



Kremlin Information Operations Intensify Condition Setting for Intervention in Belarus

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By George Barros and Mason Clark

The Belarusian opposition is developing a new weekly protest rhythm. No significant protests occurred in Belarus on August 31.¹ The size of weekday protests has decreased over the last two weeks from regular nationwide protests with hundreds of participants to scattered protests primarily in Minsk with dozens of participants. Belarusian President Lukashenko's renewed crackdown and detention campaign since August 26 and the inability of protesters to sustain missing work has likely deterred protesters.² The opposition will likely primarily use weekdays to plan and prepare for large Sunday protests.

The Kremlin is taking steps to gain direct control of, rather than suppress, Belarusian media. Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP)* appointed Russian journalist Marina Bunakova editor-in-chief of its Belarusian branch on August 31.³ Bunakova previously worked in *KP*'s main office in Moscow.⁴ Belarusian security forces halted the Belarusian *KP*'s printing at least two consecutive days, likely for providing coverage favorable to the anti-Lukashenko protests.⁵ Kremlin-linked businessman Grigory Berezkin owns *KP* and has previously taken ownership of outlets critical of the Kremlin.⁶ The Kremlin previously took control of Belarusian state television.⁷ The Kremlin will likely further seek to take control of Belarusian media to advance its framing of the crisis in Belarus.

The Kremlin sent a third covert flight to Minsk on August 30 potentially carrying personnel. An An-148 passenger plane belonging to Russia's Ministry of Emergency Situations flew from Moscow to Minsk on August 30 at 1:33am Minsk time.⁸ The plane spent approximately one hour in Minsk before leaving at 2:37 am, landing in Moscow at 3:45 am.⁹ ISW cannot confirm who or what arrived in Belarus on the flight, but has observed a pattern of Kremlin aircraft arrivals in Minsk punctuating new preparations for a Kremlin intervention in Belarus. Russian media personnel first appeared in Belarus on August 19 after a Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) plane landed in Minsk on August 18.¹⁰ Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the existence of a reserve police force ready to intervene in Belarus on August 27 after the same FSB plane visited Minsk again on August 26.¹¹ The Kremlin is likely maintaining flights to Minsk to send in key personnel and potentially equipment.

The Kremlin downplayed the scope of the crisis while continuing to blame NATO and the West for protests. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reiterated the Kremlin believes the situation in Belarus is under control and the Kremlin does not need to deploy a police reserve yet on August 31.¹² Putin and Lukashenko likely discussed the issue of sending Russian forces into Belarus in their August 30 phone call.¹³ The Russian Foreign Ministry accused the deputy chairman of the Estonian parliament's foreign affairs committee of trying to foment a "color revolution" in Belarus and falsely accused him of calling for NATO and the United States to intervene in Belarus on August 28.¹⁴ The Kremlin will likely attempt to obscure its ongoing efforts to manipulate perceptions to justify a Russian intervention by denying that intervention is necessary - while simultaneously preemptively justifying it.

Kremlin-run media outlets are increasingly discussing the benefits of a Russian intervention in Belarus. Evgeny Popov, co-host of the flagship "60 Minutes" program on the Kremlin-run channel *Russia 1*, began discussing the benefits of a Russian intervention in Belarus on August 27.¹⁵ Popov claimed Russia cannot allow "Poles,

Lithuanians, Americans, Estonians, Latvians [to] do anything they wanted in [Belarus].” Popov stated Russian involvement is “politically important” rather than “cynical,” as Belarus is both a “brotherly nation” and in Russia’s zones of political and national security.¹⁶ Another Kremlin-linked participant on the same *Rossiya 1* segment said, “I want not only Belarusians to profit from our interference, but Russians as well.”¹⁷ The Kremlin has previously used *Russia 1*, and particularly 60 Minutes, to criticize the Belarusian opposition and support Russian involvement.¹⁸ The Kremlin used similar talking points to justify Russia’s intervention in Ukraine in 2014. The Kremlin is increasingly preparing the Russian-language media space – covering both Russia and Belarus – to legitimize a potential Kremlin intervention.

Lukashenko proposed amending the constitution – a process the Kremlin will likely attempt to exploit. Lukashenko asked Belarus’ Supreme Court to work on constitutional amendments to “move society forward” on August 31.¹⁹ Peskov stated the Kremlin is prepared to help Belarus by sharing the Kremlin’s experience in writing constitutional amendments – a reference to the Kremlin’s changes to the Russian constitution in July 2020.²⁰ Lukashenko’s decision to revise the Belarusian constitution presents opportunities for the Kremlin to secure provisions granting Russia additional strategic basing rights in Belarus and provisions further institutionalizing the Union State. The Kremlin’s establishment of uncontested freedom of movement in Belarus would enhance Russian forces’ ability to threaten the Suwalki Gap and geographically isolate NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia from the rest of the alliance.²¹

Lukashenko is increasing pressure on state-owned enterprises to end strikes. Belarusian authorities compelled management at the Naftan oil refinery – which previously demanded Lukashenko’s resignation – to take “measures to cut costs in order to minimize the impact of the unfavorable external environment on the company’s performance” on August 27, likely a euphemism for firing strike leaders.²² Belarusian security services detained Anatoly Bokun, the strike leader at the Belaruskali potash fertilizers company, and sentenced him to 15 days of imprisonment on August 31 after detaining and releasing him on August 24.²³ Belarus’ oil export-dependent economy was already weak heading into the August protests due to the global oil price collapse from COVID-19 and Moscow’s economic pressure.²⁴ The strike movement is compounding these existing economic pressures. Lukashenko will likely continue targeted arrests against strike leaders and coerce state-owned companies to fire striking workers to maintain his economy and reduce protester support.

The NEXTA Telegram channel continues to advocate divestment from the state. NEXTA posted directions on August 30 at 12:11 Minsk time for teachers and students to strike.²⁵ NEXTA claimed the Belarusian education system is a corrupt extension of Lukashenko’s regime and asked parents to either send their children to private schools or homeschool them.²⁶ NEXTA asked Belarusians to stop providing donations to schools, withdraw students from extracurricular activities and field trips, and reiterated its earlier call to withdraw children from state-organized youth programs and events.²⁷ Most Belarusian families likely do not have sufficient resources to send their children to public schools or perform homeschooling. Belarusian students are scheduled to return to school on September 1. NEXTA is unlikely to compel a majority of Belarusians to abandon state schools on a single day of notice.

The Baltic States announced sanctions on Lukashenko and his inner circle. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania imposed an entry ban on Lukashenko and 29 other Belarusian officials on August 31.²⁸ The sanctions are unlikely to change Lukashenko’s repression campaigns or erode his determination to remain president, but they may encourage the EU to take more impactful sanctions. The Kremlin will exploit any Baltic or Western sanctions to claim the opposition is NATO-backed to justify Kremlin involvement.²⁹

Lukashenko and the Kremlin’s information operation may start targeting religious cleavages inside Belarus. Belarusian Border guards stopped Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, the head of the Catholic Church of Belarus, from returning to Belarus from Poland on August 31.³⁰ Kondrusiewicz, a Belarusian citizen, previously spoke out against Belarusian police brutality.³¹ Approximately six percent of Belarusians are Roman Catholics.³² Lukashenko and the Kremlin’s information operation may falsely link Belarusian Catholics to NATO-sponsored activity, leveraging historic Eastern Slavic animus towards Catholicism against the predominantly Roman Catholic Poland and Lithuania.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

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- ¹ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/10085](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/10085); [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/10073](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/10073).
- ² <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-opposition-continues-to-unify.html>.
- ³ [https://charter97\(.\)org/en/news/2020/8/31/391512/](https://charter97(.)org/en/news/2020/8/31/391512/).
- ⁴ [https://charter97\(.\)org/en/news/2020/8/31/391512/](https://charter97(.)org/en/news/2020/8/31/391512/).
- ⁵ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-kremlin-backed.html>.
- ⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-media-rbc-sale/russia-media-group-that-angered-kremlin-is-sold-idUSKBN1972KO>.
- ⁷ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-kremlin-backed.html>.
- ⁸ <https://www.flightradar24.com/data/flights/sum9608>; <https://www.jetphotos.com/photo/9434705>;
<https://www.radarbox.com/data/registration/ra-61717>.
- ⁹ <https://www.radarbox.com/data/registration/ra-61717>.
- ¹⁰ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>.
- ¹¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-announces-reserve-force.html>.
- ¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/08/31/world/europe/3ireuters-belarus-election-kremlin.html>.
- ¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/08/31/world/europe/3ireuters-belarus-election-kremlin.html>.
- ¹⁴ The deputy chairman only actually asked a rhetorical question on his Facebook page asking “what are the European Union and the United States doing?” [https://rus.postimees\(.\)ee/7036106/marko-mihkelson-poka-belorusy-boryutsya-chto-delayut-es-i-ssha](https://rus.postimees(.)ee/7036106/marko-mihkelson-poka-belorusy-boryutsya-chto-delayut-es-i-ssha);
[https://www.mid\(.\)ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEO2Bw/content/id/4303462](https://www.mid(.)ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEO2Bw/content/id/4303462).
- ¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xt6Kfh9XVz8>.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xt6Kfh9XVz8>.
- ¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xt6Kfh9XVz8>.
- ¹⁸ <https://rus.postimees.ee/7043519/simonyan-nazvala-tihanovskuyu-frikom-kotorogo-vybral-zapad>.
- ¹⁹ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/698705.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/698705.html); [https://sputnik\(.\)by/politics/20200831/1045588391/Lukashenko-vlast-budet-predlagat-peremeny.html](https://sputnik(.)by/politics/20200831/1045588391/Lukashenko-vlast-budet-predlagat-peremeny.html).
- ²⁰ [https://tass\(.\)ru/politika/9329937](https://tass(.)ru/politika/9329937); <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/07/russia-in-review-putin-deploys-new.html>;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/06/kremlin-escalates-in-ukraine-while.html>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/01/vladimir-putins-staged-power-play.html>.
- ²¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-russia-may-send-little-green.html>
- ²² [https://eng.belta\(.\)by/economics/view/kochanova-holds-naftan-supervisory-board-meeting-132966-2020/](https://eng.belta(.)by/economics/view/kochanova-holds-naftan-supervisory-board-meeting-132966-2020/).
- ²³ [https://www.lider-press\(.\)by/novosti/novosti-soligorska/20654-zaderzhan-sopredsedatel-stachkoma-belarus-kalij-anatolij-bokun](https://www.lider-press(.)by/novosti/novosti-soligorska/20654-zaderzhan-sopredsedatel-stachkoma-belarus-kalij-anatolij-bokun);
[https://interfax\(.\)by/news/policy/raznoe/1282292/](https://interfax(.)by/news/policy/raznoe/1282292/); [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/697923.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/697923.html).
- ²⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russia-review-belarus-update-lukashenko-uses-oil-tariffs-delay-integration-russia>.
- ²⁵ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_tv/3878](https://t(.)me/nexta_tv/3878).
- ²⁶ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_tv/3878](https://t(.)me/nexta_tv/3878).
- ²⁷ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_tv/3878](https://t(.)me/nexta_tv/3878).
- ²⁸ [https://tass\(.\)com/world/1195627](https://tass(.)com/world/1195627); <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-sanctions/baltic-countries-to-sanction-lukashenko-other-belarus-officials-idUSKBN25R0Z7>.
- ²⁹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>.
- ³⁰ [https://belsat\(.\)eu/en/news/roman-catholic-archbishop-and-belarusian-citizen-tadeusz-kondrusiewicz-denied-entry-to-country/](https://belsat(.)eu/en/news/roman-catholic-archbishop-and-belarusian-citizen-tadeusz-kondrusiewicz-denied-entry-to-country/).
- ³¹ [https://belsat\(.\)eu/en/news/roman-catholic-archbishop-and-belarusian-citizen-tadeusz-kondrusiewicz-denied-entry-to-country/](https://belsat(.)eu/en/news/roman-catholic-archbishop-and-belarusian-citizen-tadeusz-kondrusiewicz-denied-entry-to-country/);
<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/catholic-archbishop-of-minsk-calls-for-end-to-violence-after-belarus-election-38481>.
- ³² https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/belarus/#report-toc_section-I.