

Belarussian President Says His Country Doesn't Need a Russian Military Base: Report

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Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko

MINSK — Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Tuesday his country did not need a Russian military base, appearing to make a rare concession to public protests before this weekend's presidential election.

In September, Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed a deal for a military air base on Belarussian territory and ordered defense and foreign ministry officials to start talks with Belarus.

"We don't need a base at the moment ... I hear shrieks from the opposition about the deployment of a Russian air base. I don't know anything about it," Lukashenko was quoted as saying by official news agency Belta.

On Sunday around 400 Belarussians protested against the base in central Minsk. They chanted

"the Russian base makes us a target" and "the Russian base is occupation."

Lukashenko has been ostracized by the West for most of his rule because of alleged human rights abuses and his clampdown on political dissent which has eradicated any real political opposition.

However, his disavowal of the Russian base suggests he could be currying public favor ahead of a presidential election on Sunday, although a victory for Lukashenko is in little doubt.

Lukashenko, who has been in power in the ex-Soviet republic since 1994, is standing for what will be a fifth consecutive term in office.

He has kept his country in a close strategic alliance with Moscow. However, he seeks to counterbalance the relationship with Moscow by making occasional overtures to the West.

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