



Putin is Setting Conditions for a Long-Term Continuous Russian Military Presence in Belarus

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By George Barros

Russian President Vladimir Putin is setting conditions for the long-term continuous presence of Russian conventional ground forces in Belarus.

Russia's military activity in the Western Military District (WMD) is anomalously high during ongoing Kavkaz-2020 exercises in the Southern Military District. ISW has observed a larger-than-anticipated number of unscheduled Russian exercises in the vicinity of Belarus and throughout the WMD.ⁱ The Russian Defense Ministry holds annual strategic exercises to test the readiness of Russia's four main military districts. Each such annual exercise occurs in a different military district in a rotating order and usually precipitates a decrease in military exercises in the other military districts. This year's "Kavkaz-2020" exercises began on September 15 in the SMD and should have coincided with a decrease in Russian military activity in the WMD.

Russian forces in the WMD are instead exercising on a larger scale than they did during the last annual exercise in that military district, Zapad-2017. Approximately 7500 Russian military personnel have conducted exercises in Belarus and the WMD since Slavic Brotherhood 2020 began on September 15.ⁱⁱ Approximately 7,200 Russian military personnel participated in Zapad-2017 exercises in all.ⁱⁱⁱ

Russian forces likely have greater freedom of movement in Belarus during Slavic Brotherhood 2020 than they did during Zapad-2017. In 2017 elements of the Pskov-based 76th, Ivanovo-based 98th, and Tula-based 106th Airborne Divisions conducted exercises in the WMD but never deployed into Belarus for Zapad-2017 exercises.^{iv} Three battalion tactical groups from these divisions deployed to Belarus and are operating in Brest and Grodno near the Polish and Lithuanian borders this week.^v

Belarusian support units are likely preparing for the next Russian deployment to Belarus in October. Unspecified Belarusian signals elements,

including elements of Belarus' 1st Field Communications Center, began command and control signals exercises in Belarus on September 21.^{vi} The Belarusian Ministry of Defense stated these exercises are preparations for upcoming exercises in October.^{vii}

A regiment-sized force of the of the Pskov-based 76th Guards Air assault Division is likely preparing for a deployment, likely to Belarus. A regiment-sized force (1,500 personnel) of the 76th began snap exercises in Pskov on September 24.^{viii} The exercises practice transferring subunits in a combined way, the mass landing of personnel and military equipment from transport aircraft, and maneuvers into new areas while overcoming water obstacles, and establishing a lodgment.^{ix} The regiment-sized force is likely preparing to deploy to Belarus under the rubric of monthly exercises, though that has not been announced.

Russian military activity in the Western Military District will continue. Brigade-sized elements of a tank army, presumably the Moscow-based First Tank Army, will conduct exercises at the Mulino training ground in Nizhny Novgorod from September 28 through October 4.^x

The Kremlin may be targeting NATO in the cyber domain. Likely Russian-backed cyber actors sent emails from an address imitating Lithuanian officials' official email addresses to send fake information claiming that Lithuania and Poland called on the European Union to create European peacekeeping forces and to deploy it to Belarus on September 24.^{xi} Kremlin-backed hackers may have conducted this disinformation operation to set conditions for a Russian force deployment to Belarus under the pretext of defending against Poland and Lithuania. The Kremlin and Lukashenko have repeatedly falsely accused Poland and Lithuania of planning to partition Belarus.^{xii} Kremlin-backed cyber actors have used similar email imitation techniques in Ukraine before.^{xiii}

The Kremlin flew long-range nuclear-capable supersonic bombers toward NATO airspace as part of the Slavic Brotherhood exercises for a third consecutive day on September 24. Two Russian Tu-160M nuclear-capable supersonic strategic bombers departed from the Engels-2 airbase in Saratov, Russia, and flew along the Belarusian border with NATO on September 24.^{xiv} Two Tu-160Ms conducted a similar flight on September 22.^{xv} Six long-range supersonic Tu-22 bombers from the Shaikovka airfield in Tver flew across Belarus, and struck targets on the Ruzhansky firing range in Baranovichi, Brest, on September 23.^{xvi} The Kremlin will likely continue to conduct similar flights as Russia's military presence in Belarus persists or increases.

Forecast: Russian airborne troops currently in Belarus will likely return to Russia as scheduled on September 25, but fresh troops—likely airborne but possibly including motorized rifle forces from the WMD—will likely return to Belarus in October for the next round of now-monthly exercises. Putin likely intends to desensitize NATO to the nearly-continuous presence of Russian troops in Belarus under the pretext of exercises, shifting to a continuous presence within a few months.

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- ⁱ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russi...>
- ⁱⁱ [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315037@egNews;](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315037@egNews;)
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<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-russ...>
[https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315028@egNews;](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315028@egNews;)
<http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russi...>
<http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/the-kremlin-deploys-brigade-sized-for...>
- ⁱⁱⁱ [http://eng.mil\(.\)ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12142199@egNews](http://eng.mil(.)ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12142199@egNews)
- ^{iv} Unknown elements of the Moscow-based 1st Tank Army deployed to an unknown training range in Belarus for Zapad-2017, however. [https://www.ng\(.\)ru/politics/2017-08-11/2_7049_vdv.html](https://www.ng(.)ru/politics/2017-08-11/2_7049_vdv.html); [https://regnum\(.\)ru/news/polit/2321907.html](https://regnum(.)ru/news/polit/2321907.html); [http://eng.mil\(.\)ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12142236@egNews](http://eng.mil(.)ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12142236@egNews)
- ^v <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-russ...>
- ^{vi} [https://www.mil\(.\)by/ru/news/106477/](https://www.mil(.)by/ru/news/106477/)
- ^{vii} [https://www.mil\(.\)by/ru/news/106477/](https://www.mil(.)by/ru/news/106477/)
- ^{viii} [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315956@egNews;](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315956@egNews;)
<http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-russia-deploys...>
- ^{ix} [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315956@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315956@egNews)
- ^x [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12316020@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12316020@egNews)
- ^{xi} https://twitter.com/LT_MFA_Stratcom/status/1308779237147541505
- ^{xii} <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-russian-force...>
- ^{xiii} <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/viral-disinformation-kremlin...>
- ^{xiv} [https://www.rbc\(.\)ru/rbcfreenews/5f6ca5439a794783bafb9ff4;](https://www.rbc(.)ru/rbcfreenews/5f6ca5439a794783bafb9ff4;)
[https://www.mk\(.\)ru/politics/2020/09/24/rossiyskie-samolety-tu160-proleteli-vdol-zapadnykh-granic-belorussii.html](https://www.mk(.)ru/politics/2020/09/24/rossiyskie-samolety-tu160-proleteli-vdol-zapadnykh-granic-belorussii.html); [https://tsargrad\(.\)tv/news/dvojka-russkih-tu-160-podoshla-k-granicam-nato-ih-prikryvali-belorusskie-istrebiteli_283581](https://tsargrad(.)tv/news/dvojka-russkih-tu-160-podoshla-k-granicam-nato-ih-prikryvali-belorusskie-istrebiteli_283581)
- ^{xv} <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/putin-remains-dissatisfied-with.html>
- ^{xvi} [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315812@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315812@egNews)