



Militarization of Lukashenko's Response to Belarusian Protests Increases but Without Violence; Moscow Continues to Set Conditions for Intervention

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By George Barros

Unprecedented Belarusian conventional military deployments and widespread detentions failed to deter mass protests in Minsk on August 30. Over 100,000 protesters marched in Minsk and demonstrated at Lukashenko's Presidential Palace to demand his resignation on August 30.¹ This was the fourth consecutive Sunday protest in Minsk. Lukashenko deployed a heavy police and conventional military presence in Minsk to block protester access to Independence Square, the original location of the protest, and Lukashenko's residence.² Belarusian riot police's detained demonstrators early in the morning of August 30 but failed to deter protesters.³ *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty* reported Belarusian authorities detained at least 125 protesters on August 30. after refraining from detaining protesters on August 29 and the August 23 Sunday march.⁴ Protests also occurred in other major Belarusian cities including Brest, Grodno, Mogilev, and Gomel.⁵ Protesters dispersed from the barricade at Lukashenko's residence around 6:00 pm Minsk time following heavy rain and hail.⁶ Large weekly protests on Sundays will likely continue unless some aspect of the situation changes.

Lukashenko deployed armored vehicles alongside conventional forces against protests for the first time. Infantry fighting vehicles (BMPs) and armored personnel carriers (BTRs) arrived at Lukashenko's residence to reinforce the police barricade on August 30.⁷ At least five BTRs near Lukashenko's residence did not have visible unit insignias or numbering.⁸ The armored vehicles likely belong to units from the Belarusian Army's 120th Mechanized Brigade. Minsk residents filmed BMP columns with unit markings heading from the eastern outskirts of Minsk in the Uruchcha area, where the 120th Mechanized Brigade is based, towards the city center.⁹ Lukashenko deployed conventional military units in trucks on August 23 but has not yet deployed armored fighting vehicles. Belarusian military units did not open fire on protesters but appeared equipped for combat. Lukashenko likely deployed BMPs for the first time to increase security around his residence and intimidate protesters. Lukashenko will likely continue to use armored vehicles against future protests, further militarizing his response to the opposition.

Russian riot control personnel in Belarusian uniforms may already be operating in Belarus. St. Petersburg City Councilwoman Diana Seraya tweeted a video showing men in black uniforms with no insignia unloading luggage and riot shields from unmarked riot police trucks at the St. Petersburg riot police base on August 30.¹⁰ It is unclear from where the men arrived. The unmarked trucks in Seraya's video are visually similar to unmarked trucks the Conflict Intelligence Team OSINT group spotted driving towards Belarus from Smolensk on August 16.¹¹ The Kremlin confirmed on August 27 the existence of a Russian law enforcement officer reserve prepared to intervene in Belarus if the situation "gets out of control."¹² The men in Seraya's video may have returned to Russia from a two-week rotation in Belarus to augment Lukashenko's security forces. ISW forecasted the Kremlin's preparation to augment Lukashenko's security forces with Russian personnel on August 19.¹³

Emboldened protesters began to physically resist detentions. Protesters are now defending themselves from being arrested by swarming riot police and detention vans.¹⁴ Protesters have not confronted riot police detaining protesters prior to August 30.¹⁵ Protesters are adopting more active tactics that may lead to conflict escalation

between protesters and security forces. However, protesters in Minsk continued to avoid unprovoked confrontations with security forces and did not attempt to breach police and army barricades on August 30.¹⁶

Lukashenko further tightened control over the information space. Belarusian authorities forced AI, one of Belarus' largest mobile cell service operators, to reduce bandwidth speeds on August 30.¹⁷ This is likely part of the Kremlin and Lukashenko's information operation to regain control over the international information space regarding the protests.¹⁸ Lukashenko and the Kremlin likely seek to prevent Belarusians citizens from distributing cell phone video footage of protests and security forces; cell phone recordings have become one of the primary methods of relaying information about the protests in Belarus in the absence of a free media space.¹⁹

Kremlin media is increasingly framing the protesters as violent. Russian state media *RT* and *Izvestia* reported the Belarusian Interior Ministry claimed that protesters damaged a police car near the Independence Square barricade on August 30.²⁰ There is no photographic evidence of the allegedly damaged car as of this writing. Kremlin media will likely increasingly frame the protesters as violent – especially as both Lukashenko and the protesters continue to escalate the protests – as part of the Kremlin's information operation to justify deeper intervention.²¹

Russian involvement in Belarus will very likely increase. Russian President Vladimir Putin held a phone call with Lukashenko on August 30 and agreed to meet in Moscow at some time “in the coming weeks.”²² Lukashenko's dependence on Kremlin backing will likely increase given Lukashenko's decision to escalate protests with the use of armed conventional forces and the opposition's growing boldness to resist detentions.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://twitter.com/AlexKokcharov/status/1300128106527756290> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HLfb8XhMFE> ; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1300136216222928903>

² https://twitter.com/Den_2042/status/1300063267679883264/photo/1 ; <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1300032765694545923/photo/1>

³ <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1300029796542537729> ; <https://twitter.com/MaximEristavi/status/1300046530230071296>

⁴ <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30811591.html> ; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenko-and-kremlin.html>

⁵ https://twitter.com/nexta_tv/status/1300071769596997638 ; [https://novayagazeta\(.\)ru/articles/2020/08/30/86885-protesty-v-belarusi-den-22-chto-proishodit-online](https://novayagazeta(.)ru/articles/2020/08/30/86885-protesty-v-belarusi-den-22-chto-proishodit-online) ; <https://twitter.com/AlexKokcharov/status/1300096297081413637>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1300086837667680259> ;

https://twitter.com/Belsat_Eng/status/1300090754447048707 ; <https://twitter.com/OnlinerBY/status/1300085083202826243>

⁷ https://twitter.com/aldin_ww/status/1300078191839719427 ; <https://twitter.com/AlexKokcharov/status/1300084943930953728>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfDOvDsHAos> ; <https://twitter.com/vcdgf555/status/1300080681918369793>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/obretix/status/1300073126223663108> ; <https://twitter.com/AlexeiLesin/status/1300079147834843141> ;

<https://twitter.com/bbbayh/status/1300063369614032896> ; <https://twitter.com/HannaLiubakova/status/1300064535697555456> ;

https://twitter.com/Den_2042/status/1300065403322990592 ; <https://twitter.com/alchemeast/status/1300066407552634883> ;

https://twitter.com/aldin_ww/status/1300065995411853313 ; <https://statuspro.by/service/unp/100754819>

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/serayadiana/status/1300078944012636160> ; <https://twitter.com/i/status/1300079456242020352>

¹¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html> ;

https://twitter.com/CIteam_en/status/1295095481836724224

¹² [http://kremlin\(.\)ru/events/president/news/63951](http://kremlin(.)ru/events/president/news/63951) ; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-announces-reserve-force.html>

¹³ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-begins-security-forces.html>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/MaximEristavi/status/1300033793961660417> ;

<https://twitter.com/andersostlund/status/1300087414845771778> ; <https://twitter.com/bbbayh/status/1300110478375620610>

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/RICHARD08999364/status/1299032606449819648>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/Reevellp/status/1300111041939017730>

¹⁷ [https://ria\(.\)ru/20200830/internet-1576493232.html](https://ria(.)ru/20200830/internet-1576493232.html)

¹⁸ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenko-and-kremlin.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenko-and-kremlin.html>

²⁰ https://twitter.com/RT_russian/status/1300086816725512192

²¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>

²² [http://kremlin\(.\)ru/events/president/news/63966](http://kremlin(.)ru/events/president/news/63966)