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EXERCISE *KAVKAZ 2020* – A FINAL TEST OF RUSSIAN MILITARY REFORM?

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Kavkaz 2020 as final test of Russian military reform: messages, narratives, digital landscape

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” Messages communicated before and during *Kavkaz 2020* demonstrated how Russia could use its military element of state power to achieve the geopolitical or political objectives Kremlin desires in the European information space.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The year 2020 was one of tectonic geopolitical shifts. Strategic competition between Russia and the West intensified, while the COVID-19 pandemic had major strategic implications globally and affected the state of international affairs.

In 2020 Russia conducted *Kavkaz 2020*, a major exercise from its annual cycle, which aimed to convey the Kremlin’s ability to adapt to changing conditions of warfare and to project and integrate military power. In a period of international turmoil and economic recession linked to the effects of the pandemic, *Kavkaz 2020* was a cornerstone of Russia’s campaign to leverage its annual

training programme, display military power and upgraded military capabilities to its allies, partners and neighbours, as well as to demonstrate operational readiness to its potential adversaries. Messages communicated before and during *Kavkaz 2020* demonstrated how Russia could use its military element of state power to achieve the geopolitical or political objectives Kremlin desires in the European information space. In this report, the authors examine the main military and geopolitical messages to potential adversaries and to Russia’s partners and the major effect of these communications on the European information environment.



This report identifies several key elements among these military and geopolitical messages, including:

- Emphasis on the defensive nature of the exercise;
- Russia's claim to the status of a global power with its own sphere of interests/influence and ability to forge international military and political partnerships, notably with China;
- And, militarily, Russia's power projection and network-centric warfare capabilities, with an ability to operate on two fronts and conduct a sophisticated theatre-level operation. The exercise featured a demonstration of Russia's new weaponry and cross-domain capabilities.

The exercise was designed to impress and thus to communicate. Moreover, as this report contends, it also served as the final test of Russia's military reform process, now more than a decade long. As such, as well as for other reasons pointed out in this report, it was personally important to the two top military officials who have overseen this reform for much of the decade: Sergei Shoigu, the defence minister; and Valery Gerasimov, the head of the armed forces.

Yet the completion of the military reform process does not spell the end of Russia's re-armament drive. The approval of a new armament procurement programme for the period to 2027 suggests that a new generation of arms will now be at the centre of the continued effort further to develop the armed forces, including likely changes in the

structure of military formations (primarily divisions).

As this report sets out to explore, the situation dictated that the Russian Ministry of Defence adopt a new information approach, complete with a more realistic picture to accompany the demonstration showpiece; and a sub-narrative that aimed to prove that Russia was transparent and open. To suit the occasion, the MoD redesigned messages and narratives, changed the means of their delivery and expanded target audiences. COVID-19 was necessarily factored in.

In order to feel confident about its claim to the status of a global power, military power to Russia is an essential requirement which translates into just such a status, according to the Russian view of the world. This is a useful perspective from which to view *Kavkaz 2020*, both in purely military and associated communications terms.

Russia's major military exercises relate to the cognitive and information domains in various ways. Adding to the layers of public diplomacy and public relations that often accompany any large-scale military exercise internationally, representation of a large-scale military exercise by Russia partially depends on the wider geopolitical context, ongoing conflicts, the Kremlin's and other major actors' strategic objectives, as well as the influence campaigns conducted online. Therefore, a separate section focuses on the representation of the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise in the international news landscape online and the accompanying conversations on social media.



As multiple ongoing conflicts, protracted wars, geopolitical crises and strategic competition co-occurred with *Kavkaz 2020*, this was reflected in how *Kavkaz 2020* was represented in the digital landscape. The scope and scale of emerging flashpoints such as the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, protests in Belarus, Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine and even the prolonged strategic competition in South Asia dictated that *Kavkaz 2020* was overwhelmingly represented alongside other geopolitical events. Most importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmingly impacted almost all domains of information campaigns.

Along with an overview of Russia's approaches, these are among the many topics (too many to list in this brief summary, including, to name but some, historical, geopolitical and digital) which this report will deal with in detail.

The structure of this paper is, as follows:

- A summary of key findings
- *Kavkaz 2020* background, including notes on previous *Kavkaz* exercises, the 2020 geopolitical situation and *Kavkaz 2020* as seen from the Russian perspective
- Analysis of the primary messages from *Kavkaz 2020*, which also identifies the main themes and narratives
- Analysis of the messaging in detail
- A digital survey: representation of *Kavkaz 2020* in the digital news landscape and social media



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

As seen from *Kavkaz 2020*, Russia is guided by a defensive doctrine in its military thinking and is adapting its Military Doctrine and National Security Strategy to reflect Russia's modernization of its combat forces in support of broader state aims and its ability to respond to a potential technologically advanced state-level adversary. In its geopolitical and military messaging to European audiences Russia is seeking to amplify narratives that generate or promote Russia's status as a "great power", its power projection potential in neighbouring countries, its ability to use military power to support information goals and its desire to form coalitions for future military operations with likely-minded counterparts. By shaping such narratives, Russia is seeking to gain strategic advantage in the European information space, which aims to create a psychological effect in favour of normalization in relations with Russia.

GEOPOLITICAL MESSAGING

- In the messages targeting the European information space Russia is capitalizing on its global power image while portraying its ability to unite and guide different countries under the umbrella of reassuring and balancing military force that seeks cooperation with all interested parties. During *Kavkaz 2020* Russia stressed the importance of strategic military partnership with China and emphasized the role of regional alliances such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Those platforms become essential in Russia's geopolitical calculus to maintain its role as a global power and to counteract what is perceived as the hegemony of the US and the importance of NATO as a military and security alliance. Geopolitical messaging also underlined Russia's military intent to work towards development of coalition-based options for future military operations.
- Russia is intensifying its geopolitical messaging to its potential adversaries meant to demonstrate its power projection in the areas of its geopolitical interests, mainly the Eastern neighbourhood and the Eurasian space. By conducting military exercises close to its neighbours' borders, Russia is also exerting external pressure on them and on those neighbours that are in the position of military disadvantage or economic reliance on Russia. In the case of *Kavkaz 2020*, Crimea, Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Belarus and Armenia were in the front line of Russia's power projection spectrum as grey areas that Russia is likely to use in its hybrid activities against other European countries. *Kavkaz 2020* also underlined that the Black Sea region is a contested area of influence and of strategic competition between Russia and the West.



MAIN MILITARY MESSAGES

- *Kavkaz 2020* demonstrated Russia's effort to improve its network-centric warfare potential and Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Information, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities. Russia is also rehearsing coordination, mobilization, combined-arms action, force integration and tactical interoperability while paying attention to testing of territorial-defence measures and rehearsing operations in an electronically contested operational environment.
- *Kavkaz 2020* showed Russia's ability to adapt to a new security dynamic and quickly incorporate lessons learnt from its military operations abroad into its strategic military exercise. It also showed to international audiences that at a time of a pandemic Russia's mobilization potential and its troop readiness remain high: military formations are fully operational, mobile, agile, technologically advanced and successfully adaptable to a current shifting security environment and new pandemic realities.
- During the exercise Russia emphasized its ability to operate on two fronts (Southern Military District and Western Military District) and conduct a sophisticated theatre-level operation using different military tactics, while continuing managing other operations across the globe in Syria, Ukraine, Libya and elsewhere.¹ *Kavkaz 2020* became a demonstration of Russia's new weaponry and targeted strike capabilities across multiple domains, including drones and electronic warfare, designed to serve the strategic effect of reassuring its partners while suppressing or weakening its adversaries' capacities to respond or to sustain conflict. *Kavkaz 2020* was preceded by the *Ocean Shield* naval exercise and followed (much later) by a nuclear exercise,² which showed Russia's ability to restrict NATO Allies' movement and mass ground power. The exercise portrayed Russia's flexibility, operational depth, and ability to challenge transatlantic links.

DIGITAL LANDSCAPE SURVEY

- Regional events clearly affected what was being spoken vis-a-vis *Kavkaz 2020*. As such, *Kavkaz 2020* was subject to a competitive information environment and complex set of interactions online, often with relevance to regional and extra-regional geopolitical fault lines.
- Multiple ongoing influence operations and the use of information and network manoeuvres during and after *Kavkaz 2020* were identified. As a theme of influence, *Kavkaz 2020* did not particularly serve the owner country but rapidly became attached to ongoing regional competitions, as diverse as the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, including Turkish influence; Russia's ongoing aggression in



Ukraine; and even the India-Pakistan strategic competition. The geopolitical tensions in the Caucasus, where Azerbaijan and Turkey conducted joint military exercises at the time when *Kavkaz 2020* was fully in play, accounted for the most specific “information confrontation” campaign with the involvement of information manoeuvres, with the resultant perception of confrontation between two axes.

- Mentions of NATO, the EU, the UN, the OSCE Minsk Group for Nagorno-Karabakh and the US Department of State represent other examples where *Kavkaz 2020* was mentioned in relation to other concurrent events. The Armenian, Azerbaijani and Ukrainian subgroups of narratives in relation to *Kavkaz 2020* each reflected particular regional rivalries: respectively anti-Azerbaijan and anti-Turkey in the case of Armenia; anti-Russia and pro-Turkey in the case of Azerbaijan; and anti-Russia in Ukraine’s case.
- A number of YouTube channels actively generate content containing military-related themes alongside anti-NATO and anti-Western themes. Re-curated material from *Kavkaz 2020* claiming establishment of a new Asia-centric military alliance against the United States and NATO was observed to feature in particular. Some of these videos were narrated with a robotic computer-generated voice, resembling many other examples of such content from East Asia and countries around the South China Sea.



” Every strategic CPX brings with it at the same time an informational charge directed to different audiences and designed to support Russia’s political agenda and strategic tasks.

KAVKAZ 2020 BACKGROUND

As usual once every four years one of Russia’s Joint Strategic Commands (JSC) hosts a strategic-level Command Post Exercise (CPX). They are run according to a typical Russian military philosophy scenario, which calls for detailed planning and intensive preparation with coordination and synchronization of activities. Every strategic CPX brings with it at the same time an informational charge directed to different audiences and designed to support Russia’s political agenda and strategic tasks.

In 2020, it was the turn of the next exercise in the *Kavkaz* series. The name – “*Kavkaz*”

is the Russian for “Caucasus” – suggests that it centred on Russia’s south. As this report sets out to explore, the reality is more complex than this.

The analysis of *Kavkaz 2020* was conducted using the same framework as that which underpinned the analysis of Russia’s *Vostok 2018* and *Tsentr 2019* strategic exercises.³ Similar to those exercises *Kavkaz 2020* could be characterized as more complex, covering greater territory and involving more troops and assets than announced officially. And like those exercises Russia communicated additional messages about other activities



which at first sight were unrelated to this exercise but based on additional analysis could also be connected with it.

NOTE ON PREVIOUS KAVKAZ EXERCISES

Each of the *Kavkaz* exercises in different years over the past decade (including this year's *Kavkaz 2020*) sought to project a different informational component. In 2012 Russia was in the throes of the initial period in a military reform process (one-third of the way through) which was expected to be completed towards 2020. The eventual outcome of that reform process still existed only as plans to be implemented and confirmed.⁴ The international community, meanwhile, still thought that the 2008 Russia-Georgia war was an exception, not the rule. Prior to *Kavkaz 2012*, Deputy Chief of the General Staff Colonel-General Alexander Postnikov informed the media that while it would exercise the command and control (C2) skills of commanders and HQs as well as test the prospective C2 system, no joint military groups would be formed in the field.⁵ The troops' involvement in the field would be modest and confined to just four training grounds in Russia, without any involvement from the Russian bases in Armenia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The exercise would see limited participation by other agencies and involve only around 8,000 troops, 200 tanks, armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), 100 artillery systems, 80 aircraft and 10 ships.⁶ It was not the intention to invite foreign contingents also to take part. In preparation for the

exercise, "special" exercises were modest.⁷ Information provision during the exercise concentrated mostly on measures to confirm and demonstrate the initially limited Russian military capabilities, with emphasis mostly on the factor of mobility.⁸

Kavkaz 2016 presented a fundamentally different picture. Two years on from Crimea's annexation, the Russian military had already passed the halfway point of the reform process, with new military capabilities already in existence. The informational charge during and in relation to the exercise was divided into two distinct parts and concentrated on two main messages. The first message was designed to demonstrate Russia's "rock-solid" determination to defend Crimea. The second message aimed to showcase the results of the military reform process and to demonstrate what was presented as real, highly increased military capabilities in Russia in general and in Crimea in particular. Preparations for the exercise were on a larger scale than previously and in line with an approach which, according to Chief of the General Staff (CGS) General Valery Gerasimov, prescribed such an exercise to consist of two parts: preparations, with "special" exercises, local CPXs and snap inspections; and the formal part, in which the exercise culminated.⁹ This approach has been used to execute all strategic exercises since Sergei Shoigu became defence minister.

Compared to *Kavkaz 2012*, the amount of information and coverage increased in relation to *Kavkaz 2016*. Russian media



concentrated on support for the same two main messages, through emphasis on and coverage of 12 “special” exercises during the period of preparation in August and, later, the official exercise. Additional messages were designed to provide proof that military capabilities like a new C2 system were already in existence in reality,¹⁰ and to demonstrate the involvement of other government agencies and civilian infrastructure (for example civilian airports)¹¹ in war-fighting. Joint military groupings (including naval units and air assets) exercised at training grounds, with accredited journalists from state news agencies and specialist media embedded to provide substantial coverage. Importantly, while Russia also stated officially that the exercise would not exceed the 2011 Vienna Document ceiling of 13,000 service personnel,¹² simultaneously it would also from time to time, as if inadvertently, report numbers of participants far in excess of that ceiling and as high as 120,000.¹³

KAVKAZ 2020 VS 2020 GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION

Kavkaz 2020 took place in a highly challenging geopolitical environment and presented new particular features. First, the exercise coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. In the West COVID-19 caused governments to introduce social changes and influenced all planned military activities and exercises including NATO exercise DEFENDER 2020, the biggest in a long time and planned well in advance. **On numerous**

occasions before and during *Kavkaz 2020*, Russia also claimed that it was ready to reduce military activities close to NATO borders and move them deeper inside Russia. In reality this was not done and remained an empty gesture.

A political crisis in Belarus made Russia realize that even some of the most strictly controlled societies that have for decades lived under one ruler could suddenly revolt in the quest for greater democracy, freedom and justice. The illusion of internal stability and social unity in a nation that was supposed to be Russia’s most loyal ally suddenly shattered. The “Union State” of Russia and Belarus found itself under threat, the long years which the effort to build it has taken seemingly wasted. In the situation it became especially important to maintain existing allied relationships and secure new allies, so an internationalization of Russian military activities was high on the agenda.

Furthermore, as the West (NATO) finally recognized the progress of modernization in the Russian Armed Forces and Russia’s geopolitical ambitions, it began to respond to – reciprocate – Russia’s provocative and increasingly large-scale military activities. It was this fact that most likely influenced Russia’s decision to “lower the tension” and not exercise Crimea’s military during *Kavkaz 2020*, at least officially, as well as claim that exercises had been moved to other locations.

Even confronted with this complex environment the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise was executed according to the same design,



with a preparation stage with a number of “special” exercises and snap inspections; and a demonstrative, officially announced, presentational event. Compared to previous *Kavkaz* exercises *Kavkaz 2020* had a larger number of different narratives and messages broadcast during the preoperational phases of the exercise and during its official part. Specialist media (such as Defence Ministry-controlled *Zvezda* TV, official Defence Ministry newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* and others) took the lead and were very active in providing coverage of the preparation stage and final exercise. Russia’s national and military leaderships also joined in this informational campaign – and proved exceptionally willing to present the public with different (and occasionally misleading or contradictory) messages.

KAVKAZ 2020 AS SEEN FROM THE RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE

Russia’s *Kavkaz* annual-cycle strategic command-post exercise, led by Chief of the General Staff General of the Army Valery Gerasimov, centred on the Southern Military District, mainly in the following locations: Prudboy, Ashuluk, Kapustin Yar, Arzgirsky and Kopansky training grounds.¹⁴ *Kavkaz 2020* also took place in Armenia and in Georgia’s breakaway (and in effect Russian-controlled) regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as involved the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla.¹⁵ The active phase of the exercise was held on 21-26 September and the preparatory phase took place during June, July and August 2020.

During the preparatory phase of the exercise the Russian Ground Forces executed snap military drills that were conducted by troops of the Southern and Western military districts involving, according to Russian data, “150,000 personnel, more than 400 aircraft, more than 26,000 pieces of military equipment, and more than 100 ships and support vessels of the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla”.¹⁶

These snap exercises were designed to give an objective picture of the state of the forces after the quarantine measures and before the start of *Kavkaz 2020*, as well as to “ensure military security in the South-West of the Russian Federation, where threats of a terrorist nature persist”.¹⁷ The snap exercises revealed “no decrease in the ability of the Armed Forces to carry out their tasks”.¹⁸

The thorough preparatory phase led to the successful execution of *Kavkaz 2020*. China, Armenia, Belarus, Myanmar, Pakistan and Iran joined the exercise, the latter involved in the exercise on the Caspian.¹⁹ Additionally, *Kavkaz 2020* was attended by observers from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Indonesia, Iran and Sri Lanka.²⁰ India didn’t take part, officially over COVID-19 concerns, while Azerbaijan opted for observer status and refused an invitation to participate.²¹

In the international component of the exercise, around 100 military personnel with military equipment from China took part.²² Some 20 army aviation helicopter crews from the Southern Military District and from Armenia were involved in the exercise.²³ In



Abkhazia up to 1,500 Russian and Abkhaz military personnel took part in the exercise; the same number of military personnel was reported in South Ossetia.²⁴

As stated by the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defence, *Kavkaz 2020* combined up to 80,000 military personnel, around 450 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) and armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and 200 artillery systems including multiple rocket launcher (MRL) systems.²⁵ The exercise involved “logistical, combat and technical support, as well as air defence, the navy, the National Guard and the Ministry of Emergencies”.²⁶

The Russian Ministry of Defence and Russian media showcased a number of upgraded capabilities involved in the exercise, such as the TOS-2 “heavy flamethrower” system (incendiary-munitions MRL);²⁷ Bal and Bastion precision-guided coastal defence missile systems;²⁸ S-400, S-300V4, Buk-M2 and Pantsir-S air defence systems;²⁹ and the Su-24M fighter bomber upgrade.³⁰ Various models of unmanned aerial vehicles such as the Forpost, Orlan-10 and Eleron-3, were

employed in the exercise.³¹

The scale and scope of the exercise were widely covered in the media and on the websites of the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defence. According to the Russian Defence Ministry, the main focus of *Kavkaz 2020* was to exercise defence measures such as “combating cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles”, as well as those focused on “fire and electronic warfare activities against entire enemy formations, use of airborne troops’ vertical envelopment tactics and ways rapidly to shift between different types of combat operations”.³² Other training objectives included mobility of forces, ability to mass as well as “deployment and conduct of the territorial defence of the Russian Federation” and assessment of coalition-based options for future military operations.³³



PRIMARY MESSAGES

ANALYSIS OF THE PRIMARY MESSAGES FROM *KAVKAZ 2020*: MAIN THEMES AND NARRATIVES

Unlike the previous *Kavkaz* exercises, where a single or twofold narrative was presented, *Kavkaz 2020*'s externally oriented messaging was greater in scope. In this sense, the exercise resembled both *Tsentr 2019* and, before it, *Vostok 2018*. In another feature that stood out in contrast with both *Vostok 2018* and *Tsentr 2019*, messaging emphasizing the involvement of other government agencies and the mobilization element in the exercise was drastically scaled down (if not altogether abandoned). All *Kavkaz 2020* messaging can be divided into the main themes and – associated with them – a number of direct and indirect sub-narratives and messages.

Russian messages to European audiences centred around distinct themes that were repeatedly reported in Russian media and supported by the Russian official channels. Output analysis yields the following main themes and subordinate messages from different Russian media and channels:

DEFENSIVE

- *Kavkaz 2020*: a defensive, transparent and benign image of the exercise
- Russia is transparent with other nations and organizations about its military activities
- Russia stands for peace but is forced to defend against the aggression of others (e.g. NATO and Ukraine)

RUSSIA IS A GLOBAL POWER

- Russia is a country able to attract other nations and create and lead alliances and coalitions
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is a leader competent in military matters

RUSSIA'S SPHERE OF INTEREST/INFLUENCE

- Russia is deeply integrated militarily with Armenia and Belarus
- Abkhazia and South Ossetia are de facto Russian territories



RUSSIA'S MILITARY IS AMONG THE BEST IN THE WORLD

- Military reform has been successfully completed – the armed forces renewed
- Russia's military is able to run highly coordinated large-scale joint operations
- Russia is successfully rearming its forces with new and modernized weapons and equipment

RUSSIA IS ABLE TO COPE WITH COVID-19 AND ITS FORCES ARE ABLE TO WAGE WARS IN A PANDEMIC

These main messages and sub-narratives featured repeatedly and were fully acknowledged by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu himself as he summed up the final results of *Kavkaz 2020* at the National Defence Control Centre on 12 October 2020.³⁴

ANALYSIS OF MESSAGING IN DETAIL

THEME # 1. DEFENSIVE

Message overview: defensive, transparent and benign image of exercise

On the eve of the exercise Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin spoke to foreign defence attachés to stress the defensive and benign character of the exercise. This defensive exercise is not aimed against any country, while the 'warring party' refers to a conditional adversary not related to any state, Gen Fomin said.³⁵ In turn, CGS Gen Gerasimov emphasized the transparency of the exercise, with around 1,000 representatives of foreign countries able to take part and observe it.³⁶

A similar diplomatic discourse was undertaken by the chief of the Main Operational Department of the General Staff, Colonel-General Sergei Rudskoi, before the start of *Kavkaz 2020*. According to Gen Rudskoi, "Moscow's military activity does not pose any threat to foreign states. Moreover, the Russian Ministry of Defence seeks to de-escalate the situation in Europe and this year has not conducted a large-scale exercise near the borders of NATO member states."³⁷ Gen Rudskoi also pointed out that "the General Staff is ready to adjust the areas of the exercise on an equal footing with the Alliance".³⁸



Such messaging suggests Russia's desire to leverage the exercise for diplomatic gains as an illustration that it was genuine about the nature of the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise and at the same time of Moscow's preparedness to reduce tensions with the West and the Alliance on a reciprocal basis. Through the perspective of neutrality and diplomacy, Russia's aim was to achieve a strategic effect in the West. **On the one hand, Russia's intent was to consolidate the image of nonaggression in relation to the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise while at the same time distracting the West from paying attention to the other strategic and tactical objectives of the exercise.** On the other hand, Moscow's discourse of nonaggression aimed to strengthen relations with Russia's like-minded counterparts in the West and create favourable conditions for the pursuit of a friendlier Western policy towards Russia. Moreover, it was also a way for Russia to signal to NATO not to exercise close to Russia's borders and its areas of interest.

Russia is transparent with other nations and organizations about its military activities

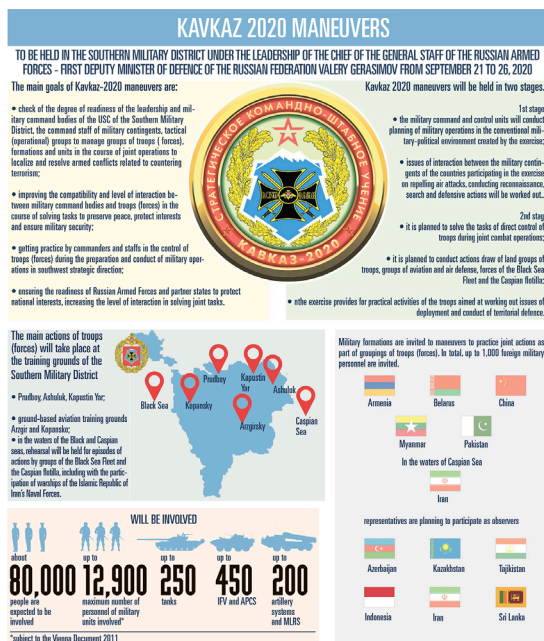
Russia routinely claims transparency and respect for international rules and agreements which support security and confidence-building measures. In previous years, especially at the beginning of the reform process, Russia held few, if any at all, exercises in the European part of the country in excess of the OSCE's 2011 Vienna Document (VD2011) limits of no more than 13,000 soldiers, 300 main battle

tanks, 500 IFVs and APCs, and 250 self-propelled artillery pieces.³⁹ Only in the case of bigger numbers than those in an exercise does VD2011 stipulate mandatory observation, which Russia prefers to avoid. Subsequently, as exercises began to be held on an ever larger scale, Russia began to resort to concealment: to hide the true size of exercises, participant numbers were played down and exercises were moved out of the zones of VD 2011's application or split up into smaller parts. For exercises conducted outside the zone of VD2011's application (with the Ural Mountains its approximate boundary), bigger numbers of participants would usually be announced in advance officially without the risk of mandatory observation. For the European part of Russia, bigger numbers would never be announced officially but would eventually be made known – without official confirmation.

Kavkaz 2020 created an intrigue. In his briefing, Deputy Defence Minister Fomin demonstrated a slide where the number of participants was put at more than 80,000, but it was claimed that those that fell under the VD2011 requirements (for the number of personnel and armament in combat units under a single operational command) numbered only 12,900, with 250 tanks, 450 IFVs and APCs and 200 pieces of artillery.⁴⁰ This discrepancy was repeated on the Russian Defence Ministry website, where it was explained that those "approximately 80,000" soldiers involved in *Kavkaz 2020* also included logistics and technical support



formations and units, as well as air defence, navy, special forces and units from the National Guard and the Ministry of Civil Defence, Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters (Emergencies Ministry), which do not fall under the VD2011 restrictions.



1) Ministry of Defence *Kavkaz 2020* fact sheet;⁴¹ and 2) Col-Gen A. Fomin's briefing to foreign DAs.⁴²

Never before had Russia ever made such an admission. While it is hard to explain Russia's rationale for doing this, it is possible that with a blunt statement like that, Russia thought that it might deflect the Western accusations that it had lied, as had been the case previously. Yet with a statement like that, Russia admitted that the exercise had far exceeded VD2011's limits. **At the same time, as it implausibly claimed that the VD2011 requirement of a "single operational command" applied only to some of the participants, Russia openly demonstrated its unwillingness to accept mandatory inspections which would most likely have verified the real, bigger numbers.** On the final and especially contradictory note, on 25 September, it was mentioned during the final phase at Kapustin Yar that the more than 12,000 troops had been brought together only at that particular training range. This meant that all the other participants at all the other training grounds would have had to be non-combat, combat support units or troops from other ministries only. It was especially ironic that this absurd claim was disproved by other reports, which showed combat units present and on exercise at other training grounds. To introduce the final element of confusion, the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* reported on the same day (25 September) that **"all the troops at all the training grounds separated by thousands of kilometres were operating under unified command and**



according to the same scenario”⁴³ – an acknowledgement that the 80,000 troops fell under the VD 2011 requirements.

Does this mean that Russia has decided to show others that it can interpret any agreement as it sees fit, as it claims the US does? Or does this mean, for example, that Russia has decided to demonstrate that VD2011 is outdated and promote what was Dmitry Medvedev’s proposal when Russian President on the need for a new security architecture in Europe? For now at least, these questions remain unanswered.

The same communications mismatch occurred with regard to the scale of the exercise. The MoD fact sheet showed seven training grounds (Kopansky, Prudboy, Kapustin Yar, Ashuluk, Arzgirsky on land, plus Black Sea and Caspian naval) but at the exercise opening ceremony Deputy Defence Minister Nikolai Pankov mentioned 14 training grounds in use for *Kavkaz 2020*. Again, in the final element of confusion, an article published in the main Defence Ministry newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, claimed 30 training grounds for the exercise.⁴⁴

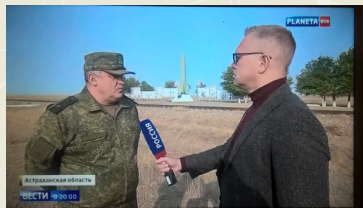
On this occasion the issue of a demonstration of openness and transparency was also handled differently compared to *Tsentr 2019*. Open Skies flights were refused during

the 2019 exercise. On this occasion Russia decided to accept a joint Franco-German-Romanian Open Skies inspection flight⁴⁵ and a German-Danish VD 2011 inspection during the exercise. Even in this case, however, an information mismatch occurred when while it advertised Russia’s willingness to accept inspectors, the Russian Defence Ministry issued permission for them to observe participants from Armenia, Belarus, Myanmar, China, Pakistan and Uzbekistan – apparently forgetting that Uzbekistan had not been named as a participant either officially or unofficially beforehand.⁴⁶

These communications and Russia’s whole behaviour might carry a simple message – Russia will no longer act the way she did before, with the military’s denials, concealment and obstruction.

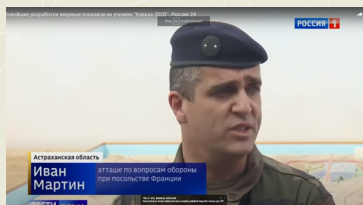
The dissemination of messages inside and outside Russia was well-orchestrated. More than 170 journalists from 13 countries including the United States, Germany, France and Japan were accredited at the exercise⁴⁷ and attended the final showpiece at Kapustin Yar on 25 September. Even before this event, they were taken to different training grounds and readily presented with the opportunity to mill around and interview generals and commanders.





1) Foreign journalists at *Kavkaz*, Zvezda TV; 2) Ashuluk commander gives interview to RTR TV;⁴⁸ and 3) Zvezda TV journalist at Rostov airfield command post.⁴⁹

Foreign military attaches from 70 countries attended the Kapustin Yar showpiece and were briefed by CGS Gen Gerasimov afterwards, who used the briefing as an opportunity to re-emphasize Russia's peacefulness and openness as he simultaneously claimed aggressive behaviour by NATO and the West.



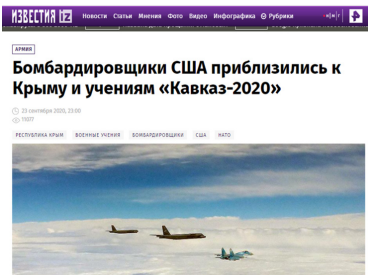
1) CGS Gen Gerasimov's briefing; 2) the French Defence Attaché;⁵⁰ and 3) a Chinese commander's interview.⁵¹

Russia stands for peace but is forced to defend against the aggression of others (e.g. NATO and Ukraine)

Kavkaz 2020 was closely observed by the West and NATO. It is standard practice for militaries in other countries to do this when military exercises take place. Whereas previously Russia did not emphasize this aspect, that policy changed on this occasion and **the Russian Defence Ministry launched an intensive information campaign designed to demonstrate the West's supposedly extremely aggressive behaviour.** In the first instance, at a briefing at the National Defence Control Centre, Deputy Chief of the General Staff and Chief of the Main Operational Department Gen

Sergei Rudskoi presented slides to claim increased NATO activity near Crimea.⁵² Later, similar claims were made routinely through different media. **Throughout *Kavkaz 2020* the narrative of a peaceful Russia and an aggressive NATO was delivered along two distinct lines. The first emphasized the official *Kavkaz 2020* scenario which framed the first exercise stage as defence against a massive air and missile strike launched by a near-peer adversary. The second presented NATO surveillance flights as proof that the exercise scenario reflected today's reality.** For maximum effect this extensive campaign with accusations of NATO's increased military activity around Russia was run simultaneously across the board in the state media.





1) Gen Rudskoi's briefing; 2) Izvestia article;⁵³ and 3) RIA Novosti report on US bomber flights.⁵⁴

In addition, Russia used exercises in Ukraine (including *Joint Effort 2020* and *Rapid Trident 2020*) to argue the case that it is surrounded by enemies. For example, Russia's RTR TV, its main state television network, followed up its *Kavkaz 2020* report immediately with a special feature which reused Ukrainian TV news coverage to claim that close to 16,000 participants including American and British exercised "in Russia's back yard" – as presumed justification for Russia to run *Kavkaz 2020* with 80,000-plus troops. This narrative was devoid of any military rationale, but logic was not Russia's primary concern in this instance. Similar messages were repeated on other television networks and other media in an attempt to create an image of Russia as a victim forced to defend itself against aggressive behaviour.⁵⁵



1) Presenter Irada Zeinalova on NTV's "Itogi Nedeli" news review about *Kavkaz 2020* and 2) with claims of British aggressiveness.



1) and 2) Ukrainian news reports re-used by Zeinalova on "Itogi Nedeli" to claim Ukraine's aggressive stand.



THEME # 2. RUSSIA IS A GLOBAL POWER

Message overview: Desire and intent to unite and form powerful regional alliances for future military operations

Kavkaz 2020 attempted to prove that Russia could consolidate military strategic partnerships and deepen military exchanges with China, Myanmar, Pakistan, Armenia and Belarus. Under the umbrella of a leading and guiding party in the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise Russia pursued geopolitical intent which claimed to provide a platform for building strategic trust among the members of different geopolitical blocs, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).⁵⁶ As stated by the Russian minister of defence, Sergei Shoigu, the SCO, the CSTO and the CIS, “three major Eurasian international organizations”, have “for the first time, in the course of these strategic manoeuvres, conducted joint exercises to combat international terrorism”.⁵⁷

China and Myanmar chimed with this Russian narrative as they highlighted the importance of strategic military cooperation among all parties to *Kavkaz 2020*. According to Major-General Ko Lei from Myanmar, *Kavkaz 2020* provided invaluable experience for building mutual understanding with other contingents and armies from different states.⁵⁸ Chinese Defence Spokesperson Senior Colonel Tan Kefei pointed out that *Kavkaz 2020* “will also further deepen China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership

of coordination in the new era”.⁵⁹ Lieutenant-General Liu Xiaowu, deputy commander of the Chinese PLA’s Western Theatre Command and commanding officer of the Chinese participating troops, highlighted that the exercise demonstrated a “determination on the part of participating countries jointly to maintain regional security and stability. In particular, the participating troops from different countries cooperated closely and fought side by side, successfully completed the exercise tasks and forged a deep fighting friendship.”⁶⁰ Messaging from China and Russia affirmed the multilateral vector of the exercise, as well as the importance of the effort to consolidate the Sino-Russian military relationship.

In its messages to partners, Russia emphasized enhanced military-political cooperation between SCO, CSTO and CIS member states to respond to regional security threats without the intervention of non-Eurasian actors. **Russia also indicated that further military dialogue could lead to the potential creation of a new Eurasian alliance in the image of NATO.**⁶¹

Geopolitical messaging was also supported by the tactical objectives of the exercise, which aimed to “assess the use of the combined forces of a coalition of states in the interests of ensuring military security in the southwest of the Russian Federation”,⁶² as well as enhance interoperability among multinational forces in order to increase the “level of interaction with the armed forces of partner countries in the course of solving joint tasks, including repelling air strikes



and conducting reconnaissance, search and defensive actions".⁶³

With Russia's geopolitical narratives analysed against the reality on the ground, it can be concluded that such an ambitious objective was achieved partially, with only some 1,000 foreign troops involved in the exercise.⁶⁴ The SCO's participation outside its full members China and Pakistan remained limited in scope. The CSTO and CIS multilateral element was confined to participation of only two members, Armenia and Belarus. Thus, even though Russia provided a perfect venue for further military cooperation through *Kavkaz 2020*, Russia's geostrategic ambition to unite and form powerful regional alliances for future military operations was only partially successful.

Russia is a country able to attract other nations and create and lead alliances and coalitions

Beyond the emphasis on the defensive nature of the exercise, the first message, and one almost as important as the demonstration of Russia's increasingly formidable military power, aimed to communicate Russia's status as that of an international player and the international power for others to follow. **It was thus an especially important objective for *Kavkaz 2020* to demonstrate that Russia has allies ready and willing to join Russia (at least on exercise).** For *Kavkaz 2020* Russia changed the way it approached the subject of international participation. It was no longer enough merely to present the fact of attendance of the exercise, however

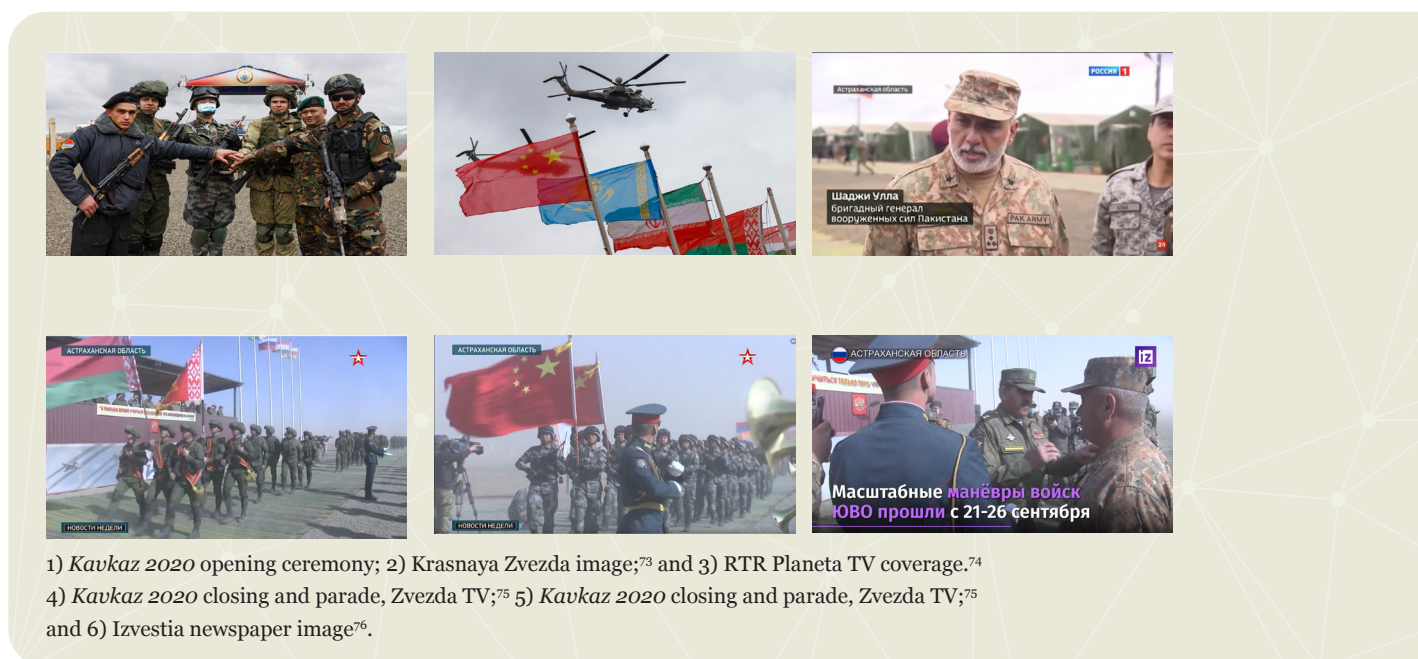
notional. What mattered now was quantity and quality as the criteria of international participation. Of these two criteria quantity became of crucial importance. As early as August 2020 the Russian Defence Ministry announced that forces from Belarus, Myanmar (Burma prior to 1989), Iran, India and Pakistan would participate in *Kavkaz 2020*.⁶⁵ Furthermore, at the beginning of September, Minister Shoigu said in a video conference that nine foreign countries would be in attendance at the exercise and added that nine more would send in observers.⁶⁶ When within days Deputy Defence Minister Colonel-General Alexander Fomin invited foreign Defence Attaches to a briefing on the subject of *Kavkaz 2020*, he named Armenia, Belarus, China, Myanmar and Pakistan as exercise participants and added that Azerbaijan and Iran would join in its naval part.⁶⁷ It apparently became so important to involve further participants that speculation was even spread that in addition also to Uzbekistan, NATO member-state Turkey would send in troops to attend *Kavkaz 2020*.^{68,69}

As the date of the official part of the exercise approached, however, the number of participants announced originally began to drop. First India decided against participation, blaming COVID-19.⁷⁰ It was followed by Azerbaijan.⁷¹ The situation remained unclear until the day the exercise began. During the opening ceremony at the Kapustin Yar training ground, close to 1,000 troops from Armenia, Belarus, China, Myanmar and Pakistan stood lined up in formation as part of a coalition force



symbolically named “Volga” after the great Russian river.⁷² During his opening speech Deputy Defence Minister State Secretary Nikolai Pankov announced the presence of observers from Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Sri Lanka at the exercise.

The importance attached to the exercise’s internationalization was impossible to conceal. The emphasis on internationalization was accorded the highest priority. Russia’s major television networks, the Defence Ministry’s official newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* and other Russian media alike, including specialist military publications, accompanied coverage of the exercise with footage and images of its international participants, whom they followed for the duration of the exercise.



1) *Kavkaz 2020* opening ceremony; 2) *Krasnaya Zvezda* image;⁷³ and 3) RTR Planeta TV coverage.⁷⁴
4) *Kavkaz 2020* closing and parade, *Zvezda TV*;⁷⁵ 5) *Kavkaz 2020* closing and parade, *Zvezda TV*;⁷⁵
and 6) *Izvestia* newspaper image⁷⁶.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is a world leader competent in military matters

As on the occasion of previous exercises it was evident that the intention was to present Putin as the national leader who cares about Russia and its military, and is knowledgeable about military matters. Indeed, the final episode of the official exercise at Kapustin Yar on 25 September belonged to Putin. Far from a demonstration designed for the attention of any odd visitor, the most spectacular events on the day were arranged specifically with Putin as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief in mind, as a showcase for the success of the military reform process. Minister Shoigu accompanied Putin on his flight to Kapustin Yar, while CGS Gen Gerasimov met him on arrival and took him straight to the observation tower. As they observed the action, both Minister Shoigu and CGS Gerasimov continuously presented data, explained about weapons systems’ performance and specifications, and commented on the action in the field.





1) Putin welcomed at Kapustin Yar, Zvezda TV;⁷⁷ 2) RTR Planeta TV footage;⁷⁸ and 3) NTV Mir “Segodnya” news.⁷⁹

Putin, Defence Attachés from 70 countries and foreign and national media were treated to an impressive military show. In professed compliance with the Vienna Document, more than 12,000 troops and 500 tanks, IFVs and APCs were brought together at Kapustin Yar. The demonstration piece included an impressive Tornado-G MRL salvo of 500 rockets launched within 20 seconds, huge explosions of ordnance detonated simultaneously, a massive helicopter assault landing, and an offensive thrust of thousands of soldiers and hundreds of tanks, with international units in assault formation shoulder to shoulder with Russian troops; all this for the firepower of the army after reform and its readiness to fight to be shown off to Putin, the invitees to the exercise and the citizens who watched coverage on TV and read about it in the reports. As mountains of fire were unleashed and the ground shook, it was designed to make an impression on those who observed this performance – and so it did. Afterwards Putin stayed on for another couple of hours to be briefed as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief on the detail of the reform and to discuss the tactical elements he had just witnessed, such as the “mobile echelon”,⁸⁰ the “fire rampart”,⁸¹ and other techniques demonstrated in the exercise (and explained elsewhere in this report).



1) An element of the “mobile echelon” – an air assault;⁸² and 2) the “fire wall”⁸³ at Kapustin Yar.



THEME # 3. RUSSIA'S SPHERE OF INTEREST/INFLUENCE

Message overview: *Kavkaz 2020* and its ability to project power to Russia's areas of interest

In its messages to neighbours Russia demonstrated its ability to mass military capabilities, respond in its near abroad and secure its geostrategic interests in its respective geopolitical backyards in the Eastern neighbourhood and in Eurasia.

Kavkaz 2020 included operations in the air, at sea and on land in the geographical periphery of the neighbouring countries and in the contested areas between them and Russia. Around 1,500 servicemen and over 500 units of various modern equipment from the joint diverse forces of Russia and Abkhazia took part in the manoeuvres on the territory of Abkhazia, where the joint forces exercised tasks involved in the conduct of territorial defence of the Republic of Abkhazia under conditions of a terrorist threat, as the Russian Defence Ministry described it.⁸⁴ The same tactical objectives were rehearsed in Georgia's other secessionist region of South Ossetia, where Russia deployed motorized rifle and tank battalions.⁸⁵

In the Black Sea Russia exercised search and "total destruction" of enemy surface assets used to deliver ammunition and food ashore to resupply "terrorists", according to the scenario.⁸⁶ Russia's naval drills in the Black Sea and Crimea triggered concerns in Ukraine. Prior to *Kavkaz 2020*, Ukraine feared that the exercise could be used as cover for

further Russian military aggression against Ukraine.⁸⁷ **As part of the exercise Russia reserved 22 sea areas in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov which blocked sea lanes to the Crimean Peninsula from all directions.**⁸⁸

Russia demonstrated its modern military capabilities and readiness in the Black Sea and ashore on the Caspian. *Kavkaz 2020* also caused concern in Azerbaijan, which did not participate in the exercise other than as an observer. More than 1,500 Russian and Armenian troops participated in the exercise close to the border with Azerbaijan.⁸⁹ *Kavkaz 2020* took place against the backdrop of a military confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. As the two sides clashed, Russia sought to project a diplomatic image of neutrality and reassured Azerbaijan that "Russian actions have never been directed against it".⁹⁰ For Russia it was essential to maintain a careful balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan and to position itself as a credible mediator and a security guarantor in the South Caucasus, which represents one of Russia's strategic areas of interest.

Russia also paid attention to its other strategic areas in the Eastern neighbourhood (Western Military District), mainly Belarus, where Russia and Belarus conducted a parallel exercise to *Kavkaz 2020* – *Slavic Brotherhood 2020* – on 14-25 September 2020.⁹¹ Evidently not coincidental with *Kavkaz 2020* but part of the same overarching exercise plan and scenario, *Slavic Brotherhood 2020* also took



place against the backdrop of the local tensions in Belarus related to the outcome of the presidential election and potential transition of power. The timeline, scale and focus of the exercise were originally different but were modified by Russia after Serbia withdrew.⁹² With *Slavic Brotherhood 2020*, Russia aimed to illustrate flexibility, mobility of forces and operational readiness for quick deployment of forces at short notice. Russia also exercised employment of nuclear-capable assets, with strategic bomber flights (by Tupolev Tu-22M3 Backfire and Tu-160 Blackjack swing-wing supersonic bombers) as part of the exercise.⁹³

In Russian media and the official channels, it was stated that Russia and Belarus are ready for greater integration, with military integration first set to pave the way for the process.⁹⁴ *Slavic Brotherhood 2020* focused on building a common operational picture with Belarus, improved interoperability between parties, and formation and complete integration of Russian-Belarusian forces. Russia and Belarus practised rapid redeployment and communications and intelligence activities to ensure regional security.⁹⁵ In its messaging to Belarus Russia stressed its intent further to integrate Russian and Belarussian defence systems, with unity of groupings and C2, and to work closely on the successful completion of integration as the Union State.⁹⁶ Russia's messaging sought to demonstrate its power projection ability to operate on two strategic fronts in the Western Military District and

the Southern Military District and to defend its Eurasian geopolitical ambitions as well as regional interests, where Belarus is key. *Slavic Brotherhood 2020* was followed by the *Unbreakable Brotherhood 2020* CSTO exercise and culminated in Moscow's announcement of plans to conduct additional military exercises monthly to sustain a Russian military presence on the territory of Belarus.⁹⁷

Russia is deeply integrated militarily with Armenia and Belarus

Some of the Belarusian and Armenian units are known to have participated alongside other invitees at Kapustin Yar as part of "an international coalition". At the same time, other units from the militaries of both countries also joined Russia to exercise at other *Kavkaz 2020* training grounds.

In Armenia's case this was announced officially and featured in coverage of *Kavkaz 2020* activities from Alagyaz, a training ground in Armenia. There, more than 1,500 Russian and Armenian troops commanded by Armenian Major-General Tigran Parvanian exercised various tactical elements including close air support and tactical air assault with assets provided by Russian aviation.⁹⁸ This type of coverage was intended to demonstrate ongoing Russian-Armenian military integration.

Belarusian forces' integration with Russia began with the signing of the "Union State" treaty in 1999. Today this integration is nearly complete. Belarusian forces have



almost the same organizational structure. Belarusian military personnel get the same education and training. Both sides' field manuals, normative requirements, weapons and other elements are fully compatible. For *Kavkaz 2020*, Belarus provided a battalion tactical group. At the head of the Belarusian delegation, Vladimir Kulazhin, one-star general and deputy commander of the Northwestern Operational Command, commented on integration as part of a "coalition group of forces" for the purposes of the exercise.⁹⁹ Besides the official participation of the battalion in the Kapustin Yar activity, Belarusians, like Armenians, might also have taken part in *Kavkaz 2020* activities on their own territory. Revealingly, in an article in Russia's *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper entitled "*Kavkaz 2020* suffers first casualties even before it starts",¹⁰⁰ while the author expressed disappointment with Serbia's decision not to take part in the *Slavic Brotherhood 2020* exercise, reference was also made to *Kavkaz 2020*. With an overlap between the dates of both *Kavkaz 2020* and *Slavic Brotherhood 2020*, it is reasonable to suspect that that exercise in Belarus was also part of *Kavkaz 2020*.



- 1) *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* links Serbia and *Kavkaz*;¹⁰¹ and
- 2) Armenian media coverage of exercise in Armenia.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are de facto Russian territories

The exercise also encompassed Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's breakaway regions notionally independent but largely unrecognized as such by the international community including some exercise participants. Given these sensitivities Russia chose not to emphasize these activities but still made them known officially.¹⁰²



Oddly, this was done in a way which – while it clearly indicated operational collaboration between the national Abkhaz and South Ossetian troops on the one hand and the Russian forces on the other in the exercise^{103,104} – did not suggest that they should also be counted among the international participants of *Kavkaz 2020*. These joint military groups in Ossetia¹⁰⁵ and Abkhazia¹⁰⁶ exercised the same activities as the Russian-Armenian or Russian-only battalion groups at other *Kavkaz 2020* training grounds. They were also about the same size (some 1,500 soldiers and 500 tanks, IFVs, APCs and other items of equipment). As a whole, the clear implication is that South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's militaries are no more than nominally national but in daily life are fully controlled by Russia.



1) Joint battalion group exercise in South Ossetia; and 2) and 3) Abkhazian and Russian tank troops in Abkhazia

The Russian Defence Ministry's second task was to make the exercise attractive for foreign militaries to attend – and make that be known. Previously, *Vostok 2018* involved a Chinese brigade, which attended as a separate unit. The following year, *Tsentr 2019* already saw Chinese forces partially integrated into Russian units. In the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise, the Russian Defence Ministry went even further than that – and not only gathered all internationals together at the Kapustin Yar training ground but also formed a coalition force which was tasked to perform according to one scenario and jointly with the Russian forces.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the Russian Defence Ministry offered the possibility for foreign participants to try out some of the Russian hardware. More than 60 T-90 and T-72B3 tanks, BMP-2 and BMP-3 IFVs and BTR-82 APCs were prepared for foreign participants to “take them for a ride”¹⁰⁸ as well as to train potential users to operate them in combat. In effect, the Russian Defence Ministry killed two birds with one stone – it enabled international participants to get a sense of what it means to “fight” shoulder to shoulder with Russian forces; and simultaneously advertised Russian weaponry for sale to foreign markets.



THEME # 4. RUSSIA'S MILITARY IS AMONG THE BEST IN THE WORLD

Message overview: Russia's image of military might, operational readiness and ability to adapt and modernize.

Kavkaz 2020 rehearsed a state-level conflict, with tactical and operational approaches to combat in an electronically contested environment practised as part of it. Several innovative approaches to modern and future warfare were pictured in the Russian state media and by the Russian Ministry of Defence through its official website.

Kavkaz 2020 demonstrated coordinated efforts to test armed forces readiness and strategic mobility, train forces' quick assembly ability, achieve better force integration and practise inter-unit collaboration.¹⁰⁹ Particular attention was paid to modernization of command and control, communications and intelligence systems as well as reconnaissance and electronic warfare capabilities. A multi-level intelligence system was tested as part of the exercise. The *Strelets* "intelligence, command and control complex equipped with the GLONASS satellite navigation system", and the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, such as the *Orlan-10*, *Tachyon* and *Forpost*, were assessed during the exercise.¹¹⁰ Russia focused on improved use of communications and intelligence systems in which "unmanned aerial vehicles were combined into a single control system".¹¹¹ *Kavkaz 2020* exercised network-centric warfare and tested the automation

of the command and control processes for troops and weapons in a way that, for example, "changed the C2 system of the Southern Military District", according to Commander of the Southern Military District General of the Army Alexander Dvornikov.¹¹² *Kavkaz 2020* also emphasized the role of combined-arms units' operation under an automated command and control system, where "automation was fundamental to the coalition forces' operation in automated mode".¹¹³ The coalition demonstrated "joint actions to repel the offensive, go on the offensive and complete the defeat of the main [simulated adversary] force".¹¹⁴

Russia integrated different capabilities, such as the TOS-2 "heavy flamethrower" system which, according to Minister Shoigu, "will significantly increase the combat capabilities of force groupings in strategic directions".¹¹⁵ The exercise became a show of force, with exposure for upgraded capabilities such as – in addition to the TOS-2 – the S-300V4 and Buk-M3 anti-aircraft missile systems,¹¹⁶ as well as the Terminator armoured fighting vehicle.¹¹⁷

Apart from demonstration of new capabilities, Moscow illustrated new modes of interaction between forces as well as new types of military formations, such as the "mobile echelon" (detailed further down in this section). According to CGS Gen Gerasimov, "the new combat formation – the mobile echelon – was shown in action along with the conduct of reconnaissance operations".¹¹⁸ Furthermore, an Airborne Troops paratrooper company



was parachuted with their BMD-4M combat vehicles for the first time during the exercise.¹¹⁹ A number of new tactics were illustrated during *Kavkaz 2020*, one of them an operation to “cut off reserve forces from the battlefield” with the use of the Zemledeliye miner layer vehicle, whose “single salvo can lay mines over an area the size of several football pitches”.¹²⁰

In all messages to the Western audiences and to partners Russia signalled its enhanced operational art, successful use of C2, improved capabilities and innovative approaches to modern warfare such as the use of drone swarms and automation of the C2 processes, along with testing and assessing the performance of such elements as the “mobile echelon” and reconnaissance assets, among others. As stated by Deputy Defence Minister General of the Army Nikolai Pankov, *Kavkaz 2020* was notable for the scale of the exercise, with the activities carried out at 14 training grounds and in the Black and Caspian Seas, where the Russian forces learnt to “improve professional skills with account taken of the emergence of new types of weapons and military equipment, and new forms and methods of military operations”.¹²¹

Military reform has been successfully completed; the armed forces renewed

A *Kavkaz 2020* sub-narrative related to the anticipated completion of the military reform process – initiated, it must be borne in mind, by Anatoly Serdyukov, the then (civilian) defence minister, back in 2008 and announced as concluded in 2020. Every strategic exercise since then has had

scenarios designed specifically to test the changes made in the military’s structure, armament, tactics and other reform elements. Thus, *Kavkaz 2020* was intended to perform one final check into the state of the military – as well as to show that the ratio of modernized and new armaments and equipment has reached the level of 70 percent that Putin had trailed and the MoD was working towards. Put simply, the intention was for *Kavkaz 2020* to confirm the success of that reform and the existence of a new Armed Forces organization.

In turn, the sub-narrative of successful reform consisted of a number of smaller elements oriented towards different audiences and with emphasis on different aspects. Some of them, mostly those with emphasis on the presentation of the massive scale and spectacular nature of military drills at tactical level, were primarily aimed at the Russian masses and politicians. The extent to which the Soviet Union had been militarized meant that almost its entire male population was familiar with military matters. Today’s Russia continues this trend, so these messages and episodes were intended to prove that the military had become truly combat-capable. To some extent, their massive scale and spectacular nature were also aimed at foreign audiences. **With the level of mass militarization and simultaneous familiarity with military matters in the West far lower than in Russia, the visual presentation of tactical elements was geared towards what could be described as creating a shock-and-awe effect.**



The aim was to produce a strong emotional impact on international journalists who would then broadcast this message to their own national audiences. In some of the examples of how this emotional effect could be generated:

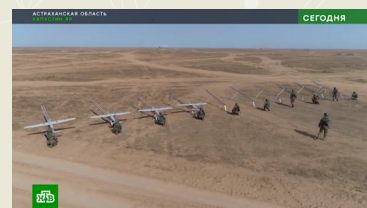
- At Kapustin Yar, where, as has been discussed, a showpiece episode was played out involving international exercise participants and which foreign Defence Attaches and journalists were invited to observe, some 60 Russian transport planes airdropped at once close to 1,000 paratroopers and around 100 vehicles. Among them (for the first time, as claimed) was an entire paratrooper company with a full set of weapons and equipment (10 new BMD-4M airborne armoured fighting vehicles).¹²²
- Also demonstrated was a swarm of UAVs and its actions in the sky.¹²³
- A two-kilometre line of explosives was detonated simultaneously as the force exercised a tactical element of defence against tanks (in what was referred to as the “fire rampart”).
- A massive artillery and missile barrage was launched. Other spectacular episodes were played out. So much turbulence and dust was created, with smoke and sand rising into the air in the steppe, that the next day a sand storm resulted.



1) Zvezda TV coverage; and 2) and 3) artillery and tank attack coverage.^{124, 125}



1) TOS-2 “flamethrower” use;¹²⁶ 2) an MRL salvo;¹²⁷ and 3) a UAV “swarm” on ground at Kapustin Yar.¹²⁸



Other reports were designed to show the reform as creating not only a powerful force but also an attractive service for citizens to join. This message again was oriented more towards the internal audience and included extensive coverage of “after-the-battle” activities including cultural, educational and sports events or leisure activities – for example as soldiers enjoyed national cuisines courtesy of military cooks.

The intention was to create a feel-good factor about the Russian military, shown as possessing “a human face” and an attractive place for young people to be in.



1) Belarusian potato cakes cooked; and 2) and 3) soldiers' life after battles in Zvezda TV coverage.¹²⁹

Russia's military is able to run highly coordinated large-scale joint operations

A different type of messaging compared to those mentioned above was directed towards specialist and expert audiences including defence and security experts and military analysts inside and outside Russia. This group cannot be easily won over with a show of dozens of tanks or a mass artillery barrage but nothing else. They need solid facts, hard evidence and interviews to draw details from which they can build a picture of what the real situation in the military is like, get a sense on the standard of military planning and execution, assess the ability of HQs and commanders to manage the battle, as well as analyse other aspects.

The answer to the question of why Russia thinks that it needs to broadcast messages such as these is that unlike in the Soviet Union, Russia's MoD understands that it is important to demonstrate its real power and status to politicians and decision-makers at home. Putin and the Russian political leadership have to be assured and convinced that the reform process is bearing fruit. The MoD knows that the president and other politicians have their own independent military experts and advisers, mostly former military. On the other hand, this approach allows foreign experts to draw conclusions on Russia's military and present their findings to their own politicians, as proof to potential adversaries of Russia as a global power and leader.

In a nutshell, real experts are unlikely to fall for a mere spectacle and require proof that the military can accomplish missions for real. Accordingly, the MoD adopted the policy of calculated openness about some of its “secrets” – and showed how things really are. To put this into practice and demonstrate particular real-life elements specifically to satisfy the requirements of specialist media such as Zvezda TV, the MoD information department and military experts from respected Russian news agencies were put to work and played the leading role as they presented details on what was happening behind the scenes – behind the façade of the fictional “battles”.



In the view of this author,¹³⁰ there was another reason, in addition to those mentioned above, why the MoD allowed greater access for more details to be seen. This particular *Kavkaz* exercise was especially important for Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and CGS Gen Valery Gerasimov personally. They both turned 65 this year and have thus reached the ceiling for a general's term of military service. Since 2013 they have both been responsible for the success of the reform process which they have overseen. As seen from this perspective, therefore, this exercise could be regarded as in a way their pre-retirement certificate of achievement before Putin, on whom their future depends. In this way, should they be able to prove that the military under their command has gone from strength to strength, they could secure a presidential extension to their term of military service or be appointed to other important positions of state after they retire from military service.

The *Kavkaz 2020* scenario presupposed the exercise being divided into two parts. The task of the first was to exercise the ability to defend against concentrated massive air and missile strike launched by a near-peer adversary. To demonstrate and confirm this ability the defenders activated various unified Automated Control System (ACS) elements¹³¹ including its air defence (AD) segment,¹³² moved AD units into position, put forces on high alert and engaged targets with live and “electronic” (simulated) fire. The Russian OPFOR (opposing forces) element in the exercise used large groups of in excess of 30 aircraft¹³³ and sophisticated air targets.¹³⁴ S-400 Triumph anti-aircraft missile system (AAMS) and Pantsir-S self-propelled anti-aircraft missile and gun system (AAMGS) crews used their own unified ACS segment as they defended specific points out of their equipped positions or, as they paused briefly to do so, defended troops as part of convoys on the move.¹³⁵

This was followed by an OPFOR land attack, which was met with concentrated resistance by the defenders, including joint artillery and missile fires as well as paratroopers landing to plug defensive gaps. The defenders used the ACS to command and control joint simultaneous action by two Iskander-M battalions, a Tochka-U battalion, a Tornado-S rocket artillery battalion and 17 other artillery battalions, including eight MRL and nine howitzer ones,¹³⁶ at Kapustin Yar, which proves that a functional data exchange system was in place among units. To exercise and monitor the precision of artillery and missile fire, a highly realistic target environment was established alongside a multi-level fire and target control system at Kapustin Yar.¹³⁷



1) and 2) Various missile systems suppressing OPFOR land¹³⁸ and air¹³⁹ attacks, and 3) “mobile echelon” preparation.¹⁴⁰

Along with combat activities a wide range of combat support and service support activities were also exercised. Most took place weeks before the official *Kavkaz 2020* exercise. CGS Gen Gerasimov himself inspected exercises for the preparation of material and technical support. Such examples of especial interest can be mentioned as a rough airstrip equipped in an open field and the fact that the Military Medical Academy, eight hospitals and four sanatoriums were involved in the exercises.¹⁴¹ A number of other special exercises, for example with signal, RKhBZ (Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) Defence), logistical support and other units, also took place before the main exercise. The final, 25 September showpiece mostly consisted of separate scenes from those activities, including a battle damage recovery operation and for example a special-purpose medical platoon's activities.¹⁴² The majority of special exercises with entire units involved (such as the establishment of a medical command post along with a hospital for 500 casualties)¹⁴³ took place at other training grounds.



1) A recovery vehicle towing a tank;¹⁴⁴ 2) military police in Kapustin Yar;¹⁴⁵ and 3) an aerosol screen at Prudboy.¹⁴⁶

With the international part of *Kavkaz 2020* confined to Kapustin Yar, other joint groupings of troops from Russia's JSC "South" and other JSCs and agencies exercised in other training grounds: Ashuluk near Astrakhan, Prudboy in Volgograd, Adanak in Dagestan and the naval infantry landing grounds of Zhelezny Rog (Black Sea) and Turali (Caspian). Alongside that, other Russian units operated jointly with Armenian (and Belarusian) forces in the territories of those countries. Other Russian troops also exercised in other training grounds. Instead of Crimea, the Caspian and the Russian part of the Black Sea and their beaches were used to exercise coastal defence,¹⁴⁷ sea battles and naval infantry landing.¹⁴⁸ The air force used a number of airfields and exercised highly coordinated activities, including the example noted above when more than 60 transport aircraft assembled from two airfields simultaneously parachuted more than 1,000 paratroopers with equipment.¹⁴⁹ Evidently, thus, the exercise took place in more locations than announced officially – as acknowledged by Deputy Minister Nikolai Pankov and Krasnaya Zvezda (in the references noted above).





1) and 2) Ships during *Kavkaz 2020* in the Black Sea and Caspian;¹⁵⁰ and 3) an Il -76MD at Taganrog airfield.

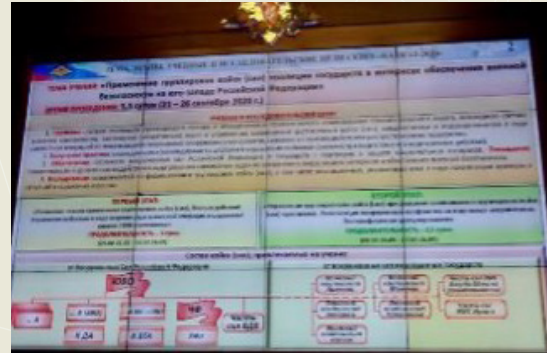
To coordinate all the activities spread over vast territories on land as well as at sea and in the air, an effective and reliable communications system with a mobile Command Post (CP) network is essential. While Russia claimed that work on such a system was in progress, with separate elements of the system tested during previous exercises, it was not until the mass delivery of mobile CP units (Russian designations APE-5 and APE-3) and other equipment into service took place in 2019 and 2020 that it enabled its military during *Kavkaz 2020* to attempt to establish a truly large-scale Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Information and Reconnaissance (C4IR) system and activate an adequate ACS network.



APE-5 and APE-3 mobile CP units in the field to establish C4IR ahead of the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise.¹⁵¹

To prove the existence of a C4IR network the MoD revealed details in the preparation period. During preparation exercises inspected by CGS Gen Gerasimov signal units in particular were among those to exercise. A week before *Kavkaz 2020* started officially, more than 1,500 troops from the signal and C2 units of JSC "South" created a C4IR network in Armenia¹⁵² and in the JSC's Area of Operation (AOO).¹⁵³ This, however, was just part of the true picture. Similar exercises took place not only within JSC "South". At the same time more than 6,000 signal and C2 troops from JSC "Centre" established a C4IR system and activated an ACS network in 29 Russian regions within the JSC's AOO.¹⁵⁴ The same also took place within JSC "West", where more than 2,000 troops did the same in eight regions within the JSC's AOO.¹⁵⁵ No communications about the termination of those exercises were observed. As a result it is quite possible that during *Kavkaz 2020*, along with the exercise's C4IR and ACS networks, a far wider C4IR and ACS network was also in operation to cover 37 other Russian regions. **This meant that not only the official exercise participants but also other units on exercise during the same period in Russia's Leningrad,¹⁵⁶ Nizhniy Novgorod,¹⁵⁷ Smolensk and Ryazan Regions as well as in Belarus¹⁵⁸ would also have functioned under unified command.**

In this context, it is noteworthy that the participation of one Operational Command (OC) from JSC “West” in *Kavkaz 2020* was mentioned in Col-Gen A. Fomin’s briefing for foreign DAs.¹⁵⁹



1) Col-Gen A. Fomin’s DA briefing; and 2) a slide with units from JSC “West” at *Kavkaz 2020*.

The majority of the Russian troops involved in the exercise conducted training in battalion and regimental tactical group-sized formation in the form of a two-sided exercise. The OPFOR element came from units directly subordinate to JSC “South” HQ (such as special-operations forces (SOF) units) or other OCs as part of the JSC. To accommodate such a large number of two-sided exercises without functional C4IR and ACS networks is almost impossible. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that given the prevalent form of exercise (two-sided), this further proves the existence of an extensive functional C4IR and ACS network during *Kavkaz 2020*.



1) Azart tactical radios;¹⁶⁰ 2) APE-5 and APE-3 mobile units as a CP; and 3) Borisoglebsk-2 EW system.¹⁶¹

The final confirmation of this assumption came from the commander of the Russian Ground Forces, General of the Army Oleg Salyukov, who after the exercise emphasized not the massive fires or the spectacular manoeuvres but the unit commanders’ and HQs’ ability to act in a unified manner and effectively command and control the units in the battles.¹⁶²



Russia is successfully rearming its forces with new and modernized weapons and equipment

It was a stated aim as part of the military reform process for the proportion of new and modernized weapons and equipment to reach an average of 70 percent. To support this it was decided that new and modernized weapons and equipment would be tested in exercises before they entered service. Every strategic exercise to date has tested new hardware. *Kavkaz 2020* was no exception. Among the much vaunted systems it featured were the Combat Tank Support Vehicle (BMPT) nicknamed “Terminator”;¹⁶³ the TOS-2 wheeled “flamethrower” or incendiary-munitions MRL;¹⁶⁴ a new type of ordinance for the Tornado-G MRL, fused to explode above ground at particular altitude;¹⁶⁵ a new mine layer vehicle named Zemledeliye, able to plant mines remotely;¹⁶⁶ and different types of Tigr-family heavy-duty armoured cars, presented earlier in the year at the *Armiya 2020* military expo.¹⁶⁷ Among other *Armiya 2020* exhibits expected to be tested during the exercise were also the Strela amphibious armoured reconnaissance car as well as the Sapsan-Convoy and Rat’ anti-UAV countermeasures systems.¹⁶⁸ In addition, fancy items like wind-turbine or solar-power energy eco-generators¹⁶⁹ were also expected to be tested during *Kavkaz*, along with for example new EW systems (such as the Borisoglebsk-2).



1) CGS Gen Gerasimov presents the BMPT to Putin;¹⁷⁰ and 2) the new Zemledeliye mine layer.¹⁷¹

THEME # 5. RUSSIA IS ABLE TO COPE WITH COVID-19 AND ITS FORCES ARE ABLE TO WAGE WARS IN A PANDEMIC

The Coronavirus crisis left a special imprint on this year's proceedings. Two types of messages were delivered in relation to this topic. First – Russia is controlling the COVID-19 situation nationwide and this allows it to hold such a large exercise. It was mentioned by Minister Shoigu during the evaluation of *Kavkaz 2020* on 12 October. The military contributed to this effort by building a score of specialized hospitals within a short period of time.

Coverage of the Coronavirus issue also featured during the exercise. Newspaper articles¹⁷² and other reports pronounced the situation to be under control and said that proper precautions had been taken. Soldiers and officers wore face masks at HQs and command posts. Masks were offered to visitors and recommended for social use. Masks were also offered to international participants. The MoD announced that establishment of quarantine would be exercised alongside exercises to practise the treatment of casualties.¹⁷³

The second message was that the military could not only fight the pandemic but could also fight wars under pandemic conditions. The bulk of activities in the exercise was about warfighting, where masks make soldiers feel uncomfortable, even though if necessary gas masks are worn, while social distance in a real battle is “a silly thing”. The majority of the troops in the training grounds were in action without masks, while distances were determined by military rationale, not medical norms. Medical Academy, hospital and other units involved in the exercise concentrated training on activating field hospitals and handling battle casualties. The message was simple – no pandemic could stand in the way of the Russian military.



1) Face masks worn at command post;¹⁷⁴ 2) Chinese soldiers at a concert;¹⁷⁵ and 3) field hospital in Astrakhan region.¹⁷⁶



DIGITAL SURVEY: *KAVKAZ 2020*, DIGITAL NEWS LANDSCAPE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

Russia's major military exercises relate to the cognitive and information domains in various ways. Adding to the layers of public diplomacy and public relations that often accompany any large-scale military exercise internationally, representation of large-scale military exercises by Russia partially depends on the wider geopolitical context, ongoing conflicts, the Kremlin's and other major actors' strategic objectives, as well as the influence campaigns conducted online. In this context, this section focuses on the representation of the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise in the international news landscape online and the accompanying conversations on social media. The following pages briefly describe the data collected and set out major findings.

The first subsection explores the international news landscape online, including unconventional news sources and with a special focus on how *Kavkaz 2020* was represented in different contexts. As described in the following pages, multiple ongoing conflicts, protracted wars, geopolitical crises and strategic competition co-occurred with *Kavkaz 2020*. Due to the scope and scale of the emerging flashpoints such as the war in Nagorno-

Karabakh, protests in Belarus, Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine and even the prolonged strategic competition in South Asia, *Kavkaz 2020* was overwhelmingly represented alongside other geopolitical events. In addition to Moscow's official promotion of the exercise, its military power, defence industry and military modernization, *Kavkaz 2020* became the subject of multiple governmental communication campaigns, represented in the news coverage and supported by social media activities about a set of interconnected conflict environments. Most importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmingly impacted almost all domains of information campaigns, including social media and international news coverage we particularly monitored in this study.

The second subsection briefly describes the conversations and content shared on social media concerning *Kavkaz 2020*. In sum, we observed strong similarities between activities and campaigns on different social media platforms, especially in terms of the temporal dynamics and volume of activity, behavioural patterns, fragmentation of the conversation and the distribution of the topics in relation to the ongoing regional or extra-regional geopolitical crises and wars.



Furthermore, we also observed that several opposing clusters of social media accounts regularly promoted similar or identical content across social media platforms. Consumers of the outlinks on Twitter and Telegram were frequently directed to several social media domains such as YouTube, while several websites covering related news also received similar engagement from correlated social media clusters. All in all, we observed similar behavioural patterns, content and representation of communities across platforms. The following pages briefly describe what this topology looked like on Twitter and how it related to the activities on other platforms.

To conduct this study, we applied a multi-layered and longitudinal data collection methodology with a particular attention to diversification of sources, cross-platform links, potential country or language-specific variations, in order to gain a broad perspective towards how *Kavkaz 2020* was represented online and whether the exercise itself actually impacted the information environment in meaningful and tangible ways. We cross-examined three sources for the news data. First, we continually crawled the relevant news and checked their social media engagement with a custom web crawler developed during recent projects. Second, we utilized the Media Cloud tool created by the MIT Center for Civic Media and the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University,¹⁷⁷ to monitor relevant coverage by international news media and relevant websites. Third, we acquired an additional layer of data from the GDELT

Project (Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone),¹⁷⁸ collecting themes, entities and actual source links mentioned in the dataset.

In the second phase, we cross-examined all three sources, crawled additional layers of data using outlinks from the existing sources and conducted a relevancy check to eliminate irrelevant data points and ensure data quality. In addition, social media conversations were also monitored and collected through Application Programming Interface (API) software provided by platforms, with a particular focus on their relationship with the links and content in the first set of data described above.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT AND ONLINE NEWS LANDSCAPE

Compared to the *Tsentr 2019* exercise of the previous year, social media engagements and content production rates, both on social media and by news outlets, were higher in relation to the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise. Overall, in Russian, English and other European languages, the volume of social media engagements approached the levels previously observed during the *Vostok 2018* and *Zapad 2017* exercises in the previous years. Moreover, the transitivity between the content and engagements between topics were high. In particular, the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, the protests and crackdown in Belarus, the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine and several other elements strongly correlated with the information activities



within the context of the exercise this year. Crucially, the unprecedented intensity and implications of the 44-day war in the Caucasus changed the entire news and social media landscape in relation to the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise.

Nevertheless, the following chart represents the content produced in Russian between early 2019 and October 2020 in relation to the major military exercises and their social media engagement rates (Facebook and Twitter) in comparison. Green bars represent the volume of content for each month, while the red line indicates the social media engagement. The level of content production and engagement in the first half of 2020 clearly indicates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the coverage of and attention to the major military exercises in Russian domains. Still, the engagement metrics for the content related to *Kavkaz 2020* recorded significant spikes, occurring several times in July and August and peaking in September. As the following pages also show, a detailed look into these spikes indicates the impact of the regional wars and crises, rather than the sole impact of the information events accompanying *Kavkaz 2020*.

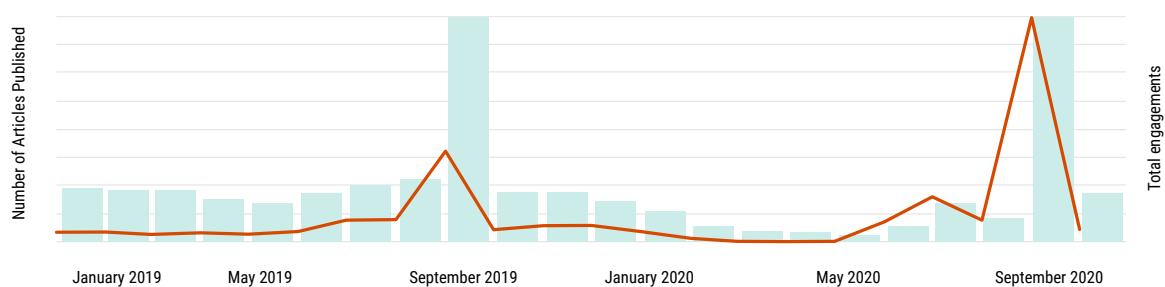


Chart 1: Representation of the online content, including news, blog posts, YouTube videos in Russian, within a period ranging from early 2019 to October 2020. The content was filtered for relevance to the military exercises.

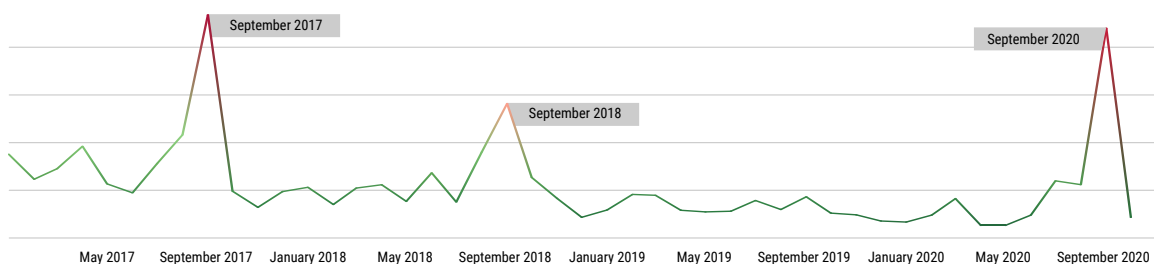


Chart 2: Representation of the volume of relevant conversations on Twitter in multiple languages. The conversation and campaigns regarding major exercises spiked several times.

Again, Chart 2 shows the longitudinal trends of activity on Twitter with regard to Russian military exercises. The number of total tweets, including both retweets and original tweets, spiked each September since 2017, while the *Zapad*, *Vostok* and *Kavkaz*-related tweets clearly reached higher levels.



Our observations confirm similar trends in terms of the activity levels on other platforms, including Facebook, VK (VKontakte), Telegram, YouTube and several new-generation platforms that are not yet very popular.

As mentioned above, a closer look at the trends of news coverage and content production yields several other findings. For example, Chart 3 shows one of the results of our multi-phased crawling of relevant content online. Briefly, following the trends depicted in previous charts, we crawled additional content by using the links shared on social media platforms and shown in the news articles for directing readers to other websites or news content. Filtering all the new material in favour of the specific mentions of *Kavkaz 2020*, we found that it was in fact mentioned many more times starting from 27 September. Remarkably, a significant proportion of the early coverage of the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia mentioned *Kavkaz 2020* in terms of its geographical proximity, Russia's close relations with Armenia and the Kremlin's potential role in the conflict. In addition, the events in Belarus are mentioned alongside *Kavkaz 2020*, leading to some additional spikes in August and October.

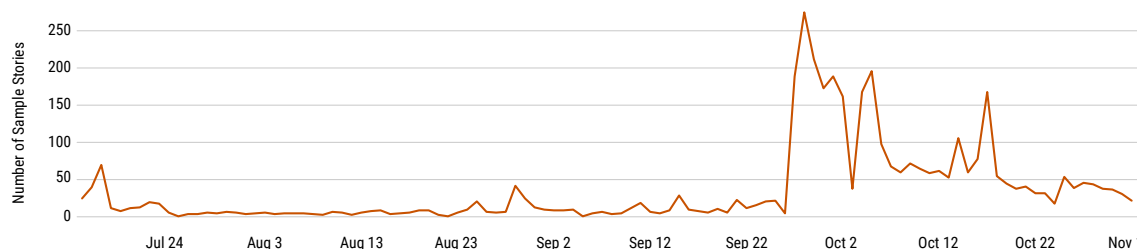


Chart 3: Representation of the coverage in English and other European languages by news outlets and relevant websites on a daily basis between mid-July and 1 November 2020.

Adding to the temporal dynamics, an additional check of some of these entities reveals a similar trend. We use an in-house algorithm to detect the organizations, influential persons and places in the corpus. We also cross-check the distribution of our detected list of entities with other tools we used, the Media Cloud and GDELT findings, and confirm a widely applicable distribution. Intuitively, the defence ministry (mostly of the Russian Federation, but also of Armenia and Pakistan) is the most commonly detected organization in the dataset. However, mentions of NATO, the EU, the UN, the OSCE Minsk Group and the State Department indicate that *Kavkaz 2020* was mentioned in relation to other ongoing events. During our analysis, we qualitatively verified this observation. Many sources mentioned the organizations in Chart 4 and *Kavkaz 2020* in the same article concerning the ongoing events in Nagorno-Karabakh, Belarus and Ukraine.



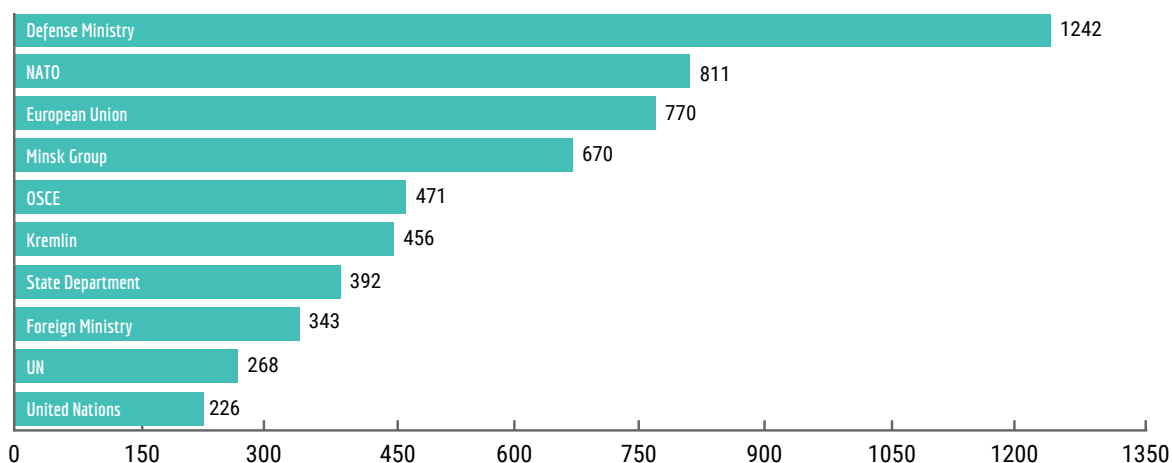


Chart 4: Entities mentioned in the *Kavkaz 2020* Web 1.0 (news and websites) dataset. The numbers were computed using a random sample of news articles from our dataset.

The list of the most frequent mentions of country and city names reveals an even clearer picture of the coverage and representation of *Kavkaz 2020*. The number one place mentioned in the corpus we collected was Azerbaijan, followed by Russia, Turkey, Armenia, Belarus and the United States. In addition, we also checked the names of influential figures in terms of the volume of mentions in the relevant coverage. Adding to the intuitive mentions of President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia and opposition leader Svyatlana Tsikhanowskaya of Belarus were mentioned many times in the corpus alongside the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise.

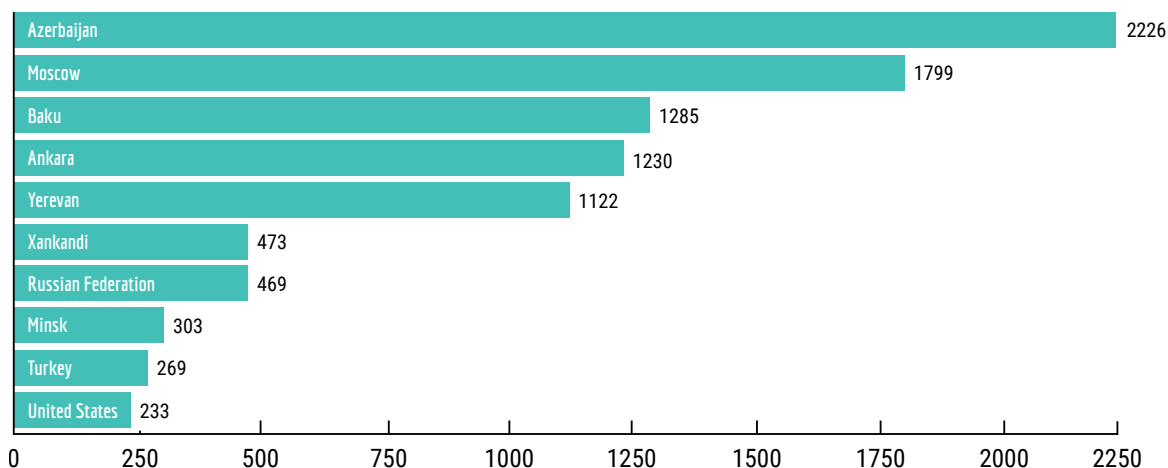


Chart 5: Location names mentioned in the collected dataset



For further topical and context-dependent analyses, we filtered our dataset into various language and country groups, with a particular focus on Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine, and also added an exploration of content about South Asia as the final element.

Armenia-originated and Armenian coverage focused on several narratives. First, the officially promoted narrative focused on the deterrent value, professionalism, fitness for purpose and increasing power of the Armenian military as a result of the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise. Second, Armenian sources suggested that Armenian-Russian defence cooperation and joint exercises would deter Azerbaijan and eventually lead to a decisive defeat of the Azerbaijani forces in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Another common theme across the Armenian sources was the defeat of “pan-Turkism” with the help of allies such as Russia and China.

In Azerbaijan, the most frequent themes and narratives were negative in tone vis-a-vis the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise. According to an exploratory analysis of the Azerbaijani sources, the first significant mentions and coverage of the exercise emanated from Baku’s announcement that Azerbaijan will not attend *Kavkaz 2020* but keep its participation to a symbolic, observer level. The second frequent theme in the Azerbaijani sources was also negative towards Russia, critical of the Kremlin’s material, military and financial support of Armenia and therefore the occupation of Karabakh. This theme was observable despite the official statements and presidential speeches which emphasized friendship with Russia. Third, we observed increased levels of emphasis on the Turkish-Azerbaijani defence partnership and “military alliance”. Finally, criticism of Pakistan over its participation in *Kavkaz 2020* alongside Armenia was observed to a limited extent. Nevertheless, Pakistan’s diplomatic service appeared active in an effort to ease such concerns among Azerbaijanis by speaking to the mass media. Moreover, during the following weeks and war in Nagorno-Karabakh Pakistan rhetorically supported Azerbaijan, and pro-Pakistan sentiment was very high among Azerbaijanis.

In Ukraine, the overwhelmingly influential narrative and theme concerned the threat from Russia and potential further aggression by the Russian military, especially in the context of the military build-up and proximity of the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise to Ukrainian territory. In addition, Ukrainian sources mentioned NATO, the United States and the European Union alongside *Kavkaz 2020* within the same content, which clearly indicated a narrative of deterrence and military balance. Furthermore, during the exercise, transitivity between the Ukrainian news sources and social media clusters was high as the capabilities of the Russian military were dismissed and satire was used to counter the threatening military narratives being employed by Russian information actors.



SOCIAL MEDIA: MAIN FINDINGS

To further explore and analyse the representation of the exercise in the information environment and to investigate its potential impacts, we monitored relevant activities and conversations on multiple social media platforms, both from a statistical perspective and with regard to further interpretation of data in terms of relevant inauthentic activities online, ongoing conflicts and the geopolitical context. Namely, we monitored conversations on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook (a sample of public pages), VK (VKontakte), Telegram and some other social media platforms that tend to attract fewer users.

In sum, conversation and content promotion trends on all platforms were similar in terms of their temporal dynamics, conversational patterns, links being shared, narratives being pushed and topics being discussed. This subsection presents the descriptive findings of the analysis on data collected from Twitter. Social media trends were similar with the time-series analysis presented in the previous subsection. Nevertheless, this time we use a more selective approach for analysing the conversations solely focusing on the exercise, events during the exercise and its military aspects. Furthermore, we also limit our data collection to filter out other topics after the end of September. As mentioned above, regional events clearly affect what is being spoken vis-a-vis *Kavkaz 2020*. However, we apply another level of data cleaning to the Twitter data we collected to focus on the conversations during the exercise and what happened as part of it. This filtering notwithstanding, further sections will further document the context-dependent coverage of the exercise overall.

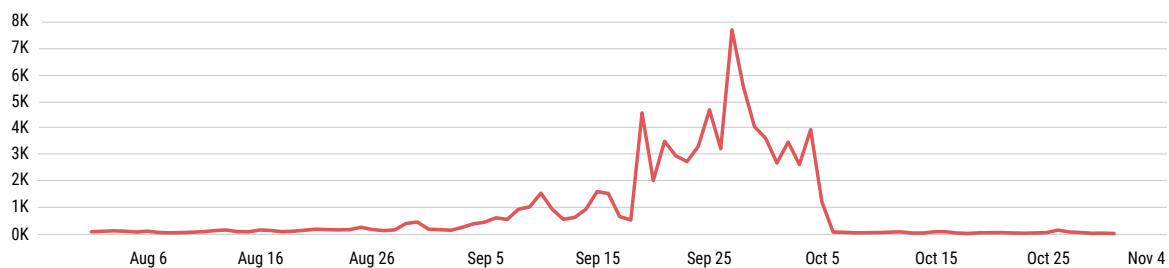


Chart 6: Volume of Tweets after the final data cleaning and acquiring *Kavkaz 2020* event-specific dataset. The line spans the period from 1 August to 1 November 2020.

In the final data we analysed for this objective, the number of Tweets and level of activity starts increasing in late August and early September. The first peaks are observed in mid-September, while the activity reaches high levels during the exercise itself. However, the most important date in terms of the volume, once again, is 27 September, with additional significant activity in the following days. On 27 September the escalation between Azerbaijan and Armenia developed into a full-scale war. A closer look into the social media posts reveals the effect of the war across social media platforms and among accounts that were previously active in the coverage of *Kavkaz 2020*.



Thus, the strictly filtered dataset also confirms the effect of the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the context of *Kavkaz 2020*-related information activities and conversations on social media.

The analysis of the conversational networks also showed significant fragmentation of Twitter conversations. We observe a similar network structure in mention, reply, quote, hashtag, phrase and retweet networks. This is partly to be expected and due to the presence of various languages as well as country-specific agendas. However, when we combined the network analysis with further investigation of topics, themes, narratives and shared links, the datasets we acquired from social media clearly depict the presence of multiple clusters, pursuing different strategic agendas vis-a-vis ongoing conflicts and competing with each other. Therefore, information campaigns in relation to *Kavkaz 2020* were not solely in favour of one actor. Instead, *Kavkaz 2020* was subject to a competitive information environment and complex set of interactions online, often with relevance to regional and extra-regional geopolitical fault lines. In addition, in all of the clusters shown in Chart 7, we recorded bot and troll activities, often peaking when an overarching conflict event occurs.

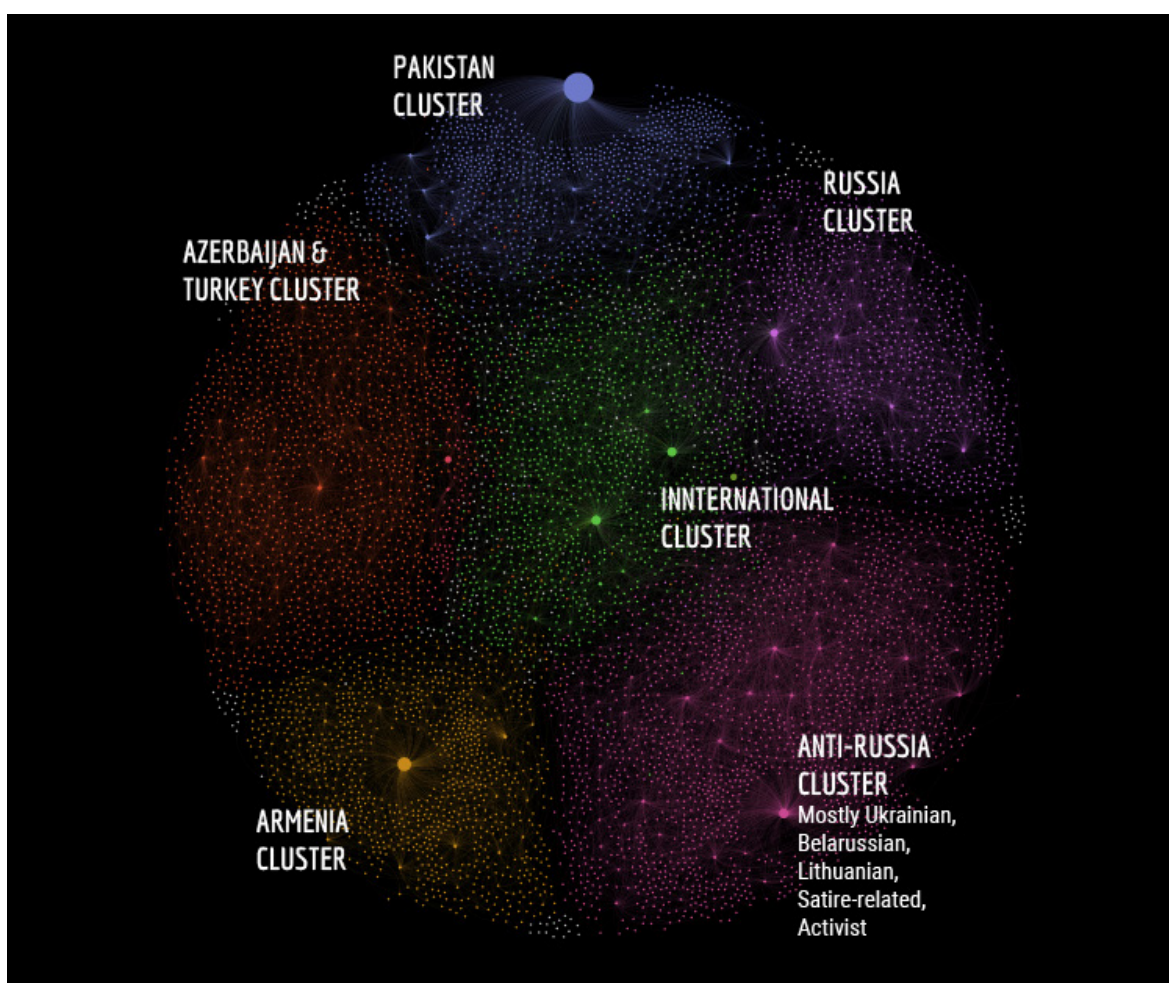


Chart 7: Twitter - Retweet Networks of the conversation during the *Kavkaz 2020* exercise. Retweets are represented as connections between retweeting and retweeted accounts. Node sizes represent the influence of individual accounts, while colours represent distinct communities.



Postings and interactions in public Telegram channels indicated similar trends and behavioural patterns. However, exploring around 3,000 messages in more than 300 channels, we observed several content-related differences between Twitter and Telegram environments. In all regional languages, Russian and English activities, Telegram often led others in terms of the formation of more radicalized, more partisan and echo-chamber-like groups. This is to be expected and has been documented many times as mostly emanating from how the platform is designed. As a result, the fragmentations we observed in the Twitter conversations were much clearer in Telegram-specific activity.

A common pattern observed in many platforms including Twitter and Telegram was the frequent use of outlinks to other platforms. YouTube, as in other cases, is an especially attractive platform to promote, store or organize relevant visual content. In addition, official accounts from various defence ministries, diplomatic services and major news outlets disseminate well-curated exercise-related content on YouTube, which is later re-produced, re-curated or promoted by social media accounts. During the period of this study, a large quantity of highly engaged content regarding *Kavkaz 2020* was stored and disseminated from YouTube to other platforms. Apart from the content promoted by official sources, a number of YouTube channels are active in generating content containing military-related themes, anti-NATO and anti-Western themes. Interestingly, re-curated material from *Kavkaz 2020* claiming establishment of a new Asia-centric military alliance against the United States and NATO features among the videos we observed. Some of these videos are narrated with robotic computer-generated voice, resembling many other examples of such content from East Asia and countries around the South China Sea.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

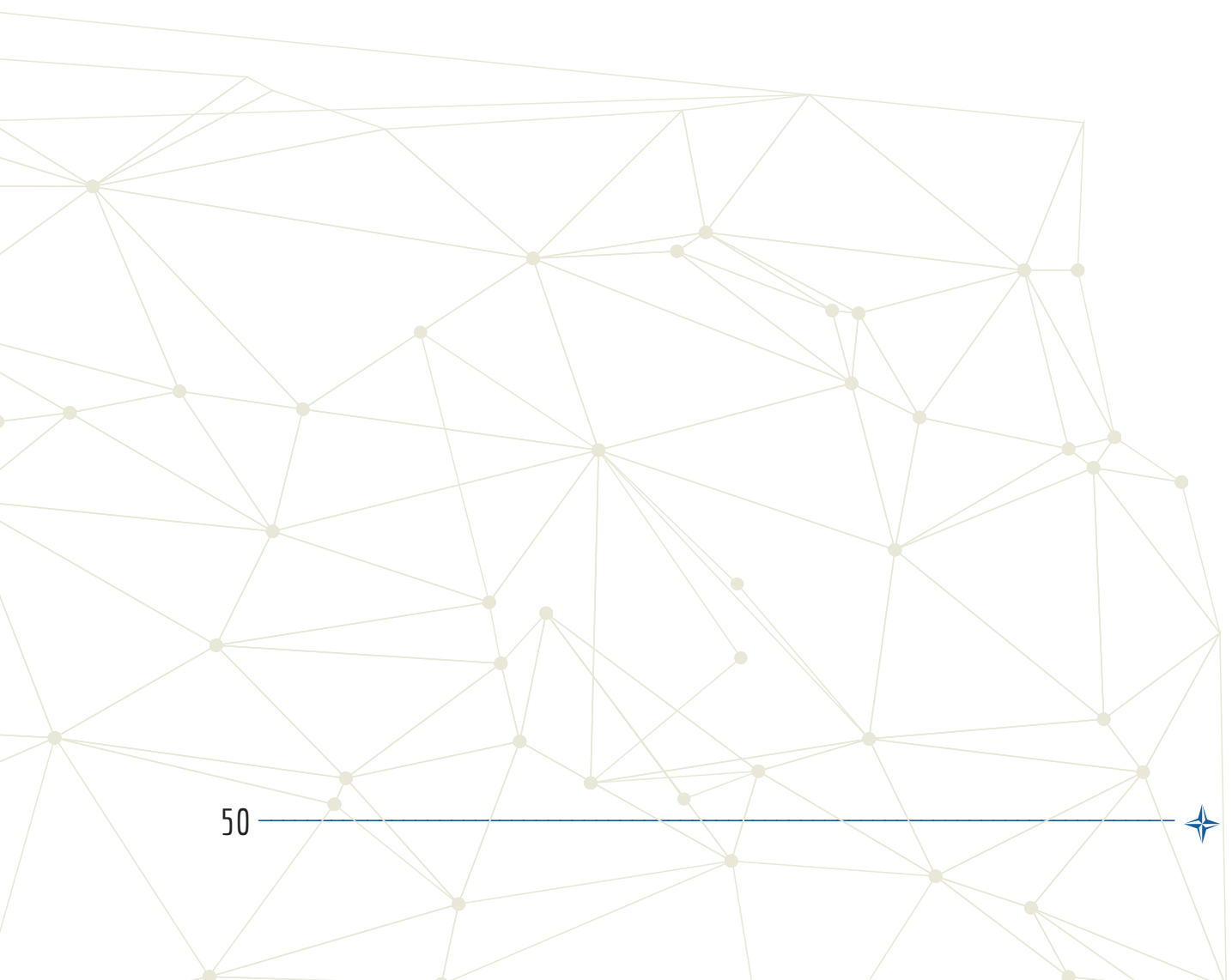
This digital survey adopted two frameworks proposed and used for analysing information campaigns. The objective of this investigation was to explore how *Kavkaz 2020* was represented in the information environment and whether the exercise itself had an impact in terms of what was being spoken, how far the information reached and whether or how any major influence campaign was used in the context of the exercise to achieve such strategic objectives.

The first is the BEND Framework, proposed as a Social Cybersecurity methodological framework to understand, analyse and characterize influence campaigns, which includes 16 different influence manoeuvres.¹⁷⁹ Social Cybersecurity, similar to conventional cybersecurity, is an operational scientific discipline, with a special focus on hostile influence campaigns and the use of the cyber domain to change human behaviour.

The second framework, used to characterize influence techniques and tactics to characterize information campaigns, is the AMITT Framework (AMITT for Adversarial Misinformation Influence Tactics and Techniques).¹⁸⁰ The AMITT Framework adopts a widely accepted methodological approach shared in cybersecurity and information security communities.



Using both frameworks, we confidently identified multiple ongoing influence operations and the use of information and network manoeuvres during and after *Kavkaz 2020*. For example, large numbers of bots and troll armies were at times very active to enhance certain messages, distract audiences or back specific actors on social media. However, the overwhelming majority of such campaigns were within the context of ongoing regional conflicts or the India-Pakistan strategic competition. The most specific “information confrontation” with the involvement of information manoeuvres was about the geopolitical tensions in the Caucasus, where Azerbaijan and Turkey conducted joint military exercises at the time when *Kavkaz 2020* was fully in play, creating a perception of confrontation between two axes. Regional media outlets from multiple countries and later campaigns on social media used this dichotomy as a major theme. Therefore, *Kavkaz 2020*, as a theme of influence, did not particularly serve the owner country, but rapidly became attached to ongoing regional competitions.



OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Kavkaz 2020 was a key exercise in Russia's 2020 training cycle, and communicated several key messages to partners and potential adversaries alike. Russia conveyed its new branding approaches to military exercises to demonstrate its considerable power projection potential, modern military capabilities, Eurasian aspirations and future geopolitical intents in its 'near abroad' – all of significance to the West, Russian's partners and the European information environment alike.

Kavkaz 2020 differed from earlier strategic exercises in a number of ways and for a number of reasons. Some of them are cumulative, having arisen over the past few years, while others have emerged unexpectedly.

For the last few years the world has witnessed a worsening geopolitical situation globally and regionally. Russia has contributed to this a lot. Increasing militarization, actions in breach of agreements, annexation of territory and interference in other nations' affairs have become the context for Russia's attempts to prove its status as a global power. As part of this process, it has also become essential for Russia to maintain its current allied relationships and secure new allies, so it has done everything in its power and used every tool at its disposal to achieve this task, the military no exception.

In order to feel confident about its claim to the status of a global power, military power to Russia is an essential requirement which translates into just such a status, according to the Russian understanding of the world. Russia's reform of its Armed Forces has lasted for more than a decade. With the reform now almost complete, the military needs to prove its success, so the political leadership can translate this achievement into political behaviour and continue political change, which has fully affected defence and the military.

At the same time, this has also forced the militaries of Russia's neighbours and NATO to take a closer look at what is happening in Russia, so *Kavkaz 2020* was observed more closely than exercises before. Russia's response was predictable and typical, as it tried to present the West and NATO as aggressive and determined to attack Russia – and sought to "prove" it.

The exercise took place in the year announced as the final year of the military reform process. While the MoD viewed it as essential to be able to prove the success of the reform process, it was also of utmost importance to two of the highest military commanders – Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and CGS Gen Gerasimov. This year they have reached the upper age limit for generals to remain on active duty. Only the president can extend it. If this happens,



moreover, it will be the first time in the history of modern Russia, as this has never happened before. For both generals, it was thus personally important to demonstrate the success of the reform process which they have overseen.

Last but not least, *Kavkaz 2020* took place at the height of the COVID pandemic, which challenged the planning, organization and execution of the exercise. It also meant that a range of precautions had to be taken in order to avoid a widespread COVID outbreak in the Armed Forces.

For all these reasons the MoD was forced to adopt a new information approach. To prove that the reform was a success required a more realistic picture to be shown along with the demonstration showpiece. It was important not only to convince the Russian political leadership of this but also to present the new military to the outside world. To suit the occasion, therefore, the MoD redesigned messages and narratives, changed the means of their delivery and expanded target audiences. It also changed its modus operandi. Along with mainstream Russian news agencies and media the MoD heavily involved its own specialist news agencies, TV and public information offices. It welcomed foreign military inspections under the Open Skies and the Vienna Document, while briefings by MoD officials were accompanied by wide coverage, interviews and presentations. On this occasion, the MoD provided more information about particular military activities concurrent with the exercise but outside it. The aim was to create a general picture, combined from the

sub-narratives in the country and abroad, designed to demonstrate Russian Armed Forces progress and to be persuadable enough to convince others of the success of the reform.

In line with Russia's international policy it was also important to present the country as a peaceful global power and potential leader for others to follow. To fulfil this mission it was necessary for particular new forms of messaging to be used during the exercise. This type of messaging included not only issuing invitations to other countries to attend but also efforts to present the exercise as exciting, attractive and useful to others.

Another sub-narrative aimed to prove that Russia was transparent and open. Announcing that Open Skies and Vienna Document inspections would be accepted, presenting briefings and allowing interviews had to create at least an image of Russia behaving according to the rules and norms of international order.

Part and parcel of all this was coverage on the topic of COVID-19, carefully thought through. One objective was to present the reformed military as a contributor to the country's success in the fight against COVID-19. Another was to prove that the situation in the country was under control, so, unlike NATO's Defender 2020, the exercise could be executed successfully. Finally, yet another was to prove that no pandemic could be an obstacle to the Russian military's ability to fight wars.



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