

Belarus Kicks Off Large-scale Military Drills Near Poland, Lithuania

Lukashenko Is Losing Propaganda War to Western-backed Opposition

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Global Research, August 17, 2020

[South Front](#) 16 August 2020

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

On August 16, the Belarusian Armed Forces announced large-scale military drills near the country's nuclear plant and in the Grodno region bordering Poland and Lithuania. The drills will take place on August 17-20 and involve rocket and artillery units, air-defense forces and airborne troops. Meanwhile, mechanized and battle tank brigades also hold live-fire exercises. The military added that forces will train to strengthen the country's western border as part of the drills.

The military exercises served as a visual and powerful confirmation to earlier remarks by the country's President Alexander Lukashenko about his readiness to defend Belarus from the 'foreign interference'. Nonetheless, if earlier Lukashenko was widely speculating about unfriendly 'Russian actions' in an attempt to gain support of the media-active pro-Western opposition, after the presidential election his position shifted towards the 'friendship' with Russia and the repelling of 'Western interference'. [Indeed the main opposition propaganda and coordination center is managed from Poland](#), but this shift is rather a result of the complicated situation in which Lukashenko found himself rather than the admission of these apparent facts.

Meanwhile, the government also staged a large rally in center of Minsk in support of the acting president. President Lukashenko participated in the pro-government rally claiming that Belarus will cease to exist as a country if the destabilization efforts achieve success. He also warned about NATO troops deployed at Belarus' border.

"I am kneeling for you, for the first time in my life. You have deserved it!" he said.

"Despite all the difficulties, all its flaws, we've built a beautiful country together. Who did you decide to surrender her to? If somebody wants to surrender the country, even when I am dead, I will not allow it."

Despite the large pro-government rally in Minsk, Lukashenko and his supporters have been losing the media battle to anti-government structures supported from the West. Furthermore, on August 16, state-run channels ONT and STV reported about anti-government protests in an apparent shift of their coverage. Earlier, pro-opposition sources claimed that at least a part of workers of state-media is going to join the so-called 'nation-wide' strike. A large number of workers from state-run plants participate in protests on a regular basis.

Among the main targets of the pro-opposition propaganda campaign:

- the Lukashenko government is about to collapse and his political regime will soon fall;
- the dehumanization of Lukashenko (as a cockroach) and servicemembers of law enforcements (as fascists);
- the promotion of the expected support of the so-called 'international community' (the US and the EU);
- the promotion of violence against law enforcements (at least at the first stages of the protest; later, when rioters lost clashes to Police, opposition media started claiming that all demonstrations are 'peaceful')
- the creation of the image of Belarus as a country with a strong economic basis and genuine 'democratic values' that are undermined by Lukashenko. According to them, if Minsk gets rid of Lukashenko and breaks ties with Russia, Belarus will immediately enter the era of wealth and prosperity (like Ukraine apparently);
- the fueling of 'fears' of the coming Russian intervention and the seizure of entire Belarus by 'bloody Russians'. The facts that Belarus is in fact economically, socially and militarily deeply integrated with Russia, a large part of population works in Russia and 100% of the population speaks Russian, are somehow ignored. By the way, Russian troops are officially deployed in Belarus already as a part of the existing military cooperation agreements.

Meanwhile, authorities said that security forces detained 2 persons that exploded an improvised explosive device near the supermarket "Belarus". No casualties were reported.

As to anti-government demonstrations and actions, they continued increasing on August 16. According to reports, tens of thousands attending a protest in Minsk. The main event took place near a memorial to the fight against Nazi Germany, which is located near a war museum and that has a lot of space around it.

Protests continue with a large-scale support on the international scene with 'groups of activists' holding anti-Lukashenko rallies across Europe and mainstream media outlets widely speculating about the fall of the Lukashenko political regime and the upcoming Russian intervention to Belarus. All of these goes fully in the framework of the propaganda campaign described above.

The US and the EU continue pressuring Lukashenko on the international scene. On August 14, EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell said that the EU had refused to accept Lukashenko's victory and promised sanctions against Belarusian officials. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also said that the election was rigged and threatened Lukashenko with sanctions.

The situation in Belarus, while in the terms of security is still mostly controlled by the Lukashenko circle, is pretty complicated. The propaganda war is about to be lost by Lukashenko, if not already, and supporters of the opposition are much more well-coordinated and have an upper hand in the field of media resources. The strike of large Belarusian plants undermined Lukashenko's support base among work class. Supporters of the president are poorly coordinated and not motivated for a real confrontation with the opposition due to the wide-scale usage of violence by police against peaceful rallies earlier.

The aggressive Western-funded succeeded in gaining a wider support of the population (mainly due to mistakes by authorities and the non-proportional use of force) and is now trying to use the protest sentiments to overthrow the Lukashenko government or at least undermine the stability in the country to fuel the social and political instability and further.

At the same time, the harsh determination of Lukashenko to keep power and protect his political regime at any cost seem to be enough to prevent any regime-change attempts through power-based methods. Therefore, if Lukashenko's "silent majority", law enforcements and local elites remain loyal to him, he will be able to remain the president. Nonetheless, his chances to organize a controlled transfer of power to the chosen successor have apparently collapsed.

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