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## **RUSSIA'S BELARUSIAN ARMY**

THE PRACTICAL ASPECTS  
OF BELARUS AND RUSSIA'S  
MILITARY INTEGRATION

Andrzej Wilk

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## MAIN POINTS

- We should consider the broadly understood military integration of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation (RF) as the most advanced aspect of the relationship between the two countries, while at the same time it is the element which shows the greatest disproportion. Belarus is fully dependent on its eastern neighbour for military cooperation, and its own armed forces and arms industry are unable to meet the state's basic defence needs. Moreover, they cannot function efficiently or develop without Russian support or if they are isolated from cooperation with the analogous Russian structures. In the short term, cutting off Minsk's cooperation with Moscow would result in the collapse of the Belarusian armaments industry and a systemic crisis in the armed forces, which would then have to be recreated from scratch.
- The two countries' military integration is unilateral in nature. The aim of the process is to adapt the military potential of Belarus to the standards and operational needs of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in their western strategic direction. Over the past 25 years, Belarus's President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has been systematically ceding his country's defence potential and sovereignty over its armed forces to Russia. In so doing he has eased the burden on the state budget and ensured the relative stability of Belarus's system of government for many years. Loyalty to Moscow in military matters is seen as a guarantee of good relations and financial support, at least in the security field.
- Belarus is one of the few countries in the world where defence spending is lower than the sum expended on internal security and defending the legal order. Military expenditure constitutes a third of the total expenditures in the 'National defence and ensuring national security' chapter of the budget: according to official data for 2019 and 2020, about US\$550 million a year is spent on defence, compared to US\$1.1 billion on internal security.
- During the 2010s, Belarus lost the remnants of its independent defence capabilities and completely handed the initiative in the field of defence over to Russia, so that it now appears content with the mere appearance of sovereignty in this area. The military undertakings which Belarus previously implemented at its own expense are now little more than bilateral projects in which it participates. At the operational and strategic level, its army only trains with that of Russia, and at the tactical level it operates on the basis

of models developed by the Russians. Its military equipment is provided at the same prices and the same standard as that of the Armed Forces of the RF, but only to the extent determined by Moscow.

- In the field of military cooperation, the Republic of Belarus acts as a supplicant towards Russia, offering it its own military resources and territory for military activity. In return, it expects support in maintaining and equipping the Belarusian Armed Forces, and in considering the interests of Belarusian enterprises in the cooperation between the armaments industries. Russia's instrumentalisation of Belarus's military potential is clear; Moscow sees the country as an area where its own armed formations could potentially expand in the event of a conflict with the West.
- Moscow has gained the opportunity from Minsk to freely deploy its own westward operational group, as well as adequate cover and security, without having to assume the burden of maintaining the Belarusian Armed Forces. However, Russia is still not exploiting the Belarusian army's full potential. From the Kremlin's point of view, the most important elements of Belarus's armed forces include the ground component of its air defence, its reconnaissance, communication and electronic warfare units, and the securitisation of its operations in the broader sense. These formations of Belarus's armed forces are included in the Russian command system and have been prioritised in the process of technical modernisation, and so they should *de facto* be treated as part of the Russian Armed Forces.
- Because Russian-Belarusian military integration has progressed to such an advanced level, Belarus can no longer be considered as an independent element of the regional security situation. It should be considered as an integral part of the Russian security space, and the army and the arms industry of Belarus as part of the Russian arsenal. Any use of all or part of its military potential will take place as a function of Moscow's military involvement.
- The Belarusian army is changing into a specialised structure in the field of support and operational securitisation, and its purely combat capabilities are becoming increasingly symbolic. While formally an ally of the Russian Armed Forces, it plays only a supporting role to them; its main task is to secure the transfer and expansion of Russian formations onto the territory of Belarus. The potential of those Belarusian military formations which do not participate directly in supporting and securing activities is

maintained at a level that allows them to participate periodically in exercises with Russian units; in a situation where the modernisation activities are extremely limited, however, this level is falling steadily. Belarusian military aviation has basically ceased to exist, and the armoured and mechanised units, whose technical modernisation has been pushed to the margins, have been written off as lost in the event of regular armed conflict.

- The Belarusian army works closely with the Russian army at every level of operation. The Land Forces and Special Operations Forces are delegated entirely to the Regional Group of Forces, i.e. the combined forces of both countries in the western (from the Russian perspective) strategic direction, and the Belarusian Air Force is a component of the Regional Air Defence System. In both cases, the Belarusians' Russian partners are formations of the operational (army) level, and actual control over both is exercised by the command of the Western Military District of the Russian Armed Forces (hereinafter WMD) as part of the Joint Strategic Command 'West'.
- The Regional Group of Forces is the banner under which the gradual incorporation of the Belarusian Armed Forces into the WMD has been taking place. During a period of threat, the Russian army has the right to use material resources and infrastructure on the territory of Belarus as part of the joint protection of the Group's rear. The Russian-Belarusian definition of 'threat' is capacious, as was demonstrated by the use of Belarusian bases to conduct reconnaissance of Ukraine during the 'hot' phase of the Donbas conflict (2014-15).
- Belarus has ceded questions related to the material supply of its part of the Regional Group of Forces to the Russian Ministry of Defence. Even considering that the RF's responsibility for equipping and supplying the Belarusian army relates to periods of threat and wartime, the agreement adopted in this regard is an unequivocal acknowledgment that in the event of any conflict, the Belarusian Armed Forces will *de facto* become part of the Russian army. Integration within the Regional Air Defence System – of which equipping Belarusian units with S-300 missile systems was an essential element – has allowed Russia to establish a so-called Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) zone over the Baltic states and part of Polish territory. As a result, Moscow can monitor all NATO aviation over the above-mentioned areas: this means that NATO planes in the airspace of the Baltic states are permanently in the crosshairs of Russian air defence systems and fall within their operational range. On the other hand, the creation of the Unified Electronic

Warfare System in the Kaliningrad oblast and Belarus has brought about the existence of a unified group which is probably the most saturated with such resources in the world.

- The degree to which Belarusian military airfields have been modernised in recent years significantly exceeds the needs of the Belarusian Air Force or the training presence of Russian aircraft. It should be assumed that the project's main aim is to prepare the infrastructure to receive at least two additional groups of Russian combat aviation.
- The possible future deployment of a Russian military base in Belarus should be treated mainly as a declaration of both countries' political will and a demonstration of Moscow's determination to defend Minsk. The existing infrastructure enables the rapid relocation and deployment in Belarus of units deployed in the adjacent regions of the Russian Federation. Considering that the Russian army is preparing to conduct an offensive rather than a defensive operation on NATO's eastern flank, a possible permanent Russian military presence in the Republic of Belarus will not be of any significant military importance. In preparation for an attack on the West, transferring WMD troops to Belarus would take much less time (12 hours or so) than bringing units from other regions of Russia to the Central European theatre of hostilities.
- The Belarusian armaments industry mainly operates in cooperation with the Russian Military-Industrial Complex. In 2015 – after cooperative ties between Russian and Ukrainian enterprises were suddenly severed, and some of those contracts were subsequently taken over by Belarusian factories – the value of supplies from Belarus reached the highest level in history, estimated at 15% of the value of Russian defence orders. Whereas for the armaments industry of Russia, cooperation with Belarusian firms is primarily a result of favourable conditions being established, for that of Belarus the cooperation with Russia is largely essential to its survival, as its arms businesses mainly produce unfinished elements, components and individual items for weapons and military equipment.

## INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly established Belarusian state adopted a model, typical of the former Soviet republics (with the exception of the three Baltic states), of organising its own military potential by ‘nationalising’ that part of the Soviet army which it had inherited. The Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus were established in May 1992 on the basis of the former Belarusian Military District; these included a significant part of the land and air formations of the USSR Armed Forces, which were intended to attack the West in the case of the so-called ‘second strategic echelon’. At that time, Belarus was already a signatory to the agreement to create the United Armed Forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States (February 1992),<sup>1</sup> under which banner attempts were made to save the disintegrating Soviet army. Most of the participants in this pact saw maintaining a relatively uniform military structure as a way of reducing the cost of maintaining their armed forces, especially those strategic elements (facilities) which seemed of doubtful utility from the point of view of most former republics. Two such facilities remaining in Belarus – the ‘Vileyka’ 43<sup>rd</sup> Naval Communications Centre and the ‘Hantsavichy’ 474<sup>th</sup> Independent Radio-Technical Unit (a ballistic missile early warning radar station) – have been maintained by Russia, which continues to control them. Although initially the Russian Federation had far-reaching plans for the United Armed Forces of the CIS, after the constitutional crisis in autumn 1993 Moscow decided to liquidate the project after less than two years.

The failure to transform the Soviet army into the United Armed Forces of the CIS did not affect Belarus’s approach to developing its own armed forces. In the period from the country’s independence until Alyaksandr Lukashenka took power (August 1991 – July 1994), no major political force in the country was interested in making any substantial changes to the military, which would have required substantial spending. In subsequent years, Minsk supported all the demands regarding military cooperation which Moscow pushed, becoming a member of the Joint CIS Air Defence System (1995), and then of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) of the CIS (2002).<sup>2</sup>

After nearly three decades of its existence, Belarus is still the only former republic of the European Soviet Union which participates in the CIS’s military

<sup>1</sup> Established as a body of the CIS on 14 February 1992. As well as the Baltic states, Georgia, Turkmenistan and Ukraine did not join.

<sup>2</sup> Created on 10 February 1995 and 7 October 2002 respectively.

projects (including the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, the so-called Collective Operational Reaction Forces, the CSTO's military structure). Since 1994, the two states' post-Soviet heritage and their uninterrupted cooperation within the Community, and thereafter the Union State of Belarus and Russia, has lain at the basis of the development of their cooperation, and then Belarus's military integration with the Russian Federation. The key objectives of this report are to present the practical aspects of this process, and to try to answer the question of to what extent Minsk has become militarily dependent on Moscow.

The military integration of Belarus and Russia, which should be considered one of the most important security problems for the states on NATO's eastern flank, has not yet been comprehensively developed. Moreover, the matter is perceived through the prism of the overall relations between the two countries, in whose history there have been numerous tensions (especially in the field of energy), and Minsk has demonstratively emphasised its independence on many occasions. As a result, an opinion has gained favour that Belarus remains relatively independent of Russia, regardless of the state of their mutual relations. Meanwhile, the process of military integration seems to be subject to completely different rules than those which apply to the political and economic relationship between Moscow and Minsk: it has not fallen victim to the two countries' periodic rifts, and it remains the only area of cooperation between them whose importance has never been undermined by the Belarusian government.

The individual aspects of this phenomenon should be considered primarily from the perspective of the functioning and development of the joint structures of Belarus and Russia: the Regional Group of Forces (RGF) and the Regional Air Defence System (RADS). Particular importance should be attached to the first of these, within which the mechanisms for integrating various types of troops and services beyond strictly military issues have been created. The author will describe the above structures in the first part of this study, thus setting the context for analysing the remaining elements of integration: the training of Belarusian army personnel in Russia, joint training activities, the supply of Russian armaments to Belarus, and the cooperation between the defence industries of both countries.

## I. BELARUS'S POTENTIAL IN THE CONTEXT OF MILITARY INTEGRATION WITH RUSSIA

Like most of the countries that emerged from the ruins of the USSR (the exceptions being Russia and the war-torn former republics of Central Asia and the South Caucasus), Belarus treated military issues primarily in terms of the burden they imposed on its budget. In conditions of chronic underfunding, the changes introduced to the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus since the 1990s mainly involved the reduction (in terms of numbers and organisation) of the potential inherited from the Soviet-era Belarusian Military District. As a result, by the beginning of this century, the Belarusian army had shrunk by two-thirds, reaching a level of fewer than 50,000 soldiers.<sup>3</sup> The role of conscription was also limited: it now provides only 10% of the total number of troops. The remainder are contract NCOs & rank-and-file soldiers (60%), and professional officers & warrant officers (30%).<sup>4</sup>

The cuts to the numbers of personnel and the number (and level) of units were accompanied by cuts to their equipment. In the first years of Belarus's independence, the amount of weapons and military equipment inherited from the Soviet army was so large that it fully met the Belarusian Armed Forces' needs at that time, and also allowed profits to be made from exporting them. At the beginning of this century, the military began to cut back on equipment, and started selling the most modern and technologically advanced types of weapons (Su-24 bombers and Su-27 fighter planes, T-80 tanks), as keeping them in service exceeded its financial and technical capabilities.

It is worth noting that from the very beginning Russia had no interest in supporting Belarus in this matter (see the next section). In the mid-2010s, when Minsk completed the implementation of contracts based on the voluntary, and then the forced sale of its post-Soviet weapons, Belarusian arms exports also collapsed. Since then, Belarus has remained on the market mainly as a sub-supplier to the Russian defence industry (more on this later).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> According to reports from February 2020, about 45,000 people serve in the Belarusian army. 'Какова численность белорусской армии и чем она вооружена. Факты, которые вы могли не знать', 42.TUT.BY, 23 February 2020, [www.42.tut.by](http://www.42.tut.by).

<sup>4</sup> Annually about 10,000 young Belarusians are sent to the service from conscription, most of them serving in military formations responsible for internal security and the protection of the legal order (mainly as part of the Internal Forces of the Interior Ministry). 4500 conscripts serve in the armed forces of the Republic of Belarus. Д. Шамко, 'Перерыв на армию. Как будет идти призыв по новым правилам?', Народная газета, 30 August 2019, as cited in: [www.pravo.by](http://www.pravo.by); 'Онлайн-конференция на тему «Призыв-2020. Нововведения»', Белтелерадиокомпания, 2 September 2019, [www.tvr.by](http://www.tvr.by).

<sup>5</sup> In the years 1992-2019, the value of arms exports from the Republic of Belarus amounted to a total of US\$3.008 billion, the majority of which took place in the 1990s. This value last exceeded

## **Belarus's participation in the CSTO's Collective Operational Reaction Forces**

The Collective Operational Reaction Forces (CORF; a kind of rapid reaction force), operating within the framework of the CIS's Collective Security Treaty Organisation, were established at the initiative of Russia, which sought to sanction its military activity on the territory of the CIS and create a counterbalance to NATO. They constitute the common military component of the CSTO, delegated from the military units of the member states; they are in a state of constant readiness to counteract military aggression, emergency situations, terrorism, organised crime and drug trafficking.

The agreement establishing the CORF was signed on 14 June 2009 in Moscow by the presidents of five of the seven CSTO countries (which currently include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan). At that time, representatives of Belarus and Uzbekistan (the latter now outside the CSTO) refused to sign. Minsk's attitude changed under the influence of Lukashenka's fears of a possible 'colour revolution' in the country. The local regime used its approval of the document to join the CORF on 15 October 2009 to intimidate the public (there were rumours that military assistance might be requested in the face of pre-election tensions). This decision was also influenced by the assurance that separating off the Belarusian contingent would make it faster for Russia to modernise part of the Belarusian army.

Belarus engages 2000 soldiers of its Armed Forces in the CORF (from the 103<sup>rd</sup> Air Assault Brigade), 80 from special units of the Interior Ministry, and 30 from the KGB (from the special Alfa anti-terrorist centre unit) and the Ministry for Emergencies.

Belarus is one of the few countries in the world (and the only one in the region) where spending on defence is lower than that for internal security and the protection of the legal order. This came about at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Military expenditure constitutes a third of the total expenditures from the 'National defence and ensuring national security' chapter of the budget:

the expenses for equipping the Belarusian army in 2016 (US\$152 million against US\$115 million). Since 2017, the value of exports (US\$50 million in 2017, US\$45 million in 2018 and US\$115 million in 2019 respectively) has on average been only a third of the expenditure on equipment (see further). Data from [SIPRI Military Expenditure Database](#), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org).

according to official data for 2019 and 2020, about \$550 million was spent on defence, compared to US\$1.1 billion dollars on internal security.<sup>6</sup> The actual level of defence spending is higher (see Table 1), but the differences are not significant compared to the amount quoted by the Finance Ministry, and total military expenditure does not exceed 1.3% of GDP. Spending on internal security also remains an unchanging priority.

**Table 1.** Belarus's military expenditure

		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Data from the Finance Ministry of the Republic of Belarus	BY roubles, billion*	2719.8	5048.1	6265.3	7368.1	9253.1
	% of GDP	0.9	1.0	1.0	0.9	1.1
Data from SIPRI	US\$ million	580	660	706	716	703
	% of GDP	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.3
		2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Data from the Finance Ministry of the Republic of Belarus	BY roubles, billion*	1.044	1.015	1.354	1.339	1.319
	% of GDP	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.0	1.0
Data from SIPRI	US\$ million	655	629	715	760	n/a
	% of GDP	1.3	1.2	1.2	1.2	n/a

\* On 1 July 2016, the Belarusian rouble was revalued; one new rouble corresponds to 10,000 old ones.

**Source:** 'Аналитические доклады «О состоянии государственных финансов Республики Беларусь», Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, [www.minfin.gov.by](http://www.minfin.gov.by); SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org).

<sup>6</sup> The expenditure of the Republic of Belarus's Defence Ministry is higher than those of the other power ministries counted individually (although only slightly higher than that of the Interior Ministry), but is lower than the combined expenditures of the Interior Ministry, the KGB and the border service. Закон Республики Беларусь 16 декабря 2019 г. No 269-З «О республиканском бюджете на 2020 год», Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, [www.minfin.gov.by](http://www.minfin.gov.by). See also С. Острына, 'Военный бюджет Беларуси: внешние угрозы пока не в приоритете', Военно-политическое обозрение, 11 November 2019, [www.belvpo.com](http://www.belvpo.com); and documents published by the Belarusian Finance Ministry from the series *Бюджет Республики Беларусь для граждан* concerning the budgets for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020, [www.minfin.gov.by](http://www.minfin.gov.by).

The impulse to modernise – which was initially limited to the above-mentioned reduction and reorganisation of the remains of the Belarusian Military District – was the country’s intensified military cooperation with Russia. It was Moscow which embarked on a comprehensive reform of its own army in 2003–4, and as this progressed, it began to systematically force Minsk to introduce further changes to the Belarusian Armed Forces.

The foundations for the future integration of both armies were laid in 1998 with the establishment of the Regional Group of Forces. However, the creation of the Union State of Belarus and Russia (1999) should be considered as the true turning point. The Union’s assumptions include a common defence policy (in political, economic and military terms),<sup>7</sup> which in the unanimous opinion of both countries’ leaders should ultimately be aimed at creating a uniform military space. In subsequent years, further documents regulating and detailing the issues of cooperation and military integration were developed and adopted within the framework of the Union State; these covered not only the armies of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation, but also the armaments industries of both countries.

The development of Belarus’s military potential as part of its military cooperation with Russia has evolved, from the former’s attempts to maintain relative sovereignty in the face of its stronger ally (as was still visible in documents from the 2000s) to focusing primarily on adapting to the needs of the Russian army. One manifestation of this significant self-limitation was the plan and development concept for the Belarusian Armed Forces adopted in 2011 (covering the periods until 2015 and 2020 respectively). In the *State Armaments Programme for 2016–2020* – which has been formally completed but not yet fully finalised (the implementation of the most important projects has been postponed to the period after 2020) – unquestioned priority has been given to those components of the Belarusian army that the Russian side has designated for cooperation under the RGF, and most of all the RADS (2009). Belarus has given up any attempts to comprehensively modernise its own armed forces (even if that just meant keeping up with the changes in the Russian army), and the changes which have taken place have been limited to giving up some of its military capabilities and – as the Belarusian side assumed – ceding them

<sup>7</sup> The agreement to establish the Union State, signed on 8 December 1999 (and which came into force on 26 January 2000), was the culmination of a process which began in the mid-nineties, under which agreements were signed to establish a community (1996), and then a union (1997) of Belarus and Russia. *Договор о создании Союзного государства*, as cited in: Информационно-аналитический портал Союзного государства, [www.soyuz.by](http://www.soyuz.by).

to its neighbour. The continuation of this trend, and with it confirmation that Minsk has accepted Russia's perception of all military issues, was confirmed in the *Plan for the Defence of Belarus* and the *Concept for the Build-up and Development of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus to 2030* (see below) published in December 2019.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Plan for the Defence of Belarus and the Concept for the Build-up and Development of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus to 2030**

The *Plan for the Defence of Belarus* consists of a package of acts to regulate the functioning of the state in times of increasing external security threats and during wartime. The most important of these are the *Commander-in-Chief's Decision on the defence of Belarus* and the *Directive on the defence of the country*. These documents have not been made public, but the information that has been disclosed shows that they emphasise the prevention of aggression, strategic deterrence, and internal destabilisation as a starting point for an internal armed conflict. Regarding the military integration of Belarus and Russia, special attention should be paid to the issue of strategic deterrence, in which field Minsk has no significant capabilities of its own. It should be assumed that these documents *de facto* include Belarus in the Russian strategic deterrence system.

The *Concept for the Build-up and Development of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus to 2030* defines the army's composition, structure and tasks in times of peace and war. The information revealed shows that its current composition and structure will be maintained, and that it will be developed through the intensification of training, retrofitting and technical modernisation. Funding will mainly be allocated to unmanned aerial vehicles, radar stations and electronic reconnaissance systems. The document also forecasts the modernisation of assault aviation and the continued modernisation of artillery, including missile systems. Ultimately, the Belarusian Armed Forces will get rid of all its morally and technically obsolete materials and equipment (this should be understood as the withdrawal from service of unmodernised types of post-Soviet weapons and military equipment). These goals will be achieved by increasing defence spending to 1.5% of GDP.

<sup>8</sup> 'Лукашенко утвердил новый план обороны Беларуси. На чем сделаны акценты?', Белта, 19 December 2019, [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by).

## II. THE REGIONAL GROUP OF FORCES

The history of the RGF, i.e. the combined land formations of the western-oriented Belarusian and Russian armies, dates back to the end of the 1990s. During the preparation of the documents constituting the future Union State, both countries agreed that it was in their strategic interest to integrate the land component of the Belarusian Armed Forces with its Russian counterpart. The RGF was established on 22 January 1998, under an agreement signed by Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Boris Yeltsin in December 1997.<sup>9</sup> Initially, the grouping consisted of the Land Forces and Mobile Forces (as of 2007, the Special Operations Forces) of the Belarusian Armed Forces (delegated to participate in the RGF as a whole) and the 20<sup>th</sup> Army of the Russian Armed Forces' Moscow, and now Western Military District (for more on the RGF's potential, see Appendix). The changes in the command structure of the Belarusian army – above all the liquidation of the Land Forces command at the end of 2011<sup>10</sup> (finalised in the spring of 2012), as well as the joint strategic exercises – allow us to conclude that in the last decade, the RGF has become a *de facto* banner under which the Belarusian Armed Forces have gradually been incorporated into the Western Military District of the Russian Armed Forces.

### Territorial Defence

The establishment of the Territorial Defence (TD) in 2002 should be considered an attempt by the Lukashenka regime to maintain sovereignty over at least part of the Belarusian army, in the face of the real threat of Russia taking full command over Belarus's operational forces. From the perspective of the integration of the Belarusian army with Russia, it was important to formally withdraw this structure from the Belarusian Armed Forces; as a result, it did not become a formal part of the RGF. After being put under the control of civilian regional governors (in coordination with the Defence Ministry), from the very beginning the TD played the role of a mobilisation facility – that is, a reserve of manpower for the Belarusian Armed Forces. At the same time, it evolved towards becoming another internal security formation (associated with the ministries responsible for it) which could serve to discipline the public and perform tasks

<sup>9</sup> Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о совместном обеспечении региональной безопасности в военной сфере, 19 December 1997, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

<sup>10</sup> 'Министр обороны Беларуси рассказал о целях оптимизации Вооруженных Сил', Военно-политическое обозрение, 13 October 2011, [www.belvpo.com](http://www.belvpo.com).

at the request of law enforcement agencies and local authorities during exercises. Because it has proved impossible to obtain proper equipment or training for the TD, the deliberations on whether to build up a light infantry formation on its basis were from the very beginning purely theoretical. At present, the military importance of this structure should be described as marginal.

As a result of the liquidation of the Land Forces command, the last attribute of Belarusian independence in the preparation and conduct of land operations at the strategic and operational level has been lost: the national competences of the Belarusian armed forces now effectively end at the operational and tactical level. The Belarusian operational commands – the Western in Hrodna and the North-Western in Barysau – are equivalent to the commands of brigade-structured combined arms corps, similar to the Russian formations (including the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Corps in the Kaliningrad oblast), with a lower status than that of the divisional-structure Russian army command. The Combat Training Directorate was established in November 2011 for the current training (basic and tactical) of units in the structure of the General Staff of the Belarusian Armed Forces. However, the General Staff actually performs administrative functions concerning the Land Forces units subordinate to it, in the way that the Russian military district command did before the implementation of the reforms which gave it the competence of the joint land forces' strategic command.

Regardless of the above, during peacetime Belarus and Russia have relatively unanimously maintained their formal equality within the RGF, as manifested in the fact that Belarusian army officers also exercise command over joint structures and undertakings. The group's current functioning is invariably determined by the annual plans for joint exercises adopted by the defence ministries of both countries. The Belarusian side, without questioning the use of its armed forces under Russian command during armed conflict (as indicated above all by the joint exercises, more on which later), does not want to formalise the rules of command in this structure during peacetime, for reasons of prestige. In this way, President Lukashenka continues to demonstrate his sovereignty over the army. So far, the Russian Federation has not striven to establish permanent RGF command structures during peacetime (even the Russian doctrinal documents do not take this into account), contenting itself with implementing successive programmes integrating the Belarusian components and units with the Russian ones (for a list of the Belarusian units integrated into the WMD, see Appendix). While allowing the President of Belarus formal

sovereignty over his country's armed forces, the Russian side is systematically attaching other elements of the Belarusian army that are important to it, and through their direct integration with their Russian counterparts (formations of troops and services in the WMD), is bringing them into the command structure of the Russian Armed Forces.

This incorporation primarily involves combined reconnaissance, communication, radio-electronic warfare (REW), technical and rear (logistic) security systems, and (most recently) topographic and navigation systems developed under the banner of the RGF.<sup>11</sup>

## Joint Logistics Support

The **RGF agreement on joint logistics support (in Russian: rear-end protection)** was the first of its kind to take effect (in 2004); it states that the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation have the right to use material resources and infrastructure on the territory of Belarus during a threat (the definition of this term could only be assessed during the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, about which later) and during wartime.<sup>12</sup> This agreement should be considered as the fundamental basis for both the organisation of joint activities (especially exercises) and the integration of successive types of troops and services.

It should be concluded from the training activity of the RGF's joint logistics that at present a relatively precise plan has been developed for the movement of Russian troops and the material resources necessary for operations onto the territory of Belarus. A unified fuel service has also been established in the RGF's joint logistics, whose responsibilities include the integration of the civilian fuel transport and distribution network for its potential use as part of a military operation (the main civilian partner is the Russian state-owned company Transneft).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Соглашение между Правительством Российской Федерации и Правительством Республики Беларусь о взаимном обмене геопространственной информацией между вооруженными силами Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь от 25 октября 2019 года (вступило в силу 14 июля 2020 года), as cited in: Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации, [www.publication.pravo.gov.ru](http://www.publication.pravo.gov.ru).

<sup>12</sup> Соглашение между Правительством Российской Федерации и Правительством Республики Беларусь о совместном тыловом обеспечении региональной группировки войск (сил) Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации и Вооруженных Сил Республики Беларусь, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 25 December 2002, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

<sup>13</sup> 'Генерал-майор Андрей Бурдыко: «У белорусской армии надёжный тыл»', *Во славу Родины*, 28 March 2018.

## The Unified System of Technical Support

In the **Unified System of Technical Support** (hereinafter USTS), established in 2005, the main role is played by the Belarusian Transport Troops (which are subordinate to the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, but which also have competences with regard to other ministries' transport security, mainly rail transport) and the Railway Troops of the Russian Armed Forces. Their cooperation is of fundamental importance for securing the transport of military units and materials: they are jointly responsible for the maintenance and repair of existing facilities and the expansion of railway lines and crossings, as well as the repair of ferry crossings, bridges and viaducts for automotive communication. Infrastructure projects under the USTS are carried out under the programmes of the Union State. Significantly, the completed programme for the years 2016–20 is entitled *Development and modernisation of a unified system of technical support for the region's railway network*. The system takes into account the capabilities not only of the above-mentioned military formations, but also of civilian Belarusian and Russian railways.

## Joint Technical Support

The **agreement on joint technical support in the Regional Group of Forces**, signed in November 2016,<sup>14</sup> does not cover the USTS's activities, but relates to the agreement on the joint logistics support of the RGF. However, it does draw upon another document from the end of the 1990s: an agreement on the joint use of military infrastructure facilities.<sup>15</sup> Although commentators have emphasised the options which the agreement on joint technical support of the RGF gives Russia with regard to the deployment of armaments and military equipment on the territory of Belarus (not only on the basis of the existing Belarusian infrastructure, but also the newly-devised 'joint' projects),<sup>16</sup> its provisions in this respect do not differ significantly from those adopted in previous documents. What is new, however, is the transfer to the Russian Defence Ministry of comprehensive material security for the "Belarusian part

<sup>14</sup> Соглашение между Правительством Республики Беларусь и Правительством Российской Федерации о совместном техническом обеспечении региональной группировки войск (сил) Республики Беларусь и Российской Федерации, 2 November 2016, as cited in: [www.pravo.by](http://www.pravo.by).

<sup>15</sup> Соглашением между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Белоруссия о совместном использовании объектов военной инфраструктуры Российской Федерации и Республики Белоруссия в интересах обеспечения безопасности государств, 16 October 1998, as cited in: Кодекс, [www.docs.cntd.ru](http://www.docs.cntd.ru).

<sup>16</sup> А. Алесин, 'Россия может разместить в Беларуси склады с военной техникой и оружием', [Navy.by](http://Navy.by), 14 December 2017, [www.navy.by](http://www.navy.by).

of the Regional Group of Forces”.<sup>17</sup> Even if we consider that Moscow’s responsibility for equipping and supplying the Belarusian army relates to periods of increasing threat and wartime, this provision is an unequivocal admission that in the event of any conflict, the Belarusian Armed Forces will *de facto* become part of the Russian army.

## The Unified Electronic Warfare System

Of the support formations, the **Unified Electronic Warfare System**, established in December 2009 on the basis of an agreement on cooperation in electronic warfare (EW; in Russian radio-electronic warfare) issues, deserves a special mention. EW units are the only ones in the Russian Armed Forces whose potential has increased (three independent battalions have been formed from scratch). By the end of 2012, the Belarusian formations of this type had been reorganised along the Russian model.<sup>18</sup> As a result, a unified group has been created in the Kaliningrad oblast and Belarus which contains probably the largest saturation of various types of EW units in the world. The participation of soldiers from Belarusian EW subunits in the competition to train the EW subunits of the Russian Armed Forces, which began in 2017, is representative of the general direction in which mutual relations within the RGF are developing. This is the first time that troops of the Belarusian Armed Forces have participated in such a competition.

Outside the main area of Russian interest are the strictly combat formations of the Belarusian Land Forces which comprise part of the RGF, as well as the Special Operations Forces, in terms of giving them capacities analogous with the Russian Airborne Forces. (In recent years the Russian Airborne Forces have become classic mechanised formations adapted to rapid air deployment; the Russian Special Operations Forces have mostly been deprived of hardware, particularly tracked combat vehicles). However, they are in fact being gradually integrated with their Russian counterparts. These processes do not apply to entire formations, though, but only to selected units, primarily from the Special Operations Forces. We can best estimate how useful the individual categories of Belarusian Forces troops & services would be for implementing Russian plans to deploy military potential in the western strategic direction by considering their joint exercises, as well as the scale and character of these units’ technical modernisation (see further).

<sup>17</sup> Article 6 of the Agreement on Joint Technical Support for the Regional Military Grouping.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Войска РЭБ: истоки и современность’, *Во славу Родины*, 16 December 2017.

## Russian military facilities in Belarus

The formal and legal Russian military presence in Belarus – going beyond military integration within the RGF and RADS – began in the mid-1990s. In an agreement of 6 January 1995, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation obtained the right to a free 25-year lease of two post-Soviet military facilities for strategic purposes, which had anyway remained in Russian hands since the collapse of the USSR. In return, Moscow cancelled some of Minsk's energy debts, provided free training for the Belarusian military, and made the Ashuluk training ground available for the local air defence exercises. This agreement came into force on 7 June 1996 and will remain valid until 7 June 2021, after which it will be automatically renewed for another 25 years. Belarus could have announced that it would withdraw (or not) from the extension of the current terms until 6 June 2020, but – despite hints from the government in Minsk just before that deadline – it chose not to do so.

The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation lease two facilities from Belarus located on the latter's territory:

- The 'Vileyka' 43<sup>rd</sup> Naval Communication Centre (radio station RJH69 Antey), which has been operating since 22 January 1964. It ensures communication between the Main HQ of the Russian Navy and nuclear submarines, and also carries out tasks in the fields of radio-technical reconnaissance and electronic warfare in the interests of the Strategic Missile Forces and the Russian Aerospace Force. It is staffed by 350 officers and ensigns, mainly from the Russian Navy. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Communications Centre remains one of the most important elements of Russia's military infrastructure beyond its borders. It is responsible for maintaining strategic connectivity throughout the North Atlantic.
- The 'Hantsavichy' 474<sup>th</sup> Independent Radio-Technical Unit (of the Russian Aerospace Forces) – also known as 'Kletsk-2'; an 70M6 Volga ballistic missile early warning system radar station – which has been a *de facto* Russian facility since it started operation. It was constructed on the foundation of an unfinished Soviet base (construction started in 1986, was suspended in 1992, and then resumed in 1996). The centre was launched in December 2001 and came into full service on 1 October 2003. The facility is manned by 2000 Russian troops.

The 'Hantsavichy' radar station, which was still of strategic importance at the beginning of the century, now plays a complementary role in the new Russian early warning system, which is based on new radars from the Voronezh family (the western direction is served by two such stations, the 'Lekhtusi' in Leningrad oblast and the 'Pioniersky' in Kaliningrad oblast).

### III. THE REGIONAL AIR DEFENCE SYSTEM

The clearest example illustrating the Belarusian Armed Forces' ongoing strategic dependence on Russia is the agreement on the Unified Regional Air Defence System, signed in Moscow on 3 February 2009,<sup>19</sup> and which came into force in March 2012. Since April 2016, when the completion of the RADS was announced, it has been known as the 'Eastern European Joint Regional Air Defence System' (a protocol on amendments and additions to the agreement, taking into account the changes which had been made during its creation, was signed in Minsk in November 2016).<sup>20</sup> Its foundations were laid in the 1990s (joint combat duty began on 1 April 1996), but for many years it functioned without any basic legal regulation. This was mainly due to resistance from the Belarusian government, which blocked the signing of the agreement for fear of losing sovereignty over a significant part of its armed forces. Ultimately, however, Minsk agreed to the Russian proposal to create a joint command that could also operate during peacetime.<sup>21</sup>

According to the agreement concluded, command over the RADS is to be exercised by "the commander of the operational level formation of the air forces and air defence of one of the parties". This puts the commander of the Belarusian Air Force (which corresponds as a whole to the structure and potential of – at most – one small operational unit of the Russian Aerospace Forces)<sup>22</sup> in a position equivalent to that of the commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Air and Air Defence Army (AADA) of the WMD. This state of affairs subordinates the Belarusian unit to the Russian command at the strategic level (in this case, the Joint Strategic Command 'West'). Currently, the problem for the Belarusian side is not the question of ceding sovereignty over the Belarusian Air Force to Russia,

<sup>19</sup> [Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о совместной охране внешней границы Союзного государства в воздушном пространстве и создании Единой региональной системы противовоздушной обороны Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 3 February 2009, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

<sup>20</sup> [Протокол о внесении изменений и дополнения в Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о совместной охране внешней границы Союзного государства в воздушном пространстве и создании Единой региональной системы противовоздушной обороны Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь от 3 февраля 2009 г.](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2 November 2016, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Formally, the commander of the RADS is appointed during a period of danger from among previously designated commanders of operational level formation; *inter alia* this recalls the Polish solution concerning the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland, who in peacetime is also only *nominated* to perform the function.

<sup>22</sup> The entire aviation component of the Belarusian Air Force is smaller than the Russian air force group in the Kaliningrad oblast, which operates at the level of tactical formation (aviation division). At most, the ground component (air defence missile regiments) of the Belarusian Air Force may be assigned to the level of an independent operational formation.

but the fact that the Russian army is not interested in using, and thus in supporting, the maintenance of Belarus's aviation and air defence as a whole, but only selected units of it (more on this later).

The RADS of Belarus and Russia is actually the equivalent of an air force operational level formation – an air and air defence army. The merger of the Belarusian Air Force and the Russian 6<sup>th</sup> AADA would nominally allow for the creation of a higher-level formation (operational and strategic); but due to its limited aviation potential, one can only perceive the first of these structures as reinforcing the second.<sup>23</sup>

Until the agreement formally launching the RADS was signed, its activities were coordinated by a joint operational group consisting of ten officers from Russia and Belarus. Russian officers were also delegated to the headquarters of those Belarusian detachments which were most important for the RADS's functioning (these men formally entered service in the Belarusian army). As part of the training, the Belarusian Air Force subunits are included in the structures of the 6<sup>th</sup> AADA. The host of the RADS exercises is the commander-in-chief of the Russian Aerospace Forces (the RADS's activities are coordinated by the Central Command Point of these forces), and the leadership of the Belarusian army acts as an observer.

So far – apart from the exercises – two practical aspects of the functioning of the RADS have been observed. Based on the agreement concerning the RADS, from the end of 2013 to 2016 Russian planes were rotated into Belarusian airbases (6 multi-role Su-27 fighters and 3 transporters in Babruisk, and 4 Su-27s in Baranavichy).<sup>24</sup> Officially, this represented a joint response from both countries to NATO's Air Policing mission in the Baltic countries, but it also coincided with the 'hot' period of Russia's military intervention against Ukraine, and preceded political discussions on the Russian Federation possibly siting a permanent air base on the territory of the Republic of Belarus (President Lukashenka's disagreement was supposed to emphasise the sovereignty of

<sup>23</sup> It cannot be ruled out that ultimately the Belarusian air force will create a separate operational level formation – a fully-fledged army of air and air defence – not with the 6<sup>th</sup> AADA, but with the 132<sup>nd</sup> Mixed Aviation Division and the 44<sup>th</sup> Air Defence Missile Division deployed in the Kaliningrad oblast.

<sup>24</sup> Including 'Летчики РФ и Белоруссии начали совместное боевое дежурство', Интерфакс-АВН, 10 December 2013; 'Российские истребители будут перебазированы на аэродромы Белоруссии – командующий белорусских ВВС', Интерфакс-АВН, 13 March 2014; 'Летчики Белоруссии и России за год совместного боевого дежурства в рамках ПВО СНГ совершили около 300 боевых вылетов', Интерфакс-АВН, 12 December 2014; 'РФ отозвала Су-27СМ из Беларуси – Bellingcat', ZN.UA, 11 October 2016, [www.zn.ua](http://www.zn.ua).

Minsk). It cannot be ruled out that Russian 'air policing' will return to Belarus on the basis of the provision, signed at the defence ministries' joint college in October 2020, on the joint protection of the external border airspace of the Union State under the RADS.<sup>25</sup>

A much more important aspect of the RADS's operation – which directly undermines the neutrality Belarus declared in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict – is the relocation to Baranavichy in March 2014 of a Russian A-50 airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft, whose main task was to observe the central and western parts of Ukraine. During its missions it was escorted not only by a Russian Su-27 but also by a Belarusian MiG-29. Minsk's official position is noteworthy; it states that the Russian aircraft were conducting air reconnaissance in the interests of the Union State.<sup>26</sup>

The frequent use by Russian military aircraft of airfields in Belarus demonstrates the relatively high freedom of movement which they have in the local airspace. This can be seen not only during joint exercises (more on which later), but especially during the basic training of Russian air regiments.

The modernisation of the Belarusian army's air base carried out so far goes beyond the needs of the local air force or its merely periodic use by Russian aircraft. It should be assumed that its primary goal is to prepare the infrastructure to accept a significant number of Russian planes (at least two regiments of 24–36 planes each) – temporarily or permanently. It is noteworthy that of the four main Belarusian military airbases (Baranavichy, Babruisk, Lida and Machulishche), three are not being used to their full capacity (due to the low potential of Belarus's air force; see Appendix), and one – in Babruisk – is used by the Russians alone.<sup>27</sup> Since its modernisation, the Babruisk facility

<sup>25</sup> 'Минобороны Белоруссии сообщило о подписании постановления о совместной с РФ охране внешней границы Союзного государства в воздушном пространстве', Интерфакс-АВН, 27 October 2020.

<sup>26</sup> 'Российский самолет дальней радиолокации передислоцирован на аэродром «Барановичи» в Белоруссии', Интерфакс-АВН, 17 March 2014; 'Российский самолет ДРЛО А-50 начал полеты в небе Белоруссии', Интерфакс-АВН, 24 March 2014.

<sup>27</sup> The airbase in Babruisk was the first to be renovated for the needs of the 'Zapad-2013' exercise. Its modernisation began after the Russian military launched its attack against Ukraine. В. Зуев, 'Белорусское небо будет под защитой', Независимое военное обозрение, 28 March 2014, [nvo.ng.ru](http://nvo.ng.ru); 'Минобороны опровергает информацию о российских авиабазах в Беларуси', Белорусский партизан, 19 August 2015, [belaruspartisan.by](http://belaruspartisan.by). The 83<sup>rd</sup> Engineer–Aerodrome Regiment, the only unit of its kind in the Belarusian army, is permanently stationed in Babruisk; it is responsible for renovating airfields and maintaining them in proper technical condition. 'Строят чтобы летать! 83-й отдельный инженерно-аэродромный полк завершил очередной строительный сезон', Бобруйский городской исполнительный комитет, 21 November 2019, [www.bobruisk.by](http://www.bobruisk.by).

can host any type of aircraft used by the Russian Aerospace Forces, including the strategic bombers that were based there during the Soviet era.<sup>28</sup> The Machulishche airbase, which was renovated in 2020, will probably have similar options (it is currently being used to a small extent; Belarusian transport planes are stationed there).<sup>29</sup>

Integration within the RADS, an essential element of which involved equipping Belarusian units with S-300 missile systems, has allowed Russia to establish a so-called A2/AD zone. This has two levels: the ranges of the S-300 and S-400 systems deployed in the Kaliningrad oblast coincide with the range of the S-300 missiles located in Belarus. As a result, all NATO activity over the above-mentioned areas can be monitored by the Russian Federation (NATO planes in the Baltic states' airspace are permanently within sight and range of Russian air defence systems).

### **A new Russian military base in Belarus?**

A permanent element of Belarusian-Russian relations, and in a broader context Russia and/or Belarus's relations with NATO, is the issue of the possible establishment of a permanent base for the Russian Armed Forces on the territory of the Republic of Belarus, regardless of the two post-Soviet facilities which the Russian army already leases there. For more than two decades, most reports on this issue have been in the form of media discussions, while representatives of both countries' governments and armed forces have referred to this issue less frequently. As of now Minsk has raised the matter more often, but Moscow has so far been the only party to publish plans for such a project.

In September 2015, the Russian government raised the issue of concluding an agreement with Belarus to establish a Russian air base on its territory. The two-week exchange of documents between the Russian government and President Putin resulted in the latter ordering negotiations with the Belarusian side and signing a relevant agreement, the draft of

<sup>28</sup> А. Алесин, 'Территория для подскока', Белорусы и рынок, 13 April 2015, [www.belmarket.by](http://www.belmarket.by); *idem*, 'Россия может превратить Беларусь в свой наземный авианосец', [Naviny.by](http://Naviny.by), 5 November 2014, [www.naviny.online](http://www.naviny.online).

<sup>29</sup> 'В Мачулищах производятся работы по ремонту взлетно-посадочной полосы. Их выполняет 83-й отдельный орден Красной Звезды инженерно-аэродромный полк', [Bobrlife](http://Bobrlife.by), 19 June 2020, [www.bobrlife.by](http://www.bobrlife.by).

which was published on the Kremlin's website.<sup>30</sup> The unusually public procedure for this issue, as well as the time when it was raised – a month before the presidential elections in Belarus – suggest that the agreement was primarily an element of Russia's involvement in the electoral campaign. It is noteworthy that military factors were raised last – only in November 2015 – and moreover, at a relatively low level (Gen. Aleksandr Lapkin, head of the Operations Department of the General Staff of the Russian Aerospace Forces, stated that a squadron of 12 fighter planes and a key of 4 combat support helicopters could be deployed at the Babruisk airfield).<sup>31</sup> In addition, this happened after Lukashenka (after being re-elected) declared that a Russian air base in the Republic of Belarus was not needed, and that no talks with Russia had been conducted on this matter. In 2018 Mikhail Babich, the Russian Federation's then ambassador to Belarus, referred to the case: he said that Moscow had not proposed deploying a military base to Minsk, either overtly or covertly. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that at the turn of 2016, most commentators presented the Belarusian position as an outright refusal to agree to a permanent Russian military presence on their territory, and thus as a confirmation of its sovereignty and the tenacity of President Lukashenka against the Kremlin's pressure.

The possible deployment of a Russian military base on Belarusian territory (in 2018, the head of Belarusian diplomacy, Uladzimir Makei, did not rule out such a solution, and presented it as a response to NATO's actions in Poland and the Baltic states)<sup>32</sup> should mainly be treated as a political demonstration of Moscow's will to defend Belarus against an imaginary threat from the West. The already existing legal and military infrastructure makes it possible to quickly relocate (even within 24 hours) and reinforce the Russian units deployed in the adjacent regions of the Russian Federation to Belarus. This would be much faster than transferring troops between military districts within Russia, or even deploying the forces of the military district in the assigned strategic direction. Considering that the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation are preparing

<sup>30</sup> Распоряжение Президента Российской Федерации от 09/18/2015 г. No 281-рп, Президент России, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru); Правительство Российской Федерации постановление от 7 сентября 2015 г. No 945, Правительство России, [www.government.ru](http://www.government.ru).

<sup>31</sup> The Russian report was repeated by the Belarusian army. 'ВКС России: на базе в Бобруйске планируется разместить 12 самолетов и 4 вертолета', BelArmy, 24 November 2015, [www.belarmy.by](http://www.belarmy.by).

<sup>32</sup> 'Makei о военной базе РФ в Беларуси: «Нет ничего невозможного»', Naviny.by, 1 June 2018, [www.naviny.online](http://www.naviny.online).

to conduct an offensive operation on NATO's eastern flank, the transfer of units (including a possible permanent military presence in Belarus) is of little importance, as before starting such an operation they would anyway have to be moved there not only from the WMD but also from the Urals and the North Caucasus.

#### IV. SCHOOLING BELARUSIAN ARMY PERSONNEL IN RUSSIA

Most of the Belarusian Armed Forces' personnel are schooled in-country, but in terms of specialist preparation, especially at the highest levels, Russian colleges lead the schooling. Belarus's potential in this respect is seriously limited. Whereas for the vast majority of applicants an officer's career begins at local universities,<sup>33</sup> over the following years of study and during further education, Russian institutions begin to dominate (for brigade and regiment commanders who are counting on further promotion, the operational and strategic course in Russia is effectively the only one available). Officers of the Belarusian army can be schooled in 19 specialisations at home, compared to as many as 52 in Russia.<sup>34</sup>

Russian military education schools most of the Belarusian army's cadres who later serve in the elite formations, which are the most active and cooperate most closely with the Russian Federation's army structures. Russia also has *de facto* exclusivity in schooling Belarusian officers and NCOs to service the armaments and military equipment which it later supplies, as well as in schooling the personnel of units which cooperate with Russia as part of the above-mentioned combined support and securing systems for the RGF (including logistics).

The largest number of trainees is the staff (officers and NCOs) of the air defence's ground component. A special case is the Special Operations Forces' officers, who can get schooling in Belarus in just two specialties: command of sub-units and telecommunications systems. In the remaining areas (command above the battalion level, weapons systems operation, etc.), they are educated from scratch in higher officer schools in Novosibirsk and Ryazan (the latter is home to the Russian Airborne Forces' main university).

After the size of the Republic of Belarus's armed forces was stabilised at a level not exceeding 50,000 military personnel, the number of candidates for Belarusian army officers has remained relatively constant for over a decade, fluctuating around 1100. After 2010, the number of students studying in Russia

<sup>33</sup> In the 2020–21 academic year, 667 future officers of the Belarusian Armed Forces (including 401 in purely military fields) started studies at military universities and the military departments of civil universities in Belarus, compared to 56 at military universities in Russia. 'Контрольные цифры приема в ВУЗы', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by).

<sup>34</sup> 'Курсантам, обучающимся в вузах РФ', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by); 'Не силою воюют, а умением', *Во славу Родины*, 9 February 2016.

increased by over 50%: from 284 in the 2011–12 academic year to 383 in 2016–17, and 450 in 2018–19.<sup>35</sup> However, each year more officers and students from officer schools in Belarus have been educated at Russian military universities, along with participants in special courses and schooling (a rise from 600 to over 900 personnel). It is noteworthy that the significant increase in the number of Belarusian army officers schooled in the Russian Federation took place after Russia’s attack on Ukraine and the deterioration of relations with NATO. This increase is also related to the modernisation of the Belarusian Armed Forces.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Равков: военное сотрудничество с Россией – важный элемент сдерживания угроз в Восточно-европейском регионе’, Белта, 24 October 2018, [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by); ‘В Вооруженных Силах Республики Беларусь начался новый учебный год’, СТБ, 2 December 2016, [www.ctv.by](http://www.ctv.by). From 1998 to the end of 2016, 1273 Belarusian military personnel completed the full five-year training cycle in Russian officer schools. The number at present is estimated at 1500.

## V. RUSSIAN-BELARUSIAN TRAINING ACTIVITY

Belarusian-Russian exercises under the RGF and RADS programmes are organised at all levels, from the tactical to the strategic. Every year, several dozen joint command-staff and training-ground exercises are held. However, while for the Russian Armed Forces these activities constitute just one of many elements of the training process, the Belarusian army primarily exercises on a bilateral basis. Joint exercises (as part of operational preparations and combat training) account for half of the projects carried out by the defence ministries of both countries (since 2010, the total number has been about 120 annually).<sup>36</sup>

The Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus almost exclusively independently organise basic training for troops and exercises of sub-units at the tactical level,<sup>37</sup> as preparation for higher-level exercises. The assumptions of the training process and the plans for these exercises are developed taking into account the needs of cooperation within the RGF and RADS, i.e. in agreement with the Russian side. Moreover, in around half the cases, the independent training ground exercises conducted by sub-units of the Belarusian army exclusively concern the relocation, deployment and supply of troops, and are associated with the limited use of precision ammunition. These types of restrictions do not apply to bilateral exercises: during these, the firing programme is carried out to the full extent.

As of 2006, operational and strategic level exercises have been organised on an exclusively bilateral basis. Belarus's attempt to organise this type of venture on its own in July 2011 – which was probably just a political demonstration – showed that it did not have the means to conduct a full training procedure, let alone conduct operations on its own.<sup>38</sup> Apart from the Special Operations Forces formations and the ground component of the air defence system, Belarus does not have adequate stocks of precision ammunition (until 2013, it had sporadically purchased air-to-air missiles from the Ukrainian military surplus in emergency mode; at this moment it currently has no other alternative than Russia in this regard).

<sup>36</sup> 'Минобороны России и Белоруссии проводят ежегодно свыше 120 совместных мероприятий', ТАСС, 27 October 2020.

<sup>37</sup> According to the information provided by the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, training ground exercises up to the battalion/squadron level are carried out independently.

<sup>38</sup> The 'Nieman 2001' should be considered the last (and only) relatively successful independent exercises by the Belarusian army at the operational and strategic level. It should be noted that the main part of the aerial element took place within the framework of the CIS's 'Combat Community 2001' exercise.

As part of its cooperation with the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (initially within the CSTO's Collective Operational Reaction Force), the area of Belarusian training activity has significantly expanded since 2011. Units of the Belarusian Armed Forces have been moving further and further from the country's borders for their exercises (to Central Asia, the Far East, the Caucasus and even the Arctic); this was almost out of the question at the end of the first decade of this century, due to the position the Minsk government had adopted that the army should only be used in operations on Belarusian territory. The training activity of the Belarusian troops remains at a constant level, ensuring that the units delegated to permanent cooperation with Russian units are at a high level of readiness.

## 1. Exercises at the operational and strategic level

Within the overall military cooperation between Belarus and Russia, the joint exercises at the strategic level, formally organised as part of the RGF, are most noteworthy. Since 2009, they have been held every two years, and the main centre of gravity of the military training activities within their framework alternates between the territory of Belarus (exercises codenamed 'Zapad' [West], held in 2009, 2013 and 2017; in autumn 2020, preparations for the 'Zapad-2021' project were begun)<sup>39</sup> and the Russian Federation (exercises codenamed 'Union Shield', carried out for the first time in 2006 as a command & staff undertaking, and then in 2011, 2015 and 2019). These are held in September as part of the completion of the training-ground phase of the summer training period, which overlaps in both armies.

Year by year, these undertakings have been gaining momentum (despite the official claim by Moscow and Minsk that, according to the agreements on confidence-building measures under the OSCE, no more than 12,500 soldiers from both sides participate in the exercises on Belarusian territory), and most of the Russian Armed Forces' WMD potential has participated in them. Belarusian involvement has risen from nearly 5000 soldiers in 2009 (over 10% of the personnel then employed full-time in the armed forces) to over 9000 (nearly 20% of the total) in 2017;<sup>40</sup> this should be considered a significant effort on Minsk's part. This rise applies not only to the 'Zapad', but also to the 'Union

<sup>39</sup> The idea and scenario of the 'Zapad-2021' exercise was approved during a joint meeting of the college of defence ministries of Belarus and Russia on 27 October 2020. 'Белоруссия и Россия ведут подготовку к стратегическому учению «Запад-2021»', Интерфакс-АВН, 27 October 2020.

<sup>40</sup> In 2009, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus numbered 48,000 soldiers, compared to 46,000 in 2017.

Shield' exercises, in which Belarusian soldiers are transferred to Russian training grounds, constituting an additional logistical challenge. As part of 'Union Shield 2019', over 4000 fully-equipped military personnel were sent to Russia.<sup>41</sup>

Scenarios for joint exercises at the strategic level include a hypothetical armed clash between a joint Belarusian-Russian force and a group of NATO forces. In the last 'Zapad' exercises in 2017, which were officially part of the strategic defence operation, the Russian Armed Forces held back the first enemy strike, conducting defence manoeuvres and waiting for the arrival of allied support – first from the Russian air force and airborne forces, and then from the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Army from the WMD, whose main task was to perform a counter-strike. On each occasion, the group of NATO countries played the role of the aggressor, although the RGF has not so far trained a strictly defensive operation (the previous assembly of Belarusian units on Russian territory as part of the 'Union Shield' cannot be seen as such; in the 'Zapad' exercises, Russian soldiers find themselves on Belarusian territory before they even begin), and it effectively always began the exercises with a counterstrike.

The scale of both countries' military integration is evidenced by the relatively little publicised so-called strategic command & staff training with the central state management institutions of the Russian Federation. In this undertaking – based on a command & staff exercise carried out in parallel by the Northern Fleet and selected units of the WMD and the Russian Airborne Forces – command representatives of the ministry of defence & the General Staff of the Belarusian Armed Forces were delegated to Russian control and command structures.<sup>42</sup>

The first step in the operational-scale exercises, which initially mainly covered the RADS, was the Russian component's participation in the Belarusian exercises. Next came the operations carried out in Belarus within the wider context of the activities being carried out in Russia at the same time ('Autumn 2008' in Belarus was included in the 'Stability 2008' exercises held in the Russian Federation); then finally the Belarusian formations began participating in Russian training. Since the start of the second decade of this century, the RADS has been directly involved in the 6<sup>th</sup> AADA's exercises (codenamed 'Ladoga');

<sup>41</sup> 'Старт дан!', Во славу Родины, 14 September 2019, [www.vsr.mil.by](http://www.vsr.mil.by).

<sup>42</sup> The only reports available relate to the training held in March 2015, and are only partial in nature. The nature of the project, however, indicates that it is held regularly. 'Белорусские военные присоединяются к стратегической тренировке органов военного управления России', Интерфакс-АВН, 17 March 2015.

the basic Belarusian elements participating therein are the air defence's ground component and the airfields to which Russian planes are deployed (the participation of Belarusian aviation in these joint endeavours is increasingly symbolic).<sup>43</sup> It is noteworthy that the exercises in the preparation and use of the RADS that have been taking place since 2017 are of a command-staff nature only, and in August 2018 they were treated as part of the wider CIS's Joint Air Defence System project entitled 'Regional Security 2018'. One should also note that the activities of the so-called standby forces within it were headed by Major-General Igor Golub, the commander of the Air Force and Air Defence of the Republic of Belarus – as commander of the RADS.<sup>44</sup>

Along with the development of combined support and securing systems within the RGF, operational-scale exercises for electronic warfare, communications, reconnaissance, and units responsible for transport and supply also began. These took place on an unprecedented scale in 2017, officially forming part of the preparations for the 'Zapad' exercises. Particular attention was paid to the exercises of the united EW system carried out in May that year, in which some Russian subunits carried out tasks on the territory of Belarus from places of permanent relocation in the Western Military District (the last time electronic warfare exercises of this scale took place was in the 1980s), as well as exercises in the RGF's joint rear in August 2017. As part of these latter manoeuvres, exercises took place in both Russia and Belarus on the deployment and defence of pipelines transmitting fuel to the operation area (with the participation of Transneft), and on setting up rail crossings for Russian units assembling on Belarusian territory.<sup>45</sup>

## 2. Tactical-level exercises

At the tactical level, joint exercises of the Belarusian Special Operations Forces and the Airborne Forces of the Russian Federation (at training grounds in both countries), as well as the ground component of the Belarusian air defence as part of the training of Russian air defence missile regiments and

<sup>43</sup> For the first time, the infrastructure of the Belarusian Air Force was used by Russian aircraft during the 'Ladoga 2009' exercise, during which planes were moved from bases in Russia to the Kaliningrad oblast. The transfer of Russian aircraft to Belarusian airfields is a regular part of the training of the Russian Air and Space Forces crews, and also takes place outside of larger exercises.

<sup>44</sup> 'В Минске прошло первое совместное учение Единой региональной системы ПВО', ТАСС-ДИФЕНС, 17 August 2018.

<sup>45</sup> 'Совместное специальное учение с силами и средствами тылового, технического (материально-технического) обеспечения вооружённых сил Республики Беларусь и Российской Федерации', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 21 August 2017, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by).

missile brigades (at training grounds in Russia), have been held continuously since 2009. Since the middle of the 2010s, the tactical exercises of subunits within the united systems of the RGF (which became operational in 2017) have also become increasingly important. Until 2013, the participation of Belarusian sub-units in activities of this type on Russian territory was limited to multilateral undertakings organised under the banner of the CSTO Collective Operational Reaction Forces or the CIS's Joint Air Defence System (as part of the annual 'Combat Community' exercises); any purely bilateral exercises – as opposed to those at the strategic level – only took place sporadically. Since 2014, the norm – mainly training sub-units of the Special Operations Forces – has been tactical exercises of a bilateral nature.<sup>46</sup> Subunits of the Belarusian army also use the Russian military training base for independent training.<sup>47</sup>

The joint field exercises of the formation of the Belarusian Special Operations Forces & the Airborne Forces of the Russian Federation are unique in terms of the military integration of both countries. They are characterised by the exchange of soldiers between units: the Belarusian sub-unit trains within a larger Russian unit and vice versa, and mixed sub-units also exist. This type of exercise was preceded by the introduction of Russian standards to Belarusian units, and by 2016 the two forces' nomenclatures had also been unified (the Belarusian army's former mobile brigades are now – like Russia's – referred to as air assault brigades).

The first exercises of these mixed subunits took place in April (near Hrodna) and September (in the Pskov region) of 2012, as part of the winter and summer training periods respectively.<sup>48</sup> As of 2017, their number has risen to three per year; additionally, the Russian-Belarusian contingent participates in CORF exercises (most often in Central Asia). In 2016–19, soldiers of both countries also participated in joint exercises of airborne formations with Serbian troops under the codename of 'Slavic Brotherhood'; they were held in a bilateral format for the first time in 2020.<sup>49</sup> However, the two-time (in 2015 and 2016) participation of Belarusian troops in the exercises of the Russian Airborne

<sup>46</sup> The most recent large multilateral undertaking with the participation of the Belarusian Special Operations Forces soldiers was the exercise of the CSTO Collective Operational Reaction Force code-named 'Cooperation', organised in Belarus in September 2013.

<sup>47</sup> The Belarusian army's permanent training grounds in Russia are: Alabino in the Moscow region (combined arms), Ashuluk in the Astrakhan region (air defence), Strugi Krasnye in the Pskov region (airborne) and Telemba in Buryatia (air defence).

<sup>48</sup> 'Совместное учение белорусских и российских десантников', Союз Десантников России, [www.sdrvdv.ru](http://www.sdrvdv.ru); 'Российские десантники прибыли в Республику Беларусь для участия в совместном учении', Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 19 April 2013, [www.mil.ru](http://www.mil.ru).

<sup>49</sup> Serbia gave up participating in these exercises under pressure from the European Union.

Forces in the Arctic (including landing near the North Pole) should be considered the most spectacular form of cooperation.<sup>50</sup>

These operations so far show that during wartime the units of the Special Operations Forces of the Republic of Belarus will be included in the Russian Airborne Forces. Depending on the operational demands, the Belarusian air assault brigades will become part of the Russian airborne divisions (as their fourth regiments; in the structure of the Russian Airborne Forces, the brigade and the regiment differ slightly in the number of support subunits, in favour of the former); alternatively, they will be distributed by battalions among the Russian divisions and brigades. This second option is supported by the persistent differences in the two forces' equipment, and hence also in their training (Belarusian brigades are lighter formations, focused mainly on carrying out sabotage and reconnaissance tasks), and also by the assignment of partners observed during the exercises. Each Russian unit has a permanent Belarusian partner, and the Belarusian brigades' sub-units train with various Russian units.<sup>51</sup>

In 2017 the training programme of the Special Operations Forces of the Republic of Belarus and the Airborne Forces of the Russian Federation grew to cover the training of soldiers in the use of the host country's weapons; this included training Belarusian sub-units in the use of the latest BMD-4M infantry fighting vehicles and BTR-MDM armoured personnel carriers. In 2020, this procedure was extended to subunits of the Belarusian Land Forces: the 19<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Brigade (MB), which was participating in the 'Caucasus 2020' exercises at the Kapustin Yar training ground in Astrakhan oblast, received tanks, armoured combat vehicles and self-propelled artillery from the hosts (including BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles not used by the Belarusian army).<sup>52</sup>

The air defence missile units equipped with the S-300, Tor-M2 and Buk systems only train on training grounds in Russia: Ashuluk (in Astrakhan oblast) and Telemba (in Buryatia). Their subordination to Russian regiments or brigades

<sup>50</sup> 'ВДВ России и ССО Беларуси и в Арктике плечом к плечу!', LiveJournal, 3 January 2015, stanislav-05.livejournal.com.

<sup>51</sup> The Russian partners of the 38<sup>th</sup> 'Gvardiysk' Belarusian Air Assault Brigade (in Russian *DShB*) are the 76<sup>th</sup> Air Assault Division (*DShD*; these units cooperate with each other most often), the 106<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division and the 31<sup>st</sup> *DShB*. On the other hand, the 103<sup>rd</sup> 'Gvardiysk' *DShB* from Belarus is mainly partnered by the Russian 7<sup>th</sup> *DShD* (the so-called mountain division), but as part of the CORF it also trains with the 98<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division subunits (in both cases the Belarusian unit trains in the mountains).

<sup>52</sup> '«Кавказ» перед нами', Во славу Родины, 19 September 2020, www.vsr.mil.by.

during this time, however, is primarily related to additional (apart from missile shooting) training in the fields of communication and command procedures. It should be assumed that, due to their specific nature, air defence units will operate from Belarusian territory within the framework of the currently existing grouping (this assumption is also supported by the fact that officers delegated from the Russian Armed Forces serve with them).

## VI. ARMS SUPPLIES FOR THE ARMED FORCES OF BELARUS

The Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus are fully dependent on Russia for their supplies of weapons and military equipment in terms of means of warfare (including small arms), and also to a large extent for the supply of spare parts for the post-Soviet equipment which is still the basis of their arsenal.<sup>53</sup> Without its cooperation with Russia, Belarus would also be unable to service its weapons and military equipment on its own. Pursuant to the agreement on the development of military-technical cooperation signed on 10 December 2009, assuming the mutual supply of weapons and military equipment during periods of increasing threat and during wartime (this document came into force in February 2011), these are delivered to Belarus at the same standard as the Russian Armed Forces receive them, and at the same prices.<sup>54</sup> The above agreement is supplemented by the agreement mentioned earlier on the joint technical support of the RGF (2 November 2016), concerning issues related to the modernisation of the infrastructure.<sup>55</sup>

Although Russia is not the sole supplier of equipment for the Russian Armed Forces, its position in this respect is dominant. Since the first transaction in 1998 to the end of 2019, the total value of Belarusian imports of arms and military equipment from Russia amounts to US\$1.3 billion, which accounted for 96.5% of the Belarusian army's external purchases in 1992–2019 (the rest is from Ukraine, total US\$43 million, and China, total US\$4 million; see Table 2). Most of these transactions took place after 2011 (previously, external purchases of weapons for the military had been sporadic). The largest items were aircraft and helicopters (a total of US\$524 million, US\$260 million of which came under the contract to supply Su-30SM multi-role combat aircraft in 2019, more on which later), air defence systems (US\$393 million), rockets and guided missiles (US\$242 million) and tanks (US\$101 million).<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> The Belarusian military analyst Aleksandr Alesin estimates the Belarusian army's dependence on supplies of equipment and spare parts from Russia at 98%. А. Заквасин, К. Услусова, 'Союзное войско: чего достиг военный блок России и Белоруссии за 20 лет существования', RT на русском, 2 April 2017, [www.russian.rt.com](http://www.russian.rt.com).

<sup>54</sup> Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о развитии военно-технического сотрудничества, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 10 December 2009, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

<sup>55</sup> Соглашение между Правительством Российской Федерации и Правительством Республики Беларусь о совместном техническом обеспечении региональной группировки войск (сил) Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2 November 2016, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

<sup>56</sup> Data from SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org).

**Table 2.** Belarusian expenditure on the purchase of arms and military equipment in 2011–2019 (US\$ millions)

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
China						2	1	1	
Russia	75	75	75	66	87	112	147	141	331
Ukraine					10				
<b>Total</b>	75	75	75	66	97	114	148	142	331

**Source:** SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org).

Despite Russia’s declared intention of achieving the full interoperability of both armies, it does not treat the technical modernisation of the Belarusian Armed Forces as a priority of military integration. One characteristic feature of Russian policy in the field of arms supply is its systematic supplementation or replacement of arms in those Belarusian army formations which directly secure the support, movement and development of Russian Armed Forces groupings on the territory of Belarus. This primarily concerns the ground component of air defence. The remaining Belarusian units are on the margins of technical modernisation, and they only started receiving new equipment after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, while the amounts of arms and military equipment transferred to them are still merely symbolic.

The situation in Belarusian military aviation should be considered particularly dramatic, as it is now only one-sixth of the size it was compared to the potential inherited from the Soviet army (see below). This applies less to the land forces, as Belarus has retained relative independence concerning their supplies thanks to the enormous amount of arms and military equipment left over from the Soviet Union until recently.

### **The degradation of Belarusian military aviation**

Of the more than 200 aircraft inherited by the Belarusian Air Force from the USSR at the end of the 2010s, 24 MiG-29 fighters were still in operational service (13 had been partially modernised by Belarusian industry

to the MiG-29BM standard in the middle of the 2000s), as were 12 Su-25s (about 20 aircraft of both types were still in storage, most likely for spare parts). According to the original plans, both types of plane were to have been withdrawn from service by the end of 2020 and replaced with new or modernised ones. Due to the shifting deadline for acquiring new aircraft, in 2015 a decision was made to overhaul 10 of the MiG-29 fighters; these are to remain in service until the ordered Su-30SMs have been delivered. In turn, the Yak-130 planes – due to their ability to perform assault tasks – were treated as successors of the Su-25. Taking the deliveries of the Su-30SMs and Yak-130s into account, at the beginning of the 2020s Belarus's military aviation will in fact have 24 combat-capable aircraft (the combat value of the unmodernised Su-25 and (despite the renovations) the MiG-29, is already illusory).

For over a decade, the Belarusian army tried to obtain the Su-30K multi-role fighters previously owned by India, which were stored at the 558<sup>th</sup> Aircraft Repair Plant in Baranavichy. Eighteen planes produced in the mid-1990s were transferred to the facility as a subcontractor of their manufacturer (the Russian corporation Irkut) with the intention of overhauling and retrofitting them before selling them on to Sudan or Vietnam. The main obstacle to acquiring these planes were the high costs for Belarus; Irkut estimated the value of these machines at US\$360 million, which was not an exorbitant price, but accounted for more than half of Belarus's annual military expenditure at that time. Eventually, at the beginning of the 2010s they were sold to Angola.

The approach both sides take to the supply of arms makes it possible to trace how they think about military integration. The most telling example is Belarus's many years of fruitless efforts to obtain new (or at least newer than those it currently uses) combat aircraft (see above).<sup>57</sup> In retrospect, it should be assumed that Russia's actions were primarily aimed at significantly reducing the potential of Belarus's military aviation, and thus, in fact, at preventing this country from conducting independent actions on the battlefield.

It is significant that Belarus treats its participation in joint military ventures as an argument which justifies its demand that Russia – for which the sale of

<sup>57</sup> 'Бывшие индийские Су-30К в Барановичах', LiveJournal, 10 November 2012, [bmpd.livejournal.com](http://bmpd.livejournal.com); 'ВВС Анголы получают самолеты Су-30К к 2017 году', ВПК.name, 30 July 2015, [www.vpk.name](http://www.vpk.name).

arms to Belarus is just a marginal amount of this branch of export<sup>58</sup> – should assume the costs of rearming and modernising the Belarusian army. However, this postulate is no longer a political or economic bargaining chip (an army for arms), but rather a veiled appeal from President Lukashenka to the Kremlin for non-returnable financial aid in the event of a deterioration in the state of the Belarusian Armed Forces.

The *State Armaments Programme for 2016–2020* is an expression of Minsk’s reconciliation with Moscow’s policy regarding the supply of arms and military equipment to the Belarusian army. It has completely abandoned the comprehensive rearmament plans contained in the previous document adopted a decade earlier,<sup>59</sup> and is now solely focused on the needs of its ally; the issues of new equipment for land and air forces are now treated purely symbolically. The intention to continue the current direction of technical modernisation is indicated by the revealed assumptions of the concept for the construction and development of the Russian Armed Forces to 2030.<sup>60</sup>

## 1. Air defence systems

The ground component of the Belarusian army’s air defence has been successfully modernised since 2005. By far the largest acquisition by the Belarusian Armed Forces during their entire existence has been the S-300 long-range air

<sup>58</sup> According to the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation of the Russian Federation, the value of Russian arms and military equipment exports to Belarus over a decade amounted to US\$1 billion, including US\$60 million in 2019 (compared to over US\$13 billion of total arms exports in 2019). The backlog of orders amounted to \$373 million in July 2019. ‘Россия поставит Белоруссии в 2019 г. продукции ОПК на \$60 млн, портфель заказов превышает \$370 млн – глава ФСВТС’, Интерфакс-АВН, 31 July 2019.

<sup>59</sup> The rearmament programme adopted in 2006 was based on the conviction that the Belarusian army was of particular importance from the point of view of Russia’s defence policy, and assumed that the Belarusian Armed Forces would be rearmed with the latest types of weapons and military equipment in parallel with the modernisation of the Russian army. Given the financial constraints, the Belarusian side most likely also assumed that Moscow would offer some form of financial participation in implementing the programme. Plans were made to introduce the following to the Belarusian army’s arsenal: Su-30 and Su-34 combat aircraft, Yak-130 combat-training aircraft, Mi-28N combat helicopters and Mi-17 combat support helicopters, S-400 surface-to-air missile systems and 9K720 Iskander mobile short-range ballistic missile systems, among others; also, Russia will modernise the MiG-29 fighter planes, Su-25 attack aircraft and Il-76 transport aircraft used by the Belarusian military. Russia treated the programme with no great enthusiasm, as evidenced by the verbal restrictions (in the declarations by representatives of the Belarusian Ministry of Defence, as well as the highest authorities of the Republic of Belarus) on the demands contained in the document (the most consistent elements of which were the Iskander missiles, S-400 systems and an unspecified new combat aircraft, which ultimately turned out to be the aforementioned Su-30), and the definite assumption that Russia would proceed to rearm the Belarusian Armed Forces after the modernisation of its own army was completed.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Лукашенко утвердил новый план обороны Беларуси. На чем сделаны акценты?’, Бelta, 19 December 2019, [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by).

defence missile systems; these have been transferred in stages from the Russian army's stores, where they are being replaced by the newer-generation S-400s. Since 2006, Belarus has received a total of 16 S-300PS battalions (eight systems in each battalion), and a supply of at least 300 missiles. The first 72 systems of the older S-300PS version to be delivered were modernised in Russia in 2012–2016, and the entire renovation process was completed in May 2016.<sup>61</sup>

The Belarusian Armed Forces received the S-300 systems for free, only incurring the costs of their renovation and modernisation. The number of S-300s it owns means that Belarusian territory may be considered one of the most saturated with ground-based air defence in the world. On a much smaller scale, from December 2011 the Russian Federation provided Belarus with more modern medium-range Tor-M2 missile systems, analogous to those used by the Russian army. In November 2018 (a month ahead of schedule), the fifth and last battery of this system was put into service, which (together with the supplies previously delivered) gives a total of 20 systems with a supply of 350 rockets.<sup>62</sup> In August 2020, the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus signed a contract with their producer (the Russian company Almaz-Antey) to service the Tor-M2 systems and modernise the missiles for the S-300.<sup>63</sup> A list of the units of the Armed Forces of Belarus supplied with the above-mentioned equipment is presented in the Appendix.

## 2. CISR systems

It is worth noting that although the Belarusian armaments industry has the capacity to build modern radar stations, the country's armed forces receive equipment manufactured entirely in Russia, or at most equipment produced as part of Russian-Belarusian cooperation. Since 2011, the Radio-Technical

<sup>61</sup> 'ЗРК С-300 заступил на боевое дежурство в Полоцке', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 5 May 2016, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by). Half of the systems used by the Belarusian army (equipping eight battalions) may not in fact be the S-300PS, but the newer S-300PMU-1. The acquisition of the first S-300PMU-1 battery was reported by its command in December 2012, but the fate of the later deliveries is not clear (they should have ended in 2017), and has been mixed up with reports that the modernised S-300PS has now been delivered. 'Россия поставит в Беларусь ЗРС С-300ПМУ1', BelArmy, 7 December 2012, [www.belarmy.by](http://www.belarmy.by); 'Иранский контракт на поставку ЗРС Москва перестроит на Беларусь?', МойВУ, 30 July 2012, [www.mouby.com](http://www.mouby.com).

<sup>62</sup> 'Полк ВВС Белоруссии с батареей ЗРК «Тор-М2» заступил на боевое дежурство по прикрытию БелАЭС', Интерфакс-Запад, 1 December 2018; '«Тор-М2» на защите мирного атома', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 27 December 2018, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by).

<sup>63</sup> 'Концерн «Алмаз-Антей» подписал контракт с Минском на ремонт ракет С-300', СОЮЗ. Беларусь-Россия, 25 August 2020, [www.rg.ru/soyuz](http://www.rg.ru/soyuz); '«Алмаз-Антей» подписал контракт с Минобороны Белоруссии на ремонт ракет к С-300', ТАСС, 28 August 2020.

Troops of the Republic of Belarus have been receiving automated command systems (Bor, Polyana-RB and Rif-R) produced jointly with Russian companies. In 2015, the new Russian-Belarusian Rosa-RB radar stations entered service, although in 2016 the army adopted the Russian 59H6-E Protivnik-G three-coordinate radar, the first examples of which were delivered to units in 2018;<sup>64</sup> by the end of 2020 they should have received a total of six such devices. In 2020, deliveries of the Russian 12A6 Sopka-2M radar stations began, and the acquisition of the 48Ya6 Podlet station is also planned (deliveries of the latter were also to have begun before 2020).<sup>65</sup>

The situation is similar in the field of the unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) used by subunits of the Land Forces and Special Operations Forces for the reconnaissance and correction of artillery fire. The potential of Belarusian industry in the field of UAV supplies is not being used to the full, and since 2015 only one small reconnaissance drone model resulting from Russian-Belarusian cooperation, the Berkut-2, has been added to the resources of the Russian Armed Forces. In 2018, Belarusian artillery units started using Russian Supercam S-350 UAVs, analogous to those used by the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>66</sup>

### 3. Aircraft

The most important element of the *State Armaments Programme for 2016–2020* was the acquisition – for the first time since the establishment of the Belarusian Armed Forces – of new combat aircraft, helicopters and tanks. However, these purchases are just a drop in the ocean of the army's needs. In 2015–19, the Belarusian Air Force received a total of 12 Yak-130 training & light combat aircraft (similar to those introduced into the arsenal of Russian training aviation, although – as the park of post-Soviet Su-25 attack aircraft has been worn away over time – these were directed to the combat unit; these planes' crews are trained entirely in Russia, and the same is true of the other purchases),<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> 'Всё небо как на ладони', *Во славу Родины*, 8 April 2017; А. Севенко, 'Новый облик «Противника»', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 5 February 2019, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by); 'Россия поставит Белоруссии в 2019 году радиолокационную станцию «Противник-Г»', ТАСС, 9 April 2019.

<sup>65</sup> 'Белоруссия планирует закупить российские радиолокационные станции «Подлет» и «Сопка-2М»', ТАСС, 7 March 2018; Я. Горбанюк, 'Надёжен наш небесный щит', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 12 April 2019, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by); 'Су-30СМ вперед и высь!', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 1 July 2020, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by).

<sup>66</sup> 'Положение в области национальной безопасности Беларуси (август 2018 года)', Belarus Security Blog, 12 September 2018, [www.bsblog.info](http://www.bsblog.info).

<sup>67</sup> The first eight Yak-130 aircraft were received by the Belarusian air force in 2015–16, but the last batch only arrived in May 2019. 'Белоруссия получила от РФ четыре учебно-боевых самолета ЯК-130 – Минобороны', ТАСС, 13 May 2019; 'Белорусские авиаторы получили очередную партию

and 12 Mi-8MTV-5 combat support helicopters in the years 2016–17 (to make cooperation between the Special Operations Forces subunits and the Russian Airborne Forces easier).

In February 2016, Belarus and Russia signed a contract for the delivery of 12 Su-30SM multi-role combat aircraft (the same as those introduced into service in the Russian Aerospace Forces), although it was only finally approved in June 2017. Originally, deliveries were to start in 2018 and end in 2020; however, while the agreement was still in force, the Russian side reported that the deadline would be moved (it was even suggested that they would start no earlier than 2020).<sup>68</sup> The first 4 Su-30SM were received by the Belarusian air force in November 2019,<sup>69</sup> and the next ones were to have come into service in 2020 and 2021. By January 2021, however, the Russian side had not provided the next batch of planes, nor any information on the reasons for the delay. It should be noted that delivering 12 aircraft over a three-year period was not a major challenge for Russian industry; since the beginning of the 2010s, the number of planes newly built for both the Russian Aerospace Forces and for export has reached 100 per year (this figure does not include modernised aircraft). It should be assumed that Russia is still guided by the assumption of the maximum limitation of Belarus's ability to undertake air operations.

Apart from military and technical issues, the contract to supply the Su-30s has highlighted the negligence of Belarusian defence spending. Although it is related to a relatively small number of planes, delivered at discount (i.e. internal Russian) prices, the cost is still higher than the Belarus Defence Ministry's annual budget.<sup>70</sup>

учебно-боевых самолетов Як-130', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 11 May 2019, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by).

<sup>68</sup> 'Беларусь получит российские истребители Су-30СМ в 2019 году', СОЮЗ. Беларусь-Россия, 14 February 2018, [www.rg.ru/soyuz](http://www.rg.ru/soyuz); А. Алесин, 'Россия откладывает на потом поставки в Беларусь новых истребителей', Naviny.by, 5 September 2018, [www.naviny.online](http://www.naviny.online).

<sup>69</sup> 'В Беларусь прибыла первая пара боевых самолетов Су-30СМ', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 13 November 2019, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by); 'Вторая пара боевых самолетов Су-30СМ прибыла в Беларусь', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 20 November 2019, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by). Belarusian military pilots began combat duty in the new aircraft on July 2020. 'Су-30СМ вперед и ввысь!', *op. cit.*

<sup>70</sup> The contract for 12 Su-30SM aircraft is valued at US\$600 million (compared to the total military expenditure of Belarus in 2019 of US\$560 million). In some studies – including Western ones – there are repeated reports that Russia has sold planes to Belarus at market prices (comparing the contract with the contract for the supply of Su-30SM to Armenia, where the unit price per aircraft is half the usual price). These sources, however, do not take into account the differences in equipment (Belarus receives planes in the variant delivered to Russian units, Armenia's are significantly depleted) and service conditions. See among others A. Sivitsky, 'Belarus's Contribution to Security and Stability in Central and Eastern Europe: Regional Safeguards, Strategic Autonomy and National Defence Modernization', The Jamestown Foundation, 2 March 2020, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

#### 4. Armoured weapons

The Land Forces of the Republic of Belarus have waited the longest for regular deliveries of weapons – a quarter of a century. The domestic modernisation programmes (including the most publicised, concerning the Polonez multiple launch rocket system: see further) ended with the delivery of a few items at best, and most often with the development of a prototype; meanwhile the first one to be implemented on a larger scale (the modernisation of the BTR-70 wheeled armoured personnel carrier to the BTR-72MB1 standard) is based on Russian KAMAZ-7403 engines. The breakthrough in this field was the start of the modernisation of T-72B tanks in Russia to the T-72B3 standard, which is being implemented on a mass scale for service in Russian Armed Forces units. Compared to the original version, which is the basic equipment of Belarusian armoured units, they are *de facto* next-generation machines.

The first four items were delivered to Belarus in June 2017. They went not to the line unit, but to the 969<sup>th</sup> Tank Reserve Base, the main task of which is maintenance and repair.<sup>71</sup> This allows us to assume that priority has been given to preparing teams to ultimately service the machines that will be delivered to Belarus as part of the Russian Armed Forces grouping (this was confirmed by the ‘Zapad-2017’ exercises). The first tanks for the Belarusian army’s line unit, the 120<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Brigade (MB) – in the number of 10 (company equipment) – were not delivered until November 2018, and by the end of 2020 the army should have received 11 more (for another company, plus a battalion command vehicle); however, the delivery of only five has been confirmed.<sup>72</sup> It is noteworthy that the acquisition of the second batch of modernised T-72B3s required a new contract to be signed with the Russian manufacturer, and the full rearmament first battalion of the 120<sup>th</sup> MB will most likely require another agreement; this will realistically postpone the completion of the project until 2022.

According to the original – unusually modest – assumptions, under the *State Armaments Programme for 2016–2020*, the rearmament of the battalion (three

<sup>71</sup> ‘Модернизированные танки Т-72Б3 поступили на вооружение белорусской армии’, Воен ТВ, 2 June 2017, [www.voentv.mil.by](http://www.voentv.mil.by).

<sup>72</sup> ‘Новая техника на вооружении воинов-гвардейцев’, Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 22 November 2018, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by); ‘«Уралвагонзавод» модернизирует для Белоруссии 11 танков Т-72Б’, ТАСС, 25 June 2019; ‘Форум «Армия – 2019»: подписаны первые контракты’, Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 25 June 2019, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by). Five of the eleven contracted tanks went to the 120<sup>th</sup> MB in May 2020. ‘Вооруженные Силы Беларуси продолжают обновление своего парка боевых машин’, Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 6 May 2020, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by).

company sets; in the Russian mechanised brigades, the tank battalion has a four-company structure) should have been completed by the end of 2020.<sup>73</sup> Apart from the fact that only half of the order was completed within the above-mentioned period, if the assumed pace had been maintained, the replacement of the tank park within the current structure of the Belarusian Land Forces would only have been completed around the year 2050.<sup>74</sup> This proves that developing the offensive potential of the Belarusian army's land component is – at best – at the bottom of the list of Russian priorities (it cannot be ruled out that Moscow is deliberately seeking to limit its main ally's offensive capabilities as much as possible). It should be assumed, however, that as the technical modernisation of the Russian Armed Forces progresses on the one hand, together with the incorporation of the Belarusian Armed Forces into the Russian army on the other, the process of rearming the Belarusian troops will accelerate.

### **The Polonez multiple launch rocket system and Belarusian-Chinese cooperation**

The most spectacular attempt to diversify production and reduce the dependence of the Belarusian armaments industry on cooperation with Russia, while at the same time presenting the Belarusian armed forces with an offer other than one from Russia, is the Polonez multiple launch rocket system project. It was created over a relatively short period of several months on the basis of Belarusian-Chinese cooperation, and in August 2016 (after the tests were completed in May) the Belarusian army adopted it under the designation V-200. The launcher consists of the Belarusian MZKT-7930 Astrolog chassis with an 8×8 wheel base (which is also used by the Russian Iskander systems, among others) with a container that can hold Chinese 301-mm A200 missiles with a range of 200 km, or (after tests carried out in 2017) M20s with a range of 280 km (the launcher with these missiles has the designation V-300). Despite a significant media campaign (by Belarusian standards) and the Polonez's undoubted advantages,

<sup>73</sup> 'До конца 2019 года в Беларуси появятся еще десять танков Т-72Б3', Воен ТВ, 22 November 2018, [www.voentv.mil.by](http://www.voentv.mil.by); 'Тридцать танков Т-72Б3 поступят на вооружение ЦВО России в 2019 году', Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, 21 September 2018, [www.mil.by](http://www.mil.by).

<sup>74</sup> According to official data, the total number of tanks in the Armed Forces of Belarus is 602, with only the 446 T-72Bs currently being of any combat value. However, no more than 368 tanks remain in service, 280 of which are in line sub-units. The actions taken independently by the local armaments industry, e.g. the replacement of gunner sights in tanks with modern Sosna-U models as part of the T-72BM1 Vityaz modernisation package (note that Belarusian sights are part of the Russian fire-control system installed in the T-72B3) have been limited to a test batch of a few items. '«Витязь» – белорусская модернизация Т-72Б', ВПК.name, 13 February 2017, [www.vpk.name](http://www.vpk.name).

its deliveries to the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus ended in September 2016 after only six items had been delivered to the 336<sup>th</sup> Rocket Artillery Brigade (based in Asipovichy, Mahiliau oblast) – the only unit of this type in the Belarusian army. So far, the system’s only buyer has been Azerbaijan, which ordered 10 V-300 launchers, the first four of which it received in June 2018. In the Belarusian army, the V-200 launchers have mainly been used for testing purposes (at training grounds in Russia and Kazakhstan), or been displayed in military parades. Domestically, they are only being used for ‘dry’ firing (virtually, with the aid of computer simulations); at training grounds, meanwhile (for example during the ‘Zapad-2017’ exercises), post-Soviet B-30 Smerch multiple rocket launchers have been used.

It is noteworthy that Russia has so far not publicly made any comments on the Belarusian-Chinese cooperation to create a new type of offensive weapon. What is more, half of the chassis used in the Polonez launchers consist of components produced in Russia. Moscow also unofficially sponsored the contract to supply the systems to Azerbaijan, for which it is the main supplier of weapons. After the Russian Federation sold an export version of the Iskander missiles with a range of up to 300 km to Armenia (Yerevan, still in military alliance with Moscow, has criticised its rearming of the Azerbaijani army) – they have a similar range, but less destructive potential – the Belarusian-Chinese Polonez came to be perceived as an ideal way to restore the relative military balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

From the point of view of the potential equipping of the Belarusian army, the Chinese companies are niche projects in which Russia does not intend to participate, and does not see as posing any threat to its position or interests in Belarus. In 2012, the Belarusian Armed Forces received 22 light armoured cars as a gift from the PRC; then in 2017 they contracted the delivery of 30 more, newer models, which is of marginal importance regarding the technical modernisation of the army (especially since the recipient of the vehicles will most likely be the Internal Forces of the Interior Ministry). This does not mean that China has not made attempts – even in the previous decade – to establish cooperation with Belarus in other areas, including air defence reconnaissance and countermeasures. The fact that this cooperation did not bear any fruit, and the failure to continue these activities, allows us to assume that Russia adopted a stance of clear opposition towards it.

## VII. COOPERATION BETWEEN THE ARMS INDUSTRIES OF BELARUS AND RUSSIA

Due to its location on the border during the Soviet period, there were no large plants producing the basic categories of weapons and military equipment on the territory of present-day Belarus. The only exception was the MAZ plants, although these did not produce weapons, but platforms for armaments. The businesses in this area functioned as sub-suppliers, and specialised in the production of equipment and subassemblies. After the collapse of the USSR, their number decreased significantly, but the structure remained unchanged.

The Belarusian defence industry is currently a relatively well-developed, internally coherent complex focused on the development of information and telecommunications technologies, automated command systems, electronic-optical systems, instrumentation, and modernisation packages for the armaments and military equipment of Soviet and Russian construction based on them (aviation, armour, air defence). The modernisation plans only assume a deepening of the already-existing specialisations. Belarus is not attempting to develop independent production of weapons and ammunition. Its armed forces' demand for platforms, weapons, ammunition, communications and spare parts is fully satisfied by imports from Russia on favourable terms (at internal Russian prices) within the Union State and the CSTO.

The Belarusian arms industry operates mainly through cooperation with the Russian Military-Industrial Complex (MIC). Most Belarusian enterprises work closely with Russian businesses; in some cases, they are formally part of Russian holdings. However, the number of cooperating companies is systematically decreasing: in August 2020 it was estimated at 250-300,<sup>75</sup> while in November 2018 the State Authority for Military Industry of Belarus reported that there were about 99 local enterprises supplying 1880 segments and components of armaments & military equipment for 255 MIC entities. At the beginning of the 2010s, meanwhile, up to 400 Russian plants were cooperating with 120 Belarusian plants.

A significant role in the progressive reduction of the number of enterprises belonging to the Belarusian defence industry was played by the consolidation

<sup>75</sup> 'Тоскомвоенпром: Беларусь и Россия заинтересованы в развитии военно-технического сотрудничества', Белта, 24 August 2020, [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by); Государственный военно-промышленный комитет Республики Беларусь - website, [www.vpk.gov.by](http://www.vpk.gov.by).

of the MIC, combined with the liquidation of some of the unprofitable plants. As a result, the number of partners from Russia fell to 180 in the middle of that decade (there were 120 Belarusian businesses), and the current level was reached after the consolidation and bankruptcy of some of the enterprises in Belarus. In the peak period of the exchange in 2015 – after the sudden severance of cooperation ties between Russian and Ukrainian companies, and the subsequent takeover of some contracts by Belarusian plants – the value of supplies from Belarus was estimated at 15% of the value of Russian defence orders.<sup>76</sup>

Defence Systems (in Russian *Oboronnye Sistemy*), the largest interstate financial and industrial group (in Russian MFPG), was established on 11 February 2000 (Armenia joined on 10 December 2016). It includes 12 Russian and 5 Belarusian enterprises. Together they offer a modernisation package for the Pechora-2M missile system (which initially was the basic purpose of the holding's existence). Nearly 280 Russian enterprises (which are mostly not part of the arms industry) provide materials and components for the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (in Russian MZKT, part of the MFPG; it was separated off from the Minsk Automobile Plant [MAZ] in 1991), and 95% of the company's production is exported (over 50% goes to Russia).<sup>77</sup> The Uragan-1M missile launchers and rockets (from the Iskander short-range ballistic missiles, through Yars intercontinental ballistic missiles, to Bal and Bastion anti-ship missiles) are mounted on the wheeled platforms manufactured by MZKT – in total, 60 types of weapons and military equipment – as well as specialised support vehicles (such as the radar-location wheeled platform of the S-400 system).<sup>78</sup> It is worth noting that while MZKT also sells its products to other countries, in recent years Russia has remained the only external recipient of the platforms developed there for the assembly of weapons and military equipment.

From the perspective of cooperation with the MIC, the company Peleng, which produces optoelectronics, should be considered the leader of the Belarusian arms industry. In cooperation with the Russian Uralvagonzavod and UKBTM design bureau (Nizhny Tagil), it produces the Sosna-U infrared sights for the modernised T-72 tanks, and together with the Volgograd optical-mechanical plant (as part of the Vizir joint enterprise, based on the technologies of the

<sup>76</sup> Ю. Зверев, «Стратегическое предполье»: Как Беларусь помогает обеспечивать военную безопасность России, Русская народная линия, 12 November 2018, [www.rusline.ru](http://www.rusline.ru).

<sup>77</sup> «Белоруссия готова продать России Минский завод колесных тягачей», РИА Новости, 21 April 2016, [www.ria.ru](http://www.ria.ru).

<sup>78</sup> Г. Петровская, «Почему Россия хочет лишиться белорусский МЗКТ военных заказов», Deutsche Welle, 8 April 2016, [www.dw.com/ru](http://www.dw.com/ru).

French Thales concern), it organised the production and supply of tank sights (ESSA for the T-90S and PLISA for the T-80U) and infantry fighting vehicles (Buklet for the BMP-3) to the Russian army.<sup>79</sup> The items of cooperation (materials, semi-finished products, elements/subassemblies, training and support) are delivered to each other without customs restrictions, quantitative amounts or licenses (on the basis of the cooperation agreement of 20 May 1994).

Another significant supplier is Integral, which produces components for radio-electronics industry enterprises (as of 2013 it has done so under a special programme of the Union State codenamed 'Osнова' [English 'foundation, basis']);<sup>80</sup> among others, it provides on-board equipment for Russian-made combat aircraft.<sup>81</sup> In June 2015, the REB Technology consortium was established, bringing together a group of Belarusian entities within the Russian Radio-Electronic Technologies Concern (in Russian KRET) which are involved with the modernisation of radio-electronic combat complexes.<sup>82</sup>

While cooperation with Belarusian enterprises has primarily been of benefit to the Russian defence industry (primarily due to the lower costs), for Belarus, whose territory mainly hosts plants producing unfinished elements, subassemblies and details for armaments and military equipment, cooperation with Russia is largely a condition for survival, and only secondarily does it allow the country to act as a legal re-exporter and supplier of post-Soviet and Russian weapons. The vast majority of the Belarusian arms industry's production is targeted directly at the Russian market (in 2019, over 30%<sup>83</sup>), or through it to third-country markets, and it often functions as a means of repaying loans incurred by the Russian Federation. It should be remembered that Russia remains the main, and often the only recipient of Belarusian products intended for strictly military purposes. Most arms enterprises in the Republic of Belarus also produce for the civilian market, some even primarily. Another issue is the fact that Belarusian exports of arms and military equipment include services

<sup>79</sup> 'Белорусский «Пеленг» начал поставлять прицелы для российских противотанковых комплексов', 42.TUT.BY, 7 July 2015, [www.42.tut.by](http://www.42.tut.by).

<sup>80</sup> 'Белорусский «Интеграл» начал выпуск микросхем для предприятий радиоэлектроники РФ и Белоруссии', Интерфакс-АВН, 21 March 2013.

<sup>81</sup> For more on this and other examples of cooperation between Belarusian and Russian defence companies, see Э. Кокошина, 'Вопросы военного и военно-технического сотрудничества между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь', *Международная жизнь* 8/2019, [www.interaffairs.ru](http://www.interaffairs.ru).

<sup>82</sup> 'КРЭТ развивает сотрудничество в области РЭБ', КРЭТ, 24 December 2015.

<sup>83</sup> 'Тоскомвоентпром: Беларусь и Россия заинтересованы в развитии военно-технического сотрудничества', *op. cit.*; Государственный военно-промышленный комитет Республики Беларусь – website, [www.vpk.gov.by](http://www.vpk.gov.by).

concerning the repair and servicing of post-Soviet equipment, mainly provided to African and Asian markets.<sup>84</sup>

Despite its broad scope, the financial value of the cooperation between Belarus and Russia's defence industries (in terms of the mutual supplies of components and subassemblies for the production of armaments and military equipment) is not significant. The main Russian arms exporter, Rosoboronekспорт, estimated it at US\$1 billion in 2019 (starting in 2001).<sup>85</sup> If the current trends related to the transfer by Moscow to Minsk of increasingly technically complex versions of equipment continue, the Belarusian enterprises will become merely subcontractors of Russian entities, forced to adapt to their technical standards.

<sup>84</sup> More information on this subject can be found, among others, in the catalogues on the [SIPRI Arms Transfers Database](http://www.sipri.org), [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org).

<sup>85</sup> 'Объем ВТС России с Белоруссией превысил 1 миллиард долларов', ТАСС, 13 May 2019.

## CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

After independence, Belarus never really began to build a sovereign army. However, it would not be true to say that the process of merging and unifying the potentials of the Russian and Belarusian armies, which has been especially noticeable since the creation of the Union State, does in fact represent reintegration. That could have happened if the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation had remained a truly Soviet army. Since the turn of the millennium, however, Moscow has done a great deal of work to break with the post-Soviet military heritage, apart from the traditions it inherited. The Russian army is today a completely different structure than the Armed Forces of the USSR, and it would be impossible to reintegrate any post-Soviet army with it now. The former ties which remained on the Belarusian side, due to inertia, were systematically severed by Russia by introducing new elements to the reform of its armed forces: shaping a system of joint commands in the strategic directions, professionalising its personnel, and continuing the process of technical modernisation. Integration with the Russian army requires adapting to its present form.

Of itself, Minsk is unable either to keep up with the changes in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, or to build a modern army; there are not enough material or financial resources to do so. Alyaksandr Lukashenka systematically ceded his country's defence potential and sovereignty to Russia for a simple reason: the army was not treated as a priority from the point of view of current policy, and the President was also able to ease the burden on the state budget in this way, thus guaranteeing himself the relative stability of the system of power for many years. Loyalty to Moscow in military matters was seen as a guarantee of good relations and financial support, at least in the field of security. The events that have taken place in Belarus since the rigged presidential elections in August 2020 show that Lukashenka has ultimately been unable to guarantee this stability, and his sovereignty over the army is strictly symbolic. Any gestures by the army against the public protests against the electoral fraud, to which he referred, would have had to fit into its exercise schedule.<sup>86</sup> The military demonstration of strength against NATO was only

<sup>86</sup> The exercises in the Grodno oblast, which were particularly publicised in mid-August 2020, and the 'transfer' of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Air Assault Brigade from Vitebsk to the border with Poland and Lithuania (and by extension the battalion of this brigade) were planned in advance (they were part of the Russian Armed Forces' summer training period). Lukashenka's suggestion that these actions were a reaction to the protests should only be seen as part of his government's information war against Belarusian society.

influenced by the Kremlin's concern about the development of the situation in Belarus, and the main role – that is, the extension of the exercises in terms of both duration and planning – was played by Russian units.<sup>87</sup>

The integration of the Belarusian Armed Forces with the Russian army observed since the 1990s should in fact be regarded as a gradual incorporation, which – despite the differences between the Russian army and the USSR's Armed Forces – brings back associations with the Belarusian Military District that existed in Soviet times. Due to the changes currently taking place, however, such a comparison should be considered as unjustified. The Soviet army grouping within the Belarusian Military District was a complex entity, maintaining the correct proportions between the various types of troops and services; as a result it allowed for relatively independent operations at the operational and strategic level (as one of the westward fronts). The modern Belarusian army is evolving towards a specialised structure in the field of support and securitisation of operations, and its purely combat functions are becoming more and more symbolic. While formally remaining an ally of the Russian Armed Forces, it in fact only serves as a subsidiary of them.

As a result, we should consider the military integration of Belarus and Russia as a one-sided process. Its goal is to adjust the military potential of the Republic of Belarus to the standards and operational needs of the Russian Armed Forces in the western strategic direction. The Belarusian army is bound to close cooperation with the Russian army at every level of operation. The Belarusian Land Forces and the Special Operations Forces (the latter is not a formation identical to special forces in the Western or even Russian understanding, but rather a poor counterpart of the Russian Airborne Forces) have been delegated to the RGF, while the Belarusian Air Force is a component of the RADS. In both cases, the Belarusian side is partnered by the operational (military) level formations, while in reality command over the RGF and the RADS is exercised by the Joint Strategic Command 'West'.

The Belarusian army's potential is incoherent. The degree of the sub-units' training and equipment depends on the degree of their cooperation with the Russian troops and the operational needs of the Russian Armed Forces, as mentioned above. In terms of training and technical modernisation, priority has

<sup>87</sup> The 'Slavic Brotherhood 2020' exercises, and especially the 'Indestructible Brotherhood 2020' exercises, which were carried out in two phases: in September and in October (including the occasional participation of strategic bombers).

been given to the air defence's ground component, electronic warfare, communications and broadly understood support formations, as well as to selected sub-units of the Special Operations Forces which are in permanent cooperation with the Russian army. This allows us to assume that the main task of the Belarusian troops is to secure the transfer and deployment of Russian Armed Forces groups (both the land and air components) on its territory. The potential of the Belarusian Armed Forces' remaining units is maintained at a level that allows for periodic participation in exercises with Russian units; in a situation of extremely limited modernisation activities, however, the level of this participation is now systematically falling. Belarusian military aviation has practically ceased to exist, and the armoured and mechanised formations which are still on the margins of the technical modernisation programme have effectively been designated for liquidation.

The possible deployment of a Russian military base in Belarus should mainly be treated as a declaration of both countries' political will, as well as a demonstration of Moscow's determination to defend its territory. The existing infrastructure allows for the rapid relocation and deployment in Belarus of units deployed in the adjoining oblasts of the Russian Federation: that could be done much faster than transferring troops between military districts within Russia, or even deploying the military district forces in the strategic direction assigned to it. Considering that the Russian army is preparing to conduct an offensive operation on NATO's eastern flank, their possible permanent military presence in Belarus would be of no military significance, because before the operation begins, forces would be deployed to the area of operations from not only the WMD but also from beyond the Urals and the Northern Caucasus.<sup>88</sup>

In the current political situation, Russia has full freedom of action in Belarus, including the deployment of its own operational group in the western direction, and adequate cover and securitisation for it, without having to assume the burden of supporting the Belarusian Armed Forces. Nevertheless, there is still the problem of that part of the Belarusian army which now appears unnecessary. However, the division of the Belarusian army into two parts, on the basic criterion of which is useful from the point of view of the current needs of the Russian command, should not, be perceived as either deliberate or irreversible. It should be assumed that Moscow has made the further fate

<sup>88</sup> The permanent presence of Russian troops in Belarus would have military advantages only in the case of a defensive operation, if NATO were the aggressor and if the Alliance was the first to prepare for an attack in the eastern direction.

of the Belarusian part of the RGF and RADS dependent on the progress of the two states' integration in the economic and political dimensions. Instead of the redeployment of some formations and the degradation of others which we have observed, the coming years may see the comprehensive modernisation of most of the Republic of Belarus's armed forces. However, at that point the term 'Belarusian army' will at most refer to another combined-arms army of the WMD. There will be no place for the Belarusian Military District in the western (from the Russian perspective) strategic direction.

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## APPENDIX

### The potential of the Russian-Belarusian grouping in the western strategic direction

(offensive units and weapons, in accordance with the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty – CFE)

	Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus	Western Military District of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation	Russian forces in the Kaliningrad oblast	Total
<b>Operational relationships</b>				
armoured army	0	1	0	1
combined arms army	0	2	0	2
air and air defence army	0	1	0	1
combined arms corps	2	0	1	3
<b>Tactical units and offensive units (combined arms and artillery) of the Land and Airborne Forces / Special Operations Forces</b>				
armoured division	0	1	0	1
mechanised division	0	3	0	3
airborne / air assault division	0	2/1	0	3
armoured brigade	0	1	0	1
mechanised brigade	4	3	1	8

	<b>Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus</b>	<b>Western Military District of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation</b>	<b>Russian forces in the Kaliningrad oblast</b>	<b>Total</b>
airborne / air assault brigade	2	0	0	2
brigade of marines	0	0	1	1
armoured regiment (independent and as part of the division)	0	6	1	7
airborne / air assault regiment (as part of the division)	0	8	0	8
mechanised regiment (independent and as part of the division)	0	10	1	11
rocket brigade	1	3	2	6
rocket artillery brigade	1	1	0	2
artillery brigade	3	5	1	9
<b>Tactical groups and offensive units of the Aerospace Force / Air Force</b>				
aviation division	0	1	0	1
air regiment / air base	2	6	2	10
land forces aviation brigade	0	1	0	1
helicopter regiment / helicopter base	1	3	1	5

	<b>Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus</b>	<b>Western Military District of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation</b>	<b>Russian forces in the Kaliningrad oblast</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Number of units of basic categories of offensive weapons (in the case of land units, approximate number of full-time objects)*</b>				
tanks	280	1132	135	1547
armoured fighting vehicles	662	2954	446	4062
artillery of calibre 100 mm and above	658	1390	194	2242
combat planes	40	295	56	391
combat helicopters	7	121	12	140

\* This list does not include weapons in storage, single items in the stock of military schools and test units, or line units remaining in storage of specialised equipment (non-combat type) based on combat vehicles or combat flying apparatuses.

## Tactical associations and independent units of the Belarusian Armed Forces integrated with the structure of the Russian Armed Forces' Western Military District

Unit	Location	Comments on weapons donated by Russia
<b>Special Operations Forces</b>		
38 <sup>th</sup> 'Gvardiysk' Air Assault Brigade	Brest	
103 <sup>rd</sup> 'Gvardiysk' Airborne Brigade	Vitebsk	
5 <sup>th</sup> Spetsnaz Brigade	Mariyna Horka (Minsk region)	
<b>Rocket Forces of the Air Defence</b>		
120 <sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade	Baranavichy	1 battalion (3 batteries) with 12 Tor-M2 launchers
1 <sup>st</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment	Hrodna	2 battalions, 12 S-300PS launchers each
15 <sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment	Fanipal (Minsk region)	5 battalions, 8 S-300PMU-1 launchers each
115 <sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment	Brest	2 battalions, 12 S-300PS launchers each
147 <sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment	Babruisk	2 battalions, 12 S-300PS launchers each
825 <sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment	Polatsk	4 battalions, 8 S-300PMU-1 launchers each
1146 <sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment	Astravyets	2 batteries, 4 Tor-M2 launchers each

Unit	Location	Comments on weapons donated by Russia
<b>Reconnaissance and Electronic Warfare troops</b>		
244 <sup>th</sup> Radio-Electronic Reconnaissance Centre		
15 <sup>th</sup> Independent EW Battalion		
16 <sup>th</sup> Independent EW Battalion		
48 <sup>th</sup> Independent EW Battalion	Brest	
16 <sup>th</sup> Independent EW Regiment of the Air Force		
<b>Communications troops</b>		
86 <sup>th</sup> Communication Brigade	Kalodzishchy	
56 <sup>th</sup> Independent Air Force Communication Regiment	Minsk	
<b>Radio-technical troops</b>		
8 <sup>th</sup> Radio Engineering Brigade	Baranavichy	
49 <sup>th</sup> Radio Engineering Brigade	Valerianava (Minsk region)	