

Belarus Opposition to Restart Protests as Crackdown Widens

By [AFP](#)

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Rallies erupted in Belarus last August after President Alexander Lukashenko claimed a sixth term in a vote the opposition and Western diplomats said was rigged. **Sergei Gapon / AFP**

Opposition activists in Belarus were preparing for fresh protests on Thursday to breathe life into a movement against President Alexander Lukashenko that fizzled out in the face of a severe crackdown.

The authorities were moving military vehicles into the center of the capital Minsk in preparation, according to videos circulating on social media and published by local media.

Rallies erupted in the ex-Soviet country last August after President Lukashenko claimed a sixth term in a vote the opposition and Western diplomats said was rigged.

But a sustained police crackdown saw weekly mass demonstrations in city centres peter out by the end of the year, with thousands of protesters detained and several killed.

The opposition has since changed tactics, calling for supporters to gather in small groups in every district.

The Nexta Telegram channel, which has mobilised and coordinated demonstrations, urged protesters to march through courtyards and organise flash mobs on Thursday.

It called on drivers across the country to sound their horns at 6:30 p.m. (15:30 GMT) and for a nationwide firework salute to end the day at 9:00 p.m.

"We want to declare March 25 the day when the cities are ours!" Nexta wrote.

The resumption of the protests coincides with Freedom Day in Belarus, which the opposition marks each year on the anniversary of the country's declaration of independence in 1918.

'Belarus we deserve'

Officials have said the planned protests are illegal and have moved to crack down on dissent this week, accuse a group representing Polish people in Belarus of stirring up racial hatred and the "rehabilitation of Nazism."

Police detained the head of the Union of Poles in Belarus, Anzhelika Boris, for 15 days on Wednesday and searched the group's offices, the homes of its activists and at least one Polish school.

Belarus's relations with Poland deteriorated after the EU member sheltered activists — including the coordinators of Nexta — who fled across the border to escape the crackdown.

Other critics, including opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, fled to Lithuania shortly after the August vote.

She has since lobbied Western governments to support her call for new elections in a country ruled by Lukashenko since 1994.

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"I wish for all of us to meet next March 25 in the Belarus we deserve — in a country where the law is respected, rights are respected and the people are respected," Tikhanovskaya wrote on her Telegram channel Thursday.

Western governments have slapped sanctions on Lukashenko and his allies and say political novice Tikhanovskaya was the true winner of the vote.

'Second wave'

EU Baltic states Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia on Thursday expanded sanctions against Belarus by slapping travel bans on more than 100 officials over the crackdown.

"The regime's supporters must realise that the response to the brutal use of force against peaceful citizens will be very strict and clear," Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius

Landsbergis said in a statement.

Lukashenko, backed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, has claimed to have overcome a revolution directed by the West.

More than 400 people have been given lengthy jail terms over the protests.

The crackdown has instilled fear and dampened risk-taking even in those "very keen on changes," said Alexander Klaskovsky, a Belarusian political scientist.

"They understand the price can be too high," he said.

Nexta has also called for mass protests on Saturday, casting it as "the day we start the second wave of street protests."

"Get ready to return to your city centers," Nexta wrote.

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