

Lukashenko's Security Forces Detain

Belarusian Opposition Leaders

August 24, 2020, 6:30 pm EDT

By George Barros

The Lukashenko regime began a new phase in its crackdown by starting to disperse and arrest protesters and conduct targeted arrests against opposition leaders in Minsk for the first time since August 19. Belarusian authorities detained Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ) strike leader Sergei Dvlevsky and opposition leader Olga Kovalkova – both members of opposition leader Svitlana Tikanouskaya's Coordination Council – on August 24.¹ Belarusian security forces also detained Alexander Lavrinovich – the strike leader at the state-owned Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT) – and Anatoly Bokun – the strike leader at the Belaruskali potash fertilizer plant – on August 24.² Authorities released Bokun after fining him 675 rubles on August 24.³ Authorities had previously arrested a key Belaruskali strike organizer on August 20, but he reportedly managed to escape his detention facility.⁴ Lavrinovich's status is unknown as of this update.⁵ Authorities brought Kovalkova to the Akrestin St. detention facility – a location the opposition associates with the physical abuse of detainees.⁶ The opposition had marched on the Akrestin St. detention facility in a poorly organized effort directed by the NEXTA Telegram channel on August 18.⁷ The Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) has not attempted to disperse any protests in Minsk or detain protesters since August 19.⁸ Belarusian authorities ended the last round of mass detentions on August 14 when they released a large number of detainees. The renewed dispersions and arrests are likely intended to intimidate protesters. The Lukashenko regime will likely increase the scope of targeted arrests against opposition leaders and use force against protesters in the coming week.

President Alexander Lukashenko likely took advantage of the small scale of protests today to demonstrate his renewed willingness to use force to disperse them and to arrest demonstrators. There were no large-scale protests in Belarus on August 24. A few hundred protesters came to Independence Square in Minsk around 7:00 pm Minsk time but riot police detained some and dispersed the rest.⁹ Localized small-scale protests continue to occur in Belarus but security forces are consistently dispersing them.¹⁰

NEXTA issued directions for new protest activity for August 25 that will likely lead to direct confrontation between protesters and Belarusian authorities given Lukashenko's actions. A NEXTA post at 10:29 p.m. Minsk time on August 24 directed Belarusians to gather at the Belarusian Investigative Committee in Minsk at 10:00 am local time and then gather at Independence Square at 6:00 pm.¹¹ The Investigative Committee of Belarus summoned Pavel Latushko, a Coordinating Council member, to appear at its premises for questioning about alleged "calls for actions aimed at causing harm to national security" on August 25 at 10:00 Minsk time.¹² NEXTA is likely trying to direct protesters to the Investigative Committee building to disrupt Latushko's scheduled questioning. NEXTA also instructed residents in other cities to hold their own demonstrations at 6:00 pm Minsk time on August 25. NEXTA stated that a "detailed strategy" on how to "return power to the people" and an "important appeal from Svitlana Tikanouskaya" would be presented sometime this week.¹³ Belarusian security forces will likely confront protesters at the Investigative Committee building. It is unclear if they will attempt to disrupt or otherwise interfere with protests at Independence Square, which they have not done over the past 10 days.

The opposition may be setting conditions for a grassroots leadership structure to emerge inside Belarus. Opposition leader Olga Kolesnikova urged Belarusians to initiate legal petitions to recall their MPs and regional officials in a Coordination Council briefing on August 24. Lukashenko will likely not allow this effort to remove any officials. The process of Belarusian opposition activists collecting signatures, however, may facilitate the emergence of a better organized indigenous opposition network necessary for sustained and more organized protest activity. The Belarusian opposition movement currently lacks a clear leadership structure inside Belarus and is

dependent on announcements from Tikanouskaya in Lithuania or NEXTA in Poland to organize large-scale protests.¹⁴ This initiative may also be an effort by the Vilnius-based Tikanouskaya to develop her own abilities to control protest events in Belarus and thereby reduce her reliance on the Warsaw-based NEXTA, which has repeatedly appeared to disrupt her plans.¹⁵

The US is engaging the Belarusian opposition in a high-profile manner despite Kremlin warnings not to meet with opposition figures. US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun met with Tikanouskaya in Vilnius, Lithuania on August 24.¹⁶ Biegun urged Lukashenko at a press conference on the same day to facilitate dialogue and engage all stakeholders.¹⁷ Biegun also stated the US has no “indication beyond some of the public remarks that we’ve heard” that the Kremlin is preparing a possible military intervention into Belarus.¹⁸ Biegun’s statement contradicts elements of ISW’s previous assessments. The Kremlin and Lukashenko previously accused the US of “foreign interference” in Belarus.¹⁹ “Foreign interference” is a legal ground for a military assistance according to Russia and Belarus’ Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) agreements. The Kremlin previously stated it observed “foreign interference” in Belarus but has not military intervened because Lukashenko has not asked for assistance.²⁰ The Kremlin has stated repeatedly it would intervene military in Belarus at Lukashenko’s first request.²¹

The Kremlin is likely extracting concessions from Lukashenko in return for supporting his continued rule. Concessions likely include the deployment of Russian military hardware in Belarus. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Lukashenko had their fourth phone call since protests began on August 24.²² Lukashenko informed Putin about his measures to restore order in Belarus. The Belarusian Defense Ministry reportedly signed a deal with the Kremlin-owned Almaz-Antey defense company on August 24 at the Army 2020 annual international military-technical forum in Moscow. The Belarusian defense minister reportedly signed a contract for cooperation on air defense systems until 2025.²³ Almaz-Antey is the holding company for the manufacturers of the S-300, S-400, and S-500 Russian air-defense systems.²⁴ Lukashenko may have agreed to this deal as a condition for Kremlin support in Belarus.

The Kremlin likely seeks to deploy anti access/area denial weapon systems in Belarus to contest NATO and Eastern European airspace more than it already does with systems deployed in Kaliningrad. Lukashenko previously declined the Kremlin’s multiple requests to expand strategic Russian airbases in Belarus since at least 2015.²⁵ ISW assessed on August 21 that Lukashenko likely made concessions to Putin under duress while Lukashenko was losing control over Belarus before the Kremlin’s intervention.²⁶

ISW is monitoring the situation and will provide further updates.

¹ [https://www.intellinews\(.\)com/leading-members-of-belarus-coordinating-council-and-strike-movements-have-been-arrested-as-belarus-lukashenko-starts-crackdown-190296/](https://www.intellinews(.)com/leading-members-of-belarus-coordinating-council-and-strike-movements-have-been-arrested-as-belarus-lukashenko-starts-crackdown-190296/)

² <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30799754.html>

³ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/697923.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/697923.html)

⁴ [https://www.rbc\(.\)ru/politics/21/08/2020/5f3fc9a9a794700f5463764](https://www.rbc(.)ru/politics/21/08/2020/5f3fc9a9a794700f5463764)

⁵ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/697923.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/697923.html)

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/KavalkovaVolya/posts/1669394853218051> ;

[https://www.dw\(.\)com/ru/%D0%BE%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BB-%D0%B6%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%B2-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8-18082020/av-54614818](https://www.dw(.)com/ru/%D0%BE%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BB-%D0%B6%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%B2-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8-18082020/av-54614818) ;

⁷ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-telegram-channel-nexta-provokes.html> ;

[https://www.kommersant\(.\)ru/doc/4459118](https://www.kommersant(.)ru/doc/4459118) ;

⁸ [https://meduza\(.\)io/news/2020/08/19/omon-razognal-miting-u-minskogo-traktornogo-zavoda-do-etogo-sluchaya-aktsiyam-protesta-v-gorode-ne-prepyatstvovali-nedelyu](https://meduza(.)io/news/2020/08/19/omon-razognal-miting-u-minskogo-traktornogo-zavoda-do-etogo-sluchaya-aktsiyam-protesta-v-gorode-ne-prepyatstvovali-nedelyu)

⁹ <https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1297930631939346432> ;

<https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1297941342891450376> ; https://twitter.com/nexta_tv/status/1297950771883933696

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- ¹⁰ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/9435](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/9435)
- ¹¹ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/9454](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/9454)
- ¹² [https://naviny\(.\)by/new/20200824/1598274073-latushko-vyzvali-v-sledstvennyy-komitet-na-25-avgusta](https://naviny(.)by/new/20200824/1598274073-latushko-vyzvali-v-sledstvennyy-komitet-na-25-avgusta)
- ¹³ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_live/9454](https://t(.)me/nexta_live/9454)
- ¹⁴ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenko-and-nexta-apparently.html> ;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-nexta-telegram-channel-divides.html> ;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-violent-confrontation-between.html> ;
- ¹⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-usa/biegun-says-u-s-sees-no-indication-of-russian-military-plans-in-belarus-idUSKBN25K1GK>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-usa/biegun-says-u-s-sees-no-indication-of-russian-military-plans-in-belarus-idUSKBN25K1GK>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.news18.com/news/world/biegun-says-u-s-sees-no-indication-of-russian-military-plans-in-belarus-2815357.html>
- ¹⁹ <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30793138.html>; <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/experts-on-belarus/5552916.html>
- ²⁰ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/politics/view/lavrov-vmeshatelstvo-v-belarus-izvne-proishodit-s-tseljju-navjazat-svoi-porjadki-403367-2020](https://www.belta(.)by/politics/view/lavrov-vmeshatelstvo-v-belarus-izvne-proishodit-s-tseljju-navjazat-svoi-porjadki-403367-2020)
- ²¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarusian-president-lukashenko.html>
- ²² [http://kremlin\(.\)ru/events/president/news/63938](http://kremlin(.)ru/events/president/news/63938)
- ²³ [https://www.rbc\(.\)ru/politics/24/08/2020/5f43c9f29a7947ddefc83127](https://www.rbc(.)ru/politics/24/08/2020/5f43c9f29a7947ddefc83127)
- ²⁴ <https://defence-blog.com/news/army/russian-army-awards-contract-to-almaz-antey-for-new-anti-aircraft-defense-systems.html> ;
https://www.defenseworld.net/news/25691/Almaz_Antey_Delivers_New_Set_of_S_400s_to_Russia#.X0Qt8hKjcs ;
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- ²⁵ [https://www.rbc\(.\)ru/politics/06/10/2015/5613ebe59a794769839c9e3f](https://www.rbc(.)ru/politics/06/10/2015/5613ebe59a794769839c9e3f) ; [https://www.vesti\(.\)ru/article/1501418](https://www.vesti(.)ru/article/1501418) ;
[https://www.gazeta\(.\)ru/army/2019/11/14/12811502.shtml](https://www.gazeta(.)ru/army/2019/11/14/12811502.shtml)
- ²⁶ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>