

Lukashenko Targets Opposition Leadership with Non-military Kremlin Support

August 25, 2020, 5:30 pm EDT

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President Alexander Lukashenko effectively dispersed limited protests on August 25. Belarusian security forces dispersed protests across Belarus on August 25. Lukashenko resumed dispersing protests on August 24, but Belarusian security forces have not used violence against protesters since August 13. NEXTA's call for Belarusians to gather at the Investigative Committee to support opposition leader Pavel Latushko only drew a small number of protesters. The Investigative committee released Latushko after interrogating him for 3.5 hours and forcing him to sign a non-disclosure agreement.¹ An estimated 5,000 protesters gathered without interference on Independence Square in Minsk from 6:00 pm to approximately 9:00 pm local time.² The Belarusian government organized a parallel pro-Lukashenko rally across the city in the Komarovsky market. Security personnel and several popular singers made speeches in favor of Lukashenko.³ Security forces detained small numbers of protesters in Minsk the evening of August 25 after protests ended.⁴ Security forces successfully deterred most protests and dispersed the remainder with little violence. Belarusian security forces likely seek to contain the scale of protests through intimidation and targeted detentions, rather than risking full-scale crackdowns.

Lukashenko is increasingly targeting opposition leaders. Belarusian authorities sentenced Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ) strike leader Sergei Dvlevsky and opposition leader Olga Kovalkova – both members of opposition leader Svetlana Tikanouskaya's Coordination Council – to ten days in prison for organizing illegal gatherings on August 25.⁵ Belarusian riot police detained Dvlevsky and Kovalkova on August 24.⁶ Dvlevsky and Kovalkova will be held in the Akrestin St detention facility, a location the opposition associates with the physical abuse of detainees. The Belarusian Constitutional Court additionally ruled Tikanouskaya's Coordination Council illegal on August 25.⁷ Lukashenko likely seeks to intimidate protesters through targeted detentions with Kremlin support.

The Kremlin is supporting Lukashenko externally despite claiming it sees no need to intervene. The Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC) dismissed Exarch of Belarus and Metropolitan of Minsk Zaslavsky Pavel and replaced him with Bishop Benjamin of Borisov and Maryingorsk on August 25.⁸ Metropolitan Pavel previously called on Lukashenko to halt violence and met with released detainees. The Kremlin often leverages the Russian Orthodox Church as a foreign policy tool and likely replaced Pavel to sideline him after his support for protesters.⁹ Russian authorities detained fugitive Belarusian investigator Andrey Astapovich in Pskov, Russia, without a formal extradition request from Belarusian authorities on August 21.¹⁰ Astapovich previously quit the Investigative Committee of Belarus and posted his desire to "kick out the dictator [Lukashenko]" on social media.¹¹ Russian state-media outlet *RT* is additionally overtly supporting Lukashenko's crackdown on protesters, running English-language stories on August 25 claiming Western media does not cover the point of view of the security forces.¹² The Kremlin will likely increasingly support Lukashenko externally – through media support and detention of opposition supporters – despite claiming it is not involved in Belarus.

Lukashenko mobilized the Belarusian military reserve for the first time. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced on August 24 it brought all military units to the highest level of combat readiness, including calling up unspecified units of reservists.¹³ This is the first time Lukashenko has attempted to mobilize the reserve since protests began. Belarus' reserve had approximately 289,500 personnel as of 2019.¹⁴ Several Belarusian veterans have supported the opposition protests by recording themselves throwing away their uniforms.¹⁵ Lukashenko likely retains the support of the majority of the security forces, but risks exposing fissures by calling up reservists who may oppose him.

Opposition leader Svetlana Tikanouskaya is likely losing influence over the protest movement despite outreach to the EU. Tikanouskaya spoke to an emergency session of the European Parliament via video call on August 25,

during which she thanked EU states that did not recognize Belarus' elections.¹⁶ Tikanouskaya reiterated she seeks to use the Coordination Council to negotiate with Lukashenko to hold new elections.¹⁷ Lukashenko is unlikely to engage with Tikanouskaya despite her outreach. Tikanouskaya risks losing influence over the situation on the ground as her representatives in Belarus are detained.

The Kremlin continues to maintain flexibility toward the opposition and seeks to prevent Western engagement in Belarus. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun in Moscow to discuss Belarus on August 25.¹⁸ The Kremlin claimed Biegun said the US does not want to create an “artificial crisis” in Belarus.¹⁹ The Kremlin claimed both parties agreed they are interested in establishing a dialogue between Lukashenko and the opposition.²⁰ The US State Department has not yet released a readout of the meeting. Lavrov accused Poland and Lithuania of attempting to provoke violence in Belarus due to their “dissatisfaction” in how the situation in Belarus is “normalizing.”²¹ The Kremlin will likely continue to portray Poland and Lithuania as engaging in “foreign interference” in Belarus to frame the protests as illegitimate and justify a possible intervention. The Kremlin is likely maintaining the possibility of outreach to the opposition as a stalling tactic but sees no direct interest in supporting Tikanouskaya over Lukashenko.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://reform.by/158797-latushko-dejatelnost-koordinacionnogo-soveta-budet-prodolzhena>.

² <https://news.tut.by/economics/697957.html>; <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30801246.html>.

³ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697957.html>.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/oonuch/status/1298292474696413185>; <https://twitter.com/tutby/status/1298246322810695681>; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1298282445394018304>; https://twitter.com/Den_2042/status/1298299653239308288; https://twitter.com/Den_2042/status/1298300954228543488; https://twitter.com/Den_2042/status/1298301788836241414; https://twitter.com/Den_2042/status/1298302212326686727.

⁵ <https://news.tut.by/society/698067.html>.

⁶ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>.

⁷ <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/belarus-constitutional-court-chief-coordination-council-is-unconstitutional-132865-2020/>.

⁸ <https://amp-charter97-org.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/amp.charter97.org/ru/news/2020/8/25/390868/>.

⁹ <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/63444>.

¹⁰ <https://belsat.eu/en/news/fugitive-belarusian-investigator-detained-in-russia-without-extradition-request>; <https://www.mk-pskov.ru/social/2020/08/25/pskovskiy-advokat-bezhavshogo-iz-belorussii-sledovatelya-zagruzili-v-mashinu-i-uvezli.html>.

¹¹ <https://belsat.eu/en/news/fugitive-belarusian-investigator-detained-in-russia-without-extradition-request/>.

¹² https://twitter.com/RT_com/status/1298289033496236032?s=20.

¹³ <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/104705/>.

¹⁴ <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2019>.

¹⁵ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/world/outraged-police-throw-away-uniforms-after-belarus-crackdown-rjjn13ds>; <https://twitter.com/gkates/status/1293622702767583239>; <https://twitter.com/gkates/status/1293626395818700803>; https://twitter.com/gruppa_voina/status/1293948420902838274; <https://twitter.com/gkates/status/1293636214206201860>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1293633014765883392>.

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEAzIjBrbMs>.

¹⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEAzIjBrbMs&ab_channel=TetovaNew.s

¹⁸ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4299276.

¹⁹ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4299276.

²⁰ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4299276.

²¹ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4299276.