



Putin's "Peacekeepers" Will Support Russian Wars

By George Barros
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The Kremlin will likely cite Russia's "peacekeeping mission" in Nagorno Karabakh in its 2021 bid to legitimize the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as a United Nations (UN)-recognized peacekeeping force. The CSTO stated it plans to conduct negotiations with the UN in 2021 to hold CSTO peacekeeping operations under the UN's auspices.¹ This stated effort aligns with the Kremlin's assessed campaign to leverage the UN to justify Russia's international military deployments—an important hybrid war capability the Kremlin is developing.²

The Kremlin is likely leveraging the CSTO to manage perceptions about Russia's military deployment to Nagorno Karabakh. The Kremlin deployed 1,960 Russian "peacekeepers" to Nagorno Karabakh on November 10.³ These Russian personnel are unspecified elements of the Roshchinsky-based 15th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade, unspecified elements of the Ulyanovsk-based 31st Airborne Assault Brigade, and unspecified elements of the Kubinka-based separate 45th Guards Spetsnaz Detached Brigade—a special operations unit of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV).⁴ This "peacekeeping" mission is an exclusively Russian undertaking and does not include any CSTO personnel, structures, or frameworks as of this writing. The CSTO, nonetheless, is supporting this Russian military deployment in the international information space.⁵ CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas said that Russia's peacekeeping mission helped establish peace in Nagorno Karabakh on November 11.⁶ The CSTO's favorable coverage of an exclusively Russian operation may seek to create a larger false impression that the CSTO is somehow involved in this operation. The successful creation of this impression will lend the operation additional connotations of legitimacy through perceived CSTO backing or could support a new, formal CSTO involvement in the operation. Russian President Vladimir Putin likely seeks to blur the lines between Russian and CSTO activities as part of a hybrid warfare technique to obfuscate Russian activities.

Russian President Vladimir Putin likely seeks to create an impression linking Russian "peacekeepers" in Nagorno Karabakh to "humanitarian assistance." The Russian Defense Ministry began constructing an "Interdepartmental Center for Humanitarian Response" in Nagorno Karabakh's capital of Stepanakert on November 15, 2020, as part of its operation in that region.⁷ The Kremlin claims this center will coordinate Russian-led refugee resettlement and humanitarian efforts.⁸ This effort helps the Kremlin frame its military personnel deployed abroad as legitimate humanitarian actors.

The Kremlin is intensifying efforts to brand CSTO peacekeepers as a legitimate humanitarian force. The CSTO announced plans to add a special medical unit to the CSTO's peacekeeping force on November 12 and called

to build further capability to counter COVID-19 on November 13.⁹ The Kremlin will likely leverage the addition of a mostly symbolic CSTO medical detachment to assist its framing of CSTO peacekeepers as a humanitarian force. The Kremlin previously included CSTO personnel and International Committee of the Red Cross observers in the October 2020 Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises in Belarus to frame Russian deployments to Belarus as legitimate and internationally accepted, despite Putin's intensified efforts to undermine Belarus's sovereignty.¹⁰

Putin will likely increase Russian control over CSTO member states' militaries on November 17. The CSTO will hold a security council secretariat committee meeting on November 17 to further formalize agreements on CSTO peacekeeping, equipping its Rapid Reaction Force (RRF), coalition security, military-technical cooperation, and counternarcotic efforts.¹¹ CSTO member states will likely sign two plans: one on joint training for command and control structures and joint military forces; and another on cooperation on foreign policy through the end of 2020 and the first half of 2021.¹² This will advance Putin's larger campaign to subordinate former Soviet Union (FSU) states' militaries to Russian-dominated structures.

The CSTO RRF conducted a rapid response exercise in Medvezhi Ozero, Moscow Oblast, November 11-12, that could support a Russian military deployment to Belarus.¹³

This exercise tested the RRF's capabilities by using VDV signals elements as the CSTO's command and control backbone for the first time. An unspecified number of Russian, Belarusian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik personnel participated in the exercise at the base of the 38th Separate Signals Regiment—the VDV's only separate signals regiment.¹⁴ The Russian Ministry of Defense did not state how many personnel participated in this exercise or provide the comprehensive readout that usually accompanies such exercises. The Kremlin likely seeks to increase the RRF's effectiveness by leveraging the VDV's expeditionary capabilities.¹⁵

The Kremlin may deploy CSTO "peacekeepers" to Belarus using the CSTO RRF. Self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko gave an interview on November 13 in which he praised deeper integration with Russia via the CSTO as the "main remedy" for color revolutions.¹⁶ The Kremlin may brand a potential future conventional Russian military deployment to Belarus as a CSTO multinational "peacekeeping" mission to conceal Putin's intent to use such a deployment to further integrate Belarus into Russia.

CSTO member states will likely begin developing information technology (IT) under a Kremlin-controlled unified security framework. CSTO member states agreed on the necessity to develop "uniform [IT] rules between states" to ensure collective security on November 12.¹⁷ CSTO member states reportedly are developing a five-year plan to harmonize legislation on IT regulations, including the creation of a single digital signature among CSTO states.¹⁸

This effort to control CSTO states' IT regulations on the Kremlin's terms advances several larger Kremlin campaigns, including the Kremlin's campaign to contest the West in international information and communications technologies—a campaign the Kremlin launched in 2014.¹⁹ This effort, if successful, will likely increase Russian access to CSTO members' IT technical networks, increasing Russia's cyber capabilities.²⁰

The United States and NATO should take several steps to mitigate these threats. The West should closely monitor Russian-led "peacekeeping missions" to challenge Putin's assertions that these operations are humanitarian in nature when they could, in fact, support hybrid wars. The West should call out Russian efforts to undermine FSU states' sovereignty by subordinating their militaries and IT industries to Russian-dominated structures. The West should also call out Russian efforts to manipulate the information space by characterizing its hybrid operations as "peacekeeping missions." Western leaders should pressure the UN not to recognize the CSTO as a legitimate peacekeeping force.

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- ⁷ <https://www.gazeta dot ru/army/news/2020/11/15/15231445.shtml>
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