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I. CSTO military exercises in Belarus

From interaction to search: What the CSTO rehearsed in Belarus

At the beginning of September, the active phase of a series of Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) drills took place in Belarus. This phase involved three linked exercises - Interaction-2025, Echelon-2025 and Search-2025 - within a common operational framework that prioritised counter-insurgency and rear-area security rather than high-end manoeuvre warfare.ⁱ

The Interaction-2025 exercises with the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Forces included two aspects: neutralising criminals in a building and in a vehicle, and preventing an attempted escape by river. In the phase more broadly, troops rehearsed blocking illegal armed formations, conducting reconnaissance, evacuation, and supply replenishment. The culmination at the Losvido range centred on detecting and suppressing “illegal armed formations”, drone-enabled reconnaissance, fire strikes on a simulated adversary, and a storming action by Belarusian and Kyrgyz internal troops supported by special operations elements, artillery and attack aviation. The scenario also included evacuation, battlefield medical support, and rapid materiel resupply, signalling a focus on stabilisation and sustainment in a contested environment.ⁱⁱ

Echelon-2025 shifted its focus to logistics under the threat of drone attacks. Belarus demonstrated a net-covered corridor and air observation posts to protect convoys on exposed routes. This was an explicit adaptation based on developments in the Russia-Ukraine battlefield.ⁱⁱⁱ The exercise also highlighted technical reconnaissance, recovery and repair at damaged-equipment collection points, as well as rail-based medical evacuation. The emphasis was less on spectacle and more on hardening the military rear, ensuring that supply lines remain operational in a situation where small and inexpensive drones can disrupt road traffic, fuel deliveries and ammunition transport.^{iv}

Search-2025 focused on the reconnaissance-fires connection. Search groups located targets, placed them under surveillance, set ambushes, and then directed and adjusted air strikes on a notional enemy. Taken together, the three drills rehearsed a coherent workflow of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), denial and sustainment. This reflects theatres in which rear areas are porous and the main risks come from saboteurs, raiders and drones rather than from massed armoured thrusts.^v

On 6 September, a closing ceremony was held for all three drills, after which participants were due to return to their home stations. The drills were not tokenistic in scale. Belarus reported the participation of over 2,000 personnel and about 450 pieces of equipment, with the finale observed by senior Belarusian, Russian and CSTO officials, including Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin, CSTO Secretary General Imangali Tasmagambetov, CSTO Joint Staff Chief Anatoly Sidorov and Russia’s Deputy Defence

Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov. This audience was clearly intended to showcase interoperability and political cohesion. Combined with the emphasis on common procedures and a “single operational background”, this suggests that Minsk sought to demonstrate that CSTO forces are capable of rapid integration for internal stabilisation missions in the alliance’s Eastern European area of interest.^{vi} In parallel, it should be noted that elements of the 71st Motorized Rifle Division and the 98th Airborne Division, which took part in the Interaction-2025 CSTO drills, remained in Belarus to participate in the ZAPAD 2025 exercises.^{vii}

Belarusian and CSTO official statements regarding the drills

Belarusian official messaging on the CSTO exercises was uniformly positive and can be read as propaganda-adjacent. The Belarusian Minister of Defence, Viktor Khrenin, stated that the drills achieved their aims, improved command-and-control practice, and validated “unity of standards” and “strategic deterrence”. CSTO Secretary General Imangali Tasmagambetov praised the forces’ readiness and the incorporation of “combat experience” from member states, while the First Deputy Defence Minister and Chief of the General Staff of the Ministry of Defence of Belarus, Pavel Muraveika, rated the reconnaissance component as “excellent”.

These statements reinforce a narrative of high readiness and seamless interoperability, but they are based largely on self-assessment and curated vignettes. They should therefore be treated with caution when extrapolating real operational capabilities beyond internal security and rear-area scenarios.^{viii}

II. ZAPAD 2025 military exercises: The main developments and evaluations’

Russian drones over Poland

The opening days of the ZAPAD 2025 exercise coincided with a surge in cross-border drone activity, most strikingly the first large scale incursion of Russian UAVs into Polish airspace from Belarus. Although limited in military effect, these incidents highlight the potential of the drills to create instability and to test regional responses. On the night of 9-10 September 2025, at least 19-21 Russian UAVs entered Polish airspace; several of these were brought down by Polish and NATO aircraft. Analysts judged that while outright aggression against NATO or Ukraine remains unlikely, smaller provocations such as UAV incursions are likely to persist as instruments of pressure and distraction.^{ix}

Prime Minister Donald Tusk confirmed that the drones originated from Belarus and described the incident as “the closest we have been to open conflict since World War II”.^x Poland’s Operational Command reported that its system was heavily overloaded and that information was exchanged with NATO Allies and neighbouring states, a fact

also acknowledged by Chief of the General Staff Wiesław Kukula.^{xi} Polish officers underlined that such communication is routine and does not change the fact that Polish airspace was deliberately violated.^{xii}

Independent monitoring and expert assessments reinforce the view that the flights were intentional probes designed to test NATO and Polish detection, response times and counter-drone measures. iSANS recorded 52 Russian UAVs in Belarusian airspace between 8 and 14 September, with about 21 crossing into Poland during the night in question and others moving into Ukraine and Lithuania. This activity, timed to correspond with ZAPAD 2025, suggests a coordinated effort to pressure NATO.^{xiii} The Atlantic Council likewise characterised the incident as a Kremlin escalation, pointing out that it marked the first engagement of Russian drones by Allied fighter aircraft over NATO territory.^{xiv} Polish media also mapped the drone routes, which indicated passage through Belarus.^{xv}

Belarusian officials put forward a different account. Chief of the General Staff Pavel Muraveika claimed the drones had “lost their course” due to electronic warfare, that Belarus destroyed some of them and warned Poland and Lithuania of the others.^{xvi} Aliaksandr Lukashenka insisted Belarus had “nothing to do” with drones entering Poland or Lithuania and accused Warsaw of exaggerating, portraying Belarus as a victim.^{xvii} These statements are intended to deny responsibility while concealing Belarus’s role as an enabler of Russian operations.

In conclusion, the prevailing experts’ and officials’ evaluation is that the 10 September incursion was a planned Russian probe carried out through Belarusian territory to gather intelligence and to test NATO readiness ahead of the ZAPAD 2025 exercises. The Belarusian claim that the drones accidentally strayed lacks independent corroboration and is consistent with wider patterns of disinformation. While some international commentary, including in *The Independent*, allowed that accidents cannot be ruled out, even these analyses emphasised that Moscow benefits strategically from cultivating such ambiguity.^{xviii}

The beginning of ZAPAD 2025

The ZAPAD 2025 joint Russian-Belarusian strategic drills took place from 12-16 September, with a restrained military build-up - Russia deployed only a limited contingent. This smaller footprint compared to previous iterations suggested a focus on signalling alliance cohesion and adaptability rather than preparing for large-scale offensive action. Exercises at Barysau and other sites in Belarus emphasised survivability, electronic warfare, drones, robotic platforms, and the use of artificial intelligence in command processes. Belarus committed several thousand troops, including territorial defence forces for the first time, thereby projecting a broader mobilisation narrative. The drills also simulated hybrid threats such as attacks on hazardous facilities and the use of irregular armed groups. Their opening coincided with significant UAV activity across Belarus’s borders, including the first major Russian drone incursion into Poland. While open aggression by Belarus against NATO or Ukraine was

assessed as unlikely, the exercises showed how controlled displays of force could be paired with smaller provocations to unsettle neighbours and test regional resilience.^{xix}

When the exercises started, Russia's presence in Belarus, according to iSANS evaluations, remained limited, with only a few hundred troops and modest air assets deployed, in sharp contrast to the scale of previous exercises such as ZAPAD 2021. The reduced logistical footprint, coupled with the reliance on pre-positioned units, suggests that Moscow is intent on demonstrating capability and alliance cohesion rather than preparing for a large-scale offensive action. The involvement of Belarusian formations across mechanised, artillery, air defence and electronic warfare domains underlines Minsk's role as a committed host and partner in this controlled display of military readiness.

An interview in *Zerkalo* with a serving Belarusian officer, mediated through BELPOL, suggested that ZAPAD 2025 was viewed inside the Belarusian army as routine, though provocations from Russia were expected. He noted the drills were moved deeper into Belarus due to Russia's resource constraints, and he confirmed that nuclear weapons were not present, with only their simulated use practiced. Officers, he said, recognised NATO's concerns but did not see this iteration as a direct threat, although future exercises could be more problematic. He also mentioned that participants received modest additional payments of about 300-400 BYN.^{xx}

The US observers at ZAPAD 2025

On 15 September 2025, unexpectedly for experts and the general public, two United States defence attachés visited the Borisov training range in Belarus to observe a stage of ZAPAD 2025 during the exercise's "honoured guests day".^{xxi} Belarusian official photos showed Lt. Col. Brian Shoup, former US defence attaché in Minsk, alongside his successor.^{xxii} Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin was pictured greeting them and promising broad access.^{xxiii}

Minsk also claimed that observers from 23 countries, including NATO members Türkiye and Hungary, were present. These details were amplified by state media to project the alleged transparency and international recognition of both the military exercises and of the Belarusian authorities more generally.^{xxiv} The Pentagon confirmed the attendance but framed it differently. It emphasised that participation in such observation days is a routine element of military diplomacy and explained that the overlap between outgoing and incoming attachés accounted for the presence of both US officers. Washington also stressed that their observation was limited strictly to the Belarusian part of the exercise and did not extend to the Russian phases.^{xxv} Moscow likewise stated that the Americans had not been invited to drills on Russian territory.^{xxvi}

The broader strategic context is equally important for understanding the visit of the US representatives. As the US Congressional Research Service underlined ahead of the drills, ZAPAD 2025 was not merely a routine event but the key strategic exercise of the year for Russia and Belarus, being held in the Moscow Military District adjacent to NATO

borders. It rehearsed the integration of Belarusian forces into the Regional Grouping of Forces under Russian command and, critically, joint nuclear planning on Belarusian territory, reflecting Moscow's expanded nuclear posture and deployment plans. Although the Congressional Research Service report noted the reduced scale of the exercises and the invitation of international observers, these gestures did little to offset the underlying concerns. The exercise demonstrated Belarus's lack of strategic autonomy, deepened its military subordination to Russia, and sharpened the nuclear dimension of Union State defence policy.^{xxvii}

The attendance of US representatives was a limited, routine practice, but Minsk exploited it to claim legitimacy and openness. In reality, ZAPAD 2025 highlighted Belarus's entrenched dependency on Moscow and its integration into Russian military planning, including nuclear dimensions. The contrast between the Pentagon's narrow account and Belarus's expansive portrayal illustrates how the Lukashenka regime instrumentalises symbolic gestures to mask strategic subordination.

Belarusian state media narratives on the ZAPAD 2025 exercises

The Belarusian state-owned agency BelTA presented ZAPAD 2025 as a routine, defensive, and transparent drill. Coverage on 12 September, the opening day, stressed that the exercise was *scheduled* and launched on Belarusian ranges together with Russia under the Regional Grouping of Forces. Ministry of Defence messaging emphasised that it was not directed "against any particular country",^{xxviii} a line repeated across dispatches as its central reassurance to its neighbours.^{xxix}

Operational snippets were used to signal readiness and normalise activity. Reports from the Barysau training area highlighted the rehearsal of air-defence tasks against a notional enemy, and this was paired with a visit by Security Council Secretary Aliaksandr Valfovich, who declared that the exercise's goals "will be achieved".^{xxx} A companion item framed the drills as posing "no threat" to western neighbours, another stock talking point aimed at blunting criticism.^{xxxi}

Another strand of coverage attacked Western reactions as hype or manipulation. On 10 September, BelTA's YouTube talk-show "*In the topic*" featured defence commentator Aliaksandr Alesin, who described Western discussion of ZAPAD 2025 as a "political operation", framing criticism as opportunistic spin rather than substantive concern. This segment set the tone for the week's information posture.^{xxxii} By 17 September, BelTA had doubled down on the openness narrative through video programming with the line "*So come and see!*", inviting outsiders to visit and recycling cues about transparency and comparability with the drills of its neighbours. On the same day, a BelTA photo note again reiterated the official dates, as well as its aims nature as a "defensive" scenario, keeping the message tightly aligned with the official script.^{xxxiii}

ZAPAD 2025: Nuclear signalling and calibrated pressure on NATO

The exercises extended to Kaliningrad, the Barents Sea and the Far East, involving nuclear-capable systems, submarine strike scenarios, and long-range bomber patrols. Observers from 23 countries, including NATO members, underscored international scrutiny. Yet the use of Kaliningrad for electronic warfare and the positioning of nuclear-capable assets near NATO borders showed how the drills combined interoperability with pressure. Coinciding with Russian drone incursions into Poland, the manoeuvres illustrated Moscow's strategy of controlled displays paired with smaller provocations to unsettle neighbouring states and test resilience.^{xxxiv}

Political implications and expert interpretations of ZAPAD 2025 exercises

According to experts' evaluations, ZAPAD 2025 should be read less as preparation for imminent conflict and more as a carefully constructed act of political signalling. Russia, constrained by its ongoing war effort, has scaled down its participation, leaving Belarus to play a more visible role in shaping the narrative of restraint and stability.^{xxxv} Lukashenka's decision to invite international observers and to shift manoeuvres away from NATO's borders suggests he seeks to reduce the perception of escalation while still embedding Belarus firmly within the Union State's military structures.^{xxxvi} For Moscow, the exercise remains a platform to test joint command arrangements and to project the image of resilience despite battlefield attrition. For Minsk, however, it is also a diplomatic tool to negotiate with the West by showing that Belarus can act as a moderating actor within the Kremlin's orbit.^{xxxvii}

The release of 52 political prisoners, brokered by Washington, demonstrates how the Lukashenka regime is instrumentalising both repression and military exercises to extract concessions. By offering a limited humanitarian gesture in parallel with ZAPAD, Minsk positions itself as both a security partner of Moscow and a negotiator with the West. This creates a dilemma for the United States and the European Union.^{xxxviii} Washington views the release as a modest success, providing an opening for dialogue, yet it risks legitimising Lukashenka's strategy of cyclical repression and selective amnesty.^{xxxix} The EU, with its greater economic leverage, is more cautious, wary of rewarding gestures that may be quickly reversed.

In summary, ZAPAD 2025 and the prisoner release form part of a dual-track strategy: Moscow uses the exercise to deter NATO, while Minsk uses it to bargain for reduced isolation. The West must therefore resist treating such moves as isolated events and instead read them as components of a coherent Belarusian survival strategy that blends military alignment with diplomatic hedging.^{xl}

III. Military bases and facilities in Belarus

An investigation by *Radio Svaboda* in cooperation with Ukrainian and Estonian outlets reveals the construction of a large, undisclosed military complex near the village of Paŭlaŭka in Slutsk district, about 60 kilometres south of Minsk. Building work began in June 2024 on the site of the former Soviet military town No. 25, which once hosted a missile regiment and nuclear infrastructure.^{xli} Satellite imagery shows rapid expansion over more than two square kilometres, including 13 fortified ammunition depots, several hangars more than 100 metres long, foundations for new buildings, and a road system linking four zones. The project has been carried out without official acknowledgement, suggesting deliberate secrecy. Analysts note that relocating such a facility deeper into Belarus may reflect Russian caution about NATO surveillance, but it also indicates intent to preserve high-value assets and strategic options.

Experts assess that the scale and design of the Paŭlaŭka facility are consistent with preparations for hosting advanced systems. Konrad Muzyka of Rochan Consulting and retired Finnish intelligence officer Marko Eklund both argue that the interconnected layout and heavy fortifications point to equipment of strategic significance, potentially including Russian “Oreshnik” missile complexes. The Cold War legacy of the site, which previously housed nuclear-capable systems such as SS-4 and SS-25 Topol, further fuels speculation about renewed nuclear infrastructure. While deployment has not been confirmed, the secrecy, speed and scope of the project underline Belarus’s integration into Russia’s long-term military posture. Together with ongoing exercises such as ZAPAD 2025, this construction signals Minsk’s deeper role in supporting Moscow’s strategic ambitions and highlights a shift from temporary deployments towards permanent infrastructure that could alter the regional security balance.^{xlii}

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