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Exiled Belarusian opposition politician Tikhanovskaya issues ultimatum to Lukashenko: Quit within 2 weeks or face mass unrest

By Bryan MacDonald

Is it a desperate last roll of the dice or the confident declaration of a woman poised to assume power? Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the runner-up in the disputed Belarusian election, considerably upped the ante with a bold warning.

The exiled former candidate, who believes the contest was rigged to prevent her from claiming victory, has announced that the opposition she aspires to lead from her Lithuanian exile intends to move to more active measures in two weeks' time, if her demands are not met.

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Tikhanovskaya insists that incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko must resign, law enforcement agencies should stop dispersing protests, and all arrested opposition figures must be released – including her husband Sergey and Maria Kolesnikova, the erstwhile co-leader of the summer protest movement in Belarus.

“We declare a national ultimatum on October 25,” she wrote on her Telegram channel. If the authorities fail to meet these demands, the opposition will organize strikes, block roads and call on supporters to stop purchasing goods in state shops, Tikhanovskaya said. These moves would be potentially devastating for the Belarusian economy if successfully implemented.

However, in many respects Tikhanovskaya's declaration seems unrealistic. Her last call for a nationwide general strike was barely heeded, and that came in mid-August, when feelings about the disputed election were raw and more intense than they are now. Viewed objectively, it suggests she actually fears her movement is running out of momentum.

Notably, Tikhanovskaya has recently taken on a close advisor from NATO's think tank

Atlantic Council, and it's reasonably likely that her maneuver has been encouraged by Western influencers. The activist concerned, Franak Viačorka, previously worked for the US state-run broadcaster RFE/RL and his presence on her team has raised eyebrows in Moscow, given Tikhanovskaya has publicly insisted she is not 'anti-Russian.' The open introduction of an Atlantic Council lobbyist to her team is astonishing given the outfit's raison d'être is to encourage a hostile stance towards Moscow.

One possible reason for the declaration is fear that Tikhanovskaya is losing control of the opposition momentum. On Saturday, Lukashenko held a surreal prison meeting with Viktor Babariko, who is widely thought to be Russia's favored alternative president if a transition takes place, and other jailed opponents. Babariko was initially the most prominent anti-Lukashenko candidate ahead of the August election, before he was barred from the race and arrested on dubious charges. Tikhanovskaya's rise to prominence was largely due to his absence.

Meanwhile, two prominent Belarusian opposition members, Anton Rodnenkov and Maxim Bogretsov, unexpectedly showed up in Moscow last weekend. Rodnenkov was last heard of when he was forcibly deported to Ukraine from Belarus last month, in the company of Kolesnikova, who ripped up her passport to avoid the same fate. He told Moscow newspaper Kommersant that he had subsequently returned to Minsk somehow and then traveled from there to the Russian capital.

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Nationwide demonstrations have engulfed Belarus since the August 9 presidential election. According to official results, Lukashenko won by a landslide, garnering 80.10 percent of the vote. Tikhanovskaya came in second, with 10.12 percent of the ballots. However, she refused to recognize the election's outcome and quickly left Belarus for Lithuania.

After the results of the exit polls were announced, mass protests erupted in downtown Minsk and other Belarusian cities. During the early post-election period, the rallies snowballed into fierce clashes between the protesters and police. The movement has continued for two months now, and mass anti-Lukashenko marches have taken place every weekend.

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