

Lukashenko Nears Crunch Time, Opposition Says

July 06, 2011



Participants detained in a silent clapping protest flashing victory signs from a prison cell in Minsk on Wednesday. **Vasily Fedosenko**

MINSK — A Belarus opposition leader says the country's plight is so grave that protests against President Alexander Lukashenko will spread to his core supporters in factories and small and medium-sized business by the end of the year.

Vladimir Neklyayev, one of the few opposition leaders at liberty since a police crackdown on anti-Lukashenko protests after elections last December, foresees an autumn of discontent as a financial crisis begins to bite.

Economists and diplomats say the crisis, which has eaten up national reserves, forced a 36 percent devaluation of the Belarussian ruble and is driving high inflation for the consumer, will push up heating, public transportation and education costs.

A recent wave of "silent" protests against Lukashenko is led by young people who hope to tap into growing discontent at rising consumer prices and falling living standards.

For a month now they have been holding weekly "clapping" protests organized through social networking sites at which they call on people to simply gather on the streets and applaud.

Plainclothes police cracked down hard on the last demonstration in central Minsk on Sunday night, arresting about 300 people there and in other parts of the country.

Though protests have been held in other cities as well as the capital, there is no sign yet that they have made any inroads into Lukashenko's core support base among workers in the big factories and other key sectors of the work force.

Neklyayev, 65, who heads the Tell the Truth movement and was beaten and arrested in December after trying to demonstrate against Lukashenko's re-election with 80 percent of the vote, believes this could change.

"The economic situation will get worse very soon," he said in an interview at his party headquarters in central Minsk.

"This time the crisis has hit that segment of our society that potentially makes up the middle class, the most active people, the entrepreneurs, small and medium business that comprise the basis of any society. ... They will not go along with living in poverty," he said.

Neklyayev's views are in line with those of many Belarussians who believe that Lukashenko, despite his public bravado, could face upheaval unless he finds a way out of the balance of payments crisis.

In his four terms in power, he has pursued quasi-Soviet policies in which key production sectors remain in state hands while he guarantees full employment and a decent salary in exchange for loyalty at the ballot box.

But reckless wage and pension increases by Lukashenko's government before the December election led to a drain on dollar reserves and increased the current account deficit, triggering a balance of payments crisis.

Belarus needs billions of dollars to plug the gap and is now searching far and wide for external borrowing at favorable rates.

A Russian-led bailout fund has promised it \$3 billion over three years provided it sells off some key state enterprises — something Lukashenko is reluctant to do.

Belarus is also seeking \$3 billion to \$8 billion in new financing from the International Monetary Fund, although the United States and some of its Western partners are pressing Lukashenko to end the crackdown on the opposition before they will agree to new IMF aid.

"If a miracle does not happen and money does not appear, then there will be a social explosion in the autumn," Neklyayev said. "The money that people have accumulated will be gone by October-November. The state will not be able to fulfill its social obligations and that will lead to social explosions.

"I don't envy Lukashenko in this situation. He is virtually cornered. In order to avoid an explosion he has to go ahead and reform. Economic reforms are not possible without

political reform, and political reform will lead to him losing power," he said.

Neklyayev and several other opposition figures ran for president last December and won only a tiny share of the vote in an election denounced as flawed in the West.

Some of them are now serving jail sentences for their part in protests against Lukashenko. These include Andrei Sannikov, a former deputy foreign minister and co-founder of the Charter-97 rights organization, who is regarded as the most influential figure in the opposition. He is serving a five-year jail sentence.

Neklyayev was given a two-year suspended sentence. In the interview he dismissed a suggestion that he might be violating the terms of his sentence by some of his comments.

"In our country we don't have any laws or rules that will guarantee you freedom and immunity. Here you can do everything according to the law and still end up serving 10 years in jail," he said. "I was simply told that if I do something that is not right then I will end up in jail. But what that something is — well, no one told me."

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/07/06/lukashenko-nears-crunch-time-opposition-says-a8085>