

The Union Shield 2011 exercise: testing the integration of the Belarusian and Russian armies

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Between 16-22 September, the biggest joint military exercises by the Russian and Belarusian armies this year were held on testing grounds in the European part of the Russian Federation, under the codename Union Shield 2011. 12,000 soldiers participated, including 5000 from Belarus. The exercises were tests for the Unified Regional Air Defence System and the Regional Groupings of the Armed Forces of Belarus and Russia. Units from both countries exercised within one (Russian) integrated command and control structure. The war games were based on the scenario of an armed clash with the regular army, and were planned as an offensive. The costs of the Belarusian soldiers' participation in the exercise were covered by both sides, while Belarus' own expenditures were likely limited to preparing and transporting troops to the Russian testing grounds.

Commentary

- Union Shield 2011 is a part of the cycle of joint training exercises held by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and its allies in mid-September on the territory of Russia and three Central Asian states. In terms of the number of heavy weapons, and because all the participating units were concentrated on two training grounds, this exercise must be seen as the biggest such project undertaken since the start of this year. Union Shield 2011 has even surpassed Tsentr-2011, which was presented as the Russian Armed Forces' major project of training exercises for this year.
- In contrast to similar exercises in previous years (such as Zapad-2009), the nature of the involvement of the Belarusian army was very different. So far, its participation in joint ventures with the Russian Armed Forces was limited to exercises on their own territory, or were only symbolic in nature (on average only a few hundred Belarusian soldiers were sent to the Russian training grounds). The current scale of the commitment of the Belarusian army (more than 10% of its personnel) outside their own territory is unprecedented. It must be considered as a demonstration by Belarus that it is a loyal and important ally of Russia, and that military integration with Russia is of paramount importance to Minsk. It is possible that by means of its activity in the field of military cooperation, Belarus is trying to gain Russia's favour in its economic relations, as it struggles with financial problems.

- The Union Shield 2011 exercises should be regarded as the culmination of efforts by Russia to integrate the Belarusian army as closely as possible into the operational structures of the Russian Armed Forces. The fundamental obstacle to this had previously been Minsk's overriding policy that the Belarusian army's activity was to be limited to defending its own territory. Minsk used to be one of the staunchest opponents of creating allied structures in which Belarusian units could be deployed in operations outside the country. This current departure from that principle is also demonstrated by the change of tone in official Belarusian comments, in which mention of the defence of the territory of Belarus was replaced by references to defending the territory of the Union State of Belarus and Russia.