



NATO's Regional Security in the Context of Military-Defensive Cooperation Between Russia and Belarus: A Polish Perspective on Eastern European Stability

Tomasz Wyczawski^{1*}

Mariusz Dudek²

¹War Studies University (Warsaw, Poland), t.wyczawski@akademia.mil.pl

²The University of Economics and Human Sciences (Warsaw, Poland), m.dudek@vizja.pl

*Corresponding author: t.wyczawski@akademia.mil.pl

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9329-1350>

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the evolving military-defensive cooperation between the Russian Federation (RF) and the Republic of Belarus (RB), analyzing its implications for regional security in Eastern Europe. The strategic partnership between these two countries, shaped by historical, political, and economic factors, has deepened in recent years through military integration, joint defense initiatives, and enhanced cooperation under the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The paper investigates the impact of this cooperation on the security structure established by NATO, with a focus on Belarus' growing dependence on Russia for economic and military support. It also examines the technological exchange and transfer of military knowledge between Russia and Belarus, which enhances their defense capabilities and strengthens their geopolitical positions. By identifying shared security threats such as NATO expansion, color revolutions, and terrorism, this paper provides insights into the future trajectory of Russia-Belarus relations and the potential consequences for NATO and regional stability. The paper argues that the ongoing military integration between Russia and Belarus will increasingly challenge NATO's security strategy in Eastern Europe, potentially destabilizing the region and affecting the balance of power between the West and Russia.

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ARTICLE HISTORY

| | |
|-----------|---------------------------------|
| Received | 02 th September 2024 |
| Revised | 31 th October 2024 |
| Accepted | 29 th November 2024 |
| Published | 30 th December 2024 |

KEYWORDS

military cooperation,
regional security,
NATO,
CSTO,
technology transfer,
military integration,
geopolitical strategy,
defense cooperation

HOW TO CITE?

Wyczawski, T., & Dudek, M. (2024). NATO's Regional Security in the Context of Military-Defensive Cooperation Between Russia and Belarus: A Polish Perspective on Eastern European Stability. *Acta Humanitatis*, 2(2), 138–166. <https://doi.org/10.5709/ah-02.02.2024-04>

1. Introduction.

The growing military-defensive cooperation between the Russian Federation (RF) and the Republic of Belarus (RB) has become a central factor influencing regional security dynamics in Eastern Europe. Rooted in historical, cultural, and political ties, this partnership has significantly evolved over recent years, deepening the military integration between the two countries. The strategic alliance formed by Russia and Belarus is increasingly seen as a pivotal challenge to NATO's security strategy, especially considering the ongoing efforts by the alliance to safeguard stability on its eastern borders. This evolving cooperation comes amid a broader shift in military alliances and defense strategies in the post-Soviet space, with Russia and Belarus playing key roles in this new security paradigm.

As both nations intensify their military collaboration, this union directly challenges NATO's regional security framework. Particularly within the context of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – a military alliance that includes several former Soviet states – the Russia-Belarus partnership is viewed as a counterbalance to NATO's influence, which has expanded eastward. The increasing alignment of military strategies between Russia and Belarus, including joint defense initiatives and the integration of military infrastructures, raises significant concerns in the West regarding the militarization of the region and the potential destabilization of neighboring countries such as Poland, which lies at the crossroads of NATO's eastern flank and the growing Russo-Belarusian bloc.

This paper investigates the ongoing military cooperation between Russia and Belarus and its implications for NATO's security strategy in Eastern Europe. It posits three primary hypotheses:

1. Russia's and Belarus's expanding military integration, through mechanisms like the CSTO and joint defense initiatives, will undermine NATO's security architecture in Eastern Europe.
2. Belarus's increasing political and economic dependence on Russia will reinforce their strategic alliance and further consolidate their military cooperation.
3. Technological cooperation, including the transfer of advanced military technologies such as missile defense systems and air defense infrastructure, will enhance Russia and Belarus's



combined military capabilities, making the region increasingly challenging for NATO to monitor and counter.

The significance of this study lies in its examination of the evolving defense and security policies of Russia and Belarus and how these policies impact not only their bilateral relations but also the broader regional security context. As military forces and technologies between Russia and Belarus integrate more deeply, this paper provides critical insights into the shifting geopolitical landscape, particularly concerning the security concerns of NATO and its member states, notably Poland, which faces direct security risks from this enhanced cooperation. By exploring key security threats such as NATO expansion, regional instability, and terrorism, this research will further analyze the political, economic, and technological factors driving the military alliance between Russia and Belarus and NATO's potential responses to these developments.

2. Regional Security and Identification of Common Threats

From NATO's perspective, the military cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, based on deeply rooted historical, cultural, and political ties, is perceived as a potential threat to regional stability. Both countries view themselves as inseparable allies in the face of shared threats, which may impact the security of the Eurasian region. This close cooperation enables the coordination of defense and strategic actions, raising concerns within NATO about the further militarization of the region and the potential for destabilization through the actions of both nations.

Russia and Belarus, as close allies, frequently share a common perception of many security threats. Among the most significant of these are:

Table 1

Key Threats to the Regional Security of Russia and Belarus

| Threat | Significance of the Threat for Belarus and Russia |
|--------------------------|--|
| <i>NATO Expansion</i> | NATO expansion, particularly the inclusion of new members from Eastern Europe, is perceived as a direct threat to the sphere of influence of both countries. The increased NATO military presence in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe prompts Russia and Belarus to intensify their own defensive actions. |
| <i>Color Revolutions</i> | Events such as the Color Revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan are interpreted as attempts of external interference in the sphere of influence of |

| Threat | Significance of the Threat for Belarus and Russia |
|--|--|
| | Russia and Belarus, motivating both countries to strengthen their military and intelligence cooperation. |
| <i>Political Instability Beyond the Borders of the Union State</i> | Political instability in countries neighboring Russia and Belarus, such as Ukraine, Moldova, and the South Caucasus, poses a significant threat to the security of the Union State. Such instability can lead to unpredictable conflicts, mass migration, and the strengthening of the presence and influence of Western powers in the region, which directly impacts the strategic interests of Russia and Belarus. In response to these challenges, both countries may seek to increase their political and military presence in the region, as well as strengthen defense and security cooperation within frameworks such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). |
| <i>Political Instability Within the Borders of the Union State</i> | Political instability within the borders of the Union State, encompassing both Russia and Belarus, can impact regional stability and the effectiveness of military cooperation between these countries. In Belarus, political instability was particularly evident in 2020, when mass protests erupted in response to the re-election of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, following the announcement of the disputed presidential election results. These protests were violently suppressed by security forces, which affected Belarus's international reputation and complicated its diplomatic relations. In Russia, instability is manifested through frequent protests and demonstrations, especially in larger cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg. These protests often focus on opposition to Kremlin policies, corruption, and support for opposition leaders like Alexei Navalny. While these events are localized, they have the potential to impact the image of the authorities and their ability to maintain control over the country. This, in turn, can affect both internal stability and the external defense policy of both nations. |
| Terrorism and Extremism | The increase in terrorist and extremist activity in the region poses a serious threat, requiring a coordinated approach in terms of intelligence sharing and joint counterterrorism operations. |

Source: Authors' Work

In response to perceived threats, Russia and Belarus are developing and implementing a series of strategic initiatives to strengthen their defense cooperation and increase military readiness. Here are the key initiatives:

Table 2

Strategic Responses of Russia and Belarus to Shared Security Threats

| Strategic Responses | Significance and Definition |
|---|--|
| <i>Strengthening the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization)</i> | Both countries actively participate in CSTO activities, allowing for more effective coordination of military actions and greater interoperability of armed forces. Regular military exercises, such as “Zapad” and “Slavic Brotherhood”, enhance combat readiness and serve as a demonstration of the alliance’s defense capabilities. |
| <i>Development of Missile and Air Defense Systems</i> | The enhancement of missile defense and air defense systems on Belarusian territory, with the involvement of Russian technologies such as the S-400 systems, is a response to potential threats from NATO. |



| Strategic Responses | Significance and Definition |
|---|---|
| <i>Integration of Military Infrastructure</i> | The development of a joint air defense system and other aspects of military infrastructure, including communication and reconnaissance systems, strengthens the defense capabilities of both countries. |

Source: Authors' Work

From NATO's perspective, Russia's and Belarus's strong focus on the security of their borders reflects their strategic pursuit of joint defense against perceived regional threats. The agreement signed on December 19, 1997, between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on mutual regional security assurance in the military sphere serves as an example of their deep military cooperation (Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Mutual Regional Security Assurance in the Military Sphere, 19.12.1997).

From NATO's standpoint, such cooperation can be interpreted as an attempt to increase the influence of both countries in the region, potentially leading to heightened tensions and destabilization. Furthermore, these actions may be viewed as part of a broader Russian strategy aimed at maintaining its dominance in Eastern Europe and limiting Western influence, particularly that of NATO, which raises concerns about the further implications for regional security and stability (Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Mutual Regional Security Assurance in the Military Sphere, 19.12.1997). The document was initiated in response to the increasing tensions and perceptions of threats in Eastern Europe, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and NATO's eastward expansion. The agreement primarily focuses on tightening military and defense cooperation and establishing mechanisms for coordinating actions in the event of threats to regional security. By establishing coordination mechanisms in the event of regional security threats, this agreement potentially enhances the military-defense capabilities of both countries.

From NATO's perspective, these actions not only strengthen the military ties between Russia and Belarus but could also serve as a platform for Russia's expansion of its influence in the region and as a means of confronting NATO's defense policy. These two countries' growing military and strategic integration could increase tensions and destabilize Eastern Europe. Key elements of this agreement encompass:



1. Both parties are committed to cooperating in the face of external threats, which includes consultations, intelligence sharing, and the possibility of joint military operations.
2. The agreement facilitates the integration of Russia's and Belarus's defense systems, incorporating shared radar, missile, and air defense systems and coordinated cyberspace actions.
3. It encourages the development of joint military infrastructure, including constructing and modernizing military bases, logistical facilities, and other essential installations for defense activities.
4. Regular military exercises are mandated to enhance interoperability and combat readiness, with strategic and tactical components to improve cooperation at various command levels.
5. The document establishes protocols for rapid responses to military and non-military crises, such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks, requiring coordinated actions from both countries.

The signing of this agreement reflects Russia and Belarus's determination to secure their strategic interests in a changing geopolitical landscape. From NATO's perspective, this attempts to counterbalance Western influence and increase regional stability by establishing a common defense front. This, in turn, raises concerns about the potential increase in aggression and destabilization in Eastern Europe.

Article 1 of the agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on the joint provision of regional security in the military sphere defines key terms that form the foundation for understanding the goals and mechanisms of this agreement (Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Mutual Regional Security Assurance in the Military Sphere, 19.12.1997). The definition of the "region" includes the territory of the Republic of Belarus and the regions of the Russian Federation bordering the Belarusian state border, along with the air and space domain (Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Mutual Regional Security Assurance in the Military Sphere, 19.12.1997). The deployment and joint operations of military groups from the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation are planned



within this region. This definition emphasizes the agreement’s geographic scope and indicates an integrated approach to security that transcends traditional national borders.

The term “regional military security” refers to the state of the military-political situation in the designated region, where the protection of the national and joint interests of the Union of Belarus and Russia is ensured against potential and real military threats (Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Mutual Regional Security Assurance in the Military Sphere, 19.12.1997). This definition emphasizes proactive protection and defense of both countries’ interests in the complex international security environment.

The term “Regional Military Grouping (forces)”, referred to as the “regional grouping”, includes the command-and-control bodies and units of the armed forces of both countries, which are stationed during peacetime or deployed in times of threat in the region to repel potential aggression (Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Mutual Regional Security Assurance in the Military Sphere, 19.12.1997). This grouping is also responsible for coordinating the activities of other military formations planned for use under a unified concept and action plan. This definition highlights integrated and cooperating forces as a key element in the defense strategy and response to threats.

Each definition provides a framework for deep military integration and strategic cooperation between Belarus and Russia. This indicates their determination to jointly address regional security challenges and understand the complex threats that may affect stability and peace in their immediate neighborhood.

One of the key documents regulating the response to threats in the Eurasian region is the Collective Security Treaty, signed on May 15, 1992, with subsequent amendments in 2010 and 2018 (Treaty on Collective Security). The treaty is the foundation for the regional security architecture, encompassing Russia, Belarus, and other former Soviet states. The signatories commit to cooperation in defense matters, coordinating their actions in response to common threats and enhancing the interoperability of their armed forces (Treaty on Collective Security). Key provisions of the Collective Security Treaty are as follows:

Article 1 of the Treaty declares the commitment of member states to maintain peace and exercise restraint in the use or threat of force. These states agree to resolve all international



disputes exclusively by peaceful means and ensure that they will not participate in actions or alliances directed against other members of the Treaty.

Article 2 emphasizes the importance of mutual consultations among member states on issues related to international security that affect their interests. In the event of a security or stability threat, member states commit to immediate joint consultations to coordinate their defense actions.

Article 3 establishes the Collective Security Council, which consists of the heads of state or government of the member states and is responsible for coordinating security and defense policy.

Article 4 stipulates that aggression against one member state is treated as aggression against all member states, obligating them to provide necessary assistance, including military support.

Article 5 explains that the Collective Security Council and other bodies it establishes ensure the coordination and implementation of joint actions under the Treaty.

Article 6 provides detailed procedures for using forces and means of collective defense, activated based on joint decisions made at the highest level of the member states.

Thus, the Collective Security Treaty is crucial for ensuring coordination and mutual support in protecting the region's security and stability. This is essential for maintaining peace and responding to new geopolitical challenges in Eurasia.

One of the most important factors that has determined the direction of the security policies of Russia and Belarus is NATO expansion (Rühle, 2024). The expansion of the Alliance to include new member states from Eastern Europe is interpreted by both countries – Belarus and Russia – as a direct threat to their spheres of influence (Pawlicki, 2024). As a result, Russia and Belarus are intensifying their defensive actions by developing military infrastructure and regularly conducting joint exercises to strengthen their strategic and defensive position in the region (The well-known institute from the USA warns: Russia is preparing for war with NATO (A Well-Known Institute in the USA Warns..., 2024).

Another significant threat is the so-called color revolutions, which brought political changes in countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan (Hurska-Kowalczyk, p. 225–234). The



“color revolutions” referred to a series of anti-government socio-political protests in newly formed states after the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005. These mass demonstrations, triggered by allegations of election fraud, were widely covered, and commented on by journalists and commentators during 2003-2004 (Hurska-Kowalczyk, p. 235). Moscow and Minsk perceive these events as attempts at external interference in their sphere of influence, often attributed to Western influence (Łysek, p. 99–116). As W. Łysek states in his analysis, “the natural consequence of viewing the ‘color revolutions’ from the perspective outlined above is to turn to geopolitics and ask: who benefited from them?” (Łysek, p. 99).

The answer is obvious: the West. Therefore, Belarus and Russia have decisively intensified their military and intelligence cooperation to counteract attempts at destabilization and external influence in the region (Human Rights Situation in Belarus: October 2023, 2024).

The mass protests that erupted in Belarus after the 2020 presidential elections represented another example of political tensions in the region (Human Rights Situation in Belarus: October 2023).

Many international observers and protesters accused the government of manipulating the election results, leading to widespread demonstrations. The authorities’ response was equally controversial; many protesters were arrested, and some were labeled as “extremists” or “puppets of the West” (Human Rights Situation in Belarus: October 2023). As a result, a significant number of protesters became political prisoners, which sparked international outrage and condemnation of the Belarusian government’s actions. The Belarusian authorities, using anti-terrorism and anti-extremism laws, have been repressing civil society, significantly restricting freedom of expression, and stifling political opposition. Anais Marin, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus, highlighted these practices in her report to the UN General Assembly (Human Rights Situation in Belarus: October 2023). Her observations emphasize how the Belarusian government applies the law in a way that serves to suppress all forms of dissent and criticism rather than genuinely addressing extremism or terrorism.



Additionally, the list of individuals accused of “extremist activities” has been expanded to include 183 new names (Human Rights Situation in Belarus: October 2023). In October, according to reports from the Human Rights Defense Center “Viasna”, at least 320 individuals were arrested for subscribing to “extremist” accounts (Human Rights Situation in Belarus: October 2023). Many of the arrested were forced to record videos in which they confessed to participating in the 2020 protests and other activities, further exacerbating the human rights violations in Belarus (Belsat, 2023, accessed April 21, 2024). In Belarus, the scope of the death penalty has been extended, including the possibility of its execution for attempting to carry out an act of terrorism (ibid.). These changes, introduced into the Belarusian Penal Code, have been widely criticized domestically and internationally. Belarusian media have repeatedly raised concerns that “terrorist” charges are often used against political prisoners (ibid.). This situation paves the way for the potential application of the death penalty for individuals accused of political activities under false terrorism charges.

In Russia, there have also been events that highlight the issue of terrorism in the region. One example is the terrorist attack that took place at the Crocus City Hall exhibition and concert complex on the outskirts of Moscow. As a result of this attack, more than 60 people were killed, and over 140 were injured. This tragic event underscores the serious security challenges that Russia faces and the necessity of effectively addressing terrorist threats (Terrorist Attack in Moscow, 2024).

From NATO’s perspective, the threat of terrorism and extremism is used by the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus to justify the expansion of their defense policies and the increase in military cooperation between these countries. The heightened terrorist activity in the region serves as a pretext for both countries to build mechanisms for cooperation, including the exchange of intelligence and conducting joint counterterrorism operations. These actions are presented as measures to neutralize direct threats, but from NATO’s viewpoint, they may also serve to strengthen authoritarian regimes and increase internal repression. Although this cooperation is officially focused on enhancing readiness and defensive capabilities, it raises concerns about potentially tightening control over society and restricting civil liberties, which may destabilize the regional situation further.



Belarus' Territorial Defense (TD), established in 2002, serves a role that, from NATO's perspective, goes beyond countering internal extremism and terrorism. It is viewed as a tool for disciplining society and pacifying protests (Wilk, *The Russian Belarusian Army...*, 2021). Such militarization of the response to civil dissent raises concerns about abuse of power and limitations on civil freedoms, which contradict democratic norms and human rights. In this context, the actions of TD can be interpreted as part of a broader strategy by the authoritarian regime to strengthen control over society and suppress any opposition. The Belarusian authorities' decision to create the Territorial Defense (TD) in Belarus in 2002 reflects concerns over excessive Russian influence on Belarusian armed forces. The creation of this structure, formally independent from the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and managed by governors under the coordination of the Ministry of Defense, was intended to maintain at least partial national control over the military. From NATO's perspective, this move can be seen as an attempt to safeguard Belarus' sovereignty against a complete takeover of command by Russia, which simultaneously prevented full integration of Territorial Defense with Russian forces within the Regional Grouping of Forces (*ibid.*). This decision may also signal internal tensions and uncertainty in Belarusian-Russian relations, impacting regional security dynamics. Initial plans to transform the Territorial Defense (TD) in Belarus into light infantry units were not realized due to significant deficiencies in equipment and training. Therefore, these plans remained theoretical. Currently, from a military standpoint, the role of Territorial Defense is considered marginal. Its main function focuses on internal operations to maintain order and political stability in the country. From NATO's perspective, such a role of the TD may indicate its use as a tool of repression against the opposition and social control, highlighting the authoritarian tendencies of the Belarusian authorities and its inclination to use armed forces for internal political purposes rather than as a genuine national defense force.

The recent Territorial Defense (TD) exercises in Belarus, which began in early April 2024, were held without the participation of Russian forces (Belarus. *New Military Exercises Launched*, 2024). During these maneuvers, the issue of the formation of a so-called "people's militia" in Belarus was raised (*ibid.*). This militia is intended to serve as an additional element of the internal security system, supporting regular forces during social or political crises. The



gathering and training of the “people’s militia” is conducted under the auspices of the Territorial Defense, which emphasizes its growing role not only as a reserve formation but also as a tool for social control and response to internal threats (Belarus. New Military Exercises Launched.., 2024).

In the subsection on regional security and the identification of common threats, it is important to note that regional security is a key element of military cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. Their shared perception of threats, such as NATO expansion, color revolutions, political instability, and the growing threat of terrorism, significantly shapes their defense policy. Both countries are intensifying cooperation within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), developing missile defense and air defense systems, and integrating their military infrastructures to enhance interoperability and combat readiness of their armed forces.

In the face of internal and external challenges, such as the protests following the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus and regular marches in Russia, both sides seek to stabilize their political situation on both the internal and external fronts. In response to these challenges, the Territorial Defense of Belarus serves as a reserve force and a tool for social control. The recent exercises of this formation highlighted its growing role in shaping internal security policy, which, from NATO’s perspective, may raise concerns about further restrictions on civil liberties and intensification of repression in the region.

The 1997 agreement on joint regional security assurance in the military sphere is a key document in the defense relations between Belarus and Russia, which, from NATO’s perspective, maybe a source of concern. This document, reflecting the reaction of both states to the changing geopolitical landscape in Europe, commits them to cooperate in the event of external threats and to integrate their defense systems. It provides a solid foundation for long-term cooperation and strategic coordination, which could increase Russian and Belarusian influence in the region, potentially threatening the interests and stability of NATO member states. These actions may also suggest preparations for confrontation or resisting Western expansion, further complicating international relations and impacting regional power balances.

3. Political and Economic Factors Affecting Military Cooperation.

Political and economic factors play a key role in shaping military cooperation between Russia and Belarus, which, from NATO's perspective, may raise concerns about the further tightening of their alliance. These aspects are inextricably linked and often directly impact the strategic decisions of both states. Belarus' political dependency on Russia, reinforced by shared economic interests and military investments, resulting in mutual support, may increase Russian influence in the region. This, in turn, affects the balance of power in Eastern Europe, potentially threatening the stability and interests of NATO member states. Such integration could also strengthen both countries' positions in confrontation with Western policies, posing a challenge to international security.

Table 3

Political Factors Affecting Military Cooperation Between Russia and Belarus

| Political Factor | Explanation |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Geopolitical Alliance</i> | Russia and Belarus view their military cooperation as a key element of their broader geopolitical strategy. Due to their close political relations, both countries frequently coordinate their actions on the international stage, supporting each other in the face of criticism from Western countries, particularly regarding human rights and democracy issues. |
| <i>Political Integration</i> | The pursuit of deeper political integration, as seen in projects like the Union State of Russia and Belarus, directly influences military cooperation. It enables joint planning and execution of military exercises as well as the implementation of a cohesive defense policy. |
| <i>Internal Political Issues</i> | The domestic politics of both countries, including the management of political crises such as the 2020 protests in Belarus, also affect the dynamics of military cooperation. Russia often provides security assistance in exchange for Belarus maintaining a pro-Russian political course. |

Source: Authors' Work

Documents and integration initiatives between Russia and Belarus form the foundation of their geopolitical alliance. These relations, shaped by historical and socio-cultural factors, were concretized after 1991 through the realization of the idea of the Union State. The integration process was diverse and dependent on both sides' political will and current interests, which influenced the fluctuating intensity of their cooperation (Tworek, 2021, pp. 83–84).

For the first time in the history of Russian-Belarusian relations, from 1991 to 1996, Belarus positioned itself as an equal partner (Tworek, 2021, p. 83). This period was marked by internal political conflicts in both countries, which impacted the formation of their mutual relations.



From 1996 to 1999, reintegration efforts intensified, driven by the interests of President Boris Yeltsin and President Alexander Lukashenko (Tworek, 2021, p. 83). The integration process was institutionalized during this time, creating the Union State.

The documents and steps towards integration between Russia and Belarus form the foundation of their geopolitical alliance. The political issues related to the integration of these two countries were further emphasized by the opaque presidential elections in Belarus in 2020. These events significantly weakened President Lukashenko's position, making him more reliant on support from Russia (ibid., p. 94).

From the Kremlin's perspective, the current conditions do not favor the full incorporation of Belarus, which marks a shift in approach compared to the early 1990s. Public opinion surveys conducted in both countries in 2019 revealed that most Belarusian citizens support maintaining state independence, a view shared by most Russians, who do not support the inclusion of Belarus into Russia (Benedyczak & Dyer, 2020, p. 1). As a result, the integration process of the Union State is likely to continue with a focus on economic aspects, particularly after the changes in oil taxation introduced by Russia, which have affected Belarus's economic conditions (Szabaciuk, 2019, p. 2).

It can be assumed that Russia may seek to change Belarus's leader to someone more open to Russia's integration processes. This could be achieved by supporting opposition candidates who do not hold strong anti-Russian positions (Tworek, 2021, p. 95). Such actions could further deepen Belarus's dependency on Russia and influence the foreign and defense policies of both countries in the region (ibid.).

Internal political issues in Russia and Belarus, especially those related to crisis management, play a significant role in shaping military cooperation between these two countries. An example of such an influence is the mass protests in Belarus in 2020 following the announcement of the presidential election results. These events were seen as a political crisis threatening the stability of the power of Alexander Lukashenko, a long-time ally of Russia (Dyer, *In the Shadow...*, 2020).

Russia, keen on maintaining stability in Belarus as a key strategic partner and buffer against NATO expansion (*The Situation in Belarus...*, 2024), frequently offers security support in

response to internal unrest in the country (Dyner, *In the Shadow...*, 2020). However, this exchange is not unconditional. Moscow expects the Belarusian authorities to maintain a pro-Russian stance in return. This includes joint military exercises, defense agreements, and political and economic concessions that strengthen Russia's influence in the region.

This approach of Russia is manifested in various forms of support, from public declarations of backing to more discreet actions such as political advice and assistance in crisis management (Żochowski, *The Last Line...*, 2021). For example, during the 2020 protests, Russia was ready to offer military aid to suppress the demonstrations (Żochowski, *The Last Line...*, 2021).

Russia's domestic policy also influences its relations with Belarus. Russian management of political crises, such as anti-corruption protests or opposition activities, is often shaped through the lens of national security and regime stability. In this context, military cooperation with Belarus is also seen as a factor in strengthening Russia's internal and external position (Rodkiewicz & Żochowski, 2021).

Ultimately, managing political crises and domestic policies in both countries impacts the dynamics of their military cooperation. This is a key factor in the context of the long-term strategic interests of Russia and Belarus on the international stage.

Table 4

Economic Factors Influencing Military Cooperation between Russia and Belarus

| Economic Factor | Explanation |
|---|---|
| <i>Military-Industrial Cooperation</i> | Economic cooperation, especially in the defense sector, is a significant element in the relations between Russia and Belarus. Joint ventures in the production and modernization of military equipment, such as aircraft, missile systems, and armored vehicles, strengthen not only local industries but also the defense potential of both countries. |
| <i>Economic Dependence of Belarus on Russia</i> | Belarus, being a relatively smaller and less diversified economy, is largely dependent on Russian energy resources and markets. This economic dependence gives Russia leverage over Belarus's political and military decisions, which could lead to greater military and strategic integration. |
| <i>Financing and Investments</i> | Belarus's defense capabilities are also reliant on financial support from Russia. Russian investments in Belarus's defense sector, such as modernizing military infrastructure and supplying modern equipment, are crucial for maintaining and developing Belarus's defense capabilities. |
| <i>Impact of International Sanctions</i> | Sanctions imposed on Belarus, and sometimes on Russia, affect the economies of both countries, forcing their governments to seek more efficient and economically |



| Economic Factor | Explanation |
|-----------------|---|
| | justified forms of military and defense cooperation to counteract the negative effects of these restrictions. |

Source: Authors' Work.

Military-industrial cooperation is a key element of Russia's and Belarus's relationship, aimed at strengthening mutual defense capabilities and developing the arms industry. Due to historical ties and geographical proximity, Belarusian enterprises were subcontractors for larger military factories in the Soviet Union. Although the structure of the defense industry in Belarus was reduced after the collapse of the USSR, it retained the ability for specialized production, focusing on information technologies, command systems, and military equipment modernization.

Belarus' defense industry is highly integrated with the Russian defense-industrial complex (DIC) (Wilk, *The Russian Belarusian Army*, 2021). Most Belarusian defense companies closely cooperate with Russian entities, and some are formally part of Russian holdings (Wilk, *The Russian Belarusian Army*, 2021). This allows Belarus to benefit from Russia's technological and scientific support, facilitating the development and modernization of its military equipment.

Strategic defense industry relations between these countries involve cooperation in producing optoelectronics, tank modernization, and missile systems. For instance, cooperation with Russian companies allowed the Belarusian company Peleng (Peleng JSC, 2024) to produce advanced thermal imaging sights, significantly contributing to the modernization of Russian tanks (Wilk, 2021, p. 48).

An important aspect of this cooperation is that most Belarusian defense manufacturers operate on the Russian market and export their products through Russia to third-country markets (ibid., p. 49). This cooperation extends beyond the trade of finished products, including joint research and development projects, component production, and repair and maintenance services, especially for Soviet-origin equipment (Ibid.).

Belarus's integration into Russia's defense-industrial complex (DIC) also has a significant economic dimension, allowing Belarus to benefit from favorable terms for importing raw materials and technologies from Russia. However, this dependency has consequences, limiting



Belarus's ability to develop independent defense production capabilities (Wilk, 2021, p. 50). In the context of global and regional security challenges, the deep military-industrial cooperation between Russia and Belarus is the foundation for maintaining and strengthening their strategic defense interests, which is crucial for the stability of both countries and the entire region.

Belarus's economic dependence on Russia stems from the fact that Belarus's economy, which is smaller and less diversified than Russia's, largely relies on imported energy resources and access to Russian markets (Kłysiński, 2021). This dependency facilitates Russia's influence over Belarus's internal and foreign policy and encourages both countries to deepen their defense cooperation. This could lead to further military and strategic integration, with Belarus becoming increasingly integrated into Russian military and defense structures, strengthening their joint defense capabilities in the face of external and internal challenges. K. Kłysiński suggests that the observed decline in the value of the Belarusian ruble, following the trends of the Russian currency, has affected Belarus's import value (*ibid.*). He also notes that there is a possibility (although lacking solid data) that some of the goods imported by Belarus may be re-exported to the Russian Federation, which, due to sanctions imposed for its aggression against Ukraine, has limited access to certain products on international markets (*ibid.*). K. Kłysiński emphasizes that the goods sent to Russia will likely include passenger cars and essential spare parts and components for Russian industry. He also mentions that recent data analysis indicates a growing imbalance between imports and exports, which could further deepen the trade deficit in Belarus's foreign trade balance over the year (*ibid.*).

Belarus's defense capabilities largely depend on the financial support it receives from Russia (Ciślak, 2024). Russian investments in Belarus's defense sector are crucial for maintaining the current readiness and developing the country's defense capabilities. Russia funds the modernization of Belarus's military infrastructure and supplies modern defense equipment, strengthening the strategic cooperation between the two countries (*ibid.*) These investments enable Belarus to maintain a high level of combat readiness and respond adequately to contemporary military challenges. This cooperation not only strengthens the security of both countries but also plays a key role in the geopolitical game in the region, allowing Russia to maintain its influence in its sphere of interest.



The European Union's economic sanctions against Belarus, introduced in the fall of 2020 (European Union Sanctions, 2024), significantly reduced the EU's share in Belarusian exports – from about 40-50% a few years ago to just 5% fundamentally transformed Belarus's trade direction (Kłysiński, 2021). Considering these changes and the loss of the Ukrainian market (European Union Sanctions, 2024), which exceeded 5 billion dollars in value in 2021, Russia became not only the natural but practically the only direction for Belarusian exports. The Russian market accounts for about 70% of Belarus's total trade operations, highlighting the significant increase in Russia's importance as an economic partner (ibid.).

The dynamics of trade cooperation between Russia and Belarus, particularly in the crisis caused by sanctions, led to deeper integration between the two countries. The growing economic and political interdependence between these two states is becoming increasingly evident, directly influencing their strategic and military relationship. The Russian Ambassador to Minsk, Boris Gryzlov, emphasized that the increase in Belarusian exports to Russia has allowed Belarus to offset nearly half of the losses from the loss of EU markets (ibid.). Such statements prove that both sides view their cooperation as a means of economic survival in the face of Western sanctions.

The importance of cooperation with Russia is also visible in the transportation sector, where Belarus uses Russian ports to transship its goods—mainly oil and chemical products subject to EU sanctions (European Commission, *12th Sanctions Package...*, 2023). Cooperation and support from Russia have always been critical for Belarus.

On June 9, 2022, during a meeting with Roman Starovoit, the governor of the Kursk region, Belarusian authorities announced that Belarus had received financial support from Russia amounting to 1.5 billion dollars (Kłysiński, 2022). These funds are intended to implement anti-import programs designed to compensate for restrictions on access to products and technologies resulting from Western sanctions. During the Eurasian Economic Forum on May 26, Vladimir Putin pointed out the “significant capabilities” of Belarusian companies, particularly in microelectronics, emphasizing the strategic importance of these programs (ibid.). These issues were also discussed during talks between the two leaders in Sochi on May 22. Additionally, on June 9, the Russian government approved amendments to a bilateral



agreement from February 9, 2021, allowing Belarusian suppliers of oil products to access port infrastructure throughout the Russian Federation (Kłysiński, 2022). On June 2, Alexander Drozdenko, the governor of the Leningrad region, declared the possibility of making terminals in Russian Baltic ports available for Belarusian goods until a separate Belarusian port is built in the region, which is currently in the initial planning phase.

On June 10, the finance ministries of both countries met to discuss the issuance of Belarusian bonds on the Russian Federation market (*ibid.*). Russian authorities supported this initiative and pledged to facilitate Belarusian companies' participation in Russian state tenders. These financial and economic actions indicate the deepening integration and cooperation between Russia and Belarus, particularly in the context of mutual support in the face of international sanctions.

Although Western sanctions have imposed significant difficulties on the Belarusian economy, they have paradoxically strengthened Belarus' dependence on Russia, making it an increasingly integral part of the Russian economic and political bloc. This, in turn, translates into further integration in military and defense policy, which is crucial for understanding current and future dynamics in the Eurasian region.

Political and economic factors shaping military cooperation between Russia and Belarus have far-reaching consequences for the two countries and the regional and global balance of power. Mutual dependence and shared interests in security and defense remain key elements of their bilateral relations.

4. Technological Exchange and Transfer of Military Knowledge.

The technological exchange and transfer of military knowledge between Belarus and Russia are key aspects of their defense cooperation, which may be potentially concerning from NATO's perspective. These interactions confirm the two countries' close political and military ties and demonstrate their efforts to enhance their defense and technological capabilities. As noted by J. Grabowiecki and M. Fedorczuk, Belarus is heavily dependent on military cooperation with Russia, as its defense industry and armed forces are unable to independently meet the country's basic defense needs (Grabowiecki & Fedorczuk, 2021, pp. 131–132). This dependency results in a deep integration of Belarus's military infrastructure and strategy with Russia, which could



increase Moscow's regional influence. For NATO, such a tightening of military relations between these two countries may challenge the balance of power and require a strategic response in the context of security policy.

The defense cooperation between both countries covers several key areas (Grabowiecki & Fedorczuk, 2021, p. 131):

1. The Regional Military Grouping (RMG), established in January 1998, combines the Belarusian and Russian army ground forces directed towards the western front. Although both sides formally have equal rights within the RMG and jointly carry out various initiatives, this grouping currently serves as a platform for the gradual incorporation of the Belarusian Armed Forces into the Western Military District of the Russian Federation Armed Forces.

2. The Eastern European Joint Regional Air Defense System (RSOP), initiated in 2009, constitutes an operational union of the air forces of both countries. Within this framework, missile systems are deployed on Belarusian territory.

3. The training system for the Belarusian army's personnel involves training officers and non-commissioned officers at Russian military academies and ensuring high training standards.

4. The system of joint military exercises within the RMG and RSOP framework enables regular training and coordination of defense activities.

5. The Belarusian Armed Forces depend on Russia to supply armament and military equipment, including combat systems and means of destruction.

6. Cooperation between the defense industries through the collaboration of Belarus's defense industry with the Russian Defense-Industrial Complex.

7. Cooperation between the border services, ministries of internal affairs, and intelligence services of both countries strengthens the security of both nations.

Additionally, Belarus's geographical proximity to the Kaliningrad Oblast allows for easier planning and execution of joint military scenarios, which could raise concerns from NATO's perspective. This proximity reduces the isolation of this Russian exclave and strengthens the defense potential of both countries in the region. For NATO, such a situation may lead to a reconsideration of defense strategies and potentially intensify activities on the eastern flanks of



the Alliance. The deepening military cooperation between Belarus and the Russian Kaliningrad Oblast raises regional security threats, particularly in the context of the potential for faster deployment of military forces and resources in strategically important locations.

In the context of the subject discussed in this section, let us pay particular attention to the third aspect of cooperation. Most of the personnel of the Belarusian Armed Forces are trained domestically. However, for specialized and advanced training, especially at the highest command levels, Russian military academies play a crucial role (Wilk, 2021, p. 28). While basic training begins at Belarusian academies, for officers aspiring to higher positions, operational and strategic training in Russia is almost inevitable: “In terms of specialized training, especially at the highest levels, Russian academies lead the way” (ibid.), “Belarusian army officers train in 19 specialties in their own country, while their neighbor offers training in 52” (ibid.).

The Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus, while based on modern standards similar to those of Western European armies, differ from the traditional continuation of the Belarusian Military District of the Red Army (*Army From Beyond...*, 2024). An independent Belarus has successfully developed an autonomous military training and education system. The training structure includes institutions such as the Faculty of the General Staff at the Belarusian Military Academy, responsible for educating senior officers. Only selected individuals holding key operational-strategic positions, most often at the rank of generals, are delegated to study at the General Staff Academy of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (*Army From Beyond...*, 2024).

Military education in Belarus is provided through several military faculties and departments at civilian universities, where officers can acquire the necessary professional skills (*Web-page of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus: <https://www.mil.by/ru/education/>*, accessed on April 21, 2024). According to the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, these include (*the list of abbreviations is provided in Appendix 1 of this paper*) the Military Academy of the Republic of Belarus, the Military Faculty at BSU, the Military Technical Faculty at BNTU, the Military Faculty at BSUIR, the Military Transport Faculty at BSUT, the Military Medical Institute at BSMU, the Military Faculty at BSAA, the Military Faculty at Grodno State University, the Military Department at BGAS, the



Military Department at BSTU, the Military Department at BrSTU, the Military Department at GSMU, the Military Department at VSMU, the Military Department at VSU, the Military Department at PSU, MSVU, the 72nd Training Centre, and studies at universities in other countries. Non-commissioned and warrant officers are also trained at the 72nd Unified Training Centre. It is also possible for Belarusian personnel to receive training abroad.

Specialized documents strictly regulate the process of training Belarusian military personnel at Russian military universities. For 2023, the “Procedure for the Admission of Citizens for Training as Cadets in Military Educational Organizations of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation” applies (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus), which pertains to the training of officers in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and the country’s transport units. Another important document is the “Decree of the Minister of Defence of the Republic of Belarus of July 7, 2014, No. 22” (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus), which approves the “Instruction on the Selection and Sending of Citizens of the Republic of Belarus for Training to Educational Institutions in the Republic of Belarus and Other Countries that Train Officers of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and Soldiers of the Transport Units of the Republic of Belarus” (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus). These regulations provide the appropriate legal and organizational framework, ensuring the practical and standard-compliant training of future military personnel in Belarus.

Technological cooperation and military knowledge transfer between Belarus and Russia are crucial in enhancing Belarus’ defense capabilities, providing access to advanced military technologies, and supporting the development of its military infrastructure. This cooperation is deeply rooted in both nations' political and military interdependence and reflects their shared aspirations to strengthen their defense potential. Given its potential implications for regional security, NATO is of significant concern about the growing collaboration.

Belarus’ armed forces comprise 65,000 personnel, including 50,000 soldiers and 15,000 civilian workers. Approximately 20% of the military consists of professional soldiers on contract, particularly in special forces units, while the remaining soldiers are conscripts. According to Wilk, Russian educational institutions dominate the training of Belarusian officers, particularly those operating military equipment supplied by Russia and those in units

cooperating with Russian forces under frameworks such as the Regional Military Grouping (RMG) and the East European Combined Regional Air Defense System (ERADS) (Wilk, 2021, p. 28). Belarusian Special Operations Forces officers are mainly involved in education in Russia, especially in command and operation of advanced weapons systems, primarily at Russian military academies in Novosibirsk and Ryazan (ibid.).

After stabilizing the size of its armed forces, Belarus maintains a steady number of officer candidates, typically around 1,100 per year, with an increasing trend in participation in Russian training programs. This shift responds to the need for military modernization and the deteriorating relations with NATO. Wilk further notes that the rise in Belarusian officers trained in Russia is linked to the intensification of training programs, especially after Russia's military actions against Ukraine, which is part of a broader strategy to modernize and enhance military cooperation between the two countries (ibid.).

Russia and Belarus are also deeply involved in exchanging military technologies essential for maintaining and developing their defense capabilities. This includes the transfer of modern technologies and cooperation in weapon system modernization. Key areas of this cooperation are as follows:

Military Equipment Modernization. Belarusian industries, such as BelTechExport, work on modernizing Soviet-era military equipment, including tanks and air defense systems, using Russian technological support (Official Website of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus, 2024).

Missile and Anti-Missile Systems. This includes developing and producing advanced systems, such as the Pechora-2M, modernized in Belarusian factories with Russian technological assistance (Official Website of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus, 2024).

Armored Vehicle Production. Belarusian factories, such as MZKT (Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant), produce platforms for Russian missile systems, demonstrating deep industrial integration (Wilk, 2021, p. 28).

Military Knowledge Transfer. This transfer involves joint military exercises, training courses, and the exchange of crisis management knowledge. According to Wilk, regular



exercises such as Zapad test new tactics and technologies and train troops under realistic conditions. At the same time, military training programs in Russian academies promote the establishment of unified operational standards (Wilk, 2021, p. 28).

Technological cooperation and military knowledge transfer between Russia and Belarus have far-reaching and potentially concerning consequences for regional security. These actions enhance both countries' defense capabilities and solidify their positions as key geopolitical players. From NATO's standpoint, such close cooperation could influence the regional balance of power and stability, contributing to increased risks and complications in international relations (*Official Website of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus, 2024*).

Significant agreements, such as the one signed on December 10, 2009, and the joint technical support agreement of November 2, 2016, ensure that Belarus receives modern military technology and equipment that meets Russian Armed Forces standards (*Official Website of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus, 2024*). These agreements have led to increased military equipment and technological support, particularly in modernizing military infrastructure.

In conclusion, technological cooperation and military knowledge transfer between Russia and Belarus are essential in enhancing Belarus' defense capabilities, strengthening military integration, and solidifying strategic ties between the two nations. These efforts are part of a broader strategy that has significant implications for the geopolitical balance in Eurasia. For NATO, intensifying this cooperation requires reassessing its defense strategies in response to the growing military potential on its eastern borders.

5. Concluding Remarks.

This paper has examined the evolving military-defensive cooperation between the Russian Federation (RF) and the Republic of Belarus (RB), focusing on its implications for regional security and its strategic challenges to NATO in Eastern Europe. The growing integration of military forces and the deepening of defense cooperation between Russia and Belarus have significant consequences for NATO's security architecture, especially in the context of the post-Soviet space and the ongoing shift in military alliances.



The analysis highlights how the increasing alignment of military strategies between the two nations, through joint defense initiatives and mechanisms like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), has the potential to undermine NATO's established security framework in the region. As Russia and Belarus continue to integrate their military infrastructures, NATO faces a growing challenge to maintain stability and security on its eastern flank. The implications for NATO's defense strategy are clear: the ongoing militarization of the region and the formation of a more cohesive Russia-Belarus military bloc risk destabilizing neighboring countries and increasing tension along NATO's borders.

Moreover, Belarus's increasing political and economic dependence on Russia has reinforced the strategic alliance between the two countries, strengthening their military cooperation. This dependency consolidates their bilateral ties and amplifies NATO's challenges in managing Russia's growing regional influence. Belarus's reliance on Russia for economic support, military resources, and political backing ensures that the partnership will continue to evolve, with potential consequences for the security of the broader region.

The technological exchange between the two countries, including the transfer of advanced military technologies such as missile defense and air defense systems, further enhances Russia and Belarus's combined military capabilities. However, this collaboration makes it increasingly difficult for NATO to monitor and counter the region, as integrating their defense systems creates a more unified and resilient military presence. NATO must adapt to these technological advancements and address the shifting balance of power in the region, which may have long-term implications for its security strategy.

In conclusion, the military-defensive cooperation between Russia and Belarus presents a significant challenge to NATO's security strategy in Eastern Europe. The growing integration of military forces, the strengthening of bilateral political and economic ties, and the transfer of advanced military technologies all contribute to a more unified and capable military bloc. These developments are reshaping the regional security landscape and increasing the risks to NATO's stability. As these trends continue, NATO will need to reassess its approach to regional defense, responding effectively to the evolving dynamics of the Russia-Belarus military alliance to ensure the continued security and stability of the region.



Funding:

This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments:

The authors thank all academic peers for the research findings and article writing.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Disclaimer Statement:

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Author Bionote:

Tomasz Wyczawski is an Assistant at the Institute of Professional Development, Methodology Training Department, War Studies University (Warsaw, Poland). His areas of interest include *military cooperation*, *defense strategies*, and *regional security in Eastern Europe*.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9329-1350>

Mariusz Dudek is affiliated with the School of Social Sciences at the University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw (Warsaw, Poland). His research focuses on *defense policy*, *security cooperation*, and *the sociopolitical dimensions of military integration in Eastern Europe*.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7316-0617>

Authorship and Level of Contribution:

Tomasz Wyczawski and Mariusz Dudek contributed to the design and implementation of the research article, the analysis of the results, and the writing of the manuscript.

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Appendix 1 Abbreviations



| | | |
|-----------------|---|---|
| RF | – | Russian Federation |
| RB | – | Republic of Belarus |
| CSTO | – | Collective Security Treaty Organization |
| ERADS | – | East European Combined Regional Air Defense System |
| RMG | – | Regional Military Grouping |
| RSOP | – | Regional Joint Air Defense System |
| NATO | – | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| CSTO | – | Collective Security Treaty Organization |
| MSVU | – | Military School of Vitebsk University |
| BSU | – | Belarusian State University |
| BNTU | – | Belarusian National Technical University |
| BSUIR | – | Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics |
| BSUT | – | Belarusian State University of Transport |
| BSMU | – | Belarusian State Medical University |
| BSAA | – | Belarusian State Academy of Agriculture |
| GSU | – | Grodno State University, a major educational institution in Belarus |
| BGAS | – | Belarusian State Agricultural University |
| BSTU | – | Belarusian State Technological University |
| BrSTU | – | Brest State Technical University |
| GSMU | – | Gomel State Medical University |
| VSMU | – | Vitebsk State Medical University |
| VSU | – | Vitebsk State University |
| PSU | – | Pinsk State University |
| MSVU | – | Military School of Vitebsk University |
| 72ndTC | – | 72nd Training Centre, a key military training facility in Belarus |
| CSTO | – | Collective Security Treaty Organization |
| RSOP | – | East European Combined Regional Air Defense System |
| RMG | – | Regional Military Grouping |
| CSTO | – | Collective Security Treaty Organization |
| S-400 | – | Russian Air Defense System |
| Zapad | – | Joint Military Exercise between Russia and Belarus |
| SlavicBr | – | Slavic Brotherhood, Joint Military Exercise between Russia, Belarus, and Serbia |
| MSVU | – | Military School of Vitebsk University |
| GSMU | – | Gomel State Medical University |