

Warning: Belarussian Opposition Reaches out to Kremlin

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By Mason Clark

Russian President Vladimir Putin warned European leaders to stay out of the Belarus crisis on August 18 to consolidate Russian management of the situation. French President Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel discussed Belarus with Putin in separate calls the morning of August 18.¹ Putin warned both leaders that Russia would not accept any “external attempts” to interfere in Belarus or pressure Lukashenko. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov additionally called German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and reiterated similar talking points.² The Kremlin will attempt to dominate likely negotiations over a potential transition government in Belarus and block any European involvement.

An opposition leader speaking on behalf of Sviatlana Tikhonouskaya softened anti-Russian rhetoric and offered to work with the Kremlin on August 18. Opposition representative Maria Kolesnikova gave an interview to Russian radio station Echo of Moscow on August 18, expressing Tikhonouskaya’s willingness to work with the Kremlin.³ “Volunteers” attempting to diffuse protests the night of August 17 initially attempted to contact Kolesnikova, who is a representative of Tikhonouskaya and associate of likely Kremlin-linked Belarussian opposition figure Viktor Babariko. Kolesnikova questioned Lukashenko’s willingness to enter serious negotiations on a new government before she emphasized that Russia is a reliable partner. Kolesnikova stated “Russia is an important foreign policy and economic partner for [Belarus]” and promised the opposition would respect “all existing agreements,” contradicting Tikhonouskaya’s previous statements that she would reverse Belarussian integration with Russia under the Union State framework.⁴ Kolesnikova further stated Lukashenko’s tensions with Russia demonstrated his unsuitability to lead Belarus and promised the opposition is ready to “build mutually beneficial relations” with Russia.

Tikhonouskaya is unlikely to have reversed her prior position rejecting Kremlin dominance, but likely assesses the opposition’s chances of replacing Lukashenko peacefully are slim to none without support from the Kremlin. Tikhonouskaya released a video messaged on August 16 stating she is prepared to take over the presidency and become a “national leader” and pledged to unite the country, reaching out to Lukashenko supporters and stating “we are all one.”⁵ Tikhonouskaya has additionally ceased rhetoric distancing Belarus from Russia since the August 9 election. Kolesnikova’s statements go beyond what Tikhonouskaya herself has previously said but may be taken as Tikhonouskaya’s position if Tikhonouskaya does not rapidly correct or reject them.

The Kremlin will attempt to shape this process and dominate any new transition government and continue to resist any European engagement in the process.

Prominent opposition Telegram channel NEXTA backed down from a confrontation over the orientation of the protest movement it provoked on August 17. NEXTA attempted to unify the protest movement around a more confrontational posture the night of August 17 and promised to call for renewed pressure on the Akrestin prison.⁶ NEXTA did not issue any instructions regarding the prison the morning of August 18, and only a few hundred protesters arrived at the prison independently.⁷ NEXTA instead called on protesters to support the nationwide strikes promoted by Tikhonouskaya and continue occupying key locations in Belarus during the day.⁸ NEXTA additionally expressed support for the “Coordination Council” Tikhonouskaya promoted August 17 to coordinate strikes and act as the basis of a transition government.⁹ NEXTA may have backed down from a confrontation to avoid dividing the protest movement. Tikhonouskaya may have pressured NEXTA to not split

from her current approach focused on national strikes and the Coordination Council over direct confrontations with Belarusian security forces.

The protest movement shifted to a defensive stance on August 18 and did not call for any major rallies or issue detailed directions. August 18 protests focused primarily on expressing support for strikes and calling for officials to step down in city and town centers across Belarus. The protest movement will likely lose momentum and may divide without a clear plan of action or leadership.

Lukashenko attempted to reassert control over security forces and factory workers. Defections from Lukashenko's government continued August 18, with the ambassadors to Spain and Slovakia speaking out against Lukashenko, though Lukashenko likely retains his core powerbase.¹⁰ The Belarusian government published a list on August 18 signed by Lukashenko of over 300 security personnel awarding them for "exemplary service" against the protests.¹¹ Lukashenko likely took this action to secure the support of the security forces – both by awarding them for their service and dissuading defections by linking them to his regime. Factory bosses are successfully dissuading workers in several key factories, including industrial giant Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ), from joining national strikes by threatening to fire them.¹² The Belarusian government additionally organized a series of pro-Lukashenko rallies around the country for the afternoon, ordering civil servants to attend.¹³ These protests are currently ongoing.¹⁴

Lukashenko's prospects for remaining in power may be increasing, but he clearly sees Tikhanouskaya as a major challenge. Lukashenko appears less likely to be directly deposed by the protest movement than had been the case over the previous 72 hours, although the situation remains very dynamic. Lukashenko seems to retain overall control over the security forces and his base of support despite defections and dissent, although he has been careful not to order his security services to take action that would force them to demonstrate their loyalty or disloyalty. He is attempting to stave off a combined government with Tikhanouskaya, denouncing the members of Tikhanouskaya's Coordination Council as criminals and Nazis, and claiming it is a front for a violent seizure of power.¹⁵

The Kremlin may prefer a transition to Tikhanouskaya, however, given Lukashenko's previous opposition to Union State integration and her apparent new willingness to accept it. Tikhanouskaya expressed clear willingness to work with the Kremlin in a transition government which the Kremlin would likely be able to manipulate. If she and NEXTA work together to manage the protest movement they may be able to bring mass demonstrations back to force Lukashenko's hand if and when she is ready to move. If the confusion of August 17 and 18 demoralize protesters and Lukashenko is able to use factory managers to keep workers from joining demonstrations, however, Tikhanouskaya could lose the power base she might require to force Lukashenko to cede power.

The opposition movement might also radicalize under different leadership, on the other hand. If the movement splits and elements of it reject Tikhanouskaya's outreach to the Kremlin she and even NEXTA might lose control of portions of it. If it appears that Lukashenko will remain in power, moreover, the protesters could become re-energized and more radical, forcing Tikhanouskaya and NEXTA to decide between retaining support of the more radical elements and opposing them, potentially seeming to be on Lukashenko's side. The situation is developing rapidly and unpredictably.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63903>; <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63907>.

² https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4290660.

³ <https://echo.msk.ru/news/2694225-echo.html>.

⁴ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/russia-in-review-turmoil-in-belarus.html>.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPATUpqAIDE>; [https://ukrainetoday\(.\)org/2020/08/17/i-am-ready-to-become-a-national-leader-svetlana-tikhanovskaya-issued-a-new-appeal-to-belarusians/](https://ukrainetoday(.)org/2020/08/17/i-am-ready-to-become-a-national-leader-svetlana-tikhanovskaya-issued-a-new-appeal-to-belarusians/).

⁶ <http://www.iswresearch.org/>.

⁷ [https://tvrain\(.\)ru/teleshov/here_and_now/chto_proishodilo_nakanune_u_sizo_na_okrestina_v_minsk-514545/](https://tvrain(.)ru/teleshov/here_and_now/chto_proishodilo_nakanune_u_sizo_na_okrestina_v_minsk-514545/).

⁸ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/8709](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/8709).

⁹ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/8753](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/8753).

¹⁰ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/697151.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/697151.html); [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/697024.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/697024.html).

¹¹ [https://pravo\(.\)by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P32000305&p1=1&p5=0](https://pravo(.)by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P32000305&p1=1&p5=0).

¹² [https://ria\(.\)ru/20200817/1575874656.html](https://ria(.)ru/20200817/1575874656.html).

¹³ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/society/697162.html](https://news.tut(.)by/society/697162.html)

¹⁴ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/society/697162.html](https://news.tut(.)by/society/697162.html)

¹⁵ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/697175.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/697175.html)