



## On the Training Areas of the Union State of Belarus and Russia

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In August and September, Russia and Belarus conducted intensive military exercises. In the case of Belarus, the organisation of some of them was dictated by the post-election crisis and the desire to demonstrate that its military is ready to respond to external threats. In the case of Russia, these were planned exercises, which functioned as another signal to neighbouring countries and NATO about the high capabilities of its armed forces. Most of the manoeuvres were based on scenarios aimed at Alliance countries.

**Drills on Belarusian Territory.** The Belarusian Armed Forces began intensive exercises at the border with Poland and Lithuania just after the [presidential elections on 9 August](#). Some of them had been planned in advance, but on 28-31 August, unannounced manoeuvres were held to check the combat readiness of units in the west of the country. What is more, forces from other parts of Belarus, such as the 103<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade from Vitebsk, were transferred to two western oblasts (Brest and Grodno) and additional armament, such as the Polonez multiple launch rocket systems, were deployed there. During the drills, the capabilities of all types of Belarusian units to operate on the country's border were checked while the exercises of signal and radio-electronic warfare units covered part of the territory of Poland and Lithuania. These actions were related to the [post-election political crisis](#) in the country, and included Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka's accusations that NATO is trying to intervene in Belarus.

However, the greatest test this year of the combat readiness of the Belarusian Armed Forces were the *Slavic Brotherhood* drills, which were organised in the Brest region. They were first conducted in 2015 with the participation of Russia and Serbia. Since then, they have rotated between these three countries. This year, however, the Serb side withdrew under pressure from the EU.

In the first part of the drills—14-21 September—involved 1,500 troops from Belarus and Russia and focused on fighting terrorist threats in the western part of the country. The scenario of the second part, conducted on 22-25

September, was adapted to the need to practise the defence of the Union State against threats from NATO. The number of soldiers participating in it was increased to 6,000, including 1,000 from Russia. Overall, 500 types of weapons/platforms were used, including tanks and planes (100 from Russia). The activities carried out by mixed companies (illustrating the level of integration of the Belarusian and Russian forces) indicated that the goal of the armies is to increase interoperability. The exercises had many analogies to the *Zapad 2009* and [Zapad 2017](#) drills, including simulated offensive operations (participation of the air force, forging rivers) against neighbouring NATO countries. The manner in which the second phase was carried out also demonstrated that Russia supports Lukashenka politically, as well as militarily.

**Testing the Russian Armed Forces.** The *Kavkaz 2020* drills were the biggest test this year for the Russian Armed Forces. Since 2009 and the beginning of the reform of the Russian military, they have been carried out every four years since 2012. They were held on 21-26 September, in parallel to the *Slavic brotherhood* exercises, which indicates that Russia is ready to conduct more than one military operation simultaneously at the scale of several corps. As part of the preparations, in July units of the Southern and Western Military Districts (MD) took part in snap exercises involving 150,000 troops.

In the *Kavkaz* exercises, 80,000 soldiers participated, including 1,000 from Armenia, Belarus, China, Myanmar, and Pakistan—countries with which Russia maintains intensive

military cooperation. All the troops were deliberately divided into groups of fewer than 12,900 to avoid obligatory invitations to international observers. Under the Vienna Document on confidence- and security-building measures, Russia is obliged to invite observers to any exercise involving more than 13,000 troops. The manoeuvres, in addition to the SMD forces, were attended by units from the 20<sup>th</sup> Guards Combined Arms Army of the WMD. Belarus sent 300 soldiers to Russia and 30 tanks and infantry fighting vehicles (IFV).

During the *Kavkaz* drills, 1,000 types of weapons were used (tanks, IFVs, artillery and missile systems, ships, planes). Units of the National Guard and the Ministry of Emergency Situations also took part. The exercises took place at five training areas in Russia and one in Armenia. They also trained in the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, where units from Russia and Iran conducted joint operations. The aim was to practice fighting an enemy with modern missile systems and an offensive operation with the use of naval and air forces, which *de facto* was a check against scenarios involving Black Sea NATO countries and Ukraine.

An important and new aspect of the *Kavkaz* scenario was to practice deepened cooperation with Russia in repelling air raids and conducting reconnaissance, search and defence actions with the militaries of partner countries, including Belarus and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Russia once again demonstrated the functional cooperation of units from the SMD and WMD, which are able to operate simultaneously in the Russian western strategic direction and in Belarus. One of the goals was also to show that [regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), the Russian Armed Forces retained their combat capabilities, [unlike NATO countries](#), which significantly reduced the [Defender Europe](#) manoeuvres planned for this year as a precaution.

**Conclusions.** The exercises, which were jointly attended by Belarusian and Russian units, show the increasing interoperability of their forces—demonstrating it is greater than that of NATO countries. They also indicated that units from the WMD may be involved in more than one large military operation at the same time. Add to that the growing capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces for a surprise attack and this poses a significant challenge for NATO countries.

Declarations by the Belarusian and Russian authorities about the need to further tighten military cooperation indicate that in the near future one can expect actions aimed at deepening the already significant military integration of the two countries, which is related to, among others, the weakening of Lukashenka's position. One of the elements of

this cooperation will be an increase in the number of joint Belarusian-Russian exercises and the re-arming of Belarusian forces by Russia. At the "Army" International Military-Technical Forum, which took place in August, Belarus and Russia concluded a number of contracts for the supply and repair of Russian-made equipment, i.e., delivery of air-defence systems by 2025 (such as the S-400, NATO: SA-21 Growler) was announced.

Taking into account the nature of this year's joint exercises by Belarus and Russia, and especially the offensive elements, it can be expected that subsequent manoeuvres, such as *Zapad 2021*, will be conducted according to the same assumptions and that their significance for demonstrating the degree of military integration of the Union State will increase even more. The increasing Russian-Belarusian military activity will pose significant challenges for the security situation in the region, primarily for Poland and other countries of NATO's Eastern Flank. Manoeuvres directly on the Polish border may also increase the number of military incidents (there were several of them during *Slavic Brotherhood*).

Tightening military cooperation, including an increase in the number of joint manoeuvres, may mean that Russian troops will constantly rotate to Belarusian territory, which will increase the control of the Russian authorities over the country. For Russia, it will also be a political guarantee that Belarus will maintain a security policy completely oriented towards integration and common defence.

It is worthwhile for NATO to verify the directions of further adaptation to the Russian threat, including the Allied deterrence and defence potential on the Eastern Flank, in terms of the growing capabilities of Russia and Belarus (especially in radio-electronic warfare, military reconnaissance and intelligence cooperation, and the possibility of rapid expansion of an offensive towards Poland and Lithuania). The nature of the exercises by the countries also indicates that the Belarusian Armed Forces should be treated as a *de facto* part of the Russian military.

Poland and other countries of the Alliance should demand the Belarusian authorities fulfil their obligations under the Vienna Document and the Polish-Belarusian agreement complementary to it because that would increase the transparency of exercises and other activities carried out close to these countries' borders. It should also call for meeting the spirit of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), especially notification of exercises and military inspections.