

Reluctant Alliance with Russia, Hope for S-300, Milex-2014 – Belarus Security Digest

Reluctant allies: Moscow has to put up with Minsk's position in the war against Ukraine. However, Putin does not see it necessary to hide his irritation any longer.

The exhibition of arms and military machinery Milex-2014 was a SUCCESS. Helicopters are a luxury for Belarusian border guards.

Belarus hopes that Moscow will finally keep its promise and transfer four battalions of S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems.

Moscow is unhappy with Minsk; Minsk does not believe Moscow

On 2 July 2014, Russia's President Vladimir Putin paid a one-day visit to Minsk to attend the festivities on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belarus from the Nazis.

Initially, Minsk hoped that Vladimir Putin would come on 3 July to attend the festivities and the traditional military parade. According to our sources, it was the reason for moving the parade to the evening. For the daytime, they scheduled a number of events with participation of Putin and Lukashenka, which eventually had to be moved to 2 July.

The Belarusian authorities showed their lack of confidence in Moscow's reliability as an ally during the entire month. On 8 July 2014, during his visit to the 103rd Guards independent mobile brigade of the Special Operation Forces of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenka imparted his apprehensions that "the brothers [i.e. the Russians] would fail to cover our backs and

we would have to fight the war on our own".

On 15 July 2014, while receiving graduates of military schools, Alexander Lukashenka said that the Belarusian army was able to "respond adequately to internal and external threats to the national security".

It should be noted separately that during the reception of graduates of military schools Lieutenant General [Viktar Sheiman](#) was on a par with the current leaders of security agencies. Sheiman may be regarded as an anti-crisis manager. And if Alexander Lukashenka once again has called upon his old proven staff, it means that the crisis is "on the doorstep".

Exhibition of arms and military machinery Milex-2014

The traditional international exhibition of arms and military machinery Milex-2014 took place on 9-12 July. The event was the biggest in its entire history. At the exhibition, Belarusian companies of the military and industrial complex signed about 60 contracts, agreements and letters of intent in the area of armaments and military equipment.

According to officials, the total volume of the contracts amounted to \$60 mln. Besides, further contracts worth over \$1 bln are under discussion.

The visit to Belarus of Pakistan's Minister of Defence Production Tanveer Hussain held in the framework of Milex-2014 is especially noteworthy.

Pakistan presents a special interest to Belarus also because this country is one of China's key partners. In addition, the level of development of Pakistan's defence industry may be of interest to Belarus in a number of areas, including missile and aviation technology.

Russia is ready to transfer S-300 to Belarus

At least, they say so. During the exhibition, the signing by

the Russian party of a contract for a gratuitous transfer of S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems to Belarus was announced. The transfer of the equipment will take place after the Belarusian party signs the document.

The number of the systems to be transferred is not known: will all four battalions promised already in 2011 be transferred or only a part of them? The modification of the anti-aircraft missile systems in question is also unknown.

Earlier, they talked about S-300PMU1 but the transfer of S-300PS systems of earlier modifications (1989 – 1995) appears more likely. The latter are upgradable to versions that are more sophisticated.

Since April 2011, the issue of supply of four battalions of S-300 has been publicly discussed. In the meantime, they have always said that the supply can be expected in the nearest future. The equipment should be transferred "as is" and Belarus will pay for its repair, shipment and modernisation.

It should be noted separately that Moscow has demonstrated far greater quickness in the issue of supply of five battalions of S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems to Kazakhstan. In January this year they signed a respective agreement and the delivery of the equipment should begin later this year already.

Minsk needs S-300 to replace the liquid fuel missile systems S-200.

The border guards left without helicopters

The helicopter unit of the State Border Committee of Belarus was transferred to the Ministry of Emergency Situations. The reason for this was the need to optimise the costs of the border agency.

Belarus plans to replace the helicopters by UAVs, which have much lower operational costs and announced that the border guards would receive the short-range UAVs Berkut-2. The

tactical range of its operation is up to 35 km with altitudes range from 100 to 3,000 metres. However, those are the declared parameters which in practise are likely to be more modest.

Belarus continues to develop its own anti-aircraft missile system

It was announced that there were already 15 procurement requests for the domestic anti-aircraft missile system Halberd. However, most likely the question is not about firm contracts but only letters of intent. The development of the anti-aircraft missile system Halberd is in its final stage; the product is not ready yet.

Further development of the project of the domestic anti-aircraft missile system Halberd bumps into the absence of Belarus' own missiles. The instability in Ukraine restrains cooperation with this country.

Attempts to buy missiles in the West or in Russia are doomed to failure: nobody needs competitors. In this regard, integration of the missiles of the anti-aircraft missile system Buk in Halberd may be of interest.

Firstly, these missiles have more powerful warheads in comparison with the already used. Secondly, there is a certain stock of these missiles. Thirdly, the domestic air defence system, which, in its turn, is a part of the unified regional air defence system of Belarus and Russia, uses the anti-aircraft missile systems Buk.

The number of those wishing to become army officers constantly decreases

During the second year in a row, the admission campaign to military schools and military departments of civilian universities essentially ends in failure. An additional enrolment has been announced in an expedited manner and the

requirements to the level of training of the prospective students have been dramatically reduced.

Moreover, some schools substantially reduced their recruitment plans already in the beginning of the admission campaign. However, it will not solve the problem.

Thus, the last year's experience shows that many students admitted during the additional recruitment failed to pass the first exams and were dismissed for underperformance.

Andrei Parotnikau

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Belarus Plays the Border Security Card with the EU

In response to the EU sanctions policy, Belarus allegedly weakened border control at the Belarus-EU border recently. This puts in doubt Belarus' willingness to implement in the nearest future local border traffic agreements with western neighbours in full.

It makes the prospect of signing a readmission agreement with the EU even more remote, which in turn makes visa facilitation impossible in short term.

"I can increase the number of border guards and customs posts, but you should be ready to pay", Belarusian ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka said addressing Europeans in April, making it clear that the move comes as a response to the EU sanctions policy. The migration wave to the EU is the result of the NATO

operation in Afghanistan, he added.

Egyptians chose Belarus as a transit country since they were aware of the border control weakening, the official communication explained, and was a clear sign of blackmail

Apparently to demonstrate that illegal immigration is a serious problem, Belarusian state media recently reported the alleged detention of Egyptian terrorists who arrived in Belarus with the intention of illegally entering the EU. A group of five who expected to enter the EU “to join the underground resistance that confronts the public and political order of European states”, an official police statement said.

Belarusian state media provided neither their names nor how they arrived to Belarus. Egyptians chose Belarus as a transit country since they were aware of the border control weakening, the official communication explained, and was a clear sign of blackmail.

Belarus has no readmission agreement either with the EU or with any of its member states. That makes a relaxed border policy a more serious problem. Readmission agreements impose legal obligations to readmit own nationals and also, under certain conditions, third country nationals and stateless persons who do not or no longer fulfil the conditions of entry to, presence in or residence in the requesting state.

All the other immediate EU neighbours in the east (Russia, Ukraine, Moldova) have agreed with the EU on readmission. Among the Eastern partnership countries, Georgia lately signed the readmission agreement, too. EU negotiations with Armenia and Azerbaijan are in progress.

Unpleasant Consequences of Worse Border Management

Belarus does not belong to the club of top transit countries and it never has. The last Frontex annual risk analysis

mentions Belarus with regard to the trafficking of petroleum products rather than as a significant transit country for illegal migration.

Indeed, a few hundred illegal immigrants coming from Belarus that EU neighbour states detect annually is not a big deal. To put it into context, the total number of detentions of illegal border-crossing in 2011 was 141 thousand, where Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes' constituted 86%.

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However, the alleged weakening border control is alarming for Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Although the European side has kept quiet so far, such changes in the border policy of official Minsk is surely of concern to her immediate neighbours. At the same time, playing the border (in)security card will surely bring adverse effects to Belarus' security itself. If Minsk keeps promoting the message of porous western frontier it risks becoming a transit hub for illegal immigrants for real, with all the negative effects that it implies.

Belarus' playing with the border issue and its reluctance to agree on readmission creates a clear obstacle for the development of people-to-people contacts and a visa facilitation regime.

First, reorientation of border forces from the western border to the south indicates that Belarus does not intend to launch long-awaited local border traffic agreements with Lithuania and Poland in the near future. At least, the agreements will not be able to become fully functional, as this requires an intensification of customs and border work, not their reduction. While the local border traffic regime [was launched at Belarus-Latvia border](#) a couple of months ago, similar agreements are stuck with Lithuania and Poland for political

reasons.

Second, visa facilitation agreements are linked to the readmission agreements. Without the latter, the EU cannot proceed with visa facilitation. There was not a single case of unilateral reduction of visa fees and facilitated procedures introduced by the EU for third country nationals without readmission agreement in force.

Creating a precedent of unilateral visa facilitation for Belarusians will cause problems in the negotiations with other countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan

Currently the so-called EU Visa Code stipulates all the procedures and conditions for issuing short-stay visas. Creating a precedent of unilateral visa facilitation for Belarusians will cause problems in the negotiations with other countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan whose citizens go through the same burdensome visa procedures when applying for a Schengen visa.

Those countries that already went through painful negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission, including Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, would not be happy with EU double standards and more favourable attitude towards their sluggish EaP partner either.

EU Pushes for Negotiations, Belarus Remains Indifferent

In June 2011, the EU Commission sent a letter to Minsk inviting them to start negotiations. Almost a year has passed with no response. During the last few months, the Council recalled its invitation twice. Belarus' procrastination with the negotiations seems ridiculous, as for many years Minsk has been claiming the visa facilitation with the EU countries to be its priority.

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a readmission agreement comes into force

Belarus worries that “thousands, if not tens of thousand” of illegal migrants would be re-admitted and gather in Belarus if a readmission agreement comes into force, Belarusian MFA press-officer Savinykh explained the sluggishness in starting the negotiations.

The readmission issue may be solved either in the framework of Customs Union between Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan, or by concluding readmission agreements with EU member states first, he suggested.

Removing a third countries nationals clause from the readmission agreement with Belarus would make Minsk concerns over illegal migrants utterly meaningless. However, such a generous move regarding illegal migration, especially towards an immediate neighbour, holds little value for the EU. Therefore, visa facilitation is a hostage of an apparent gridlock over the readmission agreement.

But how well-founded Belarusian concerns over the readmission agreement are? It turns out, they are greatly exaggerated. First, available statistics on readmission between EU and other countries show that fears about excessive numbers of re-admitted migrants are groundless. In 2010, some 867 persons were readmitted by Ukraine, out of whom 469 were its own nationals (55%).

Second, reports from Belarus and EU member states indicate that Georgians constitute the biggest number of migrants arriving in Belarus with the intention of illegally entering the EU. The current visa-free regime between Belarus and Georgia significantly facilitates their entry. Introduction of visa regime and stricter reviews of visa applications by Belarus' consular service would reduce the number of Georgian nationals that illegally go to the EU via Belarus.

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With this in mind, a real figure of re-admitted third country nationals is unlikely to exceed a couple of hundred persons a year, that is much fewer than an official assumption of "thousands, if not tens of thousands' migrants.

Benefits for the population at large from enhanced people-to-people contacts and better border control would seem to highly exceed the potential costs. The only significant cost would be supporting dozens of illegal migrants at a detention centre while seeking for their further deportation to their countries of origin.

The question remains: how sincere is the willingness of Minsk to introduce a facilitated visa regime for Belarusians?..

Andrei Yeliseyev

The "Real Belarus": Travel Tips from a German Expat

At the beginning of the new year, Belarus made headlines in the Western press once again. The reporting on the [new internet law](#) showed that Belarus is a white stain on the European map for most people. This week the Toronto Star published an article called "Belarus: The North Korea of Europe". It's those often misleading descriptions that most Westerners have in mind when going to Belarus for the first time.

Based on Western media reports, it is impossible to imagine what Belarus is actually like and how people live here. For this reason, Belarus Digest launches a new series of articles,

written by a German living in Belarus. In several articles, we will try to paint a more realistic picture of life in “Europe’s last dictatorship” and describe events and everyday life from the perspective of a Western expat. So let's begin the journey.

If you plan to visit Belarus, you are probably a diplomat or business man on a mission, a backpacker or a German between 60 and 70 on an organized commemoration tour. Unless you drive, there are two principal ways to arrive in Belarus – by plane or by train.

Landing at Minsk-2 Airport: Welcome to the Potemkin Village!

Airport Minsk 2 will seem strangely deserted. There was National Airport Minsk 1 in the very middle of the capital, which was reserved for flights of the president and inner-Belarusian flights but it is no longer used. So Minsk 2 is the only major international airport in Belarus.

✘ Upon landing you will probably be intimidated by customs officers and border guards in huge hats who never smile or try to pretend to speak anything other than Russian. You will need to buy a Belarusian insurance because the traveling insurance you bought in your home country will not be valid in Belarus no matter what the agent told you at home. When you have passed the passport and customs control, you will take a relieved breath and head towards Minsk.

Make sure to buy some Belarusian Roubles which you can't get in Western capitals. Bring small bank notes and a big purse – changing 10 Euros will bring you more than 100 000 roubles. There are no Belarusian coins, only paper money.

Take a taxi or marshrutka (a mini-bus) to the city. You will have a 42 km drive to think about where you have landed now.

The highway connecting the international airport Minsk 2 to the city looks very modern and shows off the national

companies and campaigns on glossy (English language!) road signs. Clearly this country wants to impress its foreign visitors from first sight.

However, you will understand quickly that this road as well as the impressive buildings you will see when entering Minsk are Potemkin villages. The facades are beautifully maintained and always freshly painted, but when you see them from the backside you understand that you have been fooled. Nevermind, Minsk is still a nice city.

Getting There by Train: Gradual Adaptation During an Overnight Trip

When you arrive by rail, you will probably take an overnight train from Berlin or Warsaw. Most likely you will feel like you are in one of the documentaries you saw on TV, describing trips on the Trans-Siberian railway titled "From Berlin to Vladivostok". You will have to deal with a stewardess who speaks only Russian. That seems to be very intimidating, particularly when she shouts at you at your home railway station that she is no longer going to wait until you have put your belongings into the train as the train is already running late because of you.

You will then enter a compartment that you share with two or three fellow travelers. Most probably they will be Belarusians coming back from a visit to their children and grandchildren who immigrated to the West. Over the long trip (around 18 hours from Berlin) you will get to know them very well and agree to pretend some of the booze they bought is yours as they exceed the allowed amount. You will pass the border control in the very East of Poland and then in Brest. As always, border guards will not speak a word of English.



Then you will see how the wheels of a whole train are changed. Train tracks in Belarus (and elsewhere in the former Soviet

Union) are wider than in the rest of Europe. One carriage will be lifted after another while you are actually on the train. It is an amazing experience.

When you enter Minsk after four more hours of rattling through forests and neat villages with railway buildings that are painted pink and blue and yellow you will hopefully be impressed.

The Minsk railway station is newly built and looks like a UFO landed on the railway square with its two towers. You will get out of the train and be caught up in the buzzing atmosphere: taxi drivers offering you a ride, people meeting their relatives that unload their luggage... Until some years ago, they were still playing a march for international trains arrived in Minsk. This honor is reserved for trains arriving from Moscow only.

Unless you know Minsk and its system of public transport well, treat yourself with a taxi ride to your final destination. It is not expensive, and when again in life will you have the possibility to be driven around a Soviet Union theme park sitting in a Lada with fake fur on the back seat?

Three Survival Tips for Your First Visit to Belarus

So, when traveling to Belarus for the first time, make sure you remember these three tips:

First, never be intimidated by an official unless you have done something illegal and there is a chance they know about it.

Second, never try to put on a seatbelt when sitting in the back back of a taxi. Even if you may find seatbelts, the taxi drivers will be seriously insulted and take it as a sign that you do not trust their driving skills.

Third, if you are not keen on reading newspapers and books in

Belarusian or Russian for the duration of your stay, bring your reading materials in a language you understand. It is impossible to buy international newspapers in Belarus.