

In an interview with Erkki Bahovski, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said that the importance of NATO as an organisation guaranteeing European security is on the rise again, while he does not consider it right for Estonia not to communicate with Russia at all.

You have said that the paradigm has changed after the Georgian conflict; that the West will reassess its relations with Russia. Are you sure – not all Western leaders were inclined to condemn Russia? Won't the attitude prevail that good relations with Russia must be preserved?

I have never said that the attitude of the West has changed. What has changed is the paradigm of European security – the principle, which lasted for 17 years, that Russia will not attack or invade anyone.

During the last two decades, NATO has organised its activities, including enlargement activities, based on this belief. Let us recall the great debate at the end of the 1990's, which was started by U.S. Senator Richard Lugar with an article entitled "Out of Area or Out of Business" in Foreign Affairs, the main thesis of which was that now, when Europe is no longer facing any threats, NATO must deal with problems outside of Europe.

This security policy was based on the assumption that Russia no longer poses any security threat to European countries.

It is this paradigm that has changed; the thinking of Europe has yet to change.

The change in this paradigm is a fact that does not require independent verification. And this will not change and does not depend upon how someone construes or interprets it.

Currently, we cannot yet assess what the position of one or another country will be. This takes time. NATO itself did not start up until 1949, which was three to four years after the West had realised that the Soviet Union did not have the most noble-minded plans. After the end of the Cold War, it took three to four years to arrive at the conclusion that NATO and the European Union could be enlarged. It took the same amount of time from the collapse of the Soviet Union until the time when NATO initiated the Partnership for Peace program in 1994.

Therefore, let's not expect any rapid changes.

Moreover, everything depends to a great extent on Russia's future behavior. However, one can be sure that the conception of Russia has changed and Russia's relations with the democratic countries and international organisations will change.

This is the reason why we must start thinking differently. The conviction of the European Union, NATO, as well as the entire world, which developed after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, that Russia will not militarily attack any foreign country, has collapsed. This is no longer true. Heretofore we thought that we lived in polite Europe, where there are disputes, and from time to time even quarrels, but we never grabbed for weapons.

Now Europe's security architecture is cracked. We do not yet have many of the answers on how to proceed. But we will find these answers in the European Union and NATO.

At the same time, now after the Georgian War, how should we now view Robert Kagan's idea to create an alliance of democratic countries?

This will probably remain just an idea. The need for such an alliance is just not perceived right now. Or to be more exact, this need is not yet perceived.

In addition, one must admit that in the world, much business is conducted with undemocratic countries; although it is much more difficult dealing with countries that have invaded other countries than with those who just want to do business. Let's be honest some countries just hope that the crisis will simply disappear and we can go back to "business as usual". The emphasis is on the word "business".

International relations have definitely changed, but in what direction? Should international organisations be reviewed, or should it just be accepted that force has started to play a greater role?

I think that, at least in Europe, the importance of NATO as a security-guaranteeing organisation will increase. Let's be honest heretofore there have been many who thought that NATO was a remnant, which had lost its value. Unfortunately, we now see that this is not so. Quite the opposite, NATO's core mission—to protect its member states—is again at the top of the agenda.

Whether this also means the future enlargement of NATO is too early to tell. Although at least now, one gets the impression that, from the standpoint of military security, the European Union is not a very credible organisation, after all it was not created for this. This definitely provides food for thought to those European Union member states that do not belong to NATO.

What corrections should Estonia make in its foreign and security policies?

There are certainly many different small things we should do. However, the most important to my mind is to rely on Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, stressing its importance and topicality.

How much can Estonia do at all in this worsened security situation? Increase defense spending? Continue with integration? Find a new foreign policy consensus in domestic politics?

The more solid and stronger our international position, the more protected we are. Increasing our own defense capability is one factor that increases our credibility and ensures we are taken seriously. Currently, we have no viable alternatives to NATO and European Union membership for deterring a possible aggressor.

At the same time, it is just as important to maintain solid domestic security. No one from the outside will provide us with this. And as far as a foreign policy consensus in Estonian domestic politics, then understandably this is important, especially in questions that are very important to Estonia from a standpoint of security policy.

I also believe that we must take a much more serious approach to energy supply and energy security generally. This is not easy, because these fields of activity necessitate longer planning that just one or even two election cycles, and therefore, these decisions will not result in additional votes for the governing coalition or the opposition at election time.

However, the voters have chosen their representatives to have them make the difficult decisions that may not result in votes during the next election. Estonia's future is in the hands of these people, and I hope that they understand the responsibility they have to the Estonian people in the context of this changed security situation.

How do you currently view Estonian-Russian relations?

Right now, I cannot be exceeding optimistic. While at the same time, I do not think that there is absolutely no promise in our relations with Moscow. Russia will remain Estonia's neighbour and

one must communicate with one's neighbours from time to time. Because, what is the alternative?

You have thought that Russia's aggressive rhetoric should just be ignored. Should this position be changed?

Russia has proven that its aggressive rhetoric may not be just intended for "internal consumption" as we have often thought and said during the last 17 years. Belligerent rhetoric may turn into the use of military force against one's neighbor and on a neighboring country's territory. This is a change in the paradigm.

What should we think of the current situation with the Estonian-Russian border treaty?

In the changed situation, this issue is no longer current. However, more broadly, the signing and coming into force of every international agreement depends on the will of both parties.

In what direction is the European Union developing? Do we need the Lisbon Treaty more than ever?

These agreements are definitely necessary if we are speaking of the functioning of European Union as an economic community. Viewed from a common foreign and security policy standpoint, the Lisbon Treaty only has meaning if this common policy does not become

one-sided or an expression of the lowest common denominator: à la peace is good; war is bad; and let's invite both parties to a peaceful dialogue.

I am still convinced that striving for foreign policy unity in the European Union is not a pointless activity.

After the NATO Bucharest Summit, some Estonian politicians were saying that Georgia and Ukraine were successful—they missed out on MAP but the final resolution included a statement that the possibility of joining the alliance still remained. As we now know, Russia interpreted the results of the Bucharest Summit quite differently. Shouldn't we review this entire topic?

I am sure that this will be one of the most important topics of discussion among our NATO allies this fall.

How can NATO and the EU help Georgia?

Georgia, as well as Ukraine, must quickly get a plan of accession (MAP) for joining NATO. And, of course, NATO should restore Georgia's defence capability—Russian forces have purposefully and methodically destroyed the defence resources of a sovereign state, thereby leaving it essentially defenceless.

No less important is securing an international presence that is as broad as possible. This would be an important obstacle to any new attempts to reignite the conflict.

The European Union can also do much on the humanitarian side and, for instance, with visa policies.

We must admit that our Community's visa simplification program, which gave Russian citizens easier and cheaper access than Georgian citizens to the European Union, made the EU, at least indirectly, an accomplice to the massive Russian naturalisation in the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of the Republic of Georgia.

Whether to continue with this program with Russia is a question that will definitely be discussed in the future, and our immediate agenda includes quickly plugging Georgian citizens into the European Union's visa simplification program.

How realistic is it to bring NATO bases to Estonia?

NATO bases in Estonia should not be a goal in and of itself. What's important is that NATO is ready to immediately protect Estonia if this becomes necessary. Most important is that a proper infrastructure be created, which would enable the acceptance of allied forces. However, if NATO is convinced and we also believe that the permanent presence of NATO forces is necessary to protect Estonia, then clearly these bases will have to be established here.

What do you say to those who have called for a boycott of Eurovision and the Sochi Olympic Games?

I can totally understand these positions and a call for an exchange of ideas is definitely justified. However, I do not totally understand those who speak about punishing athletes or musicians in connection with boycotts and who wish to strictly separate politics from sports and culture.

Some people also wish to separate economics and politics, or money and politics.

I believe it always pays to think about universal human values, the ideals that form the basis of the Olympic Games; the idea on which the Eurovision Song Contest is established, and then to decide whether it is appropriate to compete somewhere or not.

We definitely do not need to rush into a decision, and generally, it is not wise for Estonia to act on its own.

Today, at the beginning of fall 2008, can we speak about the start of new Cold War?

Currently, a hot war is coming to an end in Georgia. Whether this will be followed by a new Cold War that is similar to the last one depends on the situation in Georgia and whether Russia will recognise international law.

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