

LESSONS LEARNED FROM EXERCISE ZAPAD 2017

PART 1: RUSSIAN OBJECTIVES AND NATO COUNTERMEASURES

By

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Introduction

On November 28, I was invited to give a briefing about the current position on Georgia in their attempts to follow a western oriented path by trying to become a member of the NATO alliance. The major problem is Russia's stance on letting Georgia make its own decisions which kind of future they envy. An eastern/Russian dominated future as part of a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EurAsEc) and getting "protected" by the "Collective Security Treaty Organization", the military pillar of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Russia falsely considers Georgia as part of Russia's "Historical Area of Interest" and therefore part of Russia's "Area of Responsibility". Russia's MIRⁱ

This briefing will be the basis for three separate articles, in which I will determine:

1. The lessons learned from Exercise ZAPAD 2017, which was conducted in September of this year. How the scenario for this exercise was structured, it's possible consequences for the West and NATO's countermeasures
2. A second article concentrating on the actual threat by the Russians in the southern theater and the key role played by the Black Sea Fleet.
3. And finally, an article which will concentrate on Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations contributing to the European security and stability.

Theaters

In the last couple of years, I, together with my co-writer Charlef Brantz, (who will be the main author of part 3 of this series of articles) have written more than one hundred assessments about mainly the Western and Central operational theatersⁱⁱ.

- In the *northern theater* I have concentrated my efforts on the Baltic region, which automatically includes Belarus from a geopolitical and military perspective.
- In the *central region* I have written some assessments about the developments in the Russian-Ukraine war which started in 2014 and still ongoing in the year 2017 and is the struggle for real independence of Ukraine, as well as Russia's meddling in the countries of the Former Yugoslavia and.
- Relatively little time was spend on the developments in the third operational *southern theater*; de Caucasus. This article tried to compensate for that omission.



I have also written some articles about president Putin’s adventures in the Middle East, where Putin profited from the results of a totally failed foreign policy of president Trump’s predecessors where the power vacuum, after the departure of the USA from this region, has almost led to the collapse of Iraq and Syria and was responsible for the rise of ISIS. But the main lesson learned from the exercise ZAPAD 2017 was the conclusion that the exercise was only part of the overall attempt made by president Putin and his General Staff to test the West and to see if this exercise offered possibilities to be successful in one or more of Russia’s key geopolitical objectives to restore the effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union as the “Greatest political tragedy of the 20th century”, according to Vladimir Putin.

In the *northern theater* Russia intended to challenge the West by conducting operations to threaten the three islands in the Baltic Sea; the Danish island of Bornholm, the Swedish island of Gotland and the Finnish island of Åland. Those islands are crucial in controlling the sea lanes to be used to transport possible NATO reinforcements of the eastern European countries after a successful Russian attack on the former Soviet states Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, which countries are falsely considered by the Kremlin as being an historical part of the “Russian Area of Responsibility”. A situation which needs to be reversed as soon as the West shows indications that there is no political will anymore to defend those NATO allies and that on top of that, the organization lacks the military power to respond successfullyⁱⁱⁱ. The fact that Russia is still determined to isolate the Baltic countries from the rest of their Western allies was given by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs; Sergeij Lavrov, who gave a statement early this month and called to improve approaches to what he described as discrimination against Russians in other countries, especially in the Baltic states and Ukraine^{iv}.

- Simultaneously, Russia started some exercises on the Russian-Finnish (Vyborg surroundings) and the Russian-Norwegian borders (Kirkenes and surroundings) to distract Western attention from possible initiatives in the Baltic Sea. The Russian scenario did not concentrate heavily on the territory of Denmark’s island of Bornholm, Denmark being a NATO ally and therefore protected by the security

guarantees' of the organization. The Russian exercises in the northern part of Norway were also only meant to be a distraction of the key objective in the Baltic Sea.

Finland was only minimally part of the ZAPAD scenario, because the small northern country has successfully maintained a robust military capability^v which is able to provide a significant deterrent for any Russian adventures in that part of the northern theater. A lesson, the Russian have learned during the Russia-Finnish "Winter" War from 1939 till 1940, where a vast Russian army suffered a major defeat and in which tens of thousands of Russians were killed^{vi} in the Finish forests.

- In the *central theater* Russia intended and was prepared to retake the initiative in Ukraine to stop the vastly expensive military occupation, to further divide the country and to finally create the political monster and Russian fairy tale "Novorossiya" by using a fake trigger that allowed the Kremlin to restart its military aggression. To distract the West from possible Russian military activities in this theater, Russian ally Serbia could start aggression against Kosovo, binding a considerable strong NATO force in the area of the Former Yugoslavia.
- In the *southern theater* Russia made it clear that it intends to show the West that:
 - NATO membership for Georgia is unacceptable.
 - And the Black Sea region is the (again) false claim that this region was and still is part of the Russian "MIR" Because the Middle East is also considered by the Russians as being part of the southern theater, Russia has successfully consolidated its presence in the Mediterranean area by reinforcing its military position in the coastal region of Russian ally Syria. In Syria it has deployed a considerable force on and around the Syrian airbase in Hmeimim, south of its old dormant naval strongpoint Latakia and has reinforced and upgraded their naval base in the coastal city of Tartus^{vii} Russia was in September heavily involved in the fight against ISIS and what they described as "terrorist" (a common denominator for all forces that oppose Russian views and threaten Russia position as a super power in the Middle East.) As of December 12 of this year, Putin intends to withdraw a substantial amount of Russian troop, leaving a comfortable amount of "occupation" troops behind.

Northern theater.

The objectives of the exercise ZAPAD 2017 were, according to the Russian/Belarusian Ministries of Defense, a ground force of not more than 13.000 troops, had to solve a destabilized situation in Belarus, which had to be restored by a counteroffensive that stretched from the Belarus-Lithuanian border to the northern coastline of East Prussia in the Baltic Sea. In the scenario, the Baltic countries were considered to be the "enemy", part of a hostile military organization that would support the Baltic countries, and responsible for the unrest in the western provinces of Belarus, according to the ZAPAD scenario.

The counteroffensive by the CIS units would than defeat the armies of the Baltic countries including the units of their allies that were stationed in those countries and were successively "liberated" by the armies of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

In order to block air and maritime NATO transit routes to the Baltic Sea, the islands of Bornholm, Gotland and Åland were integrated into the operational plans of the exercise.

Because Denmark, as a NATO member and Finland for reasons mentioned before, the Russians concentrated on the weakest spot in the Baltic region; Sweden. Sweden has neglected its military capabilities even more than western NATO members for more than twenty years. The Swedish island of Gotland, which housed an armored division of more than 5000 soldiers during the cold war, has currently no military troops on its soil^{viii} and is the easiest target for an attack in the Baltic Sea.

It became clear that the official exercise ZAPAD 2017 was more than a simple defensive operation in Belarus, sliding into a counteroffensive to the Baltic coast of Poland, (in the scenario called; “Lubenia”) Remarkable was that the counteroffensive unexpectedly did not stop at the Polish-Lithuanian border, but went considerably further westwards including the major Polish cities of Gdansk (Danzig) and Szczecin (Stettin) that were occupied. Basically restoring the position the Soviet Union had during the Cold War, when Poland was a member of the Warsaw Pact and Lithuanian was part of the Soviet Union. On top of that, Russia would use the scenario of ZAPAD to reinforce the planned “small” garrison near Ostrovets which is part of a contract with Belarus to “protect” the construction of the newly to build Nuclear Power Plant, some 40 kilometer east of Vilnius, Lithuania.



The Ostrovets NPP , 41 kilometer from Vilnius

NATO’s answer to these plans was the execution of a large scale exercise: AURORA 17, where under Swedish Command, units from ten countries with a total manpower of more than 30.000 personnel, conducted operations to defend these islands.

AURORA 17 was executed in the Baltic Sea Region during a three-week period, from 11 through 29 September 2017.

The scripted scenario had been focused on the defense of Gotland, the expected main target of the ZAPAD exercise.

It was Sweden’s biggest military exercise in 23 years and involved troops from the United States and some other NATO countries: France, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Norway and Germany.

The designated exercise area was focused on Stockholm, Gotland and Gotenburg.



ZAPAD 2017 and parallel Russian exercises confirmed that NATO's assessments referring the Baltic Region are correct.

NATO's countermeasure showed Russia that NATO including its regional allies Sweden and Finland, were aware of the vulnerability of the Baltic region and that measures were prepared to counter a Russian threat in the region. Critical is the answer on the question if the Russians were able to man the garrison in Ostrovets. This would mean that the Russians would have a permanent military post, contrary to the agreements in the Russia-NATO Founding Act, which prohibits permanent bases near the borders between Russia and the eastern Europe. When this information will be confirmed, **NATO does not have to continue with the expensive stationing on a rotational base of NATO's "Enhanced Forward Presence" units in the Baltic counties and Poland, but give them a permanent, much cheaper and more effective status^{ix}.**

Central theater

Units of the Military District South, with its headquarters in Rostov on Don, and responsible for the operations in Eastern Ukraine as well as in the Black Sea region, were reinforced with a clear offensive military capability. Reinforcements on the Russian mainland, together with the beefed-up two Army Corps in Eastern Ukraine under Russian command, were available to eventually restart offensive operations in the ORDLO areas of eastern Ukraine^x to realize Putin's dream of reinstating the "province or state" of Novorossiya, occupying the entire eastern and the southern Ukrainian provinces, stretching from Mariupol in the east to Odessa in the west and create a link between the occupied Crimean peninsula and the Russian Federation. "Novorossiya" should than get a similar status as the apostate Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In an operation like that, the Black Sea Fleet should make a major contribution to this operation in supporting the Russian ground component by attacking the harbors of Odessa and Mariupol. In part 2 of this article I will go into further details about this key Russian military instrument.

And this is not a doom scenario, but based of factual information that the Russians mounted sufficient military capability and spend millions of rubles to prepare for this operation by creating the military conditions to restart this adventure, using a “fake” trigger like a so-called uprising (like in the South-Ossetia scenario of 2008) to liberate the “oppressed population” of the Kharkiv and the Cherson regions in east and south Ukraine. This part of the scenario promised the most successful. Ukraine was no member of NATO and therefore could not rely on security guarantees of the organization. The merely Russian speaking population in the east and the south has shown in previous elections some latent

enthusiasm for Russia.

The paramilitary units in those areas were already prepared to support this scenario that would give the Kremlin the excuse to restart the war in eastern Ukraine.

In the run up to ZAPAD 2017, Military District South was reinforced and commander had (temporarily?) four armies at his disposal: the 2nd, the 8th, the 40th and the recently created 10th Tank Army.

On top of that, an additional number of independent motor-rifle divisions were also available.



The “Liberation movements” from the Charkiv, Cherson and “Novorossiya” regions

The Air component would be supported by Russian paratroop units that conducted exercises on the Crimean peninsula and consisted of three paratroop brigades, totaling 2500 men. The brigades conducted recently wargames with units of the Black Sea Fleet. Airborne troops are Russia elite units, extremely reliable and can be used in all kind of critical operations.

“For the first time in the Russian army’s history, three large units of Airborne forces were simultaneously alerted as part of the drills and partly redeployed to Crimea with weapons and equipment,” according to Airborne Force Commander Colonel-General Andrei Serdyukov.

The exercise demonstrated the *“use of the Airborne Forces as Rapid Reaction Forces to solve crises in various regions of the world,”* he said.



Russia’s fairytale dream of “Novorossiya” and the planned operations to achieve this objective

NATO’s answer to counterbalance these plans were strong. Because the recreation of “Novorossiya”, an important role was reserved for the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF). Ground and air operations from the east to attack the eastern and southern Ukrainian provinces and create a link-up with the occupied Crimean peninsula, would be supported by attacks from the BSF, supported by thousands of naval infantry troops with the clear objective to occupy Odessa and Mariupol, while the operations in the west of “Novorossyia” would be supported by a reinforced brigade-size attack from the occupied eastern Moldovan province of “Transnistria”.

In order to show that an adventure in Ukraine could mean an unwanted confrontation with NATO soldiers, NATO consolidated its “training “ units , consisting of thousands of American, Canadian, British and Polish troops on the Partnership for Peace Training Center in western Ukraine^{xi}

Southern theater

Russia has had a free hand in that region. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia remained the key player in the entire area, by attacking Georgia in 2008, occupying the Crimea, launching attacks into eastern Ukraine and blackmailing former Warsaw partners Bulgaria and Romania to accept not only the attitude but also the aggressive actions of the single main power in the Black Sea region. When Russia decided to restart the war against Ukraine in the central theater, a major role would have been with the Russian military capabilities in the southern region, especially the Russian military capabilities of the Black Sea Fleet

The idea of implementing a HQ to counterbalance the Russian naval capabilities in the Black Sea region, was decided on the summit in Warsaw on July 8 and 9.

NATO decided that it should **take urgent steps to protect its allies and partners on its southeastern flank**. Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey, as well as partner countries Ukraine and Georgia, are all under severe pressure from Russia and require NATO assistance.

NATO should spend more attention to the Black Sea region to address Russia's rapidly escalating offensive posture in the Black Sea and protect its allies, including reinforcing air, naval, and ground assets; improving space capabilities; cyber security; reconnaissance; intelligence and creating credible deterrence strategies.

NATO decided to spread the information that the new Naval HQ would be operational in Constanța, Romania on short notice. In order to support this information, American Army reinforcements were sent to Constanta, as support for a brigade size land component of this HQ.

Also a multinational force of NATO troops has been stationed in the Romanian city of Craiova. NATO ships have been posting more frequent visits to Romanian and Bulgarian ports, as well as conducting more intensive war-games.

And the United Kingdom now says it will station a number of its Typhoon fighter aircraft in Romania later this year to bolster its air defenses.

The reinforcement also includes an establishment of a NATO "missile defense shield" in Romania's Deveselu district in 2016.

This is a facility capable of destroying incoming ballistic missiles.



NATO conducted also 18 exercises with participation of more than 30 countries in the period before ZAPAD 2017 had started:

A total of 40.000 personnel from NATO and partner countries exercised from June 30 until August 12 of this year:

- **“Tobruq legacy”** 1700 troops with participation of Bulgarian, Czech republic, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Romanian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Bulgarian, Slovakian, Turkish, Ukrainian, British, American
- **“Brave Warrior 17”, “Black Swan 17”, Szentés Axe”** with 4500 troops from Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, the USA, Serbia, Slovenia, Italy, Slovakia and the UK.
- **“Swift Response 17”**: 1500 participants from Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, USA, Bulgaria.
- **“Immediate Response”** a brigade size CPX with 110 troops from Serbia

- **“Saber Guardian 17”**, 25.000 troops, a brigade size FTX/LFX in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary.
- **“Sea Breeze 17”** with 25.000 troops from Bulgaria, Canada, Georgia, Romania, Bulgaria, The Netherlands, Poland, Turkey, Ukraine, the UK and the USA.
- **“Noble Partner”** 2800 troops from Georgia, Canada, Germany, Poland, Spain, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, the UK and the USA.

The increased activities of NATO, in advance of ZAPAD, were a reminder for the Russian leadership that any further aggression in the Black Sea region, including a restart of the war in Eastern Ukraine, has been anticipated by NATO.

NATO has shown that it is willing and determined to invest a lot of resources to counter any military adventures in the Black Sea region.

Conclusions

1. Russia became increasingly a substantial threat to NATO. Area’s of concern, as mentioned in this part of the article are the Baltic region, the Balkans and the Caucasus.
2. Russia still has the intention not only to reintegrate the Baltic countries under the “security umbrella” of the Russian Federation, but also intend to retake control of the entire southern coast of the Baltic Sea, including the main harbors of East Prussia; Gdansk (Dantzig) and Szczecin (Stettin)
3. **When NATO wants to neutralize this increasing threat the best possible way is to show Russia that there are limits to their increasingly aggressive posture.** NATO’ s response to the last exercise ZAPAD -2017 has proven that the exercise did not develop in a real military threat due to the countermeasures NATO had taken:
 - Aurora 17,
 - The information that a new NATO HQ in Constanța was on the brink of creation
 - The presence of hundreds of NATO soldiers on the territory of Ukraine, has withhold Russia to find an excuse and use the exercise as a precondition for further adventures in Ukraine.
4. Russia seems to respect the Finnish attitude, showing the resilience of the small country by mobilizing a substantial military capability. **Deeds speak loader than words.**

Putin and Russia’s financial problems will even increase on short notice. In the USA on August 2 a law was introduced which will dramatically increases the effects of the Western sanctions. In this law, signed the “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), under pressure of Republican hardliners and the special representative for Ukraine; Kurt Volker, the American Treasury Department, is tasked to draft a list of all Russian investments including Russian acquired properties within 180 days and present this list to the Congress.

Because this list already exists, the tasker is purely theoretical. The Russian properties represent an amount of 1.2 trillion dollar owned by Russian oligarchs and could be incorporated in the existing sanctions list of the so called Magnitsky Act^{xii}. In this way the

Trump government will prevent that these funds will be white-washed. Putin and his inner circle will not be able anymore to control their possessions acquired in the USA that in fact belong to the Russian population. Without the support of a very unhappy inner circle, it could be the end of Putin's position in Russia.

The Russian political analyst Piontovsky calls it :

“The sanctions law of August 2 is therefore the destruction of the economic and political foundations of Putin’s system.”

The main problem is that it is absolutely unclear what will happen if and when the Putin area will end. It could mean that the relations between the West and Russian will improve, but there is always a chance that the current Russian-Western relationship can deteriorate further when the successor shows the same or even more arrogance in matters of international security.

ⁱ MIR: The MIR or Obshchina became a topic in political philosophy with the publication of August von Haxthausen's book in 1847. It was in the mid-19th century that Slavophiles "discovered" the MIR. They hailed the MIR as a purely Russian collective, both ancient and venerable; free from what they considered the stain of the "bourgeois" mindset found in western Europe.

ⁱⁱ Articles are mentioned and stored in my website www.remouchamps.eu

ⁱⁱⁱ The fact that Russia is still determined to isolate the Baltic countries from the rest of their Western allies was given by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs; Sergeij Lavrov, who gave a statement early this month and called to improve approaches to what he described as discrimination against Russians in other countries, especially in the Baltic states and Ukraine. Continuing with: *"Amid lingering discrimination against compatriots in a number of countries, primarily in the Baltic countries and Ukraine, it is necessary to improve approaches to protecting their political, civil, and ethno-cultural rights."*

And concluding that: *"The situation today makes it necessary to step up efforts to protect the Russian language, preserve cultural heritage and historical memory, and generally tackle discrimination, including at the everyday level,"* He gave high marks to the fund's work to this end, which is taking place "in full compliance with the norms of international law."

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^v Finland, with a population of 5.6 million inhabitants, is able to bring some 300.000 troops in the field with some 600.000 in reserve formations. It can field **twice as many troops** as Italy, Germany, France, Spain and the UK combined. Finland already acquired 100 used Leopard 2A6 main battle tanks (MBT) from the Netherlands, hundreds of American FIM-92F Stinger man-portable surface-to-air missiles, 24 Norwegian-made NASAMS 2 medium-range air-defense system, 16 German-Swedish ASRAD-R short-range air-defense system and 55 Israeli Aeronautics Defense Orbiter unmanned aerial vehicles (drones)

^{vi} Russian losses during that war mounted up to more than 363.000 casualties (Fins: 26.000)

^{vii} Article (NL) "Russische schijnbewegingen in het voorterrein" (jan 2016) Tartus is the reinforced Russian Naval base, leased by the Russians as a "Material-Technical Support Point" (Russian: Пункт материально-технического обеспечения, ПМТО) and not a "base". Tartus is the Russian Navy's only Mediterranean repair and replenishment spot, sparing Russia's warships the trip back to their Black Sea bases through the Turkish Straits. ^[3]

^{viii} Except the Homeland defense Battalion of 300 volunteers

^{ix} The Dutch Intelligence and National Security Board (AIVD) concluded in a report (issued December 2017) that NATO should strengthen its presence in the Baltic countries and Poland and station a brigade size ground component in each of the respective countries. This could then become a permanent posting when the Russians will continue to man the "Ostrovets" garrison on a permanent base

^x ORDLO: the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, called the DPR (Donetsk Peoples republic) and the LPR (Luhansk Peoples Republic).

^{xi} Training facilities in Rava Ruska, Krakovets and Mostyska.

^{xii} The Magnitsky Act, formally known as the “Russia and Moldova Jackson–Vanik Repeal and Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012”, is a bipartisan bill passed by the US Congress and signed by President Obama in November–December 2012, intending to punish Russian officials responsible for the death of Russian tax accountant Sergei Magnitsky in a Moscow prison in 2009.