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Russian Violinist and Conductor Spivakov Rejects Lukashenko Award Over Belarus Crackdown

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Vladimir Spivakov. **Vyacheslav Prokofyev / TASS**

Renowned Russian conductor and violinist Vladimir Spivakov will return an award from Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenko due to police violence against protesters in the days since Belarus' presidential election.

Spivakov, 75, condemned the police crackdown in neighboring Belarus in an open letter published by the independent Novaya Gazeta newspaper. More than 6,000 demonstrators have been detained, many with violence, in the days since Sunday's vote in which officials said Lukashenko won by a wide margin.

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"Today, my heart beats in unison with the people of the Republic of Belarus, who rightfully

demand respect for basic rights and freedoms, including the right to peaceful protests," Spivakov said.

"Therefore, in the current situation, I have to give up the order that you previously awarded me," he wrote to Lukashenko, describing the crackdown as "tyranny and endless examples of extreme cruelty."

Lukashenko awarded the Order of Francisc Skorina to Spivakov, the principal conductor and artistic director of the Russian National Philharmonic and the Moscow Virtuosi chamber orchestra, in 2014. Several Russian cultural, academic and political figures have also received the order, which recognizes services to art, literature and historical study in Belarus.

"I'm ashamed to wear it because it's associated with your rule. Your power of 'black [batons'] is your major weakness," Spivakov said in the open letter to Lukashenko.

Riot police used rubber bullets, tear gas and stun grenades to break up demonstrations in Minsk and other cities. They also patrolled residential areas, firing at vehicles and grabbing people hiding inside the entrances of apartment blocks, local media reported. Authorities in Belarus have confirmed two deaths among protesters.

Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Literature Prize, condemned the police violence and urged Lukashenko to go peacefully in her first interview since the protests broke out.

"Leave before it's too late, before you've thrown people into a terrible abyss, into the abyss of civil war," she told her longtime foe in an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Several Belarusian state television anchors have announced their resignations amid the crackdown on protesters. One military reporter said "never in my nightmares could I imagine that the troops and hardware could turn against their people."

A number of unverified videos showing Belarusian servicemen throwing their uniforms and berets in the trash in solidarity with anti-Lukashenko protesters have also surfaced.

AFP contributed reporting.

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