



Belarus Warning Update: Lukashenko Raises Odd Chemical Terrorism Threat

October 29, 2020, 4:45 EDT

By George Barros

Self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko alluded to a possible chemical terrorism threat in Belarus for the first time on October 29. Lukashenko said the ongoing strike at the Azot chemical plant – a large nitrogen compound and fertilizer plant in Grodno – could create an "explosion" and that an ensuing toxic fallout cloud could kill several thousand.¹ Belarusian security services' have intensified efforts to link the protests with terrorism since October 22.²

The Kremlin could exploit a claimed chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) terrorism threat in Belarus to deploy to Belarus. Russian Foreign Intelligence Director Sergey Naryshkin met with Lukashenko on October 23, likely to disrupt Lukashenko's plans to announce steps to defuse the crisis.³ Lukashenko made major concessions to integrate Belarus' military with that of Russia on October 27.⁴

Naryshkin may have "warned" Lukashenko about a supposed CBRN terrorism plot in Belarus as part of a Kremlin pressure campaign to extract more integration concessions from Lukashenko. There is no evidence Naryshkin and Lukashenko discussed any such plot, but the observed indicators are consistent with this hypothesis among others. Moscow has periodically floated warnings of supposed "false flag" chemical attacks and attributed the preparation or conduct of chemical weapons use to its adversaries.⁵ The Kremlin will likely intervene to prevent a solution to the protests that does not include Belarus' deeper integration with Russia.⁶

Russian military units conducted military exercises with CBRN components with increased frequency in 2020.⁷ The Kremlin may be conducting CBRN exercises in part to threaten Lukashenko about Russian force readiness to deploy in Belarus if Lukashenko does not concede to Kremlin demands on Union State integration. This hypothesis requires several caveats, however. The Russian military has increased CBRN exercises annually since at least 2016.⁸ Several Russian CBRN exercises in 2020 occurred before the crisis in Belarus began. However, most of those exercises, including the most recent CBRN exercise on October 28, did not occur in the Western Military District – the district most likely to deploy units to Belarus.⁹

Lukashenko may have mentioned a potential CBRN threat in Grodno to issue an advanced warning. Lukashenko may have alluded to a potential CBRN threat at this time to warn Belarusians about a potentially dangerous course of action. Lukashenko also likely seeks to deter any such Russian deployment to Belarus under the guise of CBRN defense by degrading Russian cover for such a deployment.

ISW offers this low-probability hypothesis because of the grave crisis that would ensue if an explosion did occur at the Azot plant or elsewhere or if Russian forces intervened in Belarus, together with the coincidence of several indicators that might support it.

Belarus suddenly closed all its borders – except its border with Russia – on October 29. Belarusian authorities suddenly closed the country’s borders with Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine without advanced notice on October 29.¹⁰ Belarusian authorities claimed they closed the borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic – an improbable justification since Belarus never closed its borders during the initial COVID-19 lockdown in Spring 2020.¹¹ Belarus’ border with Russia remains open, for which no reason has been offered.

Lukashenko may attempt to create a people’s volunteer militia, possibly to deter a Russian deployment to Belarus. Lukashenko praised the work of Kyrgyz people’s volunteer militias and claimed they were crucial for restoring order in Kyrgyz protests.¹² Lukashenko stated Belarus should develop similar volunteer militias by recruiting military veterans and civilians.¹³ Lukashenko may seek to use such a force to complicate the operating environment in Belarus to either deter a Russian deployment or increase the likelihood of mission failure for Russian forces in the event of a deployment to Belarus. He could alternatively desire to use the actions of such an armed but likely disorganized group as cover for increased brutality against protesters.

Lukashenko launched a new line of effort to control security services more directly in Brest, Grodno, and Minsk on October 29. Lukashenko appointed three presidential envoys – all three of whom are career security services officials – to coordinate regional security services in Grodno, Brest, and Minsk – Belarus’ main three protests hotspots.¹⁴ Lukashenko charged these envoys with coordinating regional Ministry of Defense (MOD), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and State Security Committee (KGB) assets to ensure local “security.” These appointments indicate Lukashenko is prioritizing increasing his direct control over security structures in Grodno, Brest, and Minsk. Lukashenko also warned he may use conventional military forces in future protest crackdowns.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-postavil-pered-novymi-pomoschnikami-v-regionah-zadachu-po-obespecheniju-obschestvennoj-413201-2020/>

² <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>

³ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely.html>

⁴ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-putin.html>

⁵ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2018/12/russia-in-review-russia-poised-to.html?m=0>; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/russia-may-deploy-conventional-forces.html>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-kremlins-fake-de-escalation-donbas>

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

⁷ https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12321678@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12318011@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12318508@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12321129@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12319715@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12319722@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12311560@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12312703@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12312302@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12312721@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315786@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12314705@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12314970@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12316476@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12313367@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12314101@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12312434@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315508@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315514@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12314257@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315719@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315090@egNews; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12316119@egNews

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⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Regiment-sized elements (3,000 personnel) of the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army conducted exercises practicing operations in a CBRN-contaminated area in the North Caucasus on October 28. Troops practiced using CBRN equipment, overcoming contaminated terrain, and equipment decontamination. https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12321678@egNews

¹⁰ <https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2020/10/29/165299-smi-belarus-zakryla-na-v-ezd-vse-granitsy-krome-rossiyskoy>; https://t.me/rian_ru/62422; https://t.me/kyky_org/8281; <https://t.me/vremya4e/340>

¹¹ <https://sputnik.by/incidents/20201029/1046017933/Zakryli-ili-net-cto-proiskhodit-na-granitsakh-Belarusi.html>

¹² <https://www.belta.by/president/view/oni-mogut-nam-zdorovo-pomoch-lukashenko-poruchil-sdelat-ne-formalnoj-rabotu-narodnyh-druzhin-413202-2020>; <https://eadaaily.com/ru/news/2020/10/29/beloruskie-vlasti-namereny-navesti-v-strane-poryadok>

¹³ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/oni-mogut-nam-zdorovo-pomoch-lukashenko-poruchil-sdelat-ne-formalnoj-rabotu-narodnyh-druzhin-413202-2020>; <https://eadaaily.com/ru/news/2020/10/29/beloruskie-vlasti-namereny-navesti-v-strane-poryadok>

¹⁴ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-postavil-pered-novymi-pomoschnikami-v-regionah-zadachu-po-obespecheniju-obschestvennoj-413201-2020/>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/kubrakov-naznachen-ministrom-vnutrennih-del-413166-2020/>