



ANALYSIS

DECODING ZAPAD-2017

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Cover page photo: Russian defence officials give a briefing prior the military exercises *Zapad*-2017 in the Russian Defence Ministry headquarters in Moscow on August 29, 2017 (by Kirill Kudryavtsev / AFP).

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's military exercise *Zapad-2017*, which will be conducted jointly with Belarus, will be actively scrutinized by Western media channels, and security and defence experts. While the exercise is certainly yet another demonstration of Russia's military power and political ambitions, it could also be preparation for a future aggression. In the run up to the exercise, Russia has continued to be secretive and hostile, in spite of its efforts to suggest a change of attitude. The increasingly volatile international situation, especially with regard to North Korea and the threat of war in the Far East, may also feature in Russia's calculations for *Zapad-2017* and its identification of opportunities concerning its European neighbours.

1. PREVIOUS ZAPADS

Russia conducts major military exercises every four years, on a rotational basis, in each strategic direction—East, West, North and South. Exercises to the West, called “Zapad”, involve the Western Military District (WMD), which stretches from the Kola Peninsula to Ukraine and Belarus and includes the over-militarised Kaliningrad Oblast, headquarters of the Baltic Fleet. Russia also conducts large scale common drills every two years with its closest ally, Belarus, either as part of the WMD exercises or as the bilateral “Union Shield” exercises, the last of which was held in 2015.¹

By the autumn of 2013, it was already clear that the Kremlin had become increasingly hostile and secretive towards the West. It had deliberately deceived the OSCE and its Member States about Russia's major military exercises, especially those in the Western direction—both in the case of *Zapad-2009*,² which followed

Russia's aggression against Georgia, and *Zapad-2013*, which rehearsed tactics later employed in Ukraine.³

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series of smaller drills with sufficiently low numbers of personnel (below 13,000) and equipment, so as to avoid the observance by Western (NATO) states that would otherwise be required by the 2011 Vienna Document of the OSCE. In addition, Russia officially claimed to be exercising the “fight against terrorism”, while it flew strategic bombers over the Baltic Sea (in 2009), simulating tactical nuclear attacks against Stockholm and Warsaw. This was pure intimidation through the threat of nuclear strikes and escalation. In the course of those exercises, it also ordered the whole Baltic Fleet to the sea and deployed *Iskander-M* missile batteries, *spetsnaz* and tank brigades on a large scale, including some to the Kaliningrad Oblast, in order to rehearse the severing of the Baltic states from Poland and the rest of the Alliance's territory. The conduct of these exercises spoke for itself, whatever the official scenarios may have claimed.

From 2012 onwards, Russia has also launched frequent and similarly large-scale combat control (“snap”) exercises, especially in the Western and Southern directions, which have involved tens of thousands of troops and thousands of pieces of equipment. Such drills are particularly provocative and risky in border areas and in the maritime environments of the Baltic and Black Seas.⁴

¹Nadezhda Belyalova, “Rosyisko-belorusskiye ucheniya ‘Shchit Soyuzu’. Dos’ye” [Russian-Belorussian exercise “Union Shield”: a dossier], *TASS*, September 9, 2015, <http://tass.ru/info/2248332> (accessed September 1, 2017).

²Roger McDermott, “Zapad 2009 rehearses countering a NATO attack on Belarus”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Vol 6 Issue 179 (2009), accessed September 1, 2017,

<https://jamestown.org/program/zapad-2009-rehearses-countering-a-nato-attack-on-belarus/>.

³Pauli Järvenpää, “Zapad-2013: A view from Helsinki”, *The Jamestown Foundation*, <https://jamestown.org/report/zapad-2013-a-view-from-helsinki/> (accessed September 1, 2017).

⁴Tomasz K. Kowalik and Dominik P. Jankowski, “The dangerous tool of Russian military exercises”, *Europe's Edge*, May 9, 2017,

Although it was clear in 2013 that the next *Zapad*-series exercise would take place in 2017, it was not known at that point that Russia would, in the intervening period, wage two wars in Ukraine and Syria, and that an already tense situation would evolve quickly into outright confrontation, economic sanctions, and a direct and clear threat to NATO's Eastern Flank. Likewise, we cannot foresee now the crucial events that may take place in the coming four years leading up to *Zapad*-2021. Nevertheless, prudence requires that we try to anticipate the possible scenarios and developments that may emerge from these unpredictable circumstances.

The Zapad exercises are pure demonstrations of force, coupled with strategic political signals

The *Zapad* exercises are pure demonstrations of force, coupled with strategic political signals. These signals include that Russia is preparing for an eventual conflict with NATO, and that Belarus is not a buffer state, but Russia's ally (i.e. vassal).

2. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT ZAPAD-2017?

The active phase of the Russian-Belarusian part of the *Zapad*-2017 exercise is scheduled for 14-20 September 2017. It will be held in six military training areas of the Belarusian ground, air and air defence forces, including Lepelski, Borissovski and Losvido. Other related exercises will take place in Russia's WMD, including in the Kaliningrad Oblast, and the Baltic Sea.⁵

Russian and Belarusian preparations for *Zapad*-2017 started as early as January 2017 and consisted of some 40 events, such as command and staff military games, operational mobilization and training of reservists, and

<http://cepa.org/EuropesEdge/The-dangerous-tool-of-Russian-military-exercises> (accessed September 1, 2017).

⁵ "Zapad 2017 joined [sic] strategic exercise", Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, accessed September 1, 2017, <http://eng.mil.ru/en/mission/practice/more.htm?id=12140115@egNews>.

combined special tactics exercises for airborne and special operations forces. The final stage of the preparations, an exercise for the logistics and technical support system and a tactical exercise for air force units, started in mid-August in Belarus.⁶

The officially declared objective of *Zapad*-2017, as a combined strategic command-staff exercise of the Union State of Russia and Belarus, is the "verification of the possibility of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation to ensure the military security of the Union State, (and their) readiness to repel possible aggression."⁷

In support of this objective, Russia and Belarus will:

- inspect the readiness of a "regional group of forces" to defend the Union's borders (obviously, Belarus' borders with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia);
- practice joint land, air, naval and special operations;
- improve interoperability, command and control systems and skills and logistic support, and
- test new and modernized types of armaments and equipment.

The scenario, jointly worked out by the Russian and Belarusian General Staffs and approved in March 2017 by President Putin and President Lukashenko, appears to imply an "internal conflict" in Belarus and the Kaliningrad Oblast, generated by "opposition and illegal armed groups".

Zapad's scenario, as presented by Belarus at the OSCE, concerns a fictional country called "Vayshnoria", which is sandwiched between Belarus and Lithuania and also borders—at its

⁶ "V Belarus' nachali pribyvat' rossiyskiye voennye dlya podgotovki k 'Zapadu-2017'" [Russian military starts arriving at Belarus to prepare for "Zapad-2017"], *Tut.by*, August 15, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/economics/555797.html> (accessed September 1, 2017).

⁷ "Zamnachalnika Genshtaba VS Belarusi vo vremya foruma OBSE provedyet brifing na temu ucheniy 'Zapad-2017'" [Deputy Chief of the General Staff of Belarus will give a briefing on "Zapad-2017" during the OSCE forum], BELTA, July 12, 2017, <http://www.belta.by/society/view/zamnachalnika-genshtaba-vs-belarusi-vo-vremja-foruma-obse-provedet-brifing-na-temu-uchenij-zapad-2017-256963-2017/> (accessed September 1, 2017).

elongated extremities—Poland and Latvia.⁸ It corresponds, in real terms, to most of Grodno and parts of the Minsk and Vitebsk oblasts. Interestingly, the eastern border of “Vayshnoria” corresponds to a large extent to the Polish-Soviet border of 1920-1939, perhaps a provocative suggestion that Poland might wish to reinstate this old border. According to the scenario, the “Northern Countries” (Russia and Belarus) are in conflict with “aggressor nations”—the “Western Countries” of Vayshnoria, Vesbaria and Lubenia—which have been trying to undermine the Union State by worsening its social-economic situation, and attempting to topple its ruling regime in Minsk (and Moscow?) and occupy North-Western Belarus (essentially “Vayshnoria”).

If this scenario is followed, it will largely repeat the scenario of *Zapad-2013* (joint military actions by Russian and Belarusian forces against invading “terrorist” groups supported by unnamed foreign countries), albeit with a geographic emphasis on the so-called “Suwałki Gap”, the 100 km borderline between Lithuania and Poland, which separates the Kaliningrad Oblast from Belarus. In rehearsing, together with Belarus, large scale military operations in the event of conflict with NATO, the scenario will thus reflect Russia’s real strategic concerns.

The scenario of *Zapad-2017* reflects Russia’s increasing paranoia about “Western-instigated coloured revolutions”. On the same note, in April 2017 the Belarusian government announced dozens of arrests for “creating illegal armed formations”, which were allegedly supported with money and arms from NATO countries, particularly Poland and Lithuania.

The active phase of the Russian-Belarusian exercise will consist of two stages:

- The first period from 14 to 16 September will include the “stabilisation of the situation” and the “completion of preparations” for the “repulsion of possible aggression”, during which a regional group of forces is built up and “fights against illegal formations”. This too may be a

provocative suggestion that NATO’s “little green men” —which obviously do not exist—might cross the Belorussian border, and

- The second period from 17 to 20 September will include the “management of forces” and “repelling the aggression”, as well as the “protection of the Union’s border”. The conduct of “defensive and counteroffensive actions” is foreseen in a “rapidly changing environment”.

3. COULD ZAPAD-2017 INVOLVE FEWER THAN 13,000 PERSONNEL?

The minister of defence of Belarus, Lieutenant-General Andrei Ravkov, stated in an interview given to the Russian news agency TASS on 17 July 2017, that *Zapad-2017* would involve no more than 12,700 participants on the territory of Belarus, including just 3,000 personnel from the Russian Armed Forces. He also referred to 680 pieces of combat equipment, which might include anything from infantry fighting vehicles, battle tanks and artillery pieces to attack helicopters and fighter aircraft. More precisely, the officially declared personnel strength of the Russian contingent for *Zapad-2017* in Belarus is 3,106, with 98 battle tanks and 104 armoured combat vehicles. The two participants will also make use of 142 artillery pieces (including MRLS), 21 attack helicopters and 22 combat aircraft.

Ravkov made no reference whatsoever to the parallel (or almost parallel) exercises planned to be held in the Kaliningrad Oblast, most probably with some kind of Belarusian participation, or to those in other areas of Russia’s WMD⁹ and the Baltic Sea. Neither has Russia made any official announcements to that end. The general public then, is left with the

⁸ “Belarus at ‘war’ with imaginary country of Veyshnoria”, *BBC Monitoring*, August 31, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-41107540> (accessed September 1, 2017).

⁹ E.g. Bruce Jones, “Russia’s Northern Fleet holds preparatory drills ahead of ‘Zapad’ exercise”, *IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly*, August 17, 2017, <http://www.janes.com/article/73096/russia-s-northern-fleet-holds-preparatory-drills-ahead-of-zapad-exercise> (accessed September 1, 2017).

misleading impression that the whole *Zapad-2017* exercise is confined to the drill in Belarus.

Another important aspect of the *Zapad*-series of exercises is that they involve not only the combat troops, which are reflected in the official personnel figures, but also large numbers of support troops (including from Russia's Railway Forces), and militarized troops under the Ministry of Interior and the FSB. The numbers of these are difficult to assess precisely, but the participation of such "unofficial" (i.e. undeclared) troops in *Zapad* is beyond doubt.

In 2013, Russia announced to the OSCE that the *Zapad-2013* exercise on the territory of Belarus would involve 12,900 troops, including 2,500 Russian personnel. They were to be supported by at least 350 pieces of combat equipment, including 70 main battle tanks, 280 armoured vehicles, and 52 aircraft and helicopters. In the Kaliningrad Oblast, the exercise was to involve—according to the same announcement—9,400 troops (200 from Belarus) and another set of some 350 pieces of combat equipment, including just 10 main battle tanks, 170 armoured vehicles, 40 aircraft and helicopters, and 10 navy vessels of the Baltic Fleet. However, western military experts estimated that the real number of participants, including in the exercises that were not officially part of *Zapad-2013*, was at least three times higher than Moscow's officially stated figure.

It would be fair to assume that Zapad-2017 will also be several times larger than the officially notified Russian-Belarusian exercise

It is evident that Russia, and to a certain extent Belarus as far as exercises on its territory are concerned, has followed a pattern of officially reporting numbers of personnel and equipment that are just under the observance levels listed in the Vienna Document. It would be fair to assume—given this pattern, as well as the current political circumstances and Russia's ambitions—that *Zapad-2017* will also be several

times larger than the officially notified Russian-Belarusian exercise. Military experts cited in *The Financial Times*, for example, estimated a figure of up to 100,000 personnel.¹⁰

The general public is left with the misleading impression that the whole Zapad-2017 exercise is confined to the drill in Belarus

4. MOCK TRANSPARENCY AND QUESTIONABLE CREDIBILITY

Russia opposes the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) on NATO's Eastern Flank (in Poland and the Baltic states, but also in Romania and Bulgaria) on political grounds, rather than claiming to perceive a real military threat. For *Zapad-2017*, it has changed, to a certain extent, its tactical approach in its public statements related to the exercise. Kremlin propaganda emphasises "Western (and Ukrainian) unfounded hysteria", and even suggests that Russia is considerably more restrained and open, even "less hostile" than NATO in comparison with NATO's own military exercises.

First, the Kremlin pretends that it has nothing to hide, although it was Belarus which invited about 80 observers, including some military attachés from neighbouring countries, to *Zapad-2017*. This will most likely involve a specially prepared VIP day to observe the exercise to be held on its territory. In contrast, Russia has invited no military representatives from NATO countries to observe the parallel exercises on its own territory, including those in the Kaliningrad Oblast. This creates a false impression of openness, through which Russia suggests to the general public that all of *Zapad-2017* is taking place in Belarus and is entirely

¹⁰ Neil Buckley, "Neighbours fear 'Trojan Horse' as Russia readies war games", *Financial Times*, August 27, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/f284d7ae-89b2-11e7-8bb1-5ba57d47eff7> (accessed September 1, 2017).

observable. The reasons for the openness of Belarus are easily guessed, given the rather open suspicions about Russia's intentions towards it during the exercise.

Second, Russia—which has constantly escalated tensions since 2014, including by over militarizing its western rim—claims that *Zapad-2017* is very limited in size and benign (defensive) in scope, compared to NATO's exercises. For example, it pretends that *Zapad-2013* was a mere “analogue” to NATO's earlier “Steadfast Jazz 2013”. Referring to officially declared figures, which concern only the exercise to be held in Belarus, Russia points to the “fact” that *Zapad-2017* is significantly smaller than “Anaconda-2016”, a Polish-NATO exercise that involved some 30,000 (mostly Polish) troops. According to this logic, *Zapad-2017* would be even smaller than *SiiL-2015*, an Estonian mobilization exercise which involved about 15,000 mostly reserve troops. Yet it would be totally unreasonable to assume that a major Russian pre-planned exercise encompassing the whole of Western-Russia and Belarus (or even, for that matter, one located solely in Belarus) could be smaller than an Estonian mobilization drill of any size.

In addition, in a clear attempt to play down Western worries and suspicions about Russian troops not all leaving Belarus after the exercise, Russian and Belarusian officials, including the military top brass, claim that *Zapad-2017* is not a “response” to NATO's eFP. Russia's rhetoric, however, is not convincing because while only some 3,000 Russian troops have been officially declared as participants in *Zapad-2017* in Belarus, the Russian Armed Forces have hired some 4,162 railway carriages to transport personnel and equipment there this year. The explanations simply do not match the facts and figures.

Furthermore, on 15 August 2017, two major exercises started almost simultaneously. In Belarus, the very last stage of preparations for *Zapad-2017* began with logistics training and readying Russian and Belorussian troops for their deployment to their exercise locations. In Russia, a massive exercise of the 1st Tank Army

began in the Moscow, Nizhniy-Novgorod, Smolensk and Ivanovo oblasts, for which the Russian Ministry of Defence hurriedly denied any linkage with *Zapad-2017*. However, on 20 March 2017 the minister of defence of Belarus had explicitly confirmed that the 1st Tank Army would participate in *Zapad-2017*. The same information was included in the Belarusian exercise notification to the OSCE. The credibility

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of Russian statements, announcements and reassurances remains unfortunately very questionable. In another example, the deputy minister of defence of Russia, Lieutenant-General Alexander Fomin, declared on 28 August 2017 that Russia was not preparing for the invasion of Belarus and Ukraine, and that the rehearsal of an air, sea and land blockade around the “Suwałki Gap” was, as stated in the official scenario, simply training to fight a “very large extremist/terrorist grouping” that had infiltrated the Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus. Regarding the identity of this “terrorist grouping”, Russia may have simply misread the communiqué of NATO's May 2017 Summit because, according to a June 2017 statement by defence minister Sergey Shoigu in Kaliningrad, the Kremlin understood that NATO considered Russia and Islamic terrorism to be equal threats.

5. POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF *ZAPAD-2017*

Zapad-2013 was comprehensively reported in the Baltic and Polish media and vigilantly scrutinised by these countries, but largely ignored by their Allies further to the West. *Zapad-2017* will be quite different as NATO as a whole has made serious steps to upgrade the defence of its eastern rim. The Alliance has

made no secret that it is ready for *Zapad-2017*. However, although it included the simulation of offensive activities against Poland and the Baltic states, *Zapad-2013* was essentially Russia's preparation for its actions against Ukraine, even if those actions were not anticipated by the West at the time.

General Fomin's assurances may thus prove right in the short run but, depending on the international situation and the Kremlin's calculations, quite wrong in a matter of months. Surely, the Russian General Staff has plans for the eventual takeover of Belarus as a "response" to the deployment of Allied troops to Poland and the Baltic states, and plans for further military actions against Ukraine, including from the territory of Belarus. These plans, which will probably be rehearsed in *Zapad-2017*, may take effect later as was the case in 2013-14, for example if war breaks out around the Korean Peninsula, engaging the US in a distant theatre.

Zapad-2017 is the best indicator of Russia's political attitude and intentions, as well as its military capabilities, readiness and plans

The situation in the Nordic-Baltic and Central European regions will improve only if Russia begins to accept the new reality: that it cannot continue to be militarily dominant and threaten neighbouring NATO members. However, the facts suggest that it will not do so. Minister Shoigu announced, in Kaliningrad, that Russia will "further develop its set of forces and their locations" in its western regions. Forty new military bases are to be built by the end of 2017 to host twenty newly established, probably brigade-sized, units. There is also the prospect that Russia will continue to amass longer-range missiles, surveillance and combat drones, and special forces close to NATO's borders in Central-Europe. The US special representative for Ukraine and former Ambassador to NATO, Kurt Volker, has stated that Western countries should be ready for different contingencies during *Zapad-2017*.¹¹ The commanding officer

¹¹ "USA: Zapadi ajal peab olema valmis erinevateks arenguteks" [USA: During Zapad [we] must be ready for various

of US Army Europe, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, has not excluded the option that Russia may use *Zapad-2017* as a Trojan horse, and keep its forces permanently in Belarus, at NATO's borders.¹² These are men who know what they are talking about. The US has thus deployed, at the request of the Baltic states, additional paratroopers and combat aircraft to those countries for the duration of *Zapad-2017*.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, *Zapad-2017* is the best indicator of Russia's political attitude and intentions, as well as its military capabilities, readiness and plans. What Russia describes as Western "hysterical" and "buffoon-like" behavior is, in fact, NATO's vigilance and preparedness to counter any aggression against whichever Ally. Russia would probably refrain from blatantly occupying Belarus and/or severely escalating the conflict in the Donbas before next year's presidential election (18 March) and the football world championship (14 June-15 July), but afterwards (if not before) the lessons learned and rehearsed in *Zapad-2017* could be put into practice.

developments], *Postimees*, August 27, 2017, <http://maailm.postimees.ee/4223833/usa-zapadi-ajal-peab-olema-valmis-erinevateks-arenguteks> (accessed September 1, 2017).

¹² Andrea Shalal, "U.S. general says allies worry Russian war game may be 'Trojan horse'", *Reuters*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato-usa/u-s-general-says-allies-worry-russian-war-game-may-be-trojan-horse-idUSKBN1A52WO> (accessed September 1, 2017).

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