



Lukashenko Begins Targeting the Kremlin Ahead of Meeting Putin

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By George Barros

Belarusian authorities formally imprisoned opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova – the last prominent opposition leader active in Belarus – and charged her with calls to incite a coup d’etat on September 9.¹ Belarusian law stipulates imprisonment for two to five years for this charge.² Belarusian authorities abducted Kolesnikova in Minsk on September 7 and failed to expel her to Ukraine on September 8.³ Kolesnikova previously stated her openness to working with the Kremlin and expressed support for constitutional reforms.⁴ Lukashenko may have detained Kolesnikova in order to disrupt Kremlin efforts to undermine Belarus’ sovereignty via constitutional amendments.⁵

Lukashenko began balancing against Kremlin pressure in the information space on September 8 to push back on Kremlin efforts to absorb Belarus.

Belarusian state media agency *Belta* reported statements from Lukashenko promoting Belarusian independence from Russia on September 9. *Belta* provided new framing on September 9 from Lukashenko’s interview with four senior Kremlin propagandists in Minsk on September 8.⁶ *Belta* reported Lukashenko said he began renegotiating the Union State integration roadmaps with Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2019 because “it is impossible to realize the integration” of Belarus and Russia stipulated in the 1999 Union State Treaty “today.”⁷ Lukashenko argued times have changed and two new generations of Belarusians value Belarus’ sovereignty.⁸ Lukashenko framed his negotiations with Putin on Union State integration as a question of the extent of integration; Lukashenko said Russia and Belarus’s deep integration in economic, military, and other affairs do not impede both states’ sovereignty.⁹ Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov reacted to *Belta*’s reporting by flatly denying the Kremlin wants to “swallow up” Belarus on September 9.¹⁰

***Belta* reported Lukashenko said the Kremlin would likely attack Belarus if Belarus withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and joined NATO.**¹¹ Lukashenko did not threaten to leave the CSTO but spoke about a hypothetical situation in which Belarus leaves the CSTO. Lukashenko has not mentioned either leaving the CSTO or joining NATO since the protests began on August 9. Lukashenko – in concert with Kremlin media – has repeatedly accused NATO of threatening a hybrid war against Belarus and the Union State.¹² Lukashenko likely intended to highlight the Russian military threat to Belarus in such a hypothetical scenario (which no prominent Belarusian leader has advocated) for two reasons. First it serves as a reminder to the opposition and the West that Russia will not allow Belarus to leave its orbit and that such ideas should not be considered or advocated. Second, it puts more prominently in the minds of Belarusians the idea that Russia could be a military threat to Belarus, thereby possibly giving him more leverage to push

back against Putin's efforts to absorb Belarus by quietly supporting the emerging antibodies to such absorption.

A previously-announced Putin-Lukashenko summit in Moscow is being delayed. Russian state-owned wire *RIA Novosti* reported on September 9 Lukashenko and Putin would meet in Moscow on September 14.¹³ Peskov denied the meeting will occur on September 14, saying it is too early to know when the meeting will take place.¹⁴ Previous reports had claimed Lukashenko and Putin would meet on September 10.¹⁵ Lukashenko may have chosen to resume balancing against the Kremlin at this time to gain leverage in preparation for his meeting with Putin in Moscow and after expelling most of Belarus' opposition leaders, cracking down on protesters, and securing loyalty inside his security services.¹⁶ The Kremlin will still likely attempt to extract serious concessions from Lukashenko, such as constitutional amendments formalizing the Union State and additional Russian military basing rights in Belarus.¹⁷ Putin may be delaying the meeting in response to Lukashenko's most recent actions to reset the conditions for the discussion more in his favor.

Lithuania-based opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanouskaya's rhetoric is becoming increasingly hostile towards the Kremlin in response to deepening Russian intervention. Tikhanouskaya published a video appeal to Russians citizens urging them to not believe "lies" from "Russian propaganda" on the events in Belarus on September 9.¹⁸ The Kremlin's overt support for Lukashenko began pushing the Belarusian opposition into an anti-Russian direction for the first time on September 3.¹⁹ ISW previously forecasted Russian involvement in Belarus risked turning the protest movement against the Kremlin.²⁰ Conflict amongst Lukashenko, the Kremlin, and the opposition in the information space over Belarus will likely intensify.

Lukashenko attempted to continue his campaign to detain opposition organizers still active in Belarus on September 9. Security personnel in civilian clothing arrived at the apartment complex of Belarusian poet laureate Svitlana Alekseievich – the last member of the Presidium of the opposition Coordination Council free in Belarus – and likely intended to arrest her on September 9.²¹ The personnel did not access Alekseievich's apartment and diplomats from Lithuania, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Sweden gathered in Svitlana Aleksievich's apartment to protect her from abduction.²² Lukashenko will likely continue efforts to detain or exile remaining opposition leaders.

Serbia canceled its participation in the prescheduled Slavic Brotherhood 2020 military exercises in Belarus a day before they are set to begin. Serbian Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin stated Serbia is a militarily neutral country and suspended all foreign military exercises for six months on September 9.²³ Planning for the Slavic Brotherhood 2020 September 10-15 exercises has been underway since at least December 2019.²⁴ Vulin said political pressure from the EU compelled this decision.²⁵ Serbia's withdrawal from the exercises indicates the Kremlin faces setbacks in its influence over Serbia, as ISW forecasted in April 2020.²⁶ Other leaders of Kremlin-amenable states will likely grow increasingly cautious over close ties with the Kremlin in response to the Kremlin's overt pressure on Lukashenko. The Kremlin may still attempt to use the exercises to infiltrate Russian forces into Belarus.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30829274.html>

² [https://kodeksy-by\(.\)com/ugolovnyj_kodeks_rb/361.htm](https://kodeksy-by(.)com/ugolovnyj_kodeks_rb/361.htm)

³ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-lukashenko-deports-opposition.html>

4 <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarusian-opposition-reaches.html>;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-kremlin-linked-belarusian.html>;
<http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>; <https://tass.ru/politika/9329937>.

5 <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-lukashenko-deports-opposition.html>

6 <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-otvetil-na-vopros-o-vozmozhnoj-glubine-integratsii-s-rossiej-406063-2020/>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-chem-mozhet-obernutsja-vyhod-belarusi-iz-odkb-406057-2020/>

7 <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-otvetil-na-vopros-o-vozmozhnoj-glubine-integratsii-s-rossiej-406063-2020/>;
https://censor.net/ru/video_news/3218364/integririvat_belarus_i_rf_v_sootvetstvii_s_soyuznym_dogovorom_nevo_zmojno_lukashenko_video

8 <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-otvetil-na-vopros-o-vozmozhnoj-glubine-integratsii-s-rossiej-406063-2020/>;
https://censor.net/ru/video_news/3218364/integririvat_belarus_i_rf_v_sootvetstvii_s_soyuznym_dogovorom_nevo_zmojno_lukashenko_video

9 <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-otvetil-na-vopros-o-vozmozhnoj-glubine-integratsii-s-rossiej-406063-2020/>;
https://censor.net/ru/video_news/3218364/integririvat_belarus_i_rf_v_sootvetstvii_s_soyuznym_dogovorom_nevo_zmojno_lukashenko_video

10 <https://tass.com/politics/1198933>

11 <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-chem-mozhet-obernutsja-vyhod-belarusi-iz-odkb-406057-2020/>;
https://censor.net/ru/video_news/3218347/lukashenko_ne_isklyuchaet_agressii_rf_protiv_belarusi_v_sluchae_ee_v_yhoda_iz_odkb_video

12 <https://hromadske.ua/ru/posts/lukashenko-privel-armiyu-v-boevuyu-gotovnost-na-granice-s-es-v-nato-govoryat-cto-sily-ne-narashivayut-i-nikakoj-ugrozy-net>; <https://www.interfax.ru/world/722395>;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-lukashenko-deports-opposition.html>

13 <https://ria.ru/20200909/lukashenko-1576973944.html>

14 <https://iz.ru/1058617/2020-09-09/kreml-nazval-nesvoevremennymi-soobshcheniia-o-vizite-lukashenko-v-moskvu-14-sentiabria>

15 https://www.newsru.com/blog/02sep2020/mos_luk.html; <https://dni.ru/polit/2020/9/2/458507.html>;
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16 <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-lukashenko-deports-opposition.html>

17 <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-kremlin-prepares-to-further.html>

18 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2eI_6eF8O6s&feature=emb_title&ab_channel=%D0%A1%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%BB%D1%8F%D0%B6%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BD%D0%B8

19 <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-belarusian-opposition-begins.html>

20 <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-kinetic-intervention-belarus-through-new-information>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/warning-kremlin-announces-reserve-force-prepared-intervene-belarus>

21 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30828988.html>

22 <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5f58e3f59a79478185af7fb8>;
<https://twitter.com/AnnLinde/status/1303643890185121794>

23 https://www.blic.rs/a-m-p-article?uuid=b9761321-ae4f-475f-85f1-b13657c4ddae&type=article&id=PULS_CMS-Article-b9761321-ae4f-475f-85f1-b13657c4ddae&gem_id=zD5KuD.iD9sJXrRF68I7qMeyLVT8XRtC9_EdQkpe1HD.37&tpv=MOBILE_VESTI/POLITIKA&tdv=BLIC_RS/blic/vesti/politika/ART&__twitter_impression=true

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<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2837915.html>;
<http://www.vs.rs/en/news/1472F895256C11EABEE30050568F5424/discussions-on-military-cooperation-between-serbia-and-belarus>

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26 <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/04/russia-in-review-kremlin-faces-setbacks.html>