



Belarus Warning Update: Belarusian Protest Movement Likely Developing Local Organization

September 27, 2020 5:00pm EDT
By Mason Clark

Belarusians marched in Minsk for the eighth straight Sunday on September 27, despite a lack of clear directions from prominent opposition leaders. Telegram channel NEXTA called for a “peoples inauguration” of opposition leader Svetlana Tikanouskaya in response to self-proclaimed Belarusian President Lukashenko’s secret inauguration ceremony on September 23.¹ Tikanouskaya congratulated Belarusians on the 50th consecutive day of protests on September 27 without mentioning an inauguration.² NEXTA’s calls did not result in any special protester action. Tikanouskaya likely intends to maintain influence with the ongoing NEXTA-led protest movement without tying herself to specific actions outside her control. Control of the Belarusian opposition remains split between NEXTA’s focus on active protests and Tikanouskaya’s promotion of international diplomatic efforts, undermining the focus of the protest movement.

Local protest organization may be supplementing NEXTA’s remote control of protester movements. NEXTA directed protesters to be flexible in response to security forces on the morning of September 27 without specifying a march route.³ Unlike several previous Sunday protests, NEXTA did not issue detailed march instructions to protesters throughout the day. Protesters changed the march route several times to avoid security force cordons amid internet outages and a large security presence.⁴ Belarusian protesters additionally demonstrated increasingly sophisticated tactics, such as forming human chains around the perimeter of the march to deter security forces and collaborating to prevent security forces from detaining isolated protesters.⁵ ISW cannot currently assess the likely structure or identities of local protest leaders. The emergence of local protest organizers will likely increase the sustainability of the protest movement. ISW previously forecasted Lukashenko’s campaign to detain or expel major Belarusian opposition figures would not reduce protester capacity.⁶

The Belarusian protest movement may diminish in size and shift to a new phase of sustainable, locally driven protests. Over 50,000 protesters marched in Minsk on September 27 but did not match previous protest sizes of over 100,000 participants.⁷ Bad weather and protester exhaustion may be degrading protester will. Belarusian security forces have not altered their approach compared to past weeks and are unlikely to have caused the reduction in protest size. Emergent local organization and smaller protests may indicate the start of a new phase in the Belarusian protest movement. The protest movement will likely sustain momentum, while Tikanouskaya and NEXTA may lose their dominant place in the opposition. The protest movement will likely develop a new, locally-based leadership which may refocus the opposition, or it may steadily erode in the absence of clear direction.

Belarusian security forces escalated their use of violence outside of Minsk but continue to refrain from direct confrontations with groups of protesters. Belarusian security forces continued to deploy in force in Minsk but refrained from directly confronting large groups of protesters. Security forces focused their detentions on isolated protesters the morning of September 27, before protesters could gather in force.⁸ Minsk police particularly targeted journalists – stopping them to document their phone numbers and warning that police could detain journalists for coming within 50 meters of interior ministry positions.⁹ Belarusian security forces employed more violent tactics outside of Minsk, however, using flashbangs and beating marchers at several small protests across the country.¹⁰ The Belarusian interior ministry denied using flashbangs against protesters while confirming the use of “special equipment,” referring to water cannons, in Gomel and Mogilev – likely in an attempt to intimidate protesters without drawing further international attention.¹¹ Lukashenko likely assesses he can more openly use violence against protesters outside of Minsk and seeks to intimidate protesters without needing to confront large crowds in Minsk.

Elements of Russia’s 1st Guards Tank Army continued unusually intensive exercises on September 27, while some Russian forces which deployed to Belarus for Slavic Brotherhood 2020 remain unaccounted for. The Kremlin claimed all Russian elements would leave Belarus after Slavic Brotherhood exercises ended on September 25.¹² The Russian Ministry of Defense has not provided evidence that battalion tactical groups (BTGs) of the Pskov-based 76th and Tula-based 106th Airborne Assault Divisions have departed Belarus as of this writing.¹³ ISW assesses these elements will likely leave within a few days and that different units will return to Belarus for the announced October exercises. Elements of the 27th Independent Guards Motor Rifle Brigade, a component of the 1st Guards Tank Army, conducted intensive exercises practicing dynamic defensive operations following the simulated use of enemy weapons of mass destruction.¹⁴ Russian units in the Western Military District are likely conducting a higher-than-normal pace of exercises to prepare to deploy to Belarus.

¹ [http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/warning-putin-remains-dissatisfied-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-concessions;https://t\(.\)me/nexta_tv/5370](http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/warning-putin-remains-dissatisfied-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-concessions;https://t(.)me/nexta_tv/5370); https://news.tut.by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1.

² [https://t\(.\)me/pulpervoi/169](https://t(.)me/pulpervoi/169).

³ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_tv/5370](https://t(.)me/nexta_tv/5370).

⁴ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1).

⁵ https://twitter.com/mbk_center/status/1309938053348315137; <https://twitter.com/oonuch/status/1310207575133216769>; [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1).

⁶ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-expels-opposition-leaders-support-kremlin-information>.

⁷ https://news.tut.by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1310208860712509440?s=20>.

⁸ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1).

⁹ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1).

¹⁰ https://news.tut.by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1.

¹¹ https://news.tut.by/economics/701941.html#ua:main_news~1.

¹² [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12314021@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12314021@egNews).

¹³ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-russia-and.html>.

¹⁴ [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12316335@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12316335@egNews).