

NEXTA Telegram Channel Divides Protests in Minsk as Lukashenko Prepares for Crackdown

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By Mason Clark

Telegram channel NEXTA has disrupted the August 23 protest in Minsk. NEXTA unexpectedly changed plans for today's march in Minsk's Independence Square by directing protesters to instead move toward Belarusian army positions at Victory Park around 4:00 pm local time, a move that could be portrayed as intended to provoke a confrontation with the Belarusian military.¹ Representatives of opposition presidential candidate Svetlana Tikanouskaya's Coordination Council arrived and asked protesters to move away from security forces, defusing the situation. As the crowd was beginning to draw back at 5:50 pm local time, NEXTA issued new instructions directing protesters to march on Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's palace, approximately one mile northwest of Victory Park.² Thousands of protesters began moving up the road toward the palace. The Belarusian military quickly began assembling defensive positions in front of the palace.³ After 30 minutes, as protesters were nearing the palace, NEXTA issued new instructions asking protesters to disperse and return to Independence Square, the original stated focus of the Sunday protests.⁴ NEXTA claimed Lukashenko is currently in the Presidential Palace and planning an evacuation.⁵ Protesters remain in place around the Presidential palace.⁶

Lukashenko is likely preparing for a crackdown on protesters. Lukashenko's press office released footage of Lukashenko arriving at the Presidential Palace via helicopter and emerging in a bullet proof vest and carrying a rifle.⁷ Belarusian riot police are taking up positions around Independence Square.⁸ Belarusian military units remain in place both in front of the Presidential Palace and in front of Victory Park. Lukashenko is likely framing himself as a strongman in preparation for a crackdown.

As of 7:30 pm local time, protesters are now divided and the original plan for the Sunday rally – a key policy statement by Tikanouskaya's Coordination Council – has been disrupted. Protesters are now spread out across much of northern Minsk, instead of the original NEXTA plan of concentrating in Independence Square. Representatives of Tikanouskaya's Coordination Council began making statements in front of Independence Square calling for continued protests and for Lukashenko to step down.⁹ This was likely an ad hoc decision to attempt to refocus on the protests after NEXTA divided them by directing protesters to move toward security forces. The net effect of NEXTA's instructions will have been to thin out a massive crowd that Belarusian security forces will likely be able to disperse and crush if Lukashenko so chooses.

NEXTA is overtly dividing the protest movement and weakening Tikanouskaya's Coordination Council.

NEXTA changed plans for the Sunday march with no notice, despite previously promoting the protest as a stationary demonstration in Independence Square. NEXTA's action was not prompted by security concerns, as security forces had made no attempt to prevent the crowd from gathering in Independence Square or to disrupt or disperse once it had gathered there. NEXTA has increasingly asserted its control over the Belarusian protest movement in direct competition with Svetlana Tikanouskaya and her Coordination Council.

NEXTA has demonstrated the capability to organize and direct protests. NEXTA amplifies nationwide protests and tactically directs the physical movement of protesters in Minsk. NEXTA first issued tactical instructions to an ongoing protest on August 17, when it directed protesters toward a Belarusian detention facility without further instructions.¹⁰ NEXTA demonstrated increasingly precise and timely control on August 23, issuing several directions to protesters to move away from previously planned demonstrations in Independence Square, then march toward two separate concentrations of Belarusian security forces, and finally to go back to Independence Square. On both August 17 and August 23, NEXTA disrupted the plans of Tikanouskaya's key representatives in Minsk, Maria Kolesnikova and Olga Kovalkova, forcing them to follow NEXTA's lead in efforts to prevent confrontations with security forces.

NEXTA's actions reinforce elements of the Kremlin's information operation in Belarus intentionally or unintentionally. NEXTA has clearly demonstrated its ability to direct protests several times during the day, to choose and revise protesters destinations, and to disrupt Tikanouskaya's plans. Several of its decisions – including diminishing the influence of the Coordination Council, directing protesters toward a World War II memorial, potentially provoking confrontations, and militarizing the rhetoric of the protests – advance the Kremlin's information operation in Belarus.

ISW is monitoring the situation and will provide further updates.

¹ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-violent-confrontation-between.html>.

² https://t.me/nexta_live/9327.

³ https://t.me/nexta_live/9333.

⁴ https://t.me/nexta_live/9338.

⁵ https://t.me/nexta_live/9344.

⁶ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697738.html>

⁷ https://twitter.com/Belsat_TV/status/1297575613876916224?s=20.

⁸ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697738.html>; https://t.me/nexta_live/9361;

⁹ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697738.html>.

¹⁰ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-telegram-channel-nexta-provokes.html>.