Commentary
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Belarus Downsizes Zapad-2025 to Reduce Escalation Risks

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Summary

Belarus has announced a significant downsizing and relocation of the Zapad-2025 joint military exercises with Russia in an effort to reduce tensions with NATO. The reduced scale of the exercises brings them below international thresholds that require prior notification and international observation, yet Minsk has pledged to do both. Minsk's measures may create limited space for meaningful future dialogue and engagement with the West, while broader security breakthroughs remain unlikely so long as the war between Russia and Ukraine continues.

On 28 May, the Minister of Defence of Belarus, Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin, made an unexpected announcement regarding the Zapad-2025 joint Belarus-Russia military exercises, which are scheduled to take place in Belarus in September. During the meeting of the Council of Defence Ministers of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Bishkek, Khrenin stated that Minsk had decided to relocate the exercises inland away from Belarus's western borders and to lower their quantitative parameters. According to him, the decisions are intended to reduce regional tensions and signal Belarus's readiness for dialogue with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Zapad is the name of the largest joint strategic war game by the Belarusian and Russian armed forces. It is held biennially, and the countries host their manoeuvres in turns. Belarus hosts the drills every four years. Russia cancelled Zapad-2023, likely due to a lack of available troops and equipment given their involvement in the war against Ukraine. The most recent Zapad exercise took place on Belarusian territory in September 2021.

These drills have traditionally attracted heightened political and media attention in the West. Even before the dramatic spike of the military tensions in Eastern Europe in recent years, each Zapad war game came under intense scrutiny by NATO and particularly its eastern flank countries, including Poland and the Baltic States.

In the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, the 2025 exercise is understandably receiving even more attention in those countries and across all of NATO. Western diplomats stress that NATO countries cannot feel calm about any new joint Belarusian-Russian war game seeing as Moscow used a joint exercise with Belarus in February 2022 to concentrate its troops on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border and then ordered those units to advance in the direction of Kyiv.[1] Media speculation about Zapad-2025's potential threats to NATO abounds and aggravates regional tensions even further.

> Minsk's decision to reduce tensions around the drills by relocating them away from border areas and lowering their numerical parameters is particularly noteworthy, given the negative context.

Announcing the change in Bishkek, Khrenin underlined that Minsk seeks to "once again confirm, not just in words but also in deeds, its readiness for a dialogue, compromises and the lowering of tensions". He added that Belarus made the decision despite the fact that NATO countries "have not taken any steps to return to the implementation of several key agreements in the area of arms control with respect to the Republic of Belarus."

Minsk has offered to resume inspection and verification activities within the framework of those agreements. In June 2022, for example, after a COVID-19-related pause, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence resumed verification missions on its territory in line with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) 2011 Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures. Minsk appears prepared to undertake such missions on a parity basis—that is, from countries that permit Belarusian inspectors to operate on their territory. In February 2025, Belarus offered Poland the opportunity for information exchange and mutual inspections to a depth of 80 kilometres (approximately 50 miles) from the border, within the framework of the regional confidence-building measures outlined in the 2011 Vienna Document. Some in the West, however, are sceptical of such Belarusian offers. They argue that existing arms control instruments failed to prevent the outbreak of Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022 and that, given the complete lack of trust toward Belarus, there is no reason to resume their implementation.[2]

Following Khrenin's announcement in Bishkek, Major General Valery Revenka, head of the Department of International Military Cooperation at the Belarusian Defence Ministry, provided further details on what exactly the lowering of Zapad-2025's parameters means. According to Revenka, the number of troops involved in this year's war games will be decreased by almost half. In the previous Zapad exercises, approximately 13,000 servicemen participated in the drills in Belarus, and a similar number was originally planned for this year. This means that approximately 7,000–8,000 forces will likely participate in the Zapad-2025 exercise on the Belarusian territory.

Since the number of the expected military personnel is halved compared to previous years, Zapad-2025 may fall under the OSCE threshold for both mandatory international observation and the requirement to notify other members of the organization. The OSCE 2011 Vienna Document stipulates that military activities, including exercises, with 13,000 troops or more are subject to mandatory international observation. It further stipulates that states conducting military activities involving at least 9,000 troops are required to issue prior notification to the OSCE.

> Minsk, in an apparent gesture of goodwill, has announced that it intends to both notify all OSCE member states of Zapad-2025's quantitative parameters and invite international observers to be present on the ground.

The Belarusian Ministry of Defence has also reportedly announced multilateral CSTO exercises around the same time as Zapad-2025, which will take place from 1 to 6 September. This announcement may also be intended to demonstrate transparency and confidence-building around the Zapad-2025 war games. The CSTO exercises will involve military personnel from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus, and Russia. The simultaneous presence of these countries' troops on the same or neighbouring shooting ranges appears to signal additionally the openness and transparency that Minsk seeks to demonstrate.

These attempts by the Belarusian government appear aimed at reducing escalation risks around Zapad-2025 by introducing several measures intended to increase transparency. These measures resemble Minsk's approach during the Zapad-2017 exercise. Following that exercise, NATO officials and Western experts praised Belarus's "unprecedented transparency". Today, the regional security situation and the specific geopolitical conditions of Minsk make it impossible to imagine the same level of Belarusian openness, especially during Belarusian-Russian strategic war games. This was why Minister Khrenin's announcement was unexpected.

Some Western politicians and diplomats are recognizing the potential contribution of these changes to easing security concerns around Zapad-2025 in NATO countries.[3]

> A more important question, however, is whether such Belarusian openness can become instrumental for fostering longer-term security dialogue and confidence-building in Eastern Europe.

So long as the war between Russia and Ukraine continues, no major positive breakthroughs in European security and trust-building seem feasible. Under the present war-shaped circumstances, most, if not all, European actors maintain a strategic interest in reducing the risks of military escalation in or near their own borders. If genuine, Minsk's measures to reduce the scale of Zapad-2025 and draw the exercises further inland away from NATO's borders may offer a modest yet meaningful avenue for future dialogue and engagement.

1 Author's interviews with diplomats from NATO member states in Minsk, 23 April, 12 May.

2 Author's interview with a Western defence attaché in Minsk, 18 April

3 Author's interviews with diplomats from NATO member states in Minsk, 3 June.

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