
ESTONIA SAYS RUSSIA MAY PUT TROOPS IN BELARUS TO CHALLENGE NATO

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Estonia's defense minister said on Thursday that Russia may use large-scale military exercises to move thousands of troops permanently into Belarus later this year in a warning to NATO.

Russia and Belarus aim to hold joint war games in September that some North Atlantic Treaty Organisation allies believe could number more than 100,000 troops and involve nuclear weapons training, the biggest such exercise since 2013.

Defence Minister Margus Tsahkna said Estonia and other NATO governments had intelligence suggesting Moscow may leave Russian soldiers in Belarus once the so-called Zapad 2017 exercises are over, also pointing to public data of Russian railway traffic to Belarus.

Tsahkna cited plans to send 4,000 railway carriages to Belarus to transport Russian troops and gear there, possibly to set up a military outpost in its closest ally.

"For Russian troops going to Belarus, it is a one-way ticket," Tsahkna told Reuters in an interview in Malta.

"This is not my personal opinion, we are analyzing very deeply how Russia is preparing for the Zapad exercises," he said before a meeting of EU defense ministers.

Russias Defence Ministry did not immediately reply to a Reuters request for comment on the subject.

Moscow denies any plans to threaten NATO and says it is the U.S.-led alliance that is risking stability in eastern Europe. The Kremlin has not said how many troops will take part in Zapad 2017.

"We see what they are doing on the other side of the EU-NATO border. Troops may remain there after Zapad," Tsahkna said, saying that Tallinn had shared its concerns with Baltic and NATO allies. He put the number of potential troops in the thousands.

Such a move could see Russian troops on the border with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia just as the U.S.-led NATO alliance stations multinational battalions in the Baltic region in response to Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea.

"QUESTION OF TRUST"

The scale of this year's Zapad exercises, which date from Soviet times when they were first used to test new weapon systems, is one of NATO's most pressing concerns, as diplomats say the war games are no simple military drill.

Previous large-scale exercises in 2013 employed special forces training, longer-range missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles that were later used in Russia's annexation of Crimea, its support for separatists in eastern Ukraine and in its intervention in Syria, NATO diplomats said.

Russia, bristling at NATO's expansion eastwards into its old Soviet sphere of influence, says its exercises are a response to NATO's 4,000-strong new deterrent force in the Baltics and Poland that will begin to rotate through the region from June.

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said in January the scenario for the Zapad 2017 exercises would "take into account the situation linked to increased NATO activity along the borders of the Union state," Russian media cited, in a reference to the union of Russia and Belarus.

The exercises, to be held simultaneously on military training grounds in Russia and Belarus, aim to focus on joint planning, command tactics and joint troop formations, he said.

"In the future we plan to strengthen the practical nature of such exercises, taking into account the emerging foreign policy realities," Shoigu added, in an apparent reference to the expansion of NATO, which is soon to include Montenegro.

The U.S. Army's top European commander has called on Russia to open its exercises to observers to calm Baltic concerns.

Asked about Moscow's possible motives for leaving troops in Belarus, Tsahkna said it was likely about President Vladimir Putin's image as a strong leader at home, as well as cementing ties with Belarus, which was alarmed by the Crimea annexation.

"Russia has presidential elections next year and Putin needs to show strength to the Russian people," Tsahkna said. "It's also a question of trust with Belarus."

The West has sought to improve ties with Belarus over the past two years, lifting some sanctions in an overture to the country's President Alexander Lukashenko, the man the West calls Europe's "last dictator."

But Belarus remains Russia's ally and a member of Putin's Eurasian trade bloc. Belarus Defence Minister Andrei Ravkov has echoed Russia's position that NATO is a threat, also accusing Ukraine of raising tensions by aligning itself with the West.

Russia bans three Khodorkovsky-linked opposition groups
Financial Times, 27 April 2017

Russia has banned three non-governmental groups linked to Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the exiled former oligarch, ahead of planned anti-regime demonstrations as the Kremlin tries to curb the spread of protest sentiment.

The Prosecutor Generals Office on Wednesday declared the Open Russia Foundation, the Institute of Modern Russia and the Open Russia movement to be undesirable organisations. Such a status allows authorities to freeze their assets in Russia and exposes anyone working with them to criminal prosecution.

The three organisations carry out special programmes and projects on the territory of the Russian Federation aimed at discrediting the results of elections in Russia and at declaring them illegitimate, the prosecutors office said. It said the blacklisted organisations sought to inspire protests and destabilise the internal political situation, which threatens the foundations of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation and state security.

Open Russia had called this month on Russians to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the regime of President Vladimir Putin in nationwide marches this Saturday. These protest have been anticipated as a test of how vocally the Russian public will voice dissatisfaction □ and how the Kremlin will react.

A month ago, tens of thousands took to the streets in more than 80 Russian cities in anti-corruption rallies organised by opposition politician Alexei Navalny, who tapped into widespread anger over corruption and Russias struggling economy. Their size surprised the Kremlin and invigorated Mr Navalnys campaign to be allowed onto the presidential ballot in elections next March.

Mr Navalny rallied supporters with an online video in which he accused Dmitry Medvedev, the prime minister, of corruptly amassing luxury dachas and vineyards □ allegations dismissed by Mr Medvedev and others implicated in the video.

Open Russia has linked its appeal for protests more directly to Mr Putin. While the group plans demonstrations in more than 30 cities on Saturday, it has said that protesters in Moscow will march to presidential offices to submit a letter demanding that Mr Putin does not run for president again next year.

The protests were to show Putin does not have the unconditional support of the Russian people, Mr Khodorkovsky said in a statement.

Mr Khodorkovsky told the RBC business channel that, by declaring Open Russia undesirable, the Russian authorities were demonstrating their weakness.

The powers-that-be understand that the situation is becoming more acute for them, he said. The prosecutors decision will not affect the Enough rally at all. People will only be more motivated to go out onto the streets and protest.

Although the authorities have raised the pressure on opposition politicians, critics and non-governmental groups across the board in recent years, those associated with Mr Khodorkovsky have been hit particularly hard.

The former tycoon, once owner of Russias largest oil company, spent more than 10 years in a labour camp on fraud and embezzlement charges after a political challenge to Mr Putin. He moved to Switzerland after Mr Putin ordered his release in 2013.

Kaynak/Source: