



Belarus Warning Update: Lukashenko Tries to Control Protests Ahead of Meeting with Putin

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By Mason Clark

Lukashenko's campaign to expel and detain opposition leaders is failing to disrupt increasingly adaptable and sustained protests. Tens of thousands of protesters marched in the fourth weekly women's march in Minsk on September 12, and over 100,000 marched in Minsk and around the country on September 13.¹ Telegram channel NEXTA intentionally refrained for the first time from publishing instructions for the Sunday march on Saturday night, to prevent security forces from pre-deploying to protest sites.² NEXTA did not issue protest instructions until nearly noon on Sunday, directing protests to begin at 2:00 pm local time.³ NEXTA issued detailed instructions and maps – which tens of thousands of protesters followed – asking protesters to gather in several separate areas around Minsk before converging on key locations, including Lukashenko's residence and large plazas, from several directions.⁴ NEXTA's flexible control of the protests forced Belarusian security forces to redeploy throughout the day to follow protesters. ISW previously forecasted Lukashenko's efforts to disrupt protests through the arrest and expulsion of the remaining opposition leaders in Belarus would not impede protests, which remain effective without on-the-ground leadership.⁵

Belarusian security forces escalated their use of violence against protesters but refrained from large-scale confrontations or lethal force. Large numbers of Belarusian security forces – both in-uniform and unliveried – attacked protesters and guarded key government buildings.⁶ The Belarusian Interior Ministry claimed to detain 114 and over 400 protesters on Saturday and Sunday respectively, and security forces escalated their use of violence against protesters.⁷ Belarusian security forces have steadily increased their use of violence against protesters since the weekend of August 16. An increasing proportion of unliveried security forces, and likely OMON riot police in unmarked uniforms, have been deployed.⁸ Belarusian security forces are increasingly carrying out random detentions of protesters, and security forces fired over the heads of protesters to disperse them on September 13.⁹ Security forces have not used firearms against protesters since the first week of protests after August 9.

Lukashenko is likely - currently unsuccessfully - attempting to find a way to end protests without concessions or the use of lethal force. Despite the increasing use of random violence against protesters and Lukashenko's campaign of detentions and expulsions of opposition leaders, Lukashenko has not yet committed to a large-scale, violent crackdown on protesters. Lukashenko likely assesses the use of lethal force would likely invite further Western pressure and – likely more importantly in his assessment – further Kremlin intervention under the pretext of controlling a volatile situation. Lukashenko additionally remains unwilling to consider concessions to protesters. He therefore likely hopes to mitigate protests over time by steadily increasing the use of violence by security forces and targeting opposition leaders, while avoiding the risk carried by using lethal force of both an increased international or protester response to violence and the potential of a further Kremlin intervention. Lukashenko's approach is more likely to fuel continued protests, however, as demonstrators gradually become accustomed to the increasing violence and see it more as a grievance driving anger than a deterrent.

Lukashenko is increasingly moderating his portrayal of the protests as Western backed, likely to undermine the Kremlin's justification for intervention ahead of a meeting with Putin on September 14. Lukashenko ordered the Defense Ministry to demobilize Belarusian forces which have deployed to the Western region of

Grodno, bordering Poland and Lithuania, on September 12.¹⁰ Lukashenko claimed that while US and NATO troops remain deployed near the Belarusian border, the situation has changed “from a month ago [referring to his claims in early August of an impending NATO operations against Belarus]” and stated it is not economically feasible to retain large numbers of troops at maximum readiness.¹¹ The Belarusian Interior Ministry is additionally increasingly reframing its portrayal of protests, justifying arrests of protesters as efforts to “restore the normal life of citizens,” rather than previous claims of arresting protesters involved in a Western-backed coup.¹² Lukashenko is meeting Putin in Russia on September 14. Lukashenko is likely shifting his framing of the protests away from the Kremlin’s preferred narrative of a Western hybrid war against Belarus to reduce Putin’s leverage by refuting the Kremlin’s justification for the necessity of Russian involvement.

¹ <https://news.tut.by/economics/700287.html>; <https://news.tut.by/society/700204.html>.

² https://t.me/nexta_live/11068; <https://news.tut.by/economics/700287.html>.

³ https://t.me/nexta_live/11082.

⁴ https://t.me/nexta_live/11082.

⁵ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-expels-opposition-leaders-support-kremlin-information>.

⁶ <https://news.tut.by/economics/700287.html>; <https://news.tut.by/society/700204.html>.

⁷ <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9443563>; <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9440957>;

<https://news.tut.by/economics/700287.html>; <https://news.tut.by/society/700204.html>.

⁸ <https://news.tut.by/economics/700287.html>; <https://news.tut.by/society/700204.html>.

⁹ https://t.me/nexta_live/11113; https://t.me/nexta_live/11123.

¹⁰ <https://www.belta.by/society/view/ministr-oborony-belarusi-rasskazal-o-situatsii-vdol-zapadnyh-granits-i-reagirovanii-vooruzhennyh-sil-406520-2020/>.

¹¹ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/situatsija-na-zapadnoj-granitse-i-obschestvenno-politicheskaja-obstanovka-obsuzhdeny-na-soveschani-u-406516-2020/>; <https://www.belta.by/society/view/ministr-oborony-belarusi-rasskazal-o-situatsii-vdol-zapadnyh-granits-i-reagirovanii-vooruzhennyh-sil-406520-2020/>.

¹² <https://t.me/s/pressmvd>.