

# **Belarus and NATO**

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# BELARUS-NATO RELATIONS: CURRENT STATE AND PROSPECTS

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Security factors should be given special attention in analysing the relations between the Republic of Belarus and the European Union. Military security is one of the main aspects, although not the most important one on the continent. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the major military alliance without which it is impossible to imagine the European security system.

Three of five Belarus' neighbours are members of the bloc. Ukraine is at the crossroads, while Russia is acting as the alliance's main antagonist. It is not easy for a nation to identify its priorities under normal circumstances, let alone in these. But it is incomparably more difficult to make a choice under the current government in Belarus.

Let us first take a look at the government's official position. The Belarusian foreign ministry's website, [www.mfa.gov.by](http://www.mfa.gov.by), provides some information on Belarus' relations with the alliance. Here's an excerpt : "As a state that shares a border with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Belarus attributes particular importance to the development of mutually beneficial and stable relations with NATO and its member states. The Republic of Belarus cooperates with NATO in the framework of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme ( ... ).

Belarus attributes special importance to the implementation of the PfP programme, regarding it as one of the major instruments for developing practical cooperation with both the North Atlantic alliance and individual countries in Europe and North America. Belarus joined the PfP in January 1995 after sign-

ing the Programme's Framework Document. On 29 April 1996, Belarus officially submitted to NATO headquarters a Pfp presentation document outlining the objectives and priorities of its cooperation with NATO.

Most of the cooperation between Belarus and NATO is concentrated in the framework of the Individual Partnership Programme (IPP). The IPP outlines priorities of cooperation between Belarus and NATO for a two-year period, and specifies forces and capabilities which might be made available by the country for participation in the Pfp. A list of specific measures involving representatives of Belarus is updated on an annual basis.

The dynamics of the implementation of IPP measures have been steadily rising. If in its first IPP for 1996 and 1997, Belarus expressed interest in participating in 17 areas of cooperation with NATO, the current IPP for 2007 and 2008 covers 25 areas of cooperation. At present, the IPP gives priority to the following areas: training to enhance cooperation during emergency response operations; arms control and non-proliferation; efforts to counter challenges to modern society; planning and conducting peacekeeping operations; the fight against terrorism; language instruction; and public diplomacy.

In 2004, Belarus acceded to the Planning and Review Process (PARP), one of the basic elements of the Pfp programme designed to prepare forces and capabilities which might be made available by a partner country for participation in operations and exercises in conjunction with the forces of NATO member states. Involvement in PARP helps Belarus develop and improve its peacekeeping potential.

Cooperation between Belarus and NATO in the area of science and technology is characterised by a positive dynamic. The National Academy of Sciences of Belarus maintains contacts with NATO in the framework of the Research and Technology Organisation and the NATO scientific committee. A number of innovative projects have been carried out in the area of communication and information technologies."

Regrettably, this description of activities does not fully and accurately reflect the real state of relations with the alliance. It makes no mention of any points of contention. That is why, to correctly understand the situation and analyse the prospects of relations between Belarus and NATO, it is necessary to describe in more detail the current state of relations, starting with a brief retrospective journey into history, which offers illustrative examples of bitter confrontation.

## One spat after another

Belarus' first step in cooperation with the alliance was its entry, along with other CIS countries, into the North-Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in March 1992. The council was created by the alliance to carry out its new strategy, aimed at establishing and developing partnership, a dialogue and cooperation with countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Apart from that, in May Belarus was granted associate member status in the North-Atlantic Assembly, currently the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. A Supreme Soviet delegation attended the assembly's sessions and seminars on a regular basis. Associate membership was expected to help Belarusian lawmakers better understand security issues and familiarise themselves with basic principles and civilised approaches to the problems.

It should be noted that the foreign policy priorities of the Republic of Belarus at the time were largely conducive to close cooperation with the North-Atlantic alliance. Belarus assessed the role of NATO in the European and international security system realistically and sought to boost cooperation in the interests of security and stability on the continent. The Belarusian leadership at the time pursued a foreign policy based on the ideas set forth in the Declaration of State Sovereignty; in particular it sought to make the country a neutral state and remove nuclear weapons from its territory.

In that period, a particular emphasis was made on forms of cooperation such as NATO military inspections in the Republic of Belarus, joint efforts in the area of arms control, the conversion of defence enterprises to civilian use, contacts between military officers and scientific cooperation. A number of politicians, governmental agency employees, public figures and journalists visited the NATO headquarters on study tours. NATO head office employees told Belarusian visitors about the organisation's priorities and explained the alliance's position on various issues of international politics.

In November 1992, Manfred Werner, the then-secretary general of NATO, paid a visit to Belarus which was seen as a landmark in bilateral cooperation. He welcomed Belarus' decision to seek a neutral and nuclear-free status, noting the alliance's interest in maintaining good relations with the country. Other high-ranking NATO officials visited Belarus in the early 1990s – Gen. Henning von Onzarza and Robert C. Oaks, commanders-in-chief of NATO Allied Forces Central Europe; Field Marshal Sir Richard Vincent, chairman of the

NATO Military Committee; and Gebhardt von Moltke, NATO assistant secretary general for political affairs.

In that period, NATO's priorities with regard to Belarus included assisting the country in meeting its commitments under international arms reduction treaties; monitoring the political and military-political situation in the country; organising events aimed at informing the Belarusian leadership and political elite of the goals and objectives of the North-Atlantic alliance under new conditions; and dispelling the image of NATO as an enemy in the mentality of Belarusians.

Really, although the authorities had almost completely stopped anti-NATO propaganda during the last year of the existence of the Soviet Union, after Belarus gained independence most Belarusians continued to associate the alliance with the image created during the Cold War, i.e. as an enemy. That perception reflected on the nation's official position. That was one of the main reasons why contacts between Belarus and NATO were not as close as the alliance expected. For instance, officers from the NATO office in Brussels complained that they had been receiving few proposals, requests and questions from Belarus.

Besides Cold War stereotypes, Belarus' policies were also adversely influenced by the political and military-industrial elite's traditional inclination to form alliances with Russia. Belarus signed the CIS Collective Security Treaty (CST) in December 1993, citing concerns about NATO's alleged failure to offer Belarus sufficient security guarantees and dangers associated with the North-Atlantic alliance's attempts to expand its sphere of influence.

It may be said that in 1992 and 1993, the issue of relations with NATO was sort of a trial balloon in discussions between those who advocated closer ties with the European community and supporters of a union with Russia. Experts, scientists and politicians discussed increased cooperation with the alliance and even possible membership. But the alliance leadership seemed to be sceptical about the prospect. For instance, Manfred Werner told Belarusian journalists in the autumn of 1992 that Belarus did not need to join NATO to cooperate with the alliance.

The situation began to change radically in 1994. In January, transformation processes began within the alliance after participants at the NATO summit declared that the bloc was ready to admit new members located in Central and Eastern Europe. NATO also approved a Partnership for Peace (PfP)

Framework Document, inviting all NACC partners to sign it. These goals and plans significantly modified NATO's role in the system of European and international security. In July, Alyaksandr Lukashenka was elected as first president of the Republic of Belarus. True, no immediate changes were introduced into the government's security policies. The new head of state reaffirmed the country's commitment to neutrality and the nuclear-free status. Nevertheless, it was these two events which would define the basic trajectories of the Belarus-NATO relationship, and all its inherent contradictions.

The major developments that took place during this new phase included Belarus' accession to the PfP, the removal of nuclear weapons and conventional arms reduction in line with the country's international obligations. The Belarusian government, for its part, put forward a proposal to create a nuclear-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe, and voiced its opposition to NATO's eastward expansion.

Belarus was the last nation in Europe to join the PfP in January 1995. Initially, it limited its participation in the programme but continued to express its interest in maintaining ties with the alliance. In fact, the Belarusian leader's prejudice against NATO – the officials responsible for PfP implementation were well aware of it – was the major obstacle to real cooperation.

The Belarusian leader was angered mainly by the alliance's plan to admit the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. In late February 1995, Lukashenka declared that NATO enlargement creates new military threats to Belarus and suspended its observance of the 1990 Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. The move drew severe criticism from NATO member states. The CFE issue dominated German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel's talks with Belarusian officials in Minsk in August 1995. That visit played a crucial role, and Belarus reinstated the treaty. However, the dispute exposed the Belarusian leadership's anti-Western stance and raised questions about its ability to honour international commitments.

Thus, from that moment on, Lukashenka's fierce opposition to NATO's enlargement has had a significant effect on the country's foreign policies.

Nevertheless, in May 1997 Belarus acceded to the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), which replaced the NAPC. Belarusian officials regularly attended EAPC meetings. Given a lack of political contacts with Western countries, meetings in the framework of the EAPC offered the Belarusian government a good opportunity to convey its position to Western politicians. As

the Belarusian foreign ministry said in 1998, “cooperation of the Republic of Belarus with NATO, both with the alliance and its member states, is in the interests of its national security, and can have an effect on Belarus’ relations with the Council of Europe, the European Union, the OSCE and other European and international organisations.”

Moreover, Ivan Antanovich, foreign minister at the time, said in December 1997 that Belarus’ position with regard to NATO had been evolving, although slowly. Noting that many Belarusians were still apprehensive of the North-Atlantic alliance, Antanovich stressed, “it takes time to explain to our people what is going on.” Later, Ural Latypau, the new head of the Belarusian foreign policy office, said that Belarus does not see any direct threats in NATO’s enlargement, provided that the bloc’s leadership makes good on its promises not to site nuclear weapons on the territory of the new members or deploy considerable contingents of troops there. Belarusian officials often stressed in their statements that Belarus respects NATO’s right to make independent decisions and the right of nations to join military alliances at their own will.

However, relations with NATO deteriorated sharply again during the Kosovo crisis. Lukashenka made several strong-worded statements on the matter, describing the alliance’s use of military force against Yugoslavia as “plainly an act of aggression.” In late March 1999, Belarus followed Russia in suspending cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, but unlike Moscow, Minsk did not recall its official representative from Brussels. Belarus also suspended its activities within the PfP and EAPC. In addition, the Belarusian government turned down an invitation to a ceremony which was held in Washington to celebrate the alliance’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Strong tensions remained for some time and it was not until a year later that relations returned to normal, but not for long. After the Belarusian authorities actually forced the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group to leave the country, the Czech government in November 2002 denied an entry visa to Lukashenka, who intended to take part in an EAPC meeting held in the framework of the alliance’s Prague Summit. Syarhey Martynau, Belarus’ ambassador to Belgium and representative at NATO at the time, severely criticised the alliance at the EAPC meeting.

Belarus also attacked NATO over the United States’ plan to move some of its bases from Germany to countries in Central Europe, including Poland. A year later, NATO admitted new members, including three of Belarus’ neigh-

bours, in a second wave of accession. Minsk's reaction to the move was more measured than before. Lukashenka noted that he had opposed NATO eastward expansion for ten years, stressing that Belarus would enhance its armed forces to prepare for a possible act of aggression. Yet arguably, this was the first time that the Belarusian leader had expressed himself without escalating his confrontational rhetoric

To be fair, the Belarusian authorities made several attempts to build bridges with NATO. But the actions appeared to be intended to suit the politics of the moment – when Belarusian-Russian relations hit a dead end, Minsk wooed NATO to remind its ally that it is not the only pebble on the beach. In other instances, Minsk hinted at a willingness to work more closely with the alliance because it exaggerated the role and place of the Republic of Belarus in international and European politics. This seems to be a credible explanation for the Belarusian government's insistence on signing a pact similar to the NATO-Russia Founding Act or the NATO-Ukraine Distinctive Partnership Charter.

## Cautious rapprochement without common values

No significant escalations of tension have been observed since then. Clearly, this does not mean that the authorities have radically changed their point of view. The Belarusian leader keeps criticising the alliance now and then. Every year, Belarus conducts large-scale manoeuvres based on scenarios indicative of an overtly hostile attitude to NATO. In spring 2005, the Belarusian government postponed indefinitely the opening of the alliance's information centre in Minsk, citing "technical problems." The centre has not yet opened. Meanwhile, the authorities have considerably toned down their rhetoric.

The NATO leadership, for its part, also criticises Minsk from time to time. For instance, after Alyaksandr Lukashenka's re-election, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, secretary general of NATO, on 20 March 2006 condemned "the way in which the elections in Belarus have been conducted," urging the Belarusian authorities "to take steps to respect Euro-Atlantic democratic standards, including those to which they have committed in the Partnership for Peace." A week later, the alliance issued a statement saying that it was "closely examining its relationship with Belarus." However, NATO decided against breaking off ties with Belarus because this would be counterproductive.



Like other Euro-Atlantic organisations, NATO is mainly concerned about problems with democracy in Belarus. In 2005, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said, "It is not a secret to anyone that the cause of limited cooperation between Belarus and NATO lies in the country's regime and the consequences of this regime." He stressed that relations would not change significantly until Belarus carries out democratic reform.

Robert F. Simmons, deputy assistant secretary general of NATO for security cooperation and partnership, said in May 2005 that since NATO and Belarus do not share common values, they cannot identify common goals. He added that Belarus has the opportunity to choose and does choose NATO programmes, exercises and conferences in the framework of a partnership agreement. Simmons stressed that cooperation was limited because the Belarusian side did not take steps for rapprochement with NATO and because Alyaksandr Lukashenka did not share "our common values." He accused the Belarusian authorities of restricting access to information about NATO, leaving the Alliance's training courses for Belarus' command staff as one of the few remaining options for cooperation. But even these courses disturb the authorities and prompt them to still further restrict cooperation with the alliance, he noted.

Nevertheless, cooperation does seem to have been gradually expanding, therefore the information posted by the Belarusian foreign ministry on its official Web site gives us a basically true picture. More Belarusian soldiers and officers have been involved in various activities organised under the aegis of NATO. Some of the organisation's events took place in Belarus. In the last few years, NATO has held regular courses for Belarusian soldiers preparing to take part in peace-keeping missions.

Officers at NATO headquarters say that the Belarusian defence ministry has shown a genuine willingness to cooperate. Until recently, Belarus' Individual Partnership Programme was very limited and the country's participation in the PfP was largely symbolic, whereas the IPP for 2008 and 2009 provides for technical and military cooperation in nine key areas. The author's personal contacts with officers involved in the PfP programme proved a lack of prejudice against the alliance.

## Moscow's behind us

The Russian factor cannot be ignored in the examination of Belarus' relationship with NATO. It is beyond doubt that Russia is NATO's main antagonist and relations between the two have a great impact on security in Europe.

It is common knowledge that Moscow has never been happy with the alliance's behaviour, but it agreed to expand cooperation up to a certain point. In May 1997, Russia and NATO signed the *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation* and set up the NATO-Russia Council.

By all appearances, that relatively short period of tolerance is now over. The main point of contention was attempts by the Georgian and, especially, Ukrainian leaders to have their countries join NATO. Earlier plans by NATO to admit new members had met with strong opposition from Moscow. Ukraine's bid to join the alliance outraged the Kremlin, causing Russia-NATO relations to fall to the lowest point since the Cold War. Moscow regards (or pretends to regard) Ukraine's possible membership as a direct threat to its strategic interests, an encroachment on its territorial integrity, and a throwback to the geopolitical configuration of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

That it would be a serious psychological trauma to the Russian public and elite is beyond reasonable doubt. But there is an impression that Russia is so concerned about it not because the possible expansion poses a real threat, but because it cannot come to terms with the fact that Ukraine would be lost forever. If Ukraine succeeds in its bid to enter NATO, the Kremlin can give up its effort to bring the country back under its fold.

If that ever happened, the consequences for Belarus would be both positive and negative. What is good about it is that Belarusians could be persuaded that the alliance is not inherently evil, as their southern Slavic neighbours had bound their fate to it. In this sense, the emotional effect would be greater than in the case of the response to the NATO accession of Poland and the Baltic states, which are perceived more as foreign nations.

However, any escalation between Russia and the West also plays into the hands of the Belarusian authorities because it adds to Belarus' political weight in Russia's foreign policy, gives the Belarusian government leverage in negotiations with Moscow, and enables it to demand additional economic and other preferences. Ukraine's final departure would create an extremely favourable context for the Belarusian ruling class, accentuating the difference between geopolitical priorities of Minsk and Kyiv. Therefore, it should be reasoned, Ukraine's entry into NATO would benefit the Belarusian ruling elite.

As for Belarus, its leadership has entered the nation into a real military alliance with Russia in defiance of the Constitution. The prominent Russian

hawk, Gen. Leonid Ivashov, former chief of the Russian defence ministry's International Military Cooperation Office and current vice president of the Moscow-based Academy of Geopolitical Studies, specified the benefits for Russia of the military alliance with Belarus. In his highly competent opinion, Belarus means the following to Russia:

- a military-strategic buffer that pushes NATO's attack capabilities farther west of Russia, securing the Smolensk-Moscow attack route;
- a forward defence area that screens Russian troops from a possible thrust from the west;
- a system for gathering intelligence on the situation in the air and on the ground, and the disposition of Russia's external military elements (the missile-attack early-warning radar station near Baranavichy, Brest region);
- an element of the combined defence industry complex;
- a spiritual border between the Russian Orthodox Church on the one side and the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant congregations on the other;
- a helping hand for the Kaliningrad exclave, the Baltic Fleet and a tool of political influence over Lithuania.

In view of the above-mentioned circumstances, Gen. Ivashov said that the Russians should bear in mind that a drift of the Republic of Belarus toward NATO would have the following consequences for Russia:

- Russia would lose a reliable ally, whose capabilities would go towards strengthening the enemy;
- it would take NATO planes a shorter time, just 20 minutes, to reach positions for delivering air strikes on Moscow;
- Russia would need to establish a new grouping of forces and capabilities to secure the Smolensk-Moscow attack route and deploy additional defence capabilities around Moscow;
- it would have to spend heavily on building new missile-attack early-warning stations on Russian territory, or give up the early warning system altogether, which would cause a blackout, preventing the Russian Strategic Missile Forces from planning a counterstrike (which is equivalent to the devaluation of the strategic nuclear forces);
- the move would disrupt economic ties in the defence industry complex and leave Russia without some of the components used for manufacturing defence systems;
- Russia would lose ground in international politics, its prestige would be damaged and it would be seen as a less attractive partner;

- the move would demoralise the Russian population and Orthodox believers, the military and possibly other groups would lose confidence in the Russian government.

While some of these statements by the Russian expert in geopolitics may be arguable, in general one has to admit that Belarus' entry into NATO would be a major setback for Russia, especially taking into account its current government's confrontational spirit.

However, Belarus' interests should also be taken into consideration. The general painted an apocalyptic picture of misfortunes the Belarusian people are likely face if the country joins NATO, but his arguments do not hold water. "This is the loss of sovereignty, national traditions and culture, and the population's conversion to Catholicism. The republic's entry into a foreign and hostile environment would make Belarus a European pariah. Most production facilities will stop because they fall shy of western standards. The intelligentsia and educated youths will be servants to foreign companies and chewing gum vendors. Equipping the Armed Forces with NATO technologies and standards would require additional expenditures and leave thousands of officers without a job. Belarusian boys will be used as cannon fodder in American military gambles."

Most members of the Russian political elite hold the same or similar views, even if they do not talk as straight as the general. Nostalgia for the lost superpower status and a desire to restore the Russian Empire's former might are characteristic of a certain (quite considerable) part of Russian society, coupled with an almost organic inability ingrained in Russia to provide decent living standards for the masses, even in the best of times, and a tendency to create a situation that causes serious concern from the viewpoint of regional and global security.

These circumstances make Russian politicians suspicious, so they start looking for enemies who prevent Russia from regaining something which they believe has always belonged to Russia, trying to exert influence on developments at any point on the globe. Delusions ascribing hostile intentions to others cause inadequate reactions to actions by the other side, regarded without foundation as a threat to mythical national interests.

This is true. But Russia is Belarus' neighbour on whom our country heavily relies economically. The examples of Ukraine and Georgia suggest that Moscow reacts with anger and frustration when it sees former Soviet Empire

territories abandon its sphere of influence, following the lead of former East European satellites. In these circumstances, Belarus' possible attempt to join NATO would be equivalent to suicide, because the Kremlin would use all tools available to prevent it from doing so under any circumstances. Given Belarus' economic dependence on Russia, the Kremlin has more than enough tools to force the country to drop its bid.

## The masses do not want it yet

Officials often express fear that NATO policies can cause internal changes in Belarus. But this is a big mistake. Not only the alliance, but the West as a whole cannot impose change on Belarus if most people in the country are opposed to reform. The example of Ukraine indicates that the lack of public consensus on the issue of NATO membership can create serious internal political problems.

In Belarus, there is consensus in a denial of the possibility of NATO membership. The point is that the authorities have used NATO enlargement for internal policy ends, to create a feeling of anxiety in Belarusian society and make people feel as if they are living in a besieged camp. Since the purpose of the campaign was to change the situation in the country, the exaggeration of external threats helped fuel public sentiment, enabling the president to win public approval for an expansion of his powers and create a convenient atmosphere for freezing economic and political reform.

It is almost beyond any doubt that the Belarusian government's restrictions on people's access to unbiased information about the North-Atlantic alliance play an important role in creating a negative image of NATO, and help the authorities garner public support for its policies with regard to the alliance. At one time, Alyaksandr Lukashenka even suggested putting the question of NATO's enlargement to a national plebiscite to see what people think about the issue. Given the heavy anti-NATO propaganda, it is beyond doubt that most Belarusians would denounce the move even if their votes were counted fairly.

Opinion polls prove this. A survey conducted among major groups of the Belarusian elite by the NOVAK sociological service in early 1996 found two in three respondents opposed to the idea of NATO membership. Only 18.6 percent said that Belarus should join NATO within the next five years.

As expected, the bombing raids on Yugoslavia over Kosovo stirred up anti-NATO sentiment. NATO's air campaign dealt a really powerful blow to the few advocates of Western values in Belarus as it gave the authorities an opportunity to resume anti-NATO propaganda, including in the most primitive way, to further their interests. As a result, the proportion of people who said that NATO's eastward expansion was a threat to Belarus rose from 30.8 percent in 1997 to 47.7 percent in mid-1999, according to surveys conducted by the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies (II-SEPS). In mid-1999 only 17.6 percent said that the enlargement did not represent a threat.

The polarised views of Belarusian society on the issue of the country's relations with NATO also reflected on the positions of political parties. For instance, the platform of the Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) says, "Noting the persistent advance of the military-political bloc NATO towards the border of the Republic of Belarus and the unceasing aggressive acts by the United States and NATO against other sovereign states, the party calls for an all-out enhancement of defence capabilities of the republic and the Union of Belarus and Russia." On the other hand, the Conservative-Christian Party (CCP) describes NATO membership as "the most important task for Belarus' national security and policy." Both parties are in opposition to the government.

Public opinion on the issue seems to have been frozen in the last two years. About 20 percent of Belarusians approved of (had confidence in) NATO and 58-59 percent were wary of the alliance, according to NOVAK. The proportions were virtually the same among various age groups, with the exception of pensioners, and among people with different education backgrounds. A higher level of approval, 35 percent, was registered among those who went to college or university.

Nevertheless, when people hear a constant barrage of negative reports and statements about NATO (all broadcast media in Belarus are controlled by the government, while the print media are dominated by state-controlled outlets with a few independent newspapers having a very limited circulation) and almost never hear positive opinions about it, they can hardly be expected to change their perception of the alliance.

Incidentally, quite to the broadcaster's surprise, 54.2 percent of viewers said they were not fearful of the North Atlantic alliance in a television poll conducted during a show on the STV-RenTV channel in April 2008. Before the

voting, the host had cast the alliance in a negative light, denouncing its policies and playing anti-NATO videos.

Thus, “the monster’s” presence at Belarus’ border for nearly 10 years has not given rise to great fears and most people do not perceive the alliance as a source of new external threats. One can expect public opinion to change in favour of NATO if the media campaign shifts from negative to positive.

## Conclusions

The above-mentioned facts should not be viewed as a sign that attitudes toward NATO have changed and that the authorities will never revert to their confrontational rhetoric again. For instance, in mid October 2008, Lukashenka told members of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus that NATO’s eastward expansion was a trend. “The question is not about sweet words by Western generals and politicians that the alliance does not pose a threat to anyone. The fact is that the NATO military infrastructure has become firmly entrenched close to the Belarusian border, American military bases have been moved to east European countries, and the bloc has been building up its offensive potential. Moreover, Ukraine’s membership of NATO is on the agenda. They have been frantically accelerating the process. In fact, the alliance is drawing new division lines in Europe.”

Naturally, the Belarusian government as a whole takes the same position. “NATO threatens the Union State by situating its military bases on adjacent territories under the guise of the fight against terrorism,” Mikalay Charhinets, the then-chairman of the Committee on International Affairs and National Security at the Council of the Republic of the Belarusian National Assembly, said in late June 2008. “At present we are observing a world map revision that runs counter to all international agreements, including the Tehran treaty signed after World War II.”

The former member of the upper parliamentary chamber accused the North Atlantic alliance of failure to keep its promise “not to move an inch westward” allegedly made after the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Germany. “Now we see that NATO has moved more than 1,000 kilometres closer to the Union State,” he said, adding that NATO is preparing “full-scale positions for deploying offensive weapons.”

Statements like these indicate that the Belarusian authorities generally stick to the old position and will keep demonising NATO in the eyes of the electorate. Therefore, it would be quite naïve to expect the Belarusian government to chart a radically new foreign policy course towards real rapprochement with Euro-Atlantic organisations including NATO. Moreover, the public mood in no way encourages the authorities to take steps in this direction.

Hypothetically, of course, Belarus' entry into NATO cannot be ruled out, especially if the nation is confronted with new global political challenges. As a rule, medium-level officials in Belarus never make public statements about the country's relationship with NATO for fear that they will be out of tune with the leader's mood of the moment. This fact adds value to a remark made by Valery Surayeu, head of the Centre of Geopolitical Studies of the Institute of Social and Political Research, affiliated with the Presidential Administration, in 2004. He said that an unthinkable move such as entry into NATO may be quite possible in 10- or 20-years time, for instance in response to an Islamist or Chinese expansion.

On the other hand, it is clear that NATO will not compromise its values for the sake of closer cooperation with Belarus. Nevertheless, the alliance cannot ignore a country that shares borders with three of its members.

As officials in Brussels have said, issues concerning relations with Belarus have been raised and discussed at all levels of the organisation. Among the priority areas of cooperation are the use of air routes, measures to counter terrorist threats to the energy infrastructure, and efforts to prevent and alleviate the consequences of industrial accidents and natural disasters. Energy security could be another subject for discussion as the issue has been high on the alliance's agenda in the last two years.

In addition, the Belarusian ruling elite seems to have realised that in the event of a new confrontation, Belarus will find itself on the sidelines of European politics because the country will never succeed in building stronger ties with the West without making concessions. Its relationship with Russia has definitely deteriorated lately. Mindful of this fact, Minsk is likely to avoid real, not verbal, tensions with the alliance.

In conclusion, generally speaking one should note that the existing situation is likely to remain unchanged in the foreseeable future – Belarus and NATO will continue to maintain limited but stable ties. A fundamentally different type of relationship, a real partnership, is possible only after the establishment of democracy in the country.



Ideally, it would be good for Belarus to join the alliance. That would give it complete and irreversible guarantees of sovereignty. However, taking into consideration the above-mentioned realities – a fierce opposition from Russia and insufficient public support for such a move, the issue will hardly be on the agenda in the foreseeable future. However, this is not a matter of principle – after all, not all members of the European Union are members of the alliance and seek its membership.

On the other hand, the necessity to take into account the phobias of Belarus' eastern neighbour does not imply that Belarus should not advance its own interests, especially when Russia's actions are totally inadequate to the reality.

Taking into account all these circumstances, the best option for Belarus in the current situation would be to retain its neutral status. More accurately, the country should seek to achieve a neutral status because despite the fact that this is codified in the Constitution, the government violated the provision in joining the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and forming a military alliance with Russia.

By sticking to neutrality, Belarus could play a role similar to that of Austria during the Cold War. Clearly, this can hardly be considered an ideal solution, but parallels with Austria suggest that this is also not the worst option. After all, despite the drastic change in the configuration of Europe, Vienna has not displayed an intention to give up its neutral status, but still remains committed to Euro-Atlantic solidarity.

It appears that nothing prevents Belarus from taking the same position in the current circumstances or in the mid-term future. As for a more distant future, it is too difficult now to make any reliable forecasts.