

Kremlin Announces Reserve Force is Prepared to Intervene in Belarus

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By Mason Clark

The Kremlin announced it has created a reserve force to intervene in Belarus if necessary. Russian President Vladimir Putin gave an interview to the state-run Russia 1 TV channel on August 27.¹ Putin stated the Kremlin has prepared a “reserve of law enforcement officers” but will not deploy it to Belarus unless the situation “gets out of control.” The Kremlin previously pledged it would intervene in Belarus in response to foreign intervention on August 15 and has claimed foreign intervention is ongoing since August 19.² Putin’s statement is the first Kremlin acknowledgment of preparations to intervene in Belarus. The Kremlin has supported Lukashenko with RT technical personnel, information support, and potentially covert security coordination since August 19.³ ISW has previously assessed the Kremlin is prepared to intervene in Belarus to support Lukashenko if he is unable to control protests.⁴

Putin is likely issuing this statement as a dual warning – both to protesters and to Lukashenko – to stabilize the situation to avoid a Russian intervention. Putin stated the Kremlin hopes “the current problems in Belarus will be resolved peacefully,” but warned protesters that if they “go beyond the framework of the current law, the law will react accordingly.”⁵ Putin acknowledged that problems exist in Belarus, but stressed protesters must follow the law. The Kremlin likely aims to intimidate protesters through the threat of a Russian security intervention.

The Kremlin is additionally likely warning Lukashenko to stabilize the protests or face further Russian involvement. A Russian aircraft known to be operated by the FSB (Russian intelligence) arrived in Minsk the night of August 26 and departed 5 hours later.⁶ ISW cannot confirm who or what arrived in Belarus on the flight, but assesses the FSB likely sent dignitaries to speak with Lukashenko and may have sent Russian security personnel to remain behind as well. The aircraft made a similar trip to Minsk the night of August 19, after which Putin and Lukashenko publicly announced they had begun consultations for a possible Russian intervention.⁷ Lukashenko has primarily cooperated with the Kremlin to respond to protests since August 15. However, the Kremlin likely seeks to cement its control over Lukashenko’s actions and pressure him to control protesters with the threat of further Kremlin involvement.

Lukashenko reiterated claim that NATO is backing protests. Lukashenko claimed Belarus’ neighbors are conducting a “hybrid war” to overthrow him during a ministerial meeting on August 27.⁸ Lukashenko stated he has deployed “half the army [at] full combat readiness” to protect western Belarus, claiming Poland wants to annex the Grodno region. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry additionally formally summoned Polish diplomats to warn them against continued interference in Belarus.⁹ Lukashenko previously mobilized the Belarusian military to the Polish and Lithuanian borders on August 22 and seeks to frame the organic domestic protests as a NATO attempt to overthrow him and target Russia.¹⁰ The Kremlin and Lukashenko may attempt to leverage claims of Polish and Lithuanian interference to justify future aggressive action against both states.

Lukashenko reiterated threats against protesters and cracked down on journalists despite claiming to welcome dialogue. Lukashenko additionally stated he is willing to begin dialogue with the opposition, but only if “the street” ceases protesting; he also threatened to draft striking students as an alternative to dialogue.¹¹ Belarusian security forces detained roughly a dozen journalists, both Belarusian and foreign, in Minsk on August 27 around 6:00 pm local time.¹² The Belarusian Investigative Committee additionally interrogated Coordination Council leader Maria Kolesnikova for two hours the morning of August 27, but released her without further charges.¹³

Lukashenko has previously stated he will only talk to the opposition if protests cease, and will likely refuse any meaningful dialogue with the opposition Coordination Council, which he has labeled unconstitutional.¹⁴ However, Putin may pressure Lukashenko to enter a dialogue with an opposition the Kremlin can dominate. Increasing

numbers of Coordination Council members expressed a willingness to involve the Kremlin in negotiations on Belarus on August 26.¹⁵ The Kremlin will likely dominate any potential negotiations process between Lukashenko and the opposition and may elect to leverage this process to cement its dominance over Belarus.

NEXTA is posturing for mass protests on Sunday, August 30, and announced plans to release a “strategic plan” on August 28. NEXTA called for small protests in Minsk on August 27, with a few hundred protesters gathering around a church in Minsk that was the site of security force detentions the night of August 26.¹⁶ NEXTA explicitly called on local organizers to continue protests around the country following “their own traditions” and asking protesters to “protect their local leaders,” continuing its approach of focusing its efforts to control protests on Minsk but expanding its efforts to claim credit for country-wide protests it has not organized. NEXTA additionally stated it will announce plans on August 27 for a third Sunday protest and pledged to release a “global and important strategic plan” on August 28 on “how this autumn the people can return power to their own hands” – implicitly framing the protest movement as a long-running effort. NEXTA’s promised strategic plan will likely shape the focus of the protest movement in the coming weeks, as NEXTA retains dominant control over the protest movement. NEXTA may further align with opposition leader Sviatlana Tikanouskaya’s Coordination Council and diplomatic approach following supportive statements the night of August 26.¹⁷

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ [http://kremlin\(.\)ru/events/president/news/63951](http://kremlin(.)ru/events/president/news/63951).

² <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarusian-president-lukashenko.html>;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>.

³ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>.

⁴ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>.

⁵ [http://kremlin\(.\)ru/events/president/news/63951](http://kremlin(.)ru/events/president/news/63951).

⁶ <https://www.flightradar24.com/data/aircraft/ra-64523/>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-russia-airplane/russian-government-plane-makes-second-belarus-flight-in-a-week-tracking-data-idUSKBN25M2CO>.

⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces-support-lukashenko-following-regional-security>.

⁸ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/698314.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/698314.html).

⁹ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/698384.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/698384.html)

¹⁰ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/warning-lukashenko-mobilizes-military-western-border-local-protest-organization-emerges>.

¹¹ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/society/698330.html](https://news.tut(.)by/society/698330.html).

¹² [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/698299.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/698299.html).

¹³ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/698299.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/698299.html).

¹⁴ [https://eng.belta\(.\)by/society/view/belarus-constitutional-court-chief-coordination-council-is-unconstitutional-132865-2020/](https://eng.belta(.)by/society/view/belarus-constitutional-court-chief-coordination-council-is-unconstitutional-132865-2020/).

¹⁵ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/warning-opposition-continues-unify-lukashenko-continues-crackdown>.

¹⁶ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/9604](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/9604).

¹⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/warning-opposition-continues-unify-lukashenko-continues-crackdown>.