



The Kremlin Deploys a Brigade -Sized Force to Belarus Near Polish Border

September 21, 2020, 6:15 EDT

By George Barros

The Kremlin significantly expanded its military presence in Belarus to facilitate a brigade-sized “tactical exercise” as part of the Slavic Brotherhood exercise’s “second stage” for September 21-25.¹ Russian forces’ size was at the battalion level during Slavic Brotherhood’s first stage from September 14-21.²

The Kremlin deployed a battalion tactical group from the Tula-based 106th Guards Airborne Division to Brest, Belarus, for Slavic Brotherhood’s second stage on September 21.³ Forces from the 106th arrived in Belarus via railway on September 21. There are now elements of two different Russian airborne regiments from two different divisions in Brest.

The Kremlin deployed a senior general with extensive combat experience in Syria to “participate in” operations in Belarus. The Kremlin deployed Commander Colonel General Andrei Serdyukov, commander of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV), to Belarus for Slavic Brotherhood exercises on September 21.⁴ Serdyukov commanded the Russian military operation in Syria during the peak of the Assad regime’s Idlib offensive in April-September 2019. Serdyukov’s arrival indicates Russian President Vladimir Putin is actively prioritizing military operations in Belarus, since Russian Airborne Forces are also participating in the Kavkaz 2020 exercises, which should in principle have a higher profile as the premier annual multinational exercise.

The Kremlin will likely downplay this substantial change in its force presence in Belarus. The second stage was unplanned and was only announced on September 17.⁵ Slavic Brotherhood originally was scheduled to end on September 15.⁶ All Russian forces in Belarus should, in principle, return to Russia after the exercises end on September 25. The Kremlin, however, will very likely send additional forces to Belarus under the pretext of continuous monthly exercises.⁷

The Kremlin may be preparing additional units in the WMD for deployment to Belarus or elsewhere.

Brigade-sized elements of a combined arms army, presumably the 6th Combined Arms Army in Leningrad Oblast’, began command and control exercises in the Western Military District (WMD) on September 21. The brigade-sized force will conduct mechanized command and control exercises over the course of a week in the St. Petersburg region.⁸ The forces will practice defense against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) threats. There is no evidence this exercise was preplanned.

A Russian mechanized battalion held likely snap exercises in the WMD on September 21. A battalion of the Kantemir Tank Division of Russia’s First Tank Army held mechanized combat exercises at the Mulino training ground in the Nizhny Novgorod region on September 21.⁹ These exercises had not been previously announced. A battalion of the Kantemir Tank Division of Russia’s First Tank Army held mechanized exercises in the Moscow region at the Golovenki training ground on September 19.¹⁰ These are very likely two different battalions, as the training areas are far away from one another. The 6th Separate Tank Brigade is headquartered near the Mulino training area, whereas the organic tank units of the Kantemir Tank Division are based near Naro-Fominsk.¹¹

The Kremlin is advancing Union State formalization. State Secretary of the Union State Grigory Rapota – a Russian national – said Minsk and Moscow “reached an understanding” on the need to further develop Union State integration roadmaps on September 20.¹² Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s ability to resist Moscow’s efforts to further formalize the Union State is likely degraded.

The Kremlin will likely continue pushing for Belarusian constitutional amendments to formalize the Union State. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reiterated Moscow’s support for Belarusian constitutional reforms without providing specific details on September 20.¹³ The Kremlin will likely continue leveraging Lukashenko’s vulnerability to integrate Belarus into Russia as ISW assessed.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ [https://rg\(.\)ru/2020/09/21/v-belarusi-gotoviatsia-ko-vtoromu-etapu-ucheniia-slavianskoe-bratstvo-2020.html](https://rg(.)ru/2020/09/21/v-belarusi-gotoviatsia-ko-vtoromu-etapu-ucheniia-slavianskoe-bratstvo-2020.html)

² ISW assessed a roughly company-sized force from Russia’s 234th Guards Airborne Assault Regiment likely formed a joint Russian-Belarusian battalion-sized unit to perform Slavic Brotherhood exercises. <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-next-actively-encourages.html>; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian.html>

³ [https://tvzvezda\(.\)ru/news/forces/content/20209211750-mslkj.html?utm_source=tvzvezda&utm_medium=longpage&utm_campaign=longpage&utm_term=v1](https://tvzvezda(.)ru/news/forces/content/20209211750-mslkj.html?utm_source=tvzvezda&utm_medium=longpage&utm_campaign=longpage&utm_term=v1)

⁴ [https://www.mil\(.\)by/ru/news/106283/](https://www.mil(.)by/ru/news/106283/)

⁵ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-russian-force.html>

⁶ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian.html>

⁷ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-russian-force.html>

⁸ [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315440@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315440@egNews)

⁹ [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315418@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315418@egNews)

¹⁰ [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315039@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315039@egNews)

¹¹ http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Ground%20Forces%20OOB_ISW%20CTP_0.pdf

¹²

[https://www.tvr\(.\)by/news/politika/grigoriy_rapota_o_dorozhnykh_kartakh_neftyanykh_voprosakh_i_otmene_rouminga/?sphrase_id=1801379](https://www.tvr(.)by/news/politika/grigoriy_rapota_o_dorozhnykh_kartakh_neftyanykh_voprosakh_i_otmene_rouminga/?sphrase_id=1801379)

¹³ [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/701109.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/701109.html)