-sizo-kgb-s-chlenami-koordinatsionnogo-410406-2020/>.

¹⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/warning-putin-remains-dissatisfied-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-concessions>.

¹⁵ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-seeks-belarus%E2%80%99-integration-russia-belarusian>.

¹⁶ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/warning-putin-remains-dissatisfied-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-concessions>.

¹⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/warning-putin-remains-dissatisfied-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-concessions>.