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‘Belarus – a significant chess piece on the chessboard of regional security

DOI 10.2478/jobs-2018-0004

received February 5, 2018; accepted February 20, 2018.

Abstract: Belarus is often considered as ‘the last authoritarian state in Europe’ or the ‘last Soviet Republic’. Belarusian policies are not a popular research topic. Over the past years, the country has made headlines mostly as a regime violating human rights. Since the Russian aggression on Ukraine, Belarus has been getting renewed attention. Minsk was the scene of a series of talks that aim at stopping the ongoing war in Ukraine. Western media, scholars and society got a reminder that Eastern Europe was not a conflict-free zone. This article puts military security policy of Belarus into perspective by showing that Belarus ‘per se’ is not a threat for neighboring countries; Belarus dependency towards Russia is huge; thus, Minsk has a small capability to run its own independent security policy; military potential of Belarus is significant in the region, but gap in equipment and training between NATO and Belarus is really more; it is in the interest of Western countries to keep the Lukashenko’s regime in Belarus.

Keywords: Belarus; conflict; defence; security; NATO; Russia.

Belarus is often considered as ‘the last authoritarian state in Europe’ or the ‘last Soviet Republic’. Belarusian policies are not a popular research topic. Over the past years, the country has made headlines mostly as a regime violating human rights. Since the Russian aggression on Ukraine, Belarus has been getting renewed attention. Minsk was the scene of a series of talks that aim at stopping the ongoing war in Ukraine. Western media, scholars and society got a reminder that Eastern Europe was not a conflict-free zone.

From a regional security perspective, Belarus plays a very important role. On the one hand, it is the closest ally of Russia, with a significant military potential and great strategic location. Belarus can shorten Russian defence lines and force a wedge between Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine and Poland. If Moscow wants to launch a military operation against the West, it probably will start from Belarusian territory. On the other hand, it is not fully enslaved to the Kremlin. There is a strong dependence on Russian help and vulnerability to Russian influence. However, Lukashenko tends to undertake independent decisions wherever possible. Belarus is thus a crucial but still underestimated chess figure in the Central European chessboard.

Lukashenko runs a prevaricate policy between the West and Russia, which is somehow unique. Western countries consider Belarus as a Russian sphere of influence since its first year of independence. Because of political isolation, Minsk decided to turn to Russia. However, Belarus does not enjoy a large margin of manoeuvre and it is condemned to cooperate with Russia. The main goal of Lukashenko policy is not balancing between East and West but to integrate with Russia or join EU. He wants to maintain sovereignty of Belarus and above all to secure his power.

When scholars or journalists discuss about potential NATO–Russia tensions or conflicts, they mostly focus on Russian military potential. They often omit the role of Belarus and its armed forces. This article analyses the military security policy of Belarus and its main concepts, ideas, directions of cooperation, armed forces and its capabilities and military relations with Russia.

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This article puts military security policy of Belarus into perspective by showing that Belarus ‘per se’ is not a threat for neighbouring countries; Belarus dependency towards Russia is huge; thus, Minsk has a small capability to run its own independent security policy; military potential of Belarus is significant in the region, but gap in equipment and training between NATO and Belarus is really more; it is in the interest of Western countries to keep the Lukashenko’s regime in Belarus. What is noteworthy, Lukashenko’s regime also in favours by Kremlin. So status quo is suit for all three sides (NATO, Russia and Minsk)

This article is mostly based on publications in Polish and English language. Research on Belarus faces a series of impediments, chief among them being the limited amount of publications about this country, especially concerning military matters.

This article has three parts: the evolution of the security concept in Belarus, the national security system (documents, leadership, armed forces and their condition) and finally, military relations between Belarus and Russia.

1 Evolution of security concept in Belarus

This part analyses foreign policy of Belarus and its influence on security policy. What is interesting, besides some difference in government, is that there are a few constant ideas that determine Minsk policy: strong connection with Russia, attempts to conducting sovereign decisions despite influences and pressures from Kremlin or Brussels, non-alignment in contentions between world powers, non-aggressive rhetoric and attempts to maintain friendly relations with neighbouring states.

Over the years, the approach towards security in Belarus had some important changes. It is strongly connected with concepts in foreign affairs and can be divided into three periods: 1990–1994 (republican time period, neutrality and non-alignment, creation of independent state), 1994–2000 (accession to power of Lukashenko, process of integration with Russia) and 2000–2017 (accession to power of Putin, inhibition of integration process, conducting of multilateral foreign policy by Minsk).

2 Period of parliamentary republic

Sovereign Belarus was established in 27 July 1990, after the Supreme Council of Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) adopted the ‘Declaration of State Sovereignty’. In this document, Belarus was declared to become a non-nuclear and neutral state. In addition, it was announced right to have its own armed forces, security system authorities and free choice of alliances.

Since the creation of the state, Minsk actively promoted the idea to turn Central–Eastern Europe into a non-nuclear and non-alliance sphere. This notion was not interesting to other states. Poland and Baltic states refused to participate, because they did not want to shut down the possibility to join NATO (Mironowicz, 2001, p. 33). In addition, politics of Belarusian was not unanimous in matters of neutrality and security policy.

In the beginning of 90s, there was a great dispute in Belarus between two security concepts. The first proposed base security in Russian Federation and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This concept was supported by Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich and communists. The second idea aim to create Belarus as a neutral state which will be beside any alliances. The proponent of this idea was Stanislau Shushkevich, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Belarus and Belarusian Popular Front.

The first concept emphasised that self-reliant ensuring of security will be much more expensive than joining the collective security system. Hence, there was an idea of joining to this kind of security system but for the determined period. It will give time to reach the goal, which was neutral and atom-free Belarus. Some pro-Russian followers indicate that concept of neutrality is an anachronism and is improper in political reality for Belarus. The second concept stated that only neutrality and system of bilateral agreement with Russia will ensure security of Belarus (Malak, 2003, p. 132; Ciupiński A., Malak K., 2004, p. 260; Seniuch, 1996, p. 20-21).

Doctrine of neutrality is well evident in two documents. In 1992, Minsk prepared a military doctrine that underlined that this state will be neutral, will not have any nuclear weapons and will refuse to apply to any military block or alliances (Main, 2002, b, p.2). The other law is the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus adopted in 1994. Article 18 introduce this concept: *In its foreign policy the Republic of Belarus shall proceed from the principles of the equality of states, the non-use offeree or the threat offeree, the inviolability of frontiers, the peaceful settlement of disputes, non-interference in internal affairs of states and other universally acknowledged principles and standards of international law. The Republic of Belarus pledges itself to make its territory a neutral, nuclear-free state* (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Constitution_of_the_Republic_of_Belarus). Also constitution forbids to use Belarusian armed forces abroad (<http://minskherald.com/2015/11/belarusian-army-history-structure-weapon/>).

Debate on neutrality was especially important in years 1993–1994. On 31 December 1993, Belarus denied their neutral policy by signing the Collective Security Treaty. The final ending of the non-alliance concept was presidential election in July 1994. It was won by Alexander Lukashenko, a proponent of closer relations with Russia.

3 Period of rapprochement with Russia

When Lukashenko became president, he focused on total takeover of Belarus. He often used post-Soviet nostalgia in the society. State emblem and flag were changed similar to those during BSSR times. He fought against the opposition. After the referendum in 1996, Lukashenko got almost ultimate power in the state. In consequence, he made dissolution of parliament, which was chosen in democratic elections; extended presidential rights and prolonged his term.

These actions were criticized by Western countries, which did not recognize the National Assembly appointed by Lukashenko. These countries decided to show limited cooperation with Belarus. Minsk started self-isolation policy. Because of lack of partners and possibilities, Minsk decided to rely on Russia (Tymanowski, 2009, p. 283).

Besides political isolation, another important factor that accelerated integration between Russia and Belarus was the NATO enlargement. Minsk approach of alliance to their borders was assumed as a threat to state security and new division of Europe. In 1997, Lukashenko returned to the conception of creation of nuclear- and alliance-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe as the safest solution. This idea was in favour of Kremlin (Mironowicz, 2011, p. 91). Again, this idea did not get any support. NATO realised that it will challenge NATO's existence. In addition, the alliance recognised it as an idea inspired by Russia.

The members of former Warsaw Pact had growing demand to integrate with NATO. NATO enlargement was inevitable. Three of the states achieved their goal during the NATO Summit in Madrid in July 1997 when Poland, Czech and Hungary were invited to join the alliance. This event ended Minsk ideas of creation of alliance-free zone in Central Europe. Under these circumstances, Lukashenko regretted that he quickly agreed to withdraw nuclear weapons from Belarus. He thought that was a mistake because Russia does not have attributes that can be used during talks with NATO about enlargement of alliance to former Warsaw Pact countries (Malak, 2003, p. 139).

Changes in security on the western border and isolation from the West forced Lukashenko to make an important decision. He did not want to stay in "a grey zone" of security. Hence, alliance with Russia, which already existed after signing the Collective Security Treaty, was the only alternative for Belarus.

The process of integration between Russia and Belarus was very dynamic in the second half of the 90s. On 2 April 1996, both states erected Commonwealth of Belarus and Russia. They decreed that both states will deeply integrate both political and economic ways. In addition, both states should cooperate in case of ensuring own safety and border security and should coordinate foreign policy with partner. Exactly one year later, Treaty on the Union was signed between Belarus and Russia. It emphasised that it is still union of two sovereign states but connected each other with political, economic, social, military, scientific and cultural cooperation.

In October 1998, Russia and Belarus signed agreement on common utilization of military infrastructure. The other important moment was 9 December 1999, when both states erected Union State of Russia and Belarus. It seemed that it is only a matter of time when cooperation will be deeper and stronger or transform into confederation (Tymanowski, 2009, p. 280).

4 Multilateral foreign policy period

One of the reasons that fuelled Lukashenko into deeper integration with Russia was his political aspirations. He was very popular in the Russian society, especially compared to Boris Yeltsin. Lukashenko hoped to seize higher offices in the territories of both states. He had to resign from these plans because of legal aspects of the Union State and, what is more important, owing to political switch in Russia (Mironowicz, 2001, p. 81).

In the year 2000, Vladimir Putin became president of Russia. He did not need integration process in contrary of Yeltsin. The new leader in Kremlin acknowledged that the ‘new state supposed to be based on strong foundation’ (Tymanowski, 2009, p.281). He thought that the process of integration between 1996 and 1999 was too quick and did not secure interests and influences of Russians. Hence, there was no need to rush with the integration process. He changed his attitude towards this issue during his second term. He proposed acceleration of integration by incorporation of Belarus, which was supposed to be a governorate in the Russian Federation (Stankiewicz, 2011, p. 117). Another project was to establish bilateral relation with similar patterns as between EU member states, so without great handouts to Belarusian economy. These ideas were against Lukashenko interests. First, he will become just a governor, not president of the state. Lukashenko ascertained that ‘Belarus will not become 89 or 90 Russian governorate’ (Topolski, a, 2009, p. 181). Second, Minsk will lose discounts on resources, which are vital for Belarus economy (Mironowicz, 2011, 152). Thus, further integration processes were maintained by Minsk on the discussion level, especially that Moscow is still willing to pay for their strategic partnership.

President Alexander Lukashenko likes to underline that ‘Belarus always defends Moscow¹’ (Bohdan, 2014, p. 16). Because of this, Russia should support their ally with funding and equipment. This is the idea of Minsk. Kremlin, however, has different intentions. Currently, its main goal is not to strengthen the potential of allied armed forces but to increase their presence on Belarusian territories, for example, by creating new extraterritorial bases.

Considering rejection of integration policy and harder attitude of Putin towards Minsk, Lukashenko decided to run multilateral foreign policy. He started talks regarding supply of resources with Azerbaijan, Venezuela and Iran and also with China about common arms industry projects and purchasing of equipment (Multiple Launch Rocket System Polonez, wheeled armoured personnel carrier CS/VN3) (<http://www.defence24.pl/zbrojeniowa-ekspansja-pekiniu-bron-z-chin-w-globalnych-konfliktach-analiza>). Of course, Russia was the main and key partner. However, when relations between Minsk and Kremlin got cold, Lukashenko turned to West or other partners, even just to show Russia that he can do that.

Currently, some aspects of Belarusian policy can be considered as neutral. Minsk did not recognize independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; contrarily, it maintained friendly relationship with Georgia after the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. In addition, Belarus did not recognize the incorporation of Crimea or did not support Russia in their crisis with Turkey in 2015 (Bohdan, Isaev, 2016, p. 16). It does not mean that Russian influences in Belarus became weaker and Minsk can run fully sovereign policy. It seems that these actions are acceptable for Kremlin, until Lukashenko is running self-isolation policy and does not aim to get closer to the West like Ukraine did. The only sphere, when cooperation is closer every year, without differences between Minsk and Moscow, is military cooperation. This issue will be developed later in the article.

¹ Being “shield” of Russia had a terrible consequence for people currently living in the Belarusian territories. Only in XX century, frontline was rolled over Belarus several times during World War I, Polish–Bolshevik War and World War II; thus, these territories were sacked. During World War II, 25 % of people living in Belarusian territories died or were killed. It is the highest percentage of loss in population of a country during this war.

5 Documents and system of leadership

The security policy of Belarus is described in various documents.

The first military doctrine was published in 1992. This document underlined that this state will be neutral, would not have any nuclear weapons and will refuse to apply to any military block or alliances (Main, 2002, b, p.2). The doctrine had a defence character and emphasized that Belarus is not a threat to any other states. The main goals were to upkeep international peace and security, prevent military threats and ensure security of Belarus. These ideas were connected with neutral policy of Shushkevich's political administration (Białoskórski, 2016, p.12).

In its next military doctrine published in 2002, Belarus was supposed to be profoundly defensive in nature and did not recognize any state as a potential aggressor. The main goal was to ensure sovereignty of the state and political independence. Neutrality was not mentioned; there are more information about further cooperation with Russia and creation of legal basis for this (Main, 2002, b, p. 4-5).

In the recent doctrine, published in 2016, Belarus confirmed close, even allied, relations with Russia. Western politics hoped that Lukashenko will step backwards in having relations with Russia after the war in Ukraine. However, this doctrine showed that matters of military security are closely connected to Russia (Rącz, 2016, p. 230). This doctrine underlined the defensive policy of Belarus and confirmed the statement from its previous doctrine saying that no state or alliance is considered an opponent (http://belarusfacts.by/pl/belarus/politics/domestic_policy/defense/). In several points, this doctrine is similar to the Russian one, like in definition of terms.

6 System of leadership of armed forces

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces is the president. He has powers to appoint and dismiss the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, form and head the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus and appoint and dismiss the State Secretary of the Security Council. He is responsible for developing military policy, which is later approved by the National Assembly. The president also imposes, in the event of military threat or attack, martial law in the territory of the Republic of Belarus and announces general or partial mobilisation with the submission within 3 days of the taken decision for approval of the Council of the Republic (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Constitution_of_the_Republic_of_Belarus; Białoskórski, 2016, p. 9).

During peace time, armed forces are commanded by the Ministry of Defence. It is responsible for development of armed forces and their preparation to fulfil tasks. It compiles doctrine and programme documents and ensures material, financial and technical needs of armed forces (Rezmer, 2015, p. 252). In Belarus, there is no western standard for civilian control of the military. Officers in rank of general were assigned as a Ministers of Defence.

Another important institution is the Security Council. It is the highest collegial institution regarding security. The Council assigns trends in security and develops strategies for growth of armed forces (Malak, 2003, p. 144). The members of the Council are president, who is the chairman of the Council; Prime Minister; Chairman of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly; Chairman of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly; Chairman of the Supreme Court; Head of the Belarus President Administration; State Secretary of the Security Council; Chairman of the State Control Committee; Prosecutor General; Chairman of the Board of the National Bank; Interior Minister; Minister of Foreign Affairs; Defence Minister; Emergencies Minister; Chairman of the Investigation Committee; Chairman of the State Security Committee; Chairman of the State Defence Industries Committee; Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces – First Deputy Defence Minister and Belarus President's Aide for National Security – and Viktor Lukashenko, president's son. (<http://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-approves-composition-of-belarus-security-council-88172-2016>)

The general staff performs operational functions, manages armed forces and organizes and coordinates cooperation of armed forces and other military character formations. In case of war, whole armed forces, interior troops and border guards (Rezmer, 2015, p. 253), officials and general staff report to Ministry of Defence. In fact, it is directly under the influence of Lukashenko.

7 Army in Belarus Military District after 1990

Belarusian armed forces were not established immediately after recognising independence. Still units of Soviet armed forces in Belarusian Special Military District were stationed there. For Soviets, BSSR was very important due to the frontline location. This republic was a strongly militarized territory: around 240,000–280,000 troops were stationed there (1 soldier accruing for 43 residents). Also, there were plenty of equipment: almost 3000 tanks, 4000 infantry fighting vehicles, 1600 artillery system and 400 planes (Topolski a, 2009, p. 160).

In addition, there were around 81 intercontinental ballistic missile RT-2PM Topol (NATO: SS-25 Sickle) and uncertain number of tactical nuclear warheads (probably around 500–700) In 1993, Belarus ratified agreement of withdrawing the nuclear weapons and joined *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)*. Nuclear warheads were send to Russia, where they were reprocessed (Zarychta 2016, p. 402; http://belarusfacts.by/pl/belarus/politics/domestic_policy/defense/). In the end, atomic weapons were finally withdrawn in 1996. It took more time than planned, because Lukashenko delayed the whole process, counting that Kremlin and Washington will gave compensation for withdrawing (Topolski a, 2009, p. 162)

8 Armed forces of Belarus: structure, equipment and potential

The condition of armed forces in Belarus is a questionable issue. The amounts of personnel and armaments are quite impressive. However, on the other hand, small defence expenditures, mostly post-Soviet equipment and lack of combat experience and training, call into question the potential of this army.

Belarusian armed forces were established on 20 March 1992. It were created by seized Soviet units in their territory. Hence, the young state already had a quite large military potential, much bigger than their needs. According to Final Act on Personnel Strength of Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE-1A) signed in Helsinki (July 1992), the newly created Belarusian army was not supposed to have more than 100,000 personnel, 1800 tanks, 2600 Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV), 1615 artillery units, 260 combat aircrafts and 80 attack helicopters (Topolski a, 2009, p. 161, Main, 2003, p. 6). It began serious reduction in army. There were 96,000 soldiers in 1995; two years later, 83 000 and in 2005 and 2010, 73,000.

Belarusian authorities provided information that regarding the CFE treaty, they utilized (probably also sold) 1773 tanks, 1341 IFV and 130 air planes (http://belarusfacts.by/pl/belarus/politics/domestic_policy/defense/).

Currently, the Belarusian armed forces contain approximately 60,000 personnel (48,000 soldiers and 12,000 civilian employees). Conscription is still obligatory, around 40% of soldiers are called up (around 20,000). The service for recruits lasts 18 months (12 months for conscripts with a higher education). It gives quite a huge number of trained reserve: more or less 290,000 troops within five years (Military Balance 2016, p. 182). One of the reasons that the draft is still obligatory is the role in the creation of national identity among young citizens (Bohdan, 2014, p.7-8).

For Lukashenko, more important role in providing security, especially internal one, is played by paramilitary forces. Which are: Border Guards (12 000), Militia (87 000) and Interior Troops (11 000). They are subservient to Ministry of Interior. These forces are better financed than army.

Territory of Belarus is divided into two areas: Western and North-Western operational directions. Belarusian armed forces consist of the army, air and air defence forces and special operation forces. Another component, which is still in the process of creation, is Territorial Defence. This branch was created

in 2006, but in recent years started to have exercises and own equipment (<https://belarusdigest.com/story/strengthening-territorial-defence-new-military-priorities-nato-dialogue-belarus-security-digest/>).

9 Army

Land forces contains 16,500 soldiers. It is the strongest military branch in Belarus. The army comprises mechanised formations, rocket troops and artillery, air defences, special troops and logistics and maintenance units (<http://www.mil.by/en/forces/sv/appointment/>).

The army is deployed in two operational forces: Western Operational Command with headquarter (HQ) in Grodno (6th Mechanized Brigade deployed in Grodno and 11th Mechanized Brigade deployed in Slonim) and North-Western Operational Command with HQ in Borisov (120th Mechanized Brigade deployed in Minsk and 19th Mechanized Brigade deployed in Zaslono, few kilometres from Lepel). These four brigades are the main strength of land forces.

The structure of mechanized brigade feature is as follows: brigade HQ; 3 mechanized battalions, each one with 3 motor rifle companies (33 IFV) and 1 tank company (10 tanks); 2 tank battalions (32 tanks); reconnaissance battalion; artillery group; anti-tank battalion; air defence battalion; support battalion (engineer battalion, signal battalion); material support battalion and medical company (Rezmer, 2015, p. 253-254)

10 Air and air defence forces

The branch of air and air defence forces consists of 15,000 soldiers. It is maintained on high readiness level (60–70% headcount). Just as army, it is divided into two tactical operational commands: Western Operational Command in Baranovichy and North-Western Operational Command in Machulishchy near Minsk.

The main air bases are as follows: 61st Fighter Air Base in Baranovichy, 116th Assault Air Base in Lida, 50th Mixed Air Base in Machulishchy and 181st Combat Helicopter Base in Pruzhany (Rezmer 256). There are also bases in Babryusk and Luninets.

Belarus has air defence system of long, medium and short range. Air defence units are located in Grodno, Brest, Babruysk, Polock, Slutsk, Baranovichy and Borysov.

In 2009, an agreement was signed between Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to create a common air defence system. In 2012, the common air defence system started to operate in Belarusian and Russian airspace (Dyner, a, 2013, p.1). So, Belarusian system is also the shield of Russian airspace.

However, air defence made a huge bloomer. On 4 July 2012, a small civilian plane flew into the Belarusian airspace. Near Minsk, it dropped 900 teddy bears with leaflets against the Lukashenko regime. Probably, the plane was detected, but on account of the decision-making process, it was not intercepted. Border Guards took the blame, because it will show the weakness of the air defence system, which is connected with the Russian system. As a consequence, Lukashenko removed air force chief and chairman of the State Border Committee for “failing to ensure national security”. (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/belarus/9444174/Belarus-air-force-commander-loses-job-over-teddy-bear-invasion.html>).

11 Special operation forces

As a detached military branch, Special Operation Force (SOF) was established in 2007. This branch comprised HQ of SOF, 91st Independent Security Battalion, 38th Independent Guards Mobile Brigade

(deployed in Brest), 103rd Independent Guards Mobile Brigade (deployed in Vitebsk), the 5th Independent Special Purpose Brigade (deployed in Maryina Gorka) and support units (Gawęda, 2017, p. 42). They are directly under command of Chief of Staff. Two Guards Brigade are strike force of SOF; Spetsnaz Brigade made reconnaissance-diversion activities. SOF has around 6000 soldiers.

Their main tasks are counterterrorism, countersubversive actions, reconnaissance and intelligence, combined operations, stability operations in the nearest area and on territory of Belarus, reinforcement of borders, multinational stability activities (as being part of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)) (Gawęda, 2017, p.44).

The structure of Guards Brigade consists of HQ of Brigade, three air assault battalions, signal battalion, mixed artillery battalion, air defence battalion, air reconnaissance company, engineer company, security and maintenance company, renovation company, maintenance material company, medical company, dog company and chemical platoon (Gawęda, 2017, p. 49)

12 Budget

One of the main problems of armed forces is the lack of finances. It is linked with poor economic situation of Belarus. In 2016, Minsk spend around 1.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) (979 million USD) for defence. During the period of Belarusian independence, defence expenditures fluctuated around 1.5% GDP. It is not a bad rate. As an example, during a long period, Lithuania and Latvia spend just around 1% of GDP for defence. However, we have to underline that Belarusian army is quite large and has a lot of equipment, which need to be maintained. Hence, most of the finances are spend on the preservation of the current status, instead of innovation and increasing capabilities.

Defence expenditure per capita is one of the lowest in Europe. In 2015, Belarus spend 76.8 USD per capita on defence. Only Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldavia, Albania and Macedonia expend less than Belarus (<http://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/z9FHo/2/>).

Needs of armed forces do not have priority in Belarus. More funds are spend on internal force like militia. With lack of finances comes low salaries and low quality of soldiers' life. For example, in 2014, a captain with 10 years of experience earned equivalent to 730 USD per month (Bohdan, 2014, p.11). An NCO in the Russian army earns more than a major in the Belarusian army. Hence, armed forces are not a popular workplace. Even graduate of military academies prefer to serve in customs service, militia or border guards than in army (Rezmer, 2015, p. 258). This causes leaving of skilled personnel and lack of new contract soldiers. All in all, the funds are insufficient and will lead to further decreasing quality of equipment, capabilities and morale.

13 Equipment

Most of equipment in Belarusian armed forces is inherited from the Red Army. During the 90s, it was quite modern. Nowadays, it is mostly outdated and exhausted. Owing to insufficient funding, Minsk did not purchase much of new equipment. However, some equipment are being modernized with the help of the Belarusian industry.

When calculating the strength of Belorussia only by numbers, it seems quite big: 515 tanks (446 T-72, 69 T-80) and more than 1000 vehicles (BMP-1, BMP-2, few versions of BTR) (for specific information about equipment, see appendix 1). More equipment is in the storages (more or less 1000 tanks). The newest purchased weapon is multiple rocket launcher 'Polonez' (range 200 km), constructed in cooperation with China (<http://www.defence24.pl/434415,rakietowe-polonezy-juz-na-uzbrojeniu-bialorusi-zasieg-200-km>).

Air force is in a similar condition like the army. Belarus has around 20–30 MiG-29 fighters and more than 30 Su-25. The newest plane is training/light combat aircraft Yak-130 received from Russia in 2015.

There are also problems with helicopters; there are just a few Mi-24, Mi-26 and Mi-8. So there are mostly post-Soviet armaments.

The other crucial issue in air force is really small amount of flying hours for pilots (15 hours per year). In comparison, in Kazakhstan, pilots fly 100 hours per year and in Russia, they fly 60–100 hours². A small amount of flying hours can be one of the causes that has led to several crashes of Belarusian planes in last few years.

Air defence is equipped with post-Soviet armaments and with new systems. It uses systems such as S-200, Vega, 9K37 *Buk*, 9K332 *Tor*, 9K33 *Osa* and 9K35 *Strela-10*. The newest system is S-300PS, received in 2007 (four batteries) then after agreement in 2014, four divisions which were obtained for free (<http://www.defence24.pl/bialorus-otrzymala-czwarty-dywizjon-przeciwlotniczy-s-300>). Air defence units are treated better than rest of armed forces, because air defence system is integrated with Russian one. Hence, Kremlin supports this system to ensure own safety.

14 Condition of armed forces

Conscript service and serving conditions in armed forces were big issues after whistleblower Franak Wiaczorka raised that issue. He was forced to serve in the army in 2009, despite health problems. He runs a blog, where he described his tour of duty.

According to his story, armed forces is really in poor condition. Army is politicisation, and soldiers serve in poor sanitation and wretched fixture. Conscripts are dully educated. In addition, training with real weapons is very rare.

Army is very russified, and Belarusian identity is not promoted. Wiaczorka became famous with his struggle to use Belarusian language during service. He reported in this language, which caused fury in some officers who demanded using Russian language. What is noteworthy, because he demanded rulebook in Belarusian language, prosecutor's office ordered to create this document in this language. (http://wyborcza.pl/duzyformat/1,127290,8827972,Jak_Franak_Wiaczorka_walczył_w_bialoruskiej_armii.html). 'Belarusian army is not Belarusian. We do not defend ourselves, just Russia. In all units is Russian language. Buckles with sickle and hammer, on hats and uniforms-red stars. *Every day we have been trained to war against NATO and Poland*' – Wiaczorka told during an interview to the Polish press (<http://www.rp.pl/artykul/1054906-Bialoruskie-wojsko-w-tragicznym-stanie.html>).

Pro-Russian attitude in army is not a surprise. Most of higher officers are alumnus of Soviet military academies. That is why using Russian language and way of thinking is still similar to Soviet standards.

All in all, it is hard to give clear assessment of Belarusian armed forces. It seems clear that the situation of army is worse than that in Russia. Owing to the lack of sources, it is difficult to say that Belarusian army is very backward and in poor condition or, from the other hand, it has relevant, well-equipped strength power. Probably, the truth lies in a middle ground: significant strength but with shortcomings. Because of lack of transparency, civilian control of army and other democratic standards, while analysing Belarus, we have to use uncertain sources and sometimes circumstantial evidence. In addition, some information can be put to mislead public opinion in the West (Rezmer, 2015, p. 244).

To sum up, by looking on numbers and figures, it seems that Belarus has too big army for their needs. However, maintaining this kind of amount of equipment and soldiers is connected with Belarusian and Russian concept of war power. Both armies are preparing to conflict with stronger or equal opponents. They plan to use mass of infantry and heavy equipment. Belarus is not adequately prepared for the present warfare. Belarusian army has big shortcomings in air force or using old technology. Another important issue is lack of combat experience, which is caused by avoiding to participate in foreign operations (Pazur, 2010, p. 2-3). Belarus potential is significant in defensive operation but not in offensive ones. Reinforcement of military capabilities needs enormous amount of money, especially for this amount of soldiers and shortcomings.

² All numbers regarding equipment and flying hours are taken from *The Military Balance 2016*.

15 Military relations between Belarus and Russia

Security of policy of Belarus is strongly linked to cooperation with Russia. The alliance of these states, membership in CSTO and development of own defence capabilities are the three pillars that ensure security of Belarus.

From Kremlin perspective, Belarus is extremely important. It is a buffer state between NATO and Russia, which shifts defence lines for 500 km to the West. It is important logistically. Through Belarus comes the shortest road from Russia to EU and Kaliningrad. Also in their territories, there are three pipelines and two important military bases (Iwańczuk, 2009, p. 134). Hence the important geographic placement, preservation of Belarus in own sphere of influence is one of the key goals of Kremlin. After the crisis in Ukraine, ongoing warfare in the East of this state and pro EU policy of Kiev, Moscow believes that they cannot lose Belarus.

These reasons and relations between Minsk and Kremlin yield with the most advanced military cooperation in CIS alliance. Both sides not only coordinate military operations but also provide training for soldiers and production/modernization of armament (Dyner, a, 2013, p.1).

What makes cooperation so close – same or similar equipment, language, commands, procedures of commanding and control, tactics, etc. In both armies, the main heritage, which builds *esprit de corps*, is the World War II and USSR times. In addition, the military industry is very strongly connected.

Base of the alliance is Union State and CSTO. However, for the bilateral cooperation, there are more than 30 documents and agreements: security concept of the Union State from 1999; military doctrine of Union State from 2001 and agreement on common air defence that was signed in 2009 and ratified in 2012 (Dyner, a, 2013, p.1; Topolski, b, 2009, p. 185).

Currently, there are two Russian military bases in Belarus. One is the radar station (Volga-type radar) in Hantsavichy near Baranavichy, which is operating since 2002, but its construction started in the 80s. It plays an important role in the Russian early warning system to detect launched ballistic missiles in the area of Northern Atlantic and Europe.

The other one is the Naval Communication Centre in Vileyka, which plays an important role in maintaining communication with Russian submarines (Main, 2002, a, p.2.). This Centre is operating since 1964. These bases are being utilized on the basis of agreement between two states signed in 1995. Minsk leased them cost free for 25 years

One of the most important issues in the last few years is the possibility of creation of new Russian bases in the territory of Belarus. In December 2012 the information that Russian fighters will be deployed in this state appeared for the first time. In December 2013, four Su-27 Russian fighters flew to airbase in Baranavichy, and in March of the following year, six of the same fighters arrived to air base in Babruysk. In June of the same year, they returned to Russia (Bohdan, 2014 p.22-23). Some people thought that this is the beginning of creation of Russian bases in Belarus. Even Vladimir Putin ordered to begin negotiations about these bases between Russian MFA and MOD with Minsk. However, Lukashenko, despite pressure (or just fake pressure?), stood up to this request and in October 2015, he said: ‘We don’t need a base today (...) I hear shrieks from the opposition about the deployment of a Russian air base. I don’t know anything about it. (...) We need planes - not bases. We have our excellent pilots ... Why should I allow in planes and pilots from other countries?’ (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34463901>). He made a similar statement in 2017. Asked about these bases, he replied ‘Is this base necessary from military perspective? We don’t need it here. This base and airplanes, which Russians want to deploy, is force projector’ (<http://www.defence24.pl/lukaszenka-nie-potrzebujemy-rosyjskiej-bazy-wojskowej-potrzebujemy-rosyjskich-samolotow>). It shows that besides earlier agreements, Minsk does not want to have stronger presence of Russian troops on their territory.

When it comes to air planes, Russia does not support their neighbours. They prefer to sell Su-30K fighters to Angola, rather than to Belarus, despite the fact that Angola will have problems to redeem them. However, Minsk signed an initial agreement with Russia to purchase Su-30SM, but it can only happen after 2020 (<http://www.ainonline.com/aviation-news/defense/2016-02-10/belarus-receive-sukhoi-su-30sm-fighters>). The faltering potential of Belarusian air forces can cause problems in securing their air space

without Kremlin's help. It is strongly connected with lack of finances for expensive weapons like planes and also with Belarusian military doctrine (where there is no need to have strong air force). In addition, Kremlin does not want to hand over equipment for a small price. It will be a great opportunity for Russia, which can simplify the creation of Russian air bases in Belarus, for 'the greater good' of the Union State.

Both states need each other also in military industry cooperation. Collaboration in this branch of industry is very beneficial for them. Belarus exports, for example, navigation devices, satellite communication devices, antenna systems, radio stations, computer systems, software and optical instruments, to Russia. Belarus is the only provider of mobile platforms for intercontinental ballistic missiles Topol-M and RS-24 (Dyner, a, 2013, p 1-2). For Russia, Minsk is also an important trade arena for the development of equipment, like air defence or fighters.

16 Common exercises

Common exercises with Russian allies is a very important lesson for Belarusian soldiers. They have possibility to train with experienced personnel, equipped with some new ordnance. Joint manoeuvres are conducted every year involving a significant amount of soldiers, for example Neman 2001; Berezina 2002; Clear Sky 2003; Homeland Shield 2004; Alliance Shield 2006; Autumn 2008; Union Shield 2011, 2015 and the most famous *Zapad* (West) in 2009, 2013 and 2017 (Rezmer, 2015, p. 245).

From a regional perspective, the most important manoeuvre is *Zapad*. This exercise conducted three times is very disturbing from the perspective of neighbouring countries.

Zapad 2009 was an exercise where Russians and Belarusians were trained cooperation in repeal aggression from the western direction. Around 12,000 soldiers took part in it. The scenario involved simulation of nuclear attack against Poland and suppression of an uprising by a Polish minority in Belarus. *Zapad 2009* is considered as the biggest exercise in the first decade of the XXI century.

In *Zapad 2013*, around 22,000 soldiers participated. According to the official scenario, the army practised simulation caused by the terrorist group or religious–ethnic conflict. However, experts were not encouraged with these explanations. They affirmed that during these exercises, both armies practised assaults on Poland and Baltic states. These manoeuvres were viewed as a threat in these states.

The recent one, *Zapad 2017*, was watched out very closely. Especially, the voices of experts regarding this exercise sound really disturbing. In Autumn 2016, the information was drained that in year 2007, Russian MOD signed a contract to use more than 4000 train waggons for transport in Belarus. In 2015, it was 125 and in 2016, just 50. Belarusian opposition alarmed that it is in preparation to takeover military control on Belarus or even aggression to Baltic states, Ukraine or Poland (<http://www.defence24.pl/wielki-przerzut-rosyjskiego-sprzetu-do-bialorusi-w-2017-roku-manewry-agresja-czy-nowa-baza-wojskowa>). Some experts believed that it will begin to create new military bases. Officially, 12,700 soldiers, 200 tanks, 70 planes and helicopters and more various equipment participated in exercises. However, some experts estimated that in other exercises, connected with *Zapad 2017*, around 100,000 personnel took part. Pessimistic plans were not fulfilled, and Russian soldiers returned to their bases (Surdyk K., 2017, p.62; Smyrgała D., 2017, p.12-21).

To conclude, regarding military relations between Belarus and Russia, Kremlin treats Minsk like a younger brother and does not provide the support that Lukashenko demands. Both armies are compatible due to using the same equipment, tactics and similar chain of command. Without any doubts, Russian armed forces are in a much better condition than Belarusian armed forces. However, in case of conflicts, they can easily cooperate.

17 Collective Security Treaty Organization

Apart of alliance with Russia, an important role that Belarusian security policy plays is membership in CSTO. Currently, there are 6 members of the alliance (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan) and 2 observers (Afghanistan and Serbia). In this treaty, signatories declared refusal to use a force on other states, not to enter any military alliance and to ensure that attack on one signatory state will be considered as an attack on the whole organization (Brązkiewicz, Śliwa, 2010, p.104). The last mentioned point is clearly like the famous NATO Article 5. It is no wonder that CSTO is called 'eastern NATO'. What is very important is Russia ensured nuclear guarantees to CSTO members.

Alliance armies created three regional formations: Eastern European (Union State), Central Asian (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan) and Caucasian (Armenia, Russia).

Besides that CSTO wanted to have their multinational forces (like NATO Response Force or EU Battlegroups). Thus, in 2007, collective peacekeeping forces (around 3600 personnel) were established, which supposed to participate in UN missions. Another one is Collective Rapid Reaction Force (around 20,000 soldiers) established in 2009. This is a component with permanent readiness, capable to quick deployment. Their purpose is to defend attacked ally. At first, Belarus boycott summit, agreement on creation of CRRF, was signed. Minsk refused to participate in any military operations outside Belarus border. Kremlin forced Minsk to sign this agreement, which they did. Belarus designated for Collective Rapid Reaction Forces 103rd Independent Guards Mobile Brigade (Sadowski, 2017, p.49-50, Białoskórski, 2016, p. 23).

So far, both units were never used in international operation. There were motions to send it to Syria or Ukraine, but there were no final agreement to use this units. It was caused by differences between allies and lack of UN decision. In conclusion, it will be hard to send these forces to international operation, because of lack of common interests among member states.

18 Summary

First, according to previously mentioned information, especially military potential and military strategy, it seems that Minsk presents no danger for neighbouring countries. Small defence funding, lack of offensive potential especially on air force and shortage of combat experience in mostly reservist army show that Belarus army is mainly focused on defence operations. What is worth to emphasize, despite shortcomings and lack of finances, Belarusian army is not a total wreck. It is a medium weight player with a quite significant potential in the region, especially comparing to Baltic states. According to Global Fire Power ranking, Belarus is the 49th strongest army in the world. However, it is hard to imagine that worse equipped and trained Belarusian troops will try to invade NATO state. Minsk has friendly or neutral relations with all neighbours and does not have any territorial or political claims to them. Hence, we can assume that Belarus has no aggressive intension or plans.

There are more possible scenarios of potential threats to NATO's Eastern flank countries. One of the most famous one is hybrid warfare, especially using covert and ambiguous actions. How Minsk will act in case of this kind of conflict? There are plenty of factors that need to be taken into consideration. It seems that the conflict would not be beneficial for Belarus. If Kremlin will not force Minsk to join their actions, Belarus should remain neutral. It will be the best solution for Lukashenko, showing that he is not vassal of Moscow and will secure his position inside his country. However, in this region, it is hard to remain neutral and Russia can force their ally to take part in their actions. Because of huge dependency and influence of Kremlin on Belarusian armed forces and politicians, NATO should perceive Belarus as a part of the Russian defence system (Dyner, 2018, p.2).

Another important matter is the presence of Russian troops on Belarus. The possibility of their extended presence is a big threat for not only the NATO's Eastern flank but also Minsk. If some units of Russian armed forces are deployed in Belarus, in case of conflict, they will be much closer to NATO's borders and

can take NATO by surprise. Furthermore, the defence operation of two NATO's allies, Lithuania and Latvia, will be much more difficult. From the Lithuanian–Belarus border to Vilnius, it is only around 30 km; hence, Lithuanian capital can become a target of enemy artillery. NATO's military analysts and politics also mentioned the Suwalki gap as a vulnerable place for the alliance. If aggressors capture this terrain and join Belarus and Kaliningrad Oblast via part of Poland or Lithuania, it will cut off land connection between Baltic states and rest of NATO. This will make defence and support operations much more difficult.

From neighbouring states occurred a disturbing idea of deployment of Russian fighters in air base in Baranovichy. The first time when this information appeared was in 2012 (Dyner, a, 2013, p.2). This location is very valuable for Russian air force. From this base to Poland, Lithuanian and Ukraine border is just around 150 km.

What is important to remember, Belarusian policy is overly personalised around Lukashenko persona and a small group of his loyal officials. But can Minsk run their own independent security policy? As it was mentioned before, Belarusian security policy is strongly linked with Russia. However, Minsk is not a supporter of all Kremlin actions and targets in international policy (Kłysiński, Żochowski, 2016, p. 46). For example, Lukashenko did not recognise the annexation of Crimea or picture himself as a mediator between Russia and West by hosting summits in Minsk, regarding Ukrainian crisis. There are only a few examples that shows that Lukashenko tries to run own policy.

Besides, increasing Russian influence on Belarus is not welcomed by Lukashenko. It undermines sovereignty and allows Kremlin to be the playmaker in internal Belarusian policy. If Minsk completely subordinates to Russian policies and demands, EU, USA and China will stop considering them as an independent entity in international relations. It can cause economic and political damages (Carik, Sivickij, 2016, p. 14). It seems that Lukashenko's goal is status quo and securing his rule. On the one hand, close military cooperation and benefits from Russia are vital for Belarus. However, on the other hand, it needs to maintain the sovereignty by creating its own balanced policy, without overall acceptance of Russian actions. In the current situation, Lukashenko will stand up against the creation of Russian bases on Belarusian territory.

Of course, if Minsk stands up harder to Kremlin's policy, the current Belarusian policy and attitude towards bases can be challenged. Russia does not need to use military force to succeed. The key issue is loyalty of armed forces and law enforcement to Lukashenko. It is a great challenge because of large Russian influence in these institutions (Kłysiński, Żochowski, 2016, p. 48).

Additionally, Russia still tries to put pressure on Lukashenko. In report 'Belarus' v kontekste protivostojanija Rossija–NATO³, published by think tank Centre of Strategy Studies and Foreign Affairs in Minsk, the authors suggested that deployment of Russian troops on western border is a preparation to operate on Belarusian territory. Russian soldiers are not there to protect Russia from NATO, because battalion size units in every Baltic states are not a threat for this country (Carik, Sivickij, 2016, s. 9). Another moment of uncertainty was *Zapad 2017* exercise. Belarusian opposition suggested that this exercise may led to permanent location of Russian troops, conflict inside the Belarus or even attack on NATO. It shows that some of Belarusian authorities are afraid of sovereignty of their state and do not favour Russian policy. These kinds of tools can be used by Russia to put pressure on Minsk to achieve Kremlin's goals in regions. Also to show Lukashenko and NATO that Kremlin have power and determination or to increase their influence in Belarus.

But is there a chance of Russian military aggression on Belarus? It seems that Kremlin has many possibilities to act within this country other than using their armed forces, for example, by using soft power, pro-Russian lobby, economic pressure and sympathy of Belarusian society. These are cheaper and easier ways to force their will than a military operation. Russia plays long-term policy towards Minsk, so military solutions are not likely. Especially, these revolutionary changes can be unfavourable for Russian interests (like it was for Ukraine or Georgia). Kremlin does not want to overthrow Lukashenko but to impoverish his position and intensify their influences. Their policy of putting Minsk on pressure seems to be also a reminder to Lukashenko, which side he supposed to support in conflict between West and Russia.

³ Belarus in context of rivalry between Russia and NATO.

In this case, we can describe Minsk and Kremlin relations as a ‘marriage of convenience’. Lukashenko ensured that Belarus will still be under Russian influence and would not turn to the Western democracies. Also for Lukashenko, this relation is important because it gives him international recognition of his state and secures his power in Belarus. He can only rule with Russian economic and political help. For Kremlin overthrowing Lukashenko to other, more pro-Russian figure is uncertain scenario, with a lot of unpredictable consequences, like during colour revolutions (Topolski, 2009, p. 183-184). So for both sides, cooperation on the current level is profitable.

Also for NATO and EU, status quo is worthwhile. Lukashenko guarantees that Belarus will not be a mindless supporter of all Russian actions and contain increasing of Kremlin power in this state (like new military bases). Minsk policy of balancing gives also Western countries possibility to control the situation in Belarus. For example, Belarusian diplomats invited international observers to *Zapad 2017* exercise, giving a bit of transparency during this event. Western countries should not cut off dialog with Minsk but should give it a possibility to run own policy of balancing. Hence, the best idea will also be to maintain status quo.

In future, situation in Belarus can become area of changes. Alexander Lukashenko was born in 1954 and still will rule for some time. But who will become his successor? Media show that it will be the youngest Lukashenko’s son – Nicola (born in 2005) (<http://belsat.eu/pl/news/kola-lukaszenka-nastepca-tronu/>). It is hard to predict now who will be. However, handing over the power can cause internal struggles. It will be one of the major moments in Belarusian history.

To sum up, Belarus *per se* is not a threat to NATO and neighbouring states. Baltic states cooperate with Belarus quite well, besides being on the opposite allies. Lukashenko does not have any interests in escalating the current geopolitical situation. The biggest threat to Baltic states, Poland and NATO is Kremlin’s policy, which can change Belarusian attitude or force to use their territory to run the military operation.

What seems to be the future on this chessboard? Of course, without any further escalation, status quo, which is beneficial for everyone. NATO does not want to escalate the current situation. For the alliance, enhanced forward presence in Poland and Baltic States shows political will to defend these states and deter Russia from engaging actions against them.

In addition, Minsk would not become an adversary for Baltic states and NATO. Lukashenko can still rule as he wants, and Russia will have their flank secured, because Belarus does not have the project to joining EU or NATO. If one of these pillars changes, the status quo can be endangered, which can cause further changes in the region. However, we do not suppose to have any illusion towards Belarus. It is an important part of the Russian security system and will stay this way, probably in future decades. Russia will never let Belarus march towards West. This country is too important for Kremlin, and losing influences, there is enormous threat for them. The Ukraine scenario showed clearly what can happen if Belarus starts to think about closer cooperation with EU. If Russia will be forced to change something in Belarus or needs to switch in Minsk policy, they have power to achieve their target. The dependence of Belarus on Russia is huge, so the possibility of manoeuvre is quite limited for Lukashenko. Basically, the future of Belarus will be strongly influenced by Kremlin’s decisions.

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Appendix 1

Belarusian armed forces – equipment:

Main Battle Tanks	T-80, T-72
Infantry Fighting Vehicles	BMP-2, BRM-2, MT-LB, BTR-70; BTR-80
Artillery	Self-propelled howitzers: 2S1 <i>Gvozdika</i> ; 2S3 <i>Akatsiya</i> ; 2S5 <i>Giatsint-S</i> ; 2S19 <i>Msta-S</i> Towed artillery: 152-mm gun 2A36; 152-mm howitzer 2A65, 122 mm howitzer D-30 Mortars: self-propelled mortar 2S9 <i>Nona</i> ; 120 mm mortar 2S12 Multiple rocket launchers: BM-21 <i>Grad</i> ; BM-27 <i>Uragan</i> ; BM-30 <i>Smerch</i> ; <i>Polonez</i>
Other	Antitank weapons: 9K111 <i>Fagot</i> ; 9K113 <i>Konkurs</i> ; 9K114 <i>Shturm</i> ; 9K115 <i>Metis</i> Missiles: OTR-21 <i>Tochka</i> ; <i>Scud</i>
Air force	Fighters: MiG-29S/UB; Su-25K/UBK Transport planes: An-12; An-24; An-26; Il-76; Tu-13 Traning planes: L-39 <i>Albatros</i> ; Yak-130 Helicopters: Mi-24; Mi-26; Mi-8
Air defence	9K37 <i>Buk</i> ; 9K35 <i>Strela-10</i> ; 9K33 <i>Osa</i> ; 9K332 <i>Tor</i> ; S-200; S-300

Source: The Military Balance 2016.