



Belarus Warning Update: Lukashenko and the Kremlin Vie for Control over Future Russian Weapons in Belarus

September 16, 2020, 5:45 pm EDT

By George Barros and Mason Clark

The Kremlin qualified Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's claim he requested Russian weapons from Russian President Vladimir Putin on September 16. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Lukashenko in Minsk on September 16, likely to implement military cooperation concessions Lukashenko made to Putin during their September 14 meeting in Sochi.¹ Lukashenko said he asked Putin for weapons to "strengthen the Union State plan" on September 16.² Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov qualified Lukashenko's statement in a response to a reporter, saying Lukashenko did not ask Putin for a "weapons delivery" "in the way you [the reporter] phrased."³ The Kremlin rarely qualifies its denials of claims by other actors based on the language used by individual reporters. Peskov's attention to avoiding a full denial but disputing the reporters' question if Lukashenko requested a "weapons delivery" indicates the Kremlin is attempting to shift Lukashenko's framing.

Lukashenko likely phrased his request for Russian weapons to suggest Belarusian forces would control Russian weapons systems sent to Belarus as a result of the agreements. Peskov likely qualified the reporters' phrasing of Lukashenko's statement to avoid committing the Kremlin to giving the Belarusian military new equipment – instead setting conditions for the Kremlin to retain control over weapon systems deployed to Belarus.

The Kremlin likely seeks to control anti-access/area denial weapon systems in Belarus.⁴ The Belarusian Defense Ministry reportedly signed a contract for cooperation on air defense systems with the holding company for the manufacturers of the Russian S-300, S-400, and S-500 air-defense systems in August 2020.⁵ Lukashenko previously rejected S-400 systems in Belarus in February 2020.⁶ The Kremlin likely seeks to integrate Belarus' currently independent air defense systems into Russia's own national air defense system, which would give Moscow control over their employment.⁷ Such integration would enhance Russian capabilities to contest NATO airspace and degrade NATO's ability to defend the Baltics.

Lukashenko markedly changed his framing of military cooperation with Russia following his September 14 meeting with Putin. Lukashenko said Russia and Belarus must "more bravely defend" their joint interests on September 16.⁸ Lukashenko has repeatedly declined the Kremlin's multiple requests to expand strategic Russian airbases in Belarus since at least 2015.⁹ Lukashenko said he would never agree to concessions that undermine Belarus' independence in December 2019 – before the protests pushed him into crisis.¹⁰ The Kremlin will likely continue leveraging Lukashenko's vulnerability to the protest movement to further formalize Kremlin control over Belarus in the Union State.

Moscow will likely sustain its increased military presence and accelerate military cooperation in Belarus over the next several months. Lukashenko announced the next monthly Belarusian-Russian military exercise will occur in October 2020.¹¹ The elements of Russia's 76th Guards Air Assault Division currently in Belarus for

Slavic Brotherhood 2020 exercises should in principle return to their home station when the exercise ends on September 25.¹² They could, however, remain if exercises are scheduled early in October, or other forces could replace them. Lukashenko said Moscow and Minsk must intensify their military cooperation by the end of 2020.¹³ He appears to have conceded a nearly-continuous Russian military presence in Belarus under the guise of frequent exercises.

ISW will continue monitoring the situation and providing updates.

¹ http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/09/belarus-warning-update-lukashenko_14.html

² https://sputnik.by/defense_safety/20200916/1045696519/Peskov-Lukashenko-na-vstreche-s-Putinym-ne-prosil-o-postavkakh-vooruzheniya.html; <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9473667>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/svoi-interesy-my-dolzheny-bljusti-lukashenko-predlozhil-rossii-podumat-nad-novymi-voennymi-uchenijami-407000-2020/>;

<https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2020/09/16/14949241.shtml?updated>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zG_b3kGVxAA

³ Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded to a press question on whether Lukashenko asked for Russian weapons, saying, "In the wording you said, no." <https://tass.ru/politika/9475065>

⁴ The Belarusian Defense Ministry reportedly signed a deal with the Kremlin-owned Almaz-Antey defense company on August 24 at the Army 2020 annual international military-technical forum in Moscow. The Belarusian defense minister reportedly signed a contract for cooperation on air defense systems until 2025. Almaz-Antey is the holding company for the manufacturers of the S-300, S-400, and S-500 Russian air-defense systems. <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>

⁵ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/08/warning-lukashenkos-security-forces.html>

⁶ <https://avia.pro/news/belorusiya-otkazalas-ot-pokupki-rossijskih-s-400-zayaviv-ob-ih-bespoleznosti>;

<https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2020/02/27/belarus-refused-to-buy-russian-s-400-missile-systems-because-they-are-useless/>

⁷ https://www.defenseworld.net/news/15992/Belarus_Receives_Fourth_Battalion_Of_S_300_PS_Air_Defense_Systems#.X2JRdmhKjcs

⁸ <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9473667>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/svoi-interesy-my-dolzheny-bljusti-lukashenko-predlozhil-rossii-podumat-nad-novymi-voennymi-uchenijami-407000-2020/>;

<https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2020/09/16/14949241.shtml?updated>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zG_b3kGVxAA

⁹ <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>

¹⁰ <https://gordonua.com/news/worldnews/belarus-ne-sobiraetsya-vhodit-v-sostav-rossii-lukashenko-1478138.html>;

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02ISOGrMsiA&feature=emb_title; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tILkwwfnos>

¹¹ <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/783962-lukashenko-rossiya-shoigu>

¹² <https://www.interfax.ru/world/726986>; <https://meduza.io/news/2020/09/15/pskovskie-desantniki-pribyli-v-belorusiyu-dlya-uchastiya-v-ucheniyah-slavyanskoe-bratstvo>

¹³ <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/783962-lukashenko-rossiya-shoigu>; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/svoi-interesy-my-dolzheny-bljusti-lukashenko-predlozhil-rossii-podumat-nad-novymi-voennymi-uchenijami-407000-2020>