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Russia and Belarus to Hold First Zapad Military Drills Since Ukraine Invasion on Sept. 12-16

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Russian Defense Ministry

Russia and Belarus will hold a scaled-down version of their regular Zapad exercises from Sept. 12 to 16, the Belarusian Defense Ministry said Tuesday, marking the first time the drills have been held since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Major General Valery Revenko, head of the ministry's international cooperation department, said the drills aim to test the military preparedness of the Union State, a political and economic pact between Moscow and Minsk that has expanded into defense cooperation since its signing in 1999.

Zapad-2025 will feature air defense exercises, defensive combat scenarios, repelling incursions and tactical aviation support, Revenko said.

Belarusian officials said the first echelon of Russian troops and equipment arrived last week.

Around 13,000 personnel are expected to participate, far fewer than the roughly 200,000 who took part in the last Zapad drills in 2021, the year before Russia invaded Ukraine.

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Minsk described the reduction in troop numbers as a sign of its "truly peace-loving position" and said the drills would be held deeper inside Belarusian territory as a de-escalatory gesture.

Senior Ukrainian officials have warned that Russia could use the exercises as cover for preparing another attack from Belarus. President Volodymyr Zelensky said in April, "That's usually how they start a new attack."

Revenko accused NATO members Poland and Lithuania of ramping up their own military exercises in response. He said Belarus had invited observers, including from nine NATO states, to monitor Zapad-2025 "to see for themselves the openness and transparency of the drills."

Belarus allowed its territory to be used as a staging ground for Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

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