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Belarus Says Forming Joint Military Group with Russia

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Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. **president.gov.by**

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said Minsk and Moscow have agreed to deploy a joint regional group of military forces in response to alleged "aggravations" on Belarus' western border, Belarusian state media reported Monday.

"Given the worsening of the situation on the western borders of the Union State, we agreed to deploy a regional group of forces of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus," the long-serving Belarusian leader said during a meeting with security officials, according to the state Belta news agency.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed Lukashenko's comments, saying the agreement underscores the strong partnership between the two countries.

"The interaction of various fields, including defense, are constantly being discussed during bilateral talks between President Putin and Lukashenko," Peskov said.

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According to Lukashenko, the two countries started pulling forces together two days ago following Saturday's attack on the Moscow-built Crimean Bridge which connects the annexed Ukrainian peninsula to mainland Russia.

"I must inform you that the formation of this group has begun. It's been going on for, I think, two days. I gave an order to start forming this group," Lukashenko said.

He accused Kyiv of readying an attack on Minsk.

"I've said already that today Ukraine is not just discussing but planning strikes on the territory of Belarus," Lukashenko said.

The joint grouping of forces — which, if amassed along Belarus' western borders, would be deployed near EU members and Ukraine allies Poland, Lithuania and Latvia — would constitute just a small number of Russian forces, Lukashenko said.

"The last thing they [Russia] need is another conflict. You know they have enough problems. Therefore, we should not expect a large number from the Russian Armed Forces. But it will be more than 1,000 people," Lukashenko said, according to Belta.

Lukashenko accused its pro-Western neighbors of training "militants" to carry out a military mutiny inside Belarus.

"The training in Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine of Belarusian radical militants for them to carry out sabotage, terrorist attacks and to organize a military mutiny in the country is becoming a direct threat," Lukashenko said, accusing Washington and Brussels of seeking to "aggravate the situation."

A longtime ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Lukashenko has faced accusations of facilitating Moscow's invasion of Ukraine by allowing Russian forces to group and launch attacks on northern Ukraine from Belarus' territory — although he claimed to have stopped short of sending Belarusian forces to fight.

Lukashenko claimed the joint forces will be instructed to "keep things calm" on Belarus' borders with the EU rather than pursue an escalation.

"Please get ready to host these people soon and accommodate them where necessary, according to our plan. Without going over the top, keeping things calm," Lukashenko told his defense minister.

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