



## Russia in Review: November 10 – November 30, 2021

**NOTE:** ISW’s Russia team is closely monitoring the ongoing situation around Ukraine, including Russian force deployments, rhetorical changes, and Western responses. For more on the evolving situation around Ukraine, please consult ISW’s publication [“Indicators and Thresholds for Russian Military Operations in Ukraine and/or Belarus.”](#) updated daily.

### Belarus’s Campaign to Pressure the EU in November 2021 Further Isolated Belarus and Drew it Closer to the Kremlin

By Mason Clark, George Barros, and Julia Belov

**Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s campaign to coerce the European Union (EU) to repeal sanctions has further geopolitically isolated Belarus and**

**expanded opportunities for Russia to deploy forces into Belarus to threaten Ukraine and NATO.** Russia and Belarus set conditions throughout November to expand military cooperation on the Belarus-Ukrainian border under the guise of protecting the Kremlin-dominated Union State from claimed NATO threats. Lukashenko continues to conduct a campaign of migrant trafficking despite framing EU states as responsible for the crisis by refusing to accept migrants. US allies neighboring Belarus—including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine—have increased security measures on the Belarusian border throughout November.



**The Belarusian government is increasingly falsely blaming the migrant crisis on the West and framing Belarusian and Russian military activity inside Belarus as a response to nonexistent NATO troop buildups.** Lukashenko claimed NATO amassed approximately 15,000 troops near Belarus’ border on November 11.<sup>1</sup> NATO forces have increased their state of alert and readiness in response to Russian and Belarusian pressure, but have not deployed troops for possible offensive operations as claimed by Lukashenko. Minsk announced on November 25 that Belarus and Russia would increase joint air patrols in

Belarusian airspace in response on November 25.<sup>2</sup> Russia will likely deploy ground forces to Belarus in late 2021 or early 2022. Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin announced on November 29 that Russia and Belarus will conduct a joint military exercise on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border on an unspecified future date.<sup>3</sup> The Kremlin frames Russian military intervention in Belarus as vital to protecting its ally and preserving the Union State. A permanent Russian deployment to Belarus and subsequent increase in freedom of movement for the Russian military would enable new avenues of attack against Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states.<sup>4</sup>

**Lukashenko trafficked migrants to destabilize Poland and the EU throughout November while framing Belarus as a humanitarian actor.**

Lukashenko ordered the establishment of refugee camps along the border with Poland on November 12 to advance the narrative that Belarus is a humanitarian actor that seeks to help migrants.<sup>5</sup> Lukashenko ordered the organization of a humanitarian convoy for refugees on the Belarusian border with Poland on November 13.<sup>6</sup> Lukashenko had previously blocked three Polish humanitarian convoys from entering Belarus since the start of the conflict.<sup>7</sup> Lukashenko ostentatiously visited a Belarusian state-run refugee center in Grodno on November 27 to advance the narrative that Belarus is taking good care of migrants.<sup>8</sup> Belarusian security forces continued to marshal migrants for border crossings against Poland throughout this period, such as by arming migrants with stun grenades on November 16.<sup>9</sup>

**Lukashenko deescalated—but did not end—the migrant-trafficking campaign after securing his first phone call with a Western head of state in over a year in mid-November.** Lukashenko and German Chancellor Angela Merkel held phone calls on the migrant crisis on November 15 and 17—Lukashenko's first calls with a Western head of state since August 2020.<sup>10</sup> Belarus began returning migrants to their home countries (predominantly Iraq) on November 18, and

supported an additional flight on November 22.<sup>11</sup> Polish and Belarusian border guards confirmed that migrants vacated their makeshift camps on the border as of November 18, though small groups of migrants remain at the border as of early December.<sup>12</sup> Polish border guards reported on November 28 that illegal migrant crossings decreased from a peak of approximately 500 to 200 daily attempts.<sup>13</sup>

Lukashenko retains the option to escalate the campaign at any time, however. Lukashenko signed into law restrictions that limit media and aid organizations' access to the border on November 30.<sup>14</sup> The restrictions went into effect on December 1 and may last up to three months, increasing difficulty for journalists to assess migrant trafficking. Iraqi repatriation flights have eased tensions, but migrants remaining in Belarus will face harsh winter conditions with limited access to humanitarian resources or media coverage.<sup>15</sup> Lukashenko may use claims of migrant deaths and the heightened Polish and Lithuanian border security to intensify existing information operations alleging NATO preparations to attack Belarus and/or Russia.

**Lukashenko has so far failed to coerce the EU to end sanctions against Belarus through the migrant crisis but may have successfully exacerbated divisions within the EU.**

The EU extended sanctions on Belarus on November 15.<sup>16</sup> However, Lukashenko successfully expanded his contact with EU actors through the Belarusian-created migrant crisis. Lukashenko's phone conversations with acting German Chancellor Angela Merkel on November 15 and 17 were the first form of contact between Western leaders and Lukashenko in more than a year.<sup>17</sup> These phone calls legitimized Lukashenko as the Belarusian President despite Germany and other EU states' continuing refusal to recognize the fraudulent results of Belarus's August 2020 presidential election. Lukashenko may use these phone calls to create divisions in the EU. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki condemned Merkel for reestablishing direct contact with Lukashenko on November 27.<sup>18</sup>

The immediate threats of the migrant crisis have compelled the EU's easternmost members to respond forcefully, potentially exacerbating divisions between EU members. States bordering Belarus have increased security measures on Belarus' border: Latvia began a 3,000-person military exercise near the Latvian-Belarusian border on November 15, Estonia pledged to send forces to assist Poland and Latvia on November 18, Lithuania's armed forces established a military base on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border on November 22, and Ukraine launched a new operation to reinforce the Ukrainian-Belarusian border from migrants on November 24.<sup>19</sup> The EU and several of its western members have previously responded negatively to these actions, while the EU's eastern members assert they are undersupported by the EU in the face of Russian and Belarusian pressure. These disagreements support Russian and Belarusian efforts to fracture Western responses to Russian and Belarusian malign activity.

**Minsk and the Kremlin are poised to continue activity to destabilize the EU.** The Kremlin seeks to expand Russia's military presence in Belarus to increase its ability to militarily threaten NATO and Ukraine. Lukashenko will likely advance narratives of Belarus' de-escalation on the Polish-Belarus border to falsely cast the EU states bordering Belarus as the primary perpetrators of the migrant crisis. Lukashenko will likely continue to provoke aggressive military responses from Poland and other neighbors to justify Russian militarization and undermine EU law in EU states.

## Russia Around the Globe

**1. The Kremlin condemned several NATO naval exercises with partner forces in the Baltic, Aegean, and Black Seas in October and November, falsely portraying them as Western provocations.** Russian President Vladimir Putin said "our recent warnings"—a reference to Russian military deployments near Ukraine—are in part a response to NATO's activity in the Black Sea on

November 18.<sup>20</sup> The Kremlin seeks to end US naval operations in the Black Sea and will continue to claim NATO exercises in the Black Sea justify Russian military provocations against Ukraine.<sup>21</sup> US, Canadian, Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish frigates conducted NATO interoperability exercises in the Baltic Sea while US, Italian, Turkish, German, and Romanian vessels simultaneously conducted exercises in the Aegean Sea from October 27 to 29.<sup>22</sup> US Sixth Fleet flagship *USS Mount Whitney* and the destroyer *USS Porter* deployed to the Black Sea on November 4 and October 30, respectively, for interoperability exercises with Bulgarian, Romanian, Turkish, and Ukrainian vessels.<sup>23</sup> *USS Mount Whitney* and *USS Porter* left the Black Sea on November 15 and 16, respectively.<sup>24</sup> The US Sixth Fleet later announced on that the *USS Arleigh Burke* guided missile destroyer entered the Black Sea on November 25 "to operate with NATO allies and partners in the region."<sup>25</sup> The Kremlin condemned these deployments. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated the Russian Black Sea Fleet tracked *USS Mount Whitney* as it entered the Black Sea on November 4.<sup>26</sup> Russian missile corvette *Shuya* of the Black Sea Fleet conducted an exercise in response to the announcement of *USS Arleigh Burke's* deployment on November 26.<sup>27</sup>

**2. Kremlin state media stopped referring to the Taliban as a terrorist organization banned in Russia, the latest indicator of a gradual Russian effort to support international recognition of the Taliban as the Afghan government.** Russian state-owned news agencies began referring to the Taliban as an "organization under UN sanctions for terrorist activities" on November 8.<sup>28</sup> Russian media previously referred to the Taliban as a "terrorist organization banned in Russia"—the disclaimer that Russian media entities legally must use to describe Kremlin-designated terrorist organizations. The Kremlin additionally began to direct humanitarian aid deliveries to the Taliban in November. Russia delivered 108 tons of humanitarian cargo directly to Kabul, Afghanistan, on November 18, likely in exchange for the extraction of 380

Russian, Belarusian, Kyrgyz, Armenian, Ukrainian, and Afghan evacuees.<sup>29</sup> Russia's Foreign Ministry and President Vladimir Putin have repeatedly promised to deliver humanitarian aid to Afghanistan since late August but likely delayed the convoys until Russia could build a broader base of international support and to secure a stronger bargaining position with the Taliban.<sup>30</sup> The Kremlin will likely recognize the Taliban in early 2022.

**3. The Kremlin-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) conducted the major annual counter-terror exercise “Unbreakable Brotherhood” in early November, further preparing CSTO forces to undertake security or peacekeeping operations in Central Asia.** Approximately 1,800 personnel of the CSTO Peacekeeping Forces comprised of Russian, Armenian, Belarusian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik troops participated in the CSTO's annual Unbreakable Brotherhood exercise in Kazan, Russia, from November 8 to 12.<sup>31</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense initially stated in June 2021 that only 800 personnel would participate.<sup>32</sup> The Kremlin likely retooled the exercise in response to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. CSTO forces practiced forming a joint military and humanitarian response to a terrorist threat.<sup>33</sup> CSTO and Russian readouts noted that the exercise focused on separating conflicting parties and enforcing a ceasefire—rather than the strictly kinetic focus of the majority of CSTO exercises since summer 2021—and leveraged Russian experience from Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>34</sup> The Kremlin has long sought to legitimize the CSTO as a United Nations-recognized peacekeeping force, and will likely seek to expand the CSTO's peacekeeping capabilities through further major exercises.<sup>35</sup> CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas stated during the closing ceremony of Unbreakable Brotherhood 2021 that the CSTO seeks to integrate its joint peacekeeping force with the United Nations.<sup>36</sup>

The Kremlin is successfully diversifying the

capabilities of the CSTO to cover both military and peacekeeping operations. These CSTO exercises expand Russian force projection capabilities and grant the Kremlin further options to respond to any future escalations or jihadist operations in and around Afghanistan. The CSTO additionally conducted the likely company-sized “Colbalt-2021” exercise in Khalton Region, Tajikistan, from November 17 to 19.<sup>37</sup> The CSTO has conducted four Cobalt exercises since 2010 on an uneven schedule, unlike the annual Unbreakable Brotherhood exercise.<sup>38</sup> The exercise emphasized special forces operations against armed combatants, unlike the peacekeeping focus of Unbreakable Brotherhood.<sup>39</sup> Servicemen of the Russian 201st Military Base, Tajik border troops, and unidentified CSTO internal Special Forces, including narcotics officers and elements of the CSTO Collective Rapid Response Force, participated in the exercises.<sup>40</sup>

**4. The Kremlin increased coordination with Malian government officials in November to support a likely deployment by Wagner, a Kremlin-backed private military company (PMC), to Mali in early 2022.** The Kremlin will likely deploy Wagner Group forces to Mali ahead of Malian presidential and legislative elections in February 2022.<sup>41</sup> This deployment would advance Kremlin efforts to deteriorate French-Malian relations, secure Russian access to Malian natural resources, and increase Russia's military influence in West Africa.<sup>42</sup> Mali and Russia have reportedly held negotiations for a Wagner deployment to Mali since late September.<sup>43</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reassured Malian Foreign Minister Abdullah Diop on November 11 that Russia would continue sending Mali military equipment after France closed three of its military bases in Mali.<sup>44</sup> Lavrov denied that Russian private military contractors are preparing to deploy to Mali but stated that Russia will continue to support official Malian counterterrorism efforts during a Russian-French security cooperation meeting in Paris, France, on November 12.<sup>45</sup> European Union (EU) Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell said on

November 15 that the EU will examine Wagner-linked organizations for possible new sanctions on December 13.<sup>46</sup> The Kremlin reportedly shipped small arms and ammunition to Bamako, Mali, on November 20. The Kremlin also sent four Mi-17 military transport helicopters to Mali on November 26.<sup>47</sup>

**5. Germany suspended the certification process for Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline on November 16, significantly delaying the pipeline's commissioning.**<sup>48</sup>

German gas regulators stated that Nord Stream 2's Switzerland-based parent company could not begin gas transit to Germany.<sup>49</sup> German regulators will resume the certification process when Nord Stream 2's parent company creates a Germany-based subsidiary and receives approval from the European Commission.<sup>50</sup> These requirements will likely delay Nord Stream 2's certification beyond previous estimates of May 2022.<sup>51</sup> New US sanctions submitted to Congress by the State Department on November 22 covering two ships and one Russia-linked entity involved in the pipeline will likely further delay the certification process.<sup>52</sup> Western states likely took steps to delay Nord Stream 2's certification due in part to Russia's large military buildup against Ukraine in fall 2021.<sup>53</sup> Nord Stream 2's launch will diversify Russia's gas supply routes to Europe and allow the Kremlin to leverage those routes for political gain—both by increasing Germany's reliance on Russian gas and by depriving Ukraine of gas transit fees. The United States and EU are unlikely to be able to fully halt the launch of Nord Stream 2, but any further delays in the launch of Nord Stream 2 will reduce Putin's leverage and possibly deter Russian military action, as the Kremlin is unlikely to risk taking actions which would lead to the cancellation of Nord Stream 2.

**6. The Kremlin negotiated a ceasefire following an Azerbaijani violation against Armenian territory on November 16 and refused an Armenian request for military support.** The Kremlin brokered a ceasefire on November 16 after Azerbaijan likely initiated clashes on the Armenian-Azerbaijani

border early in the day.<sup>54</sup> Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan announced Armenia would invoke a Russian-Armenian 1997 treaty on mutual assistance during the conflict.<sup>55</sup> The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) stated it did not receive an official invocation from Armenia, however.<sup>56</sup> The Kremlin likely pressured Armenia to withhold an official appeal and instead worked to negotiate an Armenian-Azerbaijani ceasefire. Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted a meeting with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Sochi, Russia, on November 26 to support this effort.<sup>57</sup> Pashinyan and Aliyev agreed to demarcate and demilitarize the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in a joint statement with Putin.<sup>58</sup> Russia's likely unwillingness to support Armenia militarily under the 1997 agreement will likely prompt Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to seek additional security guarantees or expand Armenian military capabilities. However, Russia's refusal to support Armenia militarily is unlikely to degrade Russo-Armenian relations given Armenia's significant economic, diplomatic, and military dependence on Russia.

**7. The Kremlin continued to pressure Moldova into concessions in November using the Kremlin-favorable gas deal Russia successfully coerced Moldova to sign in late October 2021.** Russian state-owned gas company Gazprom threatened to cut off gas supplies to Moldova on November 22 and issued Moldovan state gas company Moldovagaz a 48-hour deadline to repay claimed arrears. Moldovagaz paid off the debt on November 26 after receiving a two-day extension and borrowing over \$56 million from the Moldovan government.<sup>59</sup> Moldovagaz has long disputed Gazprom's claimed arrears but agreed to repay them as part of Russia and Moldova's Kremlin-preferable gas deal signed on October 29.<sup>60</sup> Gazprom claimed it fears future delinquent payments from Moldova, and will continue to leverage Moldova's entrenched economic dependence on Russia beyond the October 29 gas deal.<sup>61</sup>



**8. Russia signed a short-term gas deal with Serbia at discount prices, likely to bolster Russian ally President Vucic ahead of April 2022 Serbian parliamentary elections.**

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a six-month gas deal with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic on November 25.<sup>62</sup> Putin offered Vucic Russian gas for \$270 per thousand cubic meters—a quarter of the average price on the European market.<sup>63</sup> This preferential gas price is not a long-term deal and is likely intended to subsidize Serbia until Belgrade and Moscow broker a long-term deal when the six-month deal expires in summer 2022.<sup>64</sup> The Kremlin likely offered Serbia a low gas price to grant Vucic’s ruling party a political boost ahead of Serbia’s April 2022 elections and prevent Serbia from pursuing alternative energy sources or closer economic ties with European states.<sup>65</sup>

**9. Russia and China signed several economic and military cooperation roadmaps in late November.** Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and his Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe signed a plan for joint

strategic exercises and joint air and sea patrols for 2021-2025 on November 23.<sup>66</sup> Russia and China extended their 2009 agreement on mutual notifications of ballistic missiles and space carrier rocket numbers and deployment to strengthen mutual trust between the two militaries.<sup>67</sup> Shoigu claimed that Russian-Chinese military cooperation is in response to the increased number of US strategic bomber flights in the Sea of Okhotsk and along the Chinese and Russian borders.<sup>68</sup> Shoigu noted the proximity of US strategic aviation exercises “Global Thunder” to Russia’s eastern border, likely to encourage China to enhance joint patrols in East Asia against the West.<sup>69</sup> Russia and China are acting in mutual interest to limit the Western presence in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean.

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