



# BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)  
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## The Russian–Belarusian “West 2013” Military Exercise: An Alliance against External Enemies?

Anna Maria Dyner

*The “West 2013” military exercises were among the common activities undertaken periodically by the Belarusian and Russian armed forces. This year’s scenario was based somewhat on the events of the Arab Spring and assumed that external forces sought to overthrow the Belarusian socio-political system but were opposed by the Russian and Belarusian armies. These assumptions, therefore, indicate the importance that the authorities of the two countries have attached to the events in North Africa, and they demonstrated to their neighbours and the NATO countries the ability of both armies to resist outside intervention. The “West 2013” manoeuvres were also an opportunity to test the combat readiness of the Russian Western Military District and included a series of exercises to test the operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces.*

**The “West 2013” Manoeuvres.** From 20 to 26 September, the Belarusian and Russian militaries carried out high-priority training exercises called “West 2013.” The exercises took place on the Brest, Gozhsky and Obuz-Lesnovsky ranges (in Belarus) and the Khmelevka and Pravdinsky ranges (in Russia’s Kaliningrad).

They were accompanied by manoeuvres codenamed “Cooperation 2013” of Collective Operational Reaction Forces (KSOR) of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). About 600 soldiers from Belarus, Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan participated in these exercises. For the first time in CFOR history, mixed-nationality military contingents were used. The exercises were held on the range in Osipovichi (in Belarus’ Mogilev region). Many elements, including ground forces, the navy, marines, air forces, air defences and internal security, were involved.

The “West-2013” plan was based on elements of the Arab Spring events and assumed that external forces wanted to destabilise Belarus, but were opposed by the Belarusian army, supported by the Russian air force, army and marines. The task of the aviation and air defence operations was to isolate the area of operation while land and sea forces neutralised the enemy. During the manoeuvres, soldiers trained on how to protect the most important buildings in the country, eliminate the effects of man-made disasters, and cooperate with relevant civil services.

For the first time in the history of joint military exercises, the Belarusian army took part in the marines’ landing operation. This part of the exercise was held at military ranges in the Kaliningrad region, where Belarusian Armed Forces troops (350<sup>th</sup> Independent Mobile Battalion of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Independent Mobile Brigade) were transported by ships of the Baltic Fleet from Leningrad’s military naval base.

During the manoeuvres, about 70 tanks (including 10 Russian), 60 aircraft and helicopters (40 Russian), multiple rocket launcher systems, 10 ships of the Baltic Fleet and about 250 pieces of other military equipment were used. Also used were a Belarusian drone called “Formula,” a remotely guided ground combat vehicle system called the “Adunok,” and modern communications and navigation systems.

Invited observers from 60 countries, including Poland, monitored the tactical episodes. Moreover, per the requirements of the Vienna Document, Russia in August informed OSCE and NATO about the scale and date of the manoeuvres, though a greater number of troops and equipment were used than assumed in the minimum limit of the Vienna Document (9,000 soldiers and 250 tanks).

**Implications for Russia and Belarus.** The exercises are among the most important regular activities of the Belarusian and Russian armies, and have been organised every other year since 2009 on the territory of both countries. The 2011 “Union Shield” series of exercises took place on Russian military ranges, while “West 2013” was mainly conducted in Belarus.

The Belarusian authorities used the joint exercises to demonstrate the importance of their military and political alliance with Russia, which is a sort of guarantee of the safety of the current regime. The common manoeuvres also show the degree of integration of the Belarusian and Russian armies and the dependence of the Belarusian Army on Russian help, without which it would not be able to fully fulfil their tasks.

Similar to 2009, the “West 2013” exercises were held in the framework of deteriorating political relations between Belarus and Russia. In 2009, the exercises took place during a period called the “Milk War” (the Russians had stopped imports of Belarusian dairy products). While the recent exercises took place during the “Potassium War,” a spat caused when Russian potassium giant Uralkali ended cooperation with its Belarusian counterpart Belkali, to which Belarus responded by arresting the head of the Russian company and accusing him of acting to the detriment of the Belarusian state. This resulted in turmoil, including a reduction in the amount of Russian oil exported to Belarus (allegedly to repair the Druzhba pipeline) and new complaints about the quality of Belarusian dairy products. These disputes, however, did not appear to have any effect on the manoeuvres, and the authorities of both countries demonstrated that the Belarusian-Russian military alliance is not strictly dependent on their political or economic relations.

For the Russians, the exercises were tests of the combat readiness of their army and were part of a series of manoeuvres and exercises by all kinds of military forces in all military districts, launched in February this year. In May and June, air and missile defence exercises took place, then in July in the Eastern Military District, manoeuvres with 160,000 soldiers were conducted. These included missions such as the rapid transfer of military units over several thousand kilometres. Within the “West 2013” exercises, in the Nizhnenovgorodsky region, the Russian army tested its cooperation with local government and civil services, such as fire brigades and railway workers.

**Conclusions and Recommendations for Poland and NATO.** The “West 2013” scenario was modelled on elements of the events in North Africa and the Middle East, which proves that the leaders of both countries (but especially Belarus) anxiously watched the developments that led to the overthrow of the leaders of three North African countries and to the international military intervention in Libya. This is confirmed by the important role in the exercises of internal security forces subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior whose main task was to defend the most important government buildings.

In contrast to previous exercises, such as “West 2009,” which assumed a fight against an insurgency supported from the outside and aiming to separate the western part of the territory of Belarus (which before World War II was a part of Poland), this year’s manoeuvres were not so clearly set against Poland and Lithuania, even though, as in 2009, the exercises were held on military ranges located near the borders of these countries (two in the Brest region and one in the Grodno region). What is more, both Russia and Belarus emphasised the open nature of the exercises and the large number of invited observers.

However, even though the countries expressed openness to outside observers, it does not mean that those who planned the exercises do not perceive NATO as a possible enemy, which is clearly indicated by the “West 2013” scenario. This seemingly “less-aggressive” scenario in comparison to the one in 2009 may be a result of Russia suffering a bit of international standing because of the adverse reaction of most NATO countries to the perceived threat of the earlier scenario. Moreover, the previous scenario, which also assumed counter-strikes on targets in NATO countries using Russia’s strategic air forces and the massive scale of the manoeuvres, increased the importance of the arguments of the Central European NATO countries for greater attention to the collective defence tasks of Article 5 in the activities of the Alliance.

The exercises confirmed that the military alliance of Russia and Belarus remains strong regardless of the current problems in the relations between the two countries. This is important to NATO when it comes to such measures as increasing confidence in Europe in the military sphere or agreeing on greater transparency in military development. NATO proposals in this area must take into account the Russia–Belarus ties, because of their now obvious deep military integration.

NATO in its defence planning, as well as Poland, should take into account the changes in the armies of Russia and Belarus. The ongoing reform of the Russian military, since 2008, is far from complete but has improved its combat capabilities, which has been proved in part by the frequency and scale of the recent manoeuvres. The replacement of equipment and armament has gradually been extended to the Belarusian Armed Forces. Another example of the deepening of cooperation is the planned Russian air base near Lida in the Grodno region, which means that Russian fighters will patrol Belarusian airspace. This year’s manoeuvres can be seen as a demonstration for NATO countries of Russia’s capabilities in the rapid mobilization, redeployment and concentration of troops to the borders of Belarus and Russia. NATO must be prepared for such a scenario, as both a show of the determination to fulfil the obligations of Article 5 as well as a demonstration of the desire to prevent the escalation of any crisis. These activities should be part of NATO exercises, such as November’s “Steadfast Jazz.”