



Russia's Zapad-2021 Exercise

By Mason Clark and George Barros

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Key Takeaway: Russia and Belarus conducted a joint strategic exercise in September 2021 that provides essential insight into the evolving capabilities of the Russian and Belarusian militaries. The exercise advanced the Kremlin's ongoing campaign to cement its control of the Belarusian military.

The Russian and Belarusian Armed Forces conducted the active phase of the Zapad-2021 large-scale annual military exercise from September 10-16. The Russian Armed Forces conduct strategic exercises each year in one of its four military districts (Western, Southern, Central, and Eastern) on a rotating basis. The Western Military District (WMD) hosted this year's exercises, dubbed Zapad-2021. The Russian military conducts these rotating annual exercises to test the capabilities of each military district, experiment with force structure and operational concepts, and refine campaign planning. Each of these annual exercises features an "active phase," a week-long scenario simulating major combat operations. The active phase is preceded by months of deployments and exercises preparing each participating unit for its role.

The Zapad-2021 exercise involved ground, air, naval, air defense, engineering, logistics and chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear defense (CBRN) units in the Western Military District, Baltic Sea, and Arctic Sea. These capstone exercises are in many respects highly formalized and preplanned actions rather than snap readiness checks or stress tests. Zapad-2021 was additionally a multinational undertaking. Many of the exercises occurred in Belarus, and forces from India, Pakistan, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Sri Lanka participated in exercises at the Mulino training ground near Moscow.¹

The Kremlin focused Zapad-2021 on advancing efforts to integrate the Belarusian military into Russian-led structures and framed the exercise as a joint effort, unlike previous Russian capstone exercises. The Russian military formally designated Zapad-2021 a "joint strategic exercise" with Belarus, rather than the typical unilateral "strategic command-staff exercise."² Russia's annual exercises typically include several international participants supporting Russian forces but have never been designated fully joint exercises. The Kremlin leveraged Zapad-2021 to further integrate Belarusian forces into Russian-led structures and to deploy Russian forces into Belarus on a likely permanent basis, as ISW previously forecasted.³ Russia deployed S-300 air defense systems and Su-30 fighters to bases in Western Belarus in early September to support permanent joint training centers.⁴ Additional Russian forces, including ground forces, may remain in Belarus following Zapad-2021.

The Russian military conducted an abnormal number of exercises in the months prior to the active phase of Zapad-2021, an approach that will likely become the new normal for Russia's capstone exercises. Russian units began deploying to Belarus for the active phase of Zapad-2021 in late July; in the previous Western Military District Zapad exercise in 2017, Russian forces only deployed internationally within a week of the beginning of the active phase.⁵ The Russian military additionally conducted dozens of unilateral exercises in preparation for Zapad-2021 since March 2021 and several major international exercises throughout 2021 with China, India, and Central Asian allies.⁶ The Russian military demonstrated improving capabilities to conduct exercises at a greater scale in all four of its military districts than in previous years and will likely carry out major exercises prior to all future annual capstone exercises.

The active phase of Zapad-2021 from September 10-16 simulated a Russian and Belarusian response to a hypothetical NATO invasion of Belarus. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense published the fictional scenario on August 5.⁷ In the scenario, a Western coalition elected to use force to destabilize Belarus after failing to do so through non-military means – referencing repeated Belarusian and Russian claims that protests against self-proclaimed Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko since August 2020 are backed by NATO.⁸ The first phase of the exercise from September 10-12 simulated an offensive by the fictional states Nyaris, Pomoria, and the Polar Republic (likely representing the Baltic States, Poland, and a Scandinavian state respectively) seizing territory in Western Belarus and attacking Russian naval assets. This first phase tested Russia’s ability to mobilize and deploy reserves to the frontlines, counter the strategic NATO air attack Russia expects to occur at the beginning of a European war, and begin localized counterattacks. The second phase from September 13-16 simulated a counterattack to retake Western Belarus, testing the Russian military’s ability to coordinate and conduct large-scale conventional operations. Russian, Belarusian, and other international forces conducted dozens of component exercises at training grounds in Russia and Belarus as part of this active phase.

The following is a list of the component exercises of the active phase of Zapad-2021. Exercises are divided by parent organization and day. Joint exercises are categorized under the appropriate echelon of Russian forces. This list does not include preparatory exercises that have occurred earlier in 2021 and is intended as a fully sourced resource for further analysis of the active phase of Zapad-2021. ISW will publish further assessments of Zapad-2021 – and the exercises leading up to it – in September and October.



Russian Forces

Baltic Fleet

September 10

- Large landing ships, corvettes, small missile ships, anti-submarine ships, minesweepers, missile boats, submarines, and various auxiliary ships of the Russian Baltic Fleet deployed to the Baltic Sea for Zapad-2021 exercises.⁹
- Brigade-sized motorized rifle elements (approximately 1,000 personnel) of the Russian Baltic Fleet Army Corps conducted defensive maneuver operations at the Pravdinsky Training Ground in Kaliningrad, Russia.¹⁰ Motorized infantry and attached tank elements retreated to prepared defensive positions and lured a simulated superior enemy force into a tank ambush while under simulated enemy electronic warfare attack.

September 11

- Brigade-sized (5,000 personnel) Russian Baltic Fleet Army Corps marine, air defense, and naval aviation elements conducted combined arms exercises to defend a line and conduct a counteroffensive at the Pravdinsky Training Ground in Kaliningrad, Russia.¹¹ Su-27 fighters secured air supremacy and repelled enemy air attacks. Su-30SM bombers struck enemy command and control and logistics assets. Artillery and Mi-24 helicopters attacked ground targets. Tunguska anti-aircraft missile systems and servicemen with Iгла MANPADs (man-portable air defense systems) targeted enemy aircraft. Artillery, aviation, and tank companies and platoons executed a concentrated strike using carousel shooting tactics derived from lessons learned from combat in Syria. Airborne infantry conducted heliborne vertical envelopment tasks. Helicopters neutralized enemy anti-air defenses with electronic warfare and thermal countermeasures.
- A pair of Baltic Fleet naval aviation Su-27s from the Chkalovsk Airfield in Kaliningrad destroyed enemy cruise missiles over a Baltic Fleet naval range.¹²
- The Kilo-class diesel-electric submarine *Dmitrov* conducted torpedo firing exercises while submerged in the Baltic Sea.¹³

September 12

- Approximately 2,000 naval personnel, 10 surface warships, and 10 aircraft of the Russian Baltic and Northern fleets conducted amphibious assault and beach defense exercises at the Khmelevka Training Ground in Kaliningrad, Russia.¹⁴ Northern Fleet fire support ships fired artillery and Su-30SM fighters and Su-24 bombers of the Baltic Fleet struck key land targets. Northern Fleet marines and engineers seized a beachhead and established a lodgment for amphibious assault equipment to conduct a mechanized offensive deep inland. The large landing ships *Korolev*, *Minsk*, *Kaliningrad*, and *Olenegorsk Miner* delivered more than 40 BTR-80 armored personnel carriers to the shore. Baltic Fleet marines operated as the opposing force and defended the coast from the Northern Fleet's amphibious assault.
- Russian Baltic Fleet air defense elements and surface ships repelled a simulated enemy air strike using S-300 and S-400 systems.¹⁵ Russian Su-30SM, Su-24, and An-26 aircraft played the opposing force and conducted simulated raids and electronic warfare attacks with a density of up to seven target strikes per minute.
- Baltic Fleet Army Corps elements conducted live-fire with small arms, grenade launchers, BMP-2 and BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, T-72B3 and T-72-BZM tanks, self-propelled artillery, and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) against simulated enemy mechanized forces at the Pravdinsky Training Ground in Kaliningrad, Russia.¹⁶
- Company-sized anti-ship missile elements (over 200 personnel) of the Russian Baltic Fleet conducted exercises to strike enemy surface ships using the Bal coastal defense missile system.¹⁷ Servicemen deployed Bal systems, camouflaged their movement, protected their deployment with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and conducted electronic fires at simulated surface ship targets.
- Unspecified Baltic Fleet anti-submarine ships and Ka-27PL helicopters conducted anti-submarine exercises at Baltic Fleet sea training ranges.¹⁸

September 14

- Platoon-sized (approximately 50 personnel) Baltic Fleet marines, combat divers, and naval aviation elements recaptured an occupied Baltic Fleet port from saboteurs and practiced underwater combat techniques.¹⁹
- Platoon-sized (approximately 30 personnel) Baltic Fleet combat divers defended a Baltic Fleet surface ship port from underwater saboteurs. The combat divers also interdicted a watercraft that violated the Kaliningrad Sea Shipping Canal.²⁰
- The Baltic Fleet corvettes *Stoyky* and *Steregushchy* and the patrol ship *Yaroslav Mudry* repelled air attacks at sea ranges in the Baltic Sea using electronic warfare and anti-aircraft fire.²¹ Baltic Fleet naval aviation Su-24 aircraft and Ka-27 anti-submarine helicopters played the role of the opposing force. Baltic Sea ships also conducted surface warfare and naval artillery live-fire exercises.
- Company-sized (200 personnel) Baltic Fleet marine elements conducted live-fire artillery exercises against a simulated enemy airborne infantry force at the Khmelevka Training Ground in Kaliningrad, Russia.²² The marines also conducted live-fire exercises with small arms and armored personnel carrier support.
- Brigade-sized (approximately 1,000 personnel) Baltic Fleet airborne assault and marine elements conducted coastal defense exercises at the Khmelevka Training Ground in Kaliningrad, Russia. Marines prepared terrain for anti-amphibious defense and defended the coast against a simulated enemy amphibious landing force.²³
- Platoon-sized Baltic Fleet electronic warfare elements (over 100 personnel) suppressed enemy communication systems at the Khmelevka Training Ground in Kaliningrad, Russia. Electronic warfare specialists collected and analyzed electromagnetic spectrum intelligence and jammed enemy aircraft controller communications and precision-guided weapon systems.²⁴
- Baltic Fleet naval aviation Su-24 bombers and Su-30SM multipurpose fighters conducted precision bombing strikes on enemy command posts and ground forces at the Dobrovolsky Training Ground in Kaliningrad, Russia.²⁵

September 15

- Unspecified Baltic Fleet Army Corps and battalion-sized (approximately 300 personnel) elements of the Russian 76th Airborne Division conducted airborne assault exercises at the Pravdinsky Training Ground in Kaliningrad, Russia.²⁶ A pair of Baltic Fleet Su-27 fighters cleared the airspace and Su-24 aircraft bombed ground targets before ten Russian Il-76 military transport aircraft deployed the elements of the 76th and 12 BMD assault vehicles. Airborne infantry destroyed enemy command posts, seized and defended a bridgehead, and conducted airborne assault operations to block and destroy an enemy's forward elements.
- The *Dmitirov* Kilo-class diesel-electric submarine performed a deep-sea dive and system and command and control checks to support combat exercises in the Baltic Sea.²⁷

September 16

- A company-sized element (over 100 personnel) of the Baltic Fleet's 841st Electronic Warfare Center conducted electronic warfare exercises to disrupt enemy navigation and radio communications.²⁸

Unspecified Western Military District Units

September 10

- Russian and Belarusian military police began conducting joint patrols and implementing security measures to uphold military discipline at the training grounds where Zapad-2021 occurred.²⁹
- Reconnaissance elements of the Russian Western Military District created a multi-level intelligence system at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod to provide continuous UAV aerial reconnaissance for enemy target identification to support fire command and control elements.³⁰ This system utilized "Orlan-10," "Takhion," and "Forpost" UAVs, GLONASS satellites, and the "Strelets" command and control intelligence system.
- Tank elements of an unspecified Western Military District combined arms army conducted mechanized warfare exercises at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.³¹ Tank elements used smokescreen concealment and crossed a contact line while under fire from enemy 125mm guns. Russian T-72 tanks enveloped and defeated an enemy armored force.

September 11

- A Russian logistics battalion established field equipment service centers to repair military equipment at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.³²
- Russian military police and Military Aviation Inspectorate elements conducted patrols and implemented enhanced security measures to uphold military discipline at the training grounds in Kaliningrad, Russia.³³
- Western Military District electronic warfare elements camouflaged the electromagnetic signatures of mobile command and control posts to protect them from enemy guided weapons and UAVs.³⁴ The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that electronic warfare specialists' interception of enemy drones in Syria informed this exercise.
- Motorized rifle elements of the Western Military District began to prepare defensive areas at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.³⁵ Servicemen deployed command posts and air observation posts, conducted engineering reconnaissance, and camouflaged positions to prepare to repel an enemy attack.
- Russian electronic warfare elements used jammers to disable a swarm of 20 enemy attack drones at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.³⁶
- Russian snipers stopped a light-armored convoy at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.³⁷

September 12

- Battalion-sized Russian reconnaissance elements (approximately 500 personnel) used Orlan-10 UAVs to provide an artillery command post with the precise targeting coordinates of advancing enemy forces at the Kirillovsky Training Ground in Leningrad, Russia.³⁸

September 13

- Combined arms army formations of the Western Military District and foreign participants from Armenia, Belarus, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia began the main stage of Zapad-2021 at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.³⁹ The joint forces planned and executed combat actions to conduct a maneuverable defense across different quality terrain, deliver a concentrated fire strike, and defeat a wedged enemy force. The exercise emphasized unit coordination and cohesion, including conventional ground, UAV reconnaissance, air combat, air defense, artillery, and missile elements.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense used Russian tank and motor rifle elements and Belarusian and Armenian elements jointly in "mobile tactical groups" for the first time as part of the joint forces' transition from defense operations into a counteroffensive at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁴⁰ Russian, Belarusian, and Armenian motorized rifle elements likely operated as a combined brigade or regiment-sized formation under a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) framework.
- Unspecified motorized rifle elements of the Russian Western Military District conducted maneuver exercises to cross the Mukhavets River and turn an enemy force's flank at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁴¹
- Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile crews of the Western Military District destroyed key enemy targets at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁴² Iskander-M crews conducted a group missile strike against a simulated enemy command post and critical infrastructure from 50 kilometers.
- Twelve divisions (approximately 36 batteries) of Msta-S self-propelled howitzers conducted fire support exercises to support ground forces at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁴³ Over 140 152-mm self-propelled howitzers also destroyed artillery and mortar batteries, tanks, anti-tank weapons, conventional units with concentrated and barrage fire.
- Reconnaissance elements used "Uran-9" and "Nerekhta" reconnaissance and fire support robots for the first time in a battle formation at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁴⁴
- "Walker," "Swallow," and "Orlan-10" UAVs provided precision-guided fire support to ground forces at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁴⁵

September 14

- Motorized rifle elements of the Western Military District, army aviation Mi-24 helicopters, and Su-25 assault aircraft surrounded and cleared an enemy-occupied settlement in Brest, Belarus.⁴⁶

September 15

- Battalion-sized (approximately 300 servicemen) Russian and Belarusian artillery elements conducted joint live-fire exercises against enemy command posts, control points, and ground forces at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁴⁷
- Russian and Belarusian signals elements – framed explicitly for the first time as “signalmen of the Union State” – conducted joint exercises to establish and maintain communication networks to support the Union State’s Regional Grouping of Forces (RGV) at several training grounds, including the 230th Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁴⁸ The Belarusian Ministry of Defense stated that Russian and Belarusian command and control officers worked “shoulder to shoulder” at RGV command posts.
- Russian military transport aviation elements of the Western Military District conducted night flight training in difficult weather conditions with heavy rain and low visibility in Leningrad Oblast.⁴⁹

September 16

- Russian Head of the Main Directorate of Military Police Sergei Kuralenko said that over 2,500 military police participated in over 140 combat training missions to support 128 military columns in Zapad-2021.⁵⁰

1st Guards Tank Army

September 10

- Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense (CBRN) elements of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army conducted special exercises to protect equipment from CBRN threats at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁵¹ CBRN specialists used aerosol camouflage countermeasures to conceal forces from enemy precision weapons.
- Logistics elements of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army conducted special exercises to provide Russian and Belarusian units with power, food, field refueling stations, and other supplies at Belarusian training grounds. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that it paid “particular attention” to logistical issues when supporting “troops operating at a considerable distance” from their home garrisons.⁵²

September 11

- Russian and Belarusian forces deployed "Akatsia-M" automated control systems at forward command posts of the Russian 4th Tank Division at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁵³ The "Akatsia-M" system is capable of transmitting information about units’ operational status in terms of ammunition consumption and reserves, equipment and personnel conditions, and live video monitoring to increase decision-making speeds.
- Russian 1st Guards Tank Army topographers created over 50 specialized three-dimension terrain models using “Kaleidoscope” software to simulate the combat actions against a simulated enemy on the battlefield in Brest, Belarus. Topographers connected firing positions to terrain to increase indirect fire accuracy.⁵⁴
- Reconnaissance elements of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army and Belarusian elements jointly used the “Strelets” command and control intelligence system to identify enemy formations and lines of communications in Belarus.⁵⁵ Russian and Belarusian scouts penetrated the enemy’s rear and identified targeting coordinates for enemy armored vehicle locations, ammunition and fuel logistics depots, and railway stations used for loading enemy echelons. The scouts also conducted sabotage tasks behind enemy lines.

September 12

- Russian 1st Guards Tank Army and Belarusian engineering elements stopped an armored counterattack using a multi-row fire shaft at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁵⁶
- Electronic warfare elements of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army conducted offensive electronic warfare operations against 100 simulated enemy communications targets at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁵⁷

- Battalion-sized Russian and Belarusian artillery elements (approximately 300 servicemen) of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army and unspecified Belarusian units conducted artillery live-fire exercises at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁵⁸
- A separate Belarusian Territorial Troops battalion exercised with elements of the Russian 4th Tank Division, Russian 76th Airborne Division, and the Kazakh 35th Airborne Brigade at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus. Self-declared Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov presided over these exercises.⁵⁹
- Unspecified tank elements of the Western Military District – very likely of the 1st Guards Tank Army – practiced ambush tactics at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁶⁰ Tank crews conducted live-fire at targets from 700 to 2,200 meters and changed positions under smoke screen concealment.
- Elements of the Russian 96th Separate Reconnaissance Brigade used quadcopter drones to calculate the positions of a simulated enemy.⁶¹ Russian scouts mapped the enemy targets and transmitted targeting data to strike aircraft for a combat mission.

September 14

- The Russian 1st Guards Tank Army, Russian Aerospace Forces, and Belarusian elements conducted conventional combined arms warfare exercises as part of the Regional Grouping of Forces at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁶² Belarusian elements delayed the advance of enemy forward elements to buy time to prepare the Russian-Belarusian defensive lines. Artillery batteries of both Russian Ground Forces and Airborne Forces struck enemy indirect fire systems and command posts. The Russian 1st Guards Tank Army elements conducted close-fire combat tasks. Russian forces repelled enemy air attacks using air defense systems, combined-arms formations, UAVs, electronic warfare, and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense (CBRN) elements. Belarusian Air Force Mi-24 and Russian army aviation Ka-52 helicopters provided air support to ground forces. Four Su-34 of the Russian Aerospace Forces detected and suppressed enemy air defense systems. Russian 1st Guards Tank Army, air defense, army aviation, artillery, and Belarusian motorized rifle elements conducted a counterattack to restore Belarusian territorial integrity after repelling the enemy attack.

September 15

- A Russian logistics battalion – likely of the 69th Separate Logistics Brigade – conducted fuel delivery and equipment mass refueling exercises to support the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁶³ The battalion also conducted logistics exercises to support the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army in the field with ammunition, water, laundry, and other services.

6th Combined Arms Army

September 10

- The mobile field command post of the Russian 6th Combined Arms Army deployed to the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, to create a unified command and control system. Russian servicemen protected the mobile field command post's maneuver from simulated enemy attacks and reconnaissance. Russian electronic warfare and engineering units protected the deployed command post from simulated enemy air attack.⁶⁴
- Russian military police destroyed a simulated enemy sabotage group who attempted to attack the Russian 6th Combined Arms Army's command post at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod.⁶⁵

September 11

- Russian military police elements destroyed an enemy sabotage and reconnaissance group that attempted to attack the command post of the 6th Combined Arms Army in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁶⁶

September 12

- Regiment-sized tank and artillery elements (about 30 tank and artillery crews – approximately 2,000 personnel) of the Russian 6th Combined Arms Army conducted live-fire exercises at the Luzhsky Training Ground in Leningrad, Russia.⁶⁷ Reconnaissance elements identified targets at night and tank and artillery units engaged the targets at distances of about six kilometers. Tank elements used “tactics informed by

modern conflicts” (a term Russian officers typically use to refer to lessons learned in Syria and Ukraine), including tank carousel shooting.

20th Combined Arms Army

September 10

- Engineers of the Russian 20th Combined Arms Army established and camouflaged field and mobile command posts for Zapad-2021.⁶⁸

Unspecified Russian Airborne (VDV) Units

September 10

- The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that approximately 4,000 Airborne Forces (VDV) personnel would participate in Zapad-2021. Elements of the 76th and 106th airborne divisions conducted airborne assault exercises at the Zhitovo Landing Site in Ryazan, Russia, at the Pravdinsky Training Ground in Kaliningrad Russia, and at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus. Elements of the 31st Airborne Brigade and 76th Airborne Division conducted heliborne assault operations at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, and at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus. The Russian Ministry of Defense also stated that elements of the 31st Airborne Brigade conducted “experiments” to “create a ‘new type’ airborne assault formation.” This may have been in reference to a September 13 exercise in which elements of the 31st Airborne Brigade and Belarusian tank elements created a joint mobile shock echelon using both airborne assault BMD-4 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) and tank battalions for the first time.

September 11

- Unspecified reinforced battalion-sized (approximately 600 personnel) Russian airborne elements – possibly of the 76th Airborne Division – conducted night airborne assault exercises at the Kislovo landing site near Pskov, Russia.⁶⁹ Aerial reconnaissance identified enemy targets. Airborne infantry captured the airfield following artillery and aviation strikes and then drove 100 kilometers to the Strugi Krasnye Training Ground to conduct maneuver and fire exercises.

September 12

- Unspecified engineering elements of the Western Military District built a floating bridge across the Klyazma River in the Vladimir Oblast, Russia, for mechanized maneuver exercises.⁷⁰ Western Military District reconnaissance elements and Mi-28 helicopters of the Russian 6th Air and Air Defenses Forces Army provided cover for the engineers.

September 13

- Elements of an unspecified airborne brigade conducted heliborne assault exercises at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁷¹ Twenty-four Mi-8 transport and combat helicopters deployed a mobile strike echelon of Russian airborne infantry to hold a defensive line against enemy attack.
- Battalion-sized (approximately 300 personnel) Russian and Kazakh airborne infantry elements conducted joint urban warfare operations at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁷² The joint force conducted sabotage activities in the rear of a simulated enemy in an urban environment. Attached engineering elements made passages in walls and ceilings to support clearing tasks. Ten army aviation attack helicopters and 122-mm howitzers provided fire support.
- Army aviation Mi-35 and Mi-24 helicopters of the Western Military District conducted carousel firing exercises.⁷³ The helicopters practiced providing air support to ground forces and targeted enemy command and control infrastructure. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that combat experience gained from operations in Syria informed this exercise.

September 14

- Russian Airborne Forces deep reconnaissance elements – possibly of the 175th Recon Battalion – assessed airstrike damage and provided corrected targeting information at the Mulino Training Ground.⁷⁴ This airborne element also conducted an airborne drop exercise at the Zhitovo Landing Site in Ryazan, Russia.

- Battalion-sized Russian and Belarusian airborne elements (over 350 Russian and Belarusian personnel) conducted airborne assault exercises at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁷⁵ Over 20 Il-76MD military transport aircraft airdropped over 350 personnel and 30 pieces of equipment to reinforce a defensive position.

76th Guards Air Assault Division

September 10

- Elements of the Russian 76th Airborne Division and Belarusian Special Operation Forces worked out forming joint command and control systems at the Brest and Obuz-Lesnovsky training grounds.⁷⁶ Airborne personnel equipped a defensive perimeter with chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense (CBRN) observation posts.

September 11

- Elements of the Russian 76th Airborne Division deployed 100 kilometers to the Strugi Krasnye Training Ground in Pskov, Russia. The paratroopers overcame mined terrain in combat vehicles as part of a column of tracked vehicles.⁷⁷

September 12

- Russian airborne elements – likely of the 76th Airborne Division – conducted live-fire using plunging-fire tactics with BMD-4M airborne assault vehicles to destroy enemy UAV control points at the Strugi Krasnye Training Ground in Pskov.⁷⁸ Airborne elements also deployed 100 kilometers to a training ground, practiced overcoming mined terrain, and conducted attacks in the rear area of a simulated enemy.
- Reinforced battalion-sized airborne elements (over 600 airborne infantry and 30 BMD-2K-AU, BMD-4M, and other armored personnel carriers) of the 76th Airborne Division conducted airborne night drop exercises at the Strugi Krasnye Training Ground in Pskov, Russia.⁷⁹ The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that this was the first time that the 76th Airborne Division conducted a night landing exercise at this scale.

September 14

- A combined Russian-Belarusian airborne battalion (over 400 personnel) of the Russian 76th Airborne Division and an unspecified Belarusian airborne element conducted airborne infantry drops at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁸⁰ The Russian Ministry of Defense stated the drop was the largest use of Russian Military Transport Aviation (MTA) in Zapad-2021. Elements of the Russian 76th Airborne Division deployed to Brest from the Kresty Airfield in Pskov, Russia in Il-76 transport aircraft. Russian Military Transport Aviation airlifted Belarusian Special Operations Forces elements from the Machulishchi Airfield near Minsk to Brest. The combined force destroyed simulated enemies and held a defensive line.

31st Guards Air Assault Brigade

September 10

- Elements of the Russian 31st Airborne Brigade conducted UAV reconnaissance exercises to find enemy forces at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁸¹

September 11

- Elements of the Russian 31st Airborne Brigade conducted a heliborne assault at the Savasleika Airfield in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁸²

September 13

- Airborne infantry elements of the Russian 31st Airborne Brigade conducted heliborne assault exercises to prevent the deployment of an enemy reserve at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁸³ Thirty-two Mi-8 transport-combat helicopters deployed the airborne infantry while 14 Ka-52 and Mi-28N attack helicopters provided air support in the landing areas.

- Elements of the Russian 31st Airborne Brigade and Belarusian tank elements operated as a joint mobile shock echelon using both airborne assault BMD-4 and tank battalions for the first time at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod.⁸⁴

38th Airborne Signals Brigade

September 16

- Elements of the Russian 38th Airborne Signals Brigade conducted special chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense (CBRN) exercises in Medvezhye Lakes near Moscow, Russia.⁸⁵

45th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade

September 13

- A company-sized airborne infantry force of 90 airborne infantry of the Russian 45th Spetsnaz Brigade, 60 airborne infantry of the Belarusian 38th Airborne Brigade, and 20 airborne infantry of the Kazakh 35th Airborne Brigade conducted a joint special operations airborne night exercise at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.⁸⁶ The participants jumped from three Il-76 aircraft. Belarusian airborne forces deployed to Brest from the Machulishchi Air Base near Minsk and the Russian element deployed from the Kubinka airfield in Moscow. The joint airborne infantry force then conducted sabotage actions and other special activities in a simulated enemy's rear area and extracted themselves from the area of operations.

98th Guards Airborne Division

September 10

- Battalion-sized airborne elements of the Belarusian 5th Separate Special Mission Brigade and the Russian 98th Airborne Division concluded a 10-day joint training to support joint exercises at the Pesochnoe Training Ground in Yaroslavl, Russia.⁸⁷ Approximately 40 Belarusian personnel of the 5th Brigade and 350 Russian personnel of the 215th Recon Battalion conducted ambush exercises with artillery and infantry fighting vehicles. The Russian and Belarusian elements likely operated as a combined airborne battalion.

106th Guards Airborne Division

September 10

- A battalion of the Russian 137th Airborne Regiment loaded approximately 30 BMD-4 infantry fighting vehicles into 15 Il-76s at the Dyagilevo Air Base for a planned battalion-sized airborne deployment (300 personnel) onto the Zhitovo landing site in Ryazan, Russia.⁸⁸

September 11

- A battalion-sized element (over 300 personnel) of the Russian 106th Airborne Division – likely elements of the 137th Airborne Regiment – deployed from the Dyagilevo Airfield in Ryazan to Ulyanovsk, Russia, for airborne assault exercises.⁸⁹

September 13

- A Russian airborne battalion (over 300 personnel) of the 106th Airborne Division and 20 Indian paratroopers conducted airborne assault exercises to prevent the approach and deployment of enemy reserves at the Zhitovo landing site in Ryazan, Russia.⁹⁰ 21 Il-76MD aircraft airlifted the airborne infantry and over 30 BMD-4M infantry fighting vehicles.

CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear defense)

September 12

- Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense (CBRN) elements of the Western Military District neutralized a simulated enemy chemical weapons attack at the Mulino training ground in the Nizhny Novgorod region.⁹¹ CBRN specialists detected contaminated terrain, assessed the chemical agent used, transferred collected data to a headquarters, and disinfected contaminated military equipment. The CBRN elements operated under the concealment of a one-kilometer aerosol curtain and cover of thermobaric Shmel rocket flamethrowers.

Russian National Guard

September 9

- The Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) stated that Rosgvardia's Central Office's operational group would participate in Zapad-2021's headquarters.⁹² Rosgvardia stated that "operational groups" of Rosgvardia personnel from Rosgvardia's North-Western, Central, and Volga directorates are participating in Zapad-2021 as command-and-control trainees. Rosgvardia stated it has representatives at the Russian National Defense Management Center and at command posts of the Russian Western Military District, Regional Grouping of Forces, and Northern Fleet. Rosgvardia did not provide any additional information about its participation in Zapad-2021 as of September 16.

September 16

- Rosgvardia stated that Volga District Rosgvardia elements deployed a command post throughout Zapad-2021 – likely at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny, Novgorod, Russia – to control Rosgvardia forces at unspecified training grounds and coordinate actions with other Russian structures.⁹³ Riot police (OMON) elements of the Nizhny Novgorod region Rosgvardia guarded this command post. Nizhny Novgorod region Rosgvardia elements conducted territorial defense and command and control exercises to refine Rosgvardia's command and control functions. Unspecified Rosgvardia signals elements deployed field communication centers for mobile command posts to ensure force command and control.⁹⁴

Engineers

September 13

- Russian sapper elements deployed false defensive areas to lure enemy air assets to strike false targets at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁹⁵
- Russian sapper elements detonated a 1.5-kilometer-long row of incendiary explosives to disrupt an enemy reserve force's approach at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁹⁶
- Russian sapper elements created an anti-tank ditch and mine barrier to stop highly maneuverable vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices armed with machine guns at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁹⁷ The Russian Ministry of Defense stated operational experience in Syria informed this exercise.
- Russian sapper elements created a minefield remotely and deployed ten TOS-1 thermobaric multiple rocket launchers to defeat an advancing enemy force at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.⁹⁸ The Russian Ministry of Defense said operational experience in Syria informed this exercise.

Aerospace Forces (VKS) and Air Defense

September 10

- Unspecified Russian air defense units of the Western Military District deployed to unspecified training grounds for Zapad-2021.⁹⁹
- Unspecified Russian and Belarusian air defense forces created a unified air defense control system that included the capability to provide targeting for air assets from a single center.¹⁰⁰
- Russian S-400 and Pantsir-S units created air-defense zones to protect troop concentration areas for Zapad-2021.¹⁰¹
- Russian Western Military District Su-35S and Su-30SM fighter crews began air defense combat duty at operational airfields in the Ryazan and Tambov oblasts.¹⁰²
- Air defense and radio-technical units of the Western Military District deployed radar fields and air defense zones to defend against enemy UAV, missile, and aircraft attacks.¹⁰³
- Russian air defense units of the Western Military District repelled simulated enemy massed missile-aviation strikes using deployed mobile field command posts and S-400 and Pantsir-S air defense systems.¹⁰⁴
- Elements of the Russian 6th Air and Air Defenses Forces Army deployed to multiple operational airfields.¹⁰⁵ Over 80 aviation units including Su-35S, Su-30SM, and Mig-31BM fighters; Su-34 fighter-bombers; and Mi-8, Mi-28, Ka-52, and Mi-35 helicopters of the Russian Western Military District began conducting exercises for Zapad-2021.

September 11

- Aircrews of the Russian 6th Air and Air Defense Forces Army and army aviation helicopters conducted air support combat exercises against ground targets at Luzhsky Training Ground in Leningrad, Russia.¹⁰⁶

September 12

- Air defense elements of the Russian Aerospace Forces and Western Military District, including S-400, Pantsir-S, and radio-technical crews, deployed to the Ashuluk Training Ground for Zapad-2021 exercises.¹⁰⁷
- Russian Aerospace Forces, Russian Army Aviation, and Belarusian Air Force and Air Defense Forces struck land targets at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.¹⁰⁸ Belarusian Mi-24 and Russian Ka-52 attack helicopters and Tu-22M3 bombers attacked ground targets. Russian Su-34 aircraft detected and suppressed a simulated enemy air defense system. Belarusian Su-25 and Yak-130 aircraft conducted bombing raids on enemy armored vehicle columns.
- Over 20 Russian and Belarusian aircraft including Belarusian Su-30SM fighters and Mi-24 helicopters conducted bombing exercises at the Ruzhansky Training Ground near Baranovichi, Belarus.¹⁰⁹
- Elements of the Russian 6th Air and Air Defense Forces Army repelled a simulated enemy air attack.¹¹⁰ Russian Su-35S and Su-34 fighters, military transport aircraft, and army aviation helicopters practiced over 10 flight and air support combat scenarios to intercept and destroy enemy air and ground targets. Russian pilots destroyed more than 40 aerodynamic targets imitating cruise missiles and conventional enemy aircraft.
- Russian Su-35S fighters of the Western Military District conducted air intercept exercises in the Ryazan Oblast. Su-35S fighter pilots intercepted more than 10 air targets simulated by Su-30SM aircraft and conducted electronic missile fires.¹¹¹
- Approximately 20 Tu-22M3 long-range bombers of the Russian Aerospace Forces and Su-34 bombers of the Western Military District conducted bombing exercises against simulated enemy armored vehicles, concrete shelters, and camouflaged and fortified underground command posts at a training ground near Smolensk, Russia.¹¹² Su-30s fighters of the Western Military District covered the bombers.
- Over 60 flight crews of Russian Aerospace Forces conducted training for a massed landing of military units and equipment at several military transport aviation airfields.¹¹³ Crews of Il-76, An-26, and other transport aircraft studied flight paths, landing plans, and standard operating procedures in emergency situations.

September 13

- Over 20 fixed and rotary aircraft of the Russian and Belarusian Air Forces conducted an air combat exercise at the Ruzhansky Training Ground in Belarus.¹¹⁴ Russian reconnaissance found an enemy airfield and Belarusian Su-30SM fighters took control of the airspace in the area of operations. Russian Tu-22M3 aircraft bombed ground targets. Other assault, bomber, and fighter aircraft and attack helicopters also delivered ordnance on targets. Two Mi-24 helicopters provided cover for a search and rescue squad to evacuate the crew of a crashed helicopter.
- Russian operational-tactical and long-range aviation elements conducted a mass airstrike to gain fire superiority at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.¹¹⁵ Over 60 airframes participated, including Su-24MR reconnaissance aircraft, 12 Su-25 attack aircraft, 16 Su-30 multifunctional fighters, 6 Su-35 fighters, 16 Su-34 fighter-bombers, 6 Su-24 bombers, and 6 Tu-22M3 bombers from the Saratov and Kaluga oblasts.

September 14

- The Western Military District said it created a unified air defense system enabling a single center to coordinate and execute a large variety of reconnaissance, air defense, and force protection tasks.¹¹⁶
- Over 50 aircraft of the Russian Aerospace Forces of the Western Military District performed flights to check the Western Military District's unified air defense network.¹¹⁷ Airframes involved included An-2 and An-26 transport aircraft, Su-35S and MiG-31 fighters, and Mi-8 and Ka-52 helicopters. Pilots attempted to penetrate air defense zones undetected during both day and night. Western Military District radio engineering forces detected and classified air targets and provided data to air defense command

posts, which neutralized the threats using MiG-31 and Su-35 fighters and electronic launches from air defense systems.

- Su-34 bombers of the Russian 6th Air and Air Defenses Forces Army destroyed enemy control posts at the Luzhsky Training Ground in Leningrad, Russia.¹¹⁸

Russian Operational Group in Transnistria

September 11

- Sappers of the Russian Operational Group in Transnistria prepared a shooting range for a battalion-tactical exercise.¹¹⁹

September 14

- A motorized rifle battalion of the Russian Operational Group in Transnistria began conducting a battalion-tactical exercise at an unspecified training ground in Transnistria.¹²⁰
- A repair company of the Russian Operational Group in Transnistria conducted a field exit.¹²¹ A platoon-sized motor rifle element drove 35 kilometers and attacked a simulated enemy.

September 15

- Motor rifle elements of the Russian Operational Group in Transnistria conducted night battalion exercises.¹²² Forces set up an anti-tank minefield and conducted anti-armor live-fire exercises. The elements also destroyed an enemy reconnaissance unit.
- Repair elements (likely a company) of the Russian Operational Group in Transnistria conducted a field exit to extract damaged equipment under enemy fire.¹²³

September 16

- A repair company of the Russian Operational Group in Transnistria conducted a field exit while using chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense (CBRN) techniques.¹²⁴

September 17

- The motorized rifle battalion of the Russian Operational Group in Transnistria completed its battalion-tactical exercise. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated the battalion deployed about 200 kilometers and consumed over 150,000 rounds of ammunition over the course of the week-long exercise.¹²⁵

Russian Strategic Rocket Forces

September 16

- Regiment-sized elements (approximately 1,000 personnel and over 100 pieces of equipment) of the Russian 35th Rocket Division conducted exercises with RS-24 Yars intercontinental ballistic missile systems likely in Altai Krai, Russia.¹²⁶ Strategic missile forces field established communications with Russian command elements, deployed Yars systems at distances up to 100 kilometers, camouflaged firing positions, changed positions, and protected their deployments against simulated enemy sabotage and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) threats. This exercise was likely Zapad-2021's culminating event to simulate a Russian nuclear strike against NATO.

International Forces

Belarusian Tank and Motor Rifle Units

September 10

- A reinforced mechanized battalion of the Belarusian 6th Mechanized Brigade defended a line with air and artillery support against a simulated superior enemy force at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.¹²⁷

September 13

- A reinforced mechanized battalion of the Belarusian 6th Mechanized Brigade defended a line with helicopter and anti-aircraft missile fire support likely at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.¹²⁸

- Belarusian tank and Russian motorized rifle elements lured enemy forces into a disadvantageous position at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.¹²⁹ A reinforced Belarusian tank company made a deliberate withdrawal from a first defensive position and pulled the forward elements of a simulated enemy into a mined and multi-layered fire kill zone. Russian and Belarusian elements practiced maneuvering from one defensive line to another under the concealment smoke screens. Russian and Belarusian forces likely operated as a combined company.

Belarusian Airborne (VDV) Units

September 10

- An anti-aircraft and artillery platoon of the Belarusian 38th Airborne Brigade used Iгла MANPADs to defend against simulated enemy aircraft, and a company of the 38th Airborne Brigade conducted a raid on a simulated enemy base at the Domanovo Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.¹³⁰

September 11

- Unspecified elements of the Belarusian special operations forces liberated an island using combat diving and airborne assault techniques.¹³¹

September 12

- A battalion of the Belarusian 38th Airborne Brigade deployed from the Domanovo Training Ground to the Brest Training Ground and crossed the Mukhavets River.¹³²

Belarusian Air and Air Defense Units

September 12

- Elements of the Belarusian 147th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment conducted live-fire exercises to protect ground forces from air attacks at the Domanovo Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.¹³³ Commander of the Belarusian Air Force and Air Defense Forces Igor Golub presided over these exercises.

September 15

- Elements of the Belarusian 147th and 377th anti-aircraft missile regiments conducted exercises to protect ground forces from enemy helicopters using Osa air defense systems likely at the Domanovo Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.¹³⁴

September 16

- Belarusian Su-25 fighters, Yak-130 light attack aircraft, and Mi-24 helicopters conducted combat exercises with Russian Ka-52 helicopters at the Domanovo Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.¹³⁵

Belarusian Combat Support Elements

September 10

- Approximately 160 Belarusian signalers established command post communication centers at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, and in unspecified locations in Belarus.¹³⁶

September 11

- Elements of the Belarusian 336th Rocket Artillery Brigade conducted live-fire exercises using Smerch and Polonez multiple launch rocket systems at the Sary-Shagan Training Ground in Kazakhstan.¹³⁷

September 12

- Elements of the Belarusian 336th Rocket Artillery Brigade and 465th Missile Brigade conducted live-fire exercises using Smerch and Polonez multiple launch rocket systems and the Tochka tactical ballistic missile system at the Sary-Shagan Training Ground in Kazakhstan.¹³⁸

September 14

- Belarusian signals elements conducted exercises to provide command and control communications to support combat units at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.¹³⁹

- The Belarusian 483rd Separate Battalion of Protection and Maintenance conducted live-fire exercises with machine guns and grenade launches to defeat enemy armored vehicles at the Domanovo Training Ground in Brest Belarus.¹⁴⁰

September 16

- Belarusian signals elements of the Belarusian 85th Communications Brigade, 86th Communications Brigade, and 74th Separate Communications Regiment conducted signals exercises to support command and control functions in a training ground in Brest, Belarus.¹⁴¹
- Elements of the Belarusian 742nd Field Communications Center and Belarusian Special Operations Forces command elements completed communications exercises to support Zapad-2021 at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.¹⁴²

Belarusian military police

September 15

- Belarusian military police conducted a special tactical lesson to repel an enemy sabotage attack to protect a Zapad-2021 basecamp.¹⁴³ Belarusian military police worked out issues of access control, joint combat, arresting armed suspects, and providing first aid and medical evacuation of casualties from the battlefield.

India

September 11

- Unspecified Indian tank and motorized rifle elements conducted live-fire exercises to prepare for larger Zapad-2021 events at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.¹⁴⁴

Pakistan

- Pakistani officers participated in Zapad-2021's exercise headquarters.¹⁴⁵

Uzbekistan

- Uzbek officers participated in Zapad-2021's exercise headquarters.¹⁴⁶

Mongolia

September 11

- Unspecified Mongolian tank and motorized rifle elements conducted live-fire exercises to prepare for larger Zapad-2021 events at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.¹⁴⁷

Kazakhstan

September 12

- Kazakh airborne elements (likely a reduced platoon of 20 airborne infantry) liberated a settlement captured by enemy combatants at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus. Kazakh forces enveloped the enemy-controlled settlement with BMD-4 infantry fighting vehicles. Russian airborne infantry conducted a heliborne deployment to clear out the settlement with fire support from Russian Ka-52 attack helicopters.

Kyrgyzstan

- The Russian and Kyrgyz defense ministries did not report any exercises by Kyrgyz forces.

Armenia

September 11

- An unspecified Armenian battalion with tank, motorized rifle, and rocket artillery elements conducted live-fire exercises to prepare for larger Zapad-2021 events at the Mulino Training Ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.¹⁴⁸

Sri Lanka

- Sri Lankan officers participated in Zapad-2021's exercise headquarters.¹⁴⁹

¹ China is not participating in Zapad-2021. However, approximately 13,000 Russian and Chinese troops participated in the joint “Interaction 2021” exercise in Northern China from August 9-13. This major exercise likely replaced Chinese participation in the annual capstone exercise. Mason Clark, “Russia in Review: August 4 – August 17, 2021,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-august-4-%E2%80%93-august-17-2021>; Jan Bratsky, [“Foreign Participants of the SSE ‘West-2021’ Arrived in the Nizhny Novgorod Region,”] *TV Zvezda*, September 7, 2021, <https://tvzvezda dot ru/news/202197258-3MBIH.html>; [“The Opening Ceremony of the Joint Strategic Exercise ‘West-2021’ was Held at the Mulino Training Ground in the Nizhny Novgorod Region,”] *Russian MoD*, September 9, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12382979@egNews

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¹²⁷ <https://vayar.mil dot by/news/139772/>
¹²⁸ <https://vayar.mil dot by/news/139980/>
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¹³¹ <https://vayar.mil dot by/news/139787/>
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