



Belarus Warning Update: Lukashenko Will Likely Outlast Ultimatum Protests

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By George Barros

Protesters failed to compel self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's resignation on October 25 – the deadline of the opposition's ultimatum for his resignation. Over 100,000 Belarusians protested in Minsk and other major cities in line with Lithuania-based opposition leader Svitlana Tikhanouskaya's ultimatum to Lukashenko for his resignation on October 25.¹ Belarusian security services in Minsk cordoned off key roads, blocked cellular internet services, and closed downtown metro stations.² Riot police used rubber bullets and stun grenade salvos to disperse protesters at dusk.³ Protesters did not regroup at midnight after the ultimatum's deadline expired. Police detained at least 500 protesters in Belarus, including 160 in Minsk, on October 25.⁴

Lukashenko will likely effectively discredit Tikhanouskaya if the opposition fails to sustain the current protests. Tikhanouskaya is encouraging protests and strikes with unprecedented vigor. Tikhanouskaya promised workers financial compensation "guarantees" if their contracts are terminated due to strikes on October 21 and claimed she received 7 million USD in donations to financially support strikers on October 26.⁵ Tikhanouskaya announced the ultimatum because she likely anticipated a risk that Lukashenko is close to defusing the protest movement.

Lukashenko did not take public action to defuse protests – as he likely initially planned – on October 25. Lukashenko did not address the protesters or issue any statements on October 25. Lukashenko likely intended to announce constitutional amendments or different concessions to placate protesters on October 25.⁶ Russian President Vladimir Putin sent a senior intelligence director to meet Lukashenko in Minsk on October 22, likely to disrupt Lukashenko's plan.⁷

Relatively small numbers of Belarusian students and factory workers began strikes in line with Tikhanouskaya's ultimatum on October 26. Belarusian university students and state-owned enterprise workers launched strikes throughout Belarus in support of the ultimatum on October 26. Approximately 5,000 protesters took to the streets of Minsk on October 26.⁸ These protests were large for a Monday, but not unprecedented; these protests are comparable in size to last Monday's October 19 pensioner protests.⁹ The current ultimatum protests are significantly smaller than average weekend protests.¹⁰ The opposition will likely fail to sustain these strikes given their inability to sustain similar strikes in August.¹¹

Lukashenko can likely outlast the protest movement in its current form. Lukashenko previously successfully suppressed similar strikes in August and September by arresting striking students and factory strike leaders and firing striking workers.¹² Lukashenko can likely outlast strikes given that Tikhanouskaya's funding to subsidize strikers is likely finite and Lukashenko can imprison strikers as he has before. Footage from student protests suggests a significant number of students are not participating in strikes.¹³ Worsening winter weather will further degrade protest participation. Lukashenko will likely replicate successes in suppressing protests barring major changes in the opposition's strategy or tactics.

Lukashenko intensified crackdowns against ultimatum protesters. Belarusian police intensified their detention campaign against protesters on October 25 and arrested at least 300 protesters on October 26.¹⁴ Lukashenko may

intensify crackdowns further. A senior Belarusian security official said protest actions could be qualified as terrorism on October 26.¹⁵ Lukashenko has previously used targeted crackdowns against student protesters and strikers to successfully suppress protests.¹⁶

Putin may be preparing to exploit sustained Belarusian strikes to deploy Russian forces to Belarus. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said the Kremlin is paying close attention to the strikes in Belarus, claiming Belarusian firms' reliability is "extremely important" for the Russian economy on October 26.¹⁷ The Kremlin may choose to use an "economic interdependence" narrative to justify intervention in Belarus to suppress the protests on the Kremlin's terms, though there is no evidence the Kremlin plans to do so at this time

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ https://twitter.com/mattia_n/status/1320472707486670855; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/25/belarus-peoples-ultimatum-protest-met-with-violent-police-crackdown>; <https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1320347246563569666>; <https://twitter.com/Tsihanouskaya/status/1320363584887623680>

² <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1320325327814643712>; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1320306528369446913>; https://t.me/nexta_tv/7432; <https://twitter.com/VoicesBelarus/status/1320292641695780865>; <https://gordonua.com/news/worldnews/v-minske-po-rasporyazheniyu-vlastey-ogranichili-mobilnyy-internet-provaydery-1520305.html>; <https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1320312121859637248>; <https://42.tut.by/705443>

³ <https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1320386976529420290>; <https://42.tut.by/705443>

<https://twitter.com/joshuawongcf/status/1320409448456835072>;

<https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1320392923846946817>; <https://twitter.com/disclosetv/status/1320386821075968000>;

<https://twitter.com/AlexKokcharov/status/1320416789533200387>; <https://twitter.com/anoncatanoncat/status/1320450110694715392>;

<https://twitter.com/VoicesBelarus/status/1320391959224197120>

⁴ <http://spring96.org/en/news/100110>; <http://spring96.org/ru/news/100106>

⁵ <https://ru.euronews.com/2020/10/21/belarus-ultimatum-guarantee>; <https://korrespondent.net/world/4288535-v-myre-sobraly-sem-myllyonov-dollarov-v-pomosch-bastuuischym-belorusam>; <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2463380/>

⁶ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely.html>

⁷ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely.html>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1320708020553326592>; <https://echo.msk.ru/news/2731518-echo.html>

⁹ http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko_19.html

¹⁰ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-tries.html>

¹¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>;

<http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-security-personnel-in-green.html>

¹² <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>;

<http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-security-personnel-in-green.html>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1320634011526549505>; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1320648104039899136>; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1320666546776190977>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1320433990126473221>; <http://spring96.org/ru/news/100108>

¹⁵ <https://sputnik.by/incidents/20201026/1045992086/KGB-ryad-deystviy-protestuyuschikh-mozhno-kvalifitsirovat-kak-akt-terrorizma.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>;

<http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-security-personnel-in-green.html>

¹⁷ <https://interfax.by/news/policy/raznoe/1285809/>