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Ukrainian-Belarusian relations in 2014-2020

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Abstract

This article explores the history of relations between Ukraine and Belarus from 2014 to 2020, highlighting the last period of improved ties between Aleksandr Lukashenko and both official Kyiv and the EU. Lukashenko successfully leveraged the events of Euromaidan and the onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine to portray himself as a "third party" acceptable to both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and to EU countries. The establishment of Minsk as a negotiating post resulted in the lifting of EU sanctions, and economic cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine grew during this time. Although Lukashenko accomplished his immediate objectives, this era ultimately failed to foster robust Belarusian-Ukrainian relations or to liberalize the conditions within Belarus. Furthermore, on February 24, 2022, Belarus emerged as an aggressor state against Ukraine, marking the end of the thaw in bilateral relations that had occurred from 2014 to 2020.

Keywords

Ukraine, Belarus, Ukrainian-Belarusian relations, Lukashenko, Poroshenko, Zelensky

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Introduction

The year 2014 was significant for Ukraine, marked by the Revolution of Dignity, Yanukovich's escape, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the onset of aggression in the Donbas region. This year not only represented a turning point for Ukraine but also ushered in a new phase in bilateral relations with many neighboring countries, including Belarus.

The new geopolitical reality required both countries to explore new avenues for cooperation and regional policy. For Belarus, the political landscape following the Ukrainian revolution was burdened by commitments arising from its Union State Agreement with Russia.

According to this agreement, Belarus must coordinate every step it takes in the international arena with Russia. (Consultant.ru, 2025) Despite this, both Ukraine and Belarus managed to quickly achieve their own goals in bilateral relations within the new political reality.

Ukraine received legitimization of the new government from Belarus after the Revolution of Dignity, along with assurances that Russian troops would not launch attacks on Ukraine from Belarusian territory.

As a result, Belarus, due to its neutral stance regarding the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and its proposal to host international negotiations on its territory (including meetings of the Normandy Format and the Trilateral Contact Group), achieved a relative normalization of relations with European Union countries and saw the lifting of sanctions imposed on the government following the repression of protesters and opposition in 2010. (BBC Russian Service, 2016)

The period of stability in Ukrainian-Belarusian relations and Belarus's relations with the EU lasted until August 2020, when mass anti-government protests erupted in Belarus following the disputed presidential elections. Just before that, Ukraine initiated the establishment of the Lublin Triangle – a diplomatic regional format connecting Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine.

Despite the use of physical violence and repression against protesters in Belarus, a joint appeal from the foreign ministers of the Lublin Triangle to the Belarusian authorities was issued. However, Ukraine's reaction to the events in Belarus following the start of the protests was generally passive and delayed compared to that of Poland and Lithuania.

This article aims to clarify Ukraine's response to the protests in Belarus through the lens of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations since 2014. To fully grasp this context, it is essential to examine the trends and political choices that shaped the relationship between Belarus and Ukraine between 2014 and 2020. Consequently, a suitable periodization for this timeframe is suggested.

Consequently, the starting date of this study is February 22, 2014. On this date, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine issued a decree for the self-removal of President Viktor Yanukovich

from his responsibilities, leading to Oleksandr Turchynov's assumption of the role of acting President of Ukraine.

The first part of the article focuses on Belarus's role in legitimizing Ukrainian power after Euromaidan and will cover the period from February to May 2014.

The second part examines the period from May 2014 to May 2019 and considers Belarus's role as a venue for international negotiations regarding the Ukraine war, its votes on Ukraine-related issues in the UN, the development of bilateral relations during this time, and Alexandr Lukashenko's response to Ukraine's 2019 presidential elections.

The third part of this work discusses the development of bilateral relations during the early years of President Volodymyr Zelensky's term.

Furthermore, the last section focuses on the events following August 9, 2020, and Ukraine's response to the widespread political repression in Belarus. The latest date referenced in this article is September 4, 2020, when representatives from five parliamentary parties of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine voiced their support for the Belarusian people's struggle for democratic rights and freedoms.

The research hypothesis will be formulated based on subsequent events, positing that the strategy of maintaining close ties with the Lukashenko regime—intended to enable him to balance relations between Russia, Ukraine, and the EU—did not achieve its objectives. It failed to promote democratization in Belarus, did not protect Ukraine from potential Russian aggression originating from Belarus, and did not result in peace, which was the primary aim of the Minsk Format.

Starting from the stated goal and research hypothesis, we can highlight the fundamental research questions:

- What changes occurred in Ukraine's policy toward Belarus after 2014?
- What objectives did Ukraine aim to achieve with this policy?
- Why were these objectives not realized?

The observational method appears effective in addressing the questions mentioned above. By observing the actions of the Ukrainian authorities toward Belarus from 2014 to 2020, we will gain a deeper understanding of the logic behind the Ukrainian authorities' actions in the Belarusian context during that period, as well as the reasons why this policy failed to achieve its intended goals.

The period from 2014 to 2020 in Ukrainian-Belarusian relations, as well as Belarusian-EU relations, appears to be a unique final opportunity for the development of genuine cooperation between Aleksandr Lukashenko and democratic states. The failure of this attempt can generally be viewed as evidence of the a priori impossibility of peaceful coexistence between democracy and authoritarian regimes. Without endeavoring to

prove or disprove this broad assertion, this article will present an analysis of a specific example of establishing such close contact, thus enriching the research area for future scholars of international relations theory.

Belarus and the Validation of Ukrainian Authority After Euromaidan (February-May 2014)

The unusual and complex transfer of power to Oleksandr Turchynov, the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada, followed the escape of Yanukovych. This situation made the international recognition of the new government the most pressing issue for Ukraine at that time.

The day after Turchynov took office as acting president, the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev, expressed doubts about the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government. (pravda.com.ua, 2014) On that same day, February 24, 2014, Viktor Yanukovych was already in Russia. (interfax.com.ua, 2016)

The issue was that Yanukovych never signed any resignation documents nor stated that he was resigning from the presidency. Furthermore, on February 27, 2014, Yanukovych acknowledged that he still considers himself the president of Ukraine. (interfax.ru, 2014) By March 1, 2014, Yanukovych, as the president of Ukraine, sent a letter to Vladimir Putin requesting the introduction of troops into Ukrainian territory. (day.kyiv.ua, 2014)

As a result, the issue of international recognition of the new Ukrainian authorities gained significant importance. The European Union acknowledged the legitimacy of acting president Turchynov immediately after the vote in the Verkhovna Rada on February 27 (5.ua, 2014). However, there remained a risk that a coalition of states could form around Russia, refusing to recognize the new Ukrainian government.

This could lead to serious issues for Ukraine on the international stage, or even increase the risk of a civil war. A similar situation of dual power was observed in Venezuela, where from 2019 to 2023, there were two presidents who did not recognize each other.

In this matter, Belarus's position on recognizing or not recognizing the new Ukrainian authorities was particularly significant at the time. Given its cultural, economic, and political ties, Belarus is the closest country to both Russia and Ukraine. This is why Belarus could start forming a coalition of nations that refuse to recognize the new Ukrainian authorities. If Belarus were to recognize the new authorities, it would suggest the absence of such a coalition.

Russia's stance on this issue would be overlooked. The initial signal that Russia would be the only country not to recognize the new Ukrainian authorities emerged in mid-March when Oleksandr Turchynov was listed on the CIS website as the acting president of Ukraine. By the end of March, Belarus's position regarding the situation in Ukraine became evident. On

March 27, Belarus voted against United Nations (UN) resolution 68/262 concerning the territorial integrity of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. (Бетлій О & Прейгерман Є, 2016: 10)

The next day, during an interview on the Ukrainian political talk show "Shuster Live", Lukashenko openly recognized for the first time the legitimacy of the new Ukrainian government. On March 29, Lukashenko took an even greater step in recognizing the Ukrainian authorities by hosting the acting President of Ukraine, Turchynov, at his residence.

Lukashenko realized the perspective of future events and the ongoing role of Belarus in the negotiation process. The vote against the UN resolution can be explained by Belarus's obligations to Russia within the Union State (Бетлій О & Прейгерман Є, 2016: 9). There was no strong position from Russia regarding the recognition of the Ukrainian authorities, which allowed Belarus some freedom of action. Even then, Lukashenko began pursuing a policy of neutrality regarding the situation in Ukraine.

Later, it helped him smooth relations with the European Union and even achieve the lifting of sanctions. Another significant gesture recognizing the new Ukrainian authorities by President Lukashenko was his visit to Kyiv. He was present at the inauguration of the new President, Petro Poroshenko, on May 7. However, so far, the issue of recognition has not been as pressing; the day before the inauguration, Vladimir Putin met Poroshenko for the first time as the president-elect. This meeting took place in France during the celebrations of the anniversary of the Allied troop landings in Normandy. At this meeting, both presidents, along with Angela Merkel and Francois Hollande, established the Normandy Format together.

The Role of Belarus in the Negotiation Process Regarding the War in the Donbas Region and Ukrainian-Belarusian Relations (May 2014 – May 2019)

The first meeting of the Tripartite Commission, which included representatives from Ukraine, Russia, and the separatists, took place in June 2014 in the Donetsk region, which had already been occupied by separatists. However, it was clear that in the long term, meetings could not be held in Donetsk all the time, primarily for security reasons, and a neutral venue for negotiations was needed.

On July 29, the President of Ukraine's website published information that Petro Poroshenko had requested Alexandr Lukashenko to facilitate further negotiations in Minsk. Belarus appeared to be an ideal neutral venue due to its strong and close relations with both Ukraine and Russia. There would be no issues or protests from the other side regarding the visit to Minsk. The effectiveness of Minsk as a negotiation venue was similarly described by Denis Melyantsov, an analyst at the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies.

He wrote: "*Minsk looks like an optimal platform not only due to the continuity of the process with Ukraine, but also due to*

the convenience for the representatives of Russia. Moreover, Belarus has additional potential to facilitate the negotiation process as a state that understands Moscow's strategic concerns, as well as the security situation in the region and actively improves relations with the West.” (minskdialogue.by, 2017)

The first meeting in Minsk occurred on August 1, 2014, during the Customs Union-Ukraine summit. On August 26, the initial meeting between Poroshenko and Putin, following the inauguration of the Ukrainian president, also took place in Minsk. Two weeks later, the Minsk Protocol on a bilateral ceasefire was finalized.

Consequently, Belarus became a permanent negotiation hub for the conflicting parties in Eastern Ukraine. This role enabled Belarus to gradually start emerging from the period of international isolation that began after the imposition of sanctions in 2010 (though it actually started even earlier).

Belarus could rely on regular visits from high-ranking European officials. On August 1, Nursultan Nazarbayev, along with Poroshenko and Putin, visited Minsk. More importantly, Catherine Ashton, the then EU representative for foreign affairs and security policy, was present. This positioned Minsk as a hub for Eastern European policy, creating significant opportunities for the Belarusian government in negotiations and diplomacy, particularly with European Union countries.

During that period, there was an effort to involve Belarus in a trade conflict with Ukraine. On May 1, Belarus implemented a licensing requirement for importing beer from countries outside the Customs Union, and in June, it introduced a mandatory one-time permit for the import of pasta, confectionery, cement, glass, and glass packaging. Licenses were granted only if the final sales prices were agreed upon with the Belarusian authorities, resulting in a substantial increase in product prices.

In reality, this ban was minor and only impacted Ukrainian imports, due to the supply of such products from other countries. Deliveries of beer, sweets, pasta, caramel, and other confectionery items from Ukraine to Belarus were halted. In response to this unfriendly action by the Belarusian side, Ukraine imposed a ban on the import of Belarusian tires, trucks, refrigerators, mineral fertilizers, and dairy products.

Consequently, Belarusian economists acknowledged that the mutual boycott caused more harm to Belarus than to Ukraine, leading to the abolition of licensing on August 19. Ukrainian journalists reported that the imposition of licensing in Belarus stemmed from pressure exerted by the Russian side. (eurointegration.com.ua, 2014)

Another aspect of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations during that time was the involvement of Belarusian volunteers in the war in the Donbas region on the side of Ukraine. Between 2014 and 2015, at least two Belarusian volunteer military units were formed: the “Pahonia” detachment first, followed a year later

by the tactical group “Belarus,” which was initially commanded by the “Right Sector” volunteer corps (ua.korrespondent.net, 2015) and later became part of the Ukrainian Volunteer Army (day.kyiv.ua, 2016).

The reaction of the Belarusian authorities was decisive. In July 2014, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus announced that Belarusians who went to fight in Ukraine would be prosecuted according to Belarusian law. This warning was confirmed in the autumn by the Belarusian KGB (censor.net, 2014). At the same time, it should be acknowledged that over the next five years, there were both Belarusian members of volunteer groups fighting on the Ukrainian side and fighters on the separatist side in Belarus (unian.ua, 2016).

However, Ukraine not only remained quite passive in defending those who were fighting on its side, but there were also many instances where Belarusian volunteers could not obtain citizenship or even refugee status in Ukraine. Sometimes, this was absurdly justified by the claim that “Belarus is a country where the law applies,” suggesting that its citizens are not in danger. As a result, they had to either return to Belarus and face persecution for participating in the war in the Donbas region or emigrate to other countries. (zaborona.com, 2020)

The passive reaction of Ukraine to these individuals can be explained by the reluctance to damage relations at a time when Belarus was already recognized by all as a negotiating post regarding the conflict in the Donbas region. One can partially observe an analogy between Ukraine's passivity toward the repression against volunteers and Ukraine's delayed response to the repression against protesters following the presidential elections on August 9, 2020. In February 2015, set against the backdrop of another escalation in the Donbas region, a meeting in the Normandy Format was held in Minsk. Presidents Poroshenko, Putin, Hollande, and Chancellor Merkel engaged in 17-hour negotiations at Lukashenko's Presidential Palace in Minsk.

A few days after the negotiations in Minsk, information surfaced that Lukashenko might participate in the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga. (eurointegration.com.ua, 2015a) Although Belarus was ultimately represented at this summit by Prime Minister Andrei Kobyakov (eurointegration.com.ua, 2015b), the shift in rhetoric was clear, since after 2010, European diplomats had consistently stated that Belarus would not be able to engage actively in European projects until the human rights situation improved. Belarus' stance toward the European Union has also evolved.

At the end of February 2015, Lukashenko acknowledged that he was hopeful for the “start of a positive dialogue” between Belarus and the EU. (eurointegration.com.ua, 2015c) In March 2015, Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin visited Belarus on a state visit, where he met with the president, prime minister, and other high-level officials. This marked the first high-level meetings between Vatican and Belarusian representatives since the freezing of bilateral relations in

2010, due to the repression of the Belarusian opposition. (eurointegration.com.ua, 2015d) In April 2015, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy made a visit to Belarus for the first time in 5 years.

An indication that clearly showed the EU's mood toward the Belarusian authorities at that time was the publication of the decision to lift EU sanctions at the end of October 2015, just a few weeks after the presidential elections. Although the opposition did not recognize the election results and the OSCE deemed the vote count to be non-transparent, on October 29, the official EU journal published the EU Council's decision to lift sanctions. (*EUR-Lex*, 2015) In fact, it legitimized another five years of Lukashenko's rule. This was one reason why there were no significant opposition protests following the 2015 elections, even though protests occurred after the 2006 and 2010 elections. Initially, the sanctions were suspended for four months, and at the beginning of 2016, they were lifted entirely.

The improvement of relations between Belarus and the European Union was also quite beneficial for Ukraine. In the "Foreign Policy Audit: Ukraine-Belarus," published in 2016 by the Ukrainian Institute of World Policy, we read: "[Minsk's role as a negotiating post] increases the chances that Belarus will not participate in anti-Ukrainian or anti-Western initiatives, which means that it strengthens Ukraine's security. Namely, Kyiv should look for ways to eliminate the flaws of the Minsk format, but at the same time not cast doubt on Belarus' neutral position towards this conflict." (Бетлій О & Прейгерман Є. (2016:13)

A notable increase in Belarus's role in Ukraine's foreign policy and Lukashenko's supportive rhetoric towards Ukraine facilitated deeper engagement in bilateral relations and the signing of agreements at the local level, enhancing mutual integration and cooperation between Ukraine and Belarus. In July 2017, Alexandr Lukashenko visited Kyiv, during which a cultural cooperation program for 2017–2021 was established between the ministries of culture of both countries. An agreement on collaboration between the academies of sciences of the two nations was also finalized.

To enhance bilateral cooperation, a new forum was initiated in 2018 – the Ukrainian-Belarusian Forum of Regions. The inaugural forum took place in October 2018 in Gomel, attended by Presidents Lukashenko and Poroshenko. (ukrinform.ua, 2018) The second forum occurred a year later in October 2019 in Zhytomyr and held special political significance, as it marked the first meeting between Presidents Zelensky and Lukashenko. (*Official website of the President of Ukraine*, 2019) The third forum of the regions of Ukraine and Belarus was scheduled for October 2020 and was set to be held in Grodno.

While Ukrainian experts deemed the key success of Ukraine's foreign policy towards Belarus during this time to be securing the Ukrainian-Belarusian border against military threats (Бетлій О & Прейгерман Є, 2016:15), this assertion appears contradictory. In 2017, Belarus conducted large-scale military

drills named "West-2017," despite the friendly rhetoric and the growing bilateral cooperation. This marked the third instance of such military exercises, with the earlier ones taking place in 2009 and 2013.

However, after the annexation of Crimea and the onset of Russian aggression in the Donbas region, the agreements reflecting the new geopolitical reality imbued such exercises with a completely new context. Ukraine regarded these exercises as a threat, as articulated by the former Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada, Andrei Parubiy, who warned that, in the worst-case scenario, the exercises could serve as a pretext for direct aggression or sabotage activities against Ukraine. (pravda.com.ua, 2017)

Despite Lukashenko's assurances that the exercises were purely defensive in nature, and the agreement to allow NATO observers to attend them, the decision to conduct such exercises during this period clearly indicated that Belarusian-Ukrainian relations were secondary to Lukashenko's commitments to Russia. This is further evidenced by Belarus's consistent voting against UN resolutions concerning the human rights situation in Crimea. Belarus also opposed the UN resolution on Russian aggression against Ukrainian sailors in the Kerch Strait at the end of 2018. (papersmart.unmeetings.org, 2018)

The 2019 presidential elections in Ukraine have posed another challenge for Belarusian-Ukrainian relations. Many journalists and analysts suggest that one factor that improved these relations from 2014 to 2019 was the warm personal bond between Lukashenko and Poroshenko. Furthermore, Lukashenko has often emphasized his excellent relationship with the Ukrainian president.

On April 8, 2019, eleven days before the second round of elections in Ukraine, Lukashenko's interview with the Turkish news agency Anadolu was published. In it, the Belarusian president expressed his belief that Poroshenko would win the elections. Furthermore, by stating that many votes for Zelensky were cast as a protest, Lukashenko remarked:

"Let Ukrainians forgive me, but I want to tell them: if you don't have anyone to vote for, then you don't have to vote. Why vote for someone you're not sure about? After all, Ukrainians have been through such a difficult political path in recent years. They have already had many incomprehensible promises. Many times, taking risks, they have believed and supported politicians. And it's always been the other way around. The experience of the Ukrainian people in recent years shows that you shouldn't take risks. If it doesn't work out, if there's no one to vote for, then re-election. It seems to me that this is better than taking another risk, voting, and then bitter remorse for ten or more years."

Certainly, the Belarusian president's words could be seen as an unwelcoming gesture towards presidential candidate Zelensky. However, during the pre-election campaigns, Lukashenko's remarks went largely unnoticed in the Ukrainian media. Immediately following the announcement of the exit poll results after

the second round, Zelensky spoke to the post-Soviet countries: *“Look at us. Everything is possible.”* (ua.interfax.com.ua, 2019)

Of course, this also signaled to the Belarusian people that, in principle, every opposition politician would be considered extra-systemic. Lukashenko welcomed Zelensky, but on May 20, 2019, during the inauguration of Ukraine’s new president, Belarus was represented by a deputy prime minister. This was the first time Lukashenko did not attend the inauguration of a Ukrainian president since 2005.

The Development of Belarusian-Ukrainian Relations during President Zelensky’s Tenure (May 2019 – August 2020)

Despite these concerning signals during the election campaign in Ukraine, there was no significant crisis in Belarusian-Ukrainian relations at the onset of Volodymyr Zelensky’s presidential term. A few months after his inauguration, during the subsequent election campaign ahead of the parliamentary elections, journalists observed that Zelensky was mimicking the style of Alexandr Lukashenko in his public discussions with officials. Vitaly Portnikov notably discussed this in a commentary for the Polish newspaper *“Rzeczpospolita”*:

“This [the scandalous conversation between Zelensky and the secretary of the Boryspil city council in the summer of 2019 - O.S.] was not even similar to the “Servant of the People”, but to the President of Belarus Alexandr Lukashenko. This is his style. However, Lukashenko completely controls the situation in the country, not only exiles people, but also dismisses them. Zelensky does not have such power, he only took on his role.” (rp.pl, 2019)

Neither Zelensky nor Lukashenko officially commented on these assumptions. Zelensky’s behavior and similar comparisons did not signal a deterioration in Ukrainian-Belarusian relations or indicate any hostility from the Ukrainian president toward Alexandr Lukashenko. As mentioned earlier, President Zelensky’s first meeting with Lukashenko occurred in October 2019 in Zhytomyr during the second forum of Ukrainian regions and Belarus.

The meeting occurred in a friendly atmosphere, with the presidents joking with each other, and there was no indication of tension in the relations between the presidents or the countries. *“You have never had problems with the territory of Belarus and with Belarus and you never will. We will always be the nicest and most reliable of your supporters and partners,”* Aleksandr Lukashenko assured Volodymyr Zelensky after a face-to-face meeting (Official website of the President of Ukraine, 2019).

The forum proved effective not only due to the pleasant atmosphere but also because of the productive collaboration between representatives from the two countries. During the forum, two intergovernmental agreements and 15 agreements on interregional cooperation between Ukraine and Belarus were signed.

(ukrinform.ua, 2019) In April 2020, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba reached an agreement with Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei to hold the Third Forum in October in Grodno. (Official website of the Government of Ukraine, 2020)

During this period, there was a notable improvement in Belarusian-American relations. In February 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Belarus. During their conversation, Alexandr Lukashenko assured him that *“the cold period in Belarus-U.S. relations is over”* (mind.ua, 2020). Prior to that, in September 2019, Alexandr Lukashenko agreed with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State David Hayle that, for the first time in 11 years, the countries would exchange ambassadors, rather than Charge d’Affaires (bbc.com, 2019).

In practice, however, the Belarusian ambassador to the United States was appointed on July 20, 2020. However, due to the U.S. not recognizing the results of the presidential election on August 9, he will most likely be unable to present his credentials. Nevertheless, the trend from 2019 to the first half of 2020 suggests that the policies of Ukraine, the European Union, and the United States toward Belarus during this period were consistent and not contradictory. Democratic countries sought to improve relations with Belarus, possibly hoping for progressive democratization and a reduction in Russian influence over the country.

Regarding Ukraine’s relations with Belarus, in addition to the many positive political developments mentioned earlier, it is important to note that from 2015 to 2019, trade turnover between the two countries consistently increased. It only declined in the first half of 2020, and this was more related to the coronavirus pandemic than to political issues. Belarus maximized its role as a negotiating post, gaining substantial advantages from this position. Nevertheless, in a geopolitical context, Belarus remained firmly under the influence of the Russian Federation, as consistently reflected in its votes in the UN and its joint military exercises with Russia. Belarus enhanced its relationships with the

The Lublin Triangle and Ukrainian Passivity

On July 28, 2020, the foreign ministers of Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania announced the establishment of a new diplomatic format known as the Lublin Triangle. *“The Lublin Triangle emphasizes the important role that Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania play in Central Europe and the world. Our unity can not only strengthen our countries, but also effectively counteract common threats, guarantee the security and prosperity of our region,”* we read in the joint declaration of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. (Official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2020a)

At the same time, Ukraine’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, emphasized that the establishment of this format indicates that Ukraine can not only participate in regional initiatives but also take on the role of an initiator. (Ibidem) Just a few days later, on July 31, Kuleba invited Belarus’s Minister

of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Makey, to Kyiv as a guest for the upcoming meeting in the Lublin Triangle format. (Official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2020b)

The start of the new initiative led us to believe that the interests of the Lublin Triangle, as a diplomatic format, encompass the entire Central European region, including Belarus, which was the first country outside this format to receive an invitation to another meeting. This allowed us to anticipate an active response from this format regarding the events surrounding the presidential elections in Belarus on August 9. It can be said that these elections represented the first real test for the Lublin Triangle. However, the reactions of the member states of the Lublin Triangle were not always consistent and did not always occur simultaneously.

On the evening of August 9, following mass arrests and repression against protesters in the streets of Minsk, a joint statement from the presidents of Poland and Lithuania was issued, addressing the Belarusian authorities to fully recognize and adhere to basic democratic standards. Andrzej Duda and Gitanas Nausėda urged the Belarusian authorities to refrain from violence and respect fundamental freedoms, human rights, and civil rights, including the rights of national minorities and freedom of speech. (Official website of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2020)

The President of Ukraine's statement did not emerge until the following day, August 10. More significantly, it was vague. Unlike Duda and Nausėda, Zelensky called for respect for human rights but only urged "the greatest possible tolerance, patience, and the abandonment of street violence methods." (Official website of the President of Ukraine, 2020) That evening, the foreign ministers of the Lublin Triangle issued a brief joint statement regarding the situation in Belarus.

The next day, Belarusian presidential candidate Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya was deported to Lithuania, after which Gitanas Nausėda stated that "Lithuania will always provide asylum to those fighting for freedom and democracy." (onet.pl, 2020) Nausėda also considered the possibility of imposing sanctions against the Belarusian authorities. On that same day, Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz discussed the possibility of implementing sanctions. (eurointegration.com.ua, 2020a)

On the same day, August 11, the Minister of Economic Development of Ukraine met in Kyiv with the Minister of Agriculture of Belarus to discuss cooperation between the two countries in the agricultural sector. (Official website of the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Agriculture of Ukraine, 2020) On August 12, the Foreign Policy Committee of the Lithuanian Parliament proposed not to recognize the official results of the elections in Belarus and not to acknowledge Alexandr Lukashenko as the legitimate president of Belarus. (ru.delfi.lt, 2020) On the same day, Krzysztof Szczerski, the Head of the Office of the President of the Republic of Poland, announced that Andrzej Duda would send a

letter to the members of the UN Human Rights Council regarding the situation in Belarus. (wiadomosci.gazeta.pl, 2020)

On August 13, a joint statement by Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia called for the de-escalation of the conflict in Belarus, the release of political prisoners, and the organization of a round table to initiate dialogue with the protesters. Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia also offered to serve as intermediaries. (eurointegration.com.ua, 2020c) Ukraine did not support these demands and did not endorse this statement in any way. It was not until August 14 that a significant moment in Ukraine's response to the events in Belarus occurred. Despite Lukashenko's earlier assurances, Belarus extradited previously detained mercenaries of the private military company "Wagner" to Russia.

Among the mercenaries were individuals who had previously fought in Donbas on the side of the separatists. President Zelensky held a telephone conversation with Lukashenko regarding the extradition of these individuals to Ukraine. The Security Service of Ukraine also initiated the process to extradite the mercenaries. Therefore, the extradition of the "Wagner" group to Russia surprised the Ukrainian side.

On August 14, a statement from the European Union was issued concerning the non-recognition of the elections in Belarus. Following this, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement asserting that "*the results of the elections for the President of the Republic of Belarus do not inspire confidence among the Belarusian people,*" and that Ukraine "*generally shares the position expressed by the European Union regarding the elections in Belarus.*" (Official website of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020d).

The next day, the President of Ukraine responded. Volodymyr Zelensky denied any intervention by Ukraine in the internal affairs of Belarus, stating that "*referring to one or another neighboring country cannot silence the voice of thousands of protests from one's own fellow citizens. If there is no trust—and the world sees that there is no trust—then this deficit cannot be filled with unjust accusations against the leadership of another country. Rather, it can lead to even greater distrust.*" Zelensky also remarked that "*unfortunately, official Minsk has already demonstrated, by irresponsibly releasing the "Wagnerites," that the historical closeness of our two nations and the principle of mutual assistance between neighbors hold no value for him personally.*" (Official website of the President of Ukraine, 2020a)

On August 15, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius referred to Lukashenko for the first time as the "*former president.*" (eurointegration.com.ua, 2020d) On February 16, a member of parliament from the ruling Ukrainian party, "Servant of the People," submitted a declaration regarding the situation in Belarus to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, condemning the violence used against protesters. (eurointegration.com.ua, 2020e)

However, the issue with this declaration was that it did not include a direct non-recognition of the election results (though it does indicate that the official election results do not reflect the free expression of society's will). Additionally, Belarus is not a member of the PACE, and the decisions of this Assembly have no practical impact on the Belarusian authorities. Moreover, the next session of the PACE is not scheduled until mid-October, and until then, this declaration will remain merely a proposal.

Although the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine appears to be the most active branch of power in Ukraine in condemning human rights violations in Belarus, on August 25, the representative of the "Voice" party, Solomiya Bobrovska, speaking from the podium of the Ukrainian parliament, called on the Verkhovna Rada to adopt a declaration condemning human rights violations in Belarus and not recognizing the election results. (Facebook of Solomiya Bobrovska, 2020).

On September 4, representatives from five parliamentary groups of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine—"European Solidarity," "Servant of the People," "Voice," "Motherland," and "For the Sake of the Future"—expressed their support for the Belarusian people in their struggle for democratic rights and freedoms. The white-red-white flags of Belarus were displayed on the parliament tribune, and some deputies spoke in Belarusian. (5.ua, 2020)

However, the Ukrainian parliament has not yet adopted any official declaration concerning Belarus. Meanwhile, on September 10, the Lithuanian Seimas recognized Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the Coordination Council as the sole legitimate representatives of the Belarusian people (wyborcza.pl, 2020).

The reception of Tsikhanouskaya in Warsaw on September 9 and her meeting with Morawiecki represented a step toward her recognition as a representative of the Belarusian people. In light of these gestures from the partners in the Lublin Triangle, Ukraine's actions in defending human rights and democracy in Belarus appear quite timid, as if done under duress. Another example of Ukraine's indecisive stance is that Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba merely mentioned the suspension of bilateral relations with Belarus during a television talk show (youtube.com, 2020).

Kuleba's comments regarding this suspension also seemed odd because the Ukrainian minister addressed the losses only in terms of repercussions for Kyiv, neglecting to mention the violations of human rights and democratic principles in Belarus. *"We have suspended all processes and communications with Belarus. We are monitoring the situation. Once we confirm that the contacts do not incur reputational, political, or moral losses for Ukraine, they will be restored,"* stated Dmytro Kuleba. (youtube.com, 2020)

As part of the suspension of bilateral relations, preparations for the Third Forum of Regions, originally scheduled for October in Grodno, were also put on hold. (belnovosti.by, 2020)

Despite this, the concept of suspending relations essentially allowed for the possibility of their renewal, irrespective of whether free and democratic elections were conducted in Belarus. This marked a fundamental difference between Ukraine's stance and that of its partners in the Lublin Triangle - Poland and Lithuania. Kuleba has repeatedly asserted that Ukraine "shares the position of the European Union" (eurointegration.com.ua, 2020f) (ukrinform.ua, 2020), yet he has not explicitly outlined Ukraine's stance on the repression occurring in Belarus.

In a speech during the presentation of the Lublin Triangle format in July 2020, Kuleba stated that Ukraine can take the lead in regional initiatives. However, being an initiator also requires taking responsibility and facing difficult decisions head-on. The Lublin Triangle could serve as an excellent format for coordinated actions among Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland regarding the situation in their immediate neighbor, Belarus. Yet, in practice, during the first month of protests in Belarus, only one brief statement from the Lublin Triangle was issued, and Ukraine, which had positioned itself as the leader of this format, became passive in its response to the events in Belarus, especially in contrast to the reactions of Poland and Lithuania.

This passivity of Ukraine during this period can be explained by the reluctance to jeopardize the established and positively developing relations with the Lukashenko regime in previous years, as well as the uncertainty regarding the reactions of Ukrainian society, since polls in 2019 indicated that Lukashenko was the most popular foreign politician in Ukraine (belta.by, 2019). It could also simply reflect excessive caution on the part of Ukrainian diplomats and politicians. However, such behavior suggested that, despite the declarations of Ukrainian officials, Ukraine was still not prepared to be a true regional leader.

Conclusion

After the events of Euromaidan and the election of a new government in Ukraine, as well as changes in the country's foreign policy in 2014, the nature of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations was expected to shift as well. During Viktor Yanukovich's presidency, despite the declared policy of European integration, there was a gradual convergence with Russia and an intensification of cooperation with Belarus. This appeared to be a natural consequence of the overarching policy. However, following the events of Euromaidan, when Ukraine's foreign policy changed drastically, the primary focus was announced as integration with the EU and NATO. Consequently, Ukraine's interests diverged sharply from those of Belarus.

Despite this, the pro-European Ukrainian authorities not only maintained strong relations with Alexandr Lukashenko, but also made Minsk a venue for negotiations on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This helped Lukashenko emerge from international isolation and fostered improved relations not only with Ukraine and the EU but also with the broader West, including the USA. The logic and goals of official Kyiv in these actions were that, firstly, Minsk was acceptable to all parties, making it an ideal location for negotiations, and secondly, by strengthening cooperation with Lukashenko.

The Ukrainian side aimed to closely align itself economically with Belarus to secure long-term interests in cooperation between Minsk and Kyiv, thereby preventing Lukashenko from taking aggressive actions against Ukraine. Another objective was to preserve economic benefits for Ukraine stemming from collaboration with Belarus, as indicated by Kyiv's hesitance to sever sectoral cooperation with the country after 2020 and to participate in the relevant series of EU sanctions. However, the approach ultimately failed, and none of the established goals were met.

On February 24, 2022, Belarus became an aggressor state toward Ukraine, allowing its own territory to be used for an attack by the Russian Federation's troops. The outbreak of war and Belarus's role in it ultimately demonstrated the ineffectiveness of Ukraine's policy toward Lukashenko since 2014. Even after the protests in 2020, Ukraine attempted to maintain this approach (albeit in a diminished form) and continued economic cooperation.

However, a systemic error in this policy has existed since the very beginning: the Ukrainian side overestimated Lukashenko's real independence from Russia. Treating Lukashenko as an

independent actor on the international stage, seeking to balance between Russia and the West, proved to be inconsistent with reality. Belarus had already been integrated into all of Russia's initiatives (Commonwealth of Independent States, Customs Union, Collective Security Treaty Organization, Union State of Russia and Belarus, etc.) by 2014, and in fact, much earlier. It was economically and militarily dependent on Russia. The involvement of Russian officials in the crackdown on protests in 2020 demonstrated that cooperation with Putin is a key factor in maintaining Alexander Lukashenko's grip on power.

From the start, Ukraine should not have viewed Belarus as a clearly neutral country aiming for balance. Instead, it should have regarded Belarus as, at a minimum, an allied state to Russia and adjusted its relations with Minsk considering the ongoing Russian aggression in Donbas and Crimea.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.

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