



Belarusian Opposition Begins First Anti-Kremlin Shift after Lukashenko Promises Moscow Union State Concessions

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The Kremlin is leveraging the Belarusian President’s weakening position to coerce Lukashenko to advance the Union State. Lukashenko met with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin in Minsk on September 3.¹ Mishustin claimed they made progress on formalizing the Union State’s “Union Cabinet of Ministers” and other “economic measures.”² The Kremlin claimed Lukashenko said he would “finally dot the i’s” on “very sensitive and painful” Union State agreements in his upcoming meeting with Putin in Moscow.³ Lukashenko thanked the Kremlin for all its support during the crisis and framed his decisions to advance the Union State as a necessity to protect Belarus and Russia from NATO aggression.⁴

Lukashenko is increasingly fully aligning his rhetoric with the Kremlin’s due to Kremlin pressure. Lukashenko accused Ukraine of supporting protests on September 3, in line with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s September 2 accusation that approximately 200 Ukrainian neo-Nazis are operating in Belarus.⁵ Lukashenko similarly parroted the Kremlin’s claim that the Kremlin did not poison Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny during Lukashenko’s meeting with Mishustin.⁶

Lukashenko has not previously fully aligned with Kremlin talking points and has even pushed back against key Kremlin foreign policy framings. Lukashenko accused the Kremlin of being a belligerent in the war in Donbas and expressed reluctance to call the peoples of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine “one nation” in October 2019, for example.⁷ Lukashenko said he would never sign Union State documents that undermine Belarus’ independence in December 2019 - before the protests pushed him into crisis.⁸ Lukashenko will likely continue to resist Russian pressure to integrate Belarus into the Union State but holds diminishing leverage.

Lukashenko and the Kremlin’s information operation will likely exploit US troops’ prescheduled exercises in Lithuania. Lithuania’s Defense Ministry stated on September 3 US Army mechanized units will deploy to Pabrade, Lithuania, on September 4 for prescheduled operation Atlantic Resolve exercises.⁹ Lukashenko first brought Belarusian army units in western Belarus to full combat readiness on August 18 in a claimed response to a nonexistent NATO buildup.¹⁰

The Kremlin may leverage unsubstantiated claims of Ukrainian operators in Belarus against Ukraine. Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergey Naryshkin said the SVR would counter Ukrainian nationalists’ attempts to “bring fire into Belarus” on September 3.¹¹ The Kremlin may use Lavrov’s unsubstantiated claims of Ukrainian operators in Belarus to gain leverage in stalled peace talks with Ukraine on the war in Donbas.

The Kremlin reportedly deployed at least 600 Russian riot control personnel to a likely staging ground close to Belarus. Video from September 2 allegedly depicts Russian riot police from St. Petersburg in Pskov.¹² ISW cannot verify the veracity of the video. Russian authorities reportedly ordered St. Petersburg police in Pskov to remove their unit and national insignia from their uniforms.¹³ Pskov is 200 kilometers north of the Russian-Belarusian border. 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.”¹⁴ ISW assessed Russian riot control personnel in Belarusian uniforms may already be operating in Belarus on August 30.¹⁵

Lukashenko extended prison sentences against detained opposition leaders. Belarusian authorities sentenced Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ) strike leader Sergei Dvlevsky and opposition leader Olga Kovalkova – both members of Tikhonouskaya’s Coordination Council to 15 additional days of imprisonment on September 3.¹⁶ Belarusian authorities previously sentenced Dvlevsky and Kovalkova to ten days imprisonment for organizing illegal gatherings on August 25.¹⁷ Lukashenko likely seeks to intimidate protesters through targeted detentions with Kremlin support.

The Kremlin’s overt support for Lukashenko is pushing the Belarusian opposition into an anti-Russian direction for the first time.

Lithuania-based Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanouskaya denounced Lukashenko’s meeting with the Mishustin and any agreements undermining Belarus’ sovereignty on September 3. Tikhanouskaya said that Belarus’ sovereignty cannot become a bargaining chip and that she doubts that “any decisions and agreements that Lukashenko may sign will be recognized by the new government.”¹⁸ Tikhanouskaya’s rhetoric will likely become increasingly hostile towards the Kremlin as Lukashenko intensifies cooperation with the Kremlin.

The NEXTA Telegram channel directly called out the Kremlin for the first time. NEXTA made a post on September 3 reading, “Let [the Lukashenko regime] carry out as many negotiations with the Kremlin as they want, but only the people themselves will decide everything.”¹⁹ NEXTA also reshared Tikhanouskaya’s denunciation of Lukashenko’s meeting with Mishustin.²⁰ NEXTA previously had not framed the Kremlin as being the Belarusian opposition’s adversary. NEXTA’s rhetoric will likely become increasingly hostile towards the Kremlin.

A minority of protesters began holding anti-Kremlin signs for the first time on September 3. Belarusian protesters in Minsk held signs reading, “We’re Belarus, not a Russian region,” and “Putin, who are you with?” on September 3.²¹ A protester held a one-person picket at the Russian embassy in Minsk on September 3.²² This is the first time protesters have employed anti-Kremlin symbols in a prominent manner since protests began on August 9. The protests remain overwhelmingly neutral on Russia and continue to focus on Lukashenko’s abdication as of September 3.

The Kremlin is likely prepared to exploit any anti-Russian shifts in the protest. ISW assessed on August 21 the Kremlin is likely prepared to exploit any future pro-Western shifts in the protesters’ demands by having already falsely claimed the protesters are anti-Russian NATO proxies.²³ The Kremlin will likely use the protests genuinely becoming anti-Russian to justify deploying its prepared forces into Belarus.²⁴

NEXTA issued directions for new protest activity for Sunday, September 6 that will likely lead to direct confrontation between protesters and Belarusian authorities given Lukashenko’s actions. A NEXTA post at 4:00 pm Minsk time on September 3 directed Belarusians to hold a mass “unity march” by gathering at Independence Square and Independence Avenue in Minsk at 2:00 pm local time on September 6.²⁵ NEXTA instructed participants to alternatively meet at Nyamiha Square and the Sports Palace if authorities block off access to Independence square, as authorities did on August 30.²⁶ Lukashenko militarized his response to the last large Sunday protest on August 30 with armored vehicles and will likely do so again.²⁷

Religious sectarianism will likely become more prevalent in the protests. Lukashenko claimed Belarusian signals intelligence intercepted communications between Poland and Germany confirming the West framed the Kremlin as poisoning Navalny to undermine Russia’s September 13 regional elections.²⁸ Lukashenko described this alleged conspiracy as “Jesuit.”²⁹ NEXTA’s unity march call-to-action includes directions to carry signs in support of

Belarusian Catholics.³⁰ ISW forecasted Lukashenko and the Kremlin's information operation may falsely link Belarusian Catholics to NATO-sponsored activity on August 31.³¹

Protests in Minsk on September 3 were larger than usual weekday protests. A few hundred protesters held scattered demonstrations in Minsk on September 3.³² The size of September 3's protests were slightly larger than weekday protest pattern ISW has observed likely due to Mishustin's presence in Minsk.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <http://government.ru/news/40333/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6-wz4ImzLE>

² <http://government.ru/news/40333/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6-wz4ImzLE>; <https://iz.ru/1056392/2020-09-03/mishustin-zaiavil-o-progresse-otnositelno-budushchego-soiuznogo-gosudarstva>; <https://nsn.fm/policy/mishustin-priznal-progress-v-voprose-budushchego-souznogo-gosudarstva>; <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/09/03/mishustin-zayavil-o-progresse-v-voprose-stroitelstva-soyuznogo-gosudarstva.html>; <https://interfax.by/news/policy/vneshnyaya-politika/1282500/>

³ <http://government.ru/news/40333/>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6-wz4ImzLE>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg2hfda3nOE&feature=youtu.be>; <https://meduza.io/news/2020/09/02/lavrov-zayavil-o-200-ukrainskih-ekstremistah-na-territorii-belarusi>; <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/09/02/vseoni/>; https://tvrain.ru/news/lavrov_v_belarusi_nahodjatsja_200_natrenirovannyh_ukrainskih_ekstremistov-515378/?from=rss; <https://nv.ua/world/geopolitics/protesty-v-belarusi-lavrov-zayavil-chto-demonstrantov-finansiruet-ukraina-poslednie-novosti-50109694.html>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-kremlin-prepares-to-further.html>

⁶ <http://government.ru/news/40333/>

⁷ <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2019/10/8/7228461/>; <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/08/10/2019/5d9e3d6b9a79479318913901>

⁸ <https://gordonua.com/news/worldnews/belarus-ne-sobiraetsya-vhodit-v-sostav-rossii-lukashenko-1478138.html>;

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02ISOGrMsiA&feature=emb_title; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tILkwwfnos>

⁹ https://kam.lt/en/news_1098/current_issues/this_autumn_u.s._troops_will_be_deployed_to_lithuania_for_training_again.html

¹⁰ <https://hromadske.ua/ru/posts/lukashenko-privel-armiyu-v-boevuyu-gotovnost-na-granice-s-es-v-nato-govoryat-chto-sily-ne-narashivayut-i-nikakoj-ugrozy-net>; <https://www.interfax.ru/world/722395>

¹¹ <https://tass.ru/politika/9363011>;

https://aif.ru/politics/world/naryshkin_ukrainskie_ekstremisty_ne_smogut_podorvat_situaciyu_v_belorussii

¹² <https://twitter.com/ErlikhmanK/status/1301208662774554625>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/ErlikhmanK/status/1301208662774554625>

¹⁴ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63951>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-announces-reserve-force.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-militarization-of-lukashenkos.html>

¹⁶ http://belapan.com/archive/2020/09/03/ru_1058217/; <https://news.mail.ru/society/43222655/>

¹⁷ <https://news.tut.by/society/698067.html>

¹⁸ <https://meduza.io/news/2020/09/03/suverenitet-ne-mozhet-byt-predmetom-torga-tihanovskaya-o-peregovorah-lukashenko-s-mishustiny>

¹⁹ https://t.me/nexta_tv/3889

²⁰ https://t.me/nexta_live/10429

²¹ https://t.me/nexta_live/10395

²² https://t.me/nexta_live/10405

²³ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>

²⁴ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>

²⁵ https://t.me/nexta_tv/3889

²⁶ <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/warning-militarization-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-response-belarusian-protests-increases-without>

²⁷ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-militarization-of-lukashenkos.html>

²⁸ <http://government.ru/news/40333/>; https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2020/09/03_a_13234928.shtml?refresh

²⁹ <http://government.ru/news/40333/>

³⁰ https://t.me/nexta_tv/3889

³¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-information-operations.html>

³² <https://twitter.com/VoicesBelarus/status/1301570893139841025>; https://twitter.com/Den_2042/status/1301579400073314307;

https://t.me/nexta_live/10454; https://t.me/nexta_live/10452; https://t.me/nexta_live/10453