

# Belarus-Ukraine: Time for Strategic Cooperation

On 8 June Belarusian ambassador to Ukraine Valiancin Vialička reiterated that Belarus supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

He emphasised that Belarus will never pose a threat to Ukraine or allow third parties to attack Kyiv from its territory. He spoke at the presentation of 'Foreign Policy Audit: Ukraine-Belarus', a discussion paper prepared by the Institute of World Policy in cooperation with Belarusian experts.

Belarusians have recently produced a number of analytical materials discussing current Belarus-Ukraine relations as well as their potential, and offering recommendations for their enhancement. This article summarises three of them.

## Foreign policy audit: Ukraine-Belarus

On 8 June, the Institute of World Policy presented the discussion paper ['Foreign Policy Audit: Ukraine-Belarus'](#). The research was conducted by Olena Betliy, Research Fellow at the Institute of World Policy, and [Yauheni Preiherman](#), Head of the Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative; Chairman of Board of the Discussion and Analytical Society Liberal Club.

The authors argue that Russian aggression has reinforced  the main foreign policy priority for both Ukraine and Belarus, which is to ensure the national security of each state. In addition, it has highlighted the fact that bilateral relations between the two countries are underpinned by specific common interests, despite being based on different

values.

The authors identify five such areas: military cooperation, border, trade, regional projects and people to people dialogue. The description of developments in these areas is followed by recommendations:

- It is important for Ukraine to maintain the neutral status of Belarus in the conflict with Russia. To this end, Ukraine needs to enlist the support of not only the Belarusian authorities but also Belarusian society. This can be achieved only by developing a distinct communication campaign to bring information about the situation in Ukraine to Belarusians.
- In the conditions of an unstable geopolitical situation and continued fighting in eastern Ukraine, it is in the interests of both countries to rapidly complete border demarcation.
- Kyiv, Brussels, and other capitals, especially those of the CEE countries, needs to maintain the neutral status of Belarus and prevent a Russian airbase and other military facilities from being set up in its territory.
- Kyiv and Minsk can join efforts to provide cybersecurity using a service similar to [Sapphire](#) and counteract misinformation, which will increase the capacity of both countries in confronting “hybrid warfare”.
- The governments must move away from protectionist policies and abandon “trade wars” as a means of solving contentious economic issues.
- In order to bring Belarusian tourists and businessmen back to Ukraine and support those Belarusian citizens who have moved to Ukraine for residence, it is advisable to change migration policy on Belarusians.
- Ukraine should encourage cooperation between NGOs and participate in discussion expert forums on the topical issues of bilateral relations.
- Academic exchanges of students and researchers should

become another platform for long-term cooperation.

- Both countries have a good chance of using Chinese investment for infrastructure development and better optimisation of their transit capacity.
- Ukraine should not delay the appointment of a new ambassador to Belarus.

## Belarus and Ukraine: time for reforms

At the presentation of the above paper in Kyiv, Ukraine-based analyst of Belarusian origin Ihar Tyškievič presented a report called [‘Belarus and Ukraine: time for reforms’](#), in which he compared the situation in the two countries, showed their strengths and weaknesses in a number of areas, and analysed their reform strategies.

He starts with the observation that both Belarus and Ukraine are currently undergoing periods of reform. In the coming years the countries can transform into knowledge economies, yet there are a number of obstacles complicating this:

- Turning into commodity economies
- High level of energy consumption in economy
- Dependence on the resources of neighbouring states
- Widening gap between the two countries and developed world in terms of development of science and the availability of technology for production of new products
- Post-Soviet system of decision-making, varying from oligarchic consensus to the lack of structured groups of influence.
- Shortage of personnel. Restrictions in the social mobility and the weak capacity of the old elite
- Depopulation problems

The two countries have employed opposite strategies for reform. Ukraine pursues changes in state decision-making and personnel mobility, which hopefully will lead to changes in the economy. In Belarus, the authorities will not risk political change, but understand the irrelevance of the post-Soviet model and agree with the need for economic reform, which can subsequently lead to political change. Tyškievič substantiates this thesis by analyzing the number of reformists in key areas of government, and finds them mostly in the economic sphere.

To tackle the problem of personnel quality, Belarus has already taken a number of steps, such as the Belarus-EU project MOST, introducing business education to bureaucrats, engaging independent experts in discussion of reforms, and reforming local government. He notes that concentration of power in the hands of Lukashenka has allowed him to implement a number of unpopular measures, such as abolition of many social guarantees and raising the pension age.

Belarus is also changing its approach to economic development, evidenced by the prioritising of knowledge economy, introduction of land market, transition from directive to indicative planning, demonopolisation of energy and communal services sectors and other steps detailed in the new government plan for 2016-2020.

He concludes that Belarus and Ukraine have completely different export structures and therefore can effectively complement each other and develop regional cooperation rather than compete.

## **Towards strategic cooperation**

# in Belarus and Ukraine: benefits and challenges

✘ In an analysis of Belarus-Ukraine relations called [‘Towards a Strategic Cooperation of Belarus and Ukraine: Benefits and Challenges’](#), Andrej Skryba argues that this is the best time for a new stage of Belarus-Ukraine cooperation, as it has been stimulated by the recent developments in the region. The author suggests five incentives that could foster Belarus-Ukraine dialogue:

- While the rapprochement should be led from a high political level, the politicians from both sides remain rather passive. The expert community can become the main generator of ideas and develop new agendas through special sites, such as Yalta European Strategy and Minsk dialogue.
- Rapprochement should move gradually to the grassroots: industrial and business cooperation, trade and economic cooperation, free environment for trade and investment. Special working groups with representatives of both countries can be created in the relevant areas of cooperation.
- Political rapprochement should promptly resolve current problems. This requires institutionalisation, or at least the creation of an appropriate interactive format. The Belarusian-Ukrainian Advisory Council of Business Cooperation could be the first step in this direction.
- Minsk-Kiev dialogue should not provoke further tensions in the region and be directed against a third party. Potential convergence of foreign policy positions should seek win-win solutions and models of relations with other states.
- Belarus-Ukraine co-operation should be as inclusive as possible, particularly with regard to post-Soviet states

and EU Eastern European members. Belarus and Ukraine should be included in a wide range of regional and integration processes, such as the EU-EEU convergence and Silk Road Economic Belt. The two countries should avoid becoming consumers and hostages of external and often competing regional projects, and instead offer their own new models of regional cooperation.

Despite a varying focus of their studies, all experts agree that the current moment presents a window of opportunity for establishing a strategic cooperation between the two countries, developing bilateral relations and common regional frameworks. Hopefully, decision makers from Ukraine and Belarus will understand that too.

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## **Thawing Relations with the West, Market Traders Protest New Imports Rules – Western Press Digest**

Western media focuses on the lifting of sanctions on Belarus by the West, Belarus's rejection of plans for a Russian air base and heralds the thawing of relations with the West.

Observers seem to agree that the temporary sanctions suspension for Belarus is due to "strategic concerns" overcoming "humanitarian ones"

In other news: Belarusian journalist convicted for the "illegal dissemination of media products" and market traders protest controversial new imports rules.

All this and more in the newest edition of the Western Press Digest.

# International Relations

[Belarus is struggling to normalise relations with the West with weak resistance against Russian dependency, despite economic and political gridlock](#) – Valiery Kavaleŭski, writing for *Forbes*, suggests that now, in Lukashenka's fifth consecutive term, "Belarus is trying to normalise relations with the West without angering Russia" and points to three events in particular which demonstrate this stance taken by the government.

First, the "foreign policy impasse" which means that Belarus's foreign policy dependence on Russia has "left Lukashenka standing alone in an environment that demands reliable partners and alliances". Second, resistance against a planned Russian airbase in Belarus. Finally, "a threat to Belarus's sovereignty" and the current economic gridlock as "it remains unclear what pillars Lukashenka plans to employ to sustain the Belarusian economy."

He concludes by saying, however, that the aforementioned factors enable "the West to help the country turn toward more democratic and sensible governance, structural economic reforms, and more respect for human rights and freedoms."

✘ [The "new chilliness" in relations between Moscow and Minsk which is causing a "relative thaw" between "Belarus and the West"](#) – Brian Whitmore, writing for *Radio Free Liberty/Radio Liberty*, comments on the similarities between how "Kazan and Minsk have been defying the Kremlin with stunning regularity – and getting away with it." Whitmore points at Lukashenka's refusal to recognise Crimea as part of Russia and his "neutral stance" on the conflict in the Donbas and Moscow's conflict

with Turkey as evidence of this.

Jury Drakachrust of *RFE/RL's Belarus Service* commented on Putin's talk of the "closeness" of Minsk's and Moscow's positions on Ukraine and Syria by saying that, "in the language of diplomacy, phrases like 'the closeness of our positions' is common for countries Russia is friendly with, but not for its closest allies." However, Whitmore stresses, this does not mean that Belarus, "which receives significant subsidies from Moscow", is "going to burn its bridges with Russia" entirely.

[Western sanctions on Belarus lifted due to "strategic concerns"](#) – Edward Wrong, writing for *Global Risk Insights*, claims that the temporary sanctions suspension for Belarus is due to "strategic concerns" overcoming "humanitarian ones" in spite of the OSCE's concerns over the October presidential election.

The article claims that the easing of sanctions is due to Belarus being crucial to current NATO-Russia tensions over the "Suwalki Gap" as it "is the only thing separating Belarus from the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea" and Belarus's recent apparent rejection of the proposed Russian air base in southern Belarus.

## Economy

[Shops shut down by market traders in protest against controversial new protectionism rules](#) – The *BBC* reports on the shutting down of shops by market traders in Belarus in response to new rules stipulating that "traders who want to sell the imported goods – which mainly come from Russia – must present proof of origin" under threat of fines.

The article claims that the trade ministry acknowledged that at "least 68% of outlets" were shut down due to this attempt

“to help the struggling state sector” despite market trader complaints that local goods are of poor quality and prices charged by state-run wholesalers too high.

## Civil Society

[Conviction and fining of Belarusian journalist for "illegal" reporting](#) – *The Huffington Post* reports on the fining of Belarusian journalist Larysa Ščhyrakova “for freelancing for an exiled television channel under a new restrictive media law.” She was found guilty of the “illegal dissemination of media products” by a Belarusian court and was fined \$250.

The court said Ščhyrakova “illegally interviewed” residents of a Belarusian village for *Bełsat*, a channel that broadcasts from Poland and which has been denied media accreditation in Belarus for nine years.

The article also mentions that in 2015, 28 journalists in Belarus were “hit with hefty fines” for similar crimes.

[Chernobyl child victims spend Christmas and New Year with their "Irish families"](#) – Elaine Edwards, writing for *The Irish Times* reports on the arrival of 31 young children with special needs from their Irish-run orphanage in the remote village of Viasnova, 175km from Chernobyl, to spend Christmas and New Year 2015 with their “Irish families”, part of an annual programme where Belarusian children come to Ireland for rest and recuperation holidays.

The orphanage was discovered by Irish volunteers from the *Adi Roche Chernobyl Children International* charity in the early 1990s and, since then, “€2.5 million of funding from Irish donations had been put into the orphanage, transforming it into a “world class” childcare centre,” according to the charity’s voluntary chief executive Ms Roche.

[Belarus Free Theatre's stand "against censorship and](#)

[dictatorship" in London part of major theatre news highlights of 2015](#) – Nick Adwe, in his international 2015 “year in review” for *The Stage*, refers to the work of the *Belarus Free Theatre* as taking a “stand against censorship and dictatorship” at their base in London at the *Young Vic* and chooses it as one of the theatre highlights of 2015.

The article quotes co-artistic director Natalia Kaliada as she explains that, “what we are banned from performing in Belarus is Sarah Kane, Harold Pinter, even Shakespeare, from talking about our personal lives and stories.”

## Culture

[Unveiling of a Polish photojournalist's project focusing on the victims of Chernobyl in Belarus](#) – The *BBC* reports on the *Invisible People of Belarus* project of Polish photojournalist Jadwiga Brontē.

The article quotes Ms Brontē as saying she hopes to change the way Belarusians see their “disabled children of Chernobyl” through the series after Belarus suffered “about 70% of the nuclear fallout.”

*Marta Kochetkova*

*Marta is an intern at the Ostrogorski Centre*

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## Air Base Suspended, Seeking

# Support in Asia and Africa, Belarusian Studies – Ostrogorski Centre Digest

In December and January the Ostrogorski Centre analysts are busy analysing Minsk's complicated games in foreign policy and security affairs, finalising the most recent issue of the Journal of Belarusian Studies and organising a conference on Belarusian studies.

It appears that Belarus continues to cooperate with Ukraine on the issues where Belarus can gain financially and technologically, while keeping its distance from aggressive Russian foreign policy. Minsk has also managed to win the standoff over a Russian air base in Belarus.

Siarhei Bohdan argues that Minsk [consistently avoids](#) supporting Moscow in Ukraine and Syria. Belarus is continuing its active collaboration with Kyiv, aimed not only at business deals but also at acquiring the military technology which Russia has failed to provide it with. At the same time, Minsk [seems to be winning](#) the ongoing game over a Russian air base. A base will, it seems, not appear in Belarus in the near future, and on top of that Belarus will soon have Russian warplanes at its disposal.

Igar Gubarevich in his foreign policy overview [shows](#) that despite his renewed right to travel to Europe, Lukashenka's "social circle" has so far remained limited to authoritarian countries. While visiting and hosting Asian and African colleagues, the Belarusian leader had to postpone his most important foreign trip to Moscow because of disagreements over relations with Turkey and the Russian air base in Belarus.

Ryhor Astapenia analyses the performance of Belarusian

industry in 2015. While many enterprises, such as [Kamvol](#), are poised on the verge of bankruptcy, others like potash exporter [Belaruskali](#) have saved the Belarusian economy, allowing inefficient industries to be subsidised.

## Comments in the media

Siarhei Bohdan in an interview with the [Belarusian service of Radio Liberty](#) comments on the normalisation of Belarus-EU relations and their future in 2016. According to Bohdan, Belarus is trying to pursue a neutrality policy in a quiet manner and is seeking to boost trade cooperation with the EU. However, warming of relations will not change domestic politics significantly, as it will be dominated by Russian and Ukrainian factors.

[Aljazeera](#) quoted director of the Ostrogorski Centre □Yarik Kryvoi, who analysed the reasons why the Belarusian authorities refrain from large-scale privatisation and its associated social costs. The Aljazeera piece also cited Ostrogorski Centre associate analyst Alieś Aliachnovič's article on BelarusDigest dedicated to the role of Russia's subsidies in the Belarusian economy.

Ryhor Astapenia together with several well-known experts summed up the year 2015 on [Radio France Internationale](#). Among the most important events of the year Ryhor mentioned was Svetlana Alexievich's Nobel Prize, which put Belarus in the focus of world media, and the October presidential election, which demonstrated people's disappointment with politics and the economic crisis in the first years of Lukashenka's new term in power.

According to the experts, the European Union should increase its presence in Belarus to be able to influence the situation from the inside

Siarhei Bohdan discussed with the [Belarusian Programme of](#)

[Polish Radio](#) current trends in the development of the Belarusian Armed Forces. Despite the declared military union with Russia, the Belarusian army is seeking more autonomy and hampering major bilateral military projects.

Yarik Kryvoi and the Ostrogorski Centre's senior analyst Siarhei Bohdan commented on the role of sanctions in Belarus' relations with the west for [WorldECR](#), the Journal of Export Controls and Sanctions. According to the experts, the European Union should increase its presence in Belarus to be able to influence the situation from the inside. Patient critical engagement and economic modernisation can ultimately strengthen Belarusian statehood and improve the human rights and democracy situation.

Vadzim Smok took part in a discussion titled In What Ways Can We Talk about the Nation and Nationalism Today?, organised in Minsk as a part of the [Debates on Europe](#) programme and supported by the German Federal Foreign Office. The experts exchanged ideas on various models of nation-building in today's Belarus and the role of nationalism in this process.

The Belarusian government allows the existence of a sizeable shadow economy because its main revenue comes from outside the country

Siarhei Bohdan discussed with [Radio Racyja](#) the problem of the shadow economy in Belarus. The Belarusian government allows the existence of a sizeable shadow economy because its main revenue comes from outside the country, mainly from Russian hydrocarbons. Many businesses operate via illegal schemes, and the authorities turn a blind eye to them in exchange for political loyalty.

## **Belarusian Studies in the**

# 21st century conference

The Ostrogorski Centre and the UCL's School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) invite proposals from established academics and doctoral researchers for individual papers and panels to discuss various aspects of contemporary Belarusian studies.

The conference will take place on 23-24 March 2016 at the SSEES in London. The Annual Lecture on Belarusian Studies will follow the main conference panels. The conference will serve as a multidisciplinary forum of Belarusian studies in the West and offer a rare networking opportunity for researchers of Belarus. The conference call for papers is available [here](#) and the deadline is 15 February 2016.

## The 2015 issue of the Journal of Belarusian Studies

✘ The Ostrogorski Centre presents the [2015 issue](#) of the Journal of Belarusian Studies. The new issue of the journal focuses on the Belarusian-Polish-Lithuanian borderland and the period stretching from the uprising of 1863 to the inter-war period of the 20th century when the territory of today's Belarus was split between the Soviet Union and Poland.

Two longer articles are followed by several essays which resulted from a conference held by the Anglo-Belarusian Society and other London-based organisations at University College London in March 2014.

This issue also includes the transcript of the first Annual London Lecture on Belarusian Studies, and two book reviews – one by Stephen Hall examining the meaning of Europe for the Belarusian and Ukrainian authorities, and the other by Siarhej

Bohdan looking at relations between various ethnic groups in Eastern Poland in the inter-war period, which is now Western Belarus.

The issue features authors from Estonia, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Belarus and Sweden.

## Belarus Profile

The BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following personalities: [Aliena Arciomienka](#), [Andrej Parotnikaŭ](#), [Uladzimir Kaltovič](#), [Dzmitryj Markušeŭski](#), [Juryj Caryk](#), [Kiryl Koktyš](#), [Aliaksandr Aŭtuška-Sikorski](#), [Andrej Rusakovič](#), [Siarhej Vazniak](#), [Uladzimir Kavalkin](#).

We have also updated the profiles of [Stanislaŭ Kniazieŭ](#), [Anton Kudasaŭ](#), [Valiery Kulakoŭski](#), [Aliaksandr Lahviniec](#), [Dzmitry Lazoŭski](#), [Žana Litvina](#), [Anatoł Lis](#), [Ihar Laciiankoŭ](#), [Alieh Latyšonak](#), [Paviel Latuška](#), [Viktar Lukašenka](#), [Anatoł Liabiedźka](#), [Anatoł Marazievič](#), [Viktar Marcinovič](#), [Siarhiej Maskievič](#), [Andrej Šorac](#), [Andrej Hajeŭ](#), [Uladzimir Amaryn](#), [Maksim Jermalovič](#), [Dzmitry Charytončyk](#).

## Belarus Policy

The Ostrogorski Centre continues to update the database of policy papers on BelarusPolicy.com. The papers of partner institutions added this month include:

- Ina Ramašeŭskaja, Nataallia Rabava. [What motivates public servants in Belarus: money not important](#). BIPART, 2015.
- Uladzimir Kavalkin. [Public procurement: increasing transparency and accountability](#). BIPART, 2014.
- Ina Ramašeŭskaja, Tacciana Čulickaja. [Do government agencies operate effectively? Modern challenges and responses](#). BIPART, 2014.

- Kaciaryna Korzun. [Public-private partnership in Belarus: what is after the law?](#) BIPART, 2014.
- Dzmitry Markušėuski. [On the way to e-government in Belarus.](#) BIPART, 2013.
- Anastasija Luzhina. [Pension benefits as a component of the social security system.](#) BEROC, 2015.
- Katsiaryna Barnukova. [Support of maternity in Belarus.](#) BEROC, 2015.
- Katsiaryna Barnukova, Anastasiya Luzhina, Katsiaryna Lisiankova . [Pension system of belarus: current state and necessity for reforms.](#) BEROC, 2015.
- Alieh Mazol. [Local government in the Republic of Belarus.](#) BEROC, 2015.
- Dzmitry Kruk, Katsiaryna Barnukova. [Decomposition of economic growth in Belarus.](#) BEROC, 2014.

Any partner organisation of BelarusPolicy.com can submit its research for inclusion onto the database by completing this [form](#).

*The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its projects include Belarus Digest, the [Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), [BelarusPolicy.com](#) and [BelarusProfile.com](#). Follow all the news from the Ostrogorski Centre on [Facebook](#). □*

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## **Strengthening Links with Autocratic Friends – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest**

Despite his regained ability to travel to Europe, President Alexander Lukashenka's 'social circle' has so far remained limited to leaders of countries that have difficulties in

their relations with Western democracies.

In the past month, the Belarusian president has become his country's most diligent diplomat. He welcomed his Serbian and Azerbaijani counterparts in Minsk and travelled to Vietnam and Turkmenistan on official visits, focusing on trade and investment but also working on reinforcing political ties.

However, he had to postpone his most important foreign trip – to Moscow to meet Vladimir Putin – due to the two countries' disagreements over relations with Turkey and the Russian air base in Belarus.

## **Serbia: trading political support for investment**

On 18 – 20 November, Serbian president Tomislav Nikolic visited Belarus on an official visit. According to his Belarusian counterpart, Serbia remains Belarus' 'key trade and economic partner in the Balkans'.

Trade and investment issues dominated the bilateral agenda. Trade has been growing steadily since 2009 and reached \$245m in 2014. However, the two countries are unlikely to reach their [declared target of a \\$500m turnover](#) in the coming years.

Nikolic came to Minsk to launch the latest project of  Dragomir and Bogoljub Karic, two Serbian brothers who have been implementing [several investment deals](#) in Belarus. The businessmen have undertaken the construction of multifunctional complex Minsk-Mir at an estimated cost of \$3.5bn, having received undisclosed incentives from the Belarusian president.

At the inauguration ceremony both presidents made public the surprising idea of gathering the presidents of the former

Yugoslavian republics in Minsk in 2016 and involving these countries in the construction of Minsk-Mir.

Nikolic also thanked Lukashenka for his continued support of Serbia's territorial integrity. In fact, ten days earlier Belarus voted against admitting Kosovo to UNESCO. This initiative fell three votes short of being adopted.

## Azerbaijan: a scheduled meeting of close friends

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev came to Belarus on a one-day official visit on 28 November. As the trip took place only a few days after Turkey downed a Russian warplane, some analysts hurried to suggest that Belarus and Azerbaijan, both close to Russia and Turkey, arranged an express meeting to discuss possibilities for mediating the emerging conflict.

✘ However, these conclusions are groundless. The presidents of Belarus and Azerbaijan keep a [regular schedule of yearly meetings](#). This time around they signed a number of important bilateral documents, which had been drafted well in advance, including an agreement on social and economic cooperation valid up to 2025.

Lukashenka and Aliyev reiterated the strategic nature of their relationship. However, Azerbaijan fails to see Belarus as a strategic market for its goods. Bilateral trade is strongly one-directional. In 2014, Belarusian exports to Azerbaijan were worth \$318m and its imports from Azerbaijan a mere \$8.7m.

Belarus is looking to further increase its exports and to [attract Azerbaijani investments](#). Azerbaijan may be more interested in military-industrial and scientific cooperation and technology transfers. Both countries support each other in the international arena.

# Vietnam: reinforcing an outpost in South-East Asia

[Lukashenka](#) made his first foreign trip following his re-election to Vietnam on 9 December. This was not an intentional tribute to the two countries' strategic partnership.

During his one day visit to Hanoi, Lukashenka met all the  top leaders of the country. Belarus and Vietnam agreed to foster their bilateral ties in a wide range of areas, going well beyond the prioritised trade relationship.

Vietnam has been [seeking technology transfers and industrial cooperation](#) with Belarus, particularly in the petrochemical industry, engineering, and automobile assembly. Reportedly, the Belarusian businessmen who accompanied Lukashenka on this trip signed contracts with their Vietnamese colleagues worth \$350m.

This is a huge amount taking into account the existing trade turnover (only \$169.3m in 2014). Routinely, Belarus and Vietnam agreed to aim at a \$500m turnover in the near future.

The Belarusian president postponed his visit to Moscow, which was originally scheduled for 25 – 26 November. Belarus and Russia explained the postponement as a result of the extreme workload of both Lukashenka and Putin. However, a more plausible explanation is Belarus' unwillingness to jeopardise its relations with Turkey by having to comment in Moscow on the warplane shoot-down incident. Another reason might be a lack of an agreement on the issue of a Russian air base in Belarus.

# Turkmenistan: supporting falling trade and playing peacemaker

On his way back to Minsk, Alexander Lukashenka made a stopover in Ashgabat on 10 – 12 December for an official visit and a celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Turkmenistan's neutrality.

Bilateral turnover has been falling dramatically since 2013. It amounted to \$67.7m in January- September 2015. As with Azerbaijan, it remains a one-way street with Belarusian exports largely dominating.

✘ The 'flagship project' of the two countries' economic relations remains the Garlyk mining and processing complex for potash fertilisers in Turkmenistan, which is being built by a Belarusian company. Turkmenistan is also one of the largest buyers of Belarusian MAZ trucks.

Furthermore, Belarus has become a preferred destination for [Turkmen students](#). Over 9,000 Turkmens have been studying in Belarusian universities.

On his third day in Ashgabat, Lukashenka used a statement at an international conference dedicated to Turkmenistan's neutrality to call for dialogue between Russia and Turkey. 'It is essential to find a solution, to make a concession. At least, a way to take a half-step towards each other should be found to de-escalate the tension', Lukashenka said.

It is highly probable that Lukashenka met Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the sidelines of the summit in Ashgabat. However, publicising such a meeting, if it indeed took place, would not be in Lukashenka's best interests. Russian public would be unlikely to respond positively to its

ally's contacts with Russia's sworn enemy. It is already unhappy with Belarus' neutrality in this conflict.

Lukashenka has been trying to capitalise on his good personal contacts with a number of foreign leaders, seeking investments and exports revenues for his currency-stripped county. It appears that he is not willing to engage in political liberalisation to gain access to the West's much larger financial assistance and further decrease his dependence on Russia.

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## **New Military Doctrine in Belarus**

On 15 November, Belarusian Defence Minister Andrej Raŭkoŭ appeared on Belarusian Television to discuss a new military doctrine, which he attributed to the arms buildup in neighbouring NATO states surrounding Belarus.

This article explores the background and content – insofar as it is known – of this doctrine and the preparedness of Belarus to meet future contingencies, including the potential development of a “hybrid war.”

## **Working with Russia**

The series of exercises with the Russian Army that began with [ZAPAD 2009](#), were in anticipation of a NATO threat to the territory of Russia and Belarus that would require a military response. Specifically, the Russia-Belarus operation targeted Poland and Lithuania, and Russian missile carriers TU-95 and

TU-160 bombed mock objects in those countries.

Such an approach anticipated the close cooperation of the two armies against the common enemy of NATO. Essentially that approach did not change drastically in the current year, as a joint exercise named "Union Shield 2015" in Kaliningrad in September preceded training sessions with the rapid response forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation in Tajikistan.

pursuit of a common military doctrine with Russia has become a liability to the Belarusian government

Another link is that one of the leading figures on military decisions, [Stanislaŭ Zaś](#), confirmed as Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus on 5 November (earlier he served four months as Acting Secretary), holds the rank of Professor at the Russian Academy of Military Sciences.

Yet the pursuit of a common military doctrine with Russia has become a liability to the Belarusian government. At a mundane level, the two armies remain vastly different, not least in salary. Whereas a Russian captain can expect to receive a monthly salary of just over \$2,000, his Belarusian counterpart brings home a salary of less than \$150 – following a rise in salary from around \$100.

But more important the goals of the two states are no longer in harmony. Belarus fears becoming embroiled in a hybrid war, particularly on its southern border with Ukraine. The Russian invasion and occupation of Crimea in February-March 2014 marked the decisive turning point in Lukashenka's decision to introduce a new military doctrine.

# Embarrassing Memory

In the number of tanks, armoured vehicles and guns per 1,000 troops, Belarus currently ranks first in Europe

In theory, Belarus possessed ample weaponry after its declaration of independence in August 1991. As military expert Aliaksandr Alesin has noted: “We don’t have many troops but we have a lot of weapons,” most of which were inherited from the former USSR. In the number of tanks, armoured vehicles and guns per 1,000 troops, Belarus currently ranks first in Europe. But in July 2012 it suffered the embarrassment of the intrusion of its airspace by planes from Lithuania piloted by Swedes, which [dropped teddy bears](#) bearing pro-democracy messages over Minsk and other areas, including directly over the residence of the president.

[Belarusian Army: Capacity And Its Role in the Region](#) Belarus successfully formed its own national army in 1992 while making use of favourable premises already available to them after the Soviet Union’s collapse.

Understandably the Belarusian authorities reacted furiously, but more important, the event served as a psychological blow to the president and sparked fears—largely unjustified—that Belarus appeared vulnerable to an attack from the air.

## Foundations of the New Doctrine: “The Polonaise”

Following his reelection, the president held three meetings with military leaders on 30 October, 3 November, and 6 November 2015. The third was largely ceremonial coming during Lukashenka’s inauguration ceremony as troops swore the oath of loyalty to the president and country.

On 30 October, Lukashenka reported that a new military doctrine would be introduced in 2016. It would entail a gradual reduction of the size of the regular army from 250,000 to 65,000, along with the restructuring of administrative and support personnel. On 3 November, while visiting an electro-mechanical factory in Dzerzhinsk, the president announced the task of introducing a new generation of modern rocketry. This latter revelation requires some explanatory background.

Its origins lie not in military links with Russia, but with China. Belarus has created [a new rocket complex](#) called "Polonez" (Polonaise), a means to inflict "unacceptable damage" on an attacking enemy. The rockets in question have a range of 200 kilometres (about 120 miles), meaning that they could strike the capitals of all neighbouring states, though they could not reach Moscow. Within range would be military objects of NATO countries: the Baltic States and Poland. China, which produces the missiles, financed the project whereas Belarus' role is to manufacture the trucks and missile launchers.

Interestingly, however, Belarus will produce and control the missile targeting system. In this way, Belarus has bypassed Russia, which had expressed scepticism about the ability of the smaller state to produce such advanced weaponry. The Polonaise' local base is the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant MZKT 7390 "Astrology," and the rockets could deliver a simultaneous strike on eight targets at the 200 kilometre range.

In addition Belarus also intends to produce its own drones, the formation of its own rapid respond force—in addition to that of the CSTO—and the formation of an army of local self-defence. In all aspects the doctrine emphasises a form of aggressive defence and even a preemptive attack on an enemy about to strike Belarusian territory.

# Problems

In addition to the new concept, the full details of which are unknown outside presidential circles, Belarus must re-equip its existing weaponry though it lacks the finances to do so. Reliance on Russia to subsidise and replenish the Belarusian military fleet backfired when Russia opted to construct [its own air base](#) near Babruisk.

The establishment of the new military doctrine runs counter to Russian plans and also appears to undermine CSTO unity because the course being pursued by Lukashenka is one of neutrality, especially in the conflict between its two neighbours Russia and Ukraine. Yet the fundamental alliance between Belarus and Russia remains and military exercises continue.

Thus the limits of Belarus' military independence appear obvious. Lukashenka seeks a national deterrent free from Russian control. Simultaneously his country remains an integral part of Russian strategic space and needs Russian help for its homeland defence. Lastly, Belarus remains in the Russian-dominated alliance CSTO, as well as the Russia-Belarus Union.

*David Marples and Uladzimir Padhol*

*David Marples is Distinguished University Professor, Department of History & Classics, University of Alberta.*

*Uladzimir Padhol is Belarusian political scientist and journalist, editor and publisher of Narodnyi televisor. Tsitaty i baiki A.G. Lukashenko [People's Television: Citations and Stories of A.G. Lukashenko], which is now in its thirtieth edition.*

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# 2015 Annual Report, Russian Airbase, Economic Reforms – Ostrogorski Centre Digest

The economy of Belarus shows a long-term negative trend. The need for structural reforms looks obvious even within the elite, and this need for structural reforms is desired especially by international creditors. In the political and military realm, Minsk struggles with Russia's attempts to influence it.

As Alieś Aliachnovič [shows](#) in his piece, the authorities are not ready for large-scale market reforms, but rather slow and partial structural reforms appear inevitable. This is because creditors will monitor the progress of reforms before agreeing to pay the next tranche of funds.

Igar Gubarevich [analyses](#) the acceleration of Belarus-US contacts and concludes that the United States no longer regards Lukashenka as a Russian puppet. In order to contain Russia's growing assertiveness in the region and beyond, the United States may help Lukashenka reduce economic dependence on Russia by assisting with securing an IMF loan and facilitating more trade and investment.

Siarhei Bohdan [argues](#) that the Kremlin is pushing for an airbase in Belarus for political, not military reasons. It seeks to eliminate any vestiges of Belarusian neutrality, which Minsk had built up in the past decade, by distancing itself from numerous Russian policies and looking for alternative partners.

# Ostrogorski Centre Annual Report



The Ostrogorski Centre has published its [annual report](#) highlighting the main achievements in 2015 and its plans for the future. In 2015, the centre expanded its leadership team and established new partnerships.

The Centre launched BelarusPolicy.com, a research database in cooperation with the Belarus Research Council and expanded BelarusProfile.com. It is about to release the 2015 issue of the Journal of Belarusian Studies.

Analysts at the Centre organised and participated in several Belarus related events in Minsk, Vilnius, London, Berlin and other place. This helped the centre increase its presence in Belarusian and foreign media. The report describes this in detail, with pictures and charts.

Over the next two weeks, the Centre plans to launch a [fundraising campaign](#) to support Belarus Digest and its other projects.

## Comments for the Media

Yarik Kryvoi in an interview for the [Belarusian service of Radio Liberty](#) comments on the recent warming in Belarus–EU relations and the EU’s apparent shift of focus from democracy to the security agenda. He also touched upon the redlines which Minsk does not want to cross in its relations with Russia.

[Polish Radio](#) talks to Igar Gubarevich about the Belarusian authorities latest steps in expanding the countries’ exports

to traditional and new markets. Minsk tries to boost trade with a wide range of countries, but its efforts may not prove effective because of administrative methods and the kinds of produce that Minsk tries to sell.

Siarhei Bohdan comments to [Polish Radio](#) about recent trends in Belarus' security situation. After the change in the wider-region's security situation Minsk has started to distance itself from Moscow and seek partners in other parts of the world. Besides, Belarus gives more attention to its army and develops its own weapons instead of buying Russian ones.

Igar Gubarevich talks to Belarusian [Radio Racja](#) about Belarus' chances of profiting from the suspension of air traffic between Ukraine and Russia and possible Russian pressure. Belarus has enough capacity to connect Russia and Ukraine, and will not stop benefiting even if Russia were to desire such an outcome.

Siarhei Bohdan discusses in [RFE/RL's Belarusian Service](#) programme the recent developments in Syria's civil war and Minsk's policy in the region. Belarus has for a long time taken the approach of its US allies in the Syrian conflict, and reacted very cautiously to Russian-Turkey tensions over a downed jet. Importantly, the Russian South Stream pipeline project involving Turkey now seems unrealistic, and Belarus may become the host for another pipeline to Europe.

## Belarus Profile

The BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following personalities: [Dzmitryj Kruty](#), [Aliaksandr Zabarouški](#), [Dzmitry Babicki](#), [Elena Korosteleva](#), [Andrej Jelisiejeŭ](#), [Lieanid Zaika](#), [Andrej Laŭruchin](#), [Anatol Michajlaŭ](#), [Mikita Bialiajeŭ](#), [Vadzim Smok](#).

We have also updated the profiles of [Taras Nadoŭny](#),

[Aliaksandr Łukashenka](#), [Michail Orda](#), [Aliena Kupčyna](#), [Juryj Čyž](#), [Aliaksiej Vahanaŭ](#), [Ina Miadzviedzieva](#), [Piotr Mamanovič](#), [Stanislaŭ Zaś](#), [Andrej Raŭkoŭ](#), [Siarhiej Kaliakin](#), [Iryna Kanhro](#), [Anatoł Kapski](#), [Viktar Karankievič](#), [Dzmitry Kaciarynič](#), [Tadevuš Kandrusievič](#), [Uladzimir Kanapliouŭ](#), [Natalia Kačanava](#), [Aliaksandr Kaškievič](#), [Vitał Voŭk](#).

## Belarus Policy

The Ostrogorski Centre continues to update the database of policy papers on BelarusPolicy.com. The papers of partner institutions added this month include:

- Strategic Thought team. [Recommendations to the program of the socio-economic development of Homieł region in 2016-2020](#). Strategic Thought, 2015.
- Uladzimir Akulich, Uladzimir Valetka, Sierž Naŭrodski, Anastasija Charnushevich, Darya Sushkevich. [The second issue of Macroeconomic Review of Belarus in graphs \(January-June 2015\)](#). CASE Belarus, 2015.
- Uladzimir Akulich, Uladzimir Valetka, Sierž Naŭrodski, Anastasija Charnushevich, Julija Trus. [The third issue of Macroeconomic Review of Belarus in graphs \(January-September 2015\)](#). CASE Belarus, 2015.
- Aleksander Avtushko-Sikorskiy, Vladimir Artyugin, Aliaksei Lashuk, Dzianis Melyantsou, Jury Chavusau. [Semi-annual monitoring of the main trends BISS-Trends \(January – June 2014\)](#). BISS. Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014.
- Aleksander Avtushko-Sikorskiy, Vladimir Artyugin, Aliaksei Lashuk, Dzianis Melyantsou, Jury Chavusau. [Semi-annual monitoring of the main trends BISS-Trends \(July – December 2014\)](#). BISS. Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015.

Any partner organisation of BelarusPolicy.com can submit its research for inclusion onto the database by completing [this](#)

[form](#).

Follow all the news from the Ostrogorski Centre on [Facebook](#).

[ostrogorski.org](#)

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# Belarus - Russia Military Cooperation: Can the Kremlin Dictate the Terms?

On 26 October Russian President Putin planned for a discussion about the plans for establishing a Russian airbase in Belarus with his Belarusian colleague Lukashenka. They did not meet.

Instead, a Russian general told the press that the base plans had been agreed on with the Belarusian side. The Belarusian defence ministry retorted that there was no political decision on the facility.

The airbase is already two years behind schedule. Unilateral statements made by Russian officials throughout the whole of this period have concealed a lack of progress on the base. "Many years of cooperation between Minsk and Moscow failed to yield an efficient mechanism of joint defence," lamented Russian *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* daily.

Meanwhile, the number of Belarusian officers studying in Russia has recently declined, as did the scale of major regular joint military exercise in September.

# Minsk Makes Clear Its Opposition to Deployment

Russia proposed the establishment of [its airbase](#) in Belarus in April 2013. Yet before the October election Lukashenka dismissed any such plans. He also accused Russia's ruling establishment of leaking fake information to the press.

Lukashenka and Putin were expected to talk about the base at a summit in Astana in October this year. But after Astana, Belarusian officials continued to firmly oppose the airbase. The Belarusian defense minister [Andrei Raukou](#) and Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makei](#) in late October criticised the idea of the Russian airbase.

Furthermore, although the joint conference of the defence ministries of Belarus and Russia on 21 October discussed the Single System of Air Defence, it failed to touch upon the issue of the Russian airbase, though it would be an indispensable part of the system.

Lukashenka categorically refuses to host an airbase. He wishes to keep guarding Moscow's sky, as he should in accordance with his alliance obligations, with the [Belarusian armed forces](#). He continues to stop the airbase in the hope of increasing the economic benefit Belarus receives from Moscow.

## Russian Airbase in Belarus: Political, Not Military

Given Minsk's firm position, Moscow again decided to change the plans. It already accepted moving the base away from the borders with NATO Members (from Lida or Baranavichy to Babruysk) as well as delaying its establishment.

Moscow apparently wants to get the air base in whatever form

On 24 October, the chief of the operative directorate of Russia's Air and Space Forces, Alexander Lyapkin, speaking at a seminar in Moscow announced that Russia wants to deploy 12 fighter jets Su-27 and four helicopters Mi-8 in Belarus. That is half of what Russia demanded during the first discussions.

Such flexibility raises questions about the strategic meaning of the base. After all it has been moved from one end of Belarus to another, and had its force deployment reduced by half. Moscow apparently wants to get the base in whatever form. Apparently it needs it not to resist NATO, but primarily for other purposes.

By establishing a military base in Belarus, the Kremlin achieves another, primarily political goal, namely eliminating any vestiges of [Belarusian neutrality](#) which Minsk had built up in the past decade by distancing itself from numerous Russian policies (for example on Georgia and Ukraine) and looking for [alternative partners](#).

## **Two Decades of Defence Cooperation: Declarations and Realities**

At a joint conference of the defence ministries of Belarus and Russia on 21 October, Russian military officials complained that despite 20 years of tight military cooperation between the two countries, the Union State of Belarus and Russia still lacked a clear-cut defence system.

The conference also discussed the implementation of the agreements on the external borders of the Union State and the Single Air Defence System. The latter is in a pitiful condition. In 2013, Moscow declared the establishment of the

Single Air Defence System of Belarus and Russia, but it does not currently function.

Belarus in military terms is closely linked with Russia yet the declarations about these links and reality differ a lot. Thus, although formally Belarus buys almost of all the [newest armaments](#) which it cannot manufacture itself from Russia, that is only half true.

Minsk cannot afford to buy major military systems despite the degradation of its military equipment.

First, Minsk cannot afford to buy major military systems despite the degradation of its military equipment. This year it acquired four Yak-130 trainer jets and plans to buy four more. The publicised deal on buying armoured personnel carriers from Russia for one battalion remains [more a plan](#) than a deal. These were the only major purchases the country made since independence. The only exception were surface-to-air missile systems. Moscow delivered these to Minsk only because Russia could not let Belarusian air defence defending Russian airspace decline.

Second, after the Kremlin in the late 2000s and early 2010s refused to give Belarus some state-of-the-art arms like the *Iskander* short-range ballistic missile system, Minsk began [cooperation with China](#) in 2009 on designing new weapons. In 2012-2013, Minsk reportedly signed two agreements with China on designing two major arms system: a multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) and surface-to-air missile system. The former has already borne fruit, as Minsk this year demonstrated the *Palanez* MLRS.

## **Declining Cooperation Volume**

# Figures after Crimea?

Moscow may be worried about Belarusian-Russian integration in the sphere of military education, too. Belarus sends many of its military specialists to train in Russia, in the last 17 years over 1,126 officers have been trained. However, the number of Belarusian officers sent to study in Russia after the Ukrainian crisis has rapidly declined. A year ago there were 447 such students, now there are only 374.

Another example is joint [military exercises](#). Belarus and Russia regularly held large-scale joint exercise, like *Shchyt Sayuza*. Few commentaries mentioned the fact that this year significantly fewer forces had participated in this exercise.

Four years ago, 12,000 troops and 450 vehicles demonstrated their skills in *Shchyt Sayuza*-2011. This year Minsk and Moscow committed only 8,000 soldiers and about 400 vehicles. Also for the first time ever, a Belarusian officer, the chief of Belarusian General Staff, [Aleh Belakoneu](#), commanded the joint forces at the exercise.

Evidently, Belarus maintains and increases its autonomy in the military sphere. Minsk will no longer clash with Moscow and it remains a partner of Russia. Yet the Belarusian government itself takes decisions. Although many, especially in the Russian media, try to prove the contrary, every noticeable aspect of military cooperation provides evidence of Minsk's increasing autonomy.

Moscow wants to counter this tendency by getting Russian combat units placed in Belarus. The establishment of a Russian airbase will clearly increase Moscow's leverage over Belarus and its possibilities for more balanced and neutral policies.

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# Belarusian Satellite, Multiple Rocket Launchers, Nuclear Plant – State Press Digest

Belarus leaders develop closer defence industry cooperation with China and do not want a Russian airbase on their territory.

Although Belarus has no alternative to integration with Russia in the foreseeable future, the two countries different economic models and the ideas vacuum in Eurasian integration make integration with Russia a challenging undertaking. In 2017 Belarus will launch a satellite and in 2018 the first block of a nuclear power plant will start operating near the Lithuanian border.

Refugees from Syria, Ukraine and other countries seek shelter in Belarus. The disabled have difficulties with accessing the entertainment places. All of this and more in this edition of State Press Digest.

[Lukashenka inspects the production of multiple rocket launchers.](#) *Belarus Segodnia* highlights the visit of Lukashenka to the defence industry plant in Dziaržynsk to check the development of the Palanez launcher. Belarusian specialists claim this is one of the most modern and powerful rocket systems in the world. Moreover, Belarus soon hopes to start the autonomous production of rocket engines. Belarus has been developing Palanez with [Chinese assistance](#) after Russia refused to transfer to Belarus a similar defence system.

✘ Now, as Russia is [pushing for an airbase](#) in Belarus, Lukashenka tries to find more arguments to impede this initiative: “We have an exclusive defensive strategy, and it means that it should be able to cause unacceptable losses to the enemy. What is an airbase today? The jets will be shot down at the very beginning of the conflict. But this (Palanez) is a supermodern machine”, Lukashenka said during the visit.

[Union of Belarus and Russia has no alternative.](#) *Soyuz* newspaper gives an interview with Moscow-based political scientist of Belarusian origin Kiryl Koktyš on the future of Belarusian and Russia integration. Although the post-Soviet states have developed a number of integration projects like the CIS and the Eurasian Economic Union, the Union State of Belarus and Russia remains the most successful project in the social sphere. It gives both state's citizens equal rights in property, education and healthcare.

However, the expert notes that the economic models of Belarus and Russia, state capitalism and liberal capitalism respectively, are barely compatible for deeper integration. The EEU, initially a liberal economic model, cannot currently be implemented because of Western sanctions. It needs state protection and will likely be based on Belarusian experience of economic management in future. Yet at the moment a union economic ideology is absent.

Speaking of the [removal of sanctions](#) from Belarus's political leadership, Kiryl Koktyš opined that it will not bring a close association between Belarus and the EU. Europe and the West in general are not ready to pay for loss of values, as the Ukrainian case demonstrated perfectly. So Belarus will remain in Russian orbit without any major shifts.

[Nuclear power plant to start in 2018.](#) *Belarus Magazine* publishes a report from the construction site of the nuclear power plant near Astraviec town on the border with Lithuania. Currently around 4000 workers are involved in the construction

and next year 8000 will be working there. The first power block of the plant will be launched in 2018. The project proposes a threefold growth of the town's population to 35,000 until 2020.

Thanks to the nuclear plant Belarus will reduce its gas consumption by 5 bn cubic metres annually, and thus will strengthen energy independence. However, state journalists always forget to mention that the plant is built using [Russian technologies](#) and will generate energy from Russian uranium, so dependence will continue.

[Belarus will launch its spacecraft in 2017.](#) *Soyuz* newspaper  writes on the meeting of CIS representatives on space cooperation which took place in Minsk. Currently, Belarusian academics in cooperation with Russian corporation Roskosmos are developing a satellite. It will become the first model of the Belarus-Russia space group. It is designed to pick up the sounds of earth from a distance and is expected to be launched in 2017. Roskosmos head Igor Komarov emphasised that the Belarusian hitech plants [Integral and Peleng](#) remain strategic suppliers of Russian space industry.

[Disabled people cannot enter nightclubs in Belarus.](#) *Belarus Segodnya* writes about the problems of disabled people who have restricted access to places of entertainment. The newspaper provides a number of life stories of people who could not get into night clubs. The security teams of the clubs blamed suggest strange reasons for not admitting the potential disabled clients, saying that they are “unable to provide sufficient safety to the disabled” or “ they look unwell”. Human rights activist Siarhei Drazdoŭski says that ethics of [treating the disabled](#) is unknown among most public and private actors in Belarus.

 [Homiel centre of adaptation and rehabilitation accepts refugees.](#) *Belarus Magazine* tells the stories of families from various countries who chose Belarus as a refuge to escape

conflicts in their homelands. Homiel region bordering Ukraine is usually the first destination for Ukrainians from the Donbas. The Belarusian authorities usually offer them [work in agriculture](#) where Belarus has a drastic shortage of workers. Meanwhile, Belarus also accepted 14 Syrians and around 100 more applied for refuge. According to the joint project with the United Nations, the government provides them with new flats, monthly financial help and adaptation services.

[Top businessman and senator from Hrodna arrested.](#) *Vecherniy Grodno* newspaper writes about the arrest of one of the biggest businessmen from Hrodna, Andrej Paŭloŭski. According to the KGB he evaded taxes of up to \$8,2m in recent years. With companies from 8 other countries he organised a grey scheme of import and selling agricultural products. Andrej Paŭloŭski was the second most influential businessman in Hrodna region and also a member of the Council of Republic, the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament, since 2012. During the last year and a half he became the third senator to be deprived of parliamentary privilege on the grounds of criminal persecution.

The State Digest Digest is based on 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.

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## **Can Belarus Stick to Neutrality Despite Russian Pressure?**

Last week, pro-government Russian experts and media launched a new series of attacks on the Belarusian government. Minsk,

they insisted, is going the way of Yanukovich's Ukraine.

Russian commentators agree on that regardless of their ideological colours. Be it the liberal *Kommersant* daily, government-affiliated think tanks or the radical right-wing *Zavtra* daily. They warn Lukashenka of Yanukovich's fate.

The attacks have been triggered by Lukashenka's statement that the issue of the Russian airbase is [far from settled](#). Minsk already irritated Moscow by its cautious building up neutrality since the late 2000s.

Moreover, while earlier Minsk could collude in Russia's politics with influential right- and left-wing elements who dreamt of restoring a multinational empire, it now has to deal with new powerful forces which hate compromise with allies like Lukashenka. Exclusive Russian nationalism is ever more influencing Moscow's policy.

## Rampant Russian Nationalism

At the beginning of October the Belarusian Embassy in Moscow held an expert video conference between Moscow and Minsk on the *"Prospects of Belarus-Russian Relations in the Context of Presidential Election in Belarus."* From both the Belarusian and the Russian sides, only well-known experts close to the respective governments participated. For Belarus, there were [Vadzim Hihin](#), Yury Shautsou, [Siarhei Kizima](#) and Alyaksandr Shpakouski.

Commenting on the video conference, the Leading Research Fellow of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) Oleg Nemenskii lashed out at the Belarusian participants. According to him, "the main thing which united the Belarusian experts was their hate towards the Russian World." Moreover, "Minsk has been so frightened by the changes that occurred in Russia in spring 2014 that it does not even try to find a

*modus vivendi* [with Russia](#).”

Bolsheviks split Western regions from Great Russia in order to implement “the un-Russian national projects of Ukraine and Belarus”

This prominent expert of a think-tank affiliated with the Russian government openly expresses radical Russian nationalist views. Earlier, he accused, in an article, the Bolsheviks of splitting Western regions from Great Russia in order to implement “the un-Russian national projects of Ukraine and Belarus.” He urged that the Soviet heritage be overcome and that a “Russian national state” be formed from a “large part of the Russian Federation, Belarus, most a bigger part of Ukraine, Transnistria and a large part of Kazakhstan.”

Russian nationalist experts seemingly believe this rhetoric. They argue that Lukashenka with his doubtful loyalty to Putin's policies does not represent the Belarusian people. They refer to presumably neutral surveys of public opinion in Belarus which show high support for Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Just a decade ago, Russian nationalists (to be differentiated from imperialist groups which reject its more ethnically-based ideas) existed as a marginal group without serious political clout. Now, they grow ever stronger in Putin's state as another recent political show has demonstrated, too.

On 25-26 September, the conference “*Russophobia and Information War Against Russia*” in Moscow for the first time featured a series of presentations on problem of Russophobia in Belarus. It also alleged that Russophobia was committed by the [Belarusian state](#). The presenters included prominent Russian nationalists from Belarus who had challenged the Belarusian government, like Andrei Herashchanka sacked from Belarusian public service for Russian chauvinism.

The event served as a stern warning to Lukashenka because the conference was not a shabby meeting of right-wing radicals. Two organisations close to the Kremlin and a group of deputies of the Russian Duma had organised the event and Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin spoke at it.

## No Friends in Moscow?

The lack of acceptance for more neutral Belarusian positions seems to be [universal in Moscow](#). Last Thursday, Maxim Yusin wrote in the liberal Kommersant daily that Lukashenka in his negotiations with Moscow was feeling surer than never before. Minsk pursues a multidirectional foreign policy, and foreign powers strive for influence over Belarus. According to Yusin, this policy of balancing between Russia and the West is similar to that of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich before his toppling in 2014. The same fate can befall the Belarusian leader, he implies.

In the Zavtra daily on 12 October, an influential Russian nationalist politician Konstantin Zatulin commented in the same vein,

*Lukashenka and the West are coming closer to one another. He, in fact, has occupied the niche which earlier was occupied by Ukraine in the former Soviet Union. That is the niche of a mediator between the East and West. Russia does not need such a mediator. But it is ideal to which at this stage aspires the Belarusian leader.*

Remarkably, it was the newspaper which for many years fiercely supported Lukashenka that has printed Zatulin's words. Minsk used to be able to reach parts of Russian establishment through Zavtra and its authors.

# Minsk Heading for Neutrality?

The Belarusian authorities felt the Russian establishment's tilt towards a more [aggressive nationalistic policy](#) and have responded accordingly. Although the Belarusian Constitution declares the neutrality of Belarus, for many years it has remained a dead letter. That changed in 2006 as [divergences with Russian foreign policy](#) emerged.

Minsk continued to go out of its way to preserve friendly relations with Moscow, yet established good relations with Ukrainian president Yushchenko and [Georgian president Saakashvili](#), and refused to recognise Russian-supported independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Minsk also refused to [extradite Bakiev](#) to the new pro-Russian government of Kyrgyzstan. Belarus's refusal to accept Russia's annexation of Crimea and ambivalent stance on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine are just some of the latest illustrations.

In the eyes of pro-Putin Russian politicians Belarus can either be with Moscow on all and every issue or against it

Belarus effectively started to implement the neutrality clause of the Constitution. That does not mean automatic acceptance of this neutrality by others. In the eyes of pro-Putin Russian politicians Belarus can either be with Moscow on all and every issue or against it. It cannot simply be an ally with its own position on some issues, even if this is a neutral position which does not oppose Russia.

Unfortunately, Minsk [finds it difficult](#) to persuade Western countries about its possibilities to act independently of Moscow, too. After his recent visit to Berlin, the chief of the Belarusian *Nasha Niva* daily Andrei Dynko wrote that German politicians do not trust Lukashenka and believe that the Kremlin can enforce any of its decisions on Belarus, including the plans for an airbase.

Indeed, Belarusian neutrality is very limited and the Kremlin maintains significant influence in the country. Yet Finland after WWII succeeded in building neutrality in not identical yet comparable conditions of tight Soviet control. Helsinki merely avoided confrontation with Moscow, accepted legitimate Soviet interests while building its own country and gradually developing more independent and neutral policy. Belarus could do the same. Maybe, its the only way to survive as an independent nation.

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## **Belaruspolicy.com, Elections, Alexievich – Ostrogorski Centre Digest**

The Ostrogorski Centre, the organisation behind Belarus Digest, starts publishing regular updates about its activities, including new projects, and comments by its analysts.

During the the first half of October Belarus saw two major events: the presidential elections and the first ever Nobel prize awarded to Svetlana Alexievich in literature.

Volha Charnysh shows how the Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich is perceived in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine and [reveals](#) how the authorities manipulated the early voting procedure to get the right result.

In his analysis of Belarus elections, Ryhor Astapienia [concludes](#) that despite the predictability of presidential elections and unfair vote counts, its results may indicate a

significant drop in public support for Aliaksandr Lukashenka. David Marples and Uladzimir Padhol [analyze](#) the conduct of independent opinion polls in Belarus.

## New Developments

- On 1 October, the Ostrogorski Centre in partnership with the Belarus Research Council launched the [belaruspolicy.com](http://belaruspolicy.com) database. The database features policy papers produced by Belarusian think tanks. Currently the database contains around 250 papers prepared by 15 organisations with short summaries in Belarusian, Russian and English.
- A Delegation of the Ostrogorski Centre, including Yaraslau Kryvoi, Ryhor Astapenia, Alieś Aliachnovič and Vadzim Smok, [took part](#) in the Fifth International Congress of Belarusian Studies, the largest Belarusian annual academic and expert event with a focus on social sciences and humanities.
- On 9 – 12 October, Belarus Digest provided [live online coverage](#) of the presidential elections in Belarus and international and domestic reactions to it.

## Comments for the Media

- Ryhor Astapenia writes about the situation before the election in Belarus for [Carnegie Europe](#)
- Yaraslau Kryvoi took part in a [BBC Russian service programme](#) dedicated to the presidential elections in Belarus (in Russian)□
- Siarhei Bohdan comments for [Frankfurter Rundschau](#) on the possible establishment of a Russian airbase in Belarus (in German)
- Vadzim Smok comments on the situation around the

Belarusian elections to the Swedish daily [Svenska Dagbladet](#) (in Swedish)

- Yaraslau Kryvoi, Igar Gubarevich and Vadzim Smok were interviewed by the correspondent of Danish newspaper [Jyllands Posten](#) on the developments around the presidential elections in Belarus
- Devin Ackles on [opendemocracy.net](#) writes about the opportunity of Belarus to come out of isolation after the presidential elections.
- Igar Gubarevich talks to [Radyjo Racyja](#) (Poland) about current Belarusian foreign policy (in Belarusian)
- Siarhei Bohdan discusses with [Polish Radio](#) the situation with a possible Russian airbase in Belarus (in Belarusian)
- Yaraslau Kryvoi commented on Belarus's presidential elections for [Lithuania Public Radio](#) (in Lithuanian)
- Alies Aliakhnovich explains to [Polish Radio](#) why economic reforms are inevitable for the Belarusian authorities (in Belarusian)
- Yaraslau Kryvoi and Igar Gubarevich discussed the presidential elections on [Czech Radio](#) (in Czech)
- Siarhei Bohdan participates in a discussion at [tut.by](#) media portal about the conflict in Syria, its repercussions for Belarus and changes in Belarusian foreign policy caused by wars in the Middle East (in Belarusian/Russian).

## Belarus Profile

- BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following personalities: [Aliaksandr Filipaŭ](#), [Miraslaŭ Kobasa](#), [Ina Ramašeŭskaja](#), [Aliena Tankačova](#), [Anton Boltačka](#), [Aliaksej Pikulik](#), [Uladzimir Dunajeŭ](#), [Tacciana Vadalžskaja](#), [Aksana Šeliest](#), [Anatol Pańkoŭski](#).

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# **Belarus and War in Syria, Launch of the Single System of Air Defence – Belarus Security Digest**

On Sunday, a rally against Russia's military bases in Belarus took place in central Minsk. This national security issue has become a major theme before the presidential elections next Saturday. And not only inside the country.

Moscow keeps leaking information on the base and putting pressure on Minsk. The situation reminds one of the history of the establishment of the [Single System of Air Defence](#) of Belarus and Russia in 2009. Minsk managed to delay its creation for years and the system still does not function.

Minsk dismissed information about Belarusians providing military technical support for the Syrian government. Meanwhile, Belarus has been again accused of arming the Syrian opposition and it has been reported that Belarusians helped transport French military cargo for France's intervention in Syria.

## **Plans for Russia's Military Base:**

# Déjà Vu?

Russia wants Belarus to [immediately accept](#) the Russian airbase and Lukashenka to clearly side with the Kremlin in its current confrontation with Ukraine and the West. The Russian media campaign continues to put pressure on Minsk. On 27 September, Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported that the agreement on the Russian airbase in Belarus might be signed by the Defence Ministries of the two countries in October and the base, located in Babruysk, would function as quickly as January 2016.

According to Nezavisimaya Gazeta, the base will include a regiment of Su-27 fighter jets, one air flight of Su-27 trainer jets and one squadron of Mi-8 transport helicopters. It is unknown whether Moscow is going to pay for the base. The newspaper believes that such a rapid deployment of the base is [a response](#) to America's possible deployment of new nuclear arms in Europe.

The situation with the airbase reminds one of how Russia forced Belarus to create a Single System of Air Defence in the late 2000s. Back then, Lukashenka said,

*We have signed this agreement because Russia was “making hubbub.” Americans and Europeans have warned us [against this]. I said to the Russian leaders: “Look, why create a disturbance? Our air defence is effectively working in the interests of Russia. [...] Why do we need an agreement? To make a PR campaign in the media? Let's wait a little with that.” – “No, no!” So, I said, “Okay, now that it is so necessary, let's sign.”*

Minsk and Moscow signed the agreement on establishing the Single Air Defence System in 2009. Then Minsk for years successfully delayed ratification and the coordination of details.

Formally, the governments announced the establishment of the system in 2012. Recently it became known that the system still does not function. The head of the Chief Staff of Aerospace Forces of Russia Pavel Kurachenko, on 8 September announced that the Single System of Air Defence would start working by the end of 2016.

## Army Refused to Buy from National Industry?

On 9 September 2015 Belarus signed with a Russian manufacturer a contract about purchasing BTR-82A, armoured personnel carriers for the Belarusian army. Minsk will get them in 2016. It means that the government for unknown reasons has decided to dismiss alternatives offered by Belarusian [defence industry](#).

Belarus produced in recent years at least two similar types of machinery to the one Minsk bought. First, is the Kobra-K, which is a thorough modernisation of the Soviet BTR-70 designed jointly by the Belarusian Barysau 140th Tank Repairment Works and two Slovak firms. Second, is the Umka MZKT-590 100 designed by the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT).

Certainly, both these products represent the first attempts by [Belarusian firms](#) to manufacture such equipment. But these attempts obviously were not welcomed by the national army. It apparently did not buy any of the vehicles. That occurred despite public statements by the Belarusian president about the introduction of Belarus-made weapons.

## Exercises with Russians, Serbs and Chinese

Most exercises conducted by the [Belarusian army](#) involve drills carried out jointly with Russian counterparts. The largest

took place on 10-16 September, when Belarus and Russia conducted an operative military exercise called "Shield of the Union-2015" on Russia's territory. More than 8,000 personnel of both countries took part in the drills which included operations by the air force, air defence, infantry and other units.

On 2-5 September, Belarusian special forces took part in a joint tactical drill called "Slavic Brotherhood-2015" with Russian and Serbian special forces near Novorossiysk (Russia). On 30 September-4 October Belarusian Special Operations Forces participated in a military exercise called "Unbreakable Brotherhood" of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The exercise took place in Armenia and involved military and police units of all the CSTO members.

Finally, on 30 September, Belarusian and Russian special forces participated in a joint company-level tactical exercise near Vitsebsk. Speaking to journalists in August, the commander of Russia's Airborne Forces, Colonel General Vladimir Shamanov commented, "interaction with Belarusians is a model for other CSTO countries in terms of development of a partnership between the countries. The bilateral cooperation plan for Russian and Belarusian special forces for this year includes more than 30 joint combat deployments."

On 22-24 September, the 61st Fighter Airbase conducted exercises involving the landing of MiG-29 fighters, An-26 transport aircraft and Su-25 close air support aircraft on a road. Minsk claimed that nobody has ever done that with an An-26. Representatives of the [Chinese army](#) attended the exercises.

## **Belarus and Wars in Ukraine and**

# Syria

Minsk avoids risks related to the [conflicts in Ukraine](#) and Syria. On 22-24 September, representatives of Belarus' and Ukraine's armed forces came together in Kyiv for a working meeting to assess the implementation of the Belarus-Ukrainian Agreement on Additional Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in 2015. The representatives also discussed bilateral cooperation in 2016.

On 2 October, the Belarusian State Military Industrial Committee announced that no [Belarusian specialists](#) were currently working for the Syrian government. On 17 March, BuzzFeedNews published a story about the reexport of 700 old Konkurs anti-tank missiles from Belarus through Bulgaria to the US-funded opposition in Syria. The news lacked any proof and many details, such as the time of the transfer. Furthermore, it was published by a web-site which usually does not write about such issues.

Nevertheless, it could be true. Earlier this year, Reuters wrote about an undisclosed UN report accusing Minsk of supplying ammunition to some Libyan forces backed by conservative Arab regimes allied with the West (above all, the traditional Belarusian ally, Qatar). Belarus since the early 2010s refocused its [foreign policy](#) in the Middle East from relations with the West's opponents (for example, Libya, Syria, [Iran](#)) to the West's allies (like Qatar, UAE, Turkey).

Also in September some authoritative Russian military bloggers like Alexander Ermakov revealed that Belarusian firm Transaviaexport was transporting military cargo [for French forces](#) participating in airstrikes in Syria. The reports concern the flights in August and September and are partially confirmed by the French Defence Ministry.

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# Russian Airbase in Belarus: A Long Story With No End in Sight?

This month, the Kremlin intensified pressure on Belarus to agree to a Russian airbase on its territory. Last Saturday President Putin asked his Defence and Foreign Ministries to negotiate and sign the agreement on an airbase with Minsk.

The *Financial Times* noted that "Russia is moving ahead with plans to establish a military air base in Belarus." Yet Moscow still needs to hammer out a deal with Minsk.

While the airbase does not change the regional military balance, it changes the relationship between Belarus and Russia. Minsk risks losing leverage over Moscow and will no longer look as a neutral party in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Minsk tries to delay the deal on the airbase and to change its terms. So far Moscow has only two technical facilities in Belarus, and the joint Belarus-Russian air defence system was only established after many years of delays and Russia having to take Minsk's demands into account.

## Some Time, Somewhere, Something...

On 2 September the Russian government sent President Putin a draft agreement on the Russian airbase in Belarus. The week after, the draft was published. However, it left out some significant details. These include the location of the base and which military units are to be deployed there. Previously the two sides had only discussed stationing a regiment of

heavy fighter jets near the Eastern Belarusian city of Babruysk.

An airbase agreement would ally it closer to Russia and strip it of much of its foreign policy autonomy.

Asked when the agreement would be signed earlier this month, Russian Prime Minister Medvedev said that the signing “should be comfortable for both the Belarusian and Russian sides.” This could prove difficult. Minsk does all it can to avoid signing the agreement at a sensitive time of confrontation in Ukraine. An airbase agreement would ally it closer to Russia and strip it of much of its foreign policy autonomy.

Moscow however is determined to integrate Belarus closer. It is tired of [Minsk's refusal](#) to support the Kremlin's policies in the former Soviet Union and of Lukashenka's deals with the West. So Moscow tries to place the Belarusian president in a bind, or as *Foreign Policy* put it, “Putin clips Lukashenko’s wings with air base in Belarus.”

Therefore, Minsk wants to sign the document either as late as possible, or preferably not at all. Moscow wants to sign it now.

## **No Change in Regional Military Balance**

Dmitry Medvedev claimed that idea of establishing an airbase in Belarus began in 2009. “Back then we signed the documents on the joint protection of the borders of Belarus and Russia and the [joint air defence system](#). In fact, the agreement [on the airbase] implements those agreements.”

That is an exaggeration. Those documents say nothing about a permanent Russian base in Belarus. Moscow decided to enhance its military presence in Belarus only in early 2013. In April

2013, it publicly announced plans to station its own airforce in the country. Back then, revealed details of official talks and expert comments indicated that the reason for such plans was the [weakened Belarusian airforce](#).

Indeed, by that time Moscow had doubts about [Minsk's ability](#) to protect the joint air border as agreed. Minsk which had inherited an impressive fleet of Soviet state-of-the-art military aircraft did not buy newer planes after independence.

[The situation](#) with obsolete Belarusian aircraft worsened in the 2010s because of financial constraints. By that time Minsk had no functioning heavy Sukhoi fighter jets at all. Earlier, in the mid-2000s, the Belarusian government due to a lack of funds had halted the modernisation programme of MiG-29 light fighter jets for ten years. This programme started again only in late 2013 after Minsk realised that Russia [would not give](#) it newer aircraft.

A decade ago Minsk still had its own regiment of Sukhoi heavy fighter jets

Now Russia is going to send its fighter jets to Belarus. In terms of the regional [military balance](#) it means return to the situation of a decade ago. Back then Minsk still had a regiment of Sukhoi heavy fighter jets. Now Russia wishes to send its own regiment (of the same modernised Sukhoi airplanes) to Belarus.

Nevertheless, in the current tense atmosphere of Eastern Europe, Minsk will anyway face a possible backlash over the possible establishment of a Russian airbase. On Tuesday, Lithuanian Defence Minister Juozas Olekas warned that a prospective Russian airbase in Belarus would harm Minsk's relations with Lithuania, the EU and NATO.

# How to Destabilise the Country?

The base will dramatically change relations between Belarus and Russia. It is, however, unlikely to create a threat of the "Crimea Scenario." One regiment of fighter jets lacks any means to prepare a Crimean-style intervention. In addition, according to the draft agreement the regiment shall be a part of the Single System of Air Defence between Belarus and Russia, hence Russian planes cannot operate without Minsk's consent.

Belarus is losing its military value for Moscow

But something more terrible than a "Crimean Scenario" threatens Minsk. Belarus is losing its military value for Moscow. Earlier, Minsk could boast of its [protecting Moscow](#) and ask for money. Now, Moscow is going to provide its security itself, without its Belarusian ally.

The Belarusian government loses a major bargaining chip in negotiations with Moscow. In the future, for its financial support the Kremlin [can demand](#) from Minsk more assets and concessions. It already started to do so in the case of the airbase.

According to the military analyst Alexander Alesin, it was not a coincidence that Russia published the draft agreement on the airbase just as the [Russia-controlled Eurasian Stabilisation and Growth Fund](#) announced a possible loan for Belarus until the end of this year.

The airbase is a payment which the existing regime owes Russia for the right to keep dominating and ruling our territory

Of course, not everything is about money. Belarusian politician Yuras' Hubarevich insists, "Russian leaders indirectly help Lukashenka get reelected. The airbase is a

payment which the existing regime owes Russia for the right to keep dominating and ruling our territory."

Meanwhile, Minsk faces another related problem too. Moscow wants Lukashenka to renounce his policy of seeking balance or even a neutral position in relations with Russia, Ukraine and western states.

Clearly siding with any side in the current confrontation between Russia, [Ukraine and the West](#) will mean for the Belarusian state reduced opportunities for foreign policy maneuvering, further deterioration of foreign trade and [increasing loss](#) of international legitimacy. It potentially also means [possible destabilisation](#) inside the country too.

The government understands the risks and tries to postpone and reshape the airbase agreement. After all, it succeeded in postponing for years the establishment of the Single System of Air Defence between Belarus and Russia and managed to make it more convenient for Belarus.

The agreement on the airbase was also prepared already by October 2013 yet Minsk successfully procrastinated on it. The end of the airbase story remains uncertain, because Belarus' [relations with the West](#) are improving, resulting in the diminishing of Russia's opportunities to put pressure on Minsk.

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## **Training Counterinsurgency, Modernising Pakistani Weapons**

# – Belarus Security Digest

Official media has celebrated new contracts to buy Russian-made military equipment. Belarus plans to decommission another advanced military aircraft the Su-25, which the newly acquired Yak-130 aircraft with its limited capacities will fail to replace.

Minsk has succeeded in developing defence ties with Pakistan, while its arms designing projects with China may convince Moscow to offer Minsk better options to improve Belarusian defence.

The government is also preparing for possible destabilisations linked to the October elections and the conflict in Ukraine. As Belarusian special forces participate in counterinsurgency exercises, the police train personnel in riot control and increase security measures around police stations in Minsk.

## Buying Belarusian?

On 25 August the Belarusian Defence Ministry signed a contract with Rosboronexport to buy five Tor-M2K short-range surface-to-air missile systems. This time, Minsk bought modified Tors which were installed on the wheeled chassis produced by the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT). Earlier in 2011-2013, Russia supplied Belarus with 12 Tor-M2E systems on caterpillar chassis.

On 26 August, the Belarusian military signed with a contract with Russia's Irkut Corporation for four Yak-130 trainer aircraft. Apparently, the Belarusian Air Force will deploy more of these trainer and light attack aircrafts and [loose](#) further combat capacities. This results in further failures to the Belarusian and Russian [Regional System](#). All this makes the establishment of a [Russian airbase](#) probable.

□The Belarusian armed forces decommissioned completely in the early 2010s two more advanced types of aircrafts: the Su-24 bomber and the Su-27 fighter, as well as many planes of other types. In the most recent development, on 29 August the Commander of the Belarus Air Force and Air Defence, Major General Aleh Dvihalyou said that the army “is currently considering the possibility” of replacing the Su-25 close air support aircraft with the Yak-130.

Minsk has failed to acquire advanced aircraft from Moscow and has attempted to overhaul and upgrade its Soviet era planes. The government has made many claims to the success of this refit recently. In September 2013, specialised periodicals like *The Aviationist* reported that the Baranavichy 558th Works have upgraded MiG-29 fighter jets to MiG-29BM standard. It reportedly got “laser-guided bomb [deployment] capability [...] with the use of a targeting pod.»

On 15 August, however, the *Võo Slavu Rodine*, army official daily, reported that for the first time in the [national army's](#) history, it had used guided bombs deploying them from Yak-130. This raises serious doubts about the success in upgrading MiG-29s. Moreover, these doubts concern a major aspect of the upgrade, which is the ability to deploy modern ammunition.

## **Russia Responds to Chinese Cooperation with Belarus**

Deputy Defence Minister Major General Ihar Lotsenkau confirmed to the Russian *RIA Novosti* news agency that Belarusian and Russian specialists were designing a replacement for the *Strela-10* short-range vehicle-mounted surface-to-air missile (SAM) system. The information about such a project first appeared in May.

The timing reveals the background of this story. Moscow might have decided on this [joint project](#) responding to the

conclusion of Minsk's agreement with China on the joint development of SAM systems. *IHS Jane's 360* in June reported about such an agreement signed in 2012.

Russia may have paid even more attention to [Belarus-Chinese collaboration](#) after the Belarusian Army presented in the military parade of 9 May 2015 a new multiple launch rocket (MLR) system called Palanez. It had been developed with Chinese involvement under another 2013 Belarus-Chinese agreement on MLR development. President Lukashenka himself has repeatedly linked the [cooperation with China](#) to Russia's refusals to help in defence field.

## Exercises with Russia and Serbia

On 15 August, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that Russia, Serbia and Belarus would conduct joint military exercises this autumn on Russia's territory. It later became known that the exercises will take place near Novorossiysk in September. Given the urgent announcement, the exercises will likely serve Russia's internal political considerations, rather than any serious military aims.

On 23-28 August, Belarusian special forces participated in the exercises *Vzaimodeistvie-2015* near Pskov. These were held to train the Collective Rapid Reaction Force of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Belarus sent an operative group of the Defence Ministry and a company of Belarus' Special Operations Forces to the exercises.

A counter-terrorism unit of the Belarusian State Security Committee (KGB) and the Emergency Response Ministry also participated in the exercises. They trained in counterinsurgency measures, guarding important facilities and emergency response.

Although the new exercises represent Russia's new tendency to increase the number and scale of exercises to demonstrate its

military capacities, the Belarusian government is genuinely interested in training its counterinsurgency units.

Minsk fears [possible destabilisation](#) of the country's situation in relation to elections and developments in [Ukraine](#). So, the counterinsurgency exercises coincide with many additional Belarusian police personnel being trained for riot control, and increasing security measures around police stations in Minsk.

## **Minsk Close to a Major Deal with Pakistan?**

During a recent visit by Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, President Lukashenka emphasised the importance of [defence cooperation](#) with Pakistan. On 5-12 August, the Pakistani delegation headed by the Federal Minister for Defense Production Rana Tanveer Hussain visited Belarus. They participated in the 1st Meeting of the Joint Belarus-Pakistani Commission on Military Technical Cooperation.

Belarus-Pakistani defence cooperation has progressed for at least two years. The parties signed an intergovernmental agreement on military technical cooperation in Islamabad on 29 May 2015.

Tanveer Hussain visited Belarus for the first time in July 2014, and after that contacts between Belarusian and Pakistani defence officials continued. The two countries undoubtedly are working on some major deal, which is very likely to involve Pakistan's ability to modernise mechanised armour.

Pakistan bought a large quantity of Soviet tanks from Ukraine in the 1990s. Belarus provides sophisticated electronic and optic components for similar Russian tanks, so Pakistan may turn to Minsk for them. Another possibility is [Minsk providing](#) a comprehensive upgrade program for the Pakistani tanks now as

their Ukrainian manufacturers have collapsed.

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## **Belarus Strengthens Its Air Force With Russia's Reluctant Support**

Last week, the Belarusian army newspaper *Vo Slavu Rodiny* published an article praising the newly received Russian warplanes. However, these Russian aircraft are a step backward compared to the equipment that Belarus already had.

President Lukashenka recently publicly complained that the Kremlin had refused to give Belarus a dozen aircraft. The Belarusian authorities therefore are delaying the establishment of a Russian airbase in Belarus. Minsk trying to convince Moscow to give it newer aircraft.

## **Is the Agreement on the Airbase Ready?**

According to an article published by the Russian news agency *Sputnik* on 17 August, Belarus and Russia had already agreed technical and legal details on establishing a Russian airbase. The two sides reportedly have prepared a draft agreement.

no Russian military units deployed on the airbase could be used without the consent of the Belarus

According to the draft, Belarus agrees to a permanent Russian military presence in the form of an airbase for at least 15

years after the signing of the agreement. However, according to the document, the prospective airbase will be subordinated to the goals and objectives of the Single Regional System of Air Defense, which means that no Russian military units deployed on the airbase could be used without the consent of the Belarus.

But the situation around the base still remains unclear. Some time ago, Belarusian Defence Minister [Andrei Raukou](#) said that the issue of the base still had [not been decided](#) upon politically. Speaking on 4 August, Lukashenka likewise failed to mention the prospective airbase while explaining that the existing Russian military communication and radar facilities pose no threat to Ukraine.

## Which Planes has Belarus Received?

The issue of the Russian airbase closely relates to the state of the [Belarusian Army](#) and its capability to fulfil its tasks with the Soviet-era equipment that it has. Since 1991<sup>1</sup> Belarus has bought no combat aircraft. Although it may appear that Belarus has many modern aircraft, including up to four dozen MiG-29, the real figure and the state of them has caused many doubts. Belarus has sold scores of planes since early 1990s and has given up on exploiting the more sophisticated Su-27 fighter jet.

Minsk did get some [new military equipment](#). On 12 August, Air Force and Air Defence commander, Major General Aleh Dvihalyou announced that by the end of the month Minsk was going to sign a contract to purchase four more Yak-130 aircraft in addition to the four planes of the same type it had got from Russia in April.

Belarus is going to replace by 2020 all the L-39 Albatros it had used as jet trainers with Yak-130 advanced jet trainer/light attack aircraft. Belarusian officials emphasise that the Yak-130 can carry out a wider range of tasks, while

the L-39 functions essentially only as trainer. Moreover, the Belarusian Army has successfully absorbed the Yak-130, said Dvihalyou.

The Army daily *Vo Slavu Rodiny* proudly wrote, "For the first time in its history, our aviation has used high-precision munition – guided bombs KAB-500Kr – dropping them from the Yak-130."

No wonder that the Belarusian Army coped with Yak-130, as it is a backward development. For decades the Belarusian Airforce flew older yet more sophisticated machines such as the heavier Su-27 (comparable with the F-15) and the lighter MiG-29 (comparable with the F-16).

## Overhaul Instead of Buying

For now, Minsk has failed to get advanced military aircraft from Moscow. On 4 August, Lukashenka said how he had asked Moscow to sell or "give" [whatever it means] Belarus "a dozen of aircraft" before the 2014 Ice Hockey [World Championship](#). The Kremlin offered to "give" Minsk just "three or four" planes which Lukashenka accepted. This story corresponds to previously known information about the aircraft flight of Russian [fighter jets](#) deployed to Belarus back then.

Lukashenka insisted that the mentioned aircraft had returned to Russia. So currently no Russian military planes – in any capacity – are deployed in Belarus. He hinted at the problem of getting newer – and even second-hand equipment. Nevertheless, the Belarusian leader asserted

*We have enough of aircraft. When I was refused [by the Kremlin] is to be sold certain weapons, including aircraft, I gave the order to overhaul and upgrade ten fighter jets. We have enough of them but their effective life-span nears its end. In November, we will finish the last overhaul – of the tenth fighter.*

The Belarusian government obviously tries to strengthen national defence although it has limited funds for this. The following table of the known overhaul and modernisation works undertaken by Belarusian industry for the national army illustrates that.



In addition, Minsk apparently decided to spend more on fuel. The fuel deficit for years debilitated the national air force, as for instance in 2000 a Belarusian military pilot flew two to five hours a year.

In 2011, the Air Force set a goal to achieve 100 hours a year per pilot. The government supports this plan. Recently, the army press hinted at a possible increase in the fuel limit for the Air Force by more than 2,000 tonnes – to 16,000 tonnes in 2015.

## **Two Goals of the Belarusian Authorities**

In its military policies in general and in its modernisation of the air defence in particular, the Belarusian authorities pursue two major goals. First, they want to remain a militarily valuable ally for Russia. In particular, the Belarusian government would be eager to provide air defence for Moscow from the western side by itself.

Belarus established together with Russia the [Single Regional System](#) of Air Defence in 2012. Despite concerns that it would put a part of the army under Russian control, [Minsk holds](#) its ground and even got its officer appointed as the system's commander. Now, the system serves Minsk as a bargaining chip in its attempts to get economic and political favours from Russia.

But Minsk has a second goal in mind, to keep some distance

from Russia, especially after the war in Ukraine.

To resolve the contradiction between the two goals Minsk opted for delaying strategy. Belarus can live with deficiencies in its Air Force yet for Russia they present a vital threat. They mean a hole in the defence perimeter of Russia's capital.

To fill this hole, Russia while refusing Belarus' requests for newer planes in the 2010s decided instead to put [its airbase](#) in Belarus. However, if Minsk manages to [procrastinate longer](#), the Kremlin will have no other option but to give Belarus the planes it wants.

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## **Strengthening Border with Ukraine, Chinese Paratroopers – Belarus Security Digest**

The situation in Ukraine continues to be a major concern for the Belarusian authorities, while the prospects of Russia's air base is still uncertain as Minsk maintains its low-profile cooperation with NATO.

Belarus is set to receive additional second-hand Russian S-300 missile systems but is unlikely to be the recipient of more modern systems anytime in the foreseeable future. In addition to the S-300s, Belarus is set to receive some additional transport helicopters from Russia.

Belarus revealed that it is cooperating with China to design a multiple rocket launcher system and Belarusian special operations forces held a third set of military exercises with their Chinese colleagues.

## **Increased Border Security with Ukraine**

The authorities in Minsk are taking seriously the potential risk of the situation further destabilising in neighbouring Ukraine. In June, the Belarusian Army and Border Guard Committee spent several weeks testing a system of strengthening border control with Ukraine and the territorial defence system located in the Homel Province. The Belarusian Security Council emphasised that this exercise was routine, pointing to the fact that there was a similar exercise in 2014. The Chief Commander of the Special Operations Forces Vadzim Dzyanisenka also noted that the training they carried out had been planned long beforehand.

Belarus formed an additional border guard unit to guard its border with Ukraine

The Security Council, however, conceded that Belarus had taken additional measures to guard its side of the Ukrainian border and formed an additional Mozyr Border Guard Unit last year. In addition, the scenario for the most training session included a battle with an armed band that invaded Belarus with the support of some local residents who underwent military training in a neighbouring country. This all suggest that Minsk had potential developments in Ukraine in mind when they drew up plans for the exercise.

On 19 June, the Chairman of Belarusian Customs Committee Yury Syanko expressed his concerns about attempts to bring weapons and ammunition into the country from Ukraine. This only four days after Alyaksandr Lukashenka discussed with Defence Minister Andrei Raukou measures for ensuring an “adequate response to developments on the southern [Ukrainian] border.”

## **How Can Belarus Upgrade its Weaponry?**

Lukashenka and Raukou also raised questions about how to go

about modernising Belarus's armed forces. Lukashenka stated that the army is already undergoing a third wave of adapting to new challenges through modernising it – the previous wave of 'adapting' apparently was apparently the result of the Arab Spring in 2011. Raikou also took time during the public discussion to discuss the testing of new rocket systems and other arms.

The following day, on 16 June, the Chairman of Military Technical Committee Siarhei Hurulyou reported to Lukashenka on the positive results of a Belarusian multiple launcher rocket system in China. Lukashenka critically remarked that, “Our ally, Russia, is as active in supporting our aspirations [as China is].” The new system is believed to be being designed together with the Chinese and contains elements of the Chinese Norinco AR3 multiple launcher rocket system.

Russia remains, of course, the main source of military equipment and related services for the Belarusian armed forces. On 17 June, the Belarusian Defence Ministry signed a contract with Russian *Vertolyoty Rossii* for 12 military transport helicopter Mi-8MTV-5. Belarus will get them in 2016-2017 and the helicopters will have the exact same specifications as those provided to Russia's armed forces.

In July, one of the world's largest defence holdings, Russian *KRET*, started overhauling and modernising Belarus' land-based electronic countermeasures stations. Four stations revamped and updated by 2017. Back in June, Belarusian defence firm *Agat-Sistemy Upravleniya* founded a joint venture with the Russian firm *NPO Kvant*, which is a subsidiary of KRET. The new joint venture *REB-Technology* will modernise Belarusian and Russian armies' radio-electronic equipment.

Raikou also announced that Belarus would receive four batteries of the S-300 surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems from Russia this year. These systems were previously deployed by Russian army who is now upgrading to the next generation of

SAM systems, the S-400. Moscow and Minsk are in talks about Belarus potentially getting some S-400s as well, though at the moment it is unclear if it will.

According to Raikou, in 2014-2015 Belarus signed "some 50 contracts [with Russia] for the supply, repair and modernization of anti-aircraft missile systems, communications, electronic warfare technology, small arms and artillery weapons, ammunition, aviation equipment for the needs of the Belarusian army", on very favourable terms. He said that a majority of the contracts have been fulfilled.

## **Russian Airbase Still on Hold**

On 17 June Defence Minister Raikou told the TASS news agency that Minsk believed the deployment of additional NATO forces and heavy weapons close to Belarus' borders created additional potential risks for Belarus. A day earlier, Lithuanian Defence Minister Juozas Olekas confirmed that the US was planning to store heavy weapons for up to 5,000 US troops in the Baltic countries and Poland.

In the same interview, Raikou said that the issue of Russia's airbase in Belarus was on hold until a clear political decision could be made. This statement undermined previous public announcements by Russian officials to the effect that a Russian base would be established in Babruysk in 2016. Minsk has never been interested in having this airbase open up and least of all now when it could be used to provoke NATO and Ukraine. As a result of these heightened regional tensions, it is unlikely that a Russian airbase will be opened in Belarus anytime in the near future.

In July, Belarusian delegation chaired by the head of the Belarus' General Staff Major General Aleh Belakoneu visited the regions where this year's joint military exercises with Russia will be conducted. The "Shchyt Sayuza" is held every other year, and this time around will take place from the

10-16 September in Russia.

## **From NATO to Qatar**

Minsk continues with its drive to diversify its international contacts in the military arena. On 31 May – 5 June NATO experts conducted a seminar in Belarus for men of the peacekeeping company of the Belarusian 103rd Mobile Brigade of Special Operations. In June, Raikou said, "The interaction of our country with NATO has a practical orientation and corresponds with our national interests, though does not affect our alliance with Russia."

On 16 June, Defence Minister Raikou met the Secretary General of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Lamberto Zannier in Minsk. They discussed military and political issues and signed a Memorandum of Understanding on a joint project concerning the utilisation of liquid rocket fuel.

Besides trying to develop its ties with Western countries, the authorities are working hard to improve relations with China. From 15-27 June, Chinese paratroopers participated in a joint anti-terror training exercise with a company of the Belarusian 38th Mobile Brigade of Special Operations on a site close to Brest. This was the third such Belarus-Chinese training exercise conducted since 2011. On 14-17 July, a Chinese delegation, headed by the deputy head of the Propaganda Unit of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army, Major-General Zhang Chanin, visited Belarus.

Some military interaction occurred also with India and Qatar. In June, India gave Belarus 25 of its newest mine detectors, the Minelab X-Terra. Last year, India also gifted Belarus 60 radio sets and 30 GPS-navigation systems. On 2-5 July, Minister of State for Defence Affairs of Qatar, Hamad bin Ali Al Attiyah visited Belarus and met with President Lukashenka.

Belarus has been cooperating with Qatar on security matters for years now, cooperation which has included Belarusian forces providing specialised military training to Qataris.