



Belarus Warning Update: Putin Sends Airborne Troops to Belarus Exercise—and a Message to Lukashenko

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By George Barros

Moscow has modified the prescheduled Slavic Brotherhood military exercises in Belarus to demonstrate its ability to deploy forces to Belarus on short notice. Elements of Russia's 76th Guards Air Assault Division arrived in Belarus for the Slavic Brotherhood 2020 exercises on September 15.¹ Russia has not deployed significant conventional forces to Belarus since the start of protests on August 9.² The number of Russian troops in the exercises is unclear.³

The Kremlin likely increased the duration of the preplanned Russian deployment to Belarus on short notice. The exercises were scheduled to run September 10–15 and include Serbian forces.⁴ The Kremlin expanded the exercises to September 14–25 on September 13, four days after Serbia canceled its participation.⁵ Moscow announced the participation of the 76th Airborne Division at that time, fewer than 48 hours before its arrival in Belarus (although the division could have been alerted to prepare for deployment earlier than that). The Kremlin says the division elements will return to Russia after the Slavic Brotherhood exercises end.⁶

The 76th Guards Air Assault Division is an experienced expeditionary force based in Pskov near the Estonian and Latvian borders. Elements of the division participated in Kremlin operations in both Chechen wars, Kosovo, Georgia, and the annexation of Crimea.⁷ This unit has additionally previously operated in Belarus; elements conducted exercises in Brest in April 2018.⁸ The Kremlin likely conducted the short-notice deployment to remind Lukashenko that Russia can deploy forces into Belarus rapidly if Lukashenko does not follow through on the concessions he likely made during talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on September 14.⁹

The Kremlin's overt information operations have emphasized de-escalation, however. Russia staged an ostentatious withdrawal of the previously announced Russian law enforcement officer reserve from the Russian-Belarusian border on September 15.¹⁰ Putin confirmed the existence of this reserve and that it was prepared to deploy to Belarus if the situation “gets out of control” on August 27.¹¹ The demobilization of this reserve is largely symbolic, as it was mobilized quickly and could thus likely be rapidly reconstituted.

The Kremlin denies it pressured Lukashenko during his meeting with Putin on September 14. The Kremlin denied that Lukashenko and Putin discussed military basing rights in Belarus and claimed Russia's \$1.5 billion loan to Belarus had no political conditions.¹² Neither assertion is particularly credible. The loan helped cover a potential crisis in Belarusian reserves that will likely re-emerge. Even if Putin demanded no specific quid pro quo on this occasion, he will likely have the opportunity to do so in the near future. The Kremlin has made multiple unsuccessful attempts to open a strategic airbase in Belarus since 2015 and likely has not dropped its demands.¹³

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

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- ¹ <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>
- ² The Russian Ministry of Defense confirmed Russian airborne infantry (VDV) personnel conducted army games exercises in Brest Belarus, on August 27. These army games exercises were insignificant, however. https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12310460@egNews
- ³ The Kremlin stated approximately 1,500 Russian and Belarusian forces will participate in the exercises. <https://meduza.io/news/2020/09/15/pskovskie-desantniki-pribyli-v-belorussiyu-dlya-uchastiya-v-uchenyah-slavyanskoe-bratstvo>
- ⁴ <https://tass.com/defense/1198433>; <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/slavic-brotherhood-2020-exercise-to-be-held-at-brestsky-training-range-in-belarus-133255-2020/>
- ⁵ <https://tass.com/defense/1200237>; <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/9440765>; <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/warning-lukashenko-begins-targeting.html>
- ⁶ <https://www.interfax.ru/world/726986>; <https://meduza.io/news/2020/09/15/pskovskie-desantniki-pribyli-v-belorussiyu-dlya-uchastiya-v-uchenyah-slavyanskoe-bratstvo>
- ⁷ https://function.mil.ru/news_page/world/more.htm?id=11980809; <https://informpskov.ru/news/164536.html>; <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2018/4/6/285494/>
- ⁸ <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2018/4/6/285494/>
- ⁹ http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko_14.html
- ¹⁰ Kremlin-run media depicted ununiformed Russian law enforcement personnel in unmarked trucks returning to their garrisons from an unspecified location on the Russian-Belarusian border on September 15. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4492669>; <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2458296>; <https://t.me/sputnikby/6140>
- ¹¹ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-kremlin-announces-reserve-force.html>
- ¹² <https://sputnik.by/politics/20200915/1045686146/Peskov-rasskazal-o-peregovorakh-Putina-i-Lukashenko.html>; <https://www.interfax.ru/world/726986>; <https://meduza.io/news/2020/09/15/pskovskie-desantniki-pribyli-v-belorussiyu-dlya-uchastiya-v-uchenyah-slavyanskoe-bratstvo>
- ¹³ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>; <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/06/10/2015/5613ebe59a794769839c9e3f>; <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1501418>; <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2019/11/14/12811502.shtml>