

Ireneusz Topolski*

Military presence of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Belarus

Obecność wojskowa Federacji Rosyjskiej w Republice Białorusi

Summary: A military presence on the territory of the Republic of Belarus is highly significant for the Russian Federation geopolitically. Russia is very particular about having buffer zones, client and neighbouring states with limited sovereignty on its borders. The aim of this article is to analyse the specificity of the Russian Federation's military presence in Belarus. In the following article, two hypotheses have been verified using factor analysis. Firstly, sustaining control over the territory of Belarus is of particular importance for the military safety of Russia, while at the same time, it detrimentally affects the stability of the Central and Eastern Europe countries. Secondly, the Russian Federation does not have a permanent military base within Belarusian territory and its military presence is solely confined to the use of military and transport infrastructure, which is indispensable for rapid accommodation and deployment of the Armed Force formations as well as for the rotation of strike forces. Due to political reasons, a permanent military presence enables Russia to keep Belarus within its area of influence. Nevertheless, in military terms, the utilisation of military and transport infrastructure in order to rapidly deploy strike forces within the territory of the Republic is far more important.

Keywords: Russian Federation, Russia, Republic of Belarus, military presence, Central and Eastern Europe, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

Streszczenie: Obecność wojskowa na terytorium Republiki Białorusi ma dla Federacji Rosyjskiej istotne znaczenie geopolityczne. Rosja przywiązuje dużą uwagę do utrzymania na swoich granicach stref buforowych, państw klienckich oraz posiadających ograniczoną suwerenność. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza specyfiki obecności wojskowej Federacji Rosyjskiej na terytorium Białorusi. W prezentowanym artykule, stosując analizę czynnikową, zweryfikowano dwie hipotezy. Po pierwsze, utrzymanie kontroli nad terytorium Białorusi ma duże znaczenie dla bezpieczeństwa militarnego Rosji, ale jednocześnie wpływa negatywnie na poziom stabilności państw Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Po drugie, Federacja Rosyjska nie posiada na terytorium Republiki Białorusi stałej bazy bojowej, a jej obecność wojskowa ogranicza się tylko do wykorzystania infrastruktury militarnej i transportowej. Jest ona nie-

* Ireneusz Topolski – PhD Habil., Department of Political Science and Journalism, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland, ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7152-8329>, e-mail: ireneusz.topolski@mail.umcs.pl.

zbędna do szybkiego rozmieszczenia i rozwinięcia formacji sił zbrojnych oraz rotacyjnego stacjonowania jednostek uderzeniowych. Ze względów politycznych stała obecność wojskowa umożliwia utrzymanie Białorusi w strefie wpływów Federacji. Jednak pod względem militarnym ważniejsze jest wykorzystanie infrastruktury wojskowej i transportowej przez Rosję, w celu szybkiego przetrzucenia i rozwinięcia formacji uderzeniowych na terytorium Republiki.

Słowa kluczowe: Federacja Rosyjska, Rosja, Republika Białorusi, Białoruś, obecność wojskowa, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, Organizacja Traktatu Północnoatlantyckiego

Introduction

A military presence constitutes a significant military instrument of any foreign policy. This notion comprises either permanent or temporary deployment of armed forces outside a country's borders. Permanent deployment involves the utilisation of military bases, important military installations (especially Distant Early Warning (DEW) systems), communication centres, and airfields. It can be solely limited to the usage of military infrastructure. Training missions, including the use of training centres, are an important issue as well. On the other hand, the permanent deployment of forces involves accommodation of armaments and military equipment in depots located on the territory of a foreign country. Temporary military presence involves the deployment of military units and may be connected with other forms of military activities such as air and naval patrols (for instance, protecting air space or controlling certain water regions or communication routes). Moreover, the execution of unified military training, personnel visits, or the presence of aircraft and warships in bases and ports should also be considered here, and the qualitative and quantitative potential of the armed forces also plays an important role in this respect¹.

Maintaining both a permanent and temporary military presence abroad is of great importance for several reasons, the most important being:

- 1) a preventative and protective function – preventing a potential assailant from taking hostile actions against the allies;
- 2) ensuring national security;
- 3) keeping stability and peace on a regional level;

1 I. Topolski, *Instrument militarny polityki zagranicznej państwa*, "TEKA Komisji Politologii i Stosunków Międzynarodowych" 2016, vol. 11, no. 3, p. 157.

4) political, military, and economic influences in a “host state”.

A military presence in certain regions may negatively affect international security. It might result in a possible attack on neighbouring states or the destabilisation of a given region.

The aim of this article is to analyse the specificity of the Russian Federation’s (Russia, the Federation) military presence in the Republic of Belarus (the Republic, Belarus). The following research hypotheses have been adopted:

1. Sustaining control over the territory of Belarus is of particular importance for the military safety of Russia, while at the same time, it detrimentally affects the stability of the Central and Eastern Europe countries.

2. The Russian Federation does not have a permanent military base within Belarusian territory and its military presence is solely confined to the use of military and transport infrastructure. It is indispensable for the rapid accommodation and deployment of the Armed Forces formations as well as for the rotating system of stationing of strike forces.

To analyse the above hypotheses, factor analysis has been used. The aim of the first part is to provide characteristics of the most important considerations of the Russian Federation’s military presence in the Republic of Belarus. Its structure and significance are analysed in the following sections of the article. The time period in question extends from the annexation of Crimea (February 2014) to the beginnings of the Russian aggression against Ukraine (February 2022).

1. Conditions on the military presence of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Belarus

Providing an explanation for the military presence of Russia in the territory of Belarus requires us to determine its geopolitical significance. This approach implies that on the borders of the Federation there should be buffer zones; client states or states with limited sovereignty. Russia is extremely particular about securing its safety on the so-called western flank. Furthermore, the military presence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Central and Eastern Europe is treated as a “potential” military threat by the Federation. Following the annexation of Crimea, a “new cold war” between Russia and NATO led to the redefinition of the geo-strategic location of Belarus, which

started to play a crucial role in maintaining stability in Europe, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the importance of Belarus in Russian military politics has increased significantly².

A potential military conflict in Central and Eastern Europe carries great weight for the Republic. The territory of Belarus forms a convenient area for Russia to take possible military action against NATO (and its members). Poland and the Baltic states are particularly at risk. In this region is the Suwałki Isthmus (corridor) – a 65-kilometre-long stretch of border between Poland and Lithuania, which is regarded as the “weakest link” of the Alliance. Its capture by Russia would mean obtaining a land connection between Belarus and the Kaliningrad Oblast. This would, in fact, block part of Poland’s Eastern border, and consequently cause Baltic states to become cut off from NATO. If such events were to take place, the defence of the most vulnerable members of NATO would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. However, taking any effective military land operation by Russia against Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia somehow “forces” the Russian army to use the territory of the Republic, with logistics and battle factors being strictly decisive in such an event. A Russian military presence in Belarus also constitutes a kind of “shield” for the Kaliningrad Oblast³.

The idea of creating a permanent military base in Belarus by the Federation is controversial. So far, the authorities of the Republic have evaded allowing the permanent deployment of Russian military units on its territory. Despite his earlier assurances, Alexander

- 2 J. Sherr, *Ukraine and the Black Sea Region: The Russian Military Perspective*, [in:] *The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective*, S.J. Blank (ed.), Carlisle 2019, p. 784; J. Hedenskog, *Endgame Belarus: Union State Integration Under Pressure*, Stockholm 2021, pp. 18-19; *Rossijsko-bieloruskoje sotrudnichestwo: wriemia strategiczeskich rieszenij. Analiticeskij doklad*, Moscow–Minsk 2021, p. 2; I. Topolski, *Polityka Federacji Rosyjskie wobec państw Europy Wschodniej*, Lublin 2013, pp. 106-107; E. Rumer, B. Belei, *Belarus: with friends like these...*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2017, pp. 1, 6-7; I. Topolski, *Manewry wojskowe jako forma demonstracji siły militarnej Federacji Rosyjskiej w Europie*, “Wschód Europy. Studia humanistyczno-społeczne” 2019, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 187.
- 3 E. Rumer, B. Belei, op. cit., pp. 6-7; J. Hedenskog, op. cit., pp. 18-19; A. Marin, *The Union State of Belarus and Russia. Myths and Realities of Political-Military Integration*, Vilnius 2020, pp. 24-25, 29-30; A. Wilk, *Rosyjska armia białoruska. Praktyczne aspekty integracji wojskowej Białorusi i Rosji*, Warsaw 2021, pp. 18-20; R. Vilpišauskas, *Perspective from Lithuania: Towards no Illusions of an Independent Belarus*, [in:] *Post-2020 Belarus: Security and Defence Implications for the Baltic States, Poland, and NATO*, M. Andžāns, E. Džatkoviča, A. Sprūd (eds.), Riga 2021, p. 30; A.A. Michta, *NATO and a Resurgent Russia: Can the Alliance Adapt?*, [in:] *The Russian Military...*, pp. 1016-1017.

Lukashenko has so far refused to allow the construction of a permanent air base by the Federation. Belarus strongly opposed Russian plans to deploy rocket systems. This stance stemmed mainly from the implications following the Crimea annexation, i.e., the risk of the Russian Army being stationed within the country. The president claimed that constructing a military base would undermine the assurances given to the neighbouring countries that the Russian army will not be allowed to use the territory of Belarus to attack Ukraine or other countries⁴.

The issue of building a permanent military base on the territory of Belarus seems to be more of a political nature for the Federation. It can be interpreted as a reaction to NATO's activities in Poland and the Baltic states; however, it does not bear great military significance, as, in practice, Russian Army units could very quickly (in 24-48 hours) be relocated and deployed in the Republic⁵.

The attitude towards the military presence of the Federation in Belarus has been "corrected" after the rigged presidential election held on the 9th of August 2020. This led to mass protests against Lukashenko. As a result, he turned to Russia for help for fear of a possible NATO intervention and the authorities of the Republic became more susceptible to Russian influences. Nevertheless, despite a very difficult situation and considerable deterioration of relations with the West, Lukashenko was still reluctant to agree to the idea of creating a permanent Russian military base. Eventually, a "compromise" was reached and Russia agreed to create a unified air force and air defence training centre. The two countries also focused on air patrol missions and the intensification of battle drills with the participation of military units on the territory of Belarus⁶.

The constitution of the Republic contained a provision regarding the stationing of foreign armed forces on its territory. In the 2nd par-

4 A. Marin, op. cit., p. 18-19; E. Rumer, B. Belej, op. cit., p. 6; J. Hedenskog, op. cit., p. 21; A. Sivitsky, *Perspective from Belarus: Russia and Belarus – Still Reluctant Allies*, [in:] *Post-2020 Belarus: Security and...*, p. 78; M. Samorukov, *Perspective from Russia: Belarus and Russia – Allies More in Words than in Deeds*, [in:] *Post-2020 Belarus: Security and...*, pp. 59-60.

5 G. Barros et al., *Indicators and Thresholds for Russian Military Operations in Ukraine and/or Belarus*, Report, Institute for the Study of War, 17 February 2022, pp. 14-15, 206; A. Wilk, op. cit., pp. 18-19, 25-27, 57.

6 J. Hedenskog, op. cit., pp. 7-8, 33; A. Wilk, op. cit., pp. 52-53; A. Sivitsky, op. cit., pp. 67-68, 76-81; M. Samorukov, op. cit., pp. 62-63.

agraph of the 18th article, it was stated that Belarus pursues neutrality and the fact that its territory should remain a zone free of nuclear weapons. This meant that no foreign military units could be permanently stationed within its borders. Belarussian authorities also declared the state's neutrality in this matter. On the 27th of February 2022, *The Republican Referendum for the Amendments and Supplementation to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus* was held. The amendments concerned, among others, the 18th article. In the new text of the law, it means that “the Republic of Belarus forecloses the military aggression against other countries from its territory”. This amendment completely changes the attitude towards nuclear weapons deployment, as well as any permanent presence of foreign armed forces on its territory⁷.

2. The structure of the Russian Federation military forces present in the Republic of Belarus

Until 2021, the only way for the Federation to maintain a permanent military presence on the territory of Belarus was by the utilisation of two military infrastructure facilities. By virtue of this agreement, Russia leases the 43rd Naval Communication Hub and 474th Independent Radiotechnical Interchange “Hancewicze”. These facilities are not treated as military bases since they do not have any fighting ability. In 2021, Russia and Belarus signed a treaty that prolonged their use by 25 years⁸.

The 43rd Naval Communication Hub located near Wilejka in the Minsk Oblast has been equipped with an RJH69 *Antiej* radio station. The primary goal of the “Wilejka” Centre is to offer communica-

7 M. Boulègue, *Russia's Assets and Liabilities in Belarus*, report, Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington 2020, p. 8; *Konstytucja Rzespubliki Bielarus'*, <https://president.gov.by/ru/gosudarstvo/constitution>, [10.03.2022]; *Konstytucja Rzespubliki Bielarus' s izmienienijami i dopolnienijami, wynosimymi na riefierendum*, Nacyonalnyj centr prawowoj informacyi Rzespubliki Bielarus', Mińsk 2022, <https://president.gov.by/bucket/assets/uploads/documents/2022/konstuciya-s-cv-24.01.22.pdf> [10.03.2022]; A. Szabaciuk, *Białoruś: referendum konstytucyjne cieniu wojny*, “Komentarze IEŚ” 2022, no. 543; *Rzespublikanskij riefierendum po woprosu wniesienija izmienienij i dopolnienij w Konstytucyju Rzespubliki Bielarus'*, <https://president.gov.by/ru/gosudarstvo/constitution/Referendum> [10.03.2022]; *Swiedienija o riezultatach gołosowanija 27 fiewrala 2022 g.*, Centralnaja Komissija Rzespubliki Bielarus' po wyboram i prowadieniju Rzespublikanskich riefierendumow, <https://rec.gov.by/uploads/folderForLinks/elect18.pdf> [10.03.2022].

8 *Rossijsko...*, p. 26; J. Hedenskog, op. cit., pp. 22-23; A. Marin, op. cit., p. 17; A. Sivitsky, op. cit., p. 68.

tion support between the Navy Headquarters and atomic submarines in the Atlantic. The facility also performs tasks for the Strategic Rocket Forces and the Russian Aerospace Forces. These tasks include radio-technical reconnaissance and radioelectronic combat. It is estimated that approximately 250-350 officers and warrant officers, coming mainly from the Navy, make up its personnel. The facility itself is guarded by Belarussian civil workers. “Wilejka” Communication Hub is considered to be one of the most important elements of Russian military infrastructure outside its borders⁹.

The 474th Independent Radiotechnical Interchange “Hancewicze” is subordinate to the Aerospace Forces. It is located in Ozierieczje in the Brest Oblast. The “Hancewicze” Interchange is part of the Russian Distant Early Warning system and its main equipment includes a 70M6 *Volga* radar. The facility’s task is to warn against an intercontinental ballistic strike coming from the northern part of the Atlantic Ocean and the Norwegian Sea. After new radar stations of the *Voronezh* type were introduced in the Leningrad Oblast (“Lechtusi”) and Kaliningrad Oblast (“Pionierskij”), the significance of this interchange diminished greatly. Its upkeep is more for political reasons for Russia since the role it plays within the Distant Early Warning System is merely supplementary. This facility is serviced by approximately 600 – 2000 army personnel (additionally, there are 200 Belorussian citizens). The majority of the personnel on both bases do not wear any uniforms, nor do they carry any weapons¹⁰.

At the end of August 2021 in the Grodziensk Oblast – 4 kilometres away from the Polish border – the deployment of anti-aircraft and anti-missile units commenced, involving two sets of S-400 systems. On

9 *The Military Balance 2015*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2015, p. 197; *The Military Balance 2016*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2016, p. 201; *The Military Balance 2017*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2017, p. 224; *The Military Balance 2018*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2018, p. 206; *The Military Balance 2019*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2019, p. 209; *The Military Balance 2020*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2020, pp. 170, 208; *The Military Balance 2021*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2021, p. 205; *The Military Balance 2022*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2022, p. 208; A. Marin, op. cit., p. 17; J. Hedenskog, op. cit., p. 23; *Rosjijsko...*, p. 26; A. Sivitsky, op. cit., pp. 70-75.

10 J. Hedenskog, op. cit., pp. 22-23; *Rosjijsko...*, p. 26; A. Wilk, op. cit., pp. 20-21; A. Marin, op. cit., p. 17; A. Mrachek, *Russia*, in: *2022 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, D.L. Wood (ed.), Washington 2022, p. 241.

the 8th of September 2021, 4 multirole combat aircraft of the Su-30SM type belonging to the Aero-Space Forces, along with their ground personnel, were deployed at Baranoviche airport. Their mission was to reinforce the monitoring of Belorussian air space, which is, in fact, the outer border of the Federal State. After the “2021 – Zapad” battle drill ended, the aircraft, along with the S-400 systems, remained in Belarus operating as part of the Centre for Combat Training of Air Forces and Air Defence in Grodno, in order to “patrol and protect” the air space of the Republic. Officially, their presence is connected with battle and combat drills. The centre itself is not treated as a military base since it does not have extraterritorial status and is not directly subject to the Armed Forces Headquarters of the Federation. What is more, its location – close to the Suwałki Corridor – is not accidental. Russian military units are regularly stationed there in a rotating system. In addition, the Unified System of Radioelectronic Combat spans the Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus. These forces are characterised by the large concentration of units belonging to this category¹¹.

The Russian Federation attaches great importance to the use of military infrastructure in the territory of Belarus. This fact is furthered by the creation of military structures in the Federal State and by the adopted treaties and agreements. The former comprises the Regional Group of Forces (RGF), which is a unified military unit of both countries, and the Unified Regional Air Defence System (URADS). RGF can be activated in case of war or a serious military threat. URADS has formally been functioning since 2016. It is supplemented by the Unified System of Technical Security and the Unified System of Radio-electronic Combat, both of which are a part of RGF. Vital resolutions have been included in documents such as the “Agreement on the unified use of military infrastructure” (1998), the “Agreement on unified rear protection of RGF” (2002), the “Agreement on unified technical security of RGF” (2016), and the “Decision on unified protection of air space of the Federal State outer border”. The Armed Forces, acting within the framework of URADS, may freely use airports lying in the terri-

11 G. Barros, *Russia Opens Permanent Training Center in Belarus and Sets Conditions for Permanent Military Basing*, Institute for the Study of War, 8 April 2021, pp. 1-8; J. Hedenskog, op. cit., pp. 7-8, 33-34; A. Sivitsky, op. cit., pp. 76-81; A. Wilk, op. cit., p. 20.

tory of Belarus. Aircraft of various types, including combat aircraft as well as early warning and command units (*Beriev A-50*), are being stationed there on a rotation system. The utilisation of airports takes place within unified battle drills and during basic training of Russian Aero-Space units¹².

The modernisation of airport infrastructure goes far beyond the actual needs of the Republic and the temporary presence of the Russian Air Force. In practice, it is ready to permanently or temporarily accommodate at least two regiments of Aero-Space Force which could amount to a total of 48-72 aircraft. Furthermore, one of the four main military airports in Belarus – Bobruysk, is exclusively used by the Federation. In effect, after the modernisation, all types of aircraft including strategic bombers may make use of it. The capabilities of other bases, i.e., Baranoviche, Lida, and Maczuliszczce, go far beyond the potential of the Air Force of the Republic of Belarus¹³.

Federal Armed Forces within the RGF have the right to use the material resources, military, and transport infrastructure within the territory of Belarus. This matter also concerns the distribution of fuel – essential for dislocation and conducting various operations. Belarussian Transport Forces and Rail Forces of the Federation are responsible for the protection of the units and transport of military resources, maintenance, overhaul, and extension of the rail infrastructure, and building pontoon bridges. Russia can also accommodate military equipment and armaments in Belarussian depots. Belarussian infrastructure, and infrastructure built on its territory as part of the Federal State, can also be used for this purpose. It needs to be emphasised that the Republic “omitted” the development of military and transport infrastructure, including airports, alongside the Ukrainian border. Moreover, some units have been relocated to other areas of the country. In practice, although the Russian Armed Forces may free-

12 A. Wilk, op. cit., pp. 16-27; M. Samorukov, op. cit., pp. 58-59; M. Boulègue, op. cit., p. 8; A. Marin, op. cit., p. 15; J. Hedenskog, op. cit., pp. 21-22; K. Muzyka, *The Belarussian Armed Forces: Structures, Capabilities, and Defence Relations with Russia*, Tallinn 2021, pp. 18-19.

13 A. Wilk, op. cit., pp. 22-27; K. Muzyka, op. cit., p. 19.

ly operate in this part of Belarus, it lacks the necessary support area for taking combat actions¹⁴.

The temporary military presence of Russia is also connected with conducting unified military exercises or drills and other forms of activities in Belarus. The biggest of these – “Zapad” – has been held recurrently since 2009, every 4 years. In the years 2017 and 2021, it was feared that their purpose was to establish a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus. The “Zapad” military exercises have been consciously planned as a “way” of getting ready for a hypothetical armed conflict with NATO. This process was accompanied by other activities in the western part of the Republic with the overall aim of the exercises being the assumed repelling of an attack on the Federal State coming from a fictional entity (the West). Officially, these exercises were supposed to be a strategic defensive operation, nevertheless, a major part of the drill involved the dislocation of the Western Military District of the Federation, i.e., air force and airborne units, followed by armoured and mechanised forces. These actions were of an offensive nature. During the “Zapad” military exercises, the main emphasis was placed on offensive actions, or counterattack, rather than typical defensive activities. The exercises were preceded by [significant] preparations, with the proper “Zapad-2021” military exercises held between the 10-16th of September 2021. Still, the first formations had arrived at the training ground near Brest as early as the 22nd of July 2021. All the Russian units had been recalled from Belarus by the 30th of September 2021¹⁵.

It is worth pointing out that other military exercises took place on the territory of Belarus. These involved, among others, the “Slavic Brotherhood”, “Sturdy Brotherhood-2020”, and “Shield of the Federation”. In addition, unified training of the radiolocating formations operation as part of URADS, during which aircraft belonging to the Russian

14 G. Barros et al., op.cit., pp. 14-15; A. Wilk, op. cit., pp. 18-19; K. Muzyka, op. cit., pp. 18-20; S. Bohdan, *Can the Belarusian army make a difference in the Russia-Ukraine war?*, Belarus Digest, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/can-the-belarusian-army-make-a-difference-in-the-russia-ukraine-war/> [23.04.2022].

15 R. Vilpišauskas, op. cit., pp. 29-33; K. Kłysiński, P. Szymański, *Perspective from Poland: From an Independent Neighbour to a Satellite of Russia Across the Eastern Border*, [in:] *Post-2020 Belarus: Security and...*, pp. 45-46; A. Sivitsky, op. cit., pp. 78-81; A. Wilk, op. cit., pp. 30-36; J. Hedenskog, op. cit., pp. 7-8, 33-34.

Armed Forces are stationed at airports in Belarus, also took place. On a tactical level, Special and Airborne Forces training is also held¹⁶. The “Allied Determination-2022” military exercises held in Belarus between 10-20th of February 2022, also need a mention; units of the Eastern Military District as well as Aero-Space Forces, Airborne Forces, and the Pacific Fleet all took part in this battle drill. The first units were relocated, operating as part of URADS, in January 2022. They comprised 12 Su-35 multi-role aircraft, two divisions of S-400 systems, and an anti-aircraft division *Pancyr-S*. A considerable force – more than 10 brigades – has been dislocated in the territory of Belarus. This included armoured, mechanised, artillery, rocket, marine, amphibious assault, special forces, logistics, and command and control units. A part of the formation from the 98th Airborne Division and the 76th Amphibious Assault Division were dislocated, as well. Additionally, strike aircraft Su-25SM have been relocated to the Brest Oblast¹⁷.

Since January 2022, in the territory of the Republic, the Russian Army has at its disposal anti-air and anti-missile defence systems *S-400* and *Pancyr-S*, respectively. Mobile *Iskander-M* ballistic missiles have also been deployed. It needs to be emphasised that Russian military units are in the process of constant rotation, which, in effect, resembles a permanent military presence¹⁸.

3. The significance of the Russian Federation’s military presence in the Republic of Belarus

“Permanent” military presence is of great importance in Russia’s politics towards the Republic and the West. Having military units on the territory of Belarus is the most efficient way of keeping this country within its sphere of influence. It also includes the rotating presence

16 M. Samorukov, op. cit., p. 62; J. Hedenskog, op. cit., p. 33; *Rossijsko...*, p. 28; A. Marin, op. cit., p. 15; A. Wilk, op. cit., pp. 32-33, 52-53.

17 Military units dislocated in Belarus, see: J. Zwieriew, «Sojuznaja reszymost’»: *Kakoj otviet na wniesznjuju agriessiju otrabotyvajut Rossija Bieloruszija, Jewrazija*.Ekspiert, <https://eurasia.expert/kakoj-otvet-na-vneshnyuyu-agressiyu-otrabatyvayut-rossiya-i-belorusziya/> [30.04.2022]; G. Barros et al., op. cit., pp. 15, 206-208, 213-225; *Kak minimum iz dwuch brigad Wostocznego wojennogo okruga pieriebrasywajut «Iskandery»*, <https://citeam-ru.medium.com/как-минимум-из-двух-бригад-восточного-военного-округа-перебрасывают-искандеры-2c6784fd71b9> [30.04.2022].

18 G. Barros et al., op. cit., pp. 14-17, 206-208; J. Hedenskog, op. cit., pp. 33-34; G. Barros, *Russia...*, pp. 1-8.

of various Armed Forces formations, predominantly as part of unified military training. The weakened position of Alexander Lukashenko both in internal and foreign politics fosters this phenomenon. Being isolated by the West seems to be especially important in this respect. In practice, the gradual increase in Russia's military presence in Belarus causes the spread of political influences. This situation affects the national defence policy and consequently, the Republic's national security. In fact, Belarus is becoming more and more militarily dependent on Russia. Therefore, it can be said that the military presence, apart from the cooperation of armaments industries and ordnance deliveries, leads to the taking of control over the Republic of Belarus¹⁹.

Having military units on Belorussian territory impacts the geo-strategic position of Russia towards the West. The Federation uses its military presence in external relations with the west as a clear message that the Republic finds itself its own exclusive sphere of influence. The temporary dislocation of military units in Belarus is argued to be the response to the strengthened, spearheaded presence of NATO in the Baltic states and in Poland²⁰.

The territory of the Republic constitutes a buffer zone, the so-called strategic depth directed westwards, which separates the Federation from the Alliance. From the Russian perspective, it serves the function of sweeping away the potential military threat several hundred kilometres from its border. Anti-aircraft and anti-missile defence systems S-400 deployed in the Kaliningrad Oblast and in Belarus are complementary to one another. It enables the Federation to create a missile engagement zone in the airspace of the Baltic states and the vast majority of Polish territory – the so-called Anti Access/Area Denial – A2/AD. Additionally, it is supplemented by S-300 systems of the Belorussian Armed Forces acting within the framework of URADS. This fact

19 M. Andžāns, *Conclusions: Belarus – from a Complex to an Even More Complex Neighbour*, [in:] *Post-2020 Belarus: Security and ...*, pp. 88-90; R. Vilpišauskas, op. cit., pp. 30-33; A. Szabaciuk, *Białoruś w polityce Federacji Rosyjskiej w rok po masowych protestach wyborczych w 2020 roku*, [in:] *Kryzys białoruski – czy są szanse na prodemokratyczne zmiany?*, A. Szabaciuk (ed.), Lublin 2021, pp. 17-24; P. Rudkouski, *Siła bez legitymizacji. Kondycja białoruskiego reżimu po wyborach w 2020 roku*, [in:] *Kryzys białoruski – czy są szanse na prodemokratyczne zmiany?*, A. Szabaciuk (ed.), Lublin 2021, pp. 32-39; J. Hedenskog, op. cit., p. 33; D. Sviridenko, M. Orzechowski, *Biało-ruskij mir. Reaktywacja reintegracyjna w relacjach rosyjsko-białoruskich*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej", vol. 19, 2021, no. 2, pp. 75-78.

20 A. Marin, op. cit., p. 1; A. Sivitsky, op. cit., p. 78.

leads to the suppression of activities taken by the NATO air force in this part of Europe. In effect, NATO aircraft constantly find themselves within the range of Russian and Belorussian anti-aircraft defences²¹.

The position of military units of the Russian Armed Forces on the territory of Belarus leads to a change in the geo-strategic aspect of Poland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine. In fact, it makes the border longer, which directly corresponds to their military security. In the case of Ukraine and the Baltic states, it is a peculiar form of “envelopment”. A major military presence, including, above all, offensive military units, generates concerns about possible aggression or provocation of the countries in the region. The strategic importance of a long and porous Ukrainian-Belorussian border needs to be highlighted in this context. From the viewpoint of the Federation, this keeps the most anti-Russian members of NATO, i.e., Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as well as the “disobedient” Ukraine in check²². On the 24th of February 2022, the Russian Armed Forces stationed in Belarus invaded Ukraine. Belorussian territory was also used to carry out airstrikes and missile attacks²³.

Unified military exercises held in Belarus have a political dimension. They have been intensified since September 2020, and in 2021 they increased by one-third. Russia’s main goal is to demonstrate to the West that the Republic is within its sphere of influence. These military exercises – especially “Zapad 2021” – were to show their operational readiness to defend Belarus in the event of any military aggression from the Alliance. In a way, they had a deterring function. These exercises were planned to strike panic into neighbouring states and they were clearly of anti-Western nature. At the same time, the Federation displayed its ability to rapidly deploy forces at the NATO-Belarus frontier; most exercises were conducted near its western border. However,

21 A.A. Michta, op. cit., pp. 1016-1017; *Rossijsko...*, p. 25; S. Gardiner, *When Do You Know it is a Bridge too Far? Emergency Deputies Committee Meeting, Defense of the Baltic States*, [in:] *The Russian Military...*, p. 767; A. Marin, op. cit., pp. 24-30.

22 A. Marin, op. cit., pp. 1, 24-25, 28; M. Samorukov, op. cit., p. 63.

23 M. Clark, G. Barros, K. Stepanenko, *Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: Initial Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment*, Institute for the Study of War, 24 February 2022, pp. 1-4; M. Clark, G. Barros, K. Stepanenko, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 27, 2022*, Institute for the Study of War, 27 February 2022, pp. 1-3; A. Szabaciuk, *Zaangażowanie Białorusi w rosyjską inwazję na Ukrainie*, “Komentarze IES” 2022, no. 532.

in the event of taking rapid and unexpected actions by the Russian Armed Forces from the territory of Belarus, the reaction time of NATO is quite short; however, a potential attack on a Baltic state might well happen during major unified military exercises, for instance, “Zapad”²⁴.

Conclusion

A military presence on the territory of the Republic is used politically by the Federation toward the Alliance. The hypotheses adopted in the introduction to this article have been confirmed. Maintaining control over Belarus is significant for the military security of the Russian Federation, however, it negatively affects the stability level of Central and Eastern European countries. The Republic of Belarus, as a “client state”, constitutes a buffer zone, i.e., an additional “security space”, especially in the event of taking (offensive) military action against the Alliance. In its relations with NATO, Russia’s military presence is also used as an instrument which provokes the feeling of “uncertainty” in countries considered to be the most “anti-Russian” such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Since the 24th of February 2022, making use of Belorussian territory to carry out various military actions, including military aggression, has posed a significant problem for Ukraine.

Furthermore, the Russian Federation does not own a permanent military base in the Republic of Belarus and its military presence is limited to the use of military and transport infrastructure. This is necessary for rapid positioning and deployment of Armed Forces formations as well as for temporary, rotating stationing of assault units. Politically, a permanent military presence, meaning military units, enables the Federation to keep Belarus within its sphere of influence. As far as the military goes, utilisation of military and transport infrastructure in order to rapidly relocate and deploy its forces in Belarus seems to be far more important for Russia. For example, while conducting military operations in the Kiev region, Russia encountered difficulties in the north of Ukraine. This is due to the fact that military infrastructure in this part of Belarus is relatively weakly developed or

24 R. Vilpišauskas, op. cit., pp. 29-33; A. Marin, op. cit., p. 16; A. Sivitsky, op. cit., pp. 78-80; J. Heden-skog, op. cit., p. 33; M. Samorukov, op. cit., p. 63; S. Gardiner, op. cit., pp. 755-756.

missing altogether. The lack of a so-called support area can be seen and difficult terrain adds to the predicament. It should be noted that military and transport infrastructure near the Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian frontiers is adequately developed and this subject matter is very important for countries in Central and Eastern Europe; therefore, more research on this issue is needed and it should also be expanded by adding the issues of the presence of Russians and special forces agents in the Belorussian Army structures.

References

- 2022 *Index of U.S. Military Strength*, D.L. Wood (ed.), Washington 2022.
- Andžāns M., *Conclusions: Belarus – from a Complex to an Even More Complex Neighbour*, [in:] *Post-2020 Belarus: Security and Defence Implications for the Baltic States, Poland, and NATO*, M. Andžāns, E. Džatkoviča, A. Sprūd (eds.), Riga 2021.
- Barros G. et al., *Indicators and Thresholds for Russian Military Operations in Ukraine and/or Belarus*, Report, Institute for the Study of War, 17 February 2022.
- Barros G., *Russia Opens Permanent Training Center in Belarus and Sets Conditions for Permanent Military Basing*, Institute for the Study of War, 8 April 2021.
- Belarus Digest, <https://belarusdigest.com>.
- Boulègue M., *Russia's Assets and Liabilities in Belarus*, report, Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington 2020.
- Clark M., Barros G., Stepanenko K., *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 27, 2022*, Institute for the Study of War, 27 February 2022.
- Clark M., Barros G., Stepanenko K., *Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: Initial Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment*, Institute for the Study of War, 24 February 2022.
- Conflict Intelligence Team, <https://citeam-ru.medium.com>.
- Gardiner S., *When Do You Know it is a Bridge too Far? Emergency Deputies Committee Meeting, Defense of the Baltic States*, [in:] *The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective*, S.J. Blank (ed.), Carlisle 2019.
- Hedenskog J., *Endgame Belarus: Union State Integration Under Pressure*, Stockholm 2021.
- Instytut Europy Środkowej, <https://ies.lublin.pl>.
- Jewrazija.Ekspiert, <https://eurasia.expert>.
- Kłysiński K., Szymański P., *Perspective from Poland: From an Independent Neighbour to a Satellite of Russia Across the Eastern Border*, [in:] *Post-2020 Belarus: Security and Defence Implications for the Baltic States, Poland, and NATO*, M. Andžāns, E. Džatkoviča, A. Sprūd (eds.), Riga 2021.

- Konstitucyja Rzespubliki Bielarus' s izmienienijami i dopolnienijami, wynosimymi na riefierendum*, Nacyonalnyj centr prawowej informacyi Rzespubliki Bielarus', Minsk 2022.
- Konstitucyja Rzespubliki Bielarus'*, <https://president.gov.by/ru/gosudarstvo/constitution>.
- Marin A., *The Union State of Belarus and Russia. Myths and Realities of Political-Military Integration*, Vilnius 2020.
- Michta A.A., *NATO and a Resurgent Russia: Can the Alliance Adapt?*, [in:] *The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective*, S.J. Blank (ed.), Carlisle 2019.
- Mrachek A., *Russia*, [in:] *2022 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, D.L. Wood (ed.), Washington 2022.
- Muzyka K., *The Belarusian Armed Forces: Structures, Capabilities, and Defence Relations with Russia*, Tallinn 2021.
- Post-2020 Belarus: Security and Defence Implications for the Baltic States, Poland, and NATO*, M. Andžāns, E. Djatkoviča, A. Sprūd (eds.), Riga 2021.
- Riespublikanskij riefierendum po woprosu wniesienija izmienienij i dopolnienij w Konstitucyju Rzespubliki Bielarus'*, <https://president.gov.by/ru/gosudarstvo/constitution/Referendum>.
- Rossijsko-bieloruskoje sotrudnicestwo: wriemja strategiczeskich rieszenij, analiticzeskij doklad*, Moskow–Minsk 2021.
- Rudkouski P., *Siła bez legitymizacji. Kondycja białoruskiego reżimu po wyborach w 2020 roku*, [in:] *Kryzys białoruski – czy są szanse na prodemokratyczne zmiany?*, A. Szabaciuk (ed.), Lublin 2021.
- Rumer E., Belei B., *Belarus: with friends like these...*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2017.
- Samorukov M., *Perspective from Russia: Belarus and Russia – Allies More in Words than in Deeds*, [in:] *Post-2020 Belarus: Security and Defence Implications for the Baltic States, Poland, and NATO*, M. Andžāns, E. Djatkoviča, A. Sprūd (eds.), Riga 2021.
- Sherr J., *Ukraine and the Black Sea Region: The Russian Military Perspective*, [in:] *The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective*, S.J. Blank (ed.), Carlisle 2019.
- Sivitsky A., *Perspective from Belarus: Russia and Belarus – Still Reluctant Allies*, [in:] *Post-2020 Belarus: Security and Defence Implications for the Baltic States, Poland, and NATO*, M. Andžāns, E. Djatkoviča, A. Sprūd (eds.), Riga 2021.
- Sviridenko D., Orzechowski, M., *Biało-ruskij mir. Reaktywacja reintegracyjna w relacjach rosyjsko-białoruskich*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2021, vol. 19, no. 2.
- Swiedienija o riezultatach gosowanija 27 fiewrala 2022 g.*, Centralnaja Komissija Rzespubliki Bielarus' po wyboram i prowadieniju Rzespublikanskich riefierendumow, <https://rec.gov.by/uploads/folderForLinks/elect18.pdf>.

- Szabaciuk A., *Białoruś w polityce Federacji Rosyjskiej w rok po masowych protestach wyborczych w 2020 roku*, [in:] *Kryzys białoruski – czy są szanse na prodemokratyczne zmiany?*, A. Szabaciuk (ed.), Lublin 2021.
- Szabaciuk A. (ed.), *Kryzys białoruski – czy są szanse na prodemokratyczne zmiany?*, Lublin 2021.
- The Military Balance 2015*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2015.
- The Military Balance 2016*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2016.
- The Military Balance 2017*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2017.
- The Military Balance 2018*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2018.
- The Military Balance 2019*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2019.
- The Military Balance 2020*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2020.
- The Military Balance 2021*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2021.
- The Military Balance 2022*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2022.
- The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective*, S.J. Blank (ed.), Carlisle 2019.
- Topolski I., *Instrument militarny polityki zagranicznej państwa*, “TEKA Komisji Politologii i Stosunków Międzynarodowych” 2016, vol. 11, no. 3.
- Topolski I., *Manewry wojskowe jako forma demonstracji siły militarnej Federacji Rosyjskiej w Europie*, “Wschód Europy. Studia humanistyczno-społeczne” 2019, vol. 5, no. 1.
- Topolski I., *Polityka Federacji Rosyjskie wobec państw Europy Wschodniej*, Lublin 2013.
- Vilpišauskas R., *Perspective from Lithuania: Towards no Illusions of an Independent Belarus*, [in:] *Post-2020 Belarus: Security and Defence Implications for the Baltic States, Poland, and NATO*, M. Andžāns, E. Djatkoviča, A. Sprūd (eds.), Riga 2021.
- Wilk A., *Rosyjska armia białoruska. Praktyczne aspekty integracji wojskowej Białorusi i Rosji*, Warsaw 2021.