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AFTER MAIDAN AND THE OCCUPATION OF CRIMEA: UKRAINIAN-BELARUSIAN RELATIONS IN EARLY 2014 IN THE INFORMATION SPACE OF UKRAINE¹

The image of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations in February–April 2014 (against the backdrop of events in Ukraine after the victory of the Revolution of Dignity and the occupation by Russia of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and part of Eastern Ukraine) in the information space of the Ukrainian state is analyzed. It is found that stories about Ukrainian-Belarusian relations during February–April 2014 (and even since the end of 2013) in the information space mainly circulated around such key areas as: the prospects of Ukraine's European integration course as an alternative to joining the Customs Union of the Eurasian Economic Union (of which, in particular, the Republic of Belarus was a member); assessments by the Belarusian side, led by President A. Lukashenko, of the events of the Revolution of Dignity and the further formation of the new Ukrainian government that led Ukraine after the victory of the Maidan; Minsk's perception of the Russian occupation of Crimea and the delineation of its legal status after March 2014; Belarusian approaches to Russian aggression against Ukraine in the East of Ukraine with the subsequent start of the Anti-Terrorist Operation there.

It is noted that in Ukraine it was emphasized that at each of the mentioned stages the position of official Minsk was marked by significant maneuvering between the desire, on the one hand, to continue to maintain diplomatic relations with Ukraine even in post-Maidan conditions, and on the other hand, to remain in the discourse of Russian narratives, which was manifested in particular in the non-voting of the Belarusian delegation at the General Assembly level on March 27, 2014 for Resolution No. 68/262 on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. So, under such circumstances, even the theoretical possibility of creating a platform for peace negotiations on the basis of Minsk in the context of the war in Donbas was not perceived positively by everyone in Ukraine, believing that in this case Russia would not receive a neutral, but a favorable field for itself, on which it would be easier for it to impose ultimatums regarding, for example, the federalization of Ukraine or the status of the Russian

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language there, completely nullifying the existing support for the Ukrainian side from Western European and American partners.

Key words: Maidan, Revolution of Dignity, Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, Russian-Ukrainian war, Donbas, Republic of Belarus, Ukraine, information space.

Back in 2013–2014, relations between official Kyiv and Minsk were determined by several factors: the question of whether Ukraine would choose the path of European integration, particularly in the economic sphere, as appealed by protesters – participants of the Revolution of Dignity, and whether it would still agree to join the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia inspired by the Russian Federation, which in a few months was to grow into the Customs Union of the Eurasian Economic Union; the change of power in Ukraine after the victory of the Maidan; Russia's occupation of Crimea and the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Modern historiography mainly considers the general context of the geopolitical situation in the post-Soviet region against the backdrop of the events of the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine with the subsequent occupation by the Russian Federation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (for example, in the works of Pavlo Artymyshyn (Павло Артимишин) and Ihor Soliar (Ігор Соляр) (Артимишин, Соляр, 2022), Andriy Bulvinskyi (Андрій Бульвінський) (Бульвінський, 2020), Volodymyr Horbulin (Володимир Горбулін) (Горбулін, 2017), Taras Kuzio (Тарас Кузьо) (Кузьо, 2018), Hryhorii Perepelytsia (Григорій Перепелиця) (Перепелиця, 2017), Valerii Smolii (Валерій Смолій) and Larysa Yakubova (Лариса Якубова) (Смолій, Якубова, 2018; Якубова, Головка, Примаченко, 2018) and others). At the same time, a much narrower research community was engaged in Belarusian-Ukrainian relations directly, or at least in the aspect of certain information spaces in Belarus (and especially chronologically, it was about the period before 2014), for example, in the works of Stepan Vasylyshyn (Степан Васишин) (Васишин, 2016; Васишин, 2017), Roman Kondratenko (Роман Кондратенко) (Кондратенко, 2020), Yurii Pavlovych (Юрій Павлович) (Павлович, 2016), Taras Polovyi (Тарас Польовий) (Artymyshyn, Polovyi, 2022) and others. However, the reflection of relations between official Minsk and Kyiv in the information space of neither Belarus nor Ukraine, and even more so of the events after 2014 in the region, has not yet become a separate subject of research, and this publication is one of the first attempts to fill this historiographical gap.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the image of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations in February–April 2014 (against the backdrop of events in Ukraine after the victory of the Revolution of Dignity and the occupation by Russia of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and part of Eastern Ukraine) in the information space of the Ukrainian state.

Back in late November 2013, an article by Bohdan Danylyshyn (Богдан Данилишин), former Minister of Economy of Ukraine (2007–2010), and in 2013, President of the European Institute for Economic and Political Studies of the Development of Central and Eastern Europe and Ukraine in Prague, was published on the Internet portal of the newspaper «Den» (The Day). Against the backdrop of revolutionary events in Ukraine, he unequivocally emphasized that in such conditions the integration of the Ukrainian state into the European political and economic space – and this was obvious even in conditions when, according to B. Danylyshyn, Ukraine still remained «a powerful “buffer zone”

between the West and the East, a kind of watershed of cultures, worldviews, ideologies» (Данилишин, 2013). As the author of the publication claimed, he was led to such thoughts by the example of the participation of the Republic of Belarus (and Kazakhstan) in the Customs Union of the Eurasian Economic Union – this «since the collapse of the USSR, the most motivated regional integration project in the post-Soviet space» in which, first of all, the states are not mentioned, namely «Russia was, is and will remain the main ideologist of the geopolitical and geo-economic reorganization of the post-Soviet space, the organizer of “all victories and failures” in both the economic and political and legal spheres» (Данилишин, 2013). Accordingly, the expectations regarding the opening of profitable sales markets for Belarusian and Kazakh entrepreneurs as of the end of 2013, starting from 2010, according to B. Danylyshyn’s calculations, did not come true, but on the contrary, the existence of the Customs Union even complicated direct trade between the Republic of Belarus and Kazakhstan, since it was carried out exclusively through the mediation of Russia, which made it unprofitable (and this, according to the author of the publication, was supposedly recognized even by the Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko (Аляксандр Лукашэнка).

According to B. Danylyshyn’s theses, in the event of Ukraine joining the Customs Union, similar processes would become characteristic of the Ukrainian economy, in particular, Ukrainian-Belarusian relations, which would become mediated by the Russian Federation. In addition, the author believes that currency risks that already existed in Belarus would increase in Ukraine, in particular, in the form of the expansion of Russian banks into Ukraine and the expansion of the use of the Russian ruble, not national currencies, in foreign economic relations, including official ones between Kyiv and Minsk. And this is in the absence of any better than those available at that time for the Ukrainian side, effective tariff preferences, significant discounts on the price of gas, effective advantages for the agricultural sector (especially at a time when Ukrainian agricultural exports to the European Union countries on the eve of 2014 were already developing more dynamically than to the countries of the Customs Union), more variable development of the defense-industrial complex of Ukraine, which at that time was almost 90 % export-oriented, guarantees of high-quality control over the circulation of goods within the Customs Union (including preventing its «shadowing») and effective prosecution of such negative phenomena as drug trafficking, crime and irregular migration. The latter, as B. Danylyshyn concluded, could manifest itself in Ukraine in the form of a significant influx of immigrants from the republics of Central Asia or other impoverished regions to the post-Soviet space – as has already happened in the Republic of Belarus, where, with the country’s accession to the Customs Union since the beginning of the 2010^s, a noticeable increase in «criminal activity of immigrants from the republics of the Caucasus» was recorded, which created a potential threat of interethnic tension between the indigenous population and newcomers (both on an economic and social basis). So Bohdan Danylyshyn’s conclusion is quite straightforward: «The deliberate dragging of Ukraine into the Customs Union is one of the attempts to somehow save this integration association. But Ukraine as a resuscitator can also be the beginning of its end. And also the end of empires and regimes with a protracted post-Soviet past [among them, apparently, he meant the presidency of A. Lukashenko in Belarus – P. A.], in which the wind of democracy breaks through a barely opened window. But the draft can be significant» (Данилишин, 2013).

Similar thoughts were voiced by political scientist and international journalist Viktor Kaspruk (Віктор Каспрук) in the pages of the newspaper «Shliakh peremohy» («The Way to Victory»), who stated that despite the outwardly attractive conditions of membership in the Customs Union, in reality its participants were not on equal terms, and the «first violin» in it was played exclusively by Russians. They, as the author of the publication claimed, actually distributed the spheres of responsibility and workload within the association between themselves, Belarus and Kazakhstan, although the article noted that official Moscow considered this geopolitical project to be incomplete without the inclusion of Ukraine, because despite this, Belarus and Kazakhstan «are trying to replace part of the import, but Siberia needs Ukrainian pears and apples, cherries and plums, Melitopol sweet cherries and Kherson apricots, watermelons and melons» (Каспрук, 2014). Therefore, according to V. Kaspruk, Ukrainian-Belarusian relations, in such a configuration within the framework of the potential complicity of official Kyiv in the Customs Union, would be perceived in the Kremlin not as cooperation between two independent and autonomous states, but as exclusively part of the creation of a «bonding ring of satellite allies around the perimeter» of Russia, without which, according to V. Kaspruk, «the Russian Federation itself will sooner or later collapse like a rotten barrel», and without Ukraine's participation in these processes, «all other post-Soviet states [including, apparently, the Republic of Belarus – P. A.] will one way or another “escape” from Moscow's influence» (Каспрук, 2014).

At the same time, the «Ukrainska Pravda» («Ukrainian truth») portal, citing direct statements by the President of the Republic of Belarus A. Lukashenko claimed that the Belarusian side, as a member of the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space, would be interested in including Ukraine (and the rest of the former Soviet republics) in these associations (Лукашенко каже, що Україну, 2013). Moreover, the head of Belarus suggested that in the event of Kyiv's failure to join the aforementioned integration projects while simultaneously continuing its course towards signing and implementing the Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), «the Customs Union, if necessary, may introduce increased customs duties to protect its market in the event of the opening of the Ukrainian border for European goods». Although at the same time, in a typically Lukashenko's maneuvering style, he summed up: «Everyone knows what Ukraine's position is on joining the EU, what we are losing and what we are not losing. We need to sit down calmly now, cool down and decide how we will proceed ... this entire set of issues needs to be calmly assessed and an appropriate decision made» (Лукашенко розповів, 2013).

The events of the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, or more precisely, the attitude of the Belarusian authorities, in particular A. Lukashenko himself, to these processes could become a litmus test for Belarusian-Ukrainian relations. And in this context, the Ukrainian information space noted the Belarusian president's traditional rhetorical «maneuvering». Thus, in January 2014, the «Livy bereh» («Left Bank») portal noted the mutual «antipathy between Maidan and Lukashenko», in particular, referring to the Belarusian leader's statements that the «political crisis in Ukraine» (as he mostly called the course of the Revolution of Dignity) is a «nightmare and a catastrophe». However, at the same time, it was noted that the Belarusian president tried to consciously distance himself from more detailed assessments of the situation in Ukraine, considering it «not his business»,

which «should be sorted out by Ukrainians themselves», and expressing the hope that «the conflict in Ukraine will be resolved and will not negatively affect the activities of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), where Ukraine was supposed to chair in 2014» (Лукашенко признал, 2014).

At the same time, the «Correspondent» portal focused on other assessments of the situation in Ukraine, voiced by A. Lukashenko on the same day: they say, the events of autumn 2013 – winter 2014 were not only and not so much a consequence of the conflict between Ukrainian politicians, but also a certain «result of the liquidation of the USSR», after which, they say, Western states (in his speech, the Belarusian president mentioned, in particular, Poland) tried to interfere in the internal affairs and foreign policy of all former Soviet republics, and in Ukraine, supposedly, «the market economy, clans in power and corruption» especially became favorable factors for such foreign influence (Лукашенко про Євромайдан, 2014).

And a month later, on February 23, 2014, when the revolutionary events ended with the victory of the protesters and the change of power in Ukraine (after the unauthorized flight from the state to the Russian Federation of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich) and the deployment of a special operation to occupy Crimea by Russia with «little green men» without identification marks, starting from February 20, 2014, in «Ukrainska Pravda» («Ukrainian truth») they noted that unlike the Kremlin, which launched the thesis that the victory of the Maidan forces meant a «coup d'état», A. Lukashenko again adhered to a rather neutral assessment of these events, claiming that the Republic of Belarus, despite any circumstances, «is doomed to live with Ukraine in friendship and harmony», the Ukrainian state itself «must be integral» (with an emphasis on its territorial integrity, among other things) and «no one should “dismember” this great country» (Лукашенко заперечивав, 2014).

At the same time, UNIAN presented the speech of the Belarusian head of state from February 23, 2014 from a slightly different perspective: to a lesser extent, they mentioned A. Lukashenko's statements regarding the future of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations in the post-Maidan period, instead emphasizing the extremely negative attitude of the head of the Republic of Belarus to the events in Ukraine – he claimed that for the Belarusian side itself, «Maidan is not something that is unacceptable, there will be no Maidan in Belarus», considering the relevant events (which he considered as another stage in a series of «unquenchable revolutions in the Muslim world [Arab Spring – P. A.] and periodic unrest in the countries of the Commonwealth [CIS – P. A.] as nothing more than the result of the influence of powerful destructive external and internal forces» that took advantage of the «weakening of power in the state, corruption, impunity and disorder, irresponsibility of the authorities», which led to a split society, economic stagnation, which turned «suffering people into blind tools» of third parties (Лукашенко пообіцяв, 2014). At the same time, according to the same UNIAN, Aleksandr Lukashenko denied the statements of some media outlets that the Minister of Internal Affairs Vitalii Zakharchenko (Віталій Захарченко) and the pro-Russian oligarch close to Viktor Yanukovich's family, Serhii Kurchenko (Сергій Курченко), fled to Belarus with the victory of the Revolution of Dignity (Лукашенко запевнив, 2014).

Finally, a significant quote is the one from the President of the Republic of Belarus, voiced on the same February 23, 2014, and reproduced in the «Dzerkalo Tyzhnia» («Mirror

of the week»), which to some extent defined the strategy that Minsk tried to follow in its foreign policy towards Ukraine over the next few years: «They [Ukraine – *P. A.*] have their own problems, they are not new to us. This is not the first time, and, you know, I am still friends with the first Maidan activists [Viktor Yushchenko (Віктор Ющенко) and his “orange” team – *P. A.*]. They have their own issues, we have ours, and we will build our policy on this. They have their own state, and we have ours ... if everything is good, peaceful, we are doomed to live with them in friendship and harmony» (Лукашенко: ніхто не повинен, 2014).

Thus, on February 28, 2014, against the backdrop of the occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and a little more than two weeks before the infamous illegal pseudo-referendum on the status of Crimea, the Ukrainian media published a statement by the Belarusian Foreign Minister, Vladimir Makei (Уладзімір Макей), made the day before in Riga after a meeting with the Latvian Foreign Minister, Edgars Rinkēvičs, in which he unequivocally emphasized the importance of preserving the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine and stressed that the latter would continue to remain a «very important partner» for Belarus, although at the same time concern was expressed about the fact that «a huge amount of weapons, in particular from the arsenals of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Armed Forces of Ukraine, fell into the hands of a number of individuals on the southern borders [in Ukraine – *P. A.*]» (МЗС Білорусі, 2014).

The information space of March 2014 was full of opposing opinions on Belarusian-Ukrainian relations. For example, on March 12, 2014, literally on the eve of the Crimean pseudo-referendum, a number of Ukrainian media outlets, in particular in the «Livyi bereh» («Left Bank»), published a new statement by A. Lukashenko that Belarus had not stopped cooperation with Ukraine after the replacement of the state leadership there (and, therefore, recognized it), especially in the economic sphere. Although, along with such, it would seem, appeal to «good neighborliness», the Belarusian head of state, as noted in the media, also resorted to mentoring instructions, noting that «the new [post-Maidan – *P. A.*] Ukrainian authorities should simply work, run around abroad less, and deal with their own country and the well-being of their own people» (Лукашенко визнає, 2014).

In the «Ukrainska Pravda» («Ukrainian truth») it was noted that in addition to the economic aspect of Belarusian-Ukrainian cooperation, that day A. Lukashenko also spoke about the humanitarian component – extremely important «support for the Ukrainian people in this difficult moment» and appealed in the current relations of official Minsk and Kyiv to the common historical experience, asserting the «brotherhood» of Ukrainians and Belarusians: «This is our country, these are our people, these are our brothers. And I will say frankly that what is being done now in Ukraine and with the people of Ukraine, the people of Ukraine do not deserve. This is a heroic people, this is a people who fought against fascism with their overwhelming majority, we were together in the last war, and we won in this war. Therefore, the position due to our historical memory, our history is unambiguous» (Лукашенко жартує, 2014).

At the same time, some publications focused on the pro-Russian (or at least anti-Western) position of the Belarusian head of state, despite his seemingly neutral position. For example, the «Dzerkalo Tyzhnia» («Mirror of the week») drew attention to the fact that, along with positive connotations towards the Ukrainian people, the Belarusian president

once again emphasized that the Maidan was not caused by the desire of Ukrainians for European integration, but «by the terrible collapse of the economy and corruption», the absence of which in the Republic of Belarus was the best guarantee that «there will be no Maidan in Minsk». And at the same time, A. Lukashenko did not forget about the Russian factor, emphasizing that, along with maintaining relations with official Kyiv, the Belarusian side will at the same time «act in accordance with the regulatory and legal framework that we have between Russia and Belarus ... in particular in accordance with the Treaty on the Construction of the Union State», and in addition to Ukrainians, Russians are «one people» with Belarusians, they say, and it is this approach that is fundamental for the Belarusian side, and not «fears of the West, which is trying to scare Belarus with possible consequences in case of support for Russia» or «pressure from the Kremlin in connection with the events in Ukraine» (Лукашенко повідомив, 2014).

UNIAN also first of all drew attention to the fact that as of mid-March 2014, A. Lukashenko spoke not only, and not so much, about relations with Ukraine (and if so, then very generally), but about relations with the Russian Federation against the backdrop of its occupation of Crimea (the latter, as noted in the online publication, the Belarusian president preferred not to mention at all before the pseudo-referendum in Crimea). On the other hand, A. Lukashenko did not forget to note that despite everything he is «in constant contact with the President of the Russian Federation [Vladimir Putin – *P. A.*]» and discusses «various issues of our relations», including supposedly expressing «a common understanding of the need to develop the situation in the interests of the Ukrainian people and all people living in Ukraine» (as if the Russian Federation did not provoke armed aggression against the Ukrainian side) (Лукашенко каже, що Кремль, 2014).

Moreover, TSN unambiguously specified what exactly the Belarusian-Russian negotiations on their relations at this stage consisted of – after all, again, referring to the statements of A. Lukashenko himself. Thus, according to the Internet portal, while the Russian «little green men» illegally seized key strategic civilian and military facilities on the Crimean peninsula, the Belarusian head of state was concerned about the «escalation of the conflict» near the Belarusian borders, and therefore, along with the start of the test of the readiness of his Armed Forces, he suggested to the Russian side (the aggressor, who actually provoked the escalation in Ukraine) to additionally deploy up to 15 Russian aircraft on Belarusian territory for an extremely abstract reason – «as part of joint exercises in connection with NATO activity» (Путін розмістить, 2014).

On the «Correspondent» portal journalists also noted that the key reasons for the «Ukrainian crisis» (this is how A. Lukashenko himself and the Belarusian foreign ministry interpreted the events of the Revolution of Dignity) in official Minsk were considered to be «the collapse of the economy and the terrible corruption that destroyed the state», but regarding «the events surrounding Ukraine and the conflict with Russia», the Belarusian side preferred not to rush to «accuse any country of someone inciting passions and inflaming these passions in a particular region» (Лукашенко: Причина розвалу, 2014). In addition, the online publication also noted the Belarusian presidency's request to the Russian side to station an additional 15 aircraft «in connection with NATO's activity near its border» – allegedly due to «the intensification and expansion of large-scale exercises [NATO – *P. A.*] further south on the territory of Poland», while no escalation by the Russian Federation against Ukraine was alleged (Білорусь запропонує, 2014).

Even more contradictory statements from Belarus were observed in Ukraine at the end of March 2014 – after the infamous events of the pseudo-expression of will of the Crimeans regarding the status of the peninsula, the signing by Russian President V. Putin of an «agreement» with the self-proclaimed authorities of Crimea on «accession» to Russia based on the results of an illegitimate «referendum».

On the one hand, the Ukrainian editorial office of «BBC News» drew attention to the statements of the Belarusian opposition, which were made during its rally in Minsk on March 25, 2014, on the traditional «Freedom Day» for Belarusian right-wing circles (the anniversary of the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918). During the meeting, as claimed on this Internet portal, the protesters did not ignore the events in Ukraine around Crimea, condemning the «Russian provocation» there, openly expressing support for the Ukrainian state, which, according to the protesters, is «building a new algorithm for exiting the post-Soviet past», and instead stating that at the same time «the allied obligations of the current Belarusian authorities to Moscow threaten the sovereignty and independence» of both the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine, because «Lukashenko will not be able to have peace with Kyiv; by cooperating with Moscow, he is getting involved in dangerous games that threaten the peoples of both Ukraine and Belarus» (Мельничук, 2014).

On the other hand, Ukrainian media also noted the then odious statements of the Belarusian president himself, which were constantly changing. For example, on March 23, 2014, the portal «Oboz.ua» («Obozrevatel») stated that on that day, during a meeting with journalists, A. Lukashenko noted that «de facto Crimea has become part of Russia ... and we will be with the Russian Federation» (Лукашенко де-факто, 2014).

The «Ukrainska Pravda» («Ukrainian truth») added that on that day, the President of the Republic of Belarus, in the situation that arose around Crimea, also reproached the Ukrainian authorities, which, they say, «made many mistakes [among them – supposedly banning the Russian language and putting pressure on Russian-speaking people, thereby repeating the narratives of Russian propaganda, because in fact, the repeal by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on February 23, 2014 of the Law of Ukraine “On the Principles of State Language Policy”, the so-called “Kivalov-Kolesnichenko Law” did not provide for this – P. A.], which ultimately led to the loss of the peninsula» (Лукашенко: Україна сама винна, 2014). At the same time, the publication noted that although A. Lukashenko assured that official Minsk would adhere to a unified position with the Kremlin, he «as a citizen negatively perceives the latest Ukrainian events», and «no one demands from him personally, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other departments of the country the legal recognition of Crimea as Russian territory» (Лукашенко: Україна сама винна, 2014).

Finally, «The Den» («The Day») newspaper's website particularly emphasized the statement of that day by A. Lukashenko regarding the prospects for a possible further termination of Ukraine's cooperation with the CIS against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Crimea, in which the head of the Republic of Belarus claimed that this would be a «reckless» step on the part of the Ukrainian side, which would be a «blow» for the organization itself, but would not stop or make its further functioning impossible (Лукашенко каже, що СНД, 2014).

But UNIAN primarily emphasized the positive connotations of A. Lukashenko's speech to journalists on March 23, 2014, noting that the Belarusian head of state spoke

about the need to preserve the indivisibility of the Ukrainian state, since, in his opinion, the creation of separate subjects of the Ukrainian federation (which was actively speculated on by certain Russian politicians and political strategists, as well as their accomplices on the Ukrainian side) could lead to «further escalation of the conflict in society». Journalists also pointed to the statements made by A. Lukashenko about his readiness to cooperate and establish relations with the newly elected Ukrainian authorities, since, according to the words of the Belarusian president himself, given in the publication, «we [Belarusians – P. A.] are doomed to live together with Ukraine and will build relations with the government that the people of Ukraine will elect» (Лукашенко хоче допомогти, 2014).

At the same time, the portal also pointed to the rather pretentious demand of A. Lukashenko regarding the need for Ukraine to maintain its non-aligned status, since «if NATO lands in Ukraine tomorrow, this is categorically unacceptable for us» (although the fact that the Ukrainian side became the victim of a Russian armed attack while non-aligned was kept quiet) (Лукашенко хоче допомогти, 2014).

At the same time, UNIAN also cited a rather strange quote from the head of the Republic of Belarus regarding the «difficulty of holding normal presidential elections» in post-Maidan Ukraine – in conditions where, supposedly, «there are several force groups and units operating here, and just so you know, every major politician has a group of militants there from 150 to 1,000 people, armed, armed for a long time. If a spark is thrown there, it will be hot for everyone: for us, for the Russians, and for the West ... what happened in Crimea will still be flowers... it will be much scarier and worse if this conflict escalates» (although, as noted, the Belarusian president did not emphasize the destructive factor of Russian armed aggression against Ukraine, which began with the occupation of Crimea) (Лукашенко хоче допомогти, 2014).

At the turn of March–April 2014, a number of materials (often contradictory) related to the rhetoric of the Belarusian president also appeared on the TSN portal. Thus, on March 23, it was noted here that A. Lukashenko stated that the «Crimean precedent» (this is how the occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation was veiledly described) could become a danger to the whole world. However, at the same time, the head of the Republic of Belarus, as emphasized on this information resource, rather ambiguously emphasized that «Crimea is dangerous not because it has become part of Russia», but because this fact itself will provoke a situation when «many territories around the world will claim to secede from their states ... especially against the background of the fact that the most powerful states in the world provided guarantees to Ukraine in exchange for nuclear weapons, but did not keep their word», which, they say, threatened the repeated nuclear armament of official Kyiv (Лукашенко назвав, 2014). On the same day, another statement by A. Lukashenko appeared on TSN, who opposed the idea of federalizing Ukraine, because, according to the Belarusian head of state, «the federation is a piano on which one side will play, on the other side – other forces, including external ones ... this will forever destabilize the situation» (Лукашенко проти, 2014а).

In addition, 5 days after this news, TSN, referring to an interview with A. Lukashenko by journalist Savik Shuster in the program Shuster Live, replicated his statement that the Ukrainian authorities, against the backdrop of the occupation of the peninsula by the Russians, «simply folded their paws and surrendered Crimea», thereby, they say, de facto «recognizing by their actions that Crimea is not the territory of Ukraine» (Лукашенко

про Україну, 2014). At the same time, referring to the same interview, TSN wrote that, in the opinion of A. Lukashenko, Russia «doesn't care» that the world does not recognize Crimea as part of its territory (Росії плювати, 2014).

It is noteworthy that these statements were made shortly after the Resolution on the Territorial Integrity of Ukraine No. 68/262 was adopted in the hall of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on March 27, 2014, at its 68th session. The authors of the document were Germany, Canada, Costa Rica, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine. Subsequently, a large number of countries joined the co-authorship, including: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Georgia, Sweden, Turkey, Great Britain, USA, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Norway and others (41 countries in total) (General Assembly Adopts Resolution, 2014).

The above-mentioned resolution stated that the UN General Assembly: reaffirmed its commitment to the sovereignty, political independence, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders; called on all States to refrain from and refrain from actions aimed at the partial or complete violation of the national unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine, including any attempts to change the borders of the Ukrainian State through the threat or use of force or other unlawful means; urged all parties to immediately pursue a peaceful resolution of the «situation regarding Ukraine» through «direct political dialogue», exercising restraint and refraining from unilateral actions and «inflammatory rhetoric that could escalate tensions» and to fully participate in international mediation efforts; welcomed the efforts of the OSCE and other international and regional organizations to promote the protection of the rights of all persons in Ukraine, in particular those belonging to minorities; emphasized that the referendum held in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and in Sevastopol on March 16, 2014, was not valid, and therefore could not be any basis for any change in the status of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol; called on all states, international organizations and specialized agencies not to recognize any changes in the status of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol on the basis of the aforementioned referendum and to refrain from any actions in this context. At the same time, the document did not directly condemn Russia's actions, did not mention the fact of the occupation of Crimea by Russian armed forces, and did not clearly indicate that the peninsula itself and the city of Sevastopol are integral parts of Ukraine (however, since as of the time of adoption of the aforementioned resolution, no international institution had recognized their Russian occupation, it is obvious that the formula «internationally recognized borders» contained in this resolution also includes these territories in Ukraine) (Resolution 68/262).

The draft resolution was supported by 100 UN member states, including its authors, but the Republic of Belarus was among the 11 states that voted «against» (in addition to Belarus, Russia, Armenia, Bolivia, Cuba, North Korea, Nicaragua, Sudan, Syria, Zimbabwe, and Venezuela), 58 countries «abstained» (including China, whose representative stated that his state «does not want further confrontation» in the situation regarding Ukraine), and 24 countries did not participate in the vote at all (General Assembly Adopts Resolution, 2014).

Journalist Rostyslav Khotyn (Ростислав Хотин), explaining precisely this Belarusian (and Armenian) position during the aforementioned vote, argued that it became a clear example of a significant division that matured in the «European» part of the post-Soviet

space during the first two decades after 1991, when some of the states that were once part of the USSR supported official Kyiv, considering Ukraine as a party that, in the context of further European and Euro-Atlantic integration, could quite realistically become a real center-counterweight in the competition with Russia for leadership in the region of the former USSR and in the context of the further development of Russia's containment belt (the Baltic states, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova), while Belarus and Armenia traditionally sided with Moscow. But, although, according to the author of the article, after Crimea, «Ukraine suffered a severe image blow», the vote at the UN General Assembly level did not mean that the position on Ukraine among post-Soviet partners had changed significantly. And even under these conditions, official Minsk continued to maneuver, because «Russia was dear to it, because it has a Union State with it, but it did not want to let Ukraine go far», especially since, according to the journalist, the fact that the then acting president of Ukraine, Oleksandr Turchynov, made his first (and as of early April 2014, his only) foreign visit was to Belarus – for three-hour talks with President Alexander Lukashenko (Хотин, 2014).

After all, the aforementioned trip of the Ukrainian leader to the residence of the Belarusian president in the village of Liaskovychi on March 29, 2014 (already in the conditions of the Russian occupation of Crimea and on the eve of Russia's active military aggression in Eastern Ukraine) was also discussed in the information space of Ukraine.

For example, the «Livyi bereh» («Left Bank») rebroadcast the hopes of A. Lukashenko, expressed on the eve of the meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart, that in the upcoming negotiations the parties will be able to «find a common point of view» and «bring our positions closer together, which, perhaps, today, due to the lack of information, are not properly understood» (Турчинов і Лукашенко, 2014). And the «Correspondent» noted that the Belarusian side, which actually initiated the event, hoped to use it to demonstrate its intention to continue relations with «“fraternal” Ukraine» and maintain «very close contact» with the Ukrainian authorities even in the post-Maidan conditions (Турчинов і Лукашенко, 2014).

The «Ukrainska Pravda» («Ukrainian truth») paid more attention to the statements made by both sides after the meeting. It is noteworthy that at that time O. Turchynov expressed confidence that «there will never be aggression from the territory of Belarus against the territory of Ukraine», just as «a third party will never threaten Ukraine from there», and in turn A. Lukashenko noted that «the Ukrainian-Belarusian borders are borders not of separation, but of friendship», and in general «a good-neighborly belt has been created around Belarus more than 100 kilometers deep into Ukraine», which does not need to be destroyed (Турчинов: З території Білорусі, 2014). Similar narratives were also contained on the portal «Ostanni podii» («Latest Events»), where, referring to the rhetoric of the Belarusian side, they stated that «Belarusians do not have any “unkind aspirations” towards Ukraine», and instead of hostility, they are focused on cooperation and «peace on the common border» (Лукашенко пообіцяв Турчинову, 2014).

«RBC-Ukraine» supplemented the above-mentioned messages with information that during the meeting the Belarusian and Ukrainian sides discussed the issue of intensifying bilateral cooperation in the economy – in the transport and energy sectors, spoke in favor of the need to create joint ventures, stated the importance of increasing bilateral trade volumes, emphasized the importance of developing a general «road map»

of interstate relations in the economic sphere, and noted, citing the words of Oleksandr Turchynov, that for both official Kyiv and official Minsk «it is very important that ties between our peoples are strengthened, that we compensate for the problems in the economy that have existed in recent years, and increase the volume of trade» (Турчинов уверен, 2014). The «Fakty.ua» portal wrote about the leveling of the military threat from the Belarusian side, as well as the possibility of intensifying economic (in particular, in the transport and energy sectors) interstate cooperation after this meeting (Турчинов не ждет агрессии, 2014). «ICTV Facts» also wrote about the development of a «roadmap» of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations, based «on the basis of friendship and good neighborliness», in particular in the creation of joint ventures, intensification of bilateral trade and economic projects (Тишук, 2014).

At the same time, UNIAN reproduced the statements of the acting President of Ukraine O. Turchynov, made in the evening after the meeting, in which he expressed gratitude to the Belarusian head of state for the promise «not to give Russia a springboard to attack Ukraine», and therefore to prevent acts of aggression against Ukraine from the territory of this country, including with the participation of third states, which laid the foundation for Ukraine for «the path of stabilization and restoration of the destroyed economy that we inherited [from the previous government headed by President V. Yanukovich – P. A.]» (Турчинов подякував, 2014). And in TSN they also added his thoughts on the prospects for the development of Ukrainian-Belarusian relations – the Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and the interim head of state noted that it is important that they only strengthen, since «Ukrainians and Belarusians are not just two neighboring peoples, they are fraternal peoples ... our common history proves this ... it is very important for us to feel the shoulder of the friendly Belarusian people» (Турчинов подякував, 2014).

Finally, the portal «Correspondent» summarized that in Liaskovychi on March 29, 2014, «the parties reached an understanding on all the problems and issues of concern», and, referring to the final statement of A. Lukashenko, noted that they could «leave for Minsk and Kyiv today and be satisfied with the agreements that ... were reached here» (Лукашенко: На переговорах, 2014).

The next batch of Ukrainian informational pretexts from Belarus began against the backdrop of the beginning of the Russian invasion of Donbas on April 12, 2014, when sabotage groups, supported and led by Russian special services, captured the cities of Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, and Druzhkivka. This event led to Ukraine's announcement of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in Eastern Ukraine (ATO) on April 13, 2014, which marked the beginning of hostilities in Donbas against Russian and pro-Russian formations and the intensification of the fight that had begun even earlier against attempts at pro-Russian protests in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, among whose slogans was the demand for its federalization (the so-called «Russian Spring»).

In the context of these events, Ukrainian media, among other things, paid attention to the statements of the Belarusian side. For example, on April 13, 2014, «the iPress» portal published a statement by A. Lukashenko, in which he stated that any attempts to transform Ukraine from a unitary state into a federal one would lead to a split and, ultimately, the destruction of the integral monolithic unified state system, which, in the end, would create a dangerous precedent for Belarus, Russia, and the West. However, the same report noted that the Belarusian president was apparently not so much concerned about Ukrainian

statehood as about the possibility of «NATO troops» appearing on the territory of Ukraine, or at least on part of it, in the event of further escalation of the situation in the neighboring country (Лукашенко каже, що федералізація, 2014).

Moreover, the «RBC-Ukraine» portal also cited more «spicy» quotes from the Belarusian president, which he said on April 13 regarding the «NATO» aspect in the context of Ukraine and its territorial integrity: «If you want to keep Ukraine a single state ... then you don't need to carry out federalization. ... Today it seems to be beautiful, the interests of some regions will be respected. But what about tomorrow? And tomorrow the main players will be able to play on this federalization. Well, I'm sitting in Kharkiv or Luhansk, all like this, almost like the President in Kyiv ... Someone needs to play on this – they will play. And this will lead to the destruction of Ukraine. Everyone: you, me, both inside (in Ukraine), and the Americans who are now instructing them [sic! – P. A.], all understand this ... we must, while preserving the integrity of Ukraine, make it so that no one even thinks that NATO can step its boots on Ukrainian land» (Лукашенко виступає, 2014).

The «Livyi bereh» («Left Bank») also emphasized another aspect that A. Lukashenko voiced that day – he once again confirmed that he considers the Ukrainian authorities, which led the state after the Maidan, legitimate – including the acting President of Ukraine, Speaker of the Parliament O. Turchynov: «According to their constitution [of Ukraine – P. A.], if there is no president, then his duties are performed by the head of the Verkhovna Rada. And that's what happened. I believe that there is no president in their country ... And because of the article of the constitution, Turchynov should replace the president. So for me, he is absolutely legitimate, and the Verkhovna Rada is absolutely legitimate» (Лукашенко категорично проти, 2014).

Instead, «BBC-Ukraine» quoted excerpts from the presidential message of A. Lukashenko to the Belarusian people, delivered in parliament on April 23, 2014, in which he repeatedly noted that he supported Ukraine as a «united, indivisible, but non-aligned state» and highly praised the «business qualities of the acting President of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchynov» as an «honest, decent, very religious person» and again emphasized that the Republic of Belarus, unlike the Russian Federation, considered the post-Maidan Ukrainian government legitimate, since «the current leaders of the Ukrainian state were elected by the legitimate Rada» (Лукашенко проти, 2014b).

On the other hand, the journalist of «The Den» («The Day») Yurii Raikhel (Юрій Райхель) expressed opinions that were far from consistent with the above-mentioned theses. He considered such «spring flirtations» of the Ukrainian leadership with the Belarusian authorities headed by A. Lukashenko to be exclusively «short-sighted politics», since thanks to the preparation for O. Turchynov's visit to the Republic of Belarus and the trip itself, they undeservedly and unjustifiably allowed into the information space of Ukraine (in particular, in the format of an interview with the «Inter» TV channel, which was broadcast on March 28, 2014 as part of the «Shuster LIVE» program) the president of a state (Belarus), which «voted with Russia at the UN General Assembly and has long been a European pariah», and A. Lukashenko himself operated with pro-Russian rather than pro-Ukrainian rhetoric in his statements: «We are engaged in repelling information invasion into the Ukrainian airwaves, we are shutting down a number of Russian TV channels due to propaganda, and at the same time, we are

actually putting the same propaganda on the national airwaves with our own hands. The leader of a neighboring country ... teaches us how to live, actually justifies aggression, and right there, and not only in this interview, he supposedly advocates for territorial integrity», – the correspondent noted (Райхель, 2014).

And the expediency of the diplomatic trip of the then acting President of Ukraine to meet his Belarusian counterpart in Liaskovychi on March 29, 2014, and further attempts by official Kyiv to maintain friendly relations with official Minsk, Yu. Raikhel greatly doubted. First, he considered it paradoxical to maintain good relations with a party that actually supported Russia's hostile actions against Ukraine and, despite promises to Ukrainian colleagues, could not really guarantee 100 % that the Russian army would never launch an offensive from Belarusian territory, since «despite all the autocratic nature of the Belarusian leadership and its leader in such matters, it is not independent and is completely under Moscow's control», and secondly, at a time when the prospects for creating a mediation negotiating platform in Minsk had not yet been publicly voiced, the Day correspondent unequivocally stated that this was a bad idea, because from the very beginning the Kremlin would receive not a neutral, but a favorable and favorable field for itself, on which it would be easier for it to impose ultimatums regarding, for example, the federalization of Ukraine or the status of the Russian language there, than if the negotiations were held somewhere in the West and with the participation of Western European and American partners. And it was precisely on the position and reaction of the latter two to Russian aggression against Ukraine, and not on the influence of the Republic of Belarus, as the journalist summed up, that the entire subsequent course of events around Ukraine depended (Райхель, 2014).

Thus, stories about Ukrainian-Belarusian relations during February–April 2014 (and even since the end of 2013) in the information space mainly circulated around such key areas as: the prospects of Ukraine's European integration course as an alternative to joining the Customs Union of the Eurasian Economic Union (of which, in particular, the Republic of Belarus was a member); assessments by the Belarusian side, led by President A. Lukashenko, of the events of the Revolution of Dignity and the further formation of the new Ukrainian government that led Ukraine after the victory of the Maidan; Minsk's perception of the Russian occupation of Crimea and the delineation of its legal status after March 2014; Belarusian approaches to Russian aggression against Ukraine in the East of Ukraine with the subsequent start of the Anti-Terrorist Operation there. In Ukraine, it was noted that at each of the mentioned stages, the position of official Minsk was marked by significant maneuvering between the desire, on the one hand, to continue to maintain diplomatic relations with Ukraine even in post-Maidan conditions (and hence the reception in Belarus of the acting President of Ukraine, Speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament O. Turchynov, assurances of neutrality in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, support at the level of statements of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, in particular the legal belonging of the Crimean peninsula to it), and on the other hand, rather to remain in the discourse of Russian narratives. They was manifested in particular in: Belarusian assessments of the Revolution of Dignity as, supposedly, a process largely inspired by Western powers; theses about the formation of «armed groups» around Ukrainian politicians while simultaneously silencing the role of the destructive factor of the Russian armed aggression against Ukraine, which began with the occupation of Crimea; the

assertion that the Crimean peninsula, which Ukraine supposedly simply «gave up without a fight», de facto became Russian; the Belarusian delegation's non-voting at the General Assembly level on March 27, 2014 for Resolution No. 68/262 on the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Therefore, under such circumstances, even the theoretical possibility of creating a platform for peace negotiations on the basis of Minsk in the context of the war in Donbas, which had not yet been publicly discussed in the spring of 2014, was not perceived positively by everyone in Ukraine. Moreover, there were also frank opinions that this was a bad idea, because in this case Russia would not receive a neutral, but a favorable field for itself, on which it would be easier for it to impose ultimatums regarding, for example, the federalization of Ukraine or the status of the Russian language there, thus completely eliminating the existing support for the Ukrainian side from its Western European and American partners.

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ПІСЛЯ МАЙДАНУ Й ОКУПАЦІЇ КРИМУ: УКРАЇНСЬКО-БІЛОРУСЬКІ ВІДНОСИНИ ПОЧАТКУ 2014 РОКУ В ІНФОРМАЦІЙНОМУ ПРОСТОРІ УКРАЇНИ

Проаналізовано образ українсько-білоруських відносин у лютому–квітні 2014 р. (на тлі подій в Україні після перемоги Революції Гідності й окупації Росією українського півострова Крим і частини Сходу України) в інформаційному просторі Української держави. Констатовано, що сюжети щодо українсько-білоруських відносин упродовж лютого–квітня 2014 р. (і навіть ще з кінця 2013 р.) в інформаційному просторі переважно циркулювали довкола таких основних напрямів: перспективи євроінтеграційного курсу України як альтернативи вступу до Митного союзу Євразійського економічного союзу (членом якого була, зокрема, Республіка Білорусь); оцінки білоруською стороною на чолі з Президентом А. Лукашенком подій Революції гідності та подальшого становлення нової української влади, яка очолила Україну після перемоги Майдану; сприйняття в Мінську російської окупації Криму й окреслення його юридичного статусу після березня 2014 р.; білоруські підходи до російської агресії проти України на Сході України з подальшим початком там АТО.

Відзначено, що в Україні зауважували, що на кожному з цих етапів позиція офіційного Мінська відзначалася значним лавіруванням між прагненням надалі підтримувати з Україною навіть у постмайданних умовах дипломатичні відносини і радше все ж перебуванням у дискурсі російських наративів, що, зокрема, виявилось в неголосуванні білоруської делегації на рівні Генеральної Асамблеї 27 березня 2014 р. за Резолюцію про територіальну цілісність України № 68/262. Зазначено, що за таких обставин навіть теоретичну ймовірність створити на базі Мінська майданчик для проведення мирних переговорів у контексті війни на Донбасі не всі в Україні сприймали позитивно, вважаючи, що в такому випадку Росія отримає не нейтральне, а сприятливе та прихильне для себе поле, на якому їй буде легше нав'язувати ультиматуми щодо, наприклад, федералізації України чи тамтешнього статусу російської мови, цілком нівелюючи наявну підтримку української сторони з боку західноєвропейських та американських партнерів.

Ключові слова: майдан, Революція Гідності, російська окупація Кримського півострова, російсько-українська війна, Донбас, Україна, Республіка Білорусь, інформаційний простір.

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