

EXERCISE ZAPAD 2017 VERSUS ZAPAD 2021

Russia's military capabilities and readiness continue to grow.

The aim of the Zapad exercises is to prepare for a conflict with NATO.

During Zapad 2021, Russia practised the reinforcement of the Kaliningrad Oblast in more detail than ever before.

In 2021, Russia conducted another major strategic exercise in the Zapad series. This exercise, aimed at the western strategic direction, takes place every four years – the previous one having occurred in 2017.

Zapad 2021 was the largest exercise in the series to date. While Zapad 2017 involved an estimated 100,000 troops, Zapad 2021 involved a total of 200,000 troops, 250 aircraft and 760 pieces of equipment, including 290 tanks, 240 weapon systems and 65 warships. According to the Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, the exercise held on 13 September 2021 at the Mulino military training area alone involved 20,000 troops, which already exceeds the threshold for observation (13,000) stipulated in the Vienna Document.

Zapad 2021 constituted the largest Zapad exercise to date, with approximately 200,000 troops participating.

The overall scenario was likely not very different from previous exercises in the western direction. There are concrete indications that NATO was still the main adversary. In addition to the Baltic Sea region, the exercise again had an important focus on the northern direction and the Barents Sea.

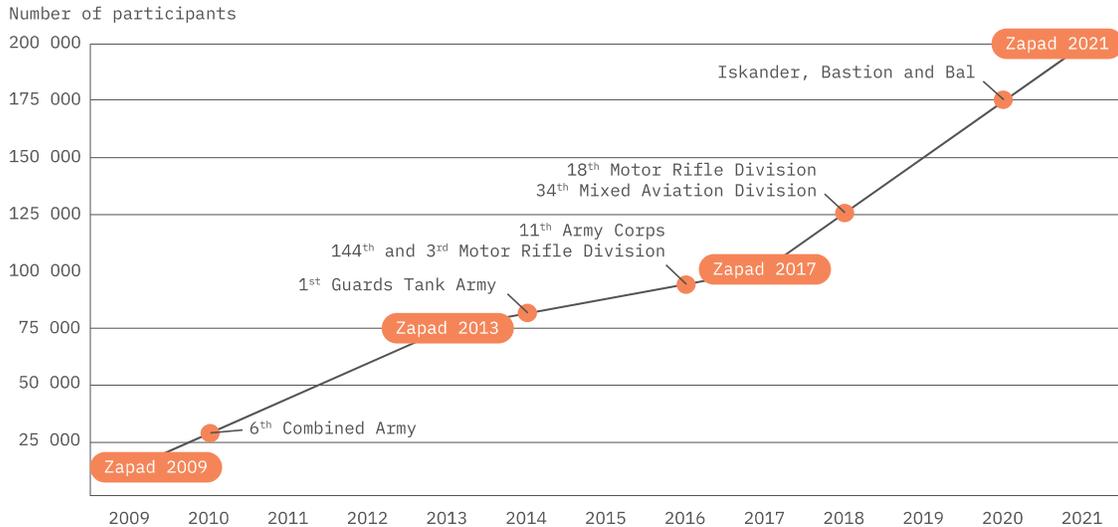
Unlike the Zapad 2017 exercise, this time, Russia did not bring additional troops from other regions to the military training areas along the Estonian border, and the most conspicuous part of the exercise took place at the Mulino training area in the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast. However, it would be a mistake to say that Russia moved the exercise further away from NATO's borders, as Zapad 2021 also took place on the Lithuanian border in the Kaliningrad Oblast, on the Polish border in Belarus, and the Norwegian border in the Kola Peninsula and the Barents Sea. An important airborne exercise also occurred near Estonia at the Strugi Krasnye military training range.

Russia's military capability and readiness continue to show an upward trend. The scale of the Zapad exercise has grown since 2009.

Zapad 2021 showed that Russia's military capability and readiness are still on an upward trajectory, with the exercise scale steadily increasing since 2009. Following the Zapad exercises, new formations have been created in the Russian Armed Forces, likely based on the lessons learned from the exercises. More and more of the prescribed tactical actions are practised in each subsequent exercise, in greater detail and on actual terrain. For example, in 2021, a large-scale night-time air-

borne assault was practised, and Iskander tactical missiles were fired from several regions simultaneously. This was due to the broader deployment of new armaments and equipment and the year-on-year improvement in combat and transport equipment readiness.

Russia's increasing military capability in the Western strategic direction 2009-2021



Exercise "Zapad 2009" took place in 2009, with the participation of approximately 15,000 troops from the Russian armed forces. Foreign countries were not involved in the exercise and most of the exercise was conducted on maps.

The 6th Combined Army was formed in 2010, before that it had existed as a reserve formation. Starting from 2010, the 6th Army has been an active formation, located also in the Leningrad and Pskov oblasts bordering Estonia.

Exercise "Zapad 2013" was conducted in 2013, with the participation of approximately 75,000 troops from the Russian Armed Forces. The foreign countries participating in the exercise included Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

In 2014, the 1st Guards Tank Army was re-established, located in the Kaliningrad oblast. The tank army is an offensive formation and the only tank army within the composition of the Russian Armed Forces.

In 2016, the 11th Army Corps was formed in the Kaliningrad oblast, the 144th Motor Rifle Division and the 3rd Motor Rifle Division were re-established under the 20th Combined Army, located in the direction of Ukraine.

Exercise "Zapad 2017" was conducted in 2017, with the participation of approximately 100,000 troops from the Russian Armed Forces. Belarusian Armed Forces were involved to a considerable extent both before and during the exercise.

In 2018, the 18th Motor Rifle Division and the 34th Mixed Aviation Division were formed in the Kaliningrad oblast. In 2019, the rearmament of the army missile brigades with Iskander missile systems (SS-26 Stone) was completed, and coastal defence units started using coastal defence missile systems Bastion (SSC-5 Stooge) and Bal (SSC-6 Sennight).

Exercise "Zapad 2021" was conducted in 2021, with the participation of approximately 200,000 troops from the Russian armed forces according to Russia. Foreign countries participating in the exercise included Belarus, India, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan, while Vietnam, China, Uzbekistan, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka attended as observers.

In 2021, the reinforcement of the Kaliningrad Oblast with additional units was practised in more detail than ever before. Approximately 2,000 marines with landing craft and combat equipment were brought into the region. In addition, 900 troops from the 1st Guards Tank Army were flown to the Kaliningrad Oblast in August to receive combat equipment from local depots and to form additional battle groups on the ground. This deployment was likely a test of the speed of the mobilisation system and the creation of reserve units.

In 2021, more countries participated in the exercise than ever before. While Zapad was mainly a joint Russian-Belarusian exercise in the past, another six countries participated



Russia's president and the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces Vladimir Putin watching Zapad 2021 through a window, accompanied by the minister of defence Sergei Shoigu and the chief of the general staff Valery Gerassimov.

Source: Alexei Druzhinin /AP

with units of their own (Belarus, India, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan), and six more countries participated as observers (Vietnam, China, Uzbekistan, Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). Involving other countries allows Russia to show that it is not an isolated pariah state and that Russia has strong military cooperation with many other nations. However, while these other nations participate in the exercise, it mostly remains on the military-diplomatic level; Russia likely only shares operational plans and substantive cooperation with the Belarusian Armed Forces. Foreign nations likely also utilise a customised scenario for the exercise, which differs from the scenario used by the Russian Armed Forces.

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It is likely that during Vostok 2022 the Russian Armed Forces will be active in all strategic directions. While they maintained a low profile in the western direction during Zapad 2021 for political reasons, things may be different in 2022.

In our assessment Zapad will remain a series of exercises where Russia trains for war against NATO. The formation of new units after previous Zapad exercises confirms the perception that the Russian Armed Forces consider the western direction a priority and are devoting resources to it, using the experience and information obtained during the exercises.