



Zapad 2021: Comprehensive Drills Aimed at NATO Countries

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The active phase of the Belarusian-Russian Zapad 2021 exercises ended on 16 September. They were the largest manoeuvres in Russia's western strategic direction since the collapse of the USSR. They were accompanied by hybrid actions aimed mainly at the countries of NATO's Eastern Flank, and they will continue after the manoeuvres. It was also another demonstration of Russia's readiness to use force against the Alliance and a presentation of the high degree of interoperability of the armed forces of both countries. For NATO, the deepening military integration of Russia and Belarus requires an update of the Alliance's defence plans and continued reinforcement of its Eastern Flank.

The Belarusian-Russian *Zapad* exercises have been held every four years since 2009. Each iteration has been the largest test of the combat readiness of the armed forces of both countries in the given year. The manoeuvres are also the culmination of a two-year training period and a test of the Regional Group of Forces, which defends the Union State of Belarus and Russia and includes the Armed Forces of Belarus and some units of the Russian Western Military District (WMD) such as the 1st Guards Tank Army. The *Zapad* exercises for years have raised tensions between NATO and Russia because the scenarios assume Alliance aggression against Russia and that country testing a simulated nuclear response to a conventional attack by "Western" forces.

Pre-Zapad and Accompanying Activities. Preparatory activities for the manoeuvres began this past winter. In January, the plan for the exercises was approved at the presidential level, followed by staff training in February. In June, Belarus and Russia began to prepare the units, equipment and training grounds where the operations were to take place, and then in July started to transfer troops and weapons between the countries. Since February, both countries coordinated smaller exercises conducted by the Belarusian Armed Forces and Russian units located mainly in Kaliningrad Oblast.

The [April activities of the Russian Armed Forces](#) on the border with Ukraine and in occupied Crimea should also be considered an element of the extensive preparations for the

Zapad manoeuvres. The more so because they were an important test of the combat readiness of units, including the Central Military District, which supports other MDs, especially the Western one.

The drills were preceded by a series of smaller-scale manoeuvres with the participation of the Armed Forces of Belarus and Russia. They included this year's *Slavic Brotherhood* in Russia (with the participation of Serbia), Russian-Chinese drills called *Cooperation* and held in China, and a series of exercises carried out by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in Central Asian countries.

Moreover, just before the active phase of *Zapad*, numerous activities by radio-electronic, logistic, and technical security units took place, often carried out simultaneously and according to similar assumptions in both countries.

For the first time, the Belarusian-Russian exercises were preceded by real hybrid activities carried out on a large scale. The most significant was the incitement of a [refugee crisis](#) on the border with three NATO countries triggered by the Belarusian government. It served to escalate tensions in the region and led to the introduction of states of emergency in parts of Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. The manoeuvres were also accompanied by a revisionist history campaign targeting Poland and led by Russia and Belarus.

The Military Dimension. According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, 200,000 troops, 760 units of military equipment,

15 ships, and 80 aircraft, including helicopters, took part in the *Zapad* drills. These exercises were carried out on 14 training grounds—nine located in Russia (three of which are in Kaliningrad Oblast) and five in Belarus (all in the western part of the country)—and in the Baltic Sea. The first part took place in Belarus and was attended by 12,800 troops, of which 2,500 were from Russia and 50 from Kazakhstan. The scale was therefore comparable to that of [four years ago](#). The second part played out mainly in Russia and was much more comprehensive than in 2017.

The wider scenario assumed that three countries called “Western”—with the fictional names “Neris”, “Pomoria”, and the “Polar Republic” (de facto Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia)—tried to instigate a political crisis in the “Republic of Polesia” (Belarus), and when it failed, they launched armed aggression against the latter country, starting with an escalation of tensions at the border. The “Republic of Polesia” was supported by the “Central Federation” (Russia), which also acted as a Union State proxy.

In the first phase, Russia and Belarus practiced, among others, stopping an enemy attack, manoeuvring and circling defences, and covering defending units. In the second phase, the aim was to encircle the enemy and counterattack.

During the drills, airborne troops played a very important role (night landings were practiced), as well as air force bombing sorties. Of particular note was the use of Tu-95MS strategic bombers, which indicates that the scenario most likely assumed a nuclear strike in accordance with the [Russian nuclear doctrine](#). Most likely, the precise targets were located deep in NATO territory where it is crucial for the transfer of forces to the Eastern Flank.

Also highly significant was the use of drones (unmanned aerial vehicles, UAVs) and loitering munitions, which was the first time on such a scale in such manoeuvres. The UAVs were used for battlefield reconnaissance, artillery targeting, disrupting enemy communication, and others. During the exercises, great emphasis was also placed on air defence, the use of artillery, and the security of the battlefield (logistics, evacuation of the wounded, etc.). The use of radio-electronic warfare systems was also tested.

In parallel with the active phase of *Zapad*, Russia organised other exercises in the Southern MD (mainly in occupied Crimea) and in the [Northern Fleet’s military district](#). Moreover, Russian mechanised units stationed in Transnistria were also very active.

Conclusions for Poland and NATO. In reaction to the *Zapad* drills, NATO increased surveillance (mainly air) of the territory of Belarus and Western Russia. In addition, Member States conducted a number of pre-planned exercises on the Eastern Flank, including in the Baltic Sea, which were partly a response to the political and military signalling from Russia.

By making the *Zapad* drills once again large-scale and confrontational, and at the same time conducting associated manoeuvres from the Arctic to the Black Sea, Russia wants to demonstrate that it is able to conduct coordinated action across its entire Western strategic direction. At the same time, the exercises showed the growing military integration of Belarus and Russia and that the significant interoperability of units from both countries exceeds that of NATO countries.

Reflecting in practice Russian doctrines, especially [military](#) and maritime, the *Zapad* exercises clearly indicate NATO as the main enemy. Russia’s goal therefore is to demonstrate its readiness to use force when it deems that its vital interests (including those related to the political and security situation in its neighbourhood) are at stake, and thus to influence the Alliance’s military calculations. Russia also wants to fuel the concerns of the societies and political elites of NATO countries, suggesting a high risk of conflict if Western countries do not begin to alleviate tensions with Russia. It is also worth emphasising that—in contrast to the Alliance’s exercise scenarios—Russia and Belarus simulated military operations on enemy territory and the use of a nuclear component.

The progress of the military integration of Russia and Belarus makes it necessary for NATO to update its defence plans for the Eastern Flank and to recognise Belarus as a state fully militarily integrated with Russia.

One of the allies’ most important activities should therefore be investments in transport infrastructure to increase the mobility of troops to the Eastern Flank ([especially in cooperation with the EU](#)). It also will be very important to conduct as many exercises as possible to increase the interoperability of Alliance units.

NATO also must deal with the growing challenges posed by Russia’s hybrid operations, including the manipulation of the information environment. Russia made extensive use of such measures during the *Zapad* manoeuvres. The Alliance can counteract them by building a unified message at every political and military level, as well as increasing activity in the area of strategic communication, which will allow, among others, for anticipatory actions and information-space dominance.