

Belarus – Ukraine: Overcoming the Post-Colonial Syndrome

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Foreword with a Historical Background

The Belarusian-Ukrainian relations provide a typical example of the horizontal post-colonial relationships between two former USSR republics. Both Belarus and Ukraine are referred to the post-Soviet nation category, although Ukraine has achieved a higher degree of success in reforming its political and economic organisation. Their inter-relations are substantively complicated by the existence of the “big brother,” Russia. Certainly, a crucial factor is represented by the Russian-Ukrainian war, where the Lukashenka regime in place in Belarus acts as a co-aggressor, is an essential factor.

The significant point is that to-day both Belarus and Ukraine are undergoing the processes of forming their political nations; that being said, the dependence on the Russian-Ukrainian war outcome is of importance (albeit to a different extent) for the two peoples.

The idea of the “triune Slavic people” has been cultivated by the Russian authorities since the mid-19th century. It may be named as an ideological foundation of tsarist and Putin's Russia, alike. The Belarusians and the Ukrainians, in this case, do not merely act as “younger brothers” who are not in a position to achieve the level of the “big ones.” In line with the Kremlin's traditionalist understanding, they play the role of limitrophe states separating the Russian Federation (Empire) space from the hostile West. The fact underlies the apprehension of the Russian state politics towards Belarus and Ukraine. In the very least, the Ems Edict and Valuev's Circular Letter produced an adverse impact on the formation of national bourgeoisies both in Belarus and in Ukraine. Because of the weakness of the national establishments, the destinies of the Belarusian and Ukrainian National Republics following the disintegration of the Russian Empire were sad.

The Soviet Union's involvement in World War 2 on Germany's side enabled uniting the territories of Belarus and Ukraine within the USSR in autumn 1939, whereas the inclusion in the USSR of the Trans-Carpathian and Crimean territories happened later and on a different legal basis. Moscow, while exercising its rule of the gun, was assembling the two Republics' lands, with the East-Slavonic nations being their titular ethnic groups. A possible undermining of Poland's positions seemed an extra gain under the circumstances. That being said, Nazi Germany's occupation regimes on the territories of Belarus and Ukraine under control between 1941 and 1944 were featured by certain differences, which fact may be attributed to the personal characteristics of their gauleiters. In 1944 Joseph Stalin initiated the foundation of the BSSR and UkrSSR Ministries of Foreign Affairs, while the relevant Republics became co-founders of the United Nations Organisation.

Regrettably, the fact did little to promote an independent diplomacy for Kyiv or Minsk after their declarations of independence in 1991. Ukraine till 2014 had remained in the Kremlin's sphere of interests and Belarus is still there to-day. The difficulties linked to their independences coming-of-age along with the post-colonial syndrome have accounted for the perception of the situation in place in the neighbouring countries, the border length among them exceeding 1,000 kilometres. The East-European information-specific and political triangle¹ with its dominant peak situated in Moscow had been formed, as a matter of fact, for over 20 years and still to-day keeps on influencing the Belarusian-Ukrainian relationship's quality.

Following the Soviet Union disintegration, which was documented in the Belarusian Belavezha Forest on 8 December 1991, Belarus and Ukraine established on 27 December 1991 diplomatic relations. They are in existence till this very day, in spite of their utmost level of degradation (the reasons for and peculiarities of the process will be covered below).

¹ The East-European information-specific and political triangle is a form of the Kremlin's informal influence on Belarus and Ukraine after their independence declarations. Its function is based on the triune Slavic nation myth.

The Presidential Factor

The roles played by the heads of state in the inter-state dialogue between Belarus and Ukraine are traditionally vital. Although Belarus is characterised by a super-presidential republic format, whereas Ukraine more than once has undergone the power distribution formula fluctuations between the head of state and the parliament, it is exactly the country top dignitary's position that has traditionally dictated the dialogue key-note with the neighbour.

July 1994 saw the elections as presidents at the post-Soviet areas of iconic personalities: Alexander Lukashenka, an MP seen as a corruption fighter and advocate of restoring relations with Russia, became Belarus' first President. Leonid Kuchma, a "red director" and an ex-premier, became the head of state in Ukraine. For about 30 years of their bilateral relations, Belarus and Ukraine have passed under the conditions of Lukashenka's permanent stay in power and ever-changing Ukrainian presidents and the official Kyiv's politics towards Belarus.

During the 10 years of their parallel presidencies, Lukashenka had reconstructed the BSSR ideological elements, while preserving a strong role played by the government in the economy. Kuchma, whose stay in the presidential position lasted for the record 10 years for Ukraine, or two presidential terms in office, was building a market-oriented economy by blessing privatisation and the rise in Ukraine of large financial and industrial groups. The economic structure differences provided no obstacle for the development of the bilateral relations. In truth, it would be wrong to name Kuchma as the major influence factor on Lukashenka: the Belarusian president in the 1990' was trying to head the Union State of Russia and Belarus. The scenario was disrupted by Vladimir Putin coming to power in Russia, who became the Russian president in 2000. At the turn of the 21st century, presidents Kuchma and Lukashenka had to combat, with varying degrees of success, a noticeable opposition strengthening, which was explained in Kyiv and Minsk by efforts exerted in the West. At the same time, the Kremlin tried hard to harness both Lukashenka and Kuchma. From our perspective, the processes provide evidence that the foreign political subject agency was in deficit then in Belarus and Ukraine.

Ukraine had experienced in 2004 its Orange Revolution, while in Belarus Alexander Lukashenka carried out a referendum that was not recognised by the OSCE, but which allowed him to take part in another presidential election, and by far not the last one in his career. Viktor Yushchenko turned to be an irritating factor for Minsk. In April 2005, George Bush and Viktor Yushchenko, the US and Ukrainian presidents, signed during the latter's visit in Washington a declaration calling for strengthening of democracy in Iraq, Belarus and in Cuba. The demarche affected in a negative way the Belarusian-Ukrainian relations

and prevented Ukraine and Belarus from at least trying to co-ordinate their actions in countering the Kremlin's energy section expansion. The sanctions imposed by Ukraine in 2006 against Belarus, showcased the attitude differences between the presidents: Yushchenko stood in the pro-Western positions, while Lukashenka looked the other way, at Moscow. Incidentally, it marked one of the first cases ever that Ukraine used its sanction tool in the international relations. The loss by the Minsk authorities of their control over the Beltransgaz, a pipeline gas transporting company, against the backdrop of gas wars staged between Russia and Ukraine, regrettably, became a logical consequence of the mindsets prevailing in Minsk.

By the way, it was during Yushchenko's presidency that the volume of trade between Belarus and Ukraine went from nearly USD 700 million in 2003 up to USD 5 billion in 2008. The bilateral trade growth was only hindered by the global economic crisis. The trends observed in the development of the commercial or economic relations prove that Minsk was building, using Ukraine as a tool, its pragmatic policies, which enabled a lower dependence on Moscow.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that in November 2009 Alexander Lukashenka arrived jointly with Victor Yushchenko to Ivano-Frankivsk, in fact, playing on his side in the presidential campaign. The politeness gesture failed to help Yushchenko to retain power in his hands. Among one of the last personnel-related decrees signed by the third Ukrainian President, was his decision to appoint as an ambassador to Belarus Roman Bessmertnii, an Orange Revolution organiser, who overtly stressed his solidarity with the political line implemented by the EU and the USA towards Minsk and conducted an intense dialogue with the Belarusian opposition representatives, which is why was recalled at a short notice from the Belarusian capital by Victor Yanukovich. The replacement of Bessmertnii in summer 2011 by Yanukovich's close associate Victor Tikhonov, who, in his turn, was subsequently replaced by admiral Mikhail Yezhel, who, following the end of his career as an ambassador, made up his mind to remain in Belarus, – did little, if anything at all, to change the Ukrainian-Belarusian relations. These, regrettably enough, failed to become a priority for Ukraine.

The relations between Alexander Lukashenka and Victor Yanukovich were not cordial. In 2011 the official Minsk went seriously sour on Victor Yanukovich because of his refusal to invite Lukashenka to take part in the commemorative event marking the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl NPP disaster. The Ukrainian and Belarusian presidents shared few common topics for conversations, as they distantly competed in manifesting, in their respective countries, authoritarianism. Both Lukashenka and Yanukovich were the Kremlin's political liege subjects, who tried to sell their loyalty to Moscow at the highest possible price. Lukashenka allowed the Russian businesses to boss around in Belarus in a more pro-active

way, whereas Yanukovich's stance was more conservative and took into account the needs of his suite and the Ukrainian oligarchs.

Lukashenka did not welcome the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, and Minsk perceived it as an evident jeopardy to his rule. Several dozens of the Ukrainian defence and law-enforcement personnel members, following the Revolution of Dignity, found their asylum in Belarus, where they were integrated with the local relevant structures. In truth, Alexander Lukashenka did not follow completely the ideological guidelines declared by the Kremlin on the situation in Ukraine. Moreover, in June 2014 he attended the inauguration of Petro Poroshenko, thus demonstrating his recognition of the choice made by the Ukrainian people.

The Hybrid Emanations

The hybrid war unleashed by Russia in the Donbass in 2014 revealed to the full extent the dialectics behind the Ukrainian-Belarusian relations. Belarus made its best to take the chance and become a kind of "East-European Switzerland" after the very first round of negotiations in Minsk. A certain thaw in the relationships of the official Minsk with the West, just like the Russian manoeuvring around the Union State creation, were directly linked to its mediation mission. Alexander Lukashenka's informal involvement in the Normandy format talks in February 2015 in Minsk ensured him, in the very least, a painless next presidential campaign and an intensified dialogue with the West. Concurrently, Belarus was developing in quite a pro-active way its military and technical co-operation with Ukraine, while its 2014 fuel deliveries were critical to restore combat readiness of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. As a matter of fact, Lukashenka acted at the said period as Ukraine's hybrid ally.²

The hybrid conflict in Ukraine was significantly reflected in the social and political situation in Belarus. The first factor was the engagement of the Republic of Belarus nationals in the hostilities on the sides of the Ukrainian army and the pro-Russian separatists: the Minsk authorities declared their preparedness to persecute both for mercenaryism. The second one was strictly designed for domestic consumption and meant coverage by the Belarusian media from time to time reports on "Ukrainian extremists" or on weapons confiscated on the Ukrainian-Belarusian border. The third one was kidnapping in Homel in August 2017 of Ukrainian national Pavlo Gryb by the Russian security services. The young person was masterfully lured into Belarus only to come back home following an exchange of prisoners

² Ukraine's hybrid ally is the author's definition based on Lukashenka's ability to combine his political loyalty to Russia with his supplies of strategic materials and double-purpose machinery to Ukraine following the Russian occupation of Crimea and the onset of war in the Donbass.

of war between Ukraine and Russia in September 2019. Presumably, it was in this way that the Kremlin demonstrated Lukashenka's position vulnerability in Belarus. The spy scandal related to the detention of the Republic of Belarus' national Yury Palityka in Ukraine and the subsequent act of retaliation by arresting in Minsk Ukrainian journalist Pavlo Sharoyko on charges of espionage showcased some controversies present in the bilateral relations between Kyiv and Minsk.

Along the Same Old Track

Faithful to his principle to support the current authorities in the neighbouring countries, Alexander Lukashenka made a forecast of Petro Poroshenko's win in the 2019 presidential race, but was hardly upset by Volodymyr Zelensky coming to power. The presidents of Ukraine and Belarus met in October 2019 during the Second Regional Forum in Zhytomyr, where Lukashenka, in his typical patronising manner, was building a dialogue by demonstrating his own prominence; that being said, confidential relations between Lukashenka and Zelensky failed to materialise. There is some indirect evidence available in support of the fact.

The official relations between Belarus and Ukraine were predominantly formed using the post-Soviet economic formats and, in particular, the Commonwealth of Independent States. The free trade principles at the post-Soviet areas were supposed to be based on the CIS documents. The main framework for an economic interaction between the two nations was the Inter-Governmental Belarusian-Ukrainian Mixed Committee on Commercial and Economic Co-operation, which conducted 27 sessions during the period of its functioning. Both Kyiv and Minsk had been quite happy with the format, until their bilateral economic relations were formally frozen in 2020.

As was mentioned above, the loss of Minsk's control over Beltransgaz has excluded any co-ordinated activity by Belarus and Ukraine, as far as the Russian gas transit is concerned. Lack of proper subject agency on behalf of Kyiv and Minsk, as a matter of fact, ruled out any such opportunities. Actually, Belarus and Ukraine put up with the fact that their economies would play a subordinate role to the Russian interests.

A low-key nature of contacts between the Belarusian and Ukrainian premiers seems emblematic in this respect. In the summer of 2009, the Prime Minister of Ukraine Yulia Tymoshenko met her Belarusian opposite number Siarhiej Sidorsky. The meeting should be seen, above all, in the light of the head of the Ukrainian Government taking part in her presidential campaigning, although energising the Ukrainian electricity exports to Belarus provided a formal reason for it.

In July 2010, soon after the presidential election in Ukraine won by Victor Yanukovich, his trusted man Andriy Kliuyev, the First Deputy Prime Minister, signed with his Belarusian opposite number Uladzimir Siamashka a Joint Action Plan on implementation of priority interests in the mutual co-operation. They declared an intended address of the economic collaboration issues that failed to be tackled in the preceding years. In 2011 Prime Minister Mykola Azarov visited Minsk to conduct negotiations with Alexander Lukashenka. In May 2013 Mykola Azarov met his Belarusian opposite number Mikhail Miasnikovich, a representative of the old administrator cohort.

The Games Legislators Play

The parliamentary dimension of the attitude the Ukrainian establishment has vis-a-vis Belarus seems to be rather a symptomatic one. On 3 July 2020, the foundation of an inter-group association *For a Democratic Belarus* was declared by Oleksiy Goncharenko, a representative of the *European Solidarity* parliamentary group. The association, generally speaking, included opposition MPs, and Goncharenko is known for his ability to deal with some extremely diverse topics on the information agenda. It would come as no surprise, therefore, that he stood in charge of the association on the eve of the Belarusian presidential election, while in May and June 2021 he was coming up with an idea for breaking diplomatic relations with Lukashenka's regime.

The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine responded officially to the mass-scale protests in Belarus no sooner than one month after they began. A condemnation of the political repressions and vote rigging could be articulated, indeed, much earlier. Yet, the team of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky could not swiftly formulate their attitude to the events going on in Belarus. The pause would play its adverse role also in the future, within the process of establishing relations between the Belarusian democratic forces and the Ukrainian authorities.

To-day the Ukrainian parliament lacks a clear and definite position towards Belarus. The Ukrainian parliament responded to the political crisis in Belarus by recording on 22 October 2020 a draft resolution by the Verkhovna Rada on recognising Belarus as temporarily occupied by Russia. A year after the commencement of a full-scale Russian intervention, on 16 June 2023, Yaroslav Yurchyshyn, a *Voice* parliamentary group MP, declared the fact of recording a parliamentary resolution that recognises Belarus as a Russian co-aggressor against Ukraine. It is symbolic that at about the same time Yurchyshyn's political sponsor, Serhiy Prytula, a popular comic actor and volunteer, made an appeal to force Belarus to paying reparations to Ukraine for the damages caused to it.

We should add to the above two more minor details: two months prior to the Russian intervention, in December 2021, the Ukrainian media brought a report that David Arakhamiya, the *People's Servant* parliamentary group leader, had been involved in electricity imports from Belarus on extremely beneficial terms (by the way, no one had lifted by that moment in time the sanctions imposed on Lukashenka's regime by Ukraine in 2020). That being said, Yevgen Shevchenko, a *People's Servant* parliamentary group member, met Alexander Lukashenka on 20 April 2021 in Minsk and declared that at least one-third of the Ukrainians would like to see the Belarusian dictator as their president. Later, Kyrylo Budanov, Chief Main Intelligence Directorate, declared that Shevchenko had had talks with Lukashenka at the initiative of the intelligence services.

I would like to emphasise that on the eve of the Belarusian-Ukrainian Ostrožski Forum held in December 2022 in Lviv, the inter-group association *For a Democratic Belarus* was accessed by the representatives of the ruling the *People's Servant* party, which enables us to-day to treat the association as an informal platform for a dialogue with the Belarusian democratic forces. That being said, Ukraine lacks a politician or a political force that consistently stands for developing relations either with the Belarusian democratic forces or with Lukashenka's regime. Belarus remains for the political domain of Ukraine a *terra incognita*, as well as a Kremlin-dominated state. Reluctance to look more closely into the societal and political realities in place in the neighbour country plays a slippery trick with the Ukrainian political elite.

A Hybrid Basis for the Economies

A principled position of the Ukrainian authorities to Lukashenka following the 2020 events was prevented by their economic considerations, whether objective or subjective ones. After the presidential election in Ukraine and the formation of its administration, the country implemented the *Big Construction* Programme under the auspices of Volodymyr Zelensky, which facility provided for highway building. Belarus became its major bitumen supplier with the Belarusian refineries playing a vital role in providing petroleum products to Ukraine. But a particularly cynical act is represented by resuming electricity imports from Belarus in January 2021. Electric power imports from the Republic of Belarus were banned from April to December 2020, but as soon as in January the deliveries resumed.

On 20 February 2021 the Ukrainian President signed his decree on regaining the government control of the so-called "Medvedchuk petroleum pipeline." It is a Ukrainian part of the Samara-Western Direction oil pipeline built far back in the USSR times, which used to provide Ukraine with the main share of its Diesel fuel. In 2019 Belarusian oligarch Mikalay Verabei became the main owner of the pipeline

to share his ownership of the strategic facility with Victor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian politician and a close family friend of Vladimir Putin.

I would like to remind that in 2021 Ukraine joined the sanctions imposed by the European Union on air communication with Belarus following “the Raman Pratasevich case.” That being said, the trade relations between Belarus and Ukraine kept on kicking in high gear; and lack of political recognition of Alexander Lukashenka legitimacy was no obstacle for the Ukrainian authorities in their intensive trade deals with Belarus, thus reinforcing, as a matter of fact, its economy. The Belarusian trade surplus with Ukraine in 2021 of USD 3 billion is an illustration of the Zelensky team’s attitude to Lukashenka.

The Moment of Truth

The 2020 presidential electioneering campaign and the ensuing political crisis caused by its outcomes significantly changed the Belarusian-Ukrainian relations. The vote rigging and the result falsification led to mass-scale protests staged by the Belarusian citizens; yet, Ukraine tended to evaluate the events from the perspective of its own revolutions, i.e. the 1990 Revolution, the 2004 Orange Revolution or the 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity. As a result, some subjective opinions could not be avoided. That being said, we should bear in mind that the Belarusian 2010 Square event, due to a number of reasons, went unnoticed by the Ukrainian society or media. The Republic of Belarus propaganda machine cultivated in a systematic way negative emotions and attitudes inside the Belarusian society as to possible revolutionary transformations in the country.

The autumn 2021 migration crisis did not affect Ukraine directly, although it, too, had to ramp up its Belarusian border protection measures. In practical terms, there were no those willing to get away to Ukraine even through the unequipped Belarusian-Ukrainian border line. To-day it is already evident that the migration crisis was caused by the Kremlin’s “active operations,” as Russia, on the one hand, destroyed any minimalistic chances for Lukashenka’s dialogue with the West and, on the other hand, created a “smoke curtain” pending its preparations for a mass-scale intervention against Ukraine. I would like to remind that it was Lukashenka who declared in January 2022 the forthcoming military exercise *Union Resolution* in Belarus for the coming February, which was to evolve into a mass-scale incursion into Ukraine by the Russian troops on 24 February 2022.

In early February 2022 Lukashenka said in his interview with the Russian TV propaganda monger figure Vladimir Soloviev that Ukraine “will never fight us,” while calling Zelensky “headless” on the same sheet of music. Presumably, the self-declared Belarusian president had by that time information on the prepared

aggression, but was not informed on its beginning date. After 24 February 2022 Alexander Lukashenka's position on Ukraine became unequivocally a pro-Russian one, which does not exclude a possible normalisation in the relationships with him:

- Belarus has become an intervention bridgehead, as well as an overhaul and repair depot, a withdrawn military hospital and a strategic thoroughfare for support of Russia's aggressive activities;
- In February and March 2022 more than 600 missiles were launched on Ukraine from the Belarusian territory, which led to significant casualties and destruction;
- An illegal deportation of the Ukrainian nationals of various age groups was carried out to the territory of Belarus; in particular, the actions included an illicit translocation to Belarus of Ukrainian children;
- The Belarusian propaganda tools were completely subordinated to serve the Kremlin's interests, as far as the aggression coverage was concerned;
- In 2023 Vladimir Putin declared deployment on the Belarusian territory "at the request of Alexander Lukashenka" of tactical nuclear weapons, which jeopardises the security of the entire Baltic-Black Sea Region; and
- Alexander Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin have visibly intensified their bilateral contacts, while acting as mutual compensators in view of an adequate international activity shortage under the aggression circumstances; that being said, Lukashenka is brandishing his co-aggressor status. Obviously, Lukashenka's future is exactly conditional on Putin's one, while under the present set-up a pro-Russian politician can become the next Belarusian president, rather than a democratically-minded person.

The Magic Skin of the Bilateral Relations

As far as the contractual and legal framework for the relationship between Belarus and Ukraine is concerned, it is reminiscent of a shell that is gradually losing its real contents. Although the diplomatic relations formally persist against all odds between Belarus and Ukraine, their level, at the same time, remains rock bottom low. In March 2022 all the diplomats employed by the Belarusian embassy to Ukraine left the territory of their country of service, although not without an incident: a Ukrainian border guard tried to give to ambassador Ihar Sokal a small money bag, the symbolic "thirty pieces of silver," for his treacherousness. It is worth mentioning that in violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, in September 2020, the Belarusian border guards inspected the automotive vehicle of Ukrainian ambassador to Belarus Igor Kizim as he entered the country after having consultations in Ukraine.

As much as two years following the beginning of the mass-scale aggression by the Kremlin against Ukraine, Belarus officially has not recognised Crimea as a Russian territory. The Minsk authorities keep on supporting the Russian Federation at the diplomatic level during any voting in the international organisations. The inauguration of a Belarusian Consulate General scheduled for May 2024 in Rostov-on-Don is to become a moment of truth in the Ukrainian-Belarusian diplomatic relations. Should the exequatur for consular district cover the occupied territories of Ukraine, the diplomatic relations between Ukraine and Belarus will be ruptured.

In the personal dimension, the diplomatic relations between Belarus and Ukraine are in a blind alley: Igor Kizim was recalled from Minsk in April 2023 and removed from his post of a Ukrainian ambassador to Belarus later that year in June, while Ihar Sokal was sacked from his position of a Belarusian ambassador to Ukraine in October 2023. The bilateral relations' nature does not allow to-day to anticipate a possible appearance of the Belarusian and Ukrainian ambassadors in Kyiv and Minsk, respectively. On 1 February 2024 came an official announcement that Igor Kizim had been appointed a roving ambassador with the Foreign Ministry of Ukraine to oversee the affairs related, among other things, both to Belarus and the Belarusian democratic forces.

A cooling in the mutual relations has led to a reduction in the contractual and legal framework underlying the Belarusian-Ukrainian relationship, the latter having a sporadic nature. For instance, the cooperation agreements between the Offices of Prosecutors General, National Banks or the Ministries of Defence have been terminated, although an interaction arrangement between the State Protection Directorate and the Security Service of the President of Belarus remains in effect. For obvious reasons, an agreement on military and technical cooperation has been cancelled, but the agreement on commercial and economic cooperation, as a whole, remains in force. A curious fact is that an agreement on readmission, visa-free travel for citizens and a simplified procedure for obtaining nationality by the citizens of Belarus and Ukraine, who reside on a permanent basis in these countries, is still in effect. The official Kyiv tends to make reactive decisions on denouncement of these or those agreements, which may be referred to a lacking clear strategy in its relations with Belarus.

In autumn 2022 Ukraine imposed sanctions against a number of individuals and entities from Belarus. An amusing incident could not be avoided, though, since Alexander Lukashenka's spouse Halina was among those sanctioned. The Verkhovna Rada imposed sanctions in November 2023 against the enterprises of the Belarusian military-industrial complex, which co-operate with Russia, for the period of 50 years, thus demonstrating its political position. The move had been preceded by introducing sanctions against a number of strategic companies of Belarus.

Following the Belarusian political crisis, hundreds of thousands of the country's nationals made use of the visa-free travel status with Ukraine, so as to leave the territory of the Republic of Belarus. However, after a mass-scale invasion by the Russian Federation of Ukraine an overwhelming majority of them had to leave the territory of Ukraine. It was not comfortable to be a Belarusian citizen in Ukraine following the mass-scale Russian incursion: for instance, no business activities could be carried out, because banking cards had been blocked, and the State Migration Service is extremely reluctant to issue Ukrainian residency permits to the Belarusian nationals. There is also a lot of confusion around the numbers of both the citizens of Belarus in Ukraine and the citizens of Ukraine in Belarus, the two indicators providing rather a theme for political speculations.

A Dialogue with Hurdles

The dialogue maintained by the Belarusian democratic forces with the Ukrainian authorities is featured by a sporadic nature, since it evidently lacks systematicity or consistence. We should single out, in the very least, two stages for the dialogue: **August 2020 through February 2022** and **from February 2022 up to date**.

The first stage is prominent by the drive on behalf of the Belarusian democratic forces to record points in the West through diplomatic activities conducted by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team members. Against this backdrop, the relations between Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office and the Office of the Ukrainian President were cool. The economic ties between the official Kyiv and Minsk caused an overt irritation among the Belarusian democratic forces' representatives. The mutual reproaches traded between the Tsikhanouskaya team and Zelensky's close associates did not provide the mainstream in the bilateral relationships; nonetheless, quite a few Belarusian nationals opposing the ruling regime and staying in Ukraine were perplexed for this reason.

The mass-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine inverted the situation. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya condemned the Kremlin's actions on 24 February 2022, thus putting in place some pre-requisites for a dialogue with the official Kyiv. By the way, the process has not always taken a successful shape. In September 2022 Oleksiy Orestovych, an advisor to the Head of the Ukrainian President's Office met with Tsikhanouskaya: and later the same year, in December, a foresight session *Belarus-30* was held in the Rumanian town of Sinaia and attended by representatives of almost the entire political spectrum of Belarus, excluding downright Lukashenka's adherents.

Valer Kavaleuski and Alina Koushyk, representatives of the United Transition

Cabinet, paid a visit to Kyiv in 2022, while in 2023 they were accompanied by Franak Viachorka, Tsikhanouskaya's first advisor, Pavel Latushka, Tsikhanouskaya's deputy for the United Transition Cabinet, and by Anatol Liabedzka, an advisor to the Belarusian president-elect. Every one among them had a separate agenda and visit programme; for example, Latushka made it a point to hold Lukashenka accountable for an illegal deportation of the Ukrainian children. Liabedzka is the most frequent visitor of Ukraine, where he contacts the Verkhovna Rada's *For a Democratic Belarus* MP group and Mykhailo Podolyak, an advisor to the Head of the Ukrainian President's Office. In February 2024 Kyiv was visited by above mentioned Viachorka and Liabedzka.

Mykhailo Podolyak, whose biography includes a Belarusian period of work as a journalist in the interests of the authorities and who is virtually unknown in Ukraine, prior to the appointment of Igor Kizim as a roving ambassador with the Foreign Ministry of Ukraine, had been the chief communicator with the Belarusian democratic forces' representatives. The fact is related not so much to the Belarusian episode in his biography, as to the super-concentration of power in Ukraine within the Ukrainian President's Office with the appropriate delegation of responsibilities. Podolyak's lacking political responsibility does not enable assessing his operational KPIs, which fact markedly complicates the dialogue between the representatives of the Ukrainian authorities and the Belarusian democratic forces. That being said, the following trends may be traced:

- Starting with autumn 2022 onward the dialogue has been measurably intensified at the level of political contacts or expert opinion exchanges. The period saw two Ostrożski Fora (Lviv, December 2022 and November 2023), the *Road to Freedom* conference (Kyiv, November 2022) and a series of expert meetings or discussions.
- Ukraine has found itself among the foreign policy actors, whose opinions have to be heeded by the Belarusian democratic forces, although the official Kyiv' resources are not large, while its relations with Belarus, regrettably, do not represent a foreign politics priority.
- The importance of the meeting between Volodymyr Zelensky and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on 14 May 2022 in Aachen, when the Ukrainian President received the Carolus Magnus prize, must not be exaggerated. The two leaders' handshake did not symbolise a breakthrough in the relations of the Ukrainian authorities with the Belarusian democratic forces, but meant just a polite gesture. After the said meeting the political contacts somewhat intensified, which is not a big deal, really.
- Lack of a consolidated position on behalf of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office and the United Transition Cabinet, as one centre of the Belarusian democratic forces, and the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment, as an alternative centre, exacerbates

the dialogue with the Ukrainian authorities. The memorandum signing situation during the *Road to Freedom* conference in Kyiv became an illustrative one. The KK Regiment is perceived by the Ukrainian authorities as a component of the Ukrainian Defence Forces, which is sufficiently active in the media sphere, as well as the most loyal part of the Belarusian democratic forces. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's teammates are yet to build confidential relations with the Ukrainian authorities.

Way Forward. Some Recommendations

Speaking about recommendations pertaining to the development of relations between Ukraine and the Belarusian democratic forces (at the official level, the Kyiv-Minsk political dialogue has been frozen since autumn 2020), the major actors could be suggested to embrace the following:

Ukraine:

1. Recognising the fact of triangular relations among the official Kyiv, official Minsk and the Belarusian democratic forces as a matrix to structure its relationship with the Belarusian society. Igor Kizim's nomination is a step in this direction.
2. Communicating to the regional states along informal channels that no armed intervention is possible from the territory of Ukraine into Belarus as it will be running counter the national interests of Ukraine.
3. Identifying that the Belarusian state and its interests should lie inside the Lublin triangle (Lithuania – Poland – Ukraine), i.e. the attitudes to the events in Belarus and in its society must be formulated in a coordinated manner in Warsaw, Vilnius and Kyiv based on permanent consultations and interactions.
4. Conducting an inventory reconciliation of mutual claims of Belarus and Ukraine both at the government level or at the society one and turning the inventory into a point of reference in the development of the bilateral relations.
5. Putting a focus on the anti-colonial nature of joint actions as an ideological matrix in the relationship of Ukraine and the Belarusian democratic forces, and perceiving their representatives as the shortest and most efficient way for bringing information to the Belarusian residents.
6. Sharing the Ukrainian experience of domestic transformations as a key to dialogue with the Belarusian democratic forces. And
7. Developing the current and creating new platforms for the Belarusian-Ukrainian collaboration in the areas of education, de-communisation, national revival,

human rights protection, environment conservation, media literacy or any other centremost issues.

The Belarusian democratic forces should:

1. Identify Ukraine as a key partner in Belarus' transformations.
2. Forming a roadmap for the bilateral relations.
3. Based on realistic approaches, set priorities in their co-operation with Ukraine.
4. Focus on mitigating controversies between the "military" and "political" wings of the Belarusian democratic forces. And
5. Identify their attitude to the international political issues that are sensitive to Ukraine and seek their resolution.

The official Minsk should:

1. Prevent rupturing its diplomatic relations with Ukraine.
2. Set a permanent-basis communication channel with Kyiv to avoid Belarus being drawn into the Russian-Ukrainian war.
3. Minimise the Kremlin propaganda manifestations in Belarus. And
4. Take demonstrative steps to support the Ukrainian diaspora in Belarus.