



Belarus Warning Update: Promised Major Opposition Protest March Fizzles

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Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanouskaya failed to marshal large protester turnout for her so-called “People’s Tribunal” on December 20.¹ Tikhanouskaya called for the protest to be the opposition’s largest turnout when she announced it on November 13.² No more than a few thousand protesters marched as part of the “People’s Tribunal” protest in the 20th consecutive week of protests, far short of the tens and hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in some previous rallies.³

The low turnout is a significant setback for the opposition because it demonstrates the limits of Tikhanouskaya’s effectiveness as an opposition leader inside Belarus. ISW has previously assessed that Belarusian citizens will be less likely to continue following Tikhanouskaya’s leadership if her ability to marshal protesters continues to decline.⁴ Protest participation will likely decline further as the weather worsens, offering Tikhanouskaya little chance to redeem this disappointment.

Protesters continued their tactic of marching in small, local rallies scattered throughout Minsk and Belarus.⁵ The Viasna human rights group reported that Belarusian security forces arrested 157 protesters.⁶ Pro-regime demonstrators drove tractors in Minsk and were accompanied by traffic police.⁷ For the second Sunday, since protests began, police did not close metro stations and the government did not shut down the internet, indicating that officials did not expect the protests to be large or threatening to state authority.⁸

Tikhanouskaya announced the launch of a reporting system to let protesters submit evidence of the regime’s violence.⁹ The evidence is meant to allow lawyers to initiate criminal cases both abroad and in the “new Belarus.”¹⁰ Tikhanouskaya’s team announced that protesters registered 28 entries by the end of December 20.¹¹

Lukashenko is increasing legalistic and nonviolent methods of deterring protests. The Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) announced the creation of an internal database of protesters on December 20.¹² The database includes personal information about Belarusians identified as protesters since August 9. The MVD also arrested an 18-year-old organizer of the Telegram channel “Punishers Molodechno” on December 20 for disseminating the personal information of law enforcement officers.¹³

Lukashenko continues to open criminal cases in Belarus to threaten Tikhanouskaya and jailed opposition leaders. The Belarusian Prosecutor’s Office announced on December 21 that it has opened criminal cases against Tikhanouskaya, jailed opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova, opposition leader Pavel Latushko, and others for the creation of an extremist organization to seize power unconstitutionally.¹⁴ The Prosecutor’s Office said it would assess cases in which people—citizens or foreigners—rendered assistance to the “extremist group.”¹⁵ Lukashenko is likely amplifying his efforts targeting major opposition leaders in Belarus and abroad to undermine support for Tikhanouskaya further.

Tikhanouskaya seeks to leverage the US-based Belarusian diaspora to garner international support against Lukashenko and in favor of Belarusian protesters. Several organizations of the Belarusian diaspora signed a petition asking the US Congress, US President Donald Trump, and US President-Elect Joseph Biden to hold Lukashenko accountable for crimes against humanity in Belarus on December 21.¹⁶ Tikhanouskaya is likely attempting to expand the opposition's strategy to use international support to exert greater political pressure against Lukashenko. She may increasingly rely on this support as her main means of challenging Lukashenko inside Belarus if her ability to muster protest action inside the country continues to wane.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ The "People's Tribunal" is the opposition's call to protest against the impunity of Belarusian security forces who used violence against citizens; <https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1340555149010472961>

² <https://t.me/tsikhanouskaya/421>

³ <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1340620144347910146>; <https://apnews.com/article/alexander-lukashenko-belarus-elections-minsk-europe-f7701b01de37c4c4c3700c796bc27d75>

⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-will-increase-pressure-lukashenko-integrate-belarus-2021>

⁵ <https://tass.com/world/1237637>; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1340620144347910146>; <https://www.belta.by/incident/view/guvd-v-minske-za-uchastie-v-nesanktsionirovannyh-meroprijatijah-zaderzhany-okolo-100-chelovek-421028-2020/>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-demonstrators-detained-rally-lukashenka-resignation/31010031.html>

⁶ <https://spring96.org/be/news/101015>; <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-bilorus-protest-zatrymannya/31010178.html>; https://twitter.com/tutby/status/1340625292604391430?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1340625292604391430%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5ES1&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.radiosvoboda.org%2Fa%2Fnews-bilorus-protest-zatrymannya%2F31010178.html

⁷ <https://twitter.com/VoicesBelarus/status/1340575425139978240>; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1340596714907037696>

⁸ <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=265564>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/Tsihanouskaya/status/1340733333542678529>

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/Tsihanouskaya/status/1340733333542678529>

¹¹ https://t.me/tutby_official/20778

¹² <https://meduza.io/news/2020/12/21/mvd-belarusi-po-trebovaniyu-lukashenko-sostavilo-bazu-s-dannymi-protestuyuschih>; <https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1340931491396726785>

¹³ <https://www.interfax.ru/world/742157>; <https://www.belta.by/incident/view/mvd-soobschilo-o-zaderzhanii-administratora-destruktivnogo-telegram-kanala-421013-2020/>; <https://www.belta.by/incident/view/mvd-soobschilo-o-zaderzhanii-administratora-destruktivnogo-telegram-kanala-421013-2020/>

¹⁴ <https://people.onliner.by/2020/12/21/sozdanie-ekstremistskogo-formirovaniya-genprokuratura-vozbudila-ugolovnye-dela-protiv-latushko-tixanovskoj-i-drugix-opponentov-vlasti>

¹⁵ <https://people.onliner.by/2020/12/21/sozdanie-ekstremistskogo-formirovaniya-genprokuratura-vozbudila-ugolovnye-dela-protiv-latushko-tixanovskoj-i-drugix-opponentov-vlasti>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/Tsihanouskaya/status/1341031523663884293>