

A moderate demonstration of power – Russian-Belarusian exercise Zapad-2025

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The so-called active phase of the Russian-Belarusian Zapad-2025 exercise will take place from 12 to 16 September. According to Lithuanian intelligence, 30,000 troops from both countries are expected to take part, including 8,000 stationed in Belarus (6,000 Belarusians and 2,000 Russians). Belarusian sources have reported that troops from elite Russian units are set to participate, including the 2nd Guards 'Taman' Motor Rifle Division, the 4th Guards 'Kantemirovskaya' Tank Division, the newly formed 71st Guards Motor Rifle Division of the 14th Army Corps, and probably the 98th Guards Airborne Division. These forces arrived in Belarus with their standard equipment in August. Unlike previous editions, this year's drills will mainly take place at training grounds in north-eastern Belarus, which Minsk presents as a de-escalatory gesture towards neighbouring states.

Zapad-2025 was preceded by exercises of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), held in Belarus with the participation of more than 2,000 troops from Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. These were conducted from 31 August to 6 September as part of three separate undertakings: Interaction-2025 (the main exercise), Search-2025, and Echelon-2025. According to the Chief of the General Staff of the Belarusian Armed Forces, General Pavel Muraveyko, the drills focused on nuclear weapons planning, although this was limited to staff-level procedures.

Zapad-2025 is the first large-scale training event of the Russian Armed Forces since the 1990s in which Moscow is not actively shaping the information narrative, leaving public messaging entirely to Minsk. Although smaller in scale than in previous years, the exercise could still serve as preparation for military operations against Ukraine. However, it is more likely that the units involved will be deployed to existing front lines rather than to launch a new incursion into Ukraine from Belarusian territory.

Commentary

- **Zapad-2025 will be significantly smaller than the editions held in 2021 and 2017**, although the scale of forces and assets involved is comparable to the exercises conducted in the first decade of the 21st century. It remains unclear to what extent the current level of Russian participation is a consequence of the need to sustain ongoing operations in Ukraine – thus limiting the possibility of deploying more units – or the result of a deliberate decision by Moscow to scale down the exercise, particularly

concerning the forces transferred to Belarus. Based on the only publicly available Lithuanian data, the latter may have been increased for show at the expense of the number of troops training on Russian territory.

- **There have been no reports of preparations or plans for Zapad-2025 exercises on Russian training grounds, particularly in Kaliningrad Oblast.** In previous years, these were synchronised with activities on training grounds in western Belarus. At present, information on the Russian side is fragmented and comes primarily from the Belarusian Ministry of Defence and unofficial Belarusian sources.
- **The scale of the exercise suggested by Lithuanian intelligence does not in itself indicate that Russia intends to use it as direct preparation for operations in Ukraine.** It is worth recalling that the core of the Russian formation that launched the assault on Kyiv in February 2022 was deployed to Belarus only after the conclusion of Zapad-2021. At present, Russia has sent sub-units for training to Belarusian ranges from divisions already engaged in Ukraine, suggesting that these groups largely consist of newly recruited personnel. The exercises may serve as their final preparation before deployment to active sections of the front, where they would reinforce or replace existing units from those divisions.
- **The inclusion of nuclear planning in the CSTO exercises – even if only at the level of a public declaration – can be seen as a symbolic gesture by Russia towards its allies in the organisation.** The most likely reason for involving CSTO member states in discussions on the simulated use of nuclear weapons lies in ongoing efforts to reintroduce nuclear capabilities in Belarus. These include the deployment of potential modern delivery systems, such as the Iskander-M tactical ballistic missiles and the Oreshnik intermediate-range ballistic missiles (the latter only announced for the time being), as well as the modernisation of nuclear ammunition storage facilities.
- **In coordination with the Kremlin, Minsk is using the exercises to conduct a disinformation campaign.** Its aim is to promote the narrative of Belarus's supposed willingness to de-escalate the military threat in the region. In reality, however, this operation has Russia's approval and serves to reinforce the image of Alyaksandr Lukashenka as an equal partner of Moscow. As early as May, the Belarusian defence minister announced a reduction in the scale of the exercises and their relocation to areas away from the Polish border. This is purportedly intended as a gesture signalling a desire to resume dialogue with the West, much like the claim that the exercise scenario envisages only a defensive operation in the event of an attack on the Union State.
- **Minsk's de-escalatory rhetoric is aimed at undermining Western concerns about potential aggressive military actions planned by Russia and Belarus.** This is accompanied by a Belarusian disinformation campaign alleging that Poland is preparing to strike both countries. To support this narrative, the Belarusian KGB carried out a provocation on 4 September, detaining a Polish clergyman on fabricated charges of espionage and allegedly acquiring classified materials linked to the Zapad-2025 exercise scenario.