

MODEST MOSCOW STYLE.

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Introduction

The Baltic region has been a topic in a number of articles¹ and the content was especially focused on the key role of Belarus and Kaliningrad oblast if Moscow decides to seize the open water Baltic ports to restore the Russian hegemony over the Baltic Sea. A potential scenario has been scripted in the ZAPAD 2017 articles. The article *“Developments in the Baltic Region”* outlines the Brussels and Mons military reaction to the ongoing strengthening of the Russian military presence in the Kaliningrad oblast and efforts to augment a military presence on Belarus territory. That reaction should discourage Moscow seizing the open water ports on the Baltic Sea² as well as lifting the isolated position of Kaliningrad.

A short scenario sketch.

The scripted exercise scenario of ZAPAD 2017 is more or less similar to the successful missions in Georgia (2008), Crimea and Donbas (2014). First an extensive and targeted disinformation offensive followed by a quick³ surprising military operation executed by “little green men” gathered in proxy armies and supported by regular military resources from areas under Moscow control. The military response is initiated by protests and demonstrations by Russian-speaking activists in the Baltic region.

For a swift and successful offensive, the required military presence on the Kaliningrad and the Belarus shoulder of the Suwalki gap and blocking the Danish approaches are essential. Given the extensive Russian military presence in the Kaliningrad oblast, the deployment of the required multidimensional forces on the Kaliningrad shoulder will cause lesser problems than an expanded military presence on the Belarus shoulder and on greater Belarus soil.

Airspace control key.



РАСПОРЯЖЕНИЕ

ПРЕЗИДЕНТА РОССИЙСКОЙ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ

О подписании Соглашения между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о российской авиационной базе на территории Республики Беларусь

Принять предложение Правительства Российской Федерации о подписании Соглашения между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о российской авиационной базе на территории Республики Беларусь.

Поручить Минобороны России провести с участием МИДа России переговоры с Белорусской Стороной и по достижении договоренности подписать от имени Российской Федерации указанное Соглашение, разрешив вносить в его проект, одобренный Правительством Российской Федерации, изменения, не имеющие принципиального характера.



Президент
Российской Федерации В.Путин

18 сентября 2015 года
№ 281-рп



Offensive operations without a multidimensional airspace control is an act with suicidal consequences. Despite the favorable combat power ratio in the region, Moscow still wants to have an effective and standing air and airspace defensive component deployed on Belarus territory to effectively protecting operations in the Suwalki region, and supporting amphibious operations on the Baltic ports from the Kaliningrad oblast.

The combination of airspace platforms and airspace defensive ground forces must also block NATO ground en airspace reinforcements deployed to disrupt and/or stop Russian operations and support NATO troops in Poland and the Baltic States

fighting invading Russian troops.

In 2014 Moscow tried to force Minsk concurring to the deployment of a number of Russian air force bases on their territory⁴. However, Minsk has still not given in to the repeated Moscow requests and the concept agreement is probably still catching dust in one of the cupboards of Luksahenko's office. Nevertheless, in the run-up to a final approval, Minsk sanctioned the establishment of two small headquarters on Belarus territory: a radar station in Baranovichy (a Belarus airbase and headquarters of the Minsk Air component) and a naval communication center at Minsk.

Minsk balking at a standing Moscow military presence.

In 2016, Moscow outlined a plan to deploy a Russian air cover on Belarus territory and discussed it extensively with Minsk⁵. For a successful CAS campaign supporting the offensives to the Baltic ports, closing the Suwalki Gap and disrupting and stopping NATO air and ground forces, a multidimensional air cover should be deployed as close as possible to the Baltic states borders. Unfortunately that plan never matured and therefore was never executed. Two developments were to blame: the weak Belarus economy, the waning Russian

support due to the effects of the sharpening western sanctions and the positive political posture of European nations towards Minsk. Lukashenko was more or less forced to seek for European economic support and tried to distance himself from Russia's Ukraine policy strengthening the relations with its neighbor. Consequently, Lukashenko grew less interested in a standing deployment of Russian troops on Belarus territory and he stalled the plan ad infinitum.

In the run-in to and during ZAPAD 2017, the air component issue came up again. In official statements for internal and international consumption, Lukashenko made it crystal clear that given the scripted scenario of ZAPAD 2017, Minsk permitted Moscow to temporarily and locally deploy troops on Belarus territory. After ENDEX all Russian troops should leave Belarus. Nevertheless, Moscow attempted in 2019 again to convince Minsk that a Russian multidimensional air component would benefit Belarus's security. However, Lukashenko still seeking western help to bring the Belarus economy up to speed, countered the request claiming Belarus has sufficient military means to protect Belarus against any military aggression. Lukashenko's posture to deny Moscow its military pressure to squeeze the Baltic states to meet its political demands, frustrated the men in the Kremlin and forced them to find another solution.

The relevance of Astravyets/Ostrovets⁶.



The location of the Astravyets NPP, clearly visible from the TV tower in Vilnius

That solution could be found in the Astravyets/Ostrovets region. In 2009, Minsk permitted Moscow to deploy a small military contingent to protect the construction of a nuclear plant. That plant was part of the 2009 blood brother agreement between Minsk and Moscow.

Astravyets/Ostrovets option in the Grodno region about 45 K's from the Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital was for several reasons quite a surprise. It was not in line with:

- The proposals of the committee ordered to find a suitable location for the nuclear plant.
- Internationally accepted rules established by the *International Atomic Energy Agency*; the IAEA stressing that a new nuclear plant should not be built within a radius of 100 kilometers from a large urbanized area.
- The caution not to build in a "*heightened seismic risk area*"⁷ in the eastern Baltic region.

Three solid arguments to default the Grodno region, but not surprisingly, Moscow ignored those arguments and prioritized its military requirement to the safety of the regional Belarus population and the fierce protests of the Baltic states. In 2009, it accommodated to the Moscow decision and it may have rejected that in 2019.

Although, a 2019 Belarus media report of the *Vo Slavu Rodiny* presented a 2009 déjà vu. More about that later in the text.

Rosatom the (then) Russian energy giant financed the bulk of the construction costs and the costs of fuel (for 2 VVER 1200 reactors), education and training of operators, controllers and the supporting staff for the nuclear plant. Under the

Russian pretense that the construction of the nuclear power plant should be protected by a “modest” security detachment commanded by a Belarus military supported by personnel trained in St. Petersburg under Belarus's supervision, Lukashenko agreed.

Modest Russian Style.



The new building for housing and office facilities

Vo Slavu Rodiny, a media source from the Belarusian Ministry of Defense, clarified the Moscow and Minsk 2009 interpretation of the term *modest* in a report highlighting the opening of the staff building for that *modest* detachment. The gullible, simple-minded viewer was extensively presented the new command post, barracks (translated as

housing) and office facilities all in one vast building, hardly be classified as *modest*.



Air Defense system TOR-M2



Installation of the newly erected buildings



Air Defense system BUK-MB3K

Source: BeIT, www.balta.by
BUK: [wiki commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BUK-MB3K)

The 7434 (independent) battalion of the Belarusian Ministry of the Interior is the "modest" military detachment housed in the building. The detachment will be commanded by a Belarus general⁸ supported by a mixed staff of Belarusian and Russian personnel trained in Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. That modest detachment has been equipped with an air defense unit and a small ground component.

The air defense unit is 1146 Guard Guided Weapon Air Defense Regiment with the TOR-M2 and the ground component is armed with armored infantry vehicles of the BTR-70 MB1 type. To stress the multidimensional character of the detachment, it will have a flight strip initially to facilitate smaller platforms such as the YAK 130, but with the potential for larger and heavier armed platforms. Officially, the detachments is only 300 troops stark, but it is unclear how an air defense organization of more than 20 vehicles with a strength of at least 600 soldiers fits into the 300 troops workforce.

For the frequent Russia follower, it is very clear that this modest detachment is regular multidimensional military unit that has substantially more than 300 troops and may have a number that is substantially higher and may trump the 1000 troops number. Presumably those 300 troops will only relate to staff and supporting component.

A future Nightmare.

In 2009, a decennium ago, Moscow laid the foundation of an extensive Russian-oriented multi-dimensional military component in Astravyets / Ostrovets , the foundations were laid for, Hidden for western eyes, the separate components can be rapidly expanded into an effective assault force and the flight strip can be adapted for CAS platforms of the SU 27 type. Reinforcing the ground component with combat will be a piece of cake. Given the Crimea and Donbas and the masking options, reinforcement in a step by step framework may become a reality in the near future. Moscow has agreed to deliver the famous BUK-MB3K⁹ on an MZKT-69225 chassis, which means that the modest military contingent of Astravyets will have a formidable AD component in the short term.

Although currently the detachment is still under Belarus's command, Moscow has included a clause stating that Russian equipment may be deployed without Belarus' permission. One does not need to have a great insight in military matters to predict that Moscow has planned Astravyets / Ostrovets years ago to be the vehicle for a relevant assault force on Belarus territory close to the borders of the Baltic States and the Suwalki gap.

A military force at 45 kilometers from the Lithuanian capital to support the political pressure on the Baltic states , is not really the desired option to give everyone on the other side of the state border a great night's sleep.

¹ Those articles are “*Are the Baltic States the next victim of Russian Expansion?* (2015), the articles concerning exercise ZAPAD 2017 (2017) and “*The Developments in the Baltic Region*”(2019)

² Especially the harbors of Riga (Latvia), which used to house the headquarters of the Soviet Baltic Fleet and Tallinn (Estonia), where the “Red Banner Baltic Fleet” was located.

³ Speed is crucial. The objective is to neutralize the Baltic States within 60 hours, before NATO will be able to send reinforcements to the region, and whereby a nuclear development can be avoided.

⁴ The commander of the Russian Air Force indicated in 2013 that two bases would be build. One in Lida (Grodno region) and one in Babruysk (center) which would be operational in 2016.

⁵ The original plan was to build an air force base for the CAS platforms; SU-27 and a squadron attack helicopters. When no permission was granted, the SU 27 base was relocated to the Kaliningrad province.

⁶The Ostravets/Astryavets NPP shortly BelaPP, is located in the northwestern part of Belarus, Grodno oblast (coordinates: 54°45'19.6"N 26°05'28.9"E.)

⁷ In 1987 on a 10 kilometer distance from Astravyets, there were two earth quakes with 2.5 on the Richter scale

⁸ Major General Yuri Karaev

⁹ Medium range Air Defense systems. NATO SA-6 “Gainfull” to be used against cruise missiles, smart bombs, fix- and roray wing targets as well as unmanned platforms on a interception distance of 18 kilometers. Heights: 25-60 kilometers.