

Belarus' relations with Ukraine and the 2022 Russian invasion

Historical ties, society, and realpolitik
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Since the beginning of its history Belarus was closely connected to Ukraine. The name of the country, Belarus (Беларусь) is related historically to Kyivan Rus – an early medieval state with its center in Kyiv and its principalities on the territory of modern Belarus. The oldest cities in Belarus, Polatsk (mentioned in 862), Turau (980), and Minsk (1067), were founded by the princes of Rus (i.e. Tor in Turau and Ragnvald in Polatsk). Sviatopolk, Prince of Turau, became the first Grand Prince of Kyiv from the Rurik dynasty in 1015.

Since the 13th century, most Belarusian and Ukrainian lands were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia – a medieval multiethnic state. After the 1569 Union of Lublin, both Belarus and Ukraine became a part of Poland-Lithuania. Until the end of 18th century, the East Slavic population of Poland-Lithuania had the same literary language, called Ruthenian (руська мова). This language, which was different from Muscovite Russian, was the official language in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and one of the official languages in Poland-Lithuania. Therefore, many medieval and early modern writers from Belarus and Ukraine (e.g. Lawrentij Zyzanij and Meletius Smotrytsky) are considered today as writers of both Belarusian and Ukrainian literatures. Modern Belarusian and Ukrainian literary languages are very close to each other (like Czech and Slovak).

The medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then a principal

military rival of the Duchy of Muscovy, is considered to have played a crucial role in the formation of the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples. After 1569, the Grand Duchy's southern border with Poland almost perfectly coincided with contemporary state border between Belarus and Ukraine.¹ The early political and cultural differences between the Belarusian and Ukrainian parts of the Ruthenian nation relate to the emergence of the Ukrainian Cossack state led by hetmans Bohdan Khmelnytsky, Petro Doroshenko and Ivan Mazepa. Belarus became part of the Russian Empire at the end of the 18th century as a result of the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Unlike Ukraine, the entire territory of Belarus was within the Russian empire, a fact that contributed to the underdevelopment of a Belarusian national movement. At the same time, a significant part of western Ukraine (*Galizien*) became part of the Habsburg Empire and achieved a certain degree of political and cultural autonomy from the 1870s on. The town of Lemberg (Lviv) in Austria became a key center for Belarusian cultural activity. Francišak Bahuševič, considered to be a “father” of modern Belarusian literature, published his books in this city; they were then smuggled into the Russian empire.

NATIONALIST POLITICAL MOBILIZATION emerged in Belarus in the early 20th century, about fifty years after this development in Ukraine. The First All-Belarusian Congress, held in Minsk in



Rahvalod (Ragnvald), Duke of Polatsk. Painting by the Belarusian artist Pavel Tatarnikov.

December 1917 with 1872 delegates, proclaimed Belarusian autonomy. The Congress was violently dispersed by Bolshevik military forces. In February 1918, the members of the Executive Committee of the Congress returned to Minsk and proclaimed the independence of Belarus on March 25, 1918. Until the end of 1919, the government of the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BDR) co-existed with an alternative Communist project, the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). The young democratic Belarusian republic gained significant economic and political help from the Ukrainian Democratic Republic and the BDR opened a diplomatic mission in Kyiv, led by Professor Mitrafan Dounar-Zapolski. Both Belarusian and Ukrainian democratic republics of 1918-1920 ceased to exist in the course of the Bolshevik and Polish aggression.² In 1921 the territory of Belarus and Ukraine was divided between Soviet Russia and Poland by the Treaty of Riga. Soon, the Belarusian Soviet Socialist republic with its capital in Minsk and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist republic with its capital in Kharkiv became autonomies within the Soviet Union. At the same time Western Belarus and Western Ukraine became part of Poland. The Belarusians and Ukrainians established a close cooperation in Poland, together participated in election campaigns to Polish parliament and formed in the end of the 1920s a joint fraction in the parliament.³ Many Ukrainian cultural and political organizations acted on the territory of Polesie, a region which is today divided between Belarus and Ukraine. During the Nazi occupation the Belarusian part of Polesie was under the administration of the Reichskommissariat Ukraine. After World War II, Belarus and Ukraine were the main republics in the Soviet Union (after the Russian Socialist Federative Republic) by population and economic capital. As founders and members of the United Nations, Belarus and Ukraine was de-jure independent and had their own Foreign Offices and diplomatic staff since 1945.

ON DECEMBER 8, 1991, the leaders of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine signed the Belovezh Accords as the representatives of three of the four republics which had signed the 1922 Treaty on the Creation of the Soviet Union. The leaders of three states declared that the Soviet Union had effectively ceased to exist and established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). After the conflict in Donbas in 2014 the Foreign Office and the Security Council of Ukraine announced the decision to start the procedure of leaving the CIS. In 2018–2021 Ukraine declared the final termination of the country's participation in the statutory bodies of the CIS. At the same time, Belarus played a leading role in the development of the CIS and has been building the Union State since 1996 – the political, military and trade union with Russia. In spite of numerous accusations of “denationalization” of Belarus, this policy represents a specific version of nation-building. Indeed, unlike other newly formed East European states, the Belarusian leadership marginalizes such ethnic referents as national language, while bringing to the fore the collectivist repertoire, borrowed from the Soviet era. The Belarusian authorities promoted the image of homogeneity, social cohesion, and total unity of the nation, implying the absence of disagreements,



The First All-Belarusian Congress was held in Minsk in December 1917. Minsk City Theatre, the venue of the congress.

disputes, and different opinions within the population.³ This is a kind of auto-training in national unity, when the need for unity is inculcated primarily via creating an unfavorable image of what would happen if the people of Belarus followed the example of the Ukrainian revolution and resistance.

The Borderland

Belarus' state border with Ukraine is 1,084 km long. The border starts from the triple junction with Poland (in the Brest region) to the west and stretches to the triple junction with the Russian Federation (in the Homel region) to the east. This is an old historical border established in 1569 as a border between the Crown of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Since then, the border shared a geographic and cultural region of Polesia in two parts. The division has also a natural dimension. The Polesian marshes separate the population in the Belarusian countryside from their Ukrainian neighbors. In interwar Poland, the western portion of the border roughly coincided with the administrative border of Polesian and Volhynian voivodships. The eastern portion coincided with the administrative border between the Soviet republics of Belarus and Ukraine. After 1945 and until 1992 it was an administrative border between the Belarusian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics. Following the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, a large part of the eastern borderland was depopulated and the people were resettled to the other regions of the countries. Today, the *Zone*, as people called this territory, is governed by special state agencies of Belarus and Ukraine.

The strategic Polesian railway, built during the tsarist era, runs from the city of Bryansk in Russia to the city of Brest along the border on the Belarusian side. The Chernihiv-Ovruch railway runs along the border on the Ukrainian side, connecting the Chernobyl nuclear power plant with the city of Slavutych. The tracks cross the border twice. The Prypiat River is used for the transportation of goods from Belarus to Ukraine by the water. The state border has 26 checkpoints, as well as good road and rail links. The citizens of Belarus do not need a visa for Ukraine and the citizens of Ukraine could stay 90 days without a visa in Belarus. In February 2022, during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian troops began moving across the border from Belarus into Ukraine as a part of the Kyiv and Chernihiv offensive operations. In April 2022, Ukrainian troops retook control of their side of the border to Belarus.

The religious issue

Christianity came to Belarus in the 10th century from Kyiv. Until the end of the 16th century, all Belarusian and Ukrainian lands were under the jurisdiction of Kyiv Orthodox Metropolis. During the 14th and 15th centuries, the residence of Kyiv Metropolitans was on the territory of Belarus in the city of Navahrudak. From the Brest Union of 1596 until the mid-19th century most Belarusians and western Ukrainians were Greek Catholics (known also as Uniates); the minority belonged to Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations. In 1839 the tsarist government abolished the Greek Catholic church, then the largest church

in Belarus; since then, most Belarusian believers belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. However, the Greek Catholic Church survived in Austrian Western Ukraine and was abolished by Stalin only in 1946. After the fall of the Soviet Union the Ukrainian Catholic Church (official name for the former Greek Catholic Church) recovered its structure in Ukraine. In Belarus, the Greek Catholic church is marginal. Today, most Belarusian believers belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, and this is still the largest in the eastern and southern provinces of Ukraine. Church life in Belarus contrasts with the situation in Ukraine where churches actively engage in politics.⁵

Lukashenka and the war in Ukraine

Independent Ukraine and Belarus did not have any inter-state conflicts. Lukashenka had good working relations with all five presidents of Ukraine with whom he collaborated for 28 years in the Minsk office. Economic ties between the two countries have grown steadily since 1992. The war has changed this situation and the recent economic crisis in Belarus also plays a role. Before the war, Ukraine was the main trade partner of Belarus, after Russia. Imports of Belarusian goods to Ukraine in 2021 are estimated at 5.4 billion US dollars.⁶ Therefore, Belarus has a great economic interest in stopping the war. Some influential businessmen already publicly expressed their negative attitude towards the Russian invasion. For example, Arkady Izrailevich, a well-known entrepreneur in Belarus, called on “those who started the war to stop it immediately” and noted that “as a Jew, I can’t understand how a Jew was elected president in a country filled with “Nazis” in completely transparent and democratic elections.”⁷

By providing territory and military airfields, Lukashenka violated not only international law, but also treaties signed by him personally: For example, the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborhood and Cooperation between Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus from July 17, 1995, which was ratified in 1997. The first and second articles of the Treaty state that the parties base their relations on mutual respect, trust and consent, guided by the principles of respect for state sovereignty, equality and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of force.⁸

Since 2020, main task for Lukashenka is the maintenance of his regime.⁹ Confrontation with the West and sanctions have led to a much stronger rapprochement between Alexander Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin. Having supported Russia’s actions at the very beginning of the war, a week later, seeing the failures of the blitzkrieg, Lukashenka began to distance himself from the Russian invasion. The hottest issue is the participation of the Belarusian army in aggression. Since March, almost every day, Lukashenka or some of his ministers has stated that Belarusian troops will not participate in the war. This fact could be explained by the enormous pressure on Lukashenka from Moscow on the issue of sending the Belarusian troops. Despite the state-



PHOTO: LI WANOV/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

1991, and the signing of the Agreement to Eliminate the USSR and Establish the Commonwealth of Independent States. Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk (second from left seated), Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus Stanislaw Shushkevich (third from left seated) and Russian President Boris Yeltsin (second from right seated) during the signing ceremony in Viskuly Government House in Belarus.

ments of many Western and Ukrainian experts about the puppet nature of Lukashenka’s governance everyone in Belarus knows that he completely controls the army and police. Refusal to send the army to the war in Ukraine gave Lukashenka new opportunities for political maneuvering. As known, Belarus has become a negotiating platform for Ukrainian and Russian diplomats and Belarus is seeking further participation in the negotiations. The withdrawal of the Russian army from the Kyiv and Chernihiv regions means, among other things, that the issue of the participation of Belarusian troops in the war has lost its relevance.

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LUKASHENKA is an excellent orator and populist who often used contradictory statements in his rhetoric. Putin, on the contrary, previously played the role of the rational politician. The war in Ukraine has changed this situation, and Putin’s speeches contain some propagandist clichés,

which were always common for Lukashenka. Lukashenka skillfully used a new tendency in Putin’s rhetoric. Now he says that Belarusian troops are guarding the western borders, preventing NATO attack in the rear of the Union State. The dubious statement has a practical meaning. Speaking the language of propaganda, Lukashenka found the most important argument for refusing to send his troops to Ukraine. The anti-NATO and especially anti-Polish rhetoric of the Belarusian leader became stronger and affected even the narratives of early modern history. At a meeting with academic historians devoted to historical politics Lukashenka suggested calling the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth “a period of brutal occupation and ethnocide of the Belarusian people by Poland”.¹⁰ He ordered schoolbooks

and museum expositions to be revised in order to propagate this new vision on Belarusian history, which is in fact, rooted in the stereotypes of tsarist times. At the same time, through diplomatic channels, Lukashenka is looking for ways to normalize relations with Poland and other EU countries. In a letter from April 6, 2022 to some counterparts in the EU, Uladzimir Makei, the foreign minister of Belarus, complained about “a new witch hunt” against his country. Speaking on behalf of Lukashenka he states that “we categorically reject any insinuations about Belarus somehow being involved in the hostilities in Ukraine. Belarus is not going to be dragged into a war. We have had our fill of wars in the course of our long and complicated history.”¹¹ In conversation with the Associated Press on May 5 Alexander Lukashenka claims he is doing everything he can to help stop Russia’s war against Ukraine, which has “dragged on longer than he thought it would”.¹² Nevertheless, Lukashenka has indicated that the seemingly more independent political course of Belarus will serve common aims of Russia-Belarus cooperation.¹³

2022 Russia’s invasion and Belarusian society

Since the 2020 protests, most major independent media in Belarus have been declared “extremist” and outlawed. Access to them via the internet is blocked. State-run media follow the Russian agenda on the war in Ukraine. However, the regime did not consider people’s diplomacy: many families in Ukraine and Belarus are separated by the border but connected by mobile phones. According to the 2019 census, 237,004 Ukrainians were living in Belarus, 1.7 percent of the total population. For last ten years, the number of Ukrainians has grown by 80,000. Ukrainians are the third largest ethnic minority (after Russians and Poles) in Belarus.¹⁴ According to the results of the last Ukrainian census there are 275,800 Belarusians in Ukraine, 0.6 percent of the total population.¹⁵ Relatives in Belarus and in Ukraine constantly communicate, monitoring the ongoing situation. This factor is of great importance. For example, on the YouTube platform, which is still available for viewers in Belarus, an emotional video was posted on February 27, 2002. Gleb Voinov from the city of Dnipro in Ukraine asked his brother Oleg Voinov from Minsk to do everything in order to prevent sending of Belarusian troops to Ukraine. General Oleg Voinov is Assistant Minister of the Belarus Ministry of Defense and responsible for international military cooperation. His mother is a citizen of Ukraine.¹⁶ In May 2022, General Voinov was dismissed from the military service and appointed by Lukashenka as director of the National Historical Archive of Belarus.

THE LEVEL OF SUPPORT for the war in Ukraine in Belarusian society is relatively low. In March 2022, Chatham House published the results of a survey in Belarus. Only 3 percent of Belarusians want to fight with Ukraine; the majority were for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops and against the shelling of Ukraine from Belarusian territory. Due to the political situation the poll was conducted online and included 896 people, urban dwellers who use the internet.¹⁷ The lack of support for the war within Be-



PHOTO: PAULIUK-SAPIECKA/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Belarusian volunteers in Ukrainian Armed Forces on March 8, 2022 (later, a separate Belarusian battalion was created).

larusian society is the factor that Lukashenka has to reckon with. Of course, he is more concerned about the attitude towards the war in the Belarusian military. According to some anonymous surveys, attitudes within the military towards the entry of Belarusian troops into Ukraine are also ambivalent. In an open appeal on YouTube from February 27, 2022, to the officer corps of Belarus, Brigadier General Valery Sakhashik condemned the Russian invasion. General Sakhashik is a founder of the Special Operations Forces of Belarus, a legend of Belarusian Spetsnaz and former commander of the 38th Brest Airborne Brigade. He urged Belarusian soldiers “not to carry out a criminal order to attack Ukraine” and concluded with words: “This is not our war”. The video has been viewed on YouTube alone by over 4 million persons.¹⁸

UNLIKE THE RUSSIA army, the absolute majority of the Belarusian army consists of conscripts, who as non-professionals are not required to participate in operations abroad. In today’s Belarus all male citizens aged 18 to 27 who are in good health are called up for military service. Military service is 18 months (12 months for those with a university degree). The possible reaction of Belarusian parents to the deaths of their young sons in an incomprehensible war might be much stronger than the reaction of the wives and parents of professional soldiers.

At the same time, hundreds of volunteers from Belarus have joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces as the soldiers of Kastus Kalinouski Battalion.¹⁹ The old guard of the battalion belongs to soldiers of Belarusian descent from the Azov Battalion, many with far-right connections.²⁰ However, this is a new formation that unites volunteers of different political opinions. The visual representation of the battalion is based on national symbols, not attributes of the far-right movement. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, dozens of Belarusians have been detained because of a “rail war” – damage of the railroad infrastructure in the southern part of the country. For example, on March 30, several “repentant” videos of detained people appeared in one of the pro-government telegram channels. In addition, four more railway workers were detained in Homel; at least one of them was placed in the KGB prison. There have been some 80 acts of sabotage on Belarusian railways as of April 12. Four persons were wounded by the police.²¹ Nowadays both the Belarusian state and Belarusian civil society are involved in one of the most serious international crises in post-war Europe. Drastically changing circumstances open up different scenarios in Belarusian-Ukrainian relations. ✕

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- Isabel Coles and Yaroslav Trofimov, “Belarusians, Russians Join Ukraine’s Military, Hoping for Freedom at Home”, *Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 2022. The political birth of Belarus goes back to the anti-tsarist uprising of 1863–64 led by Kastus Kalinouski. He was born to a family of Belarusian nobility and studied law at the University of St. Petersburg. Kalinouski was an editor of the first (illegal) newsletter in Belarusian language *Musyckaja Prawda* [Farmers’ Truth]. He promoted ideas of national liberation, rule of law and social equality and the restoration of the Greek Catholic Church. He favored the old democratic traditions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, as opposed to the autocracy of Russia. On March 22, 1864 he was publicly executed in Vilna. Kalinouski’s remains were clandestinely buried by the imperial authorities on the site of a military fortress on top of Gediminas Hill. The rediscovery of his remains in 2019 in Vilnius and the solemn funeral of Kalinouski as the first military general of modern Lithuania and Belarus, which was attended by thousands of Belarusians, became a strong demonstration of the democratic identity of Belarusian people.
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