

Ukraine-Belarus Relations: in the Shadow of War

Pavlo Rad & Iaroslav Chornogor

16 May 2024



Executive Summary

The Russian Federation launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 from the territory of Belarus, made possible by the gradual weakening of Belarusian sovereignty. As a result, Ukraine-Belarus relations plummeted to an all-time low, with signs of degradation evident in the economic, political and security realms. Despite its perception of the regime in Minsk as a potential threat, Kyiv maintains various dialogues mostly on practical issues, while adopting a restrained position on cooperation with Belarusian democratic forces. This cautious approach stems not only from Ukraine's security imperatives, but also from a lack of vision and strategy on Belarus. The latter issue also applies to the EU.

Economic Cooperation: from Hero to Zero

Ukraine's foreign policy strategy on Belarus aimed to use trade as a means of preventing restriction of the state sovereignty of Belarus by the Russian Federation. After sectoral sanctions against Belarus were introduced in mid-2021, Ukraine emerged as the main market for Belarusian petroleum products and electricity exports. Moreover, cooperation with Ukraine before the full-scale invasion served the regime in Minsk as one possible way to circumvent sanctions. In particular, Belarus could export its fertilizers through Ukrainian maritime ports after the European Union (EU) member states refused to transport or purchase them.

As a result, trade between the two states reached its peak in 2021. Belarus imported goods with a value of \$1.5 billion from Ukraine while exporting goods worth \$5.4 billion. Thus, the positive trade balance for Belarus amounted to \$3.9 billion and the dependence of the Belarusian economy on trade with Ukraine was higher than that of Ukrainian on Belarus. For Kyiv, however, imports of Belarusian petroleum products were crucial to the strategic needs of the country's economy in general and defence sector in particular. Thus, a system of trade and economic interdependence was established between the two states.

However, massive changes occurred after Belarus became a bridgehead for Russia's full-scale invasion. In the initial two months of war, Kyiv's approach to imports of petroleum products significantly changed. Ukraine was able to find new suppliers and remodel its logistics, which allowed it to divest from Belarusian petroleum products. Belarus' involvement in Russia's aggression against Ukraine made it impossible to continue the same flourishing relations with official Minsk, especially as Kyiv's strategy had turned out to be a failure.

Thus, trade turnover between the two states amounted to \$1.6 billion in 2022, which was a 74% fall on 2021. Ukraine's imports from Belarus fell by 70%, to just under \$1.4 billion, and Ukrainian exports to Belarus fell by nearly 87% to \$20 million. It is worth noting that most of the trade between the two countries took place in January and February 2022. In February 2022, trade turnover between the two states was \$543.2 million but in August it had fallen to around \$7 million.

In 2023, economic relations between Ukraine and Belarus deteriorated even further. In the first seven months (the most recent data available), trade turnover between Ukraine and Belarus was just \$13.8 million, a 99% fall on the same period in 2022. Seizures of Belarusian corporate property and denunciation of bilateral treaties in the economic realm also indicate a curtailment of economic relations between the two countries. These tendencies have been reinforced by the introduction of sanctions against Belarusian individuals and enterprises.

Political Relations: Mutual Distrust

The beginning of Russia's invasion marked a new phase in Belarus-Ukraine political relations, which have deteriorated to their lowest point in history and are currently on hold. Although both states *de jure* preserve diplomatic relations, communication between Minsk and Kyiv has dwindled to a minimum. Ukrainian and Belarusian ambassadors have been recalled from their positions, the staff at the Ukrainian embassy is reduced to five and Belarusian diplomats have been evacuated from Ukraine.

The Ukrainian embassy in Belarus functions mostly for technical reasons. Moscow and Kyiv use the channel in Minsk to exchange notes and transmit legal and consular documents. Preserving diplomatic relations has humanitarian significance, as Belarus is one of the few routes by which Ukrainians from the occupied territories can reach territories controlled by the Ukrainian government. In addition, Belarus can be used as a route for the return of Ukrainian prisoners of war from Russia, even though the Lukashenka regime has been involved in the illegal transfer of Ukrainian children from the occupied regions.

Given the lack of trust and formal diplomatic engagement at the highest level, communication is mostly through the intelligence services, or other closed channels to influence the Belarusian military and political leadership and mitigate the security threats posed by the regime. While the details of the negotiations are unknown, it appears that certain verbal political assurances have been exchanged between Minsk and Kyiv, delineating mutually unacceptable actions.

This could explain why Ukrainian special forces refrain from conducting sabotage operations deep in Belarusian territory or from targeting military facilities, as has happened in Russia. Similarly, the rhetoric and actions of Belarusian officials are not as aggressive as they might have been. Furthermore, maintaining diplomatic ties with Belarus serves a broader strategic purpose beyond humanitarian considerations. The presence of several Ukrainian diplomats on the territory of Belarus is a guarantee that official Kyiv will not resort to military force against Belarus.

Security Deadlock: Permanent Deterrence

Since the second half of 2022, security relations between Ukraine and Belarus can be characterized as permanent deterrence. There is no direct threat as the Russian military presence in Belarus is not as significant as it was at the beginning of 2022 when the Russian contingent numbered between 30,000 and 40,000 men. Today, there are approximately 2000 Russian soldiers on Belarusian soil, primarily tasked with maintaining Russian aviation and radio technical equipment. Consequently, Ukraine and Belarus conduct planned activities but do not cross the so-called red lines established as a result of the above-mentioned likely verbal assurances.

Although Belarus did not directly participate in the invasion, it has been one of Moscow's key military equipment suppliers since 2022. The Lukashenka regime has handed the Russian Federation more than 200 T-72A tanks, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles and "Ural" trucks, as well as almost 132,000 tonnes of munitions. Moreover, the regime in Minsk continues to provide the Russian Army with components and spare parts *en masse*.

Despite Belarus' support for the Russian war effort, Ukraine has refrained from mounting any attacks on Belarusian territory, apart from one on a Russian A-50 AWACS aircraft in Machulishchy in February 2023. This operation, conducted by the Security Service of Ukraine, in collaboration with the BYPOL organization, prompted the Kremlin to withdraw most of its aviation units from Belarus. Lukashenka's reaction to the operation was limited to words and there was no military response by the Belarusian Armed Forces.

In addition to acting as Moscow's material and technical base, Belarus has also become part of Russia's psychological and information operations shortly before any new phase in the Russo-Ukrainian War. For example, as became clear from leaked Pentagon documents, during the first half of 2023, Russia managed to convince Ukrainian intelligence of the possibility of a second offensive being launched from Belarus by creating the appearance of additional security threats. Similar processes are now taking place on the eve of an anticipated Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine. The Lukashenka regime is conducting military drills and accusing the Kyiv authorities of deploying saboteurs on its territory. These factors, coupled with mobilization training and statements about preparations for war, probably serve as pressure points on society and the military-political leadership in Ukraine.

Despite some changes in rhetoric, however, the prospects for a renewal of missile or drone attacks and a repeat offensive from Belarusian territory are fairly low. Turning Belarus into a war zone would currently be disadvantageous both for Lukashenka, who like any autocrat is primarily guided by the logic of preserving his regime, and for Russia, as its ability to obtain necessary components and petroleum products from Belarus would be undermined by Ukraine's attacks on defence facilities and refineries on Belarusian soil.

The probability of significant escalation is also minimized by the fact that Ukraine is now much better prepared for worst-case scenarios, and this would not allow Russia to use the element of surprise in the early days of an attack. The Ukrainian Armed Forces have enough weaponry and manpower to repel such attacks, as well as well-prepared defensive positions along the border with Belarus.

Another deterrence factor for the Lukashenka regime is the Belarusian volunteers, particularly the Kalinushka Regiment, fighting on the side of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The regime undoubtedly views these volunteers as a potential threat and a source of destabilization inside the country. For this reason, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has created several anti-

terrorist units against the background of various subversive intelligence actions conducted by the Russian Volunteer Corps in the Belgorod and Bryanks regions. Moreover, the Belarusian KGB has designated the volunteers extremists and started criminal proceedings against members of their families.

Cooperation with the Belarusian Democratic Forces: Restrained Position

There is a notable disparity in Ukraine's approach to the Kalinouski Regiment and to the Belarusian democratic forces. Official Kyiv favours the Belarusian volunteers, seeing them as integral to a military-political strategy aimed at deterring the Lukashenka regime. Moreover, the idea of armed resistance is much closer to the aims of the Ukrainian elites and society rather than the activities of the Belarusian democratic forces, which receive little public attention in Ukraine.

Ukraine's restrained position on cooperation with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team is also linked to Kyiv's narrow approach to Belarus. Security is the top priority for official Kyiv, and the Ukrainian authorities do not want to provoke Lukashenka or disrupt the fragile balance in relations with official Minsk by intensifying interactions with the Belarusian democratic forces – actors who are deemed too weak to change the ruling regime or contribute effectively to Ukraine's war effort.

Despite all the obstacles, however, regular contact between Ukrainian parliamentarians and representatives of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus, as well as the appointment of an Ambassador-at-Large for Belarus with responsibilities that include interaction with the democratic forces, could create room for a future intensification of relations between the Ukrainian authorities and the Belarusian democratic movement.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The Belarus issue remains on the periphery of the political agenda not only in Ukraine but also in the EU, overshadowed by the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Israel-Hamas conflict and internal turmoil. The lack of attention to Belarus becoming a more serious security and socio-economic issue for both Ukraine and the EU member states is surprising, given Minsk's strained relations with all of its neighbours apart from Russia, and most importantly the significant Russian influence in Belarus with all its ensuing consequences.

Unlike Ukraine, the EU has a wider set of financial and administrative tools available for adopting a comprehensive approach to Belarus. The EU should switch from a reactive to a more proactive and profound approach to Belarus, making itself a bulwark in addressing the Belarusian crisis. The goal of the EU's proactive strategy should be a democratic Belarus free from Russian military, political and economic dominance. Any positive change would be valuable because it would reduce risks in the region and correspond to the values promoted by the EU and the West more generally.

However, it is crucial to recognize that Belarus' future depends not only on EU actions, but also on the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War and developments in Russia. Therefore, resolving the Belarusian crisis will require a long-term perspective and the EU's strategy should aim to have lasting effects.

- **The EU should support the democratic forces and civil society in Belarus by providing financial and technical assistance.** The creation of a permanent funding mechanism aimed at supporting the current and future activities of democratic forces, independent media and non-governmental organizations in Belarus would be useful in terms of establishing indirect mechanisms of influence on those Belarusians who remain inside the country, while also laying the groundwork for a functioning democratic government.

- **The EU should help the Belarusian democratic forces prepare a cohort of future state officials who could govern the state in a transitional period.** Scaling-up the “Personnel Reserve” programme, expanding educational opportunities and aiding in the establishment of a Belarusian National University, possibly based at the European Humanities University, would foster preparations for a future democratic government with a new generation of competent personnel.

- **The EU should see sanctions as an instrument rather than a goal.** Aligning sanctions against Belarus with those against Russia pushes the former into the hands of the Kremlin, making official Minsk even more dependent on Russia’s markets and transport infrastructure. A flexible mechanism is needed that adjusts sanctions based on the readiness of the current regime for constructive dialogue with the EU.

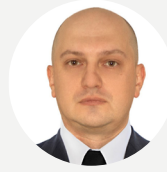
- **The EU should preserve channels of communication with official Minsk.** Maintaining an exchange of signals with the Lukashenka regime would allow the EU to keep track of developments in Belarus and monitor the mood of the elites. Communication would also remind Lukashenka and his regime that relations with the EU constitute an alternative path of dialogue and de-escalation. Moreover, it could serve as a tool for resolving practical issues, such as the release of political prisoners.

- **Finally, the EU should establish an institutional framework for cooperation with Belarusian democratic forces.** One possible step would be the appointment of an EU Special Envoy to work with the exiled Belarusian democratic forces and coordinate an overall policy of the West on this issue, thereby keeping it on the political agenda.



Pavlo Rad

Junior Fellow of the Russian and Belarusian Studies Program at the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”.



Iaroslav Chornogor

PhD in History, Director of the Russian and Belarusian Studies Program at the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”.

About SCEEUS

The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent Centre, funded by the Swedish Government, established in 2021. The Centre conducts policy relevant analysis on Russia and Eastern Europe and serves as a platform and meeting place for national and international discussions and exchanges on Russia and Eastern Europe. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

© 2024 Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies

Previous SCEEUS Publications:

Belarusian Civil Society Inside and Outside of the Country by Tatsiana Chulitskaya

SCEEUS Guest Commentary No. 7, 2024

What Is Wrong With the West's Belarus Policy? by Ryhor Astapenia

SCEEUS Guest Commentary No. 6, 2024