



Russian and Belarusian Military Drills

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Involvement in the war in Ukraine prevents Russia from continuing the training cycle of the armed forces it has pursued since reform started in 2009. Instead, Russia is focusing on exercises with Belarus, indicating that deepening military integration with that country remains a priority of Russian security policy. Russia also aims to maintain the military tension near NATO's Eastern Flank.

The information chaos over the conduct of the joint Russian-Belarusian *Union Shield* drills (officially scheduled for 22-26 September), the cancellation of the *Zapad* exercises, and the absence of manoeuvres in the Central Military District, which should have taken place this year in accordance with the training cycle that has been in place for a dozen years, indicates that the effort to wage war in Ukraine is preventing Russia from conducting drills of a significant scale and nature.

***Union Shield* and Exercises in Russia.** The *Union Shield*, carried out alternately with the *Zapad* exercises, is the biggest test of the combat readiness of the Belarus-Russia Regional Forces Group (RFG). It represents the culmination of the RFG's two-year training period, takes place on Russian territory and, like the *Zapad* drills, has always been an opportunity to demonstrate Belarusian-Russian military cooperation. This year's *Union Shield*, however, was accompanied by information chaos. The exercises were announced by the Belarusian Ministry of Defence in February this year, but until the day they began, no information had emerged about their planned course. At the same time, communications from the Russian Ministry of Defence indicated that the *Zapad* exercises were planned for autumn this year, which would be a significant change to the plan for Russian-Belarusian drills implemented to date. It would also be a deviation in the pattern of the Russian armed forces' combat readiness tests conducted since 2009, which were held every four years in each military district in a fixed order—Western, Eastern, Central, and Southern. On 4 September, however, the *Zapad* manoeuvres were officially cancelled by Minister Sergei Shoigu (who stated that Russia was conducting “exercises in Ukraine”), and

announcements about the *Union Shield* only appeared on the day they started. Russia and Belarus did not provide the scenario of activities, the number of troops taking part, or the number of pieces of equipment used. It can therefore be concluded that this year's *Union Shield* was mostly symbolic or not conducted.

The problems of the Russian armed forces are also evidenced by the failure to hold any comprehensive exercises this year that test the state of their combat readiness. The schedule of manoeuvres indicated that they should take place in 2023 in the Central MD, but the *Tsentr* exercises have not even been announced. This is a significant change in comparison [to 2019](#) when 128,000 troops took part and the scenario involved operations similar to the fight against ISIS in Syria. It is also a change from last year when, despite the hostilities in Ukraine, Russia organised the [Vostok manoeuvres](#), which, according to official figures, involved 50,000 troops.

Thus, in 2023, for the first time in more than a dozen years, Russia did not hold drills testing the combat readiness of its armed forces, although smaller-scale exercises are being conducted. This means that the war in Ukraine has significantly reduced the capabilities of the Russian armed forces, and the potential of the Central MD has been reduced to a level that makes it impossible to hold full-scale manoeuvres there.

Exercises in Belarus. Parallel to *Union Shield*, manoeuvres involving the Belarusian armed forces took place at training grounds located in the western part of the state (Brest, Hrodna, and Minsk oblasts), run by the Belarusian Operational Command North-West, in which 5,000 troops

took part. Most of them took place outside training grounds and included exercises of artillery, aviation, operations against irregular armed forces, reconnaissance, and cooperation with local authorities. In the Mogilev region, exercises were organised simultaneously for territorial defence troops and the recently established self-defence forces. The Belarusian Armed Forces exercises were preceded by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) *Combat Brotherhood* drills, which took place in Belarus from 1 to 7 September. They were attended by 2,500 troops from Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan (Armenia did not send its soldiers) and 500 pieces of military equipment.

According to the scenario description, “there was an attack on one of the CSTO countries and the cause was to be the territorial claims of another country, historical, inter-ethnic, religious and economic contradictions”. The assumptions were reminiscent of the [Zapad 2021](#) and [Allied Resolve 2022](#) exercises, showing that they were planned mainly for the needs of Belarus and Russia, as the other members of the CSTO focus on threats of a different kind (mainly terrorism, including Islamic terrorism).

During the manoeuvres, CSTO rapid reaction forces practised reconnaissance, operations against irregular formations, rope landing from helicopters, aerial guidance and correction of artillery fire, and other tasks. *Combat Brotherhood* was also accompanied by other activities of CSTO forces.

As part of the *Interaction* drills troops practised, among others, reconnaissance, detecting bases of illegal armed groups, conducting psychological operations, air attacks, destroying an illegal armed group, and re-establishing control at the border. In addition, the exercises *Echelon* (logistical security) and *Search* (reconnaissance exercise) were conducted. For the first time, there was also the exercise *Barrier* involving troops defending against weapons of mass destruction.

In addition, since 29 April 2022, small-scale Belarusian-Russian exercises have been continuously taking place at training grounds across Belarus and have been successively extended. They are part of the Belarus-Russia military cooperation plan, which envisaged that they would organise more than 150 different exercises in 2023, with the main task of ensuring the defence capabilities of the Union State. They are also an important element of deepening military integration between the two countries.

On 8 September, Belarus suspended its obligations to Poland and Czechia under the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). On 6 October, the Belarusian authorities further announced plans to build a network of fortified regions in the west of the country.

Conclusions. The lack of significant manoeuvres during the summer training ground season indicates that Russia is concentrating its military effort on defending its positions in Ukraine and that the Russian armed forces have been weakened to such an extent that they are unable to organise strategic-level exercises, important, among others, from a training point of view. This undermines the image of the Russian Armed Forces, which, in previous years, held wide-ranging and well-described manoeuvres that were an important element of propaganda and psychological influence on Russian society and other countries. It also cannot be ruled out that the abandonment of the *Zapad* drills and, most likely, of the *Union Shield*, is a consequence of delays in the implementation of the [reform of the Russian army](#), announced in 2022 by Sergei Shoigu, which included the division of the Western MD into the Moscow and Leningrad MDs.

At the same time, Russia seeks to maintain its image as the most important ally of the CSTO countries, hence the participation in the *Combat Brotherhood* manoeuvres, which is significant compared to other activities. Russia's involvement in exercises with Belarus shows that deepening military integration with that country remains a priority of Russian security policy.

In turn, the small-scale exercises that have been taking place in Belarus for 75 weeks now show that the country's authorities are trying to keep their armed forces in a state of constant combat readiness. This is part of the Belarusian policy of pointing to the supposedly constant threat from NATO countries (mainly Poland), which Belarus, in cooperation with Russia, must counter. It is also part of the [militarisation of Belarusian](#) society over the past two years. These actions, together with provocations such as the violation of Polish airspace by Belarusian helicopters in August this year, are part of the Russian-Belarusian policy of maintaining tension in relations with NATO and forcing a response from Alliance states, including in the form of maintaining reinforced military contingents near the border with Belarus. Exercises carried out by the Belarusian and Russian Armed Forces in western Belarus are expected to continue in the coming months.