



Warning Update: The Kremlin is Planning an October Multinational Command Staff Exercise in Belarus

September 29, 2020, 5:15 pm EDT
By George Barros

The Kremlin will conduct multinational military exercises through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Belarus on October 12-16. An unspecified number of Russian, Belarusian, Armenian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik forces will conduct the CSTO's annual "Unbreakable Brotherhood" exercises at the Losvido training ground in Vitebsk, Belarus, on October 12-16.¹

Unbreakable Brotherhood 2020 is a command-staff exercise, unlike past small-scale iterations of this exercise. The Kremlin-dominated CSTO described Indestructible Brotherhood-2020 as a "command-staff exercise" with a peacekeeping focus for the first time in June 2020.² The Kremlin has historically framed Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises as joint peacekeeping and antiterrorism exercises, and never as a command-staff exercise, which likely implies a larger scale activity.³

The Kremlin has consistently grown the annual Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises since their first iteration in 2012, when only approximately 600 personnel participated.⁴ Approximately 3,500 joint CSTO personnel participated in Unbreakable Brotherhood 2019 in Tajikistan in October 2019.⁵ The Kremlin has not given any indication of Unbreakable Brotherhood 2020's size as of this writing, though command-staff exercises are traditionally larger than Russian peacekeeping and antiterrorism exercises.⁶

The Kremlin continues to frame its military exercises in Belarus as a response to NATO actions against the Union State.⁷ Readouts published by CSTO member states, on the other hand, either confirm the exercises' existence without providing a unique framing or claim the exercises are annual and unrelated to the political situation in Belarus.⁸

The Kremlin is repurposing existing planned exercises under the rubric of new monthly exercises of Belarus as part of the Kremlin's pressure campaign to establish suzerainty over Belarus. CSTO officials announced that Unbreakable Brotherhood 2020 exercises would be held in the "Eastern European region of collective security"—likely Belarus—in January 2020.⁹ The Russian Defense Ministry announced Unbreakable Brotherhood would be specifically in Belarus on September 15, one day after Russian President Vladimir Putin and self-proclaimed president Alexander Lukashenko met in Sochi.

The Kremlin has improvised planned exercises in Belarus before. The Kremlin extended the duration and likely the size of the Slavic Brotherhood 2020 exercises on likely short notice.¹⁰

Russia will likely deploy a larger number of Russian forces to Belarus for Unbreakable Brotherhood than it did for Slavic Brotherhood. Approximately 1,500 joint CSTO personnel participated in the last Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises held in Belarus in 2016.¹¹ CSTO states deployed approximately 3,500 personnel to Tajikistan in for Unbreakable Brotherhood 2019.¹² The Kremlin deployed approximately 1000 Russian airborne infantry (VDV) in three battalion tactical groups (BTGs) to Belarus for Slavic Brotherhood exercises in September

2020.¹³ Joint CSTO participation in Unbreakable Brotherhood in Belarus will likely exceed 3,500 personnel, given Unbreakable Brotherhood's growth pattern. Russian forces' participation in Unbreakable Brotherhood in Belarus will likely exceed the 1,000 troops Russia sent to Belarus in September.¹⁴

The Western Military District (WMD) is likely using Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises as cover for logistical activity that supports multiple Kremlin efforts, including supporting a permanent military presence in Belarus. The WMD will likely establish a command-staff organization to support Unbreakable Brotherhood. This course of action would be consistent with the increased command and control exercises ISW has observed in the vicinity of Belarus and throughout the WMD in late September.¹⁵ WMD units likely increased their activity in late September to prepare for Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises, among other things.¹⁶

The Russian Ministry of Defense still has not provided evidence that battalion tactical groups (BTGs) of the Pskov-based 76th and Tula-based 106th Airborne Assault Divisions have departed Belarus as of this writing.

The Kremlin is using the Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises to further integrate the militaries of Belarus and other former Soviet states into Russian-dominated structures. The member states of the CSTO, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) held a defense ministerial in Moscow on September 4 in which the participants agreed on a plan to create a joint CSTO command staff, CSTO operational groups for liaison amongst member states' relevant ministries and "joint training of command and control bodies."¹⁷ The Kremlin is using Russian-led international organizations to regain control over its former subjects—a line of effort ISW's report on the Kremlin's geopolitical adaptations since 2014 analyzes in detail.¹⁸ The Kremlin will likely use Unbreakable Brotherhood 2020 to refine its planned structures. Russian forces may additionally exercise creating multinational units, following the creation of joint Russian-Belarusian airborne units during Slavic Brotherhood 2020.¹⁹ The Kremlin may have used Kavkaz 2020 exercises in part to set conditions for this by practicing interoperability between Belarusian, Armenian, and Russian combat units.²⁰

Kremlin media continues to frame Union State formalization as progressing. The Belarusian ambassador to Russia made a general statement that Russia and Belarus renewed negotiations on the Union State formalization on September 29.²¹ Kremlin media framed this statement as a significant development despite the absence of any actual Union State formalization progress.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/09/2020/5f60b9f09a79476c6b0bd39b>

² <https://www.belta.by/society/view/sroki-provedenija-uchenij-odkb-mogut-byt-skorrektirovany-iz-za-epidsituatsii-393633-2020/>

³ https://odkb-csto.org/photogallery/?PAGEN_1=7; https://odkb-csto.org/training/indestructible_brotherhood_2013/nerushimoe_bratstvo/; https://odkb-csto.org/training/indestructible_brotherhood_2013/vtoroe_uchenie_mirotvorcheskich_sil_odkb_nerushimoe_bratstvo_2013_7_1_1_oktyabrya_2013_g_chelyabinska/; https://odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/v_kyrgyzstane_nachalos_sovmestnoe_uchenie_s_mirotvorcheskimi_silami_odkb_nerushimoe_bratstvo_2014/; <https://mil.am/ru/news/3712>; <https://ria.ru/20160823/1475032583.html>; <https://informburo.kz/stati/ucheniya-nerushimoe-bratstvo-2017-fotoreportazh.html>; https://structure.mil.ru/mission/practice/all/combat_brotherhood_2018/nerushimoe_bratstvo.htm; https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12259145@egNews

⁴ The Kremlin began annual CSTO Indestructible Brotherhood exercises in 2012. The exercises occurred in Kazakhstan in 2012 (approximately 950 personnel for peacekeeping), in Russia in 2013 (approximately 2,500 personnel for counterterrorism), in Kyrgyzstan in 2014 (approximately 700 personnel for peacekeeping), Armenia in 2015 (approximately 600 for peacekeeping), in Belarus in 2016 (approximately 1,500 personnel for peacekeeping), in Kazakhstan in 2017 (approximately 1,500 troops for peacekeeping), in Russia in 2018 (approximately 1,300 personnel for peacekeeping/counterterrorism), and in Tajikistan in 2019 (approximately 3,500 personnel for peacekeeping/counterterrorism).

https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12176832@egNews; <https://tass.com/defense/1028438>; <http://eng.mil.ru/en/mcis/news/more.htm?id=12148004@egNews>;

[https://eng.mil\(.\)ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12256452@egNews](https://eng.mil(.)ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12256452@egNews); [https://odkb-csto\(.\)org/photogallery/?PAGEN_1=7](https://odkb-csto(.)org/photogallery/?PAGEN_1=7);
[https://odkb-csto\(.\)org/training/indestructible_brotherhood_2013/nerushimoe_bratstvo/](https://odkb-csto(.)org/training/indestructible_brotherhood_2013/nerushimoe_bratstvo/); [https://odkb-csto\(.\)org/training/indestructible_brotherhood_2013/vtoroe_uchenie_mirotvorcheskikh_sil_odkb_nerushimoe_bratstvo_2013_7_1_1_oktyabrya_2013_g_chelyabinska/](https://odkb-csto(.)org/training/indestructible_brotherhood_2013/vtoroe_uchenie_mirotvorcheskikh_sil_odkb_nerushimoe_bratstvo_2013_7_1_1_oktyabrya_2013_g_chelyabinska/); [https://odkb-csto\(.\)org/news/news_odkb/v_kyrgyzstane_nachalos_sovmestnoe_uchenie_s_mirotvorcheskimi_silami_odkb_nerushimoe_bratstvo_2014/](https://odkb-csto(.)org/news/news_odkb/v_kyrgyzstane_nachalos_sovmestnoe_uchenie_s_mirotvorcheskimi_silami_odkb_nerushimoe_bratstvo_2014/); [https://mil\(.\)am/ru/news/3712](https://mil(.)am/ru/news/3712); [https://ria\(.\)ru/20160823/1475032583.html](https://ria(.)ru/20160823/1475032583.html); [https://informburo\(.\)kz/stati/ucheniya-nerushimoe-bratstvo-2017-fotoreportazh.html](https://informburo(.)kz/stati/ucheniya-nerushimoe-bratstvo-2017-fotoreportazh.html);
[https://structure.mil\(.\)ru/mission/practice/all/combat_brotherhood_2018/nerushimoe_bratstvo.htm](https://structure.mil(.)ru/mission/practice/all/combat_brotherhood_2018/nerushimoe_bratstvo.htm);
[https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12259145@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12259145@egNews)
⁵ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/society/view/beloruskie-voennye-provedut-mirotvorcheskuju-operatsiju-na-uchanii-v-tadzhikistane-366465-2019/](https://www.belta(.)by/society/view/beloruskie-voennye-provedut-mirotvorcheskuju-operatsiju-na-uchanii-v-tadzhikistane-366465-2019/)
⁶ [https://odkb-csto\(.\)org/news/news_odkb/sostoyalis-pervye-shtabnye-peregovory-po-podgotovke-sovmestnykh-uchenyi-s-voyskami-kollektivnymi-sil/](https://odkb-csto(.)org/news/news_odkb/sostoyalis-pervye-shtabnye-peregovory-po-podgotovke-sovmestnykh-uchenyi-s-voyskami-kollektivnymi-sil/)
⁷ <https://rg.ru/2020/09/29/minoborony-rf-i-belarus-provodiut-voennye-ucheniia-v-otvet-na-dejstviia-nato.html>
⁸ [https://ru\(.\)sputniknews.kz/politics/20200916/14974109/Minoborony-Kazahstana-prokomentirovalo-voennye-ucheniya-v-Belarusi.html](https://ru(.)sputniknews.kz/politics/20200916/14974109/Minoborony-Kazahstana-prokomentirovalo-voennye-ucheniya-v-Belarusi.html); [https://news\(.\)mail.ru/politics/43384708/](https://news(.)mail.ru/politics/43384708/); [https://informburo\(.\)kz/novosti/minoborony-ob-uchastii-kazahstana-v-uchanii-v-belarusi-ono-ne-svyazano-s-vnutripoliticheskoy-situaciy-111336.html](https://informburo(.)kz/novosti/minoborony-ob-uchastii-kazahstana-v-uchanii-v-belarusi-ono-ne-svyazano-s-vnutripoliticheskoy-situaciy-111336.html);
[https://tengrinews\(.\)kz/kazakhstan_news/minoboronyi-rk-prokomentirovalo-voennye-ucheniya-belarusi-414314/](https://tengrinews(.)kz/kazakhstan_news/minoboronyi-rk-prokomentirovalo-voennye-ucheniya-belarusi-414314/);
[https://azh\(.\)kz/ru/news/view/71044](https://azh(.)kz/ru/news/view/71044)
⁹ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/society/view/territoriya-belarusi-budet-zadejstvovana-dlja-uchenyi-odkb-v-2020-godu-377729-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/society/view/territoriya-belarusi-budet-zadejstvovana-dlja-uchenyi-odkb-v-2020-godu-377729-2020/);
[https://rus\(.\)ozodi.org/a/30840418.html](https://rus(.)ozodi.org/a/30840418.html); [https://www.kp\(.\)kg/d](https://www.kp(.)kg/d); [https://today\(.\)kg/news/340114/](https://today(.)kg/news/340114/);
[https://www.kp\(.\)kg/daily/217183/4288352/](https://www.kp(.)kg/daily/217183/4288352/); [https://www.vb\(.\)kg/doc/392179_v_odkb_zaymytsia_radioelektronnoy_borboy.html](https://www.vb(.)kg/doc/392179_v_odkb_zaymytsia_radioelektronnoy_borboy.html)
¹⁰ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-multiple-russian.html>
¹¹ [https://eng.mil\(.\)ru/en/mcis/news/more.htm?id=12093563@egNews](https://eng.mil(.)ru/en/mcis/news/more.htm?id=12093563@egNews); [https://lenta.inform\(.\)kz/en/second-stage-of-csto-exercise-unbreakable-brotherhood-2016-begins-in-belarus_a2942174](https://lenta.inform(.)kz/en/second-stage-of-csto-exercise-unbreakable-brotherhood-2016-begins-in-belarus_a2942174); [https://eng.belta\(.\)by/fotoreportage/view/opening-ceremony-of-the-unbreakable-brotherhood-2016-exercise-93757-2016](https://eng.belta(.)by/fotoreportage/view/opening-ceremony-of-the-unbreakable-brotherhood-2016-exercise-93757-2016)
¹² [https://www.belta\(.\)by/society/view/beloruskie-voennye-provedut-mirotvorcheskuju-operatsiju-na-uchanii-v-tadzhikistane-366465-2019/](https://www.belta(.)by/society/view/beloruskie-voennye-provedut-mirotvorcheskuju-operatsiju-na-uchanii-v-tadzhikistane-366465-2019/)
¹³ <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/warning-kremlin-deploys-brigade-sized-force-belarus-near-polish-border>
¹⁴ <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/warning-kremlin-deploys-brigade-sized-force-belarus-near-polish-border>
¹⁵ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-putin-is-setting-conditions-for.html>
¹⁶ <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-kremlin-may-have.html>
¹⁷ [https://www.belta\(.\)by/society/view/glavy-oboronnyh-vedomstv-podpisali-dokumenty-po-voennoj-sostavljajuschej-odkb-405509-2020/](https://www.belta(.)by/society/view/glavy-oboronnyh-vedomstv-podpisali-dokumenty-po-voennoj-sostavljajuschej-odkb-405509-2020/)
¹⁸ <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/putins-offset-kremlin%E2%80%99s-geopolitical-adaptations-2014>
¹⁹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-nexta-actively-encourages.html>
²⁰ [https://function.mil\(.\)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12316107@egNews](https://function.mil(.)ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12316107@egNews); [https://www.mil\(.\)by/ru/news/106155/](https://www.mil(.)by/ru/news/106155/);
[https://www.mil\(.\)by/ru/news/106224/](https://www.mil(.)by/ru/news/106224/); [https://www.mil\(.\)by/ru/news/106363/](https://www.mil(.)by/ru/news/106363/)
²¹ [https://regnum\(.\)ru/news/3076401.html](https://regnum(.)ru/news/3076401.html)