

THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS IN RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR IN 2014–2022

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For Russia, it is Russia's war, and for Belarus, it is Lukashenko's war, not Belarus's¹

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Problem statement and its relation to important scientific or practical tasks. For a long time, Belarusian issues remained on the periphery of Ukrainian researchers' attention. The lack of interest was due to the low bilateral relations intensity, different foreign policy aspirations of the two states, the lack of a full-fledged dialogue between Ukrainian and Belarusian societies etc. This was partly due to the influence of the Russian Federation (RF), which was not interested in Ukrainian-Belarusian cooperation developing without the Kremlin's patronage. Therefore, Ukraine had to consider the factor of Russia in building relations with Belarus. This, as well as several other factors, determined the situational nature of Ukrainian-Belarusian cooperation in the absence of a meaningful strategy for bilateral relations building.

Analysis of recent researches and publications, which have initiated problem solution, the author relies on. With the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, the level of interest in Belarus began to grow actively. In particular, in scientific and expert circles. Since then, an increasing number of scientific publications², dissertations^{3,4} and analytical materials^{5,6} have appeared.

In light of the mediation aspirations of the Belarusian authorities, some interest in determining the role of Belarus in the settlement of the war in Ukraine arose among Belarusian researchers, in particular: D. Yurchak⁷ and A. Kosov⁸, A. Tikhomirov^{9,10}. Joint research, discussion notes, etc. have become a characteristic phenomenon. Ukrainian and Belarusian authors which reflected the views on the problematic issues of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations^{11,12}. Some interest in this topic was observed among Russian authors, for example, L. Shanshieva analyzed the place and role of Belarus in the context of the "Ukrainian crisis"^{13,14,15}, which, among other things, was seen as a threat to national security of the Republic of Belarus¹⁶.

Goal statement (task statement). The position of the Belarusian authorities on Russia's aggression

⁷ Юрчак Д. В. Минск как потенциальная площадка для урегулирования украинского конфликта. *Актуальные проблемы международных отношений и дипломатии (1918 г. – начало XXI в.)* : материалы II Междунар. научно-практической конф. (Витебск, 23–24 апреля 2015 г. / Витебский гос. ун-т) / редкол.: А. П. Косов (отв. ред.) [и др.]. Витебск: ВГУ им. П. М. Машерова, 2015. С. 259–263.

⁸ Косов О., Юрчак Д. Роль і місце Республіки Білорусь у процесі врегулювання кризи на сході України. *Вісник Львівського університету. Серія «Міжнародні відносини»*. Львів, 2017. Випуск 41. С. 89–96.

⁹ Тихомиров А. Украинский кризис и Беларусь: итоги года. *Беларуска-польскія адносінны: гісторыя і сучаснасць* : матэрыялы Міжнар. круглага стала, Мінск, 30 кастр. 2014 г. / рэдкал.: В. Г. Шадурыскі (адк. рэд.) [і інш.]. Мінск: Выд. цэнтр БДУ, 2015. С. 69-84. URL: https://elib.bsu.by/bitstream/123456789/110741/1/tihomirov_2014_BelPol.pdf

¹⁰ Тихомиров А. Белорусско-украинские отношения в условиях кризиса в Украине (2013-2016 гг.). *Беларусь в современном мире: материалы XV Междунар. науч. конф., посвящ. 95-летию образования Белорус. гос. ун-та, Минск, 27 окт. 2016 г. Минск, 2016*. URL: https://elib.bsu.by/bitstream/123456789/162949/1/tihomirov_BMW_2016.pdf

¹¹ Бетлій О.В., Прейгерман Є.Л. Аудит зовнішньої політики: Україна – Білорусь : дискус. зап. Київ, 2016. URL: http://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Aud_Ukr_Bilorus_ukr_net-1.pdf

¹² Максак Г. Сотрудничество Республики Беларусь и Украины в новых геополитических условиях. Минск, 2014. 39 с. URL: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/11006.pdf>

¹³ Шаншиева Л. Н. Беларусь и украинский кризис (2013–2015 гг.). *Европейская безопасность: события, оценки, прогнозы* : журнал. 2015. URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/belarus-i-ukrainskiy-krizis-2013-2015-gg/viewer>

¹⁴ Шаншиева Л. Н. Беларусь и украинский кризис: двойственность оценок и поиски решений. *Россия и современный мир* : журнал. 2015. URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/belarus-i-ukrainskiy-krizis-dvoystvennost-otsenok-i-poiski-resheniy/viewer>

¹⁵ Шаншиева Л. Н. Беларусь и украинский кризис в контексте региональной безопасности. *Проблемы европейской безопасности* : журнал. 2016. URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/belarus-i-ukrainskiy-krizis-v-kontekste-regionalnoy-bezopasnosti/viewer>

¹⁶ Украинский кризис как угроза национальной безопасности Республики Беларусь. URL: <https://riss.ru/article/9447/>

¹ «Лукашэнка спрабуе зноў сесці на таго ж коніка, што ў 2008 і 2014 годзе. Але зараз не атрымаецца», – аналітык Аркадзь Мошэс. URL: https://svaboda.global.ssl.fastly.net/a/31797552.html?fbclid=IwAR2fU59wvRL0a4vw_BXkC66dTytgI44mMQWkTy2t0jRxxX4Kmy7Gv6-cvjo

² Павлович Ю. О. Україна й Республіка Білорусь сьогодні: проблеми й перспективи відносин. *Науковий вісник Східноєвропейського університету імені Лесі Українки. Серія: Історичні науки*. Луцьк, 2017. № 5 (354). С. 137-141.

³ Павлович Ю. О. Образ Білорусі та білорусів в українській суспільно-політичній думці (1991–2004). – Кваліфікаційна наукова праця на правах рукопису. Дисертація на здобуття наукового ступеня кандидата історичних наук (доктора філософії) за спеціальністю 07.00.01 – історія України. – Інститут українознавства ім. І. Крип'якевича НАН України, Інститут народознавства НАН України. Львів, 2020.

⁴ Василюшин С. Ю. Українсько-білоруські відносини (1991–2014 рр.). – Кваліфікаційна наукова праця на правах рукопису. Дисертація на здобуття наукового ступеня кандидата історичних наук за спеціальністю 07.00.02. – «Всесвітня історія». – Тернопільський національний педагогічний університет імені Володимира Гнатюка, Тернопіль, 2019.

⁵ Бетлій О., Прейгерман Є. Аудит зовнішньої політики: Україна – Білорусь: Дискусійна записка. К., 2016. 55 с.

⁶ Прейгерман Е, Максак Г. Белорусско-Украинские отношения в контексте внутривосточного кризиса в Беларуси. *Аналитическая записка по итогам Белорусско-Украинского экспертного форума. Декабрь 2020*. URL: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/17179.pdf>

against Ukraine, the gradual increase of Russian influence on Alexander Lukashenko, the intensification of integration processes within the Union State, led to a significant deterioration of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations, followed by Belarus's actual entry into the war. Accordingly, the question arose of determining the role of Belarus in this war. Therefore, given the above circumstances, it is important to trace back the process of transformation that the Belarusian government has undergone in its positioning on the Russian-Ukrainian war from 2014 to 2022.

Presentation of research material with full justification of findings. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2014 marked not only the beginning of a fundamentally new stage in Russian-Ukrainian relations with further aggravation and military escalation, but also changed the nature and dynamics of Russia's relations with neighboring countries. Accordingly, in a somewhat broader, regional context, Russia's war against Ukraine has led to a reform of interstate relations in Eastern Europe. A new geopolitical reality began to shape, which led to a change in traditional approaches to the development of relations and created new conditions for further cooperation. Against this background, the position of the states in which Russia has traditionally maintained its political, economic, and military presence was important. First, this concerned the Republic of Belarus, which, as an ally of Russia, is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and a member of the Collective Security Treaty (CSTO) and is a member of the supranational Union State. Thus, as a result of Ukraine's unequivocal pro-Western orientation and confrontation with Russia, the Belarusian authorities faced the need to find new approaches to cooperation with the parties. The key task, in such circumstances, was to find a balance between dependence on Russia and allied commitments and the threat posed by Russia's aggressive policy towards Belarus itself. At the same time, it was important to maintain constructive relations with the new Ukrainian government.

Supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity, Alexander Lukashenko advocated resolving complex domestic and international problems only through peaceful means¹⁷. At the same time, on March 27, 2014, during a special session of the UN General Assembly, Belarus refused to condemn Russia's actions against Crimea. Thus, based on these circumstances and guided by its own national interests, the Belarusian leadership has taken a restrained and neutral position on the Crimea annexation and the war in Ukraine. This development was unequivocally negatively perceived by some Russian political scientists, which led to the assessment of

Alexander Lukashenko's actions as excessive sympathy for the Ukrainian leadership and betrayal of Russia¹⁸.

Instead, the position of the Belarusian side was generally positively received by the Ukrainian leadership. Evidence of this was the visit of Acting President of Ukraine, Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada Oleksandr Turchynov to Minsk on March 29, 2014. In this regard, the words of Alexander Lukashenko, who stated during the meeting that "Our borders are not borders of division, but of friendship, were quite revealing. We will always be close to you, as the friendliest state, and, based on this, will build our relations"¹⁹. This clearly showed the dualism of Belarus' foreign policy: on the one hand, it voted simultaneously with Russia against Ukrainian resolutions in the UN General Assembly, and on the other – avoided recognition of the annexation of Crimea and benefited from trade and economic cooperation with Ukraine²⁰.

At the same time, the Belarusian authorities continued to pursue the course of economic cooperation with Russia. Thus, on May 29, 2014, Belarus joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Bilateral cooperation in the security sphere also remained intensive. On March 12, 2014, Alexander Lukashenko suggested that Russia deploy an additional 15 aircraft due to NATO activity and the escalation of the situation near the border with Belarus²¹. And already on March 13, Russia sent Su-27 fighters and military transport planes to Belarus²². Such actions were dictated by the intentions voiced in April 2013 by the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation Sergei Shoigu in 2015 to create an air Russian Air Force base in Belarus for permanent residence²³.

Thus, according to Belarusian historian Alexander Tikhomirov, the game of the Belarusian leadership was more subtle. Supporting the official Kyiv in a number of positions, it did not ruin the established relations with Russia, completely abandoning the use of the terms "Russian aggression", "Russian occupation"

¹⁸ Суздальцев А. Традиционное предательство. URL: <http://politoboz.com/content/tradicionnoepredatelstvo>.

¹⁹ Важно, что с территории Беларуси никогда не будет агрессии на территорию Украины. Посольство Украины в Республике Беларусь. 2014. 29 марта. URL: <https://belarus.mfa.gov.ua/ru/news/20875-vazhivo-shho-z-teritoriji-bilorusii-nikoli-ne-bude-agresiji-na-teritoriju-ukrajini>

²⁰ Хилько М. Двосторонні відносини у регіоні: Білорусь. Сценарій розвитку відносин до 2025 р. URL: <http://prismua.org/eap-ua-by/>

²¹ Беларусь предложит России разместить у себя дополнительно до 15 самолетов. URL: <https://korrespondent.net/world/3318358-belarus-predlozhyt-rossyyu-razmestyt-u-sebia-dopolnytelno-do-15-samoletov>

²² Россия направила в Беларусь истребители Су-27 и военно-транспортные самолеты. URL: <https://korrespondent.net/world/3319022-rossyia-napravyla-v-belarus-ystrebytely-su-27-y-voenno-transportnye-samolety>

²³ Россия планирует к 2015 году разместить в Беларуси авиапункт с истребителями – Шойгу. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWruXb3L9g&ab_channel=ИнформационноеагтствоБелТА0

¹⁷ Кучма обговорив із президентом Білорусі по телефону ситуацію в Україні, Лукашенко виступив за територіальну цілісність України. URL: <https://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/political/194435.html>

and “annexation of Crimea by Russia”²⁴. Nevertheless, Russian aggression in Ukraine has affected Belarusian domestic political processes. Fearing that Russia would repeat the Ukrainian scenario in Belarus, the martial law was amended. According to which, martial law in Belarus could be imposed in the event of “sending by another state or on behalf of another state to the territory of the Republic of Belarus armed gangs (groups), irregular forces, mercenaries, or units of regular troops”²⁵.

It is important to note that the Belarusian society was generally positive about Alexander Lukashenko's policy towards the events in Ukraine. According to opinion polls conducted by the Independent Institute for Economic and Political Studies (IIEPS) in 2014, the majority of the population, 58.7%, “unequivocally / rather positively” assessed the president's policy on events in Ukraine²⁶. 74.8% of citizens did not support the introduction of Russian troops into Ukraine through the territory of Belarus, while 15.2% positively assessed this possibility. Another 10% had no answer to this question. Regarding the participation of Belarusian citizens in hostilities on the territory of Ukraine, 76.9% of Belarusians were negative about this idea²⁷.

At the same time, in their attitude to Russia's annexation of Crimea, 26.9% of Belarusians called it “imperialist seizure and occupation”, while 62.2% perceived it as “Russia's return of Russian lands, restoration of historical justice”. The war in Donbass was assessed by 23.2% as a “Russian uprising” and by 65.5% as a “popular protest against illegitimate rule”. 30.1% agreed with the participants in the armed protests in eastern Ukraine as “terrorists”, while 54.1% disagreed. At the same time, 50.9% of Belarusians perceived the new Ukrainian government as “fascists”, with which 28.8% of citizens disagreed²⁸. Such data show that the majority of Belarusians, as of 2014, shared the Russian interpretation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Moreover, among regular Russian television viewers, support for Russia's position was markedly higher than the average among respondents. However, among those who did not watch Russian television at all, most also considered the annexation of Crimea legal. It is obvious that people's attitudes were no less important than the informational influence in this case²⁹. In this way, both Belarusian

society and the government were able to reach a consensus on their position on Russian aggression in Ukraine. This ensured socio-political stability within the country, maintained a dialogue with Russia, helped create a positive image of Belarus in the West, and was generally an acceptable option for Ukraine's leadership, which relied on security guarantees from Alexander Lukashenko.

Declaring neutrality and equidistance from both sides, the next important step was for the Belarusian leadership to play a mediating role in resolving the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Since 2014, Minsk has been a venue for negotiations on resolving the war in Ukraine. The choice of the place of negotiations was advantageous for Ukraine not only in terms of logistics. The image of a neutral mediator state allowed Belarus to distance itself from Russia. Thus, the Belarusian leadership avoided the need to deploy a Russian air base on its territory, the creation of which not only posed a threat to the sovereignty of Belarus and Ukraine. According to Belarusian political scientist Yevgeny Preigerman, this gave the Ukrainian authorities reason to perceive the neighboring state as a guarantor of their own security, and not as a springboard for the Russian military – given all the obligations in the field of defense and security³⁰.

Despite its status as an ally of the Russian Federation and its membership in the CSTO, the position taken by the Belarusian authorities in the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as mediation in the peace process, was in line with the spirit of neutrality in Belarus' foreign policy³¹. In fact, the Belarusian side did not take any initiatives to resolve the conflict. Without recognizing the annexation of Crimea and the status of the so-called LPR and DPR³², Minsk became only a platform for negotiations between the parties, which took place in various formats. In fact, the peacekeeping and mediation functions of the Belarusian authorities were limited to this. However, the very non-interference of Belarus in the conflict has become a manifestation of its own position and a valuable political capital for Alexander Lukashenko. This turned out to be enough to consolidate the image of a regional donor of security and stability for Belarus, and the image of a peacekeeper for the Belarusian president. Thus, the Belarusian president acted as a guarantor of security and non-invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine from Belarusian territory. The balance between Ukraine and Belarus in the face of Russian aggression has generally suited both sides. However, even at this stage, the first precon-

²⁴ Тихомиров А. Украинский кризис и Беларусь: итоги года. *Беларуска-польскія адносіны: гісторыя і сучаснасць* : матэрыялы Міжнар. круглага стала, Мінск, 30 кастр. 2014 г. / рэдкал.: В. Г. Шадурыскі (адк. рэд.) [і інш.]. Мінск: Выд. цэнтр БДУ, 2015. С. 69-84. URL: https://elib.bsu.by/bitstream/123456789/110741/1/tihimirov_2014_BelPol.pdf

²⁵ В новой редакции изложен Закон «О военном положении». URL: <https://normativka.by/lib/news/13905>

²⁶ Пресс-релиз по результатам национального опроса в декабре. 2014. URL: <http://www.iieps.org/?p=278>

²⁷ Украинский компас для геополитических полюсов Беларуси. URL: <http://www.iieps.org/?p=1405>

²⁸ Пресс-релиз по результатам национального опроса в июне 2014. URL: <http://www.iieps.org/?p=2689>

²⁹ Там само.

³⁰ Мінські перагаворы зайшлі у глухий кут, чи вінен Мінськ? URL: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/28993366.html>

³¹ Польовий Т. Політика нейтралітету як модель національної безпеки Республіки Білорусь. *Вісник Львівського університету: Серія «Міжнародні відносини»*. Випуск 43. 2017. С. 118.

³² Лукашенко: С точки зрения права референдумы в Донецкой и Луганской областях Украины не имеют никакого значения. URL: https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cach e:ZdWkTp0CJ9EJ:https://udf.name/news/main_news/102502-lukashenko-s-tochki-zreniya-prava-referendумы-v-doneckoy-i-luganskoy-oblastyah-ukrainy-ne-imeyut-nikakogo-znacheniya.html+%cd=1&hl=uk&ct=clnk&gl=pl

ditions began to emerge, which indicated the gradual preparation of Russia's military bridgehead in Belarus. For example, Denis Ivashin, a Belarusian analyst with the international intelligence community InformNapalm, was skeptical of the Belarusian government's policies. Back in 2015, he wrote about the "need to sabotage the processes of creating Russian military bases and help protect the constitutionally neutral status of the Belarusian state"³³. He saw the threat in Russia's possible implementation of the "Crimean scenario" in Belarus.

Russia has tried to promote its own interests in Belarus, which were to increase its military presence and strengthen control and influence over the Belarusian government in the person of Alexander Lukashenko. One of the many instruments of pressure on the President of Belarus was the joint Russian-Belarusian exercise "West-2017". The nature of the exercise, as well as information and psychological operations carried out by Russia during the exercise, indicated: an attempt to destabilize Ukrainian-Belarusian relations, create additional tensions near the borders of Ukraine and NATO member states, demonstrate its military presence in Belarus and potentially threaten its sovereignty.

At the same time, the pro-Russian media carried out targeted information campaigns to discredit Alexander Lukashenko³⁴ and promote narratives about the possible transit of power in Belarus and the preservation of state independence. In this context, a special place was occupied by the topic of possible annexation by Russia to Belarus, which since the end of 2018 has been actively raised by several Russian and Ukrainian media³⁵.

It is notable that this information campaign, unlike the previous ones, was large in scale and duration. If earlier similar topics were raised mostly by marginal Russian propaganda resources, now the main channels of information are the state federal media and liberal Russian media³⁶. In this way, the Russian authorities provided favorable informational and propagandistic support for the hybrid aggression against Belarus, to further destabilize the domestic political situation in the country. One can agree with the opinion of the mentioned Denis Ivashin that the Russian aggression against Belarus should be considered in one context with the military aggression against Ukraine³⁷.

³³ Підготовка плацдарму ПКС РФ на території Білорусі (OSINT-аналіз). *Інфографіка*. URL: <https://informnapalm.org/ua/pidgotovka-platsdarmu-pks-rf-na-terytoriyi-bilorusi-osint-analiz-infografika/>

³⁴ «У Лукашенко случился ишемический инсульт». Уроки фейка. URL: <https://naviny.by/article/20180802/1533204612-u-lukashenko-sluchilsya-ishemicheskiy-insult-uroki-feyka>

³⁵ Путин готовит аннексию совсем скоро: Беларусь исчезнет навсегда». URL: <https://politika.net/news/world/982953-putin-gotovit-anneksiju-sovsem-skoro-belarus-ischeznet-navsegda/>

³⁶ Российская аннексия Беларуси: что стоит за спекуляциями. URL: <https://bsblog.info/rossijskaya-anneksiya-belarusi-cto-toit-za-spekulyatsiyami/>

³⁷ Гібридна агресія РФ: Білорусь і Україна в прицілі російського неоімперіалізму (OSINT-аналіз). URL: <https://informnapalm.org/ua/hibrydna-ahresiiia-rf-bilorus-i-ukraina/>

The expected consequence of this development was the political crisis after the 2020 presidential election in Belarus. Analysts had predicted³⁸ that the political crisis in Belarus, despite its political consequences (weakening of Belarusian statehood and restrictions on sovereignty), had a significant impact on regional security in Eastern Europe. The growing dependence of Alexander Lukashenko on Russia has affected Ukrainian-Belarusian relations and led to a gradual change in the position of the Belarusian authorities regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Along with the restriction of Alexander Lukashenko's domestic political influence and his inability to shape his own foreign policy, the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric of the Belarusian ruler began to grow. State propaganda began to work actively to form a negative image of Ukraine. This was due to the expansion of Russia's information presence in Belarus. The involvement of Russian specialists to work on local television, and the borrowing of practices and techniques previously used by the Russian media towards Ukraine³⁹. From such positions, the statements of the Ukrainian side about the intention to officially abandon Minsk as a venue for negotiations on the stopping of hostilities in eastern Ukraine seemed natural⁴⁰. Although, so far, both sides have been interested in holding talks on the territory of Belarus.

The increase in Russia's political and information presence was superimposed on the increase in Russia's military activity in Belarus. In October 2021, a joint training and combat training center for the Air Force and Air Defense Forces was launched, which housed Russian aircraft⁴¹. According to Belarusian military-political observer Yegor Lebiadok, the creation of a training and combat center is a formally permanent exercise, but in reality, it is a constant presence of Russian combat units and weapons near Belarus⁴². In practice, this could be interpreted as a departure from the neutrality that Alexander Lukashenko has long declared in his approach to Russian aggression in Ukraine and the recognition of Crimea's status. The change of position, as well as the statement that Crimea is de facto and de

³⁸ Прейгерман Е, Максак Г. Белорусско-Украинские отношения в контексте внутривосточного кризиса в Беларуси. *Аналитическая записка по итогам Белорусско-Украинского экспертного форума*. Декабрь 2020. URL: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueos/ukraine/17179.pdf>

³⁹ Польовий Т. Антиукраїнська риторика білоруських медіа після внутрішньополітичної кризи 2020 року (на прикладі телеканалів «СТВ» та «Беларусь 1») *"Politicus"* : науковий журнал. № 2. 2021. С. 122-131.

⁴⁰ Кінець мінського формату: що означає заява Кисва про зміну переговорів по Донбасу. URL: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2021/05/28/7123752/>

⁴¹ В Беларуси начал действовать совместный с Россией центр подготовки BBC и ПВО. URL: <https://www.belta.by/society/view/v-belarusi-nachal-dejstvovat-sovmestnyj-s-rossiej-tsentr-podgotovki-vvs-i-pvo-465475-2021/>

⁴² Российский учебно-боевой центр – расширение присутствия РФ в Беларуси. URL: <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2021/08/31/rossijskiy-uchebno-boevoy-tsentr-rasshirenies-prisutstviya-rf-v-belarusi.html>

jure Russian⁴³, was not, however, enshrined in law. In this regard, according to experts, Russia used the ruler of Belarus to increase tensions between Ukraine and Belarus. Because Ukraine's sharp reaction would help Russia's expansion in Belarus⁴⁴.

An important event in terms of deepening the integration of the Belarusian army with the Russian armed forces was the large-scale military training West-2021. Even though the main events took place mostly in Russia and only partially in Belarus itself, the media of the two countries broadcast narratives about the confrontation with NATO and the threat from Ukraine. The rhetoric was supported by experts' arguments⁴⁵ and statements about the threat posed by Ukraine, voiced by Alexander Lukashenko⁴⁶. By strengthening its military presence in Belarus in this way, Russia has gradually turned its territory into a springboard for further aggression against Ukraine.

The situation was complicated by the signing on November 4, 2021, of the decree "On the main directions of implementation of the provisions of the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State for 2021–2023"⁴⁷. Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko have approved 28 union programs, so-called "road maps", whose drafts have not been published. Accordingly, the image of Belarus as a peacemaker, a donor of security and stability in the region has finally changed. In light of the migration crisis on the border between Belarus and the EU, as well as the inability of the Belarusian authorities to ensure neutrality and mediation in the Russian-Ukrainian war, Belarus was already perceived as a generator of threats and instability in the region. The approval of the joint military doctrine of the Union State in November 2021 did not contribute to Ukraine's security. This fact further leveled Alexander Lukashenko's previous security guarantees. The document provided for a coordinated military policy, cooperation in the construction and development of the armed forces, increasing the level of coherence and military training, as well as the mutual use of military infrastructure⁴⁸.

⁴³ Лукашенко: Крым де-факто и де-юре стал российским после референдума. URL: <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-krym-de-fakto-i-de-юре-stal-rossijskim-posle-referenduma-472352-2021/>

⁴⁴ Заява Лукашенка щодо Криму – останній козир у діалозі і з Україною, і з Росією – Ігор Тишкевич. URL: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/zayava-lukashenka-shchodokrymu/31589290.html>

⁴⁵ Учения «Запад-2021» помогут России и Беларуси в случае конфликта с Украиной и НАТО – эксперт. URL: <https://eurasia.expert/ucheniya-pomogut-rossii-i-belarusi-v-sluchae-konfliktas-ukrainoy-i-nato/>

⁴⁶ Лукашенко попросил у Путина С-400 для защиты от Украины. URL: <https://eurasia.expert/lukashenko-anonsiroval-postavki-oruzhiya-iz-rossii-na-1-mird/>

⁴⁷ 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. URL: <https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=ad2100022>

⁴⁸ Шойгу рассказал о новой военной доктрине Союзного государства. URL: <https://ria.ru/20211020/doktrina-1755380712.html>

The final stage, which preceded the full-scale Russian invasion of Belarus, was a joint exercise of the Belarusian and Russian armed forces – "Union Determination-2022". Despite the fact that the training was supposed to last from February 10 to 20, the parties decided to continue it due to the "escalation in Donbass"⁴⁹. In addition, on February 16, announcing the withdrawal of Russian troops, Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei said that: "no servicemen, no units of military equipment will remain after these exercises"⁵⁰. This development has called into question the ability of local authorities to fully control the situation in Belarus. As a result, on February 24, 2022, Russian troops stationed in Belarus launched an invasion of Ukraine and, with the support of the Belarusian authorities, launched air and missile strikes on Ukrainian territory. It is notable that on February 27, Belarus held a referendum on amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, which, by the way, amended Article 18, which contained the phrase: "The Republic of Belarus aims to make its territory nuclear-free zone, and the state – neutral". Given the conditionality and declarative nature of this thesis, it essentially did not follow. Instead, the Constitution introduced the phrase that "the Republic of Belarus excludes military aggression from its territory against other states"⁵¹. The innovations initiated by Alexander Lukashenko should be seen in the context of Russia's concessions and its intentions to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus⁵².

Analyzing the role of the Belarusian leadership (mainly Alexander Lukashenko) in this war, it is important, in our opinion, to pay attention to the position of the Belarusian society. Trends and moods which reflected the results of a poll conducted from 5 to 14 March 2022 by the Royal Institute of International Affairs Chatham House. According to the data, Belarusians shared their sympathies for the participants of the war. 28% of respondents supported Russia's actions without entering into a military conflict; 25% supported the idea of declaring complete neutrality and withdrawing all foreign troops; 15% were inclined to condemn Russia's actions but not to enter into military conflict; 4% offered to support Ukraine's actions without entering into a mil-

⁴⁹ Лукашенко і Путін вирішили продовжити військові навчання через «активність біля кордонів». URL: <https://www.unian.ua/world/lukashenko-i-putin-virishili-prodovzhitiviyuskovi-navchannya-cherez-aktivnist-bilya-kordoniv-novinivitu-11710783.html>

⁵⁰ Макей: после учений в Беларуси не останется ни одной единицы российской боевой техники. URL: <https://www.belta.by/society/view/makej-posle-uchenij-v-belarusi-ne-ostanetsjaniodnoj-edinitsy-rossijskoj-boevoj-tehniki-485044-2022/>

⁵¹ Конституция Республики Беларусь. URL: <https://president.gov.by/ru/gosudarstvo/constitution>

⁵² Лукашенко: ядерное оружие будет размещено в Беларуси только в случае угроз со стороны Запада. URL: <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-jadernoe-oruzhie-budet-razmescheno-v-belarusi-tolko-v-sluchae-ugroz-so-storonnyzapada-485310-2022/>

itary conflict; 3% were in favor of participating in hostilities on the side of Russia; 2% called for condemnation of Ukraine's actions without entering into a military conflict; 1% supported the idea of participating in the military conflict on the side of Ukraine; 21% could not answer⁵³. Thus, the vast majority of Belarusians did not support participation in the war.

Also, the majority of Belarusians, namely 67%, were against Russian troops shelling Ukraine from Belarus. At the same time, 8% were in favor. In addition, 42% did not support a significant concentration of Russian troops in Belarus. Instead, 25% were in favor, another 33% could not decide. Also, 22% of Belarusians considered their country an aggressor country, while 54% disagreed with this statement. Interestingly, at the same time, 39% believed that Belarus did not take part in the military conflict, and 42% confirmed the participation of Belarus on the side of Russia⁵⁴. Thus, the very idea

⁵³ Chatham House. Взгляды белорусов на военный конфликт России и Украины. *Результаты социологического опроса, проведенного с 5 по 14 марта 2022 года* URL: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1QR4bYE8SVv5xR92xk4DJ79xX5_QJ99As/view

⁵⁴ Там само.

of concentrating Russian troops on the territory of Belarus was not popular among Belarusian society, let alone active participation in Russia's war against Ukraine.

Conclusions

Thus, since 2014, Belarus that declared a neutral position in the Russian-Ukrainian war was, according to Ukrainian political scientist Yevhen Mahda, a “hybrid ally of Ukraine”. As of 2022, during the creeping Russian annexation of Belarus its state sovereignty has become limited. The determining factor in this process was the “hybrid aggression” of the Russian Federation, namely a set of informational, political, military, etc. measures aimed at the Belarusian state. As a result, in the process of transformation of Ukrainian-Belarusian and Russian-Belarusian relations in 2014-2022, as well as the Belarusian domestic political reality, the role of Belarus in Russia's war against Ukraine has changed significantly. The Republic of Belarus participated in the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2024, which will have unpredictable and far-reaching consequences for both bilateral relations and the security of the Eastern European region.

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