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ZAPAD 2021 COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS: MESSAGES, NARRATIVES, (DIS)INFORMATION

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” ZAPAD 2021 amounted to pure information warfare – complete with intimidation, military signalling, political messaging, efforts to attract allies and divide enemies, and narratives conveyed to its own population and those outside Russia.

PREFACE

On 10-16 September 2021, Russia conducted the formal part of *ZAPAD 2021*, one in a cycle of annual military exercises which represent the culmination of training by the Russian Federation Armed Forces in a given year. As ‘Zapad’ (the Russian word for ‘west’) suggests, the exercise is centred on what Russia calls the Western strategic sector or ‘direction’. *ZAPAD 2021* included Belarus. Accordingly, it was termed ‘a joint strategic exercise’, primarily to emphasise the participation of Belarus as well as that of the Russia-controlled Collective Security Treaty Organisation. *ZAPAD 2021* was preceded by weeks of preparatory and associated exercises, and, as repeatedly emphasised by Russia, involved as many as 200,000 troops, drawn predominantly from Russia.

ZAPAD 2021 included a powerful communication campaign in the form of messages and narratives, which this study identifies, explores, and explains.

This study consists of two separate but interconnected parts:

Part I looks at the exercise from the perspective of what the exercise signalled, both explicitly and implicitly. It deconstructs and groups these messages and narratives.

In addition, it offers a wealth of information of interest to any student of Russia’s behaviour, be it concerning the military and security or policy and media.

Part II looks at communication associated with *ZAPAD 2021* with an eye on the information environments in the three Baltic states and Poland, all targeted by *ZAPAD 2021* communication. It does so by balancing and combining a holistic understanding with forensic attention to detail. It analyses



both official communication from the Russian Federation and Belarus and communication in digital news outlets, based on comprehensive research underpinned by a unique methodology.

Visual aids abound throughout the study – multiple screen captures from *ZAPAD 2021* reports in the Russian media, including TV and online, in the first part of the study; and dedicated, detailed graphs and charts in the second part of the study for illustration purposes and to provide further insights.

KEY FINDINGS – **PART I:** **ZAPAD 2021 MESSAGES** **AND NARRATIVES.**

Part I of the study concludes that:

- As a massive show of military force, *ZAPAD 2021* reflected Russia's enduring preoccupation with 'Great Power' status, in which, Russia believes, military might reigns supreme. This study also argues that an additional aim of *ZAPAD 2021* was to portray Russia as a global power that is strengthening its positions in and fighting for domination in Europe.
- Some of the most prominent communication aspects of *ZAPAD 2021* amounted to the manifestation of open disregard for international law and had the cumulative effect of undisguised intimidation. Communications

associated with the exercise were of a much more aggressive and provocative nature than in previous exercises.

- *ZAPAD 2021* featured various sub-narratives. These went as follows:
 - a. Russia's ability to attract other nations and create and lead political alliances and military coalitions with Belarus and beyond;
 - b. Russian and Belarusian forces' successful integration, underpinned by spiritual unity and common values;
 - c. The focus on Russia's westernmost Kaliningrad exclave as a fortress to be defended at all costs;
 - d. As in previous exercises, the portrayal of President Putin as a capable and militarily competent supreme commander-in-chief;
 - e. In a sub-narrative directed mostly to domestic audiences, the contention that NATO has been thoroughly intimidated by Russia's newfound military might.
- In a likely though hidden element, *ZAPAD 2021* tested the parameters of what is formally known as the State Defence Plan. From what is known about this classified document, it is a collection of scenarios of operations, in this case in the western theatre.



KEY FINDINGS – PART II: ZAPAD 2021 COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS.

Part II, 'ZAPAD 2021 communication analysis', concludes that:

- *ZAPAD 2021* communication rested on multiple messaging pillars, each assessed to have a distinct objective designed to shape the public's opinion of the exercise. At least four communication themes were identified in *ZAPAD 2021* coverage, which we categorised as defensive, inclusive, exclusive, and offensive. The study details each of these;
- In addition to provision of bona fide information, the Russian Federation and Belarus employed what could be described as a series of complex information influence operations – concerted efforts to influence audiences through information or disinformation – to communicate strategic narratives and messages on *ZAPAD 2021* throughout the full cycle of the exercise. Though limited, the high number of information influence operations indicates that communication actors were willing to illegitimately exploit the information environments of Russia's neighbours and manipulate public debate on the conduct of *ZAPAD 2021*;
- Despite the dominance of factual-neutral communication, at least three recurrent strategies for the dissemination of false and misleading content were identified: distribution of forged content in relation to the exercise via fringe and/or less prominent outlets; the posting of inauthentic comments under articles published by major Western digital outlets; and the removal of content associated with the public-health conditions in and among the forces of participating nations.



RUSSIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Key Russian media are controlled by the state, either directly or through Kremlin-linked or Kremlin-friendly associates. Such has been the effect of the Kremlin's desire to control information — a trend which dates back to Russian President Vladimir Putin's ascent to power more than two decades ago — that today, state control over media extends from TV to newswires, newspapers, and the online media environment.¹ The repressive conditions have become even more extreme with a comprehensive crackdown on any dissent both in the mainstream and social media following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Russian government media include the government newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta, the official Defence Ministry newspaper Krasnaya Zvezda, and Defence Ministry-controlled Zvezda TV, among others.

State-owned news agencies—TASS and RIA Novosti—drive the Kremlin's news agenda.

At home, Russia's most popular television networks are state-owned or state-controlled: state Rossiya 1, state-controlled Channel One, and Gazprom-owned NTV.

Some of the most popular newspapers and news websites are controlled by interests aligned with the Kremlin: the pro-Kremlin daily Izvestia; the pro-Kremlin tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda (Russia's most popular); business dailies Kommersant and Vedomosti; two of Russia's most popular news websites, Lenta.ru and Gazeta.ru; and Russian defence industry weekly Voenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer, among others.

Online, propaganda websites peddle Kremlin-friendly information and disinformation:

RIAfan, the flagship of Kremlin associate Yevgeny Prigozhin's Patriot Media Group, and two of its siblings, Politika Segodnya and Ekonomika Segodnya, to name but a few; as well as others from the same ilk.

Abroad, RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik are the jewels in the crown of the Kremlin's outward-facing media empire. Closer to home, there are the international versions of Russia's main state-controlled television channels. A variety of proxy media are openly or secretly connected to Russia. Social media influence operations, complete with the employment of human-input trolls and automated bots, are yet another weapon in Russia's waging of what could be justifiably described as information warfare—a concept emphasised by Russian military thinkers.

Other media, even those capable of criticising the authorities, are generally supportive of the Kremlin's bellicose foreign policy line: popular tabloid Moskovskiy Komsomolets; broadsheet Nezavisimaya Gazeta; left-nationalist website Svobodnaya Pressa;



popular pro-Kremlin online newspaper Vzglyad; pro-Kremlin website Life.ru.

This is a characteristic of most if not all media listed in appropriate charts in the communication analysis part of this study, including a plethora of propaganda sites: Eadaily.com, Nation-news.ru, Newinform.com, Politross.com, Pravda.ru, Regnum.ru, Rossaprimavera.ru, Topwar.ru, and Tsargrad, among others.

This degree of state control enables a surge of coverage to be unleashed at will when necessary. In the context of military exercises, this included an information

campaign highly critical of this year's Defender Europe 2021 multinational NATO exercise. This was followed by a similarly intensive information campaign on Russia's own *ZAPAD 2021*, which was at once defensive of the exercise and provocative towards Russia's counterparts, be that NATO or, for example, Ukraine.

The few remaining media in Russia frequently highly critical of the ruling elite have been blocked, shut down, or forced to cease their operations following the invasion of Ukraine, including popular radio station Ekho Moskvyy, independent TV channel Dozhd, and investigative newspaper Novaya Gazeta.



PART I.

ZAPAD 2021: CONTEXT; MESSAGES; NARRATIVES; BLACKMAIL?

By Daivis Petraitis

INTRODUCTION

Once every four years, the Russian Federation Armed Forces General Staff (GS) runs a formal Strategic-Level Exercise (SLE) in a particular Joint Strategic Command (JCS). In 2021 this type of exercise, termed *ZAPAD* ('West') 2021 was conducted once again. It forms part of a cycle of annual military exercises which represent the culmination of training by the Russian Federation Armed Forces in a given year.

Prior to the appointment of the current defence minister, Sergey Shoygu, the majority of these SLEs took the form of a Command-Post Exercise (CPX) played out in a headquarters environment—with limited forces in the field. Shoygu changed this, so that it became the new rule that all SLEs/CPXs would be run with heavy involvement of troops. Beyond testing the workings of particular parts of the State Defence Plan (SDP) and assessing the readiness and ability of troops to act accordingly, a number of additional tasks are executed during SLEs. For the past few years, messaging to

different audiences has formed a prominent part of these SLEs.

This study concentrates on the information domain associated with *ZAPAD 2021*: the messages and the narratives, whether implicitly communicated or explicitly broadcast. It follows the same methodology that underpinned previous analyses of *VOSTOK 2018*,² *TSENTR 2019*,³ and *KAVKAZ 2020*.⁴ Other aspects of the new State Defence Plan, such as experimentation with the forces' future combat capabilities, are dealt with only brief.



ZAPAD 2021: BACKGROUND

The current iteration of the ZAPAD exercise series started with ZAPAD 1999, where the main task was to demonstrate a potential response to NATO. The GS had developed a plan (Operation ZAPAD), which it tested mostly in a CPX format. With the armed forces in a lamentable state at that time, no more than small indicative units were involved in the field. ZAPAD 1999 was followed by a hiatus; the next exercise in the ZAPAD cycle was postponed. The state of the armed forces rather than the schedule of exercises was prioritised as the MoD concentrated on the implementation of the so-called 'Ivanov doctrine'⁵ and prepared to reform the military in order to get the new forces it desired. That reform started in 2008, and as soon as reformed units began to arrive, the GS renewed the practice of SLEs. KAVKAZ ('Caucasus') 2008, ZAPAD 2009, VOSTOK ('East') 2010, TSENTR ('Centre') 2011, KAVKAZ 2012 and ZAPAD 2013 grew in scale and scope and were used to test the capability of the modernised armed forces in responding to threats coming from the south, west, east, and centre, as implied by each exercise's name.

In 2013 the President signed the first State Defence Plan in the history of modern Russia (SDP 2013–2015). The Plan had been prepared by the GS and was based on these exercises' theoretical findings and practical results. By the time the second State Defence Plan was drawn up for the now sizable military forces, it covered not

two- but a four-year period (SDP 2016–2020). This new SDP incorporated the findings from VOSTOK 2014 and TSENTR 2015 (though not yet KAVKAZ 2016) and the lessons learned from military operations in Georgia and Crimea. The Russian State Defence Plan is classified, but open sources indicate a document consisting of different annexes, each prescribing a response to a particular threat. ZAPAD 2017 tested one of the response annexes (Operation ZAPAD) on a full-scale basis.⁶

Today, the situation is different for several key reasons.

First, the reform has been officially declared complete,⁷ the forces are now sizable, restructured, rearmed, and combat ready.

Second, the follow-on State Defence Plan, SDP 2021–2025, has been approved.⁸ It is likely crucially different from previous SDPs in several key aspects by including lessons learned from SLEs in the period 2015–2020 and operations in Syria and Ukraine, the availability of new weapons and equipment, and the development of new war-fighting elements.

Third, the West is preoccupied with other external and internal problems, which likely also contributed to the thrust of the new plan.

However, the question of the Russia-Belarus Union State is yet to be finalised, bringing some uncertainty to the SDP.



The two-fold priority of the early 2020s is to trial the updates, modifications, and changes introduced to the State Defence Plan (including 'Operation ZAPAD'), yet to simultaneously keep its details hidden as much as possible. *ZAPAD 2021* concentrated on these two tasks and continued to bring political messages to audiences inside and outside.

ZAPAD 2021 took place in a complex and volatile geopolitical environment. The situation in Afghanistan and Ukraine, the worsening relations between the West and Russia and the West and Belarus, the unclear relationship between Russia and China, events in Belarus and along its borders, and the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic all had an impact on the information domain associated with the exercise. At the same time, Russia placed less emphasis on NATO's 2021 military activities, which occurred during *ZAPAD 2021*. After last year's political disturbances in Belarus, the process of 'union state' integration influenced *ZAPAD 2021* organisation and the way both countries behaved before and during the exercise. Securing new allies, promoting 'union state' integration and emphasising the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) became issues of particular importance.

Similar to previous exercises, *ZAPAD 2021* can be characterised as a complex of activities, which covered large territories and involved sizable forces. Yet compared to the *ZAPAD* exercises of 2013 and 2017,

ZAPAD 2021 had unique features too. It involved a very large number of troops, these numbers obscured by contradictory information. It also became apparent that those who communicated about the exercise were permitted to improvise, as long as they covered two important talking points: the exercise being 'defensive' and 'not directed against anyone'. The official media (MoD, official TV channels, etc.) provided exercise coverage from fewer training grounds compared to previous SLEs. Foreign observation and media coverage were also more restricted compared to previous years. For the first time, the MoD deliberately ignored NATO and did not invite any NATO Defence Attaches (DA) or OSCE observers to the Russian part of *ZAPAD 2021*. While stiff formality prevailed on the part of the MoD, it was left to journalists from provocative programmes such as '60 Minutes' on Russia's official state television network *Rossiya 1* or politicians like controversial nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy to jeer aggressively at Russia's opposite numbers.

Russian military philosophy and culture differ from the West's. Exercises in Russia are planned in detail and activities are carefully coordinated and synchronised, leaving little room for improvisation. Intensive preparation complete with the familiar Russian practice of *maskirovka* (concealment) is another hallmark of these exercises. Usually, these exercises also culminate in staged, performative elements, which are in and of themselves have



considerable communicative value. Again, *ZAPAD 2021* was no exception.

Throughout, *ZAPAD 2021* followed the same *modus operandi* as previous SLEs. Usually, the year starts with 'organisation and mobilisation' gatherings of the highest military leadership, during which the GS presents the design of the upcoming SLE. After this meeting, similar gatherings take place at lower levels (JSC/OC (Operational Command)), where guidance for the exercise is issued, special exercises and snap inspections are planned, and the detail of the demonstrational part of the exercise is worked out. The latter forms the culmination and named part of the exercise.

This year, for the first time, the meeting of the top brass included a two-sided roundtable map game.⁹ Why this was publicised is not clear. In a historical parallel, however, this arguably echoed a two-sided map game from almost exactly seventy years ago: in January 1941, shortly before the German invasion of the Soviet Union, such a game aimed to test final preparations before the USSR was at war.¹⁰

During it, the generals most probably discussed the details of the new SDP and worked out proposals to include in the upcoming SLE. It is likely that new tactical elements, experimentation with new weapons and equipment, new battle algorithms, and potential unit composition were specified as the tasks for *ZAPAD 2021* and prioritised over the desire to re-enact

Operation *ZAPAD* as it had been conducted before. This assumption is borne out of the substantial number of two-sided, force-on-force exercises – the format best suited to the trial runs of this nature – which took place during the preparation phase and the exercise itself.

ZAPAD 2021: BACK TO THE FUTURE

In recent years, a new key priority has emerged: the protection of and insistence on Russia's understanding of the 'true' version of its history and especially the role of its military in World War II. The MoD is deeply involved in the effort to 'defend' Russian history, prevent its 're-writing' and combat 'fake Western interpretations' of World War II. In response to the European Parliament's resolution on World War II, which condemned 'all manifestations and propagation of totalitarian ideologies, such as Nazism and Stalinism',¹¹ Russia launched a highly coordinated and vociferous information campaign. President Putin, the MoD and other state institutions, various national societies and associations, researchers, archivists, and the media all contributed to this effort.¹²

The glorification of the military and emphasis of its role as saviour and protector of Russia is continuous and commonplace. *ZAPAD 2021* was no exception to this rule.

As the exercise unfolded, President Putin and the MoD performed two acts which





Figure 1: Putin speaks during the memorial opening ceremony



Figure 2: soldiers from the 6th Company are immortalised in the monument as part of Nevsky's troop.^{69,70}

at first glance appeared unrelated but turned out to be indirectly associated with the exercise. First, Putin signed a decree awarding twelve more Russian cities the status of 'City of Labour Glory',^{13,14} for a total of forty-four such cities in addition to Russia's thirteen 'Hero Cities' and forty-five 'Cities of Warrior Glory'.¹⁵ On 12 September, another project by the MoD and Putin was unveiled—a monument devoted to one of the most widely respected figures of Russian history, Alexander Nevsky.¹⁶ To celebrate his 800th birthday anniversary a sculpture consisting of Prince Nevsky himself and his troop was erected in the north-western city of Pskov. It was meant to immortalise his victory against the 'German knights'¹⁷ (read 'the West') and promote the Russian military. The monument stands for the continuation of Russia's martial traditions. Three medieval warriors next to the prince himself have the faces of soldiers from the 6th Company of the Alexander Nevsky

Airborne Troops Regiment (76th Airborne Division). In Chechnya, the company was involved in a battle during which almost the entire force was wiped out.¹⁸ In the memorial opening ceremony, designed to be a morale booster, the unit's representatives and a guard of honour were in attendance. Most of the regiment took part in *ZAPAD 2021*.

ZAPAD 2021: POLITICO-MILITARY CONTEXT

ZAPAD 2021 was merely an element, albeit major one, in Russia's exercise continuum. Viewed from a wider perspective, *ZAPAD 2021* fits into a general pattern of Russian military and political behaviour. It could be described as extortion through intimidation; directed almost exclusively against the West, the US, and (parts of) NATO. To determine why Russia is engaging in such



behaviour, whether it is driven exclusively by foreign policy factors or domestic considerations (e.g. regime survival), is outside the scope of this research. Suffice to say that this view of Russia's shared by many Russia scholars.¹⁹

Russia's attempt to intimidate the West became much more aggressive in 2021. It began with a military build-up near Ukraine in the spring of that year, which was maintained and leveraged throughout 2021. The build-up went hand in hand with *ZAPAD 2021*, by virtue of the exercise's being focused on the western part of Russia and Belarus and being directed towards the West.

Arguably, these Russian efforts were at least in part successful. The US in particular began an intensive round of bilateral consultations with Russia. Since *ZAPAD 2021* alone:

- On 22 September, the Chief of the General Staff (CGS), General Valeriy Gerasimov, met the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, in Helsinki, Finland.
- On 11 October, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland travelled to Moscow to meet Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov.
- On 15 October, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksey Overchuk travelled

to Washington D.C. to meet US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, among others.

- On 29 October, the President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, met Putin in St Petersburg. It is worth noting that Finland has historically acted as a mediator between Russia and the US.
- On 2 November, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev met CIA Director William Burns in Moscow.
- On 17 November, Patrushev and Sullivan spoke by phone.
- On 23 November, Gerasimov and Milley spoke by phone.

It is likely that informal, unpublicised contacts also took place.

These contacts likely endeavoured to culminate in another Putin-Biden summit—the prospect ended by the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

By contrast, NATO halved the size of Moscow's mission working at its Brussels headquarters to ten representatives and virtually terminated all dialogue.

All the while, Russia has been keen to emphasise a Russia-China alliance. On 23

November, the day of the Gerasimov-Milley phone call, Shoygu spoke to his Chinese counterpart, Wei Fenghe, to approve a 2021-2025 'road map' to increase military cooperation. The announcement on closer collaboration between the two nations included 'strategic military exercises and joint air patrols'²⁰ and a joint statement claiming that 'Russian-Chinese solidarity is "as strong as a mountain"'.²¹

It was perhaps an apt summary of Russian strategy when, in November 2021, Putin spoke of Russia's success at engineering 'a certain amount of tension' for NATO.²²

ZAPAD 2021: MESSAGES AND NARRATIVES

For the last few years, Russian SLE messaging has remained unchanged – subordinated to the imperative to reaffirm Russia's status as a military superpower and, accordingly, a 'Great Power'. As with previous SLEs, each of the ZAPAD 2021 messages could be divided into sub-narratives, though always in the service of this cause. Only the

wording of communications or the forms of presentation varied.

Information briefings on ZAPAD 2021 delivered by the MoD manipulated facts, offered deliberately misleading interpretations, and showed disregard for international agreements. Such an information policy could already be observed with KAVKAZ 2020, but was now practiced even more blatantly and audaciously. Another change introduced in the MoD's information briefings on ZAPAD 2021 was that only selected observers and defence attaches (DAs) were invited and admitted. The briefings did not shy away from presenting contradictory information: for example, while the exercise was described as defensive, offensive operations were being carried out on the ground. Moreover, rather than identifying unlawful combatants (*bandformirovaniya*—literally 'bandit formations') as the hypothetical enemy in this scenario, as was usually the case, the official scenario defined nation states as the aggressor (for example, the so called 'Polar Republic', more on this below). The general



Journalists from Zvezda TV broadcasting from Mulino and Belarusian training grounds (Pictures 3, 4 & 5)⁷¹





Images from Zvezda TV's 'I Serve Russia' programme from 19 September 2021 with Western media reactions to ZAPAD 2021 (Pictures 6, 7 & 8)⁷²

attitude towards NATO and the West was also more aggressive compared to previous exercises, especially in media reports.

ZAPAD 2021 also differed in the way messages and narratives were broadcast. Specialised media such as the MoD's Zvezda TV and Krasnaya Zvezda daily paper took the lead and were active in exercise coverage. As the media followed the troops, they broadcast events live from the scene, interviewed commanders and soldiers, and gave detailed explanations of exercise features and military innovations.

NATO COWED BY RUSSIA, RUSSIANS TOLD

During *KAVKAZ 2020*, the sub-narrative of Russia as a peaceful nation forced to defend itself against the aggressiveness of NATO aimed to narratively exploit NATO flights along the Russian borders or the exercises in Ukraine, Poland, or the Baltic states.²³ By contrast, the emphasis during *ZAPAD 2021* was on the contention that NATO had been cowed. Even Western concerns about *ZAPAD 2021* were presented as proof positive of Russia's might. The military's

Zvezda TV devoted airtime to commenting on *ZAPAD 2021* articles published by Western media, selecting those that emphasised the novel nature of Russian warfare or offered conclusions favourable to Moscow. An article in France's *International* was one example. While it said that *ZAPAD 2021* was 'part of strategic dialogue where manoeuvres are carried out to produce an effect and influence an opponent', the Zvezda TV highlighted the following: 'While Western General Staffs evaluated high-intensity warfare options, Moscow has shown the opponents their inability to win large conflicts'.²⁴

Inside Russia, national media and officials were more sarcastic and blunter than ever before. Multiple Russian news agency reports disseminated Deputy Defence Minister Andrey Kartapolov's warning: 'Do not poke the Russian Bear'.²⁵ Similar sentiment came from Russian parliamentarian Leonid Slutskiy who, in response to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's call for greater transparency, said that Russia 'does not have to report to anyone' about the exercises it holds.²⁶

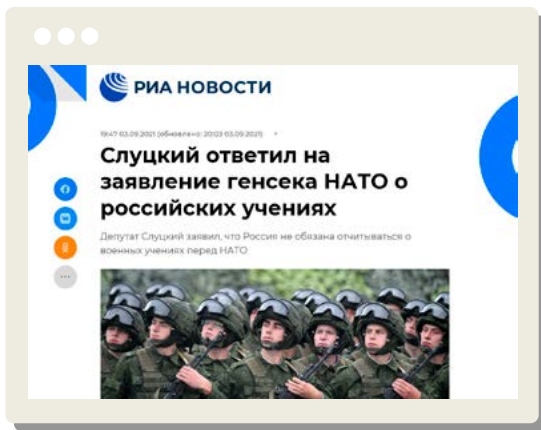


Figure 9: RIA Novost news agency quotes Russian MP Slutskiy about Russian relations with NATO

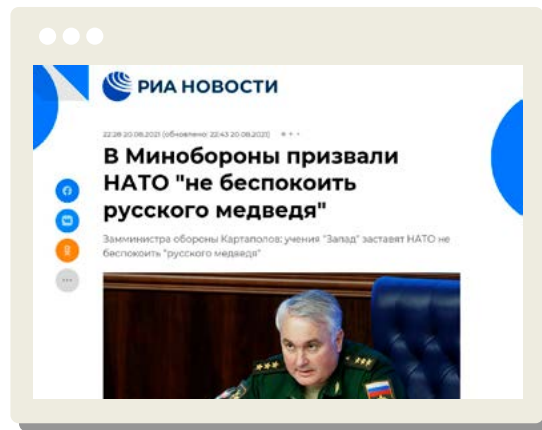


Figure 10: MoD 'Do not poke the Russian Bear' statement

On state RTR Planeta, the external service of Rossiya 1 (Russia's main television network run by state broadcaster VGTRK), nationalist parliamentarian Vladimir Zhirinovskiy was buoyant: 'We must be proud during these days.'²⁷ A VGTRK journalist, who was among the group of journalists taken to Kaliningrad, echoed this sentiment: 'NATO representatives at our exercises are gloomier and gloomier'.²⁸

INTIMIDATION THROUGH NUMBERS

In contrast to previous exercises, an emerging narrative expressed Russia's readiness to act more aggressively, reflecting Russia's growing self-confidence.

In the past, exercises with troop numbers that went beyond the limits imposed by the Vienna 2011 Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (VD2011)²⁹ usually took place outside the VD2011 zone of application.³⁰ When such exercises did

take place in the European part of Russia, the MoD would split them into parts and announce reduced numbers to avoid mandatory observation.

KAVKAZ 2020 was the first time Russia tested out what could be described as a softer version of intimidation through numbers. It foreshadowed more threatening and aggressive Russian behaviour in *ZAPAD 2021*. During *KAVKAZ 2020*, the MoD officially announced much bigger participant numbers just before the exercise. The MoD later confirmed these but did not provide any explanation. Challenges and questions from foreign states concerning these higher troop numbers would probably have been met with the claim that forces in excess of the limits of VD2011 had exercised in training grounds outside the VD2011 zone of application (JCS 'Centre'), as Russia had claimed before.³¹

Intimidation became more aggressive this year. The MoD stated there were approxi-



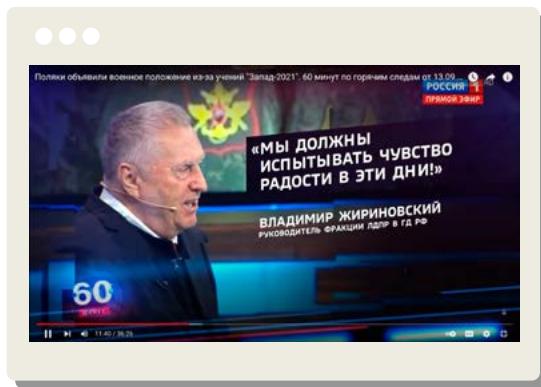


Figure 11: Zhirinovskiy on RTR TV

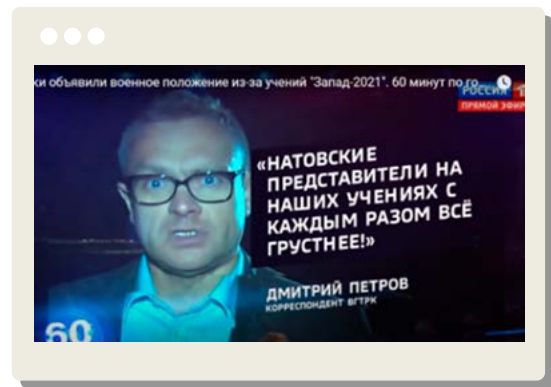


Figure 12: VGTRK journalist in Kaliningrad on RTR TV

mately 200,000 personnel participating in *ZAPAD 2021* (but did not specify whether this was the combined number from Russia and Belarus, or from Russia alone).³² The MoD continued to repeat this figure.³³ At the same time, the ministry claimed, without any justification, that only some of the military personnel would fall under the VD2011 remit.

VD2011 has a single criterion whereby it judges troop participation, namely being part of the same chain of command and control (C2).³⁴ No other rationales or explanations are considered; they represent no more than national opinion. Both Russia and Belarus confirmed that the C2 chain was the same: the exercise was run under the command of the Russian and Belarusian General Staffs. Both countries announced their participant numbers and each were only a few hundred men short of the limit. Yet when added together, the total number of Russian and Belarusian forces exceeded the limit. Despite these facts, Russia bluntly continued to insist that the exercise remained within the limits of VD2011. It is

worth noting here that the total number of *ZAPAD 2021* participants announced by Russia exceeded that limit approximately by a factor of sixteen.

CONTEMPT FOR INTERNATIONAL LAW

Russia's contempt for international law, revealed in its breaching of VD2011, culminated in CGS Gen Gerasimov's report to Putin while they observed the main episode of the exercise at Mulino: '...here, approximately 20,000 troops, 5,600 pieces of weaponry and equipment, close to 160 tanks and 118 helicopters are present.'³⁵ This was confirmation, if any more was needed, that Russia was in breach of all VD2011 limits at that training ground alone, not to mention others.

ZAPAD 2021 also exceeded the officially announced number of fourteen training grounds (five in Belarus and nine in Russia). A *ZAPAD 2021* documentary broadcast on MoD-controlled Zvezda TV showed a map with as many as twenty-four locations where *ZAPAD 2021* activities took place.³⁶

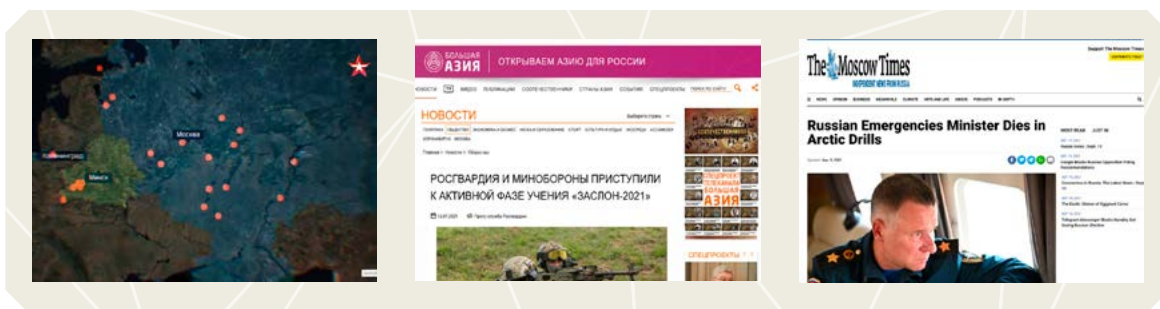


Figure 13: Zvezda TV map with ZAPAD 2021 training grounds⁷³

Figure 14: Rosgvardiya-MoD exercise ZASLON 2021⁷⁴

Figure 15: a report about the MOE minister's death during the exercise⁷⁵

Concerning exercises happening in parallel to *ZAPAD 2021* and their possible connection to the SLE, Russia similarly leveraged ambiguous communications. Previously, the MoD had avoided any admission that troops from other services, such as Russia's internal-troops National Guard (Rosgvardiya) or Ministry of Emergencies (MOE), were involved in SLEs. In 2021, it was revealed that those forces did conduct separate exercises: Rosgvardiya's *ZASLON 2021* ('zaslon' for 'barrier')³⁷ exercise and the MOE's Arctic exercise during which a Russian government minister died in an accident (along with a journalist he tried to rescue, according to official statements). Even though these two exercises were not officially linked to *ZAPAD 2021*, various sources reported that they were.³⁸

PROVOCATIVE COMMUNICATIONS DESIGNED TO CONFUSE

Besides ambiguous communications concerning troop numbers and the scale of the exercise, Russia made further announcements that its counterparts could

justifiably consider provocative. During a briefing to foreign DAs, the Russian deputy defence minister presented the official scenario and exercise maps. Instead of 'terrorists', as had been the case with previous exercises, 'states' were now named as the fictional opponents of *ZAPAD 2021*. Thus, the so called 'Polar Republic' attacked the 'Central [Russian] Federation' and, jointly with its allies, proceeded to also attack the 'Polesia Republic' (Belarus). When states design exercise scenarios they often create fictional 'states', but they usually respect international borders and create them within their own territory. Strangely, the 'Polesia Republic' had sizable territories of the Baltic States marked as its own. Furthermore, the Russian scenario maps did not show the 'Polar Republic' being active in the Baltic Sea and Kaliningrad region. Moreover, the Belarusian MoD's briefing maps showed the occupier enter 'Polesia' on land only. However, during the exercise, naval operations in the Baltic Sea and battles in Kaliningrad (part of the 'Central Federation') were numerous and more intensive





Figure 16 & 17: 'Polesia Republic' with sizable territories of Baltic States marked as 'Polesian'; and fighting taking place on land only⁷⁶

Figure 18: information from the Russian MoD official website about intensive action in the Baltic Sea and Kaliningrad⁷⁷

compared to previous ZAPADs (see Pictures 21-23). Contradictions between what official maps showed and how scenarios played out on the ground, suggest that these maps were produced with the intention to confuse.

SUPERPOWER SHOW OF FORCE

A key aim of the exercise was to communicate **Russia's status as a modern military superpower**. Though presented as novel, not much of what was demonstrated at ZAPAD 2021 was actually new. Great emphasis was placed on showcasing new and powerful electronic warfare (EW) capabilities, Automated Control Systems (ACS), new weapons and equipment, new types of tactics etc., yet all of these capabilities had already been on display during VOSTOK 2018, TSENTR 2019, and KAVKAZ 2020. Impressive demonstrations of Russian remote-controlled air and land unmanned combat platforms (the Nerekhta or Uran-9) and a massive fire support operation where a dozen artillery battalions fired simultaneously, along with sizable

attacks by armour and dozens of helicopters and aeroplanes, were intended to showcase how the Russian military had developed. All this, however, had already been on display in the past. This created the impression that these demonstration elements were primarily for show, in line with the Soviet-era traditions of *pokazukha* (familiar to foreign audiences as Potemkin Village displays).

Several advanced capabilities were presented and exercised during ZAPAD 2021, but these elements of the exercise must be viewed with nuance. During the exercise the introduction and activation of new Akatsiya-M ACS systems in different OCs was showcased. Furthermore, wide communication networks were established, troops exercised real-time data exchange and target engagement, EW systems interfered with GPS signals, short-range ballistic missiles engaged targets, etc. It remains unknown, however, how real all those achievements are and how widespread their use in service really is. If **all** those elements were to become operational



Figure 19: Uran-9 combat UGV at Mulino

Figure 20 & 21: exercise scenes from Mulino⁷⁸

across the board and were exercised in two-sided drills with real-time coordination and supervision from the General Staff, this might serve as strong proof that Russia has a very modern force. But the manner in which these innovations were showcased at *ZAPAD 2021*, does not suggest the presence of such sophistication and coordination.

RUSSIA AS AN ALLIANCE/COALITION LEADER

Presenting Russia as a nation able to create and lead alliances and coalitions deepened a sub-narrative established in previous exercises. To emphasise this, the MoD arranged the opening and closing ceremonies and parades accordingly. All featured international participants. The first such parade took place during *VOSTOK 2018* and this practice was continued during *ZAPAD 2021*. In what has also become standard practice, potential participants are announced well in advance of the exercise. *ZAPAD 2021* was no exception. *KAVKAZ 2020* participants, countries mostly from former Soviet Central Asia and the Collective

Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and those historically linked to or supported by Russia were invited to attend.

However, with the majority of invitations declined, the effort to internationalise *ZAPAD 2021* to the same extent as *KAVKAZ 2020* evidently failed.³⁹ Apart from the host countries, *ZAPAD 2021* involved forces from only five other nations – Armenia, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia. Others only sent observers. Armenia promised a battalion but delivered only a company. Nor did other participating nations contribute large numbers. The figure of 2,000 international participants declared in the *ZAPAD 2021* diagram on the MoD website did not add up with the warm welcome extended to ‘close to 500 foreign participants’ at Mulino. Where were the rest if the main training ground at Mulino hosted so few? The question remained unanswered. China chose COVID-19 as the reason not to participate, even though the pandemic had not dissuaded it from joining *KAVKAZ 2020*. Nevertheless, depictions of foreign participants remained central in





Figure 22 & 23: Foreign participants in the ZAPAD 2021 opening ceremony⁷⁹

Figure 24: Foreign participants extending a warm welcome to participants, the Russian/Belarusian way⁸⁰

ZAPAD 2021 communications to 'prove' the exercise's supposedly international nature.

RUSSIA-LED CSTO AS A COUNTERWEIGHT TO NATO

In the eyes of the Russian leadership, a nation cannot be a superpower without having an alliance to lead. Accordingly, the sub-narrative of the CSTO as a Russia-led alliance featured prominently. Transformed into a military organisation in 2002,⁴⁰ Russia has tried to promote the CSTO for the last few years. *ZAPAD 2021* continued this trend. In light of these ambitions, it

was essential for Russia to not only invite CSTO representatives to the exercise and integrate their forces, but also to highlight that this was happening. The CSTO emblem was displayed in the *ZAPAD 2021* diagram to represent its international participants. The organisers of *ZAPAD 2021* created a coalition group of forces HQ (mostly CSTO) as part of the SLE at the Mulino training ground.⁴¹ In addition to the Russia-led snap CSTO exercise designed to respond to the Afghanistan crisis in the south, *ZAPAD 2021* also had to prove that the CSTO (with Russia at its helm) was a capable force, able to respond to any conflict at short notice.⁴²



Figure 25: Sri Lankan observer

Figure 26 & 27: Indian and Kazakh participants⁸¹

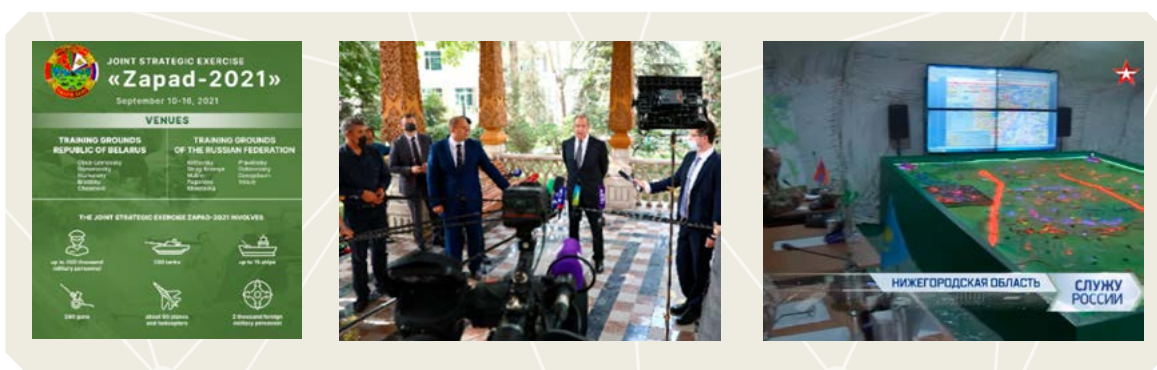


Figure 28: ZAPAD 2021 diagram with total number of participants put at 200,000 and the CSTO emblem to represent 2,000 international participants⁸²

Figure 29: Lavrov at the CSTO's 15 September meeting⁸³

Figure 30: coalition forces HQ at Mulino⁸⁴

The importance placed on the CSTO could also be gleaned from Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's attendance of a CSTO forum, which was timed to coincide with *ZAPAD 2021*. When answering questions from the media after the forum on 15 September, Lavrov seemed to juxtapose the CSTO and NATO. Lavrov rejected what he framed as attempts to make the Vienna 2011 Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (VD2011) 'even more intrusive'.⁴³ As with other elements of *ZAPAD 2021* communication, this kind of messaging was also in line with SLEs in previous years.⁴⁴ The coinciding of the CSTO forum and *ZAPAD 2021*, as well as Lavrov's statements implied that further dialogue between member countries could lead to the creation of a new Eurasian military alliance in the image of NATO. Similarly, Russia has been promoting the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as a meaningful economic integration project on a par with

the EU.⁴⁵ Russian emphasis on both these alliances reveals its desire to re-acquire the status of a superpower, where bloc is pitted against bloc, peer against peer, and Russia (and China) against the United States.

Putin referenced both the CSTO and the EAEU in a major foreign policy speech in late 2021.⁴⁶

Conversely, the effort to divide and rule continues to target NATO—through in particular the emphasis on the OSCE, as opposed to NATO, as an essential European security framework, exemplified by Lavrov's latest proposal for a new European security pact.⁴⁷

RUSSIAN AND BELARUSIAN FORCES' SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION

During this SLE, the sub-narrative of successful integration of Russian and Belarusian forces was especially capitalised





Figure 31: Belarusian opening parade in Obuz-Lesnovsk⁸⁵



Figure 32: participants presented with awards in the closing ceremony⁸⁶



Figure 33: participants in the field during the exercise⁸⁷

on. Announcements, video, and photos showcasing successful integration filled the Russian and Belarusian MoDs' websites and publications: from depicting Russia and Belarus on joint regional air defence duty with Russian Su-30SM fighters, to showing both countries' special-operations forces (SOF) and paratroopers jointly in action, Russian motorised riflemen and Belarusian tank troops forming joint combat teams, practising communications and logistics cooperation, to establishing joint command posts (CPs). During the opening and closing parades, special *ZAPAD 2021* medals were issued and awarded and symbolic

souvenirs such as watches were presented to participants, in an effort to boost a sense of unity and comradeship. This year, both countries' MoDs arranged opening and closing parades not only at the main *ZAPAD* training ground but also at other Russian and Belarusian training grounds.

CULTURAL UNITY AND COMMON VALUES

In addition to the unveiling of the Alexander Nevsky monument and Putin's 'Cities of Labour Glory' announcement mentioned earlier, other symbolic events took place in Belarus during *ZAPAD 2021* to demonstrate



Figure 34: Russia's Aleksandrov Military Song and Dance Company performs in Belarus⁸⁸



Figure 35: Russian troops pay their respects to the Brest fortress defenders⁸⁹



Figure 36: soldiers read a newspaper in the field echoing similar images taken during the 'Great Patriotic War'⁹⁰

cultural unity and common values. Military performers gave concerts to entertain troops. Soldiers watched patriotic films in the field or congregated in 'Great Patriotic War'-fashion as they read newspapers. Russian paratroopers paid their respects to the defenders of Brest city-fortress. All these activities carried an emotional and cultural charge intended to boost the troops' morale and civilians' respect.

COMMUNICATION BY BELARUS AND RUSSIA: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

During the exercise, Russian and Belarusian communications would occasionally diverge. The Russian briefing to DAs did not mention NATO. On the contrary, the Minsk briefing blamed NATO for 'provocations' and made sarcastic comments about Western leaders' concerns over *ZAPAD 2021*.

At times, it seemed as though Belarus wanted to show it was playing a more independent role in *ZAPAD 2021*, while at others it was willing to play a major yet junior role in the Russia-led exercise.

Russia invited no NATO DAs to observe the exercise. Instead, only some DAs from European Union (EU) states were invited. Minsk invited the DAs posted in Belarus to observe the event (within Belarus).⁴⁸

Russia capitalised on ambiguity surrounding participant numbers. Meanwhile, Belarus did not speak on the subject.

When Russia changed the exercise's end-date from 16 to 15 September, Belarus continued to adhere to the originally timetable despite the Russian change, but it arranged closing ceremonies for the same day as Russia.

What emerges from these examples is that while Belarus was accorded some freedom of action by Russia, the latter nonetheless held tight overall control over the event.

KALININGRAD AS A FORTRESS

In contrast to *ZAPAD 2017*, the Kaliningrad exclave featured much more prominently in *ZAPAD 2021*. It was the only other place apart from Mulino to which more than 100



Figure 37, 38 & 39: Journalists at Pravdinsk training ground; regiment and battalion commanders from the 11th Corps answer questions from the media⁹¹



journalists (Russian and foreign) were taken, observations arranged, and questions willingly answered by military commanders of different ranks.⁴⁹ Journalists were free to report about reinforcements brought into the area and sizable activities under way in local training grounds, arrangements designed to spread the message that: 'Kaliningrad will be defended at any cost.'

PUTIN: SUPREME COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

The portrayal of President Putin as a capable and militarily competent supreme commander-in-chief was another sub-narrative widely exploited both during *KAVKAZ 2020* and again during *ZAPAD 2021*. During *KAVKAZ 2020*, the chief of the General Staff (CGS), General Valeriy Gerasimov, introduced Putin to a novel piece of military hardware on display during the exercise: the Combat Tank Support Vehicle.⁵⁰ This year, Putin was made familiar with the Nerekhta and Uran-9 unmanned

ground vehicle (UGV) series, which were brought to Mulino. In turn, Shoygu explained to Putin how they were meant to be used and what they could do. Not related to *ZAPAD* directly but made public just before the exercise (and the Russian State Duma election), the announcement about an expanded military budget and efforts to 'defend' military history (as mentioned earlier) were also designed to contribute to Putin's image as a great military leader.

COVID-19 AND ZAPAD 2021: SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Finally, COVID-19 appeared to play almost no role in this year's exercise – unlike *KAVKAZ 2020*, where the subject featured prominently.⁵¹ The absence of the topic from *ZAPAD 2021* communications could be interpreted as a way for Russia to demonstrate its claimed achievements against the pandemic or as a sign of Russia's failure to take it seriously.



CONCLUSION

Russia continues to aspire to be a global player with real military power. Since the early 2000s, it has maintained its military build-up through concentrated effort and long-term planning. Initially, Russia's military build-up consisted mostly of ideas and theories. Real forces were absent. SLEs were held but remained modest in size and minimally publicised. Since 2013, with army gen. Gerasimov as the new CGS, these exercises began to give greater weight to information campaigns. The State Defence Plans and an increasingly modern military force allowed the General Staff to design and run more sophisticated types of exercises. Some SLEs focused on experimentation necessary to carry out military reform; others were designed to test State Defence Plans; and all used the exercises as an opportunity to communicate Kremlin messaging to internal and external audiences.

ZAPAD 2021 differed from earlier SLEs in at least three ways.

First, by the time of *ZAPAD 2021*, Russia had completed its military reform. Its completion was tested during *KAVKAZ 2020* and subsequently announced officially. As Russia saw it, it was now time to look towards the next stage in the development of its military.

Second, with modernised forces already available, Russia sought to further its understanding of how they could best be used. The new State Defence Plan has been significantly updated and likely includes new elements to reflect that Russia has entered a new stage in the development of its military forces.

Third, Russia arguably believes that as the geopolitical situation grows more uncertain, and among a great many

other factors the US turns to face the east (China)—away from Europe—it has a window of opportunity and political room for manoeuvre so as to change the balance of power in its favour.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine validates this assessment.

ZAPAD 2021 had at least three priorities to fulfil.

First, the military needed to decide how to progress with further development and what kind of forces to build in the future. It is likely that such decision-making was especially important during this SLE (but also the least visible to outside observers). New-generation weapons, new tactics, new structures, new concepts – all these elements were present in *ZAPAD 2021* and will be increasingly important in future SLEs. Minister of defense S. Shoygu himself



” This case study of ZAPAD 2021 communications illustrates that for the Russian political and military establishment, a military exercise is as much about training personnel and testing defence capabilities as it is about reinforcing and creating narratives, including those about its alliances, ‘great power’ status, and the legitimacy of its actions.

confirmed this in the *ZAPAD 2021* debriefing at the MoD on 6 October 2021.⁵²

The second priority was to put the new SDP 2021–2025 to the test, as outlined above, and to gauge the ability of the forces already available to act in accordance with the plan. It is likely that many elements of the new plan were played out as part of two-sided exercises. This mostly concerned command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, reconnaissance (C4IR), and ACS capabilities. According to the *ZAPAD 2021* debrief, these various tasks were fulfilled. Confirming whether this is true is difficult, since few details were

made available, and what became public knowledge was done so to signal Russia’s global ambitions.

Thus, a third priority was to use *ZAPAD 2021* to project Russia as a global power that is strengthening its positions in and fighting for domination in Europe.

In this sense *ZAPAD 2021* amounted to pure information warfare – complete with intimidation, military signalling, political messaging, efforts to attract allies and divide enemies, and narratives conveyed to its own population and those outside Russia.



PART II.

ZAPAD 2021 COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS

By Balys Liubinavičius

Introduction

In 2021, DebunkEU.org, in collaboration with NATO StratCom COE, monitored the information environments in the Baltic states and Poland for communication on the joint Russian-Belarusian strategic exercise *ZAPAD 2021*. Its formal or 'active' stage took place from 10 to 16 September in Belarus and the Russian Federation's Western Military District (MD). This project analysed communications relating to the exercise in English, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian. The initial objective was to identify key features of both official communication from the Russian Federation and Belarus and discourses in digital news outlets. In addition, the aim was to cover three phases of the exercise – the preparation, active phase, and post-exercise periods – in order to identify whether and/or to what extent communication differed throughout the full cycle of the information campaign launched to inform the public on the organisation and conduct of *ZAPAD 2021*. The time period under consideration was 1 May to 30 September 2021. This amounted to five months of extensive and thorough tracking of open-source data gathered from more than 3,000 digital news outlets, official government websites, and public Facebook groups and pages.

Key findings

- The Russian Federation and Belarus employed a series of what could be described as complex information influence operations – concerted

efforts to influence audiences through information or disinformation – to consistently communicate strategic narratives and messages on *ZAPAD 2021* throughout the full cycle of the exercise. This extended to coverage of



'special' exercises that took place in at least three Russian military districts (Central, Southern, and Western), billed as 'preparations' for *ZAPAD 2021*, during the summer training period; a surge of communications during the active phase of *ZAPAD 2021*, which featured extensive coverage, including video footage of military operations; and, finally, the post-exercise phase, to cover assessments and the broader implications of *ZAPAD 2021* for the regional security framework. The unifying principle of joint Russian-Belarusian strategic communication was to emphasise the magnitude of *ZAPAD 2021* by shaping the reactions from both domestic and foreign audiences, so as to attract as much public attention to the exercise as possible, and make *ZAPAD 2021* one of the key topics of discussion in the digital news landscape.

- *ZAPAD 2021* communication rested on multiple messaging pillars, each with a distinct objective designed to shape public opinion on the exercise. **At least four communication themes were identified in *ZAPAD 2021* coverage: defensive – based on messaging designed to re-assure and de-escalate; inclusive – based on messaging designed to promote and emphasise cooperation; exclusive – based on messaging designed to divide and exclude; and offensive – based on messaging designed to undermine and**

dismiss. The information surge which accompanied *ZAPAD 2021* conformed to the pattern of communicative approaches used in previous Strategic-Level Exercises (SLEs) and reflected the broader interest of the Russian Federation and Belarus in the use of military exercises in support of the political agenda of both regimes.

- During *ZAPAD 2021*, the Kremlin targeted the information environments of neighbouring states using established networks of influence, such as local digital news outlets. These information influence operations supported the Kremlin's messaging and promoted anti-Western, anti-NATO, anti-EU, and anti-Ukraine sentiments amongst audiences in these countries. The Kremlin further manipulated public opinion through covert tactics. For example, inauthentic comments under articles published by major digital news outlets from pre-selected countries sought to discredit criticism of *ZAPAD 2021*. Finally, this study also identified coordinated attempts to suppress and obscure communication on the SARS-Cov-2 (COVID-19) situation among Russian and Belarusian servicemen participating in the exercise, and the overall epidemiological impact of *ZAPAD 2021* on the regions where it was conducted. **Though limited in scope, the high number of information influence operations indicated that communication actors were willing**

to illegitimately exploit neighbour states' information environments in order to manipulate public debate on the conduct of ZAPAD 2021 (especially during the active phase of the exercise) and maintain a favourable digital media landscape for communication on the exercise.

- Unlike the previous exercise in the ZAPAD cycle (ZAPAD 2017), the 2021 training was marked by assertive and aggressive rhetoric from Belarusian authorities, who directed their messaging more confidently against neighbours and NATO compared to Minsk's earlier practice, which had refrained from excessive communication concerning regional developments and/or events. **Even though Belarusian news coverage of the exercise remained factual, neutral, and moderate, it mirrored the official rhetoric of the Kremlin. This once again demonstrated the Belarusian pivot to the Russian sphere of influence, signalled support for increased military integration between the two countries, and served to further distance Belarus from public communication and diplomatic relations with the West.**

Methodology

This report details the main findings of open-source monitoring of the information

environment in six regional languages carried out throughout May-September 2021 on the subject of the joint strategic-level Russian-Belarusian exercise ZAPAD 2021. In addition to the analysis of quantitative parameters, the report also reviews the results of systematic content analysis to identify key messages communicated during the period under consideration. This report's structure is as follows: first, it presents the aggregated results of general information activity trends associated with the subject of ZAPAD 2021; second, it analyses the information distribution networks related to the exercise; and third, it reviews in detail the main content communicated on the subject.

ZAPAD 2021 communication analysis was carried out based on 6,294 content pieces (n=6294) identified in the information environments of the Baltic countries and Poland throughout May-September 2021. The data was obtained using an open-source monitoring tool developed by DebunkEU.org, which was set to automatically gather both textual and audio-visual content from the digital landscape which matched the period of research interest. The content retrieved was automatically assessed according to quantitative parameters such as DebunkReach® (i.e. the combined number of the size of the readership of the domain, social interactions, and backlinks). The results were then reviewed manually using a systematic content analysis method to identify the qualitative parameters of information, such as sentiment, narratives, and messages.⁵³



” At least three recurrent strategies for the dissemination of false and misleading information could be observed between May and September: distribution of forged stories about the exercise via fringe and/or less prominent outlets; the posting of inauthentic comments under articles published by major foreign digital outlets; and the removal of content associated with the public-health conditions in participating countries.

Background

We identified a focus on *ZAPAD 2021* in public discourse long before the exercise was conducted. This dated back to early mentions of the exercise in December 2020, when, during a Defence Ministry Board meeting, Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke of the need to work out new approaches to the combat training of the armed forces and mentioned *ZAPAD 2021* as an upcoming event in the theatre of joint military operations by the Russia-Belarus Union State.⁵⁴ Putin's comments were later followed up with the official statement of the Western Military District's press service (6 January 2021) and the meeting between Belarusian Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin and the Belarusian leader, Alexander Lukashenko, on 18 January 2021, which confirmed that planning had begun for

the *ZAPAD 2021* strategic-level exercise, to be held on 10-16 September.⁵⁵ Though sporadic, the early instances of *ZAPAD 2021* coverage marked the start of a 'information build-up' in the communication landscape. Early *ZAPAD 2021* communications sought to position the exercise as the most significant event in the combat training of the armed forces of Russia and Belarus. They also aimed to emphasise the 'modern' character of the exercise, with 'new methods [employed] by joint assault units' and 'modern types of weapons and military equipment' planned to be used during the exercise. From then on, communication around *ZAPAD 2021* evolved to encompass multiple lines of messaging which served the strategic and political agenda of Russia and Belarus.

Digital landscape

Information activity related to *ZAPAD 2021* was marked by a persistent, initially gradual, and eventually steep increase in content published throughout the full cycle of the exercise. It started with early mentions of the exercise in spring and continued throughout the summer training period. From May to August, *ZAPAD 2021* communication was characterised by the topic's intermediate-to-high visibility. In September, *ZAPAD 2021* achieved a very high degree of publicity. The gradual, then steep, growth of communications on *ZAPAD 2021* reflects the different stages of the exercise: from the preparation phase, to the active phase, to the post-exercise phase. As can be seen in Figure 1, there was a steady and consistent increase in information activity during the preparation phase of *ZAPAD 2021* (May-August). This contrasts with the extreme and sudden jumps in information flows during the exercise's active and post-exercise phases (September). The dynamics of information activity observed on 9-16 September comprised a threefold increase in *ZAPAD 2021* mentions and contributed to a breakaway in September in the combined number of all subject mentions.

Public visibility of *ZAPAD 2021* was mirrored by the potential audiences reached across these five months, which saw a gradual increase throughout May-August and peaked at a record 1.93 billion potential contacts in September (Figure 2). At its peak during the

active phase, *ZAPAD 2021* communications reached more than double the combined audiences from May-August 2021 as estimated by DebunkReach®. Thus, communication during the active phase of *ZAPAD 2021* maximised the exposure of audiences to

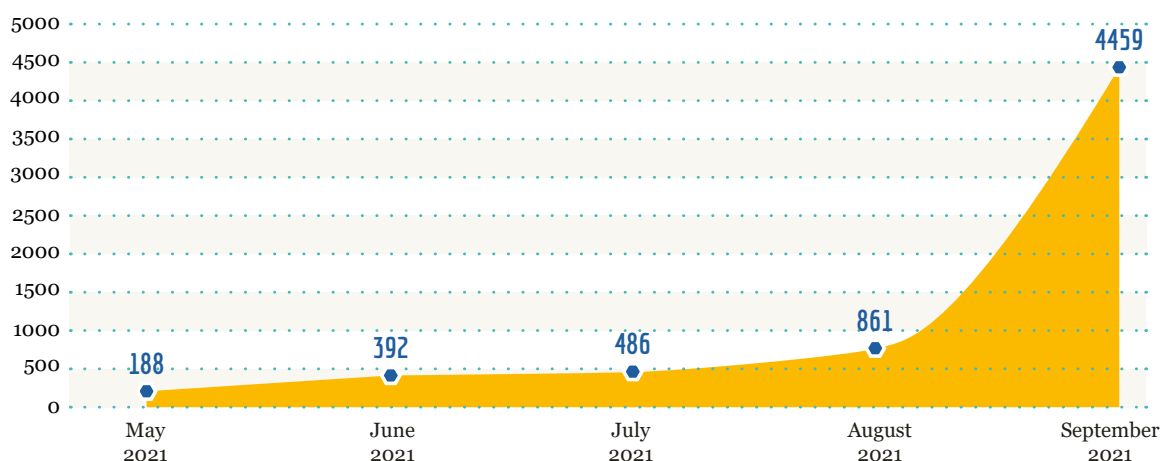


Figure 1: Monthly dynamics of information activity



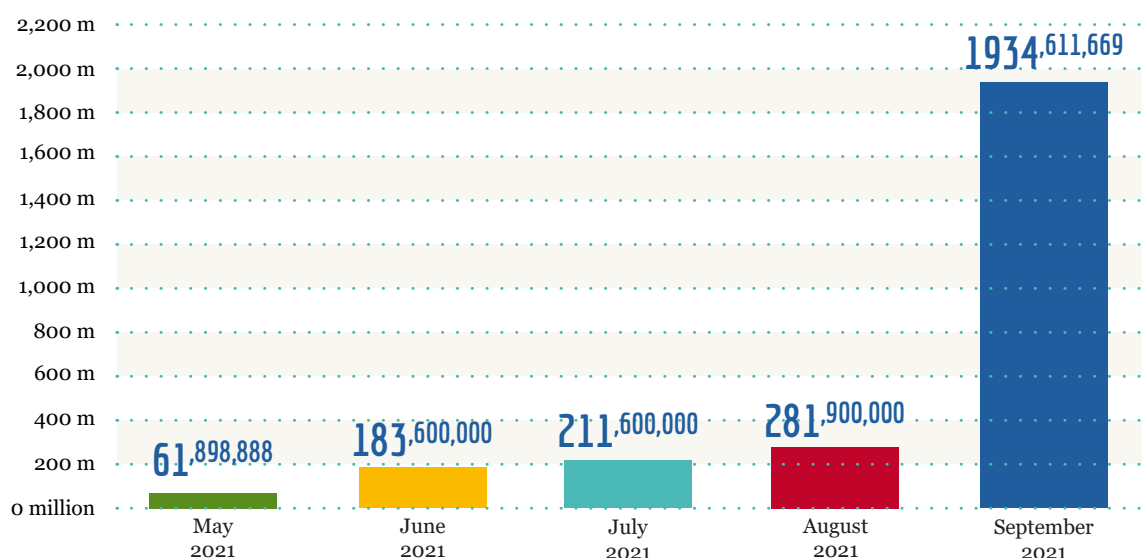


Figure 2: Monthly dynamics of mentions by DebunkReach®

information as well as, potentially, to Kremlin-led information influence operations.

The gradual and then sudden growth of information activity and its estimated reach suggests an information campaign was designed to publicise the exercise. The rise in daily mentions of *ZAPAD 2021*, which as early as 1 September had jumped almost by a factor of six (+485.9%) compared to the indicators observed during previous months, further supports the presence of such a campaign. Looking at patterns underlying the information dynamics surrounding *ZAPAD 2021* offers additional evidence of a deliberate information campaign. We see, for example, an increase in Russian Federation government communication, which grew by a factor of up to thirteen based on the number of press releases and public statements on *ZAPAD 2021*

in September compared to August. The extensive communication toolkit employed to cover *ZAPAD 2021* ranged from news reports in major digital news outlets, to extensive TV coverage, to the launch of a website⁵⁶ dedicated to exercise coverage. This suggests Russia's and Belarus's desire to magnify and emphasise the exercise over other events of national and/or international importance in order to shape the views of target audiences and meet the initial objectives of *ZAPAD 2021* communication.

Information activity triggers

The dynamics of *ZAPAD 2021* information activity were susceptible to both domestic and external communication which affected awareness of the exercise. Though characterised as persistent, public coverage

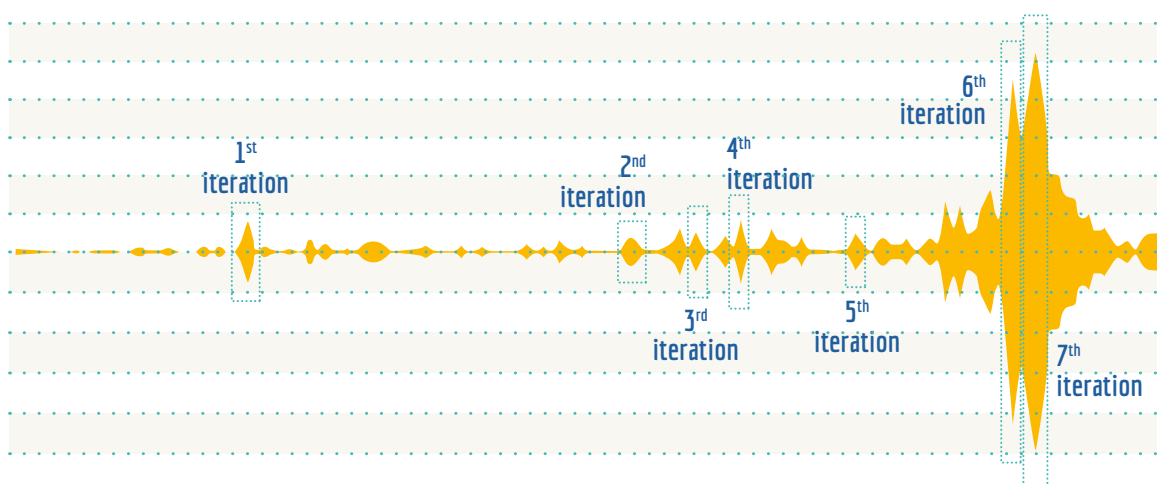


Figure 3: Daily dynamics by the cross-number of average and daily mentions

of the exercise was most often stimulated by milestone events which elevated the number of monthly *ZAPAD 2021* mentions and became important stories and/or news reports in the months leading up to, during, and after the exercise. Analysing the content of these news stories more closely, we found that political-military statements by representatives of the armed forces of the Russian Federation and Belarus often had a greater impact on the visibility of *ZAPAD 2021* than military developments in the physical environments of the host countries. This trend reversed during the active phase of the exercise, when updates on military operations in the Western Military District and Belarus were covered extensively and sparked interest in *ZAPAD 2021* during its active-phase (9-16 September).

Measured by the number of publications that exceeded the monthly information flow average (47.1 content pieces per day),

seven iterations in the information environments of the Baltic countries and Poland were identified as significant in the communication dynamics of *ZAPAD 2021* (Figure 3). Six of the seven iterations occurred as a result of domestic communication by Russian and Belarusian authorities on the technical aspects of the exercise between May and August and the conduct of the exercise in September. Non-Russian or Belarusian mentions of the exercise yielded only one significant jump in the volume of *ZAPAD 2021* communication. This followed Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs's 8 August *Financial Times* interview on the risks associated with this joint Russian-Belarusian exercise.

The greatest impact on the visibility of *ZAPAD 2021* followed the 12-13 September iteration, which occurred immediately after President Putin observed the main phase of *ZAPAD 2021* along with senior commanders

from the Russian Federation Armed Forces at the Mulino training ground. Compared within the iterations of ZAPAD 2021 communication for domestic consumption, it was found that official Russian Federation government communication influenced the visibility of the exercise more than official Belarusian communication. This was ascertained through both the quantitative lead of Russian mentions among the major triggers of the information flow and the higher number of potential audiences reached by Kremlin-led communications.

The following events affected the dynamics of information activity in the information environments of the Baltic states and Poland from May to September 2021:

■ **1st iteration (31 May -1 June).**

Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu announces during a Defence Ministry Board meeting on 31 May that active preparations for ZAPAD 2021 have begun. The statement stressed the scheduled as well as exclusively defensive nature of the exercise.⁵⁷

■ **2nd iteration (28-29 July).** During the SCO's (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) Dushanbe (Tajikistan) conference on 28 July, Shoygu reaffirms the solely defensive nature of ZAPAD 2021 and says that the exercise is not aimed against any country or alliance.⁵⁸

■ **3rd iteration (5-6 August).** On 5 August, Belarusian First Deputy

Defence Minister Maj-Gen Viktor Gulevich provides a media briefing on the scenario and objectives of ZAPAD 2021. He says that 12,800 servicemen and up to 350 armoured fighting vehicles will participate in ZAPAD 2021, and that the exercise will take place on 10-16 September in Belarus and nine training areas in Russia (Kirillovskiy, Strugi Krasnyye, Mulino, Pogonovo, Khmelevka, Pravdinskiy, Dobrovolskiy, Dorogobuzh and Volskiy).⁵⁹

■ **4th iteration (8-10 August).** In a *Financial Times* interview on 8 August, Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics emphasises the danger of potential incidents and miscalculations during ZAPAD 2021.⁶⁰

■ **5th iteration (20-21 August).** On 20 August, First Deputy Head of the Main Directorate for International Military Cooperation in the Russian Federation Ministry of Defence Maj-Gen Yevgeny Ilyin gives a briefing on the ZAPAD 2021 scenario. The Russian general restates that ZAPAD 2021's scenario is purely defensive as it does not imply any specific enemy and would simulate escalation in a conflict between the rival coalitions of notional states. At the briefing, Maj-Gen Ilyin announces that 200,000 servicemen, 80 aircraft, up to 760 units of military equipment, and 15 ships will be involved in ZAPAD 2021.⁶¹



■ **6th iteration (9-10 September).** On 10 September, the active phase of *ZAPAD 2021* begins.⁶²

■ **7th iteration (12-13 September).** On 12 September, Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko and Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov visit the Obuz-Lesnovskiy training ground (Baranovichi district, Belarus). During the visit, Belarus announces plans to purchase Russian

arms worth more than \$1 billion along with Russian S-400 air defence missile systems.⁶³

In addition, on 13 September, Russian President Vladimir Putin, along with the command of the Russian Federation Armed Forces and foreign military delegations, visits the Mulino training ground (Nizhniy Novgorod region, Russia) to observe the main phase of the exercise. During the exercise advanced military systems are demonstrated.⁶⁴



Media share

Share by media

As a joint Russian-Belarusian strategic exercise, ZAPAD 2021 was characterised by a versatile and diversified number of communication agents disseminating news reports related to the exercise. This included both official government channels and state-funded media, as well as proxy websites, affiliated foreign outlets, and user-generated content platforms, all of which contributed to increased ZAPAD 2021 messaging. The number and diversity of information actors grew in the lead-up to the active phase of the exercise in September.

Measured by the type of source, it was established that ZAPAD 2021 coverage originated with official government communication from the Russian Federation and Belarus, was then broadcast by federal and state-owned news agencies, and then further amplified by proxy sites as well as user-generated content platforms such as social networks and blogs. The media's consistent references to press releases and/or statements made by the authorities of the host countries underlined how official communication led ZAPAD 2021 discourse. These media references manifested themselves as republications at scale

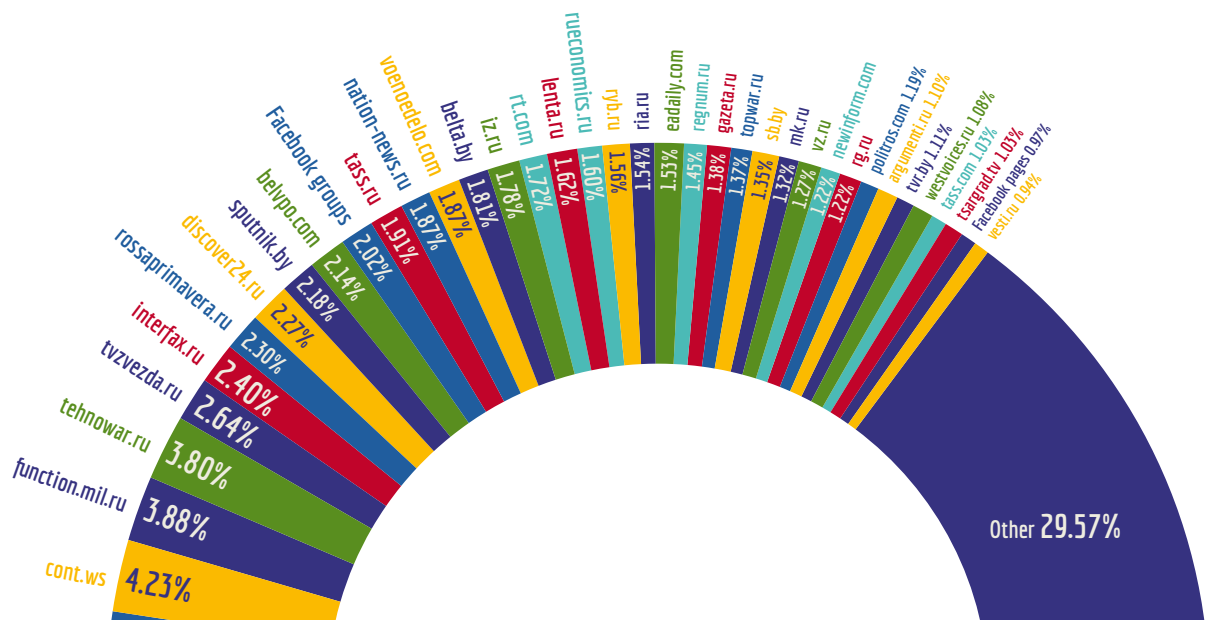
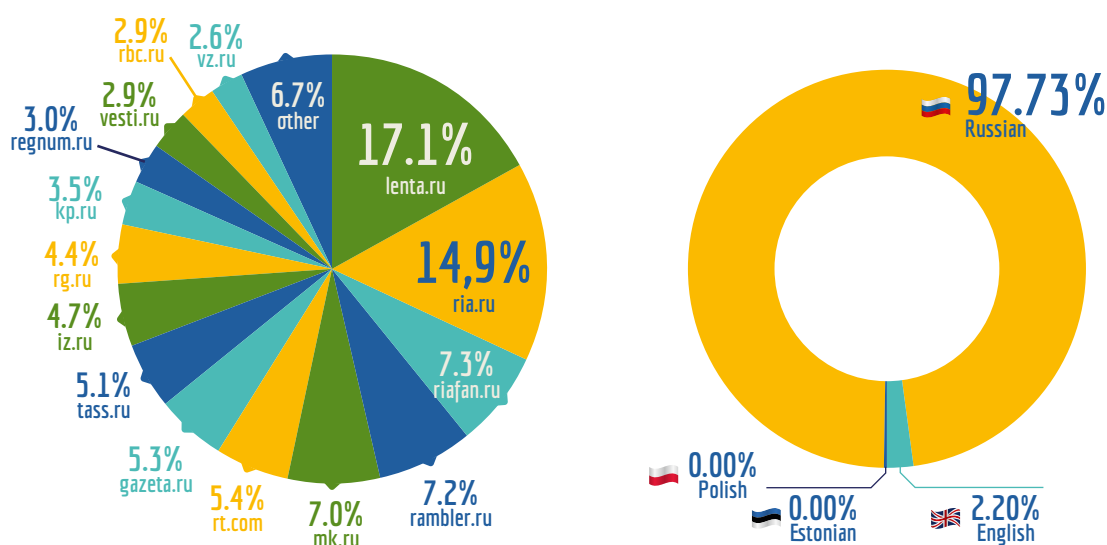


Figure 4: Share by media sources





Figures 5 & 6: Media sources and languages by DebunkReach®

rather than original content creation. The amplification of official communication by news agencies resulted in a greater share of potential contacts reached, standing at approximately 40% of the combined readership of the topic compared to other types of sources.

Measured by mentions, the Russian websites riafan.ru (4.7%), cont.ws (4.2%), mil.ru (3.9%), tehnowar.ru (3.8%), and tvzvezda.ru (2.6%) led by the number of articles produced on *ZAPAD 2021* (Figure 4). The activity of these websites did not significantly alter from May to September and these websites remained among the top sources for exercise coverage. These five websites led information activity rankings for different reasons. For example, cont.ws (known in shorthand as Kont or Kontinentalist, which positions itself

as a platform for social journalism) and tehnowar.ru (also dubbed World View—a military-themed website) led in the number of republications shared. Meanwhile, riafan.ru (linked to Internet Research Agency and through it Kremlin associate Yevgeniy Prigozhin), tvzvezda.ru (Russian MoD-controlled TV and its website), and mil.ru (the official website of the Russian MoD) stood out when measuring unique content produced on *ZAPAD 2021*.

Analysed by their potential audiences, lenta.ru (a top-ranking Russian state-controlled news website) was the most effective media source, with the highest number of potential readerships reached with *ZAPAD 2021* reports (400.6 million DebunkReach® contacts). It was followed by the state news agency ria.ru (349.7 million contacts) and riafan.ru (171.2 million contacts), by sharing



97 and 298 publications respectively (Figure 5). This trend was reversed when measuring mentions among top sources. Considering this metric, these top outlets attracted less than 1.5% of potential audiences and ranked between 55th and 71st out of the combined number of 185 outlets that engaged in ZAPAD 2021 communication, except for tvzvezda.ru, which placed 18th. Overall, audiences preferred major digital news outlets as their main source of information and news related to ZAPAD 2021.

Share by languages

Information activity related to ZAPAD 2021 sought to address multiple audiences situated in different linguistic clusters. In addition to the initial focus on messaging to domestic audiences inside the Russian Federation and Belarus, ZAPAD 2021 public communication targeted external audiences either affected by their proximity to the exercise or strategic adversaries. Throughout May-September, the visibility of

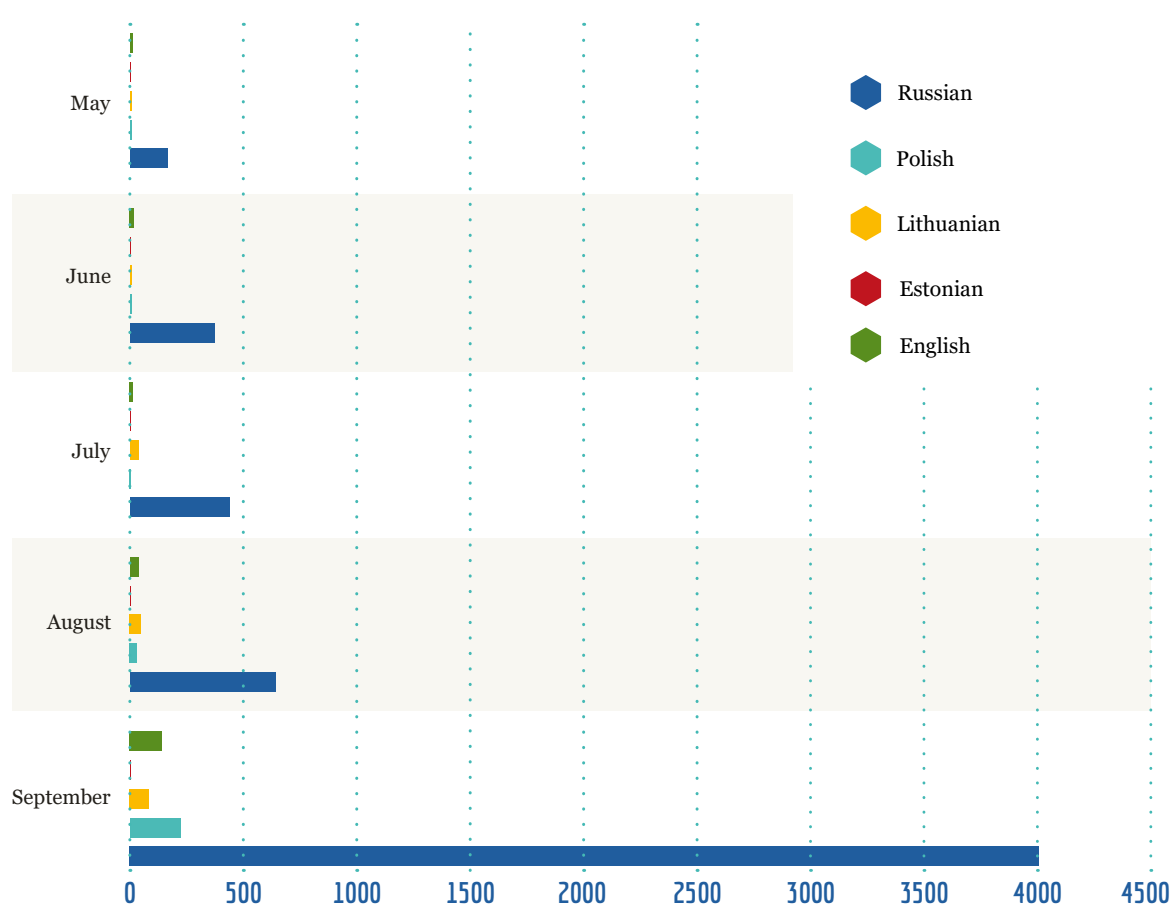


Figure 7: Monthly dynamics by language



ZAPAD 2021 as a topic among the audiences of the Baltic countries and Poland was a function of two factors: indirect targeting, which resulted from communication in non-native languages addressed to other than the local contexts (mostly Russian and English); and direct targeting, which was adjusted to promote selected messages in local languages (Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish) for greater resonance.

Russian was the predominant language of *ZAPAD 2021* content produced (89.2%), followed by Polish (4.4%), English (3.4%), Lithuanian (2.8%), and Estonian (0.3%). The dominant status of Russian-language audiences was further affirmed when analysing potential audiences reached according to the language of the content. Russian language content yielded 97.5% of the total readership. Besides Russian, English drew larger audiences than content produced for the Baltic states and Poland (Figure 6). The noteworthy absence of *ZAPAD 2021* communication in the Latvian language resulted from the effect of

national regulatory action against Russia's state-funded outlets Baltnews and Sputnik, whose activity was severely restricted and thus limited. This narrowed *ZAPAD 2021* coverage in Latvian to a minimum.

Measured by activity dynamics, it was found that communications in Russian and English were produced continuously from May-September 2021. In contrast, direct messaging in local languages (Polish, Estonian, Lithuanian) only started in July and can be mostly attributed to coverage of the illegal migration crisis, which flared up on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border and later escalated in the Polish-Belarusian and Latvian-Belarusian border regions. The coinciding of the illegal migration crisis and *ZAPAD 2021* suggests that the Minsk regime deliberately timed this hybrid operation against its neighbouring states. The border crisis served as a catalyst for drawing the Baltic states and Poland into the debate about *ZAPAD 2021*, and positioned the exercise as a factor that could further aggravate the security situation in the region.



Content analysis

Types of information

Communication on *ZAPAD 2021* was defined by the prevalence of factual-neutral reporting, which comprised a 79.2% majority of the content published, compared to the proportion of false and misleading messaging, which stood at 20.8% (Figure 8). Despite slight variations within monthly coverage of exercise activities, the volume of factual-neutral reporting maintained its dominant status from May to September 2021. False and misleading content was identified as present in one in every five *ZAPAD 2021* publications. Fact-based reporting also scored the highest number of potential contacts reached, yielding 2.24 billion estimated readers (85.3%). This

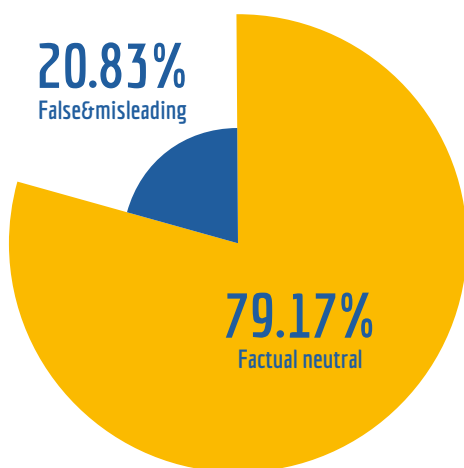


Figure 8: Share by type of information

compared with 385.9 million estimated contacts (14.7%) reached with factually misleading and inaccurate reporting.

Thus, the dominant status of factual-neutral reporting, along with the high figure for potential reach, could indicate a possible effort among distinct communication actors to cover news related to *ZAPAD 2021* in a fact-based manner, leaving less space for interpretation and/or possible speculation that could potentially harm their reputation and/or contribute to misconceptions on the conduct of the exercise.

Measured by activity dynamics, the instances of factual-neutral reporting and false-misleading content saw a growing quantitative divergence throughout May-August and experienced a matching activity trend in September during the active phase of *ZAPAD 2021*, as the former increasingly outnumbered the latter (Figure 9). The ratio between factual-neutral reporting and false-misleading content first diverged significantly during the preparation phase of *ZAPAD 2021* in June-July, which was marked by fewer attempts to distort information about the technical aspects of the exercise. Meanwhile, the active phase of the exercise presented opportunities for distinct communication actors to create false and misleading content, and exploit the high

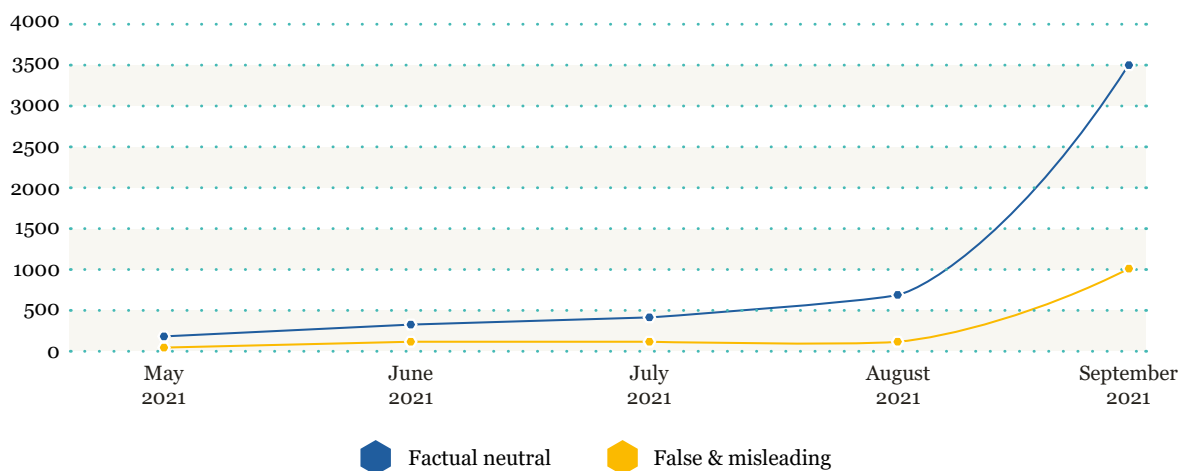


Figure 9: Monthly dynamics by type of information

visibility of the exercise for manipulative purposes.

However, across the five months under review, no unifying qualitative features of the activity dynamics were established, especially because communication actors appeared to disseminate misleading content independently of *ZAPAD 2021* milestone developments covered by factual-neutral reports.

False and misleading information

In addition to the legitimate means of communication, *ZAPAD 2021* saw the application of multiple information influence operations which were identified in the information environments of countries in near proximity to the exercise. These operations employed specific strategies for the dissemination of content and originated

from obscure false-information sources. At least three recurrent strategies for the dissemination of false and misleading information could be observed between May and September: distribution of forged stories about the exercise via fringe and/or less prominent outlets; the posting of inauthentic comments under articles published by major foreign digital outlets; and the removal of content associated with the public-health conditions in participating countries. Though fluctuating in their occurrence from May to September 2021, all three influence operations were especially prominent shortly before and during the active phase of *ZAPAD 2021* – a time when exposure to false and misleading information could be particularly effective.

Fabricated stories in less prominent web-sites. The first instances of this information influence operation were recorded at the beginning of active preparations for *ZAPAD*



2021, which were marked by a large number of national exercises and military activities in the training grounds of the Russian Federation and Belarus from July 2021 onwards. Digital media websites which engaged in this operation had small readerships and used click-bait headlines as well as speculative reporting to disseminate unverified and fabricated accounts of ZAPAD 2021 developments. They intended to sow confusion and panic in audiences in close geographic proximity to the exercise. Examples of these fabricated stories ranged from over-dramatised accounts of Russian exercises in the Western Military District (e.g. claims that Russian military vessels blocked access to the Gulf of Finland in response to NATO provocations in the Baltic Sea), to openly provocative stories about Lithuania and Poland (e.g. that the two countries were supposedly trying to develop a plan to disrupt ZAPAD 2021 with the use of drones equipped with explosives against Russian S-400 air defence systems, as the story went). While stories including such falsehoods had limited reach, these influence techniques indicate Russia's capacity to destabilise discourse by provoking excessive and/or inadequate responses in audiences targeted with distorted communication, as in the case of ZAPAD 2021.

Inauthentic comments under articles published by major foreign outlets. The first instances of this information influence operation were recorded during the active phase of ZAPAD 2021 and the post-exercise period in September. This operation could be observed across several Western

media outlets, and entailed the posting of inauthentic opinions in their comment sections.⁶⁵ The comments sought to portray the Western reaction to ZAPAD 2021 as 'hysteria', while portraying the Russian Federation as a 'Great Power' by highlighting sophisticated military operations from the active phase of the exercise. Throughout September, this tactic was identified among at least ten prominent media outlets from five countries: Bulgaria (*Dir.bg*), Japan (*Tokyo Shimbun*), Poland (*Wirtualna Polska*, *Fakt, wPolityce*, and *ZBIAM*), Sweden (*Dagen Nyheter*), and the United Kingdom (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, and *The Sun*). This tactic matched the characteristics of a pro-Kremlin information influence operation identified recently by researchers from Cardiff University's Crime and Security Research Institute. It takes advantage of loopholes in the rules that govern the comment sections of many mainstream media outlets to manipulate public opinion in favour of Russian interests. The use of this tactic is believed to have intensified recently, especially since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁶⁶

Removal of content regarding public-health conditions among participating service personnel. The application of this influence operation was first recorded in August. It was used again in September shortly before and during the active phase of ZAPAD 2021. Specifically, it concerned the publication of photos of documents from the institutional bodies of the Russian Federation and Belarus. These photos ostensi-

bly revealed public-health problems among servicemen involved in *ZAPAD 2021*. Though the origins of these photos remained obscure, Russian and Belarusian authorities quickly dismissed them as ‘forged’ and ‘absolutely untrue’. Shortly thereafter, this allegedly falsified content was removed and deleted from the forums that had originally published the photos.⁶⁷ The lack of communication regarding public-health conditions among *ZAPAD 2021* servicemen, along with the immediate denial of possible mismanagement of the SARS-Cov-2 situation during the exercise, may support the veracity of the ‘forged’ documents. Indeed, as early as June 2021, there were already inconsistencies between the declared and actual number of fully vaccinated service personnel in the Western Military District.

Messaging themes

ZAPAD 2021 coverage was marked by versatile and diversified messaging, which was deliberately designed to achieve the highest possible communicative impact among the exercise’s target audiences. Communications evolved and emerged from several different core narratives from May to September 2021. By the end of the active phase of *ZAPAD 2021*, we could observe at least twenty narratives and 130 sub-narratives related to the exercise.

The relatively high rate of communication multiplicity also indicated a competitive information environment created by distinct

communication actors who engaged in hostile messaging on the exercise.

Our content analysis revealed that communication on *ZAPAD 2021* rested on four messaging pillars:

defensive – based on messaging designed to de-escalate and reassure. This core theme presents *ZAPAD 2021* as a defensive, transparent, and benign exercise. It seeks to de-escalate possible tensions and reassure neighbours that the exercise does not pose a threat to anyone;

offensive – based on messaging designed to undermine and dismiss. This core theme seeks to discredit criticism of the exercise voiced by neighbouring countries and international organisations affected by *ZAPAD 2021*;

inclusive – based on messaging designed to promote and emphasise cooperation. This core theme emphasises international cooperation among potential allies of the Russian Federation (primarily Belarus, followed by Collective Security Treaty Organisation and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation member-states). It seeks to position Russia as an international player capable of forming political and military alliances among culturally distinct and heterogeneous countries;

exclusionary – based on messaging designed to divide and exclude. This core theme projects and promotes the image of



a strong, militarily capable, and technologically superior Russia (with references to its 'Great Power' status).

Of these four messaging pillars, defensive messaging was the most prominent, whilst exclusionary messaging was the least drawn upon theme. The information surge which accompanied ZAPAD 2021 conformed to the communicative approaches used in previous strategic-level exercises and reflected the broader interest of the Russian Federation and Belarus in the use of military exercises in support of the regimes' political agenda.

Narratives and sub-narratives

Compared within monthly distribution levels, five were used most frequently. While four of these fell under the *defensive* category, one fell into the *offensive* category: 'Countries/organisations show increased levels of interest in the military exercises'. It used a rhetoric of intimidation and was mostly aimed at rejecting criticism directed towards the exercise (Figure 10).

The narrative 'Performance of military units meets the initial objectives of the exercise' was identified as a key line of messaging

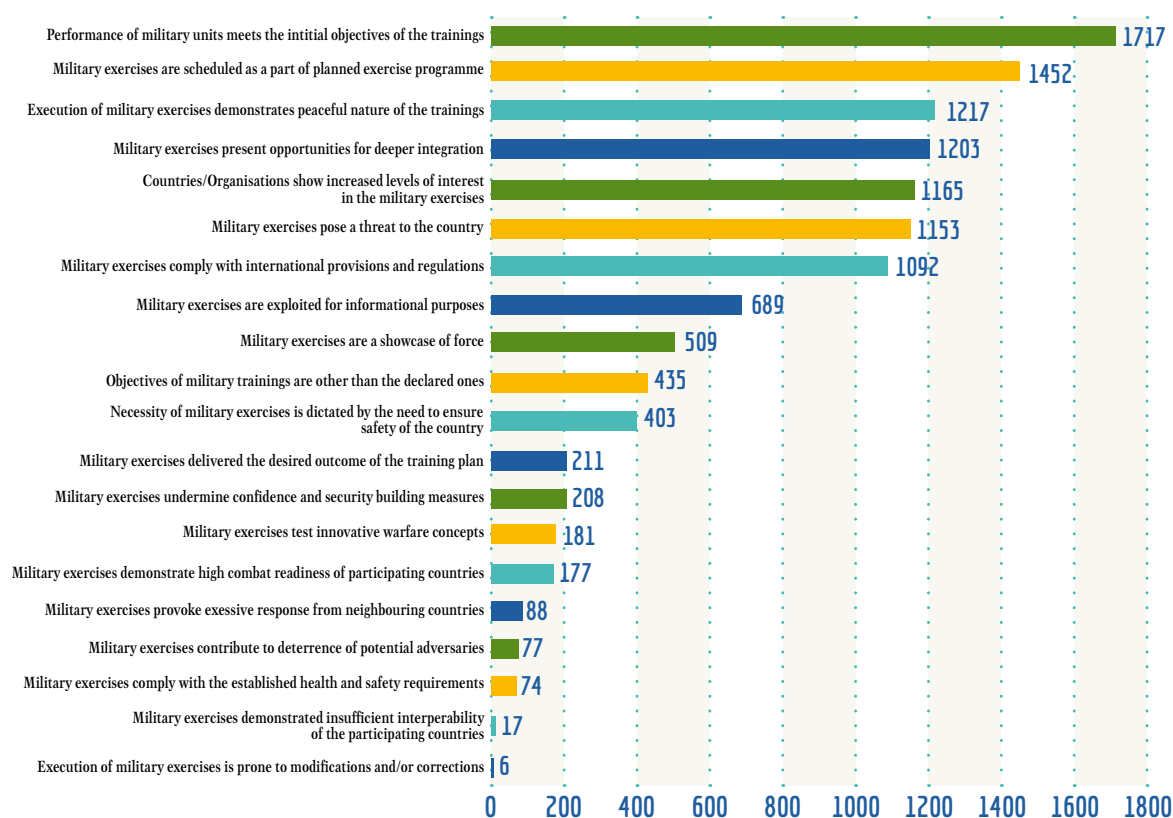


Figure 10: Narratives by mentions



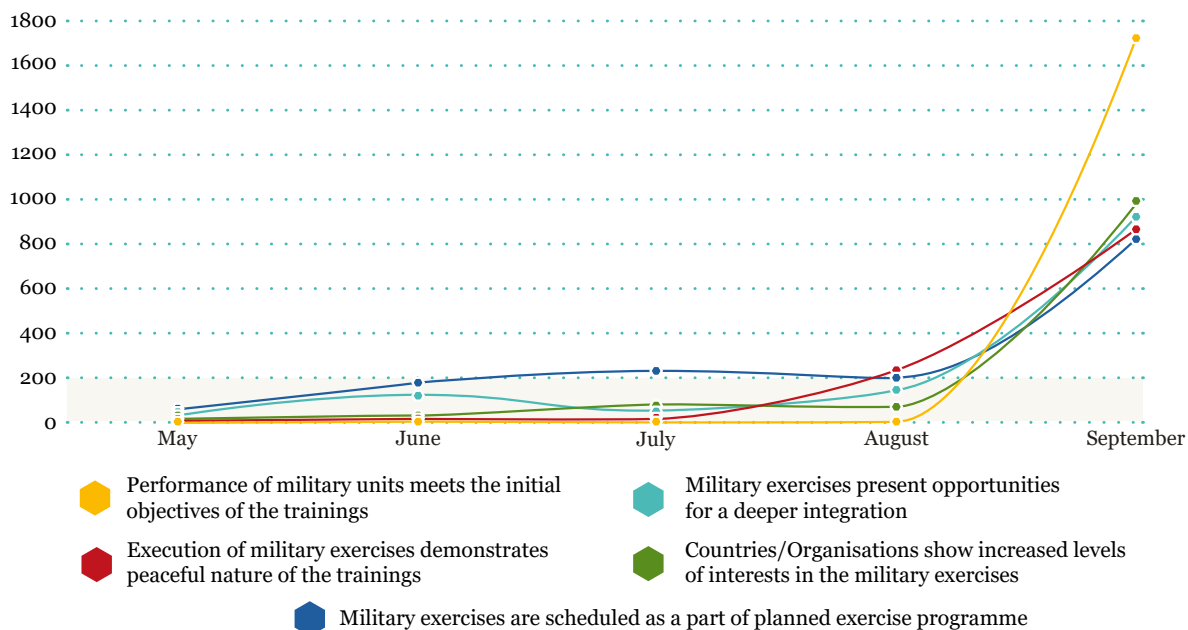


Figure 11: Monthly dynamics by TOP 5 narratives

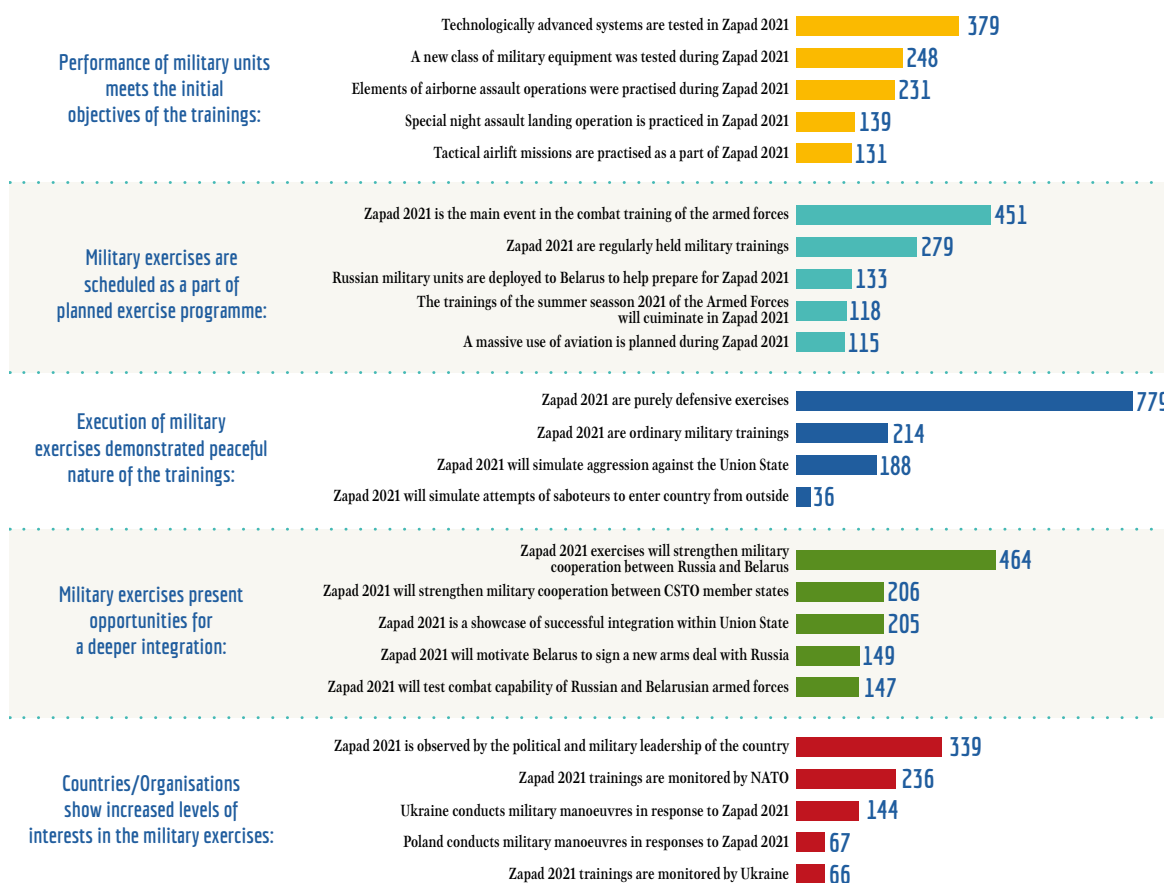


Figure 12: Top 5 narratives and sub-narratives by mentions



and amplified more than any other narrative. Its use intensified sharply and was most prevalent during the active phase of the exercise. More than two out of three mentions of this narrative occurred as part of communications about the successful completion of tasks within the exercise's scenario.

Overall, the narrative 'Military exercises present opportunities for deeper integration' was identified as the most consistently used and was amplified throughout the full cycle of the exercise. It sought to emphasise the importance of strategic military cooperation between the Russian Federation and Belarus within the 'Union State' (Figure 11). This narrative was reinforced by the leading sub-narrative 'ZAPAD 2021 exercises will strengthen military cooperation between Russia and Belarus', which ranked third among all sub-narratives related to ZAPAD 2021.

Measured by DebunkReach®, communications by the political and military leaderships of the Russian Federation and Belarus comprised the largest share of potential contacts reached (73%, i.e. 1.9 billion estimated contacts). In contrast, communications by the political and military leaderships of neighbouring countries (i.e. those sharing a border with regions where ZAPAD 2021 was conducted), made up only 27% of contacts reached (estimated at 720.3 million). The dominant position held by the political and military leaderships of the Russian Federation and Belarus in

ZAPAD 2021 communication underscores the difficulty outside communicators face when trying to reach audiences in Russian-language information environments.

The sub-narrative mentioned the most (779 times) from May to September was describing ZAPAD 2021 as a purely defensive exercise. This sub-narrative also had the highest impact on mentions of core narratives, accounting for up to 64% of all mentions of the narrative 'Execution of military exercises demonstrates peaceful nature of the trainings'. The sub-narrative also contributed to this core narrative's high position in the overall ranking (Figure 12). The narrative 'Military exercises are scheduled as part of planned exercise programme' was the most diversely communicated one, with up to 29 sub-narratives used with similar frequency. The narrative 'Necessity of military exercises is dictated by the need to ensure safety of the country' stood out as the least diversified, supported by only one sub-narrative.



CONCLUSION

This case study of ZAPAD 2021 communications illustrates that for the Russian political and military establishment, a military exercise is as much about training personnel and testing defence capabilities as it is about reinforcing and creating narratives, including those about its alliances, 'great power' status, and the legitimacy of its actions.

The information campaigns and messaging tactics which accompanied ZAPAD 2021 built upon the Kremlin's previous strategies and reflect its overall philosophy towards the role of communications in the contemporary information environment.

In the eyes of the Kremlin, information should be controlled and, when appropriate, weaponised. This notion may be the result of a paranoid Russian leadership that believes its country is already under attack and at war, particularly in the information environment. But it may also be Russia simply engaging in what has been interpreted as an international environment of heightened strategic competition, coloured by an ideological dimension, and at its core a standoff between the liberal world order and illiberal actors such as Russia and China. Regardless of Russia's motivations, its military thought leaders consider 'information superiority' as a key enabler for victory in current and future conflicts and wars:

*'Wars will be resolved by a skilful combination of military, nonmilitary, and special nonviolent measures that will be put through by a variety of forms and methods and a blend of political, economic, informational, technological, and environmental measures, primarily by taking advantage of information superiority. Information warfare in the new conditions will be the starting point of every action now called the new type of warfare, or hybrid war, in which broad use will be made of the mass media and, where feasible, global computer networks (blogs, various social networks, and other resources).'*⁶⁸

For Russia, this maxim evidently holds in peacetime too, as illustrated by ZAPAD 2021 communication and this case study. Russia's counterparts must be aware of this reality, and must not cede the information environment. More can and should be done to confront Russia on its own terms.



Endnotes

- 1 For details in addition to those outlined in this section, see the comprehensive Russian media environment guide—one of many published by [BBC Monitoring](#), a UK-based world media monitoring arm of the BBC with an international presence, which is updated annually (requires subscription).
- 2 Ratsiborynska, Vira, Daivis Petraitis, and Valeriy Akimenko. 'Russia's Strategic Exercises: Messages and Implications'. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020. ISBN: 978-9934-564-80-2.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Petraitis, Daivis, and Vira Ratsiborynska. 'Exercise KAVKAZ 2020 - A Final Test Of Russian Military Reform?'. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2021. ISBN: 978-9934-564-98-7.
- 5 So named after Sergey Ivanov, then minister of defence. See Petraitis, Daivis. 'Reorganization of the Russian Armed Forces (2005-2008)'. Finish National Defence University, 2012. ISSN 1236-4983.
- 6 Petraitis, Daivis. 'The Anatomy of Zapad-2017: Certain Features of Russian Military Planning'. Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review 2017–2018, Volume 16, 2018. ISSN 2335-870X.
- 7 Shoygu's official statement at the MoD Board (*Коллегия*) meeting in April 2021. See summary at RBC. '[Шойгу заявил о завершении основных преобразований в армии](#)'. 16 April 2021; and interview in full at Gavrilo, Yuriy. '[Эффект Шойгу: 30 лет назад Сергей Шойгу возглавил Российский корпус спасателей - «чрезвычайное» ведомство, которое он сделал лучшим в мире](#)'. Rossiyskaya Gazeta. 15 April 2021. 'Считаю, что слово «реформа» не совсем точно характеризует процессы, происходящие в Вооруженных силах. Осуществлялось плановое развитие армии и флота. На сегодняшний день можно сказать, что основные преобразования в целом завершены. Вооруженные силы приведены к трехвидовой структуре, а их штатная численность доведена до установленных указом президента Российской Федерации параметров,' he said ['I believe that the word «reform» is not quite accurate to describe the processes taking place in the Armed Forces. The planned development of the army and navy was in progress. As of today, we can say that the main transformations have been on the whole completed. The Armed Forces have been brought to a three-service structure, and their establishment strength has been brought to the parameters established by the decree of the President of the Russian Federation'].
- 8 The presidential decree approving the new SDP was signed on 13 November 2020.
- 9 The roundtable took place on 8 February 2021 during the organisation and mobilisation gathering mentioned in the text.
- 10 Krechetnikov, Artem. '[Генерал Павлов: виновник поражения или козел отпущения?](#)'. BBC Russian Service. 22 June 2016.
- 11 [European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe \(2019/2819\(RSP\)\)](#).
- 12 Petraitis, Daivis. 'The Russian Doctrine—A Way for the Political Elite to Maximize the Efficiency of Information Warfare'. In *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare*, edited by Holger Mölder, Vladimir Sazonov, Archil Chochia, Tanel Kerikmäe. Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2021. ISBN 978-3-030-73954-6.
- 13 A special status a city is awarded (*Город трудовой доблести*) to emphasise its industry's role in World War II, established by Putin on 1 March 2020.
- 14 Achtirko, Aleksandr. '[«Внесли свой вклад в Великую Победу»: городов трудовой доблести станет больше](#)'. Gazeta.ru. 9 September 2021.
- 15 A special status a city is awarded (*Город воинской славы*) to emphasise its martial role in World War II.
- 16 A state award — the Order of Alexander Nevsky — supposed to be among the most prestigious modern Russian state and military awards.
- 17 RIA Novosti News Agency. '[Началась церемония открытия мемориала Александру Невскому на Чудском озере](#)'. 11 September 2021.
- 18 Gavrilenko, Andrey. '[«Укротившему варварство на Востоке, низложившему зависть на Западе». В Псковской области состоялось открытие мемориального комплекса «Князь Александр Невский с дружиной»](#)'. Krasnaya Zvezda. 13 September 2021.
- 19 See, for example, Shevtsova, Lilia. '[Диалектика по-русский](#)'. Facebook.com. 14 November 2021. 'Russia can seriously influence Western policy. The more the Kremlin is aggressive towards liberal democracies, the more it will provoke containment in retaliation. Threats and blackmail are the best way to reawaken a West that has grown lazy and make it fighting fit again', Ms Shevtsova, a prominent Russia scholar, said in the section on the 'Boomerang effect'.
- 20 Grevatt, Jon. '[China, Russia approve 2021–25 road map to increase military co-operation](#)'. Janes. 24 November 2021.
- 21 Ul Khaliq, Riyaz. '[Japan worried as China, Russia move](#)



- to strengthen military coordination'. Anadolu Agency. 24 November 2021.
- 22 Official Foreign Ministry website. 'Расширенное заседание коллегии МИД'. 18 November 2021.
 - 23 Petraitis, Daivis, and Vira Ratsiborynska. 'Exercise KAVKAZ 2020 - A Final Test Of Russian Military Reform?'. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2021. ISBN: 978-9934-564-98-7.
 - 24 Barotte, Nicolas. 'Avec la «Zapad», Moscou veut faire trembler l'Otan'. International. 9 September 2021.
 - 25 RIA Novosti news agency. 'В Минобороны призвали НАТО «не беспокоить русского медведя»'. 20 August 2021; Lenta.ru. 'В Минобороны России посоветовали НАТО не беспокоить «русского медведя»'. 20 August 2021; and RBC.ru. 'В Минобороны посоветовали НАТО «не беспокоить русского медведя»'. 21 August 2021.
 - 26 RIA Novosti news agency. 'Слуцкий ответил на заявление генсека НАТО о российских учениях'. 3 September 2021.
 - 27 RTR. '60 Minutes.' 13 September 2021.
 - 28 Ibid.
 - 29 The VD2011 agreement requires a signatory to accept mandatory observation when the number of participants exceeds 13,000 soldiers (VD2011 Section VI). See Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). 'Vienna Document 2011 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures'. 30 November 2011.
 - 30 VD2011 covers areas in Russia up to the Ural Mountains.
 - 31 Petraitis, Daivis, and Vira Ratsiborynska. 'Exercise KAVKAZ 2020 - A Final Test Of Russian Military Reform?'. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2021. ISBN: 978-9934-564-98-7.
 - 32 Russian MoD official website. 'Zapad-2021'. Undated.
 - 33 Izvestia. 'Стартовало совместное стратегическое учение РФ и Белоруссии «Запад-2021»'. 10 September 2021; RIA Novosti news agency. 'В Нижегородской области стартовали учения «Запад-2021»'. 9 September 2021; Biryulin, Roman, and Aleksandr Pinchuk. 'В едином боевом порядке. На полигонах Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь состоялись церемонии открытия совместного стратегического учения «Запад-2021»'. Krasnaya Zvezda. 10 September 2021.
 - 34 VD2011 refers to 'The engagement of formations of land forces of the participating States in the same exercise activity conducted under a single operational command independently or in combination with any possible air or naval components' (VD2011 Section V). See Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). 'Vienna Document 2011 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures'. 30 November 2011.
 - 35 RIA Novosti news agency. 'Глава Генштаба отчитался Путину о ходе учений «Запад-2021»'. 13 September 2021.
 - 36 Zvezda TV. 'Военная приемка. Приказ на «Запад-2021»'. 19 September 2021.
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 - 38 Rosgvardiya press service. 'Росгвардия и Минобороны приступили к активной фазе учения «Заслон-2021»'. BlgAsia. 12 July 2021. Rosgvardiya commander Viktor Zolotov described Zaslون 2021 as part of 'preparations' for ZAPAD 2021 'jointly' with the Russian Defence Ministry.
 - 39 Armenia, Belarus, China, Egypt, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan participated in KAVKAZ 2020 in some form.
 - 40 The CSTO currently includes Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Afghanistan and Serbia are observers and Iran is reportedly a candidate observer.
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