

Warning: Kremlin Begins Security Forces Support for Lukashenko following Regional Security Service Defection

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By George Barros

A Kremlin security force intervention into Belarus on behalf of President Alexander Lukashenko is reportedly underway following the defection of Belarusian Interior Ministry elements in Grodno, which is near the Polish and Lithuanian borders. German newspaper *Bild* reported on August 19 that the Kremlin began using Russian Air Force and Ministry of Internal Affairs trucks to send Russian National Guardsmen to Belarus.¹ Lukashenko had apparently lacked a clear strategy to deal with protests and was losing control over the situation as of August 18.² Lukashenko's spokesperson Natalya Eismont confirmed on Russia's Channel 1 state television that Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin began consultations to coordinate actions under the Union State and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) frameworks on August 19.³ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said "there is foreign interference in Belarusian internal affairs" on Channel 1 on August 19.⁴ "Foreign interference" is a legal ground for a military assistance according to CSTO agreements. Kremlin media outlet RT claimed the Kremlin denied seeing a need to send assistance to Belarus on August 19.⁵

The Kremlin may be preparing to augment Lukashenko's security forces with Russian security personnel. Russian military police units began crowd control tactical exercises in the Western Military District on August 18.⁶ The exercises involve approximately 230 military police practicing tactics with riot gear, batons, handcuffs, stun guns and less lethal firearms in Luga and Mulino territorial garrisons in the Leningrad and Nizhny Novgorod oblasts, respectively and will continue until August 21.⁷ It is unclear whether these exercises were snap or scheduled. The Kremlin has the capability to reinforce Lukashenko's security services with Russian security personnel on short notice, just as the Kremlin likely took control of Belarusian state television.

The Kremlin is very likely supporting Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's to launch a new counteroffensive against protestors. Lukashenko ordered Belarusian security services to restore order in Belarus during a Belarusian Security Council meeting on August 19.⁸ Lukashenko ordered the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) to "locate and neutralize" protest organizers to "restore peace."⁹ Lukashenko additionally instructed the State Border Committee to strengthen Belarus' entire border to prevent militants, weapons, ammunition, and money from other countries from entering Belarus to finance protests, continuing his framing of the protests as Western-backed.¹⁰ Lukashenko also confirmed he brought Belarusian army units in western Belarus to full readiness on August 18 in a claimed response to a nonexistent NATO buildup.¹¹ Lukashenko instructed officials to protect state enterprise employees – a euphemism for stopping strikes.¹²

The Kremlin likely sent senior FSB officials to Minsk in order to facilitate Lukashenko's counteroffensive against protestors. A Russian Federal Security Service (FSB)-operated Tu-214 VPU plane flew from Moscow to Minsk on the evening of August 18 at 1318.¹³ The plane returned to Moscow on August 19 at 0943.¹⁴ The FSB operates the plane which is likely FSB Director Aleksandr Bornikov's airborne command post.¹⁵ It is unclear what Russian personnel or Kremlin officials were on the plane. There is no public evidence of with whom the plane's passengers met as of this writing. This is the first indicator of Kremlin officials' physical presence in Minsk since the beginning of the Belarusian protests' beginning on August 9.

The Kremlin is likely reacting to growing regional cracks in Lukashenko's security services. The Grodno City Executive Committee issued an apology statement to protesters on August 18 around 1200.¹⁶ The Grodno City Executive Committee claimed it would support protesters and that the regional MVD apologized for harming Belarusian citizens. The Grodno MVD reportedly released all protest-related detainees. The Grodno MVD's change in behavior is likely a defection from Lukashenko; Minsk's MVD forces are still detaining striking factory workers in Minsk as of August 19.¹⁷ Grodno is one of Belarus' westernmost cities and borders NATO members

Poland and Lithuania. ISW forecasted the Kremlin might intervene in Belarus to prevent another revolution in the former Soviet Union if Lukashenko loses control over his security services.¹⁸

Lukashenko denied the presence of Russian military personnel in Belarus for the first time. Lukashenko held a Belarusian Security Council meeting on August 19 in which he said previous reports of Russian armored personal carriers (BMP) heading towards Orsha are fake.¹⁹ Lukashenko claimed the BMPs in question are Belarusian, not Russian and were dispatched to western Belarus. This is Lukashenko's first denial of reports of alleged Russian equipment heading towards Belarus. The Critical Intelligence Team OSINT group claims it spotted more than 40 Russian unmarked trucks with soldiers inside driving toward Belarus from Smolensk on August 16.²⁰ Lukashenko is likely intentionally obfuscating an ongoing Russian intervention.

The Kremlin likely replaced Belarusian TV producers who went on strike with Russian media professionals. Security personnel began denying Belarusian state TV employees who participated in anti-Lukashenko strikes into their offices on August 19.²¹ Belteleradiocompany (BT) Director Alena Martinovskaya said BT's building security did not permit her into the building and claimed that two planes with professional media producers from Russia are now responsible for BT's work.²²

Lukashenko began courting the Kremlin by characterizing his opposition as Russophobic on August 18. Lukashenko began a new information operation characterizing his opposition as Russophobic in a Belarusian security council meeting on August 18 around 1400.²³ Lukashenko falsely accused his opposition of seeking to impose "a creeping ban on the Russian language," establish an autocephalous Belarusian Orthodox Church independent from the Moscow Patriarchate, join the EU and NATO, leave the CTSO, and close Russia's two radar bases in Belarus.²⁴ Lukashenko previously accused the protests of being both Russian and Western-organized.²⁵ Lukashenko likely deliberately mischaracterized the protests in an effort to gain Kremlin support. The protesters are not anti-Russian and their core demands have been Lukashenko's resignation, an end to police brutality, and new elections. An opposition leader speaking on behalf of Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya softened anti-Russian rhetoric and offered to work with the Kremlin on August 18.²⁶

Warning Forecast: Lukashenko will likely crack down on protesters and dissenters in Grodno and possibly elsewhere. Lukashenko brought Belarusian army combat units in western Belarus to full readiness on August 18.²⁷ Lukashenko accused protesters in Grodno of being foreign backed and waving Polish flags.²⁸ Protests began in Grodno on August 9 and have persisted until as of this writing despite crackdowns and detentions against protesters there.²⁹ The Grodno MVD likely defected from central MVD control in Minsk on August 18 when it apologized to protesters and released detained prisoners.³⁰ Lukashenko is likely setting conditions for an operation against dissenters in Grodno by portraying them as foreign-backed – a course of action ISW forecasted on August 15.³¹

There will likely be a violent confrontation between protesters and the MVD at the MVD headquarters in Minsk on August 19 at 1800. The NEXTA Telegram channel issued instructions for protesters to gather at the Minsk MVD headquarters to demand the release of political prisoners on August 19 at 1800.³² Protesters will likely arrive given their previous pattern of following NEXTA's directives.³³ The MVD will likely violently suppress the protesters given Lukashenko's new campaign to crack down on protests. The Kremlin is likely prepared to and willing to exploit turmoil following likely clashes at the MVD's Minsk headquarters.

¹ [https://www.bild\(.\)de/bild-plus/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/weissrussland-hinweise-verdichten-sich-putin-schickt-nationalgarde-72461788,view=conversionToLogin.bild.html](https://www.bild(.)de/bild-plus/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/weissrussland-hinweise-verdichten-sich-putin-schickt-nationalgarde-72461788,view=conversionToLogin.bild.html)

² <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenko-seems-to-lack.html>

³ [https://tass\(.\)ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9236803](https://tass(.)ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9236803); [https://russia\(.\)tv/video/show/brand_id/60851/episode_id/2432992/](https://russia(.)tv/video/show/brand_id/60851/episode_id/2432992/)

⁴ [http://belros\(.\)tv/news/politika/sergey-lavrov-inostrannoe-vmeshatelstvo-v-dela-belarusi-proiskhodit-dlya-navyazyvaniya-belorusam-svo/](http://belros(.)tv/news/politika/sergey-lavrov-inostrannoe-vmeshatelstvo-v-dela-belarusi-proiskhodit-dlya-navyazyvaniya-belorusam-svo/)

⁵ [https://www.rt\(.\)com/russia/498423-kremlin-denies-russian-military-convoys-belarus/](https://www.rt(.)com/russia/498423-kremlin-denies-russian-military-convoys-belarus/)

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- ⁷ [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12307518@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12307518@egNews)
- ⁸ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/vernut-ljudjam-spokojnuju-stranu-lukashenko-ozvuchil-itogi-zasedanija-sovbeza-403372-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/vernut-ljudjam-spokojnuju-stranu-lukashenko-ozvuchil-itogi-zasedanija-sovbeza-403372-2020/)
- ⁹ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/vernut-ljudjam-spokojnuju-stranu-lukashenko-ozvuchil-itogi-zasedanija-sovbeza-403372-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/vernut-ljudjam-spokojnuju-stranu-lukashenko-ozvuchil-itogi-zasedanija-sovbeza-403372-2020/)
- ¹⁰ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/vernut-ljudjam-spokojnuju-stranu-lukashenko-ozvuchil-itogi-zasedanija-sovbeza-403372-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/vernut-ljudjam-spokojnuju-stranu-lukashenko-ozvuchil-itogi-zasedanija-sovbeza-403372-2020/)
- ¹¹ [https://hromadske\(.\)ua/ru/posts/lukashenko-privel-armiyu-v-boevuyu-gotovnost-na-granice-s-es-v-nato-govoryat-chto-sily-nenarashivayut-i-nikakoj-ugrozy-net](https://hromadske(.)ua/ru/posts/lukashenko-privel-armiyu-v-boevuyu-gotovnost-na-granice-s-es-v-nato-govoryat-chto-sily-nenarashivayut-i-nikakoj-ugrozy-net) ; [https://www.interfax\(.\)ru/world/722395](https://www.interfax(.)ru/world/722395)
- ¹² [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/vernut-ljudjam-spokojnuju-stranu-lukashenko-ozvuchil-itogi-zasedanija-sovbeza-403372-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/vernut-ljudjam-spokojnuju-stranu-lukashenko-ozvuchil-itogi-zasedanija-sovbeza-403372-2020/)
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- ¹⁴ <https://www.flightradar24.com/data/aircraft/ra-64523/>
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- ¹⁶ [https://grodno.gov\(.\)by/index.php/novosti/item/9692-otvet-grodnenskogo-gorodskogo-ispolnitelnogo-komiteta-na-trebovaniya](https://grodno.gov(.)by/index.php/novosti/item/9692-otvet-grodnenskogo-gorodskogo-ispolnitelnogo-komiteta-na-trebovaniya) ; [http://grodno.gov\(.\)by/main.aspx?guid=213133](http://grodno.gov(.)by/main.aspx?guid=213133)
- ¹⁷ [https://www.rbc\(.\)ru/society/19/08/2020/5f3cc5769a7947342903f393](https://www.rbc(.)ru/society/19/08/2020/5f3cc5769a7947342903f393)
- ¹⁸ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-russia-and-belarus-launch.html>
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- ²⁰ <https://t.me/CITeam/2201?fbclid=IwAR38AkBuyLZlnS8ntFs1eyuUhp75fUlgfQfxkRLoSEf7ACckBMzQAZuEAA8>
- ²¹ [https://news.liga\(.\)net/world/news/sotrudniki-bt-v-belarusi-na-televidenii-vmesto-bastuyuschih-rabotayut-spetsialisty-iz-rossii](https://news.liga(.)net/world/news/sotrudniki-bt-v-belarusi-na-televidenii-vmesto-bastuyuschih-rabotayut-spetsialisty-iz-rossii)
- ²² [https://kyky\(.\)org/news/sotrudnitsa-bt-vmesto-bastuyuschih-belarusov-rabotayut-rossiyane-za-bolshuyu-summu?fbclid=IwAR2Z6xvyH9X1GEzlrWH2P-WCcr5dWjc7vCUqW6B6uRsLZyzWtZp_7z227tE](https://kyky(.)org/news/sotrudnitsa-bt-vmesto-bastuyuschih-belarusov-rabotayut-rossiyane-za-bolshuyu-summu?fbclid=IwAR2Z6xvyH9X1GEzlrWH2P-WCcr5dWjc7vCUqW6B6uRsLZyzWtZp_7z227tE)
- ²³ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/ot-razryva-s-rossiej-do-vhozheniya-v-es-i-nato-lukashenko-otmechaet-polnuju-nesostojatelnost-403262-2020](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/ot-razryva-s-rossiej-do-vhozheniya-v-es-i-nato-lukashenko-otmechaet-polnuju-nesostojatelnost-403262-2020) ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=wUggOzKJZ4k&feature=emb_title
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- ²⁶ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarusian-opposition-reaches.html>
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- ²⁹ <https://abc3340.com/news/nation-world/police-protesters-clash-after-belarus-presidential-vote> ; <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/13/belarus-detained-protesters-repeatedly-beaten-and-abused-in-post-election-crackdown>
- ³⁰ [https://grodno.gov\(.\)by/index.php/novosti/item/9692-otvet-grodnenskogo-gorodskogo-ispolnitelnogo-komiteta-na-trebovaniya](https://grodno.gov(.)by/index.php/novosti/item/9692-otvet-grodnenskogo-gorodskogo-ispolnitelnogo-komiteta-na-trebovaniya) ; [http://grodno.gov\(.\)by/main.aspx?guid=213133](http://grodno.gov(.)by/main.aspx?guid=213133)
- ³¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarusian-president-lukashenko.html>
- ³² [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_tv/3826](https://t(.)me/nexta_tv/3826)
- ³³ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-telegram-channel-nexta-provokes.html>