



## Belarus Warning Update:

### Russia Expands Unit Integration with Belarusian and Serbian Militaries in June Slavic Brotherhood Exercises

By George Barros

June 25, 2021

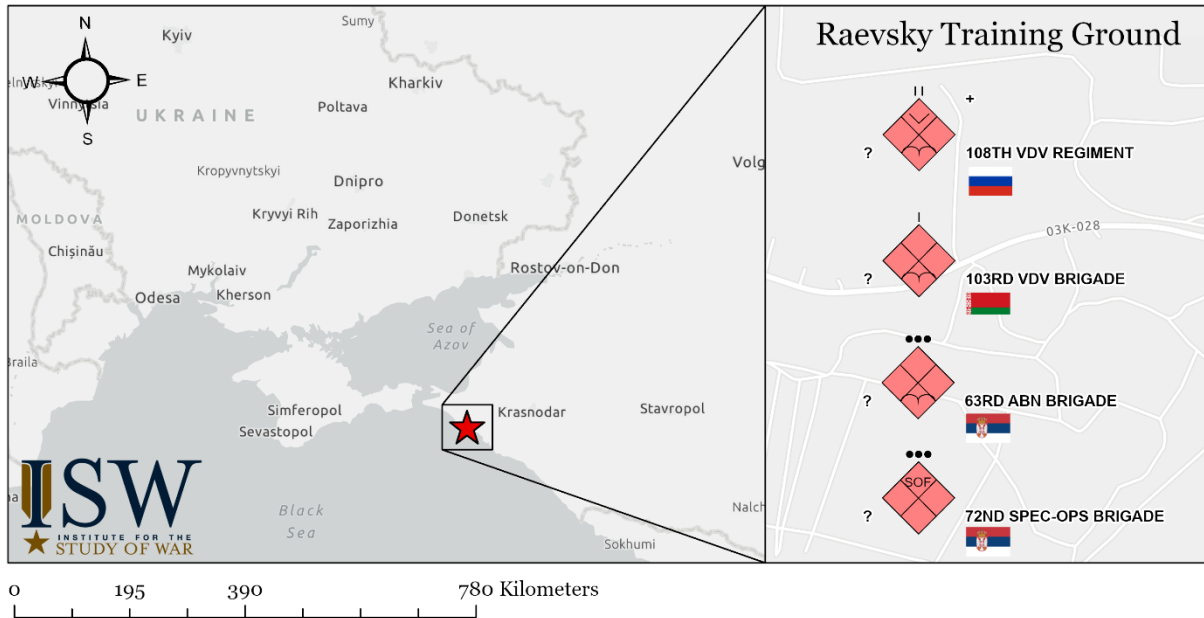
**Key Takeaway:** *The joint Russian-Belarusian-Serbian military exercise Slavic Brotherhood 2021 advanced Russian efforts to gain control over the Belarusian military and cultivate partner forces that the Kremlin can use in future Russian deployments. Russia and Belarus operated integrated combat units at the company level for the first time, building on previous exercises fielding combined battalions. The Kremlin practiced integrating non-Belarusian troops into Russian-controlled companies and platoons for the first time—a dangerous development that will expand Russian control over the militaries of sovereign states, enhance Russian force generation capabilities, and help the Kremlin obfuscate its military activity by framing Russian activities as multilateral. The Kremlin will develop these capabilities further in future exercises, including the upcoming annual capstone strategic readiness exercise, Zapad 2021, in September.*

**Joint military exercises among Russian, Belarusian, and Serbian forces from June 8 to 18, 2021, advanced ongoing Kremlin efforts to subordinate the Belarusian military to Russian-controlled structures and cultivate partner forces that the Kremlin can use in Russia's future force deployments.** The exercise was the sixth iteration of the annual Slavic Brotherhood exercises and involved almost 1,000 Russian, Belarusian, and Serbian troops in the Raevsky Training Ground in Novorossiysk, Russia.

# Slavic Brotherhood 2021 Military Exercises

## Raevsky Training Ground, Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai, Russia

### June 8-18, 2021



★ Raevsky Training Ground

Slavic Brotherhood 2021 participants included:

- A reinforced battalion-sized element (approximately 500 personnel) of the Russian Novorossiysk-based 108th airborne regiment
- A battalion-sized element (approximately 350 personnel) of the Belarusian Vitebsk-based 103rd airborne brigade
- A roughly company-sized element (approximately 100 personnel) of the Serbian 63rd airborne and 72nd special operation brigades

*Map by George Barros  
Institute for the Study of War © 2021*

*Map: A battalion-sized Belarusian element (over 350 personnel) of the Vitebsk-based 103<sup>rd</sup> airborne brigade, a Russian-reinforced battalion (over 500 personnel) of the Novorossiysk-based 108<sup>th</sup> airborne regiment, and a roughly company-sized Serbian element (approximately 100 personnel) of the 63<sup>rd</sup> airborne and 72<sup>nd</sup> special operation brigades participated in Slavic Brotherhood 2021 at the Raevsky Training Ground in Novorossiysk, Russia, from June 8 to 18.<sup>1</sup>*

**Russian and Belarusian forces likely operated as a combined battalion, advancing the Kremlin’s efforts to integrate Belarusian combat units into Russian command structures.** Russian and Belarusian forces formed an unspecified “consolidated unit” that served as Slavic Brotherhood 2021’s main operational group.<sup>2</sup> This force was likely comprised of one or more combined Belarusian-Russian battalions, though official sources did not confirm the exact unit structure unlike in previous exercises. Slavic Brotherhood 2021 had strong similarities with previous exercises in which Russian and Belarusian forces formed combined battalions. Russian and Belarusian forces conducted exercises as a single combined combat battalion for the first time in September 2020 and formed three combined battalions in March 2021.<sup>3</sup>

**Russia and Belarus operated integrated combat units at the company level for the first time—a development that could support a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus.** The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that Belarusian forces operated “as part of an airborne company,” suggesting a Belarusian element was part of a larger combined Russo-Belarusian company.<sup>4</sup> Observed Russo-Belarusian unit integration previously has not occurred below the battalion level.<sup>5</sup> Combined Russo-Belarusian companies would be the next logical step in increased unit integration and would indicate progress in Kremlin efforts to control Belarusian tactical formations.

The Kremlin’s increasing capability to create integrated units with Belarus is likely intended to support a permanent Russian presence in Belarus. The Kremlin may also be preparing Russian forces to subsume elements of Belarusian combat units in the event of a Russian intervention against the will of the Belarusian government—an unlikely but dangerous course of action ISW has previously warned of.<sup>6</sup>

**The Kremlin practiced integrating non-Belarusian troops into combined Russian-controlled companies and platoons for the first time—a significant Russian achievement that will enhance Russian force projection capabilities.** Such unit integration will expand Russian control over the militaries of sovereign states, enhance Russian force generation capabilities, and help the Kremlin obfuscate its military activity by framing Russian activities as multilateral. The Kremlin likely seeks to replicate the combined combat unit integration it has achieved with Belarus and now Serbia (on a smaller scale) with other Russia-amenable states. The West must scrutinize Russian efforts to enlist non-Russian forces within Russian-controlled tactical formations. During the Slavic Brotherhood exercises, Serbian elements operated both as discrete country units and in combined companies and platoons.<sup>7</sup> Russian, Belarusian, and Serbian forces also conducted their first-ever joint parachute landing.<sup>8</sup> The Kremlin likely seeks to expand military unit integration with its partner forces below the battalion level.

**The Kremlin used Slavic Brotherhood 2021 to develop Belarus’ ability to deploy forces long distances—supporting Russian capabilities to leverage Belarusian forces in future deployments.**<sup>9</sup> The Kremlin likely seeks to develop Belarus’ ability to deploy forces long distances to support assessed Kremlin efforts to cultivate partner forces that the Kremlin can use to augment Russia’s own force deployments.<sup>10</sup> Belarus deployed armored vehicles and a battalion of airborne infantry from Vitebsk, Belarus, to Novorossiysk, Russia—a challenging logistical undertaking for Belarusian forces that typically do not deploy outside Belarus at that scale.<sup>11</sup> ISW forecasted in January 2021 that the Kremlin would likely leverage non-Russian forces in future expeditionary operations in and that the Kremlin may deploy Belarusian forces to Syria in September 2021.<sup>12</sup>

**The Kremlin is progressing its effort to expand Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) interaction with non-CSTO states and to turn the CSTO Rapid Reaction Force (RRF)—a theoretically multinational rapid reaction force—into a Moscow-controlled force.** The Kremlin likely used Slavic Brotherhood 2021 to practice Russo-Belarusian cooperation in the RRF. The RRF is a multinational CSTO contingent tasked with quickly responding to threats against CSTO member states. A Russian officer with senior RRF responsibilities and Belarus’ 103<sup>rd</sup> brigade—which contributes 2,000 personnel to the RRF—participated in Slavic Brotherhood 2021.<sup>13</sup> Serbia’s likely interaction with elements of the RRF in Slavic Brotherhood 2021 indicates the Kremlin is successfully expanding interaction between the CSTO and non-CSTO members. ISW has warned that the Kremlin may frame Russian expeditionary deployments as CSTO “peacekeeping missions” to obfuscate Russian actions.<sup>14</sup>

**The Kremlin used Slavic Brotherhood 2021 to prepare for Russia’s upcoming annual capstone strategic readiness exercise, Zapad 2021.** The Russian military’s primary stated objective for Slavic Brotherhood 2021 was to improve cohesion between the staff headquarters and combat units of participating states—a focus likely intended to support joint operations between Russian and Belarusian command staffs in Zapad 2021.<sup>15</sup> Slavic Brotherhood 2021 participants additionally conducted tactical tasks that Russian and Belarusian Zapad 2021 participants will likely repeat.<sup>16</sup> Russia and Belarus will likely intensify their unit and headquarters integration efforts in the buildup to Zapad, which will occur in September 2021.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

---

<sup>1</sup> Belarusian participants returned to Vitebsk on June 19. [“Slavic Brotherhood 2021 Exercises,”] *Serbian Ministry of Defense*, June 9, 2021, [http://www.vs.rs/sr\\_cyr/vesti/C19D09D2C92E11EB8D050050568F5424/vezba-slovensko-bratstvo-2021](http://www.vs.rs/sr_cyr/vesti/C19D09D2C92E11EB8D050050568F5424/vezba-slovensko-bratstvo-2021); [“The Active Phase of the Russian-Belarusian-Serbian Tactical Exercise "Slavic Brotherhood-2021" Has Ended at the Raevsky Training Ground,”] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 18, 2021, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12367538@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12367538@egNews); [“Units of the Vitebsk Airborne Formation of the Belarusian Special Forces Arrives in Novorossiysk for Joint ‘Slavic Brotherhood-2021’ Exercises,”] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 8, 2021, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12365830@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12365830@egNews); [“Home With Victory!,”] *Belarusian Ministry of Defense*, June 19, 2021, <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/114031/>.

<sup>2</sup> [“The Active Phase of the Russian-Belarusian-Serbian Tactical Exercise "Slavic Brotherhood-2021" Has Ended at the Raevsky Training Ground,”] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 18, 2021, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12367538@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12367538@egNews); [“Slavic Brotherhood-2021’ Exercise Participants Blocked and Destroyed the Illegal Armed Group Training Camp at the Training Ground in the Krasnodar Territory,”] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 18, 2021, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12367285@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12367285@egNews).

<sup>3</sup> George Barros, “Russia in Review: Russia Opens Permanent Training Center in Belarus and Sets Conditions for Permanent Military Basing,” *Institute for the Study of War*, April 8, 2021, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-russia-opens-permanent-training-center-belarus-and-sets-conditions>; George Barros, “Belarus Warning Update: NEXTA Actively Encourages Belarusian Security Service Defections,” *Institute for the Study of War*, September 20, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-nexta-actively-encourages-belarusian-security-service-defections>.

<sup>4</sup> [“Slavic Brotherhood-2021’ Exercise Participants Blocked and Destroyed the Illegal Armed Group Training Camp at the Training Ground in the Krasnodar Territory,”] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 18, 2021, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12367285@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12367285@egNews).

<sup>5</sup> George Barros, “Russia in Review: Russia Opens Permanent Training Center in Belarus and Sets Conditions for Permanent Military Basing,” *Institute for the Study of War*, April 8, 2021, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-russia-opens-permanent-training-center-belarus-and-sets-conditions>.

<sup>6</sup> George Barros, “Belarus Warning Update: NEXTA Actively Encourages Belarusian Security Service Defections,” *Institute for the Study of War*, September 20, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-nexta-actively-encourages-belarusian-security-service-defections>.

---

<sup>7</sup> [“A Slavic Landing Fights Together,”] *Belarusian Ministry of Defense*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.mil dot by/ru/news/113964/>.

<sup>8</sup> [“‘Slavic Brotherhood-2021’: How the Exercises Are Conducted at a Training Ground that Has No Analogues in the World”] *Sputnik Uzbekistan*, June 18, 2021, <https://uz.sputniknews dot ru/20210618/slavyanskoe-bratstvo-2021-kak-proxodiyat-ucheniya-na-poligone-ne-imeyuschem-analogov-v-mire-19297969.html>.

<sup>9</sup> [“During the Russian-Belarusian-Serbian Tactical Exercise ‘Slavic Brotherhood – 2021’ the Issues of Deployment of Troops Over Long Distances Were Worked Out,”] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 17, 2021, [https://function.mil dot ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12367095@egNews](https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12367095@egNews).

<sup>10</sup> Mason Clark, “The Russian Military’s Lessons Learned in Syria,” *Institute for the Study of War*, January 2021, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Russian%20Military%E2%80%99s%20Lessons%20Learned%20in%20Syria\\_o.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Russian%20Military%E2%80%99s%20Lessons%20Learned%20in%20Syria_o.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> [“Units of the Vitebsk Airborne Formation of the Belarusian Special Forces Arrives in Novorossiysk for Joint ‘Slavic Brotherhood-2021’ Exercises,”] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 8, 2021, [https://function.mil dot ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12365830@egNews](https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12365830@egNews); [“The ‘Slavic Brotherhood – 2021’ Exercise Starts in Novorossiysk,”] *Sputnik Belarus*, June 8, 2021, [https://sputnik dot by/defense\\_safety/20210608/1047828356/Uchenie-Slavyanskoe-bratstvo--2021-startuet-v-Novorossiyske.html](https://sputnik dot by/defense_safety/20210608/1047828356/Uchenie-Slavyanskoe-bratstvo--2021-startuet-v-Novorossiyske.html).

<sup>12</sup> Mason Clark, “The Russian Military’s Lessons Learned in Syria,” *Institute for the Study of War*, January 2021, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Russian%20Military%E2%80%99s%20Lessons%20Learned%20in%20Syria\\_o.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Russian%20Military%E2%80%99s%20Lessons%20Learned%20in%20Syria_o.pdf); George Barros with Jennifer Cafarella, “Belarus Warning Update: Belarusian Forces May Deploy to Syria in Late 2021,” *Institute for the Study of War*, February 4, 2021, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-belarusian-forces-may-deploy-syria-late-2021>.

<sup>13</sup> “Russia, Belarus, Serbia Kick Off Slavic Brotherhood Joint Counter-Terror Drills,” *TASS*, June 16, 2021, <https://tass dot com/defense/1303171>; Andrzej Wilk, “Russia’s Belarusian Army: The Pratical Aspects of Belarus and Russia’s Militart Integration,” *Centre for Eastern Studies*, March 2021, [https://www.osw.waw dot pl/sites/default/files/OSW-Report\\_Russia%E2%80%99s-Belarusian-army\\_net.pdf](https://www.osw.waw dot pl/sites/default/files/OSW-Report_Russia%E2%80%99s-Belarusian-army_net.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> George Barros, “Russia in Review: Putin’s ‘Peacekeepers’ Will Support Russian Wars,” *Institute for the Study of War*, November 16, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-putins-%E2%80%99peacekeepers%E2%80%9D-will-support-russian-wars>; George Barros with Jennifer Cafarella, “Belarus Warning Update: Belarusian Forces May Deploy to Syria in Late 2021,” *Institute for the Study of War*, February 4, 2021, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-belarusian-forces-may-deploy-syria-late-2021>.

<sup>15</sup> [“The International Tactical Exercise ‘Slavic Brotherhood-2021’ Began in the Krasnodar Territory,”] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 16, 2021, [https://function.mil dot ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12367029@egNews](https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12367029@egNews).

<sup>16</sup> Slavic Brotherhood 2021 participants conducted airborne infantry jumps, river-crossings, envelopment maneuvers, and conducted an airborne assault to support the arrival of a main force. Slavic Brotherhood also had a combined arms component; Russian Aerospace Forces aircraft supported Slavic Brotherhood’s ground units and an Il-76 transport airdropped cargo onto the training ground. [“In Preparation for the ‘Slavic Brotherhood-2021’ Tactical Exercise, the First Classes Were Held with Landings from MI-8 AMTSh ‘Terminator’ Helicopters,”] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 11, 2021, [https://function.mil dot ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12366192@egNews](https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12366192@egNews); [“The Armed Forces of Russia, Belarus and Serbia Are Preparing for the ‘Slavic Brotherhood – 2021’ exercises,”] *Institute for the Study of War* ©2021

---

<https://eadaaily.com/ru/news/2021/06/11/vs-rossii-belorussii-i-serbii-gotovyatsya-k-uchenyam-slavyanskoe-bratstvo-2021>; Anna Berestovaya, ["The Military Worked Out Parachute and Parachute-Free Landing Before the 'Slavic Brotherhood-2021' Exercises,"] *TV Zvezda*, June 11, 2021, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/2021611218-5aoy7.html>; "Russia, Belarus, Serbia Kick Off Slavic Brotherhood Joint Counter-Terror Drills," *TASS*, June 16, 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1303171>; ["Shoulder to Shoulder at the Raevsky Training Ground,"] *Belarusian Ministry of Defense*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/114017/>; ["Servicemen of the Special Operations Forces of the Republic of Belarus Crossed a Water Barrier at the Raevsky Training Ground in Preparation for the 'Slavic Brotherhood-2021' Joint Exercise,"] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 15, 2021 [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12366752@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12366752@egNews); ["The Active Phase of the Russian-Belarusian-Serbian Tactical Exercise "Slavic Brotherhood-2021" Has Ended at the Raevsky Training Ground,"] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 18, 2021, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12367538@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12367538@egNews); ["The Closing Ceremony of the 'Slavic Brotherhood-2021' Joint Exercise Was Held at the Raevsky Training Ground,"] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, June 19, 2021, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12367549@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12367549@egNews).