Belarus Warning Update: Police Detain Demonstrators as Protests Escalate

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By George Barros

Belarusian authorities continued their new phase of violent escalation against protesters on October 11. Belarusian police detained at least 713 protesters on October 11, the highest single-day arrest total to date.¹

At least one thousand protesters marched in Minsk on Monday, October 12, a higher number than most Monday protests have seen.² Belarusian police cracked down on these marchers with stun grenades and tear gas, detained at least 186, and flew five to six Mi-8 transport helicopters over Minsk.³

Some Belarusian protesters began adopting aggressive barricade tactics evocative of the 2014 Ukrainian Euromaidan for the first time on October 12 although on a much smaller scale. Several dozen protesters created street barricades with burning tires, plastic traffic barriers, and human chains to block traffic in several Minsk neighborhoods the evening of October 12.⁴ Riot police dispersed and detained these protesters and dismantled barricades.⁵ This escalation will likely prompt self-declared Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko to further accelerate efforts to end protests before they can become more serious.⁶

Belarusian authorities warned they are prepared to use lethal force to suppress protests “if necessary” on October 12. Belarusian police reiterated they will not back down and claimed that protests in Minsk have become “organized and extremely radical” due to extremists seeking a color revolution.⁷ Authorities likely seek to persuade protesters to stop demonstrating rather than facing more forceful security force crackdowns.

Lithuania-based Belarusian opposition leader Svitlana Tikhanouskaya demanded Lukashenko’s resignation by October 25 on October 13. Tikhanouskaya also demanded that Lukashenko free political prisoners and end police violence by October 25.⁸ She threatened that protesters will take to the streets en masse to block roads and that employees of all state-owned enterprises will strike if Lukashenko does not comply.⁹ Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely ignore Tikhanouskaya’s demands.¹⁰ It is unclear that Tikhanouskaya can successfully marshal mass protests and strikes after October 25 given Lukashenko’s successful efforts to control protests and strikes so far.¹¹

The Kremlin suffered setbacks in the information operation surrounding its military exercises in Belarus.

Three planned participants withdrew from the Unbreakable Brotherhood Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) exercises in Belarus.¹² Armenia withdrew its participation on October 5 likely due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹³ Kyrgyzstan withdrew its participation on October 12 for unspecified reasons likely related to ongoing protests in Bishkek.¹⁴ Kazakhstan downgraded its participation in the exercises by sending only seven military officers as observers.¹⁵

It is unclear how many foreign military personnel deployed to Belarus given last-minute Kyrgyz and Kazakh withdrawals.¹⁶ The CSTO stated on October 7 that approximately 700 CSTO personnel would participate in Unbreakable Brotherhood after Armenia withdrew on October 5.¹⁷ The Russian Ministry of Defense stated on October 12 approximately 140 Russian personnel – likely elements of the Samara-based Second Combined Arms Army – from Russia’s Central Military District deployed to Belarus via military transport aviation at an unspecified “earlier” time.¹⁸ Russia similarly deployed armored vehicles, command and control, and chemical, biological,
radiological, and nuclear defense (CBRN), and mine-clearing equipment to Belarus via rail at an unspecified earlier time.19

Putin likely meant for Unbreakable Brotherhood to demonstrate his ability to marshal many former Soviet states into a cohesive military effort. It will instead likely be a smaller-scale version of the bilateral Russia-Belarus exercises held in September—a serious setback in Russia’s hybrid efforts.

The European Union added Lukashenko to its list of sanctioned Belarusian officials on October 12.20

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

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7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNkEeUhSTiU&feature=youtu.be; https://twitter.com/franakviora/status/1315644187967645696; https://t.me/nexa_tw/6473
12 https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12318949@egNews
16 The Kreml-in-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) stated on October 7 that approximately 700 CSTO personnel will participate in annual Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises in Vitebsk, Belarus, from October 12-16.
17 http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-will.html
19 https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12318949@egNews
20 https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12318949@egNews