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By George Barros

**The Kremlin very likely deployed Russian media professionals to run a new information operation in Belarus with the objective of regaining control over the information space in Belarus.** Lukashenko's counteroffensive against protesters has an informational component. Kremlin security and media professionals likely began helping Lukashenko implement a new information operation on August 19.<sup>1</sup> The information operation's likely objective is to regain control over the Belarusian information space in order to erode sympathy for the anti-Lukashenko opposition and characterize it as pro-Western. The information operation, if successful, will degrade the opposition movement and decrease the likelihood of opposition protesters successfully consolidating and reemerging. It will also continue the process of turning an intra-Belarus issue into a Russia versus NATO problem, an aim the Kremlin has been pursuing for some time.

**Information operations are a key weapon in the Kremlin's hybrid war toolkit.** The Kremlin has an established pattern of manipulating the information space to expand Kremlin influence in key theaters and more broadly around the world.<sup>2</sup> The Kremlin uses information operations to mask Russian intervention and spread disinformation that undermines the West.<sup>3</sup>

**The Kremlin likely replaced Belarusian TV producers who went on strike with Russian media professionals on August 19.** Security personnel began denying Belarusian state TV employees who participated in anti-Lukashenko strikes access to their offices on August 19.<sup>4</sup> Belteleradiocompany (BT) Director Alena Martinovskaya said BT's building security did not permit her into the building and claimed that professional media producers that arrived on two planes from Russia are now responsible for BT's work.<sup>5</sup>

**Traditional Kremlin media began attacking Svetlana Tikhaouskaya, the leading opposition candidate, directly for the first time.** The editor-in-chief of Russian media outlet RT, Margarita Simonyan, went on Russia's Channel I state television on August 19 and berated Tikhanouskaya, saying Tikhanouskaya's IQ is only "slightly above that of an orangutan."<sup>6</sup> This is the first time major Kremlin media have explicitly attacked Tikhanouskaya. Simonyan's statement may have aimed to shape Russia's domestic information space in order to increase Belarusian citizens' contempt for Tikhanouskaya, eroding her support and reducing the likelihood of continued protests.

**Belarusian state media began using a new anti-Western montage-style propaganda after Russian media professionals likely began their work in Belarus.**

**Belarusian state television began showing anti-American montage propaganda on August 19 after Russian media specialists took over.**<sup>7</sup> Propaganda montage ads run at regular intervals during commercial breaks on Belarusian state media.<sup>8</sup> One such montage begins with scenes of idyllic Belarusian nature and happy Belarusian youths and transitions to juxtapose those images against footage of Tikhanouskaya, intimidating protesters, and messaging that implies hostile American control of Belarus. The montage concludes with imagery of bombed Syrian cities, an American flag, and Ilya Repin's 1873 "Barge Haulers on the Volga" painting depicting Russian feudal peasants toiling under their overlords.<sup>9</sup> This montage implies that Tikhanouskaya's usurpation will result in the American enslavement of Belarus.<sup>10</sup> The level of sophistication and tone of the propaganda suggests it is a direct product of Russian media professionals who reportedly began working in Belarus on August 19.

**The Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) began releasing new montage propaganda videos on its YouTube account on August 20.** The MVD uploaded a video titled, “Meeting near the MVD meeting in Minsk 19.09.2020” on August 20 depicting the small protest at the MVD headquarters in Minsk at 6:00 pm local time on August 19.<sup>11</sup> The montage depicts a man waving a European Union (EU) flag with the word “Belarus” in its center. The editing of the video specifically highlights the EU flag. Belarusian opposition protesters have not used the EU flag in a prominent manner since protests began on August 9. The MVD’s highlighting of the flag seeks to create the impression the protesters are pro-Western and is a mischaracterization of the protesters’ stated goals. The MVD may have deliberately planted and filmed the man with the EU flag in order to bolster the Lukashenko narrative that the opposition is pro-Western.<sup>12</sup>

The MVD published another montage video titled “Peaceful protesters or an uncontrollable mob?” on August 20.<sup>13</sup> The escalating montage begins showing protesters gathering peacefully. A caption reads, “initially peaceful protests with the actions of other participants can turn into mass disorder” – an allusion to Lukashenko and Kremlin-backed claims that foreign interference are driving the protests.<sup>14</sup> The video then escalates to depict protesters throwing smashed pavement at police. A caption reads, “With this development of events people will always suffer,” and ends with intercut footage of both injured civilians and policemen to reinforce the need to restore peace.

Both MVD montage videos are designed to erode support for the protesters and to reinforce Lukashenko’s August 19 campaign to restore peace and order. The videos have higher production quality and cinematic sophistication than videos the MVD uploaded before August 20, suggesting a sudden increase in Belarusian video production capability.

**The new information operation is targeting dissenting media.** The Belarusian daily newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* did not print issues for two consecutive days on August 20.<sup>15</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda*’s editorial board claimed their printing press “broke down” in two consecutive nights due to “evil fate lingering over our printers” despite publishing “two beautiful, rich, truthful issues.”<sup>16</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda* provided coverage favorable to the anti-Lukashenko protests, including a front page story on how the Grodno City Executive Committee compromised with protesters on August 18.<sup>17</sup> Belarusian security forces likely tampered with *Komsomolskaya Pravda*’s printers or threatened staff as part of the coordinated campaign to control the media narrative inside Belarus.

**Increasing Kremlin efforts to paint the internal confrontation as a NATO versus Russia conflict raise the stakes for NATO.** Putin has clearly decided to do more than just help Lukashenko crush his domestic unrest. He is also working to advance the narrative of a united Russian world defending itself against an aggressive, US-led NATO enemy. His efforts may have the unintended consequence of driving at least part of the Belarusian opposition into a pro-Western position. But this information operation, combined with Lukashenko’s military deployments on the Polish and Lithuanian borders, increase the risk of a more serious Russia-NATO escalation pattern over time. Putin may also pivot on this narrative in Belarus to reshape his informational approach in Ukraine, Moldova, and in other contested former Soviet states.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces-support-lukashenko-following-regional-security>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-expanding-media-conglomerate> ; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/viral-disinformation-kremlin%E2%80%99s-coronavirus-information-operation-ukraine>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-expanding-media-conglomerate>

<sup>4</sup> [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)

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- <sup>5</sup> [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)
- <sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/SobolLubov/status/1296168020503605260>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1296150394775703554>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1296150394775703554>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1296150394775703554>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1296150394775703554>
- <sup>11</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BixaCCxsdY&ab\\_channel=МВДБеларуси](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BixaCCxsdY&ab_channel=МВДБеларуси)
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/warning-russia-and-belarus-launch-military-exercises>
- <sup>13</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CuxxR9uDHo&ab\\_channel=МВДБеларуси](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CuxxR9uDHo&ab_channel=МВДБеларуси)
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/lavrov-vmeshatelstvo-v-belarus-izvne-proishodit-s-tseljju-navjazat-svoji-porjadki-403367-2020>
- <sup>15</sup> [https://kurjer\(.\)info/2020/08/20/machine-broken/](https://kurjer(.)info/2020/08/20/machine-broken/)
- <sup>16</sup> [https://www.kp\(.\)ru/daily/217171/4273288/](https://www.kp(.)ru/daily/217171/4273288/); [https://kurjer\(.\)info/2020/08/18/nomer-komsomolki/](https://kurjer(.)info/2020/08/18/nomer-komsomolki/)
- <sup>17</sup> [https://kurjer\(.\)info/2020/08/18/nomer-komsomolki/](https://kurjer(.)info/2020/08/18/nomer-komsomolki/); [https://kurjer\(.\)info/2020/08/20/machine-broken/](https://kurjer(.)info/2020/08/20/machine-broken/)