
SERBIA TO HOST TWO MILITARY DRILLS WITH RUSSIA

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Serbia will host Russian Army troops in two separate exercises in September and October - although its most frequent military training cooperation is still with the US.

The Serbian Army is to hold two military exercises with Russian armed forces, Slavic Brotherhood 2016, which starts in September, and BARS 2016 in October, the Serbian defence ministry told BIRN on Wednesday.

We emphasise that the main objectives of joint military exercises and training sessions with members of foreign armed forces are, above all, the improvement of the operational and functional capabilities of the Serbian Army, the ministry said.

Slavic Brotherhood 2016 will be held in Serbia and run on into October, an exercise which is also expected to involve troops from Belarus.

The joint exercises in Serbia will involve intelligence units and equipment drills, Russian Major-General Alexander Vyaznikov told the RIA Novosti agency on Tuesday.

At the moment, the issue of the participation of a third party, the Republic of Belarus, is still being decided. They will be a continuation of the Slavic Brotherhood exercises which were held last year near Novorossiysk, with the only difference being that then combined arms units participated [in the drills], while in Serbia it will involve intelligence units, Vyaznikov added.

The Slavic Brotherhood exercises were established in 2014 when Russia and Serbia staged a joint anti-terrorist drill, codenamed SREM, near the northern Serbian town of Ruma.

In 2015, the exercise involved Russian, Belarussian and Serbian forces and was held in the Krasnodar region of Russia, when more than 700 service personnel, including the 7th Russian Airborne Guards assault division, a company of Serbian airborne troops, two Belarussian special task companies and more than 20 aircraft took part.

The BARS (Brotherhood of Aviators of Russia and Serbia) 2016 exercises will be carried out on land and in the air over Serbia in October.

According to the defence ministry, the exact dates of the October exercises will depend on weather conditions.

They will be held at Batajnica and Nis airports, where Russian and Serbian pilots will fly in mixed crews, mostly in MiG-29 aircraft and Mi-17 helicopters, which Belgrade recently bought from Russia.

Last year, Serbia was involved in 24 military exercises with foreign partners, two of them with the Russian armed forces.

Serbia's close relations with Russia are a sensitive issue in the country's EU accession process because Belgrade has refused to join the EU sanctions imposed against Moscow over its role in the Ukraine conflict.

Serbian officials have stressed on numerous occasions that EU integration is the country's strategic priority but that it also wishes to maintain warm relations with Russia, a traditional ally.

Serbia proclaimed a doctrine of military neutrality in December 2007 and the current government under Aleksandar Vucic has announced no plans to change the policy.

However, the country is linked to NATO through the alliances Partnership for Peace programme. In March 2015, Serbia concluded an Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO, considered the highest level of cooperation with NATO for a non-member country.

Military expert Aleksandar Radic told BIRN that Serbia is lacking a coherent foreign policy and participating in any military exercise that it is invited to join.

Serbia is just going with the flow, Radic said.

If you see how the majority of the army exercises happened, you can see that Serbia was asked to come and, of course, always accepted the calls, he added.

He said that on August 25, a joint military exercise of US European Command Armed Forces will begin, in which Serbia will also participate.

But the defence ministry told BIRN that it could not confirm that information at the moment.

Serbia's most significant military cooperation is with the US. In 2016, Serbia planned 127 joint military activities with the US.

Beside BARS 2016 and Slavic Brotherhood, the Serbian Army has plans to hold 24 more exercises with foreign partners by the end of 2016.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-s-hosting-two-joint-military-exercises-with-russia-08-17-2016>

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