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Belarus Leader Replaces Security Chiefs as Russian Prime Minister Visits

By AFP

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While Russia and Belarus have close trade and military cooperation, Moscow seeks a deeper integration.
Mikhail Metzel / TASS

Belarus strongman Alexander Lukashenko on Thursday replaced his security chiefs and said progress was being made on plans to bring Moscow and Minsk closer.

Lukashenko, who is under huge pressure from protesters to step down after last month's disputed election, replaced the heads of the KGB security service, the security council and the state control committee.

The reshuffle was announced during the visit of Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, who became the most senior Moscow official to make a public visit to Belarus since the political crisis broke out over disputed polls on August 9.

Tens of thousands have taken to the streets for weeks in unprecedented protests against

Lukashenko's 26-year rule.

The mustachioed leader has refused to quit and has instead sought support from the Kremlin.

In recent years the Kremlin has pushed for closer economic and political integration between the two ex-Soviet countries but Lukashenko has so far resisted outright unification.

On Thursday, he indicated he might be open to bringing the nations closer.

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"We agreed" on issues on which Russia and Belarus "could not agree earlier," Lukashenko told Mishustin, adding that opposition protests were a "lesson" for the two countries.

"This lesson prompted us to make relevant conclusions," he said.

Lukashenko added he planned to "dot all the i's on issues that are very sensitive and delicate for the two states" when he meets Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow in the next few weeks.

Mishustin, who arrived with a large delegation in tow, hailed plans to tighten up ties.

"We see progress on many issues," he told Lukashenko, adding their future "union state" will help remove "unnecessary" trade barriers.

Belarus, an ex-Soviet state sandwiched between Russia and the European Union, has for years relied on Moscow for cheap oil and loans.

The two have formed a nominal "union" with close trade and military cooperation but the Kremlin has sought deeper integration.

London-based analyst Mark Galeotti suggested that the reshuffle indicated that the replacement of KGB chief Valery Vakulchik with Ivan Tertel, who until now headed the state control committee, had been done under pressure from Moscow.

"Ex-KGB chief Vakulchik had been a fierce guardian against Moscow penetration," he tweeted, adding Tertel had a better relationship with Russia's FSB security service.

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