



Belarus Warning Update: Upcoming CSTO Exercise Could Support Russian Military Deployment to Belarus

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By George Barros

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) will conduct a rapid response exercise in Medvezhi Ozero, Moscow Oblast, November 11-12. An unspecified number of Russian, Belarusian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik personnel will participate in the exercise.¹ Armenian forces will not participate, likely due to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

This exercise is likely the November iteration of Russia’s and Belarus’ now-monthly joint exercises. Chief of the CSTO Joint Staff Colonel-General Anatoly Sidorov—a Russian national—will lead the exercise.² Sidorov participated in the CSTO’s Unbreakable Brotherhood exercise in Belarus in October.³ Russian President Vladimir Putin and self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko agreed in September 2020 to hold “almost monthly” joint military exercises in both Belarus and Russia in 2021 and have conducted large monthly joint military exercises since.⁴ The Kremlin has not claimed the upcoming exercise as preplanned as of this writing.

This CSTO exercise emphasizes logistics and command and control—elements necessary to support future Russian conventional military deployments to Belarus.

The exercise will test the CSTO’s rapid response capabilities by using signals elements of Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) as the CSTO’s command and control backbone for the first time. The exercise’s main stated goal is to test using a VDV command post as the basis of the CSTO’s Rapid Reaction Force.⁵ This exercise will occur at the base of the 38th Separate Signals Regiment—the VDV’s only separate signals regiment.⁶ The RRF’s primary mission is to quickly respond to security threats against CSTO member states.⁷ The RRF’s size is approximately 18,000 personnel.⁸ The VDV is Russia’s principal expeditionary force. The exercise, if successful, will likely increase the RRF’s effectiveness by leveraging the VDV’s expeditionary capabilities.

The Kremlin will likely use this exercise to support its hybrid war in Belarus. The Kremlin will likely exploit the exercise’s CSTO branding to conceal that the exercise could support actual combat deployments to Belarus. The Kremlin concealed new deployments to Belarus in September and October 2020 by branding them as “preplanned exercises” with multilateral participation to create a false sense of normality.⁹ Putin included CSTO participants and International Committee of the Red Cross observers in Unbreakable Brotherhood to frame Russian deployments to Belarus as legitimate and internationally accepted, despite Russia’s intensified efforts to undermine Belarus’s sovereignty.¹⁰

The exercise could be part of the Kremlin’s likely efforts to prepare logistics supply lines to Belarus. The exercise’s emphasis on logistics and command and control are consistent with assessed ongoing Russian efforts to create a capability to sustain a near-continuous Russian deployment to Belarus.¹¹ Russian and Belarusian units began conducting command and control and signal exercises—tasks necessary for a sustained Russian deployment to Belarus—in late September.¹² The Russian Ministry of Defense announced exercises to transport ammunition and fuel closer to Belarus in early October.¹³

The size of the exercise is unclear. Approximately 6,000 personnel (approximately 1,000 of which were the three Russian VDV battalion tactical groups) participated in the Slavic Brotherhood exercises in Belarus in September 2020.¹⁴ Approximately 900 CSTO personnel (approximately 140 of which were Russian) participated in Unbreakable Brotherhood in Belarus in October 2020.¹⁵

Russian Western Military District (WMD) and VDV personnel will likely constitute a majority of the participants in the exercise, given the exercise's significant VDV component, that the exercise will occur inside the WMD, that WMD forces exercised at an unusually high scale in September and October 2020, and that Russian personnel historically constitute a majority of participants in CSTO exercises.¹⁶

Russian deployments to Belarus since the crisis began have overwhelmingly been VDV units. Three VDV battalion tactical groups—approximately 1,000 personnel—deployed to Belarus for the Slavic Brotherhood exercises in September.¹⁷ ISW observed only one non-VDV conventional Russian military deployment to Belarus since the crisis began—a deployment of approximately 140 personnel, likely elements of the Samara-based Second Combined Arms Army—for the Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises in October.¹⁸ VDV units would likely be among the first units deployed to Belarus in the event of a sustained deployment.

Putin continues to pressure Lukashenko for concessions on integration. Putin and Lukashenko reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening and fulfilling their Union State obligations during a November 4 phone call.¹⁹

Putin may be offering Lukashenko economic incentives to further formalizing the Union State. Lukashenko informed Putin about the completion of a Belarusian nuclear power plant that was built by Belarusian state firm Rosatom and financed by a \$10 billion Russian loan.²⁰ Putin reportedly supported Lukashenko's proposal to produce Russia's COVID-19 vaccine in Belarus via a technology transfer and the acquisition of a Russian oil field.²¹ They also discussed transporting Belarusian goods from the port of Ust-Luga near St. Petersburg within the sphere of military-technical cooperation.²²

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://www.belta dot by/society/view/komandno-shtabnaja-trenirovka-ksor-odkb-projdet-11-12-nojabrja-414364-2020>

² <https://rg dot ru/2020/11/06/reg-cfo/sily-odkb-11-i-12-noiabria-provedut-trenirovku-v-podmoskove.html>

³ https://odkb-csto dot org/news/news_odkb/komandno-shtabnoe-uchenie-s-mirotvorcheskimi-silami-odkb-nerushimoe-bratstvo-2020-proydet-v-respubli/

⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-softens-his-opposition-protests-seeking-leverage>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian-military-exercises-occurring-western-military>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-will-likely-use-october-military-exercises-advance-its>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia%E2%80%99s-unprecedentedly-expansive-military-exercises-fall-2020-seek-recreate-soviet>

⁵ <https://www.belta dot by/society/view/komandno-shtabnaja-trenirovka-ksor-odkb-projdet-11-12-nojabrja-414364-2020>

⁶ <https://voinskayachast dot net/vozdushno-desantnie-voyska/vch54164> © VoinskayaChast.net;

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/47/Russian_Airborne_Forces.png

⁷ <https://jscsto.odkb-csto dot org/voennaya-sostavlyauschaya-odkb/ksorodkb.php>

⁸ <https://www.belta dot by/society/view/komandno-shtabnaja-trenirovka-ksor-odkb-projdet-11-12-nojabrja-414364-2020>

⁹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia%E2%80%99s-unprecedentedly-expansive-military-exercises-fall-2020-seek-recreate-soviet>

¹⁰ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-will.html>

¹¹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-likely-began-preparing-logistics-supply-lines-belarus>

¹² <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-setting-conditions-long-term-continuous-russian-military>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-and-belarus-prepare-october-exercises-belarus>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia%E2%80%99s-western-military-district-prepares-october-exercises>

¹³ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-likely-began-preparing-logistics-supply-lines-belarus>

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- ¹⁴ <https://reform.by/165444-okolo-6000-chelovek-primut-uchastie-vo-vtorom-jetape-slavjanskogo-bratstva-2020>;
<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/warning-kremlin-deploys-brigade-sized-force-belarus-near-polish-border>;
<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-deploys-third-battalion-tactical-group-belarus>
- ¹⁵ https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12319434@egNews
- ¹⁶ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia%E2%80%99s-unprecedentedly-expansive-military-exercises-fall-2020-seek-recreate-soviet>
- ¹⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/warning-kremlin-deploys-brigade-sized-force-belarus-near-polish-border>;
<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-deploys-third-battalion-tactical-group-belarus>
- ¹⁸ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-police-detain-demonstrators-protests-escalate>
- ¹⁹ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64337>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-putin-obsudili-situatsiju-v-mire-epidemiju-covid-19-perevalku-tovarov-neftegazovuju-414126-2020/>
- ²⁰ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64337>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-putin-obsudili-situatsiju-v-mire-epidemiju-covid-19-perevalku-tovarov-neftegazovuju-414126-2020/>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-launched-nuclear-power-plant-despite-safety-issues-/30928660.html>
- ²¹ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64337>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-putin-obsudili-situatsiju-v-mire-epidemiju-covid-19-perevalku-tovarov-neftegazovuju-414126-2020/>
- ²² <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64337>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-putin-obsudili-situatsiju-v-mire-epidemiju-covid-19-perevalku-tovarov-neftegazovuju-414126-2020/>