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I. Military and security developments

Zapad 2025: The Belarusian government reduces scope publicly, but reinforces on the ground

On 28 May 2025, Belarusian Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin announced a reduction in the scale of the upcoming *Zapad 2025* military exercises and the relocation of its main manoeuvres from the western border to deeper within Belarusian territory. According to Khrenin, this decision is intended to demonstrate Minsk's "readiness for dialogue and its commitment to regional stability". He described the move as a "goodwill gesture", despite "having no expectation of a constructive response from Western countries".ⁱ Nevertheless, referring to Poland's announcement of its own large-scale manoeuvres as a response to the *Zapad 2025* drills, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence stated that they would organise a smaller tactical exercise near Hrodna.ⁱⁱ

Valer Ravenka, an adviser on international cooperation to the Belarusian Defence Minister, confirmed that the revised plan of *Zapad 2025* exercises had been approved back in April and that the number of participating troops would be cut by nearly half (the previously announced number was 13,000 participants). Ravenka also announced plans to invite international observers to the exercises, presenting the move as a sign of transparency despite the drills being declared to be below the OSCE threshold for mandatory notification.ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite this rhetoric, preparations for the drills on the ground are in place. On 16 May 2025, Aliaksandar Lukashenka hosted Russian Defence Minister Andrei Belousov in Minsk. The two discussed joint exercises and weapons transfers, including aircraft, helicopters, and advanced missile systems such as the Oreshnik. Lukashenka reaffirmed that Belarus is making progress on the placement of high-end weaponry as part of its Union State military integration with Russia.^{iv}

Just a few days before announcing the scaling back of the *Zapad 2025* drills, the Belarusian Minister of Defence announced that Belarusian forces would soon receive new military equipment, including Su-30SM2 fighter jets, Mi-35 helicopters, BTR-82A armoured vehicles, electronic warfare systems, and unmanned aerial systems. Around 8,000 Belarusian troops are expected to train with this new equipment ahead of the exercises.^v On 28 May 2025, Russian Su-30SM2 fighter jets arrived in Belarus. According to the Belarusian Ministry of Defence, the aircraft will soon be placed on combat duty for air defence, and Belarusian pilots, who have already been retrained in Russia, will begin operational deployment.^{vi}

At the rhetorical level, Belarusian officials continue to promote propagandistic pro-military and anti-Western positions. At the recent CSTO defence ministers' meeting in Bishkek, Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin criticised NATO and European governments, accusing them of fuelling an arms race and militarising public consciousness. He warned that the pursuit of dominance in the security sphere by Western actors risks provoking a broader military conflict and called on them to respect the legitimate security interests of other states.^{vii}

While Belarus promotes the adjustment of *Zapad 2025* as a de-escalatory step, it also continues to deepen its military rhetoric and alignment with Russia. This dual messaging reflects a broader strategy of appearing conciliatory on the international stage while reinforcing joint force capabilities with Moscow.

Belarus to host three additional CSTO drills alongside *Zapad 2025* in September

The Belarusian state news agency BelTA shared information that Belarus is set to play a significant role in the CSTO 2025 military calendar, hosting three major exercises in September that will be closely coordinated with the strategic Russian-Belarusian *Zapad 2025* drills. According to this information, which quotes CSTO officials, these drills will include *Interaction 2025* involving the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, *Search 2025* focused on intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities, and *Echelon 2025*, a logistics and supply exercise.^{viii}

The deliberate alignment of these exercises with *Zapad 2025* signals deepening military integration between Belarus and Russia and reflects Minsk's growing role as a key staging ground for joint regional defence activities. While similar CSTO exercises are scheduled later in the year in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the Belarusian segment is notable for its scale and strategic positioning on NATO's eastern flank. These developments further confirm Belarus's commitment to Moscow-led security frameworks and highlight the country's evolving role in broader CSTO deterrence and crisis-response planning.^{ix}

Belarusian drills near the Lithuanian border

In parallel, Minsk continues to normalise a heightened military posture, especially near NATO borders. From 11–13 April 2025, Belarus held territorial defence drills in the Pastavy district, Vitsyebsk region, marking the third straight month of sustained combat readiness checks. The exercises focused on defending infrastructure, countering sabotage, and securing areas under martial law, with top defence officials closely observing.^x Belarusian authorities presented the drills as routine, yet the ongoing mobilisation of wartime territorial forces signals a deliberate shift toward entrenched militarisation.

Additionally, from 27–30 May, the KGB conducted counterterrorism exercises in the Hrodna region, involving key ministries and law enforcement agencies. Participating institutions included the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, and the Investigative Committee.^{xi}

Oreshnik missile deployment in Belarus: Diverging assessments from Minsk and Kyiv

Belarusian officials have confirmed plans to deploy a Russian Oreshnik intermediate-range missile system by the end of 2025, framing it as a key element in strengthening national defence. Security Council Secretary Aliaksandar Val'fovich described the system, along with existing Iskander-M missiles and tactical nuclear weapons, as a reliable deterrent capable of inflicting "unacceptable damage" on any aggressor.^{xii}

In contrast, Ukrainian intelligence has questioned the credibility of these claims. Kyiv asserts there is no confirmed presence of either nuclear warheads or the Oreshnik system in Belarus, viewing Minsk's statements as political signalling rather than evidence of operational readiness.^{xiii}

II. Military cooperation between Belarus and Russia

Belarus deepens military-industrial integration with Russia

Belarus is further strengthening its defence industry ties with Russia, as evidenced by a series of high-level meetings and agreements signed during the MILEX-2025 exhibition in Minsk. On 21 May, State Military Industrial Committee Chair Dzmitry Pantus held talks with Russian United Aircraft Corporation Deputy Director Alexander Bobryshev to advance the joint production of aircraft and components, including the new Osvey light multipurpose aircraft, which is expected to be manufactured in Belarus.

Pantus also met with Uralvagonzavod Director General Alexander Potapov to coordinate Belarusian-Russian cooperation in tank production and the joint fulfilment of defence orders. Additionally, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence signed a contract with the Russian Imperial Tula Armament for the supply of small arms ammunition. Pantus confirmed that the two countries increasingly depend on each other's parts and components to maintain production flows, highlighting the growing interdependence of their defence industries as Russia seeks to mitigate supply chain disruptions and sustain its war effort in Ukraine.^{xiv}

Belarus supports the Russian war effort through defence industry integration

Russia's increasing dependence on allied support for its war effort is reflected in its growing reliance on Belarus for military-industrial production, according to Ukraine's Foreign Intelligence Service (SZRU). In a statement on 26 May, SZRU Head Oleh Ivashchenko reported that Belarus is actively producing ammunition for Russia and that the defence industries of both countries are now largely integrated.^{xv}

Ivashchenko's remarks underscore how Russia's domestic production constraints, particularly in terms of adapting to Ukraine's rapidly evolving drone and counter-drone tactics, are forcing Moscow to seek cheaper, externally sourced solutions. This integration not only deepens Belarus's role in sustaining Russia's war capabilities but also highlights the strategic entrenchment of their military partnership.

Belarus and Russia conduct a joint combat training exchange

Belarus and Russia continue to strengthen their military interoperability through a joint exchange held at Belarus's 227th combined-arms training ground; this is focused on exchanging experience in organising and conducting combat training. According to the head of Belarus's Main Directorate for Combat Training Uladzimir Bely, special emphasis is being placed on both the deployment of strike drones and counter-drone

tactics, including reconnaissance, suppression, destruction, and the use of protective fortifications.

The training exchange also includes joint work on urban and forest combat scenarios, tactical shooting methods, evacuation from disabled equipment, and instruction in knife fighting as essential skills for soldiers on modern battlefields.^{xvi} These activities demonstrate the involvement of Russian military trainers in the training of Belarusian soldiers.

III. Belarusian military cooperation with other countries

Alongside its extensive military cooperation with Russia, the Belarusian government is also aiming to establish and expand military cooperation with countries in other regions.

Belarus–Qatar military cooperation: Strategic diversification or image management?

In April 2025, Belarus intensified military outreach to Qatar during Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin's official visit to Doha.^{xvii} The visit led to the signing of a protocol on bilateral defence cooperation and an invitation for Qatari military personnel to train in Belarus. Khrenin highlighted Belarus's expertise in drone warfare and counter-drone operations as a potential area for collaboration.^{xviii}

By engaging with Qatar, a Gulf state with ties to both Western and regional powers, Minsk may be seeking alternative military partnerships and greater international visibility amid ongoing isolation. However, no substantive joint programmes have been announced, suggesting the move is more symbolic than strategic at this stage.

Extension of Belarus–Iran military cooperation

The Belarusian government and Iran are steadily strengthening their military ties through ongoing high-level meetings. On 21 May 2025, Iranian Army Commander Brigadier General Abdolrahim Mousavi met with Belarusian Deputy Chief of the General Staff Uladzimir Kupryjanjuk in Tehran, after which they emphasised continued cooperation in training, defence development, and experience sharing.^{xix} This followed a March visit to Minsk by Iranian Deputy Defence Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh, who called military cooperation a key step in deepening bilateral relations. Belarusian officers have also visited Iran to assess its missile and artillery capabilities.

The consistent dialogue between Belarusian and Iranian military officials reflects a shared intent to prolong defence cooperation, offering both countries alternatives to Western-aligned military networks amid ongoing sanctions and strategic isolation.

IV. The human rights situation and political prisoners in Belarus

The human rights situation: Ongoing repression condemned in UN human rights report

The human rights situation in Belarus during April and May 2025 remained critically grave, marked by the ongoing and systematic repression of political opponents, civil society activists, and ordinary citizens. The Belarusian authorities continue to target those associated with the protests, as well as anyone perceived as a critic of the regime. As of 25 May 2025, at least 1,187 individuals remain behind bars on politically motivated charges.^{xx} New detentions continue to be reported regularly, alongside with occasional releases.

On 25 May 2025, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Nils Muižnieks, published his first report^{xxi} since taking up this position, covering April 2024 to March 2025. The report concludes that the country remains engulfed in a climate of repression. The January 2025 presidential election is deemed neither free nor fair, having taken place amid ongoing politically motivated persecution. The report highlights the continued use of anti-terrorism and anti-extremism laws to target opposition figures, human rights defenders, journalists, and activists, as well as the growing use of transnational repression, including trials in absentia and the confiscation of exiles' property. Released political prisoners face severe restrictions and ongoing rights violations, while those still detained endure torture, repeated sentences, and forced psychiatric treatment.

Detention conditions and mistreatment

Political prisoners in Belarus continue to face systematic ill-treatment and torture. Several high-profile detainees have been held incommunicado for extended periods, and penal authorities routinely deny them timely and appropriate healthcare. As a result, there was at least one confirmed death of a political prisoner during the reporting period due to lack of medical care.

Valiantsin Shtermer, a 61-year-old businessman, died while serving a five-year sentence. He had been convicted in October 2023 for insulting Aliaksandar Lukashenka and criticising the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Human rights activists report that Shtermer had suffered a stroke prior to his imprisonment, was placed in solitary confinement despite severe health issues, and did not receive adequate medical treatment.^{xxii} He is the eighth political prisoner to die in Belarusian custody since 2020, according to Viasna.

Releases of political prisoners

On 9 May 2025, which is still officially celebrated in Belarus as “Victory Day”, Belarusian authorities announced a large-scale amnesty for vulnerable prisoners. However, the measure did not include provisions for the release of political prisoners. Nevertheless, in early May, Aliaksandar Lukashenka pardoned 42 individuals convicted on “extremism”-related charges. The names of those released were not officially

disclosed, and prominent political and civic activists remain imprisoned. The only notable exception was the release of Yury Ziankovich, a Belarusian-American lawyer, who was freed at the end of April 2025 after nearly four years in prison. He had been arrested in Moscow in April 2021, forcibly transferred to Belarus, and convicted on charges of plotting a coup and the assassination of the president. In September 2022, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison, with an additional 2.5 years later added for alleged “malicious disobedience to the prison administration”. His release was secured with the assistance of US and Lithuanian officials. He was handed over at the Belarusian border to Lithuania and later travelled to the United States. The US government emphasised that his release was not part of a prisoner swap but was described as a “humanitarian gesture” by Lukashenka, possibly aimed at improving relations with the Trump administration.^{xxiii}

The persecution of political prisoners after their release and the continuation of repressions

Even after their release, former political prisoners in Belarus continue to face harassment. They report threats and intimidation, with authorities warning them against speaking out about their experiences and time in prison. Those with foreign citizenship may be deported. For example, Robert Tompala, a political prisoner with Polish citizenship, was deported upon release and banned from entering Belarus for eight years.

At the same time, new prosecutions continue to emerge. For example, two editors of the Belarusian Wikipedia were arrested.^{xxiv} Repression remains ongoing against individuals believed to be connected with the Belarusian Hajun monitoring project, the “New Belarus” initiative, and other groups labelled as “extremist formations” or “terrorist organisations”, including media outlets. Transborder repression also continues.

International solidarity efforts

In parallel, international efforts supporting solidarity with Belarusian political prisoners continue. One example is the #WeStandBYyou campaign, in which European parliamentarians and politicians symbolically adopt political prisoners to raise awareness and apply pressure on the Belarusian authorities.

On 21 May 2025, the Day of Political Prisoners in Belarus, Belarusian and international actors launched global advocacy campaigns and issued statements calling for the release of all political prisoners and an end to political persecution. For example, a joint statement was submitted to the OSCE by 38 countries that are members of the Informal Group of Friends of Democratic Belarus.^{xxv}

V. The Belarusian Democratic Forces and diaspora

International activities of the Democratic Forces in exile

The Belarusian Democratic Forces continue to work on international recognition and diplomatic initiatives. In April 2025, their representatives attended the funeral of Pope Francis in the Vatican. In May 2025, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya took part in the European Political Community Summit in Tirana, Albania, and visited the United States, where she met with former US President George W. Bush at the Bush Institute to discuss democracy in Belarus. She also visited Riga and delivered a speech at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs and the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, discussing Belarus's role in European security. Tsikhanouskaya also met with the Latvian State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, participated in a Baltic Assembly conference on parliamentary democracy, met the Speaker of the Saeima, and attended the opening of an exhibition about Belarusian political prisoners.^{xxvi}

The Belarusian Democratic Forces amid transborder repressions

The United Transitional Cabinet (UTC) of the Belarusian Democratic Forces faces a threat from the Prosecutor General's Office of Belarus of being labelled as a "terrorist organisation", following its earlier designation as an "extremist formation".^{xxvii} While a final decision has not yet been made, the likelihood of this new designation appears to be high.

The work of Coordination Council of Belarus was interrupted by the disappearance of its speaker, Anzhelika Mel'nikava. The last known contact with her was on 25 March 2025, and there has been no contact with her since. Independent media and opposition sources reported she flew from Poland to the UK, then travelled to Sri Lanka with her daughters, staying at a luxury resort from 28 February to 7 March, before vanishing. Her mobile phone was later traced to Belarus. A large sum of money – (about USD 150,000) of funds – from the Coordination Council and Cyber Partisans also vanished. Investigations by *The Insider*, *Polityka*, and the Belarusian Investigative Centre have revealed that Anzhelika Mel'nikava had an affair with a Belarusian military intelligence officer before her disappearance.^{xxviii} The case is being investigated by the Polish police.

Belarusian and Russian security services target diaspora in Lithuania

In April 2025, the Lithuanian Department of State Security (VSD) issued a public statement revealing an ongoing transnational repression campaign orchestrated by the Belarusian and Russian security services against members of the Belarusian diaspora in Lithuania. This operation, according to the VSD, has been underway since at least 2023.

Initially, the campaign took the form of an informational and psychological operation. In 2023, Belarusian and Russian intelligence agencies began targeting Belarusians residing in Lithuania with coordinated disinformation and cyber-based intimidation tactics. The repression escalated significantly in 2024. As the VSD reported, "the

operation was no longer limited to threats in cyberspace” following activities simulating the presence of hostile groups acting against the Belarusian diaspora. These staged threats were intended to sow fear and disrupt diaspora cohesion.

By 2025, the campaign had evolved into direct physical threats. The VSD confirmed that several attempts to carry out violent acts against Belarusians in Lithuania had been recorded. Alarming, Belarusian and Russian operatives actively sought individuals willing to attack members of the Belarusian community in exchange for financial compensation. Lithuanian authorities have expressed strong concern and are taking protective measures in response.^{xxix}

VI. The Belarusian government and official international relations

Another reshuffle of the Belarusian government

At the beginning of his new term in office, Aliaksandar Lukashenka announced that a central element of the government’s reconfiguration would be a significantly strengthened role for deputy prime ministers. However, only one new deputy prime minister was introduced: Uladzimir Karanik, who was assigned to oversee the government’s social bloc (education, healthcare, labour and social protection, sport, tourism, and culture). Upon his appointment, Lukashenka praised Karanik’s loyalty and crisis management capabilities, referring to his time as Minister of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 and 2020, and later as Head of the Hrodna Regional Administration from August 2020 to March 2025. As Minister of Health, Karanik played a central role in downplaying the pandemic and concealing key data such as mortality rates.^{xxx}

Despite these publicly declared high expectations, Karanik remained in office for less than three months. On 22 May 2025, Lukashenka reshuffled the government again, removing Karanik from his position and appointing him Head of the National Academy of Sciences. This is widely viewed as a political demotion, especially given Karanik’s lack of academic credentials. He was replaced by Natallia Piatkevich, First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration and a long-time confidante of Lukashenka. While Karanik’s reassignment is clearly a downgrade, Piatkevich’s appointment is more ambiguous. Some analysts interpret the move not as a demotion, but as a strategic reassignment to a sensitive area that requires full presidential trust. Her appointment points to Lukashenka’s dissatisfaction with Karanik’s performance and signals an effort to stabilise the social sector with a loyal and experienced figure.^{xxxi}

Other changes

In addition, Lukashenka appointed Valer Vakul’chyk, former KGB chief, as Head of the Council of Ministers’ Office, which, while not a particularly high-ranking position, holds important functional significance within the Belarusian public administration system. After the events of the summer of 2020, Vakul’chyk was first moved from the post of

KGB Chairman to State Secretary of the Security Council, and less than two months later, to his native Brest region as Lukashenka's assistant and inspector.

Uladzimir Piartsou, a former journalist known for his role in forming ideological policy and previously the Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, was promoted to First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, replacing Natallia Piatkevich.

In a diplomatic reshuffle, Mikalai Rahashchuk was appointed ambassador to Georgia, replacing Anatol' Lis, who was reportedly dismissed following his son's involvement in the 2020 protests. Lukashenka also named Dzianis Skabialka and Mikalai Sharstniou as Deputy Chairmen of the National Bank, alongside several new appointments to regional executive committees and deputy ministerial posts,^{xxxii} signalling ongoing efforts to tighten control over both governance and loyalty networks.

VII. Developments in the economy

GDP indicators

Belarus's GDP growth had slowed by the end of April 2025. According to the National Statistics Committee,^{xxxiii} the GDP growth rate for January to April amounted to 2.8% year-on-year. The slowdown occurred amid a decline in industrial performance, where growth fell to 1.4% over January–April 2025, compared to 2.1% in the first quarter of 2024.

Analysts from the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), in their weekly macroeconomic review,^{xxxiv} attributed the deceleration to reduced foreign demand for Belarusian goods. In contrast, sectors oriented toward domestic consumption continue to grow actively. In nominal terms, Belarus's GDP amounted to BYN 81.4 billion (EUR 23.5 billion) over the first four months of the year. It is worth noting that the official target set by the Belarusian authorities for GDP growth in 2025 is 4.1%.^{xxxv}

For comparison, GDP growth in 2024 stood at 4%. In an interview with state television, President Aliaksandar Lukashenka stated that the 2025 growth rate would likely be “somewhere near” that figure.^{xxxvi} He acknowledged the challenges of sustaining high growth rates due to an already elevated economic base, remarking that while growing from zero is easy, maintaining increases of 4.5% to 5% is unrealistic for both Belarus and Russia. He argued that modest growth of 1–2% in 2027–2030 would be more meaningful than the current rates.

Price regulation and inflation

On 2 April 2025, the Council of Ministers adopted Decree No. 713(6), introducing amendments to Belarus's price regulation system. The changes make it easier for producers and sellers to increase prices. This marks a departure from the strict controls introduced in October 2022 through Resolution No. 713, which effectively prohibited price increases in response to high inflation. While that measure helped contain inflation, it significantly undermined the profitability of trade. In 2025,

authorities announced the repeal of Resolution No. 713 and the introduction of a new system based on principles of fair price formation.

Under the revised rules, which came into effect in April and May 2025, a marginal profitability threshold has been set for producers, within which price increases no longer require prior approval. Additionally, the list of goods subject to price regulation has been reduced by approximately one-third,^{xxxvii} with 120 items removed from the previous list of over 300 regulated items. While other technical adjustments have been introduced,^{xxxviii} overall, the shift indicates a weakening of manual price regulation – though not its full abolition.

During the period of restrictions on price growth, Belarus has seen the emergence of a significant inflationary overhang. Since early 2025, inflation has been accelerating. In April,^{xxxix} the annual inflation rate reached 6.5%, up from 5.9% in March. Analysts from the Eurasian Development Bank suggest^{xl} that the easing of administrative price controls may have contributed to the increase. Independent Belarusian experts expect inflation to continue rising. This trend poses a challenge to the National Bank and the government of Belarus, which have set a target^{xli} of keeping inflation under 5% by the end of 2025.

The minimum subsistence budget

On 1 May 2025, the minimum subsistence budget in Belarus was increased.^{xlii} It now stands at BYN 462.58 (EUR 133.4) per capita, representing a 3.3% rise compared to the previous period. In Belarusian practice, the minimum subsistence budget represents the monetary value required to cover a basic set of goods and services essential for maintaining health. The figure is calculated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and is revised every three months.

A number of social benefits are linked to this indicator, including child allowances, care allowances for persons with first-degree disabilities, and social pensions. As of 1 May, the allowance for caring for a person with a first-degree disability or someone aged 80 or older is BYN 462.58 (EUR 133.4).^{xliii} The social pension for elderly individuals who do not receive a labour pension is set at BYN 231.29 (EUR 66.7).

ENDNOTES

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