

## Warning: Russia and Belarus Launch Military Exercises

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By George Barros

**Russia and Belarus are conducting military exercises in multiple locations.** *Izvestia* reported the Russian combined arms army (CAA), presumably the 6<sup>th</sup> CAA, of the Western Military District began large-scale exercises with 3,500 personnel in Leningrad Oblast on August 17.<sup>1</sup> It is unclear whether these exercises were prescheduled or snap. *TASS* reported the Southern Military District began pre-planned Collective Security Treaty Organization (CTSO) rapid reaction force exercises in Astrakhan, Russia, on August 17.<sup>2</sup> More than 1,000 servicemen are participating in the drill, including Belarusian forces.<sup>3</sup> The Kremlin may use the exercises to set conditions to insert Russian forces into Belarus. Belarus began its own exercises in Grodno near the Polish border on August 17. Tank, missile, artillery, air, and air defense units from Belarus, including the 6th and 11th mechanized brigades and 103rd airborne brigade, are participating in the exercises.<sup>4</sup> Some of the units relocated from Vitebsk to Grodno for the exercises on August 15. Unconfirmed reports from local residents on social media suggested that Russian forces were concentrating on the Russian side of the border opposite Vitebsk.<sup>5</sup> There is no evidence of an increase of Russian force presence inside Belarus as of August 17. Lukashenko reframed his statements that he would only ask for Russian help “in the event of external military threats,” implying a deployment of Russian forces would occur in the context of a confrontation with NATO rather than as an internal Union State issue.<sup>6</sup> Continuous accusations by Lukashenko and the Kremlin that NATO is stoking the protests indicate that Lukashenko may take continued demonstrations as a pretext for requesting Russian aid against an “external enemy.”

The exercises were announced close to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s August 15 trip to Poland, in which Pompeo reaffirmed the US redeployment of additional troops from Germany to Poland.<sup>7</sup> The Russian and Belarusian exercises occurred after Lukashenko made false claims that NATO deployed forces near the Belarusian border on August 16.<sup>8</sup> Any snap Russian or CSTO exercises in the Western Military District could be conditions-setting for a Kremlin intervention in Belarus.

**Unmarked Russian National Guard trucks reportedly were spotted in Smolensk heading toward the Belarusian Border.** The Critical Intelligence Team OSINT group claims it spotted more than 40 Russian “Ural” trucks with soldiers inside driving toward Belarus from Smolensk on August 16.<sup>9</sup> The trucks had no military license plates and were not marked with Russian flags. The Kremlin has used the Russian National Guard in population and riot control operations.<sup>10</sup> The Kremlin may send unmarked Russian National Guard personnel to Belarus to crack down on protests.

**Belarusian state enterprise workers – one of Lukashenko’s key historical support bases – began a coordinated national strike, indicating protests will likely intensify.** Belarusian workers launched a national strike on August 17.<sup>11</sup> Belarusian state television employees did not go into work.<sup>12</sup> A growing number of factory and state enterprise workers are striking.<sup>13</sup> The protesters demand Lukashenko’s resignation, trials for the security forces that abused detained protesters, and the release of all detainees and political prisoners.<sup>14</sup> Protesters are calling on workers to strike every day until the demands are met.<sup>15</sup> The protests and anti-Lukashenko sentiments are growing and will likely escalate. Lukashenko’s loss of a critical mass of state enterprise workers’ support would likely mark the beginning of the end of Lukashenko’s regime. Belarus’ underdeveloped economy heavily depends on state enterprises for maintaining baseline levels of employment and economic growth. State enterprises’ loss of support for Lukashenko would likely occur before Lukashenko loses control over his security services- an event that might trigger a Kremlin intervention to prevent another revolution in the former Soviet Union.

**Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko reaffirmed his unwillingness to abdicate.** Lukashenko addressed protesting factory workers at the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant on August 17.<sup>16</sup> Lukashenko said Belarusians must not give control over the state to “someone who doesn’t understand” the Belarusian Constitution – likely an allusion to Belarusian opposition leader Svitlana Tsikhanouskaya. Lukashenko told the protesters they would have to “kill” him before new elections, saying: “We conducted elections. There will be no different elections while you haven’t killed me.”<sup>17</sup> Lukashenko said new elections would necessitate constitutional amendments.<sup>18</sup> The Belarusian state news agency *Belta News* quoted Lukashenko saying he is

willing to share power and amend the Belarusian Constitution but will not do so under pressure from street protests.<sup>19</sup> Lukashenko will likely attempt to appeal to protesters but will not succeed given his and the protesters' divergent positions.

**Opposition leader Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya released a new national speech indicating she is ready to rise to the challenge of toppling Lukashenko.** Tsikhanouskaya reaffirmed her readiness to “become a national leader” in a recorded video speech on August 16 in which she called for further strikes, a new legal framework for new honest presidential elections, and for security forces to abandon Lukashenko.<sup>20</sup> Critically, she said the Belarusian opposition would support and embrace any security forces that join the protesters, increasing the likelihood of security service defections. There are no indicators of increased security service defections as of August 17. Tsikhanouskaya also said Belarus' sovereignty is the most important factor at the moment and that it cannot be lost under any circumstances. Tsikhanouskaya explicitly advocated Belarus' exit from the Union State during her electoral campaign.<sup>21</sup> The Union State is a supranational organization between Russia and Belarus that the Kremlin has been using to integrate Belarus' into Russia.

**There is increased securitization in Minsk.** Militarized personnel with automatic weapons and face coverings appeared at the Belarusian state TV headquarters in Minsk on August 17.<sup>22</sup> It is unclear whether the personnel have identifying insignia or are unmarked.

*ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://iz\(.\)ru/1049016/2020-08-17/masshtabnye-voennye-ucheniia-startovali-na-zapade-rossii](https://iz(.)ru/1049016/2020-08-17/masshtabnye-voennye-ucheniia-startovali-na-zapade-rossii)

<sup>2</sup> [https://tass\(.\)com/defense/1190361](https://tass(.)com/defense/1190361)

<sup>3</sup> [https://eng.belta\(.\)by/society/view/belarus-to-host-csto-military-exercises-in-2020-127697-2020/](https://eng.belta(.)by/society/view/belarus-to-host-csto-military-exercises-in-2020-127697-2020/)

<sup>4</sup> [https://echo.msk\(.\)ru/news/2693783-echo.html](https://echo.msk(.)ru/news/2693783-echo.html) ; [https://www.gazeta\(.\)ru/army/2020/08/17/13197967.shtml](https://www.gazeta(.)ru/army/2020/08/17/13197967.shtml)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.dialog\(.\)ua/world/213228\\_1597348991](https://www.dialog(.)ua/world/213228_1597348991) ; [https://gorod-tv\(.\)com/news/obschestvo/92120](https://gorod-tv(.)com/news/obschestvo/92120)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarusian-president-lukashenko.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-polish-foreign-minister-jacek-czaputowicz-at-a-press-availability/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.gazeta\(.\)ru/politics/2020/08/15\\_a\\_13196227.shtml](https://www.gazeta(.)ru/politics/2020/08/15_a_13196227.shtml) ; <https://www.stripes.com/news/europe/nato-rejects-lukashenko-claim-it-s-positioning-forces-near-belarus-borders-1.641546>

<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/CurrentTimeTv/status/1295302899510190082>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-kremlin-tests-authoritarian-societal-control-measures-during-covid-19>

<sup>11</sup> [https://apostrophe\(.\)ua/news/world/ex-ussr/2020-08-17/v-belarusi-obyavili-obschenatsionalnyiy-strayk-s-syurprizom-dlya-lukashenko-/206651](https://apostrophe(.)ua/news/world/ex-ussr/2020-08-17/v-belarusi-obyavili-obschenatsionalnyiy-strayk-s-syurprizom-dlya-lukashenko-/206651) ; <https://twitter.com/AlexKokcharov/status/1295247878269607936> ; <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-strike-lukashenko/30787709.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/AlexKokcharov/status/1295247878269607936>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-strike-lukashenko/30787709.html> ; <https://www.dw.com/ru/hronika-protesta-v-belarusi-pervyj-diplomat-podderzhal-protestujushih/a-54583855>

<sup>14</sup> [https://apostrophe\(.\)ua/news/world/ex-ussr/2020-08-17/v-belarusi-obyavili-obschenatsionalnyiy-strayk-s-syurprizom-dlya-lukashenko-/206651](https://apostrophe(.)ua/news/world/ex-ussr/2020-08-17/v-belarusi-obyavili-obschenatsionalnyiy-strayk-s-syurprizom-dlya-lukashenko-/206651)

<sup>15</sup> [https://apostrophe\(.\)ua/news/world/ex-ussr/2020-08-17/v-belarusi-obyavili-obschenatsionalnyiy-strayk-s-syurprizom-dlya-lukashenko-/206651](https://apostrophe(.)ua/news/world/ex-ussr/2020-08-17/v-belarusi-obyavili-obschenatsionalnyiy-strayk-s-syurprizom-dlya-lukashenko-/206651)

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.business-gazeta\(.\)ru/news/478022](https://www.business-gazeta(.)ru/news/478022)

<sup>17</sup> [https://tvrain\(.\)ru/news/lukashenko\\_zajavil\\_chno\\_perevyborov\\_v\\_belarusi\\_ne\\_budet-514474/](https://tvrain(.)ru/news/lukashenko_zajavil_chno_perevyborov_v_belarusi_ne_budet-514474/)

<sup>18</sup> [https://twitter.com/the\\_lentach/status/1295357795903168512](https://twitter.com/the_lentach/status/1295357795903168512)

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/lukashenko-my-proveli-vybory-drugih-vyborov-ne-budet-403091-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/lukashenko-my-proveli-vybory-drugih-vyborov-ne-budet-403091-2020/) ; [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/ne-pod-davleniem-i-ne-cherez-ulitsu-lukashenko-o-peredache-polnomochij-i-izmenenii-konstitutsii-403094-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/ne-pod-davleniem-i-ne-cherez-ulitsu-lukashenko-o-peredache-polnomochij-i-izmenenii-konstitutsii-403094-2020/)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=13&v=ZZr1J00hyMU&feature=emb\\_title&ab\\_channel=%D0%9E%D0%93%D0%9F-%D0%A2%D0%92](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=13&v=ZZr1J00hyMU&feature=emb_title&ab_channel=%D0%9E%D0%93%D0%9F-%D0%A2%D0%92)

<sup>21</sup> <https://ria.ru/20200728/1575073487.html>

<sup>22</sup> [https://twitter.com/Belsat\\_TV/status/1295340919235936258](https://twitter.com/Belsat_TV/status/1295340919235936258)