

Does Belarus have its own missile programme?

On 26 September Belarusian defence minister Andrei Raukou met with Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev. Given the current security concerns of Baku, it's possible that Belarus may have rushed to offer it some means to help neutralise the *Iskander* missiles recently acquired by Azerbaijan's nemesis, Armenia.

Can Azerbaijan get systems from Belarus similar to those acquired from Russia by Armenia? Most recently, in August, the Russian media reiterated previously voiced suspicions of Belarus' collaboration with Ukrainian firms to produce its own tactical ballistic missile system, a counterpart to *Iskander*.

Minsk has little money to advance such a missile project alone. So it's plausible that Minsk rushed to not only help Baku but also to gain assistance from Baku in funding the new weapons. As of now, Belarus has succeeded in establishing several partnerships with various countries to design and produce sophisticated equipment which increase its autonomy in [military terms](#).

Too many coincidences

Facing problems with procuring equipment from Russia, Minsk has already been struggling for some years to find [other options](#). Minsk has succeeded in expanding the array of military equipment it produces by having partnered with other countries: initially Ukraine and China.

Thus, this autumn the Ukrainian *Pavlohrad Chemical Plant* is planning to test its new product, *Hrim-2*, a tactical ballistic missile system. An undisclosed foreign customer financed its development. Russian experts, such as Alexander Khramchikhin

and chief editor of the *Eksport vooruzhenii* review Andrei Frolov, name Belarus alongside countries such as Saudi Arabia or Pakistan as possible sources of funding. They emphasise, however, that Minsk is not the prime candidate for this role.

Yet they neglect some facts in their analysis. First of all, the timing of the development of the *Hrim* system and the actions and statements of Belarusian officials. Ukrainian designers revealed that the funding for *Hrim* came from abroad just over two years ago, around the second half of 2014.



Prior to that, in April 2014 Belarusian president Lukashenka announced that Belarus would cooperate with Ukraine to design new weapons. Other official statements followed in the same vein: by September 2014 the task had been defined as designing and manufacturing firepower means, never previously produced by Belarus. Minsk sent delegations to centres of the Ukrainian defence industry, as well as to the Dnipropetrovs'k region, the location of the enterprises designing *Hrim*.

Ukraine inherited the Soviet rocket and missile development and production centre. So, the Belarusian leadership apparently hoped for quick results from their cooperation with Ukraine.

In February 2015 Chairman of the Belarusian State Military Industrial Committee, Siarhei Hurulyou, announced that a new system would be demonstrated at the 9 May military parade which would provide the Belarusian army with additional firepower. Many media outlets, such as Russian *Svobodnaya Pressa*, had few doubts that Minsk would demonstrate an [analogue of the Russian Iskander](#), a tactical ballistic missile.

The analysts referred to more or less explicit statements made

by Lukashenka – beginning with his 2008 interview for the Wall Street Journal, in which he announced his intent to design and produce his “[own Iskanders](#).” But then they had to review their analyses due to the 2015 Victory Day Parade in Minsk in which the nation revealed a new system – although of a less ambitious kind – *Palanez*, a multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS).

Interestingly, the Ukrainian firms designing *Hrim* complained that the Ukrainian national space agency interfered with their design and did not allow it to be completed more rapidly. In any case, this was another coincidence between the problems of Ukrainian designers and the failure of Minsk to unveil the system it had hinted at.



At the time analysts accepted the *Palanez* as the weapons promised by the Belarusian leadership and stopped discussing Minsk's plans of developing a ballistic missile. This was the case until this summer, when the theme of possible Belarusian cooperation with Ukraine on developing a tactical ballistic missile resurfaced after an anonymous foreign customer supported the Ukrainian project.

Belarus can afford it

The analysts who doubt that Belarus could be involved in the *Hrim* project emphasise that Minsk barely has enough money to put forward for such a project. The Belarusian government has always spent little on military hardware. Now its already meagre military budget has even less money remaining after Minsk financed the *Palanez* MLRS, purchased aircraft and helicopters and modernised older equipment in its air force and air defence.

However, Minsk could have contributed something other than money to the Ukrainian *Hrim* project. First of all the chassis of the *Minsk Wheeled Tractors Plant (MZKT)* on which many Soviet- and Russian-produced missile systems were installed. Military expert Andrei Frolov in his commentaries for Russian media also pointed out that pictures of *Hrim* seem to show *MZKT* chassis.

The future *Hrim* could be not only driven on Belarusian chassis but it could also get its guidance system from Belarus. Belarusian firms are known to produce significant components of guidance systems for the Russian *Iskander* tactical ballistic missile systems.

Last but not least, if Belarus did indeed finance the Ukrainian project, it could have done so in partnership. Minsk frequently proposes undertaking joint projects with other governments in third countries. Belarusian officials reiterated such proposals to [Saudi Arabia](#) in recent years, yet Minsk had already tried to obtain Saudi financing for Belarusian projects in Sudan as early as the beginning of the 2000s.



Belarus also launched [intensive cooperation](#) of a mostly undisclosed nature with Pakistan in 2014. Moreover, since the very beginning of this cooperation Minsk has been working with Pakistani defence officials, including the minister in charge of defence industry, Rana Tanveer Hossein. Interestingly, on 26 September, after meeting with the Belarusian defence minister, Azerbaijani leader Aliyev received Hossein as well. This detail sets the Baku news in an even more striking context.

Belarus-Ukrainian cooperating along proven lines?

While some experts, such as the Russian defence blog *BMPD*, have insisted that Saudi Arabia is financing *Hrim*, details known about the deal cast doubt on this. First of all, according to the conditions of the August deal with an unrevealed foreign customer, the Ukrainians will retain the intellectual property rights for the system. That is not Saudi-style business. In a similar deal with the Ukrainian aircraft design and manufacturing firm *Antonov*, Saudi Arabia financed the designing of the *An-132* aircraft on the condition that all intellectual rights for the plane remained with Saudi Arabia.

The August deal more closely resembles the conditions on which Minsk has previously dealt with Kyiv. When [cooperating with Ukraine](#) on anti-tank weapons for example, Belarusian firms shared the intellectual property rights for the systems.

Moreover, Belarus has in recent years negotiated with the Ukrainian *Motor Sich* corporation to launch the production of the Ukrainian *R95-300* turbofan engine at a [Motor Sich-owned](#) factory in the Belarusian city of Orsha. This engine is used in cruise missiles. Minsk reportedly wishes to design its own cruise missile named *Aist*. This seems strange because Belarus has no platforms to launch this type of missile.

Everything becomes clear however if it is assumed that the development of *Aist* is linked to the *Hrim* project. Ukrainian designers have stated that the *Hrim* system would be capable of launching both tactical ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. That would be a feature which puts the Ukrainian-designed *Hrim* on a par with Russian *Iskander*.

In sum, there are multiple indications that Minsk is working

on strengthening its tactical missile capacities. The Belarusian government is pursuing the aim of achieving at least [relative autonomy](#) in this field. However, a country as small as Belarus can do this only by [teaming up](#) with other nations.

How Belarus Disappointed Russia in Ukraine and Syria

Minsk consistently avoids supporting Moscow in Ukraine and Syria. To put it mildly. After all, on 7 December, Ukrainian Internal Minister Avakov inaugurated the new Ukrainian armoured vehicle Varta designed in cooperation with "Belarusian engineers".

It became just one more of a series of examples of Belarus-Ukrainian defence cooperation. Later on, the Belarusian Defence Ministry denied claims that it supported Russia's position in the latter's dispute with Turkey.

Belarus risks estranging its Russian ally, but not because it wants to earn extra money in Ukraine or from conservative Arab regimes. Minsk strives to improve relations with Russia's opponents because the Kremlin has shown itself willing to make radical foreign policy moves.

Kremlin Trash: Belarusian

arms for ISIS

Last week, Russian propaganda outlet *Eurasia Daily* published a commentary with the eloquent title "[Belarusian 'Neutrality'](#) is Hypocrisy on Spilled Blood." It summarised a series of articles in which experts close to the Kremlin accused Belarus of anti-Russian policies in Ukraine and Syria.

When prominent Russian experts criticise Minsk in half a dozen articles on *Eurasia Daily* it means that the Kremlin wants its Belarusian partner to understand the seriousness of the accusations. The leading expert on Belarus at the Institute for Studies of CIS Countries, Alexander Fadeev, pointed out that Belarus supplied Ukraine with fuel, dual-use goods and components for arms systems. He emphasised that Minsk did it not only for economic but also political reasons: in other words, to improve relations with the West.

Lukashenka not only earns money in Ukraine but also says to the West: "I am yours, don't stage a Maidan in Belarus"

On 11 December, a Russian political analyst working at the prestigious Higher School of Economics called Andrei Suzdaltsev developed this idea further. According to him, Lukashenka not only earns money in Ukraine but also says to the West: "I am yours, don't stage a [Maidan in Belarus](#)".

Russian political commentator Evgeny Satanovski earlier [accused Belarus](#) of working with Turkey and Qatar against Russia in the Middle East. Now he has taken his criticism of Minsk to the extreme. According to him, while previously Russia's opponents in the Middle East – Qatar and UAE – purchased arms for ISIS in Serbia and North Korea, now they do it mostly [in Minsk](#). Satanovski underlined, "They [ISIS] are going to use these weapons. Whether it will be against us [Russians], Syrians, Iranians or civilians whom they murder is a secondary question."

Cooperation with Ukraine: impossible to hide

Ridiculous accusations of Belarus selling weapons to ISIS will not fool anybody. In fact, it is Belarusian [policy in Ukraine](#) and not Syria which enrages Moscow. And evidence of Belarus-Ukrainian cooperation abounds. A year ago it seemed that Belarus might merely take advantage of the situation to earn some money supplying Ukraine with war materials. Now, almost two years into the Donbas war, Minsk continues to cooperate with Kyiv, proving that this collaboration is part of Belarus' longer-term strategy in the region.

Kyiv-based journalist Ihor Tyshkevich has recently published in *Khvylya* a new investigative overview of Belarus-Ukrainian cooperation. He believes that this year Belarusian firms could earn about \$90-\$100m from military-relevant deals (without fuel) in Ukraine.

Something of [this business](#) is evident, like the rise of Belarus' share in the Ukrainian aircraft fuel market from 0% before the war to 45%, or statistical data on bilateral trade which show transfers of numerous goods for probable military use.



Indeed, while in 2014 Belarus sold Ukraine \$5m worth of aircraft, in the first half of 2015 this figure rose to \$14.4m. In 2015, Kyiv bought from Belarus special trucks worth \$1.7m, i.e., the respective export rose by 210% compared with 2014.

Many possible indicators of cooperation lack direct evidence, yet look convincing. For example, Tyshkevich points out that the Ukrainian army has started to receive large quantities of

the new anti-tank missile system *Stugna*. Ukraine produces only the missile used in this system, while the rest is delivered by Minsk-based firm *Peleng*.

Why Minsk risks working with Kyiv

The statistics show that though Belarus has earned some money from these transactions, this alone is not enough to be worth the risks which these Ukrainian deals pose to Belarus-Russian relations. Minsk is not looking for money.

Minsk strives to maintain and improve relations with opponents of Moscow in the region and beyond (first of all the EU)

The Russian experts quoted above got it right: politics determines the behaviour of Belarusian government. First of all, Minsk strives to maintain and improve relations with opponents of Moscow in the region and beyond (first of all the EU) because the developments in Crimea and the Donbas have profoundly shocked it. It is not sure that something of this kind could not happen in Belarus and is looking everywhere for partners who would help prevent or, if necessary resist, such an eventuality.

At the same time, Belarus has reached the limits of its [cooperation with Russia](#) as set by the Kremlin. In the field of military industrial cooperation, Minsk has suffered numerous disappointments. For instance, its plans to establish jointly with Russia an assembly production of aircraft in Belarus in the early 2010s ended with nothing.

Earlier, in the late 2000s, Belarus negotiated with the Kremlin even more far-reaching plans for producing top defence products in Belarus. Among them were short-range ballistic missile systems (*Iskander*), surface-to-air missile systems

(*Tor*) and launchers for mobile intercontinental ballistic missile (*Topol*). To no avail, too.

Ukraine gives Belarus military technologies

For some of these opportunities Minsk then publicly [turned to China](#), and more discreetly to Ukraine, especially after Crimea. Interestingly, the Belarusian general Piatro Rahazheuski who had negotiated with Moscow possible Belarusian participation in producing *Iskanders* and *Tors* later on opted to work with Ukrainians.

This former Deputy Defence Minister of Belarus and later Deputy Chairman of the State Military Industrial Committee is now the director of the Belarusian office of the Ukrainian *Motor Sich* Company. *Motor Sich* has given Belarus something Russia denied: the Ukrainian company established a helicopters repair facility in Orsha and plans to extend it.

Ukraine helps Belarus with expertise and technology, not only concerning aviation but also tanks and missiles

Tyshkevich asserts that Ukraine helps Belarus with expertise and technology, not only concerning aviation but also tanks and missiles. Russian scholar Suzdaltsev on *Eurasia Daily* agrees: "Lukashenka is trying to get from Ukraine the arms which Russia – taking into account the not very trusting relations between Minsk and Moscow – cannot give him."

Tyshkevich and Suzdaltsev assume that Ukrainians might have participated in designing the Belarusian *Palanez* multiple launch rocket system. Officially a Belarus-Chinese product, *Palanez* shoots further than the Chinese *WS-2* and *WS-3* systems which presumably served as prototypes for *Palanez*. Since its first public demonstration in May, the media have speculated

about Ukrainian (and Russian) involvement in designing this weapon.

All in all, Belarus' contacts with the Ukrainian and [Arab regimes](#) opposing Russia cannot be dismissed as the opportunistic pursuit of easy money. Minsk dislikes the policies of the current Russian government which threaten to redraw international borders. Moreover, it has realised that the Kremlin takes its alliance with Belarus for granted and does not [deal with it](#) as a partner.