

## NEXTA Strategy to Create Grassroots Organization in Belarus Likely to Provoke Kremlin Response

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By George Barros

The NEXTA Telegram channel published its first public strategy for the protest movement on August 28. NEXTA released a “plan for victory” for the opposition on August 28 at 10:49 pm Minsk time.<sup>1</sup> NEXTA stated the plan’s purpose is to implement three “popular demands”: remove Lukashenko and enable new free elections; ensure the release of all political prisoners; and conduct fair trials for security personnel who abused detainees – in line with NEXTA’s preexisting stated goals.<sup>2</sup> NEXTA called for the opposition to unify behind Svetlana Tikhanouskaya and the Coordination Council, create activist networks inside Belarus, and implement six coordinated campaigns against Lukashenko.<sup>3</sup> Tikhanouskaya has not commented on NEXTA’s strategy as of this writing.

*The purpose of this update is to present and explain the NEXTA post rather than to evaluate its likely effects or effectiveness. ISW may offer such an evaluation in coming days if the NEXTA strategy appears salient enough to warrant further consideration and if it is not overtaken by events on the ground in Belarus or in cyberspace in the meantime.*

**NEXTA structured its plan through six coordinated campaigns and five forms of protester organization.** NEXTA called for activists to open six “fronts” against Lukashenko – labeling them the protest, economic, information, political, judicial, and international “fronts.”<sup>4</sup> Each of these “fronts” are structured anti-Lukashenko campaigns, several of which support each other and share overlapping objectives – analyzed synthetically below.

NEXTA additionally called for activists to create five “ministries” to organize coordinated opposition efforts and implement the campaigns.<sup>5</sup> The “ministries” are not formal organizations, but rather lines of effort for activist organization intended to generate cooperation and self-sufficiency for the protest movement.<sup>6</sup> NEXTA instructed individuals to choose campaigns they find appealing and work to start “systematic work in [your] chosen direction.”<sup>7</sup> The five “ministries” are:

- Ministry of Economy – to create a parallel economy to undermine the state-run system;
- Ministry of Solidarity – to provide social support, including employment, for protesters who have lost their jobs;
- Ministry of Medical Help – to provide healthcare to injured protesters and support doctors;
- Ministry of Social Protection – to coordinate charity and replace government services currently paid for by the Belarusian state;
- Ministry of Protection – to create groups to deescalate provocations at protests, carry out “local law enforcement,” and monitor Belarusian security forces.<sup>8</sup>

**NEXTA’s strategy seeks to unify the Belarusian opposition behind Svetlana Tikhanouskaya and her Coordination Council despite past disagreements between NEXTA and Tikanouskaya.** NEXTA stated it intends to “return the legitimate President Svetlana Tikhanovskaya to the country, hold new fair elections and achieve the adoption of a new Constitution.”<sup>9</sup> NEXTA previously focused on the Coordination Council over direct support of Tikhanouskaya and encouraged a more confrontational approach to protests. NEXTA is ceding its existing control over the opposition by encouraging local initiatives, encouraging decentralization away from NEXTA’s Telegram channel, and overtly backing Tikhanouskaya and her Coordination Council. However, NEXTA’s plan calls for more direct confrontation with Belarusian power structures than previously called for by Tikanouskaya (although it stops short of calling for violence) – retaining elements of NEXTA’s more assertive approach to ousting Lukashenko directly, rather than focusing on negotiations. ISW previously assessed the

opposition's unification would be a key first step for the opposition to consolidate a base from which to organize and optimize its activity.<sup>10</sup> NEXTA likely unified behind Tikanouskaya to prevent further splits in the opposition.

**NEXTA's strategy seeks to create sustainable grassroots activist networks inside Belarus under an umbrella activist organization.** NEXTA announced an overarching activist organization called the Belarusian People's Movement (BNR - Беларускі Народны Рух – an acronym that rhymes with the DNR and LNR, Kremlin proxies in Ukraine).<sup>11</sup> NEXTA claimed all opposition participants are already BNR members and called for protesters to “support local leaders you know, or become leaders.”<sup>12</sup> NEXTA directed Belarusians to create localized coordination Telegram chats for “your personal BNR group” and instructed BNR groups to establish intergroup networks with other regional BNR groups.<sup>13</sup> NEXTA has previously concentrated its efforts on protests in Minsk and encouraging nationwide protests. NEXTA likely seeks to spur the formation of grassroots organization to sustain the momentum of the protest movement and enable flexible, localized protest organization.

**NEXTA's anti-Lukashenko campaigns:**

**NEXTA's protest campaign seeks to develop decentralized protest planning capabilities and sustain regular weekly protests.** NEXTA's protest campaign calls for weekly national marches on Sundays and ongoing strikes by all workers, state employees, and students.<sup>14</sup> NEXTA likely intends to use its proven capability to direct individual Sunday protests to normalize large weekly marches. Protesters will develop their own local leadership and capability to organize large protests without NEXTA if NEXTA's protest campaign succeeds, enabling flexible protest goals. However, the emergence of local protester leadership creates additional risks. Belarusian authorities will likely be able to identify, target, and detain local protest leaders as it has with Coordination Council members.<sup>15</sup> Local protest leaders may additionally divide the opposition by pursuing diverse approaches and goals in the absence of effective centralized coordination – which NEXTA has not yet provided outside Minsk.

**NEXTA's economic campaign seeks to push Lukashenko into a liquidity crisis to force him to negotiate with the opposition.** NEXTA's economic campaign calls on Belarusians to: withdraw deposits from all state banks; stop paying taxes; stall utility payments; boycott food and textile purchases from state enterprises; and refuse commercial cooperation with the state.<sup>16</sup> NEXTA intends its “Ministry of Economy” to support this effort by using Telegram to create digital marketplaces where individuals may buy goods directly from each other, exchange currency, and maintain blacklists of pro-Lukashenko businesses to boycott.<sup>17</sup> NEXTA similarly intends the “Ministry of Solidarity” and “Ministry of Social Protection” to buttress this campaign by redirecting taxes deliberately not paid to the Belarusian state to help pensioners, orphans, the disabled, the elderly, and fired strikers. NEXTA's economic campaign, if successful, will erode Lukashenko's support base amongst groups dependent on state support, including security services. However, this campaign presumes the rapid emergence of a successful parallel economy and state structure – a lofty goal considering Belarus' historic lack of a civil society and opposition networks.

**NEXTA's judicial and political campaigns seek to erode remaining pro-Lukashenko support amongst Belarusian civilians and government officials.** NEXTA's judicial campaign calls Belarusians to: chronicle abusive detention experiences; investigate police abuses by collecting names and evidence of all personnel involved; publicize information about personnel who committed abuses.<sup>18</sup> NEXTA's political campaign calls Belarusians to: recall officials; withdraw en masse from state programs, such as pro-government trade unions and Belarus' Pioneers and Octoberists youth programs; and boycott mandatory pro-government meetings.<sup>19</sup> These campaigns, if successful, could degrade Lukashenko's support among the civilian population and government officials.

**NEXTA's information campaign seeks to reduce the audience of Belarusian and Kremlin information operations and expand a parallel opposition media space.** NEXTA's information campaign calls on Belarusians to: expand Telegram usage; increase use of social networks for communication; begin localized propaganda leaflet distribution; ignore compulsory subscription to Belarusian state newspapers; create regional content, and support independent journalists.<sup>20</sup> The Kremlin has supported Lukashenko with information support and

Russian media personnel since August 19.<sup>21</sup> Lukashenko is steadily eliminating space for independent journalism, moreover. The Kremlin and Lukashenko retain the capability to crack down harder on Belarusian journalists, impede opposition media, and could target Telegram.

**NEXTA's international campaign seeks to coalesce the Belarusian diaspora behind Tikhanouskaya and increase international pressure against Lukashenko.** NEXTA's international campaign calls on the Belarusian diaspora to: unify around Tikhanouskaya; create organizations and private foundations to support the opposition in Belarus; lobby their own governments to prevent Belarus from receiving any international support or funds; and support Belarusians with asylum and medical assistance.<sup>22</sup> This campaign supports two overarching efforts: the economic campaign's goal of pushing Lukashenko into a liquidity crisis and the effort to unify the opposition behind Tikhanouskaya. NEXTA likely intends to internationalize the cause of the Belarusian opposition and bring attention to its efforts.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3853](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3853)

<sup>2</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3853](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3853)

<sup>3</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3853](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3853)

<sup>4</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3853](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3853)

<sup>5</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3853](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3853)

<sup>6</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3853](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3853)

<sup>7</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852)

<sup>8</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3853](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3853)

<sup>9</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-opposition-continues-to-unify.html>

<sup>11</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852); [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3853](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3853)

<sup>12</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852)

<sup>13</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852)

<sup>14</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-announces-reserve-force.html> ;

<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-opposition-continues-to-unify.html> ; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenko-targets-opposition.html>

<sup>16</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851)

<sup>17</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852)

<sup>18</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852)

<sup>19</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851)

<sup>20</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3851](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3851)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-kremlin-backed.html>

<sup>22</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/3852](https://t.me/nexta_tv/3852)