

## Lukashenko and NEXTA Apparently Move Toward Confrontation After Sunday Protests

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By Mason Clark

**Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko militarized his response to protests the evening of August 23.** Lukashenko made a staged propaganda trip to the Presidential Palace in Minsk the evening of August 23. He and his 15-year-old son arrived via helicopter in military gear carrying rifles.<sup>1</sup> Lukashenko briefly toured the barricades around the Presidential Palace and spoke with security personnel, who shouted “we’re with you until the end!”<sup>2</sup> Lukashenko’s press office released a video as he departed Minsk via helicopter in which Lukashenko can be heard commenting “look at how the rats [referring to protesters] scatter.”<sup>3</sup> Belarusian authorities cut internet access in Minsk for the duration of Lukashenko’s visit.<sup>4</sup> Lukashenko’s press secretary issued a statement that Lukashenko was “controlling the situation” and directing security forces (who were predominantly stationary) throughout the day and falsely claimed protesters “literally ran” when security forces deployed.<sup>5</sup> Belarusian security forces did not take any action against protesters on August 23. Lukashenko likely made the trip to frame himself as a strongman in the face of mass protests. Lukashenko will likely increasingly militarize his response to protesters in the coming week.

**Telegram Channel NEXTA issued two posts the evening of August 23 seeking to consolidate its control over the protest movement.**

**NEXTA published the eight talking points the leaders of Tikanouskaya’s Coordination Council were supposed to make in their planned speech on Independence Square.**<sup>6</sup> NEXTA claimed the Coordination Council was unable to make its statement because security forces “blocked the transport of the equipment” to the Planeta Hotel. The Coordination Council intended to make its statement in Independence Square, however. NEXTA directed protesters toward the Planeta Hotel and Belarusian security forces before the Council began speaking, forcing it to reposition itself to the Planeta.<sup>7</sup> The published talking points reiterated the existing demands of the protesters – acceptance of Tikanouskaya’s electoral victory, Lukashenko’s resignation, an end to abuses by security forces, and an ongoing nationwide strike – and made a new call to begin an unspecified procedure to recall deputies of the Belarusian legislature and local councils. The Coordination Council did not make an independent statement the evening of August 23. NEXTA thus successfully took control of events from the Coordination Council by redirecting protests, disrupting the Council’s attempt to present its talking points in person, and then releasing the talking points itself.

**NEXTA additionally issued a second post framing the Sunday protests as a clear indicator that Lukashenko will eventually fall.** NEXTA claimed 250,000 protesters marched in Minsk and, while admitting that “not everything went to plan,” claimed the Sunday march demonstrated Lukashenko has lost his nerve. NEXTA stated the August 23 protests proved Lukashenko’s government will not survive “and even Lukashenko himself understands this, grabbing his weapon.” NEXTA concluded “the only question is how many weeks are left until the end,” framing the protests as an ongoing struggle to fully drive Lukashenko out. The message concluded by stating NEXTA will issue instructions for August 24 and the next few days tomorrow morning – August 24.

**Lukashenko and NEXTA are both framing August 23 as a turning point toward a confrontation.** Lukashenko will likely continue to militarize his framing of his response to the protests and claim that he has demonstrated he retains the support of security forces. NEXTA asserted its control of the protest movement at the expense of Tikanouskaya and the Coordination Council. NEXTA is newly framing the protests as purely a struggle to oust Lukashenko, differing from the Coordination Council’s attempts at dialogue and emphasis on peaceful protest. These converging framings will lead to further rhetorical clashes in the coming week with an increasing likelihood of violence.

ISW is monitoring the situation and will provide further updates.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://t.me/belta\\_telegramm/16009](https://t.me/belta_telegramm/16009).

<sup>2</sup> [https://t.me/belta\\_telegramm/16017](https://t.me/belta_telegramm/16017).

<sup>3</sup> [https://t.me/pul\\_1/1377](https://t.me/pul_1/1377).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30798610.html>; <https://www.facebook.com/aibelarus/posts/3147355055319014>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://news.tut.by/economics/697768.html>.

<sup>6</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_live/9386](https://t.me/nexta_live/9386).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-nexta-telegram-channel-divides.html>.