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**Olena Betlii**  
**Yauheni Preiherman**

# FOREIGN POLICY AUDIT: UKRAINE- BELARUS

DISCUSSION PAPER





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*Author:*

Olena Betlii

Yauheni Preiherman

*Editor and project coordinator:*

Kateryna Zarembo

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Warm, cold, friendly, hostile, disingenuous, self-serving – the spectrum of bilateral relations between Ukraine and Belarus includes every possible shade. By the time of the promising beginning in December 1991, both former Soviet republics had had the experience of bilateral cooperation – unique in Soviet realities – in the framework of the Treaty between the Ukrainian SSR and Belarussian SSR, signed in 1990. Furthermore, they joined forces in projects to clean up the fallout after the Chernobyl disaster. The Belavezha Accords, which put an end to the USSR, became a special symbol at the initial phase of cooperation.

Over the following 25 years, Ukraine and Belarus greatly enriched their experience of bilateral cooperation. The fundamental treaties that laid the foundation of their relations were signed in the 1990s under President Leonid Kuchma – the Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborly Relations and Cooperation (signed in 1995, entered into force in 1997), the Treaty on the State Border between Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus (signed in 1997, entered into force as late as in 2013) and the Treaty on Long-Term Economic Cooperation between Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus for 1999-2008. Meanwhile, political cooperation was established at the level of the heads of state. The working visits of the perennial President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko to Ukraine and those of each subsequent president of Ukraine to Belarus, as well as meetings on the margins of occasional summits have become the main driver of relations between the two states.

On the eve of the 25th anniversary, the Ukraine-Belarus bilateral relations cover various aspects of cooperation: political, economic, environmental, cultural, and others. They are no longer burdened down by the “legacy of the USSR’s collapse”, even though some of its traces, particularly the unfinished border demarcation, are a threat to the security of both countries. On the other hand, relations between Ukraine and Belarus have become an element of multilateral diplomacy. In particular, trade cooperation is governed by the CIS Free Trade Zone Agreement, ratified by Ukraine in 2012. In December 2015, during a visit of Ukraine’s trade representative Natalia Mykolska, official Minsk confirmed that Belarus would not

renounce the DCFTA with Ukraine. However, the risks of policy changes persist, which is apparently well understood in Kyiv. There is an opinion in Belarus that Ukraine's free trade deal with the EU is starting to frame the limits of what is possible for the Ukraine-Belarus economic cooperation. The Belarusian authorities are eyeing the implementation of the EU-Ukraine free trade agreement with caution. However, unlike their Russian colleagues, they do not look at the situation only in black and white but are, rather, thinking about new opportunities against the background of the EU-Ukraine trade deal and Ukraine-Russia sanctions.

Outside observers tend to evaluate the context of the Ukraine-Belarus cooperation in light of different transformation models implemented in the former Soviet republics. This approach is usually accompanied with a reference to geopolitical realities and sympathy. All too often, they are looked at through the lenses of bigger geopolitical debates and as supplementary to some other relations, e.g., between Russia and the EU. Moreover, politicians and experts are often guided by the rhetoric of political leaders, occasionally ignoring the real situation.

The Republic of Belarus is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. Furthermore, its relations with Russia have been regulated by the Treaty on the Establishment of a Union State since 1999. In the framework of this treaty, Minsk does, inter alia, the following:

- 1) follows the Program of Concerted Foreign Policy Action with Russia on the international scene;
- 2) actively develops bilateral military and military-technical cooperation with Russia;
- 3) creates a regional military force (the United Regional Air Defense System of both countries was recently completed

as part of this force)<sup>1</sup>. Considering Belarus' long-term membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, is it worthwhile to continue focusing on President Lukashenko's verbal balancing acts<sup>2</sup> concerning the Crimea issue or the deployment of a Russian airbase in Belarus in an effort to guess the inclinations of official Minsk?

***Establishing a strategic partnership to ensure Belarus' further non-interference in the conflict must become one of the priorities of Ukraine's foreign policy***

Ukraine, reforming the Armed Forces amid constant military action in the east of the country and without security guarantees from any great power after the signatories of the Budapest Memorandum essentially refused to provide any, has found itself under pressure to urgently develop a new security model in the region. As Belarus plays a key role in maintaining the status quo in Central and Eastern Europe, establishing a strategic partnership to ensure Belarus' further non-interference in the conflict must become one of the priorities of Ukraine's foreign policy. This is especially true if we take into account the fairly close and extensive interpersonal contacts, from the tradition of seasonal berry gathering in the Belarusian border regions to the fashion for Belarusian music in Ukraine. Pro-Russian popular views in the context of Ukraine-Russia confrontation among a vast majority of Belarusians and the fairly positive image of Belarus among Ukrainians, according to opinion polls are also part of the equation.

Furthermore, significant changes have taken place in the relations between Belarus and the EU over the past six months. After key

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<sup>1</sup> *The Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation signed some 35 international agreements regulating military and military-technical cooperation between them, especially regarding the creation of a regular military force and joint use of Belarus' military infrastructure in accordance with the approved list of such facilities: Сотрудничество с вооруженными силами Российской Федерации / Министерство обороны Республики Беларусь. – режим доступу: [http://www.mil.by/ru/military\\_policy/international/cooperation\\_RF/](http://www.mil.by/ru/military_policy/international/cooperation_RF/)*

<sup>2</sup> *One of the most up-to-date analyses: Шрайбман А. Формула Лукашенко. Как Минск два года выбирает позицию по Крыму /Московский Центр Карнеги, 28.04.2016 – режим доступу: <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/2016/04/28/ru-63465/ixpx>*

sanctions imposed in response to the December 2010 brutal clampdown on the opposition in Minsk were dropped, Brussels and Minsk are trying to get back to constructive cooperation. Kyiv has never supported the idea of isolating Belarus<sup>3</sup>, and it cannot but welcome the warming in the relations between Minsk and Brussels in the current security configuration. Even though Lukashenko's exit from isolation and his visit to Italy is a kind of repetition of his "return to the West" in 2009 and is more evidence of Vatican's backroom diplomacy than that of Brussels, official Kyiv would do well to consider all possible platforms for integrating Minsk into its own regional projects. Also important is cooperation within the so-called "Euroregions" and the Eastern Partnership, which leads to practical networking among different groups of citizens of both countries.

Thus, the priorities of Ukraine's foreign policy regarding Belarus are as follows:

- security, which involves the active use of multi-level diplomacy and intersectoral cooperation;
- extensive interregional cooperation;
- strengthening economic and trade partnerships and minimizing the risks of a repeat "trade war";
- establishing effective horizontal cooperation between the citizens of both countries and creating a common platform for civil society interaction.

In spite of multiple differences, contradictions and even some forms of regional rivalry, today Minsk has similar and oftentimes even identical interests in the following key areas:

- national security;
- military-technical cooperation;
- final resolution of all long-lasting border and related disputes;
- cooperation on current challenges in the border area;

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<sup>3</sup> *Belarusian opposition leaders often criticize Kyiv for this kind of approach. See, for example.: Наталья Радина: Если будет нападение на Киев, оно будет из Беларуси – режим доступу: <http://glavcom.ua/interviews/125888-natalja-radina-esli-budet-napadenie-na-kiiev-ono-budet-iz-belarusi.html>*



- bilateral trade intensification.
- development of bilateral economic links with a view to jointly capitalizing on asymmetric cooperation opportunities with the third countries and integration projects;
- regional projects development within bilateral and multilateral frameworks.

This discussion paper offers an overview of the main areas of mutual interest, stakeholders, and influence groups and looks at several potential risks in Belarus-Ukraine relations that can and should be averted. Based on this analysis, the paper concludes with a list of recommendations.

## **2. UNITED BY MINSK, DIVIDED BY RUSSIA: NEW TRENDS IN UKRAINE-BELARUS RELATIONS**

The fact that Russia has decisive influence on the nature of cooperation between Ukraine and Belarus has been repeatedly stressed by the experts we have contacted. Moreover, our discussions of relations with Belarus often began with an outline of its dependence on Russia's economic, financial and energy systems. Indeed, how independent Minsk is from Moscow at the level of decision making and financial capacity is known perhaps only to high-level Belarusian officials. This led to the development of distinct discourse about Minsk's "non-independent policy," "Moscow's hand" in the decisions of the Belarusian authorities regarding Ukraine, etc., which, in turn, has undermined trust in Ukraine-Belarus relations. While knowledge of how closely Belarus cooperated with Russia was important for setting short-term economic and trade cooperation objectives before 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine, which was started by Russia, added a crucial security component to this issue.

All observers understand that the security of the region depends on the position Minsk takes in the face of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. With Lukashenko ultimately calling all the shots in his country and with Belarus' political system being as personalized and closed as it is, experts

*All observers understand that the security of the region depends on the position Minsk takes in the face of Russia's aggression in Ukraine*

are forced to scrutinize the rhetoric and content of Lukashenko's speeches. It is often noted that he is seriously concerned about Russia's actions in Ukraine, which was particularly easy to see in spring 2014. Initially, the Belarusian government looked quite disoriented in the face of the escalating conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Public statements by officials and state media reports about the annexation of Crimea and the emerging conflict in the Donbas were contradictory and misleading. However, it did not Minsk long to start carving out a neutrally leaning position on the conflict.

On 29 March 2014, Lukashenko met with the then acting President of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchynov and gave him guarantees that under no circumstances would Ukraine be attacked from the Belarusian territory. Importantly, this visit was proof of Lukashenko's acknowledgement of Turchynov as the legitimate head of the Ukrainian state – in

contrast to the Kremlin. He also publicly supported the holding of the presidential elections so that Ukraine would receive a legitimate new head of state. Later, Lukashenko visited Kyiv to take part in Petro Poroshenko's inauguration ceremony and made numerous statements that were received favorably by the Ukrainian political elite and general public. For example, he said: "Ukraine should be a unitary, integral state. You should go to Crimea and negotiate so that Crimea would be Ukrainian; do not lose it."<sup>4</sup>

In a long interview for the talk show Shuster LIVE in late March 2014, President Lukashenko reiterated all these elements. However, he also stated that Crimea had "de-facto" become part of Russia and that if Belarus were forced to choose, it would be on Russia's side because of the common history and Belarus' legal commitments. Roughly, this reflects Minsk's foreign policy realities on the ground and the limits it faces in navigating the troubled and dangerous waters of the regional geopolitical escalation of tensions between Russia and the West. Whatever smart public and behind-the-scenes moves Belarusian diplomats make, they are structurally constrained by the asymmetries of Belarus' relations with the regional powers and its economic dependence on Russia.

It is not that the Ukrainian side does not understand it, but Ukrainian diplomats have to deal with the consequences of this situation. Belarus was among the 11 nations that voted against the UN General Assembly resolution entitled "The Territorial Integrity of Ukraine" on 27 March 2014. The resolution, which was adopted with 100 votes in favor, called upon "all States, international organizations and specialized agencies not to recognize any alteration of the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol on the basis of the [...] referendum and to refrain from any action that might be interpreted as recognizing any such altered status."<sup>5</sup> At that

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<sup>4</sup> *После инаугурации Порошенко Лукашенко говорил о Крыме, а Грибаускайте – о борьбе с коррупцией, 8.06.2014 – режим доступу: <http://ru.tsn.ua/politika/poste-inauguracii-poroshenko-lukashenko-govoril-o-kryme-a-gribauskaite-o-borbe-s-korruptsiei-370291.html>*

<sup>5</sup> *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 27 March 2014 – режим доступу: [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a\\_res\\_68\\_262.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_res_68_262.pdf)*

moment, Belarus did not yet hold the status of a neutral venue for the Donbas crisis negotiations and found no arguments to explain to Moscow why it had to abstain from taking a position, Belarusian colleagues note. On the other hand, Belarus could not vote in contradiction to Moscow's decision, being tied by its commitments before Russia under the Treaty on the Union State. However, immediately after that President Lukashenko and the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs made a series of statements that contradicted the vote at the General Assembly.

Sorting out all the contradictory and blurry statements that were made by the Belarusian government at that stage of the conflict, we find three dominating elements of the Belarusian position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict:

***Belarus could not vote in contradiction to Moscow's decision, being tied by its commitments before Russia under the Treaty on the Union State***

- Belarus will cooperate with any Ukrainian government;
- Belarus supports Ukraine's territorial integrity.
- Belarus is against any form of federalization in Ukraine, as it will create chaos there.

However, Minsk's position regarding the Russia-imposed scenario in Ukraine was not the only thing that was important. Equally crucial were Lukashenko's measures to counter its recurrence in Belarus. In particular, the construction of Belarusian identity with mandatory attention to the Belarusian language and symbols as a manifestation of the struggle against the "Russian world" was placed on the agenda, along with resetting relations with the EU, adoption of a new Military Doctrine, and Minsk's transformation into an Eastern European center of international diplomacy. This may suggest that Lukashenko indeed takes the threat to Belarus's sovereignty seriously and is trying to make room for a maneuver to slip out of the impasse in which he has put himself by turning Russia into the guarantor of his power. Minsk's desire to emerge as an international diplomacy hub plays a key role in this confrontation with Moscow, according to Belarusian experts.

The events of August 2014 brought a positive change to Belarus' ability to pursue more flexible policies on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, thereby helping ease security pressures on Kyiv. The idea

to hold a summit on the situation in the Donbas and, more broadly, on the prospects of the Eurasian Economic Union – Ukraine – EU economic relations in Minsk was quickly acted upon by the Belarusian government. After a series of telephone talks between the leaders of Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan, as well as representatives of the European Commission between 29 July and 19 August, Minsk was agreed upon as the place to host a round of talks that brought Presidents Poroshenko and Vladimir Putin together in the company of their Belarusian and Kazakh colleagues and two EU commissioners.

Thus, on 26 August 2014, the idea of Minsk as a neutral ground for peace negotiations started to gain ground, even though the talks did not bring about any long-lasting positive results in the Donbas<sup>6</sup>. This paper argues that the new role of Minsk became a crucial development for both Ukraine's and Belarus' security and a new factor in the two countries' bilateral relations.

On 5 September 2014, Minsk hosted the first meeting of the OSCE Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine, which became a permanent platform for ongoing negotiations between Ukraine and Russia and with the participation of representatives of the Luhansk and Donetsk separatists, all moderated by the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office.

In February 2015, after the situation in Eastern Ukraine reached another critical point, Minsk hosted another top-level summit, this time in the so-called Normandy format: it involved the presidents of Ukraine, Russia, and France and the German Chancellor. After almost 17 hours of talks, the leaders of the Normandy quartet agreed to a ceasefire in the Donbas and oversaw the signing of the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements. The implications of the Minsk-II Accords and the peace process in general for Ukraine's interests remain debated, yet it has undoubtedly become a central factor of its internal and foreign policies, as well as security calculations.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Максак Г., *Украина и Беларусь в новых реалиях: между безопасностью и экономикой*, 28.03.2016. – режим доступа: <http://storybuilder.jumpstart.ge/en/ukraina-i-bielarus-v-novykh-rieliakh-miezhdubiezopasnosti-i-ekonomikoi>

Belarus strives in every possible way to play a more meaningful role in the Minsk process, rather than just offering coffee and a round table for discussions. At the conference of the Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative in February 2016, Belarusian Foreign Affairs Minister Uladzimir Makey stated that Minsk was ready to fully provide the logistical, secretariat, and protocol functions to the Trilateral Contact Group.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Belarusian MFA was already performing most of these functions unofficially and, thus, had an indirect influence on the flow of the peace process. This fact alone, according to our Belarusian colleagues, makes Belarus a crucial partner for Kyiv and requires from the latter intensified communication and coordination with Minsk.

*Belarus strives in every possible way to play a more meaningful role in the Minsk process, rather than just offering coffee and a round table for discussions*

In this respect, it might also be reasonable for Ukraine's diplomats and experts to take a slightly modified stance on the Minsk Process<sup>8</sup>. Today, the dominating view in Ukraine, as viewed from Belarus, is that Minsk is deadlocked and new formats and locations for peace talks are needed. Whereas the problems of the Minsk Process look obvious, it is essential to understand Minsk's broader role: it strengthens Belarus' ability to abstain from participation in anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western initiatives and, consequently, strengthens Ukraine's security. Therefore, Kyiv should look for ways to address the shortcomings of the current Minsk format without undermining Belarus' neutral position on the conflict. One option might be to try broadening the Normandy format in order to get the USA directly involved in the Minsk Process. Such attempts will be supported by Belarus as Lukashenko has on many occasions

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7 *Стенограмма подхода к прессе Министра иностранных дел Беларуси В.Макея в ходе конференции «Минские соглашения год спустя: достижения, вызовы, уроки» (11 февраля 2016 г., г.Минск) – режим доступа: [http://mfa.gov.by/press/news\\_mfa/ef77517895577da2.html](http://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/ef77517895577da2.html)*

8 *The term Minsk Process will be used throughout the discussion paper to refer to the diplomatic process that is the result of the Eurasian Economic Union – Ukraine – EU summit of August 2014, regular meetings of the Trilateral Contact Group, and the Normandy summit of February 2015 – all held in Minsk.*

spoken in favor of Washington's active participation in the conflict's resolution.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the problem of the format of peace negotiations and the composition of its participants should not be exaggerated, because the main challenge seems to be about a lack of compromise which could be accepted and implemented by all sides.

The Ukrainian expert community understands this position of the Belarusian colleagues. However, Kyiv is looking for new ways to resolve the conflict. In particular, Ukrainian diplomats are now aiming their efforts at coordinating positions on the implementation of an OSCE international police mission in the Donbas. On the other hand, the Ukrainian side cannot turn a blind eye to Minsk's use of Ukrainian representatives' participation in the Trilateral Contact Group to send signals to Kyiv. This was the case in late April 2016 when First Deputy Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada Iryna Herashchenko was denied entry to Belarus for the first time as she was going to attend a meeting on the release of hostages.<sup>10</sup> Such incidents reinforce the position of those who are inclined to reiterate that Belarus, despite all the rhetoric of its authorities and the organization of negotiations, remains an ally to the aggressor – Russia.

***The main achievement of this period can be seen in that heads of both states succeeded in preventing Belarus' involvement in the war between Russia and Ukraine***

Thus, over the past two years Ukraine-Belarus relations have developed largely without any strategic planning at the diplomatic level, overcoming the situational challenges brought into their bilateral cooperation by Russian aggression. The main achievement of this period can be seen in that heads of both states succeeded in preventing Belarus' involvement in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Moreover, Minsk has been established, through joint efforts,

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<sup>9</sup> *Президент о ситуации в Украине: Если американцы, США не захотят мира, не будет мира, 29.04.2015 – режим доступу: <http://news.tut.by/society/445982.html>*

<sup>10</sup> *Герашченко повідомила про спробу зриву переговорів по заручникам через заборону їй в'їзду до Білорусі, 27.04.2016 – режим доступу: [http://dt.ua/POLITICS/geraschenko-oficijno-zaboronili-v-yizd-do-bilorusi-206971\\_.html](http://dt.ua/POLITICS/geraschenko-oficijno-zaboronili-v-yizd-do-bilorusi-206971_.html)*

## 2. United by Minsk, divided by Russia: new trends in Ukraine-Belarus relations

as an Eastern European center of international diplomacy. While Ukraine has no ambassador to Belarus after Mykhailo Yezhel was dismissed from this post in May 2015, the Ukrainian side relies on its representation in the Trilateral Contact Group. This, however, cannot replace the ambassador's role in the bilateral relations.



### 3. AREAS OF MUTUAL INTEREST: DECLARED AND HIDDEN

Russian aggression has emphasized the main foreign policy priority for both Ukraine and Belarus, which is to ensure the national security of each state. In addition, it has highlighted the fact that bilateral relations between the two countries are underpinned by specific common interests, even as they are based on different values. These interests proved to be sufficient for bilateral cooperation to enable the implementation of foreign policy priorities despite all challenge.

*It is now in Ukraine's interests to keep Belarus from irrevocable integration with Russia, especially in foreign and security policy*

Interestingly, there is a certain similarity in the defined interests now guiding Kyiv and Minsk with those that shaped the nature of their cooperation back in 2009-2010. At the time, Viktor Yushchenko tried to ensure rapprochement with

Belarus through mediation in the dialogue between Minsk and Brussels and Washington. Now Lukashenko is using Kyiv, on the one hand, to demonstrate the benefits of his own domestic policies as opposed to the political crises in Ukraine and, on the other hand, to overcome international isolation.<sup>11</sup> As in 2009, it is now in Ukraine's interests to keep Belarus from irrevocable integration with Russia, especially in foreign and security policy. In its turn, Belarus wants to return to the international arena, find alternative (non-Russian) sources of tranches which are essential to keep the Belarusian economy afloat, and build relations with Ukraine and the EU so as to minimize intervention into its internal policies. Kyiv and Brussels seem to have agreed to this position, and sanctions are becoming a thing of the past. Therefore, strengthening the Belarusian state is now becoming a priority.

The implementation of these interests requires close border, economic, regional, and human cooperation against the backdrop of new military and security challenges. It should be noted here that Minsk has adeptly exploited the window of opportunity opened by

<sup>11</sup> *«М'яка сила» України у Білорусі // «М'яка сила» України в регіону: інструмент ефективної зовнішньої політики / за ред. А. Гетьманчук, Є. Єнін, К.Зарембо, С. Солодкий та ін. – К.: ІСП, 2011. – С. 9.*

the conflict in Ukraine. This is particularly true of the gradual shaping of Belarus' image as a peacemaking country whose efforts contribute to resolving the conflict in the Donbas, something that the European partners do not omit to emphasize. Another component of this process is the resetting of relations with the EU while keeping a pro-Russian orientation. Moreover, Belarus has taken advantage of the sanctions against Russia and suspended air traffic between Ukraine and Russia. The volume of repackaged products of Ukrainian or European origin is rising, and the Belarusian airlines have significantly increased the number of flights between Ukraine and Belarus. However, the conflict in the Donbas has driven up the number of migrants in Belarus and affected interpersonal contacts – Belarusians are now much less keen on visiting Ukraine for tourism purposes or as part of shopping tours. Meanwhile, the smuggling of fuel and various goods to Ukraine and to the area of the counter-terrorist operation is one of the challenges of cross-border cooperation against the background of a significant decrease in trade turnover. New realities have also led to the reduction of military cooperation and the emergence of a new category of Belarusian citizens – combatants who have fought in Ukraine on both sides and now require a special policy from Kyiv.

#### 3.1. MILITARY CHALLENGES AND COOPERATION

In light of interdependent security realities, military cooperation could be a crucial area of mutual interest in Ukraine-Belarus relations. The intricacy of this subject stems from the fact that Minsk is Russia's ally, including in the defense realm. It is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); even more important, it is in the Union State with Russia and has bilateral NATO Article 5-type defense commitments. In other words, any attack on Russia should technically be considered an attack on Belarus.

Yet, as was underlined above, it is in Minsk's vital interests to avoid being dragged into any conflict or even strategic confrontation in the region. Therefore, since the crisis in Russia-Ukraine relations broke out, Belarus has been pursuing a cautious policy with a view to staying outside the conflicting trends and, at the same time, ensuring its own national security, including border security.

All military training conducted by Belarus in its territory has been closely and critically watched by Ukraine. Although Belarusian colleagues note that this line of Belarus' behavior has often been misunderstood and misinterpreted by the Ukrainian and even Belarusian media<sup>12</sup>, it should nevertheless be acknowledged that this reaction of the Ukrainian side was and remains justified.

***What could be a more significant threat to Ukraine is a Russian military airbase in Belarus***

What could be a more significant threat to Ukraine is a Russian military airbase in Belarus. Discussions about such a base began in 2013 when Russia's Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu told the press that an airbase would be established within two years. However, soon the issue largely disappeared from the headlines and was almost forgotten. Nonetheless, Moscow did not drop the idea and returned to it after its conflict with Ukraine broke out. In October 2014, the former Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Air Force Viktor Bondarev announced that a regiment consisting of 24 Russian SU-27SM3 jets would be permanently stationed on the military airbase in Babruysk in 2016.<sup>13</sup> Yet, in June 2015 Belarusian Defense Minister Andrey Ravkov stated that the airbase issue remained in the political dimension and that it was "too early to talk about a timeframe for deploying SU-27 jets and MI-8 helicopters of the Russian Federation in Belarus."<sup>14</sup> After that, the most interesting developments began.

All of a sudden, on 2 September 2015, the Russian government discussed the issue of establishing an airbase in Belarus publicly and asked President Putin to sign a corresponding interstate agreement, which "would ensure Russia's long-term military presence in the region

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<sup>12</sup> Preiherman Y. *Belarus-Ukraine relations beyond media headlines //Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 13 issue:57 – режим доступу: [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45231&cHash=22fc78f5b23f8662ed3ae83be39c3143#.V0w7IZF97IV](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45231&cHash=22fc78f5b23f8662ed3ae83be39c3143#.V0w7IZF97IV)*

<sup>13</sup> *Авиабаза ВВС России появится в Белоруссии в 2016 году, 15.10.2014. – режим доступу: <http://www.interfax.ru/world/401853>*

<sup>14</sup> *Министр обороны: вопрос о российской авиабазе в Беларуси – в политической плоскости, 17.06.2015. – режим доступу: <http://news.tut.by/politics/452441.html>*

and would strengthen the region's security".<sup>15</sup> On 19 September 2015, Putin tasked the Defense and Foreign Affairs Ministries with completing negotiations with a view to signing the agreement. A week later, the Russian newspaper "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" cited anonymous sources in military and diplomatic circles as saying that the agreement was ready for signing and that the airbase would start operating as soon as in January 2016.<sup>16</sup> However, Minsk managed to sideline the issue through concerted public and behind-the-scenes efforts and argue that the establishment of an airbase would not be in the interests of security.

As was underlined above, the more entrenched Minsk's status as a neutral negotiations ground becomes, the more likely it is to contain Moscow's pressures to establish Russian military presence on the Belarusian soil. However, even the two existing Russian military facilities in Belarus are enough to precipitate the security situation in the region.

As far as military cooperation between Ukraine and Belarus is concerned, it has folded over the past two years for obvious reasons. Any intensive cooperation between the military departments last took place in 2013. According to open sources, the number of military-technical cooperation projects plummeted, which is why there are no Belarusian deliveries to Ukraine's defense industry to speak of.<sup>17</sup> At

*Any intensive cooperation between the military departments last took place in 2013*

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15 *Материалы к заседанию Правительства 2 сентября 2015 года – режим доступа: <http://government.ru/announcements/19499/>*

16 *Мухин В. Белоруссия может стать ядерным форпостом России, 25.09.2015. – режим доступа: [http://www.ng.ru/armies/2015-09-25/1\\_forpost.html](http://www.ng.ru/armies/2015-09-25/1_forpost.html)*

17 *Данейко Е. В условиях «гибридной войны»: что поставляет Беларусь для ВПК Украины, 02.01.2016 – режим доступа: <http://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%B2-%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%8F%D1%85-%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B9%D0%BD%D1%8B-%D1%87%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BB%D1%8F%D0%B5%D1%82-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D1%8C-%D0%B4%D0%BB%D1%8F-%D0%B2%D0%BF%D0%BA-%D1%83%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%8B/a-18951986>*

the same time, it should be noted that the Ukrainian Motor Sich concern owns a controlling stake in the Orsha Aircraft Repair Plant,<sup>18</sup> while the Bohdan corporation intends to start assembling Belarusian MAZ trucks in Cherkasy.<sup>19</sup>

One more area of future mutual interest is the sharing of military experience and best practices, which has particularly high added value in the new realities of heightened geopolitical tensions in the region. The Ukrainian army has gained the unique experience of “hybrid warfare”, which is of obvious national security interest to Belarus.

Importantly, the new drafted Military Doctrine that is about to be passed by the Belarusian parliament identified “hybrid wars” as the main modern threat to the country. The new doctrine foresees the possibility of internally inspired conflicts and ways of preventing and eliminating them. It gives serious priority to coordinating the external and internal dimensions of national security, including in the media and information sphere, which was not the case before. Another objective is to raise the armed forces’ mobility and readiness to quickly tackle all sorts of security threats in any part of the country. According to Defense Minister Andrey Ravkov, Belarus is studying and learning from Ukraine’s experience of dealing with a “hybrid war”.<sup>20</sup>

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18 *Лукашенко предупредил «Моторс Сич», что в Беларуси «перекантоваться» не получится, 16.10.2014. – режим доступа: <http://www.epravda.com.ua/rus/news/2014/10/16/498635/>*

19 *As is noted in the company's press release: "According to Bohdan's CEO Vladyslav Sopit, the vehicles that will be produced by the Cherkasy plant will have dual purpose and can be used by both civil and power structures in the area of the counter-terrorist operation": the Ukrainian Bohdan [corporation] and Belarusian MAZ sign a deal to produce trucks in Cherkasy, 14 March 2016. – режим доступа: <http://bogdan.ua/uk/ukrayinska-bogdan-ta-biloruskyy-maz-domovylys-pro-vyrobnyctvo-vantazhivok-v-cherkasah>*

20 *Новая Военная доктрина Беларуси учитывает расширение источников военных угроз, 04.04.2016. – режим доступа: [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2016/04/04/ic\\_news\\_112\\_472931/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2016/04/04/ic_news_112_472931/) Есть вопрос. Чем отличается новая Военная доктрина Беларуси? 22.01.2016. – режим доступа: <http://www.belta.by/society/view/est-vopros-chem-otlichaetsja-novaja-voennaja-doktrina-belarusi-178661-2016/>*

### 3.2. BORDER ISSUES AND COOPERATION

Border issues have long been among key priorities and concerns in Ukraine-Belarus relations. Since the two countries gained independence in 1991, different aspects of border issues and cooperation have featured high on the bilateral agenda.

In May 1997, during Lukashenko's visit to Kyiv, the Treaty on the State Border between Ukraine and Belarus was signed, establishing the border regime and delimiting the entire border length of 1,084 km. However, Minsk conditioned the ratification of the treaty on the problem of the debt owed by Ukrainian companies since the early 1990s. As a result, the treaty entered into force only in June 2013, when the governments exchanged treaty ratification instruments. In November 2013, the first border sign was unveiled in the village of Senkivka in the Chernihiv region.

Against the background of the Donbas conflict, border demarcation and control has become a critical issue for both sides. Kyiv wants to ensure that foreign mercenaries heading towards the conflict zone cannot enter the country through the border with Belarus.<sup>21</sup> Also, even though the Belarusian authorities have guaranteed that no attack on Ukraine would ever be launched from Belarus, Kyiv needs to make certain that reconnaissance or subversive groups do not use the border.

*Against the background of the Donbas conflict, border demarcation and control has become a critical issue for both sides*

For Belarus, border threats and risks look even more challenging. First, the country has experienced a large inflow of asylum seekers from the Donbas<sup>22</sup> and the various associated risks. Second, the Belarusian authorities are concerned about arms trafficking possibly taking place across the border with Ukraine. Finally, they

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<sup>21</sup> *Максак Г., op.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *According to Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makey, Belarus has received about 100,000 asylum seekers from Ukraine, [http://ont.by/news/our\\_news/belarys-i-ukraina-gotovi-vosstanovit-prezhnij-yroven-tovarooborota-glavi-mi](http://ont.by/news/our_news/belarys-i-ukraina-gotovi-vosstanovit-prezhnij-yroven-tovarooborota-glavi-mi)*

are also concerned about Belarusian and Ukrainian nationals who have participated in the fighting in the Donbas and now want to get into Belarus.

Kyiv and Mins have been quite efficient in reacting to multiple border challenges. In May 2015, the bilateral demarcation commission held a meeting in Chernihiv and coordinated further activities on border demarcation. Later, the Belarusian State Border Committee specified that it expected to finish the demarcation in Brest and Malaryta regions in 2015 and in Kobryn and Ivanava regions in 2016<sup>23</sup>. The border guards agreed on cooperation plans, including among their special units, for 2015-2016.

On 3 February 2016, the Verkhovna Rada ratified the agreement between Ukraine and Belarus on special representatives for border-related issues, which became another important step in improving the border regime. The agreement regulates legal order issues and resolution of potential border crossing incidents<sup>24</sup>.

However, border demarcation introduces significant changes into the daily lives of citizens in border areas. On the one hand, residents have a difficult time getting used to the presence of the border as such, which now splits familiar terrain between different states. Also, there are well-established traditions one of which is the seasonal gathering of blueberries and cranberries in a Polesye forestry in Belarus. With the understanding of the Belarusian side, seasonal workers are allowed to cross the Ukrainian-Belarusian border to collect the berries. According to Ukraine's State Border Guard Service, 16,000 Ukrainian citizens, including 3,000 children, took advantage of this arrangement. Despite the fact that the Belarusian authorities introduced a special fee (equal to UAH 227) for staying in the reserve in 2015, the number of Ukrainian seasonal workers

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<sup>23</sup> Демаркація белорусско-української границі: почалися роботи по обозначению границы на местности, 16.09.2015. – режим доступу: <http://gpk.gov.by/news/gpk/19186/>

<sup>24</sup> Угода між Кабінетом Міністрів України і Урядом Республіки Білорусь про діяльність прикордонних уповноважених. – режим доступу: [http://zakon0.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/ru/112\\_200](http://zakon0.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/ru/112_200)

has not dwindled.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the authorities have failed to prevent conflicts with the residents of border villages. One of the “conflict zones” is the border of the Vetly village council in the Liubeshiv raion of the Volyn region. Engineering works to demarcate the border were stopped there over the locals’ protest against the “transfer” of the Zhyrovsky Canal to Belarus<sup>26</sup>. Ukraine’s State Border Service has informed that the cause is amber mining, which requires water supply from the canal. In fact, the “amber business” is another challenge for border guards and environmentalists in both countries.

According to the Ukrainian side, 404 out of 1,084 km of the border were marked as of early May 2016 and 977 border signs were installed<sup>27</sup>. The Belarusian side reports that one-third of the border has been demarcated and expects that the works will continue for five more years.<sup>28</sup> The porous border is a welcome sign for smugglers. Official statements usually refer only to petty contraband, such as cigarettes and alcohol. Meanwhile, fuel smuggling from Belarus remains elusive and can be “caught” only by investigative journalists.<sup>29</sup> Both sides are trying to fight such offenses by conducting special joint border guard operations, such as Bison-2015.<sup>30</sup>

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25 *На українсько-білоруському кордоні закінчився сезонний пропуск людей для збору дикоросів, 24.11.2015 – режим доступу: [http://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/about/news/news\\_9413.htm](http://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/about/news/news_9413.htm)*

26 *Щодо конфліктної ситуації на ділянці Ветлівської селищної ради Любешівського району Волинської області, 05.05.2016. – режим доступу: [http://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/about/news/news\\_11798.htm](http://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/about/news/news_11798.htm)*

27 *Щодо конфліктної ситуації на ділянці Ветлівської селищної ради Любешівського району Волинської області, 05.05.2016. – режим доступу: [http://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/about/news/news\\_11798.htm](http://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/about/news/news_11798.htm)*

28 *Почти треть госграницы с Украиной демаркирована – Мальцев, 06.04.2016. – режим доступу: [http://gpk.gov.by/news/na-granitsah-belarusi/index.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=21828&sphrase\\_id=1646356](http://gpk.gov.by/news/na-granitsah-belarusi/index.php?ELEMENT_ID=21828&sphrase_id=1646356)*

29 *Тышкевич И. Как заработать миллиарды на контрабанде между Украиной и Беларусью, 27.03.2016. - <http://hvylyu.net/analytics/economics/kak-zarabotat-milliardy-na-kontrabande-mezhdu-ukrainoy-i-belarusyu.html>*

30 *For more on the results of the special operation see: На кордоні з Білоруссю завершилася спільна правоохоронна операція «Зубр-2015». – режим доступу: [http://www.kmu.gov.ua/control/uk/publish/article?art\\_id=248682538&cat\\_id=244277212](http://www.kmu.gov.ua/control/uk/publish/article?art_id=248682538&cat_id=244277212)*



One of the common challenges is to identify channels for smuggling migrants from Ukraine via Belarus to the Baltic countries and from there to Scandinavia or from Belarus through Ukraine to the EU. A separate category of persons, quite a small one, who are also trying to enter Ukraine is asylum seekers, including citizens of Russia and Tajikistan. In contrast, the number of Belarusian asylum seekers in Ukraine is falling. Experts point this out in conversations, which may confirm the thesis that Ukraine remains a country where refugee status is hard to obtain. As far as Ukrainian labor migration to Belarus is concerned, available data show that, among the most popular destination countries, Ukrainian irregular migrant workers make up 42% of the total in Belarus (38% in Russia).<sup>31</sup> Factors contributing to this situation may include long-standing relationships, familiarity with the situation, higher wages, particularly in medical institutions and in the railway sector, well-established paths for shuttle trade, and so on.

Ukrainian border guards faced a new challenge in February 2016 – the accumulation of trucks at the Domanovo checkpoint when Russian vehicles were denied border crossing into Poland. Accordingly, in this conflict Ukraine turned into a transit territory through which Russian trucks bypassed Poland to enter the EU.

### 3.3. TRADE

Trade and economic cooperation have been another type of glue that has kept Ukraine and Belarus relatively close together, even during the turbulent times of the Russia-Ukraine confrontation. For Minsk, the conflict between Kyiv and Moscow became an extremely serious challenge from the economic standpoint, as well as in terms of national security, which pre-determined many of the government's decisions. Suffice it to say, Ukraine ranked second among Belarus' foreign trade partners in 2013, accounting for 7.8% of the total

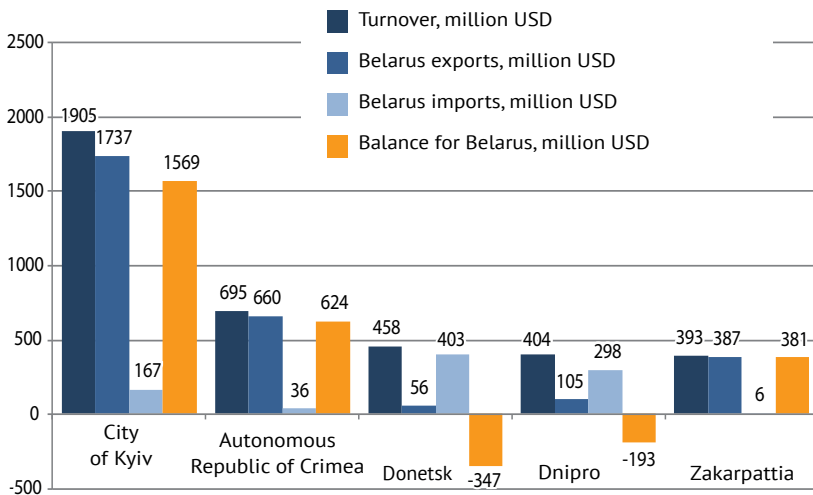
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<sup>31</sup> *Міграція як чинник розвитку в Україні: Дослідження фінансових надходжень, пов'язаних з міграцією, та їхнього впливу на розвиток в Україні. – К.: МОМ, Представництво в Україні, 2016. – С.43-44.*

volume of foreign trade. Importantly, its share in Belarus' exports was about 11.5% and Belarus earned USD 2.1 bn in surplus. And this was crucial, given Belarus' current account and foreign trade deficits and quite poor economic outlook.

It is also noteworthy, that the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas crisis affected two of Belarus' top trading partners among Ukrainian regions: the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the Donetsk region were, respectively, the second and third biggest trading partners (see Figure 1). Together, they accounted for more than USD 1 bn of trade with Belarus..

**Figure 1.** Belarus' top trading partners among Ukrainian regions in 2013

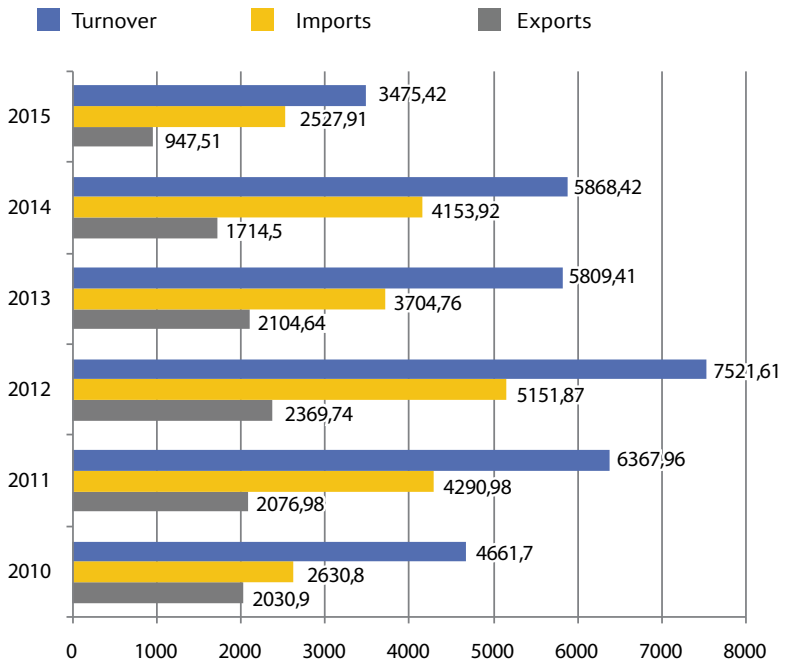


**Source:** *National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus*

For Ukraine, Belarus has been a less central, yet still very essential partner. In 2015, bilateral trade saw a dramatic decline by 40.8%, but Belarus remained Ukraine's second largest trade partner among

the CIS countries (after Russia). Before 2015, bilateral trade volume stayed at higher levels and demonstrated, especially in 2010-2012, noticeable growth (see Figure 2). Yet, for Ukraine the balance remained negative.

**Figure 2.** Ukraine's trade with Belarus, million USD



**Source:** Embassy of Ukraine in Belarus, <http://belarus.mfa.gov.ua/ru/ukraine-by/trade>

Thus, bilateral trade has seen huge losses over the Donbas crisis and overall economic difficulties that the countries are facing. At the same time, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, including mutual economic sanctions and the West's sanctions against Russia,

created some new opportunities for Ukraine-Belarus economic cooperation. As can be seen even from the trade statistics, these new niches are not enough to properly balance current trade losses, but they nonetheless offer opportunities to diversify the relations between Kyiv and Minsk.

Two new niches that often feature in the media are the re-export of Ukrainian goods to Russia (via Belarus) and increased air traffic between Minsk and Ukrainian destinations. The latter has turned Minsk and its international airport

*The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, including mutual economic sanctions and the West's sanctions against Russia, created some new opportunities for Ukraine-Belarus economic cooperation*

into a mini-hub that accommodates the needs of Russian and Ukrainian passengers. The authorities of Ukraine and Belarus have doubled the allowed number of flights between their capitals: now each side can have up to 11 flights a day. Moreover, Belarus has opened new air destinations in Ukraine: Odesa and Kharkiv.

All sorts of re-export schemes of Ukrainian goods via Belarus to Russia are difficult to track and, therefore, analyze, as most media reports talk about illegal schemes. However, vast opportunities exist for legal cooperation in re-routing flows of goods that used to be supplied directly between Ukraine and Russia. Belarus' bilateral agreements with Russia and the regulations of the Eurasian Economic Union allow this under the condition that goods of Ukrainian origin receive certain added value in Belarus. Therefore, both Kyiv and Minsk are interested in intensifying their trade relations and making use of the existing economic opportunities.

This has become a particularly important area for cooperation after 1 January 2016, when the free trade agreement between Ukraine and the EU entered into force. Minsk is seen in Ukraine as a potential platform for Ukrainian goods to enter the EEU space, given that Russia has pulled out of the free trade zone with Ukraine and introduced countersanctions against Kyiv<sup>32</sup>. As a member state of the EEU, Belarus, of course, has to coordinate its foreign trade policies

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<sup>32</sup> *Максак Г., op.cit.*

with the other member states. Nonetheless, on 21 December 2015, Lukashenko stated at the EEU summit that Belarus would not join Russia in terminating the free trade agreement with Ukraine in anticipation of the latter's free trade regime with the EU<sup>33</sup>.

***The Belarusian authorities, unlike their Russian colleagues, do not look at the situation only in black and white but are, rather, thinking about new opportunities against the background of the EU-Ukraine trade deal and Ukraine-Russia sanctions***

Yet, the Belarusian authorities are also eyeing the implementation of the EU-Ukraine free trade agreement with caution. The inflow of European goods onto the Ukrainian market is often seen as a potential challenge to low-competitive Belarusian producers. Together with the problem of small arms trafficking, it makes the Ukrainian border, in President

Lukashenko's opinion, a major source of heightened national security threat.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, a governmental working group was set up to monitor the imports from Ukraine during the first quarter of 2016. However, the Belarusian authorities, unlike their Russian colleagues, do not look at the situation only in black and white but are, rather, thinking about new opportunities against the background of the EU-Ukraine trade deal and Ukraine-Russia sanctions. An obvious potential opportunity is taking over the share of the Russian market formerly held by Ukrainian producers. Ukraine's main export goods to Russia in 2014 were machines, equipment, food, and metal and chemical products. Here only the food sector is promising for Minsk. Another opportunity is setting up joint companies with Ukraine – in Belarus in order to access the Eurasian market and in Ukraine with an eye to selling products in the EU.

Against the backdrop of falling mutual trade, the traditional import and export flows in Ukraine's trade with Belarus also leave much

<sup>33</sup> *Країни ЄАЕС не підтримали Росію в питанні відмови від ЗВТ із Україною, 21.12.2015. – режим доступу: <http://economics.unian.ua/finance/1218736-krajini-eaes-ne-pidtrimali-rosiyu-v-pitanni-vidmovi-vid-zvt-iz-ukrajinoju.html>*

<sup>34</sup> *Лукашенко потребує удосконалювати напрямлення діяльності силового блоку, 16.12.2015. – режим доступу: <http://www.belta.by/president/view/Lukashenko-trebuje-usovershenstvovat-napravlenija-deyatelnosti-silovogo-bloka-174285-2015/>*

to be desired. A lion's share of Ukrainian imports is made up by oil products. In 2015, they accounted for more than 70% of imports from Belarus, even though their amount fell by 6.7% compared to 2014.

In July 2015, the 23rd meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation was held in Chernihiv (the first such meeting since May 2013). Its participants defined priority sectors for Ukraine-Belarus economic cooperation as follows: energy, agriculture, machine building, aviation and space, as well as infrastructure projects. In some of these sectors, the sides need to overcome problems other than falling demand or low economic activity. For instance, in the energy sector several legal processes are in progress, which impedes trade. One such example is the case of aviation fuel imports, which Belarus stopped until the conflict between the Ukrainian customs and the BNK-Ukraine is settled in court. This has had a serious impact on Ukraine's aviation fuel market, as it is 50% dependent on imports and Belarusian imports accounted for 85% of its needs in 2015.

Overall, regular disputes and even "trade wars" remain typical of Ukraine-Belarus economic relations. This is where bilateral relations really become strained from time to time. In most cases, they result from protectionist policies on both sides.

A recent dispute of this kind involved mutual threats of introducing extra duties on each other's goods. It broke out in August 2015, after the Belarusian government adopted a decree subjecting all foreign goods, including Ukrainian and excluding those originating from the Eurasian Economic Union, to mandatory sanitary and hygienic certification. Kyiv retaliated with the idea of a special 39.2% duty on certain Belarusian goods. After long discussions and arguing in public, the parties announced that they would refrain from any counter sanctions. Moreover, it was in that context that Belarus announced that it would not introduce trade restrictions on Ukrainian goods after the free trade pact between Ukraine and the EU entered into force on 1 January 2016. Importantly, in order to prevent similar disputes in the future and facilitate their resolution once they occur, in October 2015 the countries established the High-Level Working Group, which is co-chaired by Ukraine's deputy minister of economic

development and trade and Belarus' first deputy minister of foreign affairs.

### 3.4. REGIONAL PROJECTS

Cooperation within the framework of regional projects is another important but insufficiently fulfilled area of mutual interest in Ukraine-Belarus relations. The fact that since the 1990s the two countries have mainly been following different tracks of regional preferences – focused on the post-Soviet space, Belarus had poor relations with the EU, whereas Ukraine looked more to the West and became cautiously involved in some post-Soviet projects – makes this realm even more interesting and promising. With such regional “specializations”, Kyiv and Minsk can mutually complement and reinforce each other, while contributing to regional development and potentially even to facilitating cooperation between the European and Eurasian integration projects. The latter looks like a long-term prospect at best, but today the countries can focus on some practical cooperation areas.

***Kyiv and Minsk can mutually complement and reinforce each other, while contributing to regional development***

The first such area is energy cooperation. It has long been a matter of discussions between Kyiv and Minsk. In 2009, the countries signed a memorandum of cooperation in the energy sphere and President Lukashenko publicly supported the need to develop strategic initiatives. Several cooperation projects were actively discussed, e.g., the construction of a nuclear power plant, transit of Ukrainian electricity to the Baltic states, construction of an LNG terminal in Odesa, and joint use of Ukrainian gas storage facilities. However, none of these was successfully implemented.

Another energy project that was launched but not realized properly had to do with oil transportation. In 2010, amidst a Belarus-Russia energy conflict, Ukraine agreed to receive in Odesa Belarus-bound oil shipped from Venezuela and then transport it to Belarus through the Odesa-Brody pipeline. The latter had to be used in the averse regime, which Kyiv allowed under the condition that Minsk guaranteed to

pump more than 9 million tons of oil per year. In the end, Belarus pumped only less than one million tons in 2011 and nothing afterwards.

The second area for regional projects of mutual interest is transport and transit infrastructure, which has also been a subject of active discussions at least since the inception of the Eastern Partnership. Currently, some of these discussions have intensified. In August 2015, for instance, during the visit of Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei to Kyiv and Odesa, the parties talked about activating the Baltic-Black Sea transport corridor. In particular, Kyiv agreed to consider the possibility of liberalizing customs procedures at Ukrainian Black Sea ports for Belarus-bound goods<sup>35</sup>. Interestingly, in Odesa, Foreign Ministers Makei and Pavlo Klimkin were joined by their Lithuanian colleague Linas Linkevicius for trilateral regional talks.

In February 2016, Lithuania and Ukraine signed a memorandum to combine the Viking railway project (Chornomorsk (former Illichivsk)-Minsk-Klaipeda) with the New Silk Belt project. Formally, Belarus has not yet acceded to the agreement but is de facto involved. As an official participant of the Viking project, it has become an important part of the future partnership. On the other hand, Belarus pays special attention to cooperation with Lithuania to become the final link in the Silk Road in Europe. At the XII Belarusian-Lithuanian forum, held in late May 2016, the development of joint projects with China, particularly within the framework of the FTA between the three parties and the development of the Big Stone industrial park, was one of the central discussion topics. Kyiv should pay attention to these negotiations between Lithuania and Belarus and to the conflict unfolding between these states involving Poland regarding the construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant in the town of Astravyets near the border with Lithuania.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Максац Г., *op.cit.*

<sup>36</sup> Hyndle-Hussein J. *Białoruska elektrownia jądrowa problemem dla Litwy: Analiza, 18.05.2016.* – режим доступу: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2016-05-18/bialoruska-elektrownia-jadrowa-problemem-dla-litwy>



The environmental dimension of regional cooperation is also extremely important. Belarus is seen here as a potential source of man-made environmental threat to the northern regions of Ukraine. Further use of the Chacislau quarry is a hazard to the ecosystem of the lakes in the Volyn region. The Ukrainian side has undertaken to perform continuous environmental monitoring of the Shatsk National Natural Park. Ukrainian environmentalists perceive further

***The environmental dimension of regional cooperation is also extremely important. Belarus is seen here as a potential source of man-made environmental threat to the northern regions of Ukraine***

risks in the operation of Belarusian agricultural and chemical industry enterprises in the Gomel region. Located near rivers, they pose the threat of an environmental disaster to the water bodies in Chernihiv region.<sup>37</sup>.

Finally, one more area for regional projects is the development of multilateral Euroregions. Two of them have been functional for a number of years already: Euroregion Bug (Belarus-Ukraine-Poland) and Euroregion Dnepr (Belarus-Ukraine-Russia). The main goal of such Euroregions is to promote transborder cooperation, particularly trade and economic development, environmental projects, and scientific and educational projects; to enhance communication and transport infrastructure; and to foster people-to-people contacts. The main problem that the two Euroregions have faced is a lack of permanent support and activities by the local authorities and self-governing bodies. In Euroregion Dnepr, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has lately been a major issue. At the same time, regional cooperation is a step towards establishing close contacts between the parties involved. No wonder that the implementation of the 2014-2020 Poland-Belarus-Ukraine cross-border cooperation is one of the key items on the Belarusian-Polish agenda. The EC has allocated nearly 176 million euros for this period of the program<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> *Національна доповідь про стан техногенної та природної безпеки у 2014 році. – режим доступу: [http://www.mns.gov.ua/files/prognoz/report/2014/ND\\_2014.pdf](http://www.mns.gov.ua/files/prognoz/report/2014/ND_2014.pdf)*

<sup>38</sup> *More details are available at the Program's web portal: <http://www.pl-by-ua.eu/ua>*

The Eastern Partnership Ukraine-Belarus Territorial Cooperation Program can also be used as a tool to promote regional projects. Like the Euroregions, it aims at facilitating sustainable transborder partnerships in the Volyn, Rivne, Zhytomyr, Kyiv, and Chernihiv regions of Ukraine and the Brest and Gomel regions in Belarus. It specifically targets local authorities, small- and medium-size enterprises, and communities and civil society organizations in order to support economic and social development, address common environmental and public health challenges and other issues with a cross-border dimension etc.

*The Eastern Partnership Ukraine-Belarus Territorial Cooperation Program can also be used as a tool to promote regional projects*

Specialists from both countries were able to receive important experience in the framework of the programs of the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States (Frontex). Joint training is designed to not only introduce new methods of risk analysis but also to discuss their implementation with the necessary adjustments for different EaP states. Assistance was provided, with the financial support from the European Union, for the development of migration management in both countries within the framework of the MIGRECO project administered by the International Organization for Migration.

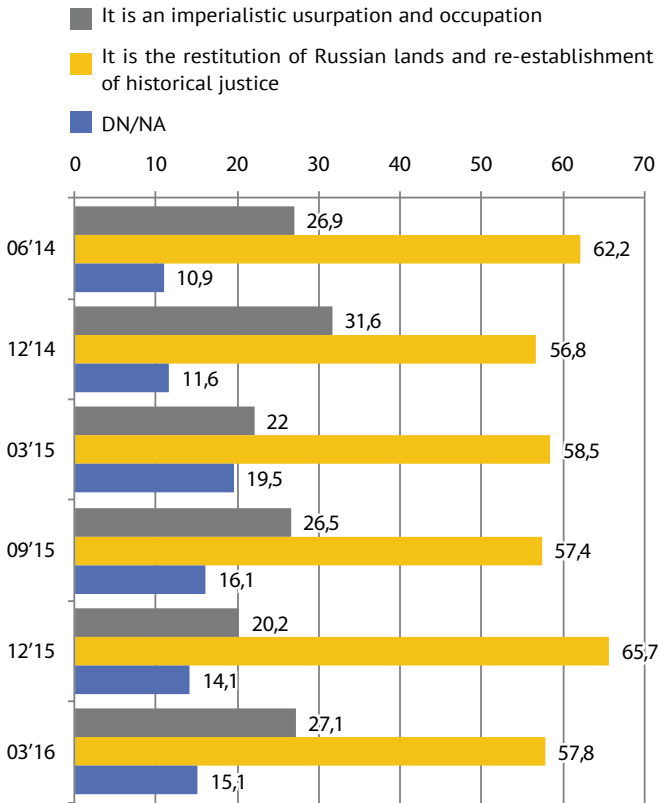
In some respects, Kyiv and Minsk can be seen as competitors in the existing and prospective regional projects, for example, vying for resources, the attention of external actors (the issue of the Chernobyl disaster is a case in point), or for leadership in certain regional niches. Yet, in most respects they can be mutually reinforcing drivers of regional cooperation. More such projects can be initiated and developed in the framework of the Eastern Partnership. Given the previously bad relations between Belarus and the EU (which have only started improving) and Ukraine's conflict with Russia, regional projects can offer serious opportunities for ameliorating regional asymmetries. In this way, by enhancing cooperation in the form of regional projects, Ukraine and Belarus can help each other to promote interests in their relations with third parties.

### 3.5. PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE DIALOGUE

Interpersonal relationships are the basis of any strategic partnership between states. For Ukraine and Belarus, these are based on family ties, intersectoral cooperation, tourism and shopping tours and cultural exchange. Moreover, this is an area where we can most frequently talk about the use of soft power for the development of bilateral relations.

A contemporary analysis of horizontal links between the citizens of both states requires a careful study of opinion polls on attitudes to other nations. Interestingly, the government's discourse and understanding of Ukraine's role for Belarus has been increasingly divergent with what Belarusian society at large thinks. Public opinion polls reveal dominant pro-Russian popular views in the context of Ukraine-Russia confrontation. For example, a sizeable majority of Belarusian respondents adhere to the Russian narrative and think that the annexation of Crimea was a historically justified return of the peninsula into its greater motherland (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** How would you assess the annexation of Crimea by Russia?



**Source:** *Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies*, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=4267&lang=en>

One more indicator of a gap in attitudes towards Ukraine between the general public and the government in Belarus is the answers to the question about who is to blame for the problems with the implementation of the Minsk-II Accords. Whereas President Lukashenko and Foreign Affairs Minister Makei keep underlining

that all sides bear responsibility, Belarusian citizens disagree (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** An agreement to settle the conflict in the Donbas was signed in February 2015. In your opinion, who is responsible for the fact that the conflict remains unresolved? (more than one answer is possible)



**Source:** *Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies*, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=4267&lang=en>

Under such circumstances, the Belarusian government faces one more limiting factor in its relations with Ukraine – the public opinion – and needs to be creative in interpreting its own foreign policy decisions. Doing it is surprisingly difficult when 65% of Belarusians have the Russian television for their main source of information and a mere 35% watch the Belarusian TV.<sup>39</sup> Russian TV channels are used by Russia as an information weapon against Ukraine and, if necessary, against President Lukashenko himself. Therefore, Ukraine, like anyone else, should be interested in changing the media space in Belarus. And this needs to be its main short-term objective in relations with Minsk.

<sup>39</sup> Kryvoi Y., Wilson A. *From sanctions to summits: Belarus after the Ukraine crisis.* – ECFR, 2015. - p. 5.

In covering the situation in Ukraine, Kyiv can rely on the small but active part of the Ukrainian diaspora.<sup>40</sup> In particular, the activities of Vatra, a Belarusian public association of Ukrainians, shows that cooperation between the diaspora and Ukraine's Foreign Affairs Ministry is picking up steam. An important role in building interpersonal relations is played by meetings with the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich, who became especially popular in Ukraine after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015.

An assessment of attitudes to Belarus in Ukraine paints a different picture. Recent surveys show that 83.6% of Ukrainians have a positive attitude to Belarus<sup>41</sup> and 63% to Lukashenko.<sup>42</sup>

**Recent surveys show that 83.6% of Ukrainians have a positive attitude to Belarus and 63% to Lukashenko**

Perception by the citizens of the neighboring country directly affects the practice of bilateral relations. Due to Russian propaganda, Belarusians significantly reduced travel to Ukraine, and the markets in Ukrainian border settlements felt it right away. In order to improve the image of Ukraine, the Chernihiv city mayor even arranged special press tours for Belarusian journalists. Moreover, the economic crisis in Belarus also contributed to the decline of shopping tours. Thus, although there is a separate shopping itinerary to Ukraine's most attractive market, located in Khmelnytsky, the volumes are not comparable with pre-war figures. The devaluation of the hryvnia made Ukrainian products attractive, causing spontaneous markets to spring up near border checkpoints.

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<sup>40</sup> According to the 2009 census in Belarus, Ukrainians make up 1.7% of its population: <http://census.belstat.gov.by/pdf/PopulationNation-en-US.pdf>. The Belarusian national minority is also small.

<sup>41</sup> Українці загалом добре ставляться до інших країн світу, і лише до Росії – негативно, 11.03.2016. – режим доступу: <http://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/general/330186.html>

<sup>42</sup> Українці найкраще ставляться до Лукашенка, Меркель і Грібаускайте, 10.02.2016. – режим доступу: [http://dt.ua/UKRAINE/ukrayinci-naykraschestavlyatsya-do-lukashenka-merkel-i-gribauskaite-199393\\_.html](http://dt.ua/UKRAINE/ukrayinci-naykraschestavlyatsya-do-lukashenka-merkel-i-gribauskaite-199393_.html)

The greatest losses were incurred by the tourism industry as Crimea used to be a major tourist destination for Belarusians. Time will show what new tourist routes will appear.

Ukrainian refugees in Belarus are another new phenomenon caused by the war. According to the UNHCR data as of 23 January 2015, 663 asylum seekers and another 59,637 applicants for other forms of stay were registered in Belarus in 2014.<sup>43</sup> According to data published on 10 March 2015, this category of Ukrainian citizens grew to 80,700 persons.<sup>44</sup> The Deputy Interior Minister of Belarus Nikolay Melchenko said in May 2016 that the flow of migrants from southeastern Ukraine slowed down considerably: 18,000 Ukrainians applied for a work permit in 2014 and 14,000 in 2015.<sup>45</sup>

Building bridges between the societies of both countries in such circumstances became the prerogative of NGOs. In particular, a variety of projects are being implemented with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's offices in Ukraine and Belarus. Their goal is to establish cooperation among experts, youth, and journalists of both countries and hold joint round tables, conferences, and summer schools. Chernihiv is turning into an unofficial center of this kind of cooperation, which fact can be effectively utilized by the municipal authorities. Organized events create a platform for joint reflection over the current state of the Ukrainian-Belarusian

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43 *УВКБ ООН закликає забезпечити безперешкодний доступ на сході України; виражає занепокоєння з приводу урядових постанов, що погіршують становище переміщених осіб, 23.01.2015. – режим доступу: <http://unhcr.org.ua/uk/novini/novyny/1431-uvkb-oon-zaklikae-zabezpechiti-bezpereshkodnij-dostup-na-skhodi-ukrajini-virazhae-zanepokoennya-z-privodu-uryadovikh-postanov-shcho-pogirshuyut-stanovishche-peremishchenikh-osib>*

44 *УВКБ ООН доставляє гуманітарну допомогу до Луганська в той час, як становище на Сході України надалі погіршується, 10.03.2015. – режим доступу: <http://unhcr.org.ua/uk/novini/novyny/1472-uvkb-oon-dostavlyae-gumanitarnu-dopomogu-do-luganska-v-toj-chas-yak-stanovishche-na-skhodi-ukrajini-nadali-pogirshuetsya>*

45 *Поток вынужденных мигрантов из юго-восточной Украины в Беларусь замедлился. – Мельченко, 26.05.2016 – режим доступу: <http://www.belta.by/society/view/potok-vynuzhdennyh-migrantov-iz-jugo-vostochnoj-ukrainy-v-belarus-zamedlilsja-melchenko-194830-2016/>*

relations, leading to the elaboration of specific recommendations for their improvement.

Finally, there is cultural exchange. Ukrainians follow many Belarusian music bands. Lyapis Trubetskoy, whose song “Warriors of Light” became the unofficial anthem of the Revolution of Dignity, is especially popular. Belarusian groups

*Chernihiv is turning into an unofficial center of this kind of cooperation, which fact can be effectively utilized by the municipal authorities*

playing ethnic music have long been participants of the annual Dreamland festival in Ukraine. On the other hand, the Ukrainian band Okean Elzy has a large fan base in Belarus. The Belarusian language has its supporters among the Ukrainian youth. Belarusian studies are part of the curriculum in Ukrainian universities, for example, in Kyiv National University, just like Ukrainian studies are in Belarusian State University. Moreover, there is a tradition of bilateral cooperation in the space and nuclear power industries. While scientific and technical cooperation is regulated by state institutions (the academies of sciences and ministries of education of both countries), cooperation in IT, the largest investment sector which is rapidly developing in both Ukraine and Belarus, needs no government intervention.



#### 4. STAKEHOLDERS, INTEREST GROUPS, AND INFLUENCE GROUPS

Singling out stakeholders and, particularly, interest and influence groups within the Belarusian political system and society is always a complicated task. Politically, the country is highly centralized and public institutions are tuned to sustain the power vertical. As a result, lobbying, as well as competition between interest and influence groups take place behind the scenes and non-transparently. Therefore, in order to avoid unreliable media stories and various popular conspiracies, analysis has to be limited to generalized groups.

***A key person in determining the nature of Ukrainian-Belarusian cooperation is the President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko***

A key person in determining the nature of Ukrainian-Belarusian cooperation is the President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko. He formulates positions on events in Ukraine and identifies which directions of cooperation are desirable for Minsk. This was the case also under President Yushchenko and in Yanukovych times, which were also marked by a certain cooling down of relations after Lukashenko was not invited to the conference on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster in 2011. During his official visit to Kyiv in June 2013, Lukashenko introduced the initiative to set up joint ventures to modernize the Ukrainian agribusiness. Back then, the idea was not supported by Ukrainian government officials, who were interested in cooperation with China, but today there are some signs that the Ukrainian side is ready to revisit the proposal. President Poroshenko seems to know best the decisive weight of Lukashenko's position. Poroshenko managed to establish effective cooperation between Kyiv and Minsk in 2009 in the capacity of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and later settle trade conflicts as the Minister of Economic Development and Trade. Moreover, Poroshenko came up with the initiative to hold a meeting of European officials in Minsk on 26 August 2014, which was the beginning of the "Minsk process". That the trilateral meeting in Minsk was initiated by Poroshenko was also noted by Lukashenko.

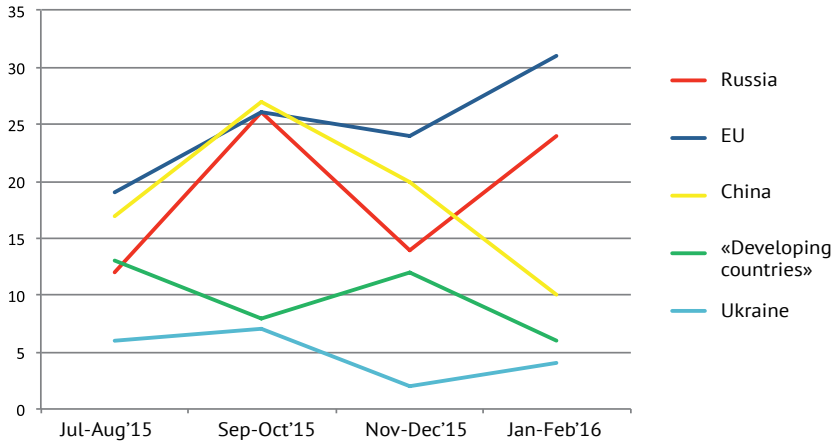
Another core stakeholder in the relations with Ukraine is the Belarusian government. It is difficult to single out any ministries or

individual representatives of the ruling elites who have the most influence on Belarus-Ukraine relations. Of course, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the most vocal and active interlocutor for Kyiv, which results from its foreign policy mandate and generally high professional level. Also, the MFA has the biggest say and influence (within the limited possibilities that are available to Belarus) on the course of the Minsk Process, primarily within the Trilateral Contact Group meetings. As was stressed above, Belarusian diplomats already provide unofficially logistical, secretariat and protocol functions to the Trilateral Contact Group. Moreover, it is First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Aliaksandr Mikhnevich who co-chairs the High-Level Working Group established in October 2015 with a view to preventing economic disputes between the countries.

The Belarusian Ambassador to Ukraine Valiantsin Vialichka is obviously a key actor in Ukraine-Belarus relations. The very fact that he has been in this ambassadorial position for 15 years and remains in it at the age of 71 already makes him an exceptionally long-serving top diplomat and attests to his special role in Ukraine-Belarus relations. The quality of his work during the days of the annexation of Crimea and intense fighting in the Donbas was highly valued and even praised by the Belarusian leaders.

Overall, the Belarusian government perceives its relations with Ukraine as less central than the ones with Russia and even the EU. In a very general sense, this is a reflection of the relations' intensity (see Figure 5). However, recent years have seen a noticeably growing understanding among the Belarusian authorities that Ukraine is key to Minsk's foreign policy and that ties with Ukraine are crucial for broader purposes rather than just for bilateral relations.

**Figure 5.** Intensity of Belarus' relations with key foreign policy partners, July 2015 – February 2016 (quantification of major events)



**Source:** *Belarus Foreign Policy Index, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, [http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS\\_FPI30\\_2016en.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_FPI30_2016en.pdf)*

Opposition parties and movements tend to be significantly more vocal on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and in their majority support the Ukrainian side. However, their role in Belarusian politics and society has been further marginalized in recent years, which makes the Belarusian opposition a factor of little significance in Belarus-Ukraine relations. Certain NGOs are now playing an even more influential role than political parties. Thus, all views on Ukraine and Minsk's relations with Kyiv seem to be represented: support, opposition and indifference.

A separate group of supporters and even friends of Ukraine includes representatives of the Belarusian opposition and diaspora. These people care about the positive development of Ukraine-Belarus relations, are well aware of the situation in both countries, and have a vision for the bilateral relations.

#### 4. Stakeholders, interest groups, and influence groups

As a separate influence group, the expert community in Belarus is playing an increasingly visible role for Belarus-Ukraine relations. Its weight and leverage should not be overestimated, yet its media presence and some important, even groundbreaking, initiatives can have significant potential. One such example is the Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative, which was launched in March 2015 as an expert platform with the aim of generating innovative policy recommendations for decision makers inside and outside of the post-Soviet states. It has already held a series of international conferences in which Ukraine has been a central item on the agenda.

*As a separate influence group, the expert community in Belarus is playing an increasingly visible role for Belarus-Ukraine relations*

## 5. EXISTING AND POTENTIAL RISKS AND CONFLICTS

MINSK LOSES THE STATUS OF THE NEUTRAL NEGOTIATION PLATFORM FOR RESOLVING THE DONBAS CRISIS AND BECOMES EXPOSED TO INCREASED RUSSIAN PRESSURE TO ESTABLISH A RUSSIAN MILITARY BASE

Belarus' neutral position on Russia-Ukraine conflict and the fact that Minsk hosts peace talks help the country argue that it is in the interests of all sides (including Russia) to have Belarus stay outside of regional tensions. This is a way for the country to hedge against the risks of being dragged into military confrontation against its will and an additional guarantee for Ukraine that the Belarusian territory will not be used for launching attacks. But the less productive the Minsk Process becomes and the more the sides of the conflict and international actors demand to change the negotiations venue, the more exposed Minsk becomes to increased Russian pressure to establish an airbase or another form of Russian military presence in Belarus. This elevates risks and threats to Ukraine's national security and drastically changes the economic and geopolitical situation in the region.

**Probability** Medium. With the Minsk-II Accords remaining largely unimplemented and the Minsk Process becoming protracted, Minsk is losing momentum and attraction as the ground for negotiations. At the same time, Russia-NATO relations are aggravated by the deployment of the American ballistic missile defense system in Romania and Poland. If the situation in the Donbas continues to deteriorate and geopolitical and military tensions in Eastern Europe rise as a result of growing NATO and Russian military presence, Minsk will find it really difficult to stay aside.

**How to avoid?** In order to remain firmly in the position of a neutral negotiation ground and facilitator, Minsk needs to demonstrate progress in the peace talks. In present-day conditions, this requires new ideas and initiatives to be realized on the Minsk platform. The role and functions of international organizations (e.g., the OSCE) could be

another direction of thought for the Minsk platform. In these circumstances, the Ukrainian government and expert communities need to pay special attention to the timely analysis of the situation in Belarus and, based on obtained data, elaborate Ukraine's tactics and strategy in case Belarus fails to maintain its essential neutrality in the conflict (for example, if a Russian airbase is set up in Belarusian territory).

#### NEW DISPUTES AND EVEN "TRADE WARS" IN BELARUS-UKRAINE BILATERAL TRADE OCCUR WHEN MINSK IS FORCED TO ABANDON ITS FREE TRADE REGIME WITH UKRAINE UNDER RUSSIA'S PRESSURE

Recurring trade disputes and even "trade wars" remain typical of Ukraine-Belarus economic relations. This is where the bilateral relations really become strained from time to time. In most cases, disputes result from protectionist policies on both sides and are then overblown by the media.

**Probability** High. Trade disputes between the two countries took place under all administrations and continue to happen, the current level of political relations notwithstanding. Bureaucratic protectionist logic is very difficult to confront, especially in political systems of the types that Belarus and Ukraine have. However, it is in Minsk's interests to keep the free trade regime with Ukraine, as it allows capitalizing on the existing trade situation between Ukraine and Russia and, more broadly, between Russia and the West. Yet, if things start getting out of control, Minsk might be forced to join Russia's actions on the grounds of its EEU and Union State obligations.

**How to avoid?** In all probability, disputes are unavoidable and will happen from time to time. It is only possible to minimize their number and severity. To this end, the recently launched High-Level Working Group that deals with preventing economic disputes between

the countries needs to become a permanent bilateral platform of first contact with real and effective leverage over the decision-making machines of the two states. The Working Group could also be supplemented with relevant expert groups. Moreover, in order to safeguard their businesses from potential losses, Ukrainian entrepreneurs need to explore new markets which are opened, in particular, by the Association Agreement with the EU.

### THE BELARUS-UKRAINE BORDER BECOMES AN IMMINENT THREAT TO THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF THE TWO COUNTRIES

Both governments consider the Belarus-Ukraine border a serious source of potential risks and threats to national security. It is important for Ukraine to stop the smuggling of goods and fuel and close the channels used for smuggling illegal migrants, as well as to be sure that mercenaries or reconnaissance and subversive groups do not use the incompletely demarcated border to infiltrate its territory. And Minsk is concerned about the inflows of asylum seekers, arms trafficking and the arrival of former or current combatants in Belarus.

**Probability** Medium to high. Given the underdeveloped border infrastructure and that the situation in the broader regional context may become more electricized and less controlled, all sources of potential threat are likely to make use of the porous border.

**How to avoid?** Kyiv and Minsk should continue close cooperation on all border issues and make it as a priority for every bilateral or multilateral (regional) project. The offices of the special representatives for border-related issues should be brought to a high operational and effective level. The completion of border demarcation should become a priority for the cooperation of the respective agencies of both countries.

POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES  
DETERIORATE, WHICH AFFECTS ALL IMPORTANT AREAS OF  
BILATERAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

Political relations and, more specifically, personal relations between the leadership of the countries have been the key driver of all types of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. They played a crucial role at the outbreak of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, when uncertainties and unpredictability could easily lead to uncontrolled developments. Given the multiple challenges and risks that surround Ukraine-Belarus relations, the quality of political dialogue will remain the top factor for many years to come.

**Probability** Low to high. Even against the background of various regional and national threats and unpredictable developments, Kyiv and Minsk will do everything possible to preserve the current level of political relations. They can suffer from minor disputes and misunderstandings, but the countries have the political will and pragmatic need to overcome all serious conflicts. On the other hand, Ukraine cannot rule out separate agreements between Putin and Lukashenko against the Ukrainian state. Nor is it possible to predict what leverage Moscow might use to change Minsk's position.

**How to avoid?** More communication channels should be developed at all levels of government and society. Various bilateral and regional forums initiated jointly by Kyiv and Minsk, including at non-governmental and expert levels, can also serve the purpose of enrooting the present-day quality of the relations. Developing a joint regional agenda (e.g., on military security, energy, and infrastructure issues) can further advance the bilateral relations and make them even more stable. While personal contact with President Lukashenko may for now remain the main channel of communication, this situation also requires greater skill in applying backchannel diplomacy.



## UKRAINIAN CITIZENS MAY BECOME HOSTAGE TO THE BILATERAL RELATIONS AND THE GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION IN BELARUS

The unstable geopolitical situation and the dependence of Ukraine-Belarus relations both on the will of the Belarus leadership and on the Russian factor have already set precedents when some citizens of Ukraine became hostage to the situation. This was the case when Ukrainian citizens were detained in Minsk in April 2005 to teach Kyiv a lesson for allegedly interfering with the internal affairs of Belarus.<sup>46</sup> The situation persists to this day as Ukrainian citizens are occasionally denied entry to Belarus.

**Probability** Low to high. The so-called “blacklists” of Ukrainian citizens who are banned entry to Russia can be used by Belarusian border guards to deny entry to Belarus. If the relations between the two states deteriorate, there is no guarantee that criminal proceedings will not be opened against Ukrainian citizens, as is the case in Russia.

**How to avoid?** It is important to work out legal preventive measures to reduce the risks of recurrence of cases when Ukrainian citizens are imprisoned for political reasons in Belarus, as it happens in Russia. Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has to make a commitment of timely informing Ukrainian citizens about all possible risks of staying in the territory of Belarus.

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<sup>46</sup> Свірко Ю. П’ять громадян України залишаються за ґратами в Мінську принаймні до вівторка. 02.05.2005. – режим доступу: <http://www.radiosvoboda.mobi/a/929922.html>

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. it is important for Ukraine to maintain the neutral status of Belarus in the conflict with Russia. To this end, Ukraine needs to enlist the support of not only the Belarusian authorities but also Belarusian society. This can be achieved only by developing a distinct communication campaign to bring information about the situation in Ukraine to Belarusians. To enter Belarus' media space, Ukrainian radio and television channels need to be rebroadcasted, and Ukraine needs to continue negotiating this with President Lukashenko. Importantly, opinion leaders, journalists, and public figures of both countries have to be involved in communication campaigns.
2. In the conditions of an unstable geopolitical situation and continued fighting in eastern Ukraine, it is in the interests of both countries to rapidly complete border demarcation. It is important to continue the good tradition of joint border control and develop measures to combat border crossing offenses. A closed and well-controlled border will not only enhance security but also protect both economies against losses caused by smuggling. However, the border should not turn into a hard-to-cross "iron curtain" that would complicate relationships between the citizens of both countries.
3. The change of EU policy on Belarus defines the common goals of the EU member states and Ukraine regarding Belarus. Kyiv, Brussels, and other capitals, especially those of the CEE countries, needs to maintain the neutral status of Belarus and prevent a Russian airbase and other military facilities from being set up in its territory. Thus, it is essential to introduce the initiative of coordinating efforts and establishing continuous political dialogue between Ukraine, the EU, and Belarus.
4. In the new geopolitical realities, Kyiv and Minsk can join efforts to provide cybersecurity and counteract misinformation, which will increase the capacity of both countries in confronting "hybrid warfare".
5. Both countries are now interested in developing bilateral economic and trade cooperation. As they face an economic crisis

and globalization and the consequences of the conflict in the Donbas, which has affected the trade turnover, the governments must move away from protectionist policies and abandon “trade wars” as a means of solving contentious economic issues.

6. In order to bring Belarusian tourists and businessmen back to Ukraine and support those Belarusian citizens who have moved to Ukraine for residence, it is advisable to change migration policy on Belarusians. Among other things, the restriction on the length of stay in the territory of Ukraine for employed Belarusian citizens should be lifted, and the bureaucratic procedures for granting residence permits to asylum seekers need to be simplified as much as possible.
7. Jointly with the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Belarus, Ukraine should encourage cooperation between NGOs and participate in discussion expert forums on the topical issues of bilateral relations. The citizens of both countries need to be encouraged to develop an interest in the culture of the neighboring state. Moreover, it is necessary to extend the experience of the Belarusian-Lithuanian business forums and involve Ukrainian experts and businesses in trilateral cooperation. The diplomats of both countries must understand that the more actively citizens are engaged in joint projects, the lower are the risks of potential conflicts.
8. Academic exchanges of students and researchers should become another platform for long-term cooperation. Joint research projects, summer schools, training sessions, and workshops that bring young people together are another investment in the secure future of both countries. Crucially, such endeavors need to not only be supported by Western donors but also financed from the Ukrainian and Belarusian budgets.
9. Both countries have a good chance of using Chinese investments for infrastructure development and better optimization of their transit capacity. The Viking Train, a joint trilateral project of Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, shows that cooperation in this area can be quite effective. Another example of cooperation

can be the creation of joint Ukrainian-Belarusian enterprises to assemble agricultural machinery in Ukraine.

10. Ukraine should not delay the appointment of a new ambassador to Belarus. In the absence of the leader of its diplomatic mission in Minsk, Kyiv is deprived of an important channel of timely and effective communication with the Belarusian authorities. Regardless of whether the situation shifts in the direction of peace or that of war, not having one's representative in Minsk could significantly weaken Ukraine's position. Moreover, in this way or another Minsk repeatedly finds itself in the focus of attention of European countries, as evidenced by a recent visit of the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs. Therefore, joining efforts and establishing cooperation with their counterparts in the EU member states must become an important tactical move of Ukrainian diplomats in Minsk.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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01001, Україна, Київ, вул. Еспланадна, 32 В, офіс 1  
Тел. +38 044 374 03 11  
e-mail: [info@iwp.org.ua](mailto:info@iwp.org.ua)



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Office 1, Str. Esplanadna 32 V, Kyiv, 01001, Ukraine  
Tel. +38 044 374 03 11  
e-mail: [info@iwp.org.ua](mailto:info@iwp.org.ua)



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