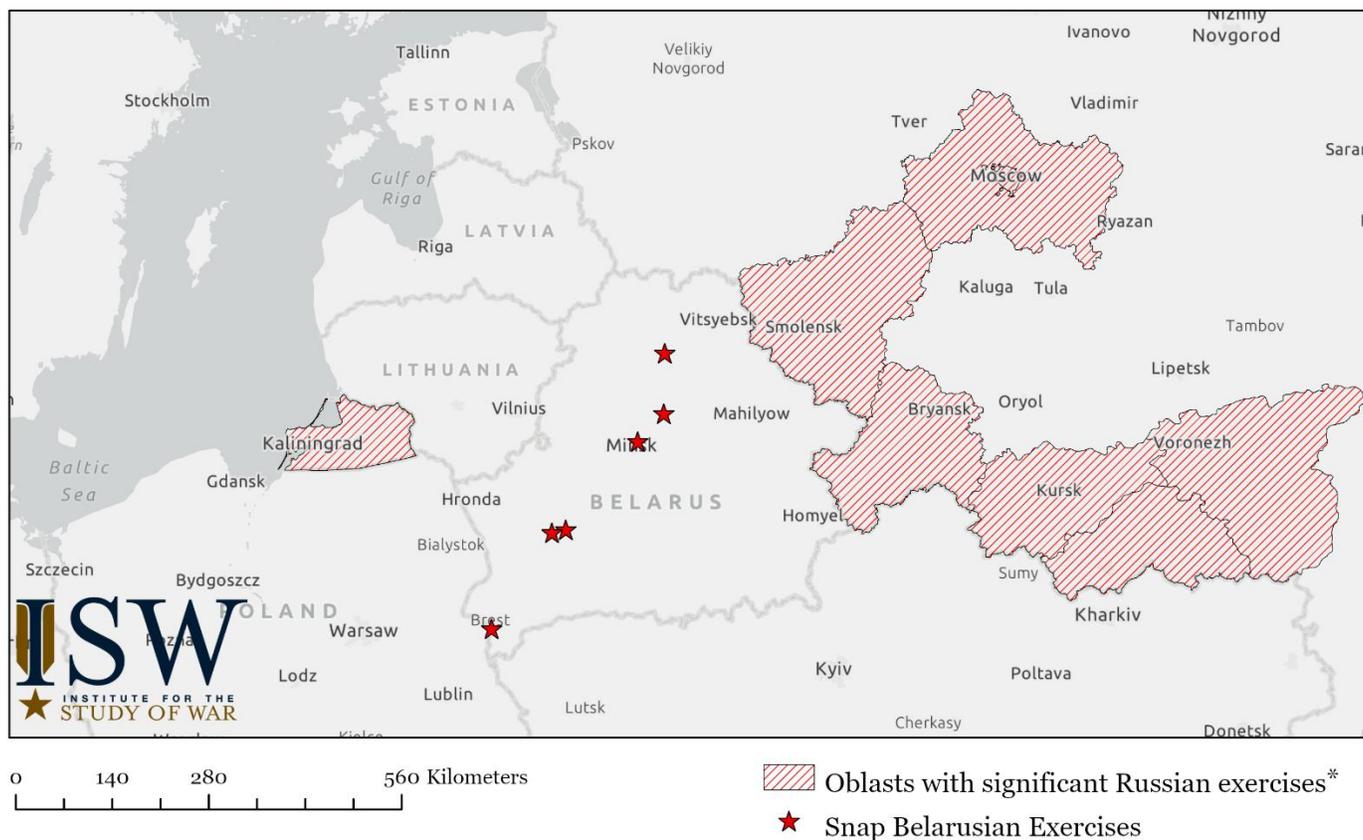


Belarus Warning Update: Moscow and Minsk Hold Simultaneous Combat Readiness Exercises in Kaliningrad, Mainland Russia, and Belarus

By George Barros
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Russian Western Military District (WMD) and Belarusian forces began simultaneous, large combat-readiness exercises in Kaliningrad, Belarus, and mainland western Russia on January 25, 2021. The Russian and Belarusian exercises are nominally separate and do not mention any joint activity; however, the exercises' similarities in timing, geographic proximity, scale, and type of activity in resemblance to previous joint exercises indicate they are likely connected and complimentary.

Russian Western Military District and Belarusian Military Readiness Exercises on January 25-28, 2021



Map by George Barros
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*ISW has not identified the exact locations where these Russian exercises are occurring. These Russian exercises are occurring in training grounds within these larger administrative boundaries. ISW will issue an updated map if open sources provide higher fidelity information.

Russia's Western Military District (WMD) began a brigade-sized readiness exercise in Kaliningrad on January 25. Brigade-sized elements (approximately 3,000 personnel) of the Russian Baltic Fleet began comprehensive combat readiness exercises with ground, naval, naval infantry, naval aviation, and air defense units in Kaliningrad on January 25.¹ The Russian Ministry of Defense claims these exercises are preplanned and did not specify their end date. Baltic Fleet exercises have continued through January 28 as of this writing.²

The WMD also conducted command and control (C2) and signals exercises across five regions (oblasts) in the WMD on January 25. Roughly reinforced-battalion-sized (approximately 800 personnel) signals elements of the Moscow-based First Tank Army conducted communications and C2 exercises across five unspecified oblasts in the WMD on January 25.³ Belarus borders three oblasts in the WMD.

Belarus began a snap countrywide readiness exercise on January 25. Unspecified elements of Belarus' Minsk-based 120th, Slonim-based 11th, and Liepiel-based 19th mechanized brigades; the Vitebsk-based 103rd airborne brigade; and other unspecified Belarusian military units are participating.⁴ These ongoing exercises include air, air defense, engineer, signals, and other support units. This snap exercise is likely a large-scale strategic readiness exercise given its size, scope, and that the four of Belarus' six brigades are participating.⁵ The Belarusian Ministry of Defense has not specified where else in Belarus the exercises are occurring, or an end date.

The WMD began another brigade-sized exercise on January 28. Approximately 3,500 personnel of the Russian 6th Combined Arms Army began exercises in Voronezh, Belgorod, Bryansk, Smolensk, Kursk, and Moscow on January 28.⁶ This exercise includes C2, signals, electronic warfare, reconnaissance, and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense (CBRN) activity. The Russian Ministry of Defense claims this exercise was also preplanned and has not specified when it will end. This exercise is occurring in tandem with the ongoing "preplanned" exercises in Kaliningrad and snap readiness exercises in Belarus. Smolensk and Bryansk border eastern Belarus.

These exercises are likely the January 2021 iteration of the monthly joint Russo-Belarusian exercises and are intended to support Russian-Belarusian military integration at the upcoming Zapad 2021 exercises.⁷

Russian and Belarusian forces have conducted joint military exercises on an almost monthly basis since August 2020.⁸ 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 starting in 2021.⁹ Western Military District Commander Alexander Zhuravlev said preparations for the Zapad 2021 exercises had already begun in December 2020.¹⁰ A large joint Russian-Belarusian exercise in January 2021 would thus be consistent with the pattern of frequent joint Russian-Belarusian exercises that ISW has observed since August 2020.

The activities from the simultaneous ongoing exercises in Russia and Belarus are consistent with activities from previous observed joint Russian-Belarusian exercises since August 2020.

Russian and Belarusian exercises in January 2021 have similar air defense elements. A battalion-sized air defense element (200 personnel), likely of the Russian Baltic Fleet's 22nd Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment, began conducting air defense exercises in Kaliningrad on January 24.¹¹ This exercise was likely connected to the larger brigade-sized exercise that began on January 25, given their close timing. Unspecified elements of the

Belarusian Brest-based 115th Anti-Aircraft Rocket Regiment began air defense exercises as in Brest on January 26 as part of Belarus' larger snap exercise.¹²

Russian and Belarusian military-technical cooperation since August 2020 has emphasized joint air defense.¹³ The Kremlin likely seeks to integrate Belarus' currently independent air defense systems into Russia's own national air defense system by leveraging the Zapad 2021 exercises.¹⁴ Nominally independent but effectively joint air defense exercises in Kaliningrad and Brest could help prepare for this assessed effort.

Both Russian and Belarusian exercises in January 2021 have similar C2 and signals elements. The pattern of C2 and signals activities in Belarus and the WMD in these late January exercises is consistent with Belarusian and WMD exercises that also emphasized C2 and signals activity throughout fall 2020.¹⁵

The Kremlin is likely intensifying its operational security to obfuscate its efforts to integrate Belarus' military into Russia's. A Kremlin information operation is likely framing these complementary and simultaneous Russian-Belarusian exercises as "independent." The Kremlin deliberately misrepresented its snap exercises with Belarus in fall 2020 by branding them as "preplanned exercises" to create a false sense of normality.¹⁶

Minsk's assertion that Belarusian exercises are "snap" against the Russian claims that WMD exercises are "preplanned" may indicate a Belarusian effort to resist a Kremlin information operation or a lack of information operation coordination. It is also possible that the exercises are unconnected, though that is unlikely given the exercises' strong correlations and consistency with previously observed patterns of activity.

Forecast: The Zapad 2021 exercises will likely support Putin's efforts to establish a continuous Russian military presence in Belarus. Zapad 2021 will emphasize the logistical activities necessary to establish supply lines that could support a sustained Russian presence in Belarus. Kremlin-linked newspaper *Izvestia* reported that Zapad 2021 participants—likely Russian WMD logistics units—will establish a special logistics base to supply troops participating in Zapad 2021 with fuel, lubricants, food, and other materials.¹⁷ This revelation is the latest in a series of indicators of Russia setting conditions to create supply lines to Belarus to support a permanent or near-permanent deployment.¹⁸ The Russian Ministry of Defense announced exercises to transport ammunition and fuel closer to Belarus in early October 2020, for example.¹⁹

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12341121@egNews; https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12341121@egNews; https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12340594@egNews; https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12340792@egNews; https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12341172@egNews

² https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12341121@egNews

³ https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12340507@egNews

⁴ <https://www.mil dot by/ru/news/109800/>; <https://www.mil dot by/ru/news/109816/>; <https://www.mil dot by/ru/news/109859/>; <https://www.mil dot by/ru/news/109916/>; <https://www.mil dot by/ru/news/109867/>; <https://1reg dot by/2021/01/26/puskovyie-ustanovki-pod-brestom-pereveli-v-boevoe-polozhenie/>

⁵ Belarus' likely principle maneuver units are the 6th, 11th, 19th, 120th, 103rd, and 38th brigades.

⁶ https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12341119@egNews

⁷ <https://actualnews.org/exclusive/379417-the-national-interest-rossija-gotovitsja-k-voennomu-triumfu-v-baltijskom-regione.html>

⁸ <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-look-recreate-soviet>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-upcoming-csto-exercise-could-support-russian-military-deployment>

⁹ <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-look-recreate-soviet>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-upcoming-csto-exercise-could-support-russian-military-deployment>

¹⁰ https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12332338@egNews

¹¹ <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20210124/kaliningrad-1594373776.html>; <https://eodaily.com/ru/news/2021/01/24/v-kaliningrade-gotovjatsya-otrazit-uslovnnyj-raketnyj-udar-protivnika>; <https://klops.ru/news/2021-01-25/227035-sistemy-s-400-triumf-i-kompleksy-pantsir-s-1-v-kaliningradskoj-oblasti-prohodyat-ucheniya-baltflota>

¹² <https://1reg.by/2021/01/26/puskovyie-ustanovki-pod-brestom-pereveli-v-boevoe-polozhenie/>

¹³ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-belarus-confirms-plans-purchase-advanced-air-defense-systems>

¹⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-and-kremlin-vie-control-over-future-russian-weapons>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-intensifies-russian-belarusian-military-integration>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-belarus-confirms-plans-purchase-advanced-air-defense-systems>

¹⁵ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-upcoming-csto-exercise-could-support-russian-military-deployment>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-likely-began-preparing-logistics-supply-lines-belarus>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-setting-conditions-long-term-continuous-russian-military>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-police-detain-demonstrators-protests-escalate>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia%E2%80%99s-western-military-district-prepares-october-exercises>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-may-have-used-kavkaz-2020-exercises-part-prepare>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/warning-kremlin-deploys-brigade-sized-force-belarus-near-polish-border>

¹⁶ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian-military-exercises-occurring-western-military>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-upcoming-csto-exercise-could-support-russian-military-deployment>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-will-likely-use-october-military-exercises-advance-its>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-deploys-third-battalion-tactical-group-belarus>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/warning-kremlin-deploys-brigade-sized-force-belarus-near-polish-border>

¹⁷ <https://iz.ru/1115704/roman-kretcul-aleksei-ramm/armeiskaia-druzhba-rossiia-i-belorussiia-provedut-rekordnoe-chislo-uchenii>

¹⁸ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-upcoming-csto-exercise-could-support-russian-military-deployment>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-likely-began-preparing-logistics-supply-lines-belarus>

¹⁹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-upcoming-csto-exercise-could-support-russian-military-deployment>