

The Real Shooting Distance of Belarusian Guns

The Belarusian government not only violates human rights at home, but also hand over fist contributes to their violations abroad, going just as unpunished.

Last week Graduate Institute of International Studies issued a report titled “Small Arms Survey 2009: Shadows of War”, which named Belarus – along with principled regimes like Iran and North Korea – a “significant exporter” of small arms that provides little or no information on its exports. Produced annually by a team of researchers based in Geneva, Switzerland, the report estimates the undocumented trade of firearms to be at least US\$ 100 million.

Little Belarus has been culpable of keeping the illegal arms trade up from its very birth as an independent state. In the new millennium it has only become better at it. In 2002, Mark Lenzi wrote in the Wall Street Journal Europe, that Belarus secretly delivered over \$500 million worth of weapons to Palestinian militants. In 2003, Lebanon seized Belarusian weapons waiting to be smuggled into Iraq in defiance of a United Nations ban. In 2004, a report produced by Amnesty International accused Minsk of selling weapons and equipment “complicit in torture, rape and murder” in the western Darfur region.

The Belarusian leadership did not even flinch at being caught red-handed by the world’s leading human rights watchdog and in 2006 concluded a military cooperation protocol with Sudan, selling even more armored personnel carriers. Incidentally, the same carriers were seen in Darfur in March 2007. In January 2007, a Memorandum of Understanding on defense cooperation was signed with Iran. And in March of 2007, Minsk

publicly offered to sell Venezuela the SA-3 Goa and SA-8 Gecko surface-to-air missile systems. Another good Belarusian friend, authoritarian Turkmenistan, did not mind acting as a conduit for delivering Belarusian weapons to the opposition in Tajikistan and to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

According to information available on the Web site of Belarusian embassy in the United States, Belarusian export control system "meets high international criteria" and the country "acts in strict correspondence with the United Nations embargo that prohibits exports of arms and equipment to the countries of unfavorable military and political situation or states participating in any regional conflicts." In reality, however, export control regulations in Belarus remain porous allowing the Minsk to continuously rank among the world's leading arms exporters earning millions in lucrative deals with developing countries.

Belarus' dangerous exports end up in places just as "roguish" as where they come from. Many are sent to conflict-ridden and armed-to-teeth hotspots, to which the West knows better than to sell more weaponry. According to the U.S. Congressional Research Service, from 1998 through 2005 the country ranked 11th in the world in deliveries of arms to developing nations with \$1.1 billion in deliveries to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, conflict areas in the Balkans, the Adjara region of Georgia, and the Palestinian territories among other glorious places. Such markets are most profitable because Belarus faces no competition there as few other nations have as little to lose in their international image as Minsk does.

Belarusian heavy industry constituted 25 percent of Soviet machine production. After the USSR collapsed, the country's defense sector started exporting left and right to survive, just as all other former Soviet Union states. In 1997, profits from selling the warehouses of the former Soviet Army reached \$500 million, securing Belarus ninth place among the world's ten largest arms exporters.

For a desperate satellite reeling off its Soviet orbit, the country was doing surprisingly well. At the end of the 1990s Belarus started manufacturing parts to repair the old technical equipment purchased earlier by the Soviet clients – Cuba, China, Ethiopia, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and others. Ten years after the Soviet implosion, Belarusian defense industry switched to modernizing old Soviet equipment and developing new technologies. At the same time, the secrecy of Belarusian arms exports increased. In January 2004, presidential decree established Goskomvoenprom, the state military-industrial committee. Besides planning, coordination, and control of production, the committee's tasks include dabbling into arms export, which was previously reserved exclusively for the Foreign and Defense ministries.

Belarusian swagger on the arms market perplexes those who know the limitations of the country's weapons industrial base. All of the Soviet heritage must have been sold out or become obsolete by now. So where do the guns for sale come from? While damaging the country's relations with the West, the arms exports are suspected to be oiling the wheels in the country's relations with Russia. With no weapons development base of its own, it is Russian weapons Belarus may be selling. The symbiosis of the two "brotherly" nations results in a political cover for Moscow and financial backing for Minsk. This way Russia is able to reach the markets frowned upon by the West without risking international denunciation, and the Belarusian government can tap into considerable profits, cementing its authoritarian power at home.

More than 100 Belarus enterprises cooperate with Russian partners. According to the official data, their teamwork goes no farther than making spare parts and accessories for military equipment. In May 2007, Russian arms officials publicly denied any allegation that Moscow violated international embargos by selling arms through Minsk. However, even Russian analysts from Moscow Defense Brief admitted that "[i]t would have been

quite difficult for Belarus to take this position [on the world's arms market] without cooperating with Russian agencies."

Belarus is careful not to give away too much about its arms exports. Four years ago the National Report on arms exports published by the Foreign Ministry stopped disclosing information about Belarus' customers, volumes of trade, and types of the equipment sold. The document has been reduced to a list of normative acts in the field of licensing and export control.

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka claims that Belarusian weapons sales are insignificant and that the revenues are used to prop up the Belarusian ruble. The leader denies Belarus' involvement in the illegal arms trade, dismissing allegations as disinformation fed to the Western media by the opposition. In an interview with AFP news agency in November 2008 Lukashenka accused NATO of provoking a 'mini arms race' by flying planes near Belarusian borders and said he was considering buying short-range Russian Iskander missiles to step up air defenses.

The regime's dependence on arms exports to unsavory regimes is an indication that since the collapse of the Soviet Union the nation's economy has evolved as little as its political system. This year, the country's relationship with the West has improved. If Belarus still plans on joining the rest of Europe, it must act like a civilized nation: end oppression at home and stop profiting on oppression abroad.