

Minsk silently builds a new army

On 1 December, Minsk made public an agreement with Russia to supply a joint regional group of Belarusian and Russian troops. In return, Russia's Defence Ministry has committed to providing Belarus with necessary equipment and arms in times of "increasing military threat to the Union state [*of Belarus and Russia*] and in times of war."

Meanwhile, the weapons and training Minsk gives its army show little in common with how Moscow develops its military. The Belarusian government is making its army ever smaller and getting rid of most of its expensive, heavy weapons necessary for all out offensive operations.

Increasing rearmament

Minsk usually buys [major arms systems](#) from Russia. This year, Belarusian defence ministry official media reported that Belarus had received six Mi-8MTV-5 helicopters and a division of Tor-M2 surface-to-air missile systems from Russia. Less costly—yet still important—purchases from Russia include the 2017-produced RPO-A Shmel, an infantry flamethrower that the Belarusian army already uses, and its modernised version, the Shmel-M, bought for the first time. Minsk has also signed contracts [on purchasing](#) 12 Su-30SM aircraft and some Protivnik-GE radars from Russia.

[National arms industries](#) are [supplying](#) the Belarusian army more and more equipment, too. A key new piece of equipment is the Palanez, Belarusian multiple-launch rocket system. At the end of October, an improved version, the Palanez-M, was successfully tested at a distance of more than 300km for the first time.

The Belarusian military is also planning to continue purchases of communication, navigation, and surveillance means, armoured vehicles, small firearms and body armour. Some of this equipment will be from Belarus's defence industries (see Table one below). Minsk also plans to buy over 50 drones, which are mostly Belarus-manufactured, and to continue modernisation of T-72B tanks.



Source of data in the table:
MoD official statements &
Belorusskaya voennaya gazeta
in 2014-2017.

The picture of modernisation looks, however, contradictory. Speaking to reporters on 28 November, Deputy Defence Minister for Armaments Siarhei Simanenka said [as many as four](#) T-72B, 30 GAZ-66 military trucks, and some other old Soviet era equipment had been successfully modernised. However, the refitting of military truck models from the 1960s, which had already proved highly vulnerable during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, raises questions about the rationality of such modernisation.

The situation concerning Belarus's heavy weapons is another story. Minsk is clearly not replacing most of its heavier, Soviet-inherited weapons. It [decommissions them](#) for further sales, like Su-27 heavy fighter jets or Su-24 bombers, or it simply does nothing about them as they grow older, like T-72 tanks. It is highly likely that the government is going to build a new army, which will not deploy these older heavy weapons. Indeed, in an article published on 3 November in *Belarus Segodnya*, the main Belarusian government daily, hinted at exactly such vision by declaring, "The main aim for the period until 2020 is to construct a compact, mobile, well-trained and well-equipped army." In plain words, an army with

only a minimum of heavy weapons.

Special forces model for Belarusian army of the future

Belarusian Special Operations Forces (SOF) Commander Vadzim Dzyanisenka spoke with *Belorusskaya voennaya gazeta*, a military industry newspaper, on 21 November and presented the Belarusian military leadership's vision of contemporary armed conflicts. Dzyanisenka emphasised that the role of SOF was growing rapidly. He said that without these forces "it is not possible to solve the tasks related to ensuring national security." Dzyanisenka described these forces as "mobile, agile and [not burdened](#) with heavy weapons."



Vadzim Dzyanisenka, SOF
Commander. Image: CTV.by

That is the direction in which Minsk is developing its military. The SOF seem to be serving as the model for the future [national army](#). The special operations forces were established in the early 2000s and, according to Dzyanisenka, their composition and the scope of their responsibilities remain unchanged.

SOF units have become a priority for the government and, therefore, they receive more new equipment than many other parts of the army. This year, the SOF received a trove of new equipment: [Kaiman](#) and Volat V-1 armoured vehicles designed and manufactured in Belarus, Chinese-made CS/VN3 Dragon armoured vehicles, the Belarusian-modernised BTR-70MB1 armoured personnel carrier, Russian-made P-7 parachute platforms for cargo, and Russian-made NONA M-1 120mm mortar.

On the one hand, this list of new equipment for the SOF is larger than for any other part of the Belarusian armed forces, excluding air defence. In short, Minsk sees the SOF as its highest priority. On the other hand, it lends credence to the idea that Minsk wishes to build a smaller, yet more efficient fighting force, which can deal with Donbas- or Kosovo-like conflicts, but harbours no ambition of fighting a major war, say, with NATO.

The President's new arms?

Minsk has little money and it has always tried to [get funding](#) for its military from Russia. Speculation about secret deals between Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka and the Kremlin abound. And for good reason, too, as the case of a recently published agreement with Russia shows. The agreement concerns supplying a joint regional group of Belarusian and Russian troops. Minsk and Moscow signed the agreement on 2 November 2016 and it entered force on 14 November. Belarusian citizens learned about the document only *post factum*, last Friday.



Image: vsr.mil.by

However, the terrible secret of that agreement turns out to be banal. The Kremlin essentially made clear that Minsk would only get free arms from Moscow in the case of full out war. Therefore, the Belarusian government's attempts to arm itself without bearing too much of financial burden seem to have failed. Indeed, the appearance of such an agreement should be no surprise, because the Kremlin for some years has already stopped supplying its post-Soviet allies through [CSTO mechanisms](#).

Inhibited by the Kremlin's [staunch refusals](#) to provide Belarus

with heavy weapons, the Belarusian government adapted its policies. Minsk is now silently building a new army better suited to its limited needs and financial constraints. It is letting its Soviet-era, heavier arms be silently discarded without replacement—a huge fleet of T-72 tanks that have been neither modernised nor replaced provides an illustration. Simplification of existing army structures automatically follows, which also means a reduction of offensive capacities.