

# 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 Klinty, Bryansk 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 practice. 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

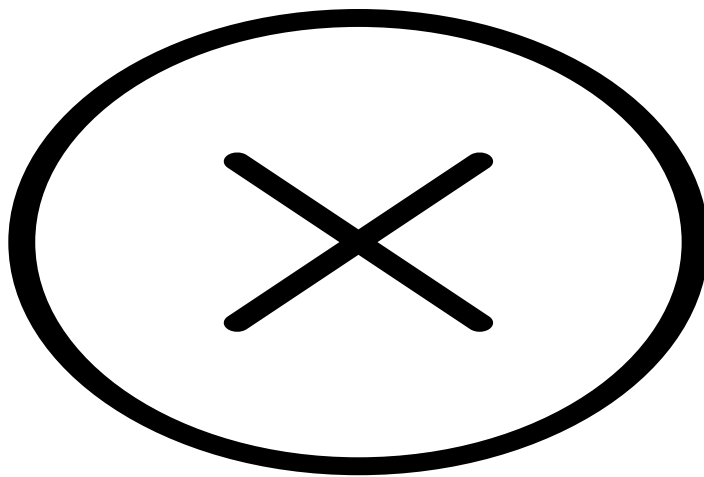
country. What's more, the General Staff emphasised that the main idea behind the exercises was to ensure Belarus is capable of maintaining independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity with its own forces.

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.

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