

Analytical report:
National security and defence
of Belarus
(January 2023)

Minsk

The factors. The main factors affecting the state of national security of Belarus in January were:

- The persistent view of the Belarusian leadership that it is possible to use the threat of an escalation of the war as a tool to "encourage" the West and Kiev to at least not take steps to the detriment of official Minsk.
- Official Minsk stakes on at least a political victory for the Kremlin (and as soon as possible) in the war with Ukraine and in the confrontation with the West.
- Demonstration of allied support for the Kremlin in the war with Ukraine according to the formula "we will help with everything, except for soldiers and money."
- The desire of Minsk and Kyiv to avoid armed confrontation, despite the occasional militant rhetoric.
- The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on changes in the organizational structure of the army of Belarus.
- The growing influence of Western sanctions pressure.

The developments within the month. On January 5, 2023, it became known that another battalion set of new-made Russian armored personnel carriers BTR-82A arrived in Belarus. Interestingly, Russia simultaneously threw both old Soviet armoured vehicles and new ones made for export to the front. For example, the T-90S tanks.

Since January 5, in the Minsk and Vitebsk regions, the KGB has been conducting exercises to test readiness to respond to acts of terrorism, where units of the State Security Committee, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the State Border Committee, the army, the Ministry of Emergency Situations and other state bodies were involved.

On January 6, 2023 Aliaksandr Lukashenka visited the Abuz-Lasnouski training ground near Baranavičy, where he got acquainted with the process of coordinating the Belarusian and Russian troops. He also met with Russian servicemen. Judging by the statements that have been made, in the process of coordinating, first of all, the preparation of Russian mobilized troops is being carried out, and this activity is planned to be continued in the future.

From January 16, 2023, a joint tactical flight exercise of the aviation units of Belarus and Russia from the aviation component of the regional grouping of troops (forces) (hereinafter referred to as the RGT) was held.

During the event, among others, the following exercises were carried out:

- conducting aerial reconnaissance and control of fighter crews, including using A-50 AWACS aircraft;
- joint patrolling of the airspace, fighter cover for important objects (source);
- air support for groupings of troops, defeating ground targets with fighter cover for strike groups of attack and bomber aircraft;
- overcoming and suppression of air defence;
- parachute and non-parachute landing of tactical airborne troops;
- delivery of goods and evacuation of the wounded;

- the use of Mi-24 fire support helicopters, search and rescue operations by the Mi-8MTV-5 helicopter;
- relocation of aviation units to operational airfields, including those located on the territory of Russia;
- the action of air crews as control targets for checking the air defence forces on duty.

On January 23, 2023 Lukashenka approved the decisions to protect the state border in 2023. For the first time – in the airspace, and not just on the ground. Border protection in the airspace is carried out by the Air Force and Air Defence of the Army. On the ground – by the border service. Interestingly, after a long break, Lukashenka again returned to the topic of illegal migrants who are trying to enter the EU through Belarus.

It was also stated that, according to the State Border Committee, there are 17.2 thousand Ukrainian servicemen and 3.7 thousand Polish servicemen near the borders of Belarus. These numbers have remained stable over the past months.

On January 31, 2023, a joint staff training of the Joint Command of the Russian and Belarusian Republican Armed Forces began. Issues of joint planning for the use of troops were worked out on the basis of the experience of armed conflicts. It is reported that the event is an element of preparation for the Union Shield-2023 joint exercise, which will be held on the territory of the Russian Federation in September. As part of the event, officers responsible for the territorial defence of the military commissariat of the Minsk region and districts, as well as representatives of operational groups from the internal affairs department of the Minsk regional executive committee, internal troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Minsk department of the Ministry of Emergency Situations worked out issues of territorial defence of the region.

The combat readiness of one of the tank battalions of the 19th mechanized brigade was checked. Practical shooting from the armament of the T-72B tank with a standard artillery shell took place, which demonstrated the readiness of the battalion to carry out tasks for its intended purpose. The actions of the tankers were observed by the commander of the North-Western Operational Command, Major General Aliaksandr Navumenka.

The State Secretariat of the Security Council conducted an inspection of the combat readiness of the immediate reaction forces of the 6th mechanized brigade, which became one of the stages of a comprehensive check of combat readiness and the state of weapons and military equipment in the army as a whole. This inspection will last throughout 2023. The ability of tank and mechanized battalions to start performing tasks on time, the technical condition of weapons and military equipment, and the availability of ammunition and supplies of materiel were checked.

During January, the Belarusian military department reported on the build-up of the RGT, which is being carried out in stages. Personnel, weapons, military and special equipment of the Russian Armed Forces continued to arrive in Belarus.

As part of the coordination of the regional grouping of troops (forces), Belarus and Russia were brought to readiness to fulfill the tasks of the material support unit of the 11th mechanized brigade. Equipment was removed from long-term storage (vehicles, as far as one can judge). The reception of personnel from the reserve force was practiced.

A range of tasks to supply troops with the necessary reserves of fuel, ammunition, food and other equipment from field depots rather than from fixed bases has been worked out, enabling an assessment to be made of, inter alia:

- the state of military and special equipment;
- opportunities for transporting the necessary goods in a short time to threatened areas;
- protection of goods during their delivery.

In January, it became known that the Ministry of Defence, together with the Ministry of Health, softened the requirements for the state of health of persons entering military service. Innovations apply to all categories of servicemen, both those serving on a contract basis, as well as conscripts and reserve service. This is explained by:

- previous health requirements are “significantly overstated”;
- it is necessary to align the requirements for different groups of potential servicemen;
- the troops receive new types of military equipment, the forms of warfare are changing, which does not require the previous physical load on military personnel;
- new methods of treatment and health correction have been introduced.

We have devoted a separate article to this event.

Conclusions and trends. Obviously, the new BTR-82A for the Russian military at the front would not be superfluous. Nevertheless, they were transferred to Belarus.

There can be two reasons for that:

- propagandistic. Moscow thus demonstrates confidence in the ability of its military-industrial complex to meet the needs for equipment not only of its own army, but also of its closest ally;
- compensation to Minsk for Moscow's support (as in the case of the transfer of the Iskander OTRK and the S-400 air defence system).

The decision to guard the border in the airspace is probably related to the activity of Ukrainian unmanned reconnaissance aircraft. Moreover, not only in the border area, but also in the depths of the Belarusian territory, as well as flights of aviation of NATO countries along the borders. Another practical reason could be the cases of missiles flying and falling on Belarusian territory from Ukrainian territory during Russian air strikes. In this regard, it is appropriate to recall the plans from 2014 to create a low-altitude radar field along the entire border of Belarus with the EU countries and Ukraine.

With regard to the staff training of the Joint Command of the Regional Grouping of Troops (Forces) of Belarus and Russia, it is worth noting the following: if it is an element of preparation for the Union Shield exercise, then the development of issues of the territorial defence of the Minsk region is incomprehensible. Or there are two separate events (joint staff training and territorial defence), perhaps as part of the general plan. Or the Union Shield will be held not only on Russian, but also on Belarusian territory. And this means that it will differ in scale more than usual, which generally follows from the

logic of the current development of cooperation between Minsk and Moscow in the military sphere.

Of interest is the fact of monitoring the combat readiness check of just the tank battalion of the 19th mechanized brigade by a general. This usually happens when it comes to checking new / modernized equipment, or a newly formed unit.

As far as it can be judged from open information, the rotation of Russian troops in Belarus is currently being carried out. Those units that have been trained leave Belarus. New ones take their place. But it is not clear in what proportion this rotation takes place. In any case, the interest of the Russian side in the possibility of training its military personnel in Belarus indirectly indicates the continuation of mobilization in Russia, but just on a smaller scale.

This interest, in particular, is evidenced by the fact of the visit of the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Ground Forces Oleg Salyukov to Belarus. He came in January to inspect the readiness of the Russian troops. Salyukov is the deputy head of the so-called "special military operation" leader Valery Gerasimov.

Thus, it is highly likely that the training of Russian troops in Belarus in various formats will continue.

The combat training activities of the Belarusian army, especially in terms of mobilisation deployment and various types of support, are dictated by two considerations. First, it is an element of propaganda, pedaling an external threat in order to rally society around the regime. Secondly, the situation on the Ukrainian front –not necessarily in connection with the intention to support the Russian military efforts against Ukraine, but as insurance in case of failure of these efforts, the transition of the initiative in the war to Ukraine and the West standing behind it. The Ukrainian Defence Forces number about 1.2 million fighters (of which about 950 thousand are in the Armed Forces of Ukraine). And Kyiv clearly intends to convert a hypothetical military success into an increase in its status in regional politics, up to the creation of their own sphere of influence (although Ukrainian officials publicly deny this). So the Ukrainian military capabilities and political ambitions are a serious reason for official Minsk to worry. The answer to which in the future may be:

- Building up its own military capabilities. But the constraints are Belarus' financial and technological capabilities.

- Restoration (maintenance of existing) channels of communication with individual Western countries, which will require serious concessions from Minsk (including in the non-public sphere).

- Involvement of non-regional actors (China, India, Turkey) in the subject of regional security. Although success is doubtful due to the specific interests of these countries in Europe in general and in Eastern Europe in particular.

At the same time, Minsk and Kyiv are currently striving to avoid a direct military clash. During January, Belarusian officials made statements in the style of “the situation is not simple, but stable” and “the West/Washington is to blame for everything.” We have devoted a separate article to this event.

In general, the official Minsk is interested in the victory of the Kremlin, considering this option as representing the greatest prospects: on the one hand, Russian preferences are preserved; on the other hand, the development of a peace agreement is a priori perceived in Minsk as impossible without Belarusian participation. And the West and Kyiv, in case of defeat in the war, will be forced to make concessions not only to Putin, but also to Lukashenka. In this situation, the Belarusian side will adhere to the previous practice of supporting Russia within the existing formats.

The demographic situation and the migration of young people means that the “deficit” of conscripts will continue in the future. That will require:

- further reduction of health requirements for potential recruits;
- raising the age limit for conscription, the age and length of service required to receive a pension;
- the introduction of a single term of fixed-term military service for all categories of conscripts according to the upper bar (that is, 18 months);
- restrictions on the mobility of persons of military age in terms of traveling abroad;
- more active involvement of women in the service in law enforcement agencies.

