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Protests in Minsk As Kudrin Warns Lukashenko

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Belarussian policemen blocking the sidewalk in central Minsk during a 1,000-member protest late Wednesday. **Vladimir Nikolsky**

MINSK — Up to 1,000 people turned out in the Belarussian capital, Minsk, on Wednesday in a rare protest against economic hardship.

Police sealed off Minsk's Oktyabrskaya Square close to President Alexander Lukashenko's main administration building, but several hundred people amassed in a largely silent protest in nearby streets all the same.

The protesters — replying to a protest call sharply critical of Lukashenko that was carried on social networking sites — carried no slogans, and they were largely silent apart from some rhythmic clapping of hands.

Police made no move to intervene against the protesters.

Motorists last week rallied in the center of Minsk in protest against a sharp rise in the price

of gasoline.

And on the weekend scores of people rallied on the border with Poland, before being dispersed by police. They were protesting against restrictions on the quantity of gasoline and other goods they could take out.

Belarus' central bank said Thursday that it will raise its benchmark refinancing rate to 18 percent from 16 percent from June 22. Tightening monetary policy was one of the steps agreed upon by Belarus and Russia this month when a Russian-led regional fund set up a $3 billion three-year lending program. However, just days before the deal was agreed upon, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko lashed out at Russian media, saying they were stirring panic about Belarus and threatened to evict them.

On Thursday, Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin warned Minsk that this attitude could prompt Moscow to review its financial commitments.

"We see curbs on media freedom, ... unfriendly moves toward Russian media," Kudrin said, Interfax reported.

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