

An unprecedentedly intense beginning to the Russian Armed Forces' winter training period

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In the first week of December, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation started to carry out testing ground exercises as part of the winter training period which has just begun, and which also mark the beginning of the new training year (from December to November). All the operational groups (armies and corps) of the Western and Southern Military Districts (MD), as well as two of the four armies of the Eastern Military District, are participating in the exercises. Training on a smaller scale has also begun for the Central MD (two tactical groups) and the Northern Fleet, which has operated as a military district since January 2021. In total, at least 50,000 soldiers are exercising at training grounds throughout the country. The exercises by the units in the European part of Russia are particularly noteworthy. Despite the fact that these exercises are being carried out by various types of troops and services (armoured, mechanised, electronic warfare, engineering, air defence subunits, etc.), they are multi-level and complex in nature, that is, soldiers of various formations are training simultaneously. In addition, reservists in the European part of the country have been mobilised to the exercises.

Commentary

- The beginning of this new training year for the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation is unprecedented in recent Russian history in terms of the scale and timing of the field exercises. For many years, the winter deployments of subunits to military training grounds began in mid-January or February. At the end of the previous decade they were intensified and their start dates were moved up, but even then it was rare for the training ground exercises to begin in December. This year, the first units left their barracks for the exercises on 1 December, so the plans for winter training must have been prepared much earlier. It cannot be ruled out that – despite the declarations by the Ministry of Defence – the exercises currently being conducted are of an extraordinary nature. This is evidenced by the extremely high activity in the Western and Southern MDs in the context of current Russian-Ukrainian relations. It should also be remembered that a Russian army strike group has been under development since at least October in the regions bordering Ukraine and the occupied territories (mainly Crimea). Units from this group are currently participating in the exercises.
- The ongoing training can be understood as the direct preparation of these subunits for a possible military operation against Ukraine, even if in the political dimension they are merely part of a demonstration of force, and no aggression will take place. This is

evidenced by the fact that they probably involve all the units that would be needed to carry out such an action. The report from the Ministry of Defence of 4 December, according to which 500 tank crews of the Southern MD undertook firing exercises at the training grounds, is a further sign of this plan. This means that all the armoured units in this district (tank battalions in brigades and regiments) are undergoing training. With regard to the training of other types of troops and services, no such information has been presented, but the fragmentary data allows us to assume that they are also involved on a similar scale.

- A total of 30 training grounds in the Southern MD and 31 in the Western MD are being used for the training exercises. In the first of them, all the operational units are undergoing intensive training: the 8th Combined Arms Army (CAA), the 22nd Army Corps (AC; in Crimea) and the Black Sea Fleet are all oriented towards Ukraine, as well as the 49th CAA (including the tactical battalion groups in Crimea separate from the main army), which could form the basis of a second echelon, and the 58th CAA and the Caspian Flotilla. The involvement of marines in the exercises is noteworthy: both the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla will probably practice landing operations for the first time in December. In the Western MD, the preparations of two operational units – the 1st Tank Army and the 20th CAA oriented directly at Ukraine) – as well as the formations of the Airborne Forces and the contingent in Transnistria (under the command of the Western MD), are taking place at an exceptionally intensive level. The degree of involvement of the 6th CAA (on the border with Estonia and Finland) and the 11th AC (in the Kaliningrad oblast) should be seen as smaller, but their military activity in December is also at a greater level than before.
- The extent to which the two operational units of the Eastern MD – the 29th CAA (from the Zabaikalsky *krai*) and the 36th CAA (from Buryatia) are involved is unclear, compared to that observed in European Russia. Their activity may be treated as an earlier than usual start of preparations for the Russian Armed Forces' main training project in 2022, the strategic exercises codenamed Vostok-2022. However, the negligible involvement of the remaining operational units, especially the Pacific Fleet, allows us to assume that the field armies listed above may be part of the so-called second strategic echelon if new aggression is launched against Ukraine, and if the conflict is escalated or extended.
- There is insufficient information about the training activity of the 41st CAA of the Central MD, which has been engaged in exercises in the European part of the Russian Federation for several months as the main element of the second strategic echelon from Siberia (some subunits, or at least equipment, from the 41st CAA have remained in the regions of the Western MD bordering Ukraine since the Zapad-2021 exercises). At the beginning of December, the announced training activity in the Central MD was limited to the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan (although for several months this facility has been in a state of increased readiness due to the situation in Afghanistan), as well as the 'motorised tactical unit' from the Samara oblast, i.e. most likely the 30th Mechanised Brigade (MB; the 15th MB, also stationed in the Samara oblast, is referred to in Russian reports as a peacekeeping [*mirotvorcheskaya*] unit). The 30th MB can be seen as a possible contribution from the Central MD's second operational unit – the 2nd CAA – to the activities in the western (from the Russian perspective) strategic direction (for the last

year, the 15th MB's main task has been to guarantee the truce between Armenia and Azerbaijan).