

Thawing Relations with the West, Market Traders Protest New Imports Rules – Western Press Digest

Western media focuses on the lifting of sanctions on Belarus by the West, Belarus's rejection of plans for a Russian air base and heralds the thawing of relations with the West.

Observers seem to agree that the temporary sanctions suspension for Belarus is due to "strategic concerns" overcoming "humanitarian ones"

In other news: Belarusian journalist convicted for the "illegal dissemination of media products" and market traders protest controversial new imports rules.

All this and more in the newest edition of the Western Press Digest.

International Relations

Belarus is struggling to normalise relations with the West with weak resistance against Russian dependency, despite economic and political gridlock – Valiery Kavaleŭski, writing for *Forbes*, suggests that now, in Lukashenka's fifth consecutive term, "Belarus is trying to normalise relations with the West without angering Russia" and points to three events in particular which demonstrate this stance taken by the government.

First, the "foreign policy impasse" which means that Belarus's foreign policy dependence on Russia has "left Lukashenka

standing alone in an environment that demands reliable partners and alliances". Second, resistance against a planned Russian airbase in Belarus. Finally, "a threat to Belarus's sovereignty" and the current economic gridlock as "it remains unclear what pillars Lukashenka plans to employ to sustain the Belarusian economy."

He concludes by saying, however, that the aforementioned factors enable "the West to help the country turn toward more democratic and sensible governance, structural economic reforms, and more respect for human rights and freedoms."



[The "new chilliness" in relations between Moscow and Minsk which is causing a "relative thaw" between "Belarus and the West" –](#)

Brian Whitmore, writing for *Radio Free Liberty/Radio Liberty*, comments on the similarities between how "Kazan and Minsk have been

defying the Kremlin with stunning regularity – and getting away with it." Whitmore points at Lukashenka's refusal to recognise Crimea as part of Russia and his "neutral stance" on the conflict in the Donbas and Moscow's conflict with Turkey as evidence of this.

Jury Drakachrust of *RFE/RL's Belarus Service* commented on Putin's talk of the "closeness" of Minsk's and Moscow's positions on Ukraine and Syria by saying that, "in the language of diplomacy, phrases like 'the closeness of our positions' is common for countries Russia is friendly with, but not for its closest allies." However, Whitmore stresses, this does not mean that Belarus, "which receives significant subsidies from Moscow", is "going to burn its bridges with Russia" entirely.

[Western sanctions on Belarus lifted due to "strategic concerns"](#) – Edward Wrong, writing for *Global Risk Insights*, claims that the temporary sanctions suspension for Belarus is due to “strategic concerns” overcoming “humanitarian ones” in spite of the OSCE’s concerns over the October presidential election.

The article claims that the easing of sanctions is due to Belarus being crucial to current NATO-Russia tensions over the “Suwalki Gap” as it “is the only thing separating Belarus from the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea” and Belarus’s recent apparent rejection of the proposed Russian air base in southern Belarus.

Economy

[Shops shut down by market traders in protest against controversial new protectionism rules](#) – The *BBC* reports on the shutting down of shops by market traders in Belarus in response to new rules stipulating that “traders who want to sell the imported goods – which mainly come from Russia – must present proof of origin” under threat of fines.

The article claims that the trade ministry acknowledged that at “least 68% of outlets” were shut down due to this attempt “to help the struggling state sector” despite market trader complaints that local goods are of poor quality and prices charged by state-run wholesalers too high.

Civil Society

[Conviction and fining of Belarusian journalist for "illegal" reporting](#) – *The Huffington Post* reports on the fining of Belarusian journalist Larysa Ščhyrakova “for freelancing for an exiled television channel under a new restrictive media law.” She was found guilty of the “illegal dissemination of

media products" by a Belarusian court and was fined \$250.

The court said Ščhyrakova "illegally interviewed" residents of a Belarusian village for *Belsat*, a channel that broadcasts from Poland and which has been denied media accreditation in Belarus for nine years.

The article also mentions that in 2015, 28 journalists in Belarus were "hit with hefty fines" for similar crimes.

[Chernobyl child victims spend Christmas and New Year with their "Irish families"](#)

– Elaine Edwards, writing for *The Irish Times* reports on the arrival of 31 young children with special needs from their Irish-run



orphanage in the remote village of Viasnova, 175km from Chernobyl, to spend Christmas and New Year 2015 with their "Irish families", part of an annual programme where Belarusian children come to Ireland for rest and recuperation holidays.

The orphanage was discovered by Irish volunteers from the *Adi Roche Chernobyl Children International* charity in the early 1990s and, since then, "€2.5 million of funding from Irish donations had been put into the orphanage, transforming it into a "world class" childcare centre," according to the charity's voluntary chief executive Ms Roche.

[Belarus Free Theatre's stand "against censorship and dictatorship" in London part of major theatre news highlights of 2015](#)

– Nick Adwe, in his international 2015 "year in review" for *The Stage*, refers to the work of the *Belarus Free Theatre* as taking a "stand against censorship and dictatorship" at their base in London at the *Young Vic* and chooses it as one of the theatre highlights of 2015.

The article quotes co-artistic director Natalia Kaliada as she

explains that, “what we are banned from performing in Belarus is Sarah Kane, Harold Pinter, even Shakespeare, from talking about our personal lives and stories.”

Culture

[Unveiling of a Polish photojournalist's project focusing on the victims of Chernobyl in Belarus](#) – The *BBC* reports on the *Invisible People of Belarus* project of Polish photojournalist Jadwiga Brontē.

The article quotes Ms Brontē as saying she hopes to change the way Belarusians see their “disabled children of Chernobyl” through the series after Belarus suffered “about 70% of the nuclear fallout.”

Marta Kochetkova

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[Moscow-Minsk Military Axis](#)

On 16 October, the High Command of the Belarusian military conducted a detailed analysis of West-2013 exercise, which played out in Belarus in late September. The event became the largest show of force by the Union State of Russia and Belarus in four years.

Second in scope only to the controversial West-2009 exercise, West-2013 has become another milestone in the Russia-driven military integration in the post-Soviet space. Whether the exercise helped the Belarusian leader to strike non-military bargains with Kremlin remains to be seen.

Russian-Belarusian Integration: Guns for Butter

Pro-regime commentators in Belarus often compare the Union State of Belarus and Russia with the European Union. While regular [economic “wars”](#) and top-level spats make the comparison hollow, in one area the Union project has probably achieved more success than its European counterpart. The area is military integration.

The roots of the close cooperation between the two militaries lie in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not affect the military ties between the two countries as much as their economic and political trajectories. In the early 1990s, the transitional Communist-dominated government ensured the conservation of the Belarusian military-industrial complex, which was created to serve the needs of the Soviet military.

After the 1994 presidential elections, Alexander Lukashenka reinforced this trend. On the one hand, he turned the conservative Belarusian military, which was nostalgic of the Soviet military might, into his loyal base during the power struggle of the mid-1990s. On the other, his policy of generous military allowances made servicemen and military retirees Lukashenka's core constituency.

Moscow-Minsk Military Axis: 1990s to 2000s

Empty political declarations and still-born agreements of the 1990s aside, effective cooperation between the two militaries originated from within the [Commonwealth of Independent States](#) (CIS).

The year 1998 saw the launching of yearly air defence exercises of CIS member-states' Combat Community. The exercises enabled Moscow to maintain control over the air defence capabilities of the former Soviet republics, particularly its Central Asia states. However, by 2013 the Combat Community was reduced to little more than pre-sales

testing of advanced Russian air defence technology.

The early 2000s marked a time of maturation for the Belarusian military. Three major military exercises took place within a three-year period – a defensive Nioman-2001, a counter-offensive Biarezina-2002 and a comprehensive air force and air defence exercise “Clear Sky-2003”. The latter became the first instance of major Russian military involvement in Belarus.

On 13 October 2003, in a statement summarising the outcome of Clear Sky-2003, President Lukashenka claimed that the exercise reflected the lessons learned from the NATO campaigns in Yugoslavia and Iraq and aimed to counter an identical scenario in Belarus.

The first truly joint military exercise Union Shield-2006 took place three years later. The pivotal points of this staff-centred exercise were air defence and the coordination of the newly created Joint Military Force, which comprised the military forces of Belarus and the Russian 20th Army.

West-2009: a Milestone

In 2009, the militaries of Russia and Belarus conducted their first full-scale joint field exercise West-2009, which became the largest field exercise in the region since the dissolution of the USSR. It came as a surprise to Belarus' Western neighbours and caused significant angst in the Baltic republic and Poland.

West-2009 lasted for two weeks and played out across several locations, including the Kaliningrad enclave and Belarus. The exercise imitated a full-blown military conflict, involving strategic bombing, airborne and seaborne landings and a tank attack spread over a large front. The scenario of West-2009 leaves no doubt that the exercise had a distinct offensive character.

The following major Union State military exercise Union

Shield-2011 received little attention in the West, largely due to the fact that it was conducted far from the borders of the EU. Thus, Poland and the Baltic states saw the return of a large joint Russian-Belarusian military force to their borders in 2013 as a repetition of the 2009 scenario.

West-2013: Who Benefits

However, the similarities between the two West exercises are only superficial. While comparable in scope and the number of military personnel involved, the exercises differed significantly in the composition of their forces and set objectives. The official exercise plan of West-2013 foresaw the neutralising of a group of terrorists invading the Union State.

Most military analysts rightly qualified the choice of Belarus and Kaliningrad region for a large-scale anti-terrorist operation as misguided. However, the absence of ground operations over a large front or a serious air component de facto limited the exercise to a number of intense tactical operations completed by elite task forces.

This exercise did not display any clear defensive or offensive characteristics. Rather, it was reminiscent of a coordinated anti-insurgency mission. The skills trained during such an exercise would prove useful in a conflict similar to the current situation in Syria or in a potential political breakdown scenario in a Central Asian republic.

Coupled with the absence of heated anti-Western rhetoric in the state-controlled media, which marked West-2009, it appears unlikely that Lukashenka prepared West-2013 as an opportunity to flex his muscles in the face of his Western critics.

In 2009, the impending elections and Russia's economic backing allowed him to reap the fruits of publicly defying the West with impunity. However, in the late 2013 the Belarusian leader finds himself making cautious advances towards the EU and IMF

in the face of a looming currency crisis in Belarus. An aggressive military move simply would go against President Lukashenka's current game.

On a different note, the exercise provided Alexander Lukashenka a rare opportunity to hold circumstantial negotiations with President Putin. Lukashenka used the traditional joint inspection of the troops to raise the issues on Uralkali and extending new credit lines to Minsk. The coming weeks will show whether these talks yielded any practical results.

What Next?

Quite predictably, the exercises ended with enthusiastic reports from both the Russian and Belarusian military commands. In contrast to West-2009 and Union Shield-2011, the planners of West-2013 indeed managed to avoid both international incidents and any highly embarrassing loss of life.

However, an implausible legend and the secrecy around the event cast doubts about whether its planners had clarity about the ultimate purpose of the exercise. In the wake of West-2013, it appears that its only clear consequence is the further consolidation of Moscow's hold over the Belarusian military. However, this alone might as well be considered by the Russian military strategists to constitute a success.

Alexander Martynau

This article won a best article prize in a recent [Belarus Digest contest](#). □

Belarus - Russia Military Drills, Tajikistan, CSTO – Belarus Security Digest

Belarus shows its adherence to a defence alliance with Russia and other members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). In September, already two joint exercises took place in the country.

However, the ability of the post-Soviet military alliances (CSTO and the bilateral alliance between Belarus and Russia) to ensure independently stability inside their borders remains questionable. Suffice to say that during almost the entire period of its existence, the CSTO is trying to engage with NATO on issues of mutual interest such as Afghanistan and terrorism.

The financial crisis forced the Belarusian authorities to soberly assess their ability to create an adequate system of territorial defence. Previously voiced strong statements do not correspond to the real advances made in this area. The authorities have to recognise that their initial plans regarding the composition and number of the main component of its territorial defence – ground troops – have been virtually still-born.

Belarusian-Russian Military Exercises West-2013

The [West-2013](#) exercises went according to a pre-planned scenario and without any major incidents. At times it looked more like an exhibition performance preceded by rehearsals. However, there were several moments that are worth paying attention to.

For the first time ever, the Belarusian military gained

experience with a sealoift. A detachment of the 103rd mobile brigade crossed the sea from St. Petersburg to Kaliningrad on an assault ship. The Russian navy had to involve landing craft from three fleets (Baltic, North and Black Sea) for transfer of a small Belarusian contingent with military hardware and weaponry.

The Belarusian landing in East Prussia was more of a symbolic nature. It demonstrates parity and equal participation in West-2013: a Russian military contingent arrived in Belarus, and a Belarusian contingent was sent to Russia.

The Belarusian military-industrial complex used the exercises to study the potential of new weapons systems in a simulated combat situation. The findings of West-2013 will be taken into account when adjusting the military and technical policy of Belarus until 2025. For the first time ever, heavy MRLS "Smerch" and the unmanned aircraft system (UAS) "Grif" were deployed as a part of a unified system.

The multifunctional remote surveillance helicopter INDELA-I. N.SKY were also used in the exercises, which has the capability to deliver small-sized goods. And what is more important, its ability to engage targets was made public for the first time ever.

The UAS "Berkut-2" which is manufactured jointly by Belarus and Russia and the Belarusian UAS "Burevestnik" with a range of 290 km were also exhibited during West-2013. The latter is more of a demo unit, and its engineering follow-up requires further considerable effort to make it fully functional.

Despite alarmist sentiment in neighbouring countries, the West-2013 exercises that were held within Belarus had purely defensive nature. As for the proposed scenario, they simulated the possibility of a local inter-state armed conflict erupting which was limited in scope and in the objectives of the opposing sides. The use of the term "terrorists" and "illegal

armed groups" to designate the simulated enemy was dictated by political correctness. In fact, the scenario assumed the participation of military units from a neighbouring state and not groups of insurgents.

The way the UAS "Grif" was utilized during West-2013 suggests that the system has reached the level of operational readiness. The UAS "Grif" with the tail number 07 demonstrated its capabilities during the exercises.

CSTO Exercises Interaction-2013

The planned joint exercises of the Collective Rapid Response Forces of [CSTO](#) Interaction-2013 took place almost simultaneously with West-2013. During these exercises, they simulated the use of military contingents of participating countries in the Eastern European region. These exercises have only propagandistic significance, as in fact they were a battalion-level training event: only about 600 people from six countries took part in them.

The scenario of the exercises were based on a storyline of how the military and political situation would unfold in the case of the penetration of extremist groups into the territory of a member state of the CSTO with an objective to carry out terrorist attacks.

Elements of surprise and variability in the proposed scenario were not to be found anywhere in its design. Both CSTO forces and the "terrorists" acted according to a pre-planned scenario. Thus, the exercises were more like an exhibition performance than the real combat training of the alliance troops.

The Belarusian side used Interaction-2013 to demonstrate the capabilities of its domestically produced new weapons and military hardware. The following equipment was tested successfully: electronic warfare equipment used for radio interception and the suppression of radio communications;

optical and electronic equipment used for search, detection and the liquidation of an enemy; an automated system for tactical control; an automated remotely controlled surveillance and firing complex "Adunok" mounted on self-propelled units and automobiles.

If one omits the propaganda hype around the Interaction-2013, it is too early to talk about any plausible prospects of it strengthening the operational capacity of CSTO. Their level of operation remains rather low and in fact, it is determined only by Moscow's readiness and ability to act in a crisis situation.

Belarusian Border Guards May Appear in Tajikistan

The Council of Commanders of Border Troops of the CIS countries discussed in Baku on 9 September measures to improve security of external borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. They discussed a possible mechanism of setting up an inter-state grouping of the border agencies of the CIS countries that could be used in a crisis situation on the external borders of the Commonwealth.

Obviously negotiations covered primarily the border of the CIS with Afghanistan. During the meeting in Baku they also discussed providing emergency assistance to Tajikistan to strengthen the border security on the Tajik-Afghan border. The decisions taken on these issues remain confidential.

Taking into account the financial constraints, one can expect that the possible assistance of Belarus in strengthening security on the Tajik-Afghan border will be limited to sending a small group of advisors and experts from the Belarusian State Border Committee and supplying equipment withdrawn from operational use of the Belarusian army but still in usable condition. These could be the BTR-70, BMP-1 and artillery systems. However, it can happen not before Moscow fulfils its promises to render military and technical support to

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

As is traditional for all post-Soviet integration unions, there is a probability that neither Tajikistan nor Kyrgyzstan will get any real assistance in the framework of the CSTO as the decision will be buried in endless reconciliations and clarifications.

Reorganisation of the Territorial defence system

A reorganisation of the territorial defence system has been announced in September. The defined priorities include:

- optimisation of the structure and number of territorial troops;
- improving the mobilisation preparedness of the management of the territorial defence for the formation of the territorial troops;
- increasing the efficiency of the management system, quality of training of officials of state and local government and reservists for the territorial troop force.

In fact, by taking this step the authorities acknowledge the existence of problematic points in the territorial defence system which were earlier identified by independent analysts but fiercely rejected by the top management of the Ministry of Defence.

First, the declared number of 120 thousand people in the territorial troops is obviously unrealistic. It would take 6 to 8 years to train this number of combatants in a continuous loop from the ranks of all four mechanised brigades. Besides, the cost of maintaining the structure of the territorial troops on the basis of their planned quantity will be much too high.

Second, the mobilisation of 120 thousand people in the territorial troops in time of war would be problematic.

Experience shows that about 50% of all drafted reservists come to the recruiting stations for the reserve training sessions.

Third, the 120-thousand strong territorial troops require a peace-time permanent staff of about 1,800 – 6,000 people composed of career officers and small unit leaders. It is simply impossible to provide them taking into account the chronic under-staffing of the Ministry of Defence. To train them from civil officials would take time and be very costly. Besides, there are different requirements for the professional and personal characteristics of civil officials and officers.

Having faced the excessive demands of Alexandr Lukashenka regarding the creation of the territorial defence in 2011, the Ministry of Defence, two years later, became aware of the real possibilities and began the gradual movement towards a more realistic image of the territorial defence force with regards to its organisation and the number of territorial troops it can maintain.

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Nuclear Race in the Baltic Sea Region

In the coming years virtually all southern Baltic Sea region states will be involved in a nuclear race. Disagreements between Vilnius, Minsk and Moscow over the Russian and Belarusian nuclear plants in the vicinity of the Lithuanian border is just a part of the picture.

In late June, Lithuanian parliament approved the concession agreement for the new Visaginas nuclear power plant. The old Ignalina plant shut down a few years ago in accordance with Lithuania's accession agreement with the European Union. Japanese GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy is to become a strategic investor of the project, Lithuania (Visagino Atominė Elektrinė) would share 38%, Latvia (Latvenergo) 20% and Estonia (EestiEnergia) 22%. Despite these agreements, the Lithuanian nuclear power plant remains a hotly contested project.

Three Baltic States in the Nuclear Plant Business

During the pre-voting debate in the parliament, Lithuanian prime-minister Andrius Kubilius urged to vote in favour of the Visaginas project, saying "those who vote against, vote for Belarusian and Russian nuclear stations". Earlier, he publicly stated that Belarus and Kalingrad regional nuclear plants from the outset were envisaged as projects that would potentially stop the Visaginas plant project.

There is no unity among the Lithuanian political elite on this issue. On 16 July the Lithuanian Parliament voted for the referendum on a nuclear plant in Lithuania, thus highlighting disagreements between the opposition and the incumbent government.

Over the last two years previous years, Lithuanian officials on numerous occasions expressed their discontent with the planned Russian and Belarusian nuclear power plants in their backyard. Lithuanians are alarmed by the fact that both plants did not come through the procedure or an environmental impact assessment pursuant to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention).

In 2009 Implementation Committee of the Espoo Convention initiated a special case about Belarus Astravets power plant reviewing the implementation of Belarus' international

obligations at the planning stage. An additional complaint to the Secretariat of the Espoo Convention was lodged with Lithuania in mid-2011.

Taking into account the slow procedures in the Espoo Convention and weak mechanisms to ensure state compliance with the recommendations made, Lithuanian authorities initiated a proposal in the EU organs to conduct the so called "stress tests" for nuclear reactors. Such tests are usually required for nuclear and radiation safety both for EU member states and neighbouring states when implementing their nuclear projects. The Commission submitted a report on "stress tests" to the President of the European Council in mid-2011 and assured that efforts would be made to engage Belarus and Russia in the process.

Planned Nuclear Power Plants

Although Russia and Belarus have not finalised appropriate procedures according to the Espoo Convention obligations, both have already started preparatory work on the new construction sites. Russia started construction of a nuclear station in Kaliningrad in 2010 and in spring 2012 work on concrete pouring into the foundation began. Belarusians got down to developing the foundation pit for their nuclear plant in late May.

Commissioning of the first Kaliningrad nuclear reactor is expected in 2016, followed by the Astravets first reactor in 2017 and Visaginas in 2020. The projected capacity of the latter is 3.4 thousand MW, Russia's and Belarus' power plants are somewhat less powerful at 2.4 thousand MW each. Estimated cost of both Russian and Belarusian nuclear projects is around \$9bn, while Visaginas expenditures are projected to be as high as \$5-7bn. The cost of the Lithuanian power plant is cheaper primarily because the Visaginas plant is designed to be placed in the area of the old plant, which removes the need to create extensive infrastructure from scratch.



1 – Baltic NPP (Kaliningrad NPP)

2 – Astravets (Belarusian) NPP

3 – Visaginas NPP;

4,5,6 – three potential localizations (Żarnowiec, Choczewo, Gąski) of the first planned Polish NPP.

(Prepared by the author)

Poland is somewhat lagging behind the neighbours. According to the strategy of the Polish Energy Group that was given a mandate to build two nuclear power plants, the first one is to be completed in 2025 and the second in 2029.

Currently Polish energy matrix almost exclusively (94%) consists of coal and Warsaw plans to diversify its energy mix. Out of hundred proposed locations three were pre-selected for the first nuclear power plant site, all near the Baltic coast. The final decision on the construction site is expected to be unveiled in 2014 together with the winner of the bid.

The Baltic Sea region is becoming intensively saturated with nuclear plants that would change its regional energy pattern in the coming years and decades and would require an intensification in the realm of nuclear cooperation between Baltic Sea region states in the near future.

Juggling the Energy Figures

Officials of the Baltic Sea region states involved in the nuclear race operate with contradictory scientific data to support their intentions. On the one hand, Lithuanians are allegedly puzzled why Russians push a nuclear project in Kaliningrad which has enough to satisfy its energy demand

without a nuclear plant.

Lithuanian prime-minister Kubilius lamented that Russian officials failed to explain this to him. Some even say that Russia's Baltic nuclear power plant risks becoming bankrupt as Polish energy giant PGE announced its decision to stop negotiating on power imports from Kaliningrad. Interestingly, PGE was considered a probable investor in the Visaginas NPP too, but later withdrew from the Lithuania project.

Contrary to the calculations of commercial detriment to the Baltic nuclear power plant without Lithuania's and Poland's interest in buying its electricity, Russians insist that the project will surely be profitable. According to the official "Energy strategy in Kaliningrad until 2015", the region may start suffering from an energy deficit by 2015. Rosatom also refers to the energy balance scenarios in the Baltic region by the year of 2020, prepared by the European Network of Transmission System Operators. According to them, energy deficit in the region is inevitable.

Belarus ruler Aleksandr Lukashenka in the manner so characteristic to him, explained these contradictory regional energy estimations by unfair competition. According to him, Russians in Kaliningrad and Belarusians in Astravets took the lead making in Lithuanians and Poles start "screaming" and coming up with various arguments in order to undermine the success of their neighbours.

For all that, in the regional nuclear power race Belarus seems to be the weakest link. Its Astravets power plant totally [relies upon Russia's money and technology](#), in contrast to the other players that either aim to diversify their energy mix or lessen their energy dependency on their big resourceful neighbour.

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