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Putin Arrives in Minsk for Rare Belarus Visit as Drone Strikes Batter Kyiv

By Sergei Supinsky for AFP

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Russian President Vladimir Putin being met at Minsk Airport by Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko. **kremlin.ru**

Updates with Putin's arrival in Minsk

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday arrived for a rare visit to neighboring Belarus, from where Moscow partially launched its invasion of Ukraine nearly 10 months ago, for talks with close ally and strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko.

His arrival on an icy runway in Minsk came hours after Russian forces launched a swarm of attack drones at critical infrastructure in Kyiv, which provoked emergency blackouts in a dozen Ukrainian regions.

The Kremlin has for years sought to deepen integration with Belarus, which relies on Moscow for cheap oil and loans, but Lukashenko had resisted outright unification with Russia despite

being a key ally in the war.

Speculation was mounting ahead of the Russian leader's visit that he would pressure Lukashenko to send his troops to Ukraine alongside Russia's military after a series of defeats for Moscow in nearly 10 months of fighting.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov however described the reports as "totally stupid, groundless fabrications."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was already in Minsk on Monday alongside Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, as Russia announced its forces were running military drills with Belarusian forces hours before Putin's arrival.

The Defense Ministry released footage of drills in Belarus, showing soldiers conducting tank maneuvers, and practicing artillery and sniper fire at a snow-dusted training ground.

"From the morning until the evening twilight — there is not a single second of silence at the training grounds of Belarus," the ministry said.

It did not say where the drills were taking place or how long they would last.

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In October, Belarus announced the formation of a joint regional force with Moscow with several thousand Russian servicemen arriving in the ex-Soviet country, fuelling concerns Minsk could also send troops to Ukraine.

Russia launched a swarm of attack drones at critical infrastructure in Kyiv on Monday in strikes that Ukraine said provoked emergency blackouts in a dozen regions.

The attacks came as Russia said it had shot down several U.S.-made missiles over its airspace near Ukraine.

"I first heard the air raid siren howling from the street... I thought there is going to be a drone attack. For the first time, it scared me," Natalia Dobrovolska, a 68-year-old resident of Kyiv, told AFP.

She described hearing multiple explosions before power shut off in her building in western Kyiv. Officials said Russia had dispatched 35 attack drones nationwide, including 23 over Kyiv.

Ukraine said it had downed 30 of the aerial weapons, including Iranian-made "Shaheds," which have pummelled the capital in recent weeks.

Mayor Vitali Klitschko said critical infrastructure facilities were "damaged" but there were no known casualties.

Energy operator Ukrenergo said emergency electricity outages were scheduled in the capital and nearly a dozen regions.

Moscow said its air defense systems had shot down four U.S.-made missiles over Belgorod, a Russian region bordering Ukraine, in one of its first such claims in nearly 10 months of fighting.

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