



Scan to know paper details and
author's profile

Belarusian-Ukrainian Relations: From Neighborhood to Confrontation (2019-2021)

Hleb Salauyou & Uladzimir Snapkouski

INTRODUCTION.

Models of interstate relations in the Slavic triangle. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union initiated by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in December 1991, relations among three Eastern Slavic countries became an important factor in the development of the geopolitical situation in the post-Soviet area, European and international security. During more than 30-year period of independence, the relations between the countries in the Slavic triangle turned into a vivid example of integration and disintegration, convergence and divergence, cooperation and confrontation, the emergence of interstate disputes and attempts to settle them.

Keywords: NA

Classification: For Code: 160607

Language: English



London
Journals Press

LJP Copyright ID: 573333
Print ISSN: 2515-5784
Online ISSN: 2515-5792

London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 22 | Issue 22 | Compilation 1.0



© 2022 Hleb Salauyou & Uladzimir Snapkouski. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncom-mercial 4.0 Unported License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), permitting all noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Belarusian-Ukrainian Relations: From Neighborhood to Confrontation (2019-2021)

Hleb Salauyou^a & Uladzimir Snapkouski^b

I. INTRODUCTION. SETTING THE PROBLEM

Models of interstate relations in the Slavic triangle. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union initiated by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in December 1991, relations among three Eastern Slavic countries became an important factor in the development of the geopolitical situation in the post-Soviet area, European and international security. During more than 30-year period of independence, the relations between the countries in the Slavic triangle turned into a vivid example of integration and disintegration, convergence and divergence, cooperation and confrontation, the emergence of interstate disputes and attempts to settle them. The complex dialectic of tripartite Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian relations was determined by a number of historical, cultural-civilizational, geopolitical, legal, political-ideological, socio-economic and other factors.

The Moscow rulers in Soviet and post-Soviet times used the historical concept of *fraternal relations*, which was created in the Russian Empire, among Eastern Slavic people as a justification for dividing the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian people into *elder*, *middle*, and *younger* brothers or sisters. These ideologies were especially actively supported by the younger, Belarusian brother. The obvious differences in territory, population and economic potential of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus predetermined the complex and contradictory nature of their relations within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. But this problematic or conflict-causing nature was hidden by the official ideology and propaganda behind narratives about a single Russian super-ethnic group or a single Soviet nation.

During the independence period, each of the three countries embarked on the path of finding and developing their own national identity. This happened when the imperial structured models collapsed. Ukraine, having the territorial and demographic potential of a large European country, has deeper and stronger traditions of statehood and national movement than Belarus, especially in the area of ethnic nationalism, chose the option of an abruption (*civilized divorce*) with the imperial metropole (Russia). Belarus, as the territorially smallest country in the Slavic triangle, with less accumulated potential for ethnic nationalism, stronger and more durable ties with Russia, began to build relations with the Russian Federation on the basis of preserving the previous economic, cultural and humanitarian connections. During the presidency of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, these connections turned into the so-called Union State, an integration project of Belarus and Russia.

In the first years of independence, the national-democratic circles of Belarus and Ukraine considered the possibility of uniting their forces and creating the Union of the Baltic and Black Seas with the inclusion of the Baltic countries. The Belarusian Popular Front showed the greatest interest in this project. However, the Baltic states, and later Ukraine, chose the path of independent development relying on the Western countries. Russia, experiencing a strong deficit of state identity and painfully suffering from the loss of the former greatness, tried to revive its former power in the form of gathering “historical Russian territories”, which included the lands of Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Northern Kazakhstan.

Thus, three models of bilateral relations were formed in the Slavic triangle: the “conflict” Russian-Ukrainian model, the “integrative” Russian-Belarusian model, and the

“good-neighbourly” Belarusian-Ukrainian model. Despite the conventionality of the models' names, in our opinion, they reflect the most significant characteristics of interstate relations of these pairs. These models were deepened between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus during almost 30 years of their independent development and existed before the start of the political crisis in Belarus, which unfolded after the presidential elections in August 2020. What happened after that? The “conflict” and “integration” models were preserved and even acquired clearer features, while the “good-neighbourly” model began to degrade after the development of Russian-Ukrainian relations into an open war from February 2022, the strengthening of Belarus' dependence on Russia, since the autumn of 2020, when Ukraine declared its non-recognition of the legitimacy of President Lukashenko. With the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine, when the territory of Belarus was used by Russian troops, the “good neighbourly” model of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations was broken.

The results of the Russian-Ukrainian war will undoubtedly have a strong impact on the reformation of the world order and the system of international relations in Europe. Regarding the prospects of relations between the three East Slavic peoples and their states, it is possible to foresee a significant deterioration of Russian-Ukrainian relations, which will be in the stage of rupture for a long time. There will be the strengthening of the “integration” model, which will involve Minsk in increasing dependence on the Kremlin, and possibly the creeping incorporation of Belarus into Russia. After the collapse of “good-neighbourly” model between Belarus and Ukraine, a wall will arise on their border (it was already taken place), which will separate Ukraine as a new part of the collective West from the Russian-Belarusian Union State. Now, during the war, Ukraine built strong defensive fortifications on the border with Belarus in order to prevent a repeat invasion of the enemy from the north. And Belarus deployed a joint regional grouping of troops with Russia in the south of the country and strengthened the anti-aircraft and anti-missile defence system.

We would like to emphasize that these short- and medium-term scenarios are likely if the existing political regimes in Russia and Belarus are preserved, the fate of which will be linked to the results of the war in Ukraine.

II. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

The chronological framework of the study covers the time from the election of Volodymyr Zelensky as the President of Ukraine in May 2019 to the beginning of November 2022. The annexation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions parts by Russia initiated a new stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the results of which remain uncertain. *Blitzkrieg* planned by Putin was substituted by military actions receiving the characteristics of a protracted military conflict.

During this more than 3-year period, we observe historic changes in bilateral Belarusian-Ukrainian and international relations, which have already had an impact and will have an impact on the European and world order for a long time in the future. First of all, this is connected with the beginning of the Russian intervention in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, in which the regime of Lukashenko participated (perhaps and most likely against its own will). This event was a turning point in the history of relations between the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine. In the period after February 24, their bilateral relations acquired a qualitatively different character since Belarus became a military ally of Russia. At the same time, it is important to note that Kyiv formally and legally does not consider Minsk as a third party in the military activities and did not break diplomatic relations, which normally happens after the war begins between states. From Minsk's perspective, Belarus does not consider Ukraine as an enemy state and explains its actions as preventive measures in response to the “provocations of the Kyiv regime”.

For a better understanding of the authors' approaches, analysis and evaluations, we consider it necessary to express several preliminary theses and remarks.

- Despite the differences between the development models of the post-communist transformation in both countries and foreign policy strategies (Minsk – orientation towards Russia and the East, Kyiv – towards the EU and the West), the special importance of Ukraine and Belarus to each other has always prevented any serious destabilization in bilateral relations. Even in difficult periods in the past, starting from 1991, both Minsk and Kyiv maintained a pragmatic and emphatically constructive political dialogue continuing to develop bilateral and multilateral (regional) economic cooperation. Official Minsk always found a common ground with any leadership of Ukraine, regardless of the foreign policy and ideological orientation. Hence, the "good neighbouring" model worked successfully before the political crisis in Belarus.
- After the August events of 2020, there was a break in the trend that defined bilateral relations in previous decades. After some hesitation, Kyiv refused to recognize the results of the presidential elections in Belarus and, accordingly, the legitimacy of A. Lukashenka's new presidential term. Moreover, the authorities of Ukraine joined the EU sanctions against Belarus. Minsk, in return, immediately demonstrated that it is ready to respond by increasing the degree of tension in bilateral relations. This was manifested by Minsk's decision to indefinitely allow the grouping of Russian troops in the territory of Belarus after the end of the military drills. The Belarusian authorities also launched a propaganda campaign against Ukraine and its leadership, baselessly accusing it of preparing an attack on Belarus.
- An important element of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations, especially after the beginning of the political crisis in Belarus, is the factor of the Belarusian protest movement and the activities of S. Tikhanouskaya's office in Vilnius. The Ukrainian authorities showed solidarity with the Belarusian national movement, refused to recognize the legitimacy of A. Lukashenka, joined the EU sanctions against Minsk, accepted refugees and opponents of the regime. With the beginning of hostilities in Belarus, a wave of indignation and anti-Belarusian sentiment swept over Ukrainian political circles and society, which, however, subsided rather quickly. Thanks to Belarusian-Ukrainian contacts of intellectuals, politicians, public figures, scientists, civil society, work of the Belarusian diaspora and political circles abroad (Kyiv, Vilnius, Warsaw, capitals of Western countries), participation of Belarusians in the military activities on the side of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment), it was possible to achieve a more adequate understanding from ordinary Ukrainians, Ukrainian military personnel, political and academic circles and elites about the complicated situation inside Belarus, especially after the suppression of protests and the start of repressions and persecution of those who participated in the civic and political strife in recent years. It is necessary to emphasize the acts of solidarity of Belarusian citizens supporting Ukraine.
- The format of the article and the methodology of the research are subordinated to the concept of foreign policy analysis of the tripartite relations between Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, which are considered through the prism of the Slavic triangle. The authors try to study specific historical events, phenomena and processes using the tools of political and historical science, within the framework of which foreign policy research is mainly conducted in Belarus. These are traditional and time-tested methods of description, observation of foreign and domestic political events, research of diplomacy, foreign policy propaganda and foreign policy process, the interaction of military and peaceful means of conflict resolution, content analysis of information and literature, use of methodologies and research paradigms of national foreign policy schools, first of all, Belarusian, to which the authors refer themselves, as well as assessments and approaches of authoritative scientists and expert centres, analysis of sociological surveys. The leading scientific paradigms guided by the authors are political realism, the

cultural-civilizational approach, and the school of analysis of political regimes.

The article is the result of a creative collaboration between a Bachelor in International Relations, Belarusian State University, with honours (Hleb Salauyou), and Uladzimir Snapkouski, professor of the Department of International Relations at BSU. Their joint work was carried out during the study period of H. Salauyou and ended with the thesis defense about the role of Belarus in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2013-2019¹. The academic activity of U. Snapkouski is measured by the publication of books, textbooks and articles on general issues of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus and Belarusian-Russian relations, in which the Ukrainian issue was also reflected². Here we can also add his teaching experience for both undergraduate and graduate students, as

¹ Салаўёў, Г. Абмеркаванне ўкраінскага канфлікту ў ААН і пазіцыя Рэспублікі Беларусь / Г. Салаўёў // Сб. науч. стат. студ., маг., асп. / Ф-т межд. отн. Белорус. гос. ун-та ; сост. С. В. Анцух. – Минск: Четыре четверти. – 2019. – Вып. 22. – С. 76-78; Ён жа. Беларусь і крымскія падзеі 2014 г. ва Украіне / Г. Салаўёў // Сб. науч. стат. «Лучшие работы студентов «НИРС ФМО 2018». – Минск, 2018. – С. 167-173; Ён жа. Падзеі 2014 г. ва Украіне і пазіцыя Рэспублікі Беларусь / Г. Салаўёў // Актуальні праблемы історыі і філасофіі у даследаваннях моладых учених: Зб. тез уч. конф. мол. уч. – Київ, 17 травня 2018. – С. 132-137.

² Снапковський, В. Е. Анализ внешней политики Республики Беларусь : пособие / В. Е. Снапковський. – Минск : БГУ, 2021. – 243 с. <https://elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/274777>; Снапкоўскі, У. Е. Будучыня беларускай дзяржавы ў прагнозна-аналітычным дакладзе Маскоўскага дзяржаўнага інстытута міжнародных адносін / У. Е. Снапкоўскі // Беларусь в современном мире = Беларусь у сучасным свеце: материалы XVII Междунар. науч. конф., посвящ. 97-летию образования Белорус. гос. ун-та, Минск, 26 окт. 2018 г. / Белорус. гос. ун-т ; редкол.: В. Г. Шадурский (пред.) [и др.]. – Минск : БГУ, 2018. – С. 58-60; Он же. Политический кризис в Беларуси и Россия / В. Е. Снапковський // Беларусь в современном мире = Беларусь у сучасным свеце: материалы XIX Междунар. науч. конф., посвящ. 99-летию образования Белорус. гос. ун-та, Минск, 29 октября 2020 г. / редкол.: В. Г. Шадурский (гл. ред.) [и др.]. Минск: Изд. центр БГУ, 2020. С. 81-88; Snapkouski U. E. Foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus: milestones and priorities // Journal of Belarusian State University. International relations. 2021. № 1. P. 36-43. <https://elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/269682>; Eadem. Fundamentals of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus: Manual for English-speaking graduate students / U. E. Snapkouski. Minsk: BSU, 2022. 60 p.

well as participation in expert professional activities.

The purpose of the article is to analyse the main events and processes in the development of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations in 2019-2022 through the prism of relations in the Slavic triangle. To achieve it, a periodization of bilateral relations was developed, highlighting the features of each of the three stages. Three models of relations between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, which developed at the time of independence, were traced, briefly described and questioned about their reformation in 2020-2022. An important research task of the authors was to reveal the root fracture of the Belarusian-Ukrainian "good-neighbourly model", as well as to show the further consolidation of the other two models: the "integrative" Belarusian-Russian and the "conflict" Russian-Ukrainian.

III. GOOD START OR ENDURANCE OF GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS: DEVELOPMENT OF BELARUSIAN-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS (MAY 2019 – AUGUST 2020)

New president Zelensky and the maintenance of a dialogue. After the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Belarus successfully developed the image of a peacemaker in the international arena, accumulating positive political points in the West, in the internal Ukrainian discourse and among the Russian authorities. During the presidential election race in Ukraine, A. Lukashenka openly supported Petro Poroshenko, associating his personality with "relative peace and stability". But shortly after the results of the second round on April 22, 2019, the representative of the "Servant of People" party, Volodymyr Zelensky, got the victory. President Lukashenka, who always tried to maintain good relations with any Ukrainian leadership, was one of the first to congratulate the new Ukrainian colleague and expressed his readiness to maintain a dialogue³.

³ Встреча с представителями общественности и экспертного сообщества, белорусских и зарубежных СМИ "Большой разговор с Президентом" // Президент Республики Беларусь. – 01.03.2019. – Режим доступа: <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-predstavitelja>

Zelensky became the country's president at a time when the conflict in Donbas was lasting for the fifth year. He declared that his main goal is to achieve peace and ensure the territorial integrity of Ukraine within the borders of 1991. The protracted conflict in Donbas was evaluated differently by the conflicting parties. Official Minsk relatively successfully tried to find a middle ground and distanced itself from any references to the war or transferred responsibility for it to Ukraine or Russia. President Lukashenka, Foreign Minister Makei, Belarusian ambassadors in Kyiv Velichka (until 2018) and Sokal (from 2018) declared their support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. A. Lukashenka did not deny that Ukraine lost Crimea *de facto*, but he stated his non-recognition towards its legal accession to the Russian Federation. Officials in Minsk promised that Belarus will never become a foothold for a military threat to Ukraine⁴.

At the beginning of Zelensky's presidency, a new phase of Belarusian-Ukrainian political and economic relations was initiated, which, however, turned out to be short-lived. Minsk retained the negotiating platform of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG), which resumed its work in June 2019, the Ukrainian delegation was headed by ex-president Kuchma. On the second day after the election of the new president of Ukraine, the Belneftexhim concern lifted the restrictions on the export of Belarusian oil products, which were introduced in connection with the arrival of low-quality oil from Russia through the Druzhba oil pipeline⁵. In June-August 2019, delegates from the Belarusian Ministry of Industry visited Kyiv, the meeting of advisory boards of the Central Banks of Belarus and Ukraine was organized, Belarusian "BelAZ" and Ukrainian "Metinvest" signed new agreements, there were new deliveries of Belarusian trolleybuses to Mykolaiv and Dnipro, of MAZ buses to Mariupol. On July 9 the

Chiefs of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus (A. Belakoneu) and Ukraine (R. Khomchak) met in Kyiv. On August 17, Minsk's Upper Town welcomed days of Ukrainian culture⁶.

On 27-31 August, J. Bolton, Trump's adviser on national security, visited Chisinau, Kyiv, Minsk and Warsaw. His visit became historic for both Ukraine and Belarus, gaining wide resonance in the political circles of the two countries. At the meeting with Bolton, Zelensky officially invited the USA to become a part of the Normandy contact group holding peace negotiations for the southeast of Ukraine. Lukashenka previously used this narrative but always faced a negative reaction in the Kremlin⁷. Bolton's visit took place at the time of a temporary Belarusian thaw and unstable Belarusian-Russian relations because of the tempestuous negotiation process on integration maps. Right before the visit, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell stated that Belarus and Ukraine serve as a bastion protecting Europe against Russian neo-imperialism. Polish researcher M. Budzisz considered the American attention to Belarus as a good sign, especially when Lukashenka, Putin's ally, tried to implement a policy of counterbalancing Russia. In this way, he demonstrated to Moscow *vis-a-vis* that although he does not get aligned with the West, he creates alternatives for Moscow at the same time, receiving better conditions for the process of integration maps' discussion⁸. Using Bolton's visit, the Belarusian authorities wanted to show Moscow, neighbouring countries and the internal opposition that they will not trade their sovereignty and national interests. However, there were no significant positive steps for Minsk (except for the agreement to return the ambassadors to the capital). Problems with

mi-obschestvennosti-i-ekspertnogo-soobschestva-belorusski x-i-zarubezhnyx-smi-20590. – Дата доступа: 08.08.2022.

⁴ Встреча с представителями украинских СМИ // Президент Республики Беларусь. – 26.09.2019. – <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-predstavitelja-mi-ukrainskix-smi-22081>. – Дата доступа: 16.08.2022.

⁵ Минский барометр / Д. Мельянцов, В. Костюгова [и др.]. – 2019. – №9 (май-июнь 2019 г.). – 42 с. – с. 18-21.

⁶ Минский барометр / Д. Мельянцов, В. Костюгова [и др.]. – 2019. – №10 (июль-август 2019 г.). – 42 с. – с. 18-20.

⁷ Якименко Ю. Візит радника президента США з національної безпеки Дж. Болтона в Україну в оцінках ЗМІ / Ю. Якименко // Україна: події, факти, коментарі. – 2019. – № 17. – С. 38–44. – с. 41.

⁸ Будзиш, М. Польша, Україна и Беларусь идут навстречу друг другу / М. Будзиш // Польское Радио. – 2019. – Режим доступа: polskieradio.pl. – Дата доступа: 06.09.2022.

human rights inside the country remained a strong obstacle.

On 26 September 2019, Lukashenka held a meeting with Ukrainian journalists for the first time. The Belarusian president emphasized the warm welcome of Ukrainian refugees and granted them equal status with Belarusian citizens. He also assured that Ukraine will never be attacked from the territory of Belarus. He stated that Belarus is interested in the soon ending of the conflict in southeast Ukraine and returning the eastern territories to Ukraine. Belarus refused to legally recognise Crimea but considered it as Russian territory because the Russian authorities had total control of the peninsula. Lukashenka, speaking about the territorial integrity of Ukraine within the borders of 1991, stated: “I signed the Budapest document in 1994 and the map of Ukraine was with Donbas and Crimea. What should I do now? Retract my signature?”⁹

The discussions around the border issue remained strained. In 2019, the Belarusian Border Committee began to strengthen control over the border between the two countries. The Belarusian authorities were afraid of the weapon transfer for destabilization of the internal political situation. They ordered to seal the border with Ukraine. Belarusian ambassador Sokal reassured the Ukrainian media that the border control is exclusively related to the transfer of weapons from the territory of Ukraine, and not to the Russian-Belarusian integration, which has only economic benefits. He promised there is no Russian military personnel on the territory of Belarus, and Ukraine remains the most important partner for Minsk¹⁰.

On 3rd October, A. Lukashenka and V. Zelensky met personally for the first time at the II Forum of

⁹ Встреча с представителями украинских СМИ // Портал Президента Республики Беларусь. – 2019. – Режим доступа: <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-predstaviteljami-ukrainskix-smi-22081>. – Дата доступа: 02.09.2022.

¹⁰ Сокол, И. Построить стену между людьми гораздо проще, чем потом ее сломать // Укринформ. – 23.12.2019. – <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-world/2843793-igor-sokol-posol-belarusi-v-ukraine.html>. – Дата доступа: 16.07.2022.

the Regions of Belarus and Ukraine in Zhytomyr. The Ukrainian president confirmed that during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Belarusian border remains a border of peace. Lukashenka promised to increase oil product supplies to Ukrainian enterprises, noting that this meeting is not directed against the strengthening of Belarusian-Russian relations¹¹.

Turbulences over the presidential campaign in Belarus. Political Thaw paved a good beginning for Minsk in 2020, starting with the sign of the long-awaited agreement between Belarus and the EU on the simplification of visa issuance and readmission. At the same time, no EU visa was required from Ukrainian citizens for several years. Many politicians and experts called such an agreement a breakthrough for Belarus because of the existing problems in human rights and capital punishment. At the same time, there was remaining tension inside Belarusian society concerning the possible sign of road integration maps with Russia. Representatives of the national-democratic movement held a series of demonstrations in the Belarusian capital in December-March 2019-2020, which were positively perceived in Ukrainian media and political circles as a desire to preserve independence. Kyiv worried about the geopolitical game of the Belarusian authorities with Moscow, but Minsk calmed Ukrainian politicians down by meeting with EU representatives, opening the Swiss embassy in Minsk and welcoming the US Secretary of State with the official visit.

Since March 2020, the intensity of political and economic relations between Belarus and Ukraine has significantly decreased due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The authorities of the two countries adopted different combating approaches. The Ukrainian authorities shifted their contacts with Belarusian colleagues to the online mode. Kyiv even banned the import of electricity from Belarus until the end of the quarantine. However, different combating approaches in Belarus and Ukraine were not approved by the public. Ukraine

¹¹ Літвінава, А. Як Беларусь і Ўкраіна мяняліся «шпіёнамі». Эксклюзіўныя падрабязнасці // Радыё Свабода. – 2019. – Режим доступа: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30211642.html>. – Дата доступа: 17.06.2022.

remained the country with the most influential anti-vaccination movement in Europe and widespread refusal to comply with the new epidemiological norms that were adopted by the authorities. Despite the solid vaccine availability, Ukraine had the lowest vaccination rate in Europe. In Belarus, the vaccination level was higher, but the authorities did not apply consistent measures to combat the pandemic¹².

Meanwhile, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Belarus continued to vote against “one-country” resolutions, which were directed against one specific country (e.g. Russia). Ukrainian politicians called such position “pro-Russian”. Presumably, as a reaction to such “pro-Russian” Belarusian vote on Crimea, Azov Sea and the Donbas question, Ukraine joined EU sanctions against Belarus on 31st March, which included full embargo on the sale of weapons to Belarus that could be used for internal repressions¹³.

Nevertheless, official Ukrainian-Belarusian contacts remained intensive: 1) meeting of the Ambassador I. Kizim with V. Makei, 2) the head of the Ukrainian President’s Office A. Yermak’s visit to Minsk, 3) the visit of Defense Minister A. Taran and Minister for Occupied Territories O. Reznikov to Minsk. At the online meeting “Ukraine-Belarus: economic cooperation during global challenges”, the representative of Ukraine supported the Belarusian joining the World Trade Organization. During the presidential campaign in Belarus, which broke out in the summer of 2020, Ukrainian officials continued the dialogue with A. Lukashenka and the Belarusian authorities, welcoming their anti-Russian rhetoric and accusations of the most influential opposition candidates of financial and political support from Russian oligarchs. In the perception of Ukrainian elites, Lukashenka was fighting against the

“Russian world” and defending the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Belarus. Such narratives were confirmed by the visit of the most popular Ukrainian interviewer D. Gordon to Lukashenka’s residence and the release of a three-hour interview the day before the presidential elections in Belarus¹⁴.

The collapse of the “good neighbourly” model started with the PMC Wagner Group case. The Ukrainian authorities hoped for the extradition of 33 contract fighters of the Wagner Group, who participated in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on the side of separatist units. They were detained in Minsk during the election campaign, and two weeks later returned to Russia, which caused a negative reaction in Kyiv as Ukraine waited for the promised extradition. Nevertheless, some channels to support good-neighbourly relations with Belarus remained. The Ukrainian society was interested in democratic changes in Belarus as such an outcome would transform the geopolitical balance of power in Ukraine’s favour and represent a huge blow to Putin’s revisionist agenda¹⁵.

During the pre-election presidential race in Belarus, the “integration” model was losing its power as Lukashenka used anti-Russian rhetoric. He accused his main opponents S. Tsikhanouski, V. Babaryka and V. Tsapkala of being supported by Russian oligarchs and constantly repeated this narrative in his dialogues with Ukrainian partners. These theses were confirmed in the Ukrainian discourse when it turned out that in 2020 S. Tsikhanousky was mentioned in the Myrotvorets database (an independent pro-bono initiative registering crimes against Ukrainian national security) as a person who visited the occupied Crimea¹⁶, V. Tsapkala appeared in the

¹² Åslund, A. (2020) Responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 61:4-5, 532-545, DOI: 10.1080/15387216.2020.1778499

¹³ Беларусь в ООН проголосовала против вывода российских войск из Крыма // *Euroradio*. – 2019. – Режим доступа: <https://euroradio.fm/ru/belarus-v-oon-progolosovala-protiv-vyvoda-rossiyskikh-voysk-iz-kruma>. – Дата доступа: 01.09.2022.

¹⁴ Лукашенко. Ссоры с Путиным, Тихановская, “Вагнер”, Зеленский, Порошенко, Крым // В гостях у Гордона. – 2020. – Режим доступа: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5UmsPFMUaw>. – Дата доступа: 05.09.2022.

¹⁵ Tregubov, V. Minsk Maidan? Belarus facing summer of discontent / Victor Tregubov // *Atlantic Council*. – 2020. – Source: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/minsk-maidan-belarus-facing-summer-of-discontent/>. – Date of access: 04.09.2022.

¹⁶ Тихановский, С. Л. // *Миротворец*. – 2020. – Режим доступа:

same database as a “Belarusian pro-Russian activist” who left to Moscow during the election race fleeing persecution¹⁷, and V. Babaryka was the head of Russian-baked “Belgazprombank” for many years. Hence, some part of Ukrainian elites believed that Lukashenka was fighting against the “Russian world” and thus defending the sovereignty of Belarus.

The reaction of Ukrainian parliamentarians to the controversial, brutal and unprecedented election campaign in Belarus remained calm. Only a few deputies supported the opposition leaders openly. Opposition deputy in the Verkhovna Rada O. Honcharenko from “European Solidarity” created the inter-factional association “For Democratic Belarus”, the purpose of which was to demonstrate support for democracy and enhance international awareness of Belarusian interpolitical situation¹⁸.

2019 and the first half of 2020 became a time of positive political dialogue and the development of economic cooperation between Minsk and Kyiv. Lukashenka continued to deepen good-neighbourly relations with Ukraine, normalize relations with the EU and the US. Minsk’s constructive position regarding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict led to the end of sanctions from Western countries. Many political experts called it a period of Belarusian Thaw. In domestic Ukrainian society, the Belarusian president became the most popular foreign political leader. According to the results of the sociological group Rating, 66% of Ukrainians against 15% had a positive attitude towards A. Lukashenka, and he took the first stage in the rating, ahead of A. Merkel, A. Duda and E. Macron¹⁹. In 2019,

<https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/tikhanovskij-sergej-leo-nidovich/>. – Дата доступу: 14.08.2022.

¹⁷ Цепкало, В. В. // Миротворець. – 2020. – Режим доступу: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/cepka-lo-valerij-vilyamovich/>. – Дата доступу: 14.08.2022.

¹⁸ Goncharenko, O. Belarus presidential vote: Ukrainian MPs join calls for democratic breakthrough / Oleksi Goncharenko // Atlantic Council. – 2020. – Source: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/belarus-presidential-vote-ukrainian-mps-join-calls-for-democratic-breakthrough/>. – Date of access: 04.09.2022.

¹⁹ Динаміка ставлення українців до світових лідерів / Соціологічна група «РЕЙТИНГ». – 2019. – Листопад 2019. – 14 с. – с. 4.

Ukraine became the second Belarusian export partner. Total turnover amounted to \$5.8 billion. Belarus maintained a positive balance in bilateral trade with \$4.1 billion in exports and \$1.7 billion in imports²⁰.

The beginning of the coronavirus pandemic resulted negatively in economic indicators in bilateral relations. Compared to the previous year, in 2020 the total turnover decreased by 20.7% (by \$1.1 billion) and amounted to \$4.4 billion. The export of Belarusian goods and services decreased by 23.4% and amounted to \$3 billion (in 2019, the turnover amounted to \$5.8 billion). During the election campaign in Belarus, a number of Ukrainian politicians supported the civil society and opposition candidates, but officials in Kyiv maintained neutrality. Ukrainian political analyst H. Maksak explains this by Kyiv desire to preserve the minimum percentage of the achieved level of cooperation with Minsk in the economic and humanitarian spheres²¹.

After 9th August 2020, the political component of bilateral relations changed radically. Kyiv officially refused to recognize the victory of the current president A. Lukashenka and on 17th August recalled its ambassador to Minsk for consultations “to assess the prospects of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations in a qualitatively new political reality²²”. According to the Belarusian embassy in Kyiv, official contacts were put “on hold” by the Ukrainian side²³.

This period was characterized by the gradual development of political and economic relations between Belarus and Ukraine. They maintained the normalization of Belarusian relations with the USA and the EU. The West recognized the

²⁰ Максак, Г. Беларусь – Украина: погружение в холод / Г. Максак // Белорусский ежегодник. – 2020. – С. 92-99. – с. 98.

²¹ Maksak, H. *ibid*.

²² Україна ўпершыню ў гісторыі адклікала свайго амбасадара зь Менску // Радые Свабода. – 17.08.2020. – Рэжым доступу: <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30788445.html>. – Дата доступу: 04.09.2022.

²³ Политические белорусско-украинские отношения // Посольство Республики Беларусь в Украине. – Режим доступу: https://ukraine.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral_relations/political/. – Дата доступу: 07.08.2022.

constructive contribution of Belarus to the settlement of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Normal and friendly relations have been established between Presidents A. Lukashenka and V. Zelensky, which was confirmed by their first meeting at the regional forum in Zhytomyr. Economic ties and humanitarian contacts increased. The President of Belarus was the most popular foreign politician among Ukrainians. At the same time, the unprecedented intensity of the election campaign in Belarus, in which the "Ukrainian footprint" regarding the cases of Wagner Group and the hidden actions of the "Kremlin towers" in the supposed support of opposition candidates was clearly manifested, did not promise an easy life and the unequivocal election of Lukashenka. For the first time, the matter of deciding his political fate was put on the line. Since August 2020, Belarusian-Ukrainian relations have entered a new stage, which is characterized by the deterioration of the entire complex of interstate relations.

IV. DETERIORATION OF THE GOOD-NEIGHBOURLY MODEL: BILATERAL RELATIONS DURING THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN BELARUS (9 AUGUST 2020 – 31 DECEMBER 2021)

Ukrainian reaction to the presidential elections in Belarus. When the results of the presidential elections in Belarus were announced by the Central Election Commission, Ukrainian authorities changed their pragmatic approach and joined the common Western position on the non-recognition of the results. They also took such a step after unfulfilled Lukashenka's promise to Zelensky about the extradition of the Wagner Group fighters to Ukraine. Belarusian authorities began to criticize Kyiv's actions, accusing Ukraine of financing the protest movement in Belarus. On 17th August Ambassador I. Kizim was recalled to Kyiv for consultations for the first time in the history of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations. Upon his return to Belarus on 7th September, he was additionally observed at the border, which caused indignation at the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry²⁴.

²⁴ Заява міністра закордонних справ України Дмитра Кулеби щодо виклику посла України у Білорусі на

The Ukrainian ambassador said that Belarus violated the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations²⁵.

On 22nd August, V. Zelensky recommended A. Lukashenka to hold new elections in order to calm people and assure all internal and external actors of his victory²⁶. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus harshly reacted to the recommendation of the Ukrainian president stating that Belarus does not require "broken record advice from all sides"²⁷.

After political non-recognition, A. Lukashenka accused Ukraine (*together with Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic*) of financing the opposition and protest movement, which aimed to overthrow the "elected government". He assured that specifically prepared people came from Ukraine to participate in the riots, stressing, however, that "this is not the policy of the Ukrainian authorities", leaving space for maintaining a dialogue. On 5th September, Foreign Minister D. Kuleba responded to the criticism, reminding that Russia, but not Ukraine, sends propagandists and security forces to Belarus: "The integration of Belarus into the Union State is the price that Aliaksandr Lukashenka pays for the Russian support. I can say absolutely clear that Ukraine did not interfere, does not interfere and will not interfere in the

консультації до Києва // МЗС України. – 17.08.2020. – <https://mfa.gov.ua/news/zayava-ministra-zakordonnih-sprav-ukrayini-dmitra-kulebi-shchodo-vikliku-posla-ukrayini-u-bilorusi-na-konsultaciyi-do-kiyeva>. – Дата доступу: 08.08.2022.

²⁵ Порушили міжнародне законодавство. Посол України розповів про провокації білоруських прикордонників // НВ. – 10.09.2020. – <https://nv.ua/ukr/world/geopolitics/ukrajina-i-bilorus-vidnosini-mashinu-posla-ukrajini-oglyanu-li-na-kordoni-novini-ukrajini-50111344.html>. – Дата доступу: 08.08.2022.

²⁶ I would repeat Belarus presidential election, Ukraine's leader Zelensky says // Euronews. – 22.08.2022. – <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/22/i-would-repeat-belarus-presidential-election-ukraine-s-leader-zelensky-says>. – Date of access: 10.08.2022.

²⁷ МИД: у руководства Украины еще много лет будут вопросы поважнее, нежели раздавать советы соседям // БелТА. – 23.08.2020. – <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/mid-u-rukovodstva-ukrainy-esche-mnogo-let-budut-voprosy-povazhnee-nezheli-razdavay-sovety-sosedjam-403839-2020/>. – Дата доступу: 10.08.2022.

internal political life of Belarus." He emphasized that despite the Ukrainian initiative to put relations "on hold", the countries maintain economic relations and diplomatic dialogue. The main Ukrainian task is to minimize the negative impact of the crisis process in Belarus, preserving good economic and trade relations²⁸. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry replied that Minsk did not put the dialogue with Ukraine "on hold", and put the responsibility for the sharp drop in relations on the Ukrainian side²⁹.

The inauguration of A. Lukashenka on 23rd September convinced the Ukrainian officials of the right choice of direction towards Belarus. Kuleba noted that Kyiv supports the struggle of Belarusians for freedom and does not recognize the official results of the elections. At the political level, relations were frozen. No official meetings were held with representatives of the Belarusian government. Kyiv also decided how to officially address the Belarusian leader, inventing the term "Aliaksandr Lukashenka" without the prefix "President"³⁰, to which Lukashenka reacted with a mocking message: "The pot calls the kettle black"³¹. But it should be mentioned that Kyiv did not insist on new elections in Belarus and did not start a dialogue with the head of the Coordination Council S. Tikhanouskaya, whom it did not recognize either. Ukrainian political scientist H. Maksak believes that the Ukrainian authorities

²⁸ Цивілізацію на значну територію Росії принесли українці. Росія повинна пам'ятати про це – Дмитро Кулеба // Радіо Свобода. – 05.09.2020. – <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/dmytro-kuleba/30821633.html>. – Дата доступу: 11.08.2022.

²⁹ Контакты Киева и Минска поставлены на паузу, но отношения сохраняются – Кулеба // Укринформ. – 06.09.2020. – <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-politics/3094358-kontakty-kyiva-i-minska-postavleny-na-pauzu-no-otnosheniya-sohranautsa-kuleba.html>. – Дата доступу: 12.08.2022.

³⁰ Сидоренко, С. Без права на легитимность: что меняет заявление МИД об инаугурации Лукашенко // Европейская правда. – 24.09.2022. – <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/articles/2020/09/24/7114660/>. – Дата доступу: 12.08.2022.

³¹ "Чья бы корова мычала". Лукашенко ответил Зеленскому на непризнание его президентом Беларуси // Гордон. – 13.11.2020. – <https://gordonua.com/news/worldnews/chya-by-korova-mychala-Lukashenka-vyskazalsya-a-o-prezidentstve-zelenskogo-1527343.html>. – Дата доступу: 12.08.2022.

took such a step in order to reach compromise and show a gesture of goodwill, and not an unfriendly act towards Minsk³².

The collapse of good-neighbourly relations was indicated at the international level. Since September 2014, Belarus played the role of the moderator of the meetings of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG). But shortly after the crisis in Belarus escalated, accusations against Kyiv about financing protests took place, the obvious trend of Minsk's dependence on Moscow increased, Ukraine demanded a change of the negotiating platform location because it did not believe in the true neutrality of the Belarusian officials. Until 2020, the question of moving the location was not a big issue, as all rounds of negotiations were held online. But in 2021, especially after the permission of the Belarusian authorities to interrogate the detained journalist R. Protasevich by the separatists from Luhansk People's Republic, official Kyiv requested the location change. This idea was voiced by the head of the Ukrainian delegation, ex-president L. Kravchuk, who proposed Poland as an alternative option³³, Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council O. Danilov, ministers D. Kuleba and O. Reznikov, representative of certain regions of the Donetsk region of Ukraine in the TCG S. Harmash³⁴. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus bitterly reacted to such initiatives. In particular Minister U. Makei said that "the bacchanalia surrounding such statements indicates the reluctance of some Ukrainian politicians to adhere to the agreements that were reached in Minsk."³⁵

³² Прейгерман, Е., Максак, Г. Белорусско-украинские отношения в контексте внутривосточного кризиса в Беларуси // Белорусско-украинский экспертный форум. – декабрь 2020. – 22 с.

³³ Кравчук считает, что перенос из Минска позволит перезапустить ТКГ // Укринформ. – 03.06.2021. – <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-politics/3258561-kravcuk-scitaet-cto-perenos-iz-minska-pozvolit-perezapustit-tkg.html>. – Дата доступу: 01.10.2022.

³⁴ ТКГ перенесут из Минска, вопрос решается – Данилов // Укринформ. – 04.06.2021. – <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-politics/3259176-tkg-perenesut-iz-minska-vopros-reshaetsa-danilov.html>. – Дата доступу: 01.10.2022.

³⁵ Стенограмма интервью Министра иностранных дел Республики Беларусь В.Макея телеканалу «Беларусь 1»

In the interview with the Russian portal Sputnik, Makei assured that Belarus made maximum efforts to stop the conflict in Donbas, and A. Lukashenka proposed his plan for conflict resolution, which the countries of the collective West did not want to accept and that is why this conflict is still ongoing³⁶. Makei repeated the narratives about the good intentions of Minsk, as a "donor of security and stability", to continue offering the territory of Belarus for Russian-Ukrainian negotiations in an interview with the Russian agency "RIA Novosti", where he expressed regret for the fact that the Ukrainian side refused to continue the negotiations in Belarus and the next rounds went to Istanbul³⁷.

Belarusian emigration to Ukraine has become a new problem in bilateral relations. From 1st November 2020, Belarus introduced a temporary ban on both entry and exit from the territory of Ukraine through land points. Perhaps this was connected to the large outflow of the IT sector to Ukraine, which until now successfully worked in Belarus, taking advantage of state tax benefits. Not only legal entities but also individual employees relocated to Ukraine, bringing additional human, financial and intellectual capital. The reason for this decision of the Belarusian authorities was the decree of the President of Ukraine on October 4, 2020 "On some measures to attract entrepreneurs, highly qualified specialists who are citizens of the Republic of Belarus"³⁸. A week later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus handed the

// МИД Беларуси. – 10.04.2021. – <https://mfa.gov.by/press/smi/aa4e5d7a6cce18bf.html>. – Дата доступа: 01.10.2022.

³⁶ Интервью Министра иностранных дел Беларуси В.Макея информационному агентству «Sputnik. Беларусь» // МИД Беларуси. – 27.06.2022. – https://www.mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/ecfd654dfc2949e6.html. – Дата доступа: 29.10.2022.

³⁷ Стенограмма интервью Министра иностранных дел Беларуси В.Макея агентству «РИА Новости» // МИД Беларуси. – 26.09.2022. – https://www.mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/f639f36afb1e4444.html. – Дата доступа: 30.10.2022.

³⁸ Президент подписал указ о мерах по привлечению IT-специалистов из Беларуси // Президент Украины. – 04.10.2020. – <https://www.president.gov.ua/ru/news/prezident-pidpisav-ukaz-pro-zahodi-iz-zaluchennya-it-fahivci-64249>. – Дата доступа: 01.11.2022.

Ukrainian ambassador a note of protest, calling the decree an unfriendly and discriminatory step, as well as a violation of international norms, as it applies exclusively to citizens of one country³⁹.

With the increased pressure of the authorities on the private sector, not only representatives of the IT sector relocated. Many people went to Ukraine due to the visa-free regime for Belarusians, the absence of a strong language barrier, and a relatively close business culture. The Belarusian diaspora in Ukraine significantly increased. From August to December 2020, 31,000 citizens of Belarus crossed the border with Ukraine⁴⁰. Belarusians in Ukraine organized mass actions near the building of the Belarusian embassy in Kyiv. In order to manage the activity of the Belarusian diaspora, activists V. Shyshou and R. Batulin created the public organization "Belarusian House in Ukraine", which was engaged in organizing protests, helping Belarusian refugees, providing consultations and legal registrations for residence in Ukraine. In August 2021, V. Shyshou was found hanged in Kyiv, after which the Belarusian diaspora reckoned the activities of "Belarusian death squads"⁴¹. However, A. Lukashenka rejected the involvement of the KGB in the murder of V. Shyshou⁴².

³⁹ О вызове Посла Украины в Министерство иностранных дел Беларуси // МИД Беларуси [Электронный ресурс] Режим доступа: https://www.mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/cf32cd41ab7c89a3.html. – Дата доступа: 08.08.2022.

⁴⁰ Войтюк, Т. Скільки білорусів оселилося в Україні від початку протестів. Розповідає ДМС // Суспільне Новини. – 22.01.2021. – <https://suspilne.media/98316-skilki-bilorusiv-oselilos-a-v-ukraini-vid-pocatku-protestiv-rozpovidae-dms/>. – Дата доступа: 30.09.2022.

⁴¹ Самагубства ці забойства? Што вядома следзтву праз год пасля гібелі Віталія Шышова ў Кіеве // Радые Свабода. – 03.08.2022. – <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31970511.html>. – Дата доступа: 30.09.2022.

⁴² Ситникова, И. «Мы остались вдвоем — Россия и Беларусь»: Лукашенко прокомментировал смерть Шишова и угрозу «боевиков из Украины» // Hromadske. – 09.08.2021. – <https://hromadske.ua/ru/posts/my-ostalis-vdvoem-rossiya-i-belarus-Lukashenka-prokommentiroval-smert-shishova-i-ugrozu-boevikov-iz-ukrainy?user=Irina-Sitnikova>. – Дата доступа: 30.09.2022.

Increasing dependence of Minsk on Moscow. When the "good-neighbourly" model began to collapse, the "integrative" became stronger, which was characterized by frequent Russian-Belarusian meetings at the highest level and the Kremlin's full support of the Belarusian authorities to stabilize the domestic political situation. On 2nd September U. Makei met S. Lavrov in Moscow, where the Russian minister, without providing any evidence, shared the information about "200 Ukrainian extremists" that were sent by Kyiv to Belarus⁴³. The next day, Russian Prime Minister M. Mishustin paid an official visit to Minsk, and on 4th September, Belarusian Defence Minister V. Khrenin, in his report at the joint meeting of defence ministers of the CIS, SCO and CSTO countries in Moscow, openly reprimanded the leadership of Ukraine for supporting "various destructive forces to attempt an unconstitutional change of power in Belarus" and thanked the Russian leadership for their support. S. Tsikhanouskaya, in response to a series of official Belarusian-Russian meetings, declared that any agreements between A. Lukashenka and Russia after 9th August 2020 are invalid⁴⁴. The Ukrainian Foreign Minister, commenting on the Belarusian-Russian rapprochement, said that Ukraine, unlike Russia, has not and will not conduct any subversive activities against Belarus: "Russia's attempts to present its little green men in Belarus as Ukrainian extremists are cheap and poor trick⁴⁵".

During the domestic political crisis and a strong wave of international indignation, A. Lukashenka could only count on support from Russia. On 14th September, he met Putin in Sochi, where he stated that he was "forced to discuss the common

defence of the Union State together with the President of Russia". Putin promised that during the next year military drills will be held on the territory of Belarus almost every month, and a reserve of Russian security forces was prepared to be sent to Belarus in case of necessity⁴⁶.

Evidence of military-political concessions became military exercises, after which parts of Russian troops remained permanently on the territory of Belarus. On 14-25 September, the "Slavic Brotherhood" military drills were held, and on October 12-16, the CSTO "Indestructible Brotherhood-2020" drills took place. On November 19, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus and the National Guard of Russia signed an agreement on cooperation in the fight against terrorism and extremism, which gave legitimate grounds for the presence of Russian internal troops on the territory of Belarus⁴⁷. These series of joint military exercises ensured the permanent presence of Russian troops on the Belarusian territory on a rotational basis. According to the existing Russian-Belarusian agreements, the Russian military can stay in Belarus for no more than 2 months⁴⁸.

In January 2021, the Ukrainian TV channel TSN released the film "Strike from the Flank", which documented the agreements between Belarus and Russia allowing Russian special services and military personnel to access Belarusian intelligence posts on the border with Ukraine⁴⁹. This is how the scenario of Russia's use of the Belarusian territory against Ukraine was developed. On February 26, the Ukrainian

⁴³ Лавров: порядка 200 натренированных на Украине экстремистов находятся в Белоруссии // ТАСС. – 02.09.2020. – <https://tass.ru/politika/9350219>. – Дата доступа: 30.10.2022.

⁴⁴ Тихановская пообещала пересмотреть договоренности Лукашенко с Россией // Известия. – 26.11.2020. – <https://iz.ru/1092460/2020-11-26/tikhanovskaia-pooobeshchala-peresmotret-dogovorennosti-Lukashenka-s-rossiei>. – Дата доступа: 30.10.2022.

⁴⁵ Владимирив, В. Что означает российско-белорусская челночная дипломатия? // Голос Америки. – 04.09.2020. – <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/belarus-russia-shuttle-diplomacy/5571190.html>. – Дата доступа: 15.08.2022.

⁴⁶ Ромалийская, И. "Нужен кэш, чтобы удерживать систему на плаву". Помогут ли Лукашенко \$1,5 млрд от Путина // Настоящее Время. – 14.09.2020. – <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/Lukashenka-putin-dolg/30838641.html>. – Дата доступа: 08.08.2022.

⁴⁷ "Славянское братство": Москва прислала на учения в Беларусь 300 десантников и одного министра // BBC. – 16.09.2020. – <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-54167158>. – Дата доступа: 12.08.2022.

⁴⁸ Прейгерман, Е., Максак, Г. Белорусско-украинские отношения в контексте внутривосточного кризиса в Беларуси // Белорусско-украинский экспертный форум. – декабрь 2020. – 22 с.

⁴⁹ Удар з флангу: Білорусь кличе російських військових на кордон з Україною // ТСН. – 17.01.2021. – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULWBVbx6haU>. – Дата доступа: 08.09.2022.

Defence Minister A. Taran stated that he does not exclude the emergence of a military threat from the north, where Russia and Belarus conducted large-scale military exercises "West-2021". In February 2021, Minsk agreed to extend the term of Russian use of the two military facilities on the territory of Belarus for 25 years: the 43rd communication centre for the Atlantic "Vileika" and the 474th radio engineering station "Volga" near Baranavichy for monitoring and warning of missile attacks⁵⁰.

In December 2020, Belarusian analyst Y. Preiherman and his Ukrainian colleague H. Maksak published a scientific report on the impact of the political crisis in Belarus on Belarusian-Ukrainian relations. They concluded that Belarusian events had a negative impact on bilateral relations. In particular, the crisis witnessed the strengthening of Minsk's dependence on Moscow, since the Russian militarization of the Belarusian territory shows that the Kremlin perceives Belarus as a theatre of military operations, from which it is possible to deploy a group of troops against Ukraine. Preiherman believed that the tense situation in the Eastern Slavic triangle is the result of different foreign policy orientations of the countries: while Belarus allies with a country hostile to Ukraine – Russia, Ukraine tries to join the EU and NATO. Maksak correctly stated that Ukraine strengthened its defence in the north and seriously perceived Belarus as a country that could potentially pose a direct military danger to it⁵¹.

On 30 November 2020, Ukraine joined the EU's personal sanctions against a number of Belarusian officials, demonstrating it is politically on the side of a collective West approach. However, Kyiv did not encounter such measures in economic relations refusing to join European economic sanctions in December. Minister D. Kuleba noted

that he is personally fundamentally opposed to stifling Belarus, its business and its economy, commenting he does not support the idea of sectoral sanctions against Belarus⁵².

In spite of the long and relatively successful economic dialogue, A. Lukashenka was dissatisfied with the lack of political contacts with Kyiv and tried to find a reason to compare his successes with the failures of Ukrainian presidents. On 16 December, he declared that Ukraine had run out of medicine and invited Ukrainian doctors to work in Belarus, stressing that they would find better conditions there. Kuleba responded on Twitter providing statistical data, according to which 66% of Ukrainians had a positive attitude towards the Belarusian leader a year ago, and now, his support reaches only 38%⁵³. Lukashenka repeatedly made statements about the supply of weapons from Ukraine to support the protest movement in Belarus, justifying the detention of a number of activists. On December 25, 2020, he announced the successful operation of the Belarusian KGB that detained the "terrorist group of M. Autukhovich", which received "tons of weapons through Ukraine"⁵⁴. The press secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Nikolenko rejected claims about Ukraine's influence in the activities of the Belarusian opposition: "The mantra about "weapons from Ukraine" goes along with Lukashenka's policy of intimidating the Belarusian people."⁵⁵

⁵² Кулеба заверил Лукашенко, что не хочет "душить" Беларусь // Европейская правда. – 27.11.2020. – <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2020/11/27/7117044/>. – Дата доступа: 02.09.2022.

⁵³ Ткачук, Б. Лукашенко зовет украинских медиков к себе, потому что в Украине «про***ли» медицину. Кулеба уже обвинил его во лжи // Hromadske. – 16.12.2020. – <https://hromadske.ua/ru/posts/Lukashenka-zovet-ukrainskih-medikov-k-sebe-potomu-cho-v-ukraine-proli-medicinu-kuleba-u-zhe-obvinil-ego-vo-lzhi>. – Дата доступа: 08.08.2022.

⁵⁴ Лукашенко о задержании террористической группы Автуховича: если бы наши ребята их не накрыли, ох нам бы Новый год был // БелТА. – 25.12.2020. – <https://www.belta.by/president/view/Lukashenka-o-zaderzhanii-terroristicheskoy-gruppy-avtuhovicha-esli-by-nashi-rebjata-ih-ne-nakryli-oh-421773-2020>. – Дата доступа: 07.08.2022.

⁵⁵ Україна категорично відкидає чергові інсинуації Лукашенка про "зброю з України" // Interfax Ukraine. –

⁵⁰ Министерство обороны Республики Беларусь. – <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/110458/>. – Дата доступа: 07.09.2022.

⁵¹ Прейгерман, Е., Максак, Г. Белорусско-украинские отношения в контексте внутривосточного кризиса в Беларуси // Белорусско-украинский экспертный форум. – декабрь 2020. – 22 с.

Despite the curtailed political relations between Kyiv and Minsk, the economic sector continued to develop. Belarus remained one of Ukraine's main trading partners. In September 2020, MAZ launched an assembly line of utility vehicles in Kremenchuk and delivered 54 buses to Kyiv, the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine purchased a batch of MAZ-Bohdan trucks for the amount of UAH100 million, BelAZ supplied quarry dump trucks, and Ukroboronprom announced that it was moving on the use of the MAZ chassis in the design of new types of equipment. Belarus took first place in the export of potatoes with volumes of more than \$20 million⁵⁶. However, Belarus was more dependent on Ukraine in the energy sector. Ukraine imported 40% of its fuel from Belarus, and Belarus accounted for 45% of fuel from the total export to Ukraine, and in the event of an escalation of the conflict, it would be easier for Kyiv to replace Belarusian fuel than to find buyers for products from the Mazyr refinery plant⁵⁷. Mutual trade in 2021 increased by 60% and amounted to \$6.9 billion. Ukrainian political scientist Y. Magda believed that Ukraine thereby strengthened Lukashenka's position, supporting him economically, since almost all export-import operations were carried out by Belarusian state enterprises. He called Zelensky a "hybrid ally of Lukashenka"⁵⁸.

Deterioration of relations after the aircraft landing in May, 2021. When Ryanair passenger aircraft was forcibly landed in Minsk and journalist R. Protasevich and his partner S. Sapega were arrested in May 2021, interstate relations turned to a new round of

confrontation⁵⁹. The European Union immediately imposed sanctions, to which Ukraine promptly joined and stopped air connection with Belarus. Russia came to help its strategic ally by expanding air traffic at a time when other countries flew around Belarusian airspace⁶⁰. Lukashenka reacted to the Ukrainian step by allowing Belavia to fly to Crimea, which was another step towards the tacit recognition of this territory as part of Russia.

On August 9, 2021, during the "Big Conversation with the President", A. Lukashenka admitted that Belarusian-Ukrainian relations are at the lowest point in history: "The red line was crossed when the European Union did not still stop air communication with us, but Ukraine did". Although he assured that Belarus will never attack Ukrainian territory and will not impose sanctions because when it does so, according to Lukashenka, "Zelensky will be kicked off from his building within a day, because we supply 35% of fuel to Ukraine, and Russia supplies 35-45%." Belarusian commander advised Zelensky not to listen to representatives of the Belarusian national-democratic movement, who definitely influenced his decision to impose sanctions on Minsk⁶¹.

Nevertheless, Minsk and Kyiv were not going to burn all bridges in political and diplomatic communication channels, despite such proposals being made by individual Ukrainian parliamentarians. The chairman of the faction "For democratic Belarus" in the Verkhovna Rada,

25.12.2020. – <https://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/political/712636.html>. – Дата доступу: 07.08.2022.

⁵⁶ Минский барометр / Д. Мельянцов, В. Костюгова [и др.]. – 2020. – №17 (сентябрь-октябрь 2020 г.). – 39 с.

⁵⁷ Źochowski, P., Iwański, T. Ukraina–Białoruś: w spirali kryzysu // Ósrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia. –14.06.2021.–<https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2021-06-14/ukraina-bialorus-w-spirali-kryzysu>. – Data dostępu: 02.10.2022.

⁵⁸ Магда, Е. Как Зеленский превращается в гибридного союзника Лукашенко // The Page. – 27.10.2021. – <https://thepage.ua/experts/kak-zelenskij-prevrashaetsya-v-gibridno-go-soyuznika-Lukashenka>. – Дата доступу: 10.10.2022.

⁵⁹ Eccles, M., Sheftalovich, Z. Inside the control room of Belarus' hijacked Ryanair flight // POLITICO. – 25.10.2022. –<https://www.politico.eu/article/belarus-hijack-minsk-ryan-air-athens-to-vilnius-control-room/>. – Date of access: 30.10.2022.

⁶⁰ Зеленский поручил Кабмину остановить авиасообщение с Беларусью // УП. – 24.05.2021. – <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2021/05/24/7294691/>. – Дата доступу: 01.10.2022.

⁶¹ Встреча с журналистами, представителями общественности, экспертного и медийного сообщества "Большой разговор с Президентом" // Президент Республики Беларусь. – 09.08.2021. – <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-zhurnalistami-predstavitelami-obshchestvennosti-ekspertnogo-i-mediynogo-soobshchestva-bolshoy-razgovor-s-prezidentom>. – Дата доступу: 02.10.2022.

O. Honcharenko, in response to Lukashenka's statements during his meeting with journalists, called to end diplomatic relations with Belarus and reproached the Ukrainian government for not doing it⁶².

Analysts were also looking for the answer to this question. The German political scientist Martin Schön-Chanishvili believed that the conflict between the governments in Minsk and Kyiv occurs since Ukraine is at war with Russia, and Belarus continues to publicly demonstrate strong relations with it. It was always beneficial for Lukashenka to use the Ukrainian card during problems in Belarusian-Russian relations, but after August 2020 he lost such possibility. Paweł Usau, a researcher at the Warsaw Center for Political Analysis, notes that Lukashenka uses the Ukrainian case to justify political repressions, accusing Kyiv of supplying weapons and supporting extremist groups, stating that "the world's best secret services are working in Kyiv to wipe out Belarus." He takes benefits showing the electorate inside the country that the economic problems are not connected with the election results but caused by external destructive activities⁶³.

As a result of the deterioration between Belarus and Ukraine, Lukashenka expressed his intentions to recognize Crimea as Russian. On November 30, 2021, in an interview with the head of Russia Today, D. Kiselyov, he mentioned: "This is not a secret either for me or for Putin. There is no such question between me and Putin."⁶⁴ According to Lukashenka, the official recognition of Crimea by Belarus could be accompanied by his

probable visit to the peninsula. Belarusian pro-government political scientists hastened to call these statements the official recognition of Crimea as Russia's territory *de facto* and *de jure*⁶⁵. However, the statements of A. Lukashenka did not find a diplomatic embodiment on the part of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, and the department did not take concrete actions to implement them.

Earlier in November 2021, in an interview with the Russian RIA-Novosti, Minister of Foreign Affairs Makei addressing the question about the recognition of Crimea stated that the Belarusian position remains the same as before: "We understand that *de facto* Crimea is a Russian territory"⁶⁶. In these statements there was nothing about official legal recognition of Crimea, moreover, the same statements were permissible on the part of the Belarusian authorities during the "political thaw" of 2018-2019 and it was perceived by the Ukrainian establishment with understanding. Minsk understood the powerful negative consequences of such a step, hence, it delayed the legal resolution of the Crimean question in every possible way. At the same time, the regime in Belarus developed economic, cultural and tourist ties with Crimea.

In February 2021, according to a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), 36% of Ukrainians trusted A. Lukashenka, and he remained at the top of the ranking ahead of J. Biden and E. Macron. At the same time, 53% did not trust him, and his credibility balance was equal to 17.6%, which was affected by the August events of 2020. Regarding the political crisis in Belarus, 45.3% of Ukrainian citizens supported the national democratic movement, and 31.3% believed that Lukashenka

⁶² Комарова, О. Реакція депутатів Верховної Ради та президента на заяви Лукашенка // Радіо Свобода. – 10.08.2021. – <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/reakciya-deputativ-ta-prezidenta-na-zayavy-lukashenka/31401584.html>. – Дата доступу: 02.10.2022.

⁶³ Ржеутская, Л., Дорохов, В. У Лукашенко новый враг? Почему ссорятся Украина и Беларусь // DW. – 26.03.2021. – <https://www.dw.com/ru/u-lukashenka-novyy-vrag-pochemu-ssorjatsja-ukraina-i-belarus/a-57003916>. – Дата доступа: 02.10.2022.

⁶⁴ Интервью международному информационному агентству "Россия сегодня" // Президент Республики Беларусь. – 30.11.2021. – <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/intervyu-mezhdunarodnomu-informacionnomu-agentstvu-rossiya-segodnya>. – Дата доступа: 14.09.2022.

⁶⁵ Дзермант про признание Крыма: это нужно наполнить реальным содержанием 10.12.2021 // <https://sputnik.by/20211210/dzermant-pro-priznanie-kryma-eto-nu-zhno-napolnit-realnym-soderzhaniem-1058604891.html>. – Дата доступа: 07.11.2022.

⁶⁶ Глава МИД Белоруссии назвал Крым российской территорией // РИА-Новости. – 10.11.2021. – <https://ria.ru/20211110/krym-1758425845.html>. – Дата доступа: 02.11.2022.

was pursuing the right policy⁶⁷. Lukashenka's support was especially wide in Eastern Ukraine, while the Western part overwhelmingly supported the protest movement⁶⁸.

V. CONCLUSION

The examined two-and-a-half-year period in the development of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations (May 2019-December 2021) turned out to be full of very important historical events that continue to affect both bilateral and multilateral international relations in Eastern Europe and around the world. The studied period began with the election of U. Zelensky as the President of Ukraine and ends with the completion of the active phase of political crises in Belarus. The key moment or defining historical process of this period was the political crisis in Belarus, which took place against the background of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Crisis events in Belarus caused a negative reaction from the UN, OSCE, EU, and Western countries. Kyiv refused to recognize the legitimacy of proclaimed President A. Lukashenka and V. Zelensky terminated official contacts with Minsk. Ukraine put political relations with Belarus "on hold", but continued to develop trade and economic cooperation. Bilateral relations became even more complicated after the forced landing of the Ryanair aircraft at the Minsk airport on May 24, 2021. Following the EU common approach, Ukraine imposed sanctions against Belarus, which in turn took an important step toward legal recognition of Crimea by allowing its planes to fly to the peninsula. Kyiv's alienation logically pushed Minsk into the arms of Moscow, which helped A. Lukashenka to retain power in the critical days in August-September 2020 when the country was rocked by unprecedented waves of the protest movement.

⁶⁷ Рівень довіри до політиків, електоральний рейтинг і ставлення до окремих ініціатив / подій: січень 2021 року / А. Грушецький // Київський міжнародний інститут соціології. – <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1003&page=3>. – Дата доступу: 10.10.2022.

⁶⁸ Кого підтримують українці в ситуації в Білорусі: вересень 2020 року // Київський міжнародний інститут соціології. – <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=971&page=1>. – Дата доступу: 10.10.2022.

The situation within the Slavic triangle changed significantly at the end of 2020, when the international consequences of the political crisis in Belarus became apparent. For the first time in the history of his 26-year rule and six presidential campaigns, A. Lukashenka was not recognized as a legitimate president by Western countries. As you know, problems with the recognition of the results of the presidential elections have arisen before, especially in 2006 and 2010, but then things did not reach the point where the ambassadors of the Western countries refused to hand over credentials to the elected president.

The results and consequences of the political crisis in Belarus for Russia and Ukraine became especially visible after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war. It can be said with a high degree of probability that V. Putin supported his ally in the critical days of August-September 2020, having in front of him a strategic plan to attack Ukraine from the north. This plan began to be implemented from the end of 2021 through a series of joint Russian-Belarusian military exercises and maneuvers, leading to the events *casus belli* of February 24, 2022.