



Belarus Warning Update: Belarus Confirms Plans to Purchase Advanced Air Defense Systems from Russia

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The Kremlin will likely employ Russian S-400 advanced air defense systems in Belarus as ISW forecasted. The commander of Belarus' Air Force and Air Defense Forces announced on January 14, 2020, that the Belarusian Defense Ministry (MoD) is conducting pre-contract work to equip Belarus' anti-aircraft missile divisions that currently operate the S-300 system with S-400 and Pantsir-S systems.¹ ISW first warned of this threat in August 2020, after the MoD reportedly signed a contract for cooperation on air defense systems with the holding company for the manufacturers of the Russian S-300, S-400, and S-500 air defense systems.²

Belarus' acquisition of S-400 systems poses a significant threat to US national security. The Kremlin likely seeks to integrate Belarus' currently independent air defense systems into Russia's own national air defense system, which would give Moscow control over their employment.³ The Kremlin likely seeks to deploy new and control existing anti-access/area denial weapon systems in Belarus to contest NATO and Eastern European airspace more than it already does with systems deployed in Kaliningrad.⁴ Such integration would degrade NATO's ability to defend the Baltics—a risk ISW forecasted in September 2020.⁵

The Kremlin will likely use the upcoming Zapad 2021 exercise in September 2021 to further consolidate Russian control over Belarus' anti-access/area denial systems. Russia's next annual capstone strategic readiness exercise—Zapad 2021—will likely emphasize Russian-Belarusian air defense integration. Belarusian air and air defense forces conducted joint training emphasizing using “new and modernized weapons” to defend against precision weapons and unmanned aerial vehicles on January 14.⁶ The MoD explicitly said the experience gained from this January 14 training will be used in joint exercises with Russian units during Zapad 2021.⁷ Russia's Western Military District (WMD) will likely conduct Zapad 2021 in western Russia and Belarus.⁸ ISW warned in December 2020 that the Kremlin would likely use the Zapad 2021 exercise to further integrate Russian and Belarusian military units at deep levels.⁹

The Kremlin may field S-400 systems in Belarus before September 2021. The MoD's confirmation of “new and modernized” air defense systems' role in Zapad 2021 coincided with its confirmation of plans to purchase Russian S-400 systems. This coincidence may indicate that Moscow seeks to equip Belarusian air defense units with S-400 systems before September 2021 so Belarusian and Russian air defense units—both equipped with S-400 systems—can participate in an integrated fashion during Zapad 2021.

Russian security personnel in unmarked uniforms are reportedly operating in Belarus. A Belarussian protester claimed unmarked Russian personnel detained and beat him in Minsk on December 20, 2020.¹⁰ The protester claimed that during his detention an unmarked Russian security agent said, “I came here from Moscow to help,” and, “Pray that Belarusian riot police detain you, and not us. Because we will simply kill you.”¹¹

This testimony follows a series of indicators of Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) preparations to operate in Belarus. Unmarked Rosgvardia trucks reportedly were spotted in Smolensk heading toward the Belarusian Border on August 16, 2020.¹² Security personnel wearing unmarked uniforms appeared in Minsk for the first time on

September 5, 2020.¹³ Elements of two Rosgvardia units deployed to Minsk on September 28–October 3, 2020, for a small arms military sports tournament that was effectively a series of tactical exercises with Belarusian special forces.¹⁴ Rosgvardia and the Belarusian Interior Ministry ratified a cooperation agreement on November 19, 2020, permitting Rosgvardia personnel to operate in Belarus.¹⁵ The Kremlin already may have deployed Rosgvardia personnel to Belarus to augment Belarusian security forces, which are operating at reduced strength following a steady trickle of personnel resignations since the crisis began in August 2020.¹⁶

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://www.belta.by/society/view/armija-vypolnit-ljubuju-zadachu-dlja-sohraneniya-territorialnoj-tselostnosti-strany-golub-424021-2021/>; <https://www.interfax.ru/world/745186>; <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/822235-belorussiya-kompleksy-s-400>; <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/10461405>

² <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>;

<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-and-kremlin-vie-control-over-future-russian-weapons>

³ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-and-kremlin-vie-control-over-future-russian-weapons>

⁴ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>

⁵ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-and-kremlin-vie-control-over-future-russian-weapons>

⁶ <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/109473/>

⁷ <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/109473/>

⁸ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-will-increase-pressure-lukashenko-integrate-belarus-2021>

⁹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-will-increase-pressure-lukashenko-integrate-belarus-2021>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO-NDgfixpo>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO-NDgfixpo>

¹² <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-russia-and-belarus-launch-military-exercises>

¹³ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-security-personnel-green-uniforms-without-insignia-appear-minsk>

¹⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/belarus-warning-update-putin-likely-disrupts-lukashenko%E2%80%99s-plan-defusing-protests>

¹⁵ An official Belarusian legal portal did not publish this document until December 18, 2020. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=102000029&p1=1&p5=0>

¹⁶ https://t.me/By_Pol/146; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/14/lukashenko-belarus-by-pol-security-forces-protests/>; <https://isans.org/analysis-en/policy-papers-en/the-situation-in-law-enforcement-agencies-of-belarus.html>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/exiled-defectors-belarus-police-holding-ex-colleagues-to-account/30976835.html>