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# ***Belarusian-Ukrainian Relations: On the Brink of War***

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## Introduction

Belarus and Ukraine share a common (or similar) history, enjoy linguistic proximity, and cooperate on regional border issues, all of which were the basis for the development of bilateral relations at the level of people-to-people contacts before the full-scale invasion in 2022. A visa-free regime, mutual recognition of educational diplomas and many other agreements have helped maintain good bilateral relations since the countries gained independence from the Soviet Union. Relations started to deteriorate in 2014 after Lukashenka's reaction to the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine. In Minsk, the events of the Maidan Revolution were perceived by Lukashenka as a threat to his own rule. Several dozen representatives of the Ukrainian security forces found refuge in Belarus, where they were accepted into local security agencies. Nevertheless, the benefits of "pragmatic" relations made a policy different from that of the Kremlin prevails.

Alongside espionage scandals, trade was booming, primarily in fuel and energy resources through well-known "grey schemes": selling raw materials for energy production or oil products that were made from Russian oil. This far-from-honest business was carried out under the patronage of the Ukrainian oligarch Medvedchuk. As Ukraine became a premium market for Belarus, Kyiv accordingly formed the illusion that the principle of "pragmatism" took priority over ideology in Belarusian foreign policy. This became the main mistake in Ukrainian strategic plans before the Big War

### **Political and economic aspects of bilateral relations: From cooperation to sanctions and war**

Before the war, the main principle of bilateral relations was the principle of "pragmatism". The economies of Belarus and Ukraine were in some sense complementary.

Ukraine was already Belarus's third most important trading partner, after Russia and the European Union. On the eve of the Big War, its role in the economy of Belarus even increased, due to a growth in sales of petroleum products. In 2021, petroleum products

exceeded 50% of all Belarusian exports to Ukraine. As a result, by the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, trade turnover between Ukraine and Belarus had reached record levels. In 2021, trade turnover between Belarus and Ukraine amounted to 6.9 billion USD – the highest figure since 2012.

Despite the deterioration of the political climate, and even Ukraine’s partial accession to the EU economic sanctions against Lukashenka’s regime, trade between the two countries increased. The principle of “pragmatism” remained fundamental for Ukrainian foreign policy. The growing dependence of Lukashenka on the Kremlin, due to Putin’s support of him during the protests in 2020, has fundamentally changed the regional situation. In November 2021, the first plan for “deepening integration” between Russia and Belarus within the Union State was signed marking the beginning of the gradual absorption of Belarusian sovereignty. The military doctrine of the Union State was also adopted, which became the framework for the Russian army’s invasion of Ukraine from Belarusian territory.

In January 2022, Lukashenka announced<sup>i</sup> large-scale joint military exercises dubbed “Union Resolve”, which served as a cover for the attack on Ukraine. On the eve of the referendum about constitutional amendments in Belarus, on February 24, 2022, a large-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine began, including attacks from Belarusian territory. After February 24, Aliaksandar Lukashenka's position on Ukraine became clearly pro-Russian. Belarus’s complicity in Russia’s aggressive war against Ukraine has several aspects: it is a bridgehead for the invasion by the Russian army, a repair base for military equipment, a rear hospital, and a strategic highway to support Russia’s aggressive actions. From February to March 2022, 630 missiles<sup>ii</sup> were fired from Belarus into Ukraine, causing casualties and destruction. Ukrainian citizens of all ages were illegally deported to Belarus<sup>iii</sup>. Belarus’s propaganda machine was completely subordinated to the interests of the Kremlin in matters related to covering the aggression. In 2023, “at the request of Aliaksandar Lukashenka”, Vladimir Putin

announced<sup>iv</sup> the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus, which significantly changed the balance of power in Europe.

Despite the complicity of the Belarusian regime in the war against Ukraine, the Ukrainian Embassy still operates in Minsk and a number of treaties and agreements remain in effect. However, this set of bilateral documents is constantly shrinking due to gradual denunciation by the Ukrainian side. The agreements on cooperation between the Prosecutor General's Offices, National Banks and the Ministries of Defense have been terminated, but the agreement on interaction between the State Security Service and the Security Service of the President of Belarus remains in force. For obvious reasons, the agreement on military-technical cooperation has been terminated, but the agreement on trade and economic cooperation remains in force. It is curious that the agreements on readmission, on visa-free travel for citizens, and on a simplified procedure for acquiring citizenship for citizens of Belarus and Ukraine who permanently reside in the other country all remain in effect as well. The Verkhovna Rada has just recently imposed sanctions against Belarusian defense industry enterprises that are cooperating with Russia.

On the Belarusian side, all diplomats from the embassy in Kyiv left the territory of the host country. However, there was an incident related to this: a Ukrainian border guard tried to hand Ambassador Igor Sokol a bag of coins<sup>v</sup> – a symbolic “30 pieces of silver” for betrayal.

The level of diplomatic relations today is at its lowest point. Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine Igor Kizim was recalled from Minsk in April 2023 and dismissed in June of the same year. Igor Sokol was dismissed from the post of Ambassador of Belarus to Ukraine in October 2023. Nevertheless, the preservation of diplomatic relations remains a factor, which is a deviation of Minsk's position from Moscow's position.

After the bulk of Russian troops and military equipment were withdrawn from the territory of Belarus in 2023, Belarus began to play a different role. Exchanges of prisoners of war<sup>vi</sup> between Russia and Ukraine began to take place at the border.

According to classified information, Ukrainian citizens who left the occupied territories are returning through Belarusian territory. The consular department of the Ukrainian Embassy in Minsk continues its work.

This in turn gives reason to speculate that a rupture in diplomatic relations will not occur in the short term. Security experts<sup>vii</sup> have also spoken about this in a closed interview. According to the majority of Ukrainian and Belarusian experts, Lukashenka is not interested in the direct involvement of the Belarusian army or of Belarusian territory in the war, and neither is the Ukrainian side. Therefore, their relations are of an ambiguous character. However, as has been repeatedly noted by Ukrainian experts and politicians, Lukashenka's complicity in the Russian aggression against Ukraine cannot be forgiven and forgotten.

### **Belarusian democratic forces and volunteers as factors in bilateral relations**

Today, there is a crisis in Belarusian-Ukrainian relations, as a result of which their foundation has been significantly undermined. However, an important element of these bilateral relations is the position of Belarusian civil society and democratic forces.

Large-scale protests in Belarus in 2020 and subsequent mass repressions against civil society led to the exodus of the entire civil sector from the country. Ukraine accepted the largest number of Belarusians fleeing political persecution. We are talking about tens of thousands of activists. Amendments were adopted in Ukraine to soften the conditions of stay for Belarusians.

After the beginning of the war, Kyiv's policy and the views of Ukrainian society towards Belarusians changed dramatically. Regulatory acts<sup>viii</sup> were adopted that reduced periods of stay without a visa, bank accounts were frozen and the simplified procedure for submitting documents for temporary residence was canceled. At all levels of the Ukrainian bureaucratic apparatus, Belarusians were subjected to civil discrimination. The sharp change in the attitude of Ukrainian society towards Belarusians was recorded, among other things, by public opinion polls<sup>ix</sup>. Many Belarusians were forced

to flee the war and corresponding discrimination to Poland, where a corridor was organized for them – this was done with the active participation of Belarusian civil society organizations that had fled to Poland and with the strong support of the Polish government. But many activists remained in Ukraine.

The Kastus Kalinouski Regiment, consisting entirely of Belarusians, was formed as part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Subsequently, other “purely Belarusian” military units were created. It is believed<sup>x</sup> that Belarusians constitute one of the largest proportions of foreign volunteers in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Since the Kalinouski Regiment has, in addition to Ukrainian insignia, its own flag (the Belarusian white-red-white alongside the “chase” image) and other insignia, their role in the liberation of the occupied territories has also had a political effect. Not least thanks to the Belarusian volunteers who are fighting in the hottest places on the front line, the attitude of the Ukrainian public towards Belarusians has generally softened. In addition, Belarusian civil society organizations are also active in Ukraine, helping Ukrainians overcome the hardships of wartime.

Since the beginning of the war, the Belarusian democratic forces have also begun to undergo a transformation. Due to the fact that the President Elect of Belarus Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya was forced out of the country back in August 2020, a political headquarters had to be created around her. Due to the mass repressions in the lead up to the beginning of the war, there were many such political structures and organizations outside of Belarus. In August 2022, at the “New Belarus” Conference, they created the United Transitional Cabinet, which generally functions as a government in exile. The cabinet is headed by Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya. In addition, the Coordination Council, created in August 2020 in Minsk as a representative body of the democratic forces, was reformed and convened for the second time. All these political organizations operate in Lithuania and Poland, but they unite Belarusians from all countries where they were able to flee from repression. One of their priority tasks has been to establish official relations with Kyiv. In spite of the fact that the administration of Volodymir Zelensky, as well as the Ukrainian government more widely, has taken a

cautious position from the beginning, a number of meetings and contacts took place during 2022-2023.

Communication between the Belarusian democratic forces and Kyiv became more stable in connection with the appointment<sup>xi</sup> of Ambassador-at-Large Igor Kizim (former Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Belarus). Igor Kizim began to communicate constantly with representatives of the all the Belarusian democratic forces. He is also developing a systematic working relationship with the Belarusia diaspora in Ukraine.

Unfortunately, there is no clearly formulated strategy for Kyiv regarding Belarus. Experts have repeatedly said this, starting in 2022 and going up to this day. Why is there still no strategy? Most often, the reason given is the fluctuating interests of Ukraine, which are very dependent on the situation at the front. The most important interest continues to be the “non-participation” of the Belarusian army in the war. In addition, the territory of Belarus is increasingly viewed as a “hub” for the exchange of prisoners of war. An important element of relations with the Belarusian democratic forces is the parliamentary inter-factional group “For a Free Belarus!”, which comes up with legislative initiatives to help Belarusian volunteers, holds support campaigns, and takes part in expert discussions together with the Belarusian civil and expert communities.

## Conclusion

Relations between Lukashenka’s regime and Kyiv are framed in the spirit of *realpolitik*. The territory of Belarus today plays a dual role: as a hub for the exchange of prisoners of war on the one hand and as a potential threat for invasion on the other. In addition, we should not forget that Belarus produces weapons for the Russian army, repairs Russian military equipment, and trains Russian military personnel. Lukashenka is an ally of the Kremlin. Nevertheless, Russian troops have been driven out of Belarus and the shelling of Ukrainian territory from Belarus is no longer carried out.

Despite official relations between Kyiv and the Belarusian democratic forces developing slowly, a gradual improvement can be observed, and the formation of a system of Belarusian civil organizations and initiatives can be seen in Ukraine. Thanks to Belarusian military and civil volunteers, the image of Belarusians in Ukraine has softened. This gives some hope for a general reconciliation in the future between Ukrainian and Belarusian societies. Accordingly, this would strengthen the future system of regional security in the post-war period.





## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> “Военное учение Беларуси и России получило название ‘Союзная решимость-2022,’” [the military exercise of Belarus and Russia has been named “Union Resolve-2022”]. Белорусское телеграфное агентство, January 17, 2022, <https://belta.by/society/view/voennoe-uchenie-belarusi-i-rossii-poluchilo-nazvanie-sojuznaja-reshimost-2022-479783-2022/>

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> Русская служба «Голоса Америки.» 2023. “Госдепартамент: Беларусь участвует в систематической депортации Россией украинских детей.” [State Department: belarus is involved in the systematic deportation of Ukrainian children by Russia]. ГОЛОС АМЕРИКИ, November 17, 2023. <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/belarus-collaboration-with-russia-in-the-systematic-deportation-of-ukraine-s-children/7358796.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> “В стране.” [In the country]. 2023. ТАСС. 2023. <https://tass.ru/politika/17974417>.

<sup>v</sup> Броскова, Ольга. 2022. “Послу Беларуси, который покидает Украину, вручили символ предательства (видео).” [The Belarusian ambassador leaving Ukraine was presented with a symbol of betrayal (video)]. War Telegraf, March 19, 2022. <https://war.telegraf.com.ua/ukraina/2022-03-19/5699914-poslu-belarusi-kotoryu-pokidaet-ukrainu-vruchili-simvol-predatelstva-video>.

<sup>vi</sup> “Украина и Россия провели очередной обмен пленными на границе с Беларусью.” [Ukraine and Russia conducted another prisoner exchange at the border with Belarus]. 2024. Wwww.pap.pl. <https://www.pap.pl/ru/russian/news/ukraina-i-rossiya-proveli-ocherednoy-obmen-plennymi-na-granice-s-belarusyu>.

<sup>vii</sup> Можейко, Вадим, and Роза Турарбекова. 2023. *Беларусско-украинский экспертный диалог: будущее двусторонних отношений*. [Belarusian-Ukrainian Expert Dialogue: the Future of Bilateral Relations ]. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/20366.pdf>.

<sup>viii</sup> “Про роботу банківської системи в період запровадження воєнного стану.” [On the Operation of the Banking System During the Implementation of Martial Law]. 2022. Офіційний вебпортал парламенту України. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/v0018500-22#Text>.

<sup>ix</sup> “Analytical Report ‘Opinions and Views of Ukrainians on State Electronic Services in 2023.’” 2023. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/ukraine/publications/analytical-report-opinions-and-views-ukrainians-state-electronic-services-2023>.

<sup>x</sup> Гулийчук, Дмитрий. 2024. “Сколько белорусов сражаются на стороне Украины – цифры.” [How many Belarusians are fighting on the side of Ukraine – the numbers]. ТСН.ua, August 4, 2024. <https://tsn.ua/ru/ato/skolko-belorusov-srazhayutsya-na-storone-ukrainy-cifry-2634087.html>.

<sup>xi</sup> “Игорь Кизим назначен послом по особым поручениям в Беларуси.” [Igor Kizim has been appointed as the ambassador for special assignments in Belarus]. 2024. Новости Беларуси | Euroradio.fm, February 3, 2024. <https://euroradio.fm/ru/igor-kizim-naznachen-poslom-po-osobym-porucheniyam-v-belarusi>.

