



Russia's Demonstration of Power on the Border with Ukraine and in Occupied Crimea

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By organising military exercises in April this year and signalling its readiness to attack Ukraine, Russia wanted to force it to return to talks under the Normandy process and, at the same time, check the reaction of Western countries, especially the U.S. In the military dimension, the exercises were an important element of testing the state of the Russian armed forces' combat readiness in the western strategic direction, the next stage of which will be September's Zapad drills. Despite the withdrawal of most of the Russian units to permanent dislocation sites, the tense situation in the region will remain.

Course of the Drills. Russia began concentrating its troops on the border with Ukraine and in occupied Crimea at the turn of March to April this year. Components of two Combined Arms Armies were transferred there—the 41st from the Central Military District (MD) and the 58th from the Southern MD, as well as three airborne divisions, the 7th, 76th and 98th, which took part in military operations during the war with Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and operations in Syria. In addition, ships of the Baltic and Northern fleets and the Caspian Flotilla entered the Black Sea. On-site units of the Black Sea Fleet (including aviation), coastal defence forces, air forces, and radio-electronic warfare also took part in the exercises. In total, about 120,000 troops participated in the drills.

The final stage was manoeuvres in occupied Crimea and the Black Sea in which 10,000 troops, 40 ships, and more than 100 aircraft and helicopters were involved. During them, great emphasis was placed on logistics. On the peninsula, field hospitals and sapper and anti-contamination units were set up. The troops concentrated on defending the coast using, among others, Bal and Bastion missile systems and drones. A very important element was air and sea landing operations. In the latter, Russia showed that it has significantly increased its capacity in this sphere. During the exercises, new command systems were also tested for the first time, offering an integrated view of the battlefield and allowing all units involved in military operations to

simultaneously receive necessary messages and remain in a common, uniform information system.

Although the withdrawal of most of the military units that took part in the drills was completed on 1 May, a significant part of the 41st Army's equipment remained in the Voronezh Oblast, which will be used during the *Zapad* exercise (which means it will be withdrawn from there in the autumn at the earliest) and a military component to protect it. In turn, the 56th Assault Brigade, which will be reduced to the size of a regiment, will be permanently deployed to occupied Crimea.

Military Significance. The manoeuvres carried out by Russia are part of this year's wide-ranging check of the combat readiness of the armed forces in the western strategic direction. They cooperated with other activities carried out in the Western MD and [Military District of the Northern Fleet](#). It was also an important element of preparations for this year's *Zapad* exercises. Their active phase is planned between 10 and 16 September and it is highly probable that some of the units that took part in the April operations will be involved in these manoeuvres and accompanying operations.

Russia has demonstrated a growing ability to shift and deploy significant forces that include the most important types. In turn, the significant involvement of airborne troops indicates that the exercises were important in assessing the reform of this branch and including checking their increased mobility. Testing radio-electronic warfare

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by, among others, Russian aviation units, was also important.

Officially, Russia's actions were a response to the military activity of NATO countries and their preparations for the *Defender Europe 2021* exercises. In turn, by making the drills mostly unannounced, Russia circumvented its obligations under the Vienna Document on confidence and security-building measures, which requires the obligatory invitation of international observers in the case of exercises of this scale.

The exercises as usual also had a propaganda aspect. Through mass media, including social media, Russia built up a sense of threat from European countries, especially those located on NATO's Eastern Flank, as well as from Ukraine and Belarus. Some of the information was intentionally disseminated in the form of false news, including reports of a planned attack on the Kherson Oblast to take the northern section of the [North Crimean Canal](#). These false reports comprised disinformation aimed at causing panic among people in the neighbouring countries. Such activities are an element of information warfare and will continue to appear in the coming months ahead of the *Zapad* exercises.

The Political Goal of the Drills. By carrying out such extensive military activities, Russia wanted, above all, to achieve political goals. Probably the most important of these was to test Ukraine's reaction and try to provoke it to take military action in Donbas. This was not achieved and the Ukrainian authorities, by mobilising territorial defence units and taking other defensive actions, demonstrated their readiness to defend their own territory. What is more, they successfully mobilised the international community to focus on the Russian build-up, especially in NATO countries. On 13 April, a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission was held at the request of the Ukrainian side, during which NATO and its member states once again strongly supported Ukraine politically, condemning Russia's actions.

The second goal that Russia failed to achieve was to force Ukraine to return to negotiations under the Normandy format. The [negotiations have been in a deadlock](#). By increasing military tensions, the Russians wanted to compel the Ukrainian side to agree to the implementation of the Minsk agreements in line with their concept or there could be a significant military escalation in Donbas.

A parallel Russian goal was to test the reaction of the new American administration to the crisis in Europe. The U.S. strongly supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine. But,

during the escalation of tensions, a meeting between Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden was announced, which may take place in June this year. One of the topics will be the situation in Ukraine, and the April crisis was used by Russia to shape the ground for these talks.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The exercises organised in the South MD aimed to prove that Russia is able to quickly take additional Ukrainian territory. Russia has also shown that it is able to develop and redeploy the forces necessary to carry out a full-scale conventional operation. Other elements of the exercises worth noting include the increasing Russian capabilities to conduct sea-landing operations and the significant use of new command systems and radio-electronic warfare systems. Such large-scale exercises are an important element in maintaining the permanent combat readiness of the Russian Armed Forces and provide an opportunity to test modern types of weapons.

Given that the Russian Defence Ministry plans to further strengthen the Southern MD (the 20th mechanised is to grow to division-level, and will be part of the 8th Guards Combined Arms Army), it can be expected that Russia will increase its military involvement in the Black Sea Basin, including the number of exercises.

Russia will continue to use its military capabilities to provoke political crises and security tensions in the region, not only in relation to Ukraine or Georgia but also towards NATO countries. Moreover, additional weapons that Russia left at the border with Ukraine can be easily used by units transferred from the Central MD. This will contribute to the continuation of military tensions in the region and political pressure on Ukraine and NATO countries, at least until September's *Zapad* drills end. During this period, as well as during the manoeuvres, further military incidents should also be expected, especially in the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Barents Sea.

Russia also will continue to use information warfare tools to increase tensions before the *Zapad* drills. Thus, the EU and NATO states should attach particular importance to the fight against Russian disinformation campaigns and to building the resilience of their societies to such actions.

The continuing destabilisation in the Black Sea region will also be a challenge for the OSCE, which Poland will preside over in 2022. Therefore, monitoring missions should pay special attention to crisis prevention.