

‘West 2013’: the Belarusian and Russian armies’ anti-NATO integration exercises

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On 20-26 September, the active (military) phase of the strategic-level exercises held by the armed forces of Russia and Belarus, entitled ‘West 2013’, were held. This was the largest joint exercise both armies had ever carried out; including the ranges in the western part of Belarus, Kaliningrad and the Baltic Sea, over 22,000 soldiers took part in it. For the Russian army, ‘West 2013’ did not constitute a particular challenge, coming as it did as part of the larger series of exercises arranged in parallel in the Murmansk oblast and the Barents Sea. For the Belarusian army, however, this year’s joint exercises are the biggest undertaking in military training it has carried out for two decades. Above all, ‘West 2013’ was a test of the integration of the Belarusian and Russian armies, and particularly of the former’s ability to act within the norms and structures of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

The scenario and nature of the ‘West 2013’ exercises leave no doubt that the Russian/Belarusian forces are training to conduct regular military operations, and their potential opponent is the NATO countries bordering with Russia and Belarus. In political terms, however, we can observe a certain duality in Russia’s approach to NATO. On the one hand – thanks to the information about the exercises reported in media – we see that Moscow is aiming to provoke a negative reaction from its western neighbours. But on the other – from its joint non-military exercises (the ‘Vigilant Sky 2013’ anti-terrorist exercises held in parallel with ‘West 2013’) – it has tried to allay NATO’s concerns regarding the objectives of Russia’s military policy towards Europe.

The military aspect

The exercises carried out by the Regional Group of Forces of the Union State of Belarus and Russia have been organised at the strategic level every two years continuously since the middle of the last decade (alternating in codenames between ‘West’ and ‘Shield Alliance’), and are also announced at least one year in advance. In this respect there is nothing new about the ‘West 2013’ exercises. However, they are distinguished from previous projects of this magnitude by the scale of the forces and manpower involved (12,000 Russian and 10,000 Belarusian soldiers; for more information, see the Appendix), as well as by their geographical scope; this time the military project is being conducted in Belarus and Russia simultaneously, and has been shifted westwards to the maximum extent. For the first time the main thrust of the exercises was focused in Kaliningrad and the Baltic Sea. Some projects related to ‘West 2013’ were carried out in the central part of Russia, and involved

the interactions of the Russian Federation's Ministry of Defence with the ministries of transport, energy (in the Nizhny Novgorod region) and home affairs (one component of Internal Troops exercises in the Moscow region on 20 September), especially the security facilities and logistical support units fighting at a distance from their place of permanent deployment (the Russian troops which trained in Belarus are normally stationed in the central part of Russia).

The 'West 2013' exercises were part of a broader programme of military training in the Western Military District (within the Joint Strategic Command 'West'). They were associated with exercises in the Pskov and Leningrad oblasts which started a few days earlier and were completed on 22 September, and above all in parallel with the Northern Fleet exercises and the troops in the Kola Peninsula (see Appendix), as is indicated by the common theme of both projects. The exercise scenarios were based on the blockade and destruction of the hypothetical enemy's units (referred to in official communiqués as illegal armed formations or terrorists). However, the nature and specifics of the force used (such as artillery and rocket units, aircraft bombers, large ships), as well as the ongoing projects, lead us to believe that the references to 'illegal armed formations' actually conceal the notion of a potential opponent's regular armed forces. It is worth noting that the projects involved the Navy (both in the Baltic and the Barents Sea) and units in the Kaliningrad and Murmansk oblasts, where the exercises included strikes on assault forces and repelling seaborne attacks (the Barents Sea also saw exercises aimed at neutralising submarine attacks by the so-called 'terrorists'). Another noteworthy element of the exercises involved taking and holding towns and fighting in urban areas (in the Kaliningrad region).

For the Belarusian army, the 'West 2013' exercises have been their biggest such military manoeuvres in two decades. A quarter of the entire potential of the Armed Forces of Belarus was directly involved. Given the inadequate funding of the military sphere (which has a budget of US\$500 million per year, compared to Russia's military spending this year of over US\$70 billion and Poland's US\$9 billion), it must be assumed that the most efficient units of the Belarusian army participated in the exercises. The jointly implemented projects served primarily as a test of the integration of the Belarusian and Russian armies, and of the former's real capacity to act according to the standards of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (one particular example was the involvement of a Belarusian mobile battalion as a part of Russian Baltic Fleet Marines). It is worth emphasising that since the middle of the last decade, the Armed Forces of Belarus have only trained above tactical level as part of the Regional Group of Forces (and/or the Unified Regional Air Defence System), and most of the projects carried out independently were aimed at preparing individual Belarusian units for further joint training with the Russian army.

The political aspect

The 'West 2013' exercises took place during a chill in relations between Russia and the West, in relation to the situation in the Middle East and Ukraine's move towards signing an Association Agreement with the EU. This may also explain the largely unofficial reports (controlled leaks) of the scenario and character of the exercises, in which the Regional Group of Forces' main opponents are traditionally the forces of the NATO border states, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. However, although there is some justification for the

idea that these exercises represent a preparation by Belarus and Russia for battle with regular armed forces (meaning the NATO forces lying – from a Russian point of view – in a westward strategic direction), the leaks to the media suggesting that they are a counteraction to alleged aggressive actions by NATO states (mainly subversion on Belarusian territory) do not have any such justification, and must be considered as serving exclusively to provoke negative reactions from the NATO states bordering on Russia, and thus to maintain their image as irrationally Russophobic and incapable of constructive cooperation. Statements by representatives of the Baltic states in connection with the exercises confirmed that the Russian provocation had succeeded.

The deepening divisions in NATO (and within individual member states) also favours the two-track policy that Russia has been observed to be pursuing. In parallel to the 'West 2013' exercise, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation also took part in joint exercises against aerial terrorism entitled 'Vigilant Sky 2013' (23-25 September), in which NATO was represented by Norway, Poland and Turkey. It must be assumed that from the military perspective, the synchronisation of these exercises with the joint Russian/Belarusian undertaking was intended to distract NATO from the 'West 2013' manoeuvres, and from the political perspective, to discredit NATO's fears regarding the aims of Russia's European military policy. This last was also the reason for Russia's invitation of military attaches to Belarus, and of OSCE inspectors (from Denmark, Lithuania and Norway) to the Kaliningrad region, to observe selected military operations.

The 'Cooperation 2013' exercises by the Collective Rapid Reaction Force of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CRRF CSTO), conducted on the territory of Belarus in parallel with 'West 2013', should be considered as Russia's reaction to NATO's 'Steadfast Jazz 2013' exercises planned for this November in Poland and the Baltic states. Over 600 soldiers from Belarus, Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan participated in 'Cooperation 2013'; at the same time, related CRRF CSTO exercises entitled 'Thunder 2013' were taking place in Kyrgyzstan. This project, which does not have any serious military importance, should be regarded as a political demonstration. However, it is noteworthy that, by its nature and the scale of forces and resources involved (the participant states mainly sent sub-units), it directly corresponds to the planned NATO exercises ('Steadfast Jazz 2013' is intended to include 6000 soldiers from 20 countries), and – in contrast to 'West 2013' – should represent a real counterstrike to them.

Appendix

The most important exercises by the Russian Federation's Armed Forces in the Western Military District and the territory of Belarus in the second half of September

18-22 September; training on training areas in Leningrad and Pskov oblasts, including:

- exercises by the 25th Mechanised Brigade (tactical battalion exercises);
- exercises by the 138th Mechanised Brigade (at the Kirillovskoye training ground in the Leningrad district; 700 soldiers, 200 armoured vehicles and 10 helicopters);
- mobilisation of 2000 reservists in the Leningrad district (for the first time since 1989) and stationing them on the ranges as reserves in the 'West 2013' exercises;

- exercises by rocket forces and artillery in the Western Military District (at the Luzhsky training ground in the Leningrad district; brigades equipped with operational and tactical Iskander and Tochka-U missiles, as well as Smerch and Uragan multi-guide missile launchers).

20-26 September – exercises by the Regional Grouping of Armed Forces of the Union State of Belarus and Russia 'West 2013'. Implemented in two stages: preparation (20-22 September) and implementation (23-26 September) of operations by joint forces.

On the territory of Belarus (at Briestky and Obuz-Lesnovsky in the Brest region, and Gozhsky in the Grodno region) approximately 12,800 soldiers were involved, including:

- 2520 Russian soldiers (subdivisions of the 2nd General Army, including the 2nd Taman Mechanised Division, the 6th Armoured Brigade and the 9th Mechanised Brigade);
- 10,300 Belarusian soldiers (including units of the 11th Mechanised Brigade and the 38th Mobile Brigade);
- 400 combat vehicles (including 70 tanks and 50 self-propelled artillery and rocket units), 50 planes and helicopters (including Russian Mi-28N attack helicopters, and military support from Mi-8s, and Su-24 front bomber based at the Belarusian Machulishchy and Baranavichy airbases).

On the territory of Russia (Khmielovka and Pravdinsky ranges in the Kaliningrad region) approximately 9,400 soldiers were involved, including

- 9,200 Russian soldiers;
- 200 Belarusian soldiers (the 103rd Mobile Brigade of the 350th Mobile Battalion, transported to the Kaliningrad region aboard a Russian amphibious assault ship);
- 180 combat vehicles (including 10 tanks), 40 aircraft and 10 ships of the Baltic Fleet.

20-25 September - exercises by the Collective Rapid Reaction Force of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CRRF CSTO) 'Cooperation 2013' on the territory of Belarus.

Contingents from Armenia, Belarus (from the 103rd Mobile Brigade), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia (from the 31st Air Assault Brigade) and Tajikistan. In total 600 troops, 60 combat vehicles, 15 aircraft and helicopters.

21-25 September - exercises by groups from the Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula (Murmansk region) and the Barents Sea.

2500 troops, 50 combat vehicles, 20 aircraft and helicopters, and 30 warships (including the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*) and security units participated.