The potential ‘anschluss’ by Russia: will Belarus resist?

On 5 April 2019, the Russian Ambassador to Belarus Mikhail Babich informed that Alexander Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin agreed to conduct further consultations on the inter-state integration. However, both Belarusian and Russian media continue discussing the possibility of the Belarusian ‘anschluss’ by Russia.

Moscow believes that Belarusians do not want to lose its independence, but if an attempt is made to include Belarus into Russia by force, the Belarusian uniformed services will not offer resistance and there will be no strong opposition from Belarusian society. Indeed, the failure of the Belarusian authorities to conduct a proper ‘Belarusization’ has resulted in the generally passive attitude from the Belarusians toward the potential Russian threat.

Any grounds for the Belarusian ‘anschluss’?

The inclusion of Belarus into Russia, among other things, in order to enable Putin to run for president of Russia in 2024, is a scenario that strikes imagination. In early 2019, Russian media began discussing the subject of Putin remaining President of Russia after 2024. The Russian Constitution stipulates that “one and the same person may not be elected President of the Russian Federation for more than two consecutive terms”.

Putin could have taken the post of Russia’s prime minister in 2024, essentially appointing a president who was loyal to him, a controlled person, and then returning to the presidency in
2030. However, in 2030 he will be 78 years old. According to some Russian experts, Putin can solve the problem of 2024 by merging Belarus with Russia, which would allow him to run for president of the all-new Russian state.

Many in the Russian expert community believe that the Belarusian uniformed services will not resist the ‘anschluss’ attempt. There will be no resistance on the part of Belarusian society. The Belarusians do not want Belarus to be merged with Russia. However, there is a very big difference between not wanting it and fighting for independence, being ready to die for it and kill Russian soldiers.

In fact, Belarus has no army capable of rendering any resistance in the event of Russia’s aggression. The army is an organic part of society. Some of the Western experts note that the Belarusian nation and the Belarusian national self-consciousness have been being formed under Lukashenko. This is a disputable statement.

The authorities do not interfere with the activities of civil initiatives aimed at popularizing the Belarusian language and forming a cultural and historical identity. However, the authorities themselves have been making contradictory steps. A step forward, as a rule, is followed by a step in the opposite direction.

The ugly face of the pro-governmental ‘Belarusization’

Billboards with slogans such as “We are Belarusians!”, “For Belarus!” were placed in towns. In the streets and along roads, one can often see billboards with social advertisement where the Belarusian language is used.

However, in most schools, schoolchildren receive education in
Russian: all subjects, except for the **Belarusian language**, are taught in Russian. The Belarusian language is often taught as a foreign language: students are taught to understand it but do not to speak it.

In Homiel, the second largest city in Belarus with a population of over 0.5 million, there is one gymnasium in which several classes study in Belarusian. In Hrodna, thirteen students are taught in Belarusian. This training is provided in two secondary schools. In Vitsiebsk, there is no single class with the Belarusian as the language of instruction.

In Mahiliou, a city of over 380,000 people, only one schoolgirl is studying in Belarusian. In the provincial district towns (there are 118 of them), there are only two schools with the Belarusian language of instruction.

In higher education institutions, the Russian language is normally used. After graduating from school, a Belarusian citizen faces only one situation when he needs to fill out a document in the Belarusian language – when filling the passport application. In all other cases, a person can use the language he masters much better than the Belarusian – the
If a person does not have any Belarusian-speaking friends, then he hears the Belarusian language seldom — on television or radio. With age, his understanding of the language is worsening; he quickly forgets the rarely used words. The vast majority do not speak Belarusian. Belarusian society under Lukashenko is a Russian-speaking society in which Belarusian-speaking people are a minority.

**Russian media domination continues**

According to a study conducted by journalists of the web portal nn.by, programs of Russian production represent 80% of the content of the Belarusian state television channel ONT; the share of Belarusian production is 10%, and the Western production (American and European movies) is 10%. Apparently, the other state television channels have similar proportion.

The state censorship does not allow the broadcast of Russian TV shows which are critical towards the Belarusian authorities. However, a significant part of Belarusian society receives information about what is happening outside Belarus from the Russian TV channels’ shows and news bulletins. A significant part of Belarusian society looks at the world through the prism of Russian TV channels, and these people are more and more under the cultural influence of Russia.
In 2015, the Belarusian public was alarmed by the war in Ukraine. The opinion was widespread that destabilization of political situation would cause the appearance of Russian “green people”. Nevertheless, according to the results of a public opinion poll conducted by independent sociologists in October 2014, 67.8% of Belarusians supported the annexation of Crimea by Russia. About 20% spoke against it.

18% of the respondents said that they fully trusted the Russian media, 55.4% trusted them partially. Only 17.3% of respondents said that they did not trust the Russian media.

In conclusion, the importance of building a Belarusian cultural-historical identity cannot be underestimated. So far, the official discourse has not properly answered the question “Who are the Belarusians?”, only the President once remarked that “the Belarusians are the Russians with a quality mark.”

As a consequence, Belarusians have become extremely prone to the influence of Russian propaganda and the narratives of the
‘Russian world’. As Belarus-Russia relations get more complicated, the general weakness of national identity of Belarusians poses serious questions in the sphere of national security for the Belarusian state.

Church split, army bullying and scandalous opera – State Press Digest

Alexander Lukashenka meets Patriarch Kirill of Moscow amid the Orthodox schism between Moscow and Constantinople. Former Ukraine’s President Viktor Yushchenko visits Minsk.

Prime-minister Rumas outlines the key priorities for the new government and calls for an urgent meeting amid the average salary’s decrease.

Vladimir Putin wants to increase Belarus-Russia trade. Russian Ambassador Babich promises the end of “milk wars” in future. Belarus requires new re-industrialization worth billions of dollars.

Lukashenka condemns military bullying, yet suggests students should undergo military training on summer holidays. Scandalous Strauss’s opera “Salome” features in Minsk’s Opera Theatre despite the religious protests.

Politics

Lukashenka meets Patriarch Kirill of Moscow amid the Russian Church’s split from Constantinople, reports Soyuznoye Veche
newspaper. On 15 October, Alexander Lukashenka welcomed Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and stressed the importance of the church unity. According to the President of Belarus, the recent Orthodox church’s split would negatively impact all the levels of the society in the Post-Soviet space. “It had a lot to do with politicians”, maintained Lukashenka. Patriarch Kirill, in his turn, praised the Belarusian neutral position and admired “big positive changes” in Belarus over the years.

Prime-Minister Siarhei Rumas outlines the top priorities for the new government’s work, reports BELTA agency. According to Rumas, the increase of the nation’s well-being and the improvement of competitiveness of the state’s sector should remain the key government’s priorities for the next five years.

Viktor Yushchenko visits Minsk, reports Belarus Segodnya newspaper. On 9 October, Alexander Lukashenka welcomed Viktor Yushchenko in Minsk to discuss Belarus-Ukraine relations. Lukashenka maintained that Belarus would always abstain from criticizing Ukraine’s political standing and interfering into Ukraine’s domestic affairs. On the other hand, the President of Belarus disapproved Ukraine’s intention to leave the CIS block and warned about the increase of arms smuggling via the Belarusian-Ukrainian border.

**Economy**

Lukashenka intends to strengthen the state’s alcohol monopoly in order to combat the unfair competition on the alcohol market, reports Belarus Segodnya newspaper. On 22 October, Alexander Lukashenka held a special meeting to discuss the development of the national alcohol production. Previously Lukashenka strongly criticized the experimental ban on alcohol sales after midnight exercised by the Minsk authorities. At present, the Belarusian state fully controls the production and distribution of alcohol production.
Prime Minister **Siarhei Rumas calls for an urgent meeting amid the average salary’s decrease**, reports *Hrodna News*. On 23 October, Rumas held a working meeting to discuss the average salary’s decrease recorded in September – for the first time since April 2018. According to Rumas, this situation happened due to the fluctuations of the Russian rouble and the ignorance of public administration.

**Belarus requires a new industrialization**, reports “*Finance, accounting and audit*” magazine issued by the Ministry of Finance. In order to increase the Belarusian GDP from $54 bn in 2017 to $100 bn as planned by Alexander Lukashenka by 2025, Belarus has to re-industrialize its regions. The Belarusian re-industrialization should include the development of energy-saving and electric transport, “smart house” construction, petrochemical and microbiological projects, and production of new construction materials. Such large-scale projects will require at least $4 bn investments.

Alexander Lukashenka meets Russian Ambassador Mikhail Babich. Source: The Press-Service of the President of Belarus

Russian Ambassador **Mikhail Babich wants to reload Belarus-Russia economic relations**, reports *Soyuznoye Veche* newspaper.
Mikhail Babich views his major task in supervising the duly implementation of the agreements between Alexander Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin on petroleum products.

Babich maintained that the “milk wars” between Russia and Belarus sufficiently damaged the relations between the two states. At the same time, the “milk wars” might disappear in future due to the introduction of tight food balances.

Vladimir Putin believes that [trade volumes between Belarus and Russia could increase up to $50 bn], reports Belarus Segodnya newspaper. While visiting Mogilev on 12 October, Putin praised the large-scale economic cooperation between Belarus and Russia. Putin maintained that the trade volumes between the two states could increase from the actual $32 bn to $50 bn in the nearest years.

Security

Lukashenka condemns bullying in the military, reports Belarus Segodnya newspaper. On 5 October, Alexander Lukashenka criticized the Belarusian military for the bullying cases. According to the President of Belarus, bullying in the military strongly harms the image of the Belarusian troops and provokes young men to avoid the military service at all costs. Lukashenka urged the Ministry of Defense to eradicate bullying as soon as possible.

Lukashenka’s criticism relates to the tragic death of private Alexander Korzhych and the ongoing trial of his military superiors. The final verdicts on Korzhych’s offenders should come at the beginning of November.
Lukashenka discourages Belarusian students from studying abroad, reports Belarus Segodnya newspaper. On 20 October, Alexander Lukashenka visited Hrodna region and met the students of Hrodna’s Yanka Kupala State University. The President emphasized that Belarusians moving to study and live abroad would most probably remain “second-class citizens” there. The Hrodna region stands among the leaders in terms of students’ migration: many students from Hrodna easily move to neighbouring Poland for work and study.

Apart from that, Lukashenka criticized the introduction of the Bachelor/Master diploma frame to the Belarusian universities. According to the President of Belarus, the Belarusian higher education system should aspire to become more practical-oriented rather than blindly adopt the Western standards.

The scandalous Strauss’s opera “Salome” features in Minsk’s Opera Theater. Source: https://www.sb.by/articles/vtoraya-popytka-salomei.html
Lukashenka suggests drafting Belarusian students to the military on summer holidays, reports Hrodna News. During his visit to the Hrodna region, Alexander Lukashenka stressed that too many students misused their military service postponing in order to avoid the military service at all.

The President suggested that first-course university students could undergo basic military training during the summer holidays. The second-course students could obtain a military specialization the following summer and continue advancing their military skills during the subsequent summers.

Culture

The Minsk’s Opera Theatre launches the premiere of the scandalous Strauss’s opera “Salome” despite the religious protests, reports Belarus Segodnya newspaper. Opera “Salome” describes the relations between John the Baptist and the members of Herod’s family, very roughly based on the Bible. The Belarusian protesters objected the launch of the opera’s premiere on 9-10 September, close to the commemoration of John the Baptist’s beheading on 11 September. Apart from that, the protesters described the opera as “promoting lewdness”.

The Administration of the President of Belarus carried out the opera’s inspection together with the Prosecutor General’s Office and approved the opera. Metropolitan Pavel, the leader of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, also approved the opera’s staging. Eventually, the opera featured on 18 October.

The State Press Digest is based on the review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.
The Belarusian arms business: new deals and old collisions

On 14 November, key Belarusian arms exporter Beltech Export signed a deal with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Belarusian firm has agreed to maintain and modernise Emirati radars. This means that Minsk has successfully entered a new market, as it has never sold air defence-related products or services to Arab monarchies before.

This news, along with news of further remarkable international contracts entered into by Minsk this autumn, illustrates the silent evolution of the Belarusian defence industries. They have not only succeeded in developing new products – anti-tank weapons, rockets, missiles, armoured vehicles and others – and started selling them. They are also establishing cooperation with major foreign defence firms like the Chinese Long March aerospace corporation or the Turkish Roketsan missile firm. Such actions illustrate a promising development toward building autonomous national military industries and making the Belarusian state more economically viable.

Arms and friendship

The latest Belarusian deal – assessed at $15.7m – with the UAE military at the Dubai Airshow in November was widely seen as a coup for Minsk. The Dubai–based Khaleej Times has even listed it among the major contracts concluded at the Dubai Airshow 2017. After all, Belarus had participated in the airshow for the first time, yet Arab countries of the Persian Gulf were seen reluctantly buying non-Western defence products and services.
In addition, this February, Beltech Export won a contract worth some $14.4m to supply the Emiratis with spare parts, repair services and technical assistance for its Russian-manufactured BMP-3 armoured vehicles. Minsk not only won the contract over Russian arms firms, but the Belarusian offer has political implications, as well. After all, the UAE would currently prefer to avoid working with Russia yet it needs parts and support for its BMP-3s deployed in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen.

Belarusian defence firms, and the state agencies responsible for them, have been regularly meeting their Emirati counterparts for around two decades. The latest conference of the defence industry officials from the two countries took place on 15–16 October. Belarusian president Lukashenka also paid a visit to the UAE between 25 October and 6 November, ostensibly to promote trade between the two countries, including trade in military equipment.

These contacts seem to have borne fruit. Moscow-based Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported that last year Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT) successfully received an order for tank transporters without any tender. The delivery was due this year yet no details on the contract have yet been made publicly available. The MZKT has been selling such equipment to the UAE since the early 2000s.
Minsk also relies on arms deals to advance relations with Middle Eastern countries. It therefore came as no surprise that in 2013 Raman Halouchanka, the deputy chairman of the Belarusian state military industrial committee, was appointed as the Belarusian ambassador to the UAE.

**Forthcoming breakthrough in relations with Turkey?**

Some unprecedented results have also been achieved in relations with Turkey. Şuay Alpay, Turkey’s deputy defence minister, paid a visit to Belarus from 23 to 26 October. The Belarusian media has kept silent on the content of these negotiations. However, Turkish daily *Yeni Ufuk* reported that the Turkish defence official had expressed his satisfaction with the cooperation between Turkish and Belarusian companies on “rifle sights, inertial navigation systems for howitzers, electro-optic equipment, avionics, satellite cameras and land vehicles”.

Indeed, he brought to Belarus a large delegation which...
included not only state military industries officials, but also managers of leading Turkish arms firms. Among them were Aselsan (radios, defence electronic), Roketsan (rockets, missiles, satellites), BMC (trucks and tactical vehicles), MKEK (ammunition and various weapons systems). Although Minsk and Ankara first signed an agreement on defence industrial cooperation in 1998, their cooperation effectively started in the late 2000s to coincide with Turkish president Erdoğan’s launch of his assertive foreign policy.

At the same time as starting new cooperation projects, the Belarusian government has worked to advance most of its old partnerships, most importantly the partnership with China. The President of China’s leading Aerospace Long-March International Trade Co., Shi Kelu, came to Minsk on 23 October. Minsk has for many years worked with Beijing in the aerospace arena, even choosing to launch its satellite with Chinese and not Russian help. The Belarusian government has also started its missile programme with China’s assistance after being denied new missile systems by the Kremlin.

Belarusian equipment begins to neutralise Russian products

The business and political interests of Minsk and Moscow collide in the most explicit way in former Soviet nations, especially in terms of relations between Belarus and Azerbaijan. On 8–10 October, Minsk welcomed Azerbaijani defence minister Zakir Hasanov. A military expert close to the Azerbaijani defence ministry Yaşar Aydəmirov told several Azerbaijani media outlets on 13 October that Baku should purchase Belarusian-made Palanez multiple-launch rocket systems. According to him, given Azerbaijan’s specific
geographic and other advantages, Palanez systems would serve as an adequate response to Russian-made Iskanders deployed by Armenia.

Belarusian military technical cooperation with Central Asia reveals the same tendencies for entering new markets despite Moscow’s disapproval. A case in point is the recent move towards cooperation with Uzbekistan: a country which severed most of its ties with Belarus in the early 2000s. On 4 October, Moscow-based Kommersant daily revealed that the Belarusian 558th Aircraft repairs plant began the overhaul of four Su-25, close air support aircraft and four MiG-29, fighter jets owned by Uzbekistan.

Moreover, there are reports that Belarusian firms are to receive contracts for the overhaul of another eight aeroplanes of this type. The 558th Aircraft repairs plant, based in the Belarusian city of Baranavichy, has signed the contract with Uzbekistan despite the fact that the latter had negotiated with the Russians concerning the overhaul of its aircraft in the spring of this year. Kommersant quoted a source from the Russian defence industries as saying that this deal between Minsk and Tashkent has caused “some consternation” in the Russian arms industry.

Uzbekistan is not the only post-Soviet country which has begun to choose Belarusian firms. From 24 to 26 October, the
Commander of the air defence forces of Kyrgyzstan, Kylychbek Aydaraliev, also visited Belarus to discuss the possible overhaul and repairs of Kyrgyzstani aircraft, helicopters and air defence equipment in Belarus.

Minsk has to constantly take into account the Kremlin in doing arms business as Moscow dislikes the recent successes of its ally in diversifying its international contacts. Russian right-wing Regnum news agency published a commentary entitled “Mission impossible: Belarus seeks an alternative to Russia for its defence industries” on 14 November. Therefore, although Minsk hardly considers the development of its defence industries in cooperation with non-Russian partners or sales to new markets as a move aimed against Russia, the Russian establishment now sees such deals in exactly those terms.

Yet the Belarusian government is forced to act in this way in order to survive both politically and economically. Not only because Minsk would become a Russian satellite otherwise, but because the Kremlin is actively substituting Belarusian defence products and continues to insist that Minsk must sell its defence firms to Russia lest they go bankrupt without Russian support. So, Minsk has endeavoured to seek and find its own solutions: the examples above serve as irrefutable proof of that.

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**International support grows for Belarusian peacekeepers in Ukraine**

At a press conference on 17 November 2017 in Minsk, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel described his meeting with
Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka, in which they “talked a lot about Ukraine,” in positive terms.

The upbeat summary is a remarkable surprise. On 15 November, Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makey announced his country’s willingness to dispatch peacekeeping forces to Eastern Ukraine. In addition, for the first time, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov voiced Russia’s support for the deployment of Belarusian peacekeepers, which Minsk has repeatedly proposed since 2014.

Thus, Belarus appears to be on its way to secure the support of key international players for an active role in defusing the Ukrainian crisis. The deployment of peacekeepers in Eastern Ukraine offers Belarus a chance to raise its international status.

Minsk finally accepted as a peacekeeper?

Minsk has sought to play a peacemaking role in the Ukraine crisis for years now. A new window of opportunity emerged on 5 September when Russian President Vladimir Putin called for the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces in Eastern Ukraine. On 9 November, The Wall Street Journal reported that the US government—it did not specify what part—suggested the deployment of 20,000 peacekeepers in Eastern Ukraine because it believed Putin might be interested in ending the conflict.

The Belarusian government is undoubtedly involved in horse trading over the Donbass region, home to Ukraine’s two separatist “republics.” On 17 October, President Lukashenka met with the director of Russia’s Foreign intelligence service (SVR), Sergei Naryshkin. Without any direct mention of Ukraine, official sources say their meeting dealt with the “coordination of activities and adjustment of directions of joint work aimed at protecting national interests.” These are
serious grounds to assume that Lukashenka and Naryshkin discussed Ukraine.

Indeed, as early as in October 2014, at the very beginning of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Lukashenka offered to send Belarusian peacekeepers to the Donbass region. Belarusian officials have continued to cautiously articulate the idea to no avail. As recently as October, the Kremlin still did not support the deployment of Belarusian peacekeepers to Ukraine.

**Ukrainian reaction**

Certainly, the position of the most important party to the conflict—Ukraine itself—is unclear. First, Kommersant, a Russian daily newspaper, on 15 November quoted a source within the Ukrainian administration saying Kyiv would prefer Polish and Lithuanian peacekeepers. The same source continued to say that Russia would hardly welcome such an option. As a compromise, Kyiv might instead agree to Belarusian and Kazakh peacekeepers.

Second, relations between Minsk and Kyiv are improving but not ideal. On 15 November, Ukrainian Parliament First Deputy Chairwoman Iryna Herashchenko accused Belarus of “stabbing Ukraine in the back for the second time” after it had voted in the UN General Assembly against a Ukrainian-sponsored resolution on human rights violations in Crimea. The first time was exactly a year earlier in 2016 when Belarusian
representatives voted against a UN resolution on investigating human rights abuses in the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol. “Voting by the Belarusian delegation contradicts loud statements about its neutrality,” Herashchenko said. Minsk, however, insists that it always votes in the UN against “country resolutions.”

Ukrainian radical politicians have attacked the idea of Belarusians helping to restore peace in Eastern Ukraine. On 16 November, a prominent member of the Ukrainian parliament, Ihor Mosiychuk, said that Belarusian peacekeepers could become a “Troyan horse.” It would be Russian occupation forces disguised as Belarusians entering the Donbass region. Mosiychuk, who represents a major right-wing radical party, said, “Belarus has behaved not as a neutral state, but as a satellite of the aggressor country, the Russian Federation.” For proof, he cited recent Belarusian voting at the UN, the joint “West” 2017 military exercises with Russia, and “the kidnapping by the [Russian] FSB of a Ukrainian political prisoner, Igor Grib, from Belarusian territory.”

Another well–known representative of another Ukrainian right-wing party, Ihor Miroshnycenko, on 16 November said Belarus was an “enemy territory,” which has “common military interests” with Russia.
He also urged Ukrainian diplomats to do everything to remove Belarus from the sphere of Russian influence.

“Diplomats [will work to distance Belarus from Russian influence] at their level using various methods. However, we should clearly realise—and I am talking now sincerely and seriously—that we cannot achieve this without forming serious subversion and intelligence groups, and carrying out subversive acts on the territory of Belarus and Russia, including within cyber space.”

It would be somewhat self-defeating if Ukraine did, indeed, pursue such a disruptive policy. Belarus already persecutes citizens who support separatists in Eastern Ukraine. As recently as 16 November, a court in the southern Belarusian city of Rechytsa sentenced another Belarusian, Vitali Mitrafanau, on grounds of fighting for the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic in Eastern Ukraine. He had been detained by police in July. In September, a Vitebsk court in the north of Belarus convicted a Belarusian for the very same reason. The former was sentenced to two years of hard labour, the latter for two years of restricted freedoms.

Many Ukrainian politicians speculate on Belarus’s role in the conflict. However, they often ignore the special circumstances that limit Belarus from taking a definite position. All the same, the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko so far have demonstrated a willingness to accept Minsk as a partner.

However, powerful forces in and outside Ukraine work to sabotage Belarusian participation in the peace process. In addition to the calls of radical parliamentarians quoted above, other odd incidents occur regularly, which threaten to derail bilateral relations. On 25 October, for example, Minsk detained a Ukrainian citizen, Pavel Sharoiko, for espionage. Sharoiko is officially a journalist. However, until 2009 he
openly served with Ukrainian military intelligence. Belarusian authorities have tried to downplay the incident, keeping quiet on the issue until Ukrainian activists on 17 November revealed the story, which is now generating tensions between Minsk and Kyiv.

Minsk has Ukraine’s best interests in mind

Despite Russia’s hesitancy and Ukraine’s concerns, Minsk has shown its primary interest to bring it to an end the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Indeed, Minsk has ignored other opportunities for joint military operations with the Kremlin. For instance, in recent years, international media have speculated on Belarus’s participation, together with other member states of Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), in ensuring peace in Syria. However, that scenario has never materialised. On 27 October, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry announced there are no plans to discuss the sending of CSTO member state troops on a peacekeeping mission to Syria.

Belarusian airborne troops.
Image: Vayar news agency.

In the 1990s, Russia also tried to convince Minsk to send Belarusian airborne troops as peacekeepers to Transnistria. Belarus did no such thing. Its participation in peacekeeping
operations has so far been limited to deploying a symbolic number of Belarusian military personnel as part of UN operations, in particular in Lebanon. Indeed, this is in stark contrast to many of Belarus’s neighbours, all of whom have participated in one international operation abroad or another.

Since 2014, the Belarusian government’s offer of peacekeeping services to Ukraine has to do with the transformation of Belarus and its neighbourhood. Minsk wishes to find a new, international niche for itself through engaging in conflict resolutions. A central goal is to break out from the tired “last European dictatorship” epithet. At the same time, the volatility of the region has pushed Belarus along this course of action. Russian support is uncertain and increasingly limited. Thus, the Belarusian government has tried both to defuse at least some tensions around Ukraine and to gain more international respect.

Until now, Minsk’s efforts to become more neutral have appeared problematic. Moscow, in general, has never appreciated these attempts. The West has been unsure of Belarusian claims of neutrality. However, if Belarus does deploy peacekeepers, then arguably Russia, the West and other neighbouring states would, in effect, be validating Belarus’s right not to choose sides.

Hazing investigation, local elections 2018, nuclear stress test – Belarus state
Belarusian experts Jaŭhien Prejhierman and Piotr Piatroŭski opine that a pause in Eurasian integration is necessary until the members resolve current controversies. The government announces the date and details of the 2018 local elections.

The Defence Ministry brings changes to the Piečy training centre after an outrageous hazing incident. The first Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant, Astraviec, successfully passes its stress test. Belarus improves its anti-corruption record. Officials and cultural figures discuss policies to raise the status of the Belarusian language.

This and more in the new edition of the Belarus state press digest.

Politics and foreign policy

The experts call for a pause in Eurasian integration. Narodnaja Hazieta, a newspaper, provides the opinions of Belarusian experts Jaŭhien Prejhierman and Piotr Piatroŭski on the state of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). In just a few years, the EEU overcame several development stages that took the EU several decades: a customs union, a single economic space and an economic union. However, the result is that none of these platforms operate properly. Each contains numerous barriers, exceptions and limitations. Member states do not fully implement agreements. Deadlines for eliminating exemptions from the single market are continually postponed, including oil and gas prices, which are particularly sensitive for Belarus.

This simply contradicts the spirit of the alliance and violates the interests of the participating states. Instead of bringing member states together, it increases strategic
uncertainty and vulnerability. Therefore, if the countries really want to build a strong mutually beneficial union, there must be a respite from further integration. It is for this reason that Belarus has proposed a moratorium on any new decisions in the EEU until the implementation of previously reached agreements.

**Elections to local councils will be held on 18 February 2018.** The state plans to allocate about $10.5m for election funding, but Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka has urged the authorities to save rubles anywhere possible, writes Belarus Segodnia, a daily newspaper. The Chairman of the Central Commission for Elections and Republican Referendums, Lidzija Jarmošyna, announced the government has no obligation to invite international observers to elections to local councils.

Nevertheless, the President underlines the special role of observation and offers a possibility for short-term observation to all foreign diplomats accredited in the Republic of Belarus. Organisations that interact with international structures in the field of local self-government are allowed to invite experts and observers from partner organisations, too. Jarmošyna also said that since business plays an essential role in the life of our country, it should be well represented within local councils.

**Military**

The Defence Ministry has instituted major changes at the Piečy training centre after a brutal hazing incident allegedly led to the death of private Aliaksandr Korżyč. It ordered the replacement of the junior command staff and sent 20 sergeants from the 3rd and 307th schools to other military units.

Uładzimir Makaraŭ, the press secretary for the Defence Ministry’s Ideology Directorate, assured the public that the
transfers will not spread hazing practices. Those who carried out and were involved in the hazing activities are already under investigation. After the death of the soldier, the Investigations Committee (equivalent to the FBI in the United States) opened 15 criminal cases against officers stationed at the Piečy training centre.

New (left) vs old (right) uniform. Photo: sb.by The Belarusian army changes its uniform. The reform aims to make the uniform more lightweight and practical. Many servicemen will be able don new winter garb in a month. The traditional Soviet hat with ear-flaps known to many generations will be dismissed and replaced with a crocheted hat.

The jacket collar will turn from fur to fleece, which is
cheaper and several times lighter. The costly black leather belts will be replaced with protective colour textile belts. In total, the new uniform is lighter by a third. Recent research by the Defence Ministry has shown that lighter and higher quality materials make soldiers more capable.

Public policy

The Belarusian Astraviec nuclear power plant (NPP) successfully passed its stress test. The Emergency Ministry’s Nuclear and Radiation Safety Department has published a national report on the results of a series of stress tests for Astraviec plant, reports Zviazda, a state-owned daily newspaper. The tests checked the resistance of the NPP to threatening phenomena that can hypothetically happen in Belarus: strong winds and squalls, tornadoes, large hail stones, dust storms, strong blizzards, ice, fog, drought, as well as combinations of these phenomena.

According to Department Head Volha Luhoŭskaja, the NPP at Astraviec is resistant to emergency situations similar to Fukushima. The NPP, which is constructed to the latest generation Russian ‘3+ design,” fully meets the highest international safety standards. Belarusian specialists have already submitted the report to the European Group for the Supervision of Nuclear Safety and the European Commission for international review.

Belarus improves its anti-corruption record. An interdepartmental conference at the Academy of Public Administration discussed anti-corruption law application and its further improvement in Belarus. Transparency International states that in the corruption perception index, Belarus rose from 107th place to 79th in 2016. A survey of Belarusian economists conducted among small and medium-sized businesses shows that the actual rating of the country is much higher and is at the level of Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia.
One newspaper claimed that international experts regard Belarusian anti-corruption legislation as some of the most progressive and effective in the world. Prosecutor General Aliaksandr Kaniuk pointed out that the country is currently implementing policies that minimise corruption: limiting state interference in business, easing firefighting, sanitary, environmental and other requirements, abolishing administrative checks, simplifying procedures for obtaining certificates, approvals, and other permits.

Can the Belarusian language play a greater role in society? On 11 November, Belarus Segodnia held a roundtable on the Belarusian language, featuring both pro-governmental figures dealing with the language policy (MP Ihar Marzaliuk, ideologist Vadzim Hihin, Iryna Bulaŭkina from the Ministry of Education) and nationalists from the opposition (artist Mikola Kupava and historian Lieanid Lyč). The participants agreed that the vast majority of Belarusians want to live in an independent country, and no Belarusian nation and statehood is possible without the Belarusian language, history and cultural heritage.
The opposition speakers claimed that the role of the Belarusian language can be improved only through its wider use at the highest levels of education. Officials responded that forced Belarusianisation will lead to its rejection by the citizens, and therefore soft methods should be used in this process.

The state press digest is based on the review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.

Belarus is strengthening military cooperation with UAE

From 25 October to 6 November 2017, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka held an official visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Belarusian delegation included two of Lukashenka’s sons: the elder, Viktar, and the youngest, Mikalaj. Despite taking time off for some autumn vacationing, the Belarusian leader also managed to make a couple of important agreements in the security sphere.

Belarus is developing both economic and security relations with UAE. This will likely result in new contracts in the defence industry. In addition, the UAE is providing more financial help and investment for Belarus.

An official, working vacation

Despite the fact that this year marks 25 years of diplomatic relations between Belarus and the UAE, the United Arab
Emirates cannot be called a state of great importance for Belarusian foreign policy. The frequency of the Belarusian president’s visits there confirms this: one can count five visits throughout the last ten years. In 2014 and 2016, Alexander Lukashenka visited the UAE accompanied by his younger son Mikalaj and his eldest son Viktar. In 2014, he even managed to play hockey in Abu Dhabi. Lukashenka also flew to the UAE in 2007 and 2013.

It is not the first time Lukashenka scheduled a trip to the UAE from the end of October to the beginning of November. In fact, this period is usually the time for autumn vacation in Belarusian schools. Apparently, 13-year-old Mikalaj Lukashenka, in particular, enjoys these sorts of “working visits.”

Another important detail is that Lukashenka donned a tie only once during his 12-day visit. The tie made its appearance at a meeting with the Abu Dhabi crown prince. This suggests the primary reason for the visit was to take a rest and to provide a good vacation for the family, especially for his beloved youngest son Mikalaj. At the same time, the Belarusian leader managed to combine vacation with business. Indeed, Lukashenka discussed important issues in the security field.

On 2 November, Alexander Lukashenka met with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, who was visiting the United Arab Emirates, too. In addition to discussing the implementation of previously reached agreements, the two presidents also brought up security cooperation. For example, they highlighted the resumption of work by a bilateral commission to properly demarcate the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. The meeting between Poroshenko and Lukashenka highlighted urgent issues in Belarus-Ukraine relations, which need to be solved at the highest level.
Earlier, on 27 October, the Belarus’s presidential press-office reported the agreement of a loan between the Development Bank of Belarus and the Khalifa Fund for Entrepreneurship Development. The Fund will provide the Bank with about $25m for the development of private initiatives, innovation and regional projects, and the creation of jobs in Belarus.

Economic relations between the two states are improving. From January to August 2017, exports from Belarus to the UAE amounted to $44.8m (an approximately 318 per cent increase compared to the same period last year). For the first 6 months of 2017, the amount of direct UAE investment to Belarus exceeded $11m (more, than for the whole last year).

Strategic interests

On 5 November, Alexander Lukashenka met with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander-in-Chief Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. They discussed spheres of bilateral cooperation and prospects for the further development of relations. It is probable, though, the main item on the agenda was security and defence. Especially, taking recent developments into consideration.
On 15–16 October 2017, Abu Dhabi hosted the eighth meeting of the Joint Belarusian-UAE Committee for Military-Technical Cooperation. According to the official press-release, committee members discussed the implementation of previous decisions and their aftereffects. New cooperation projects were also put forward. The sides noted the high level of cooperation achieved and confirmed their mutual interest in the further development of military-technical cooperation between Belarus and the UAE.

“Yabhon Flash 20” UAV by ADCOM Systems

Earlier, during a military parade in Minsk on 3 July 2017, people could observe an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the BELAR YS-EX, which is a modification of the Yabhon Flash 20 UAV manufactured by UAE company ADCOM Systems. For their part, UAE representatives showed interest in Belarus’s own Berkut UAV, which is developed by the 558 Aircraft Repair Plant.

Four enterprises will represent the Belarusian military industry at the 2017 Dubai Airshow from 12–16 November 2017: (1) Closed joint stock company BelTechExport; (2) Open joint stock company (OJSC) KB Radar—the management company for Radar Systems holding; (3) OJSC 2566 Electronic Weapons Repair Plant; and (4) the Scientific and Production Centre of Multifunctional Unmanned Systems at the Belarusian National
From harems to tank tractors

In late March 2016, the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MWTP) and the Al Badie Trading Establishment, a company from the United Arab Emirates, signed a contract to supply the UAE Defence Ministry with tank tractors. The all-wheel drive (8×8) MZKT-741351 tractor—equipped with either the MZKT-999 421 or the MZKT-837 211 trailer—can carry up to three tracked and wheeled armoured vehicles or 20 to 40-feet containers weighing up to 136 tons.

For Belarus, the purchase of these particular vehicles is significant. The UAE already has 20 American Oshkosh M1070A0 tractors. The Belarusian and American vehicles are propelled by the same engine, the Caterpillar C18 diesel. However, the key difference is that the Belarusian MWTP tractor has more power (812 hp). Given the almost two-fold superiority in load capacity (136 tons vs. 75), a slight lag in the maximum speed (70 km/h vs. 80 km/h) is negligible.

Indeed, MWTP has been somewhat of a success story in the UAE market. MWTP’s first contract dates back to a private order by...
a sheikh in 1997. The sheikh wished to have a “mobile apartment” when he took falconry trips into the desert. The full motorcade consisted of three heavy vehicles: the first one for the sheikh, the second for his harem, and the third one for goods.

MWTP successfully fulfilled the order, fitting special wheeled chassis to the MZKT-79097-30 for the desert conditions. The extraordinary contract was delivered on time and with high quality. After that, UAE leaders saw MWTP as a trusted supplier, capable of developing and fitting tractors for different needs.

While the finance and investment statistics continue to improve, Belarus-UAE relations are focusing not just on economic issues, but on security cooperation, too. The Emirates are looking for new, and relatively cheap, technologies and products in Belarus. Belarusian officials are trying to attract Arab investments and to gain access to Western military technologies, which are restricted due to sanctions. One can expect joint projects in electronic and radioelectronic warfare, as well as information security. Belarus will also try to get more involved in the UAV high-tech market in order to improve its own force capabilities and to become influential in this fast-developing, niche market.

Have Belarus’s neighbours convinced its military to open up?

Minsk continues to face fall-out from the West-2017 military exercises. Earlier this month, Russian media outlets, such
as *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, criticised Belarus for “excessive openness” in allowing foreigners to observe its military drills. Remarkably, this openness in regards to military drills corresponds with signs of increasing openness inside Belarus itself.

On 1 November, Tatsyana Karatkevich and Andrei Dzmitryeu, leaders of the *Tell the Truth* social movement, met a group of leading Belarusian military officials to put forward proposals to solve various issues facing the national army. Even the Chief of General Staff, Aleh Belakoneu, was at the meeting. Top military officials meeting with opposition activists is unprecedented in Belarus.

Indeed, the 1 November meeting is the latest in a series of moves by the Belarusian government, which seems to be cautiously taking steps to make the Belarusian military more transparent. Now, officials in Minsk are responding to negative incidents not simply by meting out punishment against perpetrators. It appears the army leadership want to enable soldiers to communicate more freely with the world outside the barracks, promising open investigations and installing new technology to help prevent abuse.

**Generals swear to reveal details of investigation into the death of a soldier**

On 3 October, a soldier in Barysau most probably committed suicide, because of mistreatment. The army, and even Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka, responded to the incident with more attention than in previous cases. The reaction may go to improve transparency and responsibility in the army. On the one hand, Lukashenka fired the head and other officers at the facility where the victim had served. In fact,
the army began checks of all local commissioned and non-commissioned officers at the facility. So far, a dozen military personnel have been detained.

On the other hand, the Defence Ministry is expressing a willingness to keep the public informed. On 25 October, the Defence Ministry issued a statement in which it offered guarantees that the public would get all the details of the Barysau investigation. Never before have the Belarusian armed forces seemed to care so much about public opinion.

Likewise, on 8 November, the media reported that henceforth soldiers serving at the Barysau military facility would be allowed to carry mobile phones with them at all times. Previously, soldiers were allowed to use mobile phones, however, their phones were stored in specially designated areas, which meant they were inaccessible most of the time. The Defence Ministry praised the decision by Barysau facility's commander and, thereby, appears to support introducing this more liberal regime at similar military facilities.

Earlier on 4 November, answering questions online, Defence Minister Andrej Raukou said that ICTV cameras would be installed in barracks to help prevent mistreatment and abuse. The minister’s decision to communicate with citizens directly
online also appears to be a response to the tragic events that took place in October.

**Is the Belarusian army about to open up to NATO?**

In a similar vein, the Belarusian government has for some years struggled to demonstrate its peaceful intentions. On 3 November, Moscow-based newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* criticised the “exaggerated openness at the West-2017” military exercises. Indeed, Minsk made a point of pursuing its own policy with regards to the exercises. Unlike Moscow, people were invited to view Belarusian maneuvers: it invited more than 80 diplomats and admitted almost 280 foreign journalists to watch Belarusian parts of the exercises, in which about 10,000 soldiers participated.

![Image: vsr.mil.by](image)

Speaking to *Verdens Gang*, a Norwegian daily, Ragnhild Valle Hustad, Chief of the Army Control Office at Norway’s Defense Ministry, said her office considers Minsk’s invitation “as a kind of reciprocation after we had invited Belarusians to observe the Cold Response exercises in Norway two years ago.”

The Belarusian government believes this level of openness has paid off. OSCE observers from Norway and Sweden on 20
September told *Verdens Gang*—which otherwise reported on the joint Belarus–Russia military exercises in a highly critical tone—that they had not found anything to condemn in Belarus’s own exercises. Indeed, Colonel Lieutenant Thomas Möller, sent by the Swedish Defence Ministry, called the question of whether neighbouring states have reasons to be wary of Minsk and Moscow “a political question.” That is, Minsk managed to secure relatively positive assessments of its drills from military professionals of influential Western countries.

**Successful confidence-building with Ukraine**

Minsk can see increasing military transparency as not just some abstract norm, but as an effective means of increasing mutual trust with its neighbours. The increased openness of the West military drills have, perhaps, helped produce a positive development in military relations with Ukraine. Kyiv invited two Belarusian military observers to watch the active phase of the Ukrainian-American Rapid Trident–2017 drills in September near Lviv.

The invitation was not only remarkable, but unprecedented. After all, in June, speaking at Ostrogorski Forum, Ukrainian Ambassador Ihor Kyzym accused the Belarusian government of lacking transparency in its military drills. Belarusian foreign ministry responded by pointing out that

> At our invitation, the military observers of Ukraine, as well as other neighbouring states, observed the active phases of all the main military exercises—beginning with Nyoman-2001 to West-2013... [While] Ukraine, within the framework of the Vienna documents in this period, has never invited military observers from Belarus to monitor the largest military activities conducted on Ukraine’s territory. [Even] the representatives of the Belarusian military attaché apparatus
in Ukraine since 2013 have not been invited to any military multinational or national exercise conducted on Ukraine’s territory.

Image: BelTA news agency

The dispute between Minsk and Kyiv over observing each other’s military preparations continued as Ukrainian military observers in September fiercely criticised Minsk after watching the West drills. According to them, the exercise had been only “conditionally open” and offensive in character. Therefore, Belarusians observing Rapid Trident–2017 has become a major move to further improve bilateral relations.

The examples cited above prove that the Belarusian state is transforming. Even the army is choosing to admit its shortcomings and deal with them. Some of these reform decisions have been taken because of tragic events, like the death of the soldier in Barysau on 3 October.

Other decisions have been taken by officials perhaps after learning of positive practices in other Europeans countries. The Belarusian military’s decision to open up the West-2017 exercises after earlier seeing military drills in NATO countries supports this idea. Greater openness and responsibility will help to solve a host of problems. Inside Belarus, this can assist the army not only to become more efficient, but also to been seen as more professional and secure by citizens. Carrying on this sort of behaviour with
other states, Minsk can so reduce tensions in the region.

Lukashenka’s recent appointments strengthen Belarusian independence and identity

Over the last few months, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka has made a number of high-level appointments that indicate “Belarusianisation” of the government.

A number of new military chiefs never studied at Russian military schools in contrast to most of their peers. Certain candidates known to speak Belarusian on a daily basis also received positions, for example the rector for Mahilioŭ State University (Lukashenka’s alma mater), the Information Minister and the Deputy Foreign Minister.

This policy is intended to strengthen the country’s independence and national identity. It differs from Lukashenka’s traditional approach to policy insofar that it is not purely statist and adds a cultural element to Belarusian nation-building.

Siloviki: loyal technocrats in lieu of Russian-educated

On 18 July, President Lukashenka appointed Alihe Dvihaliou to be the Chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee.
Until then he was the commander of the Air Force and Air Defense of the Armed Forces of Belarus. Like his predecessor Siarhiej Hurulioŭ and many other high-rank Belarusian siloviki, personnel who oversee state security and power ministries, he was born in Russia. But unlike most of them, he received his full military education and pursued his career in Belarus.

According to military establishment sources for Naša Niva, a Belarusian newspaper, Alieh Dvihaliou casts the impression of being an “intellectual,” a “patriot,” and an “expert in military equipment.” According to the Belarusian military expert Aliaksandr Aliesin, he is a competent manager and technical expert. By his appointment, the leadership is expressing their view that the military-industrial sector needs modern managers, rather than regular military men at the top.
The 49-year old Ihar Holub, who is Dvihaliou’s former deputy, replaced Dvihaliou as commander of the Air Force and Air Defense. Holub, too, appears to be part of the new wave of officers. He was born in Ukraine and has also never studied in Russia. This serves as further evidence that Lukashenka is pursuing a policy of removing Russia-affiliated siloviki from high positions and replacing them with those loyal to Belarus’s independence. The Belarusian leader seems to have taken notice of Ukraine’s predicament, whereby many high-level officers turned out to be Russian agents after the ousting of Yanukovych.

Along with this trend, special and military services saw a number of shakeups after abuses were revealed to the president. On 13 October, Lukashenka removed all acting heads...
for the Operations and Analysis Centre—the government agency responsible for information security—until an audit of its practices had been completed. The nature of their offences has yet to be revealed.

At the same time, a number of military officers are under criminal investigation after outrageous acts of hazing led to the death of a soldier in a Minsk region military unit. New officer appointments may follow as more facts of army hazing emerge.

**University rectors: ‘healthy nationalism’ instead of dissent**

At the end of September, Lukashenka changed a number of rectors. Andrej Karóľ, 44, became Rector of Belarusian State University, considered the top-ranked university in Belarus. Previously he was rector of Hrodna State University. Lukashenka, appointing him, mentioned that, “We need to establish order at BSU and... take it to a new level.”

The new rector is not respected within civil society. During his tenure, purges of dissenting academics continued unabated at Hrodna University. He came from a peripheral university, did not demonstrate any high achievements as a prominent scholar or manager. On the other hand, he does seem to have a knack for carrying out decisions issued from higher-up.
Another notable appointment came to Lukashenka’s own alma mater—Mahilioŭ State University. The position of University Rector was granted to Dzianis Duk, a 40-year-old historian and archaeologist and previous vice-rector of Polack State University.

People who know him personally call him a “serious researcher,” an “outstanding person and scholar.” Interestingly, Lukashenka highly praised a joint work written by Duk and Volha Liaŭko, *The Origins of Belarusian Statehood: Polack and Viciebsk Lands in the 9th–18th Centuries*. He characterised their approach to history as a “healthy nationalism.”

Last but not least, Duk speaks Belarusian in his daily life, which is quite rare among Belarusian officials. Lukashenka, who received his historical education at Mahilioŭ State University and always praises his teachers, may want to revitalise historical studies there—the most important part of this rejuvenation being a “healthy nationalism.”
Information and foreign affairs – growing Belarusianisation

The appointment of Aliaksandr Karliukievič as the new Information Minister on 28 September continued this trend of Belarusianisation within the establishment. Karliukievič worked as deputy information minister this past year, and before that he headed the Literature and Art state holding (2006-2011) and the newspaper and publishing house Zviazda (2011-2016). Although he has always been on the official side of the cultural community, he represents a definitively patriotic part of the establishment, which is clear from speeches he has made on TV. Last but not least, he always speaks Belarusian in the media.

This August, Andrej Dapkiunas was appointed Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Prior to that, he served as Permanent Representative of Belarus to the United Nations, and was replaced by another Deputy Foreign Minister Valiancin Rybakoŭ. Dapkiunas has remained a little known, but interesting personality in the Belarusian government. He shares kinship with the great 20th century Belarusian poet, Janka Kupala, and his parents were high-level cultural officials in Soviet Belarus.
In 2011, Lukashenka recalled the diplomat from New York. The authorities suspected him of having links with opposition presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau. Allegedly, Dapkiunas’s embassy colleagues had tipped Belarusian authorities off. He had to undergo interrogation at the KGB headquarters in Minsk, but managed to prove his innocence and returned to New York.

At his first speech before parliament this October, Dapkiunas persistently spoke Belarusian, even when deputies asked him questions in Russian. This behaviour has seldom taken place in parliament—if ever at all. However, former Belarusian diplomat Igar Gubarevich told Belarus Digest that Dapkiunas’s high professionalism might also have been a strong contributor to his appointment, while his position on Belarusian language use played a more minor role.

The above mentioned appointments in military, information, education and foreign affairs ministries indicate that Lukashenka is pursuing a firm strategy of Belarusianisation of
the government. The strategy is intended to strengthen the country’s independence. What differs it from his previous policies is an emphasis not on a statist, but rather on a cultural approach to nation-building. Therefore, this could become a major shift in the shaping of Belarusian statehood.

Will Azerbaijan help Belarus to become more independent?

On 8 October 2017, Defence Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Colonel-General Zakir Hasanov, visited Minsk. The visit lasted until 10 October. During the visit, Hasanov held meetings with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka as well as with all the senior military leadership of the country.

The Azerbaijani guest probably made an agreement with his Belarusian counterparts on widening military industrial cooperation and supplying Baku with “Polonaise” multiple launch rocket systems. Azerbaijan deems the new weapons necessary to balance an Armenian military build-up.

“Iskander” vs “Polonaise”

One should definitely pay attention to the structure of the visit. First, Colonel-General Hasanov met with President Lukashenka. The Belarusian leader’s words during the meeting were vague yet revealing. “I do not want to make excuses about the nature of our cooperation. I just want to say that our relationship does not in any case violate any international treaties or resolutions of the UN Security Council. We are
sovereign independent states, and we are entitled to identify the areas of cooperation which correspond to the time and the needs of our countries,” stated Lukashenka.

“Iskander-E” in Armenia. Source: azatutyun.am

Such statements hint at serious intentions of military-technical cooperation, particularly in the supply of Belarusian “Polonaise” multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to Azerbaijan. The arrangements have a certain logic: Armenia’s deployment of Russian “Iskander-E” tactical missile complexes on its territory has forced Baku to look for a symmetrical response.

The “Iskander-E” tactical missile complex can reach targets up to 280 km away. Armenia thus has a missile range that covers almost all of Azerbaijan. With the latest modifications, the Belarusian “Polonaise” system is capable of shooting to 300 km. This modification was presented during the ADEX-2016 military exhibition in Baku last year. Azerbaijan has also shown interest in Belarusian developments in areas of electronic warfare, radar systems, wheel chassis and anti-aircraft missile systems.
Belarusian weapons for Azerbaijani oil

Having discussed the main issues of military cooperation with President Lukashenka, Colonel-General Hasanov spoke on more technical questions to the country’s top military leadership. On 10 October, the Azerbaijani Defence Minister signed a military cooperation plan for 2018 together with his Belarusian counterpart Andrej Raŭkoŭ. As is usual in such cases, the details of the plan remain unknown to the public.

On the same day, Colonel-General Hasanov met with Belarusian State Military-Industrial Committee Chairman Alieh Dvihalioŭ. In addition, Hasanov visited the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant and the “Belspetsvneshtechnika” state enterprise, which, among other things, deals in arms exports. The Azerbaijani defence minister familiarized himself with the latest modifications to the MLRS “Polonaise,” as well as with air defence and electronic warfare means. At the final stage of his visit to Belarus, Hasanov held a discussion with Belarus Security Council Secretary Stanislau Zaś.

It is also important to note that Secretary Zaś met with the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, during his visit to Baku on 27 September 2017. Once again, military and industrial cooperation represented the main topic of the meeting. Supposedly, the Belarusian security council secretary came with a proposition to Baku and discussed the details with President Aliyev. The following step was Zakirov’s visit to Minsk in order to present Azerbaijan’s answer and sign the documents.
While Baku mainly orients itself around military cooperation, Minsk is also hoping for the growth of economic relations between the two states. There is an assumption that the Belarusian military industrial complex might get financial support from Azerbaijan to develop and produce new weapons. With the economic slowdown Belarus is experiencing at the moment, such collaboration seems optimal for both states.

At the same time, Belarusian authorities are working to diversify the inflow of energy resources to Belarus. Previous deals to supply Belarusian refineries with Azerbaijani oil have been successful. Widening such cooperation is essential for Minsk against a background of continually worsening relations with Russia.

On the subject of propitious Belarusian-Azerbaijani projects in various spheres, one should remember that Lukashenka and Aliyev are on good personal relations. The Belarusian leader visits Azerbaijan as often as Russia and China, which means places high importance on ties with Azerbaijan.
Loud Yerevan, silent Moscow

The character of Belarusian-Azerbaijani relations raises serious questions in Armenia and Russia, who are Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) members along with Belarus. This situation becomes even more complex when the Belarus-Armenia relationship is taken into account. On the same day Colonel-General Hasanov began his tour of Minsk, Belarusian Special Operations Forces completed their maneuvers as part of the CSTO “Search-2017” military exercises, which took place on Armenian territory. This can serve as a canonical example of the Belarusian authorities’ much-touted “multi-vector foreign policy.”

But in terms of the Azerbaijan-Belarus relationship, one can expect harsh rhetoric from Yerevan. It is important to remember that at one time Armenia proposed to exclude Belarus from the CSTO. From the end of 2016 to the beginning of 2017, Belarus and Kazakhstan both attempted to block the appointment of an Armenian representative to the position of CSTO head. Supplying strategic weapons to Baku will definitely not make relations between Minsk and Yerevan any better.

Alexander Lukashenka and Ilham Aliyev. Source: kp.by
One can’t expect Russia to publicly show its disapproval of Belarusian-Azerbaijani cooperation. Moscow’s options are to try to contain their partnership or to pressure Belarus. The reason for Russia’s indirect reaction is clear: Russia itself is the largest weapons supplier to Baku. But Armenian authorities seem to have ignored this fact. They can blame Belarus for destabilizing the region and undermining the national security of a CSTO member-state, but Yerevan will never make the same claims of the Kremlin. Indeed, especially not after having deployed Russian strategic weapons on its own territory.

The development of cooperation with Azerbaijan plays extremely important role for Belarus in the light of the latest Belarusian security agenda. After the failure to carry out an information and public relations campaign during the “West-2017” military exercises and a number of provocations from Russia, Belarus is trying to restore its image as an independent actor.

Thus, working together with Baku on strategically important projects should prove to the international community, including close neighbours, that Minsk is a true sovereign player on the international stage and a stable partner in the security sphere. Arguably, this is even more valuable at present than temporary economic benefits for Belarus.

On whose side is Belarus in the Syrian civil war?

On 7 September, the Israeli air force attacked the Syrian military’s Scientific Studies and Research Centre. According
to the *Times of Israel*, Belarusians may have been among those working at the Centre.

Meanwhile, a Bulgarian hacker group recently published documents showing that Silk Way, an Azerbaijani airline that transports arms for Syrian opposition groups, directed some of its flights via Minsk. Concurrently, Russian and Polish media circulated reports of alleged arms deals between Minsk and sponsors of Syrian opposition groups for several millions euros.

Belarus thus is accused of supplying all sides in the Syrian civil war. But available evidence proves that Minsk is an indirect participant. Its involvement in the Syrian conflict as supplier of weapons is limited to working with intermediaries acting on behalf of Western countries and their allies.

**Belarus has no missile technology for Damascus**

On 15 September, the *Times of Israel* published an article about alleged defence cooperation between the Belarusian and Syrian governments. It quoted Ronen Solomon, an Israeli freelance intelligence analyst, saying there were Belarusians working at the Syrian military’s Scientific Studies and Research Center helping Damascus to improve its ballistic missiles.

However, the Syrian opposition website *Zaman al-Wasl* reported it was Russians, Iranians and North Koreans, who had worked at the bombed facility. Solomon told *Times of Israel* “that given the nature of the site and Russia’s interests in the region, it’s unlikely that Moscow would send experts to such a facility,” hence they should have been Belarusians.
He also insisted that “Belarus ... is particularly skilled in improving existing missiles with better guidance systems ... Belarusian companies ... tout also their preparedness to sell technologies coveted by Hezbollah, like anti-aircraft systems, drones and shore-to-ship missiles.”

Belarus, however, has little to offer to Damascus in terms of missile technologies. and that little technology it itself acquired in the most recent years. Minsk inherited a great deal of military technologies from the Soviet Union, but has next to nothing to build missiles. In the early 2010s, it even had to ask the Chinese, and maybe also recruited some Ukrainians, to help assemble multiple-launch rocket systems. These types of systems are the most basic for a country intending to master missile technologies. Although this year Belarusian defence companies demonstrated something similar to short-range cruise or ballistic missile at a defence industry exhibition in Minsk, these are not the types of technologies that interest either Syria or its Iranian allies.

Moreover, even if Belarus had something to offer the Syrian government, that would be a doubtful deal for Belarus. Minsk knows these sorts of deals would hardly bring money from an embattled leader such as Assad. It would also undermine Belarusian relations with Assad’s opponents, particularly rich, Arab, conservative regimes.

A litany accusations
In 2012, *The Atlantic*, a respectable US media outlet, reported that Minsk might be trying to help Syria build fibre-optic gyroscopes for surface-to-surface missiles. No proof has ever been publicly presented.

Nonetheless, since 2012, the US Treasury has maintained sanctions on the Belarusian defence firm Belvneshpromservice (BVPS). The sanctions have been imposed for violating the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act, which forbids supplying these states with any materials and equipment related to weapons of mass destruction or cruise or ballistic missiles.

It is not clear what triggered the imposition of US sanctions. Back in 2012, the media reported that the sanctions had been imposed for Minsk providing Syria with “fuses for general purpose aerial bombs.” But, in fact, it could have been for a deal with any of the three black-listed countries. Indeed, during that period Minsk is documented to have supplied radars to Iran.
Arms for Syrian opposition: How much did Minsk know?

Meanwhile, on 30 August, the Russian web-site EADaily published a lengthy piece on alleged Belarusian-supplied arms to the radical Syrian opposition. According to Russian journalists, “Deliveries were implemented through a chain of intermediaries, but Minsk cannot claim ignorance about the final recipients.”

The EADaily article was not the first report about Belarusian arms reaching Syrian opposition via the Balkans. As early as September 2015, American media outlet Buzzfeed revealed that a US contractor via a Bulgarian intermediary had bought 700 missiles for “Konkurs” anti-tank systems from Belarus. Moreover, the Buzzfeed article alleged that American instructors sent to teach Syrian opposition fighters how to use the systems had passed through Belarus en route to Syria.

This may just be the tip of the iceberg. In an official report, the Bulgarian Economics Ministry catalogued €37.8m in arms imports from Belarus to Bulgaria for 2015. In 2016,
Belarusian arms imports rose to €84.2m.

Most of these deliveries were sent via Romania. This ensured the arms were subject to customs declaration. Therefore, according to official Romanian Foreign Ministry reports, Belarusian military exports to Bulgaria via Romania in 2015 not only included smoothbore arms with a calibre of more than 20mm, but also various arms with a calibre more than 12.7mm, and ammunition, missiles, artillery shells, and bombs. In 2016, the Romanian Foreign Ministry tracked imports of missile systems, artillery shells with a calibre of more than 122mm, RPG grenades, missiles, an armoured vehicle, and aircraft-cannon shells.

These shipments stand out, because before 2015 Belarus scarcely exported arms to Bulgaria. For instance, according to the Bulgarian Economics Ministry, in 2013 Bulgaria imported missiles, artillery shells and military electronic equipment from Belarus worth €411,000.

**Arms from Belarus ensures alibis for sponsors of Syrian opposition**

Of course, these accusatory reports are shtum about the final destination of the Belarusian arms. Bulgaria has no need for these weapons. Russian *EADaily*, furthermore, noticed that the exports from Belarus to Bulgaria coincide with the value of official Bulgarian exports of similar arms in similar quantities to the US and Saudi Arabia. It is most likely that the Belarusian arms went to the Syrian opposition.

Oddly enough, Bulgaria itself manufactures almost all the types of equipment and ammunition that it bought from Minsk. Such deals, however, make perfect sense, because Minsk still
has these items left over from Soviet times. Such arms, if sent to Syria, would not attract much attention in a country that for many decades had bought Soviet arms.

Nonetheless, the situation is even more complicated. The arms might have gone from Bulgaria to various destinations outside Syria, as well. Hackers from the group Anonymous Bulgaria have recently published stolen documents from Azerbaijani airline company Silk Way. The documents appear to show the company has been transporting arms for the Syrian opposition. The documents also indicate Silk Way had flights originating from Minsk, but not heading for the Middle East. On 14 February, the company reportedly transported ammunition from Minsk via Bulgaria to Afghanistan.

In sum, Western and Russian media regularly speculate on Belarus’s alleged ties to various parties in the Syrian civil war. The secretive and relatively unknown Belarusian regime naturally attracts such accusations. In particular, this sort of speculation provides explanations for otherwise murky cases, like that of the Syrian missile centre.

In addition, accusations for alleged Belarusian assistance to
either the Syrian government or to the opposition can be used as a political tool against Minsk.

If the allegations are proven, unscrupulous deals in such a conflict amount to a gross violation of international security regulations. The responses by more influential states or a global power like the US or Russia to such a violation would likely be much harsher than their reactions to human rights violations committed by Minsk.

Belarus-Russian military exercises: the story still not over?

On 28 September, the last train filled with Russian troops that had participated in the West-2017 military exercises reportedly left Belarus. Some hours later, however, Commander–in–Chief of Ukraine’s Armed Forces Viktor Muzhenko disputed the news. He claimed only a few Russian military units had returned to their garrisons in Russia, and the rest of Russian troops had, in fact, stayed in Belarus.

Muzhenko’s claims follow a string of other accusations and speculations over possible covert aspects to the Belarus-Russian military drills that made up West-2017. Minsk and Moscow have held the “West” military drills regularly since 2009. Each time the exercises are held, they cause observers to speculate about the hidden, aggressive intentions behind the war games.

This year Minsk tried its best to open up the drills to counter negative publicity. Yet, it found this task immensely
Moscow presents an exaggerated picture, and opponents are eager to accept it.

IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly, a review that covers security issues, published contrasting statistics on the number of Russian troops involved in the West-2017 military exercises. On 28 September, the review wrote that “estimates ranged from Russia’s official number of 13,000 to more than 100,000.” Huge differences in troop-number estimates among analysts—even after the drills finished—point to a lack of evidence-based expertise on the matter.

To escape that problem, IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly announced the main issue was not to ascertain the exact number of Russian troops involved. The weekly cited a NATO source as saying “it was the force posture and the quality of the troops that matter.”

Of course, confusion about the West-2017 exercises also stems from the Kremlin’s behaviour. Moscow lost no opportunity to exaggerate the scale of the exercises and to make matters ambiguous.
While Minsk firmly insisted the exercises are limited to a separatist conflict scenario—meant to resemble conflicts in Kosovo and Ukraine’s Donbas region—on Belarusian territory, Russian military officials have been ambiguously promising to hold military exercises “from sea to sea.” That is, Moscow tried to link the West-2017 exercises with its other military training activities, some as far away as the Arctic.

Minsk attempted to dispel Moscow’s hints and ambiguities. All the same, many foreign media outlets, politicians and pundits seemed eager to accept Russia’s more threatening portrayal of the exercises. The Kremlin appears to have succeeded in representing West-2017 as an effective, Russian show of force.

The Russian military tasked its psychological warfare division with making the drills appear large-scale. The following two cases discussed below illustrate Russian efforts at sowing confusion over Russian troop numbers.

The first case dates to the end of last year. In an unprecedented move, Russia’s defence ministry published information on the 4,162 train cars it allegedly ordered for transporting Russian troops to Belarus and back. Writing in Defense One, a defence analysis website, Finnish military expert Jyri Raitasalo pointed out, “With one Excel spreadsheet made public in late 2016, the West has been made to guess [at the number of troops to be on-board] for eight months.”
The second case relates to a 14 February news publication on the arrival of Russian First Tank Army units to Belarus. The news caught Minsk by surprise. In a matter of hours, Belarusian military officials dismissed that information. No additional tank units had arrived. Moscow, however, chose to keep the news published on official military websites. The aim appears again to be to spread uncertainty.

Nowhere to hide

Meanwhile, Minsk and Moscow can hardly conceal their massive military preparations from Western eyes. First, Western satellites can observe any location in Eastern Europe. Indeed, last year the Belling Cat website authors used satellite imagery to reveal the withdrawal of Russian aircraft which had been temporarily based in Belarus.

Second, regional and Western countries—both members and non-members of NATO—conduct surveillance flights over Belarusian and Russian territory according to quotas determined by the 1992 Treaty on Open Skies. In exchange, Belarus and Russia—the two countries form one single group under that Treaty—conduct flights over these countries’ territories.

Information collected in these flights is fed into a unified data-bank. About three dozen NATO member countries and states
aspiring to join the alliance can together conduct more flights and collect more information on the military capacities of Belarus and Russia than vice versa. Indeed, before the beginning of the West-2017 military exercises, on 4–8 September, the US and Ukraine conducted a surveillance flight over Belarus and Russia.

That is, Western and regional countries may have doubts about some minor details of the joint Belarus-Russian exercises, but not about their main features. It is logical to assume that intelligence agencies know exactly whether 13,000 or 100,000 participated in the drills, as such things cannot remain concealed under these circumstances.

**Fog of verbal war**

The many opportunities that regional and Western countries had to study the exercises make many statements about the drills by foreign politicians and media look odd. Though Belarus and Russia regularly conduct “West” military exercises causing some negative reactions, this year Minsk faced an unprecedented flurry of negative media coverage, both at regional and global levels.

Lithuanian president Grybauskaite even used an opportunity to address the UN General Assembly on 19 September to lash out at this year’s “West” exercise as a threat to international security. In addition, she also cited the Belarusian-built Astraviets nuclear power plant as a weapon from the “Kremlin’s arsenal.”

Bloomberg, a business news agency, went as far as to warn on 15 September, “If war breaks out with the West, it’s most likely to start in ‘Veyshnoria’ [the fictitious name Belarus’s General Staff gave the enemy zone in the West-2017 exercises].”
Often, foreign media, politicians and analysts denied any active role for Belarus in the exercises. A case in point is provided by the BBC’s media coverage. At least, on the first day of West-2017, the BBC World Service described the drills in its news summary as “Russian” exercises conducted in Belarus.

Even in the cases where Western media mentions Belarus, Russia is discussed first. Never mind the greatest number of troops involved were Belarusian—according to Minsk, more than 7,000 Belarusians trained together with less than 3,000 Russians. Moreover, the drills were concentrated on Belarusian territory and planning corresponded to standard training scenarios designed and used by the Belarusian military for several years.

Minsk has responded to all the negative coverage and statements in a restrained manner. For instance, reacting to Ukrainian accusations of Russian troops staying in Belarus after the exercise, Moscow mocked Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief as ‘professionally incompetent’ and elaborated on ‘degradation’ of Ukrainian General Staff. On the contrary, Minsk merely repeated that Russian troops had left.

In sum, the West-2017 exercises illustrate two key points. First, Minsk reluctantly joins in any show of power staged by Moscow. For the most part, Minsk can hold its ground when the
Kremlin pushes for more aggressive displays of military strength. Indeed, none of this is new. Minsk has defended its position on other major joint defence projects with Russia, such as over the establishment of the Single Air Defence System or the Russian airbase in Belarus.

The second point demonstrated by the West-2017 exercises is that it’s really a moot point whether Western or regional states understand Minsk’s policy. Foreign media coverage of the exercises show that Moscow’s opponents feel somewhat comfortable both with Russia’s exaggerated claims and with the illusions Russia paints of controlling Belarus. The statements of top officials from Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania in particular demonstrate this attitude.

Zapad 2017: limits of Belarusian independence, national unity, western attention — digest of Belarusian analytics

In September, analytics on Belarus both at home and abroad almost entirely focused on Zapad 2017 military exercises and related issues of security and defence.

Arciom Šrajbman claims that Russia showed Belarus the ceiling of its independence, Jaŭhien Prejhiерman responds that rumours about these limits are exaggerated. Andrej Jahoraŭ explains why Belarus was not occupied during Zapad 2017. Belarus in Focus notes that the military drill prompted a heated
discussion about national unity.

Zapad-2017 was also discussed by Bloomberg, ECFR, the National Interest Magazine, American Enterprise Institute and Lithuanian EESC.

This and more in the new edition of digest of Belarusian analytics.

Rumors About the Ceiling of Belarusian Independence Exaggerated – Jaŭhien Prejhierman, at TUT.BY, argues with a journalist Arciom Šrajbman and states that the limits of Belarusian sovereignty are determined not by Moscow or Kiev, but Minsk’s own ability to pragmatically manoeuvre between conflicting interests of neighbours. In fact, Zapad 2017 exercises showed that Belarus does not know how to effectively act in the information wars.

Why We Were Not Occupied. What Zapad 2017 Was About – Andrej Jahoraŭ, at Belarusian Journal, notes that the military Russo-Belarusian drills are over; no occupation took place. According to the expert, the most important things occurred in the information sphere. Zapad 2017 is a doctrine of a consociational war, with an empirical test of the parties’ reactions to information moves and attacks.

Poverty and vulnerable groups in Belarus. Consequences of the recession of 2015-2016 This issue is dedicated to the analysis of various aspects of absolute and relative poverty in the Belarusian regions

Belarus Is Shown the Ceiling Of Its Independence – Arciom Šrajbman, TUT.by, draws attention to two events of the last month, which remind the real limits of today’s Belarusian sovereignty. The journalist means an incident with a young Ukrainian Pavel Grib who was detained in Homiel and moved to Krasnodar detention centre and thousands of Russian soldiers who entered Belarus for the military exercises.

Belarus Is the Real Victim of Russia’s Zapad War Games (Op-
Jaūhien Prejhierman, The Moscow Times, notes that this year’s hype around Zapad 2017 exercises, obviously, reflects the West’s deep mistrust for Russia and its military. The analyst believes that Russia and the West need to understand that it is in everyone’s strategic interest to keep Belarus as a neutral ground for peace talks and not a part of the Russian-Western confrontation.

Putin Pointed out to Lukashenka His Place – Aliaksandr Aliesin, a military analyst, believes that Putin and Lukashenka separately inspected Zapad 2017 exercises because Russia wanted to show Lukashenka, that he is not an equal partner. The military exercises sharpened the contradictions between Russia and Belarus, while Lukashenka is still trying to play independence.

Situation In the Field of National Security And Defence of Belarus. August 2017 – According to monthly monitoring of Belarus Security Blog, the most important event of the month was the kidnapping of a Ukrainian citizen Pavel Grib by Russian special services in Homiel. Provocation was intended to cause a crisis in the Belarusian-Ukrainian relations.

Aliaksandr Lukashenka at Zapad-2017. Photo: president.gov.by

Zapad on Belarus’ Mind – A non-paper of the 7th Belarus Reality Check analyses the recent developments in EU-Belarus relations and concludes that Minsk will try further building trust with the West, and continuing to work with and appease Russia, as its only ally. Organised by EESC, the 7th Belarus Reality Check took place in June 2017, in Vilnius to contribute to the policy debate in and outside of Belarus.

The Zapad Military Exercise Reveals Putin’s Fear – Leonid Bershidsky, Bloomberg, considers the large-scale Russian military exercise known as Zapad, which started in Belarus on
14 September, as a propaganda success: it has alarmed Russia’s NATO neighbours and garnered so much Western media coverage that one might think it was an actual combat operation. It has also provided an important insight into the fears of the Russian and Belarusian rulers.

So Far From God, So Close To Russia: Belarus and the Zapad Military Exercise – Fredrik Wesslau & Andrew Wilson, ECFR, consider that fears that Russia may use Zapad 2017 as cover to carry out a hybrid operation in Belarus are overblown. Moscow has other levers with which it can coerce Minsk, and it neither needs nor is interested in another military adventure at the moment.

Zapad 2017: What It Reveals About the Prickly Russia-Belarus Relationship – Bruce McClintock & Bilyana Lilly, The National Interest Magazine, suppose that the Kremlin has little to gain from using Zapad 2017 as a pretext to establish the military presence in Belarus. Belarus continues to view Russia as its principal strategic military partner and seems likely to do so in the future.

Belarus’ Susceptibility to Russian Intervention – David R. Marples believes that Russia’s overriding geostrategic goal in Belarus is to keep a stable, relatively pro-Russian regime in power. Therefore, the chances of a Russian military intervention in Belarus are low for the near future.

Indicators of Belarus export activity in the 1998-2016: what are the chances for growth? The work analyses the indicators of export activity of Belarus in 1998-2016

Zapad-2017. Who Will Benefit From the Russian-Belarusian Drills – Arciom Šrajbman, Carnegie Moscow Centre, believes that despite all the reputational risks, Minsk will try to derive maximum diplomatic benefit from the military drills. On the one hand, Belarus shows to Western observers that they can trust to Minsk’s guarantees. On the other hand, Belarus will convince Moscow that it does not ‘follow the path of Ukraine’,
not being afraid to host large-scale exercises with Russian troops.

**West-2017 Russo-Belarusian Military Drill Causes Controversy in Belarusian Society** – Belarus in Focus notes that the September military drill prompted a heated discussion in civil society about national unity. The fact that the Belarusian authorities keep alternative political views exclusively outside the political system has increased the risks of external influences or interference in domestic political processes with possible destabilisation.

**West-2017: Facts and Analysis of Threats** – Ihar Tyškievič, the Ukrainian Institute of Future, argues whether there is a danger for Ukraine because of the joint military drills between Russia and Belarus. He concludes that the exercises will be held as they are publicly stated, and media noise will go away.

**Belarus Policy**

**Indicators of Belarus export activity in the 1998-2016: what are the chances for growth?** The work analyses the indicators of export activity of Belarus in 1998-2016. It studies how the structure and complexity of the country’s export basket, its competitive advantages, penetration to foreign markets and inclusion in global value chains changed over the period.

**Poverty and vulnerable groups in Belarus. Consequences of the recession of 2015-2016.** This issue of the ‘Review of poverty and vulnerable groups in Belarus’ is dedicated to the analysis of various aspects of absolute and relative poverty in the Belarusian regions. The study was carried out on the basis of sample surveys of living standards of households in 2013-2016.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a*
richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

Zapad on Belarus’s mind: 7th Belarus Reality Check Non-Paper

The European Union’s ‘critical engagement’ policy has contributed to attitude change by the Government of Belarus as well as procedural improvements. However, as the March 2017 crackdown on peaceful protesters suggests, there are no substantial political changes in Belarus.

Some positive steps taken by Belarus in the recent past – release of the remaining political prisoners and peaceful presidential elections, for example – have created an opportunity for EU-Belarus relations to further develop. Western insistence on democratic norms, practical incentives, focus on building trust and widening dialogue matter around human rights issue has led to the last detainees of the crackdown on peaceful protesters in March 2017 released before OSCE Parliamentary Assembly held in Minsk in July 2017. In the context of the Ukraine crisis, both Minsk and Brussels are fine with the gradual widening of contacts and dialogue.

Although Russia has been reducing the level of its subsidies, it maintains a strategic stake. Minsk has a degree of independence regarding the Ukraine crisis, while its structural dependence on Russia also serves as a deterrence. Moscow provided a much-needed bailout this year in form of a
loan as well as energy agreements favourable to Belarus.

Status quo and conservative policy principles continue to have the upper hand in Belarus. Despite the March protest against the so-called social parasite tax, the opposition remains fragmented. It was unable to utilise the general dissatisfaction caused by several years of recession to increase its popular base.

Meanwhile the role of private sector has been constantly growing. Despite lack of structural reforms, Belarus managed to climb to 37th place in the Doing Business Survey. But the potential of the current recovery is limited. To meet its ambitious modernisation goals, Minsk will need external financing. This leads back to structural reforms.

Belarus assistance to regulate the Donbas conflict has been welcomed. Nevertheless, future dynamics of the relations with the West will mostly remain conditional around human rights issues. During Zapad 2017 Minsk will aim to meet two objectives simultaneously: to continue building trust with the West, while continuing to closely cooperate and appease Russia. Minsk thinks it has no other realistic geopolitical choice.

The EU and Belarus: less alien

Relations between the European Union and Belarus are driven by the “only possible policy” within the framework of domestic factors and region’s geopolitics. Brussels’ critical engagement has created opportunities for Minsk to change attitudes by raising sensitive issues hoping that it will lead to policy (legislation) change in human rights, political freedoms and rule of law in the longer run.
Belarus’s gradual opening towards the West is a careful balancing act; performed while keeping an eye on Minsk’s interest of strategic engagement with Russia. Minsk’s expectation is that the West would accept its current form of government, allowing Belarus greater room for (economic) maneuvering. In the context of Ukraine crisis, neither Minsk nor Brussels wants a U-turn.

Belarus foreign minister Uladzimir Makiej visiting Poland, 12 April 2017. Photo: Belarus MFA

The EU’s objective of the dialogue is building contacts and trust, particularly getting Belarus closer to ‘European identity’, i.e. values and standards. Out of the 29 points included in the 2015 EU document on how to improve relations with Belarus, around half have been fulfilled according to independent analysts. EU financial assistance remains modest compared to the region: EUR 29 million was released in 2016, similarly in 2017. Total indicative amount of assistance for 2014-2017 is EUR 89 million.

The EU-Belarus relations were shaken by the protests against the so-called social parasite tax and the crackdown on peaceful protesters. Although the police intervention was
brutal, all those detained were released, the last one before the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly held in Minsk in July 2017.

The EU’s red line towards Minsk – no political prisoners\(^1\) – has not been crossed. Compare to 2010 post elections crackdown, Minsk (through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) has kept a constant dialogue with the EU, including addressing human rights concerns. Direct European engagement with Belarusian law enforcement structures may have also played a role. At the very least, Belarusian officials’ willingness to listen to European human rights-related concerns was cited as a positive change by European diplomats.

**Track Record of EU’s Critical Engagement:**

- Increased contacts level between Western institutions and the Government of Belarus.
- Visa free regime by Belarus (up to five days).
- Arms embargo and restrictions to some individuals extended by the EC.
- Three rounds of EU – Belarus human rights dialogue.
- Widening sectoral dialogue between European institutions and the Government of Belarus. EU-Belarus Coordination Group set up.
- Contacts with parliament established.
- Negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements continue. Education efforts for state officials.
- Improved state-civil society relations, ‘Tell the Truth’ political movement registered.

The EU’s current policy towards Belarus is challenged by the domestic political opposition, what used to keep a certain ‘monopoly’ on contacts with Western institutions for a long time. Lithuania is trying to mobilise the EU to stop the Astraviec nuclear power plant built by Belarus with Russia’s Rosatom near the Lithuanian border, in a close proximity of the capital city of Vilnius. To mitigate the challenge, Minsk
has showed some efforts, for example agreed to an EU stress test, yet to be completed according to EU standards.

**Belarus’ politics: soft dissatisfaction**

The so-called ‘social parasite tax’, requiring unemployed citizens (around 470,000 citizens) to pay EUR 230 annual tax triggered protests across the country. Although the number of protesters was not high, up to 3,000 people demonstrated in Minsk on 17 February 2017. Despite Lukashenka suspending the law, protests continued to spread to various cities through March. Grassroots opposition activists were the core organisers in the regions. The protests also tapped into a general dissatisfaction with the economy, frustration about the decree as well as the government’s handling of the issue.

The events culminated on 25 March 2017 with the traditional ‘Freedom Day’ protest rally in Minsk, Brest, and Hrodna. The authorities, after the organisers refused to hold the rally at an authorised place, used riot police to disperse around 3,000 protesters detaining hundreds including pensioners standing by and journalists covering the rally. Regional rallies were sanctioned, and were held without complications. Analysts suggested that Lukashenka’s social contract has been shifting from social welfare towards providing security.

Protests in February and March may have also been used by the government to show strength and determination (at home, vis-à-vis the West and Russia) to counter ‘hybrid’ threats and not allowing a Ukraine-type of conflict to arise. Criminal charges against the so-called White Legion, which were later dropped, at least suggested such a consideration from the law enforcement agencies.
One of the participants pointed out that looking from a historical perspective, the March demonstrations attracted several thousand people, in contrast to the 100,000 people who protested against economic and social decline in early 1990s. Election-related protests called by the opposition and civil society actors in 2006 and 2010 brought up to 30,000 to the streets.

Protests against ‘social parasite tax’ in spring 2017. Photo: gazeta.ru

The government is also capitalising on infightings among opposition leaders. Belarus’s opposition has never been a cohesive unit. Long ranging Western expectations about unified opposition fractions challenging the Lukashenka regime has created a certain ‘political show’. Opposition leaders are willing to play the unity card before elections to gain Western support, but the underlining differences between the parties and the competition among their leaders to become the main opposition challenger during elections always trumped over cooperation.

In addition, civil society organisations no longer have
'regime change' as a key purpose, and their relations with the opposition have not been much of a priority. Similarly, there are multiple interests and disputes within the government. These include reformers and law enforcement (or siloviki) tug of war, wherein the lines of interests are often blurred. The current conflict within the government is between the new generation of lawmakers and the ‘conservative elements’. The president needs to demonstrate decisive actions: the crackdown on peaceful protesters was not dictated by an obvious risk, but he needed to show he was in charge.

Incentives for political reforms are still weaker than old (policy) stereotypes. Priority is to fill state coffers, and one of the ways to do so is by harassing large local businesses companies and businessmen. Reformers within the government are few and far between, dependence on Russia remains a limitation in considering reforms. Although Moscow is bailing Belarus out on a much lower scale, it is enough to keep its structural dependence.

Radical forms of protests from opposition, or the fabrication of those, also help maintain the status quo, siloviki’s influence and a conservative policy line. Reformers face a lack of legitimacy and lack of financing (both internal and external), which are main obstacles in their efforts. As the failed negotiations with the IMF suggested, reformers have to work hard to convince the conservative institutions, while in the end the president makes the final call about key steps.

**Economy: slow motion**

Belarus is out of recession but its growth is modest at 1.1% YOY. To compare, growth rate was averaging 9.9% per annum between 2004 and 2008, having fallen to -0.5% between 2012 and 2016. Such growth and convergence in the past were driven mostly by investment boom funded with direct and indirect state support. Growing external imbalances were financed via
external borrowing, which led to debt accumulation and growing costs of its servicing: last year Belarusian government spent about 7% of GDP for this purpose.

Key factors behind the current recovery are non-energy related exports increasing by 10%–20% YOY in real terms due to real depreciation of Belarusian ruble, Russia’s economic recovery, and gradual recovery of domestic consumption and investment. Export of potash is growing, and exports of oil refinery products are about to recover due to the resolution of the recent energy conflict between Belarus and Russia.

However, potential of the current recovery is limited as the Belarusian economic model that operated at the expense of Russian energy subsidies and debt accumulation has exhausted its possibilities. The government is very cautious in terms of reforming the current economic model. Minsk exited from the negotiations with the IMF, while announcing further modernisation of its key manufacturing enterprises and an ambition to make Belarus an IT country.
Authorities succeeded in stabilising the exchange rate (National Bank) and achieving fiscal consolidation (Ministry of Finance). As a result, inflation and interest rates have gone down, and Belarus managed to close its external financial gap due to a new loan from Russia and a drawdown of deposits. Savings declined by almost $1bn in the last 18 months, standing at $6,8bn – the lowest since 2013.

The share of the private sector in the Belarusian economy increased considerably in the last ten years. The share of employment at enterprises with 100% state ownership fell from 51.2% in 2006 to 40.2% in 2016, but market capitalisation remains low. Total number of traded domestic companies in 2016 in Belarus was 194 with total capitalisation of $5.3bln or 11.2% of the country’s GDP. Out of this, 57% was generated by Belarusbank (the largest state-owned bank).

As domestic savings are historically smaller than investments, external funding is of key importance. However, the volume of FDI has been at $1.3-1.5bn per year (mainly in the form of reinvested earnings) without significant changes in recent years, while at least three times more would be needed for economic development.

The IMF can “easily” reach a common ground regarding economic reforms with the government, but it has been difficult to reach the final agreement with the president. Main IMF requirements are state enterprise re-structuring and increasing utility bills. The Eurasian Development Bank’s requirement of reforms in the state sector, including privatisation, is not applied consistently.

Regional security: mitigating
Belarus’s neighbors are getting anxious when their largest neighbor flexes its muscles. In reality though, military exercises — at least from 1981- have been about Moscow (previously the USSR) establishing ‘coercive credibility’ with the United States. In some analysts view this strategy is effective due to ‘help’ of the alarmist voices coming from neighbors and amplified by Western military institutions and media. A deeper look at the issues around Zapad-2017 military exercise does not match the concerns. The Suwalki gap is a hypothesis for a case of a full-scale war given that Russia has an enclave in Kaliningrad. An invitation for 80 international military observers is an attempt to ease the geopolitical tension in the region, a policy that Minsk has been pursuing since the Ukrainian crisis.

The high number of rail transport wagons, which has been the original cause of concern, has been explained as including all military transport between the two countries for the entire year of 2017. These numbers are not particularly high compared to 2009 or 2013 exercises. Russia is not bringing offensive (modern) equipment; what an invasion would require. The total number of soldiers involved is difficult to estimate. The official figures submitted by Russia and Belarus total 12,700 troops, with 10,200 soldiers expected on Belarusian territory including 7,200 from Belarus and 3,000 Russian soldiers along with 680 pieces of equipment. NATO member states suspect that Russia manipulates troop numbers to avoid transparency under the OSCE’s Vienna document, according to which nations conducting exercises involving more than 13,000 troops must notify other countries in advance and invite observers.

Western estimates are up to 100,000 soldiers. The difference may come from Western observers counting the National Guard
and other paramilitary forces as well as forces that belong to Russia’s Western Military District (not participating directly, but being on alert). Either way, no evidence to support such high estimate has been made public.

Concerns have been voiced that in the past military exercise led to the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and of Ukraine in 2014. At the same time Kavkaz 2008, the exercise held just before the Russia-Georgia war, showed that any ‘surprise attack’ would come only after the exercise, utilising the West’s notoriously short attention span.

As the Polish OSW’s analysis suggested, Zapad-2017 is at ‘the core of the information war between Russia and NATO’. Some think Russia’s goal to show a ‘larger-than-life military power’ has been achieved, with some help from the West.

What increasingly matters for Belarus’ Western neighbours is that after the Ukrainian crisis, Minsk has not entertained the idea of joining NATO or the EU. Instead, the Government of Belarus pursued a policy of integration with Russia. Belarus is a not an integrated part of Russia’s military security, but Moscow’s objective is to make the two militaries as close as
possible. For example, using Zapad-2017 Russia is likely to use aircraft deployments close to its neighbours’ airspace.

Russia does not need to occupy Belarus as long as Minsk honours, at least rhetorically, its obligations. Occupying Belarus would bring the Eurasian Union to an end, and would keep increased level of Western sanctions on Russia indefinitely.

Belarus has maintained a degree of independence from Russia regarding the Ukraine crisis. The recently updated military doctrine of Belarus includes hybrid warfare among military threats, while ‘the plural wording clearly indicates that Minsk is also concerned about Russia’s growing military might, and not only about NATO’.

Lukashenka has gained leverage by establishing himself as Russia’s most loyal partner, utilising it mainly in form of ‘forced’ subsidies. But the time of high level Russian subsidies is over. Minsk will try further building trust with the West, and continuing to work with and appease Russia, as its only ally.

The pdf version of this non-paper is available [here](#).

The 7th Belarus Reality Check took place on 21 June 2017 in Vilnius, Lithuania. Organised by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (EESC) with the support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, USAID through Pact and Forum Syd, and together with programmatic contributions from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the event gathered leading Belarusian and international experts and practitioners to discuss the latest political, economic and security developments in Belarus and to provide evidence-based analysis and balanced policy advice. This non-paper is the result of the meeting and further research. Since 2012, the Eastern Partnership Reality Check meetings were held under Lithuanian and Latvian EU presidencies. Other non-papers about Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine are available at [EESC website](#).

More than 50 media representatives and 14 members of the military-diplomatic corps accredited by the Belarusian Defence Ministry attended the event. The media drew special attention to the plan and scenario of the exercises, which led to many questions.

According to the scenario, extremists, supported by two neighbouring states, invade a part of Belarus, which they then occupy, setting up a different state. It is the role of Belarus and Russia to fight them. Interestingly, according to the scenario, extremists take over in the western part of Belarus. The map of the exercise shows the precise territory of the alleged enemy. The new state is called Viejšnoryja and is propped up by its two western neighbours: Viesbaryja and Lubienija.
First of all, it should be noted that all these names sound Baltic. It is thus likely that the Russian and Belarusian authorities are trolling the Baltic states, which frequently voice alarmist sentiments about West-2017 being the beginning of a Russian invasion of Europe.

Historically, Viejšnoryja itself is the Belarusian part of Lithuania Propria – a historical region and the cradle of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This cannot be a simple coincidence. What’s more, Viejšnoryja coincides suspiciously with the majority-Catholic part of Belarus.

Meanwhile, the tone of the briefing and the following press-release were unusual and somewhat unclear. At first, Mr. Bielakonieŭ mentioned the NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe which recently took place, claiming they were designed to prepare for an assault on neighbouring states.

He then spoke about the Rapid Trident exercises in 2017 in Ukraine and the intention of the Ukrainian Right Sector group
to deploy temporary militias near the Ukrainian-Belarusian border in case of an invasion from the north. Such rhetoric is especially odd as Belarus had promised not to strongly criticise NATO and Ukraine for their military exercises in the region.

This presentation of West-2017 was thus an epic fail for the Belarusian Defence Ministry, as its effect was the complete opposite of the intended one. Originally, the ministry intended to show society that West-2017 was not a threat to the independence of Belarus or its international image. Instead, the Ministry of Defence aggressively accused NATO of belligerence and openly trolled the Baltic states. The media focused not on the number of Russian troops and comparisons between West-2017 and similar NATO exercises in Eastern Europe, as planned, but on the division of Belarus into parts, declaring one of them an ‘enemy’.

The rise of Viejšnoryja

The reaction in society was immediate. Right after the press release, all independent media sources posted a map of the exercises showing the imaginary states. Some experts considered this an attempt to split the Belarusian population along religious lines: the Catholic West against the Orthodox ‘Russian world.’ The fact that two neighbouring states were supporting ‘Viejšnorian extremists’ was also taken to symbolise NATO destabilising the situation in Belarus in order to ‘break it apart from its union with Russia’.
A ‘Viejšnorian card’. Source: вейшнорыя.бел

At the same time, the exercises’ scenario became the butt of jokes on the internet: the country has taken on a life of its own as a meme. Viejšnoryja already has an official website, which also issues Viejšnorian ID cards and passports. At the time of writing, almost 7,000 people had applied for Viejšnorian passports.

Some enthusiasts decided to take the ‘statehood’ of Viejšnoryja even further, creating a coat of arms, flag, currency, and even a Twitter account for the Viejšnoryja MFA. It is now possible to buy a number of products with Viejšnoryja’s name and logo, including passport covers, t-shirts, magnets, and more.

At Lidbeer festival in the western city of Lida, people were seen waiving the Viejšnorian flag. Jokes about the imaginary state are quickly becoming popular on the Belarusian internet, with some claiming that ‘The Belarusian authorities have already asked Viejšnoryja to provide them with a loan.’

More soberingly, however, the exercises’ scenario was one presented by the Belarusian Defence Ministry itself. Had Russia unveiled the scenario, the Belarusian military could have managed to save face, as the low level of trust between the two states is a well-known fact.
Presumably, the scenario was originally a Russian idea, aiming to discredit Belarus once again and cause a harsh reaction from neighbouring states. Either the Belarusian authorities failed to see through this trick or simply had no choice but to agree to it and present it publicly. Seeing as Russia had already started with such provocations before West-2017 even started, they are bound to continue. The way Belarusian authorities react to them could determine the continued independence and further development of the country.

**Dangerous jokes**

On one hand, the Belarusian authorities are lucky that the release of the exercise scenario resulted only in jokes, rather than official statements from neighbouring states and international organisations. On the other hand, this situation is revealing of the negative image of the Belarusian Defence Ministry and the military as a whole: society does not take them very seriously.

At the same time, Viejšnoryja quickly became an internet symbol of opposition to the Belarusian regime: some people who disapprove of the authorities have started calling themselves Viejšnorians. A tongue-in-cheek awareness campaign calling for ‘the protection of Viejšnoryja from Russian aggression’ and creation of ‘Vejsnorian volunteer forces’ now also exist. People are using the word ‘Viejšnorian’ to mean ‘traditionally Belarusian’ as opposed to Soviet or Russian.
However, although opponents of the Belarusian regime are using the Viejšnoryja meme in jest, supporters of the “Russian world” could use it more seriously, such as for information campaigns against Belarus.

For example, pro-Russian propagandists have started using the names ‘Viejšnoryja’ and ‘Viejšnorians’ to describe Belarusian patriots or opponents of the Belarusian authorities and Russian aggression.

Their long-term goal could be to deprive people with dissenting political views of the very status of Belarusian nationals. Now, the enemies are not Belarusians, but Viejšnorians: traitors of the state and the Russian-Belarusian union.

In the long run, it may turn out that in presenting this West-2017 scenario, the Belarusian Defence Ministry has opened Pandora’s box: a rift in the population on the basis of support for either Russia or the West could really materialise, especially if a corresponding information
campaign was held. This is exactly what the Belarusian authorities have been trying to prevent for decades: they rely on preserving stability and maintaining full control of the country to remain in power.

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**Minsk struggling to reassure its neighbours about the West-2017 military exercises**

At a press briefing on 29 August, Aleh Belakoneu, Head of the Belarusian General Staff, promised that by 30 September all Russian troops participating in the West–2017 Belarusian-Russian military exercises would leave the territory of Belarus. He also emphasised that Minsk had chosen sites for the exercises which were as far as possible from the borders of neighbouring countries.

The Belarusian government is struggling to reassure its neighbours, who continue to express their concerns about the drills. Lukashenka himself has repeatedly visited Ukraine to persuade Kyiv of Belarus’s peaceful intentions. In contrast, the Kremlin craves an intimidating military show. Thus, Minsk and Moscow are jointly holding an exercise which both countries see in very different ways. It is unsurprising that their policy regarding West 2017 is vastly different.

**Minsk wants a transparent**
Nothing illustrates the different approaches of Minsk and Moscow to the exercises better than the issue of foreign observers. Belarus and Russia invited observers to the West-2017 separately, and both are offering them different observation programmes. While Minsk invited observers to the forthcoming exercise for five days, Russia invited them for only one. The week-long exercise will last from 14 to 20 September.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka invited NATO observers as early as 20 March, after neighbouring states voiced their concerns over the drills. On 13 July, Belarus issued formal invitations to Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Norway, Sweden, and Poland, as well as the UN, CIS, OSCE, CSTO, ICRC, and military attaches accredited in Minsk.

The Kremlin disregarded the issue of inviting foreign observers as long as possible, issuing invitations to military attaches accredited in Moscow on 15 August without much publicity.
The Kremlin-linked Russian media also took advantage of the drills to demonstrate its contempt for the concerns of other countries. On 8 August, the anniversary of the 2008 Russian–Georgian war, the Kremlin-associated media outlet Sputnik published a column on West-2017 which contained explicit threats. Its author, Aleksandr Khrolenko, a political commentator for the Russian government-affiliated Rossiya Segodnya, wrote:

‘Our partners’ [US] efforts are in vain [in bringing reinforcements to Lithuania before West-2017]. In 2008, Georgia also relied on the presence of the US military and NATO-standard weapons. This did not prevent Russia from successfully bringing peace to Georgia... Since that time, the Russian army ... has only increased its capacities.’

Needless to say, the Belarusian government-affiliated media has published nothing of the kind.

A purely regional affair?

Moscow’s aspiration to put on an intimidating military display has triggered fierce reactions throughout the region. However, it is up to Minsk to deal with the fallout, which comes in the form of numerous statements by officials and the media of neighbouring countries.

Belarus’s neighbours reiterate that West-2017 could be larger than announced: Russian troops might remain in Belarus, and Moscow might even take advantage of the exercise to occupy Belarus and invade Ukraine. The Ukrainian and Lithuanian defence ministers, the Polish deputy defence minister, the Lithuanian president, a former Georgian president, the secretary of Ukraine’s National Security Council, and other
prominent leaders are just a few examples of important political figures to express concerns.

However, outside Belarus’s immediate neighbourhood, few are worrying about the exercises. Speaking on 23 August to the Belarusian-language service of Radio Free Europe, Arkady Moshes of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs dismissed concerns over West-2017. He claimed that these worries were sparked by certain Belarusian commentators and remain mostly limited to speculation rather than evidence-based argument.

On 17 August, Deutsche Welle published a report on the drills, maintaining that they should indeed be cause for concern in the West. However, the only Western expert cited, Margarete Klein of the German think tank SWP, simply suggested waiting to see how the exercise turns out.

No money for big projects

Image: BelTA

Russia certainly wants to use the forthcoming drills to prove
its military might. In all likelihood, however, the Kremlin harbours no plans to put its strength to use.

A research paper published in July by the Valdai Club, a Kremlin-affiliated expert community, illustrates this attitude. The paper stresses that ‘In fact, Belarus is a buffer zone between Russia and NATO.

Changing the existing status would absolutely not suit either Moscow’s or the West’s interests.’ The paper’s author, Prokhor Tebin, cites the deployment of Russian troops in Belarus on one hand, and NATO’s increasing pressure on Minsk on the other, to back up his argument.

The fact that Moscow backed down regarding building an airbase on Belarusian territory lends credence to the argument that Russia accepts the situation as it is. Indeed, on 30 March, the Russian ambassador to Minsk Aleksandr Surikov announced that the issue of the Russian military base ‘had never been there.’ He added that even a legal basis for such a facility was lacking.

The reasons behind this restraint are unsurprising: simply put, there is no money. The issue of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), designed to be a ‘post-Soviet NATO,’ is a case in point. In May, the CSTO’s Deputy Secretary General, Valery Semerikov, officially admitted that Moscow had recently stopped providing supplies to its allies through CSTO channels because of financial troubles caused by Russia’s economic decline and international sanctions.
In sum, Belarus is doing its best to counterbalance the Kremlin’s provocative moves and assuage its neighbours. Thus, the Belarusian government has made the Belarusian part of the exercise as transparent as possible, despite Moscow’s wishes. Minsk is also de-escalating tension by holding the drills far from its borders and removing the traditional CSTO components.

So far, Minsk has been able to hold its ground. This is because the Belarusian government has one trump card when it comes to dealing with Moscow: Belarus’s key strategic location. This factor makes the country an irreplaceable ally for Russia.

Moreover, Belarus remains too close to Russian civilians for the Kremlin to be able to lash out – as it as it does usually in its relations with post-Soviet nations – without risking widespread indignation domestically. As Russia continues to struggle with economic decline and international isolation, its opportunities to put pressure on Belarus are slowly but surely dwindling.