

Belarusian Army at a Crossroads

The Belarusian military forces rarely fall into the spotlight of public discussions. Like in other post-Soviet countries, this institution mainly lives behind closed doors. Army generals normally try to escape contact with the media and their critics in the non-governmental sector. As a result, the lack of official information results in numerous myths and popular rumours about the state of the military.

However, open data suggests that the army in Belarus is far from being a monster. Its size has gone down nearly fourfold since 1991 and military expenditures look modest by international standards. Also, crime levels in the army have been minimised.

At the same time the Belarusian military forces are becoming increasingly vulnerable to demographic, technological, financial and geopolitical challenges. Even army generals have started talking about the need for reform.

Soviet Military Avant-Garde

Belarus inherited a huge army from the Soviet Union. Before the latter's collapse, more than 240,000 military men served in the so-called Belarusian Military District. The country had one of Europe's highest ratios of the military to civilian population: 1 soldier per 43 citizens.

Compare: Ukraine had the ratio of 1:98, Kazakhstan: 1:116, and Russia:1:634.

At the time of the USSR's disintegration the army in Belarus was also packed with military equipment and weaponry. For more than a decade the country actively exported those weapons in

order to earn foreign currency. At some point in the 1990s Belarus even entered the list of the world's top 10 military exporters.

The Belarusian Army Today

The leadership of sovereign Belarus faced the task of reforming the huge military force left behind by the Soviet Union and adapting it to the needs and ambitions of the new independent state.

The new authorities gradually brought the size of the Belarusian army down to about 65,000. Out of them nearly 50,000 are soldiers and the remaining 15,000 civilians who provide various services for the Ministry of Defence.

How do these figures look from an the international perspective? According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS), in 2012 Belarus had a comparatively large active military force.

Country	Active military/1000 capita
<i>Belarus</i>	7.6
Ukraine	2.8
Germany	2.3
Latvia	2.6
Lithuania	2.5
Poland	2.6
Russia	7.2
Kazakhstan	3.2
Georgia	8.3
Venezuela	4.3
Israel	22.2

(The ISS seems to have slightly exaggerated the size of the Belarusian army, but the ratio looks nonetheless interesting for international comparisons)

The present day Belarusian army has a mixed principle of formation. About 60 per cent of the military constitute professional contractors. And nearly 40 per cent of them are drafted as conscripts.

The structure of the Belarusian military forces also went through modifications in the last decade. Now the army has only two major military components:

1. Ground forces.
2. Air force and air defence.

Military Expenses

Belarus spends about 1-1.5 per cent of its GDP on the army. This equals an estimated 4-5 per cent of the state budget.

In 2013 the military budget amounts to about \$700m. This exceeds public expenditure on the police or healthcare and is slightly less than the allocations for education.

Sphere	Expenditure (USD, mln.)
Military	700
Police	490
Border guards	110
Healthcare	625
Education	780
Culture	100
Physical culture and sports	95

By international standards Belarus's military budget seems quite modest. According to the Stockholm International Peace

Research Institute (SIPRI), Belarus sits far behind the 150 biggest military spenders in the world.

In the regional context, Belarusian military expenditure also looks tame, according to the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database:

Country	Expenditure (USD, mln.)*	% of GDP**
Belarus	709	1.4
Lithuania	405	1.1
Latvia	267	1.1
Ukraine	3,747	2.7
Poland	9,149	1.9
Russia	64,123	3.9

**As of 2011.*

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Demographics and Financial Restraints Against the Army

The modest military budget has implications for the prospects of the Belarusian army upgrading its infrastructure and weaponry as well as attracting qualified professionals.

The military equipment is to a large extent getting outdated. Belarus has more than 50 companies that produce weapons or equipment but they specialise in a narrow range of products and often prove uncompetitive internationally.

[Thanks to Russia](#), however, Belarus sometimes gets discounted deals for purchasing strategic weaponry.

The limited resources also explain why the military service does not enjoy great popularity among Belarusians. This is not to say that no one wants to serve. Enrolment competition at the Military Academy in Minsk remains quite high. However, fewer and fewer young men want to devote their lives to the

army as the pay remains low. The Belarusian military earn an estimated two times less than their counterparts in Russia.

The authorities realise the problem. Last year Alexander Lukashenka even publicly asked the Russian leadership to consider [the possibility of sharing the salaries burden](#). In his words, the Belarusian army also defends Russia from any potential security threat in Russia's West. Therefore, Lukashenka suggested, it would be justified if the Russian Federation could help to raise salaries for soldiers in Belarus. But the Kremlin held a different opinion.

Finally, the Belarusian army is experiencing a blow from the demographic trends in society. The number of male adolescents whom the army authorities register as potential conscripts has been on a steady decline. According to the Ministry of Defence, between 2006 and 2011 the number of newly registered boys went down from 70,596 to 51,017.

It should also worry the army's leadership that the number of baby boys in the country also continues to decrease. Between 1990 and 2001 the number of newborn boys went down from almost 80,000 to slightly more than 47,000. Given that more than half of male adolescents normally do not end up serving in the army, this demographic fact shines as a warning sign.

Need for Reform Looming Larger

In those few cases when high-ranking military officials appear in the media or public discussions, the majority of them will normally argue that the Belarusian army is super advanced. They will point to some successes: for example, low criminal rates in the military or effective modifications of the command structure. And then conclude that the army in Belarus stays in perfect shape.

However, more and more factors point to the opposite. Besides the worrying demographics, the army's technical and technological handicap is getting new [public scrutiny](#). It is

also obvious that in modern geopolitics traditional armies are becoming marginalised.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a growing number of army generals also speak in favour of comprehensive military reform. Some of them even support the idea of a totally professional army. But because of the lack of political will and financial resources, military reform hardly remains realistic.