

Iskanders in the Kaliningrad region, regardless of the 'missile shield'

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On 25 January, quoting a source in the headquarters of the Baltic Fleet (Kaliningrad), the Interfax news agency announced the start of preparations for the deployment in Kaliningrad of short-range (up to 500 km) Iskander 9K720 ballistic missiles. In the near future, the process of choosing officers and non-commissioned officers for these units should start, and the first squadron equipped with Iskanders should come into service in the second half of 2012. On the same day, this information was partly denied by the General Staff of the Russian Federation's Armed Forces, which reported that they "have taken no decision on approving the staffing of the Baltic Fleet's military unit equipped with Iskander missile systems." Despite this denial, on 26 January, Lithuania's Ministry of Defence, which assumed the report of the Interfax news agency to be reliable, took a negative position towards the forthcoming deployment of missiles in the Kaliningrad region.

Commentary

- The report from Interfax and the subsequent denials from the General Staff of the Russian army should be considered as a so-called 'controlled leak'. In the current perspective, it should be linked to the failure of the NATO/Russia talks on the deployment of the American missile defence system in Europe under the banner of the Alliance, and regarded as an attempt to put pressure on the West before the NATO/Russia summit in Chicago scheduled for May this year. However, the statement on 26 January from NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who did not rule out the cancellation of the NATO/Russia summit, shows that this attempt has failed.
- Since the beginning of the discussion about the US 'missile shield' in Europe, Russia has treated the issue of deploying Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad instrumentally. Moscow has consistently worked to present its actions as retaliation in response to the US's actions. Meanwhile, the rearmament of army units in the Kaliningrad region with latest-generation weaponry is a part of the general technical modernisation of the Russian army, which has been planned since at least 2006 (and currently is scheduled for 2011-2020). The Iskander rocket, which can carry nuclear warheads over a range of 500 km, is intended to replace the Tochka-U missile, whose range is 120 km. The intention of deploying the Iskanders is apparent, first of all, in the decision to keep the 152nd Missile Brigade (Chernyakhovsk) in the region. If, despite everything, Russia and NATO come to

some form of agreement on the 'missile shield', the deadline for deploying the Iskanders may be pushed back slightly (perhaps to 2013). However, it is more likely that they will be deployed according to plan, without any political demonstration or media coverage.

- The deployment of the Iskander missiles is part of a series of actions Russia has undertaken in recent months to increase the potential of the military formation in the Kaliningrad region. December 2011 saw the launch of a latest-generation Voronezh-DM radar station, and this spring will see the rearmament of the region's air defence units with the newest Russian surface-to-air missile systems S-400. It should be noted that Kaliningrad will be the second, after Moscow, area in the Russian Federation to be covered by these systems.