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Russian Top Defense Official Says Zapad Exercises Don't Pose Threat to Europe

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Viktor Drachev / TASS

A senior Russian Defense Ministry official aimed to soothe fears over large-scale joint military exercises on Europe's doorstep this week, saying the drills are purely defensive in nature.

The week-long "Zapad 2017" drills in Western Russia and neighboring Belarus kicked off on Thursday, with the participation of around 13,000 troops and hundreds of tanks, aircraft, warships and other military hardware.

The war games spanning the borders of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have caused concern among NATO countries that Russia could be planning military action at a time of tense relations with the West. NATO this summer deployed additional forces in eastern Europe and the Baltics.

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Russia's Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin told the German Deutsche Welle television station that the Zapad drills, named after the Russian word for West, do not pose a threat to Europe.

“I can calm our dear neighbors straight away,” he said in the interview published on Thursday. “The exercise is absolutely peaceful and absolutely defensive in nature.”

“In this case, the ‘West’ isn’t to be taken in the broad, political sense of the geographic term as the countries of the West, of the European Union or the members of NATO,” he added.

Fomin said he expected relations between Russia and NATO to be restored “in the next year or two at most.”

The Zapad drills will run until Sept. 20.

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