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The impact of political, military, and social factors on the repositioning of Belarus within the regional security architecture

Wpływ czynników politycznych, wojskowych i społecznych na repozycjonowanie Białorusi w architekturze bezpieczeństwa regionalnego

Abstract: The next phase of Russian aggression against Ukraine demonstrated that despite lacking a large military, territorial, population, or raw material potential, Belarus could play a significant role in the project to construct a new regional, continental, and even global security architecture. The purpose of this article is to discuss the problem of repositioning Belarus, which was affected not only by the multidimensional change in Belarusian-Ukrainian relations as a result of the war but also by long-term efforts to elevate Belarusian-EU relations. In this area, the fundamental research question is whether the war in Ukraine, the breach of the so-called Budapest Memorandum and the deepening of the multifaceted Russian-Belarusian integration within the Union State (including the militarisation of Belarus and the allocation of tactical nuclear weapons) will cause the projects for the redefinition of Belarus-EU relations (which are instrumental in reducing the intensity of political turbulence in the region) to disappear from the EU diplomatic agenda for a long time, with a direct negative impact on the future of European security. The article verifies the hypothesis that due to the specificity of the Belarusian authoritarian model, despite the systematically deepening Russian-Belarusian integration and the ever-expanding sanctions policy towards Belarus, (2) due to the shape of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations after 2014 and the periodically satisfactory Belarusian-EU relations, (1) there are still prospects for Belarus to pursue foreign policy diversification and repositioning of the European vector in it.

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Streszczenie: Kolejna faza rosyjskiej agresji na Ukrainę udowodniła, że pozbawiona dużego potencjału militarnego, terytorialnego, ludnościowego czy surowcowego Białoruś może okazać się istotnym państwem w projekcie budowy nowej architektury bezpieczeństwa regionalnego, kontynentalnego, a nawet globalnego. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie rozważań na temat problemu repozycjonowania Białorusi, na które wpłynęła jednak nie tylko wielowymiarowa zmiana relacji białorusko-ukraińskich, będąca konsekwencją wojny, ale również długoletnie próby wyprowadzenia relacji białorusko-unijnych na wyższy poziom. W tym obszarze zasadniczym pytaniem badawczym jest, czy wojna na Ukrainie, złamanie ustaleń tzw. memorandum budapeszteńskiego oraz pogłębienie wielopłaszczyznowej integracji rosyjsko-białoruskiej w ramach Państwa Związkowego (w tym militaryzacja Białorusi włącznie z alokacją taktycznej broni jądrowej) spowodują, że projekty redefinicji relacji białorusko-unijnych, mające zasadniczy wpływ na zmniejszenie intensywności politycznej turbulentności regionu, na długo znikną z dyplomatycznej agendy UE, co będzie miało bezpośredni, negatywny wpływ na przyszłość bezpieczeństwa europejskiego. W artykule zweryfikowano hipotezę, że ze względu na specyfikę białoruskiego modelu autorytaryzmu, mimo systematycznie pogłębiającej się integracji rosyjsko-białoruskiej oraz wciąż rozszerzanej polityki sankcyjnej wobec Białorusi, ze względu na kształt relacji białorusko-ukraińskich po 2014 r. oraz okresowo zadowalające relacje białorusko-unijne nadal istnieją perspektywy realizowania przez Białoruś dywersyfikacji polityki zagranicznej i repozycjonowania w niej wektora europejskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna Rosji z Ukrainą, Białoruś, Państwo Związkowe, bezpieczeństwo Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej, relacje białorusko-ukraińskie, relacje białorusko-unijne

1. Outline of the problem

Although Belarus has been a key element of the Central and Eastern European security system since the collapse of the USSR, it has never been considered a major player in the region. Since the 1990s, neither the United States nor the major EU members have shown much interest in Belarus. They consented to the Belarusian state's designation as a sphere of Russian influence in order to preserve good relations with that country¹. This situation significantly determined the place and role of Belarus as a buffer state located between the key centres of influence in the region. It was further facilitated by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's long-term policy of balancing Russian and Western

1 E. Mironowicz, *Polityka zagraniczna Republiki Białoruś 1990-2020*, "Biuletyn Historii Pogranicza" 2021, no. 21, p. 18.

interests and attracting diversified sources of support for his power². For almost 30 years, the Lukashenka regime has been characterised by reactivity, which means the ability to flexibly adapt to dynamically changing conditions both in domestic and foreign policy. The use of such a legitimising strategy by the authorities explains a whole range of contradictions that defined the practice of Belarus' domestic and foreign policy for years: modernisation without democratisation, episodes of Belarusianization accompanied by a simultaneous fight against the national movement, close ties with the Russian Federation, and, at the same time, a declared pro-European attitude (in line with the implementation of the geopolitical concept in which Belarus is a country of equal distance, able to maintain good relations with the East and the West).

After 2020, the literature on Belarus in the field of regional security is dominated by two major thematic trends: the first includes analyses of various dimensions of the deepened integration of the Union State, with particular emphasis on military aspects³, and the second discusses the problem of multifaceted Belarusian-EU relations, in which, the issue of security is treated as secondary in comparison to political and economic ties⁴. However, regardless of its diversity, the literature clearly emphasises the extremely pragmatic nature of Belarus's activity in the international space, which should be understood as having a largely simulated multi-vector character. However, there is a lack of assessments linking the issue of the relevance of Belarus' foreign policy vector positioning to the new element shaping the regional security landscape, namely the onset of the next phase of Rus-

2 A. Kulaszewicz, *Between Russia and the West: Belarus as a challenge for European stability and security*, "Polish Political Science Yearbook" 2017, no. 46(1), pp. 91-101.

3 M. Banasik, *The military integration of Belarus into the Russian Federation*, "Safety & Defense" 2022, no. 8(1), pp. 8-14; P. Usov, *Evolution of the Belarus-Russia Union State: From integration to attempts of incorporation*, "Studia i Analizy Nauk o Polityce" 2020, no. 1, pp. 95-108; A. Wilk, *Russian Belarusian Army: Practical aspects of military integration of Belarus and Russia*, Centre for Eastern Studies, 2021, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/Raport-OSW_Rosyjska-armia-bialoruska_net.pdf; P. Matsukevich, R. Astapenia, *The degradation of Belarusian foreign policy: A proposed course correction*, Briefing Paper, December 2022, pp. 9-11; I. Topolski, *Military presence of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Belarus*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2022, vol. 20, issue 2, pp. 75-91.

4 A. Wierzbicki, *Belarus and the EU – No common way in sight*, [in:] W. Hilz, S. Minasyan, M. Raś (eds.), *Ambiguities of Europe's Eastern Neighbourhood*, Springer VS, Wiesbaden 2020, p. 78.

sian aggression against Ukraine, although the first studies addressing these issues are emerging⁵. Therefore, the main research problem formulated in this work is an attempt to determine what factors related to the existing relations with Russia, EU countries and Ukraine may determine the redefinition of Belarus' place in the newly created environment of international relations, with particular emphasis on the area of European security.

In 2022, the issue of potential vectors of Belarusian foreign policy returned to the international agenda due to two events: the Russian aggression that followed 24 February and the events that took place on 26 November, when the long-time head of Belarusian diplomacy, Uladzimir Makei, unexpectedly died. In this context, the main issue addressed in the text is an attempt to answer the research questions: whether, after the presidential election in 2020 and the support of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Belarus definitively closed its way to political and economic cooperation with Europe? Does the death of Makiei – particularly in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine – signify the symbolic and definitive end of an era in relations between Belarus and Europe? Were there any indications in the first months of the new Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Aleinik that the appointment of this diplomat was intended to weaken Russian influence in Lukashenka's environment and create new opportunities for constructing a space for dialogue with the West?

In the course of the research, a hypothesis was adopted that due to the specificity of the Belarusian model of authoritarianism, despite two significant crises (external – Russia's aggression against Ukraine; internal – protests after the presidential election in 2020), systematically deepening Russian-Belarusian integration, the death of Makiei, who is considered a pro-European politician, and the ever-expanding sanctions policy against Belarus, there are still prospects for Belarus to

5 P. Klysiński, P. Żochowski, *The reluctant co-aggressor. Minsk's complicity in the war against Ukraine*, OSW Commentary, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-02-10/reluctant-co-aggressor-minsk-complicity-war-against-ukraine> [10.02.2023]; K. Shmatsina, *The prospects for Belarus in 2023 in the light of Russia's war in Ukraine: The future is not set in stone*, "SCEEUS Guest Platform for Eastern Europe Policy" 2023, no. 35, <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/the-prospects-for-belarus-in-2023-in-the-light-of-russias-war-in-ukraine-the-future-is-not-set-in-stone/>; T. Stępniewski, *Russia-Ukraine war: Independence, identity, and security*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2022, vol. 20, issue 2, pp. 7-16.

diversify its foreign policy. The trajectory of Russian-Belarusian, Belarusian-EU, and Belarusian-Ukrainian relations to date indicates that the European vector of the country's activities is not yet definitively closed, despite opinions that Belarus is erecting a new "Iron Curtain" between itself and the West, as tangibly demonstrated by the activity of the Belarusian State Border Committee, which is creating a network of stationary engineering facilities and barriers along one-third of the country's entire western border⁶. Since the current EU policy towards Belarus has been unstable and ineffective, and its two basic instruments, namely diplomacy and economic cooperation, have been applied selectively and inconsistently (see the increase in trade between Belarus and the EU during the periods of the increased repressiveness of the Lukashenka regime), it is difficult to foresee a possible improvement in relations between Belarus and the EU. In the case of relations between Belarus and Ukraine, ending the war will probably be crucial.

2. Russia – Belarus: symbiosis or parasitism?

As a geopolitical and military power, Russia was and remains the most active power in the region. Belarus plays a significant role in Russia's geostrategic approach to Central and Eastern Europe for a number of reasons. Firstly, Belarus lies between Russia and Europe, East and West, which enables the transit of energy resources and the control of the transport of goods. Secondly, geographically and historically, Belarus is an important element of the Baltic-Black Sea axis in the north-south direction. Thirdly, Belarus invariably serves as Russia's main and most stable ally in the Commonwealth of Independent States and is its key partner in the field of defence and security, creating the Union State of Russia and Belarus. Fourthly, being a buffer state located in an area of critical strategic importance, Belarus is treated by Russia as a kind of bridgehead for expanding political, economic and cultural influence in other countries in the region. It is, therefore a key element for protecting Russia's national interests. Highly relevant in this context is the so-called "Smolensk Gate", a key area located between the upper Dvina and the upper Dnieper, which is the easiest and shortest

⁶ Source: gpk.gov.by.

route from the west to Moscow and the central part of Russia. From this perspective, Belarus is more significant to Russia than Ukraine, which is why Belarus remains a source of contention between centres of influence. Keeping the existing Belarus in its sphere of influence was a priority for the Russian political leadership. This is evidenced by, for example, the document published in February 2023 entitled *Strategiczne cele Federacji Rosyjskiej na kierunku białoruskim* [*Strategic Goals of the Russian Federation in the Belarusian Direction*], which outlines the goals of the Russian strategy towards Belarus, containing political, economic, socio-cultural and security plans⁷. In fact, this is a plan for a gradual soft annexation of Belarus, which assumes the country's inclusion into the legal, economic and military structures of the Russian Federation by 2030.

Taking into account the above factors and circumstances, the Russian-Belarusian rapprochement was a completely natural process. Moreover, the course of bilateral integration began to take shape in the environment of the Belarusian authorities in the early 1990s, during the existence of a parliamentary republic in Belarus. The legal basis for further Russian-Belarusian integration was established with the rise to power of Lukashenka, who attempted to subordinate the concept of a union state to his own political ambitions. It should be noted that while the Treaty on the Union State of Belarus and Russia was signed in Moscow on 8 December 1999, by Presidents Lukashenka and Boris Yeltsin, the exchange of ratification and entry into force of the treaty had already taken place between Lukashenka and the acting President Vladimir Putin. It was during this period that fundamental differences emerged in the vision of the mechanisms and goals of integration. Although the Belarusian president repeatedly accused the Russian side of passivity and delaying integration, in August 2002, during a meeting with Lukashenka in Moscow, it was Putin who proposed accelerated integration with the subsequent incorporation of the Belarusian

7 A. Myroniuk, *Leaked document reveals alleged Kremlin plan to take over Belarus by 2030*, Kyiv Independent, <https://kyivindependent.com/leaked-document-reveals-alleged-kremlin-plan-to-take-over-belarus-by-2030/> [20.04.2023].

regions into Russia as federation subjects⁸. This approach by the Russian side provoked a sharp and negative reaction from Belarus.

The topic of the Union State was revisited in 2018, with the communication of the Russian ultimatum to the Belarusian side: either the implementation of the agreement on the Union State or no discount on oil⁹. Thus, the push for integration became a powerful instrument of pressure on Belarus and the restrained position of the Belarusian leadership was perceived by the Russian side as ignoring common interests. The apogee of the crisis was 2019, and it was no coincidence that researchers at that time¹⁰ describing the course of Russian-Belarusian relations used the terms: “crisis of trust”, “difficult ally”, “in the suffocating embrace of a brother”, “play of appearances” and “distanced co-aggressor”, etc.

After the presidential election in 2020 and in the face of a crisis regarding the legitimacy of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's leadership, Belarus's foreign policy was subordinated to one goal; Lukashenka's retention of power and the continuation of the current power structure in Belarus. The price for Russia's support of the Belarusian leader at the time was the intensification of the multifaceted integration of the Union State of Russia and Belarus. On 4 November 2021, Putin and Lukashenka signed a decree *On the main directions of the implementation of the provisions of the Treaty on the Establishment of the State of the Union for 2021-2023*¹¹ and approved 28 union programmes, so-called “roadmaps”, the draughts of which have not been published. The

8 Состоялась встреча Владимира Путина и Президента Белоруссии Александра Лукашенко [Sostojalas vstrecha Vladimira Putina i Prezidenta Belorussii Aleksandra Lukashenko], <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/27286> [10.04.2023].

9 Лукашенко обвинил РФ в использовании налогового маневра для давления на Белоруссию [Lukashenko обвинил RF v ispolzovanii nalogovogo manevra dlja davlenija na Belorussiju], 24 January 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/business/692552> [10.04.2023].

10 W. Konończuk, *Trudny sojusznik, Białoruś w polityce Rosji*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/prace-osw/2008-09-15/trudny-sojusznik-bialorus-w-polityce-rosji>; J.M. Nowakowski, J. Olędzka, M. Rust (eds.), *W dusznym uścisku brata. Relacje białorusko-rosyjskie*, Studium Europy Wschodniej UW & Grupa Analityczna “Białoruś w regionie”, https://studium.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Raport_Bialorus_2021_2PL.pdf.

11 Декрет Высшего Государственного Совета Союзного государства 4 ноября 2021 г. № 6. Минск – Москва. Об Основных направлениях реализации положений Договора о создании Союзного государства на 2021-2023 годы [Dekret Vysshego Gosudarstvennogo Soveta Sojuznogo gosudarstva 4 nojabrja 2021 g. № 6. Minsk – Moskva. Ob Osnovnykh napravlenijakh realizacii polozhenijj Dogovora o sozdanii Sojuznogo gosudarstva na 2021-2023 gody], <https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=ad2100022> [20.04.2023].

approval of the Joint State Military Doctrine in November 2021 envisaged the implementation of a coordinated military policy, cooperation in the construction and development of armed forces, the enhancement of coordination and combat training, and the mutual use of military infrastructure facilities. In this way, the existing security guarantees of the Belarusian side for Ukraine were invalidated, and a legal basis was created to legalise the increase of the Russian military presence in Belarus.

Belarus' manifestly pro-Moscow foreign policy direction was sustained after 24 February 2022: from its territory, Russia launched its first attack on Ukraine, and Belarus itself became a logistical and medical base for the Russian army. Seemingly, therefore, the rapprochement between Minsk and Moscow should be considered definitive and without alternatives. On the one hand, Putin's visit to Minsk in December 2022 was a gesture towards the Lukashenka regime, which received guarantees from Russia to subsidise the Belarusian economy through preferential gas and oil prices. On the other hand, it testified to an increase in the Russian military presence in Belarus (transfer of missile complexes and anti-aircraft missile systems, etc.). It is significant that at this stage, both sides focused more on the military sphere while the issues of political integration receded into the background. Instead, despite the lack of concrete results, the declared objective of economic rapprochement was to create a unified economic system based on the principle of "two countries, one economy"¹². The implications of bilateral integration¹³, as announced by the leaders of both nations, meant a rise in Russian influence in Belarus and limitations

12 „Две страны – одна экономика”. Вице-премьер РФ о целях союзных программ Беларуси и России, 16 June 2022, <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/dve-strany-odna-ekonomika-vitse-premjer-rf-o-tseljah-sojuznyh-programm-belarusi-i-rossii-508357-2022/> [15.04.2023].

13 „Впечатляет, конечно!” Путин доволен результатами экономического сотрудничества с Беларусью [„Vpechatljaet, konečno!” Putin доволен rezultatami ehkonomicheskogo sotrudnichestva s Belarusju], 5 April 2023, https://www.belta.by/politics/view/putin-dovolen-rezultatami-ekonomicheskogo-sotrudnichestva-s-belarusiju-559573-2023/?utm_source=belta&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=accent [15.04.2023]; *Общая безопасность, углубление кооперации и ядерный „радикализм”. Подробности заявлений Лукашенко в Кремле [Obshhaja bezopasnost, uglublenie kooperacii i jadernyj „radikalizm”. Podrobnosti zajavlenij Lukashenko v Kremle]*, 5 April 2023, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/obschaja-bezopasnost-uglublennie-kooperatsii-i-jadernyj-radikalizm-podrobnosti-zajavlenij-lukashenko-v-559827-2023/> [15.04.2023].

on Belarus' ability to pursue an independent policy. Therefore, the benefits were mutual: Lukashenka's policy corresponded to Russia's strategic interests, and Russia, in turn, became the only guarantor of the ruling regime's retention of power. In addition, Lukashenka's short-term objective was to maintain power, but the long-term perspective and the potential for a controlled transfer of power were of much greater significance. In this regard, the formation of a new political party, White Ruthenia, which has long been in Russia's best interests, can be considered significant. Although this party positioned itself as pro-government and sought to support Lukashenka's political course, the Belarusian leader distanced himself from this initiative, whereas the ruling United Russia party supported the formation of a mirror party in Belarus. In addition, both sides declared their willingness to further cross-party cooperation¹⁴.

While the policy of the Belarusian regime met Moscow's expectations to a greater or lesser degree, the Russian side's actions did not always coincide with Lukashenka's interests. Nevertheless, taking into account the nature and dynamics of the integration processes and the increasing political, economic and military dependence of Belarus on Russia, the rapprochement is inevitable, and after deepening economic and military integration, the time will undoubtedly come for intensified political integration, which may go even further towards the unification of the political space and the institutions present in it¹⁵. By contrast, it should be emphasised that the factors that gave new impetus to the integration process (which until now had been clearly slowed down by the Belarusian side) were the consequences of the political crisis in Belarus in 2020 and the series of Russian political and military setbacks in Ukraine. Given that the political turmoil in Belarus has not been resolved and Russia's war with Ukraine continues, one could argue that it is in these two issues that opportunities and potential options for changing the trend in Russian-Belarusian relations

14 *Партии „Белая Русь” и „Единая Россия” планируют в апреле подписать соглашение о взаимодействии* [Partii „Belaja Rus” i „Edinaja Rossija” planirujut v aprele podpisat soglaszenie o vzaimodejstvii], 18 March 2023, <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/partii-belaja-rus-i-edinaja-rossija-planirujut-v-aprele-podpisat-soglaszenie-o-vzaimodejstvii-556188-2023/> [20.04.2023].

15 A. Czwołek, *Bliscy sojusznicy? Perspektywy pogłębienia integracji rosyjsko-białoruskiej po 2018 roku*, „Nowa Polityka Wschodnia” 2022, no. 3(34), p. 57.

should be sought¹⁶. Nevertheless, it appears evident that Belarus's security policy is not conducted independently; instead, it is an integral component of Russia's security policy. Therefore, the loss of influence over Belarus, which would be highly problematic for the Russian Federation, would wreak absolute havoc in the spheres of military, cultural, and information security.

3. Liability of the European foreign policy vector of Belarus as an element of regional (in)security

Undoubtedly, due to its location, Belarus has a permanent place in the area of interest of EU countries and especially those bordering it, namely Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. Despite many potential economic and security benefits, relations with Belarus were not harmonious and would remain so after 2020 and 2022 for obvious reasons. On the one hand, since 1994, relations with Belarus have been burdened by Minsk's systematic project to deepen democratic regression, devalue human and civil rights, depoliticise parts of society and destroy manifestations of civil society activity. On the other hand, Minsk's relations with Brussels are constantly overshadowed by Moscow, which has consistently stood in the way of the normalisation of Belarus-EU relations, torpedoing them with diplomatic instruments (especially in the framework of so-called raw materials diplomacy) or unofficial pressure. Belarus, in turn, contrary to the wishes of some European elites, quite consistently pursued a policy of extreme pragmatism and only turned to Europe when the Russian Federation tried to complete the process of integration into the Union State or limited the scope of direct or indirect economic support for Belarus.

For decades, the basic instrument used by the West towards Belarus was the policy of conditionality, which was reflected in the key project of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In practical terms, this mainly meant expanding the catalogue of opportunities for economic cooperation, even though, in terms of declarations, it was also linked to progress in the sphere of democratisation (since 2011, the

16 J. Olędzka, *The "Year of Truth" The impact of the 2020 elections on the integration project of the Russian Federation with Belarus*, "Romanian Political Science Review" 2022, vol. XXII, no. 1, pp. 33-50.

principle of “more for more” was introduced). As early as 1998, personal and economic sanctions were applied against Belarus to varying degrees and based on the situational context. Yet, this has translated neither into a pro-democratic correction of the policy course of the Belarusian state nor into consequences in the form of a complete and definitive collapse of economic cooperation with Minsk¹⁷. Belarus began to be perceived in the West as a peculiar – but given its limited population or territorial and raw material potential – a harmless hybrid of anachronistic political solutions and a modernising economy – a nation located geographically, politically, and metaphorically on Europe’s periphery.

In view of the above, it was quite predictable that the issues of the place and role of Belarus in the architecture of regional security remained secondary for years, though, of course, the topic of the need to improve relations between the EU and Belarus returned to European forums during periods of turbulence in the region¹⁸. For instance, following the Russian-Georgian war, the Eastern Partnership was established, which was supposed to be a breakthrough initiative for the entire post-Soviet area, and, thus also for the EU’s relations with Belarus. Interestingly, in defiance of Moscow, Belarus managed not to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which was seen as a pro-Western gesture by the Belarusian leader¹⁹. A year later, however, it became apparent that the Lukashenka regime prioritised actions to consolidate authoritarianism: non-transparent elections were held in Belarus, and post-election opposition demonstrations were pacified. In response to these events, the European Union imposed further personal (but not economic) sanctions on Belarus and limited its participation in the Eastern Partnership. At the same time, however, trade between Belarus and the EU was growing²⁰.

17 K.-O. Lang, M. Koopmann, *The EU and Belarus – a relationship with reservations in Belarus and the EU: From isolation towards cooperation*, [in:] H.-G. Wieck, S. Malerius (eds.), *Center for European Studies and the Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung*, Vilnius 2011, pp. 22-33.

18 T. Kubin, *W poszukiwaniu rezultatów... Polityka Unii Europejskiej wobec Białorusi*, “*Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis*” 2013, no. 10, pp. 173-199.

19 Only on 28 September 2022, Lukashenka went to Abkhazia, where he met the head of the self-proclaimed republic, Aslan Bzhania.

20 Source: <https://belgium.mfa.gov.by/en/exportby/>.

The Belarusian issue returned to the European agenda after Euro-maidan and Russia's annexation of Crimea, when a wide-ranging discussion about Ukraine's European aspirations commenced. The subject of Central and Eastern European security also appeared at that time. A key element of this was to be the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit, at which Uladzimir Makei, Belarusian foreign minister since 2012, presented a clearly pro-European stance and an offer to improve EU-Belarusian relations. For years, Makei himself was traditionally regarded as one of the most pro-Western people in Lukashenka's entourage, with a biography that perfectly reflected the complicated situation of the post-Soviet elites. Early in the 1980s, he was promoted to the rank of colonel in the Soviet Union's Main Intelligence Directorate. Due to his education, he was also fluent in foreign languages, and after 1991 he studied abroad and graduated from the Diplomatic School of the Vienna Academy in Austria. However, the assessment of this politician's activity is as ambiguous as the conclusions drawn from the analysis of Belarus' foreign policy strategy in recent decades. On the one hand, the politician, as one of the few in Lukashenka's entourage, initiated a rapprochement with the West; on the other hand, the attempts at dialogue he promoted were largely only simulated and were primarily aimed at a highly pragmatic search for new sources of legitimisation of the Lukashenka regime²¹. Therefore, there are no unequivocal answers to the question of whether the plans declared by Makei to turn Belarus into "Eastern European Switzerland"²² had ever had a chance to go beyond the sphere of propaganda and become the leading strategy of Belarusian foreign policy. In this context, however, one cannot omit Makei's letter published on 14 April 2023, by the journalist of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Rikard Jóźwiak, in which the Minister outlined his contribution to the improvement of Belarusian-EU relations between 2016 and 2019, and appealed to the EU for improv-

21 See opinion of Artyom Shraibman from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: *Окно невозможностей. Что значит для Беларуси смерть ее главного дипломата* [*Okno nevozmozhnostej. Chto znachit dlja Belarusi smert ee glavnogo diplomata*], <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88495>.

22 Makei gave an interview to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* with the telling title "We do not want to repeat Ukraine's mistakes". In it, he stated that "caution is an inherent feature of the Belarusian mentality" and that Belarus is a factor stabilizing the region (see *Wir wollen die Fehler der Ukraine nicht wiederholen*, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/russland-weissrussland-eu-putin-1.4676828>).

ing ties with Belarus. According to some commentators, the reasons for the suicide death of the head of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry can be sought in the failure of his project for the Europeanisation of Belarus. Yet there is no hard evidence for this claim.

After 2014, Belarus tried to distance itself from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and simultaneously strengthen its position towards Moscow. On the one hand, it announced its willingness to pursue a policy of neutrality, which explained its reluctance to make its territory available to Russian military bases. On the other hand, it declared its readiness to support peace negotiations (finally concluded with the Minsk agreements) that are so important for Eastern European security. As early as 2016, the EU lifted most sanctions against Belarus. Both diplomatic relations between Minsk and Brussels and multifaceted bilateral relations between the Belarusian side and EU member states intensified. The culmination of the stage of warming up the image of Lukashenka in the West was the visit of the President of Belarus to Austria in 2019 and the signing of agreements in 2020 on the simplification of visa procedures for Belarusians. However, the events following the 2020 presidential election dramatically changed the trajectory of this promising relationship, although, it should be emphasised that regardless of the dynamics of these relations, economic issues significantly dominated Belarus' ties with EU countries for almost three decades, overshadowing security issues²³. Since 24 February 2022, the Lukashenka regime has been trying to use the complicated regional security situation to create new prospects for trade and political cooperation. Once again, he has been behaving as pragmatically as he has flexibly. It is, therefore, possible that at some point, the West will face a dilemma about whether, despite close Russian-Belarusian cooperation, it should redefine its relations with the Lukashenka regime or create the foundations of a new architecture of international relations with representatives of the Belarusian political opposition in exile (the Transitional Cabinet and the Coordination Council). European countries neither in 2020 nor in 2022 took definitive steps to break

23 A. de Liedekerke, O. Husieva, K. Frankenthal, *Pitfalls and opportunities for an EU-strategy towards Belarus*, "ISPK Das Institut für Sicherheitspolitik an der Universität Kiel", Policy Brief, January 2022, no. 11, pp. 1-9.

diplomatic relations with Minsk (neither Brussels nor Kyiv did so). There are still claims that the severance of channels of communication with Minsk and the escalation of the policy of sanctions against Belarus will lead to an even stronger rapprochement between Minsk and Moscow, as there is no alternative. The key question is what idea Europe has of Belarus after 2022 and whether it is capable of building an effective security policy under conditions of deepened Belarusian-Russian integration.

4. Dynamics of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations after 2014

The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014 significantly changed the dynamics of the processes taking place in the region and increased its geopolitical importance. The sources of interest in Central and Eastern Europe for global actors are to be found in its location, the consequences of the end of the Cold War and the Russian Federation's unwillingness to shed its post-colonial syndrome²⁴. The destruction of the security architecture in Central and Eastern Europe caused by the annexation of Crimea by Russia created a vacuum in the place of the destroyed regional security system. Therefore, recognising the geopolitical importance of Belarus' position, acting Ukrainian President Oleksandr Turchynov made his first foreign visit to Alyaksandr Lukashenka in March 2014. As a result, he received security guarantees²⁵ from the President of Belarus, which protected Ukraine's northern borders under the conditions of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war in the Donbass. This solution, as well as the signing of the Minsk agreements (Minsk-2) in the capital of Belarus in February 2015, created the conditions for a temporary de-escalation of the conflict and opened up new opportunities for the Belarusian side to build cooperation with Ukraine. The neutral stance adopted by the Belarusian authorities during the first phase of the Russian-Ukrainian

24 A. Włodkowska, *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia jako obszar rywalizacji i wpływu. Ciągłość i zmiana w perspektywie 30 lat*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2022, no. 4(20), p. 14.

25 Лукашенко и Турчинов во время трехчасовых переговоров достигли понимания по всем проблемам [Lukashenko i Turchinov vo vremja trekhchasovykh peregovorov dostigli ponimaniya po vsem problemam], 29 March 2014, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-turchinov-vo-vremja-trehchasovykh-peregovorov-dostigli-ponimaniya-po-vsem-problemam-40815-2014> [22.04.2023].

war contributed to the image of Belarus as a regional guarantor of security and stability. On the one hand, Belarus declared neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian war; on the other hand, it was still bound by allied obligations towards Russia within the framework of the Union State and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Analysing the nature of the position of the Belarusian authorities in this period, the Ukrainian political scientist Yevhen Mahda called Belarus a “hybrid ally of Ukraine”²⁶.

In these conditions, the key task of the Belarusian authorities was to find a balance between dependence on Russia and allied obligations and the threat posed to Belarus by Russia’s aggressive policy. Nonetheless, maintaining this status quo for a brief period stabilised the security situation in the region; therefore, from the perspective of regional security, the internal destabilisation of Belarus or its tendency to crystallise the target geopolitical choice would alter the power balance and increase Russian influence in the country.

Russia’s economic, political, and informational pressure on Belarus, as well as the concurrent intensification of military cooperation, occurred against the backdrop of the region’s progressive militarization and the escalation of interstate confrontational sentiments. Russia sought to advance its own interests in Belarus, which included expanding its military presence and consolidating its control and influence over the Belarusian government. According to Belarusian analyst Denis Ivashin, Russian aggression against Belarus should be seen in the same framework as the military aggression against Ukraine, as a united front²⁷. In addition, one of the many tools for strengthening the Russian military presence in Belarus was the regular joint Russian-Belarusian exercises: “West-2017”, “Union Shield-2019”, “Slavic Brotherhood-2020”, “West-2021”, and “Allied Decision-2022”.

The internal crisis that followed the presidential election in 2020 weakened Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the destabilisation of

26 Ю. Дракахруст, „Лукашенко – гібридний союзник України”. Що думають в Україні про вибори президента Білорусі? [Ju. Drakakhrust, „Lukashenko – gibrinijj sojuznik Ukraini”. SHHo dumajut v Ukraini pro vobori prezidenta Bilorusi?], 2 July 2020, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/vybory-prezydenta-bilorusi-i-ukrajina/30700395.html> [22.04.2023].

27 Гібридна агресія РФ: Білорусь і Україна в принципі російського неоімперіалізму (OSINT-аналіз) [Gibridna agresija RF: Bilorus i Ukraina v princili rosijskogo neoimperializmu (OSINT-analiz)], 21 February 2020, <https://informna.palm.org/ua/hibrydna-ahresija-rf-bilorus-i-ukraine/> [16.04.2023].

the political situation was beneficial for Russia, strengthening its influence and making it a kind of “guarantor of security” for the Belarusian authorities. As a result, the dependence of political power on Russia and external isolation gradually reduced the subjectivity of the Belarusian state.

The above factors led to the fact that the territory of Belarus began to be actively used by the Russian military for its own purposes. By increasing its *de facto* military and indirect political presence in Belarus, the Russian leadership has presented the West with a vision of a new balance of power and a future security model predicated on Russian dominance in Central and Eastern Europe. Considering the current situation in the region as a threat to its own security, on 17 December 2021, the Russian Foreign Ministry published a communiqué, “On Russian draft documents on legal security guarantees from the US and NATO”²⁸. Particularly important was Article 4 of the Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and the member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which stipulated that “the Russian Federation and all participants shall not deploy their armed forces and weapons on the territory of all other European states, except for forces stationed in this territory on May 27, 1997”²⁹. By proposing a new order, Russia aimed to strengthen its own influence, considering that the scenario on the table involved the loss of the regional states’ international actorhood and a return to the Cold War balance of power.

De jure, the security situation in the region has so far been regulated by the Minsk agreements signed in 2015. However, it should be noted that from the beginning of their conceptualisation, their implementation by the Russian side was not envisaged³⁰, which resulted

28 О российских проектах документов по обеспечению правовых гарантий безопасности со стороны США и НАТО [O rossijskich proektakh dokumentov po obespečeniju pravovykh garantij bezopasnosti so storony SSHA i NATO], https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1790809/ [18.04.2023].

29 Соглашение о мерах обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации и государств-членов Организации Североатлантического договора [Soglashenie o merah obespečenija bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii i gosudarstv-chlenov Organizacii Severoatlanticheskogo dogovora], <https://mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1790803/> [18.04.2023].

30 Сурков заявил, что при работе над „Минском-2” не рассчитывал на его выполнение [Surkov zajavil, chto pri rabote nad „Minskom-2” ne rasschityval na ego vypolnenie], 16 February 2023, <https://tass.ru/politika/17063673> [20.04.2023].

in a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Belarus became a bridgehead for the Russian invasion and supported the Russian army, hence was an accomplice to the aggression. In addition, the involvement of Belarus as a participant in the war on the side of Russia gave the conflict a more comprehensive regional dimension and caused the emergence of new challenges and threats to the security of neighbouring countries. In the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the seemingly basic issue in the context of Belarus is the likelihood of using the Belarusian army in a Russian invasion and the increased threat associated with the allocation of part of the Russian nuclear arsenal to Belarus. Meanwhile, the situation in Belarus should be analysed in a broader context: both its currently unclear status as a state economically and militarily subordinated to Russia and the rather complicated nature of relations between Minsk and Kyiv are debatable. Belarusian-Ukrainian relations were also complicated by the fact that the Belarusian government had lost its legitimacy, the state had lost its subjectivity, the opposition had lost the ability to influence internal political processes, and society was unprepared for new challenges and resistance to Russian expansion. This resulted in a complex and ambiguous policy by the Ukrainian authorities towards Belarus, which can be described as ambivalent. Taking into account the reluctance of Belarusian society and Lukashenka to participate directly in the war, the Ukrainian side tried to prevent the ruling regime from becoming even more involved in the war without undermining its internal position and maintaining diplomatic representation in Belarus at the level of an ambassador. At the same time, Kyiv tried to exert an information and propaganda influence on the Belarusian population (primarily those belonging to armed formations), conducting numerous campaigns aimed at discouraging Belarusians from participating in the war with Ukraine. The approach adopted by the Ukrainian side has made contact with the exiled Belarusian opposition even more difficult than they were in 2020. The situation so far is not one-dimensional. The Ukrainian authorities were satisfied with the stance of some Belarusian oppositionists on Belarusian-Russian relations and their narrative regarding the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories. In turn, some leaders of the Belarusian opposition showed a very cautious approach to building dialogue with Ukraine, which did not go unnoticed by Kyiv. The Ukrainian authorities are currently fo-

cusing on a pragmatic assessment of the situation, trying to minimise the risk of the Belarusian army joining the war and maintaining contacts with a party capable of influencing processes inside Belarus. At the same time, they support the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment, accept the political wing that is emerging within its structures and contribute to its transformation from a purely military formation into a future military-political structure.

However, Belarus' involvement in the Russian aggression has led to a reflection in Ukraine on the need to redefine more than just political or economic relations. The attitude of Ukrainian society towards Belarusians has clearly changed. In the collective consciousness of Ukrainians, Belarus was perceived positively, regardless of Belarus's close ties with Russia. According to polls conducted between October and November of 2019, the most popular foreign politician in Ukraine was the president of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who was viewed favourably by as many as 66% of respondents³¹. In comparison, the results of a survey conducted between 22 February and 1 March 2023, by the Razumkov Centre indicate the opposite. According to these sources, 80.6% of Ukrainians believe Belarus to be a participant in the ongoing conflict with Ukraine. Only 7.5% of respondents were of the opposite opinion. On the whole, Ukrainian society is mostly negative towards Belarus (more than 80% of respondents), and only 12.4% of respondents expressed a positive attitude towards Belarus. In addition, two-thirds of respondents (total – 46.7%, but most probably – 22.5%) supported severing all ties between Ukraine and Belarus following the Ukrainian victory. Also, contrary to the data from 2019, over 90% of Ukrainians now had a negative attitude towards Alyaksandr Lukashenka³². Analysing the change in the mindset of Ukrainians towards Belarusians that has been taking place during the war, Serhiy Dembitsky, deputy director of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, noted that although the majority of Ukrainians have

31 *Динаміка ставлення українців до світових лідерів [Dinamika stavlennja Ukraïnciv do svitovih lideriv]*, https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/dinamika_otnosheniya_ukraïncev_k_mirovym_lideram.html [10.04.2023].

32 *Ставлення українців до Білорусі (лютий–березень 2023р.) [Stavlennja Ukraïnciv do Bilorusi (ljutij–berezien 2023r.)]*, 9 March 2023, <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/stavlennia-ukraïntsiv-do-bilorusi-ljutyi-berezien-2023r> [10.04.2023].

a bad attitude towards Belarusians, a relatively large group still exist those who treat the citizens of the neighbouring country neutrally – 42% at the beginning of 2022, and 34% in August 2022³³. As the war progressed, the attitude of Ukrainians towards Belarusians changed to the disadvantage of Belarusians. However, it should be noted that until 24 February 2022, Ukrainians and Belarusians had quite stereotypical ideas about themselves. Over the years, people-to-people contacts were rather limited. Both nations viewed each other through the lens of Russian propaganda and Soviet stereotypes that persisted in post-Soviet societies for many years. Regardless of the reluctance of the public, the Ukrainian authorities will have to create some perspective for post-war relations with Belarus. This is an absolutely key issue for the security of the state and the stability of the entire region.

Conclusions

The political crisis in Belarus and its short- and long-term consequences, along with the next phase of Russian aggression against Ukraine, have brought major changes to the architecture of regional security.

Three eastern European nations – Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, have experienced significant political, economic, and demographic declines for very different reasons. Clearly, the war in Ukraine has a decisive impact on the current security space, but special attention should be paid to the expanding role of Belarus in it, even though it is still unclear whether Belarus is a fully independent state. It is systematically losing more and more areas of its own sovereignty to Russia, and the development of the Russian military infrastructure on Belarusian territory is of key importance in this respect. As early as October 2021, a joint Russian-Belarusian training and combat centre for air forces and air defence troops became operational, with Russian aircraft³⁴ stationed there, ensuring the continued presence of Russian

33 Як і чому змінилося ставлення українців до білорусів під час війни [Jak i chomu zminilosja stavlennja ukrainciv do bilorusiv pid chas vijni], 24 February 2023, <https://i-soc.com.ua/ua/news/yak-i-chomu-zminilosja-stavlennja-ukrainciv-do-bilorusiv-pid-chas-vijni> [10.04.2023].

34 В Беларуси начал действовать совместный с Россией центр подготовки ВС и ПВО [V Belarusi nachal dejstvovat sovmestnyj s Rossiej centr podgotovki VS i PVO], 20 October 2021, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/v-belarusi-nachal-dejstvovat-sovmestnyj-s-rossiej-tsentr-podgotovki-vvs-i-pvo-465475-2021/> [20.04.2023].

combat units. By bolstering its military presence in Belarus, Russia gradually transformed its territory into a launching pad for further aggression against Ukraine, while also substantially influencing the Euro-Atlantic community's stance towards Belarus. The militarisation of Belarus may, therefore, in the long term, significantly weaken the possibilities of creating a platform for dialogue between this country and the European Union or the countries on NATO's eastern flank.

A factor with great potential to destabilise the region was and still is the migration/border crisis initiated by the Belarusian authorities and implemented politically and logistically with the support of Russia. It consolidated the new status of Belarus in the security space as a state that is a source of threats and instability for the whole of Europe. As a result, the image of Belarus as a peacemaker and guarantor of regional security and stability has finally changed due to its ostentatious submission to Russia.

The constitutional amendments adopted during the referendum on 27 February 2022, also contributed to Belarus' transformation into a potential source of regional instability. Although the amendment originally intended to cover systemic issues, some of them referred to matters related to state security. These were, in particular, changes to Article 18, which initially stated that "The Republic of Belarus aims to make its territory a nuclear-free zone and to make the state neutral" and was replaced by the words: "The Republic of Belarus excludes military aggression against other states from its territory"³⁵. This is a radical change in the Belarusian position. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the postulate of neutrality has been the fundamental principle guiding the Belarusian authorities during the establishment of independent statehood and Belarus' entry into the international arena. In this context, the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus³⁶, military cooperation, and the increasing number of planned

35 Конституция Республики Беларусь [Konstitucija Respubliki Belarus], <https://president.gov.by/ru/gosudarstvo/constitution> [20.04.2023].

36 Лукашенко: ядерное оружие будет размещено в Беларуси только в случае угроз со стороны Запада [Łukašenko: jadrońnoje orużije budżet raźmieščajeno v Bielarusi tolko v slučaju uhroz so storony Zapada], 11 February 2022, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-jadernoe-oruzhie-budet-razmescheno-v-belarusi-tolko-v-listening-ugroz-so-storony-zapada-485310-2022/> [20.04.2023].

Russian-Belarusian military exercises indicate that both unconventional and conventional threats to the region's countries are growing.

In conclusion, given the alliance commitments within the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation) and the Union State of Russia and Belarus, it can be argued that, from a security standpoint, Belarus can be treated as part of Russia today. Belarusian territory has become a kind of training ground for the implementation of Russian military, economic and political goals. For this reason, it seems impossible to return to the findings of the so-called Budapest Memorandum. However, the studies conducted so far on the impact of the Belarusian model of authoritarianism on the foreign policy of Belarus indicate that despite the systematically deepening Russian-Belarusian integration and the ever-expanding sanctions policy towards Belarus, due to the shape of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations between 2014 and 2021 and the periodically satisfactory relations between Belarus and the EU (mainly in the economic sphere), there are still prospects for Belarus to diversify its foreign policy and reposition the European vector in it. The most important question, however, is whether Belarus itself will want to take advantage of these opportunities and remain interested in cooperation with the West. The situation is complicated not only by the deepening Belarusian-Russian integration but also by the fact that Belarus has begun to promote the model of a new polycentric international order, marginalising the role of Euro-Atlantic actors³⁷, and Lukashenka himself publicly stated that "the time has come for Asia"³⁸. This Asian turn in Belarusian policy is multifaceted, as it covers both economic issues (Belt and Road or Digital Silk Road, transcontinental networks of trade, infrastructural and logistics^{39,40}) but also security-related projects such as SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation),

37 *Lukashenko: Recent developments herald the emergence of a multipolar world*, 11 October 2022, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-recent-developments-herald-emergence-of-multipolar-world-153764-2022/> [16.11.2022].

38 *Lukashenko calls to find a faster way out of the crisis*, 13 October 2022, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-calls-to-find-faster-way-out-of-crisis-153820-2022/> [16.11.2022].

39 *Lukashenko: CIS states are able to reduce the impact of external shocks*, 14 October 2022, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-cis-states-are-able-to-reduce-impact-of-external-shocks-153859-2022/> [16.11.2022].

40 *Lukashenko: Western sanctions have failed*, 30 September 2022, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-western-sanctions-have-failed-153480-2022/> [16.11.2022].

CSTO⁴¹ and CICA (Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia)⁴². So far, the European Union has not offered such an attractive offer of multidimensional cooperation.

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⁴¹ In July 2022, Belarus submitted a formal application for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and as early as September of the same year, at the Samarkand summit, Lukashenka was assured that the application would be granted.

⁴² *Lukashenko: West's attempts to keep unipolar world order resulted in severe crisis*, 16 September 2022, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-wests-attempts-to-keep-unipolar-world-order-resulted-in-severe-crisis-153152-2022/> [16.11.2022].

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