

Belarusian arms exports grow with new rockets and missiles planned

On 31 January, Belarus's state military-industrial committee reported that the export of Belarusian arms in 2017 exceeded the previous year by 15%, reaching more than \$1bn sales. Growth occurred despite problems in accessing Russian military orders, an unclear situation about cooperation with Ukraine and the reported disruption of a deal with Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Belarusian officials announced plans to produce new missiles and combat drones.

Last year's performance of the national defence industry proves that Belarus evolves economically. It also demonstrates the contradictory balance between Minsk's efforts to maintain [neutrality](#) and its efforts to manoeuvre between Moscow and Kyiv, Baku and Yerevan, and other centres.

No stagnation in the defence industry

On 31 January, a session of the managing officials of Belarus's state military-industrial committee summarised the results of the committee's work in 2017. According to official information, production grew by a quarter. Total exports of Belarusian arms exceeded the [previous](#) year's level by 15% and made up more than \$1bn in sales. While the government steadily struggles with problems in the civilian segments of its machine-building branch, the defence industries perform much better. They continue to earn impressive sums year after year, such that Belarus retains its position among [top-20 world arms sellers](#).

Belarusian arms manufacturers have also diversified their client base. In 2017 they sold products to 69 countries, compared to just 60 countries in 2016. For instance, Minsk-based *KB Radar* could export its electronic warfare systems *Groza-S* and *Optima-B*, while the Barysau-based 140th Tank Repair Plant delivered its light-armoured vehicles, *Kaiman* and *V-1*, not only to the Belarusian army but also to an undisclosed African nation.

Precarious situation with the arms industry's main markets

On state TV, Belarusian businessmen and [defence firm managers](#), including from *Minotor-Servis* and *Integral*, have [openly criticised](#) Russia's policy that aims to [substitute Belarusian components](#) in its military equipment. Furthermore, the chairman of the state military industrial committee, [Aleh Dvihalyou](#), admitted on 31 January that Belarusian firms still face restrictions on receiving Russian state defence orders.

He also revealed something remarkable about the Belarusian arms industry's international ties. Despite historical ties and the critical importance of Russian markets and partners for Belarus, only 54% of the 'international interaction' volume for Belarusian defence industries involves Russian firms. He did not specify what he meant under 'interaction.'

In any case, 46% of interactions involve non-Russian firms and, apparently, the committee did not calculate interaction with Ukraine here. After all, on 1 February, an unnamed representative of the committee talking to *Nasha Niva* weekly announced that military-technical cooperation with Ukraine had been halted as early as in 2014.

Minsk allegedly stopped selling Kyiv military equipment

immediately after it started military operations in eastern Ukraine. This statement likely shows the wish to downplay respective contacts with Ukraine which [undoubtedly continue](#), although Minsk most probably reclassified them in order not to irritate Russian chauvinists.

Did Armenia disrupt Minsk-Baku deals?



Image: Azerbaijani Defence Minister Zakir Həsənov visiting Belarus in October 2017. Image: Salamnews.org

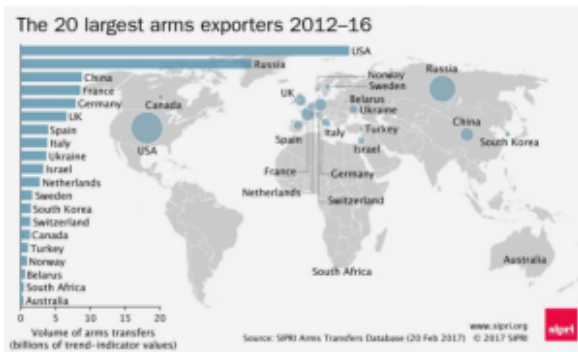
In addition to difficulties with Russia and Ukraine, Belarus recently needed to resolve controversies in its collaboration with Azerbaijan. On 1 February, Belarusian journalist Alyaksandr Alesin told the daily *Komsomolskaya pravda v Belorussii* that Minsk had renounced the deal it negotiated with Baku for the sale of *Palanez* multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS). He insisted that the Belarusian government renounced these plans because of Armenia's intervention. Armenia, clashing with Azerbaijan over Karabagh, formally partners Minsk in the [Collective Security Treaty Organisation](#). Alesin announced that Minsk would soon sell arms to Armenia instead.

The Russian propaganda outlet *Eurasia Daily* followed the story on 6 February. It quoted Russian and Armenian military experts as saying that there was probably never such a deal in the first place.

These allegations clash with some well-known realities. First, Yerevan has hardly any leverage over Minsk. For more than a decade, Baku and Minsk have cooperated in effectively every sphere and the Belarusian government has no interest in disrupting such relations because of Armenia. Yerevan, by far the poorer of the Caucasus states, cannot replace Baku, especially in the defence sphere.

Much circumstantial evidence indicates that Minsk and Baku at least considered the *Palanez* deal. First, top defence and defence industry officials from both countries held numerous talks in recent years. Official announcements acknowledged that last year's negotiations between the Belarusian and Azerbaijani presidents covered defence cooperation. Almost certainly these negotiations included *Palanez* – it cannot be otherwise, given the importance Lukashenka attaches to his *Palanez* project. Azerbaijan also has an interest in such weapons to neutralise the *Iskander* ballistic missiles Armenia received last year. Last but not least, a prominent Azerbaijani expert, general Yaşar Aydəmirov, spoke to several Azerbaijani media about the probability of such a deal between Belarus and Azerbaijan.

Cautious advancement of missile programme



Map: SIPRI

Minsk tries to develop [new products](#) to counter problems in traditional markets. Talking to the *BelTA* news agency on 31 January, the state secretary of security council, [Stanislau Zas'](#), revealed plans to produce new sophisticated arms. In particular, this year, defence industries are planning to complete the development of combat drones.

Above all, however, Minsk develops its defence industrial capacities in the area of rockets and missiles. Minsk started its [missile programme](#) from zero, perhaps only in the early 2010s. In the quoted interview, Zas' said that in the first half of 2018 Belarus would test a new, completely Belarusian-made rocket for the *Palanez* MLRS. Until now, Belarusians relied on [rockets including some Chinese parts](#) for this system.

In addition to replacing the remaining foreign components in the *Palanez* rockets, Zas' announced that designers were developing a new, Belarusian missile for the Soviet-designed *Buk* surface-to-air missile (SAM) system. Minsk believes that with the introduction of a new missile it can make the SAM system fit-for-purpose again.

According to circumstantial evidence published in Belarusian media, it could be retro-fitted Soviet-designed air-to-air missile types R-60 and R-73 that Belarusian designers intend to use in a new version of the *Buk* SAM system. First, Belarusian company *Belspetsvneshtekhnika* has modernised these missiles to extend their lifetime and efficiency. Moreover,

it has designed new modifications, R-60BM and R-73BM, to be launched also from land-based SAM systems.

To summarise, the Belarusian defence industry faces [multiple challenges](#) which, if not addressed, could weaken the industry in the long term. First, instability in cooperation with [Russia and Ukraine](#), especially with both at the same time, looks potentially damaging. Secondly, the national arms manufacturers need to design new defence products, sometimes never before produced in Belarus, as older Soviet types become outdated.

However, if the [national defence industry](#) copes with both tasks by diversifying its partnerships and developing new products, that not only will ensure its survival but also strengthen the country's independence.

Belarus's new Russian arms: what Minsk has given in exchange

In an interview published on 23 February, Belarusian defence minister Andrei Raukou announced the forthcoming purchases of state-of-the-art Russian weaponry.

He specifically mentioned the Su-30SM fighter aircraft and 120mm Nona-M1 heavy mortars. Earlier, on 4 February, armament director of the Belarusian armed forces Major General Ihar Latsyankou said that Minsk would purchase these systems this year.

In other words, despite its dependence on Moscow, Minsk has

prevailed in its dispute with the Kremlin over defence issues. Moscow initially did not wish to provide Minsk with weapons, intending instead to replace Belarusian with Russian troops. However, it has conceded one position after another. Minsk has thus emerged victorious in this spat.

Minsk receives arms after agreeing to a military exercise

Minsk's first attempts to procure Su-30 from Moscow date back to the late 2000s. However, a flurry of official statements over the past year indicate that the deal may be in its final stages: Moscow has decided to sell the airplanes to Minsk at a minimal price, and the parties are hashing out the deal and its specific conditions.

As for the Belarusian government, it most probably succeeded in getting the new equipment delivered more rapidly than foreseen by promising to host a joint military exercise with Russia in September. The [large-scale exercise](#) Zapad-2017 had already caused a fall-out between Belarus, its other neighbours, and the West. It only makes sense for Minsk to agree to the exercise, which has undermined its recently repaired relations with the West, if it gets something valuable in exchange from the Kremlin.

The newest military equipment – which Russia had refused to provide to Minsk before – is a logical exchange. As recently as 23 November 2016, Belarusian Air Force and air defence commander Aleh Dvihalych had spoken about general plans to buy at least a squadron of Su-30SM fighter jets from Russia as late as 2020. Now Moscow, eager to conduct a large show of its military might in the centre of Europe, promptly agreed to

give Belarus the fighter jets.

A Triple Alliance

However, the Russian government would like to minimise the costs of rearming Belarus. The Kremlin would prefer not to bear these costs at all, and for years it has refused to give Minsk sophisticated weapons such as the Su-30. As the Soviet-era fighter jets of the Belarusian air force gradually became obsolete, a growing hole emerged in the [single air defence system](#) of Belarus and Russia. Speculating on this danger, Moscow tried to stop relying on the Belarusian air force altogether. For three years, it has been [putting pressure](#) on Minsk to host the Russian air force in the country rather than rearming the Belarusian air force.

[Minsk refused](#) to increase foreign military presence in the country. Nevertheless, the problem of maintaining the joint system of air defence remained. Thus, against its will, Moscow was forced to provide Belarus new aircraft to keep the system functioning properly. Minsk, certainly, will not pay very much for the aircraft. Given its status as a critical ally of Russia, this is a logical stance. Therefore, the Kremlin has invented a scheme to simultaneously arm Minsk and reduce its own costs.



The most likely scheme is trilateral and involves Serbia. Last year, Russia promised Serbia's Russia-friendly government six MiG-29 second-hand fighter jets and some Buk surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems. The Buk deal failed, and anyway the six airplanes from Russia would not have sufficed for Serbia to rebuild its air force, which it lost in 1999. But then, on 27 January, after returning from Minsk, Serbian Defence minister Zoran Đorđević told the Serbian daily

[Politika](#) that Belarus would supply Serbia with a further eight MiG-29 and two batteries of Buk SAM systems.

There are good reasons to believe that Moscow demanded that Minsk help Russia's friends in Belgrade in exchange for new arms for the Belarusian army. That is, Moscow prefers to send Belgrade Belarusian equipment rather than give it its own.

The conditions of the deal between Minsk and Belgrade are very similar to those discussed between Moscow and Belgrade, [emphasises Politika](#). In both cases, Serbia has to pay a minimal price for the hardware and finance, leaving only overhaul and modernisation. The Belarusian government would accept such a deal only if the Kremlin forced its hand or offered it compensation. Otherwise, Minsk would have no reason to be so generous. It has almost always sold its decommissioned aircraft to the customer offering the best price: the most recent example being its sale of [Su-24 bombers](#) to Sudan.

Minsk aware of risks

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in 2012-16 the Belarusian Defence Ministry purchased arms and military equipment from Russia worth \$475m. They included multi-purpose Mi-8MTV5 helicopters, Yak-130 trainer jets, and second-hand S-300PS and new Tor-M2 SAM systems. Russia remains the principal source of defence equipment for Belarus. In comparison, in the same period Minsk purchased arms worth \$10m and \$2m respectively from its two other major partners, [Ukraine](#) and [China](#).

The Belarusian government strives to achieve the greatest possible independence in the defence sphere. Thus, after the [personal intervention](#) of president Lukashenka, the defence ministry stopped the negotiations on purchasing Russian BTR-82A. The Belarusian leader instead insisted upon the use

of alternatives already developed by the national defence industry. As a result, in January 2017 after government tests, the Belarusian army deployed modernised BTR-70MB1.

This was not an isolated case. Armament director of Belarusian armed forces Latsyankou stated in a recent interview that a major task of national defence industries this year would be re-installing various multiple rocket launch systems on Belarusian-manufactured chassis. Until now, they had been installed on chassis manufactured mostly in Russia.

In sum, the situation of Belarusian-Russian military cooperation is more complex than the basic figures of equipment procurement or personnel training suggest. Belarus and Russia are largely interdependent.

Belarus depends on Russia disproportionately for procuring military equipment, as it lacks money to buy from alternative sources. Russia critically depends on Belarus strategically. It needs Belarus because the latter is located in the vicinity of Russia's core region around Moscow and contributes to its security. Moreover, Belarus, as one of Moscow's few allies, helps the Kremlin keep the remnants of its imperial prestige by participating in demonstrative shows of Russian strength, despite [avoiding backing](#) Putin's adventurous moves in Ukraine, the Middle East, or the Caucasus.



Both governments try to diminish their dependence, but Minsk has more chances of success in the long run. The situation surrounding [Russian plans](#) for an airbase in Belarus in 2013-2015 and Minsk's final success in getting modern aircraft proves it.