UKRAINIAN PRISM: TEN YEARS OF EXPERTISE

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG BELARUS

BELARUS–UKRAINE RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF MINSK–WASHINGTON DIALOGUE

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SUMMARY

- **Context.** The resumption of dialogue between Washington and Minsk under the Trump administration, accompanied by the release of political prisoners and the easing of sanctions on certain Belarusian companies, has opened a window of opportunity for the Lukashenka regime to partly reduce its international isolation. In parallel, Poland and Lithuania have begun to build their own tracks of engagement with Minsk, guided by their own vulnerability to Belarusian and Russian threats.
- **Ukraine's belated activation.** For a long time Kyiv remained on the periphery of these processes and took a passive position, until the shift in public rhetoric toward the Lukashenka regime and the first meeting between President Zelenskyy and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya signaled a noticeable adjustment of approach.
- **Reasons for the change in tone.** The need to warn Lukashenka against further involving Belarus in the war, the wish to demonstrate Kyiv's own "red lines" against the backdrop of talks between Minsk and Washington, and the logic of implementing plans to end hostilities, which requires the Belarusian question to be resolved.
- **Limits of the current approach.** Despite these shifts, Kyiv's approach remains tactical rather than strategic: systemic issues, including the legalization of Belarusians in Ukraine, are still unresolved.
- **Risks of a limited approach.** The absence of a proactive policy of its own means that Ukraine may become an observer of broader processes around Belarus, and that Kyiv's interests will not be fully taken into account by external actors.
- **The "two tracks" model.** A proactive policy should include a certain level of practical engagement with the Lukashenka regime within clearly defined "red lines" (border security, humanitarian issues, no deepening of defense integration with Russia) and a set of pressure instruments in case those "red lines" are violated, together with a parallel, long-term, institutionalized track of support for Belarusian democratic forces and society.
- **Economic dimension.** Belarus is of exceptional importance to Ukraine from the security, geographic and economic points of view. Despite the deterioration, Belarusian-Ukrainian relations still hold considerable but uneven potential, the realization of which depends on how the war ends.
- **Main conclusion.** Kyiv should start preparing its toolkit for dealing with Belarus now, rather than shaping its approach after the fact, once the parameters of a peace agreement or of the regional balance of power take clearer form.

INTRODUCTION

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and his efforts to find ways to end the Russia-Ukraine war have created a new space for resuming dialogue between Washington and official Minsk. Since 2024, the sides have held a series of consultations, which have resulted in several rounds of political prisoner releases and a partial easing of American sanctions on certain Belarusian companies, banks and state structures. This process has at the same time pushed Poland and Lithuania to shape their own tracks of engagement with the Lukashenka regime, driven by each country's specific vulnerability to potential threats from Belarus.

For a long time Ukraine stayed on the sidelines of these processes, adapting to circumstances rather than shaping its own agenda. The situation began to change only at the turn of 2025-2026, when a change in rhetoric toward the Lukashenka regime coincided with a gradual warming of political contacts with Belarusian democratic forces, in particular the first meeting between President Zelenskyy and the leader of the Belarusian democratic opposition, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Nevertheless, despite these shifts, there is no basis for saying that Kyiv has a coherent, long-term strategy toward Belarus: its reaction is rather situational and in part follows the dynamics of the Belarusian-American or Belarusian-European dialogue instead of anticipating it.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the current foreign policy situation around Belarus, assess the interests of the key actors, namely the Lukashenka regime, the United States, Russia, Poland and Lithuania, and on that basis formulate practical approaches to work on the Belarusian track. This study is an attempt to give impetus to a broader discussion of what Kyiv's realistic interests regarding Belarus should be, both in the short term and over a longer time horizon.

The study relies on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods: on the one hand, desk research and a series of 16 semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian and Belarusian experts and politicians, and on the other, an analysis of bilateral trade statistics and logistics flows. Structurally, the text is divided into two blocks. The first block is devoted to the foreign policy context around Belarus and covers an assessment of the approaches of the United States, the Russian Federation, Poland and Lithuania to the Belarusian question. The second block focuses on Ukraine's position: it analyzes relations with the Lukashenka regime and with Belarusian democratic forces, outlines potential principles of work, and articulates Ukraine's interests on the Belarusian track.

1. FOREIGN POLICY SITUATION AROUND BELARUS

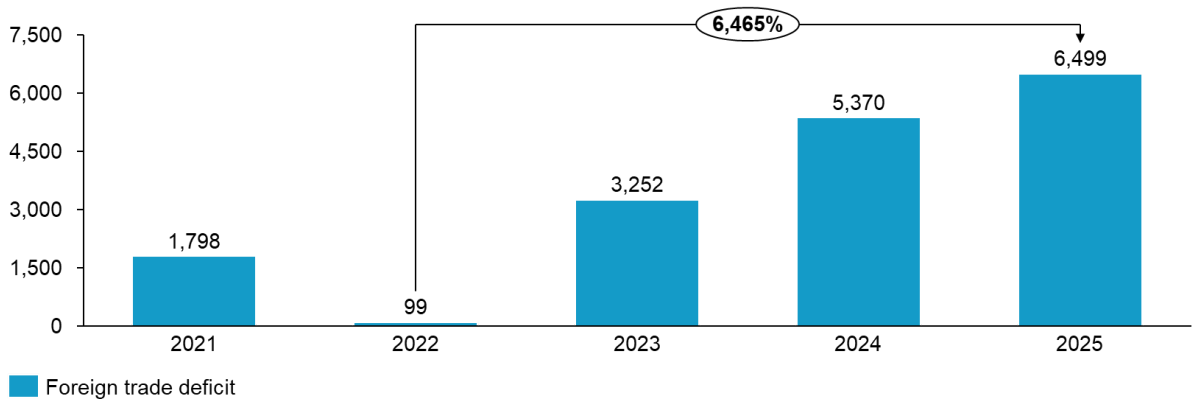
1.1. FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES OF THE LUKASHENKA REGIME

The Russian Federation remains Belarus's main foreign policy priority, and the survival of the Lukashenka regime depends on its assistance. Russia matters not only as a political partner but above all as an economic one: in conditions of partial foreign policy isolation, Russia is the main market for Belarusian goods and the key logistics route through which Belarus can export to the so-called "far arc" countries, in particular in Asia and Africa.

Traditionally, the foreign policy of the Lukashenka regime has been largely subordinated to the task of increasing exports and finding new markets for Belarusian products. This economic logic historically gave rise to Minsk's characteristic model of balancing between Russia and the European Union, since diversifying foreign economic ties has always been for the regime a matter not of ideological choice but, above all, of the need to secure sales and foreign currency earnings.[1] Even after 2020 and 2022 this logic did not change, although there are fewer opportunities, and despite a difficult and complex foreign policy situation, official Minsk still tries to take measures to minimize risks and diversify its partnerships.[2]

One such opportunity was the dialogue between the Lukashenka regime and the United States. The motives for rapprochement with Washington are to some extent linked to the gradual deterioration of Belarusian exports, in particular on the Russian market: Belarusian producers face competition from Chinese and Turkish companies, and the market itself does not always need such large volumes of Belarusian products. In addition, because of the limited capacity of Russian logistics infrastructure, it is difficult for Minsk to increase exports to more distant countries.

Fig. 1. Dynamics of the foreign trade deficit of the Republic of Belarus, USD million



[1] Based on the expert interview conducted with a Ukrainian expert
[2] Based on the expert interview conducted with a Ukrainian politician

As a result, in 2023 the foreign trade deficit more than tripled compared with 2022, to USD 3,252 million. The deterioration then became persistent: in 2024 the deficit deepened to USD 5,370 million, and in 2025 to USD 6,499 million, the worst figure in the past 6 years. The negative trend continues in 2026 as well: despite growth in exports, the negative trade balance in the first half of this year amounted to USD 2,780 million.

Since the regime's economic model essentially comes down not to development but to preserving the status quo, any threat to economic stability is existential for Lukashenka, because it risks a social explosion similar to the protests of 2011–2012.[3] That is why Lukashenka saw in rapprochement with the United States a certain window of opportunity for economic maneuver, since dialogue with Washington can potentially create the conditions not only for bilateral agreements but also for a broader range of contacts with Western countries.[4] Consequently, since 2024 Belarusian diplomats and lobbyists have noticeably stepped up their work, and for communication with Europeans, in addition to expert diplomacy, official Minsk uses two main channels:

1. **Security services.** The head of the KGB, Ivan Tertel, has already taken part in negotiations with the American delegation in Minsk and has publicly commented on the results of the talks with US representatives. In addition, the KGB maintains contacts with European security services and is involved in discussing sensitive issues with Polish and Lithuanian security officials.

2. **Work through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.** Dialogue with Western European actors is handled by Belarus's ambassador to the Vatican, Yury Ambrazevich, who previously served as deputy foreign minister (the Vatican has traditionally been one of the channels through which the Lukashenka regime lobbied for the thawing of relations with EU countries). The Belarusian diplomat actively tries to meet any Western interlocutors willing to make contact, even if they are lower than him in rank.[5]

This dual system is caused by different problems in relations with Belarus's neighbors and with Western European countries. The KGB takes part in the dialogue because the agency is involved in drawing up the lists of oppositionists whom Lukashenka releases as part of political bargaining with the Americans, and also because Poland and Lithuania mostly perceive Belarus through the prism of security threats, which makes dialogue at the level of security officials entirely justified. At the same time, the geographic distance of Western European countries and the absence of a sense of direct danger from the regime create conditions for the work of classical diplomats, such as Yury Ambrazevich and other representatives of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Despite the intensification of contacts with the West, the Lukashenka regime shows no signs of a strategic move away from Russia. Its foreign policy continues to be determined above all by the logic of survival: worsening trade dynamics,

[3] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert
[4] Based on an interview with a Ukrainian politician
[5] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

narrowing export opportunities and critical dependence on Russian logistics force Minsk to look for a limited space for maneuver. In this context, dialogue with the United States and individual European states serves as an instrument for diversifying risks, and not as an attempt to radically change the country's geopolitical orientation.

1.2. US APPROACH TO BELARUS AND RUSSIA'S REACTION TO THE BELARUSIAN-AMERICAN DIALOGUE

A reassessment of American strategy toward Belarus also took place already under the Biden administration, since after 2020, with the emergence of organized centers of the Belarusian opposition abroad, Washington began to see the Belarusian question as part of a broader regional context.[6] With Trump's arrival, a pragmatic, mercantile interest was added to the humanitarian logic, and the administration's transactional approach considerably accelerated the process. Donald Trump has taken transactional diplomacy to a new level, because reputational toxicity is of practically no importance to his administration. Taking advantage of this, Lukashenka also began to signal his interest actively, probably attracting the interest of different sections of the Trump administration.

Thus, on the one hand, humanitarian negotiations could become for Donald Trump another opportunity to show a success story, and on the other hand, the humanitarian track opened opportunities for a broader dialogue, for passing certain messages to the American side, and for seeking levers of influence on Russia in the context of the Trump administration's attempts to end the Russia-Ukraine war. In addition, the Belarusian issue may also have a certain geopolitical and economic dimension for Washington, which is due to two factors:

- Since 2025 the United States has faced problems with importing potash fertilizers from Canada against the backdrop of worsening relations between Washington and Ottawa, which makes importing products from Belarus a rather attractive way out of the situation. Lukashenka himself signaled readiness to sell the Nizhyn Mining and Processing Plant to the Americans, and the Americans confirmed their interest in Belarusian potash fertilizers and worked through options for their possible supply.
- Although the Americans also used Lukashenka to pass certain messages to Moscow, Washington's other interests lie in a clearer definition and understanding of Belarus's role in the postwar security architecture of the region, and in preventing its competitors (above all China) from gaining more influence in a country that is quite important in terms of geography.

In the context of the emerging opportunities for contacts between Belarus and the United States, the question arises of how Moscow reacts to such developments. Judging by everything, Russia's reaction to the rapprochement between Minsk and Washington is also not uniform, since several agencies monitor developments in relations with Belarus at once, so Moscow's reaction may have several levels:

[6] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

1. **Russian Ministry of Defense.** No discontent from the Russian military is observed, since the Russian Ministry of Defense is fully satisfied with the level of military-industrial, material and logistical support from Minsk. The Belarusian military-industrial complex mostly fulfills the Russian defense order, and Belarus plays its role well in psychological and information pressure and in creating hypothetical tension.

2. **Foreign Intelligence Service.** Concern, by contrast, is traditionally shown by the security services, above all the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the Rossotrudnichestvo agency close to it, which have historically had a paranoid attitude toward any attempts by Lukashenka to pursue an independent policy, even in trivial matters such as giving up St George ribbons. This may be due to the fact that a de facto separate branch of the SVR has formed in Minsk, to which employees who were exposed on assignments in Europe are usually transferred, and it is most likely from there that signals come that the Belarusian side may not like.

3. **Ministry of Foreign Affairs.** Like the SVR, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also monitors Minsk's work in the foreign policy field more closely and coordinates its position with the security services, which is rather due to its traditionally higher level of expertise on Belarus-related issues. A telling example was that this spring the SVR announced that the West was preparing a "revolution" in Belarus, which the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs joined almost immediately, and the statement coincided in time with Lukashenka's decision not to attend the Board of Peace summit.

Thus certain "red lines" on Russia's part, it seems, do exist, but they are articulated not by the Kremlin directly but by the agencies that have historically been on the most paranoid flank of Russian policy toward Belarus.[7] Over the past five years Putin has not once publicly warned Lukashenka against any actions, and the Russian president himself probably does not fear that Minsk will leave Russian influence.

The Belarusian-American rapprochement resulted from a combination of Washington's humanitarian, geopolitical and economic interests. At the same time, Russia's reaction is more complex than the traditional notion of a single Kremlin position: while the security services and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs show heightened wariness, the political leadership in effect allows Lukashenka limited diplomatic maneuver, seeing no threat in it to Russian dominance in Belarus.

1.3. POLAND AND LITHUANIA: TWO APPROACHES TO ENGAGEMENT WITH MINSK

It is natural that the intensification of contacts between the United States and Belarus eventually acquired a broader regional dimension, since possible agreements between Minsk and Washington could pose a certain threat to Belarus's neighboring countries. Since Donald Trump came to power, the United States has by no means

[7] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

always consulted regional partners on Belarusian issues. In particular, in the first half of 2025, until roughly August, both Lithuanian and Polish authorities voiced many complaints about the lack of precise information on Washington's intentions, and the main source of anxiety in both countries remained the fear that the United States would impose its own agenda on the region without taking local interests into account.[8]

Nevertheless, despite shared concern at the start, both countries stepped up their work on the Belarusian track in order to prevent a scenario in which their interests are not taken into account, in effect building their own track of contacts and ways of engaging with the Lukashenka regime. Despite similar fears, the foreign policy positions of the two countries differ fundamentally, and the difference is explained primarily by different amounts of resources and different types of vulnerability to potential threats from Belarus and Russia.

Poland | the Polish side, having greater resources, has more opportunities for conducting a limited and pragmatic dialogue with official Minsk, often following a "carrot and stick" approach.[9] A telling example of this logic was that in autumn 2025 Warsaw temporarily suspended the operation of all functioning border crossings, which forced China to intervene. The restrictions were later lifted, and Poland reopened 2 additional crossings that had not operated since 2021. Minsk, for its part, reduced migration pressure on Poland, and hybrid pressure was redirected first to Lithuania, which suffered from weather balloon flights, and then to Latvia, which faced a significant increase in attempts at illegal border crossing.

Another tangible result of pragmatic engagement was the agreement on the release of Andrzej Poczobut, which was reached with the participation of the American side and which Warsaw repeatedly named as one of the preconditions for returning to dialogue with Belarus. Moreover, Minsk did not obstruct Poczobut's trip to Belarus in September of this year, where he stayed for several days and took part in a number of events organized by the Union of Poles in Belarus.

The exchange of gestures continued, and on 23 September in New York the first meeting in a long time between the foreign ministers of Poland and Belarus took place. Polish Foreign Minister Sikorski described the meeting as merely introductory, comparing the chance of normalization to a snowdrop that "may bloom if the weather helps," and announced the opening of new embassy premises in Minsk, which should also be seen as one of the signs of readiness for further limited dialogue, through which Warsaw manages to resolve practical issues in order to avoid unwanted escalation and maintain security on its eastern borders.

Lithuania | the situation with Lithuania is different: for it the Belarusian question is both a foreign policy issue and, because of the country's greater vulnerability, practically a domestic policy issue. Lithuania's vulnerability is explained by a combination of several factors: a shared border with Belarus, a negative stereotype of the Lukashenka regime formed over decades, and the sacred significance of Vilnius and the historical legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania for Belarusian national consciousness, which gives rise to a Lithuanian fear of "Belarusization." On top of this

[8] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert
[9] Based on the expert interview conducted with a Ukrainian expert

comes mass migration, which the Lithuanian authorities frame as a security problem, unlike Ukrainians, with whom there is no shared border and no mutual historical disputes. The pressure on the Belarusian community in Lithuania is unprecedented (the number of Belarusians in the country has fallen by roughly 15-20 thousand over the past two years), and the internal split within the Lithuanian political class is being actively exploited by supporters of rapprochement with Lukashenka, in particular John Coale, the US Special Envoy for Belarus, who separately gathered such supporters in Lithuania.

The domestic Lithuanian picture is complemented by a purely institutional dimension: despite the shared pro-European and pro-NATO rhetoric, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs consistently takes the most pro-European position (since it is this agency that leads the track), while the presidency and the Seimas try to balance between the European Union and the United States, and this balance is additionally affected by active lobbying from the Belarusian side regarding the easing of sanctions. The situation is further complicated by the presence in Lithuania of a small number (about a thousand people) of American troops. Given its limited own defense capabilities and its immediate proximity to Russia and Belarus, Lithuania depends on American troops in the region. It is this dependence that forces Vilnius to balance between loyalty to the common position of the European Union and preserving its strategic partnership with the United States, avoiding direct confrontation with Washington.[10]

So, trying to avoid a scenario in which Belarus-related issues are resolved without taking Lithuania's interests into account, Vilnius began to shape its own negotiating track with Belarus. At the end of October 2025, Lithuania, largely following Poland's example, temporarily closed one of the road sections of the border with Belarus for a month, in order to raise the stakes and demonstrate readiness for tougher action toward Minsk. However, that experiment was not very successful, since the Lukashenka regime blocked more than 1,000 Lithuanian trucks that were in Belarus at the moment the border was closed, threatening to confiscate them. Even the resumption of operations at the crossings did not help de-escalate the situation until the United States intervened in it more actively.

In spring 2026, John Coale visited Lithuania, where he stated that Washington would be interested in restoring dialogue between Minsk and Vilnius, and later it even became known that the US State Department had sent Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine an official letter setting out a proposal to consider the possibility of restoring the transit of Belarusian potash fertilizers. At that point the Lithuanian side made it clear that it was ready for dialogue at the level of foreign ministers if Minsk fulfilled a number of conditions, including stopping migration pressure and smuggling using weather balloons. And although over the following months Belarusian customs released the detained Lithuanian trucks, and Minsk also began to launch weather balloons and use migration pressure less actively, no serious negotiations took place.

A new attempt by American negotiators to assess the prospects for restoring the transit of Belarusian potash fertilizers took place in September 2026, when John Coale, after talks in Minsk, visited Vilnius and Riga, where, among others, he met with the President of Lithuania and the Prime Minister of Latvia. Border security is

[10] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

one of the key conditions for the Baltic states, and without Minsk meeting it, the prospects for serious dialogue on further steps to improve bilateral relations are unclear.

Thus Poland and Lithuania react differently to the new diplomatic dynamics around Belarus, which reflects differences in their resources and security vulnerability. Despite these differences, both countries have already partly formed their own tracks of engagement with Minsk. This means that regional policy toward Belarus is no longer determined solely by relations between Minsk and Moscow and increasingly depends on multi-level interaction among actors.

2. UKRAINE'S POLICY TOWARD BELARUS: FROM REACTING TO SHAPING A STRATEGY

These three components, that is, Minsk's motivation to seek dialogue with Washington, the pragmatic and transactional approach of the Trump administration, and the increasingly active, though different in character, position of Poland and Lithuania, together mean that a new regional configuration is taking shape around Belarus, in which each actor tries to protect its own interests. For Ukraine this creates both risks and opportunities: on the one hand, decisions concerning Belarus may be made without Kyiv's participation; on the other, opportunities are opening up for Ukraine, and the need for a clearer articulation of its own interests is growing.

2.1. BELARUSIAN-AMERICAN RAPPROCHEMENT AS ONE OF THE FACTORS BEHIND THE ACTIVATION OF UKRAINE'S POSITION ON BELARUS

Like Poland and Lithuania, which, as shown above, began building their own tracks of engagement with Minsk precisely out of fear of being left out of decision-making, Ukraine faced the same challenge, although it responded to it much later. Its long-standing position on the periphery of the Belarusian-American track made Ukraine more of a hostage to the situation than a co-creator of it. Noticeable changes took place only at the end of 2025, when the Ukrainian side joined the process of releasing Belarusian political prisoners, most of whom were delivered in transit through Ukraine to EU countries, among them such emblematic figures of the 2020 protests as Viktar Babaryka and Maria Kalesnikava. In January the first meeting took place between President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and already in May the opposition leader arrived in Kyiv on her first visit.

In parallel, the security factor became more prominent in the public space. During May-June 2026, the Ukrainian side reported the detection on Belarusian territory of relay stations that, according to available data, were meant to provide more effective coordination of Russian drone flights along Ukraine's northern border, and Kyiv threatened to resort to kinetic action to disable this equipment. Over the following months, President Zelenskyy and other senior officials, including the then Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Oleksandr Syrskyi, repeatedly stressed that Russia might be preparing to involve Minsk in the war further and to use Belarusian territory again for military purposes. According to the President of Ukraine, Russia had allegedly been working out up to five possible scenarios for an offensive from the north, including in the Chernihiv-Kyiv direction. In this context Kyiv began to strengthen fortifications along the border with Belarus, and the Security Service of Ukraine stepped up security measures in the five border regions that adjoin Belarus.

The change in the tone of the Ukrainian authorities' rhetoric, which in previous years had reacted to the actions of the Lukashenka regime very cautiously, is linked to several interrelated factors that complement one another:

- **A warning to Lukashenka.** The logic here is built in three consecutive steps: given the increasingly noticeable difficulties of the Russian army with recruiting contract soldiers, there were fears that after the autumn elections to the Russian parliament the Kremlin would announce compulsory mobilization; such an expansion of the armed forces would in theory give Moscow additional opportunities to open new fronts, and this in turn raises the risk of Belarus being drawn deeper into the war. That is why the rhetoric and actions of the Ukrainian authorities at this stage were meant to warn Lukashenka: any deeper involvement of Belarus in the war will cause an immediate and harsh response.

- **Demonstrating its own "red lines" against the backdrop of talks between Belarus and the United States.** The lengthy talks and mutual concessions between the United States and Belarus, as well as Washington's encouragement of Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine to consider restoring the transit of Belarusian potash fertilizers, raised the question of Kyiv's role in the broader geopolitical processes around Belarus. In this context, a tougher rhetorical line serves as a way to raise the stakes and show that Ukraine has its own "red lines" regarding Belarus, and that the regime in Minsk should not expect to achieve its interests quickly even with US support. Against this background official Kyiv began a gradual rapprochement with Belarusian democratic forces, in particular with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. It is noteworthy that this visit, which had been postponed for some time, was agreed by the Ukrainian side relatively quickly precisely after it became known about the letter from the US State Department to Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian counterparts with a proposal to restore the transit of Belarusian potash fertilizers.

- **Implementing plans to end the war.** The pressure that Ukraine exerted on the Lukashenka regime is connected with the implementation of plans aimed at forcing Russia to sit down at the negotiating table and end hostilities by the end of this year. Since ending the war is impossible without resolving the Belarusian question, Kyiv signaled to Lukashenka what it expects from him. The pressure and the raising of stakes were needed so that, in case of progress in peace talks, it would later be possible to speak with the Belarusian authorities from a stronger position.

To these three factors are added two structural factors of an economic and foreign policy nature:

- **Postwar reconstruction.** Suppose that, under a possible peace agreement based on the so-called Dmitriev-Witkoff plan (which is currently postponed, but to which the sides may return), part of the frozen Russian assets passes under the management of the Board of Peace created by Trump, and the Republic of Belarus is included in the list of recipients of aid for reconstruction projects. In that case the Ukrainian authorities would effectively face a choice: either reject the entire reconstruction block and thereby violate the peace agreement, or tacitly accept Minsk's participation in the Ukrainian economy.

- **Dependence on external actors in shaping its own agenda.** If the Lithuanian, Polish or broader European track with Minsk develops autonomously, which depends on the further course of the Belarusian-American dialogue, a scenario similar to the revival of the Druzhba oil pipeline may repeat itself, when Ukraine, after a pause, nevertheless resumed the transit of Russian oil to Hungary and Slovakia under pressure from European partners. Another possibility may be consideration of the transit of Ukrainian grain through Belarusian territory toward ports on the Baltic Sea in conditions where Ukrainian Black Sea ports are blocked. That is why it is critically important for Ukraine to have its own proactive policy on Belarus, and not merely to react to changes in the political situation.[11]

In sum, Ukraine's inclusion in the negotiation process should be seen as a symbolic turn of events in its own way: the situation in which all sides were in a position practically unreachable for communication is changing to one in which everyone seeks to take part in order not to let their own interests be ignored. At the same time, despite the noticeable changes, it is doubtful that Ukraine has a coherent and long-term vision of its work on Belarus. The recent adjustment of behavior still has a rather tactical character, since the change in the tone of rhetoric occurred after noticeable progress in the dialogue between the United States and Belarus.

2.2. POTENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF UKRAINE'S WORK ON BELARUS

It is precisely the lack of a coherent strategy, discussed above, that defines the starting point for further work: the practical shaping of a position toward the Lukashenka regime should begin now. In its approach Ukraine should avoid extremes, such as a complete refusal of dialogue or economic incentives for the Lukashenka regime, for example in exchange for the release of political prisoners. Using only instruments of pressure or threats may also be counterproductive, since it will lead to unnecessary and undesirable escalation. A more productive option may instead be the "two tracks" model:

1. **Practical contacts with the Belarusian authorities.** Maintaining contacts with official Minsk is justified both by security and humanitarian considerations and by the fact that restoring economic cooperation, logistics and trade may become possible under a corresponding configuration of certain political agreements or peace deals.

2. **Support for Belarusian society and democratic forces.** A separate track oriented directly toward Belarusian society, by analogy with how the European Union builds its policy toward Belarus, that is, a set of programs and initiatives supporting democratic forces and people who are loyal to Ukraine.

[11] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

It is the development of the second track that is an important element of Ukraine's security system in relations with Belarus, and separating these two tracks is the optimal model for Kyiv, although, as will be shown below, at the tactical level individual decisions in one track inevitably affect the other. Each of these tracks is examined separately below.[12]

2.2.1. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE LUKASHENKA REGIME

The security component remains the unconditional priority of any strategy of engagement with the regime. The map of expectations and "red lines" in relations with Minsk should be built around several levels:

1. **Border security.** The primary requirement is guaranteed security on the border, both on the ground and, which is technically much more difficult, in the airspace, given the possibility of launching drones from Belarusian territory, in particular through the use of facilities in Hantsavichy or Zyabrovka, where the Russians can bring their own equipment.

2. **Humanitarian issues.** This concerns above all the exchange of prisoners of war and the return of citizens: any halt or curtailment of this process by Minsk is a "red line" here, while the desired benchmark is for it to be stable and guaranteed over time.

3. **The political dimension.** An unconditional "red line" is any further deepening of military cooperation between Belarus and Russia, and an even more serious signal would be the actual absorption of Belarus by Russia through the merging of the two countries' defense structures or the stationing of permanent Russian bases on Belarusian territory, and not just individual units and exercises.[13]

In practice this logic already works in part: communication between the security structures of the two countries continues not only around humanitarian issues. The key topic at first was precisely the question of an offensive from Belarusian territory, and when in 2022-2023 the Ukrainian side received convincing, and not merely rhetorical, arguments about the possibility of weakening defenses on the northern border, this, despite the paradox of building a mechanism of trust with the Belarusian regime, made it possible to move part of the troops to other sections of the front.

Further dialogue should unfold on the principle of a gradual exchange of "signal flags," by analogy with the Lithuanian-Polish experience, which gradually leads to lower tension and de-escalation. The specific content of future exchanges of "signal flags" is hard to predict, but the security situation on the border will undoubtedly remain the first topic of negotiations.[14]

Symbolic steps are also a separate lever of influence: it is obvious that Lukashenka is unhappy to see that the Ukrainian authorities have finally opened the door to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, while closing this door again is relatively easy. Although such symbolic steps do not bring direct pragmatic dividends, they can matter for

[12] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert
[13] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert
[14] Based on the expert interview conducted with a Ukrainian expert

Lukashenka's vanity, so a temporary postponement of certain symbolic actions addressed to democratic forces may well be a sufficient bargaining chip for launching deeper pragmatic negotiations.[15]

More pragmatic negotiations, obviously, cannot mean a return to the situation of 2021, but they can be a test of Lukashenka's real capacity to reach agreements and of official Minsk's readiness to abide by the commitments it has taken on.

Any easing of restrictions, expansion of political engagement or other possible form of international reward must be linked to verifiable changes on the part of official Minsk. It is not a promise to change behavior but the change of behavior itself that must be the basis for changing policy.

Thus, for example, in exchange for Minsk fulfilling its commitments in the security sphere, depending on the results of verification and a lasting positive trend, Ukraine could create conditions for legalizing certain shadow trade schemes. In addition, in the case of more complex combinations, Kyiv could consider the restoration of certain economic contacts with the regime as a bargaining chip in relations with external partners. For example, when Ukraine agrees to concessions, such as restoring the transit of certain categories of Belarusian products, in exchange for concrete political gains from third parties.[16]

A more concrete example of such bargaining is possible interaction with the United States: if Washington pressures Ukraine to restore the transit of, for example, Belarusian potash (following the Lithuanian precedent), Kyiv could demand concrete compensation in return, financial or military. This is rather an illustration of a possible bargaining logic than a concrete proposal: for example, permission to import the necessary quantity of PAC-3 missiles for Patriot systems, or to set up their production. In such a hypothetical scenario the United States theoretically loses nothing, since NATO countries would pay for the missiles, while Ukraine gets a real strengthening of its air defense.

However, in case Minsk violates the agreements reached, Ukraine must reserve the right to unilaterally revise its policy, to refuse to provide rewards, and to increase pressure on the Lukashenka regime by available means.

2.2.2. ENGAGEMENT WITH BELARUSIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES AND BELARUSIAN SOCIETY

A strategy of engagement with democratic forces requires foresight rather than a situational approach, and it is precisely the lack of a long-term horizon that is the root problem of building Ukrainian-Belarusian relations in this dimension. Realistically assessing the practical capabilities of democratic forces, one must admit that they can offer Ukraine neither additional military units, nor significant capital, nor weapons production, unlike what Belarusian enterprises do for the Russian army.

[15] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert
[16] Based on the expert interview conducted with a Ukrainian expert

What democratic forces can realistically offer today is "symbolic capital," which, however, could have played a much greater role had it been used back in 2022.[17]

In view of this, practical cooperation with democratic forces and Belarusian society should cover several areas:

1. **Returning to unfinished agreements.** The issues of bank accounts, legalization, and the rights of volunteers and their families must be resolved. Although noticeable progress has been made on these components in recent months, bureaucratic obstacles still exist and need to be removed.

2. **Updating the format of political communication.** A shift from isolated public statements, such as declarative support for democratic Belarus, to the creation of standing working groups on different areas, able to develop joint action plans, even if these are not public.[18]

Within this same area, three specific formats of engagement with society deserve separate assessment, each of which has its own potential:

1. **The volunteer fighter movement.** Supporting volunteer fighters, ensuring their rehabilitation and integration into civilian life, and publicly communicating positive changes can be steps that improve Ukraine's image and increase trust in Ukraine among part of Belarusian citizens.

2. **The volunteering movement.** Another area, though with somewhat limited potential because of migration policy in recent years, is the potential of the volunteering movement: many Belarusians would like to take part in rebuilding destroyed cities and in other formats of practical engagement, and realizing this idea requires above all political will and open doors, with security concerns taken into account.

3. **Business engagement.** Business engagement also remains an underestimated area: despite their refugee status in the European Union, the bank accounts of Belarusian companies in Ukraine are regularly blocked not because of direct legislative restrictions but rather because of excessive risk aversion on the part of the National Bank of Ukraine. Changing this approach would open up considerably more opportunities for other Belarusian entrepreneurs who are ready to move their business to Ukraine.[19]

However, none of the listed instruments will work without change at the societal level. The future of cooperation will depend to a large extent on how ordinary Ukrainians and Belarusians treat each other, and not only the elite groups, since it is precisely the lack of mutual understanding that today fuels the fears of some Belarusians about a repeat of the Ukrainian scenario at home. Overcoming this gap is a long-term but necessary area of work, which must proceed in parallel at the level of civil society organizations, business and the academic community, and not only on the political track, which so far still has a rather demonstrative character and is not a

[17] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert
[18] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert
[19] Based on an expert interview with a representative of Belarusian democratic forces

real driver of tangible change.[20] It is precisely internal Belarusian sentiment, and not only the position of the public opposition in exile, that is able to really influence the regime's behavior even under dictatorship.[21]

It is important to note that work with representatives of Belarusian democratic forces, as well as work with Belarusian society, should be instruments that Kyiv needs to apply regardless of the state of dialogue and relations with the Lukashenka regime. Improving Ukraine's image among different groups of Belarusian society is a long-term investment in relations between Ukraine and Belarus after Lukashenka.

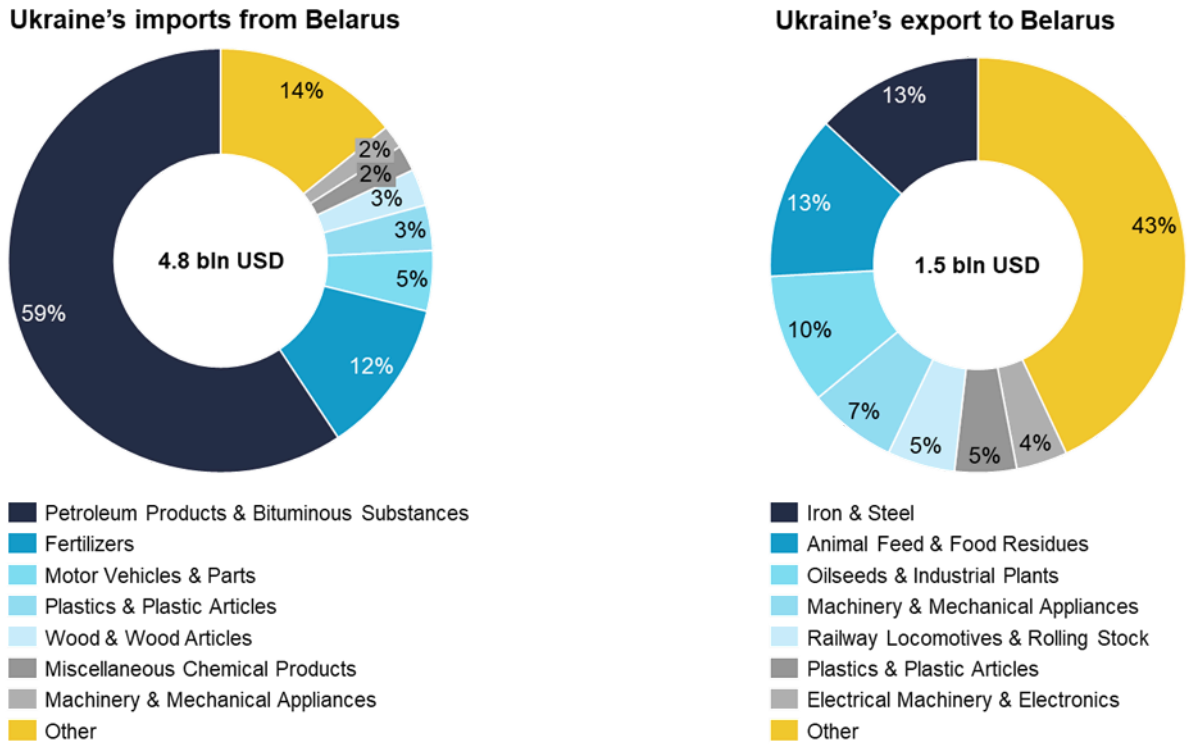
2.3. THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF UKRAINE'S STRATEGY TOWARD BELARUS

Up to this point, the study has presented arguments for why Ukraine needs a strategy of its own toward Belarus and on what principles it can be built. However, a strategy is impossible without understanding what material interests lie behind this direction.

The economic dimension is important not only because it makes it possible to assess the losses from the rupture of bilateral ties. It shows what may become a subject of negotiation under different scenarios of how the Russia-Ukraine war ends, which sectors may become a subject of bargaining and of setting red lines, and where potential benefits may exist, in particular in the context of possibly attracting investment, creating alternatives to Russian projects, and competing for human capital.

[20] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert
[21] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

Fig. 2. Commodity structure of Ukraine's imports from Belarus (left) and Ukraine's exports to Belarus (right), 2021



Before the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, imports of Belarusian fertilizers and, above all, petroleum products were of strategic importance for Ukraine given the needs of the national economy, in particular the agricultural and defense sectors. In 2021, 59.3% of Ukraine's imports from Belarus were petroleum products and bituminous substances, while another 11.9% were mineral fertilizers. In turn, Belarus mainly imported from Ukraine ferrous metals (13.0%), animal feed (12.8%), products of vegetable oil processing (10.2%), and machinery and equipment (6.9%).

However, most likely, some of the areas of cooperation that existed before 2022 will no longer be relevant after hostilities end. Part of the Soviet-era value chains will disappear, among other reasons because Ukraine has a lot of production infrastructure destroyed by the war, which will not always be profitable to rebuild because of the low value added of its output. As a result, modernized Ukrainian enterprises will focus on production with higher value added, so the layer of cooperation that existed since the collapse of the USSR will disappear.[22]

Depending on how the war ends, the proposed model of engagement with Minsk will have different practical consequences. In a favorable scenario, individual economic contacts can become an instrument of gradual normalization within clear conditions. In an unfavorable one, they can turn into a subject of external pressure on Ukraine. Three variants can be distinguished here:

[22] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

1. **An agreement acceptable to Ukraine**, under which Kyiv gets more room for maneuver in foreign policy and can partly restore certain economic contacts with a view to a possible democratic transformation in Belarus.
2. **The status quo**, that is, a frozen conflict along the front line, under which relations between Ukraine and Belarus likewise remain frozen, and restoring ties is unlikely.
3. **An agreement unfavorable to Ukraine**, under which Kyiv may be forced to make certain concessions and to accept economic contacts under pressure from external actors, for example, following the logic of the so-called Dmitriev-Witkoff plan.

On this basis, each sector below is divided into three groups: promising sectors, which are best realized under a scenario acceptable to Ukraine; risky sectors, which correspond more to the unfavorable scenario; and sectors with mixed potential, which, depending on how the war ends, may turn out to be both promising and risky.

Promising:

Agriculture and fertilizers

Opportunities:

- Mutual complementarity in the supply of certain types of grain and potash fertilizers, as well as demand for relatively cheap Belarusian agricultural machinery, which Ukrainian machine building is still unable to fully meet.

Risks:

- A return of Ukraine's dependence on a single supplier of potash fertilizers in case of a new worsening of relations.

This area is best realized under the first scenario for how the war ends, the one acceptable to Ukraine, when the political context allows practical contacts to be restored without significant reputational risks. The most obvious complementarity between the two economies is seen in the agricultural sector. A rye shortage in Ukraine alongside a wheat surplus and, conversely, a better rye harvest in Belarus once created a practical basis for the agricultural sectors to complement each other, including through fertilizer supplies. Ukrainian black soils combined with Belarusian fertilizer production are probably the most obvious point where the interests of the two countries intersect.[23] Ukraine historically depended critically on Belarus precisely for the supply of potash fertilizers, and demand for Belarusian agricultural machinery, according to industry producers' estimates, exceeded actual supply volumes by an order of magnitude: Belarus traditionally occupies the niche of relatively cheap machinery, while Ukrainian machine building in this segment rather lost the competition.[24]

[23] Based on an expert interview with a Ukrainian expert
[24] Based on an expert interview with a Ukrainian expert

Industrial cooperation and specific commodity groups

Opportunities:

- Targeted cooperation in individual commodity groups: special-purpose machinery, equipment for power grids, and agricultural biochemistry based on Ukrainian grain.
- A model of joint ventures along the lines of the Indonesian-Japanese agreements, in which the Belarusian contribution in technology is counted as compensation for participation in the war, and the controlling stake belongs to the Ukrainian side.

Risks:

- Limited scale because the strengths of both countries are highly localized, and because part of the equipment depends on Chinese components.

Like the agricultural sector, this cooperation is realistic above all under the scenario for ending the war that is acceptable to Ukraine, when the compensation logic of joint ventures becomes politically acceptable. Despite the loss of many production ties that remained from Soviet times, there are still certain areas in which sectoral cooperation is possible. In the transport and special-purpose machinery segment, this concerns excavators, construction machinery and the automotive industry, including passenger cars, since Belarus has fairly well localized the assembly of Chinese Geely vehicles.

In the area of power equipment, the condition of Ukrainian thermal generation remains critical: it is now being restored using equipment dismantled in European countries, and this resource is almost exhausted. Part of the shortfall, in particular transformers, relays and equipment for power grids, could be covered by imports from Belarus, although this is equipment produced in partnership with China. Agricultural biochemistry provides one more telling example: a Belarusian biotechnology corporation producing amino acids and lactates gets a low-quality product without high-quality Ukrainian wheat and corn as raw materials, and without Ukrainian supplies the enterprise effectively operates at a loss, so this is where there is real room for agreements, in particular on premixes and feed additives for livestock farming.[25]

At the same time, for industry one can consider not ordinary trade but a model similar to the Indonesian-Japanese agreements of the 1960s-1970s on compensation for occupation: joint ventures in which the Belarusian side's contribution, that is, technology and equipment, would be counted as compensation for complicity in the war, while the controlling stake must belong to Ukrainian capital, with a 10-15 year moratorium on the Belarusian side buying out its share.[26]

Risky:

Oil refining

Opportunities:

[25] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert
[26] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

- Purchasing fuel at noticeably lower prices.

Risks:

- The dependence of Belarusian oil refining on Russian Urals crude, which means that cooperation would amount to indirect support for Russia and would be highly politically toxic for Ukrainian society.

Purchasing petroleum products from Belarus is possible only under a scenario that is negative for Kyiv, although even in such a case Ukraine should by all means avoid engagement in this sector, since the energy dimension of cooperation remains the most politically sensitive and may also become an additional instrument of Kremlin pressure on Ukraine. As long as the war with Russia continues, Russia remains Belarus's key supplier of oil and gas: Belarusian refining capacity is traditionally set up exclusively for heavy sour Urals crude, so even if relations normalize, the format of cooperation will most likely return to the prewar model, in which Minsk refines Russian oil and formally calls the finished product its own.[27] Although the petroleum products market remains an obvious place for cooperation, the key restraining factor is precisely the political question.

With mixed potential:

Logistics and transit potential

Opportunities:

- Restoring rail transit to the Baltic states and potential involvement in international corridors such as the IMEEC.
- Involvement in transport corridors that could become an alternative to Russian projects.

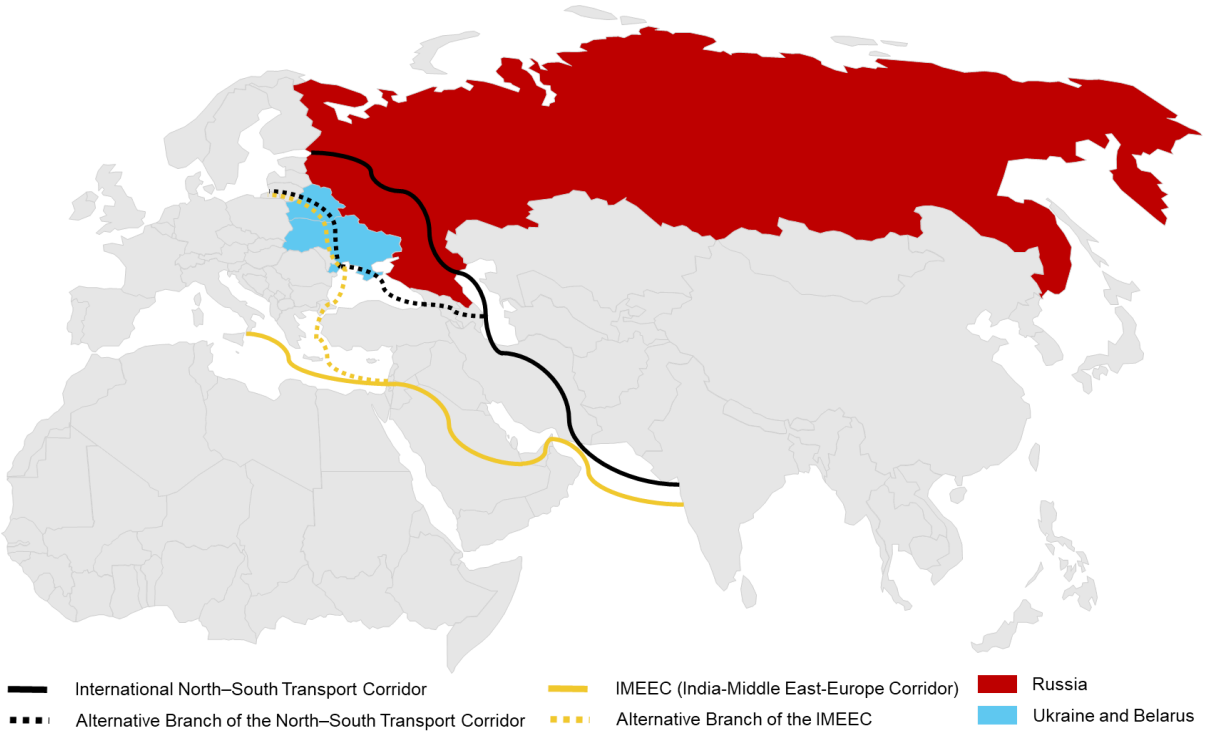
Risks:

- In the initial stages, direct cooperation with Minsk without involving an authoritative third partner risks causing sharp rejection in Ukrainian society and among partners.

It is in this sector that the risk mentioned in section 2.1 materializes most concretely: if the Lithuanian or broader European track of engagement with Belarus develops autonomously, Ukraine may find itself having to join transit arrangements that have already been agreed, instead of setting its own terms, by analogy with the return to oil transit through Druzhba under pressure from partners. Whether this cooperation develops on terms favorable to Ukraine or, on the contrary, is imposed from outside depends directly on which of the three scenarios the war ends with, which is also why this area is placed in the category of mixed potential. Particularly notable potential remains in transit and logistics. This concerns rail links with the Baltic states through Belarusian territory.

[27] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

Fig. 3. Map of transport corridors that could pass through the territory of Ukraine and Belarus



Belarus, as a landlocked country, is critically interested in transit through Ukraine to the Caucasus or to the Black Sea, while for Ukraine access through Belarusian territory to the Baltic states and Scandinavia is just as important: the basic infrastructure for this already effectively exists, although at present it is used mainly for Russian military purposes.[28] In the logistics dimension, international transport corridors also deserve separate attention, in particular the Indian India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) project, the northern branch of which could theoretically enter the Black Sea through the port of Odesa, although this is hindered by different railway gauges and a lack of dry ports.

An alternative is to reactivate the old Soviet route through Homel, Orsha, Mahilyou and Vitebsk to Latvia, or through Minsk to Lithuania: Ukraine could offer an alternative route through Odesa to the Baltic or Scandinavia, which would indirectly weaken India's support for Russia and help form an alternative branch of the North-South corridor bypassing the Russian Federation. Implementing such an initiative, however, will in the initial stages require involving an authoritative third partner, since otherwise direct cooperation with the Lukashenka regime will cause sharp rejection in Ukrainian society and among partners.[29]

Labor market and human capital

Opportunities:

- Cultural and consumer closeness of the markets and a shared educational base, which facilitate spillover effects, especially in IT.

[28] Based on an expert interview with a Ukrainian expert
[29] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

Risks:

- The demographic crisis in both countries pushes toward competition for labor resources rather than toward cooperation.

A significant part of prewar economic ties consists of value chains inherited from the USSR, which were severed when the conflict began, as well as ties based on the cultural and consumer closeness of the two markets: a product popular in one country is highly likely to succeed in the other, and advertising campaigns are easily adapted between markets. To this are added spillover effects in the labor market resulting from a similar education system: before the war, it was typical for an IT company founded in one country to open an office in the other.[30]

When forecasting postwar dynamics, the demographic factor should be taken into account: both countries are in a difficult demographic situation, so instead of labor market cooperation, competition for labor resources is more likely, since after the changes Belarus will try to attract Ukrainians and Ukraine, in turn, Belarusians, although room for cooperation still remains for businesses that will rely on resources from both sides at once. Human capital as a whole remains one of the main assets of both countries and at the same time a potential field for both cooperation and competition, especially in IT and scalable services.[31]

The economic analysis shows that the question of Belarus is not reducible to security or diplomacy. Under different scenarios for how the war ends, economic decisions may become a subject of external pressure or, on the contrary, a lever of Ukraine's negotiating position. This once again confirms the main conclusion of the study: Kyiv should prepare its instruments for dealing with Belarus in advance, rather than shape policy after others have set the rules of the game.

Economic cooperation with Belarus must be a consequence of changed political conditions, not a precondition for them. Priority should be given to areas that create mutual benefit without restoring Ukraine's critical dependence on Belarusian infrastructure or Russian production chains.

[30] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert
[31] Based on an expert interview with a Belarusian expert

CONCLUSIONS

The regional picture emerging from the analysis shows a Belarus that, through dialogue with the United States and individual European states, is trying to diversify its external ties and somewhat ease its isolation without changing its geopolitical orientation: dependence on Russia as an economic and logistics partner remains decisive, and the dialogue with the West serves rather as an instrument for diversifying risks than as an attempt to seriously distance itself from Moscow. Russia's reaction to this rapprochement is not monolithic: the security services and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs show heightened wariness, while the political leadership in effect allows Lukashenka limited diplomatic maneuver, seeing no threat in it to its own dominance. In parallel, Poland and Lithuania, despite different resources and types of vulnerability, have already partly formed their own tracks of engagement with Minsk, as a result of which regional policy toward Belarus is no longer determined solely by relations between Minsk and Moscow and increasingly depends on the multi-level interaction of several actors.

Against this background, Ukraine's involvement in the process, in particular through participation in the release of political prisoners and the meeting between President Zelenskyy and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, should be seen as a symbolic turn in its own way: the situation in which the sides were in a position practically unreachable for communication is changing to one in which everyone seeks to take part so as not to let their own interests be ignored. At the same time, as the analysis shows, it is doubtful that Ukraine already has a coherent and long-term vision of its work on the Belarusian track: the recent adjustment of behavior still has a rather tactical character and follows the dynamics of the Belarusian-American dialogue instead of anticipating it, as is also shown by the absence of positive changes on issues that require systemic work, in particular the legalization of Belarusians in Ukraine.

The proposed "two tracks" model gives rise to different sets of principles for each of the tracks. In engagement with the Lukashenka regime, the key point is tying any easing of restrictions or other form of international reward to verifiable, rather than promised, changes in Minsk's behavior, as well as Ukraine retaining the right to unilaterally revise its policy, to refuse to provide rewards, and to increase pressure if the agreements reached are violated. In work with Belarusian democratic forces and society, by contrast, the areas of cooperation concerned, in particular returning to unfinished agreements and updating the format of political communication, should be applied regardless of the state of dialogue with the regime, since this is a long-term investment in relations with Belarus after Lukashenka.

The economic dimension of relations is subordinated to the same logic of sequencing: the possibilities for restoring cooperation depend directly on which of the three scenarios the war ends with, and the areas examined are accordingly divided into promising (agriculture and fertilizers, industrial cooperation), risky (oil refining) and sectors with mixed potential (logistics and transit potential, labor market and human capital). The common principle for all areas remains that economic cooperation must be a consequence of changed political conditions, not a precondition for them, and priority should be given to areas that create mutual benefit without restoring Ukraine's critical dependence on Belarusian infrastructure or Russian production chains.

In sum, as noted at the beginning of the study, Kyiv should start building its toolkit for dealing with Belarus along both tracks now, rather than wait until the parameters of a peace agreement or of the regional balance of power take clearer form.

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