Commentary
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Missile Incident in Belarus Represents a "New Normal" for Eastern Europe

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Summary

On December 29, the Belarusian state media reported that an S-300 surface-to-air missile launched by Ukrainian forces had dropped into Belarus, near the village of Horbakha, about 50 kilometers from the shared border with Ukraine.

Later, the Belarusian Ministry of Defense clarified that air defense units had shot down the missile and that its debris had landed in a crop field. Col. Kiryl Kazantsau, commander of Belarus's anti-air missile forces, stated that Belarus considered two probable causes of the incident: an unintentional misfire or a deliberate provocation by Ukraine.

In another statement aired on Belarusian state television, Brest Oblast Military Commissar Col. Oleg Konovalov corroborated that the missile had been misfired, stressing that the situation reminded him of the recent missile incident in Poland and that Belarusian citizens had nothing to worry about. He also added: *"Such incidents, unfortunately, happen. The missiles were produced in the late 1990s. … Unfortunately, it happens that [these missiles] might miss the target, go astray and fly in the opposite direction."* However, a day later, Belarusian Security Council State Secretary Alyaksandr Valfovich opined that there were "very few chances" the missile had entered Belarusian airspace by accident and that its launch had likely been intentional. He added that Minsk would investigate and uncover the exact cause.

On the day of the incident, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the ambassador of Ukraine to Belarus, Ihor Kyzym, and conveyed to him "a strong demarche in connection with the launch of the S-300 anti-aircraft guided missile". Minsk "demanded that Ukraine conduct a thorough investigation into all the circumstances of

this missile launch, hold those responsible to account and take comprehensive measures to prevent the recurrence of such incidents in the future, as they lead to catastrophic consequences for everyone.”

In response, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense stated that Kyiv was ready to conduct “an objective investigation of the incident” and to invite authoritative experts from countries that do not support Russia in any possible way. The Ukrainian statement also contained a suggestion that the incident could have resulted from a deliberate provocation by Russia.

With so many parallels to the similar missile incident in Poland in November 2022, it is curious that the event in Belarus did not receive even remotely as much international media coverage. One reason appears to be straightforward: This time, no immediate risks of a direct war between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were associated with the incident (even though Belarus’s hypothetical entry into the war would drastically raise the probability of further horizontal escalation).

> Yet another reason is Minsk’s own reserved reaction, which its Foreign Ministry’s statement reflects.

While some voices in the Belarusian government and media did accuse Ukraine of a purposeful provocation, the overall tone has remained rather neutral and has stressed the need for an impartial investigation as well as measures to prevent similar incidents in the future. This stance falls fully in line with Belarus’s clearly stated goal to avoid direct military involvement in Ukraine, even as it continues to emphasize the centrality of its alliance with Russia.

The December 29 missile incident took place against the backdrop of two earlier visits to Minsk by high-level Russian delegations. On December 3, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu held talks with Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his Belarusian counterpart Viktor Khrenin. As a result, the two defense ministers signed a protocol amending the 1997 bilateral agreement on the joint provision of regional security in the military sphere. The text of the protocol was not made public, which triggered wide media speculations and concerns in Western diplomatic circles that the two countries might be expanding the territorial scope for the use of their joint grouping of forces to include Ukraine. However, the Belarusian Defense Ministry later specified that the protocol amends the planning and financing of joint activities of the regional grouping. Moreover, judging by the list of Belarusian officials present at the meeting, it can be assumed that military-industrial cooperation was also on the agenda.

On December 19, Russian President Vladimir Putin paid his first visit to Belarus in more than three years, heading a large Russian government delegation. According to Lukashenka, strategic questions of economic cooperation and integration represented the primary negotiation items, but the sides discussed foreign and security policy matters as well. Belarusian officials expressed overall satisfaction with the meeting’s results. In particular, they announced a breakthrough in talks on “the common gas market and the concept and pricing [of trade in energy resources] for the next three years”. Yet, no details were released, which provoked another wave of media speculations about whether Minsk secured beneficial economic contracts in exchange for a more active role in Moscow’s war against Ukraine.

In this light, when the December 29 missile incident was first reported, it indeed looked particularly worrisome. But statements by Belarusian military officials and diplomats, which quickly followed, signaled that Minsk remains determined to stay away from any direct participation in the conflict and, thus, seeks to avoid any escalation on its border with Ukraine.

> At the same time, the incident shows how increasingly tough this task is becoming and how many challenges Belarus is facing as the war approaches its one-year mark.

After two similar missile incidents in Poland and Belarus, this kind of expansion of the war’s geographic impact is becoming a “new normal” in Eastern Europe. As such, all regional actors should treat these developments seriously with a view to minimizing the further risks of an outright Russian-NATO military collision. To that end, sustaining permanent military-to-military communication channels among the countries in the region and maintaining any transparency mechanisms that remain feasible will be critical. Therefore, Ukraine’s recent decision to withdraw from the agreement with Belarus on advanced bilateral confidence- and security-building measures from April 16, 2001, seems rather hasty and unnecessary. Even if implementation of the agreement is unrealistic at the moment, keeping it intact would not pose any military risks, as at a later point, depending on the battlefield developments in Ukraine, it could once again become instrumental for security and stability in Eastern Europe.

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