

Russia-Belarus military cooperation

As shown by the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus, the power of Aliaksandr Lukashenka depends entirely on Russia. That is why his regime has offered his country's territory to Russia to support it in its aggression against Ukraine. The question is whether the Belarusian army is capable of supporting Russia in direct battle, without further undermining the stability of Lukashenka's regime. As bilateral military cooperation progresses, with repetitive military exercises and a growing Russian military presence in Belarus, the answer remains unclear.

Belarusian army power and shared borders

According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' [Military Balance 2022](#), the Belarusian army has roughly 48 000 troops (of which 6 150 in special operation forces) and a further 12 000 state border troops. The estimated number of reservists who have served within the past 5 years is 290 000. The Belarusian army ranks [60th](#) in the 2023 global firepower index – behind Hungary and Bulgaria and ahead of Slovakia and Belgium. Both Belarus and Russia are members of the [Collective Security Treaty Organisation](#) (CSTO), a Moscow-led military alliance; this year, Belarus holds the CSTO presidency. The length of the Belarusian [border](#) is as follows: 1 084 km with Ukraine, 1 250 km with the EU, and 1 283 km with Russia.

Lukashenka's support for Russia's war against Ukraine

In November 2021, Lukashenka, whose regime [depends](#) on Russian support, abandoned his policy of non-recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea and his previously assumed mediating [role](#) in the Ukraine conflict, and stated that [Crimea](#) is 'legally Russian'. After Lukashenka pledged [loyalty](#) to Moscow, Russian troops entered Belarus and held joint military exercises lasting longer than [planned](#) (10-20 February 2022). The exercises served as a cover-up for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February. Russian forces based in Belarus attacked Kyiv and Chernihiv, and initially took control of the Chernobyl power plant, and of nearby cities and villages, such as [Irpin](#) and [Bucha](#), where they committed [war crimes](#).

Constitutional referendum in Belarus and the issue of a nuclear-free zone

The attack on Ukraine coincided with a constitutional referendum in Belarus, which took place on 27 February. The [referendum](#) replaced an article that had the declared aim of making the country's territory a nuclear-free zone and the state neutral, with a new article explicitly stating that 'Belarus excludes military aggression against other states from its territory' – a commitment already broken at the time of voting – but leaving out the aim of a nuclear-free zone. At the time of writing, Belarus remains a non-nuclear state party to the [Treaty](#) on Non-Proliferation of [Nuclear Weapons](#).

Currently, as underlined by experts, Belarus [supports](#) Russian armed forces in [many](#) ways. First, it provides its territory for Russian missile strikes and [unmanned aerial vehicle](#) attacks against Ukraine. It also supplies Russia with military equipment, including [tanks](#) and ammunition, military training and health care, logistics and other services (e.g. accommodation, fuel-processing and military equipment repairs). Belarus serves as a safe haven for the Russian army. Moreover, the constant threat of invasion across the Belarusian border keeps part of the Ukrainian army there, rather than on the front line where it is most needed.

Furthermore, there are repeated signs that Russia is [pressuring](#) Belarus to send its soldiers to Ukraine. Belarusians, regardless of their political position, are [against](#) direct military engagement in Ukraine. Some claim that the decision to [send troops](#) could spark a new wave of massive protests and expose the lack of Belarusian army support for the regime, with some units putting down arms or [switching](#) sides. Besides further destabilising the situation in the region, such a scenario would further increase Lukashenka's [dependence](#) on Russia. Russia, as suggested in the past, [might](#) then try to choose a [new](#) ruler for Belarus. Some experts [argue](#) that for these reasons, the current arrangements may be optimal for both Putin and Lukashenka. The experts add, however, that constant monitoring of the situation (with regard to the scale of Russian troops and equipment on Belarusian soil) is necessary, as this assumption of an optimal scenario for both sides may change or prove incorrect.



Military cooperation

The new [military doctrine](#) of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, a slowly-progressing [integration](#) framework covering the two countries, was approved on 4 November 2021, 22 years after the Union State was created. The doctrine pays special attention to actions to be taken during a period of perceived increased military threat. These actions include pursuing agreed security and foreign policy, regular joint exercises, deepened defence industry cooperation, coordination of armament procurement and a bi-national Regional Group of Forces (RGF); in 1999 the [Treaty on the Union State](#) referred to it as a 'regional grouping of troops' (the media use both names). Other actions include infrastructure development and the establishment of an RGF joint command. The doctrine further addresses hybrid threats, including information warfare and cyber. Soon after its adoption, Russia launched its open invasion of Ukraine.

In October 2022, Lukashenka [announced](#) that the RGF would be formed on Belarusian territory, owing to an alleged 'threat' to the borders of the Union State. Analysts found it possible that, by pointing to a 'threat' to Belarus' external borders, Lukashenka was trying to argue against direct involvement of the Belarusian armed forces in Ukraine. However, as shown below, it only further stepped up Russia's military presence in Belarus (with the Russian RGF component officially estimated at 9 000 soldiers), accelerated the two armies' integration, and deepened the regime's dependency on the stronger partner – Moscow.

December 2022 was marked by many high-level bilateral meetings. On 3 December, the Russian and Belarusian ministers of defence signed a [protocol amending the 1997 agreement](#) on the joint provision of regional security in the military sphere. While the content of the amendment remains confidential, some assume it covers the establishment and operation of joint training centres, which would lead to the unification of the two sides' training systems and increase interoperability. On 19 December, Putin and Lukashenka held a [meeting](#) in Minsk where they agreed that Belarus and Russia would create a 'common defence space'. Experts expect that such a space will translate into even closer joint defence activities and planning, with a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus. On the same day, Lukashenka announced the start of the combat duty of [Iskander-M](#) (the short-range ballistic missile system capable of carrying nuclear weapons) and of the [S-400](#) air defence missile system received from Russia. Putin confirmed that Russia would provide training for Belarusian pilots of jets capable of carrying nuclear weapons ([Belarus](#) claims that its jets have been modified to be able to carry out this task, although Belarus does not have nuclear weapons). Other December 2022 announcements include joint military exercises in Belarus, Russian support for Belarusian railway troop development (note that Belarusian [railway](#) workers managed to disrupt military transit through the country by sabotaging infrastructure) and increased intelligence cooperation.

Joint Russian-Belarusian military exercises took place on Belarusian soil in early 2023, [reportedly](#) focusing on urban warfare, followed by [air force](#) drills. A key part of the most recent joint staff training of the RGF [Joint Command](#) was 'decision-making on the use of a regional grouping of troops in the interests of ensuring the military security of the Union State'. Reportedly, the training was 'aimed at increasing the compatibility of the military authorities of the two states' and 'is the next stage of preparation for the joint operational exercise 'Union Shield – 2023'.

According to a [leader of the Belarusian opposition](#), everything is ready for mobilisation in Belarus, as evidenced by Lukashenka's decision in October 2022 to verify military reservists' [records](#). Some view this as hidden [mobilisation](#), while for others it is merely a way to check how many reservists [have left](#) the country since 2020. In December 2022, Belarus ran a [check](#) of its troops' combat readiness.

European Parliament position

In its resolutions, the European Parliament has [repeatedly](#) condemned the use of Belarusian territory for Russian aggression against Ukraine. Moreover, in a resolution of [24 November 2022](#), it endorsed the position of the Belarusian democratic opposition and civil society that 'Belarus should be recognised as an occupied or de facto occupied territory'. On [19 January 2023](#), Parliament stated that the tribunal on the crime of aggression against Ukraine 'must have jurisdiction to investigate ... also Aliaksandr Lukashenka and the political and military leadership in Belarus, as an enabling state'. On 19 October 2022, in its plenary session, the European Parliament [debated](#) Lukashenka regime's active role in the war against Ukraine.