The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Tens of Thousands March in Belarus Despite Police Threat to Open Fire

By AFP

October 18, 2020



Belarusians have taken to the streets every Sunday since their country's disputed presidential election.
Natalia Fedosenko / TASS

Belarusian police on Sunday detained more than 200 people as tens of thousands marched against strongman Alexander Lukashenko in defiance of police threats to open fire after weeks of demonstrations.

Crowds of demonstrators waving red-and-white opposition flags descended on a gritty industrial neighbourhood in southeast Minsk for a march along Partisan Prospect, a key transport artery and home to a number of factories.

Protesters took to the streets despite threats by police this week to use lethal force from now on "if necessary."

Some protesters chanted "Strike!" and "You and your riot police get out!"

Embed:

> Вот еще один ракурс на колонну протестующих, которая идет по Партизанскому проспекту. pic.twitter.com/SEVaL9xFjE
>
> — TUT.BY (@tutby) October 18, 2020

Belarusian authorities deployed military trucks and water cannon but police largely refrained from using riot control equipment on Sunday.

Belarusian interior ministry spokeswoman Olga Chemodanova told AFP that members of law enforcement fired off rubber bullets as a warning to protesters who threw stones at police.

Chemodanova said that more than 200 people were arrested, most of them in Minsk.

The ex-Soviet nation has been gripped by historic protests after Lukashenko claimed victory in August 9 elections over Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, a popular opposition candidate.

Protester Anzhela Krasovskaya said she was not afraid of authorities' threats to use live ammunition.

"There's no way back for us," Krasovskaya told AFP. "If they start shooting then there would be even more people in the streets."

'Unprecedented violence'

Pensioner Maria Petrovich said demonstrations would continue until Lukashenko quits.

"The level of violence perpetrated by the authorities is unprecedented," she told AFP.

Phone networks were heavily disrupted, and mobile operator MTS Belarus said it had been ordered to limit access to "ensure national security".

Tikhanovskaya, who was granted shelter in EU member Lithuania after the vote, has called on Lukashenko to quit power before October 25, warning he would otherwise face a crippling general strike.

Ahead of Sunday's protest, the 38-year-old urged Belarusians to press ahead with their demands.

"We will stop only when every political prisoner walks free, when members of law enforcement begin to defend the people, and rule of law and honest elections return to Belarus," Tikhanovskaya said.

'Descendants of glorious warriors'

The Nexta Live channel on social-media platform Telegram, which has coordinated

protesters, urged Belarusians to express solidarity with workers during the protest, dubbed the "March of Partisans."

"We, descendants of glorious warriors and partisans, are worthy of our forefathers who already defeated fascism once," the channel said in a message to its more than two million subscribers.

During World War II, Nazi-occupied Belarus had Europe's largest partisan movement.

The protest movement has kept up a series of large-scale demonstrations for the past two months, with 100,000 people or more taking to the streets every Sunday.

Tikhanovskaya, who maintains she won the August polls, says Lukashenko must release political prisoners and halt "state terror."

Related article: Belarus Police Threaten to Use Firearms on Protesters

Several people have died and thousands have been arrested in a post-election crackdown, with harrowing accounts emerging of abuse in jails. Many said they had been tortured, beaten and humiliated in detention.

Ahead of Sunday's march Ivan Tertel, head of the KGB security service, said provocations were being prepared to "destabilise the situation in our country."

Many said they supported Tikhanovskaya's call for a general strike, expressing hope that it could help end the current impasse.

"We have to push the situation forward," said student Oleg Demyanenko. "Many of my friends are ready."

Lukashenko, who has been in power for 26 years, has refused to step down and has secured backing from Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

The European Union has refused to recognize the results of the disputed vote. Last week EU foreign ministers agreed to impose sanctions on Lukashenko as the bloc seeks to step up pressure over the crackdown on protesters.

A Norwegian MP said Sunday he had nominated Tikhanovskaya and her two opposition coalition partners for the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize for organizing the peaceful protests.

Geir Toskedal, of the Christian Democratic Party, told the Vart Land daily he had nominated Tikhanovskaya, Maria Kolesnikova and Veronika Tsepkalo "for their struggle for fair elections and for inspiring peaceful opposition against the illegitimate regime in Belarus."

Kolesnikova is in jail, while Tsepkalo, like Tikhanovskaya, has left the country.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/18/tens-of-thousands-march-in-belarus-despite-police-threat-to-open-fire-a71785