

Russia Threatens to Turn Belarus Unrest into Major International Crisis



Featuring Mason Clark and George Barros

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Belarus has been in a state of civil unrest for several weeks. As popular protests came to pose a genuine threat to President Lukashenko's regime, Russia became involved to protect its interests in the country. Since then, the situation in Belarus has become exponentially more complicated, evolving from a relatively straightforward domestic dispute between a strongman president and his disgruntled citizens into an international debacle that involves Russia, Poland, Lithuania, NATO, and the EU. In this episode of Overwatch, ISW's Mason Clark and George Barros draw on their daily coverage of Belarus to unpack what the situation there means for US national security.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. Belarus has been in a state of civil unrest for several weeks. Protests initially began in opposition to president Alexander Lukashenko's claimed victory in the August 9th elections, which were widely reported as fraudulent. As the protests became increasingly organized and began to gain support from certain local leaders and bureaucrats, they came to pose a genuine threat to Lukashenko's regime. In response to the prospect of a pro-democratic revolution in Belarus, Russia became involved to preserve its influence. And since then the situation in Belarus has become exponentially more complicated, evolving from a relatively straightforward domestic dispute between a strong man president and his disgruntled citizens into an international debacle that involves Russia, Poland, Lithuania, NATO, and the EU. ISW's Mason Clark and George Barros have been publishing daily updates on this crisis since it began and are with me today to discuss the state of play in Belarus and what it might mean for U.S. National Security. Mason, George, thank you for being here today.

Mason Clark:

Thanks for having us Jacob.

George Barros:

Thank you Jacob.

Jacob:

Let's start with the basics who is president Lukashenko and what is the state of the protest against him in Belarus?

Mason:

Sure. So Alexander Lukashenko is an old Soviet apparatchik, he used to actually run a state farm, so he's about as Soviet as they come, and he has led Belarus as its first president since independence from the Soviet Union since 1994. He runs a very tight security state. He has total control over the security forces. There's not a free press in Belarus and has managed to keep a tight grip on power throughout this entire period through elections every five years that he typically wins with a claimed 80% of the votes. He's Kremlin aligned. He has a lot of policies that favor Russia, and he openly talks about having a brotherhood of nations between Belarus and Russia, but he's not necessarily a Moscow proxy or just a yes man.

He has for a number of years attended to essentially balance between Russia and the West and done so very well, preventing Belarus from being completely subsumed into Russian structures, despite Russian president Vladimir Putin's best efforts, and maintaining some outreach to the West, both economically and diplomatically to hold his position and playing a weak hand very well because by all rights, he does not have the strength to directly resist Putin. However, this sort of fell out from under him this year due to a botched response to COVID-19, overt infractions, new legalities in the run-up to August 9th presidential elections, and have finally turned into a mass pro-

test movement since his rule, since that August 9th election, which he again, claimed to have won 80% of the vote, but likely actually lost with only 25% of the vote.

Jacob:

So what is it that the protests are about then? Is it essentially just this rigged election that Lukashenko claims he won?

George:

To best understand the current protest in Belarus it's actually good to expand the aperture beyond the elections, and beyond August, and looking back further into spring and early summer of 2020. So Lukashenko was actually doing very strong in the end of 2019. He was successfully leveraging against the Kremlin's efforts to integrate Belarus into Russia and things were basically same as usual. However, Lukashenko refused to actually enforce any quarantine measures during the coronavirus and the Belarusian people did not take well to that. Belarusian people started their protests in the spring and early summer of 2020 in response to incompetent government policies that said that people should continue going to work. They should just continue their jobs as normal, go to saunas, and drink vodka, and that coronavirus is a non-issue. That was the beginning of the Belarusian wide popular anti-Lukashenko sentiment. I think the really blatant electoral manipulation that occurred in August was just the final straw that broke the camel's back.

Jacob:

Understood. And what are the protestors core demands? Just Lukashenko's ouster or have their demands expanded over time?

Mason:

That's actually a fascinating point about the ongoing protest here in Belarus that actually differentiate them from a lot of other various pro-democracy movements in the former Soviet Union. There's been a lot of comparisons in Western media of the events in Belarus to say, the 2014 revolution in Ukraine or past demonstrations in Georgia and other countries around the region, but these protests are very narrowly focused on Lukashenko himself, his corruption, his security state, the terrible response to COVID-19, that George talked about, and they're not really either pro-EU or pro-Russia. The protesters have framed themselves as very much against the Lukashenko. We've seen a number of fascinating occasions of protesters both stating that they are fine with friendly ties with Russia, but they don't want to just be led by Russians. And similarly, there were a few occasions in the early protests where protesters would bring out EU flags and would actually be asked by other protesters to take them down.

I think the overall tone of these protests have actually really been summed up by a flag that has actually become the sort of symbol of them is, the anti-Lukashenko protesters have brought back a red and white striped flag that Belarus has not used since the 1920s before it was incorporated into the Soviet Union. So it's very much being framed as a back to Belarusian independence, distancing themselves from both the EU and Russia, and trying to just secure a free and progressive state to move into the future and get rid of Lukashenko. It's really Kremlin and Lukashenko that are trying to frame this as a NATO versus Russia conflict and at the core of this is actually the opposition candidate that in truth likely won the August 9th election, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.

Jacob:

And why is that? Who is Tikhanovskaya and what is her relevance beyond being the opposition candidate?

George:

Tikhanovskaya, is the Belarusian presidential candidate who almost certainly actually won the August 9th election and she's become the main rallying figure for the Belarusian opposition. She actually doesn't have a background in politics. She's the wife of a man named Sergei Tikhanovsky, who was a major contending presidential candidate, but Lukashenko arrested him and a bunch of other candidates. And so Tikhanovskaya stepped in to basically fill his shoes and be a placeholder for the election and turns out that she likely in all earnesty won the elections. Unfortunately, she has been forced to flee Belarus, since August 10th Tikhanovskaya fled to Lithuania to be with her children, and since then she's been directing the Belarusian opposition movement from Lithuania. That's actually one of the pieces of evidence that the Kremlin and Lukashenko are using to back up their mostly false claim, or rather backup their false claim that the West and Lithuania are backing the opposition.

Jacob:

And is she, Tikhanovskaya, essentially running the opposition from Lithuania? Is the opposition coalescing around her?

Mason:

The opposition's actually divided between Tikhanovskaya and is more directed in terms of the actual protests by a popular Telegram account known as, NEXTA, run from Poland. And the divide between NEXTA and Tikhanovskaya is actually pretty integral to the protests and has a good chance, unfortunately, of undermining them. Tikhanovskaya is heavily focused on a very legalistic approach to reform. Her statements have focused on re-running the election. She has set up this body known as The Coordination Council that intends to reach out to Lukashenko and try and negotiate a reconciliation government to move forward to hold new elections. She is not issuing instructions to protests on the ground. She's given broad statements supporting them and has called for a general strike that often turned into localized protests, but she's not giving directions. That area has been taken over by NEXTA. NEXTA is run out of Poland by a 22 year old Belarusian blogger who's been an opposition figure for a number of years, and NEXTA has been the one issuing detailed instructions to protestors down to in 15 or 20 minute intervals, directing them where to go, for example, on Sunday during a large rally.

NEXTA has been able to dominate the protests, shape them towards more directly overthrowing Lukashenko, though to be clear, they still remain nonviolent. And this divide between Tika, who is pursuing what is likely a hopeless political approach, as Lukashenko has stated he is not going to talk to The Coordination Council and actually on August 25th called it unconstitutional. And NEXTA which is organizing and promoting these mass protests, is a key divide that is yet to be reconciled and is weakening the opposition to crack downs from Lukashenko enabled by the Kremlin.

Jacob:

So I'd like to turn to the protests themselves. How is president Lukashenko responding to them in a tangible, tactical sense?

George:

So, in our course of studying Lukashenko's campaign against the protest, really we have two phases. I'll talk about the first one, and that one spans from the period of August 9th in to about August 13th. During August 9th through August 13th, the Lukashenko regime initiated violent police crackdowns against local protestors and large gatherings, and that's largely because Lukashenko thought that just an overwhelming showing of force immediately would have a deterring effect against the protestors. Unfortunately, that was not an effective response. The protest movement actually grew stronger. Anti-Lukashenko sentiment grew stronger and the protests seemed to have been escalating. On August 14th, Lukashenko initiated mass releases of detainees from Belarusian prison

and detention facilities, in an attempt in order to diffuse the situation. And that worked to a limited extent, when the detainees were released from Belarusian prisons however, they ended up telling very graphic stories about the various just cruelties and human rights and physical abuses that Lukashenko's goons had inflicted upon them and that had actually had the counter effect of also in the long run amplifying anti-Lukashenko sentiment.

By about August 16, the protests were continuing to grow and they were becoming uncontrollable. Lukashenko actually went one morning to a Minsk tractor factory, in which case he thought that it would have been a good idea to address striking workers, but he ended up just being shouted, booed off the stage. Since then, up until August 18th, Lukashenko ostensibly did not have a clear strategy for dealing with the growing protest movement and that actually leads us to a key date, August 18th, which is when ISW assesses that the Kremlin actually intervened.

Jacob:

And what does the Kremlin's intervention in Belarus look like?

Mason:

ISW assesses that the Kremlin intervened in Belarus in response actually to a very specific incident, which is that on August 18th, regional authorities in the city of Grodno, which is in Western Belarus, bordering Lithuania and Poland, and therefore very strategic regarding NATO, apologized to the protestors, pledged that they would support the protestors with equipment going forward, and security forces were starting to actually withdraw from being willing to confront the protestors. We think that this likely provoked a Kremlin response as Lukashenko losing support of his security forces was probably a major red flag for the Kremlin, and our first indication was a Russian intelligence plane flew to Minsk on August 18th, shortly after these announcements.

Jacob:

You've said that Lukashenko has long balanced Russian interests with Western interests and really not been much of a team player with the Kremlin. So with that in mind, why is the Kremlin backing him so hard? Why would his ouster be such a problem for them?

Mason:

That's a great question. So the Kremlin's key interests regarding Belarus is simply retaining dominance over it and avoiding having it fall into a potential pro-Western orbit. Now, as I stated earlier, the protests are not necessarily pro-West, trying to get Belarus to join the EU, or anything like that, but the Kremlin is likely still concerned about this and is focusing this as sort of a struggle between Russia, and NATO, and the EU. The Kremlin is very concerned with retaining influence over not just Belarus, but the entire former Soviet Union, including Ukraine, Georgia, other republics, that sort of thing. And as difficult as Lukashenko has been to the Kremlin for the last 20 years or so, Russian president Putin is likely deciding that his best bet at retaining influence over Belarus is supporting Lukashenko and keeping him in place rather than risking a new opposition government. There's also the worry that a successful revolution in a former Soviet state could perhaps inspire the opposition in Russia and lead to further effects in Russia itself.

Jacob:

What specific actions have the Kremlin and Lukashenko's regime taken to control the protests in Belarus?

Mason:

So the Kremlin's intervention in Belarus has primarily focused on shaping the information space to both Lukashenko and the Kremlin's advantage. Russian technical personnel from propaganda outlet RT took over Belarusian state media on August 19th after Belarusian media personnel went on strike and began both directly

re-posting content from Kremlin propaganda arms, reframing the protests as a NATO attempts to undermine Lukashenko, and inserting very blatant Russian propaganda. A lot of Belarusians even noticed that they were using words that would not at all be familiar to a Belarusian audience, and the Kremlin has not even attempted to hide the fact that RT is on the ground. There's RT media trucks very visible on the streets of Minsk now. Additionally, the coverage that Lukashenko and the Kremlin have used on the crisis has converged. They're increasingly framing the protests as NATO versus the Kremlin, which as we already said the protesters emphatically don't focus on. Lukashenko was already claiming that the protestors were backed by NATO and the EU, trying to overthrow him, that this was a color revolution. Pardon me.

But since the Kremlin intervention on August 18th, he is even further shifted likely at the behest of the Kremlin to say that "NATO was trying to use overthrowing him in Belarus as a springboard," was his direct quote, to attack the Kremlin and destroy Russia. So the Kremlin is really trying to internationalize this and turn it into a conflict between NATO and Russia. The Kremlin is also interestingly obfuscating Moscow's ongoing intervention, it's framing Russian involvement as a future possibility even when it is already in fact underway, and it has been promoting a series of false narratives in the Belarusian information space that set conditions for a possible deeper intervention that unfortunately track with a lot of what the Kremlin has promoted in other crisis situations, such as in Ukraine. For example, claiming that protesters are trying to erode the Russian language, that there are fascists involved in the protests, both of which had been previously used as justifications for a Kremlin crackdown and intervention.

Jacob:

And what effect of those actions had? How has the Kremlin's support for Lukashenko's regime changed the situation on the ground in Belarus?

George:

Lukashenko and his security forces, after they launched their likely Kremlin backed counter offensive against protests, has actually regained the upper hand to control the situation in Belarus. Now protesters are having difficulty actually being able to congregate because police and security forces are doing targeted detentions against protest leaders and they're also dispersing them. For example, after the Kremlin started backing Lukashenko, the Grodno City Regional Council, that Mason already talked about, did a complete 180 on its previous statement on supporting the protests, and regional officials and security elements in Grodno have re-initiated their crackdown on protests. There's a lot less overt violence against protestors than there were in the first days of Lukashenko's response, but security force presence has increasingly grown and the streets of Belarus are becoming increasingly militarized.

Now, I would like to take a moment to talk briefly about the very large inflection that we saw on August 23rd, which was this past Sunday, in which Belarusians had what was likely the largest political demonstration in Belarusian history in Minsk, where some estimates claim that up to 200,000 Belarusians protested. During that protest, they were remarkably peaceful. The Kremlin said that there were no provocations, that those protesters were not particularly anti-Russian, and the protesters and security forces didn't do anything in terms of creating an unstable or violent escalation. Belarusian police claimed that they did not detain a single person that day and that's likely true given the complete lack of any reports of any detentions that day. However, the very next day on Monday, on August 24th, police started targeted crackdowns on multiple opposition leaders that were prominent. For example, two key leaders in Tikhanovskaya's Coordination Council were arrested and sentenced to 10 days imprisonment, and multiple strike leaders were also imprisoned. So looking forward, this campaign that Lukashenko's launched has definitely become a lot more effective at controlling the ground and preventing large protests from occurring.

Jacob:

So presumably the Kremlin would not support Lukashenko if it didn't stand to gain something from doing so. What do you assess the Kremlin seeks to gain? Has it secured any concessions or promises from Lukashenko?

Mason:

The full extent of what Lukashenko likely promised the Kremlin in exchange for the Kremlin essentially bailing him out is currently unknown, but it likely wasn't cheap for Lukashenko. Lukashenko has completely reversed rhetoric he has stood on for years pushing back against Kremlin pressure to integrate Belarus into various Russian structures, and has taken a sharp 180 into praising the Kremlin, promising to work closely with Putin. He's been having nearly daily calls, on August 22nd, actually two calls in one day with Putin, and likely is going to be under the Kremlin's thumb after this crisis is over.

More immediately, Belarus and Russia signed an air defense cooperation deal on August 24th and are potentially going to be announcing another deal on August 25th. These are likely concessions from Lukashenko to Russia that will further cement Russian dominance over Belarus and potentially allow the Kremlin to deploy more military forces into Belarus, which would be a grave danger to NATO and put direct pressure on Poland and Lithuania. So overall, Lukashenko is likely going to be able to retain his control over the country, but is going to be permanently indebted to Russian president Putin essentially.

George:

I would like to highlight that this is really a large inflection from Lukashenko, if it turns out that Russian forces are able to increase their strategic basing in Belarus. Since at least 2015, on multiple occasions, Lukashenko over the past five years has repeatedly denied the Kremlin its desired strategic Russian air basing inside Belarus. This has been a point that Putin has consistently been trying to extract out of Lukashenko and he's consistently said that he's not going to have any of it, but with this potential air defense cooperation deal coming into effect yesterday, that could indicate that that was one of the main concessions Lukashenko might've made.

I'd also like to briefly point out that on August 25th, the Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov announced that the Kremlin is potentially ready to discuss a brand new refinancing deal for Belarus. So Belarus, which is usually strapped for cash, might be getting some sweet, sweet Kremlin money in exchange for long-term sovereignty. In addition to also threatening NATO members, Lithuania, and Poland, an increased strategic Russian presence in Belarus would also threaten Ukraine. Ukraine's defense posture is currently not situated to defend its Northern border, which is where Belarus is located and the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv is actually only 95 kilometers from the Belarusian Ukrainian border. So a Russian presence in Belarus would have implications for not only NATO, but also Ukraine.

Jacob:

Now, everything we've talked about so far has related to information operations, physical stuff, his media personnel and equipment, but what events or shifts should observers look for that might lead to a physical Russian military intervention into Belarus?

George:

So there are really two key things that could potentially drive a Russian military intervention into Belarus, which we assess has not occurred yet, but likely will if any of these two things happen. The first one is, Lukashenko directly asks the Kremlin for intervention. Russia and Belarus have multiple collective defense treaties and both countries agree that the terms for the legal procedures to have a Kremlin intervention in Belarus have been met. The Kremlin however, has reiterated that the only thing that is keeping them from intervening is Lukashenko's

request and obviously Lukashenko at any point in time is welcome to ask the Kremlin for support. The second thing that could occur is that the Kremlin decides to move into Belarus without Lukashenko's support or consent and that would occur under the circumstances of Lukashenko's losing control over the protests or his security services start defecting from him, in which case the Kremlin would feel that Lukashenko is incapable of securing Moscow's interests in Belarus and therefore moves in.

Jacob:

So where does this seem to be heading? What do you guys predict will happen in Belarus in the coming weeks?

Mason:

Most likely Kremlin support will enable Lukashenko to crush the protests and essentially permanently ensure that he is in the Kremlin's orbit. The opposition remains divided, as we spoke about, between NEXTA who is organizing protests on the ground and Tikhanovskaya and her Coordination Council who are continuing to attempt a political avenue that likely will go nowhere as Lukashenko is unwilling to talk to them. There's still not much domestic protest organization. Lukashenko is accelerating his crackdown and it's unlikely currently that the protests will be able to evolve into something that will directly threaten Lukashenko, and even if they do, as George said, the Kremlin will likely intervene. So unfortunately, the end state is likely Lukashenko is still in power and permanently under the Kremlin's thumb being indebted to Russian president Putin essentially, for bailing him out from a popular protest movement. However, the situation is of course very much still in flux and the Institute for the Study of War will continue to monitor the situation and provide regular updates.

Jacob:

And with that, thank you both for being here today.

Mason:

Thanks for helping us, Jacob.

George:

Pleasure to be here Jacob.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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