



Belarus Warning Update: Russia Fields New Motor Rifle Division in Kaliningrad and Conducts Joint Command Training with Belarus

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The Kremlin is increasing its projection capabilities against both NATO and Belarus.

The Kremlin announced in December 2020 its decision to field a new motorized rifle division in Kaliningrad. Baltic Fleet commander Admiral Aleksandr Nosatov announced on December 7, 2020, that the Kremlin decided to reinforce the Baltic Fleet's 11th Army Corps with a motorized rifle division in response to an alleged NATO military buildup near Kaliningrad.¹ Nosatov said this new division includes one motorized rifle regiment, one artillery regiment, and one separate tank regiment.

This new division's formation is likely still underway. The Russian Ministry of Defense is still renovating barracks for new elements of the 11th Army Corps as of January 2021.²

The Kremlin likely began plans to form a division under the 11th Army Corps before 2019. Each Russian ground forces division structurally has at least three combat units each at the brigade/regimental level.³ The 11th Army Corps had only two combat brigades before 2019. The Kremlin reinforced the 11th Army Corps with a tank regiment—increasing the Army Corps' total combat units to three like other Russian ground unit divisions—in January 2019.⁴ The Kremlin likely intended the fielding of this tank regiment in 2019 to enable the creation of this division later.

The Kremlin's military buildup in Kaliningrad poses a significant threat to NATO. The division's formation in Kaliningrad compliments other ongoing Russian military efforts to project against NATO from Belarus. The Kremlin likely seeks to establish a continuous Russian military presence in Belarus and has intensified efforts to do so since August 2020.⁵ The division's formation in conjunction with Russia's total freedom of movement in Belarus would further enhance Russian forces' ability to threaten the Suwalki Gap and geographically isolate NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia from the rest of the alliance.

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) began Russian-Belarusian joint headquarters training for the Russian-Belarusian "Regional Grouping of Forces" (RGV) Joint Command in Minsk on February 8, 2021.⁶ Unspecified Belarusian and Russian defense personnel are participating in this staff training, which reportedly will run from February 8-12.⁷ The primary stated goal of this training is to coordinate Russian and Belarusian command staff in the RGV's Joint Command to work out RGV operations to protect the Union State—a supranational organization between Belarus and Russia that the Kremlin seeks to use to subsume Belarus. The Russian Ministry of Defense has not commented on this training as of this writing.

The Kremlin will likely increasingly leverage the RGV in its efforts to integrate Belarus into Russia. The RGV's further formalization with a common military doctrine in October 2020 was a major

achievement in Russian President Vladimir Putin's larger campaign to subordinate former Soviet states' militaries to Russian-dominated structures.⁸ The RGV's founding treaty from 1999 defines the RGV as a combined military structure—broadly encompassing both forces and control elements—of the armed forces of Russia and Belarus.⁹ The original RGV treaty states both Russian and Belarusian defense ministries determine the military units that constitute the RGV. The RGV's operation jurisdiction is all Belarusian and Russian territory and airspace. Open sources do not discuss the full roster of Russian and Belarusian units that currently constitute the RGV. Former Belarusian Ministry of Defense Andrei Ravkov said the RGV included Russia's 1st Tank Army of the Western Military District in March 2017.¹⁰

This training is a February 2021 iteration of the monthly joint Russo-Belarusian joint military activity intended to support Russian-Belarusian military integration at the upcoming Zapad 2021 exercises. The Belarusian MoD explicitly said this training is part of joint Belarusian-Russian activities to prepare for Russia's capstone military exercise for 2021—Zapad 2021.

The Kremlin may leverage the RGV to exert military pressure against NATO. The Kremlin may use RGV forces to project against NATO given Russian and Belarusian units have already conducted joint exercises with explicitly anti-NATO objectives before Putin coerced self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko into further formalizing the RGV in October 2020.¹¹

Belarusian forces continued combat readiness-exercises postured against NATO throughout Belarus on February 8. The Belarusian MoD mobilized an unspecified battalion of the Minsk-based 120th mechanized brigade to the Borisov training ground in Grodno for exercises and raised an unspecified battalion of the Vitebsk-based 103rd airborne brigade to its highest combat readiness level on February 8.¹² There is no evidence these exercises were preplanned.

These exercises have no clear complimentary Russian counterpart as of this writing. Russian and Belarusian forces held likely joint (though nominally separate) large combat-readiness exercises in Kaliningrad, Belarus, and mainland western Russia on January 25.¹³

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ redstar.ru/budem-i-dalshe-kreplit-boegotovnost/; kaliningrad.rbc.ru/kaliningrad/07/12/2020/5fcddc6e9a7947d1925c34fc; www.reuters.com/article/russia-military-kaliningrad-idUSKBN28H1B8

² function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12341318@egNews

³ www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Ground%20Forces%20OOB_ISW%20CTP_0.pdf

⁴ www.kommersant.ru/doc/3866301;

www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Ground%20Forces%20OOB_ISW%20CTP_0.pdf; www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=506496&lang=RU; www.kommersant.ru/doc/3866301

⁵ www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/belarus-warning-update-moscow-and-minsk-hold-simultaneous-combat-readiness-exercises; www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/belarus-warning-update-upcoming-csto-exercise-could-support-russian-military-deployment; www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/belarus-warning-update-russia-likely-began-preparing-logistics-supply-lines-belarus; www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/belarus-warning-update-upcoming-csto-exercise-could-support-russian-military-deployment

⁶ www.mil.by/ru/news/110232/

⁷ www.mil.by/ru/news/110232/

⁸ www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/belarus-warning-update-putin-intensifies-russian-belarusian-military-integration

⁹ docs.cntd.ru/document/901796828

¹⁰ embassybel.ru/news/427f175892bb.html; www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=540673&lang=RU

¹¹ www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/belarus-warning-update-putin-intensifies-russian-belarusian-military-integration

¹² rg.ru/2021/02/08/pod-grodno-nachalis-uchenii-tankistov-rezervistov-na-t-72b3.html; www.mil.by/ru/news/110241/; www.mil.by/ru/news/110240/; www.mil.by/ru/news/110218/

¹³ www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/belarus-warning-update-moscow-and-minsk-hold-simultaneous-combat-readiness-exercises