

Thwarting plans for a Russian airbase, Minsk strengthens its air force

On 1 October the investigative platform *Bellingcat* reported that Russia has withdrawn its fighter jets from Belarus. After analysing satellite images, it found no Russian planes on the Baranavichy airbase. Bellingcat also found that they had not been redeployed to any other airfield in Belarus.

This report clarifies why Russia has finally agreed to sell Minsk new fighter jets. In mid-September, a report leaked from the Belarusian parliament revealed that Minsk had included the cost of state-of-the-art Russian fighter jets in the next year's national budget.

The Belarusian government has had a long standing dispute with the Kremlin on how best to secure the Belarusian segment of the Single Air Defence System should the Belarusian Air Force not have enough planes. In the end, Minsk prevailed. It will apparently receive new planes for the Belarusian army rather than a [Russian air base](#).

Getting Putin's foot out of the door?

In 2013-2015, Moscow tried to persuade Belarus to host a Russian [air base](#). It did have reasonable arguments: the Belarusian Air Force has had difficulties meeting its obligations to the [Single Air Defence System](#) of Belarus and Russia. Minsk has decommissioned numerous planes and the technical condition of the remaining aircraft has deteriorated.

The Kremlin, however, has been contributing to this situation for years by denying Minsk newer planes. At one point, a Russian firm even transported several newer second-hand Su-30MKI planes to Baranavichy for storage. Minsk was sure it would be able to buy them. [Unfortunately](#), Moscow decided to sell them elsewhere.

In 2013, the Kremlin launched a [pressure campaign](#) to force Belarus to host a Russian air base. What's more, in December 2013, Russia deployed four of its Su-27SM planes to Baranavichy. Minsk had apparently requested them in order to guarantee the security of the 2014 [Ice Hockey World Championship](#) in Belarus. However, the planes remained there after the event and their otherwise inexplicable presence seemed to be a sign of the Kremlin getting its foot in the Belarusian door.

However, facing resistance from Minsk, Russia's plans failed at the end of last year and Belarus began to strengthen its air force. Seeing [no prospects](#) for a base, Russia eventually withdrew its planes from Baranavichy last May.

Minsk buys the latest aircraft

In recent years the Belarusian government appears to have [reconciled](#) itself with the national army's downshifting in air force capacity. This mind-set is also reflected in official rhetoric. Belarusian military officials have criticised the sophisticated yet out-dated Soviet-era planes it possesses already as unreliable.



According to them, the Russian-manufactured Yak-130 could replace almost all types of combat aircraft Belarus inherited

from the Soviet Union. [They downplay](#) the fact that the Yak-130 is only suitable as a trainer and light ground-attack aircraft.

Minsk has started stocking up on this type of Russian aircraft. In mid-September, Belarus was delivered its fifth Yak-130. This was the first plane the Belarusian army received from its second contract with the Russian *Irkut* corporation concluded on 26 August 2015.

Only this year did Belarusian officials cautiously begin to discuss their plans to buy something more sophisticated than the Yak-130. Belarus initiated talks with Russia on the purchase of Su-30 fighter jets over the coming years. Despite not being a top-of-the-line plane, the Su-30 nevertheless possesses more advanced capacities than the Yak-130. These prospects, however, were uncertain for Minsk.

But then the media published a bombshell. On 15 September, a discussion in the Belarusian parliament disclosed plans to purchase four Su-35, the most modern Russian fighter jet. The parliament held debates on how to fit their cost into the national budget.

Tut.by, the largest Belarusian internet portal, reported that although the 2017 budget provided for allocations to procure military equipment, this was not enough money for Su-35s. Deputy minister of finance Yury Seliverstau insisted that the government could make additional purchases – meaning Su-35s – only if it could find additional sources of revenue

At what price?

☒ Seliverstau requested that parliamentarians not reveal the sums involved in the possible Su-35 deal. Yet this remains the most intriguing detail. On one hand, these planes – regarded as not only the best of Russian industry but also

among the best in the world – would significantly boost the capabilities of the [Belarusian military](#). On the other, if Russia demands significant payments in real money for the aircraft, the deal begins to appear more questionable.

After all, Minsk's planes do not just contribute to the defence of Belarus itself. They will also guard the Belarusian segment of the Single Air Defence System of Belarus and Russia. Hence, the fact that Russia could be profiting by selling Belarus planes which provide security for Moscow does not seem so cordial. A Russian ally paying in real money would look especially odd given similar deals between Russia and more distant states. For instance, Moscow sold Malaysia modern aircraft and received a large part of the payment in palm oil.

Minsk, certainly, has few options but to buy the Russian planes – which are undoubtedly excellent aircraft. The Belarusian air force suffers from a lack of new planes: over the last two decades it has bought only L-39 trainers, Yak-130 trainers, and light ground-support aircraft.

Last year, Belarus also completed the modernisation of ten MiG-29 fighter jets. Nevertheless, without new planes the national army would soon be unable to guard the sky. And because it guards not only the Belarusian sky but also participates in the [Single Air Defence System](#) with Russia, this deficiency would become a major issue in bilateral relations.

Modernisation: Helicopters next

Meanwhile, Minsk is moving to improve not only its fighter jets but other parts of its air force as well. On 6 September the Belarusian 558th Aircraft Repair Plant and the Russian Firm Vertolety Rossii signed a contract on repairing certain

components of the Mi-24 attack helicopters deployed by the Belarusian military. Besides [purchasing Mi-8MTV-5 transport helicopters from Russia](#), this has become the most significant action so far taken to bolster the helicopter fleet of the Belarusian army.

Moreover, Belarus has decommissioned all of its Su-24 bombers and apparently plans to decommission its Su-25 close air support aircraft. This leaves the Belarusian army with Mi-24 attack helicopters as its strongest airborne source of firepower on the battlefield. Importantly, this is the chopper most suitable for deployment against insurgent activities such as those in Eastern Ukraine and which Minsk fears most.

To summarise, in developing its air force, the Belarusian government is pursuing two [different goals](#) requiring different equipment. The first is to fulfil its obligations as part of the Single Air Defence System while avoiding the [deployment](#) of Russian combat units on Belarusian soil. For this, Minsk needs modern fighter jets such as the Su-30 or Su-35.

The second goal is to prepare for [possible contingencies](#) of the kind Ukraine faced in its eastern regions. This requires both transport and means of close air-support (provided by Mi-8 and Mi-24 helicopters, correspondingly). Minsk procurement of military equipment seems to take both goals into account.