



The Kremlin Prepares to Further Integrate Belarus

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By George Barros

Warning forecast: Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's upcoming meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow may culminate in Lukashenko ceding more of Belarus' remaining sovereignty to Russia.

The Kremlin is conducting ministerial meetings with Belarus to set conditions to exploit Lukashenko's vulnerability at an upcoming meeting with Putin. The Kremlin confirmed Lukashenko will meet Putin in Moscow "in the coming weeks" on August 30.¹ Lukashenko will reportedly meet Putin around September 10.² Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow on September 2.³ Lavrov articulated some of the Kremlin's likely demands by expressing support for further formalizing Russia and Belarus' interactions in the Union State, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). All are Kremlin-dominated international organizations Moscow leverages to reconsolidate control over the former Soviet Union.⁴

The Kremlin is likely coercing Lukashenko to sign Union State roadmap agreements he previously refused to sign in December 2019. Lavrov confirmed Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin will visit Minsk on September 3.⁵ Lukashenko reportedly signed 28 of 30 Union State roadmaps for Belarusian integration into Russia by the end of 2019.⁶ The exact contents of the Union State roadmaps are classified, but Lukashenko's refusal to sign two final roadmaps on taxation and energy was reported in December 2019.⁷ Lukashenko has so far stalled Russia's absorption of Belarus via the Union State mechanism by stressing that Union State roadmaps' ratification is only possible as a package deal after every individual roadmap has been agreed upon.⁸ Lukashenko will not be able to use this argument to stall further if he signs the final two roadmaps.

The Kremlin will likely deepen its military footprint in Belarus by exploiting the false narrative of external threats to the Union State. The Belarusian Defense Ministry (MoD) confirmed Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin's participation in a prescheduled defense ministerial along with member states of the CIS, CSTO, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Moscow on September 4.⁹ The MoD stated Khrenin's participation will confirm Belarus' "adherence to its commitments in the framework of international organization" and will "contribute to the gradual development of military cooperation."¹⁰ Khrenin will discuss "consolidation of efforts to prevent the threat of the outbreak of wars" and "further strengthening military cooperation" at this ministerial.¹¹

The Kremlin likely seeks to open additional strategic basing in Belarus despite Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov's denial on September 2.¹² Moscow has made multiple unsuccessful attempts to open a strategic airbase in Belarus since 2015.¹³ ISW forecasted the Kremlin would coerce Lukashenko to permit the Kremlin freedom of movement, strategic basing, and advanced anti-access area denial systems in Belarus based in part on the continuing information operation focusing on a non-existent NATO security threat to Belarus.¹⁴ The Kremlin alternatively may deprioritize securing additional basing in Belarus until after it secures control over Minsk, however.

The Kremlin began a new information operation accusing Ukrainian neo-Nazis of operating in Belarus on September 2 without offering any evidence for this claim. Lavrov claimed the Kremlin gained intelligence that approximately 200 Ukrainian nationalist “extremists” are operating in Belarus to support and “introduce force elements” after his meeting with Makei on September 2.¹⁵ Lavrov stated Russian and Belarusian security services should “deal with [Ukrainian nationalists in Belarus] more substantively.”¹⁶ Lavrov offered no evidence supporting these claims. The Kremlin used disinformation about Ukrainian neo-Nazis to justify Russian military intervention in Ukraine in 2014.¹⁷ This is the first time a senior Kremlin official has explicitly accused Ukrainian personnel of covertly operating in support of the Belarusian protests. Lavrov likely made this statement to justify future Russian intervention into Belarus.

Lukashenko and the Kremlin continue to accuse NATO falsely of a military build up. Lavrov repeated this accusation on September 2.¹⁸ Belarus introduced reciprocal sanctions against Estonia, Latvian, and Lithuanian officials on September 1 in response to their initial sanctions against Lukashenko and his inner circle on August 31.¹⁹

Lukashenko confirmed that Russian media personnel are supporting him in Minsk, and the Kremlin is attempting to obfuscate their involvement. In an interview to Kremlin media outlet *RT* Lukashenko thanked *RT* journalists for coming to Belarus saying, “You were so important to us in this tough period.”²⁰ Lukashenko’s *RT* interviewer interjected, saying, “I’d like to remind everyone that we didn’t replace anyone” – a reference to when Russian media personnel took control over Belarusian state media after Belarusian state journalists went on strike on August 19.²¹

There were no significant protests in Belarus on September 4. Protesters held small spontaneous protests in Minsk on September 4.²² Belarusian authorities dispersed some demonstrations and detained some protesters.²³ These protests were consistent with the weekday protest pattern ISW has observed.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63966>

² https://www.newsru.com/blog/02sep2020/mos_luk.html; <https://dni.ru/polit/2020/9/2/458507.html>;
https://udf.by/news/main_news/217768-10-sentjabrja-belorusskij-prezident-priedet-v-moskvu-tam-budut-proishodit-jeti-samyerokove-peregovory.html

³ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4307980;
https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4308361

⁴ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4307980;
https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4308361

⁵ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4307980;
https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4308361

⁶ <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/09/02/nazvany-usloviya-torga-lukashenko-s-rossiye.html>;
<https://belaruspartisan.by/politic/511004/>; <https://openmedia.io/news/n3/lukashenko-zhdut-v-soyuzena-vstreche-glav-rossii-i-belorussii-vstanet-vopros-o-zavershenii-integracii/>

⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/russia-review-belarus-update-lukashenko-uses-oil-tariffs-delay-integration-russia>;
<https://www.uawire.org/lukashenko-refuses-to-kneel-every-new-year-s-before-putin>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-lukashenko-russia/leader-of-belarus-dismisses-fears-russia-could-swallow-his-country-idUSKBN1Y9iDU>;

<https://atlanticsentinel.com/2019/12/lukashenko-isnt-interested-in-belarus-russia-union/>;
<https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/04/russia-resumes-limited-oil-supplies-to-belarus-amid-stalled-talks>

⁸ <https://rg.ru/2020/04/02/semashko-rossiia-byla-est-i-ostanetsia-osnovnym-soiuznikom-belarusi.html>;
<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4310726>; <https://interfax.by/news/policy/vneshnyaya-politika/1277048/>

⁹ <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/105359/>

¹⁰ <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/105359/>

¹¹ <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/105359/>

¹² <https://tass.ru/politika/9349497>; <https://www.rosbalt.ru/russia/2020/09/02/1861559.html>

¹³ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>;
<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/06/10/2015/5613ebe59a794769839c9e3f>; <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1501418>;
<https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2019/11/14/12811502.shtml>

¹⁴ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-russia-may-send-little-green.html>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg2hfda3nOE&feature=youtu.be>; [https://meduza\(.\)io/news/2020/09/02/lavrov-zayavil-o-200-ukrainskih-ekstremistah-na-territorii-belarusi](https://meduza(.)io/news/2020/09/02/lavrov-zayavil-o-200-ukrainskih-ekstremistah-na-territorii-belarusi); [https://lenta\(.\)ru/news/2020/09/02/vseoni/](https://lenta(.)ru/news/2020/09/02/vseoni/); [https://tvrain\(.\)ru/news/lavrov_v_belarusi_nahodjatsja_200_natrenirovannyh_ukrainskih_ekstremistov-515378/?from=rss](https://tvrain(.)ru/news/lavrov_v_belarusi_nahodjatsja_200_natrenirovannyh_ukrainskih_ekstremistov-515378/?from=rss); <https://nv.ua/world/geopolitics/protesty-v-belarusi-lavrov-zayavil-chto-demonstrantov-finansiruet-ukraina-poslednie-novosti-50109694.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg2hfda3nOE&feature=youtu.be>; [https://meduza\(.\)io/news/2020/09/02/lavrov-zayavil-o-200-ukrainskih-ekstremistah-na-territorii-belarusi](https://meduza(.)io/news/2020/09/02/lavrov-zayavil-o-200-ukrainskih-ekstremistah-na-territorii-belarusi); [https://lenta\(.\)ru/news/2020/09/02/vseoni/](https://lenta(.)ru/news/2020/09/02/vseoni/); [https://tvrain\(.\)ru/news/lavrov_v_belarusi_nahodjatsja_200_natrenirovannyh_ukrainskih_ekstremistov-515378/?from=rss](https://tvrain(.)ru/news/lavrov_v_belarusi_nahodjatsja_200_natrenirovannyh_ukrainskih_ekstremistov-515378/?from=rss); <https://nv.ua/world/geopolitics/protesty-v-belarusi-lavrov-zayavil-chto-demonstrantov-finansiruet-ukraina-poslednie-novosti-50109694.html>

¹⁷ https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/02/russian-disinformation-distorted-reality-in-ukraine-americans-should-take-note-putin-mueller-elections-antisemitism/>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-41915295>

¹⁸ [https://www.mid\(.\)ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4308361](https://www.mid(.)ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4308361)

¹⁹ [https://tass\(.\)ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9350557](https://tass(.)ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9350557); [https://112\(.\)ua/mir/ssh-mogut-vesti-sankeii-protiv-7-belorusov-a-takzhe-protiv-rf-esli-ona-vvedet-voyska-v-belarus-548460.html](https://112(.)ua/mir/ssh-mogut-vesti-sankeii-protiv-7-belorusov-a-takzhe-protiv-rf-esli-ona-vvedet-voyska-v-belarus-548460.html); [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>.

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/mjluxmoore/status/1301042771390758912>

²¹ <https://twitter.com/mjluxmoore/status/1301042771390758912>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-kremlin-backed.html>

²² [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/10311](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/10311); [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/10310](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/10310); [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/10309](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/10309); [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/10308](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/10308); [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/10302](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/10302); [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/10300](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/10300); [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/10352](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/10352); [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/10351](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/10351)

²³ https://twitter.com/Den_2042/status/1301221144004042753