

Why Russia is Unlikely to use Zapad-2021 to Intervene Militarily in European Countries

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 706

August 2021

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The last time Russia and Belarus teamed up to hold a large-scale strategic command-and-staff military exercise, a number of international media outlets [pondered](#) whether it might be a prelude to [war](#). Less than two months before Zapad-2017 (“West-2017”), *The New York Times* [proclaimed](#) that the drills near NATO’s borders had raised “fears of aggression,” and a [CNN](#) contributor wondered, “Could they turn into war?” Ukraine’s then-defense minister [cautioned](#) that Zapad could be a ruse to attack any European country that shares a border with Russia. None of these scenarios materialized. Since then, the Russian General Staff has held three comparable sets of drills annually in the geographical areas of [Vostok](#) (“East”) in 2018, [Tsentr](#) (“Center”) in 2019, and [Kavkaz](#) (“Caucasus”) in 2020.

It is now time for Russia to hold exercises in its western regions again, and we hear warnings that Moscow will use it as cover for the start of aggression against another country—although such warnings are not as numerous as in 2017. For instance, the Ukrainian leadership is considering as many as nine scenarios of “aggravation of the situation around Ukraine” as a result of Zapad-2021, according to [Alexey Arestovich](#), a member of Ukraine’s delegation at the Trilateral Contact Group on Donbas. One of the scenarios, Arestovich said, involves an “invasion by an attack grouping formed in the course of Zapad-2021 in the direction of Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv.” In addition, Russia watchers such as former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and the American Enterprise Institute’s Leon Aaron have recently speculated that Russia could either [annex](#) Belarus or use the territory of that country to execute an [intervention](#) in one of the Baltic states. I would argue, however, that it is unlikely—though not impossible—that President Vladimir Putin would use Zapad-2021, the main phase of which is to take place September 10-16, to either absorb Belarus or intervene in a state that borders either Russia or Belarus (or both).

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Why Zapad-2021 is Unlikely to Serve as Cover for an Intervention

My research on Putin's (and his interim caretaker Dmitry Medvedev's) past decisions on whether to order military interventions in foreign countries has revealed three instances when the Russian leadership was likely to have considered ordering a military intervention in a foreign country but decided against it, and three instances when it did issue such an order. As these cases demonstrate, for an order of military intervention to be issued and implemented, there must be a confluence of three conditions.

First, the Russian leadership had to be directly motivated by a clear, acute threat to one or more of Russia's vital national interests as the leadership sees them (Condition 1). Second, the Russian leadership had to have a reasonable hope that military intervention would succeed in warding off these threats (Condition 2). Third, the Kremlin had either to have run out of non-military and, therefore, less costly options of responding to these threats or to lack the time needed to exercise such options due to the urgency of the threats (Condition 3). All three of these conditions were present when Russia chose to intervene in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria in 2015. At least one of these conditions was absent when the Russian leadership was likely to have considered intervening militarily in a foreign country but chose not to: revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, massive protests in [Belarus](#) in 2020, and the war between [Armenia](#) and Azerbaijan in 2020.² (See **Tables 1** and **2** in the Appendix.)

When it comes to a hypothetical Russian military operation to annex Belarus, I see only Condition 2 present. Arguably, if the Kremlin were to choose to intervene in Belarus militarily, then Zapad-2021 would have offered a good opportunity, as the scenario for the exercise provides for a number of Russian military units. This and the sheer size of the Russian war machine would give the Russian leadership a reasonable hope that if it were to order a military intervention into Belarus, either upon Alyaksandr Lukashenka's invitation or without it, that intervention would succeed. However, while Condition 2 is present, Conditions 1 and 3 are absent. While the protests that followed the August 2020 presidential elections in Belarus did threaten Lukashenka's rule last fall, that threat has subsided, and no other threats to Russia's vital interests are currently emanating from Belarus.

Nor do I see a confluence of these three conditions when it comes to using Belarus as a launch pad for a hypothetical Russian military intervention into a state bordering either Russia or Belarus, such as Ukraine, Poland, or the Baltic states. When it comes to Ukraine, neither of the existing threats to Russia's vital interests, such as preventing armed conflicts waged against its allies and preventing the arrival of hostile regional hegemonies on

² My research revealed six additional instances in which the Russian leadership may have considered an intervention but decided against it: Georgia, 2003; Ukraine, 2004-2005; Kyrgyzstan, 2005; Ukraine, 2008; Armenia, 2018; and Kyrgyzstan, 2020. Direct evidence was not found that an intervention was considered in these cases so they were not included in the dataset.

Russia's borders, has become more acute recently, nor have new threats to these interests emerged. Therefore, Condition 1 is absent. Second, as long as Ukraine doesn't make the first military move in Donbas, I doubt that a Russian offensive against this country would advance any Russian vital interests. Third and last, Putin has yet to run out of non-violent and, therefore, generally less costly options of defending and/or advancing Russia's interests in Ukraine. When it comes to the Baltic states and Poland, these countries are members of NATO and the EU. Therefore, Condition 2 is absent. Russian military intervention in any of these countries would generate costs, including a military response and prohibitive blanket sanctions, which would most likely outweigh the hypothetical benefits of such an intervention.

But if Russia is not plotting an intervention in either Belarus or via Belarus during Zapad-2021, then what ends is Moscow pursuing in this strategic exercise, and with what means does it plan to attain those?

What is Officially Known About Zapad-2021?

The initial official statements by Moscow (and Minsk) about what and how will happen during the pending wargame have been too vague (most likely purposefully so) to draw unequivocal conclusions regarding the aforementioned ends.

A January 2021 [description](#) of the exercise scenario by the Belarusian Defense Ministry said the Russian and Belarussian militaries plan to practice a joint response to a "phased escalation of the military-political situation in multiple hypothetical countries." The wargame will take place "against a common operational-strategic backdrop," which would allow the Russian and Belarusian armed forces to practice employing a joint regional grouping of the two countries' forces, [according](#) to that description. On the Russian side, Putin [announced](#) back in December that "new approaches to using the Russian-Belarusian Union State's regional [military] group must be tested during the upcoming Zapad-2021." The wargame will [reportedly](#) be used to test newly procured and recently modernized systems. In fact, when discussing Zapad-2021 in his [address](#) to military top brass in December, Putin called for a "more active use of weapons and equipment with AI elements, including robotic vehicles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and automated control and command systems." The wargame will see Russian officers share the experience they have gained operating some of their newer weaponry systems in Syria.

Russian military formations participating in the exercise will include units that belong to various branches and arms of the Russian armed forces that are permanently stationed in the country's western, central and southern military districts but will be deployed for the wargame. These will include units of the Ground Forces, including formations of the [1st Tank Army](#), units of the [Navy](#), including the [Baltic Fleet](#), units of the [Airborne Forces](#), and units of the [Aerospace Forces](#), including the 6th Air and Air Defense Forces Army. Some

of these units were redeployed westward from their permanent bases during Russia's massive build-up of forces in regions abutting Ukraine this past spring. Those troop movements sparked concerns of imminent aggression, with [multiple](#) experts and [officials](#) sounding alarms that a Russian invasion was "[imminent](#)." But the Russian build-up was most likely a signal, I [wrote](#) at the time, of Moscow's resolve to defend Donbas, sent by Putin to Kyiv after the latter apparently redeployed some Ukrainian units closer to the separatist region.

We know from statements by [Lukashenka](#), Defense Minister Viktor [Khrenin](#), and Chief of the Belarussian General Staff Viktor [Gulevich](#) that the main phase of the exercise will [unfold](#) on five Belarussian training ranges. As for Russia, as many as [nine](#) of its training ranges will host parts of the main phase of the September 10-16 wargame, including two ranges in the exclave of Kaliningrad—where the Russian Defense Ministry has [re-established](#) the 18th Guards Motorized Infantry division. We also know that the chiefs of the Russian and Belarussian general staffs will be commanding the exercise, [according](#) to the January statement by the Belarussian Defense Ministry. If one were to believe the official statements, then these two chiefs would be commanding fewer soldiers than the commanders of some of the previous quadrennial exercises did.

According to Gulevich's August estimate, the [number](#) of servicemen taking part in the main phase of Zapad-2021 on Belarussian territory would be 12,800. In contrast, only [400](#) Belarussian soldiers are to participate in Zapad-2021 on Russian territory. Both assessments are probably understating the actual number of participants, given the number of troops that took part in [some](#) of the [previous](#) strategic annual exercises.

What is the Actual Purpose of Zapad-2021? It's Anti-Zapad and Counter-Revolution

As for the ends of this strategic wargame, it could be inferred from the Russian and Belarussian militaries' statements as early as this winter that Zapad-2021 would focus on a conflict with the Western world's primary military alliance. That participants of Zapad-2021 will also focus on countering NATO's influence on the situation in Belarus follows from a [statement](#) to that effect by Khrenin in January. Khrenin [told](#) Lukashenka that Western countries continue to seek a solution with regard to the "Belarusian bulge," and it is with their efforts in mind that the Belarussian and Russian defense agencies crafted the concept of Zapad-2021.

Then February saw Estonian intelligence chief Mikk Marran (whose agency, by the way, [does not believe](#) Russia poses a military threat to the Baltic state) state that he [expects](#) the Zapad participants to practice war with NATO, including an operation to isolate the Baltic states from the rest of the alliance—which is, apropos, holding its own massive [Defender Europe](#) exercises. More recently, Gulevich [said](#) in early August that the scenario of the wargame provides for Russian and Belarussian forces to respond to an "unleashing of aggression against the Union State" by a "Western" coalition against a North Coalition,

which would include the fictional Polesye (presumably Belarus) and Central Federation (Russia). If repelling a Western attack indeed turns out to be the main scenario of the wargame, then one can expect a repetition of the test-firing of [ICBMs](#) and, perhaps, of air-launched missiles by Russia's strategic Tu-160 and Tu-95 [bombers](#), as during Zapad-2017—moves that Arms Control Now interpreted as Russia [signaling](#) preparedness to “raise the stakes in a conventional clash with NATO.”

But fighting out a large-scale war with NATO troops might not be the only training purpose of Zapad-2021. The choice of “[highly urbanized](#)” terrain for Zapad-2021 indicates that the exercise participants may also practice quelling protests on city streets in addition to warding off hypothetical aggression by NATO armed forces. Such a conclusion also follows from preparations for the strategic wargame: a Russian-Belarusian tactical exercise in Russia in March [included](#) servicemen of the 38th brigade of the Belarusian Special Operations Forces, who were involved in the crackdown on protesters in Brest and other Belarusian cities in August 2020. The March 9-20 exercise was billed as a peacekeeping training, but, as military reporter Vladimir Mukhin [observed](#), “the challenges that Russian and Belarusian paratroopers worked to tackle in the Ulyanovsk region were related to preparations for operations to prevent potential and existing conflicts on the territory of the former USSR.” The participation of the 38th Belarusian brigade both in this preparatory exercise and in the main phase of Zapad-2021 suggests participants will “master methods of countering so-called Maidan technologies,” Mukhin [wrote](#), alluding to Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan revolution, which included months of public protests.

Zapad-2021 or Not, the Russian Military Presence is Bound to Increase

With or without the exercises, Russia's permanent military presence in Belarus is bound to increase. A [statement](#) that Shoigu and Khrenin jointly issued after signing off on a five-year plan of “[strategic partnership](#)” earlier this month provides for the Russian and Belarusian militaries to establish three joint training centers, including one in Belarus' Grodno region. The three centers will [reportedly](#) prepare specialists for the two countries' air forces, air defense forces, and ground forces. The center in Grodno will [train](#) pilots for Su-30 warplanes as well as crews of air defense systems. The other two centers will be [located](#) in Russia's Kaliningrad and Nizhny Novgorod regions. It should be noted that Belarus already [hosts](#) a Russian-manned early warning radar station in Hantsavichy and the 43rd Communications Center of the Russian Navy at Vileyka. In addition to these facilities, Russia has also repeatedly suggested that Belarus [host](#) a Russian air force base, but Lukashenka has rejected these suggestions, [reportedly](#) noting that “there are enough bases, they shouldn't be created, why spend money.” The two countries also operate what they bill as a “joint” regional system of air defense. In addition, a joint Russian-Belarusian grouping of forces was [established](#) in 1999, and it has come to include the armed forces of Belarus and Russia's aforementioned 1st Tank Army.

Conclusion

The pace of joint Russian-Belarusian military training has been intensive for many years, and it is no surprise if it does set a new [record](#) this year as Lukashenka remains keen to flaunt Russia's support for his regime, which faced a real threat during last year's protests – protests that he blamed on the West rather than on his own abuse of power. However, even though Russian leaders are keen to use the opportunity, brought about by last year's protests, to integrate Belarus even more closely into the two nations' Union State, my research shows it is unlikely that Moscow will use Zapad-2021 to either annex Belarus or invade Ukraine (unless Kyiv makes a first move against separatist Donbas) or intervene in the Baltics or Poland.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Cases of Intervention and Non-Intervention in Chronological Order

The manifestations of factors that can potentially explain Putin's decisions on whether to order a military intervention in another country, as inferred from the academic literature on military interventions.

Case	Intervention Y: (occurred or not)	X1: "Threat to vital national interests as seen by the leader." (present or not)	X2: "Need for the leader to save face." (present or not)	X3: "Need for the leader to ensure his popularity." (present or not, measured by % change in Putin's approval in the preceding year)	X4: "Color revolution in a country Russia is an ally of or which Russia seeks to make an ally." (happening or not)	X5: "Leader's reasonable hope that the intervention will succeed." (present or not)	X6: "Leader has run out of non-military options for responding to crisis or such options were absent at the time of that crisis." (yes or no)	X7: "Increase in national power in preceding calendar year, fueled by rising energy prices and/or other factors." (present or not)
<u>Georgia</u> on the verge of being granted MAP by NATO in 2008	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (-5.9%)	No	Yes	Yes (because of Georgia's ground offensive on Tskhinvali)	Yes (7%)
<u>Kyrgyzstan</u> revolution of 2010	No	No	Yes	No (0.0%)	Yes	Yes	No	No (-6%)
<u>Syrian</u> civil war of 2011-present	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (-3.5%)	No	Yes	Yes	No (-2%)
<u>Ukrainian</u> revolution of 2013-2014	Yes	Yes	Yes	No (0.0%)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (3%)
<u>Belarus</u> massive protests of 2020	No	Yes	Yes	Yes (-11.8%)	Not yet	Yes	No	No (-2%)
Conflict between <u>Armenia</u> and <u>Azerbaijan</u> in 2020	No	Yes	No	Yes (-1.5%)	No	Yes	No	No (-2%)

Table 2. Russia's Vital National Interests as Seen by the Russian Leadership

In order of importance.

1.	Prevent, deter and reduce threats of secession from Russia; insurgency within Russia or in areas adjacent to Russia; and armed conflicts waged against Russia, its allies, or in the vicinity of Russian frontiers;
2.	Prevent the emergence of hostile powers or regional hegemonies or failed states on Russian borders, ensure Russia is surrounded by friendly states, among which Russia can play a lead role and in cooperation with which it can thrive;
3.	Establish and maintain productive relations, upon which Russian national interests hinge to a significant extent, with core European Union members, the United States and China;
4.	Ensure the viability and stability of major markets for major flows of Russian exports and imports;
5.	Ensure steady development and diversification of the Russian economy and its integration into global markets;
6.	Prevent neighboring nations from acquiring nuclear arms and long-range delivery systems on Russian borders; secure nuclear weapons and materials;
7.	Prevent large-scale and/or sustained terrorist attacks on Russia;
8.	Ensure Russian allies' survival and their active cooperation with Russia.