

Mass protests in Belarus continue as conflict between Russia and NATO intensifies

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Hundreds of thousands of people have again taken to the streets in Belarus on Sunday to protest against President Alexander Lukashenko, who declared himself the winner of the August 9 elections. According to Russian and Belarusian press reports, last weekend's demonstration in Minsk was the largest to date, with more protesters in attendance than two weeks ago, when between 100,000 and 200,000 people participated. Tens of thousands also took part in protests in other cities across the country.

The demonstrations were fueled by opposition to an increasingly violent crack-down by the Lukashenko regime. Over the past days hundreds of protesters have been arrested. Among them were striking workers and dozens of journalists, including many reporters for international outlets. Correspondents from Reuters, BBC, Deutsche Welle, Associated Press and other international agencies and media had their accreditations revoked. Lukashenko threatened to call out the army against demonstrators.

In anticipation of Sunday's protests, the Lukashenko regime mobilized a large number of OMON and military troops and paramilitary formations of the interior ministry. Prisoner transport vehicles were parked in the city center. The residence of the president in Minsk was surrounded by heavily armed security and military personnel, as well as tanks. Like the Sunday before, Lukashenko was reportedly seen with an assault rifle.

At least 140 people were arrested, including a journalist for the Russian TASS press agency. The internet was shut down in Minsk for the entire duration of the protest. The German government summoned the Belarusian ambassador to discuss the revocation of accreditation for German journalists in Belarus.

The renewed mass protests followed days of growing tensions between Russia and the imperialist powers over the crisis in Belarus. On Thursday, Russian president

Vladimir Putin for the first time since the beginning of the mass strikes and protests openly declared support for Alexander Lukashenko.

He also publicly stated that he and Lukashenko discussed the formation of special security forces to help bring the situation in Belarus under control, if need be. However, so far, "there is no need" for such a force, Putin stated. This weekend, the Kremlin declared that Russia would recognize the August 9 elections as legitimate. On Sunday, Putin invited Lukashenko to Moscow in another phone call.

Russia and Belarus agreed on a \$1 billion loan for the Belarusian economy, which has been brought to the brink of collapse by the ongoing strike movement.

The shift in the Kremlin's attitude toward the Lukashenko regime, which thus far has been cautious, comes as the imperialist powers have stepped up their intervention in the Belarus crisis.

Putin's statements on Thursday came on the heels of a tour by US Deputy Secretary of State Steve Biegun, who initiated official discussions with opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in Lithuania the previous weekend. Biegun spoke to both the Lithuanian and the Ukrainian government before travelling to Moscow to talk with the Kremlin. Details of these discussions have not been published.

On Friday, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky declared that Ukraine would cut all diplomatic ties with Belarus.

Poland and Lithuania, which have been at the forefront of the NATO military build-up against Russia, have also stepped up their intervention in support of the opposition in Belarus. Two weeks ago, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki from the far-right Law and Justice party (PiS) announced an 11 million euro program in support of the opposition in Belarus. Lithuania declared this weekend that it would spend 150,000 euros to support

“civil society” and “independent media” in Belarus.

Opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has been in Lithuania since the presidential elections. She was invited to address the UN Security Council on Friday. On Monday, the Baltic states introduced sanctions against Lukashenko and 29 other officials of his regime.

These interventions by the imperialist powers and their allies in Eastern Europe are carried out under the fraudulent pretense of the defense of “democracy” and “human rights.” This rhetoric is a sham. The US government has been violently cracking down on protesters regularly within its own borders, and US president Donald Trump is openly inciting fascist violence against immigrants and peaceful demonstrators.

In Germany, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland and neo-Nazi terrorist networks enjoy the support of substantial sections of the political establishment and state apparatus. In Poland, free speech on Polish anti-Semitism and the Holocaust has been banned, and Ukraine and Lithuania are the two countries with the arguably most blatant state-sanctioned glorification of Nazi collaborators and the Waffen-SS in all of Europe.

What these governments are concerned about are not the democratic rights of the population in Belarus. Rather, they seek to exploit the crisis in the country to advance their geopolitical agenda against Russia. A comment in the newspaper *Vzglyad*, which is close to the Kremlin, noted that the imperialist powers have avoided intervening too aggressively in Belarus for fear of only strengthening the ties between Minsk and Moscow.

However, an escalation of the imperialist intervention in Belarus is actively being discussed in leading circles. A particularly aggressive comment by the German Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, a think tank with close ties to the German government, stated: “There should be clear communication with Moscow about both potential solutions but also the costs of an intervention [by Russia]. There is no reason to fear conflict: The EU is already long engaged in a conflict with Russia.”

The growing influence of China, which has established close relations with the Belarusian government, and is one of the largest investors in the country, is also a thorn in the side of the US and EU. A comment in the Russian *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on Steven Biegun’s visit to Moscow stressed that the US was concerned, above all, with the influence of China in Belarus and Europe more broadly.

At the same time, the imperialist powers are deeply concerned about the ongoing, three-week-long strike

movement in Belarus, and fear that Lukashenko’s violent crackdown will only further ignite the anger of substantial sections of the working class. These concerns are shared by the Russian oligarchy, which has suffered substantial economic losses because of the strikes and fears that they might spread to Russia.

While concrete numbers are not being reported, strikes at many key factories, including Belaruskali, the producer of 20 percent of the world’s potash, also seem to be ongoing. Last week, a section of teachers also walked-out. According to a report in the German *Handelsblatt* last week, the strikes at state-owned enterprises have cost the economy “billions of dollars,” sending the Belarusian ruble into “free fall.” The country’s GDP was less than \$60 billion in 2019.

Anders Aslund, a long-time operative of US imperialism in the region, noted on the website of the Atlantic Council think tank on Friday that Belaruskali, the fertilizer plant Grodno Azot, and the petrol refineries of Naftan and Mozyr, accounted for 68 percent of Belarus’s exports to the West in 2019. Belaruskali, Grodno Azot and Naftan have been centers of the strike movement. Aslund warned, “A prolonged strike at any of these four state-owned companies would collapse Belarusian export revenues and the Belarusian ruble, bringing Lukashenko to his knees. Nevertheless, the scale of the looming economic threat facing the country is not yet widely understood or appreciated. If the currency collapses, the real strife will start.”

The great danger is that workers who have now entered into struggle remain tied to one or another faction of the ruling class and become pawns in the machinations of imperialism. A genuine fight in defense of democratic rights must be tied to a struggle for social equality and against capitalism. Workers in Belarus can only carry this forward through a complete political break with all factions of the ruling class, and in close alliance with their class brothers and sisters throughout Europe and internationally.



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