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Russia Moves to Open Defense Ministry Office in Serbia

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Serbia's military relies on Russian-made weapons, including fighter jets, helicopters and tanks. **Defense Ministry / TASS**

Russia is moving toward opening a Defense Ministry office in Serbia to deepen military ties with its longtime ally, a move that risks straining relations with the West, Reuters reported Tuesday.

Serbia, which claims military neutrality, is an EU candidate country that also maintains close ties with Moscow. Belgrade suspended its military drills with all partners for six months last month, pointing to pressure from the EU to drop out of joint military drills in Belarus with Russia.

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According to Reuters, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed an order last Thursday authorizing the proposed Defense Ministry office's head to inspect Serbian military

units that are armed with Russian weapons. Serbia would first need to consent to the inspections.

Serbia's defense ministry said in a later statement that "a legal procedure that precedes the concluding of the agreement" had been launched, according to Reuters.

Serbia's military relies on Russian-made weapons, including fighter jets, helicopters and tanks, which the West watches with unease. Serbia also depends on Russian oil and gas, and the Balkan nation wants to join the TurkStream gas pipeline that would bypass Ukraine and carry Russian gas to European markets.

Serbia cooperates with NATO but says it has no plans to join the Western military alliance, reflecting deep resentment among Serbs over NATO's airstrikes against the country during the Kosovo War in 1999.

The Associated Press reported that NATO refused to comment on the possible Russian Defense Ministry representative office in Serbia.

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