



CENTRE-2026

How Russia Is Institutionalizing the Lessons of the Ukraine War

From Battlefield Adaptation to Institutionalized Warfare

DATE

4 October 2026

GEOGRAPHIC AREA

Russian Federation / Central Asia / Caspian Sea

INTELLIGENCE DOMAIN

Defence & Military / Training / Force Adaptation

Executive Assessment

Centre-2026 provides credible evidence of partial institutionalization of combat adaptations developed during the war in Ukraine. The strongest indicators are not the presence of new equipment by itself, but the deliberate transfer of Ukraine-derived practices into a strategic command-staff exercise linking the Central Military District, Aerospace Forces, Airborne Forces, centrally controlled formations, the Caspian Flotilla and multinational contingents. Russian officials explicitly framed the exercise around combat experience, while the practical phase emphasized mass unmanned employment, ground robotics, counter-UAS defence, small assault groups, light mobility, reconnaissance-fire integration and logistics under drone threat.

The exercise therefore marks a movement beyond local battlefield improvisation. FPV support to assault elements, unmanned resupply, repair and evacuation under UAV threat, buried and camouflaged support areas, mobile counter-drone groups and layered short-range air defence were presented as normal components of force employment. Strategic exercises are a principal mechanism through which a military standardizes procedures for formations not continuously exposed to the Ukrainian theatre and trains staffs to plan around new battlefield constraints.

The evidence does not support a judgment of full institutionalization. Centre-2026 showed selected formations and systems under controlled conditions; it did not establish force-wide availability, production depth, resilience under hostile electronic attack, sustained logistics under continuous UAV surveillance, or the quality of decentralized decision-making under heavy attrition. The exercise remains partly demonstrative. The most defensible judgment is that Russia has moved from adaptation toward a structured process of codification and dissemination, but implementation across the wider force remains uneven.

1. Strategic Context

Centre-2026 was conducted from 28 September to 3 October while Russia remained engaged in a high-intensity war. More than 47,000 personnel were reported across eleven training areas and the Caspian Sea, with the Central Asian strategic direction used as the operational frame. At Chebarkul, the principal active phase involved roughly 6,000 personnel, about 700 items of equipment, more than 600 UAVs and over 60 robotic systems. The exercise was linked directly to the CSTO Interaction-2026 command-staff exercise and to the Search-2026 reconnaissance and Echelon-2026 logistics exercises.

The scale is less important than the distribution of activity. Russia was not simply rehearsing a conventional mass-manoeuvre scenario. It was testing how a strategic-level grouping should operate when persistent reconnaissance, unmanned strike, electronic warfare and counter-UAS requirements are assumed to be permanent features of the battlefield. The simultaneous conduct of the war and the exercise creates a direct institutional pathway: combat experience can be harvested from deployed groupings, translated into training tasks and exposed to commanders and partner forces outside the Ukrainian theatre.

2. From Battlefield Adaptation to Institutionalization

Several features point toward institutionalization. Ukraine-derived methods were embedded across different exercise functions rather than isolated in a technology display. Assault, reconnaissance, air defence, engineering and logistics all incorporated unmanned systems. CSTO exercises were aligned with the Centre-2026 concept, extending Russian combat lessons into multinational command and training. Russian officials also described the transfer of combat experience to foreign contingents as an explicit objective.

The pattern is clearest in unmanned warfare. FPV drones supported assault groups; reconnaissance UAVs fed target acquisition and battle-damage assessment; robotic platforms moved supplies and evacuated casualties or damaged equipment; and the air-defence architecture treated drones as a continuous threat. At Centre-2026, unmanned systems were represented as organic to the tactical and operational system rather than as specialist enablers.

CENTRE-2026

Main characteristics, tasks and objectives of the Russian strategic exercise



MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

- Strategic command-and-staff exercise
- Period: 28 September – 2 October 2026
- Strategic direction: Central Asian area
- Linked to the CSTO exercise "Interaction-2026"
- 47,000+ troops involved
- 2,000 weapons systems and vehicles
- 90 aircraft
- 77 ships and naval units
- Final phase: Chebarkulsky training ground, Chelyabinsk region

PARTICIPANTS

- Russia
- Belarus
- China
- Kyrgyzstan
- Tajikistan
- Mongolia
- Pakistan
- Delegations / observers from almost 60 countries

TRAINING TASKS

- Joint command and control
- Multinational interoperability
- Repelling external aggression
- Land and aerospace operations
- Integration of UAVs and robotic systems
- Maritime component in the Caspian
- Mobility and logistics support

OBJECTIVES

- Strengthen operational readiness
- Test the response to threats on the Central Asian flank
- Validate coordination among allied forces
- Experiment with the combined use of traditional assets, drones and robotic systems
- Demonstrate deterrence and coalition capabilities

FINAL PHASE AT CHEBARKULSKY:

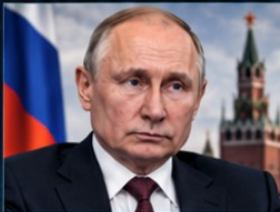
about
6,000
troops

~**700**
vehicles

600+
UAVs

60+
robotic
systems

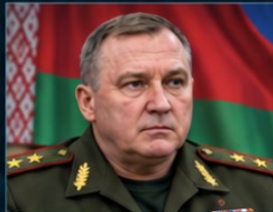
MAIN LEADERS INVOLVED



Vladimir Putin
President of the
Russian Federation



Andrey Belousov
Minister of Defence
of the Russian Federation



Viktor Khrenin
Minister of Defence
of Belarus



Andrey Mordvichev
Commander of Russia's
Central Military District



KEY MESSAGE:

CENTRE-2026 combined deterrence, interoperability and large-scale operational experimentation.

3. Command, ISR and the Drone-Dominated Battlefield

The participating force combined district troops, VKS, VDV, central-subordination units and naval forces while integrating CSTO command structures and foreign contingents. Public reporting shows attention to multinational command posts, concentration areas, base areas and small tactical groups. Earlier 2026 Russian reporting also linked the exercise cycle to a new digital battle-management architecture intended to improve information exchange and shorten the reconnaissance-to-fire cycle.

What remains uncertain is how far this changes Russian command culture. The exercise demonstrates an effort to make centralized command more data-rich and responsive, but it does not prove broad delegation of authority. Counter-UAS activity showed a layered concept combining surveillance, electronic warfare and kinetic effectors, including mobile firing groups, gun-based systems and newer experimental platforms. Their presence is significant; force-wide availability and maturity remain uncertain.

4. Combined-Arms and Logistics Adaptation

The tactical episodes reflected several adaptations associated with the Ukrainian battlefield: attacks by small assault elements from multiple directions, FPV support to advancing troops, dispersed reconnaissance, counter-battery fires, precision strike, light tactical mobility and robotics for tasks that expose personnel to observation and attack. Motorcycles, buggies and quad bikes were included in assault and support activity. These methods are not wholly new in doctrinal terms; Russia has long used reconnaissance-fire complexes, assault detachments and mobile reserves. What is new is the density of unmanned systems and the degree to which signature reduction, rapid movement and dispersion now shape how those older concepts are executed.

Engineering and force protection were treated as part of the same adaptation cycle. Robotic platforms were used for bridging and battlefield support. Ground systems such as Bogomol-7 were employed for resupply and evacuation. This points to an emerging preference for pushing unmanned platforms into routine but high-risk tasks under persistent ISR. Their battlefield value will depend on reliability, communications, operator burden and field repairability; Centre-2026 showed the concept, not its wartime scalability.

Logistics Under Persistent UAV Threat

Echelon-2026 is one of the strongest indicators of institutional learning because it applied combat experience to support functions often underrepresented in public exercises. Logistics units rehearsed dispersal, field refuelling, recovery and repair while assuming continuing enemy UAV activity. Rear areas were described as buried and camouflaged, with autonomous dugout-type facilities rather than large exposed support nodes. Damaged vehicles were repaired with additional anti-drone protection; motorcycles, quad bikes and robotic vehicles were included in maintenance planning; mobile firing groups and air observers protected support areas.

The use of UAVs and ground robots to move materiel toward the line of contact and evacuate casualties or damaged equipment illustrates a shift from logistics as a rear-area function to logistics as a contested tactical activity. The inclusion of 3D printing for spare parts and dedicated repair points for robotic systems also suggests an effort to normalize field-level technical adaptation. These practices are directly relevant to a battlefield where every logistics node, route and maintenance area can be detected and attacked.

5. The Multinational Dimension

Centre-2026 also functioned as military diplomacy. Belarus, China, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan and Tajikistan sent contingents, while Kazakhstan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo were represented by operational groups; a wider group of foreign observers attended. CSTO forces practised planning a joint operation, reconnaissance, assault and logistics within a Russian-led training framework. Russian officials openly stated that experience from the war was being passed to foreign participants.

This creates a channel through which a Russian interpretation of contemporary warfare can influence partner training and procurement. The transferable package is broader than individual weapons: mass use of low-cost UAVs, layered counter-UAS defence, protected logistics, small-group assault, rapid sensor-to-shooter integration and robotic support. The effect on partner forces will vary with resources, industrial capacity and command culture. Participation demonstrates exposure to the model, not successful adoption.

6. Caspian Component

The Caspian Flotilla component is important because it shows the geographic transfer of lessons from the Black Sea. Training included defence of the Kaspiysk naval base, countering an unmanned surface vessel attack, coastal defence, UAV activity and strikes against maritime targets. The missile ship Tatarstan and a Bal coastal-defence unit were reported in maritime strike activity. The operational message is that unmanned maritime threats are no longer treated as theatre-specific phenomena: base defence, counter-USV procedures and distributed coastal firepower are being integrated into training in a maritime area that has not faced the same wartime pressure as the Black Sea.

7. What Centre-2026 Does Not Prove

Exercise performance should not be treated as evidence of force-wide combat effectiveness. Centre-2026 does not establish that new counter-UAS systems are available in sufficient numbers, that robotic platforms can sustain high sortie rates, or that logistics units can remain functional under continuous hostile ISR, electronic warfare and precision attack. It does not test industrial replacement rates, ammunition depth or the ability to regenerate units after heavy attrition. Nor does it reveal the quality of junior leadership, the reliability of communications under deliberate disruption, or the combat effectiveness of multinational contingents outside a scripted scenario.

The distinction is essential. Russia demonstrated an exercise architecture built around drones, robotics, layered counter-UAS defence, dispersed logistics and combined-arms adaptation. Russia claims that these systems and procedures reflect combat-proven experience and are suitable for wider adoption. It can reasonably be inferred that the Russian military is institutionalizing selected lessons through training and command procedures. It cannot yet be inferred that implementation is uniform, resilient or sustainable across the entire force.

8. Assessment

Centre-2026 supports a judgment of partial institutionalization. The exercise went beyond demonstrative adaptation because Ukraine-derived practices were integrated into strategic command activity, reconnaissance, assault, air defence, engineering, logistics and multinational training. The deliberate linkage of Interaction-2026, Search-2026 and Echelon-2026 to the Russian strategic exercise is especially significant: it shows an attempt to convert combat experience into repeatable procedures for staffs and formations that may not share the same level of wartime exposure.

The most consequential change is conceptual rather than technological. Russia is training for a battlespace in which unmanned reconnaissance and strike are persistent, rear areas are exposed, logistics must disperse and hide, tactical units require organic counter-UAS measures, and commanders must connect reconnaissance, fires and manoeuvre more rapidly. Many individual techniques adapt older Russian doctrine rather than replace it. The institutional shift lies in making these techniques routine across functions and echelons.

The main constraint is uneven implementation. Prototype systems, curated demonstrations and selected high-readiness formations can move faster than the wider force. The next phase of Russian adaptation will therefore be determined by whether Centre-2026 practices appear in routine training, organizational tables, procurement and manuals beyond showcase units. If that occurs, the exercise will be best understood not as a snapshot of innovation, but as a milestone in the conversion of wartime learning into a durable force model.

9. Indicators to Watch

- Repetition of Centre-2026 procedures in district- and army-level exercises outside the Ukrainian theatre.
- Wider fielding of counter-UAS systems and dedicated anti-drone units in non-deployed formations.
- Formal organizational changes to UAV, robotic and electronic-warfare units.
- Revised training manuals and logistics doctrine emphasizing dispersion, concealment and repair under UAV threat.
- Procurement moving from prototype counter-UAS and robotic systems to sustained serial production.
- CSTO exercises adopting Russian FPV, counter-UAS and contested-logistics procedures as routine standards.
- Replication of counter-USV and naval-base defence training across other Russian fleets and flotillas.