



Lukashenko Deports Opposition Leaders to Support Kremlin Information Operation

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Belarusian authorities are holding Belarusian opposition leader Kolesnikova after a failed attempt to expel her to Ukraine following her abduction on September 7. Ukrainian officials confirmed Belarusian authorities “forcibly expelled” Ivan Kravtsov and Anton Rodnenkov – two of Kolesnikova’s staffers – to Ukraine on September 8.¹ Belarusian security personnel in civilian clothes abducted Kolesnikova, Rodnenkov, and Kravtsov in downtown Minsk on September 7.² Rodnenkov claimed Belarusian authorities decided to expel him and Kravtsov to Ukraine, rather than Poland or Lithuania, because they did not have passports with EU visas.³ Kravtsov and Rodnenkov confirmed at a press conference in Kyiv on September 8 that they witnessed Kolesnikova destroy her passport while in Belarusian detention to avoid expulsion.⁴

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko falsely claimed on September 8 Belarusian authorities detained Maria Kolesnikova at the Belarusian-Ukrainian border – not in Minsk – after she attempted to flee to Ukraine to meet her sister there.⁵ Belarusian authorities falsely claimed Kolesnikova, Rodnenkov, and Kravtsov attempted to drive to Ukraine – where Belarusian authorities claim Rodnenkov and Kravtsov have Ukrainian residence permits – and that Rodnenkov and Kravtsov kicked Kolesnikova out of the car at the Belarusian border checkpoint.⁶ Ukrainian authorities confirmed Kolesnikova did not arrive at the Ukrainian border checkpoint with Kravtsov and Rodnenkov.⁷

Lukashenko previously expelled Olga Kovalkova – a member of Lithuania-based opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanouskaya’s Coordination Council – to Poland on September 5. Kovalkova claimed Belarusian authorities expelled her to Poland on September 5 after threatening her with indefinite detention if she remained in Belarus.⁸ Belarusian authorities arrested Kovalkova on August 25 and extended her first 10-day arrest by an additional 15 days on September 3.⁹

Lukashenko likely continued his campaign to detain opposition organizers still active in Belarus on September 8. Tikhanouskaya’s headquarters announced that Tikhanouskaya staffer Antonina Kanovalova disappeared on September 8.¹⁰ Kanovalova’s whereabouts are unknown as of this writing. Belarusian authorities may expel Kanovalova to Ukraine, Poland, or Lithuania, as they did Kovalkova, Kravtsov, and Rodnenkov.

Lukashenko is likely expelling Belarusian opposition leaders to disrupt opposition coordination and support the Kremlin’s information operation that NATO is waging a hybrid war against Belarus. Lukashenko may intend to disrupt the opposition’s ability to sustain large-scale protests by arresting or expelling all organizers still active in Belarus. However, Telegram channel NEXTA has largely organized mass protests without any presence in Belarus, and protests will likely continue. Lukashenko may have alternatively intended to intimidate the opposition through targeted expulsions, but likely could have done this more effectively by indefinitely detaining opposition leaders. Lukashenko may finally intend to amplify his framing of Western backing for a hybrid war to overthrow

him by sending opposition leaders to European states. Rodnenkov's claim Belarus only expelled him and Kravtsov to Ukraine because they lacked EU visas supports this framing.

Kolesnikova's ostentatious decision to foil Lukashenko's attempt to expel her was an act of courage and potentially based on confidence in receiving external support. Kolesnikova posed special risks to Lukashenko because she was the last prominent opposition leader active in Belarus and has demonstrated her effectiveness at organizing the opposition. She also has the clearest and strongest connections to Kremlin-amenable actors among prominent opposition leaders. Lukashenko may have attempted to expel her to disrupt any Kremlin efforts through her to negotiate a transition government or pursue constitutional changes. Kolesnikova's resistance to her expulsion – unlike her staffers or Kovalkova – additionally singles her out. Kolesnikova has repeatedly demonstrated her courage and willingness to risk detention or harm by continuing to operate in Belarus after other opposition leaders fled or were detained. Her decision to destroy her passport disrupted Lukashenko's desired framing that opposition leaders left Belarus by choice, making it clear she is being held by Lukashenko against her will and does not desire to leave the country. Kolesnikova may have taken the brave choice to act as a symbol for the opposition by risking indefinite detention – since Lukashenko cannot readily force her to leave Belarus without openly abandoning his framing of legality, which is an important component of Russian and Belarusian information and hybrid operations. Kolesnikova may alternatively have confidence – rightly or wrongly – that she will not be detained indefinitely or harmed too badly due to her prominence among the opposition or because she trusts that an external authority such as Putin will protect her and ensure her release.

Security personnel in green uniforms without insignia began to operate with regular marked Belarusian riot police in Minsk on September 8. Security personnel wearing unmarked green uniforms – initially reported as Belarusian riot police (OMON) in new uniforms – first appeared in Minsk on September 5.¹¹ The unidentified personnel may not be Belarusian OMON as initially reported. These personnel operated with OMON who wore their regular black uniforms with identifying insignia on September 8.¹² It remains unclear why Belarusian OMON would have changed their uniforms and removed identifying markings or why possible Belarusian OMON personnel are now sporting two different uniforms. The unidentified personnel are likely setting conditions for the appearance of Russian security personnel in similar unmarked uniforms, or may themselves be Russian personnel.

Lukashenko gave a prominent interview to four senior Kremlin propagandists in Minsk on September 8. RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan, *Pervy Kanal* anchor Anton Vernitsky, *Russia 1* anchor Yevgeny Rozhkov, and *Moscow Speaks* Editor-in-Chief Roman Babayan met Lukashenko for an interview on September 8.¹³ Lukashenko said he does not rule out the possibility of early presidential elections but that elections are only possible after constitutional reforms.¹⁴ Lukashenko said he would not resign from office because his supporters would be killed and only he is capable of protecting Belarus – a reiteration of Lukashenko's unsubstantiated claims of a Western hybrid war against Belarus.¹⁵ Lukashenko also claimed Russia will fall if Belarus does and that it is “impossible” to block Telegram channels that organize protests – a tactic Lukashenko accused US-backed centers in Poland and the Czech Republic of using to organizing protests against him.¹⁶

The Kremlin likely organized this interview to humanize Lukashenko and reaffirm the Kremlin's framing of the protests as a Western hybrid war that targets Russia. Lukashenko claimed his police response, though heavy-handed at times, was necessary given the severity of the threat to Belarus.¹⁷ Simonyan in particular praised Lukashenko's successful efforts to extinguish a color revolution, advancing the Kremlin's framing of the Belarus protests as a Western hybrid war eventually targeting Russia.¹⁸

The Kremlin denies it had or will have contact with the Belarusian Coordination Council on September 8. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the Kremlin has had no contact with the Coordination Council and will not contact the Coordination Council on September 8.¹⁹ The Kremlin likely has conducted some form of backchannel contact with Kolesnikova given her association with the Kremlin-linked Viktor Babariko. Babariko served as the chairman of Belgazprombank – the Belarusian branch of a bank owned by Russian gas giant Gazprom

- from 2000 to May 2020.²⁰ The Kremlin will likely continue to downplay overt communication with the Belarusian opposition while leaving open the possibility of supporting an alternative to Lukashenko.

The Kremlin reiterated its desire for Belarusian constitutional reforms after Lukashenko detained Kolesnikova – who has voiced support for constitutional reforms. Peskov reiterated the Kremlin’s desire to begin a dialogue to discuss Belarusian constitutional reforms on September 8 – a policy the Kremlin has advocated since August 31.²¹ Kolesnikova previously stated her openness to working with the Kremlin and expressed support for constitutional reforms.²² ISW warned Belarusian constitutional reforms could present opportunities for the Kremlin to secure provisions granting Russia additional strategic basing rights in Belarus and provisions further institutionalizing the Union State.²³ Lukashenko may have detained Kolesnikova in order to disrupt Kremlin efforts to undermine Belarus’ sovereignty via constitutional amendments.

An unknown number of Russian and Serbian troops will arrive in Belarus on September 10 for prescheduled annual tactical joint exercises. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed on September 8 the “Slavic Brotherhood 2020” counterterror exercises will be held in Brest on September 10-15.²⁴ The MoD stated up to 1,500 troops from Belarus, Serbia, and Russia will participate in the exercises.²⁵ Units from Belarus’ 38th Guards Air Assault Brigade are garrisoned in Brest and will likely participate in the exercise. Planning for these exercises have been underway since at least December 2019.²⁶

Slavic Brotherhood 2020 is at least twice as large as the previous two iterations of the exercises in 2018 and 2019. Approximately 600 Russian, Belarusian, and Serbian troops participated in the Slavic Brotherhood 2019 exercises in Pancevo, Serbia, in June 2019 and approximately 700 Belarusian, Russian, and Serbian troops participated in Slavic Brother 2018 in Krasnodar, Russia, in June 2018.²⁷ The 2020 exercises may be larger due to a higher number of Belarusian troops’ participation given the Belarusian military’s mobilization to full combat readiness since August 18.²⁸

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

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⁵ <https://strana.ua/news/288519-lukashenko-zajavil-chto-oppozitsionerka-kolesnikova-planirovala-pobeh-v-ukrainu-k-sestre-smi.html>.

⁶ <https://t.me/gpkgovby/216>.

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/anton.gerashchenko.7/posts/3273700299383461>;
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¹² https://twitter.com/Den_2042/status/1303385448723734529/photo/1.

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¹⁴ <https://www.themoscowtime.com/2020/09/08/belarus-leader-admits-to-staying-too-long-in-power-in-rt-interview-a71381>;

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¹⁵ [https://www.themoscowtime\(.\)com/2020/09/08/belarus-leader-admits-to-staying-too-long-in-power-in-rt-interview-a7I38I](https://www.themoscowtime(.)com/2020/09/08/belarus-leader-admits-to-staying-too-long-in-power-in-rt-interview-a7I38I);
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¹⁶ [https://www.themoscowtime\(.\)com/2020/09/08/belarus-leader-admits-to-staying-too-long-in-power-in-rt-interview-a7I38I](https://www.themoscowtime(.)com/2020/09/08/belarus-leader-admits-to-staying-too-long-in-power-in-rt-interview-a7I38I);
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