

# The Belarus-Russia conflict through the lens of the Gerasimov Doctrine

The recent visit of Alexander Lukashenka to Sochi on 15 – 26 February 2017, which did not include an audience with Vladimir Putin, casts the relationship between Minsk and the Kremlin in an ever more ambiguous light.

Tensions between Belarus and Russia have been mounting over the past months, as the Kremlin puts more and more pressure on Minsk. The nature of this pressure is perfectly encapsulated by the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine of hybrid warfare. According to the doctrine, Belarus and Russia have entered the 'pre-crisis' stage of conflict.

## Russia's asymmetric warfare concept

In February 2013, General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, published a [report](#) on hybrid or asymmetric warfare (the Gerasimov Doctrine), which Russia successfully tested during its conflict with Ukraine.

General Gerasimov believes that the rules of war have changed and the line between war and peace has blurred. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown. In many cases, these means have proved more effective than conventional warfare.



This new type of conflict relies broadly on political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures, applied in coordination with mounting discontent and an atmosphere of protest on behalf of the population.

All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed nature, including disseminating hostile information and deploying special operations forces.

According to Gerasimov, Russian military practises must evolve to accommodate these new methods of warfare. He has also proposed a schematic model for modern conflict, entitled 'The Role of Nonmilitary Methods in Interstate Conflict Resolution'.

His model outlines six stages of conflict development (see picture below). Each stage focuses on nonmilitary measures, but potentially entails increasing military involvement as the conflict approaches resolution.



## **Is Russia already waging a hybrid war against Belarus?**

The Gerasimov Doctrine perfectly captures the ongoing conflict

between Belarus and Russia. According to the schematic model, Belarus and Russia have already passed through the first ('covert origins') and second ('escalations') stages. They are now in stage three: 'start of conflict activities'. Meanwhile, Belarus and Russia formally remain strategic allies. For this reason, applying the Gerasimov Doctrine to the case of Belarus first requires some clarification.

As interstate contradictions intensify, the third stage of conflict begins, and opposing forces begin to take action against one another. This can take the form of demonstrations, protests, subversion, sabotage, assassinations, and paramilitary engagements. The Kremlin then frames this intensification of conflict as a direct threat to Russia's national interests and security and begins preparations to intervene politically and militarily.

According to General Gerasimov, conflict activities must involve nonmilitary and military measures in a 4:1 ratio. Russia has already begun to take such actions against Belarus.

The Kremlin has been **grooming coalitions and unions** in Belarus for decades, [expanding its influence](#) in different areas such as security services, the bureaucracy apparatus, and even certain NGOs and oppositional groups. Although it may be hard to believe, even prominent Belarusian oppositional leaders such as [Stanislaŭ Őuškievič](#) and [Zmicier Daškevič](#) discussed the option of bringing in [Russian troops to Belarus](#) in order to [overthrow Lukashenka](#) in 2010.

The Kremlin has been systematically putting **political and diplomatic pressure** on Belarus since the beginning of the conflict with Ukraine and the West. Moscow urges Minsk to take sides in a new Cold War, attempting to establish a Russian military presence on the territory of Belarus, thus transforming it into [a military outpost for Russia](#).

**Economic sanctions** include permanent [trade wars and](#)

[restrictions](#) of Belarusian goods on the Russian market, the [gas price dispute](#), and insufficient delivery of Russian oil to Belarus. Because of this, in January 2017 alone Belarus lost 1.5% of its GDP. This Russian economic pressure contributes significantly to undermining social and economic stability.

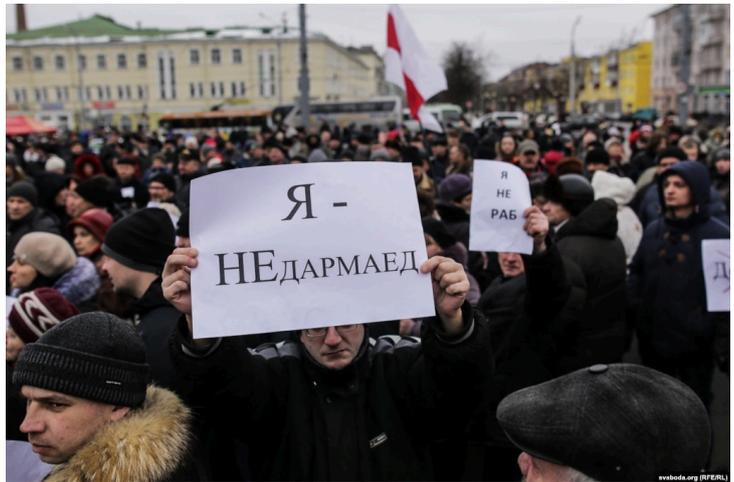
✘ Despite their ongoing conflict, Minsk and Moscow have not announced a **break in diplomatic relations**.

Nevertheless, Vladimir Putin recently ignored Alexander Lukashenka and refused to meet with him in Sochi, according to the press. This may be Moscow's way of signalling that the Kremlin no longer perceives Lukashenka to be a partner worthy of negotiation.

The year 2017 hasn't seen any significant signs of improvement in Russian-Belarusian relations except statements of difficulties and problems; this includes the visit to Moscow of Uladzimir Makei, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, on 21– 22 February. It seems that the Kremlin does not take the arguments and concerns of the Belarusian leadership seriously during talks.

A few days later, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak stated that a full repayment of Belarus's \$600 million natural gas debt is the key condition for the two sides to reach a compromise. On top of this, Gazprom increased the price of gas for Belarus by 6.81% (to \$141.1 per 1,000 cubic metres) since January 2017 despite ongoing gas price talks.

[On 17–19 and 26 February 2017](#), Minsk and several other cities saw the largest **demonstrations of opposition forces** since December 2010, when Belarusians protested against the results of the presidential election. Hundreds of people protested against the controversial 'social parasite' law.



Some oppositional figures, such as [Uladzimir Niakliajeŭ](#) and [Mikalaj Statkievič](#), also took part in the demonstrations. They wished to transform the socially-oriented protests into political ones, demanding the resignation of the government and Lukashenka on 25 March 2017. On 5 March 2017 dozens of anarchists in black masks appeared unexpectedly at the demonstration in Brest. They may easily become a source of provocations.

The protests have provoked debate regarding whether Russia could take advantage of the situation to destabilise the country and send in troops to 'restore the constitutional order'. Lukashenka has already alluded to this scenario in a recent statement about the protests.

It seems that the Kremlin is preparing Russian public discourse for a serious crisis in Belarusian-Russian relations with the help of an **informational warfare campaign**. Some journalists' reporting on Belarus in the Russian media evinces parallels with the situation in Ukraine. Allegedly, the West is attempting to drive Belarus away from Russia.

According to them, Belarus can expect Ukraine-style instability, as Western intelligence agencies are preparing a colour revolution to overthrow Alexander Lukashenka. Other stories focus on the growth of nationalist sentiment and

'[Russophobia](#)' in Belarusian society.

Recent polls conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre have demonstrated that 60% of Russians oppose oil and gas discounts for Belarus even if Minsk should support the Kremlin on the international arena. About 80% are for reinstating border controls with Belarus.

As for **military measures**, Belarus Digest has already covered the ongoing [deployment of two mechanised brigades of the Russian Armed Forces](#) in Yelnya and Klinty close to the Belarusian border. Incidentally, these brigades would be very well suited for a hypothetical crisis intervention under the guise of, for example, a joint anti-terrorist operation.

It seems that the Kremlin is considering the [possibility of deploying troops](#) to 'stabilise the situation and restore the constitutional order' in response to unrest in Belarus, judging by the 2015 military drills 'Interaction' and 'Slavonic brotherhood'.

In addition, Russia continues to [reinforce border controls and infrastructure](#) on the Belarusian frontier, deploying operational formations of the FSB border service. In February 2017, units of the Federal Customs Service appeared there as well. Officially, these are meant to protect the Russian market from the embargo on Western food products which pass through Belarus and other member-states of the Eurasian Economic Union. However, it may easily turn into an economic blockade.

It seems that the Belarus-Russia conflict could easily advance to the next crisis stage, if it is to escalate further. The main question is whether the Kremlin is really preparing for a crisis with Belarus or merely using threats to achieve political aims and concessions by means of brute blackmail.

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# **Belarus's new Russian arms: what Minsk has given in exchange**

In an interview published on 23 February, Belarusian defence minister Andrei Raukou announced the forthcoming purchases of state-of-the-art Russian weaponry.

He specifically mentioned the Su-30SM fighter aircraft and 120mm Nona-M1 heavy mortars. Earlier, on 4 February, armament director of the Belarusian armed forces Major General Ihar Latsyankou said that Minsk would purchase these systems this year.

In other words, despite its dependence on Moscow, Minsk has prevailed in its dispute with the Kremlin over defence issues. Moscow initially did not wish to provide Minsk with weapons, intending instead to replace Belarusian with Russian troops. However, it has conceded one position after another. Minsk has thus emerged victorious in this spat.

## **Minsk receives arms after agreeing to a military exercise**

Minsk's first attempts to procure Su-30 from Moscow date back to the late 2000s. However, a flurry of official statements over the past year indicate that the deal may be in its final stages: Moscow has decided to sell the airplanes to Minsk at a

minimal price, and the parties are hashing out the deal and its specific conditions.

As for the Belarusian government, it most probably succeeded in getting the new equipment delivered more rapidly than foreseen by promising to host a joint military exercise with Russia in September. The [large-scale exercise](#) Zapad-2017 had already caused a fall-out between Belarus, its other neighbours, and the West. It only makes sense for Minsk to agree to the exercise, which has undermined its recently repaired relations with the West, if it gets something valuable in exchange from the Kremlin.

The newest military equipment – which Russia had refused to provide to Minsk before – is a logical exchange. As recently as 23 November 2016, Belarusian Air Force and air defence commander Aleh Dvihalyou had spoken about general plans to buy at least a squadron of Su-30SM fighter jets from Russia as late as 2020. Now Moscow, eager to conduct a large show of its military might in the centre of Europe, promptly agreed to give Belarus the fighter jets.

## A Triple Alliance

However, the Russian government would like to minimise the costs of rearming Belarus. The Kremlin would prefer not to bear these costs at all, and for years it has refused to give Minsk sophisticated weapons such as the Su-30. As the Soviet-era fighter jets of the Belarusian air force gradually became obsolete, a growing hole emerged in the [single air defence system](#) of Belarus and Russia. Speculating on this danger, Moscow tried to stop relying on the Belarusian air force altogether. For three years, it has been [putting pressure](#) on Minsk to host the Russian air force in the country rather than rearming the Belarusian air force.

[Minsk refused](#) to increase foreign military presence in the

country. Nevertheless, the problem of maintaining the joint system of air defence remained. Thus, against its will, Moscow was forced to provide Belarus new aircraft to keep the system functioning properly. Minsk, certainly, will not pay very much for the aircraft. Given its status as a critical ally of Russia, this is a logical stance. Therefore, the Kremlin has invented a scheme to simultaneously arm Minsk and reduce its own costs.

✘ The most likely scheme is trilateral and involves Serbia.

Last year, Russia promised Serbia's Russia-friendly government six MiG-29 second-hand fighter jets and some Buk surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems. The Buk deal failed, and anyway the six airplanes from Russia would not have sufficed for Serbia to rebuild its air force, which it lost in 1999. But then, on 27 January, after returning from Minsk, Serbian Defence minister Zoran Đorđević told the Serbian daily [Politika](#) that Belarus would supply Serbia with a further eight MiG-29 and two batteries of Buk SAM systems.

There are good reasons to believe that Moscow demanded that Minsk help Russia's friends in Belgrade in exchange for new arms for the Belarusian army. That is, Moscow prefers to send Belgrade Belarusian equipment rather than give it its own.

The conditions of the deal between Minsk and Belgrade are very similar to those discussed between Moscow and Belgrade, [emphasises Politika](#). In both cases, Serbia has to pay a minimal price for the hardware and finance, leaving only overhaul and modernisation. The Belarusian government would accept such a deal only if the Kremlin forced its hand or offered it compensation. Otherwise, Minsk would have no reason to be so generous. It has almost always sold its decommissioned aircraft to the customer offering the best price: the most recent example being its sale of [Su-24 bombers](#) to Sudan.

# Minsk aware of risks

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in 2012-16 the Belarusian Defence Ministry purchased arms and military equipment from Russia worth \$475m. They included multi-purpose Mi-8MTV5 helicopters, Yak-130 trainer jets, and second-hand S-300PS and new Tor-M2 SAM systems. Russia remains the principal source of defence equipment for Belarus. In comparison, in the same period Minsk purchased arms worth \$10m and \$2m respectively from its two other major partners, [Ukraine](#) and [China](#).

The Belarusian government strives to achieve the greatest possible independence in the defence sphere. Thus, after the [personal intervention](#) of president Lukashenka, the defence ministry stopped the negotiations on purchasing Russian BTR-82A. The Belarusian leader instead insisted upon the use of alternatives already developed by the national defence industry. As a result, in January 2017 after government tests, the Belarusian army deployed modernised BTR-70MB1.

This was not an isolated case. Armament director of Belarusian armed forces Latsyankou stated in a recent interview that a major task of national defence industries this year would be re-installing various multiple rocket launch systems on Belarusian-manufactured chassis. Until now, they had been installed on chassis manufactured mostly in Russia.

In sum, the situation of Belarusian-Russian military cooperation is more complex than the basic figures of equipment procurement or personnel training suggest. Belarus and Russia are largely interdependent.

Belarus depends on Russia disproportionately for procuring  military equipment, as it lacks money to buy from alternative sources. Russia critically depends on Belarus strategically. It needs Belarus because the latter is located

in the vicinity of Russia's core region around Moscow and contributes to its security. Moreover, Belarus, as one of Moscow's few allies, helps the Kremlin keep the remnants of its imperial prestige by participating in demonstrative shows of Russian strength, despite [avoiding backing](#) Putin's adventurous moves in Ukraine, the Middle East, or the Caucasus.

Both governments try to diminish their dependence, but Minsk has more chances of success in the long run. The situation surrounding [Russian plans](#) for an airbase in Belarus in 2013-2015 and Minsk's final success in getting modern aircraft proves it.

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## **Belarus at the centre of Russia-NATO wargame simulation**

On 23 – 26 January 2017 a Baltic security wargaming simulation took place in Warsaw. Two defence and security think tanks, the Potomac Foundation and the Casimir Pulaski Foundation, hosted the event.

The wargaming initiative focused on the scenario of a Russia-NATO conflict and analysed the nature of the Russian military threat to the Baltic States and Poland. As a result Belarus was found to be a key contributor to regional security and stability by containing Russia's aggressive strategy.

The author of this piece also took part in the simulation.

# Inside the wargaming simulation

The wargame simulated a military conflict between Russia and NATO caused by a Russian attack on the Baltics. It used the 'Hegemon' computer-based programme which was originally created by the United States during the Cold War.

'Hegemon' operates using open-source and de-classified data for tactical, operational, theatre and strategic level analysis.



The Potomac Foundation already conducted several wargaming simulations using the 'Hegemon' platform last year: at the Baltic Defence College; in Washington with a group of defence attachés; at the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) headquarters in the United Kingdom; and with the Latvian joint staff.

The recent Baltic wargaming simulation in Warsaw brought together defence experts and government representatives from Poland, the United States, Baltic and Nordic countries and NATO. Retired four-star United States Air Force general Philip Breedlove took part in this wargaming simulation. He had served as Commander, U.S. European Command, as well as 17th Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) of NATO Allied Command Operations. NATO Allied Rapid Reaction Corps Brigade General Paul Tennant also participated in the event.



'Hegemon' also took into consideration open-source intelligence data which outlined deep concerns among western military analysts over a possible conflict with Russia. This data directly refers to Belarus.

## A source of concern

Military analysts from the Potomac Foundation believe that the ongoing reestablishment of the 1st Guards Tank Army of the Russian Armed Forces has far-reaching strategic intent. This raises a number of security concerns.

During the Cold War the 1st Guards Tank Army was stationed in East Germany as part of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany. It served as the mobile, hard-hitting spearhead and vanguard of a Warsaw Pact drive into Western Europe. Today the army is located in Russia's Western Military District, close to Belarus, where it would likely be called into action in the event of a conflict in the Baltic states.

The 1st Guards Tank Army consists of around 3 Divisions and 3 manoeuvre Brigades – a very powerful and offensive strike force. Its assets will soon number approximately 700 Tanks, 1,300 other armoured vehicles, 500 tubes of artillery and multiple rocket launchers, covered by a dense, mobile-radar air defence umbrella. The 1st Guards Tank army is equipped with the latest Russian armament, and has been declared an early recipient of the new Armata T-14 Main Battle Tank.

Russia has already announced that the 1st Guards Tank army will be ready by this spring. The Kremlin is planning to test it in the upcoming West/Zapad – 2017 exercise. This will take place in Russia's Western military district as well as in Belarus in September 2017.



Military analysts from the Potomac foundation also announced that Russia has ordered over 4,000 rail flat cars for the deployment of heavy equipment into Belarus. According to their estimations this is sufficient to transport all the heavy vehicles of the 1st Guards Tank Army and a substantial amount of ammunition. This means the West/Zapad – 2017 military drill may serve to bring together the most powerful concentration of offensive weaponry in Eastern Europe since the end of the Cold War, allowing the Kremlin to present military threats to NATO.

## **The Russia-NATO conflict begins with Belarus**

In the Baltic wargaming simulation scenario, the conflict between Russia and NATO begins with Belarus, with Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko refusing to establish a large-scale permanent military presence of Russian troops on the territory of Belarus.

Therefore the Kremlin decides to launch a coup, overthrowing Alexander Lukashenko and replacing him with a fully controlled and loyal secret service general. The new leader of Belarus then officially invites Russian troops into Belarus. After this the Kremlin begins to generate hybrid threats to the Baltic countries and Poland.

NATO then decides to activate Article 5 and sends High Readiness Forces to protect these states. The Kremlin

interprets this step as a declaration of war and responds with a large-scale offensive operation against the Baltic states and Poland. According to this scenario Russia even deploys a tactical nuclear weapon on the territory of Belarus.

## Some conclusions and results

The Baltic wargaming simulation took place in an 'off the record' format. This means the organisers and participants will not share all the details and their conclusions publicly. They will deliver a post-event report to Polish and US officials. Nevertheless, the wargame demonstrates a significant shift in Western strategic perception of Belarus.

The West has until now viewed Belarus and its leadership as a fully controlled satellite and political-military appendix of Russia. Today western strategists are reviewing their attitude towards these myths and stereotypes about Belarus, with Alexander Lukashenko demonstrating a strong commitment to defend the sovereignty and independence of his country through political and military means.

Recently Alexander Lukashenko has reaffirmed his position on the Russian air base in his [press conference of over seven hours that brimmed with anti-Kremlin sentiment](#). According to his statement, Belarus does not need Russian military bases on its territory.

Obviously such a position contradicts [the Kremlin's strategic intentions to transform Belarus into its military outpost](#). This may lead Moscow to activate the crisis scenario posited in the wargaming simulation.

That is why Dr. Phillip Petersen, Vice President for Studies at the Potomac Foundation, suggests that the West now consider how to support independence and sovereignty of Belarus.

He proposes disconnecting Russia from the SWIFT (Society for

Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications) if the Kremlin intervenes in Belarus and undermines its independence. To rejoin the SWIFT, Moscow would need to withdraw its troops from the territory of Belarus and restore its sovereignty.

Only a strong, sovereign and independent Belarus can contribute to regional stability and security and prevent a heated military confrontation between Russia and NATO.

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## **Will Russia occupy Belarus in 2017?**

Recently, the Russian Ministry of Defence disclosed [logistical data of railway traffic](#) to other countries for the upcoming year.

It revealed that the Kremlin is planning to significantly increase the amount of military cargo headed for Belarus.

This may be a sign that Moscow is preparing to redeploy a large number of Russian troops to Belarus in 2017.

A [piece](#) by Belarus Digest predicted that the Kremlin is trying to transform Belarus into a flash point for menacing NATO and Ukraine by deploying its military capabilities on Belarusian territory.

Unfortunately, this prediction is corroborated by the aforementioned logistic data, as well as the fruitlessness of the recent meeting between Alexander Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

# The negotiation agenda: two different angles

On 22 – 23 October 2016 Alexander Lukashenko paid a working visit to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to discuss bilateral economic problems. The lack of official comments on the results of the negotiations in Moscow raises some doubts about its real agenda. Moreover, the current state of affairs demonstrates that the Kremlin is unwilling to compromise and will continue to put pressure on Minsk.

Significant economic problems have been accumulating in Moscow-Minsk relations since the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2014. The list of grievances includes [permanent trade wars and restrictions](#) of Belarusian goods on the Russian market, [the gas price dispute](#) and the incomplete delivery of oil to Belarus from Russia, and the sudden implementation of [controls on the Belarusian-Russian border](#).

However, Alexander Surikov, the Russian ambassador to Belarus, announced shortly before the meeting that the two presidents would not be discussing economic problems. According to him, Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko would focus on political issues in the changing international context. He did not specify which 'changes' were implied.

Nevertheless, it seems that Putin had already set the political agenda for negotiations with Lukashenko during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Peru on 21 November 2016, one day before the meeting in Moscow. He explained why Russia is so alarmed by NATO's expansion and stressed that the 'situation is heating up'.

Without doubt, Putin did discuss the current security situation in the region with his Belarusian counterpart. According to Kremlin strategists, upcoming deployments of four

NATO battalions in Poland and the Baltic states will undermine the strategic stability of the region.

Putin believes that Belarus must participate in Russia's military response to NATO's activities on its Eastern flank

For this reason, Putin believes that Belarus must participate in Russia's military response to NATO's activities on its Eastern flank. Part of this response includes [the large scale 'Zapad / West 2017' military drills](#) taking place on the territory of Belarus and Kaliningrad next year.

## Military drills or occupation?

However, the newly revealed logistical data of Russian military cargo to Belarus illustrate the Kremlin's far-reaching strategic designs. It seems that Moscow is planning to redeploy a large number of Russian troops on the territory of Belarus for purposes other than military drills.

According to these [data](#), the Russian Ministry of Defence plans to send 4,162 railway carriages to Belarus next year. This would be 33 times more traffic than in 2015, and 83 times more traffic than this year. Some more argue that this increase in flow is connected with the 'Zapad/ West' joint strategic military exercises taking place next September.

However, comparing next year's logistical data with the number of railway carriages coming from Russia in 2013, during the previous 'Zapad' military drills, paints a rather different picture.

The Russian Ministry of Defence sent only 200 railway carriages to Belarus that year. Moreover, almost half of the motorised brigade of the Russian Armed Forces (comprising

2,500 troops) took part in the joint military exercises on the territory of Belarus.



In contrast, next year the Russian Ministry of Defence is planning to send 20 times more railway carriages to Belarus than during previous 'Zapad' drills in 2013. What's more, the Kremlin's strategists are not required to publish certain military logistic data in open sources. This is a usual practise. Therefore, to get a more realistic idea of the scale of Russian troops' redeployment to Belarus, the number of railway carriages should be multiplied at least by a factor of 1.5.

This logistical military data indirectly confirms that Russia is going to redeploy a number of troops to Belarus almost equal to the 1st Guards Tank Army of the Western Military District, and not simply participate in regular military drills.

Obviously, the Kremlin does not need this many troops for training purposes. A more likely scenario is that Russia plans to transform Belarus into an outpost for military confrontation with NATO. Specifically, Russia may use Belarusian territory in order to generate security threats and challenges to the Baltic states.

the Kremlin must first set up a strategic military presence on the territory of Belarus

In order to accomplish this, the Kremlin must first set up a strategic military presence on the territory of Belarus. Obviously, if this many Russian troops arrive in Belarus, it will be difficult to send them home later. Without doubt, this is detrimental to the sovereignty and independence of the Belarusian state.

# Implications of the meeting in Moscow

Notably, this Russian military logistical data appeared in open sources one week prior to Lukashenka's visit to Moscow earlier this month, despite the fact that Belarusian military officials had not yet ironed out the details of next year's 'Zapad' drills with their Russian counterparts.

In this regard, the publication of these data can be seen as a tool to put psychological pressure on Minsk in order to bring Belarus into line with the Kremlin.



Simultaneously, the Russian media launched an information campaign dedicated to Belarus immediately following Lukashenka's visit to Moscow. Even certain federal-level Russian TV channels, such as 'Channel One Russia' and 'Zvezda', reported on the topic of Belarus

Some journalists' stories drew parallels with the situation in Ukraine. According to them, the same fate of destabilisation awaits Belarus, as Western intelligence agencies are preparing a colour revolution to overthrow Alexander Lukashenko.

Other stories focused on the growth of nationalist sentiment and 'Russophobia' in Belarusian society, as well as an outburst of right-wing oppositional political movements and parties. 'Zvezda', the TV channel of the Russian Ministry of Defence, warned explicitly that Alexander Lukashenko could be overthrown by Ukrainian provocateurs and so on.

Belarus Digest has written articles outlining a hypothetical [coup scenario in Belarus launched by the Kremlin](#). According to this sequence of events, Russian-backed sabotage groups could operate as Belarusian nationalists or 'Ukrainian

provocateurs'. In another scenario, based on the failed tactics of plotters in Montenegro, Russian agents could also pose as local security forces.

It seems that the Kremlin is preparing Russian public opinion for a serious crisis in Belarusian-Russian relations. The fruitlessness of Alexander Lukashenko's visit to Moscow also signals that Belarus is refusing to become a Russian military outpost in the event of a confrontation between NATO and the West.

In the future, an intensification of tension and an increase in coercive measures by the Kremlin – should Belarus continue to defend its national sovereignty and independence – is possible. This could even entail a coup attempt and destabilisation as an excuse for the Russian military to intervene in Belarus and instal a fully pro-Kremlin regime in Minsk.

Without a doubt, such a pro-Kremlin regime would acquiesce to however many Russian troops the Kremlin desires on Belarusian territory.

*Arseni Sivitski*

*Arseni is the Director of the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies based in Minsk; he is also a military officer in reserve for the Belarusian Armed Forces.*

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## **Lessons from Montenegro: is a coup possible in Belarus?**

On 6 November 2016 Milivoje Katnich, the Chief Special

Prosecutor of Montenegro, gave a statement regarding the failed coup attempt in Podgorica during the Parliamentary elections on 16 October 2016.

According to him, several groups of Russian and Russian-backed Serbian nationalists were behind the coup; they were hoping to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO and the EU.

The fact that the Kremlin was able to plan such an operation in Montenegro leaves no doubts as to its capabilities to launch a similar plot in Belarus. Analysing last year's joint Belarusian and Russian military exercises, which were developed by the Russian General Staff, also arouses suspicions.

## **The case of Montenegro**

Several groups of Russian and Serbian nationalists had planned to open fire on the pro-Russian opposition rally wearing Montenegrin police uniforms. The rally took place in front of the Parliament to protest against Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic. This ploy was intended to provoke massive bloodshed by assaulting the protesters near the Parliament. The plan also included the elimination of the prime minister, calling to mind the situation in Kiev during Maidan in February 2014.

Fortunately, Montenegrin and Serbian security services were able to prevent the coup attempt and arrest several participants. Meanwhile, Belgrade quietly deported several Russians suspected of coordinating the coup after Nikolai Patrushev, the Head of the Russian Security Council, flew to Belgrade on 26 October 2016 in an apparent attempt to diffuse the scandal and evacuate his compatriots.

According to officials in Podgorica, the sabotage groups wanted to destabilise the political situation in the country

and prevent Montenegro from further integrating with the EU and NATO. It is clear that Montenegro, along with other countries in the Balkan region aspiring to draw closer to the EU and NATO, are highly at risk of destabilisation.

## **The Kremlin's networks in Serbia and Belarus**

According to our Serbian sources, pro-Russian forces are carrying out subversive activities in Serbia as well. Unfortunately, it seems that Belarusians are also involved in these plots.

Vencislav Buyich, director of the SEAS Foundation (Belgrade), stated in an interview that he had met with Sergey Lushch, a representative of the pro-Kremlin organisation "Rus molodaya" (Minsk), in Belgrade in Spring 2016. The latter apparently spoke quite openly about his plans to destabilise Serbia.

Specifically, Sergey Lushch spoke of the need to have his own people in every Serbian city with a population of over 20,000 people. The main task of these people and organisations would be to gain the trust of the locals, mostly through civic activities. These activists ought never to outwardly demonstrate their pro-Russian orientation, nor should they speak out publicly against pro-Western developments in the country.

Without a doubt, pro-Kremlin organisations are creating their own network of "sleeping agents"

Without a doubt, pro-Kremlin organisations are creating their own network of "sleeping agents". According to Sergei Lushch, at any given moment they could begin anti-Western uprisings in several countries. Unfortunately, the Kremlin has already proved the efficacy of this technique in Ukraine.

“Rus molodaya” is not a well-known or popular NGO in Belarus. Nevertheless, it does enjoy the support of the Russian Embassy in Minsk as well as “Rossotrudnichestvo”, the Russian Federal Agency responsible for foreign “civilian aid”. Certain Belarusian officials with explicitly pro-Kremlin views participate frequently in their events, one example is [Vadzim Hihin](#), former chief editor of the magazine *Belaruskaja Dumka*, a mouthpiece of the Presidential Administration.

The fact that the Kremlin has managed to involve Belarusians in destabilising activities in Serbia is deeply worrying. This proves that the Kremlin has been working to create a network of “agents” in Belarus as well. Several pro-Russian groups, such as the Cossacks and Orthodox organisations, have indeed become more active since the start of the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

## The plan for Belarus

Unfortunately, like other post-Soviet states, Belarus is a hostage to the Kremlin's perception of international relations as a zero-sum game. It is clear from statements by Aliaksandr Lukashenka that the Belarusian leadership has no intention of normalising relations with the West at the expense of its strategic obligations to Russia or Eurasian integration. Despite this fact, the Kremlin persists in treating any hint of normalisation between the West and Belarus as a threat to its influence.

The Kremlin has also considered the possibility of deploying troops to “stabilise the situation and restore the constitutional order” in Belarus

Some evidence points to the fact that Moscow has already developed a contingency plan for Belarus should it lose influence there. Last year, Belarusian and Russian joint

military drills (“Interaction – 2015” and “Slavonic brotherhood – 2015”) demonstrated that Russia is preparing for a possible destabilisation of the military-political situation in Belarus. The Kremlin has also considered the possibility of deploying troops to “stabilise the situation and restore the constitutional order” in Belarus.

According to the scenario of these military drills, which were developed by the Russian General Staff, illegal irregular armed groups (far right radicals) destabilise the military and political situation in Belarus. They practise capturing critical state and military facilities, eliminating political and military leadership, carrying out terrorist attacks, and provoking protests.

In the scenario, the Belarusian government is unable to stabilise the situation on its own and requests military help from the Kremlin. Moscow decides to send troops in to conduct a joint anti-terrorist operation, prevent unrest, and “restore constitutional order”. Incidentally, the 76th Air Assault Division of the Russian Armed Forces and recently deployed mechanised brigades, which are stationed close to the Belarusian border, are very well suited for such hypothetical anti-terrorist operations.

Obviously, such a scenario is a clear exaggeration of the real internal and external situation in Belarus. Such drills, along with a Kremlin-backed media campaign attempting to convey the possibility of Belarus becoming a “russophobic” state, are seemingly intended to prepare the Russian population for a possible crisis with Belarus. Propaganda featuring similar rhetoric could also be seen before and during the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Such assessments by military and civilian analysts illustrate the Kremlin’s willingness to destabilise Belarus and take advantage of the ensuing disorder in order to project its military power, rather than improving the security situation.

The Montenegrin case also demonstrates how easily the Kremlin can initiate a coup with the help of sabotage groups

The Montenegrin case also demonstrates how easily the Kremlin can initiate a coup with the help of sabotage groups (potentially even disguised as Belarusian nationalists) and subversive tactics. Given the Kremlin's influence on Belarusian security services, the bureaucracy apparatus, and even certain NGOs and oppositional groups, it could certainly pull off such a coup in Belarus.

## Consequences and implications

Without doubt, the ultimate goal of such destabilisation and military power projection would be a regime change resulting in fully pro-Kremlin political leadership in Minsk. Moscow needs to be sure that it has full access to the territory of Belarus in the case of a large-scale military conflict with NATO.

Theoretically, Moscow intends to transform Belarus into a Cold War outpost in order to generate conventional and hybrid threats to NATO member states and Ukraine. This remains difficult to accomplish as long as the Belarusian state is strong and Aliaksandr Lukashenka attempts to maintain neutrality by refusing to host Russian military bases on Belarusian territory.

Belarus needs to expect increasing pressure from the Kremlin, which wants to gain more political and military control in the near future. However, if Aliaksandr Lukashenka resists such pressure, a coup remains a highly likely scenario in Belarus-Russia relations.

The upcoming meeting between Aliaksandr Lukashenka and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in the coming month will be indicative of further developments. Belarus Digest will be monitoring them closely.

*Arseni Sivitski*

*Arseni is the Director of the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies based in Minsk and military officer in reserve of the Belarusian Armed Forces.*

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## **What does a New Cold War mean for Belarus?**

Last week's visit by the Russian Minister of Defence clearly demonstrated the Kremlin's intentions to undermine the image of Belarus as a country with a predictable and neutral military and foreign policy.

The confrontation between NATO and Russia, as a manifestation of the New Cold War, has direct implications for the independence, sovereignty and national security of Belarus.

There is a risk that Russia will manage to transform Belarus into a Cold War outpost in order to generate conventional and hybrid threats to NATO member states and Ukraine. The Kremlin may also destabilise the political and military situation in Belarus if it decides that Aliaksandr Lukashenka is crossing too many red lines.

## **A sudden visit from Shoigu**

Last week Sergey Shoigu, the Russian Minister of Defence, paid an unexpected visit to Minsk to discuss Russian-Belarusian bilateral military cooperation during a joint board of defence ministries; such a meeting usually takes place only once a

year. Nevertheless, the visit was not announced beforehand and seemed to be urgent.

During the meeting, he stated that the US and NATO are increasing their offensive capabilities on the western borders of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. He also detailed NATO's plan to deploy four multinational battalions on its Eastern flank in order to undermine the strategic stability of the region.

According to Shoigu, this means that the Union State has to formulate a joint response. Thus, Russia has already taken "defensive" measures against a possible Western threat, and the Kremlin is trying to persuade Minsk to do the same.

Without doubt, the Kremlin is trying to increase its political and military clout in Belarus. It involves Minsk in a number of different initiatives such as deploying Russian air, land, and missile bases on Belarusian territory. The formation of the joint military organisation of the Union State (by 2018) and the conducting of joint large scale military drills such as 'West'/'Zapad' have helped Moscow undermine Belarus's image as an open and reliable partner with an independent, predictable, and peaceful military policy. This also calls Belarus's intention to behave neutrally in the context of NATO-Russia confrontation into question.

## **Belarus and the region's military balance**



Russia began to increase its military capabilities on the Western strategic direction right after the Crimean annexation and destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine. Moscow has already established the first Guards tank army on the Belarusian

direction and re-deployed the 20th Guards Army to the Ukrainian border to assist in the hybrid war conflict in Donbas.

The Kremlin also plans to form new motorised (mechanised) and tank divisions in the Western military district and one motorised (mechanised) division in the South military district. Moscow is also rearranging the 11th Army Corps in Kaliningrad, providing it with additional facilities to enforce two motorised (mechanised) brigades to division level.

According to official statements, Russia is undertaking these military steps as a defensive response to NATO's increased activity in Central Europe and the Baltic region. The Kremlin will deploy two motorised brigades close to the border with Belarus for this reason as well.

One of these is stationed in Klinty, Bryansk region, 40 km from the Belarusian border, and will be upgraded to a mechanised regiment. The second one is located in Yelnya, Smolensk region, 90 km from the Belarusian border, and will be reinforced to a mechanised division at the beginning of 2017.

Russia's measures are disproportionate and superfluous from the point of view of military balance in the region

It is obvious that Russia's measures are disproportionate and superfluous from the point of view of military balance in the region, especially given that Belarus and Russia are still allies. According to statements of the Belarusian military, Minsk does not believe the deployment of the four NATO battalions in Poland and the Baltic states to be a direct military threat to the security of Belarus.

These steps will not significantly change the current military balance between Belarus and neighbouring NATO states. According to the Global Militarization Index, Belarus remains among the ten most militarised countries in Europe, placing

12th out of a total of 152 countries, leaving Poland (68), Latvia (85), Lithuania (63), and Estonia (25) far behind. From this point of view, Minsk doesn't have any reason to be concerned.

## **Russia as the real source of concern**

If NATO's activities on its Eastern flank do not generate a direct military threat even to Belarus, then the same must be true for Russia as well. Nevertheless, the Kremlin has been exacerbating the military situation in the region since the annexation of Crimea using any decision or move by NATO as a pretext.

Russia has already conducted sudden readiness checks of its armed forces in the Western military district with as many as 100,000 troops, practising large-scale conflicts with NATO on the Baltic and Scandinavian theatres. The fact that Russia has sent 'Iskanders' – nuclear-capable missile systems – to Kaliningrad, and deployed 'Kalibrs' – capable long range missile warships and submarines – to the Baltic Sea support the fear that Russia may use nuclear weapons in a hypothetical conflict with NATO.



This strategy of escalation serves as a tool of pressure and psychological leverage on the EU and NATO; it is meant to undermine the unity and solidarity of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. However, first and foremost this strategy generates security challenges and threats to Russia's neighbours, especially Ukraine and Belarus.

On the other hand, Moscow is generating instability in the countries along its border as a mean of reducing the influence of other world and regional powers in those regions. This is a result of Russia being unable to maintain its influence in the region through economic cooperation and soft power.

## **Is Belarus Russia's next target?**

Obviously, the hardliners behind the destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine and the confrontation with the West perceive the normalisation process of Belarus with the EU and US as a threat to Russia's influence.

For example, Russian military analysts believe that the West will be able to separate Belarus and other Eastern Partnership countries from Russia and draw them into its sphere of influence by the end of this year. Such analysis is problematic, as the normalisation with the West has obvious limits. Moreover, Belarus is not planning to join the EU and NATO or even sign an Association agreement in the foreseeable future.

At the same time, such analysis arms the Kremlin with reasons to put more pressure on Belarus. Moscow may even attempt to destabilise the country if it fails to stop its shift towards the West and China or if it loses its political influence following a regime change.

Belarus Digest will discuss possible scenarios in upcoming articles.

*Arseni Sivitski*

*Arseni is the Director of the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies based in Minsk and military officer in reserve of the Belarusian Armed Forces.*

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# Belarus struggles to control its borders

On 13 October Belarusian border guards received EU-funded special equipment worth €2.5m. This will help Minsk control the Ukrainian border. There is an element of irony in this: although it works to remove borders within the EU, Brussels is helping to construct them in the rest of Europe.

If Belarus succeeds in [sealing off](#) its border with Ukraine, its Russian border will be the only one to remain open. However, despite decades of integration, the status of this border is [precarious](#). In mid-September, the Kremlin closed its border with Belarus for third-nation nationals without any prior notice – thus ruining Minsk's plans of becoming a transit country.

Belarus still has serious problems with the development of adequate border control agencies, as their dependence on foreign aid, as well as allegations of corruption, reveal.

## Why is the EU giving millions to Minsk?

In order to provide the Belarusian border patrol with what it need to [control its border](#), the EU is funding a project called “Strengthening surveillance and bilateral coordination capacity along the common border between Belarus and Ukraine” (SURCAP), implemented by of the International Organisation for Migration.

The EU launched SURCAP in 2012 after a period of disruption in relations with Belarus following the 2010 presidential election in the country. In November 2012, Lukashenka even hinted that without such EU assistance, Minsk would no longer be able to control [illegal migration](#) to the EU.

Was averting such a threat the reason Brussels initiated the SURCAP project? This is unlikely. By the time the Belarusian president had articulated this threat, SURCAP was already a done deal. Moreover, such declarations have never been particularly alarming, given the fact that illegal migration from Belarus to the EU has always been relatively insignificant.

Brussels probably intended to help Ukraine establish control over its borders and thus move it further towards eligibility for EU membership. The [Belarus-Ukrainian border](#) has for years been an issue which Minsk links to Ukraine's need to settle its debts with Belarus.

For the first phase of the project the EU allocated €1.3m  to Belarus in 2012-2014. In the second phase (2014-2016) funding doubled to €2.68m. Thanks to these funds, Belarusian border guards received SUVs, swamp buggies, speed boats and motor boats, quadracycles, motorcycles, and other equipment. This collaboration proves that the interests of Brussels and Minsk coincide in this area and that the Belarusian government is not averse to working with the West on issues of national security.

## The empire strikes back

Although problems with the Ukrainian border are being solved, Minsk is unexpectedly encountering problems from the east. At some point in mid-September, Russia – without any prior announcement – closed its 1,230-km long border with Belarus for all third-country nationals.

They can now cross the Belarus-Russian border in just one place: the southernmost part of Belarus where the borders of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine intersect. This came as an unpleasant surprise for Belarus as many foreigners are accustomed to entering Russia via Belarus.

For many years, persons banned by Russia from entering its territory could circumvent this by first coming to Belarus and then heading to Russia. Minsk and Moscow also failed to coordinate their visa policies, and kept their own lists of unwanted persons and citizens not allowed to go abroad.

As a result, for many years citizens of Belarus and Russia, as well as of third countries, used the Belarus-Russian border to enter or escape the two countries. The Kremlin put up with this despite the fact that Russia's borders have become increasingly closed since the mid-2000s.

So why did Moscow decide to close the border with Belarus now? There are good reasons to believe that this was a reprimand for Minsk. In July, Reuters reported a roughly 40 per cent decrease in Russia's oil supplies to Belarus as a punishment for Minsk's overly friendly gestures toward the West: the Kremlin has many other tools to put pressure on Minsk.

Another detail seems to prove that this is the real reason for the border closure rather than, for example, a response to the [smuggling of sanctioned goods](#) to Russia via Belarus. Russia continues to let cargo trucks cross the border unimpeded; only the movement of individuals is controlled.

## Large-scale smuggling



The Belarusian border control system struggles with a number of internal problems as well. On 26 July, President Lukashenka

publicly expressed his dissatisfaction with the work of the State Border Committee. He emphasised that it was already the third time in 2016 that he had addressed the activities of border control agencies saying that they cause “not worry but deep unhappiness.”

Although he did not elaborate further, corruption and large-scale smuggling might be what Lukashenka had in mind. There are more and more examples of this. Thus, on 21 October Polish customs officials discovered 356,000 packets of [cigarettes smuggled](#) from Belarus in a cargo train. If sold at market price in the EU, they would cost \$1.2m. In Belarus that quantity could cost as little as \$72,000.

This is not the first time Polish authorities have apprehended this sort of [illegal cargo](#); the problem has existed since the early 2010s. For instance, in July Polish authorities in Terespol confiscated two loads of cigarettes smuggled from Belarus in cargo trains with a total market value of more than \$1.2m. Evidently, somebody is reaping [huge profits](#). More conspicuously, it is impossible to smuggle such large quantities of cigarettes in this way without the collusion of border control officials.

## Problems despite investment

Such problems present a paradox. The social prestige of border control agencies is high: even Lukashenka's sons have served on the border.

In material terms, Belarusian border control agencies belong to the most prestigious and developed government agencies in the country. Unlike other security agencies, they regularly receive up-to-date equipment. This comes not only in the form of foreign technical aid: in the late 2000s, the Belarusian government even purchased four French helicopters Ecureuil AS 355 NP for border guards. This was an unprecedented deal, as

Minsk usually procures sophisticated hardware for its security agencies only from Russia.

Nevertheless, the Belarusian government struggles to [maintain control](#) over its hundreds of kilometres of borders. Over the past two decades it had to start patrolling borders which had not previously existed – with the exception of the Belarus-Polish border inherited from Soviet times.

In addition, Minsk has made efforts to avoid the harsh border control measures of Soviet times, when 30-km border zones, a highly militarised system, the subordination of border guards to the KGB, etc. were the norm. The Belarusian government has succeeded in overcoming many of these residues of the past. Constructing a more efficient system takes time as well as trial and error.

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## **Will Minsk revive the “post-Soviet NATO” at the behest of the Kremlin?**

On 14 October, Belarus became the chair of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Taking over the chairmanship, Alexander Lukashenka stated that the CSTO needs to become “serious” in order to force the West to finally recognise the Russian-dominated organisation.

On the surface, Lukashenka promises to help bring about Moscow's dream of making the CSTO “a post-Soviet NATO.” This militant rhetoric seems to confirm the opinion of Lithuanian foreign minister Linas Linkevičius that Belarus functions as “one whole” with Russia.

The facts of Belarusian membership to the CSTO, however, point to a different reality. The CSTO never mattered very much to Minsk, and probably matters even less now. Unfortunately, the Belarusian government has trouble convincing its neighbours that it is not playing Putin's game.

## Lukashenka and the CSTO

At the recent CSTO summit in Yerevan, Lukashenka criticised the CSTO for its passivity, and demanded more ambitious plans. Not a single one of his counterparts supported this line however, giving the impression of a one man show.

This was not the first time Lukashenka lashed out at the CSTO. For instance, in an April 2015 meeting he insisted to the CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha that the Organisation “should not become another phantom.” In May 2013, Lukashenka refused to attend an informal CSTO summit in Bishkek.

Despite this criticism, the Belarusian government has done little to strengthen the CSTO. For instance, this year Minsk renewed its prohibition on deployment of Belarusian troops abroad in its national military doctrine.

Minsk [preferred the CSTO](#) as it was before 2009, i.e., a political project without military obligations. In 2009, it established the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces. These have never been deployed – despite the existence of certain situations in which they could hypothetically have been. In 2011, the Belarusian [leader proposed](#) using the CSTO Collective forces to quell “Arab spring” style uprisings in post-Soviet nations. Nothing came of it.

After a couple of years, Minsk began to [fear Moscow](#), with its concept of Russkiy Mir (the Russian World: where Moscow insists on its right to maintain its interests), no less than Western-backed colour revolutions. And although Lukashenka

speaks of strengthening the CSTO, Minsk now has few reasons to really want this.

## Two reasons for Minsk not to strengthen the CSTO

At present, the CSTO effectively plays two roles. Belarus is not happy with either of them. Firstly, it facilitates links between post-Soviet countries and guarantees favourable conditions in purchasing weapons from Russia.

Yet most relations between post-Soviet nations already  develop on a bilateral basis. As a result, Belarus boasts more military cooperation with certain non-CSTO members (like Azerbaijan or Ukraine) than with some of its CSTO partners.

Moreover, Russian arms supplies have proven scarce and linked with undesirable conditions from Russia. Thus, Minsk had to wrangle significantly to obtain *Tor-M2* surface-to-air missile systems, as Moscow was apparently trying to make their delivery contingent upon Belarus agreeing to host a Russian air base.

The second role of the CSTO concerns Moscow's use of the organisation to make some of its unilateral operations seem multilateral, and thus less intrusive. For instance, the Russian base in Kyrgyzstan is formally linked to the CSTO.

Had Belarus not refused to host the Russian air base last year, the Kremlin might have tried similar tactics on Minsk: making its unilateral project "quasi-multilateral". Experts hinted at this probability after the [Kremlin's plan](#) for a Russian base in Belarus failed. [Alyaksandr Shpakouski](#), a political analyst known for his access to Belarusian government sources, then claimed that if Moscow and Minsk were to return to the idea of the Russian air base, it would no

longer be a “Russian airbase” but rather some other arrangement – such as a base linked to the Union State of Belarus and Russia.

The Kremlin could easily make use of the proven method of putting a military facility under the auspices of the CSTO. This is one more reason for the Belarusian government to keep the organisation at arm's length, lest Moscow take advantage of it to insert its troops inside the country.

## **Few have noticed Minsk's independent policy...**

Politicians and the media frequently cite Belarusian membership in the CSTO, along with similar arrangements with Russia, as evidence that the emerging Belarusian neutrality is nothing more than an illusion. In recent months, several government officials in neighbouring countries repeatedly dismissed Minsk's attempts to not take sides.

For example, Lithuanian foreign minister Linkevičius, speaking at NATO's Warsaw summit on 8 July, insisted that “Belarus should be perceived as one whole with Russia. Belarus has made its own decisions on several isolated issues, yet our perception has not changed.”

On 19 August, Commander of the Ukrainian Navy Ihor Voronchenko issued a gloomy warning to the Belarusian government. According to him, “Everything is clear with Belarus. Lukashenka tries to satisfy all sides. But such games end badly. If he allows Russian [*to enter Ukraine*] via Belarus, he will pay dearly.” He further implied that [Belarus cooperates](#) with Russia in its attempt to surround Ukraine.

Given the efforts Belarusian officials have undertaken to emphasise the country's refusal to support the Kremlin's

policies on Ukraine, this means Minsk has achieved little in persuading its neighbours of its independent foreign policy.

## ... except Moscow

The Belarusian government keeps trying. Its officials – ranging from the president to deputy foreign ministers and ambassadors – incessantly reiterate that they do not consider the additional NATO troops deployed in the region a threat to Belarus.

✘ They are also seeking more channels to get their message through. On 20 September Belarusian foreign minister [Uladzimir Makei](#) met with the US deputy assistant secretary of defence Michael Carpenter. The Foreign Ministry reported that they discussed the facilitation of “direct dialogue between military agencies of the two countries.”

On 11-13 October Minsk hosted Ukrainian inspectors, who visited one of the most combat-ready units of the Belarusian army, the 38th Air Assault Brigade, on the [Ukrainian border](#) in Brest. The inspectors also verified an unspecified region of Belarus and confirmed the absence of un-notified military activities.

Unlike certain NATO countries and Ukraine, Russia does notice such gestures and reacts accordingly. The Moscow-based daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* wrote about the direct link between the recent dispute between Minsk and Moscow over natural gas payments and Moscow's statement that “Belarusian leadership has stopped calling NATO a monster to intimidate the local population.”

To sum up, the moribund CSTO, like similar organisations, provides Minsk with an opportunity to demonstrate that it cares about Russian sensitivities without making much sacrifice. However, these manoeuvres do cause some Western and

neighbouring countries to dismiss the autonomy of Belarus's foreign policy. In doing so, they miss the substance of Belarusian policy by paying too much attention to loud words.

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## **Thwarting plans for a Russian airbase, Minsk strengthens its air force**

On 1 October the investigative platform *Bellingcat* reported that Russia has withdrawn its fighter jets from Belarus. After analysing satellite images, it found no Russian planes on the Baranavichy airbase. Bellingcat also found that they had not been redeployed to any other airfield in Belarus.

This report clarifies why Russia has finally agreed to sell Minsk new fighter jets. In mid-September, a report leaked from the Belarusian parliament revealed that Minsk had included the cost of state-of-the-art Russian fighter jets in the next year's national budget.

The Belarusian government has had a long standing dispute with the Kremlin on how best to secure the Belarusian segment of the Single Air Defence System should the Belarusian Air Force not have enough planes. In the end, Minsk prevailed. It will apparently receive new planes for the Belarusian army rather than a [Russian air base](#).

# Getting Putin's foot out of the door?

In 2013-2015, Moscow tried to persuade Belarus to host a Russian [air base](#). It did have reasonable arguments: the Belarusian Air Force has had difficulties meeting its obligations to the [Single Air Defence System](#) of Belarus and Russia. Minsk has decommissioned numerous planes and the technical condition of the remaining aircraft has deteriorated.

The Kremlin, however, has been contributing to this situation for years by denying Minsk newer planes. At one point, a Russian firm even transported several newer second-hand Su-30MKI planes to Baranavichy for storage. Minsk was sure it would be able to buy them. [Unfortunately](#), Moscow decided to sell them elsewhere.

In 2013, the Kremlin launched a [pressure campaign](#) to force Belarus to host a Russian air base. What's more, in December 2013, Russia deployed four of its Su-27SM planes to Baranavichy. Minsk had apparently requested them in order to guarantee the security of the 2014 [Ice Hockey World Championship](#) in Belarus. However, the planes remained there after the event and their otherwise inexplicable presence seemed to be a sign of the Kremlin getting its foot in the Belarusian door.

However, facing resistance from Minsk, Russia's plans failed at the end of last year and Belarus began to strengthen its air force. Seeing [no prospects](#) for a base, Russia eventually withdrew its planes from Baranavichy last May.

# Minsk buys the latest aircraft

In recent years the Belarusian government appears to have [reconciled](#) itself with the national army's downshifting in air force capacity. This mind-set is also reflected in official rhetoric. Belarusian military officials have criticised the sophisticated yet out-dated Soviet-era planes it possesses already as unreliable.



According to them, the Russian-manufactured Yak-130 could replace almost all types of combat aircraft Belarus inherited from the Soviet Union. [They downplay](#) the fact that the Yak-130 is only suitable as a trainer and light ground-attack aircraft.

Minsk has started stocking up on this type of Russian aircraft. In mid-September, Belarus was delivered its fifth Yak-130. This was the first plane the Belarusian army received from its second contract with the Russian *Irkut* corporation concluded on 26 August 2015.

Only this year did Belarusian officials cautiously begin to discuss their plans to buy something more sophisticated than the Yak-130. Belarus initiated talks with Russia on the purchase of Su-30 fighter jets over the coming years. Despite not being a top-of-the-line plane, the Su-30 nevertheless possesses more advanced capacities than the Yak-130. These prospects, however, were uncertain for Minsk.

But then the media published a bombshell. On 15 September, a discussion in the Belarusian parliament disclosed plans to purchase four Su-35, the most modern Russian fighter jet. The parliament held debates on how to fit their cost into the

national budget.

Tut.by, the largest Belarusian internet portal, reported that although the 2017 budget provided for allocations to procure military equipment, this was not enough money for Su-35s. Deputy minister of finance Yury Seliverstau insisted that the government could make additional purchases – meaning Su-35s – only if it could find additional sources of revenue

## At what price?

✘ Seliverstau requested that parliamentarians not reveal the sums involved in the possible Su-35 deal. Yet this remains the most intriguing detail. On one hand, these planes – regarded as not only the best of Russian industry but also among the best in the world – would significantly boost the capabilities of the [Belarusian military](#). On the other, if Russia demands significant payments in real money for the aircraft, the deal begins to appear more questionable.

After all, Minsk's planes do not just contribute to the defence of Belarus itself. They will also guard the Belarusian segment of the Single Air Defence System of Belarus and Russia. Hence, the fact that Russia could be profiting by selling Belarus planes which provide security for Moscow does not seem so cordial. A Russian ally paying in real money would look especially odd given similar deals between Russia and more distant states. For instance, Moscow sold Malaysia modern aircraft and received a large part of the payment in palm oil.

Minsk, certainly, has few options but to buy the Russian planes – which are undoubtedly excellent aircraft. The Belarusian air force suffers from a lack of new planes: over the last two decades it has bought only L-39 trainers, Yak-130 trainers, and light ground-support aircraft.

Last year, Belarus also completed the modernisation of ten

MiG-29 fighter jets. Nevertheless, without new planes the national army would soon be unable to guard the sky. And because it guards not only the Belarusian sky but also participates in the [Single Air Defence System](#) with Russia, this deficiency would become a major issue in bilateral relations.

## Modernisation: Helicopters next

Meanwhile, Minsk is moving to improve not only its fighter jets but other parts of its air force as well. On 6 September the Belarusian 558th Aircraft Repair Plant and the Russian Firm Vertolety Rossii signed a contract on repairing certain components of the Mi-24 attack helicopters deployed by the Belarusian military. Besides [purchasing Mi-8MTV-5 transport helicopters from Russia](#), this has become the most significant action so far taken to bolster the helicopter fleet of the Belarusian army.

Moreover, Belarus has decommissioned all of its Su-24  bombers and apparently plans to decommission its Su-25 close air support aircraft. This leaves the Belarusian army with Mi-24 attack helicopters as its strongest airborne source of firepower on the battlefield. Importantly, this is the chopper most suitable for deployment against insurgent activities such as those in Eastern Ukraine and which Minsk fears most.

To summarise, in developing its air force, the Belarusian government is pursuing two [different goals](#) requiring different equipment. The first is to fulfil its obligations as part of the Single Air Defence System while avoiding the [deployment](#) of Russian combat units on Belarusian soil. For this, Minsk needs modern fighter jets such as the Su-30 or Su-35.

The second goal is to prepare for [possible contingencies](#) of the kind Ukraine faced in its eastern regions. This requires both transport and means of close air-support (provided by Mi-8 and Mi-24 helicopters, correspondingly). Minsk procurement of military equipment seems to take both goals into account.

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## **Does Belarus have its own missile programme?**

On 26 September Belarusian defence minister Andrei Raukou met with Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev. Given the current security concerns of Baku, it's possible that Belarus may have rushed to offer it some means to help neutralise the *Iskander* missiles recently acquired by Azerbaijan's nemesis, Armenia.

Can Azerbaijan get systems from Belarus similar to those acquired from Russia by Armenia? Most recently, in August, the Russian media reiterated previously voiced suspicions of Belarus' collaboration with Ukrainian firms to produce its own tactical ballistic missile system, a counterpart to *Iskander*.

Minsk has little money to advance such a missile project alone. So it's plausible that Minsk rushed to not only help Baku but also to gain assistance from Baku in funding the new weapons. As of now, Belarus has succeeded in establishing several partnerships with various countries to design and produce sophisticated equipment which increase its autonomy in [military terms](#).

# Too many coincidences

Facing problems with procuring equipment from Russia, Minsk has already been struggling for some years to find [other options](#). Minsk has succeeded in expanding the array of military equipment it produces by having partnered with other countries: initially Ukraine and China.

Thus, this autumn the Ukrainian *Pavlohrad Chemical Plant* is planning to test its new product, *Hrim-2*, a tactical ballistic missile system. An undisclosed foreign customer financed its development. Russian experts, such as Alexander Khramchikhin and chief editor of the *Eksport vooruzhenii* review Andrei Frolov, name Belarus alongside countries such as Saudi Arabia or Pakistan as possible sources of funding. They emphasise, however, that Minsk is not the prime candidate for this role.

Yet they neglect some facts in their analysis. First of  all, the timing of the development of the *Hrim* system and the actions and statements of Belarusian officials. Ukrainian designers revealed that the funding for *Hrim* came from abroad just over two years ago, around the second half of 2014.

Prior to that, in April 2014 Belarusian president Lukashenka announced that Belarus would cooperate with Ukraine to design new weapons. Other official statements followed in the same vein: by September 2014 the task had been defined as designing and manufacturing firepower means, never previously produced by Belarus. Minsk sent delegations to centres of the Ukrainian defence industry, as well as to the Dnipropetrovs'k region, the location of the enterprises designing *Hrim*.

Ukraine inherited the Soviet rocket and missile development and production centre. So, the Belarusian leadership apparently hoped for quick results from their cooperation with Ukraine.

In February 2015 Chairman of the Belarusian State Military

Industrial Committee, Siarhei Hurulyou, announced that a new system would be demonstrated at the 9 May military parade which would provide the Belarusian army with additional firepower. Many media outlets, such as Russian *Svobodnaya Pressa*, had few doubts that Minsk would demonstrate an [analogue of the Russian Iskander](#), a tactical ballistic missile.

The analysts referred to more or less explicit statements made by Lukashenka – beginning with his 2008 interview for the Wall Street Journal, in which he announced his intent to design and produce his “[own Iskanders](#).” But then they had to review their analyses due to the 2015 Victory Day Parade in Minsk in which the nation revealed a new system – although of a less ambitious kind – *Palanez*, a multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS).

Interestingly, the Ukrainian firms designing *Hrim* complained that the Ukrainian national space agency interfered with their design and did not allow it to be completed more rapidly. In any case, this was another coincidence between the problems of Ukrainian designers and the failure of Minsk to unveil the system it had hinted at.

☒ At the time analysts accepted the *Palanez* as the weapons promised by the Belarusian leadership and stopped discussing Minsk's plans of developing a ballistic missile. This was the case until this summer, when the theme of possible Belarusian cooperation with Ukraine on developing a tactical ballistic missile resurfaced after an anonymous foreign customer supported the Ukrainian project.

## Belarus can afford it

The analysts who doubt that Belarus could be involved in the *Hrim* project emphasise that Minsk barely has enough money to put forward for such a project. The Belarusian government has

always spent little on military hardware. Now its already meagre military budget has even less money remaining after Minsk financed the *Palanez* MLRS, purchased aircraft and helicopters and modernised older equipment in its air force and air defence.

However, Minsk could have contributed something other than money to the Ukrainian *Hrim* project. First of all the chassis of the *Minsk Wheeled Tractors Plant (MZKT)* on which many Soviet- and Russian-produced missile systems were installed. Military expert Andrei Frolov in his commentaries for Russian media also pointed out that pictures of *Hrim* seem to show *MZKT* chassis.

The future *Hrim* could be not only driven on Belarusian chassis but it could also get its guidance system from Belarus. Belarusian firms are known to produce significant components of guidance systems for the Russian *Iskander* tactical ballistic missile systems.

Last but not least, if Belarus did indeed finance the Ukrainian project, it could have done so in partnership. Minsk frequently proposes undertaking joint projects with other governments in third countries. Belarusian officials reiterated such proposals to [Saudi Arabia](#) in recent years, yet Minsk had already tried to obtain Saudi financing for Belarusian projects in Sudan as early as the beginning of the 2000s.

✘ Belarus also launched [intensive cooperation](#) of a mostly undisclosed nature with Pakistan in 2014. Moreover, since the very beginning of this cooperation Minsk has been working with Pakistani defence officials, including the minister in charge of defence industry, Rana Tanveer Hossein. Interestingly, on 26 September, after meeting with the Belarusian defence minister, Azerbaijani leader Aliyev received Hossein as well. This detail sets the Baku news in an even more striking context.

# Belarus-Ukrainian cooperating along proven lines?

While some experts, such as the Russian defence blog *BMPD*, have insisted that Saudi Arabia is financing *Hrim*, details known about the deal cast doubt on this. First of all, according to the conditions of the August deal with an unrevealed foreign customer, the Ukrainians will retain the intellectual property rights for the system. That is not Saudi-style business. In a similar deal with the Ukrainian aircraft design and manufacturing firm *Antonov*, Saudi Arabia financed the designing of the *An-132* aircraft on the condition that all intellectual rights for the plane remained with Saudi Arabia.

The August deal more closely resembles the conditions on which Minsk has previously dealt with Kyiv. When [cooperating with Ukraine](#) on anti-tank weapons for example, Belarusian firms shared the intellectual property rights for the systems.

Moreover, Belarus has in recent years negotiated with the Ukrainian *Motor Sich* corporation to launch the production of the Ukrainian *R95-300* turbofan engine at a [Motor Sich-owned](#) factory in the Belarusian city of Orsha. This engine is used in cruise missiles. Minsk reportedly wishes to design its own cruise missile named *Aist*. This seems strange because Belarus has no platforms to launch this type of missile.

Everything becomes clear however if it is assumed that the development of *Aist* is linked to the *Hrim* project. Ukrainian designers have stated that the *Hrim* system would be capable of launching both tactical ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. That would be a feature which puts the Ukrainian-designed *Hrim* on a par with Russian *Iskander*.

In sum, there are multiple indications that Minsk is working

on strengthening its tactical missile capacities. The Belarusian government is pursuing the aim of achieving at least [relative autonomy](#) in this field. However, a country as small as Belarus can do this only by [teaming up](#) with other nations.

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## **Belarus is preparing for a Donbass-like hybrid war conflict**

On 14-20 September 2016 the Belarusian Armed Forces conducted large-scale military drills.

Despite the fact that these military exercises were planned, they demonstrate a significant shift in security policy as Minsk increasingly takes into consideration possible risks and challenges from Russia.

It seems that the Belarusian Armed Forces are preparing for a possible Donbass-like hybrid conflict in light of increasing pressure from the Kremlin.

## **Full-spectrum pressure from the Kremlin**

As a matter of fact, Belarus is in a position of uncertainty in regards to what to expect from Russia. Permanent [trade wars](#) between Belarus and Russia have become the new normal since the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Moreover, there is also a

possibility of gas and oil wars because there is [still no consensus](#) on a new agreement. This is why Minsk has voiced profound dissatisfaction with the efforts of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Union State.

These sore spots in Belarus-Russia relations have given reason for the Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka to heavily criticise various integration programmes with Russia. He has also expressed his concerns about certain unfriendly actions as “pressure that he would not tolerate”.

What's more, at the beginning of this year Kremlin decided to deploy two mechanised brigades not far from the Belarus-Russia border. One of them is stationed in Klinttsy, Briansk region, 40 km from the Belarusian border and will be upgraded to a mechanised regiment. The other one is located in Yelnya, Smolensk region, 90 km from the Belarusian border, and will be reinforced to a mechanised division at the beginning of 2017. Because this will be the first time the Kremlin deploys mechanised formations directed towards Belarus, it is necessary to speak about full-spectrum pressure on Belarus, not only economic, but political and military as well.

## **New drills reflect the military-political situation in the European region**

Underlying the general framework of these recent national military drills are special operations to stabilise the situation in potential crisis areas. Some 7,500 troops, 60 battle tanks, 220 armoured combat vehicles, and 50 artillery pieces, mortars and multiple launch rocket systems were part of these exercises. Territorial defence and Border guard forces, as well as the Ministry of Interior and Emergencies Ministry also joined them.

Thus, the Belarusian Armed Forces brought a very large number of military equipment to the firing range. As a matter of fact, roughly the same amount of military hardware was used in the [“West” \(“Zapad”\)](#) joint strategic exercises with Russia in 2013 (350 armoured vehicles, including 70 tanks, over 50 artillery pieces and multiple rocket launcher systems).

According to statements by [Alieh Bielakonieŭ](#), the Head of the Belarusian Armed Forces General Staff, military officials took the new military-political situation in the European region into consideration, as well as the experience of new military conflicts, which have significantly changed the nature of war. Recently Belarus has adopted a [new Military doctrine](#) which pays a lot of attention to countering hybrid warfare.

Therefore, the Belarusian Armed Forces are now conducting exercises in preventing hybrid conflicts in order to put the basic provisions of the new Military doctrine into practise. Since the Ukraine-Russia conflict they have been conducting drills which include elements of a Donbass-like hybrid scenario. Recent military exercises were completely dedicated to hybrid warfare.

## **Donbass-like hybrid scenario**

According to this scenario Belarusian military strategists simulated a situation in which a hypothetical foreign adversary provoked an internal armed conflict in the country with the help of reconnaissance and sabotage groups and illegal armed formations. Incidentally, the new Military doctrine of Belarus doesn't mention “hybrid conflict”, favouring the term “internal armed conflict.”

The Belarusian Armed Forces have been practising neutralising illegal armed groups, securing and releasing captured critical infrastructure objects, and neutralising separatist groups

backed from abroad. Assigned tasks also included establishing temporary checkpoints on the state border and main road routes and conducting surveillance along the border. Without doubt such measures remain necessary only on the Belarus-Russia border due to the absence of any border control, in contrast with the NATO countries and Ukraine.

This was the first time that military drills were held over the entire territory of Belarus: officials achieved a uniform distribution of forces in the Western and Eastern parts of the country. What's more, the General Staff emphasised that the main idea behind the exercises was to ensure Belarus is capable of maintaining independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity with its own forces.

It also differs from previous military exercises before the Ukrainian crises (for example "West"/ "Zapad" in 2009 and 2013 or "[Shield of the Union](#)" in 2011 and 2015) when Belarus and Russia formed the Regional army group in order to defend Belarus from possible attacks from the West.

## **Blockage and mopping-up, liberating an airfield, securing a border**

Many elements of the recent military drills bear a strong resemblance to the actions of the so called DNR and LNR separatist groups in Eastern Ukraine. At the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine hybrid conflict, separatists under the command of Igor Strelkov (Girkin) successfully seized towns and cities such as Slavyansk. They captured important infrastructure objects including the railway stations Debaltsevo and Avdiyivka and Donetsk airport. They crossed the Russia-Ukraine border and received a military support from Russia without any problems. It seems that Belarusian military strategists are

taking this experience into consideration.

For example, one element of the recent military exercises  included the creation of a humanitarian corridor for civilian residents from a town captured by illegal armed groups.

According to this scenario, illegal armed groups capture a town in order to persuade the civilian population to side with them. Representatives of the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Internal Affairs had to negotiate the withdrawal of the civilian population from the dangerous perimeter. And in case the separatists did not agree with the terms of surrender – the 19th mechanised brigade had to block and mop up the town.

The 120th mechanised brigade was ordered to establish checkpoints and secure the state border from infiltration and sabotage by illegal armed groups. The 6th mechanised brigade conducted several reconnaissance raids in order to destroy them.

The 103th special operation forces brigade had to block and release an airfield captured by illegal armed groups. The 38th special operation forces brigade was in charge of securing and defending critical oil infrastructure objects from sabotage groups.

## **Message to the Kremlin**

All these formations of the Belarusian Armed Forces were assisted by heavy artillery and Air Forces, which indicates that they were preparing for confrontation with illegal armed formations and separatist groups backed by the armed forces of a hypothetical foreign state.

The same situation can be seen in Donbass where the illegal armed formations DNR and LNR are operating with the military support of at least 15 tactical battalion battle groups from

the Russian Armed Forces.

By conducting such military drills Minsk is expressing its concerns over the economic, political and military pressure on Belarus from Russia and demonstrating its readiness for any scenario, including a coercive one.

*Arseni Sivitski*

*Arseni is the Director of the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies based in Minsk and military officer in reserve of the Belarusian Armed Forces.*

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## **Brothers in arms: Russia in Belarus's new military doctrine**

On 20 July 2016 Belarus's new military doctrine came into force. Although there was lively discussion about the contents of the new doctrine earlier this year, its text was not then public.

Early speculation focused on officials' [references to new threats](#) including "hybrid warfare." Even Jane's Defence Weekly, a highly credible source of military information and analysis, interpreted this as a reference to Russia.

However, contrary to the expectations of some Western commentators, the new doctrine consolidates Belarus's alliance with Russia and its obligations under the Collective Security Treaty.

Although the doctrine proceeds from the claim “that no one state (or coalition of states) presents itself to Belarus as an adversary,” we can infer that the main threats identified are NATO expansion and prospective regime change in Belarus.

The two may go hand-in-hand, and we should understand references to hybrid war (the term itself does not appear in the text of the doctrine) – an admixture of traditional and non-traditional methods – in this context.

There is no significant change about the origins of security threats in the new doctrine; the claimed expansion of “the spectrum of sources of military threat” is a vague formulation that signifies little. It is the nature of the threats that is perceived differently from in the past.

As [Stanislaŭ Zaś](#), State Secretary of the Security Council, told CTV in January: “emphasis ... is more on information warfare. This is one of the components of present-day hostilities.”

## **A more complicated security environment**

the original military doctrine of 1992 advocated “armed neutrality”

This is Belarus’s third such doctrine, and it complements the military doctrine of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Sources at the time said that the original military doctrine of 1992 advocated “armed neutrality,” the policy of not participating in any alliance during wartime. Belarus under Lukashenka never seriously contemplated armed neutrality, despite occasional remarks that Belarus will not commit troops outside its borders.

The doctrine adopted in 2002 was more compatible with Belarus's membership since 1994 of a military alliance (the Collective Security Treaty Organisation), and its ostensible integration into a Union State with Russia. However, the European security environment changed significantly after the previous version came into force.

These changes necessitated a new doctrine. First, NATO's 2004 enlargement brought the three Baltic states – two of which have borders with Belarus – into its fold. Secondly, Belarus's leaders watched the "colour revolutions" in former Soviet states nervously.

the doctrine does not solely respond to recent events in Ukraine

Accordingly, work on the new doctrine was announced long before the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, the doctrine does not solely respond to recent events in Ukraine. On the other hand, regional instability gave impetus to work on the doctrine. References to "illegal armed groups," "non-state subjects," and "private military formations" in its pages are reactions to events in the Middle East as well as Ukraine.

## **The Russian threat**

This does not mean no threat is perceived as originating from Russia. Despite tight military cooperation between the two states, Belarus's military would be acting responsibly if it considers the possibility of Russian moves against Belarus.

Russia's persistent refusal to provide Belarus with requested military equipment is consistent with efforts to minimise Belarus's autonomy

The Belarusians do not know what discussions go on in the

Kremlin; for example, details of Russia's operation in Crimea [were probably not shared](#) with Belarus. Russia's persistent refusal to provide Belarus with requested military equipment is consistent with efforts to minimise Belarus's autonomy, and has left Belarus dependent on Soviet-era stock.

Moreover, in the event of a war between NATO member states and Russia, a land corridor between Russia and the semi-enclave of Kaliningrad becomes a vital strategic interest to Russia. Russia will want to ensure reliable supply lines to its military facilities in Kaliningrad. Belarus needs to think through the implications of such a conflict.

Security policy inevitably demands speculation about threats. As [Viktar Šadurski](#), Dean of the International Relations faculty at the Belarusian State University, remarked recently: "I don't think NATO is a direct threat to Belarus, but I could not think that Russia was a direct threat to Ukraine a few years ago."

## Whose hybrid war?

Certain Western analysts mistakenly think that all references to "hybrid warfare" imply Russia. For sure, the term hybrid warfare gained currency in the Western press against the backdrop of Ukraine, which link the concept to Russia.

However, hybrid warfare has more pedigree than this acknowledges. Debates in military circles date to at least the early 2000s. Russia has used cyber warfare and proxies in Ukraine, and is as capable (if not more so) than Western states of bringing about regime change in Belarus. However, in the Russian literature, which the Belarusian elites read, references to hybrid warfare methods are shorthand for perceived US-led tactics to bring about regime change. Hybrid warfare thus refers to the "colour revolutions" that brought down governments in the mid-2000s.

A little ambiguity in the doctrine – it does not name an enemy – serves Belarus well in this respect

A little ambiguity in the doctrine – it does not name an enemy – serves Belarus well in this respect. It is a mistake, though, to think that Belarus is doing anything other than consolidating its military alliance with Russia. The process of consolidation includes establishing the limits of alliance commitments, and the doctrine is part of a process of ongoing negotiations with Russia.

The focus on NATO appears elsewhere in the doctrine. Although declaring that any military-political alliances ambitions for “global functions” threaten world order, this is primarily a reaction to mission creep within NATO. The relevant Article confirms this by invoking as its subject military-political organisations “to which Belarus does not belong.” Meanwhile, Belarus strives “to strengthen the status of the CSTO in the international arena.”

## The Union State framework

Earlier this year Russian sources announced revisions to the military doctrine of the Union State. This will take into account and nest with both Belarus and Russia’s (December 2014) new doctrines. Both states’ national doctrines underscore the concept of strategic deterrence or containment (*strategicheskoe sderzhivanie*), which suggests some coordination. Indeed, Andras Racz at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs says it would be “scandalous” if Russia was not consulted on the draft.

Belarus will continue to trust Russia knowing it cannot defend itself against an attack by its ally. Russia spends more of its GDP on defence than any other major state; 5.42% in 2015 according to the International Institute of Strategic Studies’ annual *Military Balance*. In absolute terms this is far less

than the USA spends (3.27% of GDP), but a comparison of total expenditure does not tell us very much of interest; the USA's distant location limits the direct military threat.

## No choice?

The leadership in Belarus thinks it has no alternative to alliance with Russia, because Russia would not consent to Belarus's neutrality. The coming-into-force of an integrated air defence system covering Belarus and Russia reminds us that a break with Russia is neither imminent nor likely in the medium term.

The revised military doctrine is part of a process of consolidation and negotiation of the two states' alliance, and reflects a security environment that greatly changed over the past fifteen years.

*Paul Hansbury*

*Paul has degrees from the University of London and the University of Oxford. He is currently a doctoral candidate in International Relations, also at the University of Oxford.*

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## **Belarus's New Military Doctrine: What's the Message?**

On 20 July 2016 Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka approved the final version of the new Military Doctrine of Belarus. The previous version had been adopted in 2002 and has obviously outlived its usefulness in light of the dramatic changes in the global and regional security architecture.

The Russia-Ukraine hybrid conflict and a new “Cold war” contributed greatly to the development of this document. It now takes into consideration possible challenges and threats not only from the West, but from Russia as well.

## **Criticism from allies**

The whole process of adopting the doctrine took several months, starting at the beginning of April, when the project was approved by the House of Representatives (Lower Chamber) after the first reading.

the doctrine undermines Belarus’s obligations and the collective defence principles in the framework of the CSTO

It seems that one of the reasons the process took so long was a campaign of heavy criticism coming from Armenia. The Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia, Shavarsh Kocharyan, unexpectedly claimed that the new Military Doctrine of Belarus compromises the entire Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). It forbids the Belarus Armed Forces to take part in military operations abroad and therefore undermines Belarus’s obligations and the collective defence principles in the framework of the CSTO.

Some analysts suspect the Kremlin's hand in such statements. Moscow has decided to use its ally Armenia to send a message to officials in Minsk about its concerns regarding the new Military Doctrine as well as the normalisation process with the West.

In fact, the First Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Defence and Security, Frants Klintsevich, has interpreted the adoption of a new Military Doctrine as a way of flirting with Western countries. He has also warned Minsk that this could lead to tragic consequences, as the West would

merely take advantage of Belarus.

It apparently took almost four months to modify the document and make some insignificant, mostly stylistic changes in order to avoid such criticism in the future. The final version of the new Military Doctrine no longer directly prohibits the deployment of the Belarus Armed Forces abroad. Nevertheless, this prohibition is still mentioned in several clauses of the text.

## **Defensive nature**

First and foremost, the new Military Doctrine of Belarus remains defensive in nature, as was the previous one. According to statements by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, this means that the Belarus Armed Forces may be used only on home territory, in cases of military conflict, for the purpose of protecting Belarusian independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty and constitutional order (the same is true if any CSTO member is attacked).

Secondly, by proclaiming a new Military Doctrine, Belarus confirms its fundamental commitment to the maintenance of international peace and security. Thirdly, Belarus affirms a peaceful foreign and military policy.

The new Military Doctrine does not portray any state as an adversary. However, Belarus does consider an adversary any state or non-state actor (such as terrorist and extremist organisations), whose activity poses a military threat. The text characterises such activity as having as its object interference in internal affairs or encroachments on the independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and/ or constitutional order of Belarus.

# Impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict

There is no doubt that the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid conflict, as well as the new “Cold War” between Russia and the West, precipitated the development of a new Military Doctrine.

The previous one, adopted in 2002, followed NATO intervention in the Yugoslav Wars (1991 – 2001), the enlargement of NATO in Eastern Europe, and concerns from officials in Minsk that the West was preparing a “colour revolution” in Belarus. For this reason, Belarus gave priority to the formation of a common defence space with the Russian Federation at that time.

□□ Doctrine does indirectly voice concerns about Russia’s aggressive foreign and military policy

However, the regional military landscape has changed dramatically since the Ukrainian crisis and the resulting Russia-NATO confrontation. For Belarus, The main priority for coalition military policy still remains the strengthening of collective security mechanisms (seen as defensive) with Russia and CSTO member states. Nevertheless, the text of new Military Doctrine does indirectly voice concerns about Russia’s aggressive foreign and military policy.

## Countering hybrid warfare

We can find allusions to hybrid warfare in the section regarding characteristics of the current military and political landscape in Belarus's neighbourhood (Chapter 3). The new Military Doctrine mentions certain attempts by state actors to interfere in the internal affairs of individual countries, including European ones.

According to the text, such attempts have provoked internal armed conflicts with large-scale use of military force, including both traditional and guerilla (partisan or terrorist) warfare. Use of information-psychological warfare for aggressive purposes becomes a threat in such types of conflicts.

This section undoubtedly alludes to the practical application of so called “hybrid warfare methods” or the “Gerasimov doctrine” by Russia Armed Forces during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. [Andrej Raŭkoŭ](#), Minister of Defence, has even claimed that the Belarus Armed Forces have been studying the experience of their Ukrainian counterparts in counteracting hybrid warfare in the Donbass.

the Belarusian Armed Forces have been conducting exercises in preventing a Donbass-like hybrid scenario

What's more, since the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Belarusian Armed Forces have been conducting exercises in preventing a Donbass-like hybrid scenario during almost every large-scale military drill or sudden combat readiness check.

Belarusian officials have decided to avoid the notion of “hybrid warfare” in spite of an announcement from former State Secretary of the Security Council [Aliaksandr Miažujeŭ](#), possibly not to annoy Minsk's Eastern ally. Nevertheless, the new Military Doctrine does use the term “internal armed conflict” in this respect.

## **An open and reliable partner**

According to the new Military Doctrine, this opens the door for Belarus to build new military coalitions with countries other than Russia and CSTO or CIS member states, including countries that have signed bilateral international agreements with Belarus on strategic partnership.

Belarus has already concluded several strategic agreements, such as with China in 2013. This has provided significant impetus for intensified development of political and military cooperation between Minsk and Beijing.

Belarusian leadership wants to rely on China's international influence, and in the case of a conflict with its Eastern neighbour

Recent results of such cooperation demonstrate the concrete intention of Belarusian leadership to rely on China's international influence, and in the case of a conflict with its Eastern neighbour, technical and diplomatic assistance at the least (Belarus and China have already developed some weaponry systems, such as the "Palanez" multiple launch rocket system).

Minsk is also seeking to maintain positive and mutually beneficial relations with the EU and establish dialogue on equal terms with NATO. Belarusian officials would like to increase transparency and promote mutual understanding in the framework of strengthening regional security, in line with the new Military Doctrine.

Such an approach helps Minsk achieve a balance and avoid involvement in confrontations between Russia and NATO. In this regard, the adoption of the new Military Doctrine sends a message to the international community: by proclaiming a new Military Doctrine Belarus, wants to present itself as an open and reliable partner with an independent, predictable and peaceful military policy.

This is especially relevant in the context of regional instability caused by the aggressive foreign and military actions of the Russian Federation.

*Arseni Sivitski*

*Arseni Sivitski is the Director of the Centre for Strategic*

*and Foreign Policy Studies based in Minsk, he is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Philosophy of the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences, and military officer in reserve of the Belarusian Armed Forces.*

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## **Belarus Develops Strategic Deterrence Capacities, Downshifts Air Force**

On 22 August the Belarusian the defence ministry announced the purchase of trainer and light ground-attack aircraft and transport helicopters to modernise its Air Force. At first glance this unimpressive deal seems to contradict Minsk's recently announced ambitious plans to develop strategic deterrence capacities.

Belarus's military equipment procurement policy, however, is less paradoxical than it seems. Speaking at a conference on 1 July Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka explained that after studying the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Ukraine Minsk chose mobile forces supported by firepower as the most effective in such conflicts. "Airplanes and tanks have little say in today's wars."

Is Minsk really overhauling its army according to new challenges? Or is this just a trick to conceal the decline of the Belarusian military due to financial difficulties?

# Strategic deterrence: Belarusian-style

On 22 August the Belarusian army officially [deployed the \*Palanez\*](#) multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS). In doing this, Minsk completed the full cycle of development of a new armament. According to Belarusian officials, it took about two years of intensive work from scratch. While Belarus admits to resorting to Chinese help in developing the *Palanez*, some experts suspect Ukrainian involvement as well.

*Palanez* has a declared firing range of 50-200 km, significantly more than the MLRS types the Belarusian military used until now. Addressing the personnel of the 336th Rocket Artillery Brigade in Asipovichy, which was the first to receive *Palanez*, the head of General Staff Aleh Belakoneu characterised the newly deployed arms as “an element of strategic deterrence.”

The *Palanez* MLRS is proof of conceptual innovation in Belarusian national security policy. The [Military Doctrine](#), which came into effect on 20 July, articulates among its new terms the notion of “strategic deterrence.”

In pursuit of that aim, Minsk initially planned to obtain Iskander tactical ballistic missile systems from Russia. Moscow initially denied Minsk this equipment, but later proposed to deploy them to Belarus on the condition that they remain under Russian command. However, these terms were unacceptable to Belarus.

✘ Besides the *Palanez* MLRS, Minsk might have more in the pipeline when it comes to strategic deterrence. For three years the Ukrainian *Yuzhnoye State Design Office* has been developing the *Hrim* Tactical Ballistic Missile System, funded by an undisclosed foreign country.

Some experts, such as Aleksandr Khramchikhin, suspect it to [be Belarus](#). Indeed, circumstantial evidence seems to point to the fact that Belarus – possibly together with some third country – might be paying Ukraine for a brand-new missile system.

## Air force: downshifting continues

On 22 August the *Belta* news agency published information from the Defence Ministry about procurement of new equipment for the [Air Force](#). Minsk decided to purchase four more *Yak-130* aircraft. In the next weeks, the Belarusian army also received *Mi-8MTV-5* helicopters. Although *Belta* failed to specify exactly how many, in June 2015 the Russian Holding *Vertolety Rossii* announced a contract with Belarus on delivery of 12 *Mi-8MTV-5s* in 2016-2017 .

Explaining the procurement decision, the Defence Ministry insists that “air force and air defence troops are being perfected and improved based on global trends in development of forms and methods of troop deployment.” He once again praised the *Yak-130* aircraft as “the newest” and “unparalleled in its class.”

These claims, however, are dubious. Both *Mi-8* and *Yak-130* are indicative of an ongoing trend of Belarusian [Air Force downshifting](#). Instead of decommissioned *Su-24* bombers and *Su-27* heavy fighter jets, Minsk deploys *Yak-130* subsonic advanced jet trainers and ground-attack aircraft. In the future it wants to replace *Su-25* ground-attack aircraft with *Yak-130*, too.

Interestingly, the *Yak-130* was developed as a result of a Russian-Italian joint project and the plane has a twin brother, the *Alenia Aermacchi M-346 Master*. Poland has recently deployed it, but unlike Belarus and the *Yak-130* it

does not try to present *M-346* as anything more than it is – a trainer and light ground-attack aircraft unable to replace modern military aircraft such as *Su-25* or *Su-27*.

A similar problem concerns the purchase of *Mi-8 MTV-5*. These multi-purpose military transport helicopters can be armed with weapons like those installed on the famous *Mi-24* attack helicopters. They thus can become a kind of ersatz *Mi-24*, although they certainly do not measure up to the *Mi-24*'s capacities.

At the moment the [Belarusian army](#) still operates several *Mi-24* inherited from the Soviet armed forces. The machines are old but they constitute a significant part of the mobile firepower capacities of the Belarusian army. Minsk has never openly discussed plans to buy replacements in the form of newer modifications of the *Mi-24*. It now seems that the Belarusian army plans to use *Mi-8MTV-5* for that purpose.

✘ This means that in the foreseeable future the Belarusian Air Force will increasingly rely on *Yak-130* and *Mi-8* with various modifications. It also continues to use older Soviet-times *MiG-29* fighter jets, hoping at some point to acquire new *Su-30s* from Russia.

Another indicator of the decision to rely on *Yak-130* and *Mi-8* emerged earlier this month. On 17 August the Belarusian military news agency *Vayar* reported that Belarusian defence industries are producing their own fuel for *S-8M* unguided aviation rockets. These rockets are installed only on *Mi-8*, *Mi-24* and *Yak-130*.

Minsk is apparently focusing its [R&D efforts](#) on the most urgent needs of the national Air Force. Belarus can now refuel rockets itself and keep older ammunition in working order. Before, it had to ask for services of the Russian firm which has been producing them since Soviet times.

# Radars as a response to the US missile defence system?

On 16 August the Belarusian Defence Ministry announced deployment of the first *Protivnik-GE* early warning surveillance radar. By 2020, Minsk plans to receive a total of seven Russian-made radars of this type. Ihar Nasibyants, commander of Radiotechnic Forces, told the *Belta* news agency that after deployment of these radars, Belarus would have “completed the establishment of the radiolocation intelligence component of a non-strategic missile defence system”.

In other words, the delivery of these radars to Belarus is a Russian answer to the US missile defence system in Europe. Moscow argues that [NATO can](#) use the latter system to attack Russia with cruise missiles. Notably, the new radars Belarus plans to deploy are reportedly especially efficient in dealing with such threats.

Moscow discussed the possibility of deploying Iskander tactic ballistic missile systems in Belarus

To counter the US missile defence system, Moscow discussed the possibility of deploying *Iskander* tactic ballistic missile systems in Belarus. However, Minsk resisted this move as they would have remained under Russian command. Thus, Minsk and Moscow have chosen to deploy new radars to react to the [US missile defence](#) system.

In sum, it would be wrong to describe the current transformation of the Belarusian armed forces as a decline. Minsk is reshaping its army in an organised manner in accordance with its financial resources, e.g., downshifting its air force.

Although procurement of equipment for the Belarusian military

is in line with both the national security priorities of Belarus and the interests of its Russian ally, Belarusian leadership retains the [final word](#). Hence, Minsk has deployed new radars from Russia and refuses to host a Russian airbase and Russian army missile units.

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## **Private Sector and Export Revenues Boost Belarusian Defence Industry**

On 11 August, the State Military Industrial Committee of Belarus announced that in the first half of this year its defence enterprises earned a net profit of \$80m, thus over-fulfilling the assigned export plans by a quarter.

Foreign media have recently reported that new Belarusian military equipment or equipment modernised in Belarus is being used by the Turkmenistani and Kazakhstani armies, Syrian government troops and Burmese air defence. In addition, the Belarusian government has finally started procuring arms for the country's armed forces.

The national defence industry, which emerged in the 1990's as a helpless fragment of Soviet arms industries, evolved to become a significant branch of the Belarusian economy. This happened also because of the rise of the private sector and [diversification](#) of its markets and partners.

# Money from Arms

The Belarusian defence industry began to pick up speed in the early 2010s. For instance, in 2011-2015 the Baranavichy-based *558th Aircraft Repairs Plant* increased its production volumes by 5.5 times while its personnel grew by a quarter.

How much arms Minsk actually exports remains a secret. Based on insider information, the Moscow-based *Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade* reported that in 2004-2011 Belarus exported arms for \$550m, i.e., \$69m every year.

However, these were hard times for Belarusian arms exporters as the old Soviet arms had already been sold and new products had yet to appear. The figures are now higher as the industry has started producing new items and a proliferation of [local conflicts](#) requires a growing amount of equipment.

So far, Belarusian firms have been exporting arms with [no proven violations](#) of international norms, despite concluding risky deals. On 27 July, the *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network* and the *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project* claimed that arms from Belarus, alongside other countries, were being sent [to rebels](#) supported by the West or associated with [Western allies](#) in Syria and Yemen. Belarusian transportation companies had been transporting arms to these rebels.

However, by doing this Belarus has neither broken international legal norms nor challenged global powers. Investigators believe that everything probably took place with the CIA's knowledge.

## New Players

This increase in export resulted from the large-scale evolution of the national defence industry. First of all, the

private sector has got larger. In January, Belarusian President Lukashenka praised a privately-owned defence company, *Minotor-Servis*, for its efficiency, describing it as a paragon for the entire economy.

Following that, the Belarusian media outlet TUT.by published an analysis of private defence firms indicating that *Minotor-Servis* was not an exceptional case. It listed ten more private defence companies which have succeeded in finding a profitable niche.

The Minsk-based company *Tetraedr* is just one example. It  already runs several production sites of up to 13,000 square metres in Minsk. However, as its founder and director Andrei Vakhouski told Belarusian media earlier this year, “we do not limit ourselves to Belarus. Our main production sites are outside the country.”

On 7 August *Tetraedr* declared that it signed an agreement with the *Electronics Corporation of India Limited*. The two companies revealed only that they intend to cooperate in manufacturing and delivery of “high-technology defence equipment.” Given their profiles, they are probably attempting to undertake maintenance, modernisation or manufacturing of air defence- and electronic warfare-related systems owned by the Indian military.

The implications of the private sector's rise in this area are immense. First, the defence industry can provide a model for development of private firms in other branches of the economy. Secondly, throughout the world the defence industry has frequently become a driver for technological innovation in other areas, leading to the manufacture of high-technology civil-use items.

# New Partners

Thirdly, even though the Belarusian defence industry is [disproportionately entangled](#) with the Russian military industrial complex, Belarusian private firms working in the defence industry boast more diversified international partners. For example, for many years the main customer of privately-owned *Tetraedr* was Azerbaijan; the firm also worked actively with Kazakhstan.

In addition, while earlier Belarusian defence firms were most likely to do business with former Soviet allies and relied on older Soviet-era ties for their exports, the situation is now different. For example, over the past three years Belarus has been developing [relations with Pakistan](#) in the defence sphere thanks largely to the help and mediation of China and/or conservative [Arab regimes](#).

Last December, The French daily *Le Monde* reported [another case](#) in which Belarusian arms firms were doing business with international arms traders outside the former Soviet network. According to French journalists, a French-Israeli businessman named Steve Bokhobza had been acting as an agent for the Belarusian defence firm *Beltechexport* for at least three years.

Steve Bokhobza reportedly has good connections with French and African politics and business communities as well as the Israeli security establishment. Bokhobza, according to *Le Monde*, facilitated deals between the Belarusian firm and its affiliates in the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea and most likely other countries.

# Not Just Exports

For the first time ever, the new [Military Doctrine](#), which entered into force on 20 July, contains a separate section on national defence industries. It emphasises the necessity of developing the defence industry as "a high-technology sector capable of meeting the needs of the Armed Forces with regard to modern armaments, military and special equipment."

This is new for the Belarusian defence industry, which in 1991 was still a highly export-driven branch. Initially, Belarusians exported equipment inherited from the Soviet era and modernised Soviet arms. The capacities of national defence industries subsequently evolved. By the early 2010's the government announced that 90 per cent of exported arms constitute Belarusian-made products.

✘ [The Belarusian military](#), however, has deployed few of them.

In January 2013, Lukashenka admitted that more than 70 per cent of products manufactured by national defence industries were going abroad, and such major firms as *Peleng*, *MZKT* and *Tetraedr* were exporting almost all their production.

Back then, in 2013, he demanded from government officials in charge of the defence industry to create arms for export and mentioned supplying the national army almost as an afterthought. Now, Lukashenka insists on providing weapons for the national army.

Addressing graduates of military colleges on 5 July, Lukashenka exclaimed, "Any country that takes its own security seriously should produce its principal weapons with its own hands." The Belarusian leader cited the recently established production of lightly-armoured vehicles and [missiles production](#) as examples of the approach.

In sum, despite many contradictions, the Belarusian defence industry is far from stagnation, unlike many other branches of

the Belarusian economy (such as machine building). It brings a stable income from exports and develops finished products.

These products, including anti-tank rockets, optics, electronics, and missiles, have not only found a market abroad, they have also contributed to national military capacities.

Moreover, the development of this branch can set an example for other industries, especially with regard to the incremental development of the private sector and diversification of international ties.