



Belarus Warning Update: Lukashenko Softens His Opposition to Protests, Seeking Leverage against Increased Russian Pressure

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By Mason Clark

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko met Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Russia, on September 14. Putin and Lukashenko made initial public remarks before meeting privately for nearly four hours.¹ Lukashenko has not traveled outside Belarus or met Putin in person since the August 9 election but has held several calls with Putin and hosted Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin in Minsk on September 3.²

Lukashenko sharply changed his framing to tacitly accept continued weekly protests but retained the threat of violence against protesters in response to an unspecified “red line.” Lukashenko markedly changed his framing of ongoing protests to downplay their threat in his public remarks. Lukashenko stated that Belarusians “live an ordinary life” on weekdays and claimed that on Saturday and Sunday “we release a part of Minsk so that people can, if they wish, walk through this part.”³

Lukashenko’s statement is a marked change from previous statements by the Belarusian government, which continues to decry the protests as illegal. Lukashenko’s statement additionally misrepresents Belarusian security forces continued beating and detention of protesters, as well as continued protests outside Minsk. Lukashenko claimed that reports of the protests as being more widespread are misrepresentations, telling Putin “you know as well as I” how “information confrontations and wars” distort protests.⁴ Lukashenko further downplayed the protests by stating they have not yet crossed the “red line,” which he compared to Putin’s “red line” in Chechnya. Lukashenko is likely opening the door to continuing protests while threatening demonstrators with brutal oppression if they go too far. Ordering Russian military operations against Chechen insurgents in the Second Chechen War, which killed tens of thousands of civilians, was among Putin’s very first acts as president.

Lukashenko likely seeks to steadily erode the scale of protests without a violent crackdown that could invite an immediate Kremlin intervention. Lukashenko began distancing his rhetoric on the protests from the Kremlin’s portrayal of the protests as a Western hybrid campaign in the week prior to his meeting with Putin.⁵ ISW previously assessed Lukashenko seeks to find a method to end protests without either making concessions to protesters or using lethal force, which would likely trigger a more direct Kremlin intervention to control the situation.⁶ Lukashenko is likely downplaying the scale of protests to minimize the threat of the opposition and – in a reversal of earlier claims of an impending NATO invasion to justify military deployments – seeks to justify a *lack* of a large-scale crackdown to the Kremlin.

Lukashenko likely assesses prior Kremlin support and his security forces’ efforts have managed the protests enough to secure his position, even if weekend protests continue. The Sunday protests continue to regularly exceed 100,000 participants, but other opposition efforts have largely failed: regular weekday protests have ceased since the first two weeks of protests; nationwide strikes ended in late August; telegram channel NEXTA’s efforts to spur protesters to create alternative state structures failed; and Lukashenko has successfully imprisoned or exiled every major opposition leader previously active on the ground in Belarus.⁷ Lukashenko will likely refrain from large-scale

crackdowns while continuing targeted detentions to steadily erode protester will. If Lukashenko is willing to allow protests to continue for months, he may hope that the arrival of winter will finally end them. His new rhetoric leaves open that possibility.

Putin successfully secured increased leverage over the Belarusian economy and security space. The Kremlin granted Belarus a \$1.5 billion state loan to maintain Belarus' economic stability and cement Belarusian economic reliance on the Kremlin.⁸ Belarusians withdrew approximately \$1 billion from bank accounts in August 2020 – 17 times as much as in the previous month.⁹ The financial strain of the August protests exacerbated the Belarusian economy's dependence on Russian subsidies.¹⁰ The Kremlin likely seeks to economically stabilize Belarus in the short term to maintain Lukashenko's control over Belarusian security services, and will likely leverage this economic pressure and the dependence of a large state loan to coerce Lukashenko into adopting more Kremlin-preferable policies.

Putin additionally secured an increased level of Belarusian military cooperation with Russia. The Kremlin doubled the length of the Slavic Brotherhood 2020 military exercises in Belarus – which began in Brest, Belarus, near the Polish border – from September 14 to September 25.¹¹ The exercises were originally planned to run from September 10-15 and included Serbian forces.¹² Serbian forces withdrew from the exercises a day before they were scheduled to begin on September 9 due to European Union pressure.¹³ In addition to this immediate exercise extension, Putin and Lukashenko agreed to hold “almost monthly” joint military exercises in both Belarus and Russia in 2021.¹⁴ Putin said Russian forces will return to their permanent home garrisons after these monthly exercises.¹⁵ The Kremlin will likely exploit regular exercises to increase its military presence in Belarus with the eventual aim of permanent basing, as well as maintain its framing of the necessity of Russian military deployments to counter NATO despite Lukashenko's increasing minimization of the NATO threat.

Putin likely secured a further roadmap of Belarusian integration. The Kremlin likely secured further, currently confidential concessions from Lukashenko during the September 14 meeting. Lukashenko made several conciliatory statements to increased integration with Russia, including stating Belarus must remain close to its “older brother” Russia and praising the Kremlin for demonstrating “the border of Belarus are the borders of the Union State” and thanking Putin.¹⁶ Lukashenko stated the Kremlin and Minsk “postponed” several agreements until the meeting between himself and Putin.¹⁷ Neither the Kremlin or Lukashenko has released a statement following the meeting as of this writing.

Putin directly threatened Lukashenko with the prospect of constitutional changes and continued Russian relations with Belarus “regardless of who is in power.” Putin called for “timely and expedient” work to “update” the Belarusian constitution and stated Russia will participate in the process “at the highest level,” a typical Russian diplomatic term for Minister-level consultations.¹⁸ Putin further stated Russia considers Belarus its closest ally and will fulfill its treaty obligations “regardless of who is in power” – directly threatening Lukashenko with the possibility of the Kremlin supporting his eventual removal from power.¹⁹ The Kremlin likely retains Lukashenko as its current preferred partner in Belarus but will likely seek to cement its dominance and potentially remove Lukashenko over time through involvement in constitutional changes. Lukashenko is unlikely to fully prevent the Kremlin's absorption of Belarus but will seek to slow the Kremlin's efforts.

¹ [https://tass\(\(.\)\)ru/politika/9456187](https://tass((.))ru/politika/9456187); [https://tass\(\(.\)\)ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9455045](https://tass((.))ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9455045).

² <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-pm-visits-minsk-as-belarus-looks-to-ally-for-help/30818225.html>.

³ [http://kremlin\(\(.\)\)ru/events/president/news/64031](http://kremlin((.))ru/events/president/news/64031); [https://www.belta\(\(.\)\)by/president/view/lukashenko-o-protestah-v-minske-poka-krasnye-linii-nikto-ne-narushal-406697-2020/?utm_source=belta&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=accent](https://www.belta((.))by/president/view/lukashenko-o-protestah-v-minske-poka-krasnye-linii-nikto-ne-narushal-406697-2020/?utm_source=belta&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=accent).

⁴ [http://kremlin\(\(.\)\)ru/events/president/news/64031](http://kremlin((.))ru/events/president/news/64031).

⁵ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-tries-control-protests-ahead-meeting-putin>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-resists-moscow%E2%80%99s-pressure-economic-integration>.

⁶ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-tries-control-protests-ahead-meeting-putin>.

⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-expels-opposition-leaders-support-kremlin-information>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-tries-control-protests-ahead>

meeting-putin; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-nexta-strategy-create-grassroots-organization-belarus-likely>.

⁸ [https://www.kommersant\(\(.\)\)ru/doc/4492168](https://www.kommersant((.))ru/doc/4492168).

⁹ [https://www.vedomosti\(\(.\)\)ru/finance/articles/2020/09/14/839796-ottok-sredstv-iz-bankov-belorussii-dostig-1-mlrd-na-fone-protestov](https://www.vedomosti((.))ru/finance/articles/2020/09/14/839796-ottok-sredstv-iz-bankov-belorussii-dostig-1-mlrd-na-fone-protestov).

¹⁰ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/02/russia-in-review-belarus-update.html>.

¹¹ [https://tass\(\(.\)\)ru/armiya-i-opk/9440765](https://tass((.))ru/armiya-i-opk/9440765)

¹² [https://tass\(\(.\)\)com/defense/1198433](https://tass((.))com/defense/1198433); [https://eng.belta\(\(.\)\)by/society/view/slavic-brotherhood-2020-exercise-to-be-held-at-brestsky-training-range-in-belarus-133255-2020/](https://eng.belta((.))by/society/view/slavic-brotherhood-2020-exercise-to-be-held-at-brestsky-training-range-in-belarus-133255-2020/).

¹³ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-lukashenko-begins-targeting.html>.

¹⁴ [https://www.interfax\(\(.\)\)ru/russia/726882](https://www.interfax((.))ru/russia/726882); [https://www.belta\(\(.\)\)by/president/view/lukashenko-putinu-my-ni-u-kogo-ne-dolzhen-sprashivat-provodit-ili-ne-provodit-u-nas-voennye-uchenija-406688-2020/](https://www.belta((.))by/president/view/lukashenko-putinu-my-ni-u-kogo-ne-dolzhen-sprashivat-provodit-ili-ne-provodit-u-nas-voennye-uchenija-406688-2020/).

¹⁵ [https://www.interfax\(\(.\)\)ru/russia/726882](https://www.interfax((.))ru/russia/726882)

¹⁶ [http://kremlin\(\(.\)\)ru/events/president/news/64031](http://kremlin((.))ru/events/president/news/64031).

¹⁷ [https://www.belta\(\(.\)\)by/president/view/nado-tesnee-derzhatsja-s-nashim-starshim-bratom-lukashenko-o-sotrudnichestve-s-rossiej-406703-2020/](https://www.belta((.))by/president/view/nado-tesnee-derzhatsja-s-nashim-starshim-bratom-lukashenko-o-sotrudnichestve-s-rossiej-406703-2020/).

¹⁸ [http://kremlin\(\(.\)\)ru/events/president/news/64031](http://kremlin((.))ru/events/president/news/64031).

¹⁹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-13/putin-doubles-down-on-belarus-ally-wary-of-protest-contagion?sref=Y0jVLcFo>.