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By Mason Clark

Russia's intervention in Belarus likely deterred protesters on August 19. The threat of a Russian intervention to support Lukashenko, which ISW reported on August 19 and forecasted on August 14, likely deterred protesters on August 19 and 20.¹ Belarusian security forces additionally deployed in force on August 19 for the first time since August 13 following instructions from Lukashenko to “crush” the protests.² Belarusian security forces deployed around key buildings in Minsk and cleared opposition protests in several cities around Belarus – with protesters quickly withdrawing without a fight.³

Lukashenko regained control over authorities in the city of Grodno on August 20, after defections on August 18 that may have prompted the Russian intervention. The City Executive Committee of Grodno, near the Polish and Lithuanian borders, issued an apology statement to protesters on August 18, released protest detainees, and promised to support protesters.⁴ Lukashenko contained this defection on August 19 and 20. City authorities did not crack down on protesters on August 19, but reversed their statement from the previous day and refused to support protesters with logistical support or statements.⁵

Grodno's mayor then revoked his prior support and threatened protesters with detention, and claimed they were destroying property and threatening families on August 20 – after stating on August 18 “not a single shop has been broken” during protests.⁶ The Belarusian military additionally began unspecific “defensive tactical exercises” in Grodno, likely as a show of force.⁷ Belarusian units that deployed to Grodno the night of August 19 included UAV and Electronic Warfare assets that could be used to disrupt protests and any further defections among Belarusian security forces – in addition to supporting the Belarusian force posture on its border with Poland and Lithuania.⁸ Lukashenko's reassertion of authority in Grodno, the highest profile defection of the protests so far, will likely deter other cities from speaking out against his regime.

Lukashenko is likely preparing further crackdowns on striking workers and protesters. Belarusian security forces detained a key organizer of the strike by major mining company Belaruskali.⁹ The organizer has not been heard from since 11:00 am local time. Protesters shared videos of Belarusian army trucks arriving in downtown Minsk around 3:00 pm local time.¹⁰ The Lukashenko government organized several pro-Lukashenko rallies across Belarus on August 20, particularly in Minsk.¹¹ Belarusian security forces are likely positioning to suppress any further protests.

Primary opposition Telegram channel NEXTA may be losing its ability to marshal protesters. NEXTA has driven the focus of protests around the country and particularly in Minsk since August 9, including organizing the largest rally in Belarusian history on August 16. NEXTA did not issue any instructions for protests on August 20 for the first time since the August 9 elections, following a lackluster showing on August 19. NEXTA asked protesters to support strikers and gather at the Belarusian Interior Ministry in Minsk at 6:00 pm local time on August 19.¹² Likely less than a hundred protesters gathered in the evening, with independent Belarusian media reporting at 6:00 pm that there were more journalists than protesters at the interior ministry.¹³ Protests continued at a small scale around the country but avoided confrontation with security forces.¹⁴ This was the first instance of NEXTA's protest instructions not receiving a widespread response.

NEXTA is aligning behind Tikanouskaya's attempted political process and announced a second Sunday march on August 23. NEXTA called for a march in Minsk's Independence Square on August 23, announcing the leaders of Tikanouskaya's Coordination Council will make an “important policy statement” at the march.¹⁵ NEXTA – the

primary coordinating body of the protest movement to date – is likely increasingly working with Tikanouskaya’s efforts to broker a political compromise with Lukashenko. NEXTA may successfully rally support for Tikanouskaya during the Sunday rally and NEXTA may be taking an operational pause to prepare for the Sunday rally. However, the protest movement could alternatively dissipate in the face of government crackdowns and a lack of ongoing protests.

Tikanouskaya’s attempts to engage Lukashenko and the Kremlin politically will likely fail. Tikanouskaya’s Coordination Council stated it unsuccessfully attempted to contact the Lukashenko administration on August 19.¹⁶ Lukashenko has flatly stated he will not engage with the Coordination Council.¹⁷ Belarusian Prosecutor General Alexander Konyuk opened a criminal case against the members of the Coordination Council for attempting to seize power.¹⁸

The Kremlin is also downplaying the legitimacy of the Coordination Council and is unlikely to engage with it, despite outreach from Tikanouskaya.¹⁹ Head editor of RT Margarita Simonyan dismissed Tikanouskaya, claimed Belarusian protests are only continuing because some do not understand Tikanouskaya’s message, and said she has the IQ of an “orangutan” on primetime Russian news.²⁰

The Kremlin likely poisoned Russia's main opposition figure, Alexei Navalny, on August 20, possibly in part as a warning to Russians not to follow the examples of Belarus and Khabarovsk. The Kremlin likely poisoned Navalny the morning of August 20.²¹ Navalny is currently in a coma in a hospital in the Siberian city of Omsk after his flight made an emergency landing. Doctors initially did not allow Navalny’s wife to see him and are impeding her efforts to take him to a toxicology hospital in Europe.²² The Kremlin likely poisoned Navalny as a message to Russians to not follow the Belarusian example and to distract the news cycle from Belarus.

Lukashenko is more likely to stabilize the situation and nullify the protest movement with Russian support. Protests will likely weaken on Friday and Saturday due to the threat of a renewed crackdown and a lack of clear protest organization. The planned Sunday rally in Minsk may once again marshal support, but Lukashenko will likely be prepared to contain it with active Russian assistance. The Belarusian opposition risks losing momentum as it coalesces around Tikanouskaya’s Coordination Council – a political body unlikely to make any progress in securing a transition government.

The opposition may alternatively be taking time to prepare for the August 23 protests to be met with violence from Belarusian security forces. A reduction in active protests from Thursday to Saturday may be a deliberate tactic by the opposition to prepare for Sunday. Belarusian security forces will likely contest the August 23 protests, unlike on August 16, with new Kremlin support and the ongoing crackdown. The August 23 protests will be a key inflection in the direction of the protest movement – depending on its ability to retain large-scale support and respond to a likely violent response from security forces.

¹ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>.

² <https://news.tut.by/economics/697285.html>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/vernut-ljudjam-spokojnju-stranu-lukashenko-ozvuchil-itogi-zasedanija-sovbeza-403372-2020/>.

³ <https://naviny.by/new/20200819/1597852296-akciya-protesta-prohodit-naprotiv-zdaniya-mvd-v-minske>; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1295976058014117889?s=20>.

⁴ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>.

⁵ <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30792528.html>; <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-hrodno-mitynh-bez-transliantsii/30792597.html>; <https://twitter.com/tutby/status/1296132009878851584>.

⁶ <https://news.tut.by/society/697421.html>.

⁷ <https://42.tut.by/697445>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly4TddD3R7Q&feature=youtu.be>; <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/104471/>.

⁸ <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/104471/>

⁹ <https://news.tut.by/society/697411.html>.

¹⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElimS_RwkP8&feature=youtu.be.

¹¹ <https://news.tut.by/society/697384.html>

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- ¹² https://t.me/nexta_tv/3826.
- ¹³ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697285.html>; https://twitter.com/Belsat_Eng/status/1296127559734898688.
- ¹⁴ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697285.html>.
- ¹⁵ https://t.me/nexta_live/8903.
- ¹⁶ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697346.html>.
- ¹⁷ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697202.html>.
- ¹⁸ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697424.html>.
- ¹⁹ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarussian-opposition-reaches.html>.
- ²⁰ https://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/60851/episode_id/2433077/video_id/2324183/;
https://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/60851/episode_id/2433077/video_id/2324183/.
- ²¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-navalny/putin-critic-navalny-fights-for-life-aides-suspect-poisoning-idUSKBN25G0F9>.
- ²² <https://twitter.com/maxseddon/status/1296440950215016448?s=20>.