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THE BELARUSIAN VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT IN UKRAINE: CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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INTRODUCTION

The Belarusian opposition movements have a long history linked to the growth of authoritarian tendencies in Belarus following Aliaksandr Lukashenka's election as president. As power became consolidated in Lukashenka's hands, nearly every election campaign was accompanied by repression, sparking new waves of political resistance and emigration.

Against this backdrop, the first seeds of the Belarusian volunteer movement began to take shape. While its history in Ukraine dates back to the Revolution of Dignity (Euromaidan), it was the connections between Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalists, as well as the latter's refuge from repression in Ukraine, that paved the way for cooperation during the first and second phases of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Belarusians have traditionally been among the largest groups of foreigners fighting on Ukraine's side, which was due to cultural and ideological affinity. While Belarusians served in various Ukrainian units in 2014, the first dedicated Belarusian volunteer unit, the Tactical Group "Belarus," was formed in early 2015. Later, in 2022, former members of this group were among the founders first of the Battalion and subsequently the Kastus Kalinoŭski Regiment.

After the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, the Belarusian volunteer movement expanded, and the number of units in which Belarusian citizens fought increased significantly. In fact, for the first time among all foreigners in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Belarusian fighters started to claim political agency. At the same time, internal problems, compounded by the Ukrainian government's reactive stance, led to a certain crisis within the volunteer community.

Despite the Ukrainian authorities' passive approach to the Belarusian issue, the volunteer movement remains important for Ukraine. This is due to the need to strengthen the capacities of Lukashenka's opponents and develop effective mechanisms to counter the threats arising from Minsk's close cooperation with Moscow.

The development of pragmatic and targeted steps in the context of interaction with Belarusian volunteers should become part of Ukraine's broader strategy towards Belarus. This strategy should enable effective responses to immediate and long-term challenges posed by the Lukashenka regime.

This project is a logical continuation of the previous research, "The Ukrainian View of Relations among the Belarusian Democratic Forces and Their Perspective," which was carried out last year by the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. The results are based on 12 semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian politicians and experts, as well as representatives of the Belarusian volunteer movement, ensuring impartiality and the most comprehensive nature of the conclusions obtained.

1. HISTORY OF THE BELARUSIAN VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT IN UKRAINE

1.1. Emergence and decline of the Belarusian volunteer movement, 2014–2022

The basis for the emergence of the Belarusian volunteer movement during the Revolution of Dignity and the start of the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 was the previous contacts between Belarusian and Ukrainian nationalists. Since the 1990s, there have been horizontal ties between Ukrainian parties and Belarusian nationalist organizations. This cooperation has included exchanging experiences and engaging with representatives of international organizations that were in Ukraine and were of interest to Belarusian representatives. Moreover, the opportunity to cross the Belarusian-Ukrainian border freely allowed Belarusian activists to come to Ukraine and wait out periods of increased repression. This enabled them to participate in Ukrainian political processes to some extent.

The Revolution of Dignity intensified contacts between Ukrainians and nationalist-minded Belarusians. Belarusian activists took part in the protests, and some later joined the defense of Ukraine's eastern borders. Another wave of volunteers arriving in Ukraine, who joined their fellow citizens or ethnic Belarusians, was linked to the start of hostilities in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (regions). During this initial phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war, an estimated 300 to 500 Belarusians fought alongside Ukrainian forces. The structures in which they served can be categorized into three types:

- ***Battalions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Guard.*** Belarusian fighters were particularly visible in battalions such as Donbas and Azov. Some were granted Ukrainian citizenship and continue to serve today, albeit in different units.
- ***Units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.*** In the summer of 2016, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko signed Decree No. 258, allowing foreigners and stateless individuals to serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In 2017, the Armed Forces' press service reported that approximately 100 foreigners, including Belarusians, were serving in the military under contract.
- ***Volunteer formations.*** These included units such as the Right Sector Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, Carpathian Sich and others. The fighters from these formations initiated the formation of the only completely Belarusian military unit at that time.

On Freedom Day, March 25, 2015, which commemorates the declaration of the Belarusian People's Republic, Belarusian fighters formed the Tactical Group "Belarus" in the village of Pisky, located in the Donetsk oblast, where volunteer units were concentrated. The group united Belarusians from the 1st Assault Company of the 5th Battalion of the Right Sector Ukrainian Volunteer Corps and allied formations. It operated in some of the fiercest combat zones: Avdiivka, the Butivka mine, Pisky, Volnovakha, and Maryinka. As the Ukrainian

government moved to regulate and formalize volunteer formations by 2016-2017, the Tactical Group "Belarus" began to lose its structural coherence. Its members either transitioned into the Armed Forces or National Guard, or left military service and transitioned to civilian life.

Thus, between 2016 and 2022 the Belarusian volunteer movement in Ukraine entered a period of decline, driven by several factors:

- ***The end of the hot phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the retreat of this topic into the background.*** The emotional momentum of 2014–2015 dissipated, and the topic of war became less popular among Belarusians, Ukrainians, and the Ukrainian political elite. Under these circumstances, the hopes of some Belarusian volunteers for further struggle against the Lukashenka regime were dashed.
- ***The state's regulation of volunteer formations.*** In 2016-2017, the Ukrainian government moved to assert full control over volunteer formations, which gave some Belarusians the opportunity to serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and legalize their status in Ukraine.
- ***Lack of a strategy to support foreign volunteers.*** During the first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Ukrainian leadership did not see the potential in supporting foreign volunteers, and some promises, in particular regarding the granting of Ukrainian citizenship to all foreigners who participated in the defense of Ukraine, were not fulfilled.

Therefore, the cessation of the active phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the lack of institutional support and waning public attention to the hostilities not only sharply reduced the flow of Belarusians willing to join the defense of Ukraine, but also led to the disappearance of what had been the only Belarusian formation fighting in an organized manner on Ukraine's side up to 2017. This was due to the absence of a coherent strategy for working with Belarusian citizens and the mounting challenges to their legal status that intensified after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Despite this, in the face of the renewed threat, the Belarusian volunteer movement was reborn, this time on a larger and more serious scale.

1.2. Development of the Belarusian volunteer movement after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine

The presence of Belarusian veterans of the Russo-Ukrainian war in Ukraine, as well as the arrival of Belarusian citizens in 2020 – some of whom remained and joined the Armed Forces – helped restore the organizational structure of the Belarusian volunteer movement. Even before the start of the full-scale Russian invasion, some veterans who had previously fought in the Tactical Group "Belarus" began preparing for combat. Specifically, agreements were

made with the Ukrainian Volunteer Army, led by Dmytro Yarosh, and the Azov movement regarding the readiness of individual Belarusians to join these groups.

Once Russia's full-scale invasion began in February 2022, Belarusian volunteers found opportunities to join former Azov fighters then serving in Kyiv's 112th Territorial Defense Brigade. From that point, a Belarusian unit began to take shape as the number of Belarusian recruits steadily grew. After receiving a proposal from the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine (HUR), Belarusian fighters joined the International Legion of the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, within which the *Kastuś Kalinoŭski Battalion* was established. This battalion later grew into the *Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment*.

Thanks to support from Ukrainian state structures, notably the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the consul, who helped set up a border-crossing recruitment system, the Battalion, and subsequently the KR, became the principal hub for Belarusian volunteers. The willingness of Ukrainian security agencies to support the formation of the Belarusian national unit enabled it to adopt a coherent and organized form.

While Kyiv remained the primary center for Belarusian volunteers, attempts were also made to establish national units in Kharkiv and Odesa, though these efforts were unsuccessful. Belarusian citizens also joined units within the Armed Forces of Ukraine, leading to the emergence of Belarusian groups under the patronage of individual Ukrainian military formations. In addition, throughout 2022 and the first half of 2023, attempts were made to create other Belarusian national units within Ukraine's Armed Forces. These included:

- ***The "Pahonia" Regiment***, formed within the HUR's International Legion, was envisioned as a micro-model of a national liberation army. However, by the turn of 2022–2023, the unit was disbanded, and its fighters were absorbed into other formations.
- ***The Belarusian company within the 2nd International Legion***, a project initiated by Valery Sakhshchychk who at the time served as the defense and national security representative of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus. The initiative was ultimately not realized, although a number of fighters remained within the Legion.
- ***A separate air-assault company (in practice, a group of Belarusian fighters) within the 79th Separate Air Assault Brigade***, which was a new project of Valery Sakhshchychk. This unit is currently engaged in combat operations in the Donetsk oblast. Although Sakhshchychk has since stepped away from military and political affairs, Belarusian fighters continue to serve in the unit.
- ***The Belarusian Volunteer Corps***, which includes the Terror Battalion, formerly part of the *Kalinoŭski Regiment*. It is currently one of the largest Belarusian units.

Therefore, the configuration of the Belarusian volunteer movement from 2022 to 2023 was primarily shaped by the initiative of Belarusian fighters, political activists, and selected Ukrainian governmental and security officials rather than by a coherent state strategy involving Belarusian citizens in combat operations against the Russian Federation. This factor

was one of the reasons for the further dispersion of Belarusian fighters across various units, their dismissal from the ranks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and the emergence of internal conflicts within the volunteer movement itself.

2. THE BELARUSIAN VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT TODAY: CONFIGURATION AND INTERACTION WITH THE UKRAINIAN AUTHORITIES

2.1. Current configuration of Belarusian volunteer units within the Armed Forces of Ukraine

The Kalinoŭski Regiment's (KR) popularity and brand-building were aided by its cooperation with some representatives of the Ukrainian political establishment from 2022 to 2023. These representatives viewed the KR as a legitimate Belarusian counterpart with whom Kyiv could engage in dialogue. Representatives of the KR repeatedly met with members of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, as well as with heads of regional military administrations. In a situation where the United Transitional Cabinet (UTC) is unable to establish cooperation with the Ukrainian authorities, the Kalinoŭski Regiment has even announced plans to become political representatives of democratic Belarus in Ukraine.

However, it was precisely the involvement of representatives of the Kalinoŭski Regiment in political processes, compounded by the inert reaction of the Ukrainian authorities, that became a problem which, over the following years, was a stumbling block between the unit's fighters and did not always have a positive impact on its combat capability. Initially, against the backdrop of the participation of some Kalinoŭski Regiment fighters in political processes, the Terror battalion separated from the formation, first operating as a separate unit and later joining the Belarusian Volunteer Corps (end of 2022). The leaders of the Corps openly stated that the reason for the creation of the new formation was their disagreement with the attempts to politicize Belarusian soldiers. As a result, the Belarusian Volunteer Corps focused exclusively on combat tasks, eventually becoming one of the largest Belarusian units within the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Starting in the second half of 2023, individual fighters, and sometimes entire groups of volunteers, began separating from the Kalinoŭski Regiment. They either joined other units, created new ones, or left military service, often leaving Ukraine. In 2023, former KR fighters from the "Volat" Battalion formed the "Tango-Romeo" unit within Ukraine's International Legion, which [provides](#) heavy weapons support to combat formations. Also in 2023, the Tactical Group "Athena" was formed within the International Legion of the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine. This group includes, among others, Belarusian volunteers who had previously served in the Kalinoŭski Regiment.

This fragmentation continued in subsequent years. In 2024, the Belarusian-Ukrainian unit "Tur" was formed within the 225th Separate Assault Brigade. It incorporated a team of Belarusian [technicians](#) who had previously served in the KR. Currently, "Tur" focuses on evacuating wounded soldiers and repairing damaged equipment, as well as directly employing armored vehicles on the battlefield. At the end of that year, the Special Purpose

Unit "1514" was formed within the HUR "Timur" Special Unit. Its fighters also include former KR servicemen.

For the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment, the climax of changes came in the summer of 2024. A series of internal conflicts and a change in leadership altered the Regiment's manpower and the spectrum of missions performed by its fighters. Another group of fighters split off from the KR and joined other HUR-affiliated units, notably the aforementioned "Tur" and "1514." The KR now focuses primarily on providing artillery and medical support, as well as developing the UAV sector. Unlike in previous years, the KR no longer undertakes assault missions.

The main reasons for the Kalinoŭski Regiment's gradual degradation were:

- ***The death of the leaders who stood at the origins of the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment.*** During the first months of 2022, the combat commanders who had formed the KR in its early stages and who had enjoyed unquestioned authority among their fighters were killed in battle. The leadership then passed to others who steered the KR in a different direction.
- ***Conflicts over corruption and poor management decisions.*** From 2023 to 2024, the KR leadership faced a series of allegations regarding corruption and poor management decisions. This led to an outflow of fighters and made recruitment less than effective. Apparently, clear, transparent explanations regarding the accusations were not provided, which fueled escalating conflicts and further outflow of fighters.
- ***Politicization of the Kalinoŭski Regiment.*** Since 2022, representatives of the KR have gradually become involved in political processes within the Belarusian democratic movement, entering into confrontation with other Belarusian opposition structures, including the United Transitional Cabinet and the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Some fighters were dissatisfied that certain servicemen pursued personal political ambitions rather than focusing on combat work.
- ***Absence of strategy regarding Belarusian volunteers at the level of individual Ukrainian agencies.*** Another problem was that certain Ukrainian security and political institutions lacked a coherent vision for engaging with Belarusian nationals and expanding the volunteer movement. This applies to the political ambitions of individual volunteers, as well as to issues of legalization, support, and rehabilitation of Belarusian fighters (this problem is analyzed in more detail in the next section).

Therefore, given the changes in recent years regarding the formation and disappearance of units with Belarusians in their ranks, the current configuration of the Belarusian volunteer movement in Ukraine looks as follows:

Figure 1. Configuration of units that include Belarusian volunteers.

Unit name	Year established	Composition	Characteristics
Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment	2022	Kryvtsov Tactical Group, "Volat" Battalion, "Litvin" Battalion	The most recognizable and formerly the largest Belarusian unit within the Ukrainian Armed Forces. As a result of internal conflicts, it fractured; between 2022 and 2024, a number of groups of Belarusian fighters separated from it in several waves.
Belarusian Volunteer Corps	2022	Exact composition is unknown, but it is known that the unit includes former KR fighters from the Terror Battalion.	Arguably the largest Belarusian unit today. Part of the "Timur" Special Unit. The first formation to incorporate former Kalinoŭski Regiment fighters. Unlike the KR, it has focused exclusively on combat tasks from the outset.
Group within the 79th Separate Air Assault Brigade	2023	Exact composition is unknown	The Belarusian separate air-assault company (in practice, a group of Belarusian fighters) within the 79th Separate Air Assault Brigade was conceived by Valery Sakhshchyk, then representative for defense and national security of the United Transitional Cabinet. After Sakhshchyk left his post, the group was no longer associated with any political structure of the democratic forces.
"Tango-Romeo"	2023	Exact composition is unknown; it is known that former KR fighters are part of the unit.	A small unit formed by fighters who departed the KR at later stages. Provides heavy-weapons support to combat units.
Tactical Group "Athena"	2023	Exact composition is unknown; it is known that former KR fighters are part of the unit.	A unit under the HUR which includes former KR fighters. Unlike other formations, it is not nationally oriented.

"Tur"	2024	Core of the unit formed by former KR fighters from the "Volat" Battalion	The Belarusian-Ukrainian unit within the 225th Separate Assault Brigade that incorporated a team of former KR technicians. Specializes in repair, evacuation, and employment of armored vehicles.
"1514"	2024	Exact composition is unknown; it is known that former KR fighters are part of the unit.	Subunit within the HUR "Timur" Special Unit, which includes former KR fighters; conducts special operations (including assault and airborne)

It should be noted that, in addition to the units listed above, Belarusian citizens or ethnic Belarusians continue to perform combat tasks in other formations within both Defence Intelligence of Ukraine and Armed Forces of Ukraine. A defining feature of this group of fighters is that they do not form separate national units and do not publicly articulate political or military goals, which is why not much is known about their combat path.

In general, the Belarusian volunteer movement has been in a phase of transformation during the second half of 2023-2025. This process led to the movement's fragmentation and the loss of the Kalinoŭski Regiment's status as the main hub for Belarusian volunteers and the largest Belarusian unit in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The number of volunteers and the recruitment process have changed. For a number of reasons, some volunteers left; existing units now perform specific tasks; and some representatives of the volunteer movement resigned from military service to become more actively involved in political processes.

2.2. Political activity by certain representatives of the volunteer movement and the Ukrainian authorities' approach

As previously mentioned, from 2022 to 2023, some Ukrainian politicians, primarily members of parliament, expressed interest in the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment. They described it as a legitimate Belarusian counterpart with which Kyiv could engage. Although some members of parliament may have had, at best, a nominal consensus on the desirability of creating a political subject in the person of the KR, their membership in different political factions made a coherent approach virtually impossible.

In addition, another problem was the absence of a shared understanding among Ukrainian state bodies regarding the further use of the Belarusian volunteer movement, which produced divergent approaches across agencies. This problem concerns the security agencies, where one structure saw a need for KR to cooperate with other structures of the Belarusian democratic movement (notably the United Transitional Cabinet, the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and the Coordination Council), while another viewed the

Belarusian volunteers primarily as an element of deterrence against potential aggressive actions by the Lukashenka regime.

A similar situation existed in the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), where the process of forming a position on the Belarusian volunteer movement completely stalled at a certain stage, an important point given that the State Migration Service, which is responsible for regularizing foreigners' stay in Ukraine, is subordinate to the MIA. As is well known, Belarusian volunteers and veterans still face serious problems with legal residence in Ukraine, which in turn severely undermines their potential to consolidate any political agency. This is partly due to the approach of the Security Service of Ukraine, which takes the most cautious position in the context of admitting and legalizing Belarusian citizens in Ukraine in order to prevent the possible infiltration of enemy agents.

Finally, there is a lack of understanding in the Office of the President regarding how to deal with Belarusian volunteers. Without the approval of the Office of the President, as the de facto center of political decision-making, developing a comprehensive strategy was nearly impossible.

This practical absence of strategy and cross-government understanding of how to involve Belarusian volunteers into political processes was one factor behind the mostly unsuccessful attempts by KR representatives to engage politically within the Coordination Council and the United Transitional Cabinet. Against this backdrop, internal contradictions within the Kalinoŭski Regiment itself sharpened. Some commanders [opposed](#) the idea of their fighters participating in the Coordination Council elections, which acted as a catalyst for internal fracturing. Added to this was a conflict with HUR, which directly prohibited active military personnel from participating in such processes due to concerns that doing so would degrade the unit's overall combat readiness.

Amid these disagreements over deeper political engagement, some fighters left military service and focused on political work. Denis Prokhorov, a former KR commander, [became](#) one of the founders of the "Kalinovtsi" movement, whose goals were [declared](#) to be: (1) strengthening the Kalinoŭski Regiment and (2) uniting the capabilities and resources of Belarusian military personnel, civil society organizations, and representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces to achieve change in Belarus. In the summer of 2024, Prokhorov's deputy Vadim Kabanchuk was appointed as the United Transitional Cabinet's Representative for Defence and National Security, and a number of former Belarusian fighters and activists became delegates to the Coordination Council.

Although representatives of the Belarusian volunteer movement gained political representation, this came at a high cost:

- ***Fracturing within the KR and the volunteer movement as a whole.*** It was the combat path of the Kalinoŭski Regiment, its recognition and brand that were the resource on which a certain political agency could be built. Now that fighters are

largely dispersed across different units, it will be very difficult to regain their previous level of influence.

- **Conflict with HUR.** The conflict with one of the security agencies resulted in reduced autonomy for the KR, primarily in terms of recruiting new members. Without a significant influx of new personnel and with some of its fighters leaving, the KR could neither scale nor maintain its prior level of development.

Moreover, participation in political processes has not yet brought any serious dividends, as strengthening political agency is impossible without productive engagement with Ukrainian authorities. Given the Ukrainian establishment's inertia, a more logical step would have been to create an organization parallel to the KR that would, for example, lobby for the legalization of Belarusian veterans in Ukraine, while maintaining close contacts with the State Migration Service, the Office of the President of Ukraine, and other institutions. This would, at a minimum, allow them to gain support in Ukraine and approach negotiations or partnerships with the United Transitional Cabinet and the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya from a stronger position. Although the KR's new leadership announced this year the creation of the "Kalinovtsi"¹ veterans' movement and announced more active participation in political processes the decision appears belated in light of the political capital lost in previous years.

¹ The new Kalinoŭski Regiment leadership announced the creation of a movement with the same name that was mentioned in statements by Denis Prokhorov and Vadim Kabanchuk last year. So far, it resembles yet another parallel structure that emerged amid internal fractures within the unit.

3. THE FUTURE OF THE BELARUSIAN VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT AND ITS UTILITY FOR UKRAINE

3.1. Prospects for Belarusian volunteers in Ukraine

The further evolution of the Belarusian volunteer movement can be divided into two phases: the continuation of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the period after its end.

During the continuation of the Russo-Ukrainian war. If Ukraine does not change its approach to veteran policy and Belarus in general during the continuation of hostilities, the Belarusian volunteer movement will likely become increasingly amorphous and less of a political actor. Consequently, while a significant number of Belarusian fighters will serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, they will be dispersed across various units and unable to claim any political role. There is a risk that the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment will continue to lose its combat effectiveness and eventually play a rather symbolic role.

However, if Ukraine changes its policy by clarifying the role that Belarusian volunteers can play and reforming its migration policy, time will be needed to shape a new configuration of the volunteer movement. Given past disagreements and conflicts, quickly establishing a single center of power for Belarusian fighters will be difficult. At the same time, the issue of recruitment could improve, and the availability of opportunities for legalization would enable the emergence in Ukraine of Belarusian veterans' organizations which, with adequate support, could engage not only in volunteer and assistance activities but, in some cases, seek participation in political processes.

However, the likelihood of a positive scenario is not high. Beyond the absence of a strategy, several additional factors apply:

- ***Decision-making framed by short-term security interests.*** The Ukrainian authorities and security agencies continue to avoid taking steps that could provoke more aggressive behavior from Lukashenka. Since spring 2023, Belarus [has not posed](#) a direct military threat to Ukraine, primarily due to the withdrawal of almost the entire Russian military contingent from Belarusian territory. The Lukashenka regime's role has also evolved, with Moscow now viewing it primarily as a supplier of military products rather than as a combat unit. Despite these changes, Kyiv's actions remain limited to a narrow range of tasks in response to potential security threats, with no clear indication of a willingness to change course.
- ***Competing priorities.*** An even greater problem is that the Ukrainian elite have different priorities. The immediate wartime requirement is to secure Western support and counter Russia. Against this backdrop, the issue of Belarus, which is not currently a serious irritant, becomes less important.
- ***Instrumentalization of partnerships.*** Given the need to confront Russia daily, official Kyiv tends to instrumentalize partnerships to achieve quick, concrete results. A chronic lack of resources forces it to act mostly reactively and with a short-term

focus. If a given initiative does not yield the desired effect in the near term, or requires the construction of complex arrangements, the likelihood of its adoption drops significantly.

In the event of the end/cessation of hostilities. If Kyiv does not reconsider its approach to Belarusian volunteers and the Belarusian question in general, the future of the volunteer movement will be even more uncertain if the war continues. It is likely that history will repeat itself, as it did from 2017 to 2020, when organised groups of Belarusian volunteers were largely disbanded due to their departure from the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the few remaining fighters were scattered across various units.

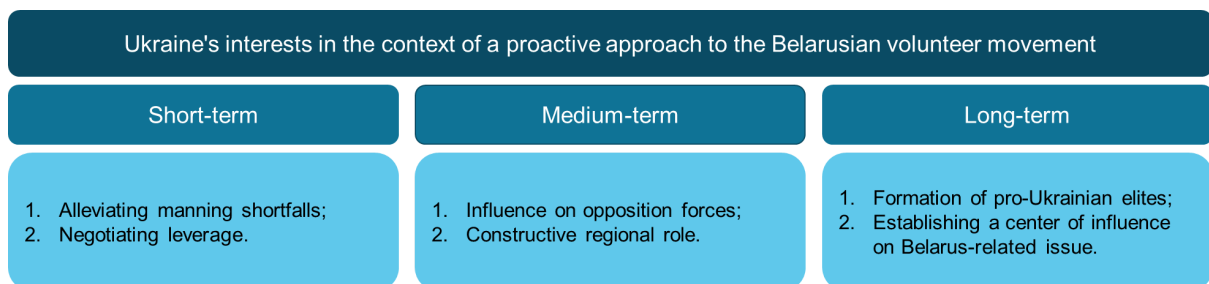
It is possible that small, relatively weak veterans' organizations will emerge, but they will not be numerous due to legalization difficulties: many former fighters will be forced to leave Ukraine because they cannot legally remain there. Some former volunteers will leave due to a mismatch between reality and their ideological or political goals, as their hopes for an armed struggle against the Lukashenka regime will not be realized. Others will leave Ukraine to seek new conflict zones where they can apply their combat experience under more favorable financial conditions.

Predicting how Ukraine will treat Belarusian volunteers in the post-war period is difficult because it depends on the conditions that end the Russo-Ukrainian war, the regional balance of power, and Ukraine's resources. With favorable conditions and a proactive policy, Belarusian volunteers could be an instrument for Ukraine to project influence in the region.

3.2. Potential benefits of Belarusian volunteers for Ukraine

The potential of the Belarusian volunteer movement has not yet been fully realized for the reasons outlined above. Even the problems of recent years related to its fragmentation can be gradually overcome with the right approach, focused on achieving Ukrainian interests both in cooperation with Belarus and in the broader process of reformatting the regional security system. Ukraine's interests here can be grouped into three time horizons: (1) short-term, (2) medium-term, and (3) long-term.

Figure 2. Diagram of Ukraine's interests under a proactive approach to the Belarusian volunteer movement



Partial alleviation of manning shortfalls. In the short term, improving migration policy and the approach to volunteers would help retain some fighters within the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In the event of their demobilization, it would create conditions for legalization and employment. There is also the question of Ukrainian private military companies (PMCs). If such entities are established, Belarusian fighters could be engaged to advance Ukrainian interests in other regions. Additionally, an influx of Belarusian citizens from abroad could partially offset the effects of Ukrainian emigration in certain sectors.

Potential negotiating leverage in talks with Lukashenka. The presence of a strong instrument after the Russo-Ukrainian war ends will strengthen Ukraine's position in the event of negotiations with the Lukashenka regime. Official Minsk will have to engage in a more constructive dialogue, given the concerns about the possible use of volunteers against the regime in Belarus.

Influencing the agenda-shaping within the Belarusian opposition In the long term, working with the political wing of the volunteer movement will provide a direct mechanism for influencing Belarusian democratic forces. Given the appointment of Vadim Kabanchuk, the former deputy commander of the Kalinoŭski Regiment, as the United Transitional Cabinet representative for national security and defense, as well as the Coordination Council membership of several figures active in Ukraine, Kyiv could acquire tools to shape the political course of the democratic forces based on its own interests and those of its volunteers.

Demonstrating a constructive regional role. Ukraine can use the Belarus issue as an opportunity to act as a constructive regional player, despite a less-than-favorable foreign policy environment driven by Western domestic debates and war weariness. This means that Kyiv will be able to appeal to Western capitals not only with emotional narratives, which receive less feedback over time, but also with its role as an actor in regional transformation. This will provide new arguments for engagement with the West.

The formation of new pro-Ukrainian elites. Over time, this will create opportunities for the formation of new, pro-Ukrainian Belarusian political elites who will view Ukraine as a long-term partner. Additionally, it would create mechanisms to respond to challenges related to internal political transformations in Belarus after Lukashenka leaves power, and, given positive changes in Belarus, it would also create opportunities for joint projects and foreign policy coordination.

Establishing a center of influence on the Belarus issue. Given the emergence of the U.S.–Belarus negotiating track and the likelihood of European states initiating consultations with Minsk, there is a need for another political center – in Ukraine. This would allow Ukraine to play a more proactive and constructive role in the region with regard to the Belarusian issue.

CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014, the Belarusian volunteer movement has undergone a significant evolution, becoming a tangible military force and claiming political agency. At the same time, the absence of a Ukrainian strategy toward Belarus, and the prioritization of short-term problem-solving over the pursuit of long-term interests, became one of the reasons for serious problems among volunteers from around the second half of 2023.

The lack of a common understanding among Ukrainian state bodies regarding the further use of the Belarusian volunteer movement produced divergent approaches at the agency level. Attempts by individual volunteers to get involved in political processes within the Belarusian opposition environment provoked a conflict with the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine (HUR), as well as an internal fracturing within the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment, which was a point of attraction for Belarusian fighters. As a result, the Kalinoŭski Regiment lost certain elements of autonomy and the volunteer movement became fragmented.

If Ukraine does not take productive steps to support the volunteers with a view to achieving broader foreign policy interests, there is a risk that the volunteer movement will effectively decline, as occurred in 2017–2020.

To prevent such a scenario and gain instruments of power and influence in interaction with the Lukashenka regime and in promoting Ukraine's interests in the Belarusian issue at the regional level, the current approach must be revised to favor proactive measures.

Although the immediate benefits of working with Belarusian volunteers may not be significant, they should be treated as conduits for advancing Ukrainian interests both in terms of influencing the formation of new Belarusian elites and in the broader paradigm of preventing security challenges and Belarus losing its independence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of interaction with Belarusian volunteers, official Kyiv should develop a comprehensive strategy and the tools needed to create the conditions for achieving Ukraine's interests listed in the previous section. Within this process, the following steps are required.

Step 1. Assessment and analysis of capabilities and prospects.

- ***Conducting a comprehensive review of Ukraine–Belarus relations at the level of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and security agencies.*** The goal is to assess the domestic political situation in Belarus, evaluate security risks posed by the Lukashenka regime, and identify Ukraine's strategic interests and potential areas for enhanced engagement with Belarusian volunteer formations.
- ***Study the potential of the Belarusian volunteer movement.*** The goal is to assess recruitment potential, determine the types of tasks that volunteers can perform, and outline political goals and interests that can be achieved in the context of constructive work with the volunteer movement.

Step 2. Resolving organizational problems.

- ***Resolving legal and other obstacles.*** First of all, it is necessary to simplify the conditions for legalization for Belarusian fighters and veterans, which would not only prevent them from leaving the country, but also strengthen recruitment capabilities.
- ***Resolving the problem of fragmentation of the volunteer movement.*** Create a unified structure for Belarusian volunteers under the patronage of one of Ukraine's security agencies. This will take time, but without it, strengthening the agency of the volunteer movement will be significantly more difficult.
- ***Establishing political representation.*** Forming and supporting political representation of former fighters who are no longer in service. This will avoid breaches of military discipline and create conditions for Ukrainian state institutions to support such individuals.

Step 3. Preparing for the post-war period.

- ***Work on the concept of Ukrainian so-called PMCs.*** Involving veterans of the Russo-Ukrainian war, including Belarusians, in such structures will not only integrate people into post-war life, but also provide an instrument for advancing Ukrainian interests abroad.
- ***Support for veterans.*** Creating appropriate conditions for rehabilitation, supporting entrepreneurial activities and other initiatives of former fighters will allow them to better integrate into society and settle in Ukraine rather than leaving the country.

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