



## Belarus Warning Update: Russia Deploys a Third Battalion Tactical Group to Belarus

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By George Barros

**Russia deployed a battalion tactical group (BTG) from the 217<sup>th</sup> Airborne Regiment of the Ivanovo-based 98<sup>th</sup> Guards Airborne Division to Belarus likely on September 21.**<sup>1</sup> It is unclear where the elements of the 98<sup>th</sup> are operating as of this writing.

**Moscow has now deployed a total of three battalion tactical groups from three different Russian airborne divisions to Belarus as part of the Slavic Brotherhood exercises as of September 22.** An element of Russia's 234<sup>th</sup> Airborne Regiment of the 76<sup>th</sup> Guards Air Assault Division arrived in Brest on September 15.<sup>2</sup> Elements of the 137<sup>th</sup> Airborne Regiment of the Tula-based 106<sup>th</sup> Guards Airborne Division arrived in Grodno on September 21.<sup>3</sup> All three of these regiments have combat experience in Ukraine.<sup>4</sup>

**Russia's force presence in Belarus expanded to Grodno, near the Lithuanian border, Baranovichi, closer to central Belarus, and possibly elsewhere on September 22.** Russian forces in the Slavic Brotherhood exercise were confined to training grounds in Brest, near the Polish border, during its first phase on September 14-21. The BTG from the 76<sup>th</sup> conducted a ground movement from Brest to the Baranovichi airbase (about 200 kilometers) and then airdropped into an unspecified landing site likely in Brest on September 22.<sup>5</sup> The Kremlin will likely continue to frame Slavic Brotherhood exercises as "preplanned" despite evident changes in their timing and scale.<sup>6</sup>

**Russian and Belarusian forces conducted another water obstacle exercise in Brest on September 22.** Russian and Belarusian airborne forces airdropped near and then crossed the Mukhavets River using diving equipment. They then secured a piece of "hydraulic junction" – likely a dam – with army aviation support.<sup>7</sup> This exercise could prepare forces to operate in Syria, where ISW forecasts that a pro-regime offensive will begin soon.<sup>8</sup> It could also be preparation for operations in Belarus in various contingencies.

**The Kremlin flew two strategic bombers near NATO airspace as part of Slavic Brotherhood exercises on September 22.** 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 22.<sup>9</sup> Moscow asserts Slavic Brotherhood's focus is counterterrorism, however its deployment of supersonic nuclear-capable strategic bombers near NATO airspace was likely meant as a message to NATO.<sup>10</sup>

Russian forces used Tu-160M bombers in operations in Syria Moscow billed as counter-terrorism efforts. Such airframes are likely more capable and costly to fly than would be needed to support battalion-level exercises of the sort described in Belarus, however. The close approach of such aircraft to the Polish border was likely meant to attract NATO's attention and possibly gauge its response.

**Battalion-sized motor rifle elements of Belarus' Zaslono-based 19th Guards Mechanized Brigade are participating in Kavkaz 2020 field exercises in Kapustin Yar, Astrakhan.**<sup>11</sup> A Belarusian communications unit is supporting the motor rifle element's participation.<sup>12</sup> These elements should return to Belarus after Kavkaz-2020

ends on September 26. The Kremlin, however, will very likely send additional Russian forces into Belarus after Kavkaz-2020 under the rubric of continuous monthly exercises.<sup>13</sup>

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/106360/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/russian-paratroopers-arrive-in-brest-oblast-to-participate-in-army-exercise-133465-2020/>;  
<https://iz.ru/1060848/2020-09-15/rossiiskie-desantniki-pribyli-v-belorussiiu-na-sovmestnye-ucheniia>

<sup>3</sup> ISW initially inaccurately reported elements of the 106th arrived in Brest. <https://naviny.by/new/20200922/1600775218-voennye-belarusi-i-rf-treniruyutsya-otrazhat-agressiyu-v-menyayushcheyasya>; <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/106360/>; <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/9512817>

<sup>4</sup> [https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201503\\_bp\\_russian\\_forces\\_in\\_ukraine.pdf](https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201503_bp_russian_forces_in_ukraine.pdf); <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-putin-sends.html>

<sup>5</sup> [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12315648@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315648@egNews); <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/106367/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/the-kremlin-deploys-brigade-sized-force.html>; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian.html>

<sup>7</sup> [https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/2020922329-hlVR6.html?utm\\_source=tvzvezda&utm\\_medium=longpage&utm\\_campaign=longpage&utm\\_term=vI](https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/2020922329-hlVR6.html?utm_source=tvzvezda&utm_medium=longpage&utm_campaign=longpage&utm_term=vI);

[https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12315449@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12315449@egNews); <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/106364/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/syria-warning-update-syrian-regime.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://rg.ru/2020/09/22/video-rossijskie-tu-160-proleteli-vdol-granic-belarusi.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5f576ef59a7947d8ed72fa58>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/106155/>; <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/106224/>; <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/106363/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/106155/>; <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/106224/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-russian-force.html>