

# Kremlin Exploits Crisis to Secure Greater Russian Control of Belarus

Featuring Mason Clark and George Barros



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*Russian President Vladimir Putin has a longstanding objective to integrate Belarus into Russian-controlled structures. The Kremlin is undermining the Belarusian president's attempts to calm protests while simultaneously using the protest movement to justify Russian involvement in Belarusian affairs. This interference may enable Putin to deploy more Russian forces on NATO's eastern flank and advance Putin's campaign to reassert Russian control over former Soviet states. On this episode of Overwatch, Mason Clark and George Barros discuss the trajectory of the crisis and what the Kremlin seeks to gain from it.*

## **Jacob Taylor:**

This is *Overwatch*, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. ISW has been tracking the ongoing unrest in Belarus, publishing more than 60 reports on the crisis since mid-August. In that time, what began as an internal struggle between a president of questionable legitimacy and his disillusioned citizens, has turned into a multinational struggle with overt Russian involvement, and potentially severe ramifications for NATO members and the fundamental sovereignty of Belarus. Mason Clark and George Barros are with us today to talk about the status of the crisis and, crucially, what Russia seeks to gain from its involvement. Thank you both for being here today.

Mason, I'd like to start with you. Can you give us a quick overview of how this crisis began?

## **Mason Clark:**

Sure, Jacob. The current crisis began on August 9th of this year, when self-proclaimed Belarusian President Lukashenko blatantly stole an election. He's been in power for 26 years, and generally has kept a tight lid on the control of Belarus as a largely authoritarian state. However, discontent following the election led to mass protests and was rooted in Lukashenko's botched response to COVID-19 and overt repression of opposition figures earlier this year. So for the first time in Belarus's post-Soviet history, popular discontent led to mass protests. These protests have continued since August 9th but have steadily diminished in size, as Lukashenko has carried out a harsh crackdown against protesters and as the weather has worsened going into winter.

The ongoing protest movement, however, is actually not the most important story in Belarus, as of this time. The Kremlin has exploited Lukashenko's vulnerability to the protests and reliance on some Russian assistance to advance its efforts to gain control over Belarus through various means, including gaining additional control over Belarusian governance and military structures, which is an effort that Lukashenko continues to resist. While the protest movement is of course very key to watch, it's incredibly important not to lose sight of the Kremlin's ongoing efforts, which has potentially profound effects for Europe and NATO, by enabling the Kremlin to achieve a longstanding objective of gaining control of Belarus and potentially positioning military forces far closer to NATO's Eastern border.

## **Jacob:**

So, you say the Kremlin's involvement in Belarus has somewhat eclipsed the protest movement itself in terms of significance. What is the status of the Kremlin's campaign in Belarus?

## **Mason:**

So, as ISW has previously forecasted, the Kremlin has managed to exploit the fact that Lukashenko originally needed Kremlin assistance to deal with the protests. In early August it was much more unclear what exactly the scale the protests were going to be, and he was very worried about his ability to keep a handle on the ongoing protests. And the Kremlin has leveraged what began as this assistance to integrate Belarus into Russian-dominant-

ed structures. Throughout August and September, we saw several Russian actions, like deploying media personnel to help control the narrative inside Belarus, diplomatic support, likely Russian intelligence personnel traveling to Belarus, that helped Lukashenko get a handle on the situation earlier on.

However, all of this assistance meant that the Kremlin had increased influence in the country. And Lukashenko was not able to necessarily turn down further Russian assistance that the Kremlin wanted to offer for its own ends that Lukashenko wanted to push back on. Lukashenko has continued to resist these efforts by the Kremlin to essentially take control of management of the crisis. But the Kremlin has reached a major milestone this week regarding the Belarusian military, and continues to prevent Lukashenko from finding an off-ramp to the protests, which is essentially Lukashenko's current main objective; is to find a way to negotiate a way for a protest to end, without needing to concede even more of his authority to the Kremlin.

**Jacob:**

And you've said that he has already conceded some things. What things has Putin, by extension Russia, secured from Lukashenko and Belarus as of this recording.

**George Barros:**

Hi Jacob, this is George, I can take that. So this past week, on October 27th, Russia and Belarus's defense ministers met in Moscow and Lukashenko actually conceded to four key things. They agreed on the updated common military doctrine for the union state, which is, of course, Russia's desired international organization that is constituted of Belarus and Russia in order to try to regain control over Belarus. They completed the formation of a regional grouping of forces with Belarus. This is a military formation whose structure is currently unclear, but has been in the works since at least 2017. The Kremlin also agreed to hold more joint special exercises with Russia as they prepare to hold their next keystone annual exercise in 2021. And they agreed to create a unified regional air defense system. This is a risk that ISW forecasted back in September. Mason can talk more about the significance of the Russian effort to try to incorporate various former Soviet states into a Kremlin-dominated structures.

**Mason:**

Thanks George. So, as George alluded to, the Kremlin has an even broader objective spanning beyond just Belarus to regain dominance over the former Soviet Union. This is one of Russian president Vladimir Putin's key strategic goals, and he is seeking to do this through a number of mechanisms, primarily gaining control over military and economic structures in the other states, the former Soviet Union. He's leveraged various economic dependencies among former Soviet states to gain control. This was a big mechanism in his pressure on Lukashenko, as well as promoting the idea of essentially integrating the militaries of the former Soviet states into a cohesive whole, that the Kremlin can dominate. Now, the Kremlin seeks to gain this integration of former Soviet Union militaries into Russian-dominated structures by emphasizing interoperability across the militaries of the former Soviet Union, while of course being dominated by the Kremlin itself.

This idea of gaining control over the militaries of the former Soviet Union is a key part of Kremlin military thinking, which emphasizes coalition operations in future wars to support the Kremlin's concept of hybrid wars that will require other states beyond just conventional Russian forces. Belarus has long been a thorn in Putin's side in being able to secure this dominance over its forces. And he hasn't been able to have the same success in gaining control of Belarusian military structures that he has in other countries in Central Asia or in Armenia. But he's made new strides exploiting the ongoing protests in Belarus to gain this increased control over the Belarusian military that he's previously been denied.

**Jacob:**

You've both given some credit to Lukashenko for resisting the Kremlin's overtures in the past. But what specific-

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ly has he done about this pressure in the wake of this new crisis?

**Mason:**

That's a great question. So, Lukashenko is mainly trying to resist Putin's pressure to integrate by diffusing the protest without conceding to all of the Kremlin's demands. Because Putin, on the other hand, is exploiting the threat of these protests and, particularly by claiming, which Lukashenko has done as well, that they are backed by NATO, and Europe and the U.S., to essentially justify the deployment of Russian military forces, the increased integration of Belarus into Russian-dominated structures and that sort of thing that George has already talked about. So, what Lukashenko seeks to do is to diffuse these protests, not only to get rid of the obvious threat of recurring protests against him in the capital of Belarus Minsk every weekend, but to get rid of, essentially, this justification that Putin is using. Now, he actually planned to diffuse the protest on October 25th, likely by announcing constitutional amendments as a service-level concession to protesters, but didn't after Putin sent a senior intelligence director to Belarus, which likely derailed this plan. George, would you like to talk a little bit more about that?

**George:**

Sure, Mason. Over the past several months of the crisis Lukashenko has definitely cracked down very harshly and violently against protesters. But in the past couple of weeks we've noticed a different trend, where Lukashenko has been alluding to a series of various political concessions that he likely intends to employ to diffuse the protests to end the crisis. In recent weeks, Lukashenko has mentioned constitutional reforms and amendments, potentially a amendment on presidential term limits. Lukashenko promised reportedly to not seek reelection after his current term ends in 2025, and he's also promised a various number of economic social benefits to certain members of Belarusian society. We assess that these are the types of concessions that on October 25 Lukashenko was likely planning to announce.

The Belarusian opposition leader, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, likely planned her ultimatum for Lukashenko's resignation on October 25 in order to spoil that initial plan. This play by the opposition indicates that the opposition may have anticipated a risk, that Lukashenko might have been able to effectively discredit the opposition as well as end the protests. However, that doesn't take into full account the other actors that are involved in Belarus. Russian president Vladimir Putin right at this point in time, has an incentive for the protests to continue and not be diffused, as a successful play by Lukashenko to end the protest at this point in time, would be a strategic failure for the Kremlin's larger effort to regain control over Belarus.

**Jacob:**

Now with that said, did Putin's efforts to derail the opposition also undermine Lukashenko's strategy then?

**Mason:**

No. So, Putin likely bought himself more time to try to pressure Belarus into further integration using the threat of the protests, but has not ended Lukashenko's efforts to find his own offer essentially before the Kremlin can make him make these concessions. Lukashenko is pivoting to try and diffuse the protests, again with a similar play at constitutional amendments at what he is referred to as an upcoming Belarusian National Assembly meeting. Now, the date and exactly what this assembly meeting entails has not been announced yet, but he has already stated that constitutional amendments will be announced then and discussed. So he's continuing his outreach to the opposition to likely try and enact some form of constitutional amendments that he hopes will get protesters to go home and accept that, Lukashenko's concessions, which will probably be minimal, will be enough.

The Kremlin is likely going to try and intervene to prevent a solution to the protest that does not include Belarus' deeper integration with Russia, and may again pressure Lukashenko to not get through these constitutional amendments, as the Kremlin has repeatedly said that it seeks a part in what sort of constitutional amendments

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Belarus has going forwards, likely to enshrine its own influence in the country.

**Jacob:**

Doesn't the Kremlin want to end the protests though? We've previously said that Putin seeks to avoid a successful color revolution in a former Soviet country, in Belarus, but it seems like his actions are in some ways enabling the protests.

**Mason:**

Right, so the Kremlin is playing a game here where, agreed, that Putin absolutely does not want a revolution overthrowing and a minimal leader anywhere in the former Soviet Union. However, at this stage in the protest, the Kremlin likely assesses the protests, and ISW assesses as well, that the protests do not threaten Lukashenko anymore. The Kremlin's objective now is not to prevent a revolution overthrowing Lukashenko, losing Belarus to a more Western leaning government, or that thing that it may have originally feared, but to leverage Lukashenko current weakness to further integrate Belarus into Russia. It's a strategic failure for Russia, as George said, if Lukashenko is able to diffuse the protest without surrendering further Belarusian sovereignties to the Kremlin. So the Kremlin actually prefers ongoing protests to pressure Lukashenko and make him need to concede more to the Kremlin. This is not at all to say that the Kremlin is backing the protests and trying to directly overthrow Lukashenko, but it is very much in Putin's interest for there to continue to be this pressure on Lukashenko.

**Jacob:**

Critical to that though, why don't these protests threaten Lukashenko? Or why don't they threaten him anymore?

**George:**

At the beginning of the crisis, it was unclear what direction the protesters would take. It was unclear what kind of tactics they would employ, whether they would attempt to try to replicate similar tactics from the Ukrainian protests, at the Euromaidan in 2014. And so we paid a lot of very close attention to the nature and character of these protests. Over the course of the past two and a half months, ISW has observed that these protesters are not like the Ukrainian protesters. They're decreasing in numbers, they're likely not able to sustain their activities in their current form, they've not attempted to take government buildings or occupy squares or other strategic infrastructure. They failed to oust Lukashenko on October 25, which was the day of their big ultimatum and they're really just not that radical. The current wave of striking students and factory workers, they likely are going to continue diminishing in numbers, and the tactics that Lukashenko use to suppress these sort of strikes in late August, he's replicating now and they appear to be effective.

**Jacob:**

So, the two of you are clearly very well versed in this crisis. As of recording, you've published, I believe, 63 reports on the crisis in Belarus. And you have clearly a comprehensive understanding of what is going on there. At this time what do you believe the West should do in response to either Russian action or to the crisis in general? What should the U.S.' objectives be going forward?

**Mason:**

Sure, Jacob. It's certainly a difficult situation. So, the U.S. and Europe should continue to call out Putin's efforts to undermine Belarus's sovereignty and independence. Secretary of State Pompeo made a great statement recently, reaffirming that the U.S. commitment to supporting Belarusian sovereignty in the face of this Kremlin pressure to gain control over Belarus, as part of Putin's ongoing campaign to re-cement his control over the entire former Soviet Union. Of course, the U.S. should also continue to publicize Lukashenko's offenses against peaceful protestors, while not losing sight of the greater play being carried out here by Russian president Vladimir Putin.

**Jacob:**

Thanks Mason. George, do we have a final thought from you?

**George:**

I would also add that interested parties in the current crisis in Belarus should try to look beyond the headlines and Western media that tends to focus on the day-to-day dynamics of the protests, but really look further towards Vladimir Putin's efforts to try to use all of the distraction of the protests to strong arm Lukashenko into making a serious concessions that could potentially lead to the end of a sovereign and independent Belarus. Of course, this current information environment is very beneficial to the Kremlin's efforts, and people should be conscientious of that.

**Jacob:**

Thank you both for taking the time to unpack this crisis for us today, and for sharing your expertise and insight. Thank you.

**Mason:**

Great. Thanks for having us, Jacob.

**George:**

Thank you, Jacob. Always a pleasure.

**Kim Kagan:**

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit [www.understandingwar.org](http://www.understandingwar.org) to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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