



Belarus Warning Update: The Kremlin Will Likely Use October Military Exercises to Advance its Hybrid War in Belarus

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The Kremlin is orienting its Unbreakable Brotherhood 2020 military exercises on peacekeeping operations as part of its hybrid war in Belarus.¹ The Kremlin-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) stated on October 7 that approximately 700 CSTO personnel will participate in annual Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises in Vitebsk, Belarus, from October 12-16.² The CSTO stated the exercise is intended to enhance the CSTO's capability to conduct multinational peacekeeping operations by practicing monitoring ceasefire compliance, restoring "peaceful life," maintaining checkpoint security, and riot control.³ The Russian military considers deploying conventional forces under the cover of "peacekeeping" to be a key means within hybrid war.⁴ The Kremlin considers its ongoing campaign in Belarus to be a hybrid war and is likely using CSTO exercises to advance its campaign.⁵

The Kremlin will likely use Unbreakable Brotherhood to expand its information operations in Belarus. Retired Russian Colonel Viktor Baranets, who often speaks on behalf of the Russian military, stated that Unbreakable Brotherhood will emphasize political propaganda techniques and influence operations in a sensitive information environment rather than "the power of arms."⁶ Baranets additionally stated Unbreakable Brotherhood will send a "message to those [implied to be NATO-backed protesters] in Belarus who want to operate outside the law and do much to cause the situation in Belarus to go out of control," in line with the Kremlin's false framing of Belarusian protests as part of a NATO hybrid war against Belarus and Russia.⁷

Russia is leveraging the participation of Western international observers in Unbreakable Brotherhood 2020 in part to legitimize Russia's military presence in Belarus. Observers from the International Committee of the Red Cross will participate in the Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises.⁸ Russian President Vladimir Putin likely seeks to frame Russian deployments to Belarus as legitimate and internationally accepted despite his intensified efforts to undermine Belarus' sovereignty.⁹ The Kremlin prioritizes leveraging international institutions to justify its malign actions.¹⁰

The Kremlin will likely use Unbreakable Brotherhood in part to develop interoperability with CSTO forces to enable Russia's hybrid war capabilities. Unbreakable Brotherhood's stated learning objectives include increasing interoperability between CSTO commanders, planning staffs, and combat subunits.¹¹ A Russian-dominated deployment of CSTO forces into Belarus will advance the Kremlin's likely effort to establish a near-permanent contingent of forces in Belarus. The Kremlin additionally seeks to integrate the CSTO and other international structures into its own hybrid campaigns.¹²

Unbreakable Brotherhood will likely be smaller than ISW forecasted, but the Kremlin demonstrated the ability to rapidly adjust preplanned exercises in September 2020. ISW initially assessed Unbreakable Brotherhood 2020 would be larger than the 2019 iteration given the exercises' historic growth pattern.¹³ Armenia's October 5 withdrawal from Unbreakable Brotherhood 2020 and an increasingly likely Kyrgyz withdrawal are

undermining the exercises' likely goal of integrating CSTO members into Russia's ongoing hybrid operations in Belarus.

Putin may modify the size and focus of the Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises as he likely did with Slavic Brotherhood exercises in Belarus in September, however.¹⁴ Russia may also simultaneously exercise Western Military District forces on a large scale nominally independently as it did during the Slavic Brotherhood and Kavkaz 2020 exercises.¹⁵

Russian security services began conducting negotiations for deeper cooperation with Belarus' principal law enforcement agency on October 6. The Kremlin instructed the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia), Federal Security Service (FSB), Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct negotiations with the Belarusian Ministry of Internal affairs for deeper cooperation on October 6.¹⁶ The first news about this development did not surface until October 8. Putin is likely setting conditions for a Russian law enforcement personnel deployment to Belarus or deeper Russian integration with Belarusian law enforcement.¹⁷

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

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<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Putin%27s%20Offset%20The%20Kremlin%27s%20Geopolitical%20Adaptation%20Since%202014.pdf>;

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf>

² The CSTO is a collective defense military alliance that the Kremlin uses to exercise military influence in former Soviet states.

Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan are CSTO members. https://odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/komandno-shtabnoe-uchenie-s-mirotvorcheskimi-silami-odkb-nerushimoe-bratstvo-2020-proydet-v-respubli/

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

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf>

⁶ <https://m.sputnik.by/radio/20201008/1045853160/Baranets-ucheniya-Nerushimoe-bratstvo-v-Belarusi-proydet-po-osoboy-tekhnologii.html>

⁷ <https://m.sputnik.by/radio/20201008/1045853160/Baranets-ucheniya-Nerushimoe-bratstvo-v-Belarusi-proydet-po-osoboy-tekhnologii.html>

⁸ https://odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/komandno-shtabnoe-uchenie-s-mirotvorcheskimi-silami-odkb-nerushimoe-bratstvo-2020-proydet-v-respubli/

⁹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian-military-exercises-occurring-western-military>

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<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Putin%27s%20Offset%20The%20Kremlin%27s%20Geopolitical%20Adaptation%20Since%202014.pdf>;

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf>

¹¹ https://odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/komandno-shtabnoe-uchenie-s-mirotvorcheskimi-silami-odkb-nerushimoe-bratstvo-2020-proydet-v-respubli/;

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf>;

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Putin%27s%20Offset%20The%20Kremlin%27s%20Geopolitical%20Adaptation%20Since%202014.pdf>

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<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Putin%27s%20Offset%20The%20Kremlin%27s%20Geopolitical%20Adaptation%20Since%202014.pdf>

¹³ Approximately 3,500 CSTO personnel participated in Unbreakable Brotherhood 2019 in Tajikistan.

<http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-is.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian-military-exercises-occurring-western-military>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian-military-exercises-occurring-western-military>

¹⁵ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-russia-and.html>; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-russias-kavkaz-2020-military.html>; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-putin-is-setting-conditions-for.html>

¹⁶ <https://rg.ru/2020/10/08/rosgvardiia-pomozhet-kollegam-iz-belarusi.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-announces-reserve-force-prepared-intervene-belarus>