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Russia and Belarus Stage Simulated Nuclear Strike During Zapad-2025 War Games

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Sergei Savostyanov / TASS

Russia and Belarus staged a simulated nuclear strike during their joint Zapad-2025 military exercises, which are being observed this year by delegations from several NATO countries, including the United States.

The drills, which began Friday and end Tuesday, are aimed at testing Belarus and Russia's ability to repel an enemy attack and retake lost territory, according to the Belarusian Defense Ministry. Zapad-2025 has put NATO countries on alert, particularly in Eastern Europe, where Poland and neighboring countries carried out their own exercises earlier this summer.

Top Belarusian general Pavel Muraveiko said the maneuvers included "planning and examining the potential use of non-strategic nuclear weapons and the evaluation and deployment of the Oreshnik mobile missile system."

Russia first unveiled the Oreshnik, a hypersonic ballistic missile, during a strike on Ukraine last November in what many analysts described as political theater rather than a demonstration of a new superweapon. Belarusian President Aleksander Lukashenko later asked Moscow to station the missile system in his country, citing threats from NATO members Poland, Lithuania and Germany.

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Muraveiko said Russian troops shared their experience and lessons from the ongoing war against Ukraine, particularly in drone warfare and urban combat. The exercises also included training to assault populated areas and to counter "illegal armed groups," he said.

Belarusian officials had said that this year's drills would be scaled back and held deeper inside the country. Around 13,000 troops are taking part, they said, compared with roughly 200,000 in 2021, the last Zapad before Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

However, Russian President Vladimir Putin, who made a surprise visit to the exercises in Belarus on Tuesday, claimed 100,000 soldiers were participating.

India also sent 65 soldiers, according to The Times, which cited India's Defense Ministry. New Delhi has grown closer to Moscow since U.S. President Donald Trump last month introduced a 25% tariff on Indian goods as punishment for the country refusing to end its purchases of Russian oil.

Russian news agencies reported that Iran, Bangladesh, as well as Burkina Faso, Congo and Mali also sent soldiers to the exercises.

Belarus invited observers from nine NATO states and others "for openness and transparency." On Monday, its Defense Ministry released footage of two U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonels shaking hands with Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin.

The exercises come amid heightened tensions between NATO and Russia after Poland said last week it downed Russian drones that crossed its airspace during large-scale strikes on western Ukraine.

Prime Minister Donald Tusk described Zapad-2025 as "very aggressive" and warned the drills were being held "very close" to Poland's border. Ukrainian officials have cautioned that Russia could use the exercises as cover to stage another offensive from Belarus.

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