

The West-2017 Belarus-Russian military exercise: smaller than anticipated

During a meeting with defence minister Andrei Raukou on 20 March, president Alexander Lukashenka demanded 'absolute transparency' at the forthcoming West-2017 Belarusian-Russian military exercise. The Belarusian government is working to counter the negative repercussions of such a massive show of military force in the region.

These repercussions have certainly been felt. On 9 February, Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaitė stated that during the West-2017 exercises 'aggressive forces are concentrating in very large numbers, this is a demonstrative preparation for a war with the West.'

Moscow would apparently like to increase the fog of uncertainty surrounding its military moves. The Russian military previously published the numbers of railway wagons needed for troop movement. In the absence of proper explanations, this created a threatening impression. Yet it is now clear that the exercises on Belarusian territory will [be smaller](#) than in 2009.

Minsk avoids confrontation with the West

As Lukashenka elaborated, 'I demand that this event [*West-2017*] on the territory of our country [*sic!*] be transparent and all its components be accessible not only to our friends in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Commonwealth of Independent

States, but also to NATO members.'

However, the Belarusian and Russian media framed Lukashenka's words in remarkably different ways. The Belarusian media, such as *TUT.by*, simply mentioned the quote as part of more general reports. Meanwhile, the Russian media, such as *Lenta.ru*, used the quote as a headline and expressly underlined Lukashenka's 'demand' to admit NATO observers to the exercise, thus creating an impression that he was openly defying Moscow.

Moscow is prone to militant statements and ambiguous threats. Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu, commenting on West-2017, said that his government had been forced to take preparatory defensive measures: 'The US and other NATO



members are actively building up their offensive potential at the western borders of the Union State [*of Belarus and Russia*].'

Needless to say, his Belarusian counterpart [Andrei Raukou](#) describes West-2017 only in general terms, highlighting the necessity to practise defensive measures and continue cooperation with Russia. He also emphasised that Belarus would invite Western observers and that 'the requirements of Western partners would be met.'

West-2017 smaller than West-2009

Belarus and Russia have been holding 'West' (*Zakhad, Zapad*) joint strategic exercises every four years since 2009: on Belarusian and Russian territory in turn. As part of the West-2017 military exercise, on 14-20 September Belarusian and Russian troops will exercise on a territory spanning from the

extreme North of Russia to Belarus. In Belarus, a 'Regional Group' of Russian and Belarusian troops will train on seven different sites. The Regional Group includes Belarusian armed forces and the First Tank Army of Russia.

Moscow means for these exercises to seem impressive. Nevertheless, Belarusian defence minister Raikou revealed that the activities of the exercise on Belarusian territory would be of a rather limited nature. Around 3,000 Russian personnel and 280 items of equipment will arrive in Belarus to participate in the drills. [In comparison](#), in 2009 more than 6,000 Russian troops participated in the drills on Belarusian territory.

Raikou's revelations put an end to lively discussions regarding the scale of the forthcoming West-2017 exercise which began last November. At that point, Ukrainian websites such as *Inform Napalm* and *Apostrophe* had discovered that the Russian defence ministry had announced an official tender for 4,162 railway wagons for shipments to and from Belarus in 2017.

The Russian military did not explain its need for so many wagons, and no data for similar purchases during previous West exercises were available at the time. Thus, [all kinds of hypotheses](#) attempting to explain the number of wagons were set forth, including a forthcoming annexation of Belarus by Russian forces, which would come to the country under the guise of military exercises.



It took the Russian military two months to finally comment on the tender for more than 4,000 wagons. Upon the request of the Moscow-based liberal daily *Novaya Gazeta*, the Russian military explained itself in just four sentences.

First, it clarified that the declared amount of wagons were meant for transportation to and from Belarus, i.e., 2,000 wagons in each direction. Second, the Russian military disclosed never-before-published information on military shipments to and from Belarusian territory from previous joint exercises. During West-2009, these shipments required over 6,000 wagons, and during West-2013, almost 2,500 wagons.

Defence cooperation as a 'red line' for the Kremlin

Given that the Belarusian government wishes to limit the potentially negative repercussions of the exercise on [Minsk's relations](#) with its neighbours and the West, it is exercising caution with regard to military cooperation with Russia. Bilateral relations with Russia are also suffering from several unresolved problems. Nevertheless, on 20 March, Lukashenka had to say that Minsk 'was not going to reduce military cooperation with Russia because of disagreements which had emerged in other areas'.

On one hand, the Belarusian government maintains a critical attitude towards the defence cooperation with Russia. Hence, Lukashenka told Raukou that he wants the Belarusian defence ministry 'to conduct a general assessment of the efficiency of bilateral military cooperation with Russia.' This could be important because of a 'possible' meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, at which time the Belarusian leader would like to [raise relevant issues](#) with his Russian counterparts.

On the other hand, the Belarusian leader realises the sensitivity of defence cooperation issues for Moscow given the [vital role](#) of Belarus in providing security to Russia's core region around Moscow. Therefore, at the same conference, Lukashenka together with the defence minister announced: 'As

far as security issues and defence of our common borders are concerned, they could never under any circumstances be taken lightly.'

In a word, Minsk and Moscow differ in their attitudes towards the West-2017 exercises. Minsk downplays the confrontational aspects of the exercise. Moscow, on the contrary, is working to make the drills non-transparent and thus more threatening than they really are.



The leakage of the previously unrevealed and confusing numbers of Russian military shipments via Belarusian railways, along with the intentionally late explanation, are aspects of Russia's information warfare.

The Belarusian government has tried to neutralise the negative consequences of this 'fog of war' by making the drills more transparent. [This divergence](#) with regard to transparency started years ago. A case in point is the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). Minsk consistently adheres to the CFE, which rests on principles of transparency, while Moscow suspended its cooperation in 2007 and renounced it altogether in 2015.

Minsk continues military cooperation with Russia knowing that this is a 'red line' for Moscow. Yet the Belarusian [government shapes](#) the conditions and scale of its cooperation. It does not plan to participate in Putin's intimidation of NATO and its allies.