



The Importance of the *Zapad 2017* Exercises

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The Zapad 2017 Russian military exercises were just one element of an extensive plan to checking its armed forces' combat readiness. At the same time, the exercises were used to test the experience gained by the Russian army in combat operations in Ukraine and Syria, and to practise full-scale conventional conflict. The manoeuvres proved that, according to the strategic documents of Russia and Belarus (including the Treaty on the Union State of Russia and Belarus), the Belarusian army would, in the event of war, become a de facto part of the Russian military.

Zapad ("West") is the name of Russian-Belarusian exercises that have been organised once every four years since 2009, mainly on the territory of Belarus. They are the second most important regular military exercises for both countries (after *Union Shield*, held mostly held in training camps in Russia). The declared military goal of the *Zapad* drills is to strengthen the Regional Forces Group of Belarus and Russia (including the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army stationed in the Western Military District and the Armed Forces of Belarus).

Course of Exercises. According to the Belarusian Ministry of Defence, 7,200 Belarusian soldiers and 5,500 Russian troops (3,000 on Belarusian territory) took part in *Zapad 2017*. During drills, 250 tanks, 200 artillery units, 40 helicopters and other aircraft, and 10 ships of the Baltic and North Fleet were used. Additionally, the Union State air defence system was tested.

During the manoeuvres, all types of troops were used, including airborne units, special forces, armoured and mechanised infantry, and the navy. At the same time, *Zapad 2017* was the most important this year test for the Russian Aerospace Forces. Moreover, both countries' electronic warfare forces cooperated on this scale for the first time. Finally, territorial defence forces, border services, units subordinate to the both ministries of emergency situations and the Russian National Guard participated in the September manoeuvres, preceded in August by logistics unit exercises.

Therefore, it was a complex operation, during which, as in Syria, Russia used automated command-and-control systems including intelligence and recognition systems relaying data to command stations in real time. It was also a demonstration of Russia's offensive capabilities, as evidenced by the use of Tu-22M (NATO: Backfire) strategic bombers, Iskander-M (SS-26 Stone) systems and modern Su-35 (Flanker-E) fighters.

Zapad 2017 was comparable in scale to the 2013 manoeuvres, and both were called a "counterterrorism operation." However, *Zapad 2017* differed from previous exercises. This year's operation simulated a conventional large-scale and intense conflict, with NATO states clearly indicated as potential opponents (which was confirmed by the exercise maps presented by the Belarusian Ministry of Defence).¹

¹ A.M. Dyner, "Zapad 2017 Scenario," *PISM Spotlight*, no. 47/2017, www.pism.pl/publications/spotlight/no-47-2017.

Context of Manoeuvres. Preparations for exercises were accompanied by many political and military concerns. NATO members and Ukraine also differed in their assumptions about how many Russia troops would participate in *Zapad 2017*. Media of the Alliance countries reported that 100,000 soldiers could be involved in manoeuvres, while the Ukrainian side suggested as many as 230,000. According to the experience of previous years, it was possible to assume that number of troops involved could be much higher than that declared; as many as 150,000 troops were deployed for snap exercises across Russian territory during *Zapad 2013*.

The exercises were also accompanied by fears that, after their completion, Russia would not withdraw its troops from Belarus, or that they would be used to assault neighbouring countries (especially Ukraine).

Not only Zapad. The drills should be considered in the broader context of all activities of the Russian armed forces. According to an announcement by Russian Defence minister Sergei Shoigu, around 2,800 military exercises of different character and level are planned for 2017. Immediately before this year's *Zapad* manoeuvres, the 58th Army from the Southern Military District was raised to full combat readiness. At the same time, Baltic Sea Fleet exercises involving about 700 troops took place in Kaliningrad Oblast. *Zapad 2017* was also preceded by the *Combat Brotherhood* exercises involving the air defence forces of CIS states. They took place on 7–8 September in Russia and on 11–15 September in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and involved troops from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan, as well as 50 aircraft.

The September *Zapad* manoeuvres, though the largest, were not the only joint exercises of Belarusian and Russian armed forces to take place this year. In April, the Belarusian special operations forces exercised with Russian airborne troops, and electronic warfare units of both states participated in drills in May.

Conclusions. The *Zapad 2017* manoeuvres showed that Russia is practicing military actions with which it already has experience. The simulated countries of Vesbaria and Lubenia made an assault on Belarus, and the creation of Vejsnorja in the north-west of the country echoed the scenario used by Russian armed forces used during the annexation of Crimea and operations in Donbas. Therefore, *Zapad 2017* was an opportunity for Russia to verify the experience gained in various combat operations.

The manoeuvres showed that, in the event of conflict, the Belarusian armed forces will cooperate closely with the Russian army, while the scale of exercise and the type of equipment used demonstrated Russia's military potential. At the same time, the large scale of the drills was intended to test the reactions of neighbouring countries, especially NATO members.

The exercises also were a military demonstration addressed to the Alliance, displaying Russian capacities for rapid mobilisation, dislocation, and concentration of troops at the western border of the Union State, and the formation of a combat group there. The course of manoeuvres showed that, despite NATO activity to strengthen its Eastern Flank, Russian troops operating out of Belarusian territory could break the Alliance defence system in the event of a conventional conflict. This is an important signal for Alliance countries to continue implementation of the Eastern Flank defence resolutions adopted at the Newport and Warsaw summits. At the same time, the Alliance should not assume the neutrality of Belarus in its operational planning.

It should also be stressed that the scenarios targeted at NATO members (Poland and the Baltic States) have been used since 2009, when a nuclear strike on Warsaw was a part of the scenario. This means that Russia practices aggressive action against NATO states irrespective of the prevailing political climate. Moreover, exercises assuming aggression by Alliance members show that Russia treats them as strategic opponents.

The extent of the Russian information campaign related to *Zapad 2017* shows that Moscow is continuing an ongoing propaganda war against NATO and Ukraine. The reaction of the Alliance and the Ukrainian authorities, raising concerns about the exercises, could be seen in Russia as a manifestation of weakness. Thus, Russia will continue its current policy of strengthening its Western Flank to increase its military advantage in the region.

Information activities were also targeted at Belarus. Russia has discredited its neighbour by showing it as a dependent state that cannot defend its own territory. At the same time, the exercises showed that maintaining Belarus in its sphere of influence is necessary for Russia due to military interests—the protection of Moscow and the maintenance of the Kaliningrad Oblast. This means that Russia will continue to bear part of the costs associated with exercises of the Belarusian armed forces and supplies of armaments.