

The Zapad-2021 exercises. Russian strategy in practice

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The Zapad-2021 strategic exercises, scheduled for 10–16 September, are the most important training programme yet undertaken held by the Russian Armed Forces and the Belarusian army which cooperates with them. As they involve as many as 200,000 soldiers, they will also be the largest military exercises conducted in Europe for nearly 40 years. The training phase actually began in July, and will peak during the officially announced dates. The accompanying disinformation operation began even earlier, at the end of 2020; the aim was to present the exercises as a defensive action by the alliance of Belarus and Russia against allegedly rising aggression by NATO. The Zapad-2021 (*zapad* meaning ‘west’) exercises are a test of how ready the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus are to conduct operations on NATO’s eastern flank, but they also represent a test of the state structures, in terms of the comprehensive security of their activities and operation in conditions of armed conflict. Particular importance should be attached to the attempt at verifying how effective both countries will be at conducting information warfare, the goal of which is to confirm the potential enemy in the belief that Russia is militarily superior, and that it is ready to use force for political purposes.

Zapad-2021 in the calendar of Russian strategic exercises

The Russian army has been carrying out strategic exercises every year since 2004 (previously they were not held at regular intervals). A different military district organises them each time. The return to regular exercises at this level has been associated with the reconstruction of Russia’s military potential and the military-administrative division of the country’s territory into four military districts (MD) – the Eastern, Central, South and Western – which at the same time represent strategic directions. As a result, each of the military districts prepares strategic exercises every four years, and the names of the districts (strategic directions) are also the code names of the manoeuvres. The ‘North’ strategic direction (from January 2021, based on the new, fifth military district) should be seen as auxiliary to the western direction; in both cases the main potential enemy is NATO. The units of the Northern Fleet participate in the Zapad exercises.

However, the strategic-level undertakings organised by the Western MD since 2009¹ differ from the others, with the permanent participation of the allied Belarusian army as a co-organiser, and because

¹ The first Zapad exercises after the collapse of the Soviet Union were carried out by the Russian army in June 1999, without the participation of Belarus. They were not formally planned in advance, and primarily represented a demonstration



they take place on the territory of both countries. In addition, the Western MD prepares strategic exercises not every four years, but every two: the 'Shchit Soyuzu' ('Union Shield') exercises are held alternately with the Zapad exercises. However, the latter occupy a unique place in the overall training process of the Russian Armed Forces, and their main goal is to assess how far the integration of the Russian and Belarusian armies has progressed. Each of the above-mentioned projects is also characterised by the different ways in which the Belarusian army is involved: in the former it exercises mainly on its own territory; in the latter, on Russian training grounds.

The strategic exercises are a comprehensive joint operation, in which all types of armed forces and independent types of Russian

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army troops participate.² However, they also involve other troops – mainly those of the National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*), the Ministry of the Interior and the FSB Border Service – as well as services responsible for maintaining internal security and order, local administrations, and businesses carrying out defence tasks (from the so-called defence-industrial complex and the fuel sector, and latterly also the financial sector). Therefore, these exercises are a test of both the readiness of the Russian Armed Forces to conduct operations in a given strategic direction, and the structures of the state in terms of securing the army’s activities and operation in war conditions.

Since the middle of the 2010s (*Kavkaz 2016*), units representing armies and fleets from at least one of the other strategic directions have participated in the strategic exercises as reinforcements. In the period under discussion, the reorientation of the Southern MD towards the western direction (Ukraine and the Black Sea) became permanent,³ as has the practice of using the Central MD as the so-called second strategic echelon, also mainly in the western direction. As a result, in the case of three of the four strategic exercises, the Russian Armed Forces’ potential opponents are NATO’s forces in Europe, and only in the Eastern MD are they the US’s armies and their Pacific allies. It is noteworthy that Russia has so far not considered it necessary to organise such projects in the Central direction, i.e. Central Asia.

The military aspect

Officially, Zapad-2021 is scheduled to be held on 10–16 September. However, this period only marks the culmination of the so-called active phase, in which foreign contingents and observers participate.⁴ In fact, the exercises have already been going on since June when, to coincide with the start of the summer training season, the Russian Armed Forces and the Belarusian army began the so-called active preparation phase together with a series of bilateral preparatory exercises (at the training grounds since July). The first transport carrying the Russian participants in the final September phase reached the training ground near Brest on 22 July. The planning and preparatory work had taken place even earlier: in January the presidents of both countries approved the plan of the event; in February there was a staff training session; and at the turn of April, a reconnaissance of the training grounds was held.

Zapad-2021 is the Russian Armed Forces’ largest training exercise in the western strategic direction to date. For the first time, the Russian Ministry of Defence has announced that more than 13,000

against the accession to NATO of the first ex-Warsaw Pact states (Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary), as well as the bombardment of former Yugoslavia.

² The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation consist of three types of armed forces (the Land Forces, the Air & Space Forces and the Navy) and two independent types of troops (the Strategic Missile Forces and the Airborne Forces).

³ 'Caucasus' – the traditional name adopted by the Southern MD, inherited from the North Caucasus MD – could be considered the last one to have corresponded to the real direction of action, in 2012.

⁴ Symbolic contingents have been sent by Armenia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia and Sri Lanka, and observers are to be sent by China, Vietnam, Myanmar, Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

soldiers will participate, as indicated in the Vienna Document 2011 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures. Apart from the actual size of the training camps, according to the information they have provided, the Russians have never exceeded that number.⁵ By citing a figure of “up to 200,000” soldiers – which reflects the true scale of the strategic exercises that have already been carried out in recent years – Moscow aims to cause great concern in the West; but this announcement also takes into account the negative reception which this information will find among the pro-Moscow part of the West’s elites. This is most likely the reason why, at the Russian Ministry of Defence’s briefing for the diplomatic corps, Maj. Gen. Yevgeni Ilyin tried to soften the message, noting that “the maximum number of personnel in the military units involved in the exercises and coming under the terms of the Vienna Document will not exceed 6400 soldiers”.⁶

However, the statement suggesting that none of the 15 training grounds used as part of Zapad-2021 (see Map) will host more than the aforementioned 6400 military personnel does not reflect the reality of the situation. A simple calculation shows that 96,000 soldiers and sailors may be present during the final phase of the exercises at all facilities, which underlines the enormous scale of the undertaking. It should be remembered that organising the training exercises also requires the involvement of people in support staffs, garrisons and communication lines, rotating the participants, etc.

General information given by the Russian Ministry of Defence allows us to assume that the phrase ‘up to 200,000’ covers all the partici-

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pants; that is, it also includes the 12,800 soldiers who are to train in Belarus. The Ministry of Defence in Minsk provided this figure on 5 August, pointing out that (apart from the Belarusian soldiers) it includes 2500 Russian personnel and 50 from Kazakhstan. In addition, a Belarusian battalion (nearly 400 soldiers with 30 weapons) will train in Russia. In total, 30 aircraft & helicopters and 350 heavy weapons (including 140 tanks and 110 gun & missile artillery units) will be used in the exercises in Belarus.⁷

For the exercises on the territory of the Russian Federation, the local defence ministry has assigned 80 aircraft and helicopters, 760 heavy weapons (including 290 tanks and 240 gun & missile artillery units), as well as 15 combatant ships. This information confirms the disproportionately high share of specialised formations in the programme (communications, electronic warfare, engineering, logistics, etc.), significantly exceeding the involvement of regular combat formations. This indicates that in the organisational and personnel dimensions, the Zapad-2021 operation will assume the use of a force at least twice as large as the declared figure of 200,000 personnel.

According to the data disclosed so far, the following military units are to participate in the exercises on the Russian side:

- from the Western MD: the 1st Guards Tank Army (in full), the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army (GCAA; so far one division has been confirmed), the 6th Air & Air Defence Army, the Baltic Fleet (including units of the 11th Army Corps), support and security units subordinated directly to the district command, including airborne troops divisions deployed in the Western MD; and

⁵ The only Zapad exercises in which the number of soldiers failed to meet the threshold recorded in the Vienna Document (about 7000) were held in 1999. In all regular exercises held since 2009, the actual number of personnel exceeded 13,000, and with each successive instalment of Zapad, the number of soldiers has increased significantly, up to 100,000 in 2017.

⁶ ‘Главное управление международного военного сотрудничества Минобороны РФ провело брифинг о подготовке совместного стратегического учения «Запад-2021»’, Министерство обороны Российской Федерации, 20 August 2021, mil.ru.

⁷ ‘«Запад-2021» – учение оборонительного характера’, Министерство обороны Республики Беларусь, 5 August 2021, mil.by.

- from the Central MD: the 41st GCAA (units which took part this April in checking the combat readiness of the group deployed in the Ukrainian direction).

It is worth noting the overrepresentation of specialised units from the Western MD which will take part in the manoeuvres in full, as well as the lack of information concerning the involvement of the 6th GCAA, which is subordinate to the command of this district. The presence of the latter, as well as of the grouping in the Arctic region (which is subordinate to the Northern Fleet command), is evidenced by the preparatory exercises and the exercise scenario which are discussed below.

The actual scale of the operation carried out under Zapad-2021 is illustrated by the preparatory exercises. As part of these, training was conducted in August which

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involved military police, engineering troops and radiation, chemical & biological defence troops, as well as logistical units (as part of exercises concerning *matériel* and technical security). Virtually all the above-mentioned units from the Western MD and the Belarusian army participated in them. The largest of these undertakings (the *matériel* and technical security exercises) covered two strategic directions, the Western and the Northern. The radio-electronic warfare (EW) exercises announced as part of the preparations for Zapad-2021 are scheduled to take place in September; these will be the largest EW training exercises carried out by the Russian army so far.⁸ Apart from formations of the Russian Armed Forces, units of *Rosgvardiya* have also been preparing for Zapad-2021 (as part of the Zaslou 2021 exercises held in July).

The preparatory exercises saw the testing of the Russian army’s new capabilities. Two unrelated events deserve special mention: the landing of a field hospital (by airborne forces with transport aviation) and tactical defence exercise with the use of Uran-9 combat robots (by land forces). In turn, a new system for financing the activities of military units is to be tested as a direct part of Zapad-2021; this will include using both foreign and domestic means to make payments during wartime.

In the context of Zapad-2021, attention should be paid to the activity of the Southern MD in cooperation with the Western MD facing Ukraine. On 9 August, a series of bilateral tactical battalion exercises and special exercises were initiated simultaneously on 20 training grounds in the Western MD. This is scheduled to last until 15 September, so their final phase will coincide with the Zapad exercises. It is worth noting that in the absence of public data on the number of participants in the exercises in the Southern MD, it was reported that 80 airplanes and helicopters will take part in them, as in the Zapad-2021 exercises.

A deceptive exercise scenario

The official scenario for Zapad-2021 was presented on 5 August by the Belarusian deputy minister of defence, Viktor Gulevich. Its announcement is another example of how these exercises are being used to promote the thesis about the aggressiveness of the NATO countries bordering the republic, and the need for it to prepare to take defensive actions. The movements of the Belarusian and Russian troops and their operational development are intended as a response to NATO’s “provocative actions” (the purported appearance of illegal armed groups supported by local pro-separatist populations). Divisions from both countries were presented as belonging to the ‘Union State of the Republic of Polesia and the Central Federation’ (a reference to the Union State of Russia and Belarus). Their nominal

⁸ Р. Крецул, А. Ерепанова, ‘Измерить подавление: в сентябре пройдут масштабные учения войск РЭБ’, *Известия*, 11 August 2021, iz.ru.

opponent is an alliance of 'Neris, Pomoria and the Polar Republic', as well as terrorist organisations. In this scenario, the situation in the region deteriorates because of a series of attempts to destabilise the Republic of Polesia and change the local government (a reference to last year's crisis in Belarus) and detach part of its territory (a reference to the accusations repeatedly formulated by Alyaksandr Lukashenka about the possibility of a so-called fifth column – composed of Poles, among others – being created in Belarus). As a result of the coup's failure, the nominal opponent launched military operations which met with the allied response of Polesia and the Central Federation.

In fact, this scenario is not defensive, but offensive in nature. The manipulations are intended to convince the target audience that Russia & Belarus assume a limited, defensive conflict with Poland and the Baltic states, which are actively working to provoke an armed conflict. In reality, however, the plan provides for large-scale offensive military operations. In addition to the Western Military District, the activity of the Russian army also covers the Arctic direction, and units of the Central Military District are also preparing for the exercises.

One innovation was the inclusion in Zapad-2021 of the Sino-Russian exercises which took place in early August. Initially, the Russians even gave them the code name

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'Zapad-Cooperation', which can be perceived as a sortie in the information war. The manoeuvres by the PRC (in which very modest numbers of Russian forces took part, no more than 300 soldiers and several planes) were intended to suggest that China would informally support Russia militarily in the event of an armed conflict in Europe, to protect its Far Eastern border. In practice, the Zapad-2021 exercises are another element of Russian preparations for a possible military clash on NATO's eastern flank. However, they represent just a part of Russia's extensive training efforts with a view to a potential conflict ranging from the Arctic to the Black Sea.

Zapad-2021 from Minsk's perspective

By leaving the planning and conduct of exercises under Zapad-2021 to the defence ministries of both countries, Lukashenka has been able to use the project to implement domestic and foreign policy. The exercises have become a pretext for the regime in Minsk to continue the militarisation of its society along the lines already observed in Russia. For the first time in the history of Belarusian-Russian joint training, the structures of Belarusian territorial defence have been included in the complementary activities of the exercise. Units composed of reservists will carry out tasks related to combating subversives and defending built-up areas, as well as fighting "destructive internal forces".⁹ Mobilising reservists will serve as a way of selecting the people who support the government and who will provide assistance to the other organs of security (such as the KGB or the Interior Ministry's internal troops) in a crisis situation.

The creation by the regime in Minsk of a migration crisis on the borders with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia is another undertaking intended to give particular importance to Belarusian-Russian cooperation in the military sphere. The Kremlin must at the very least have approved Minsk's organisation of a migration route from the Middle East countries during the Zapad-2021 period. Although the issue of the migration threat was not included in the official scenario, the Belarusian authorities, by their use of disinformation, have been able to present the crisis on the EU's border as a provocation by the NATO countries.

⁹ 'Лукашенко нацелил территориальную оборону на борьбу с внутренними врагами', *Reformation*, 16 June 2021, reform.by.

The continuing influx of migrants to Belarus and their attempts to cross the EU border are an example of an action planned at generating a regional crisis and justifying the military's potential participation in resolving it. The fact that the use of arms is being considered was demonstrated by the statement issued after Lukashenka's conversation with Vladimir Putin on 23 August, during which the preparations for the exercises and the situation on Belarus's borders were discussed. In it, Lukashenka accused Poland of violating the state border and causing the conflict.

The (dis)informational aspect

The organisation of these large-scale military exercises does not only have a military dimension: they also form a part of the Russian strategic narrative, in which the definitions of war and peace become blurred. Its key message is to present Russia and Belarus as countries that are constantly under threat from the hostile policies of the West, which is striving to destabilise them and replace the ruling regimes. This justifies the use of 'appropriate' measures, including military ones, to counteract this 'aggression'. The apparatus of disinformation and propaganda is using the military manoeuvres to intimidate the public in the countries directly bordering the countries organising them, and to perpetuate the view that there is a real threat of armed conflict. The great importance of the exercises is demonstrated by the statements made in August by Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, in which he stated that the greatest threat to Russia's security comes from the Western strategic direction, and therefore the country should build up a system of defence against "anti-Russian propaganda". According to Shoigu, the authors of this 'propaganda', the aim of which is to influence the internal situation in the Russian Federation, are Poland, Finland and the Baltic states.¹⁰

The information activities carried out by Russia and Belarus during the preparations for the Zapad-2021 exercises cover the implementation of four basic offensive tasks. These are:

- a media offensive to present the exercises as being in compliance with the Vienna Document; a planned bilateral defensive project, demonstrating that the territory of Belarus is an area of permanent Russian military presence, and that the process of integrating the armed forces of both countries is heading rapidly towards a conclusion;
- a media operation, with elements of 'psychological warfare', which is focused on spreading reports about the need to oppose the 'aggressive policy of NATO countries';
- activities in the field of international military policy, which present the exercises as a platform for activating foreign contacts (this is to be achieved by inviting contingents and observers from 'friendly countries');
- a consistently conducted campaign aimed at the general public in Poland, other NATO countries and Ukraine, which causes anxiety and undermines the rationale of allocating more resources to arming and expanding the Allies' presence in that area, by saturating the media space with information about Russian & Belarusian military superiority in the Western theatre of operations.

This information operation began when the Russian defence ministry named the date of the exercises in October 2020. This was accompanied by the announcement that the Russian and Belarusian armed forces would prepare for their active phase as part of the summer training cycle in 2021. The decision to start this process so early and saturate the information space with detailed data concerning the military activity of both countries was a response to the political crisis in Belarus. Russia, positioning itself as Belarus's most important ally, recognised that Zapad-2021 would be a great opportunity

¹⁰ М. Гафурова, 'Шойгу призвал Россию ответить врагам', Информационно-аналитическое агентство «УРА.РУ», 27 August 2021, ura.news.

to present the military relations between the two countries as a permanent, dynamically developing, anti-Western military alliance. This was aided, among other things, by reports that a Belarusian/Russian air defence training facility was being opened near Hrodna, as well as the decision on 3 September to send Russian Su-30SM fighter aircraft to the airfield at Baranavichy, in order to reinforce the monitoring of Belarusian airspace.

On the other hand, on 30 July Lukashenka stated that, if necessary, he would consent to the deployment of Russian military units equipped with all types of weapons on the territory of Belarus. This means that Minsk and Moscow are considering introducing a contingent of Russian troops (while not establishing an extraterritorial base), in order to exacerbate the situation in the region and put pressure on NATO countries to refrain from expanding their defence potential near the borders of Russia and Belarus.

APPENDIX

Map. Zapad-2021 exercises



Source: Author's own calculations, based on data from the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.