



Kremlin-linked Belarusian Opposition Leadership Threaten to Further Fragment Opposition Unity

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By George Barros

Kremlin media is overtly discussing Russia’s absorption of Belarus. Kremlin-run wire service *RIA Novosti* argued Belarusians and Russians are “one people with two states” and that “two states of one people are always a temporary phenomenon” on September 1 – implying the inevitable incorporation of Belarus and Russia.¹ The Kremlin used similar talking points to justify Russia’s intervention in Ukraine in 2014.

Kremlin-linked actors in the Belarusian opposition called for constitutional reforms – a proposal that may fragment the opposition. Kremlin-linked Belarusian opposition politician Viktor Babariko’s YouTube channel released a video titled “We are creating a party” at approximately 11 pm Minsk time on August 31.² Babariko served as the chairman of Belgazprombank – the Belarusian branch of a bank owned by Russian gas giant Gazprom – from 2000 to May 2020.³ Babariko claimed he aims to reform the Belarusian constitution in the video.⁴ Babariko likely recorded the video before his arrest on June 18, 2020.⁵ It is unclear why Babariko’s staff did not release the video prior to now. Lukashenko first mentioned constitutional reforms on August 17.⁶ Babariko-affiliate and Coordination Council member Maria Kolesnikova appeared in the video after Babariko’s speech and announced she would soon submit documents to create a new political party called “Together.”⁷ Kolesnikova’s usage of Babariko’s likely prerecorded video indicates Babariko had primary or contingency plans to use to initiate a campaign for Belarusian constitutional amendments.

Lithuania-based opposition leader Svitlana Tikhanouskaya denounced the call for constitutional reforms prior to ousting Lukashenko and holding new elections. Tikhanouskaya denounced Babariko’s initiative, stating Belarus must hold new elections before reforming the constitution.⁸ Tikhanouskaya said opposition discussion of constitutional amendments plays into Lukashenko’s efforts to delay his departure by “talking about an incomprehensible constitutional reform for an indefinite period.”⁹ Tikhanouskaya did not condemn the creation of the “Together” Party, but questioned Kolesnikova’s contradictory actions to formally submit documents to Lukashenko officials to register the party given the opposition’s common effort to depose Lukashenko.¹⁰ This is the first time Tikhanouskaya has directly called out an action by another member of the opposition as a mistake.

The Kremlin continues to back Belarusian constitutional reforms and will exploit Babariko’s video. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed support for constitutional amendments on September 1 claiming they will “organize a dialogue with civil society” to solve all Belarusian issues.¹¹ The Kremlin will likely exploit the video released by Kolesnikova, who has previously stated she is open to working with the Kremlin.¹² The Kremlin will likely leverage the split between Tikhanouskaya and Kolesnikova to fragment the opposition. ISW has previously assessed the Kremlin will likely dominate any negotiations over a transition government or revisions to the

Belarusian constitution, enabling the Kremlin to potentially add provisions securing Russian dominance over Belarus and potentially basing rights in Belarus.¹³ The Kremlin's establishment of uncontested freedom of movement in Belarus would enhance Russian forces' ability to threaten the Suwalki Gap and geographically isolate NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia from the rest of the alliance.

The Kremlin will exploit Belarus' growing financial dependency. Lukashenko asked the Kremlin to refinance \$600 million of Belarus' debt to Russia on September 1.¹⁴ The Belarusian Finance Ministry reported on August 31 Belarus' total external debt increased from \$600 million in January 2020 to \$17.8 billion as of August, 1 2020 – an approximate 30-fold increase in nine months.¹⁵ Belarus' debt has likely increased since the start of protests on August 9. Western creditors – which were already reluctant to finance Belarus in 2019 – are unlikely to support Lukashenko given the possibility of additional European Union sanctions.¹⁶ The Kremlin will likely leverage this economic pressure to coerce Lukashenko into adopting more Kremlin-preferable policies such as constitutional amendments and further economic dependency.

Lukashenko and the Kremlin's information operation began a new narrative denying the Kremlin pressured Lukashenko and Lukashenko balanced with the West. Lukashenko denied accusations of Kremlin pressure against Belarus on September 1.¹⁷ Lukashenko called claims that Belarus sought cooperation with the West before the August 9 election a "media fiction" and that the Kremlin simply misunderstood steps Lukashenko had to take to save the Belarusian economy.¹⁸ Lukashenko further claimed he would preserve Russia and Belarus' common "Fatherland from Brest to Vladivostok" and that the two states have always enjoyed "brotherly" relations.¹⁹ Kremlin media outlet *RIA Novosti* ran an article backing Lukashenko's claims on September 1, claiming Lukashenko has always been a close Russian ally and that Moscow never pressured Lukashenko.²⁰

This framing is false. ISW has extensively tracked how the Kremlin has employed pressure – particularly energy pressure – to coerce Lukashenko to surrender Belarusian sovereignty to the Kremlin.²¹ Lukashenko intensified his outreach to the West in late 2019 and began purchasing American, Saudi, and European oil for the first time, to the Kremlin's chagrin, in early 2020.²² This information operation seeks to sterilize the information space in order to support the false narrative that the crisis in Belarus is the result of a hostile Western effort to undermine the Union State. The Kremlin seeks to obfuscate ongoing Kremlin coercion against Belarus and legitimize a future intervention in Belarus. The Kremlin will continue exploiting Lukashenko's current vulnerability – a course of action ISW forecasted on August 14.²³

Lukashenko and the Kremlin continue advancing the false narrative of a NATO plot against Belarus. Lukashenko said he blocked Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, the head of the Catholic Church of Belarus, from returning to Belarus from Poland because he may be engaged in subversive activities on September 1.²⁴ Lukashenko alleged Kondrusiewicz went to Poland for "consultations in Warsaw" and only attempted to return to Belarus after receiving "certain tasks."²⁵ Lukashenko said the Baltic States issued sanctions against Lukashenko and his inner circle because they "were given the command to bite," implying the Baltic States followed NATO directions.²⁶ Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov called the Baltic sanctions against Lukashenko "unacceptable" and claimed Western countries – including the US and Canada – are attempting to interfere in Belarus on September 1.²⁷

Alexander Lukashenko successfully dispersed scattered university student protesters in Minsk on September 1. Several hundred university students protested against Lukashenko by holding a series of solidarity rallies and marches in Minsk on September 1 – the first day of school in Belarus.²⁸ Prepared Belarusian security forces dispersed the gatherings and detained several dozen students and at least one journalist.²⁹ The student protests were better attended than protests usual for weekdays, likely in part because the NEXTA Telegram channel issued directions for large-scale student strikes on August 30.³⁰ Most Belarusian university students did not participate in these protests. There is no evidence as of this writing that Belarusian parents redirected their children away from state schooling per NEXTA's direction, suggesting NEXTA's more radical calls to action are ineffective.³¹ ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

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- ¹ <https://ria.ru/20200901/belorussiya-1576547983.html>
- ² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynf9F0FOTa8>
- ³ <https://belsat.eu/en/news/banker-and-philanthropist-babaryka-may-stand-in-2020-presidential-election/>;
<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarusian-opposition-reaches.html>
- ⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynf9F0FOTa8>
- ⁵ Babariko's YouTube account posted two videos titled "Viktar Babariko's Appeal- on a national referendum" and "Viktar Babariko on a referendum" on June 19, 2020 in which Babariko is wearing the exact same clothing and is in the exact same room as in the August 31st video, indicating the videos were filmed at the same time. Babariko explicitly mentions holding an all-Belarusian referendum on amending the Belarusian constitution in the June 19 the "Viktar Babariko on a referendum" video, indicating his prior support for constitutional changes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIsG0y4oOow>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQnCmBst0c8>; Babariko said he did not know whether this new initiative would manifest in either a "party or a civil movement," in the August 31 video, indicating it was filmed with future flexibility in mind. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynf9F0FOTa8>; <https://express.by/rubrics/obshhestvo/2020/08/16/vadim-iosub-golosa-bolshinstva-nevozmozhno-ukrast-sobytiya-etoj-nedeli-pokazali-naskolko-etot-tezis-viktora-babariko-okazalsya-vernym>
- ⁶ <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/08/2020/5f3a68899a7947454a1e2a7b>; <https://news.tut.by/economics/698705.html>;
<https://sputnik.by/politics/20200831/1045588391/Lukashenko-vlast-budet-predlagat-peremeny.html>;
<http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>
- ⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynf9F0FOTa8>
- ⁸ <https://www.dw.com/ru/tihanovskaja-ne-soglasilas-s-dvumja-zajavlenijami-shtaba-babariko/a-54781032>
- ⁹ <https://www.interfax.ru/world/724057>; <https://www.dw.com/ru/tihanovskaja-ne-soglasilas-s-dvumja-zajavlenijami-shtaba-babariko/a-54781032>
- ¹⁰ <https://news.tut.by/economics/698885.html>
- ¹¹ <https://rg.ru/2020/09/01/lavrov-nazval-reformu-konstitucii-optimalnym-variantom-razresheniia-konflikta-v-belarusi.html>;
<https://sputnik.by/politics/20200901/1045594359/Lavrov-vyskazalsya-o-konstitucionnoy-reforme-v-Belarusi.html>
- ¹² <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-belarusian-opposition-reaches.html>
- ¹³ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>
- ¹⁴ <https://interfax.by/news/policy/raznoe/1282317/>
- ¹⁵ http://www.minfin.gov.by/ru/public_debt/pressreleases/8e2eceb4386d4083.html
- ¹⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/20/world/europe/china-belarus-battery-protests.html>;
<https://www.obserwatorfinansowy.pl/in-english/belarus-faces-limits-in-its-hunt-for-eu-and-imf-money/>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4475240>; <https://tsn.ua/ru/svit/ot-bresta-do-vladivostoka-lukashenko-rasskazal-o-sovmestnoy-s-putiny-m-rodine-1616989.html>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ob-otnoshenijah-s-rossiej-my-sohranim-nashe-obschee-otechestvo-405013-2020/>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ob-otnoshenijah-s-rossiej-my-sohranim-nashe-obschee-otechestvo-405013-2020/>; <https://interfax.com.ua/news/political/684682.html>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4475240>
- ²⁰ <https://ria.ru/20200901/belorussiya-1576547983.html>
- ²¹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russia-review-belarus-update-lukashenko-uses-oil-tariffs-delay-integration-russia>
- ²² <https://www.state.gov/first-shipment-of-u-s-oil-to-belarus/>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/belarus-oil-russia-saudi/update-1-belarus-buys-first-oil-from-saudi-arabia-refiner-belneftekhim-idUSL5N2CH4AS>; <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/belarus-buys-oil-from-norway-as-russia-halts-supplies/>
- ²³ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-russia-may-send-little-green.html>
- ²⁴ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-v-belarusi-kostely-rabotali-i-budut-rabotat-404998-2020/>
- ²⁵ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-v-belarusi-kostely-rabotali-i-budut-rabotat-404998-2020/>
- ²⁶ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/im-dali-komandu-fas-oni-i-vjakkuli-iz-pod-zabora-lukashenko-o-sanktsijah-so-storony-stran-baltii-405004-2020/>
- ²⁷ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4307068;
<https://ria.ru/20200901/belorussiya-1576566492.html>
- ²⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-53973434>; <https://www.rbc.ru/photoreport/01/09/2020/5f4e1f3e9a79475278d06e77>;
https://www.wfmz.com/news/belarus-students-detained-while-protesting-nations-leader/article_778ee674-6421-5b08-9028-b6c087b19b64.html

²⁹ <https://twitter.com/EFJEUROPE/status/1300730454371336192>;
<https://twitter.com/AlexKokcharov/status/672010289903177728>;
<https://twitter.com/LizaVereykina/status/1300718308203859970>; <https://twitter.com/OnlinerBY/status/1300769689480691712>;
<https://twitter.com/XSovietNews/status/1300717718434349057>;
<https://twitter.com/BBCWillVernon/status/1300817746104586242>;
https://twitter.com/Joyce_Karam/status/1300819520593055748; <https://twitter.com/MBKhMedia/status/1300792953020076032>;
<https://twitter.com/MBKhMedia/status/1300792556842823683>

³⁰ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_tv/3878](https://t(.)me/nexta_tv/3878); <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>

³¹ [https://t\(.\)me/nexta_tv/3878](https://t(.)me/nexta_tv/3878); <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>