



Belarus Warning Update: Putin Intensifies Russian-Belarusian Military Integration

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By George Barros

Russian President Vladimir Putin achieved a major milestone in his pressure campaign to subordinate Belarus' military to Russia. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin adopted a common military doctrine and announced the completed formation of Russian-Belarusian “regional grouping of forces” on October 27.¹ The formation of a Russian-Belarusian regional grouping of forces is a major achievement in Putin’s larger campaign to subordinate former Soviet states’ militaries to Russian-dominated structures.² The Russian State Duma first ratified the agreement to create a regional grouping of forces with Belarus in 2017.³

Russia is pressuring Belarus to create a unified advanced air defense system. Shoigu also stated Russia and Belarus are planning to create an “unified regional air defense system.”⁴ ISW warned Putin likely seeks to deploy and control Russian anti-access/area denial weapon systems in Belarus in September.⁵

Putin will likely intensify Russian conventional military deployments to Belarus over the next year. The ministers also agreed to jointly conduct Russia’s next annual capstone strategic readiness exercise – Zapad 2021 – and signed resolutions on conducting “joint special exercises” to prepare for this exercise.⁶ Russia’s Western Military District will likely conduct Zapad 2021 in western Russia and Belarus in September 2021.⁷ Conventional Russian forces likely will deploy to Belarus for Zapad 2021 on a significantly larger scale than they did for Zapad 2017. Russian-Belarusian joint exercises will likely intensify in the immediate future as ISW forecasted.⁸ The Kremlin has not yet announced the next Russian-Belarusian monthly exercise for November 2020.

Kremlin information operations are intensifying efforts targeting NATO. Shoigu used his meeting with Khrenin to intensify the Kremlin’s existing information operation falsely portraying the Belarusian protest movement as a NATO-backed hybrid war. Shoigu claimed the situation on Belarus’ western borders is “still turbulent” and falsely accused NATO of creating a “forward presence” and supply lines for combat operations near Belarus.⁹ Shoigu also falsely accused the West of using protests to derail Russia’s and Belarus’ integration.¹⁰

Self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko will likely take action to defuse protests at an upcoming national Belarusian assembly. Lukashenko said on October 27 Belarusians from “all strata of society” will consider constitutional reforms and solve other problems hindering Belarus’ development at the upcoming Sixth All-Belarusian People’s Assembly. Lukashenko has not announced the date for the assembly. Lukashenko likely seeks to use the assembly to conduct a putative intra-Belarusian dialogue during which Lukashenko will announce constitutional amendments or different concessions to placate protesters.¹¹ The Kremlin will likely intervene to prevent a solution to the protests that does not include Belarus’ deeper integration with Russia.¹²

Ultimatum protests in Minsk are decreasing. Street protests in Minsk on October 27 are significantly smaller than those of October 26.¹³ Factory managers are firing striking workers and threatening to cancel their bonuses.¹⁴ Significant numbers of students are not participating in strikes.¹⁵ Police arrested at least 39 protesters on October 27 as of this writing.¹⁶ Lukashenko seemingly is succeeding in suppressing ultimatum protests as ISW forecasted.¹⁷ Lukashenko will likely replicate successes in suppressing protests barring major changes in the opposition’s strategy or tactics.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://tvrzvezda dot ru/news/forces/content/202010271131-qRRUg.html>

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

³ <https://ria dot ru/20171020/1507225598.html>

⁴ <https://tvzvezda dot ru/news/forces/content/202010271131-qRRUg.html>

⁵ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-and.html>;

<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>

⁶ <https://reform dot by/175035-hrenin-nazval-uchenija-zapad-2021-glavnym-meroprijatiem-sledujushhego-goda>

⁷ Russia's annual strategic joint-staff exercise usually occurs in September.

⁸ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian.html>;

<https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/russias-unprecedentedly-expansive.html>

⁹ <https://tvzvezda dot ru/news/forces/content/202010271118-8ciLE.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.rbc dot ru/politics/27/10/2020/5f97ea9d9a79472722d10df4>

¹¹ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely.html>

¹² <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely.html>

¹³ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-will.html>

¹⁴ <https://finance.tut dot by/news705528.html>

¹⁵ https://twitter.com/bel_fayette/status/1321047483653476352

¹⁶ <http://spring96 dot org/ru/news/100121>

¹⁷ <https://www.rbc dot ru/society/27/10/2020/5f9800179a794735397f2e23>; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/10/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-will.html>