



# HELSINKI COMMISSION REPORT

October 2, 2017

## IN BRIEF

### Witness to ZAPAD

#### *A Helsinki Commission Staffer's Experience*

*For months, watchers of European security have focused unprecedented attention on one, singular scheduled event: ZAPAD 2017, a Joint Strategic Military Exercise conducted by Russia and Belarus from September 14 to September 20, 2017. The author, the political-military affairs advisor for the U.S. Helsinki Commission staff, attended the final phase of the exercise as a Distinguished Visitor at the invitation of the Government of Belarus.*

ZAPAD 2017, the most anticipated—and, in some quarters, feared—military exercise in recent memory concluded on September 20. The extensive maneuvers by Belarusian and Russian forces took place at a number of training ranges in Belarus and on nearby Russian territory and featured a broad range of military capabilities.

The planned exercise was in some ways routine; it followed a well-known Russian schedule of readiness-enhancing exercises that rotates among Russia's military districts on a quadrennial basis ("ZAPAD," or "West," takes place in the Western Military District).

However, unlike previous exercises, ZAPAD 2017 took place in a strategic context now defined by Russian aggression in Ukraine and Georgia—incursions that were, according to western analysts, facilitated by Russian exercise activity. The Russian leadership's track record of aggression, dismissiveness towards transpar-



ency, and geopolitical unpredictability understandably put its neighbors to the west on edge. These countries have seen prior Russian exercises serve as cover for force build-ups that enabled, for instance, the illegal attempted annexation of Crimea.

Leading officials ranging from Baltic defense ministers, to the Ukrainian President, to the

Secretary General of NATO raised concerns about what ZAPAD 2017 might mean for the security of Belarus' neighbors, both before the exercise and during its execution.

### **A Numbers Game**

Fears of potential ZAPAD-related Russian aggression were aggravated by long-standing concerns regarding Moscow's reluctant approach to military transparency. Transparency in military affairs is a central commitment undertaken by the signatories to the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, and one that the Helsinki Commission is mandated to monitor.

Perhaps no set of commitments is more central to this principle—and applicable precisely to an exercise like ZAPAD 2017—than the Vienna Document. This confidence building measure, endorsed by its signatories, requires states holding exercises above certain thresholds of personnel and equipment to invite the other OSCE participating States for extensive observation and monitoring, allowing the other parties to verify, in principle, that the exercises are inherently inoffensive. These measures were designed to increase stability and security by providing greater information and predictability and reducing the risk of misunderstandings that could lead to conflict.

Based on historical precedents and other indicators, ZAPAD 2017 was widely expected to feature more than enough troops and equipment to require, under provisions of the Vienna Document, invitations for a full observation mission. Many observers were therefore surprised when official Belarusian and Russian communications asserted that fewer than 13,000 total troops were to take part in ZAPAD.

Western officials suggested publicly that this figure may have been manipulated to fall conveniently below the Vienna Document thresholds requiring full observation missions. More realistic assumptions would see total forces reaching upwards of 100,000 personnel, several western leaders stated in the lead-up to the exercise. (On September 23, 2017, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander - Europe was quoted in the *Washington Post* stating that the exercise was “larger than what they told us.”)

### **Witnessing ZAPAD Close Up**

In response to the concerns generated by ZAPAD 2017, the Government of Belarus took steps to reassure its neighbors about the benign nature of the exercise. Chief among these was an invitation to approximately 90 officials from neighboring countries and international organizations, including a group of Defense Attachés, to view elements of the exercise.



It was in this context that the Helsinki Commission was invited by the Government of Belarus to send a representative to the “Distinguished Visitors” program taking

place September 19-20, 2017, in and around Minsk. The Distinguished Visitors program featured two elements: an informational briefing on September 19 outlining the exercise, and a live-fire demonstration the following day.

At the informational briefing, Belarusian officers outlined the scenario, participating forces, and expected outcomes of the exercise. The officers sought to emphasize the defensive nature of the activity and asserted that no state should feel in any way threatened by ZAPAD 2017. All Belarusian troops and equipment would be returned to permanent basing stations by September 30, 2017, and Russian forces and equip-

ment would similarly be withdrawn by that date, they assured the foreign visitors.

The live-fire demonstration, conducted in the presence of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, was the culmination of the second and final phase of ZAPAD 2017. The Belarusian government brought the Distinguished Visitors group (along with a sizeable media contingent) to the Borisov training range, approximately one hour east of Minsk, to witness the program.

The demonstration featured an impressive array of military capability, including Russian and Belarusian tanks; artillery; rocket launchers; unmanned aerial vehicles; and fixed and rotary wing combat aircraft. The joint operations of the exercising Belarusian and Russian soldiers were designed to test their ability to organize themselves into a “joint regional group of forces” in order to repel the attacks of a fictional “Coalition of the Interested States.” The coalition was headed by the made-up state of Veyshnorria, a country which, in the exercise scenario, is a neighbor of Belarus and seeks to split the Union State of Russia and Belarus.

### **Transparency Is in the Eye of the Beholder**

Certainly, the Government of Belarus offered a significant measure of transparency and openness as they prepared for ZAPAD 2017, including providing briefings at NATO headquarters; organizing the distinguished visitors program; and inviting a selected group of neighboring states for somewhat more extensive observations. The attendance of representatives from the Helsinki Commission, the OSCE, NATO, and the ICRC were also positive signs. These voluntary steps were commendable, and the information provided was valuable to those who were able to participate.

On the other hand, however positive, these steps should not be understood to be equivalent to the transparency that would have been provided by a full Vienna Document observation mission, both in terms of intrusiveness and scope, and in terms of the number of nations



invited to participate. Had Russia and Belarus declared only slightly higher numbers of participating troops and equipment, or sought to fully embrace the spirit of the Vienna Document, such measures would have been expected.

Furthermore, while the military demonstration provided during the visitors' program was certainly impressive, it offered its participants little chance to assess the totality of the exercise and verify, for example, its scale and scope through first-hand observation.

### **Conclusions**

The Belarusian Government made significant efforts to address concerns about the lack of transparency surrounding ZAPAD 2017, efforts that included limited observation opportunities for a selected group of neighboring states, as well as a two-day program for invited guests, including the Helsinki Commission, to witness the concluding day of the maneuvers.

Nevertheless, the run-up to the exercise provided ample evidence of the need to recall and un-

derline the importance of the Helsinki Final Act's emphasis on greater security through transparency in military affairs. Concerns expressed by a wide range of observers regarding the anticipated size and consequences of ZAPAD 2017 had to be taken seriously, if only because of the recent history of the Russian leadership using such exercises to intimidate, and in some cases attack, its neighbors (including the illegal annexation of Crimea).

The regrettable downturn in European security caused by the Russian leadership's actions in recent years is exactly what the Helsinki Process was intended to forestall. Unfortunately, Moscow has chosen to evade or outright deny its commitments under these agreements. Russia has not provided the means that other participating States would consider essential to fulfilling both the letter and spirit of its transparency commitments, including full observation

of military exercises as foreseen under the Vienna Document.

ZAPAD 2017 should provide further impetus to renewed efforts to ensure the Vienna Document is not only fully implemented as it currently stands, but also that its provisions are modernized so that the Document can continue to keep pace with trends in European security.

This was one reason the Helsinki Commission was especially grateful for the opportunity provided by the Belarusian government to experience ZAPAD 2017 first-hand. The Commission will continue to “monitor the acts of the signatories which reflect compliance with or violation of the articles of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe,” including commitments to transparency in military affairs.

*All photos of ZAPAD courtesy of Alex Tiersky.*

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## About the Helsinki Commission

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, is an independent agency of the Federal Government charged with monitoring compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advancing comprehensive security through promotion of human rights, democracy, and economic, environmental and military cooperation in 57 countries. The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. Senate, nine from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce.

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