

The future of European security



**BELARUS IN  
NATO**



**Janusz  
Onyszkiewicz**



**Andrius  
Kubilius**



**Luīze  
Līce-Tāne**



**Silver  
Loit**



**Kari  
Liuhdo**



**Yuri  
Felshtinsky**



**István  
Gyarmati**



**Andrei  
Sannikov**



**Pavlo  
Klimkin**

# BELARUS IN NATO



European Belarus Foundation

Warsaw 2023

Note from the editor .....	4
A VIEW FROM POLAND	
Belarus in NATO?	
Janusz Onyszkiewicz .....	6
A VIEW FROM LITHUANIA	
Belarus in NATO: Myth or Reality?	
Andrius Kubilius .....	18
A VIEW FROM LATVIA	
Assessing Belarus in Regional Security	
Luīze Līce-Tane .....	31
A VIEW FROM ESTONIA	
Tyrants Are Not Afraid of Your Neutrality	
Silver Loit .....	41
A VIEW FROM FINLAND	
Finland's road to NATO	
Kari Liuhto .....	54
RUSSIA / USA	
Belarus as a geopolitical key to the security of Europe	
Yuri Felshtinsky .....	68
A VIEW FROM HUNGARY	
Belarus' road to NATO	
Dr. István Gyarmati .....	76
A VIEW FROM BELARUS	
Belarus in NATO is Indispensable for European Security	
Andrei Sannikov .....	89
A VIEW FROM UKRAINE	
NATO - the most efficient security model for Belarus in future	
Pavlo Klimkin .....	103

## ***Note from the editor***

After the war that Russia unleashed on Ukraine the architecture of European and, in fact of transatlantic security is changing. European countries, especially in its Eastern part are already seriously reviewing their security postures to adjust to the new or renewed challenges, including the war, to secure stable peace on the continent and in the world.

Special role in this review and rethinking process belongs to “grey zones”.

Belarus is one of them and a very important one. Being occupied by the dictatorial regime of Lukashenko who made the country completely dependent on Russia, it provided a spring board for the Russian attack on Ukraine.

At the same time the mass protests in 2020 against the rule of Lukashenko demonstrated to the world that Belarus will not tolerate this regime and it's only a matter of time before it collapses.

It looks like the only security option for a free Belarus after the war is joining NATO as soon as possible.

The purpose of this project is to look not only into possibilities but also to into practical aspects of a future Belarus membership in NATO, to review the advantages and possible obstacles on this path.

Set of articles of distinguished authors who have unique experience and insight on the security issues in the region and on their respective countries, provides a view on the matter from different angles.

Belarus is bordering Russia from one side and countries that are members of NATO and Ukraine that made it its Constitutional goal to become a member.

As history shows there is no security that could come from the eastern neighbor of Belarus. On the contrary, for centuries Russia has been a source of insecurity and a threat for the independence and the mere existence of Belarus.

Baltic neighbors of Belarus and Poland opted for NATO security and joined the Alliance as soon as it became possible.

Their experience and their guidance is valuable for the discussion on the topic.

The authors of the articles indicate difficulties that Belarus encounters today and that it will encounter when accessing NATO. At the same time the indisputable advantages for the security of Belarus and European security are stressed.

A new security architecture based on the collective political and military capabilities of European countries is a condition *sine qua non* for prosperous and peaceful Europe and Belarus must be part of such Europe.

***Andrei Sannikov***

## ***A VIEW FROM POLAND***

### ***Belarus in NATO?***

***Janusz Onyszkiewicz***

The new, democratic Belarus, which will undoubtedly emerge after the natural or imposed departure of Lukashenko, will have to decide what place it wants to occupy in the European political environment, as well as define its priorities and security policy.

Belarus faced a similar challenge in the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union, formed by these countries in 1922, was dissolved in December 1991 by the decision of leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

**The first problem was then to determine the relationship of the newly established independent Belarusian state to other states that began to emerge on the territory of the former USSR. It was particularly important to define the attitude towards Russia, which declared itself as the legal successor of the USSR and clearly wanted to maintain its leadership or hegemonic status over the emerging states.**

The political situation in Belarus was quite special. As a prominent Belarusian analyst Valery Karbalevich put it

*The phenomenon of Belarus was that due to the low level of national self-awareness and national self-identification, the issue of state sovereignty became a bone of contention and the subject of a sharp political struggle.*

This struggle took place between the part of the new political elite focused on the program of building and strengthening a national identity separate from the Soviet one and the vast part of the former political elites with a more conservative attitude.

Thus, in Belarus, two tendencies clashed clearly. The first one was visible primarily in the activities of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF). Their intention was to embark on a nation building program, based on a complete independence from Russia, considering Russian influence as a threat to building Belarusian distinctiveness and genuine Belarusian national identity.

However, there was a second, much more conservative tendency, visible in activities of growing part of the political elite, which did not see any threats from Russia. Using arguments based primarily on the real needs of the economy and the army as well as cultural proximity, it postulated maintaining close relations with Russia.



The results of the referendum held in May 1995 (before Lukashenko managed to completely strengthened himself and before he took full control over the Belarusian society), could say a lot about the attitude of this majority of the contemporary Belarusian society to Russia. In this referendum, the vast majority allegedly voted for restoring Russian as the official language, for further economic integration with Russia and for adopting Soviet-era style national symbols such as the flag and coat of arms. The problem is that nobody knows to what degree the results of the referendum were rigged by the authorities.

One of the areas of struggle for the future of Belarus has become the issue of treaty ties between Belarus and Russia.

The instrument that would enable Russia to play the role of hegemon was to be a military alliance known as the Tashkent Treaty of May 1992. It was to be a framework for further military cooperation between the signatories and a common security provider.

The treaty was signed by 6 countries: Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Belarus has not signed this treaty, but the pressure of conservative circles was quite strong, what led to the signing in Moscow in July 92 of an agreement on close cooperation between the armed forces of both countries.

This agreement was strongly protested by the BNF, which based its arguments on the contradiction between close military cooperation with another country (Russia) and Belarus's postulated path to neutrality.

The postulate of neutrality finally appeared in the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus adopted a year later, where the following statement was found:

*The Republic of Belarus, taking into account its geopolitical position, will strive to achieve the status of a non-bloc, non-nuclear and neutral state in its independent foreign policy.”*

The twisted and bizarre statement of the Belarusian Ministry of Justice about the full compliance of the signed agreements on military cooperation and the Tashkent Treaty with the above neutrality provisions paved the way for the treaty ratification in April 1993. Therefore, Belarus has embarked on a path of increasing military and political dependence on Russia.

Today Belarus, with all appearances of independence, is a country completely politically and economically dependent on Russia. As for its military forces, they are practically fully integrated with the western grouping of Russian army.

The new, democratic Belarus, wanting to regain full sovereignty, will therefore have to face huge problems of undoing what has been done under Lukashenka and, above all, it will have to make a stra-

tegic choice of one of the three possible political directions.

The choice of the first one would be the result of the recognition of Russia as a current or potential threat to the basic interests of Belarus, such as national sovereignty and border security, as well as the need of comprehensive development based on close ties with the West.

This may result in seeking security based on NATO membership

It's a very radical program. First of all, Belarus will have to rebuild completely the currently developed system of political and military ties with Russia. And they are extremely strong, reducing Belarus to the status of a Russian satellite and paving the way of becoming a subject of the Russian Federation.

Therefore, it would be necessary to start with withdrawing from the Union of Belarus and Russia and from all decisions and commitments adopted within this framework. Further, it will also be necessary to leave the Commonwealth of Independent States (SNG) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (ODKB) - an alliance modeled on NATO, into which the Tashkent Treaty was transformed, and to free the Belarusian armed forces from all organizational, personal and doctrinal ties with the armed forces of the Russian Federation.

While the difference of the equipment of the Belarussian army with the systems used in NATO will not be a major obstacle (although communication and identification systems, air defense systems and organizations will have to be changed), it will be worth paying attention to the credibility of the secret services. In NATO, the protection of jointly shared secret information rests on the shoulders of national services, which must guarantee reliability and resistance to infiltrations and leaks.

An additional problem is the necessary knowledge of English, the working language of the Alliance.

**NATO is joined not by the armed forces, but by the whole country. It must be a democratic country with strong and accepted democratic institutions, a country where effective barriers are put up against corruption, a country with a healthy market economy. And - last but not least - it must be a country in which the fundamental principle of civilian control over the armed forces is implemented, which makes the armed forces not a factor influencing state policy, but an important, admittedly, but only an instrument of democratically elected authorities.**

The NATO membership program must be accepted by the majority of significant political forces that will emerge in democratic Belarus and by the majority of Belarusian society. It won't be easy at all. In Ukraine, the majority of political elites were in favor of Ukraine's entry into NATO but the perception of NATO by Ukrainian society was different. For many years an average Ukrainian perceived the Alliance, in accordance with the Soviet and then Russian narrative, as a hostile, aggressive pact and an important instrument of US domination. The change of this opinion was incremental and was finally completed after a brutal Russian invasion.

A natural and logical complement to this program of bonding with the West should also be accession to the European Union, which will ultimately stabilize the international position of democratic Belarus.

The main problem, however, will be how Russia will react to such a program. For Russia, Belarus does not have the same meaning as Ukraine, which is part of Russian national mythology and a determinant of Russia's superpower status. For Russia, Belarus is not only a window to Europe, but above all an area of fundamental strategic importance. In Russia, the memory is still cultivated that the armies of Poland, Napoleon and Hitler, who were marching on Moscow, passed through Belarus, although it is forgotten that the only

permanent threat to Russia's sovereignty came from the east, from the Mongol empire of Genghis Khan.

Whether Russia will want to block Belarus' entry into NATO by resorting to armed force, as happened in the case of Ukraine, will remain an open question. However, if this happens, the question arises whether Belarus will be ready for such a response as the Ukrainians made in a similar situation? Belarus is a much smaller country than Ukraine, with a different state of national self-awareness and different historical Russian experience. And it is not clear whether the political West (mainly NATO countries and the European Union) will want to support Belarus in this unequal fight like it was in case of Ukraine.

A lot will depend on how the war in Ukraine will end, or at least how the active phase of fighting will end, what Russia will be like then and how strong the West would be affected by the war fatigue. If in Russia, even after Putin, its imperial and aggressive policy will not change, another intervention in Belarus is highly likely, especially since the political West will probably not be ready to engage in another conflict.

Individual countries, such as Poland, may be ready for this, but it certainly will not be enough.

The most optimistic variant, that of Russia's return to the policy of establishing rational relations with the West is unlikely, but not excluded.

In such a situation, Russia's inevitable resistance to Belarus' entry into NATO may be limited to purely

political or economic measures. However, the question remains whether in this situation, when fears of aggression from Russia will diminish, the view will not prevail in many countries that it is not worth straining relations with politically changing Russia and not agreeing to Belarus' accession to the Alliance.

The second possible option is to maintain ties with Russia, but clearly redefine them so as to preserve sovereignty, national identity and opportunities for economic and civilizational development. This would mean, on the one hand a resignation from creating one common state entity with Russia, reestablishing political contacts with the West, opening the economy to foreign investments, and finally, the autonomy of the defense sector. On the other hand, maintaining the customs union with Russia and accepting the treaty regulating the principles of cooperation and guaranteeing Russia its basic interests in the field of security. It is hard to believe, however, that even with such a formal weakening of ties with Russia, the danger of Russia gradually recreating the present state and continuing its policy of turning Belarus into another Russified entity of the Russian Federation will disappear. Let us remember that in "Voices from Russia" one of the most liberal and open minded Russian thinkers Herzen wrote in the middle of XIX century that

*"...instead of russyfying Belarusians and Lithuanians by force it is more effective for the government to*

*leave these changes to time and the force of realities.. This is how the Finnish and other tribes became russified.”*

The third possibility is to copy, with possible modifications, the relations that Finland had with Russia after the end of World War II. In this model, Belarus, like Finland, would provide Russia with the necessary security assurances and commitments, with full freedom in domestic policy and economic cooperation with the West in return. This is a solution that would probably be considered by many Western countries as the best possible, or rather, to put it bluntly, as the most convenient and least demanding of the West. However, this solution, like the previous one, may turn out not to be a permanent one. After all, Finland, for good reasons, finally found itself in both the European Union and NATO...

**The choice that the new, democratic Belarus will make, will be the resultant of the external political situation at the time of making this choice. It will also be the result of the political situation inside the country and how the national awareness and aspirations of the Belarusian society will be shaped, as well as what will be a determination in their implementation.**



In 2004 Valery Karbalevich (quoted already earlier on) wrote:

*In Belarus, there is one important phenomenon in the general consciousness. Paradoxically, there are two ideas that are difficult to reconcile at first glance: the lack of an alternative other than integration with Russia and the appreciation of the Belarusian statehood and sovereignty. (...) On the one hand, most Belarusians have a permanent complex of incomplete national value, disbelief in the ability to preserve national identity and an instinctive desire to join a larger state. But on the other hand, they do not want the complete termination of their Belarusian statehood. The optimal variant, which could satisfy a significant part of the Belarusian electorate, would be an intermediate position between full unification and full independence*

Belarus society to day is certainly not the same as in 2004. Nevertheless what options will be open and what options will be chosen remains to be seen.

We in Poland can only keep our fingers crossed that Belarusians' choices and aspirations will be European ones and that we shall be able to find ourselves, together with Belarus, in a common European and Atlantic community of nations.



**Janusz Onyszkiewicz**, Polish politician with most distinguished career. He graduated in mathematics from Warsaw University. In the 1980s, Onyszkiewicz became the spokesman for the Solidarity movement. He was arrested and interned several times. After the fall of communism in 1989,

Onyszkiewicz became a member of the Polish Sejm. He served all subsequent terms from May 1989 until 2001. In the spring of 1990, Onyszkiewicz became the first civilian vice-ministers of defence in the communist-dominated Ministry of Defence. Later Onyszkiewicz was Minister of Defence twice, 1992–1993 and 1997–2000. From 2004 until 2009, he served as a Member of the European Parliament and was elected as a Vice-President of the Parliament, a post he held from 2004 until 2007. Councillor to the Minister of National Defence 2010-2015.

Janusz Onyszkiewicz has been active in Belarus affairs. For his position he was twice expelled from Belarus by the authorities.

From 2004 he has served as the Chairman of the Euro-Atlantic Association Council (Poland).

## ***A VIEW FROM LITHUANIA***

### ***Belarus in NATO: Myth or Reality?***

***Andrius Kubilius***

The question of future relations between Belarus and NATO may elicit an ironic smile from someone today, as it may seem disconnected from reality. However, in the midst of geopolitical tremors shaking the entire European continent, any inquiry into Belarus's future is neither naive nor untimely.

Of course, discussing the future relations between Belarus and NATO implies that we are talking about the future relations between democratic Belarus and NATO, as discussing Belarus's relations with NATO as long as Belarus is effectively controlled by the authoritarian ruler Lukashenko makes little or no sense.

Potential future leaders of democratic Belarus for a number of years have been formulating pro-European geopolitical orientation, goals, and aspirations of Belarus after the fall of Lukashenko regime. This is crucial because it allows Belarusian people, who are still living under oppressive conditions, to understand the direction in which the democratic forces will guide Belarus when its people will regain the

right and freedom to determine their country's destiny after the regime will fall.

**The choice awaiting Belarusians after they reclaim democratic freedoms will be straightforward: whether they want to live a normal and secure European life or reject such a prospect, opting to remain hostages to the political culture and lifestyle of the post-imperial Eastern sphere.**

As the experience of Eastern European countries over the past few decades demonstrates, once these countries regained democratic rights, they sought to distance themselves from authoritarian Putin's Russia and aimed to integrate into Euro-Atlantic Western structures as quickly as possible. This was the case with Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and now Armenia is beginning to follow this path. There are no rational arguments to suggest that democratic Belarus will not follow the same path. Therefore, it can be confidently stated that democratic Belarus will also move in the direction of Western integration because it is the only way to ensure security and prosperity for its people on the European continent.

Quite recently Belarusian democratic forces confirmed that democratic Belarus will aim to become a member of the European Union. Certainly, the final

geopolitical choice will be made by the people of democratic Belarus when they regain the right and freedom to make such decisions.

**Belarusian democratic forces and European Union institutions can already begin preparations for future integration and to start drafting and announcing the project of a future Association Agreement because such an agreement will be the first step on the path to integration.**

It also demands to define the future relationship between democratic Belarus and NATO. In this case, it is worth considering the definitions and arguments regarding such relations, differentiating them through the lens of two significantly different scenarios of geopolitical changes in the region:

- a) Russia, together with Belarus, embarks on a path of democratic transformation, or
- b) Russia continues to be governed by an authoritarian regime.

Why is it worth distinguishing these two different scenarios?

First and foremost, we need to discuss how the transformation towards democracy in Belarus itself could unfold. In theory, there are several possible

scenarios, with the distinguishing feature being whether such changes occur simultaneously in Belarus and Russia or whether they occur at different times.

Firstly, it is worth noting that the main trigger for such changes could be Ukraine's clear victory over Russia, which would force Russia to withdraw its military from all occupied Ukrainian territories. In this case, we could expect that the defeated Russia would witness the downfall of the Kremlin regime, while at the same time a transformation toward democracy would commence within Russia. Simultaneously, the regime of Lukashenko, who is a Kremlin protégé, would also collapse in Belarus.

**Another possible scenario is that Ukraine's victory leads only to the fall of Lukashenko's regime, prompted by the Belarusian Kalinouski Regiment, which would return to Belarus after the victory in Ukraine.**

Separately from developments in Russia, significant changes can also occur in Belarus in the event of Lukashenko, who has long had visible health problems, finally passing away or is becoming incapable to govern. This opens the door to significant changes driven by the current political and business elite in Belarus, which has freed itself from

Lukashenko's dictatorship. This would mark the beginning of a 'Belarusian perestroika,' which, like the Soviet Union's perestroika during Gorbachev's time, eventually breaks free from the control of such a 'perestroika elite' and evolves into a true democracy.

Separately from Russia's transformation, Belarus could also see scenarios similar to those in Ukraine or Armenia, where regimes close to the Kremlin, such as Yanukovich or Sargsyan regimes, were ousted by the massive rallies for democracy.

Lukashenko brutally suppressed the first such attempt in 2020, but this does not negate the historical trend in the post-Soviet space, where democracy gradually but steadily spreads from the western borders to the eastern regions. In the case of such historical inevitability, democratic changes would primarily occur in Belarus and only then extend to the current Russian territories, where Belarus' example could serve as significant inspiration for the Russian people.

In any case, the future democratic Belarus' relations with NATO are worth considering in the context of those two possible scenarios for Russia's development: a) Belarus goes through democratic changes while Russia continues to be governed by an authoritarian regime, and b) Russia, along with Belarus, embarks on the path of democratic transformation.

## **I. Authoritarian Russia in the Neighbourhood of Democratic Belarus**

It is abundantly clear that authoritarian Russia will oppose democratic changes in Belarus and, once they occur, will attempt to undermine democratic Belarus by all means, including military ones, to threaten its security. For the authoritarian Kremlin regime, democratic Belarus poses a threat not because it would lean towards the European Union or NATO, which would endanger Russia's security, but because Belarus' Western integration would create the danger for the survival of the authoritarian Kremlin regime. The Kremlin knows very well that Belarus integration with the West is the only possibility of how conditions for normal European type of life can be successfully created in Belarus. Just as such conditions have been established in Central Europe and the Baltic States over the past decades, and as they are being developed in Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia or Georgia today. Evolution of the success of Belarus through integration with the European Union is dangerous to the Kremlin regime (not Russia itself), just as Ukraine's integration into the European Union is a threat to the Kremlin regime too.

**The success of both Belarus and Ukraine's democracies, becoming inspiring and followable examples for the Russian**



**people would undermine the foundations of the authoritarian Kremlin regime.**

There is no doubt that the Russian people, while witnessing the success of Ukraine and Belarus, would increasingly question why Russia could not undergo such democratic changes, which would mean the end of Putin's regime.

Certainly, Putin's regime began military aggression against Ukraine, fearing the prospects of its democratic success. It was also frightened by the 2020 people's revolution in Belarus, which showed that the alleged loyalty of Belarusians to Lukashenko's regime, which Lukashenko had enjoyed until then, was a complete fiction, evaporating during the first mass demonstrations. Putin understood that the loyalty of ordinary Russians to his authoritarian Kremlin regime is also the same fiction, which could also quickly dissipate. Starting a war against Ukraine, Putin sought not only to stop the success trajectory of Ukraine, which was mortal to his regime, but also to send a frightening signal to the Belarusian society – look at what awaits you if, like Ukrainians, you strive for democracy and European integration. Putin's aim was twofold: firstly, to thwart any temptation for ordinary Russians to follow their neighbours' example of democratic success, primarily hoping to destroy the opportunities for such success militarily and, secondly,

to flood his citizens' minds with total propaganda and war hysteria.

**Therefore, the prospects of democratic Belarus are crucially dependent on Ukraine's military victory in the near future. Because it would serve as a response to both Belarusian and Russian citizens that Putin is incapable of stopping the success of democratic Ukraine. Consequently, he would be incapable of halting the success of democratic Belarus when it follows the same path.**

Russia's war against Ukraine is a painful lesson for the democratic West, whose long-standing mistaken geopolitical stance contributed to Putin ultimately deciding that he could initiate military aggression against Ukraine, and the West would not respond adequately. As the West failed to respond adequately to the war in Georgia or the occupation of Crimea. The West's major mistake was leaving Ukraine in a "grey" security zone, without real prospects of integrating into the EU or NATO, even after Ukraine definitively turned towards democracy and European integration in 2014. The West kept its attitude that Ukraine's integration should not "provoke Putin," but it was precisely this stance that provoked Putin's

aggression because the West did not open the doors to integration and left Ukraine precisely in the same "grey" zone.

It seems that the West has already recognised its mistake, which is why Ukraine and Moldova have become candidates for EU membership, and negotiations on their membership are likely to begin soon. Both countries are ambitiously expected to become EU members by 2030. It is also likely that NATO will extend an invitation to Ukraine in the near future. This way, Ukraine will finally be removed from the dangerous "grey" zone.

This lesson must be incorporated into a clear concept for a new Western security on the European continent: democracies that emerge and establish themselves in Eastern EU neighbouring countries must not be left in a "grey" geopolitical security zone because doing so only creates temptation and provokes authoritarian Kremlin aggression against its neighbours who are transforming into democracies.

Therefore, once Belarus transforms into a democracy, and Russia remains under the occupation of its authoritarian kleptocratic regime, not only should democratic Belarus seek protection for its democracy by integrating into Euro-Atlantic organisations, including NATO and EU, but the West itself should also be interested in the integration of democratic Belarus and offer security guarantees to democratic Belarus.

## **II. Democratic Russia in the Neighbourhood of Democratic Belarus**

Russia's transformation from an authoritarian state into a democratic republic would be a fundamental change to the security architecture of the entire European continent. Democracies do not wage war against each other. This would mean the end of Russia's aggressive stance towards all its democratic neighbours. The success of democratic neighbours would no longer threaten the authority of democratic Russia but, on the contrary, would encourage healthy competition to achieve the same level of success in Russia.

Such a new geopolitical situation would also raise broader questions, such as the future goals of NATO. NATO was founded in 1949 to protect the West from the aggressive expansion of authoritarian Stalinist Russia (the Soviet Empire) into Western Europe. With the absence of authoritarian Russia, there would be no more threats of its aggression. It might seem that in such a case, not only would democratic Belarus no longer need to consider NATO membership, but the organisation itself would need to rethink the basis for its continued existence – if there is no longer an authoritarian threat, what then should NATO defend Europe against?

However, there is a serious strategic argument why, even after Russia transforms into a democracy,

not only should NATO remain, but it should also enlarge to democratic Belarus, not to mention Ukraine. Moreover, this would be necessary for the democratic Russia itself.

Democratic Russia would very soon, after such a transformation occurs, face a phenomenon typical of all collapsing empires – societal nostalgia for the past and the former grandeur of the empire. For former empires, this has caused significant challenges to their democracies. During Yeltsin's era, democracy in Russia could not withstand such waves of nostalgia, and Putin, after he came to power, actively fueled this nostalgia. It is evident that democratic Russia, if it re-emerges, will face a similar challenge. This time, the West can significantly assist Russian democracy in resisting the "post-imperial nostalgia" threat. For this, the West must demonstrate through its actions that Russia no longer has any chances to restore its empire, as both Ukraine and democratic Belarus are firmly integrated into the Western security (NATO) and economic organisations (EU). As Zbigniew Brzezinski said, "Russia, which has the possibility to control Ukraine (and Belarus), will always remain an empire, while Russia that loses these opportunities will have the possibility to become a democracy." NATO membership for Belarus and Ukraine would send a clear signal that Russia will never have the opportunity to control these countries again. This would be very healthy for the fledgling Russian democracy.

**Therefore, in any case, democratic Belarus will need to strive for NATO membership, not only for the security of democratic Belarus against authoritarian Kremlin but also for the sake of a democratic Europe and sustainable peace on the European continent.**

It would also be necessary for democratic Russia's sake, to strengthen its resistance against the wave of "post-imperial nostalgia."

In conclusion, the future relations between Belarus and NATO are not merely a fantasy but a possible and important consideration in the context of Belarus's democratic transformation and its impact on the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe. Regardless of the path Belarus takes to democracy, whether simultaneous with Russia or independent of it, NATO membership offer for democratic Belarus will be crucial for its security, fostering a more stable and peaceful Europe and for assisting Russia to overcome nostalgia to imperial past.



**Andrius Kubilius** is a Lithuanian politician and a Member of the European Parliament (MEP). He served as Prime Minister of Lithuania from 1999 to 2000 and again from 2008 to 2012.

Between 1990 and 1992, he was the Secretary-in-Charge of the Lithuanian Pro-independence Reform Movement *Sąjūdis* and Chairman of the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats from 2003 to 2015.

He was a Member of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania between 1992 and 2019.

Andrius Kubilius is the Head of the EPP Group Lithuanian Delegation in European Parliament, Co-President of Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, Standing Rapporteur of European Parliament On Russia and the Initiator and Chair of various Inter-parliamentary Forums in the European Parliament such as United for Ukraine (U4U) global network, the EU Neighbourhood East Forum, and Friends of the European Russia Forum.

# ***A VIEW FROM LATVIA***

## ***Assessing Belarus in Regional Security***

### ***(Perspective from Latvia)***

***Luīze Līce-Tane***

Since the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, the geopolitical landscape in Europe has witnessed significant changes as countries, in response to Russia's war against Ukraine, have had to re-evaluate their defense postures to address the changing security environment. As Belarus is situated between Russia and several North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) member states, Russia's role in the developments taking place in Belarus has further influenced regional security considerations. To understand the role of Belarus in regional security, it is necessary to examine the point of view of Belarus' neighboring countries, of which Latvia in this article will be analyzed more closely. Due to the geostrategic location of the Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, these countries have historically been affected by the politics of their neighbors.



**Nowadays, while geographically smaller, the Baltic States have great geopolitical significance and, as NATO member states, they have a vital role in safeguarding NATO's eastern flank. Therefore, disputes between the countries of Eastern Europe and Russia and more recently Belarus' unpredictability, are of great concern to the Baltic States and has made Latvia more aware of its security vulnerabilities on multiple occasions.**

The 2020 Belarusian presidential election that witnessed widespread civilian protests and state violence, and the events that followed, added to the unease felt by Belarus' neighboring countries. Particular examples of this were on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2021 with the forced landing of a Lithuania bound civil airline instigated by Belarus, the 2021 migrant crisis and the 2022 Russia's war against Ukraine exacerbated by the fact that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was partly launched from Belarus' territory. As such, in the spring and summer of 2021 Poland, Latvia and Lithuania experienced an ongoing flow of migrants coming from the Middle East via Belarus who were pushed towards the countries' borders by Belarus' regime. The humanitarian crisis was quickly recognized as manufactured by Belarus' regime and as an act of hybrid warfare. These efforts have illustrated

the weaponization of migrants as a tool in a broader effort to put forward Belarus' political agenda and destabilize the target country and the European Union (EU) as a whole. While Latvia's border with Russia has been an important factor in its threat assessment, the crisis revealed the necessity to further improve resilience to hybrid threats and border protection with Belarus. The described events marked a sudden decline in Latvia's and Belarus' relations which until 2020 could be described as pragmatic.<sup>I</sup> To illustrate, in 2021 the replacement of the official flag of Belarus with the Belarusian opposition's white-red-white flag by the Riga city mayor during the Ice Hockey World Championship led to both Latvia and Belarus expelling each other's diplomats,<sup>II</sup> thus suspending the countries' diplomatic relations.<sup>III</sup>

Furthermore, in the summer of 2023, against the backdrop of the ongoing Russia's war against Ukraine, a new security threat emerged in Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania due to the presence of the Wagner Group in Belarus, the private military organization with close ties to Russia.<sup>IV</sup> While the threat did not materialize, it reflected the unpredictability of Belarus' regime. Consequently, the unfolding events in Belarus and Russia's and Belarus' military and political cooperation challenges future regional stability and security. Furthermore, the cooperation between Russia and Belarus has added to the complexity of constructing a

credible deterrent for the Baltic States and other neighboring NATO member countries.

**Thus, if until 2020 relations between Latvia and Belarus were based on practical cooperation, then after 2020 Belarus threatened the national and regional security of Latvia as well as other neighboring countries.**

Furthermore, Russia's war against Ukraine has highlighted the importance and contemporary relevance of NATO and has reminded of the reasons why the Alliance was founded in the first place. Since NATO's establishment in 1949, the Alliance has had a significant role in shaping Europe's security landscape. Importantly, NATO's deterrence and assurance measures in its eastern flank have maintained stability and have also greatly alleviated Latvia's security concerns especially after the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea.<sup>v</sup> While Belarus has carried out dialogue and practical cooperation with NATO until 2021, when member states suspended cooperation between NATO and Belarus,<sup>vi</sup> it has not expressed a clear intention to pursue NATO membership. Moreover, the discussion of Belarus' NATO membership at present is hypothetical. However, in the probability of a democratic transition in Belarus, it may be implied that

the country's long-term security could be ensured if Belarus becomes a NATO member state.

**While Belarus' possible NATO membership has complex and far-reaching implications, as a neighboring country of member states of NATO and the EU, Belarus' NATO membership may bring positive contributions to Euro-Atlantic security and promote sustainable peace in Europe.**

Therefore, in the context of this article, it is useful to consider the possible opportunities and challenges of Belarus' potential NATO membership according to Latvia's security perspective.

It may be proposed that Belarus' potential NATO membership could contribute to regional stability and lead to increased cooperation with neighboring countries by establishing a relationship based on common values of democracy, human rights, and rule of law. Its membership may also encourage cooperation to counter hybrid threats. Additionally, the membership may directly strengthen the security of Latvia by securing the so-called Suwalki Gap. The Suwalki Gap that connects Lithuania and Poland and is located between Russia (Kaliningrad) and Belarus, has been a strategic vulnerability for the Baltic States security.<sup>vii</sup> The takeover of the Suwalki Gap could cut off the only land route for potential NATO

reinforcements and isolate the Baltic States from the rest of NATO's territory.

**Therefore, the prospect of Belarus joining NATO would potentially increase the security of the Suwalki Gap by uniting the region. As such, its membership in NATO may strengthen the security of Belarus' neighboring countries by creating an additional buffer against countries challenging regional security.**

Crucially, Belarus' NATO membership would strengthen deterrence by increasing the credibility of deterrence to a potential aggressor as NATO membership offers access to collective defense mechanisms outlined in Article 5 of the NATO treaty, stating that an attack on one member state is considered an attack on all. It may suggest that Russia has not attacked the territory of a NATO member state due to the risk of triggering collective action. As such, NATO membership would provide Belarus with collective defense guarantees and consequently create a more stable relationship between Belarus and Russia. In the event of an armed attack, Belarus' membership could also further contribute to Latvia's security and vice versa due to the countries' proximity to one another. Therefore, the Baltic States as well as other neighboring countries would benefit from a

stronger collective defense mechanism and increased deterrence measures in the region.

On the other hand, when considering the strategic relationship between Belarus and Russia and the countries close historic and cultural ties, potential membership may escalate tensions between the two countries. The tensions may also have potential spillover effects in Russia's relations with NATO and lead to an escalation of tensions in the region. Moreover, as Russia may perceive Belarus' move towards NATO as a threat to its national security and security interests, Russia may respond with countermeasures to destabilize regional security. Given Latvia's geographical proximity to Russia and Belarus, such a development would directly affect its national security. Consequently, it can be argued that the most substantial challenge to a neighboring country of Russia aspiring NATO membership is Russia's enduring opposition to NATO's enlargement near its borders.

**Considering the Baltic States path to independence and democracy, Belarus can draw valuable lessons from the Baltic States who joined NATO in 2004, even though the countries membership in the Alliance at the time seemed unlikely.**

After the Baltic States regained their independence in 1991, the path towards NATO membership presented challenges mainly due to the necessary political, military, and institutional reforms to meet NATO's membership criteria. However, while Russia at the time communicated its opposition to NATO's expansion near its borders, Russia was divided and preoccupied with domestic concerns to present a real challenge to the Baltic States joining NATO. Therefore, considering the current geopolitical environment, Belarus' NATO membership is unlikely until Belarus and Russia changes course.

**Importantly, the assistance received by the northern neighbors of the Baltic States, the Nordic countries, after the Baltic States regained independence and the resulting partnership between the countries paved the way for the Baltic States membership in NATO and the EU.**

Likewise, considering the Baltic States unwavering support for the Belarusian society in its efforts for freedom and democracy, Belarus in its democratic transition may consider seeking out the support of its immediate neighbors, the Baltic States. For the moment, the future of a democratic Belarus depends on the Belarusian society's persistence in its efforts to further a democratic transition. Furthermore,

preparatory steps towards integration with NATO should be carried out within the limits of possibilities.

---

**I. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, “Latvijas Republikas un Baltkrievijas Republikas divpusējās attiecības”, Jul**

**022, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/arpolitika/divpusejas-attiecibas/latvijas-un-baltkrievijas-attiecibas>**

**II. “Belarus and Latvia expel diplomats in tit-for-tat move”, *Lsm.lv*, May 24, 2021,**

**<https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/belarus-and-latvia-expel-diplomats-in-tit-for-tat-move.a406011>**

**III. For more information on Latvia’s perspective, see Djatkoviča, E., “Perspective from Latvia: From Complacency to Anxiety”, in Māris Andžāns et al., “Post-2020 Belarus: Security and Defence Implications for the Baltic States, Poland, and NATO”, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2021, p. 15-22, <https://www.liia.lv/en/publications/post-2020-belarus-security-and-defence-implications-for-the-baltic-states-poland-and-nato-949>**

**IV. Ghaedi, M., “Who are Russia’s mercenary Wagner Group?”, *Deutsche Welle*, June 27, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/who-are-russias-mercenary-wagner-group/a-64429380>**

**V. NATO, “Relations with Russia”, August 3, 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50090.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50090.htm)**



**VI.** NATO, “Relations with Belarus”, July 22, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49119.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49119.htm)

**VII.** Sytas, A., “NATO war game defends Baltic weak spot for first time”, *Reuters*, June 18, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-russia-suwalki-gap/nato-war-game-defends-baltic-weak-spot-for-first-time-idUSKBN1990L2>



***Luīze Līce-Tane*** - Tane is a junior researcher at Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga. She holds a bachelors degree in Political Science and a masters degree in International Relations and Diplomacy. Her research interests include the security and defense of the Baltic States, deterrence strategy, Arctic security and military conflict analysis.

# ***A VIEW FROM ESTONIA***

## ***Tyrants Are Not Afraid of Your Neutrality***

### ***(The Estonian Experience)***

***Silver Loit***

The ongoing war of Russia against Ukraine has changed the security situation around the Baltic Sea dramatically. Finland's membership in NATO and Sweden's application for NATO membership that will be accepted sooner or later have strengthened the security of the Baltic Sea region, developing its resilience against the single dangerous and potentially damaging local power – Russia. It all has happened in spite of Russia's blatant ultimatum to NATO, the US and the OSCE on 17 December 2021 that attempted to impose Russia's rules of the game on the West, again. Russia's brutal war against Ukraine has had the opposite effect, as it was confirmed by the President of Finland Sauli Niinistö who addressed Vladimir Putin by saying, 'You caused this. Look at the mirror'. Symbolically and dramatically, it marked the end of the long-time Finnish neutrality, and it finally closed the chapter on two centuries of the policy of neutrality in the region.

For Estonia, the policy of neutrality had proven its weakness already a long time ago. The strong support for NATO in Estonia has been built on the foundation of Estonia's tragic past.

**At the beginning of Estonia's independence, the concept of a policy of neutrality seemed quite appropriate for a new-born country that had felt the burden of the First World War.**

The Manifesto to the Peoples of Estonia, the founding declaration of the independent Republic of Estonia, proclaimed on 24 February 1918 in Tallinn, clearly stated that 'the Republic of Estonia wishes to maintain absolute political neutrality towards all neighbouring states and peoples and expects that they will equally respond with complete neutrality'. The quest for neutrality was very practical: tens of thousands of Estonians had fought in the battlefields of the First World War in the ranks of the Russian Army, and the founders of independent Estonia did not want to take sides in the hostilities between collapsing empires.

Estonia was forced to move away from the idea of total neutrality already in the first days of its independence. On the second day of Estonia's independence, Tallinn was occupied by the troops of imperial Germany. After the defeat in the World War of the latter, Estonia was attacked by Soviet Russia and the Baltic

*Landeswehr*. The Estonian War of Independence (1918 – 1920) resulted in a victory for Estonia, supported by its allies – the United Kingdom, Finland, Latvia, Swedish and Danish volunteers, Baltic German units and the Russian White movement. Thus, **Estonia's experience in its War of Independence clearly showed the need for reliable allies**, and this need only increased when Estonia started to apply for full diplomatic recognition from the International community, especially from the members of the Entente. Soviet Russia was the first state that recognized Estonia *de jure* according to the Tartu Peace Treaty signed by the representatives of the two governments on 2 February 1920. Russia unreservedly recognized 'the independence and autonomy of the State of Estonia', and renounced 'voluntarily and for ever all rights of sovereignty formerly held by Russia over the Estonian people and territory by virtue of the former legal situation, and by virtue of International treaties, which, in respect of such rights, shall henceforth lose their force' (Article 2). The Soviet side promised that 'should the perpetual neutrality of Estonia be internationally recognised, Russia undertakes to respect such neutrality and to join in guaranteeing it' (Article 5). From the perspective of the wider security of the Baltic Sea, the parties agreed that 'in case of the neutralisation of the Gulf of Finland, the two contracting Parties undertake to accede to such neutralisation of the conditions drawn up by common agreement of the States concerned and

established by international declarations relating hitherto; in case of the conclusion of any such international agreement, they also undertake to bring their naval forces, or a portion thereof, into conformity with the provisions of such International agreement' (Article 6). The parties agreed to forbid all kind of recruiting and mobilisation of official and unofficial forces that could be directed against the other contracting party (Article 6).<sup>1</sup> The following Peace treaties between the Soviets and Lithuania (Moscow, 12 July 1920), Latvia (Riga, 11 August 1920), Finland (Tartu, 14 October 1920) and Poland (Riga, 18 March 1921) gave some hope for peace and regional stability. But not for long: soon after the first years of civil war, Soviet Russia managed to stabilize its domestic situation by making false promises and applying terror against its population, as well as against the population of annexed countries. Communist Russia revealed its revanchist goals by occupying and annexing other new-born states like Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and initiated a Communist hybrid war and disinformation campaigns against its neighbours, including Estonia. On 1 December 1924 the Soviet Union tried to topple Estonia's democratically elected government by initiating an armed coup d'état in Tallinn. This attempt ended in vain, **but it once again demonstrated the need for a credible alliance or at least a more enhanced security cooperation between like-minded states.**

At the beginning of the 1920s, Estonia tried to secure the guarantees of support from the United Kingdom that had helped during its most critical days in the Estonian War of Independence at the end of 1918. It was clear by 1925 that the United Kingdom would rather distance itself from the Baltic affairs. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement signed on 18 June 1935 limited British presence even more and increased German detrimental influence in the Baltic Sea. But the United Kingdom and France as cornerstones of the Versailles system remained both politically and culturally important factors in Estonia's foreign policy.

**It seemed to be very natural to invest in the cooperation of like-minded neighbours. In the first half of the 1920s, Estonia initiated and actively supported regional security cooperation initiatives between Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.**

The Baltic Conferences tried to bring about a closer coordination of the foreign policy of the states that shared the common threat coming from the Soviet Union and that were afraid of the growing influence of revanchist powers, the gathering storm in the democratic Weimar Republic. Regrettably, the war and termination of diplomatic relations between Poland and Lithuania undermined the prospect of closer Baltic cooperation. Finland was generally treated as a Baltic

country but it started to distance itself from the Baltic matters and made (initially quite fruitless) efforts toward joining the cooperation of traditionally neutral Nordic countries. **The idea of a broad Baltic defence league failed and materialised only partly in a bilateral defence agreement between Latvia and Estonia on 1 November 1923.** The alliance engaged the two states immediately to lend assistance to the other state in the event of unprovoked aggression. The alliance was never put into effect, but it does not change the fact that **the only real military ally of Estonia between the two World Wars was Latvia**, a close neighbour that had experienced an almost identical fate in the past: three centuries of medieval Livonian statehood, followed by Polish, Swedish and Russian rule. Eleven years later, on 12 September 1934 Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania signed the Treaty of Good-Understanding and Co-operation in Geneva in order to take joint action in foreign policy. The framework became known as 'the Baltic Entente', but its practical value was very limited, as the threat perception of the parties was somewhat different – Estonia and Latvia saw the Soviet Union as the main threat to their independence, and they supported cordial relations with Poland, but Lithuania considered Poland and Germany to be the key threats to its existence. Nevertheless, even the symbolic 'Baltic unity' between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania laid a firm groundwork for close cooperation between their diplomats and common actions of

their communities in the West during the Soviet occupation.

The early years after the First World War gave some hope for the effectiveness of the peace initiatives of the League of Nations. This hope ended in vain, as some of the great powers did not join the league, and totalitarian regimes in the Soviet Union, Italy, Germany and Japan publicly ignored the principles of its collective security and disarmament. As a result of internal crisis caused by the Great Depression, Estonia took an authoritarian pathway in 1934 that alienated some of Estonia's friends among the Nordic democracies. Even under the relatively mild authoritarian rule of Konstantin Päts (1934–1940), during the so-called Silent Era, Estonia remained a safe haven for its ethnic and religious minorities, which enjoyed a wide-ranging cultural autonomy. Fascist, Nazi and Communist organizations were completely banned in Estonia. In 1934, one year after the Nazis came to power in Germany, a faculty of Jewish studies was opened at the University of Tartu. In 1936 an influential London weekly 'The Jewish Chronicle' described Estonia as an 'oasis of tolerance'.

After the Nazi takeover of Austria and Czechoslovakia, the only way to preserve this 'oasis' seemed to be bilateral non-aggression treaties (with the Soviet Union on 4 May 1932 and with Nazi Germany on 7 June 1939), and neutrality. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania agreed on their common neutrality law at the Conference of Baltic Foreign Ministers on 18 November



1938 in Riga, and the Parliament of Estonia ratified it on 1 December 1938. The neutrality law of Estonia was modelled on Sweden's declaration of neutrality (29 May 1938). Together with other Nordic and Baltic countries, Estonia declared its strict neutrality on the first day of the Second World War. In practical terms, Estonian leadership hoped that cautious balancing between the Soviet Union and Germany would secure Estonia's independence.

But Estonia's fate, together with Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania, had been decided already by the Nazi-Soviet Pact from 23 August 1939 and its secret additional protocols. The Soviet Union, formally still a neutral country, invaded Poland and forced Estonia (28 September 1939), Latvia (5 October 1939) and Lithuania (10 October 1939) to sign agreements on Soviet military bases on their soil. After the Nazi-Soviet joint attack and destruction of Poland as one of the key powers in the region, the possibilities for successful military resistance seemed to be hopeless. The Estonian government, together with its Baltic neighbours, continued to underline its neutrality in the ongoing war, bending under growing Soviet demands. **Finland resisted Soviet demands and during the Winter War (30 November 1939-13 March 1940) the Soviet air force used its bases in neutral Estonia to bomb Helsinki and other Finnish territories.** Soviet bombers heading from their airfields in occupied Estonia to Finnish airspace were visible for everyone, but

Estonian authorities officially denied the fact, as well as the Soviet violation of Estonia's neutrality. At the same time, Estonia's military intelligence informed the Finns about the attacking Soviet bombers, and helped Finland to prepare itself. The Estonian population firmly supported Finland in the ongoing war against the Soviet invaders and Estonian volunteers joined the Finnish Army.

**History repeats itself – Russia attacked Ukraine through its neighbour Belarus in February, 2022. But unlike in Estonia in 1939-1940, Belarusian authorities eagerly supported their Russian allies, for example by providing logistical support. No one asked the opinion of the population in Estonia in 1939-1940, as no one did in Belarus in 2022. Nevertheless, one of the goals of the Kremlin seemed to be the same: to then alienate Estonians and Finns, now Belarusians and Ukrainians, *divide et impera*.**

Continuation of clandestine intelligence cooperation between Estonia and Finland during the Winter War against the Soviet Union did not change the fact that Estonia's neutrality and independence had become a mere illusion. In wider context, Estonia was no exception – in April 1940 Germany invaded neutral Denmark and neutral Norway. Only Sweden was able

to avoid direct violations of its long-standing neutrality in the Second World War, at the cost of numerous limitations.

At the time when Germany occupied France in June 1940, the Soviet Union overthrew the governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and annexed the countries in August 1940. Among other things, the Kremlin accused very cautious, neutral and loyal Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian governments of not having been neutral enough. The Kremlin has never had problems in finding an 'evidence' for false accusations – one of the key accusations of the Soviet Union against the neutral Baltic states was the existence of the above mentioned hapless 'Baltic Entente', that had never had any military substance, and that had never drawn the Kremlin's serious attention. In reality, the 'Baltic Entente' had only been a platform for discussions of the three neutral states, and it had never conspired against anyone.

The decision of the Baltic countries to cancel all frameworks of mutual cooperation and their decision not to defend their independence militarily did not avoid further accusations from the Kremlin's side and terror against their population. In 1941 the German occupation followed until 1944, and it was replaced by the Soviet occupation (1944-1991). The democratic countries of the West condemned the occupation of the three Baltic countries, refused to recognize their annexation, and continued to recognize Baltic diplomatic represen-

tations and passports. But they could not avoid Nazi and Soviet atrocities in the occupied states: mass killings and deportations, Holocaust, confiscation of properties, purges of intellectual and political elites, massive damage to the environment, aggressive Sovietization and Russification campaigns.

The failure of the neutrality policy and the loss of independence was the reason why the foundation of NATO on 4 April 1949 was immediately welcomed by Baltic representatives in the free world. On the same day, Acting Consul General of Estonia Johannes Kaiv wrote to the Secretary of State of the United States Dean Acheson that Estonia, illegally occupied and dominated by the Soviet Union, was 'prevented from manifesting its keen interest in this pact'.<sup>11</sup> Similar statements were issued by Latvian and Lithuanian diplomats. The importance of Trans-Atlantic military cooperation and security guarantees in the aftermath of the Second World War was clearly understood by Denmark and Norway, whose neutrality had been violated during the war and became founding members of NATO.

**The understanding that NATO would be the only powerful and trustworthy guarantee against Soviet/Russian tyranny was shared by many in occupied Estonia, including a young generation of Estonian students who even wrote a song devoted to NATO during the Brezhnev era. One of the stu-**

**dents – Mart Laar – became Prime Minister after the restoration of Estonia’s independence, and he laid the ground for Estonia’s accession in the EU and NATO.**

Debates on the security policy of Baltic countries after their restoration did not leave much space for the issue of neutrality – the sad historical experience was visible enough. After the departure of ex-Soviet troops from the Baltic states in 1994, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were able to strengthen their existing consensus on NATO. Their skillful diplomacy and support from like-minded countries gave good results, and their accession in NATO and the EU was finalized ten years later. This decade was needed for structural changes and democratization of the society. **No one could present serious arguments in favour of the neutrality of the Baltic states**, and Russia started to renew its imperialistic agenda.

On 29 March 2024 Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, together with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, will be celebrating their 20th anniversaries as NATO member states. The history of the Soviet-Nazi collaboration, the Cold War and its continuation after the fall of Berlin Wall has proven that neutrality in Europe is an illusion that can exist only in the neighbourhood of prosperous and predictable NATO member states, and at their expense. **If one wants to remain free in Russia’s dangerous neighbourhood and**

**stay away from its corruptive influence, there can be no alternative to a resilient society, a strong army, and an active membership in NATO.**

---

I. Estonia and Soviet Republic of Russia. Peace Treaty, signed at Tartu, February 2, 1920. League of Nations Treaty Series. <http://www.worldlii.org/int/other/LNTSer/1922/92.html>

II. <https://estonianworld.com/security/the-74-year-old-letter-that-indicates-estonia-wanted-to-be-a-nato-founding-member/>



**Silver Loit**

*Has studied history at the University of Tartu and at the Jagellonian University in Krakow, PhD researcher in the field of Estonian diplomacy, Estonia-Poland relations, and diplomatic protocol in Estonia between the two World Wars.*

*Has been working in Estonia's diplomatic service since 2007. In the years 2010-2013 and 2019-2021 he worked in the Embassy of Estonia to Russia in the field of Russian internal politics and human rights, 2013-2016 deputy head of mission and consul in the Embassy of Estonia to Israel. Has been working for the Estonian Centre for International Development since 2021.*

# ***A VIEW FROM FINLAND***

## ***Finland's road to NATO***

***Kari Liuhto***

As Finland's road to NATO is considerably longer than our country's actual NATO integration process, a brief summary of the history behind it is in order.

The Soviet Union failed to occupy Finland in World War II, and after the war, Finland was not part of the Soviet Union, unlike the Baltic States. Even though Finland was not occupied, it remained in the Soviet sphere of interest, which is why our country had to refuse, among other things, the Marshall Plan provided by the USA, due to pressure from the USSR.

**The basis of relations between Finland and the Soviet Union was the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, or the YYA Treaty as we Finns call it. It also had a security policy dimension: the Soviet Union's opportunity for military consultations if Finland had tried to break away from the Soviet sphere of interest. Particularly during the Hungarian Uprising in 1956 and the Prague Spring in**

**1968, Finland was concerned that social commotion in the Soviet Union's Eastern European satellite states could trigger the Kremlin's desire to start military consultations with Finland.**

In addition to the YYA Treaty, the USSR sought to increase Finland's dependence on the Soviet Union by, for instance, supporting the career development of pro-Soviet politicians in Finland and increasing Finland's economic dependence on the Soviet Union. Since Finland was not a member of the socialist states' Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), the Soviet Union sought to increase Finland's dependence by creating a clearing payment system five years after the Second World War. The clearing trade between Finland and the Soviet Union was based on the exchange of goods, with no need for convertible currencies, of which there was a chronic shortage in the USSR

The Soviet share in Finland's foreign trade was at its highest at the time of the second international oil crisis in 1983, when the USSR accounted for a quarter of Finland's foreign trade. The Soviet Union sought to increase Finland's dependence, especially through its energy supply. Indeed, the Soviet Union accounted for a lion's share of Finland's energy imports.

For its part, Finland worked to prevent the Soviet goals from being achieved and Finland from falling under the control of the Kremlin. In 1956–1982, the Pres-



ident of Finland was Urho Kekkonen. He was a former employee of Etsivä keskuspoliisi, Finland's secret police, and as the President, he took the management of the relations with the Soviet Union under his own control as well as defined that one of the main tasks of the secret police was to monitor and limit the spread of communism in Finland.

From the outside, it may have seemed that Finland underwent so-called Finlandisation and that Kekkonen could be steered by the Kremlin, but in reality, with close relations with the Kremlin, Kekkonen sought to edge Finland towards the West with the help of Nordic and European co-operation (a membership in the Nordic Council in 1955, an associate membership in the European Free Trade Association in 1960 and a full membership in 1985, and a free trade agreement with the European Economic Community in 1973) and by increasing Finland's weight in the international arena, through the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) process in the 1970s, for instance. Similarly, in order to prevent energy dependence from becoming too significant, Finland restricted the spread of natural gas as a household energy source and exported a significant part of Soviet crude oil after having refined it. Although Finland sought to curb the growth of the Soviet Union's power to influence the country's affairs, the USSR gained a fairly strong grip on Finland's political and economic elite. However, the Soviet Union did not succeed in signifi-

cantly influencing appointments in the Finnish Defence Forces and the secret police. An exception to the above is the Communist-led era in the secret police in 1945–1948. This so-called Red Valpo (Red State Police) was decommissioned at the beginning of 1949, and its successor was the current secret police, the Finnish Security and Intelligence Service (Suopo and later Supo).<sup>1</sup>

The situation changed dramatically in the early 1990s. The clearing trade between Finland and the Soviet Union ended unexpectedly at the end of 1990, and a year later, the USSR was dissolved. Without the dissolution, the Soviet Union would probably have continued to integrate Finland politically and economically into itself, and, for its part, Finland would have done its best to protect itself from the Kremlin's embrace, which would have narrowed our independence. However, the dissolution of the USSR changed the situation. Russia's watchful gaze waned and Finland moved to the West, where it has always belonged culturally and historically.

In 1992, the YYA Treaty was terminated in consensus by Finland and Russia. In the same year, Finland joined the newly established North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). Another significant step was the purchase of equipment from the West by the Finnish Defence Forces, such as the decision in 1992 to buy F-18 Hornet fighter jets. Two years later, Finland signed a Partnership for Peace agreement with NATO.

Finland joined the European Union in January 1995, at the same time as Austria and Sweden.

**NATO co-operation was included in Finland's foreign and security policy for the first time in the 1999 Government Programme. Several forms of NATO co-operation emerged: the Partnership for Peace, military exercise co-operation, crisis management operations, and the NATO compatibility of the Finnish Defence Forces.**

In 2007, Finland's option to apply for NATO membership was included in the Government Programme for the first time. This NATO option was also included in subsequent Government Programmes. Finland joined NATO's rapid reaction force (the NATO Response Force) in 2008, and in 2014, Finland signed a host country agreement with NATO, the purpose of which is to facilitate practical co-operation between Finland and NATO.

Since 2015, Finland has participated in the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan, for instance. Even more importantly, the Finnish Defence Forces began to adjust its equipment and operating methods to be NATO-compatible. Without exaggeration, it can be said that even before Finland's accession to NATO, the Finnish Defence Forces were more NATO-compatible than the

armed forces of some countries that already were members of the alliance.

**It may sound ironic, but it is an undeniable fact that Finland was ultimately taken into NATO not by our country's political elite, but by the Russian President Vladimir Putin and the invasion he started in Ukraine in February 2022.**

As a result of the invasion, the Finnish people became supporters of NATO membership “overnight”, and the Finnish Parliament turned almost unanimously to favour NATO membership. Before the invasion – more specifically in January 2022 – support for NATO among Finns was less than 30 percent, despite the war in Georgia in 2008 and the start of the war in Ukraine in spring 2014. **The speed of the change is aptly illustrated by the fact that already in May 2022, three out of four Finns were in favour of NATO membership.** In line with the principles of a functioning democracy, the Finnish President Sauli Niinistö took public opinion into account and started Finland's NATO accession process (Table 1).

## Table 1. Finland's NATO accession process

**17 May 2022:** The President of the Republic of Finland decides, on the proposal of the Government, to notify the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) of Finland's interest in engaging in talks on accession to NATO.

**18 May 2022:** Finland's declaration of interest in acceding to NATO is delivered to the NATO Secretary General in a letter signed by the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

**29 June 2022:** NATO invites Finland to become a member in connection with the Madrid Summit.

**4 July 2022:** The President of the Republic decides to submit Finland's letter of intent to NATO concerning its accession to the North Atlantic Treaty and its commitment to the obligations of NATO membership.

**5 July 2022:** All NATO member countries sign Finland's Accession Protocol, and Finland becomes an observer member of NATO (invitee).

**5 December 2022:** The Finnish Government submitted a proposal on Finland's accession to NATO to Parliament.

**1 March 2023:** Parliament approved the government proposal on Finland's accession to NATO.

**23 March 2023:** President of the Republic of Finland approved the accession and the bill for the Act to bring into force the NATO Accession Agreement.

**30 March 2023:** All NATO member countries have ratified the Accession Protocol of Finland.

**4 April 2023:** Finland became a full member of NATO.

Source: Finnish Government.

In March 2023, the Finnish Parliament voted on NATO membership. Only seven of the 200 members of the Finnish parliament did not support NATO membership. The only ones to vote against Finland's NATO membership were the MPs of the Communist Party of Finland's successor, the Left Alliance, and a one-man party's MP.

**At the beginning of April 2023, a geopolitically significant moment in Finland's history took place. Finland acceded to NATO, and thus Finland finally succeeded in detaching from the leash that Stalin had placed around the neck of the Maiden of Finland.**

Finland's NATO membership and the sanctions related to Russia's invasion in Ukraine have had various consequences for Finland and its economy. **Firstly, Russia's share in Finland's foreign trade collapsed.** In May 2023, Russia accounted for only one percent of Finland's foreign trade. Before the start of the war in Ukraine, the situation was different: in 2013, Russia accounted for just under 15 percent of our foreign trade (Table 2).<sup>11</sup>

**Table 2. Russia's share in the Finnish foreign trade**

	2013	2021	May 2023
Russia's share in Finnish exports (value-based)	10 %	5 %	1.2 %
Russia's share in Finnish imports (value-based)	18 %	12 %	0.7 %
Russia's share in Finnish crude oil imports (volume-based)	86 %	81 %	0.0 %
Russia's share in Finnish petroleum product imports (volume-based)	35 %	34 %	0.0 %
Russia's share in Finnish coal imports (volume-based)	68 %	45 %	0.0 %
Russia's share in Finnish electricity imports (volume-based)	26 %	37 %	0.0 %
Russia's share in Finnish pipe gas imports (value-based)	100 %	76 %	0.0 %
Russia's share in Finnish liquefied natural gas imports (volume-based)	-	72 %	0.0 %

\* Finland, among some eastern EU member states, still imports uranium from Russia to be used in the nuclear reactors. A quarter of Finland's current nuclear power capacity was built in the Soviet era, and thus these reactors still use Russian uranium.

Source: Customs Finland.

Secondly, the Russian government took Fortum's power assets in Russia under its control in the same month that Finland joined NATO. Before this nationalisation, the company accounted for at least three quarters of the total investment value of Finnish companies in Russia. At that time, the value of Fortum's assets in Russia was EUR 5–10 billion, depending on the calculation method.

Thirdly, Russia has closed down the Finnish consulates in Petrozavodsk and Murmansk as well as its own consulate in Lappeenranta and has already decided to close down the Finnish Consulate General in St. Petersburg in October 2023.

In response, Finland plans to close down the Russian Consulate General in Turku in October 2023. It is also possible that Finland closes down the Russian Consulate in Mariehamn, Åland Islands, and perhaps even withdraws from the convention on Åland's demilitarisation. It is also possible that in the future, foreign NATO troops will be permanently stationed on Finnish soil.

If Russia uses a nuclear weapon in Ukraine, either directly or via Belarus, Finland should acquire a nuclear weapon together with the other Nordic countries and the Baltic States or even alone. It should not be forgotten that NATO's nuclear deterrent is largely based on US nuclear weapons. In addition to the United States, only France and the United Kingdom have their own nuclear weapons. When contemplating NATO's nucle-



ar deterrent, it should not be forgotten that there will be presidential elections in the United States in November 2024 and the former US President Donald Trump's attitude towards NATO has been reluctant, at least in public. Another Republican politician, Ron DeSantis, has also stressed in his statements that the European NATO countries must take responsibility for Europe's security. In his opinion, the United States should focus on curbing the growth of China's influence.

Finland's NATO membership undoubtedly increases the security of our country as our neighbour Russia is pursuing an aggressive foreign policy, and after Putin, Russia's foreign policy may become even more intense. NATO's common defence enhances Finland's security but does not guarantee it. For this reason, Finland must continue to make additional investments in its military. In my opinion, NATO's recommendation of using 2 percent of the country GDP for defence spending is not enough for Finland; instead, Finland should invest at least 3 percent of its GDP in defence.<sup>111</sup> In addition to additional financial contributions, general conscription, the comprehensive security concept and additional investments in internal security are essential for Finland's defence and security.

I have worked researching Russia for more than 30 years, and I am delighted to say that Finland's accession to the EU in 1995 and to NATO in 2023 are the most significant events during my career. Finland has finally fully joined the community of Western countries.

However, this does not mean that the Russian threat is over, but we are now better prepared for the future. The eastern threat will only be over when the Kremlin realises how destructive its empire nostalgia is, both for itself and for its neighbours.

Lessons from Finland's NATO membership process for other countries aspiring to NATO: NATO membership was never an intrinsic value for Finland, but part of Finland's separation from Russia's sphere of influence and the completion of Finland's western integration. This process has lasted throughout Finland's independence, starting with the disarmament of the Russian troops on Finnish soil in 1918, continuing with the gradual joining of Western organizations that strengthen Finland's status in international politics, and ending with Finland's NATO membership in April 2023. Some valuable observations in Finland's NATO membership process are the Western arms purchases, which ensured the compatibility of the Finnish Defense Forces with NATO even before the actual membership was realized. Another noteworthy point is that Finland advanced its NATO membership cautiously without causing a conflict with Russia. In my opinion, however, Finland should have joined NATO as early as 1999 with the countries of Eastern Central Europe, or at the latest in 2004, when the Baltic States joined NATO. Unfortunately, Finland's then-leadership did not yet comprehend that Russia was on its way to an empire-nostalgic dictatorship.

**The prerequisite for the security of Finland and the whole of Europe is democratic development in the neighborhood of the European Union. I hope the leaders of North Africa, the Middle East, Belarus and Russia understand the importance of democracy, because dictatorships are only quasi-sustainable states. All dictatorships fall sooner or later, causing instability and possibly even endangering the existence of these states.**

I hope that I will still see someone at the head of Russia who values democracy and respects fundamental human rights, both in Russia and elsewhere. My hope may be futile but it is also necessary so that we Finns, too, do not see, and possibly also experience, turbulence caused by Russia in the future.

---

I. With the 2019 intelligence legislation, Supo became the security and intelligence service responsible for Finnish civilian intelligence. The Finnish Defence Forces have their own military intelligence unit.

II. By comparison, in 2022, Russia accounted for more than 60 percent of Belarus's foreign trade, and the country's energy supply relied almost entirely on energy coming from or through Russia.

III. In 2022, Russia officially spent more than 4 percent of its GDP on its military. In reality, the proportion is higher.



**Kari Liuhto** received his Ph.D. from the University of Glasgow, the United Kingdom, in 1997, and the degree of Doctor of Science from the Turku School of Economics, Finland, in 2000. Liuhto was nominated as a tenure professor in International Business at the Lappeenranta University of Technology in the year 2000, and he has been Director of

the Pan-European Institute at the University of Turku since 2003 and Director of Centrum Balticum Foundation since 2011. Professor Liuhto has been involved in several projects funded by the European Commission and several Finnish ministries. Liuhto is the founder and the editor-in-chief of one of the world's leading discussion platforms dealing with the Baltic Sea region, namely the Baltic Rim Economies (BRE) review, which has been published quarterly since the year 2004.

## ***RUSSIA / USA***

### ***Belarus as a geopolitical key to the security of Europe***

***Yuri Felshtinsky***

The Eastern European state of Belarus, bordering Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Latvia, and being a kind of buffer between Russia and Europe and having no ports of its own -- in the modern world is intended to be a convenient transit zone connecting East and West, Russia and Europe. This has been the case since late 1991 when Belarus gained its independence. By 2022, this transit zone had become a springboard for the attack on Ukraine and Russian troops' potential invasion of Eastern Europe.

**The transformation of Belarus from an independent democratic country to a Russian protectorate led by a Kremlin-controlled dictator took 25 years. Alexander Lukashenko, elected president in 1994, believed neither in democracy nor in the independence of his country.**

His election was the result of the Belarusian people's fatigue from the severe economic turmoil of the

early 1990s caused by the collapse of the USSR and the disappearance of the planned state economy (familiar to Soviet citizens), which had not yet been replaced by the market economy. It came into operation a little later. These economic shocks were easily played on by the cunning Lukashenko, who promised his voters stability and prosperity. The price of this stability was not yet clear in 1994.

On December 8, 1999, shortly before his resignation from the presidency, the decrepit Boris Yeltsin (who on December 31 would place Russia under the control of state security – namely Putin) signed a decree “On the creation of the Union State of Russia and Belarus.” By then Lukashenko was already an authoritarian dictator. Putin was only starting this path. Both of them refused to release their power. Both remain in charge of their countries for life.

More and more, Belarus was drawn into the orbit of the Russian Federation, gradually becoming a springboard for the Russian aggression against its neighbors. First of all, Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania were in the risk zone. The appearance of Russian air bases in Belarus, constant joint exercises, and Russia's formal commitment to protect the external border of Belarus became real indications that in the upcoming military conflict, Belarus would be on Russia's side and would provide its territory for the attack.

Russia's first military campaign against Ukraine, launched in March 2014, was only partially successful.

Russia seized Crimea and launched Operation Novorossiia to seize eastern and southern Ukrainian territories and break through to Moldova's Transnistrian region, where Russian troops, numbering 3,500 at the time, had been concentrated since 1995. However, Operation Novorossiia failed. Russian troops were unable to make their way to Transnistria. Apart from Crimea, Russia's only success in the 2014 campaign could be considered the unleashed war in Donbas and the formal formation of the unrecognized "Donetsk" and "Lugansk" People's Republics.

Belarus avoided direct participation in that armed conflict on the side of Russia, but in the political and diplomatic sphere, it openly supported Russian aggression. It is not by chance that the bondage terms of the "peace agreements" imposed on Ukraine were formalized in Minsk and were called "Minsk agreements."

**In Belarus itself, the situation changed dramatically after Lukashenko lost the 2020 presidential election. Lukashenko refused to admit defeat and leave office. The protest movement was brutally suppressed, including with the help of Russian troops who were secretly transferred from Russia and dressed in Belarusian uniforms. Lukashenko managed to stay in power, now as a dictator. But he lost any**

## **autonomy in his relations with Russia and Putin.**

Belarus was gradually being flooded by the Russian army. The year 2022 was approaching, and Russia was scheduled to invade Ukraine. Belarus was to play a vital role in this military campaign: the target of the main strike of the Russian army this time was Kyiv, and they would attack from Belarus. Starting the 2022 campaign with strikes from the South and East, as was done in 2014, would mean turning the war into trench warfare from the first weeks of advance. The offensive from the North against Kyiv was supposed to provide Russia with a victorious blitzkrieg, comparable to the Crimean operation of March 2014.

**Lukashenko provided the territory of Belarus to concentrate Russian troops and attack Kyiv. Shortly after the war began, at Putin's direction, he called Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky on Putin's behalf and offered for Ukraine to capitulate. Zelensky refused.**

The war has been going on for a year and a half and has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. It can end under three conditions: if Ukraine's Western allies decide to provide Ukraine with the necessary number of offensive weapons, including long-



range missiles; if they allow Ukraine to use these weapons to strike the territory of the enemy - the Russian Federation, including Moscow; and if they, together with Ukraine, eliminate the threat to Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia coming from Belarus, because today, after a year and a half, Belarus continues to be the most important geopolitical threat to those nations. This is indicated by numerous aggressive statements of the Belarusian dictator Lukashenko and his propagandists, the withdrawal of Belarus from the status of a nuclear-weapon-free state at the end of February 2022, and, finally, the beginning of transfers to Belarus of Russian tactical nuclear weapons and military formations of the Wagner Group threatening to invade Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania from the Belarusian territory.

**One can consider many theoretically possible scenarios for the end of the Russian-Ukrainian war. But none of these scenarios will guarantee peace for Ukraine and Eastern Europe unless it provides for the simultaneous liberation of Belarus from Russian occupation, the fall of the Lukashenko regime, and the restoration of democracy in Belarus. In fact, without the liberation of Belarus, it is impossible to end the Russian-Ukrainian war.**

Russia's loss of control over Belarus would make it impossible for Russia to conduct military operations against Ukraine from the north, condemning it to trench warfare against the Ukrainian army in the south and east -- two directions, that from the military and strategic points of view are absolutely hopeless. Russia can neither win the war against Ukraine nor make any significant progress in this war deep into Ukraine from the East and South if it loses Belarus, while Eastern Europe, with the liberation of Belarus, would acquire the most important security buffer separating Eastern Europe and Russia.

**Belarus has all the necessary conditions to restore its independence. The population of this country already demonstrated its commitment to democracy in 2020, when it tried to force Lukashenko to resign through a peaceful protest movement. Hundreds of opposition politicians ended up behind bars. A number of opposition leaders have been forced to leave the country. They are abroad and are ready to return to their homeland to continue their activities as soon as circumstances allow.**

Tens of thousands of Belarusians left the state, where it was now impossible to live and work freely. But they will return to Belarus with the return of democ-

racy. The armed forces of free Belarus today already fight together with the Ukrainian army against Russian aggression in Ukraine. These people are ready to initiate and lead the national liberation movement of Belarus, for its liberation from Lukashenko's regime and Russian occupation. The natural allies of Belarus in this struggle will be Ukraine and NATO countries, interested in eliminating the threat to Europe from the Lukashenko regime controlled by Putin.

At the legislative level, a democratic Belarus will have to revise and disavow all of the agreements that were reached by the old government to the detriment of the country's interests and independence. Belarus must regain its nuclear-free status, renounce the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on its territory, withdraw from numerous political agreements with Russia, including the Union Treaty of December 8, 1999, and various military agreements, and refuse to cooperate with Russia through the CIS, CSTO, and EAEU. Withdrawal from these interstate structures is a prerequisite for Belarus' independence.

To ensure the military-political and economic security of its country in the future, the new government of Belarus will have to consider joining NATO, on the one hand, and the European Union, on the other. Bringing Belarus as well as Ukraine into NATO and the EU will finally allow Europe to create a single bloc of allied states along Russia's borders, capable of countering any potential military threat coming from Russia,

guaranteeing the European continent the peace that Russia has broken in this century at least four times: in August 2008 (in Georgia), in March 2014 (in Ukraine), in January 2022 (in Belarus), and in February 2022 (again in Ukraine).

**Belarus will not be able to preserve its independence if it remains outside NATO and the EU and instead declares neutrality or joins some regional associations like the Baltic-Black Sea Union.**

The question of another Russian attempt to seize it will only be a matter of time, just as it was a matter of time for Ukraine in the period 2014-2022.



**Yuri Felshtinsky** - Russian-American historian.

Author of *“Blowing Up Ukraine: The Return of Russian Terror and the Threat of World War III”* and *“From Red Terror to Terrorist State: Russia’s Intelligent Services and Their Fight for World Domination.”*

## ***A VIEW FROM HUNGARY***

### ***Belarus' road to NATO***

***Dr. István Gyarmati***

Belarus in NATO? What a stupid idea! That's what most would react to such a proposal. But "stupid ideas" might turn out no less than vision that might happen and might happen sooner than most could imagine. Let me elaborate briefly why I think this is not a "stupid idea", but even more than a vision: an unavoidable necessity.

There are big differences in how people – even experts – see the current security situation in Europe. This is not surprising: what we see today is an immensely complicated situation that resembles the Cold War, but in many respects it is different. The origins are different, the main players are different compared to what they were in the second half of the Twentieth century, the solutions – if any – are different and the perspectives are different, too.

**Belarus' NATO membership must be looked at from two perspectives.**

**First: is it what the Belarus people want?**

**Second: what is the strategic context within which such an analysis makes sense?**

**Let's start with the first. It is very clear – and the last elections, especially its aftermath showed it unambiguously – that the Belarus people want democracy, freedom and a normal life.**

Just like other people in Europe (and worldwide). They see a shining example in Central and Eastern Europe, where former Soviet colonies became normal democracies. And, surprise surprise – they are all (current or upcoming) members of NATO (and the European Union). That alone is a strong argument in their (and our) eyes to join these countries as democratic, free, independent states (by implication also members of NATO and the European Union). But that is not the whole picture. There is no doubt that the people of Belarus want democracy and independence. But I don't want to suggest that they all see and accept that in the geostrategic situation of Belarus – and drawing the consequences from the Russian aggression against Ukraine – they understand that NATO membership is the only way to unquestionably secure the country's independence thus also make sure there is no interference from outside (Russia) to undermine democracy.

Why is that? It is easily understandable if we look at history and the current situation. First, the people of Belarus were socialized in a Soviet-type regime. A dic-

tatorship that constantly suggested them that this form of Government is the best and, by implication, the only way to guarantee stability in and security of the country is through cooperation with Russia.

This argument cannot be easily dismissed. For sure, good neighbourly relations with a much stronger power can be very beneficial. Provided this neighbour is democratic, has no aspirations to interfere with the internal affairs of the country concerned, does not have the tendency and the desire to dominate others, especially its neighbours and, ultimately, does not want to annex them, one way or the other.

That all sounds – and can be – good, but Russia is not such a country. Russian history is the history of Russian expansionism – be it in the good old form of conquering territories or under the disguise of “internationalism”. Current day Russia is no exception: on the contrary: Putin’s Russia is more aggressive than most of its predecessors – including even the post-Stalinist Soviet Union.

For Putin Ukraine is only the first step. His goal is – not the restoration of the Soviet Union. He goes far beyond that. His vision is „русский мир” – Russian world. What does it mean? In short – and admittedly little simplified – it means that wherever Russians live, lawfully Russian territory. Even more: wherever Russians have ever lived, is lawfully Russian territory. This is not a new concept: remember, what was the title of the Tsar? He/she was the „Tsar of all Russians”.

Not "of Russia", but "of all Russians". i.e. wherever Russians live the Tsar is their ruler. And with it comes, of course, the territory, where they live.

Ilyin and Dugin – the ideologists of Putin's court – have made it very clear. So did Putin himself – admittedly, not very recently, as in the current situation it would sound just a little ridiculous, but many times in the course of the past years. And he never gave it up. Ukraine is only the first step – he and his lieutenants said it frequently and very clearly. The „draft treaty” presented in December 2021 clearly reflected that the next step would be to restore the Russian domination over Central and Eastern Europe thus *de facto* killing NATO. Which clearly shows that his next goal would be conquering those countries, after they have lost the NATO umbrella.

**So, the Belarus people need democracy to understand what it takes to be safe and secure with the Russian neighbor. This will be part of the education people always and everywhere need after the transition from dictatorship to democracy (one of the mistakes we, in several Central and Eastern European new democracies made was that we did not explain what democracy really means, what it takes to promote democracy in our own country and how security is an important part of democracy).**



That being said, it will be a difficult, but not impossible task. It must be part of Belarus' preparation for NATO. I don't want to go into details of what it takes to become eligible and prepared for NATO membership. The above-mentioned task will be one of them. **Already here I want to state: we must not envisage a decade long process. Democracy must be stabilized quickly. And together with that the country's security must be secured.** I would suggest, it should take a few years, not more, after democracy will have been established in Belarus.

Just one word about the present. I am convinced those who want (democratic) change in Belarus should already now start to explain what it takes for Belarus to become safe and secure. It must start to enlighten people about the dangers Russia is posing to the country. And when the question arises, how to deal with that danger, the NATO option becomes obvious.

One of the biggest challenges (is) and will be how to deal with Russian propaganda. Have no doubt, even after democracy will have been established in Belarus, Russia will not stop its subversive propaganda. On the contrary: it will become stronger and even more aggressive. And they will find allies and supporters within the newly democratic Belarus, too. It is a bit challenge – for the democratic countries in Europe at present, as well - how to resist Russia propaganda. It will be a daunting task for Belarus, too.

Let's move to the second issue, the strategic context.

NATO enlargement has been a controversial issue all the time. Part of the controversies was Russian opposition, which – while grossly exaggerated, can be seen as understandable, though not acceptable. Part of it, that has been even more difficult to understand and overcome, was (is) opposition from within: quite a few politicians, and even more experts, thus also part of the public opinion has opposed NATO enlargement all the time. We do not want to go into the reasons of it, just concentrate on one “reason”: Russia's legitimate security interests must be taken into account and satisfied.

In itself, this is a legitimate and acceptable reasoning. There is, however, one little problem: what is legitimate?

Those mentioned above suggested, it is Russia and Russia alone that can define what legitimate security interests are. Even in the case of a democratic country it is not entirely true: security is a complicated issue. One country's security affects the security of others. The closer the other country is, the more. Consequently, neighbors are, as a rule, more affected. Today, in the era of globalization – and warfare is being globalized, too this is less significant, but still basically true. Accordingly, only those security interests can be recognized as legitimate that take into account and

honor the security interests of others, especially those of neighbors.

The issue is even more complicated if the country in question is not a democracy. In the case of Russia, nobody in her/his right mind has ever claimed that Russia was a democracy – with the exception of Putin, but that does not deserve serious consideration (sure, Kerensky and Yeltsin could be seen as intending to create democracy, but they failed). Accordingly, what the leadership of those countries, in our case Russia, does not necessarily reflect the real interests of the people, of the country, and this is increasingly true, when it comes to security. And when we speak of Russia, whose history has been the history of expansion, who never hesitated to use force to underline and implement its expansionist policy, it must be clear: that the security interest as defined by the Russian leadership, could not be seen as “legitimate”.

What are then the legitimate security interests of Russia? It is an extremely complicated issue as it is very difficult to find the credible source of it. Is it the Russian internal opposition? Not really, as they are many times also under the influence of some Russian ideology (see Solzhenitsyn or even Navalny).

Or is the foreign politicians and/or experts? It is, in principle, incorrect to suggest that foreigners are the holders of truth in relation to a country. But in practice, it is even more difficult as experts widely differ when they try to define what Russia’s security interests are.

The conclusion is that -as it has been in the past – it will be also in the future to find a credible definition of Russian security interests that would be universally or even majority acceptable – even if it does not include the Russian leadership. A pragmatic solution – or rather *modus vivendi* – could be to try to agree on what are NOT legitimate, thus not acceptable security interests of Russia. In such an effort even most of the Russia-appeasers could agree. And ultimately: every country, and also NATO and the European Union will offer a definition that will serve as theirs and will serve as the basis of their strategy towards Russia.

Let's look at what cannot be accepted as legitimate security interest of Russia – all of them have been declared as legitimate by Putin.

The right to influence, or even determine the type and composition of the Government of another country. Yes, I know: what about the United States and other democratic countries interference by “democracy building”? Again, this deserves and other, or more, similar essays, let it limit to saying that it is different, if somebody wants to support the efforts of the people to get rid of dictatorship and create some kind of democracy and the opposite: to support or create internal forces to establish a dictatorship. Yes, in some cases, the United States and others have done similar things, too, it might be seen as a mistake, but for sure, does not give the right to do it again and again. And one more difference: the last time the United States was conquering

and annexing territory, happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while Russia is in the process of just doing it and has done it all the time.

**And one more remark: we, who cherish values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights should not feel ashamed to admit: yes, we think sometimes it is legitimate, moreover: our obligation “to interfere” with the internal affairs of another country. In some cases it is legitimate and in accordance with international rules in the case of “humanitarian intervention” or in the case of “gross violations of human rights”.**

But it is time to be bold and go further: in some cases, exceptionally, we should do it, even if it is not necessarily in accordance with international rules: democracy promotion – if it is done as an exception and if it is done right – if different from imperialist dictatorships invading other countries. Let’s have the courage to say: two similar things are not always similar. Our principles are superior to those of dictators as they serve the common good of the people - accordingly they can justify certain steps that are not necessarily legal – but the right thing to do.

**Let’s come back to NATO. The most frequently used argument against NATO ex-**

**pansion is that it would provoke Russia and would trigger Russian reaction that would lead to large-scale conflict, World War III, etc. Before arguing, let's have a look, why has NATO been enlarged in the past decades? And the answer is: for the same reason why it was established in 1949. The Russian threat and the fear of a Russian invasion. Now, if it was legitimate to "provoke the Russians" in 1949, and it was legitimate "to risk a large-scale conflict" in 1949 for the reason that countries and peoples were afraid of Russian expansion, why is it not legitimate to do it now?**

The reason for the creation and the expansion of NATO is the same: Russian expansionism and aggressiveness, and frequently direct threat to other countries.

The reaction to it should not be to suggest – or demand – to take Russia's" legitimate security interests " into account, accept them and base our policy o that assumption, but to make it impossible for Russia to realize those "legitimate interests" as they are NOT LEGITIMATE. Strange as it might sound it is also in the interest of Russia, the Russian people to contain Russian expansionism. First, it saves them from a devastating war that would destroy much of their country and kill millions of Russians. I don't think it would be a real

consolation to those people that millions of others will be killed, too. I also believe that if and when the centuries long Russian imperialistic policy will come to an end, Russia's internal situation will also slowly change for the better. Nationalism and incitement to war will give place to real problems: democracy, good neighborly relations, cooperation. The money wasted for preparations for war will be spent for the good of the people. It is my strong conviction that democracy will not be able to progress in Russia as long as this imperialistic warmongering remains in the center of Russian policy.

While we hardly can influence the internal situation in Russia (but try to help emerging forces of democracy), we might be very well able to create the external circumstances that will slowly undermine and weaken this Russian foreign policy thus slowly opening the way for a more realistic and cooperative one thus also weakening the internal dictatorship of Russia.

In addition to the strategic reasons that Russia expansionism, revisionism and aggressiveness, thus the Russian threat must be opposed for the sake of our own security, it is clear to me that it is also in the interest of the Russian people.

**NATO is the only structure that can effectively withstand the Russian threat. If we want to make NATO more capable, we need to do everything possible to make it**

**happen. New members make NATO stronger. New members bordering Russia even more so. Accordingly, we must finish building real European security by accepting the remaining three states, Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus in NATO.**

Yes, the conditions are not yet ripe to do it immediately. Not because of the war in Ukraine as the Vilnius decisions not to accept Ukraine in NATO are counterproductive, since they give Russia the right of veto – which never happened before and it is ridiculous that this happened when Russia is weaker than ever before –, but also for other reasons, both internal in the three countries and also external ones. But we must be clear: NATO must expand to fill the still existing gaps. It will not only strengthen the Alliance thus the security of its members (including the new ones), but also help Russians reform their own country, make progress towards democracy.

---

I. The reference to the "right" of humanitarian intervention was, in the post Cold-War context, for the first time invoked in 1990 by the UK delegation after Russia and China had failed to support a no-fly zone over Iraq.

II. As defined by the OSCE





**Prof. Dr. István  
GYARMATI**

*Ambassador Gyarmati is President of the International Centre for Development and Democratic Transition and Secretary General of the Hungarian Atlantic Council. He was chairman of the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Disarmament*

*Matters, member of the Board of the International Institute of Strategic Studies and the NATO Defense College Foundation, etc. He has a distinguished career in the Hungarian diplomatic service as Head of the Hungarian Delegation to the OSCE, Chair of the Task Force of The Hungarian OSCE Presidency, Director General for Security Policy, etc. He also served as Head of OSCE Missions to Georgia and Chechnya, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Senior Vice President of the EastWest Institute, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Monitoring Mission in Moldova. Amb. Gyarmati holds an MBA, a doctorate in Political Science and a Ph.D. of Strategic Studies. He is titular professor at the Milton Friedman University and the Atanaz University. He is author of numerous publications on security and defense policy, European security, conflict management and Hungarian defense policy.*

## ***A VIEW FROM BELARUS***

### ***Belarus in NATO is Indispensable for European Security***

***Andrei Sannikov***

#### **The security void of the 90s**

Post-war security architecture was shaken and affected by two geopolitical events: the fall of Berlin wall in 1989 that meant the unification of Germany, and the collapse of the totalitarian Soviet Empire.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the re-emergence of independent states, the issue of changing security architecture in Europe was recognized as a crucial one but no reliable solution was found.

The complexity of the challenges that the newly independent states were facing were not realized either by these states themselves, nor by the outside democratic world and their institutions.

The end of “The Cold War” was perceived as the overall victory of the West, of its “soft power”, and the mission was to be completed with resolving the prob-

lem of “hard power”, left after the confrontation of the two political systems.

In other words, it was deemed sufficient to deal with huge arsenals of conventional weapons in Europe with the help of The Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and confidence building measures and to ensure control over Soviet nuclear weapons by adapting the nuclear disarmaments treaties concluded between the USSR and USA.

International security and nuclear and conventional disarmament were not at the top of the list of the priorities of the newly independent states. State building challenges, pressing economic issues, the necessity to introduce reforms and the lack of resources dictated the real hierarchy of priorities.

### **Past Mistakes that Lead to Today's Catastrophe**

The independent states, that re-emerged after the collapse of the USSR, had to conduct difficult security negotiations with the West and between themselves under pressing and more burning problems. No wonder under the pressure of the circumstances, many mistakes were made, and many strategic decisions were taken in a hurry.

**One of the gravest mistakes was the approval of Russia's succession of the USSR**

**in the UN Security Council and other international organizations. The approval was the result of Russia cheating during the negotiations and literally faking the document that other CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) states signed without knowing exactly what they were signing.<sup>i</sup>**

Other permanent members of the UN Security Council supported Russia's foul play and recognized its status as the successor of the totalitarian state thus giving a lot of international leverage to the unpredictable entity still heavily intoxicated with imperialism. (Imagine there is no Russia as a permanent member in the UN Security Council today! International peace and security would be in much better shape).

The democratic world and world leaders in the early 90s were viewing Russia as an emerging democracy and giving it much more leeway in international affairs than was reasonably acceptable. Besides, the free-market world was interested in the huge Russian market and was willing to bend the rules a little bit to have that market.

Thus, when Russia invented the term "blizhneye zarubezhye", the West promptly translated it as "near abroad" and recognized it as a political reality thus helping to preserve Russia's domination in the post-Soviet area.

The attempts to start meaningful discussion on the future European security, let alone broader international security, were not serious despite the new possibilities that were created after the changed geopolitical situation and the new, more open channels of communication between former rivals.

The relations between the remaining superpower, USA, and what remained of the other superpower, Russia, became more transparent but still with a substantial degree of suspicion on both sides.

Despite all proper declarations about commitment to democracy, rule of law and respect for sovereignty of its neighbors, Russia never wished to let them go and considered all newly independent states as its “sphere of influence”.

### **New Possibilities and New Divisions**

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant inevitable dissolution of the Warsaw Pact <sup>ii</sup>.

In fact, the formal dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in July 1991 preceded the formal denunciation of the USSR in December that same year.

The geopolitical changes at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that were supposed to eradicate dividing lines between East and West, didn't produce the desired result and in some cases created new divisions between countries of the former Eastern bloc and the countries of the former Soviet Union. The countries of

the former Warsaw Pact and the three Baltic states knew that they wanted to be integrated in the West and were moving in this direction at different speeds but with determination.

Former parts of the USSR couldn't afford themselves such a luxury as a free geopolitical choice. They had to deal with their common interdependence and dependence on Russia first. To some extent European republics of the former USSR, by agreeing to establish CIS and to subordinate themselves to Russian domination, made a decisive contribution to a relatively safe passage of Central European countries from the political East to the political West.

In the 90s those dividing lines didn't seem to be dangerous but gradually they were becoming more distinct again, separating part of Europe from the whole. The search for new security arrangements eventually resulted in two tendencies that roughly shaped the situation in the region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

These tendencies had opposite vectors:

- one was voluntary accession to the North Alliance of the former Warsaw Pact members supported by the population of those countries.

- another was the new military pact hastily created and controlled by Russia where several CIS countries were coerced into signing the Collective Security Treaty (CST)<sup>iii</sup>

It is worth noting that the CST was signed much earlier than the first enlargement of NATO that occurred in 1998.

NATO in early 1994 established the Partnership For Peace (PfP) program by which, according to US President Clinton, NATO would give way for countries in Eastern Europe, including those that were part of the Soviet Union and even Russia itself, to work together "for the best possible future for Europe".<sup>iv</sup> That was an attempt from the side of NATO that was trying to find some ground for cooperation in the area of security with Russia and the other newly independent states. It was reluctantly accepted by Russia. However Central European states were not happy with the program, fearing that it could become an obstacle to their full membership.

These countries also were very cautious with Russia, fearing retaliation, and didn't openly declare outright their NATO ambitions. At one moment Poland even put on the table an idea of a "NATO-bis," or a shadow NATO, for East Central Europe.

The hesitancy and cautiousness of former Warsaw Pact members was understandable: firstly they needed to get rid of Soviet troops on their territories, which was not an easy exercise, fraught with chaos and risks. When that was eventually achieved, the road to NATO was cleared and Central European countries

led by the Visegrad Group started their accession to the Alliance.

### **What About Belarus?**

Similar to all the other independent states that emerged after the collapse of the USSR (except Baltic states, of course), Belarus was not able to claim its NATO aspiration even if it would have wanted to do so. In the early 90s, Belarus became independent but was not free. The democrats had never been in power in Belarus. The politics were affected by the retrograde communist majority in the parliament and the government, and the rise of Lukashenko. That's why Belarus was not able to formulate any free and independent security concept.

However, Belarus was a net contributor to the European and international security by playing a constructive role in security and disarmament negotiations on conventional forces and on nuclear arsenals of the former USSR.

Russian armed expansion in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, that went practically unpunished, was understood by Putin as a weakness of the West and served as a basis for his decision for a full-fledged war against Ukraine that started in February 2022.

There were other factors that paved the way for the unprecedented bloody war in Europe.



One of these factors was the dictatorship of Lukashenko in Belarus, which in many ways served as a model for the Putin regime and that provided all the necessary conditions including logistics, for Russian aggression.

**Dictatorship always means war, be it the war of dictators against their own people or, as in the case of Russian attack on Ukraine, monstrous war against the neighbors. The most efficient way to prevent war is to get rid of the dictatorships.**

Despite a horrendous record of human rights abuses, even political killings, Lukashenko was allowed to live quite comfortably for almost 30 years, easily surviving short periods of “sanctions” that were so mild until 2020. Even in 2020, when there was a revolution in Belarus, the reaction of the West was very slow and not effective. Surviving the revolution and brutally cracking down on the protesters, Lukashenko eagerly provided the territory of Belarus to his fellow dictator Putin to attack Ukraine. The war against Ukraine had been prepared quite openly during large scale Russian-Belarusian military exercises on the territory of Belarus. The West preferred not to see the dangers of future war in these drills.

## **There is no alternative to NATO**

The barbaric Russian war unleashed on Ukraine made it crystal clear what kind of security Europe needed.

**Europe is threatened by Russia and protected by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. As simple as that.**

All the efforts to engage Russia on common security, all attempts “not to alienate” Russia, were nothing else but appeasement of a belligerent dictatorship.

Fearing Russia, Ukraine has tried for many years to get a positive and definite decision on its membership in NATO. The Bucharest Summit of the Alliance in 2008 is often blamed for not meeting the expectations of Georgia and Ukraine. This prompted Russia to invade Georgia that same year and Ukraine in 2014. However, it was not the denial of MAP (membership action plan) *per se* that was the failure of Bucharest, but the yielding to Putin who put up an ultimatum to stop future NATO expansion, and after it was met, he was allowed to speak at the Summit to further humiliate Georgia and Ukraine.

It was a hard lesson for NATO that mishandled the whole situation in 2008. It was even harder, tragic, and lethal for Ukraine where people are today sacrificing

their lives to save their country and the whole of Europe from the ruthless murderers from the East.

Ukraine has a legitimate right to demand an urgent decision on its membership in NATO and such a decision should follow promptly after Ukraine wins its war against Russia.

At the same time, it must be said that lasting peace is possible in the region and in Europe only with a free and democratic Ukraine and a free and democratic Belarus.

### **Geopolitical significance of Belarus**

Belarus holds an extremely important place in Europe in many respects. Its geostrategic importance is due to two geographical regions adjacent to Belarus in the east and the west. These are the **Smolensk Gate and the Suwalki Gap**.

The Smolensk Gate, the area between the Western Dvina and Dnieper rivers, is one of the main strategic corridors important for cross-border trade between East and West, and it is important not only for Russia, but also for the second economy in the world, China.

At the same time, the Belarusian Smolensk Gate is the route through which the Russian Empire repeatedly invaded Europe and through which the Russian Federation today invaded Ukraine with the goal of taking Kyiv.

**It is known from history that when Russia begins its invasion of Europe through the Smolensk Gate, it reaches the Vistula River and goes further - to the Elbe and Danube.**

The second geostrategic area, the Suwalki Gap, acquired special significance after the collapse of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact. The Gap is extremely important for the security of the Baltic region since it separates Belarus and the Russian exclave Kaliningrad. This Gap is the only road and rail link between Poland, Central Europe and the Baltic states. In the event of an invasion, the Gap would cut off the three countries from the mainland of Europe. For these reasons some experts call the Suwalki Gap “NATO’s Achilles heel.”

During periods of tension between Russia and the West, Belarus becomes a key geopolitical factor. It depends on its policy whether the situation will escalate (if Belarus sides with Russia), or whether a detente is possible (if Belarus becomes democratic and rejoins Europe).

### **Inevitable Security Choice for Belarus**

Since the renewed independence of Belarus, different security options were discussed to find a workable solution before the time comes for a free and qualified choice on security issues.

For quite a long time many democratic opposition politicians and groups were contemplating the idea of a Baltic-Black Sea Union, put forward in 1992 by the Belarusian Popular Front, as a buffer to international formation without NATO and Russia's military bases.

Something similar was offered by Ukraine. In April 1993, Kyiv prepared the project of the creation of the Central and East European Space of Stability and Security (CEESSS)<sup>v</sup>

Clearly those were attempts to find a security arrangement that would protect Eastern Europe from Russia. They didn't work, even in Ukraine although the country was much more independent from Russia.

That geopolitical concept in the form of *Intermarium* exists today within the EU (alas without Ukraine and Belarus), more as an economic project. It is clear that for the European countries outside the European Union it cannot be a security solution.

The war that Russia unleashed against Ukraine and the reaction of the world, has illustrated that all regional arrangements are shaky and unreliable constructions in the face of the aggressiveness of Russia. Russia being a country that can easily break all its international obligations and denounce all security and disarmament treaties and agreements.

**NATO was the only security entity that came to help Ukraine and has been rescuing the country ever since.**

Ukraine today, rightfully has started to negotiate security guarantees aimed at protecting the country from the repetition of Russian aggression in the future. Such guarantees are impossible if they do not include a free and democratic Belarus.

The recent history demonstrates that Belarus, under the dictatorship, is used by the perpetual aggressor of the Kremlin as a springboard for war against Europe, and will continue to be used until the country is free and democratic.

Free Belarus will need to become a NATO member as soon as possible to protect its independence and prosperity.

At the same time, NATO needs Belarus in order to prevent future Russian aggression from this “balcony” and to seal the obvious gap in the European security.

Such is the hard-won conclusion of more than three decades of the developments in the region after the end of “the cold war”.

---

I. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/member-states/russian-federation>

II. *Warsaw Pact- a collective defense treaty established by the Soviet Union and seven other Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe: Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania (Albania withdrew in 1968).*

III. *The Treaty was signed on May 15, 1992 in **Tashkent** by the Heads of six countries: Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In December 1993*

*after a lot of pressure from Russia and from communist forces inside the country Belarus had signed the Treaty as well. Despite the similar pressure and even blackmail from the side of Russia, Ukraine managed to stay away from this trap.*

**IV.** <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/dsptch13&div=20&id=&page>

**V.** CEESSS had to include the Baltic States, Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria and Romania.



**Andrei Sannikov**

*Chairman of the European Belarus Foundation*

*Career diplomat, worked in the Foreign Ministry of Belarus, Deputy Foreign Minister in 1995-96. Headed Belarusian delegations at conventional and nuclear disarmament negotiations.*

*Resigned in protest against*

*Lukashenko's policy in 1996.*

*Was a candidate at the 2010 presidential election in Belarus, and had the second highest percentage of the popular votes.*

*Was incarcerated in a Minsk KGB facility for peacefully protesting at a demonstration after the elections. After release in 2012 had to go into exile. Lives and works in Europe.*

## ***A VIEW FROM UKRAINE***

### ***NATO - the most efficient security model for Belarus in future***

***Pavlo Klimkin***

The current security of Belarus is at an all-time low since its independence. Its sharp deterioration is determined by a variety of factors that begin to add up to a single mosaic. A systematic analysis of these factors is impossible within the framework of a short review and requires considering more than just open sources, especially to model their mutual influence and possible “resonance” or even explosive effect. However, the main elements affecting the security of Belarus are quite clear for general analysis of the situation.

**Firstly**, the critical level of coordination of foreign and domestic policies with the Russian Federation.

This does not mean that the Belarusian leadership is not capable of making its own decisions in domestic politics, but its field is limited by financial and economic dependence on the Russian Federation. “Harmonization” of the economic space will make this independence rather formal. There is virtually no room for maneuver under the current conditions in matters of foreign policy.



**Secondly,** Belarus is a member state of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), but at the same time, it is the only state within the organization that has provided its territory and infrastructure for Russian aggression against Ukraine. This made Belarus not only a formal legal ally, according to CSTO documents, but also a de facto ally of the Russian Federation, which must bear political and legal responsibility for the consequences of the aggression. The imposed sanctions are a part of this responsibility. The sanctions cannot be lifted or weakened until the end of the war and, accordingly, until the responsibility is defined and consequences are faced. Other CSTO member states are taking a formally neutral position and going on with “balancing”. Return to the status quo is already impossible for Belarus as the point of no return has passed. At the same time, Belarus bears legal responsibility for providing its territory as a base for the deployment of Russian forces and also shares responsibility for all the criminal actions of the Russian Federation.

**Additionally,** Russian Armed forces are still using the infrastructure of Belarus not only for the deployment but also for the attacks on the territory of Ukraine. This means that the leadership of Belarus has agreed to participate in the continued aggression and thus its responsibility keeps growing. This raises the question of the necessity and legitimacy of actions to prevent such developments on the territory of Belarus. Within

the framework of international law and, in particular, the UN Charter, Ukraine has the right to self-defence, which is not limited to the territory of Ukraine.

**Accordingly, further escalation of sanctions and other pressure also makes sense and meets the key principles of international law.**

**Furthermore,** Russian tactical nuclear weapons are placed in the territory of Belarus. This makes Belarus a target for special monitoring by NATO and its member states and also incorporating planning a response to threats of a nuclear strike from the territory of Belarus, including the re-targeting of some means of deterrents. There are carriers of these tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus, which in terms of strategic deterrence puts it on the same level as the Russian Federation. Accordingly this changes the nature of the necessary response measures, taking into account the proximity of the location of nuclear weapons and the carriers to NATO member states and Ukraine.

**Also,** the level of infiltration by Russian security forces and other structures has reached a critical level, and it is no longer possible to determine to what extent the Belarusian leadership controls them. It can be assumed that the Russian Federation can already now exercise effective control over the elements of these structures, and probably over the structures as a whole.

**Following this**, Lukashenka's alleged "participation" in negotiations around the pacification of Prigozhin's coup extended Russian domestic politics to Belarus, and the deployment of the remnants of Wagner's troops on its territory clearly confirms this. Moreover, Belarus is affected by Wagner's activities abroad, which also makes it a legitimate target in terms of countering the Wagner Group.

**Finally**, the Russian Federation uses the territory of Belarus for provocations against Poland and Lithuania, deliberately and artificially creating "tension" on the border by establishing supply chains for the so-called "refugees". Belarus's neighbours have to spend significant resources to reduce these threats, including media efforts.

It's obvious that all the developments associated with the Russian Federation will, directly and indirectly, affect the security of Belarus even without going into all the details. Moreover, Belarus, under current conditions, is vulnerable to any changes or even moves in Russian domestic politics.

The Russian Federation believes that Belarus belongs to the so-called "Russian world". Both the Russian leadership and the Russian people agree with this. Accordingly, Belarus has "conditional" independence, since it is in the real sphere of influence of the Russian Federation. Russia considers the so-called "Union State" project temporary. The goal of this project is the actual absorption of Belarus.

Belarus took an advantageous position and supported its economy through its jurisdiction over its territory to circumvent the sanctions imposed on Russia. However, this advantage was negated on February 24, 2022. The Belarusian economy is critically dependent on the Russian one under the sanctions, even when trying to balance it out with the help of China. Russian business is inextricably linked with the Russian power clans and it's obviously using this situation to strengthen its position in Belarusian economic affairs.

Belarus can retain the formal attributes of independence only on the condition that all elements of the country's state structure are subordinate to Russia, but even such an option is a risk for the Kremlin. Changes in the consciousness of Belarusians, the strengthening of national identity and the change of generations - all these will gradually separate Belarus away from Russia. The current leadership of Belarus relies heavily on the generation that still remembers the USSR, yearns for it and sees its reincarnation in modern Russia. However, it is obvious that Belarusian society is capable of independent thinking and the analysis of the situation even in the conditions of total propaganda and the dominance of official rhetoric. Russia's dominance will obviously cause resistance and protest. Russia will lose its position even if the situation develops moderately and gradually. This means that time is working against the Kremlin and the current level of control over Belarus does not provide future guarantees,

which means that the status quo can only be short-term and cannot suit the Russian Federation for the future.

**The authorities managed to overcome the protest surge after the last rigged presidential elections but it also gave many a hitherto unprecedented feeling of the ability to influence events in the country. Even in a latent state, this feeling constitutes a fundamental challenge to both current Belarusian and Russian leadership.**

Russian aggression against Ukraine temporarily protects Belarus, since launching one of the Russian plans to reset Belarus in these conditions will create new, unpredictable, risks. Nevertheless, the Kremlin will launch these plans if it feels that time is working against it and that the risks can be minimized. This creates an extremely dangerous situation for Belarus and raises the question of a permanent and long-term vision of security for Belarus.

**Russian aggression against Ukraine has completely destroyed the existing security system in Europe. It's impossible to return to the previous situation even with all its shortcomings. The security model for**

## **Ukraine should become part of the European model.**

There are three sets of solutions in general terms.

**The first** involves the creation of a stable Ukrainian state with a strong and combat-ready security and defence sector, the provision of the necessary types and quantities of weapons, as well as sufficient financial support that is, turning Ukraine into a kind of “porcupine”. The operational implementation of this model is possible through a number of agreements or arrangements with certain states and/or international organizations. This model is often called the “Israeli” model, although this is not entirely true. Israel has nuclear weapons, albeit unofficially, while Ukraine does not, and this is a critical difference. Also, Israel's agreements with the United States provide the concept of “qualitative military superiority”, which Israel must maintain. In the case of Ukraine, a similar concept with the code name “quality deterrence capability” is needed, which should be integrated into the overall NATO concept of deterrence of the Russian Federation even before Ukraine joins NATO.

**The second** option provides for a system of security guarantees for Ukraine - unilateral or multilateral. These must be legally enforceable and credible guarantees, similar to those the United States provides to Japan or South Korea based on the concept of “extended deterrence”. It is obvious that the United States

must be part of the system of these guarantees, which, in turn, raises the question of Ukraine's immediate entry into NATO. There are risks of a European fragmentation in NATO's strategy as the solidarity of the NATO members is the decisive factor.

And finally, **the third** option provides for Ukraine's membership in NATO. This is the only permanent and clear option in terms of obligations and deterrence, it leaves no "grey zones" and uncertainty - legally and politically.

Obviously, these options are not mutually exclusive and may overlap. It is also obvious that successful integration of Ukraine into the EU is impossible without a stable and reliable security element. Membership in the North Atlantic Alliance is the only way to achieve this in the future.

In this regard, the question arises about the security model for Belarus and its place in the European security system, since the current situation can only lead to the establishment of Russian control over Belarus, with or without the formal statehood attributes. Attempts to annex Belarus will cause long-term protests in Belarusian society, which the Russian Federation will not be able to minimize. Belarus can't exist as an independent state, as being Russia's ally it entails the risks described above. At the same time, the future European security system excludes "grey zones", because this enables uncertainty and therefore creates additional danger. Belarus will likely be tempted to

maintain a “neutral” position, judging by its history, mentality and existing sentiments. Moldova is not very successful, but still is an example of this. However, “grey zones” create even more unpredictable risks.

**One of the key features of the future European security system should be the absence of such zones.**

Although this looks like “non-scientific fiction,” the best option for Belarus is to join the European security system with subsequent membership in NATO. Only this option minimizes and almost eliminates the potential risks that exist today. It is difficult to imagine this option in the current realities, but it is quite possible in the future. Most Belarusians may be unable and unwilling to imagine themselves as part of NATO today, but just a few years ago – before 2014 – the majority of Ukrainians had a positive attitude towards the Russian Federation. Moreover, the current de facto ruler of Belarus, Lukashenko, was the most popular foreign leader among Ukrainians.

For a very long time, it seemed to many that Ukraine’s place in the “grey zone” suited everyone and even provided an opportunity to make a balance between the West and Russia. There were ideas about “cities as connecting links” between them. The fallacy of this approach is that such links should be subjective and self-sufficient, which in the current conditions is,



firstly, unattainable, and secondly, does not allow Ukraine, and also Belarus in the future, to realize its European identity.

**Ukraine and Belarus both belong to Central Europe.**

The use of quasi-Soviet paraphernalia cannot hide the fundamental differences in the mentality of Russians and Belarusians. Belarusians will be able to restore their identity only by confirming their belonging to Western civilization, which involves accepting and using the Western security model, which means NATO. Only such a development can eliminate some level of hostility between Ukraine and Belarus. Moreover, such processes will give grounds for the creation of a new, properly balanced Central European identity as part of a pan-European self-identification. After all, the other neighbours - Poland and Lithuania - are also wary of Belarus.

Belarus can join NATO and the EU only when key requirements are fulfilled: sustainable democracy and the rule of law. Only a new Belarus can become part of European bodies. However, recent events related to the falsification of the presidential elections have shown that there is a potential for civil consciousness in Belarus, as well as the desire to be heard and exercise their rights. This is exactly what guarantees the

future of Belarus. Any other path is the path of turning Belarus into a province of Russia.

**Joining European bodies can happen much faster than many people believe. Ukraine can and should become a driver for Belarus, just as it became a driver for Moldova, and this will happen in the foreseeable future.**



***Pavlo Klimkin** is co-founder of the Centre for National Resilience and Development and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. He holds a Master's degree in Physics and Applied Mathematics from the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology. He worked as a researcher in the Ukrainian*

*Academy of Sciences, before joining the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry in 1993, where his main profiles were arms control and security, nuclear safety, energy security, the EU and NATO. He was head of the negotiating team for the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and the EU visa-free regime for Ukraine. He has been posted to Germany and the UK, including as Ambassador to Germany. Klimkin is a Member of the Board of the Come Back Alive foundation.*

*The Parties reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments.*

*They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. They seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area.*

*They are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security.*

**The North Atlantic Treaty,  
Washington D.C. – 4 April 1949**

