

Warning: Lukashenko Mobilizes Military to Western Border as Local Protest Organization Emerges

August 22, 2020, 2:30 pm EDT

By Mason Clark

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko fully mobilized the Belarusian military and continued to emphasize his false claims of a NATO military threat on August 22. Lukashenko traveled to the Western region of Grodno, bordering Lithuania and Poland, on August 21 and 22. Grodno has previously been a protest hotspot and was the site of the only major defection (now suppressed) by regional officials to date in Belarus on August 18.¹ Lukashenko claimed during a meeting with military officers in Grodno that the West continues to attempt a “color revolution” against Belarus but that Belarusian authorities remain in place and are “strongly resisting.”² Lukashenko falsely claimed NATO is mobilizing troops in Poland and Lithuania to add an “external factor” as this color revolution falters.³ NATO is not mobilizing protests and protests remain strong. Lukashenko additionally continued his efforts to reorient the Belarusian crisis as a struggle between NATO and Russia, stating NATO wants to use Belarus as a “springboard” to destroy Russia later.⁴

Lukashenko may be attempting to distract attention from protests in Minsk and around the country by focusing on a false Polish and Lithuanian threat, in addition to preparing for further protest crackdowns. Lukashenko brought the Belarusian military to full combat readiness in a claimed response to this false NATO mobilization.⁵ Lukashenko further reconsolidated his control over Grodno on August 22, appointing Health Minister (and Grodno native) Vladamir Karanik as regional governor.⁶ The Belarusian Ministry of Information restricted Belarusian access to around 75 websites on August 21 and 22, primarily opposition news outlets and the websites of Belarusian opposition leaders.⁷ Lukashenko will continue to attempt to restrict and shape the information space with Kremlin support. Lukashenko’s focus on Grodno will likely enable crackdowns on potential further protests in Grodno.

Lukashenko may additionally be posturing for future actions against Lithuania and Poland as part of offensive hybrid efforts. ISW previously warned the Kremlin’s support for Lukashenko may enable attempts to destabilize Poland or Lithuania under the pretext of responding to “foreign interference.”⁸ Lukashenko may also be falling for his own false information campaign claiming a NATO operation against Belarus is imminent and be posturing forces on the Polish and Lithuanian border to defend against a self-created threat.

Protests continued in Minsk on August 22 without interference from security forces. Protests continued in Minsk on a small scale on August 22 without overt organization from major opposition telegram channel NEXTA. Women in white – a form of protest that emerged in the last two weeks – began forming a human chain in downtown Minsk around 2:00 pm local time and marched to Minsk’s independence square throughout the afternoon, intentionally passing key landmarks including the Interior Ministry and Belarusian KGB.⁹ Protesters began gathering on Minsk’s Independence Square around 7:00 pm local time.¹⁰ Independent media reported around a thousand people had gathered by 7:30 pm local time.¹¹ Security forces were present in small numbers monitoring the Minsk protest but did not impede the march.¹²

Emerging local organizers likely organized the Saturday protests. Additionally, the Belarusian Interior Ministry announced on August 22 it had begun targeting street protest organizers.¹³ Lukashenko’s administration has not previously used language referring to local protest organizers, instead focusing on its claims of foreign organization of the protests. The change in rhetoric may reflect a changing protest dynamic, as it is not in Lukashenko’s interest to admit to indigenous protest organization. A public-facing local protest coordination organization has not yet emerged, but the Belarusian protest movement is likely developing domestic capabilities. NEXTA notably did not call for Saturday’s protests, and Lukashenko’s restriction of Belarusians’ access to opposition media may hinder

NEXTA's and Tikhonouskaya's abilities to shape and direct protests, which was clearly Lukashenko's intent. This local organization will likely increase the longevity of the protest movement.

The current known centers of protest coordination, NEXTA and Tikhonouskaya, are predominantly oriented on planned August 23 protests. Opposition coordination of the protest movement has previously come primarily from Belarusians operating outside of Belarus – including the Poland-based NEXTA telegram channel and opposition presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhonouskaya's headquarters in Lithuania. NEXTA and Tikhonouskaya both reduced their explicit calls for protests in Belarus on August 18, focusing their planning on preparing for marches on Sunday August 23. NEXTA promoted the August 22 march but did not call for it.¹⁴

The Kremlin's information operation in Belarus will likely attempt to exploit demonstrations on August 23 to promote false framing that Lithuania and NATO are interfering in Belarus.¹⁵ Lithuanian television anchor Andrius Tapinas announced on August 14 his intent to organize a human chain stretching from Lithuania to Belarus as a demonstration of solidarity on August 23.¹⁶ The planned event imitates and occurs on the anniversary of the 1989 Baltic Way – a August 23, 1989 demonstration in which approximately two million Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians formed a 675-kilometer human chain to demonstrate to protest Soviet occupation. Tapinas claimed the demonstration would need about 25,000-30,000 Lithuanian participants and expressed a desire to link with a similar human chain in Belarus planned for August 23.¹⁷ Lukashenko sent Belarusian security forces to prevent this human chain on August 15.¹⁸ Russian language media described Tapinas as a “pro-Lithuanian government propagandist.”¹⁹ The Kremlin's information operation will likely use the presence of human chains in Belarus as evidence of NATO-directed subversion in order to justify a crackdown and possibly deeper Kremlin intervention.²⁰

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-enables-lukashenko-to.html>.

² <https://news.tut.by/economics/697682.html>;

³ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-vpervye-za-chetvert-veka-prishlos-prinimat-samoe-serjeznoe-reshenie-403766-2020/>.

⁴ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-u-nas-s-putiny-mnenie-belarus-travjat-chtoby-potom-brositsja-na-rossiju-403786-2020/>

⁵ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697686.html>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-vpervye-za-chetvert-veka-prishlos-prinimat-samoe-serjeznoe-reshenie-403766-2020/>.

⁶ <https://news.tut.by/economics/697692.html>.

⁷ <https://42.tut.by/697663>; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1296907996602261511?s=20>.

⁸ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>.

⁹ <https://news.tut.by/society/697676.html>.

¹⁰ <https://news.tut.by/society/697676.html>.

¹¹ <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2020/8/22/390519/>.

¹² <https://news.tut.by/society/697676.html>.

¹³ <https://t.me/pressmvd/1950?fbclid=IwAR1IdVnt8cewN21Awz0O8wKTvWwbdCKUX3LBrXyGo2KhSREEoIn3SATgU8>.

¹⁴ https://t.me/nexta_live/9103.

¹⁵ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1210622/lithuania-plans-human-chain-from-vilnius-to-belarusian-border-to-show-solidarity>

¹⁷ <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1210622/lithuania-plans-human-chain-from-vilnius-to-belarusian-border-to-show-solidarity>; <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1210622/lithuania-plans-human-chain-from-vilnius-to-belarusian-border-to-show-solidarity>.

¹⁸ <https://www.kp.ru/online/news/3979551/>; <https://t.me/pressmvd/1950?>

¹⁹ <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2020/08/15/litovcev-i-latyshey-zovut-vystroitsya-v-cep-solidarnosti-so-zmagarami>;

<https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2019/09/04/litovskuyu-issledovatelnicu-holokosta-vanagayte-snova-nachali-travit>;

<https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2018/07/26/deputata-titova-osypali-mukoy-za-vyskazyvaniya-o-litovskom-lesnom-brate>.

²⁰ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>.