

# Belarus protests: nationwide strike looms after 'people's ultimatum' rally

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## **Opposition leader calls for action on Monday as Lukashenko defies demand from 100,000 marchers in Minsk to step down**

Belarusian riot police launched another violent crackdown in Minsk on Sunday evening, throwing stun grenades into crowds of peaceful protesters, chasing people through courtyards and making arrests as they attempted to curtail the 11<sup>th</sup> consecutive Sunday of protest in the country.

At least 100,000 people marched through the centre of the Belarusian capital earlier in the day to give what they called a "people's ultimatum" to Alexander Lukashenko: step down, or face a nationwide strike on Monday that could cripple the economy.

Long columns of protesters, wrapped in the red-white traditional Belarusian flag that [has become the symbol of the protests](#), streamed through the city centre, shouting "resign!" and "strike!"

As usual, authorities cut off mobile internet across central Minsk, closed metro stations and placed cordons of riot police at key sites. Military and riot control vehicles were positioned throughout the centre and officers in balaclavas and wielding shields stood at almost every intersection, but they did not attack the crowds until the evening.

The human rights group Viasna said 216 people had been detained on Sunday. It was not immediately clear how many people had been injured in the clashes with police.

The [current wave of discontent](#) was prompted by Lukashenko declaring an overwhelming victory in August presidential elections that were widely believed to be rigged, and then [cracking down ruthlessly](#) on those who came out to protest.

In the first big rallies in August in response to the crackdown, euphoria and disbelief combined to create a heady excitement that Lukashenko's days were surely numbered. The authoritarian leader, who has been in charge for 26 years, has since made it clear he does not intend to give up power without a fight.

A number of opposition leaders have been forced out of the country or arrested over the past two months, and authorities have threatened to use live ammunition on protesters. The crowds on Sunday were still largely buoyant though, with several bands of drummers providing a thudding musical accompaniment and many people flashing victory signs.

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, [who stood against Lukashenko](#) after her husband was imprisoned, was able to act as a lightning rod for protest voters but was forced to flee to neighbouring Lithuania the day after the vote, having been given just 10% in the official tally. Tikhanovskaya has declared herself the legitimately elected leader from Vilnius, and has said she wants to oversee a transition period

before arranging a new, free election.

Tsikhaneuskaya called for Belarusians from Monday to block roads, shut down workplaces, stop using government shops and services and withdraw all money from their bank accounts.

“The regime once again showed Belarusians that force is the only thing it is capable of,” she wrote in a statement. “That’s why tomorrow, 26 October, a national strike will begin.”

Few in Minsk expect the strike to be successful, however. Strikes in August and September drew some support from workers at big factories but were soon crushed.

“I support the strike, but of course I’ll still go to work,” said Sergei, a 29-year-old sales assistant who was draped in a red-and-white flag at the protest on Sunday. “We need to get rid of Lukashenko, but I also need to keep my income.”

Whether or not the strike is a success, it is clear that Lukashenko has lost legitimacy among huge swathes of the population, and he appears to have little chance of regaining it. A counter-rally in central Minsk in his support was planned for Sunday but called off late in the week, ostensibly to avoid the risk of clashes with the opposition protesters. Most people felt the real reason was a fear that embarrassingly few people would show up.

Lukashenko does retain the loyalty of his security forces, however, and if the strike does not work, the question will be whether the protest movement, which has so far remained almost entirely peaceful, will radicalise or whether it will die down as a result of fatigue and the onset of winter. The renewed violence from authorities on Sunday evening may serve to galvanise the weary protest movement again.

The incumbent president has promised, alongside the threats, to launch a constitutional reform process. He even paid a visit to the KGB prison in Minsk this month for so-called negotiations with political prisoners in an attempt to win over part of the opposition. Many have dismissed the initiative as too little too late, but how events will play out remains uncertain.

“It’s impossible to predict what will happen in a few months. We don’t know what will happen with the economy, we don’t know where Russia will stand, and we don’t know how far Lukashenko will go with concessions,” said the Minsk-based political analyst Artyom Shraibman.

The US secretary of state, [Mike Pompeo](#), called Lukashenko on Saturday, one of the only conversations the Belarusian leader has had with a western politician since his controversial re-election. According to a description of the call published by Lukashenko’s team, the two men discussed “the internal political situations in both Belarus and the US”.

The EU has placed sanctions on many in the Belarusian regime since the protests began, and [Lukashenko has turned to](#). The Russian president is known to dislike Lukashenko but appears to have decided that propping him up is better than allowing a change of power to come from the street. The head of Russia’s spy agency, Sergei Naryshkin, flew to Minsk last week in one of many high-profile Russian visits.

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