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Regional Grouping of Forces of Belarus and Russia

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Summary

Training and operational coordination of the Regional Grouping of Troops (Forces) of Belarus and Russia (RG) is still underway in Belarus. There have been persistent suspicions in the Western political community and the media that the grouping will be used to strike at Ukraine from Belarus's territory. However, there is an obvious lack of information about the background and purpose of the grouping, which is an important reason fuelling this alarmism.

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RG deployment: Motives and progress

Amid multiple state media reports about the growing tension on the western and southern borders of Belarus, on 6 October 2022, Defence Minister Viktar Khrenin said any provocation by a potential adversary would be readily countered, including with the use of the RG. On 7 October, a decision was made at the meeting between Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin to deploy the RG. On 10 October, the Belarusian president said: "*Given the aggravations on the western borders of the Union State, we have resolved to deploy a regional grouping of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. This is all in line with our documents. If the threat reaches the current level, the one we observe now, we will start deploying the Union State grouping.*"

On 14 October, the Ministry of Defence of Belarus spoke in detail about the threats and challenges, which the deployment of the joint grouping is supposed to address. According to the report, over the past few years, the Baltic States and Poland have been engaged in force development aimed at building NATO's capacity in the eastern European region near Belarus's borders: "*There are currently over 60,000 U.S. troops*

permanently deployed in Europe, equipped with state-of-the-art strike weapons. Further, about 35,000 troops are involved in ongoing operations in Eastern Europe, of which over 22,000 personnel are concentrated in Poland and the Baltic States." The decision to deploy the RG is designed to curb this growing threat and ensure parity in the west. At the same time, the defensive character of the grouping is emphasised.

On the following day, 15 October, the Belarusian Defence Ministry announced the arrival of the first trains with Russian personnel and equipment. On 16 October, redeployment of the aviation component of the grouping began. There were no reports about the strength, composition, or deployment locations of the RG at that time.

The news was interpreted in the West as the first step to form a strike force to assault Ukraine again, this time from the north. The statements made by the Belarusian authorities about the ongoing counterterrorism measures and sweeping data verification campaign involving all Belarusians liable for military service further contributed to the negative media environment. Therefore, in order to bring down media tensions and as a measure to increase transparency, the Ministry of Defence organised a briefing for foreign military attachés on 17 October. They were informed about the procedure of the arrival and deployment of the troops, as well as on operational and combat training plans. Specifically, the number of incoming Russian forces and facilities was reported: up to 9,000 servicemen, about 170 tanks, up to 200 armoured combat vehicles and up to 100 guns and mortars of calibre of more than 100 millimetres. The arriving military units are deployed at four training grounds in eastern and central Belarus.

> The Ministry of Defence emphasised that the core of the RG is formed by the national army "within its peacetime numbers." The grouping also includes units and formations of the Russian Western Military District and the Baltic Fleet, which implies its original focus on actions in the northern and western directions (the Baltic Region) rather than in the south (Ukraine). Notably, RG deployment was referred to as a strategic deterrence tool.

In parallel with the briefing of the Defence Ministry (also on 17 October), Aliaksandr Valfovich, the secretary of the Security Council, clarified the RG deployment procedure. He said the RG was being deployed in stages, and its strength was reduced. Full deployment was not planned during that phase. Defence Minister Viktar Khrenin later confirmed this: "*It [the regional grouping] can be deployed both in stages and entirely.*

We are currently operating on a piecemeal basis. This is an adequate response to NATO's actions in the region and a demonstration of our determination to defend our land, the Union State."

Despite the initial alarmism in the Ukrainian and Western media, representatives of Ukrainian, U.S.' and British military agencies issued public statements that they saw no real threat in the operation of the RG in Belarus.

RG deployment within the anticipated parameters had been generally completed by early December, and intensive training in operational coordination of the Belarusian and Russian components immediately followed. Early in December, Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu visited Minsk to sign a protocol making amendments to the agreement between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on joint regional military security assurance of 19 December 1997. The document also provoked a great deal of speculation, as the content of the amendments was not publicised.

Later, the Belarusian Defence Ministry said the protocol was signed "in order to enhance the legal framework for bilateral cooperation." Specifically, it "clarifies the conceptual framework, procedure for the planning and financing of joint activities to ensure the operation of the regional grouping of troops." On 30 December, Valfovich built on that explanation by saying that the amended agreement makes it possible "to create any troop grouping in terms of its composition and size that is adequate to the emerging situation." However, his statement raises additional questions, as the original agreement did not envisage any limitations on the size and composition of the RG.

The resolution of the Russian government dated 18 August 2022 entitled "On the proposal for the President of the Russian Federation to sign the Protocol between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on amendments to the Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Joint Regional Military Security Assurance of 19 December 1997," contains no reference to RG size caps; it mainly concerns clarifications of definitions and terms (for example, 'Chief Headquarters' is changed to 'General Staff'). It is possible that the document contains classified provisions, but there is no indication of this in the text.

RG history: 20 years in the shadows

RG's history is long. Underpinning it was the Collective Security Concept of the Collective Security Treaty (CST) member states adopted as part of the CST of 5 May 1992 by the resolution of the Collective Security Council dated 10 February 1995. In the

Concept, coalition (joint) groupings of troops (forces) in regions that are to be established to repulse aggression against the member states are regarded as an element of the collective security system.

The Supreme Council of the Community of Belarus and Russia adopted the general principles for the military development and use of the military infrastructure elements of the two countries by its resolution of 2 April 1997. According to them, the development and improvement of the organisational and staff structure and composition of the RG became a priority dimension of the coordination of military capabilities. That document served as the framework for the Supreme Council of the Union of Belarus and Russia to approve the Concept of Joint Defence Policy of Belarus and Russia on 22 January 1998, which determined the composition and the basic principles of planning, utilisation, command, and support for regional groupings of troops.

On 19 December 1997, Belarus and Russia signed the Agreement on Joint Regional Military Security Assurance (which came into effect on 14 May 1999).

> In the agreement, the term “region” means the territory of Belarus, as well as the territory of only those Russian regions that are adjacent to the state border of Belarus, where the deployment of groupings of troops of the Belarusian and Russian Armed Forces and their combined operations to ensure the security of both countries are planned.”

The term “regional grouping of troops (forces)” means the command and control bodies and troops (forces) of the Belarusian Armed Forces and Russian Armed Forces located in the region in peacetime or deployed there during a period of threat to repulse possible aggression, as well as other military formations of both countries designed for use according to a common concept and plan.

Since the operation of the RG falls within the exclusive competence of the Union State under Article 17 of the Union State Treaty, the defence ministries of the two countries worked out the RG Employment Plan, which was approved on 27 June 2000. The establishment of the RG had therefore been completed by that day. The RG comprises the Belarusian Armed Forces, the 20th Army of the Western Military District of the Russian Armed Forces, as well as formations and reinforcing units of the central and district commands of the Russian Armed Forces deployed in the region.

Since 2000, the Defence Ministries of Belarus and Russia have annually submitted for approval to the Council of Ministers of the Union State joint action plans to ensure the operation of the regional grouping of troops. Since then numerous joint activities have been held to address not only the interoperability of both national components of the RG, but also the adequate combat composition and system of support. The most notable exercises involving the RG were the "Shield of Fatherland – 2006" and "West – 2009". Following the operational and strategic exercise "West – 2009", it was resolved to hold such exercises on a biennial basis.

Since the establishment of the RG, Belarus and Russia have entered into a number of defence agreements that are associated, in one way or another, with the operation of RG:

- 2000: On the joint use of the military infrastructure of Belarus and Russia;

- 2002: On the joint logistic support of the RG;

- 2003: On the mutual protection of state secrets and confidential information;

- 2008: On the establishment and operation of the Joint Communications System of the RG;

- 2016: On the common technical support for the RG.

> According to the latter, Russia will provide Belarus with military equipment and all necessary armaments in times of a growing military threat to the Union State and in wartime.

There are also further agreements in place on the status of military formations in the RG, cooperation in radioelectronic warfare, etc.

In November 2021, the Supreme State Council of the Union State approved a new military doctrine, which envisages the reinforcement of the RG. It maintains that the purpose of RG employment is to repel attacks, defeat an aggressor and ensure preconditions for the cessation of hostilities on conditions that serve the interests of the member states. During the period of escalating military threat (of immediate threat of aggression), a Joint Command of the RG is formed to refine decisions taken (or plans formulated) in accordance with the circumstances and exercise control of the grouping. The RG is deployed during the period of escalating military threat (of immediate threat of aggression) based on a resolution of the Supreme State Council of the Union State.

Operational coordination

Training and operational coordination of the Russian and Belarusian components followed the deployment of the RG. Servicemen from both countries were trained under a single programme, using the same instructors from both Russia and Belarus. Training was provided in such basic areas as tactics, firing proficiency, tactical medicine, with a special focus on engineering training. The second phase presupposed coordination of crews, squads, platoons, and companies. At each level, many integrated exercises, live-fire exercises, and tactical drills were organised, thoroughly covered by the media. In parallel with RG training, it is likely that previously mobilised Russians were additionally trained to be sent to the Ukrainian front, the British intelligence reported.

The tactical flight training of aviation units of the armed forces of Belarus and Russia, which took place from 16 January to 1 February 2023, became one of the main events within the framework of the RG operational coordination campaign. A broad range of tasks was practiced, including aerial reconnaissance, joint patrolling of the airspace along the border, air support of groupings of troops, tactical landing, delivery of supplies, and evacuation of insured personnel. All of the airfields and ranges of the Air Force and Air Defence Forces of the Armed Forces of Belarus were involved. According to a statement by colonel Andrey Lukyanovich, the chief of the Air Force and Air Defence of Belarus, A-50 long-range early detection and warning aircraft were used in the exercise, which made it possible to significantly increase the radar field at low and extremely low altitudes, as well as the combat control field. During the exercise, evasion of the entire aviation component was practised. Lukyanovich emphasised that the best Russian practices were used: some battle deployment formations and methods of combat use of assault aviation and army aviation were adjusted.

Following multiservice level training, joint staff training is planned. More than 150 joint Belarus–Russia defence activities are scheduled for 2023. The highlight is the joint strategic exercise of the Armed Forces of Belarus and Russia entitled “Union Shield – 2023”, which is expected to take place in Russia on 22-26 September.

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