

Warning: Moscow Sets Conditions for Kinetic Intervention in Belarus Through New Information Operation

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By George Barros

The Kremlin has assumed direct control of Belarusian media to conduct an information campaign for its own ends as the key component of its hybrid operation in Belarus. Lukashenko stated on August 21 he “invited” Russian media professionals to work at Belarusian state media.¹ Lukashenko’s statement confirms ISW’s August 20 assessment that the Kremlin began an information operation in Belarus and took control of Belarusian state news agencies on August 19.² The Kremlin, Lukashenko, Belarusian authorities, and Belarusian state media organizations’ rhetoric are converging. Belarusian state entities are acting as components of this Kremlin information operation and must be studied as such. This information operation is likely a component of a larger Russian hybrid operation currently underway.

The Kremlin’s information operation is manipulating the information space by perpetuating false memes. The final section in this update includes a list of false memes and an explanation of why they are false. Kremlin information operations rely on shifting the narrative over time, an approach that depends in turn on the target audience losing track of previous events, statements, and arguments.³ It is vitally important for policy makers and Western media to remain oriented on the original sequence of events and the various claims and arguments advanced by Lukashenko and Moscow and to resist Russian and Belarusian efforts to rewrite recent history in support of their efforts to shape the information space. A forthcoming ISW report on the Russian definition of hybrid warfare will further expand on the Russian approaches to such conflicts and use of information operations in them.

The Kremlin is obfuscating Moscow’s ongoing intervention in Belarus, framing Russian involvement as a future possibility when it is, in fact, already underway. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke with Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei on August 21 and agreed anti-Lukashenko protests do not require external intervention at this time.⁴ Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov additionally stated the same day that Moscow is ready to do “everything possible” to help resolve the protests if Lukashenko requests Kremlin support.⁵

The Kremlin is falsely framing the protests as a NATO versus Russia conflict. Russian President Vladimir Putin held a Russian Security Council meeting on August 21 and reiterated the unacceptability of “external interference” in Belarus.⁶ Lukashenko made a speech framing the protests as an international conflict between NATO and Russia during a visit to the Dzerzhinsky agricultural plant on August 21.⁷ Lukashenko stated the US goal, with the Europeans “playing along,” is establishing the Baltics, Belarus, and Ukraine as a “sanitary cordon” around Russia.⁸ Lukashenko accused NATO of trying to separate Grodno from Belarus and claimed protesters are flying Polish flags in Grodno.⁹ Lukashenko has referred to the protests as a hybrid war since August 6, but had not previously framed it explicitly as a NATO vs Russia conflict.¹⁰ Lavrov and Makei called on external “players” to respect the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Belarus and to stop attempts to provoke confrontation in Belarus on August 21.¹¹ This rhetoric is consistent with how the Kremlin describes Western efforts to pressure Russia through color revolutions.

The information operation is perpetuating falsehoods about the protesters' NATO allegiance.

Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko said Belarus' withdrawal from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) would result in income losses of about \$300-350 million annually for the Belarusian defense industry.¹² This statement is a dual attempt to degrade support for protests among Belarusians by appealing to an economic incentive and also to perpetuate the false meme that "protesters are trying to break the CSTO" – which Lukashenko originally claimed on August 18.¹³ Lukashenko also 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 (referring to the establishment of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's autocephaly in January 2019), join the EU and NATO, and close Russia's two radar bases in Belarus on August 18.¹⁴

The Kremlin is retaining flexibility in its information campaign to exploit any future changes in NATO's posture or the protesters' demands.

The evolving information operation in Belarus is distorting the true order of facts about the anti-Lukashenko protests. The Kremlin already exploited NATO's Defender 2020 exercises in Poland by falsely claiming these were a buildup against Belarus.¹⁵ The Kremlin is likely prepared to exploit any future pro-Western shifts in the protesters' demands by having already falsely claimed the protesters are anti-Russian NATO proxies.

The West is contesting the Belarusian information space with its own information operations.

Lukashenko continues to suppress print media and the internet inside Belarus.¹⁶ Poland's state public radio broadcaster Polskie Radio announced it will launch special news broadcasts for Belarus via long wave radio on August 21.¹⁷ Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty's Belarusian serviced resumed radio broadcasting on medium waves into Belarus, as it did during the Cold War, on August 11.¹⁸ The Kremlin will likely frame Polish and American information activities as evidence of NATO interference in sovereign Belarusian and Union State affairs.

Lukashenko's Kremlin-backed counteroffensive is suppressing large-scale protests for now. Lukashenko is reportedly conducting targeted arrests of Belarusian protest leaders who brokered the August 18 compromise with the Grodno City Executive Committee – the key development that triggered the Kremlin's intervention.¹⁹ The Minsk Automobile Plant fired strike leaders on August 21.²⁰ Small-scale protests persist throughout Belarus as of August 21.²¹ Protest organizers have not called for large-scale demonstrations before Sunday, August 23, however, so the cause of the reduction in protest activity is not entirely clear.

Lukashenko will likely use force against protesters on Sunday, August 23. The opposition is preparing for a large protest on Minsk's Independence Square on August 23 from 2:00 – 7:00 pm Minsk time. Opposition leader Svetlana Tikanouskaya urged protesters to prepare for August 23 protests in an August 21 press conference, her first full press conference since fleeing to Lithuania on August 11.²² Belarusian news outlet *Nasha Niva* reported Belarusian Defense Minister Victor Khrenin said the Belarusian army could use lethal weapons against protesters in a secret meeting with Belarusian military officers on August 19.²³ Belarusian security forces with Kremlin support will likely crack down on the Sunday march.²⁴

The Kremlin will likely intervene with force if Lukashenko loses control of the situation again. Lukashenko will likely "ask" the Kremlin for deeper intervention if protesters reconsolidate and threaten Lukashenko's control over Belarus or if Belarusian security services defections resume. The Kremlin currently holds significant leverage over Lukashenko and may send its security forces into Belarus without Lukashenko's consent if it perceives its objectives are threatened.

A deeper Russian intervention into Belarus under the pretext of protecting Belarus against "foreign interference" from NATO may not end at Belarus' borders. The Kremlin may seek to additionally destabilize NATO allies Poland and Lithuania with hybrid operations below the threshold of an invasion.

A deeper Kremlin intervention would likely result in a “soft annexation” of Belarus. Lavrov and Makei discussed Putin and Lukashenko’s “agreements” during their call.²⁵ The “agreements” may refer to recent concessions Lukashenko made to Putin under duress while Lukashenko was losing control over Belarus before the Kremlin’s intervention. The Kremlin seeks to integrate Belarus into Russia via the existing Union State treaty.²⁶ The Kremlin seeks to establish permanent strategic Russian bases in Belarus postured against Ukraine and NATO.²⁷ Lukashenko will likely be forced to concede to Kremlin desires after having resisted them for several years.

The information operation will likely amplify and perpetuate the following memes that are based on falsehoods and/or distortions of the actual sequence of events:

- The Kremlin did not intervene in Belarus and is not intervening now. (Russian personnel are more or less openly running Belarusian state television.)²⁸
- The EU and/or NATO is threatening Belarus and/or Russia with a military buildup in Poland and Lithuania. (NATO has conducted no military build-up and no unscheduled or unannounced exercises on its borders with Belarus as of August 21.)
- The EU and/or NATO seek to overthrow Lukashenko in an illegal junta as the Euromaidan did to former pro-Russian Ukrainian President Yanukovich in Ukraine in 2014. (Belarusian protests began as an organic response to Lukashenko’s incompetent handling of the COVID crisis and transformed into demonstrations against his obvious stealing of the presidential election, and were neither initiated nor organized or led by the EU, NATO, or the US).²⁹
- Anti-Lukashenko protesters are pro-western NATO proxies. (Demonstrators and opposition leaders have been notably focused on grievances with Lukashenko rather than calling for deeper integration with the EU, NATO, or the West, in marked contrast with Euromaidan leaders in Ukraine in 2014.)³⁰
- Anti-Lukashenko protesters are Russophobic and seek to ban the Russian language in Belarus, create an autocephalous Belarusian Orthodox Church withdraw Belarus from the Union State and CSTO. (There is no evidence for any of these claims as of August 21.)³¹
- Military action from the Kremlin-Lukashenko axis is inherently legitimate given external NATO aggression and Belarus and Russia’s Union State and CSTO treaties. (There has been neither NATO aggression against Belarus nor any build-up by NATO in preparation for such aggression. Lukashenko can, of course, call on Russia to provide assistance in oppressing his own people on a bilateral basis or under the auspices of either the CSTO or the Union State agreement. The West began radio programming into Belarus in response to Lukashenko shutting off the internet on August 9, not in order to dispose Lukashenko.)³²

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates

¹ <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/lukashenko-confirms-russian-journalists-in-belarus/30795745.html>

² <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-kremlin-backed.html>;

<https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1296767983809896448?s=20>

³

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%20I%20Putin's%20Information%20Warfare%20in%20Ukraine-%20Soviet%20Origins%20of%20Russias%20Hybrid%20Warfare.pdf> ;

<https://www.iswresearch.org/2018/07/putin-poised-for-easy-victory-ahead-of.html> ;

⁴ [https://www.mid\(.\)ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4294262](https://www.mid(.)ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4294262)

⁵ <https://nbnews.com.ua/politika/2020/08/21/peskov-zayavil-o-gotovnosti-rossii-pomoch-belarusi-chto-reshili-v-kremle/>

⁶ [http://kremlin\(.\)ru/events/president/news/63926](http://kremlin(.)ru/events/president/news/63926)

⁷ [https://www.belta\(\(.\)\)by/president/view/ot-ameriki-do-varshavy-lukashenko-zajavil-chto-protiv-belarusi-dejstvujut-neskolko-tsentrov-sil-403658-2020/?utm_source=belta&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=accent](https://www.belta((.))by/president/view/ot-ameriki-do-varshavy-lukashenko-zajavil-chto-protiv-belarusi-dejstvujut-neskolko-tsentrov-sil-403658-2020/?utm_source=belta&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=accent)

⁸ [https://news.tut\(\(.\)\)by/economics/697579.html](https://news.tut((.))by/economics/697579.html)

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- ⁹ http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/rabochaja-poezdka-v-minskuju-oblast-24360olis;
http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/rabochaja-poezdka-v-minskuju-oblast-24360
- ¹⁰ Lukashenko did not specify where the hybrid war was coming from at that point in order to leave him options to blame Russia. <https://news.tut.by/economics/695619.html>
- ¹¹ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4294262
- ¹² <https://eng.belta.by/economics/view/belarus-withdrawal-from-csto-estimated-at-300-350mn-annually-132760-2020/>
- ¹³ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/ot-razryva-s-rossiej-do-vhozhenija-v-es-i-nato-lukashenko-otmechaet-polnuju-nesostojatelnost-403262-2020> ; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/ot-razryva-s-rossiej-do-vhozhenija-v-es-i-nato-lukashenko-otmechaet-polnuju-nesostojatelnost-403262-2020> ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=wUggOzKJZ4k&feature=emb_title
- ¹⁵ <https://www.eur.army.mil/DefenderEurope/> ; <https://www.euointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2020/08/18/7113351/> ;
<https://lenta.ru/news/2020/08/19/otan/>
- ¹⁶ <https://news.tut.by/society/697555.html>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7785/Artykul/2568689,Polish-Radio-launches-special-news-broadcasts-for-Belarus>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30778440.html>
- ¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/QOMT6pFmbVqynsM/status/1296772070601306112> ;
- ²⁰ <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30795685.html>
- ²¹ <https://www.dw.com/ru/protesty-v-belarusi-glava-mid-frg-napomnil-o-prazhskoj-vesne/a-54641926>
- ²² <https://news.tut.by/economics/697560.html>
- ²³ <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=257508&lang=ru>
- ²⁴ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-enables-lukashenko-to.html>
- ²⁵ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4294262
- ²⁶ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/ot-razryva-s-rossiej-do-vhozhenija-v-es-i-nato-lukashenko-otmechaet-polnuju-nesostojatelnost-403262-2020> ; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>
- ²⁷ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/02/russia-in-review-belarus-update.html>; <https://www.rubaltic.ru/news/06112018-lukashenko-otkazalsya-ot-razmeshcheniya-rossiyskoy-voennoy-bazy/>
- ²⁸ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-kremlin-backed.html> ;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>
- ²⁹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/russia-in-review-turmoil-in-belarus.html> ;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>
- ³⁰ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>
- ³¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>
- ³² <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html> ;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarusian-opposition-reaches.html> ;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarusian-president-lukashenko.html>