



BELARUS'S QUEST FOR SECURITY:

Ally of Russia Seeking Entente with the West



foreign policy association



BELARUS'S QUEST FOR SECURITY:
Ally of Russia Seeking Entente with the West

by Dzianis Melyantsou

Editor: Jeff Lovitt

Project Manager, Caucasus Institute for Peace,
Democracy and Development/CIPDD:
Tiko Tkeshelashvili

© **Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy
and Development/CIPDD**, June 2016

72, Tsereteli Avenue
0154 Tbilisi, Georgia
cipdd.org



This policy paper was produced in the framework of the Project *Security Alert on the EU's Eastern Doorstep*, by the **Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development/CIPDD (Georgia)**, in partnership with the **Foreign Policy Association (Moldova)** and the NGO **Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation (Ukraine)**. The project is supported by the **EaP CSF Re-granting Scheme**. The aim of the project is to raise awareness about the EaP security challenges and to develop a comprehensive vision for the region.

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

About the author:

Dzianis Melyantsou is a research fellow at the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS).

This paper was peer reviewed by Richard Giragosian, the Founding Director of the Regional Studies Center (RSC), an independent “think tank” in Yerevan, Armenia. The author bears sole responsibility for the views and arguments expressed in the final paper.

BELARUS'S QUEST FOR SECURITY:

Ally of Russia Seeking Entente with the West

by Dzianis Melyantsou

*As a military ally of Russia, Belarus fears most a confrontation between NATO and Russia, as it will become a frontline state in conflict. **BELARUS'S QUEST FOR SECURITY: Ally of Russia Seeking Entente with the West** assesses the internal and external threats facing Belarus's security, including heightened concerns of regional tensions following the Russia-Ukraine conflict since 2014.*

Reformed Structures, but Soviet-Era Armoury

Belarus is a consolidated authoritarian regime with a strong governmental system of vertical power that controls many spheres of citizens' life. During the rule of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka, strong and powerful structures have been formed to ensure internal and external security. The Belarusian military forces – at the moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union the most numerous per capita of all former Soviet states – have been reduced in size several times.

Today, the Belarusian Army possesses a wide range of armaments (including combat aircraft, heavy artillery, tanks, and strong air defences) and, together with the Territorial Troops (National Guard) and Internal Troops, serves as a rather efficient instrument to deter a possible attack on Belarus's sovereignty (with the exception of an attack from Russia, since Russia is a military ally and it surpasses the Belarusian military in manpower and weaponry). Although it has ageing Soviet-era armaments, the Belarusian military has undergone modernising reforms of its structures, and to some extent approximated to NATO standards.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The **government** of Belarus should continue diplomatic efforts aimed at settling the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and undertake diplomatic steps to prevent militarisation of the region and to relieve tensions between Russia and NATO (including proposing a high-level conference on a new security architecture in Europe, and resisting the establishment of a Russian airbase in Belarus).

The **government** should build confidence between Minsk and NATO and work with NATO to enhance the potential of Belarus's military forces. This should be supplemented by establishing a full weapons production cycle in Belarus to reduce dependence on external weapons suppliers, and by prompt demarcation of the Belarus-Ukraine and Belarus-Russia borders and building of all necessary border infrastructure.

To strengthen economic security, the **government** should implement reforms in accordance with International Monetary Fund (IMF) recommendations, and make use of the financial and technical assistance programmes of international financial institutions to implement reforms and enhance capacities of government institutions. The government should diversify markets for exports, decrease energy dependence by using local and renewable energy sources as well as by modernising industry, strengthen the role of the Parliament, introduce gradual decentralisation of power, and prioritise engagement in dialogue with civil society on modernisation.

Civil society should elaborate proposals for security sector reforms, and corresponding reforms of public policymaking, with an emphasis on more participatory decision-making, and public discussion of proposals.

However, the Belarusian military lacks democratic or civilian oversight. Formally, it is controlled by the President who serves as the Commander-in-Chief and by the Minister of Defence who holds the military rank of Lieutenant General. The National Assembly (Parliament) has only a minor influence on the military. At the same time, despite the lack of civilian control, the armed forces never interfere in the political processes in the country, and have never associated with any political forces or ideology.

The Belarusian Armed Forces today contain about 59,000 personnel, including 46,000 soldiers and 13,000 civilians. Belarus therefore has fewer than five soldiers per thousand inhabitants. Recruitment for the Belarusian army takes place according to a "mixed" principle: about 60% of military personnel are professional servicemen and nearly 40% are conscripts. Compulsory military service for men still exists.

The structure of Belarus's military forces underwent significant changes after independence. The army now includes: ground forces; air force and air defence (these components were united in December 2001); special operation forces; and auxiliary services and units.

On 20 August 2013, President Lukashenka held a conference on the future priorities of Belarus's armed forces. He proclaimed that "while analysing recent conflicts and wars, we understood that the most important thing for us today is air defence and an air force". He called these forces "the key component of our armed forces".

Over the past decade, Belarusian military expenditure has remained low by international standards. During the 2000s, the country never allocated more than 2% of its GDP for defence. Nominally, Belarus possesses an impressive old Soviet armoury, but it has acquired few modern arms since gaining independence. As with many other assets of the Belarusian state, the real value of its armed forces is hard to measure. Officially, Belarus still has a significant stock of military equipment, but lacks the funding to modernise it. According to military experts, the battle readiness of fighter jets is estimated

at from 30% to 60%.¹ By early 2013, the air force decommissioned about 50 aircraft due to age, yet they have not been replaced. Belarus currently possesses 300-400 tanks in service, but lacks the funds to modernise them. According to one independent military expert, Alexander Alesin, the Belarusian military is one of the strongest in the post-Soviet countries (except the Russian military, of course).

The Minister of Interior has a military rank. The Internal Troops (of the Ministry of Interior) and Militia (also Ministry of Interior) are a serious force in Belarus and outnumber the military forces almost two to one (together, they are nearly 120,000 strong). It is the Internal Troops who serves as a mainstay of the authorities and an effective instrument of repression against political opponents. On the other hand, numerous and influential security services make a contribution to combatting crime. According to the Numbeo Crime Index 2016, Belarus is placed 7th in Europe,² which is higher than any of its neighbours.

“ Although it has ageing Soviet-era armaments, the Belarusian military has undergone modernising reforms of its structures, and to some extent approximated to NATO standards. ”

The State Security Committee (KGB) has preserved its structure and functions (as well as the name) from Soviet times, and remains the main intelligence service in the country with a wide range of tasks, ranging from protection of the constitutional order to anti-terrorism measures and combatting corruption.

1 "Belorusskaya armiya: problemy i koncepciya razvitiya" (Belarusian Army: Problems and the Development Concept), *Nashe Mnenie*, 30 November 2010, <http://nmnby.eu/news/discussions/2952.html>, and "Belorusskaya voennaya aviatsiya: na chestnom slove i na odnom kryle?" (Belarusian Military Aviation: on parole or on one wing?), *Naviny.by*, 30 November 2014, http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2014/11/30/ic_articles_112_187660/
2 http://www.numbeo.com/crime/rankings_by_country.jsp?title=2016®ion=150

Belarus is a close military ally of Russia and is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Altogether, there are more than 30 agreements in place with Russia in the sphere of military co-operation and aimed at the harmonisation of joint military activities, solving issues of military-technical co-operation, the implementation of arms control obligations and military intelligence, and the joint use of military infrastructure assets. Belarus and Russia have created a Joint Regional Air Defence System as well as a Joint Regional Group of Forces. Belarus is tremendously important for Russia as the first line of defence and as a foothold for ensuring access to the Kaliningrad exclave in case of military conflict with NATO.

Simultaneously, Belarus has developed practical co-operation with NATO on the basis of an Individual Partnership Programme (IPAP). It participates in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme and in the NATO Planning and Review Process (PARP).

Belarus is the only country within the Eastern Partnership (EaP) that fully controls its territory and has no territorial claims or conflicts with its neighbours. Nevertheless, following the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the Belarusian authorities have made efforts to improve the readiness of its military forces and to increase independence in the military sphere in order to adapt to the new security environment. To this end, Belarus's Military Doctrine is being updated; in 2014-2015 a new Martial Law was passed, and the updated Defence Plan (classified) was signed by the President.

To prevent the possible infiltration of militia and trafficking in weapons from the territory of Ukraine, the Belarusian authorities have started taking measures to enhance the security of the Belarus-Ukraine border both in terms of infrastructure (demarcation of the border has been started) and in terms of countering possible attacks. In the course of 2014-2015 Belarus organised a number of exercises near the border with participation of the Military Forces, Territorial Troops, and the Border Guard to test their ability to close and protect the border.

Despite the absence of imminent external military threats or internal conflicts, there are serious challenges in the spheres of economy, energy, and information security. The low oil price and the devaluation of the Russian ruble

resulted in a significant drop in Belarusian exports and a worsening of living conditions for the Belarusian population. These factors demonstrated the critical dependence of the Belarusian economy on Russia and on the fortunes of Russia's economy.

“ Belarus is tremendously important for Russia as the first line of defence and as a foothold for ensuring access to the Kaliningrad exclave in case of military conflict with NATO. ”

At a time of economic crisis, the Belarusian authorities demonstrated an absence of political will to conduct structural reforms that they fear could undermine the very foundations of political and social stability in Belarus. In the future, without reforms, an economic crisis could result in growing social tensions and protests in the country.

To mitigate these risks, the government has elaborated the Programme of Socio-economic Development for 2016-2020 and a new Energy Security concept. In his State of the Nation Address to Parliament on 21 April 2016, President Lukashenka called for the creation of 50,000 jobs annually and a reduction in production costs of 25%, but these goals seem unrealistic in current conditions without international assistance.

Internal and External Security Challenges

The current Military Doctrine of Belarus describes the following challenges to Belarus's security:

- the strengthening of ethnic, national and religious extremism in different parts of the world;

- the attempts of some states and coalitions of states to ensure their leadership without respecting the interests of other international players, which leads to the illegitimate adoption of rights of international security organisations to establish peace with military means;
- the use of military force in violation of international law;
- the attempts of some states to interfere in the internal affairs of other states;
- the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD);
- the expansion of politico-military blocs in the European region;
- the strengthening of offensive capabilities of some states and coalitions of states (including anti-missile systems);
- the build-up of military infrastructure in neighbouring states;
- the decrease in the potential and capability of military unions in which Belarus participates;
- the creation of special military units aimed at destructive informational activities against Belarus; and
- sanctions and embargos against Belarus.

Although NATO is not cited explicitly in the Doctrine as a threat or challenge, it is obviously presupposed as a potential enemy in the clauses on military infrastructure build-up near the Belarusian border and the expansion of military blocs in Europe. As a close military ally of Russia, Belarus has to stay in line with Russian strategic considerations and planning, but the position of the government in Minsk tends nevertheless to leave space for greater political manoeuvre and refrains from naming any state or organisation as a threat.

The Military Doctrine is currently being updated. The new text has not been published yet, but military officials have made several comments about new elements that can be expected in the renewed document. According to Defence Minister Andrei Raukou, the new Doctrine is focused on “tendencies connected with the planning of coloured revolutions and mechanisms to change the constitutional order, and the undermining of the territorial integrity of a state by inspiration of internal armed conflicts”.

The document includes a wider list of internal and external threats (they have not been made public yet), and for the first time the Doctrine refers to “the active position of the state in prevention of a military conflict by taking preemptive measures of strategic containment”.³ Obviously, these changes were inspired by the conflict in Ukraine.

In public discourse, senior Belarusian officials openly criticise NATO expansion and NATO’s build-up of military infrastructure in Poland and the Baltic States. However, these statements should be understood not as fear of NATO as a direct military threat, but rather as an indirect challenge – because of the conflict between Russia and the West, NATO increases its presence in the region and this, in turn, increases Russia’s pressure on Belarus as a military ally.

Russia’s demand to place a military airbase in Belarus in response to NATO’s activities is one such example. The base has not become a reality, however, because of: a) a certain decrease in tensions in Russia-West relations; and b) Minsk’s efforts to mediate a settlement of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, together with diplomatic efforts towards Russia to prevent militarisation of the region, which poses a serious potential threat to Belarus.

The airbase is one example demonstrating that Minsk still has the potential to resist Russia’s pressure for an increase in Russia’s military presence in the territory of Belarus. Other examples include Belarus’s non-recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and an openly negative position towards Russia’s annexation of Crimea and intervention in Donbas.

In general, despite the alliance between Belarus and Russia, Moscow has refrained from a substantial strengthening of the capacity of the Belarusian armed forces and participates only reluctantly in its rearmament with modern weapons, preferring to wait for the obsolescence of the Belarusian military in order to subsequently replace it with its own troops and weapons.

Against this backdrop, Belarus has become more interested in assistance from other

³ “Новая военная доктрина Беларуси учитывает расширение спектра источников военных угроз” (The new military doctrine of Belarus takes into account the expansion of the range of sources of military threats), *Naviny.by*, (http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2016/04/04/ic_news_112_472931/)

countries and organisations to improve the capacity of its army to confront modern threats and in enhancing interoperability with other countries' militaries in order to be able to participate in multinational peacekeeping missions. Based on these considerations, Belarus participates in NATO's PfP and PARP.

The key objective is to make its military forces interoperable with NATO forces and able to act at the same level with NATO forces during joint peacekeeping, humanitarian, and search-and-rescue operations.

“ During the conflict in Donbas, Belarus organised numerous readiness checks of its military units, strengthened its special operation forces, and made a decision to make its own missiles for its MLRS, which are already produced by Belarus. ”

The development of military co-operation with NATO as a main PARP task is achieved by joint military planning, joint exercises, and the training of servicemen. Annually, Belarus takes part in nearly 100 events together with NATO, although the majority of these activities are language courses and seminars. Belarus has yet to sign an agreement with NATO on sharing classified information, which prevents Belarus from participation in some programmes, but the two sides are co-operating in numerous thematic areas, including civil emergency planning, scientific co-operation, and defence reforms.

On the official level, Belarus has many times underlined that it remains a loyal ally of Russia but at the same time it reserves the right to maintain relations with NATO and other security organisations to ensure its security.

The Military Doctrine cites the following internal military challenges (they are hypothetical and do not reflect the real situation):

- weakening of patriotism in society and of readiness to protect the country;
- increase in illegal migration;
- facilitation of illegal trafficking in weapons;
- creation of terrorist and extremist organisations;
- provocation of social and ethnic tensions; and
- decrease of ability of the military forces to strategically deter aggression.

The crisis in Ukraine has changed the perception of threats and challenges – both external and internal. The main conclusion for the authorities has been that Russia is able and willing to wage a war even against historically and culturally close nations. Secondly, it has demonstrated that conventional war in Europe with the use of heavy armoured vehicles, artillery, and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) is still possible today. During the conflict in Donbas, Belarus organised numerous readiness checks of its military units, strengthened its special operation forces, and made a decision to make its own missiles for its MLRS, which are already produced by Belarus (the “Polonaise” multiple launch rocket system with a range of ca 200 km).⁴

On the other hand, there is a clear understanding among the elites, as well as among experts, that Belarus is neither able to re-orient towards NATO nor able to become a truly neutral state. Russia has enough powerful leverage (e.g. energy supplies and trade) to make Belarus behave in line with Russia's strategy in the case of a serious conflict between Russia and the West. There is also no illusion that Russia will ask Minsk to allow use of Belarusian territory for its military needs if the Kremlin takes a decision to attack Poland or Lithuania. Under such conditions, the only feasible security strategy for Minsk is to try to widen its ability for manoeuvre between Russia and the West, to take – when

⁴ There are indications (and some hints from Lukashenka) that the Belarusian military industrial complex is working on the creation of a long-range MLRS (up to 300 km) that could fulfil the same tasks as an operational-tactical complex like Russia's “Iskander”, and can be regarded as a weapon of deterrence.

possible – a neutral position in regional conflicts (such as in hosting the Minsk talks on the Ukraine crisis) in order to maintain good relations with major international players, and simultaneously to increase its military potential as a means of deterrence.

In addition, internal conflict within the ruling elite is unlikely in Belarus. Over two decades, a stable and well-consolidated authoritarian regime has been built, and the vertical of power is formed on the principle of personal loyalty to the president. There is no democratic control over the military and intelligence, but there is a balance between state bodies responsible for security and defence so that none of them can dominate or seize power in the country.

No Territorial Disputes, but Energy Dependence and Economic Stagnation

Belarus has no territorial conflicts with its neighbours. It fully controls its territory and has no territorial claims on other states. Potential challenges could stem only from non-demarcated borders with Ukraine and Russia with a lack of border infrastructure, which could result in an increase of smuggling and illegal trafficking.

These challenges are of an economic nature – Belarus lacks sufficient budget resources to equip these borders accordingly. Whereas Russia helped to strengthen Belarus's state borders with NATO members, it is unlikely that Moscow will be willing to offer the same assistance when it comes to the Belarus-Russia and Belarus-Ukraine borders. In this regard, the assistance of the European Union (EU) would be helpful, especially given the fact that the EU is interested in having strengthened controls on external borders and increased stability in its immediate neighbourhood.

In spite of the changing overall security situation in the region, the majority of Belarus's internal security challenges stem from the weak state of its economy. Following the second half of 2011, the Belarusian economy stagnated. In 2015, stagnation turned into recession, mainly due to external shocks (the fall in oil prices, devaluation of the Russian ruble, and shrinking of the Russian market). In January 2016, GDP dropped by

4.3% compared with January 2015, and the World Bank forecasts a decrease in GDP of 1% for 2016 as a whole. The current account deficit for 2015 reached US\$ 2.1 billion, or 3.7% of GDP, and monthly nominal salaries in US dollars dropped by 21.7% from US\$ 419 to US\$ 328 over the year since January 2015.⁵

In 2015, bilateral trade with the main trade partner of Belarus – Russia – decreased by 26.3% against 2014. Exports from Belarus amounted to US\$ 10.4 billion, down 31.6% year-on-year. Belarus has traditionally reported a trade deficit with Russia, and this stood at US\$ 6.8 billion in 2015.

These problems demonstrate inter alia the critical dependence of the Belarusian economy on Russian energy supplies and the Russian market. Belarus imports 100% of its natural gas (21.9 billion cubic meters in 2015) and more than 90% of its crude oil (22.9 million tons) from Russia.

To overcome these energy security challenges, in 2015 Belarus adopted its Energy Security Concept, which prescribed the following measures:

- increase of consumption of local and renewable energy resources;
- extraction of energy resources abroad (in Russia and Kazakhstan);
- building of capacities to increase natural gas transit;
- completion of the Belarusian nuclear power plant construction;
- replacement of consumption of oil and gas with electrical energy (from own nuclear power plant);
- decrease of energy intensity of GDP by 50% by 2035.

The Concept also sets as a priority a decrease in Russia's share in Belarus's energy imports by 70% by the same year.

For the first time, Belarus faces an unemployment problem. Tens of thousands of Belarusians returned from Russia where they worked before the crisis. Large industrial enterprises such as the Minsk Tractor Works or Minsk Automobile Plant have concealed

⁵ *Экономические тенденции в Беларуси* (Economic Trends in Belarus), http://case-belarus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ETIB_Issue_1_in_russian_2.pdf

unemployment that has arisen from their inability to sell their products abroad. The government has adopted a programme to create 50,000 jobs annually, but independent local economists have doubts about the government's capabilities to implement the programme.⁶

“ Belarus fully controls its territory and has no territorial claims on other states. Potential challenges could stem from non-demarcated borders with Ukraine and Russia with a lack of border infrastructure. ”

There is an urgent need for the reconstruction and privatisation of large (often unprofitable) industrial enterprises inherited from Soviet times and largely subsidised by the state. The current economic crisis has strengthened the need for structural reforms and market liberalisation. However, in Belarus this is not an economic issue, but a political one, because the Belarusian authorities fear that such reforms might lead to mass unemployment and a loss of control over some sectors of the economy. From this perspective, structural reforms are viewed as a threat that could undermine the foundations of political stability in the country.

⁶ "Otkuda poyaviatsia 50 tysiach rabochih mest v Belarusi?" (Where Will 50,000 Jobs Come From in Belarus?), *Thinktanks.by*, 21 March 2016, <http://thinktanks.by/publication/2016/03/21/otkuda-poyavyatsya-50-tysyach-novyh-rabochih-mest-v-belarusi.html>

Caught in the Information Crossfire

by Dzianis Melyantsou

Belarus is a consolidated authoritarian regime that imposes significant limitations on the human rights of its citizens. Democratic transition and approximation with international human rights standards are not priorities for the Belarusian government. Thus the planned government measures to enhance security are not viewed through the prism of values, but rather stem from the state's goals to protect core national interests (survival and sovereignty).

Local and international human rights organisations report serious infringements of the rights of expression and assembly. Belarus has a state monopoly on electronic media (television and radio), and independent media are limited in their activities. However, the Internet in Belarus remains almost unrestricted with (for the post-Soviet states) a relatively high level of penetration. Some opposition print newspapers can also be bought in the state-owned distribution network.

Since early 2014, the Belarusian authorities have significantly lowered the level of repression against political opponents, a development connected to the willingness of the leadership in Minsk to improve relations with the West. In 2015, for example, all political prisoners were released, leading the EU to first suspend and subsequently lift almost all sanctions imposed against Belarus. The Belarusian authorities also now allow opposition leaders to organise traditional demonstrations in the centre of Minsk.

Thus, the normalisation of relations with the West is improving the domestic political climate and creating a window of opportunity for civil society organisations to operate in the country more freely. To sustain such positive changes, the EU should continue to engage in dialogue with the government in Minsk aimed at improving political relations and the modernisation of Belarus.

Belarus sees challenges in the informational field as well. At a time when Minsk has been taking a neutral position on the Ukraine-Russia conflict and has tried to contribute to its resolution, official Russian propaganda has been negatively influencing Belarusian public opinion. Belarus remains firmly in the

Russian information sphere. The majority of the population speaks Russian, watches Russian television, and reads Russian news websites, so it is no surprise that 58% of the population support Russia's annexation of Crimea and 75% think that Ukraine is sliding towards a civil war.⁷ As countermeasures, the government has taken the following steps: it carefully explains the official position and criticises Russia's actions; it censors Russian TV news and analytical shows, sometimes replacing them with Belarusian ones; it is cautiously widening the usage of the Belarusian language and organising campaigns aimed at strengthening Belarusian national identity.

At the same time, Western propaganda is also viewed as a challenge, which – from the perspective of the Belarusian government – is focused on the one hand on the creation of a distorted vision of Belarus and its political and social system, and on the other on the stimulation of dissent and protests inside the country. In order to resist the Western informational influence, the authorities restrict the activity of foreign journalists and of TV channels and radio stations financed from abroad and broadcast from the territories of neighbouring EU states. But the government's actions are rarely of a repressive character, and journalists from Euroradio, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and elsewhere often take part in Lukashenka's press conferences.

EU Integration and Relations with NATO

Belarus has never pursued the goal of joining the EU or concluding an agreement on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Furthermore, after Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan established the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), it became impossible to integrate with the EU economically. The Ukrainian example persuaded the Belarusian authorities even more deeply that a break-up of relations with Russia and re-orientation to the West would be too dangerous for the country's sovereignty.

Belarus still doesn't have a Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA) ratified with

⁷ March 2016: *Conflict in Ukraine: A Russian View from Belarusian Eyes*, Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=4267&lang=en>

the EU, but Minsk is very interested in a chance to normalise relations with the EU and to conclude a framework agreement on co-operation because of the following considerations:

- the necessity to maintain good relations with neighbours in order to prevent their possible interference in internal affairs;
- the need to improve trade relations and to avoid sanctions;
- the EU is viewed as a possible source of investment and advanced technologies as well as an actor that can assist with modernisation; and
- the EU can serve as an additional pillar to counterbalance Russian influence.

Today, Belarus and the EU have a large and diversified agenda for co-operation. They have launched sectorial dialogues (including a human rights dialogue), and the bilateral Belarus-EU Co-ordination Group (with the participation of civil society representatives). Belarus actively participates in the Eastern Partnership initiative, and negotiations on Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements have reached their final stage. In 2015, the parties agreed on a roadmap for gradual normalisation of relations called "29 points".

“ The Ukrainian example persuaded the Belarusian authorities even more deeply that a break-up of relations with Russia and re-orientation to the West would be too dangerous for the country's sovereignty. ”

The negative side of the normalisation process is that the direct dialogue between Brussels and Minsk often excludes Belarusian civil society and independent experts, with

a corresponding negative impact on the transparency and sustainability of the process.

Improving relations with NATO also ranks among Minsk's priorities. NATO is interesting for Belarus, first of all, because it can provide assistance in the transformation of the Belarusian military and in its preparation for multinational peacekeeping missions. This interest was shown symbolically in December 2015 when Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei met with NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow. NATO could also help Belarus with the establishment of a system of better civilian control over the military.

At the same time, Belarus is a member of the CSTO, and has to adhere to its duties as an ally of Russia. The enhancement of NATO's military infrastructure in Poland and the Baltic states, together with Russia's possible response, could threaten the security and sovereignty of Belarus, including the establishment of a Russian airbase, military ground bases, and the deployment of tactical missiles on the territory of Belarus.

Priorities for National Government and Civil society

To ensure security in the military sphere, the government of Belarus should take the following measures:

- Continue diplomatic efforts aimed at settling the conflict in Eastern Ukraine;
- Undertake diplomatic steps to prevent militarisation of the region and to relieve tensions between Russia and NATO as well as to establish CSTO-NATO relations (e.g. to put forward a high-level conference on a new security architecture in Europe, to resist the establishment of a Russian airbase in Belarus, and to suggest a platform for negotiations to settle tensions between Russia and the West);
- Build confidence between Minsk and NATO and work with NATO to enhance the potential of Belarus's military forces;
- Implementation of programmes aimed at establishing a full weapons production cycle in Belarus, and reducing dependence on external weapons suppliers;

- Promptly demarcate the Belarus-Ukraine and Belarus-Russia borders and build all necessary border infrastructure.

Priorities for ensuring security in the economic and societal spheres:

- Implement reforms in accordance with International Monetary Fund (IMF) recommendations;
- Make use of IMF, World Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and European Investment Bank (EIB) financial and technical assistance programmes to implement reforms and enhance capacities of government institutions;
- Diversify trade markets for Belarusian exports;
- Decrease energy dependence by using local and renewable energy sources as well as by modernising industry;
- Strengthen the role of the Parliament, introduce gradual decentralisation of power, and prioritise engagement in dialogue with civil society on modernisation of the country;
- Launch dialogue with the Council of Europe and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on implementation of their recommendations in the sphere of elections.

Priorities for civil society:

- Monitoring of normalisation between the EU and Belarus, independent assessment of common projects and programmes, and communication of the results to the public;
- Lobbying for wider participation of civil society in Belarus-EU dialogues on modernisation;
- Elaboration of proposals for security sector reforms, and corresponding reforms of public policymaking, with an emphasis on more participatory decision-making, and public discussion of proposals.

The project benefits from the support through the EaP CSF Re-granting Scheme. Through its Re-granting Scheme, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) supports projects of the EaP CSF members with a regional dimension that contribute to achieving the mission and objectives of the Forum.

The donors of the Re-granting Scheme are the European Union, National Endowment for Democracy and Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The overall amount for the 2016 call for proposals is 320.000 EUR. Grants are available for CSOs from the Eastern Partnership and EU countries.

Key areas of support are democracy and human rights, economic integration, environment and energy, contacts between people, social and labour policies.