



Belarus Warning Update: Russian Force Deployment to Belarus is Likely Imminent

September 17, 2020 7:15 pm EDT

By George Barros

The Kremlin will likely deploy Russian conventional military forces into Belarus on a long-term basis under the pretext of expanding bilateral exercises. Multiple indicators ISW had identified as presaging the stationing of Russian troops in Belarus have now tripped, including the presence of Russian troops during extended exercises and specific changes in Belarusian rhetoric.

Russian President Vladimir Putin let it be known that he had discussed Belarus at a meeting of his national security council on September 17.¹ Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko spoke some hours later using bellicose and pro-Russian rhetoric dramatically different from the tone of his speech on September 14. He announced the currently underway Russian-Belarusian Slavic Brotherhood exercises will have a “second stage” in Belarus but provided no additional details.² Putin likely took a decision or issued some directive relevant to Lukashenko’s speech at his national security council meeting.

Lukashenko said unspecified Polish and Lithuanian provocations could transform Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus “into a theater of military operations,” and called on Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine to prevent a “hot war.”³ Lukashenko has accused Poland and Lithuania of foreign interference and subversion but has never so directly accused them of actively agitating for war. ISW assessed Lukashenko’s usage of intensified rhetoric about a NATO threat would indicate a Russian intervention in Belarus is likely.⁴

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko revealed he and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to “rebuild the Union State’s common defense” without providing specifics on September 17.⁵ Putin likely coerced Lukashenko to accept Russian anti-access/area denial weapon system deployments to Belarus during their meeting in Sochi on September 14.⁶

The Kremlin may expand its existing expeditionary force presence in Belarus. Russia and Belarus began previously-scheduled joint military exercises on September 14.⁷ Putin announced on September 13th that the exercises, which were originally scheduled for September 10-15, would be rescheduled for September 14 and extended until September 25.⁸ The exercises did not begin on time likely because Serbia cancelled its participation on September 9.⁹ Approximately 300 Russian troops from Russia’s 76th Guards Air Assault Division arrived in Brest, Belarus, on September 14th.¹⁰ The Kremlin will likely use this and future exercises to deploy more forces into Belarus and keep them there on a continuous or nearly-continuous basis.

Lukashenko likely changed his framing of the situation in Belarus to set conditions for a Russian force deployment to Belarus. Lukashenko said Belarus is on the “precipice of a terrible catastrophe” and that the “acute situation” in Belarus necessitates the second stage of joint Russian exercises – a marked change in Lukashenko’s framing of the situation. Lukashenko previously framed the current level of protests as acceptable, saying protesters had not crossed a “red line” and that most Belarusians “live an ordinary life” on September 14.¹¹ There have been no significant NATO movements or protest escalations in Belarus since September 14 that would account for the

change in Lukashenko's rhetoric. It is more likely correlated with a decision taken in Moscow or made jointly between Lukashenko and Putin.

Lukashenko closed Belarus' borders with Poland and Lithuania and strengthened positions on the Ukrainian border.¹² Belarus never closed any of its borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lukashenko is likely closing them now in response to intensified Polish and Lithuanian efforts to encourage Belarusian citizens to flee Belarus.¹³

Lukashenko denied the need for international recognition of his election results for the first time.¹⁴ The European Parliament passed a resolution rejecting Belarus' August 9 presidential elections results on September 17.¹⁵ Lukashenko has repeatedly defended the elections but has never denied the need for international recognition. Lukashenko's increased political ostracization from Europe and the threat of European Union sanctions will likely increase the Kremlin's leverage over Lukashenko.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ [http://kremlin\(.\)ru/events/president/news/64043](http://kremlin(.)ru/events/president/news/64043)

² [https://interfax\(.\)by/news/policy/vneshnyaya_politika/1283529/](https://interfax(.)by/news/policy/vneshnyaya_politika/1283529/)

³ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-chto-situatsija-vynudila-vmeste-s-rossiej-otstroit-obschuju-zaschitu-sojuznogo-407231-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-chto-situatsija-vynudila-vmeste-s-rossiej-otstroit-obschuju-zaschitu-sojuznogo-407231-2020/); [https://sputnik\(.\)by/politics/20200917/1045705525/Lukashenko-klyanus-nikakogo-vranya-na-vyborakhe-bylo.html](https://sputnik(.)by/politics/20200917/1045705525/Lukashenko-klyanus-nikakogo-vranya-na-vyborakhe-bylo.html); [https://grodnonews\(.\)by/news/glavnoe/aleksandr_lukashenko_priekhal_na_zhenskiy_forum_v_minsk_arena.html](https://grodnonews(.)by/news/glavnoe/aleksandr_lukashenko_priekhal_na_zhenskiy_forum_v_minsk_arena.html); [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/700890.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/700890.html); [https://officelife\(.\)media/news/20394-lukashenko-my-zakryvaem-granitsy-s-zapadom/](https://officelife(.)media/news/20394-lukashenko-my-zakryvaem-granitsy-s-zapadom/);

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZMKfzpAIWQ&ab_channel=TUT.BY.%D0%9F%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0

⁴ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-moscow-sets-conditions-for.html>

⁵ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-chto-situatsija-vynudila-vmeste-s-rossiej-otstroit-obschuju-zaschitu-sojuznogo-407231-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-chto-situatsija-vynudila-vmeste-s-rossiej-otstroit-obschuju-zaschitu-sojuznogo-407231-2020/)

⁶ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko-and.html>

⁷ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-putin-sends.html>

⁸ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-putin-sends.html>

⁹ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-putin-sends.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-putin-sends.html>; [https://www.ukrinform\(.\)ru/rubric-world/3101658-ucenia-pod-brestom-voennye-belarusi-i-rf-proveli-artillerijskie-strelby.html](https://www.ukrinform(.)ru/rubric-world/3101658-ucenia-pod-brestom-voennye-belarusi-i-rf-proveli-artillerijskie-strelby.html)

¹¹ http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko_14.html

¹² [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-chto-situatsija-vynudila-vmeste-s-rossiej-otstroit-obschuju-zaschitu-sojuznogo-407231-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-chto-situatsija-vynudila-vmeste-s-rossiej-otstroit-obschuju-zaschitu-sojuznogo-407231-2020/); [https://sputnik\(.\)by/politics/20200917/1045705525/Lukashenko-klyanus-nikakogo-vranya-na-vyborakhe-bylo.html](https://sputnik(.)by/politics/20200917/1045705525/Lukashenko-klyanus-nikakogo-vranya-na-vyborakhe-bylo.html); [https://grodnonews\(.\)by/news/glavnoe/aleksandr_lukashenko_priekhal_na_zhenskiy_forum_v_minsk_arena.html](https://grodnonews(.)by/news/glavnoe/aleksandr_lukashenko_priekhal_na_zhenskiy_forum_v_minsk_arena.html); [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/700890.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/700890.html); [https://officelife\(.\)media/news/20394-lukashenko-my-zakryvaem-granitsy-s-zapadom/](https://officelife(.)media/news/20394-lukashenko-my-zakryvaem-granitsy-s-zapadom/);

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZMKfzpAIWQ&ab_channel=TUT.BY.%D0%9F%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-poland/poland-offers-new-support-for-belarus-civil-society-media-idUSKCN25A0X3>; [https://www.thefirstnews\(.\)com/article/new-polish-visa-procedures-allow-easier-entry-for-belarusians-15799](https://www.thefirstnews(.)com/article/new-polish-visa-procedures-allow-easier-entry-for-belarusians-15799);

[https://www.barrons\(.\)com/news/lithuania-further-eases-visa-rules-for-belarusians-01600272605?tesla=y](https://www.barrons(.)com/news/lithuania-further-eases-visa-rules-for-belarusians-01600272605?tesla=y)

¹⁴ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-chto-situatsija-vynudila-vmeste-s-rossiej-otstroit-obschuju-zaschitu-sojuznogo-407231-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-chto-situatsija-vynudila-vmeste-s-rossiej-otstroit-obschuju-zaschitu-sojuznogo-407231-2020/); [https://sputnik\(.\)by/politics/20200917/1045705525/Lukashenko-klyanus-nikakogo-vranya-na-vyborakhe-bylo.html](https://sputnik(.)by/politics/20200917/1045705525/Lukashenko-klyanus-nikakogo-vranya-na-vyborakhe-bylo.html); [https://grodnonews\(.\)by/news/glavnoe/aleksandr_lukashenko_priekhal_na_zhenskiy_forum_v_minsk_arena.html](https://grodnonews(.)by/news/glavnoe/aleksandr_lukashenko_priekhal_na_zhenskiy_forum_v_minsk_arena.html); [https://news.tut\(.\)by/economics/700890.html](https://news.tut(.)by/economics/700890.html); [https://officelife\(.\)media/news/20394-lukashenko-my-zakryvaem-granitsy-s-zapadom/](https://officelife(.)media/news/20394-lukashenko-my-zakryvaem-granitsy-s-zapadom/);

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZMKfzpAIWQ&ab_channel=TUT.BY.%D0%9F%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0

¹⁵ <https://www.voanews.com/europe/eu-parliament-votes-stop-recognizing-belarus-president-when-his-term-expires>