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[Home](#) > [News from Belarus](#) > [Police, Protesters Meet in Minsk Amid Warnings](#)

# Police, Protesters Meet in Minsk Amid Warnings

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By Aliaksandr Kudrytski and Emma O'Brien

Belarus police prevented about 1,000 protesters from entering a central square in the capital, Minsk, yesterday after President Alyaksandr Lukashenka warned the population against public demonstrations.

Heeding calls to rally against the government's handling of Belarus's economic crisis put out through social networking sites Facebook, Twitter and Russia's Vkontakte.ru, people gathered around the borders of October Square as police sealed it off with metal fences. Smaller protests took place in other cities, with about 180 demonstrators arrested in the southern city of Homel and 10 of around 300 protesters arrested in Brest, near the border with Poland, the Belapan newswire reported.

Lukashenka, whose regime was described by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2005 as "the last dictatorship in Europe," has banned price increases of more than 5 percent and has gone begging to Russia and the International Monetary Fund for loans as he seeks to resuscitate the former Soviet republic's struggling economy. Inflation in Belarus tripled to 13.1 percent in May, and the central bank was forced to allow a 36 percent devaluation of the ruble as the nation's foreign-currency reserves hit a 20-month low. The 16 percent benchmark rate is Europe's highest.

Messages on a Facebook group called "Revolution through a social network" told protesters in Minsk to "stand still" on October Square -- which is across a small park from the presidential palace -- and not to bring "flags or slogans." The Facebook page encourages members to protest in the square every Wednesday.

## Parade Rehearsal

Behind the police barricade, people who said they were students at the city's Academy of Physical Culture rehearsed for the Day of Independence parade scheduled for July 3. Several hundred protesters marched the two-kilometer (1.2-mile) route down Nezalezhnasci Avenue, one of Minsk's main arteries, to Victory Square to cheers from pedestrians and honking horns from passing cars. There were no reported arrests in the capital.

"My protest is 50 percent against the government and 50 percent against the way it handles the economy," said Michail, a 25-year-old retail worker at the protest who declined to give his last

name.

Lukashenka, whom the IMF has blamed for Belarus's economic woes by overspending prior to last year's election, told reporters in the country's Smaliavichy region yesterday that he was monitoring the protest movement, according to the state-owned Belta news agency.

"I will be looking at it and observing it and then will land such a blow that they won't even have time to run away across the border," Belta reported the president as saying.

The IMF said June 13 that Lukashenka's regime must agree to "structural reforms," including a free-floating ruble, to qualify for a new bailout package. Russia, which along with other former Soviet partners is lending Belarus \$3 billion, is demanding the government sell \$7.5 billion of state assets in order to receive the financing.

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