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CONSTRUCTING THE NEIGHBOR: UKRAINE'S LOCATION IN BELARUSIAN INTERNAL RELATIONS SCHOLARSHIP

Abstract

This article examines how Belarusian International Relations (IR) scholarship portrays Ukraine. Drawing on constructivist and sociological approaches, it argues that local academic discourse can shed light on the interplay between domestic political constraints, regional allegiances, and knowledge production. The analysis focuses on three peer-reviewed IR journals, examining articles that refer or are primarily devoted to Ukraine. While Ukraine ranks second to Russia in terms of general mentions, sustained scholarly engagement remains limited. Belarusian scholars tend to avoid sensitive topics such as the annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in Donbas, often employing neutral language that neither criticizes Russia nor explicitly supports its position. Reference analysis reveals a strong reliance on Russian sources, though this does not necessarily reflect a pro-Russian narrative. Taken together, these patterns demonstrate how a state's political environment shapes the scope and tone of scholarly engagement with regional developments.

Keywords: Belarus, Ukraine, sociology of internal relations (IR), scholarly discourse, image of a state

Introduction

Belarus and Ukraine share extensive geographical, economic, and historical linkages, yet their bilateral relationship has assumed a markedly ambivalent and asymmetric character over the past decade. While

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formally aligned with Russia, Belarus has offered tacit support for the key aspects of Moscow's geopolitical agenda – most notably by facilitating military operations during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine – yet without fully or explicitly articulating its own position *vis-à-vis* the latter. Ukraine, in turn, despite being directly targeted by Russian aggression, has responded to Belarus's complicity and deepening authoritarianism with a notable degree of restraint, opting for selective sanctions and avoiding sustained rhetorical confrontation. This mutual hesitancy suggests a logic of strategic ambiguity or constrained calibration, inviting broader reflection on how states navigate foreign-policy signalling, alliance entanglements, and reputational risks.

This hesitancy prompts an expansion of the scope of analysis. Rather than focusing exclusively on official policy statements or state actions, this study turns to the domain of academic scholarship – specifically, publications in the field of International Relations (IR) – as a potentially revealing site for assessing how Ukraine's geopolitical trajectory has been understood in Belarus. This move is guided by the recognition that scholarly discourse both reflects and shapes a nation's broader worldview: it can reproduce prevailing narratives, signal internal dissent or navigate ambivalence under constraints. Whether Belarusian IR scholars have critically engaged with, echoed or sidestepped Ukraine-related developments, it becomes an open and empirically tractable question connected to the broader intersection of knowledge, power, and regional order(s).

Drawing on sociologically and constructivist-informed accounts of identity formation within IR, we treat Belarusian IR scholars as situated agents whose work reflects both institutional-professional and broader societal pressures. In authoritarian contexts such as Belarus, academic publications may serve not only as sites of analysis but also vehicles for reproducing, negotiating or cautiously contesting dominant narratives. Hence, IR scholarship may align with official positions, maintain strategic neutrality or advance critical perspectives within permissible boundaries. Examining how Ukraine is represented – or omitted – in Belarusian IR journals offers exploratory insights into the intersection of national identity, foreign-policy constraints and intellectual tradition: sparse, neutral or euphemistic references to Ukraine's post-2014 trajectory may signal reluctance to challenge Moscow's framing. By contrast, discursive variation may instead point to subtle forms of contestation within a restricted academic field.

To address these questions systematically, we examined three Belarusian IR journals officially recognized by the Higher Attestation Com-

mission of Belarus (*HACRB*).¹ Our study sample comprised: *Journal of the Belarusian State University: International Relations* (*JBSUIR*),² *Journal of International Law and International Relations* (*JILIR*)³ and *Actual Problems of International Relations and Global Development* (*APIRGD*).⁴ Given their staggered founding dates, we included all the issues published from each journal's inception through February 2022.⁵ This resulted in an analysis of *JBSUIR* from 2017 onwards, *JILIR* from 1996, and *APIRGD* from 2013.

To address our overarching research question, we developed a set of empirically operationalized sub-questions designed to examine the scope and character of Ukraine-related content. First, after defining our article sample, we measured the frequency with which Ukraine was mentioned in each journal, using the keywords "Ukraine", "Ukrainian" and "Ukrainians". We then compared these frequencies with the references to Belarus's neighbouring states, i.e. Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russia. Second, we identified the number of the articles primarily focused on Ukraine: those with "Ukraine" or "Ukrainian" in the title were classified as explicitly dedicated to Ukrainian topics. The same procedure was applied to Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russia.

We also examined the temporal focus of each article addressing Ukraine, distinguishing between those concerned with contemporary developments (defined as events occurring within two years of the publication) and those dealing with historical topics. In addition, we categorized the articles according to whether they focused on the pre- or post-1991 period (e.g. the Ukrainian SSR or the Ukrainian People's Republic), thereby adding an extra temporal dimension to our analysis of how Ukraine is situated within Belarusian IR discourse. Finally, we identified the most common subject areas in the Ukraine-related articles, grouping

¹ Перечень научных изданий Республики Беларусь для опубликования результатов диссертационных исследований [List of scientific journals of the Republic of Belarus for publishing the results of dissertation research], Higher Attestation Commission of the Republic of Belarus, <http://vak.gov.by> (01.03.2025).

² Журнал Белорусского государственного университета. Международные отношения [Journal of the Belarusian State University. International Relations], Electronic Library of the Belarusian State University, <https://www.elib.bsu.by> (01.03.2025).

³ Журнал международного права и международных отношений [Journal of International Law and International Relations], Electronic Library of the Belarusian State University, <https://www.elib.bsu.by> (01.03.2025).

⁴ Актуальные проблемы международных отношений и глобального развития [Current Problems of International Relations and Global Development], Electronic Library of the Belarusian State University, <https://www.elib.bsu.by> (01.03.2025).

⁵ We decided to refrain from studying articles published after this date, given the likelihood of distortion of the study results.

them into thematic categories. This thematic mapping has allowed us to assess whether Belarusian IR scholarship primarily emphasizes foreign policy, economic cooperation, domestic politics or broader issues.

We further analysed Belarusian authors' perspectives on Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, assessing whether the moves towards its integration with the EU or NATO were portrayed in positive, negative or neutral terms. These evaluations offered an insight into broader attitudes towards Ukraine's alignment with Western institutions. Given the significance of the Crimea and Donbas conflicts for the regional geopolitics, we also explored whether such perspectives shifted over time, particularly after 2014. In addition, we examined how Belarusian IR scholars characterized the key events in Ukraine's recent history. Special attention was paid to the framing of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea – whether described as a "regaining", "annexation", "accession" or otherwise. A similar approach was applied to the 2014–2022 conflict in Donbas, focusing on whether it was depicted as a civil war, Russian-Ukrainian conflict or generic "Ukrainian crisis".

Finally, we conducted a basic reference analysis to determine which sources were most frequently cited in Ukraine-related scholarship. By identifying the institutional affiliations of cited authors, we aimed to establish whether Belarusian IR scholars primarily drew on Russian, Ukrainian, or other international sources, thus revealing the "national origins" of the interpretive frameworks shaping their understanding of Ukraine's regional role.

By examining academic publications, this article seeks to shed light on the aspects of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations that may remain unspoken in official political discourse. In the contexts where strategic ambiguity shapes foreign policy, scholarly writing can offer indirect insights into how regional developments are interpreted and framed. Moreover, the case of Belarusian IR highlights the broader challenge of conducting IR research under the conditions of authoritarian rule and external political pressure: when a dominant regional actor and ally (such as Russia) is directly involved in a neighbouring conflict, local scholars may adopt strategies of rhetorical neutrality, selective omission or carefully coded critique. These, in turn, reveal both the pressures of the political environment and the interpretive space that scholarship continues to occupy.

The following sections elaborate on the historical context of this study, its theoretical foundations, methodological approach and empirical findings. We begin by situating the Belarus-Ukraine relations within a historical-interpretive framework that foregrounds the sociological

production of IR knowledge. We then present our data on how Belarusian academic journals engage with Ukraine, focusing on the frequency of mention, thematic emphasis and discursive framing. Finally, we interpret these results in the light of Belarus's domestic political constraints and the broader regional context, arguing that the representation of Ukraine in Belarusian IR scholarship reflects the complex interplay between scholarly autonomy, national interests and the influence exerted by a dominant regional ally.

From the Image of a State to the Discipline of IR and Back

Although our interest in the image of Ukraine within Belarusian IR scholarship falls thematically within the realm of self-reflexive IR and disciplinary sociology, it was motivated by the developments in the Belarusian-Ukrainian bilateral relations, which had remained stable and largely free of major tensions for decades⁶ but have taken a dramatic turn in recent years. At the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Minsk allowed Russian forces to utilize its territory as a launch pad for the invasion.⁷ Despite Lukashenko's insistence that Belarus was not directly engaged in the fighting,⁸ Ukraine positioned Belarus as a co-belligerent in Russia's aggression. The 'Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation'⁹ concluded by Ukraine and Belarus in 1995 affirmed, among other things, that neither party's territory should be used in such ways that could compromise the other's security. At the same time, however, Ukrainian officials have been cautious in their direct criticism of Lukashenko.¹⁰ Belarus, notwith-

⁶ A. Kotljarchuk, N. Zakharov, *Belarus' relations with Ukraine and the 2022 Russian invasion: Historical ties, society, and realpolitik*, "Baltic Worlds", 2022, Vol. 15, No. 1–2, p. 35.

⁷ F. Trejos-Mateus, E. Marín-Aranguren, K. Arévalo-Franco, *Perceptions of the role of Belarus in the Ukrainian conflict and the impact on the international system*, [in:] *Handbook of Regional Conflict Resolution Initiatives in the Global South*, ed. J. Delgado-Caicedo, Routledge 2022.

⁸ S.A. Mudrov, "We did not unleash this war. Our conscience is clear". *The Russia–Ukraine military conflict and its perception in Belarus*, "Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe", 2022, Vol. 30, No. 2.

⁹ Договір про дружбу, добросусідство і співробітництво між Україною і Республікою Білорусь [Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus], Верховна Рада України, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/01.03.2025>.

¹⁰ S. Sierakowski, *Opinion: Why is Ukraine rejecting the Belarusian opposition?*, The Kyiv Independent, <https://kyivindependent.com>, 17.04.2024 (01.03.2025).

standing its rhetorical alignment with Russia, has exhibited similarly paradoxical restraint. If not openly seeking ways out of the war-provoked political cul-de-sac, Belarus seems to have avoided the overt involvement of its armed forces in the aggression against Ukraine.

Before the full-scale war between Ukraine and Russia broke out, Belarusian–Ukrainian relations had already become fairly reserved following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the onset of the Russia-orchestrated insurgency in Donbas. Belarus voted against the UN Resolution 68/262 on Ukraine's territorial integrity¹¹ and opposed the provisions condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea in the final resolution of the 24th OSCE Parliamentary Assembly session.¹² Nevertheless, a precarious balance was maintained as Minsk, despite being a member of the Belarus–Russia Union State, refrained from recognizing Crimea as a part of Russia.¹³ That balance deteriorated further after the Belarusian presidential elections of 2020, when Ukraine, alongside the US and the EU, imposed sanctions on Belarus for human rights abuses and the Ryanair Flight 4978 hijacking.¹⁴ In turn, the self-proclaimed president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, reacted with a promise to put Ukraine "on its knees if he only wished".¹⁵ At the same time, however, Belarus had become Ukraine's second-largest trading partner within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and sixth-largest globally, with their trade turnover of nearly USD 6.9 billion by mid-2021.¹⁶

Hence, our article addresses the gap between the two types of socio-logically minded IR scholarship.¹⁷ The first one regards IR scholars themselves as the primary object of interest, viewing them as social ac-

¹¹ Territorial integrity of Ukraine, United Nations General Assembly, <https://docs.un.org>, 27.03.2014 (01.03.2025).

¹² OSCE Parliamentary Assembly: *Recalling the spirit of Helsinki (2015, July 5–9)*, OSCE, <https://www.osce.org> (01.03.2025).

¹³ R. Astapenia, D. Balkunets, *Belarus–Russia Relations after the Ukraine Conflict*, BelarusDigest, <http://belarusdigest.com>, 2016 (01.03.2025); A. Kazharski, K. Lozka, *Belarus–Russia relations: Identity as product and factor*, [in:] *Russian policy toward Belarus after 2020: At a turning point?*, eds. A. Moshes, R. Nizhnikau, Lanham 2023.

¹⁴ T. Lister, *Belarus condemned for 'hijacking' Ryanair plane to detain journalist*, CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com>, 24.05.2021 (01.03.2025).

¹⁵ *Лукашенко заявил, что мог бы вместе с Путиным поставить Украину на колени* [Lukashenko said he could, together with Putin, bring Ukraine to its knees], Ukrayinska Pravda, <https://www.pravda.com.ua>, 09.08.2021 (01.03.2025).

¹⁶ L. Lvovski, *Belarusian–Ukrainian trade and economic relations in 2020–2023*, Free Belarus Center, <https://freebelaruscenter.org>, 2024 (01.03.2025).

¹⁷ A.M. Peña, *International relations as a social system: From sociocybernetics to the sociology of IR*, "International Political Sociology", 2019, Vol. 13, No. 3.

tors embedded in the production of knowledge about the international.¹⁸ The second one seeks to sociologically reconceptualize the relationships among various socio-political structures and institutions, of which the discipline of IR itself is a natural part.¹⁹

In this regard, we depart from the mainstream rationalist conception of the international realm and its assumptions about the autonomous and unchanging nature of primary international actors, namely, states. Instead, our approach primarily relies on a rich and eclectically internalized constructivist concept of the international, focusing on the systemic distribution of identities and the mutual dialectics involved in the co-production of the elements of these identity structures.²⁰ Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, we introduce the element of a “sociology of agents producing IR”,²¹ emphasizing the overall embeddedness of the discipline in the social context of international politics.

This sociological standpoint demonstrates that IR knowledge is never produced in an autonomous or isolated context.²² Hence, the images created, opinions held, and perspectives advanced by local IR scholars (in our case, Belarusian IR scholars) concerning other states (in this case, Ukraine) partially reflect the social imaginaries and their institutional objectifications characteristic of their own country or society. In this sense, another crucial part of our perspective hinges on the constructivist conceptualization of international politics, particularly the idea that state identities are socially constructed rather than predetermined, evolving from the patterns of interaction among them.²³ Therefore, states – and their constitutive elements, i.e. domestic actors – shape and objectify international norms, institutions and practices through their

¹⁸ O. Wæver, *The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations*, “International Organization”, 1998, Vol. 52, No. 4; F. Grenier, J. Hagmann, *Sites of knowledge (re-)production: Toward an institutional sociology of international relations scholarship*, “International Studies Review”, 2016, Vol. 18, No. 2.

¹⁹ O. Kessler, *Toward a sociology of the international? International relations between anarchy and world society*, “International Political Sociology”, 2009, Vol. 3, No. 1; G. Lawson, R. Shilliam, *Sociology and international relations: legacies and prospects*, “Cambridge Review of International Affairs”, 2010, Vol. 23, No. 1; M. Albert, B. Buzan, *International relations theory and the “social whole”: Encounters and gaps between IR and sociology*, “International Political Sociology”, 2013, Vol. 7, No. 2.

²⁰ A. Wendt, *Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics*, “International Organization”, 1992, Vol. 46, No. 2.

²¹ A.M. Peña, *op.cit.*

²² M. Albert, B. Buzan, *op.cit.*

²³ A. Wendt, *Collective Identity Formation and the International State*, “American Political Science Review”, 1994, Vol. 88, No. 2.

interactions and, in turn, these interactions define and redefine state “identities” and the overall “distribution of identities” within the international domain.²⁴

Hence, Ukraine's identity is not an external or immutable attribute of the Ukrainian state but, rather, a co-constituted subjective reality arising from the social processes taking place both inside and outside Ukraine itself – for example, those located within the social field of the Belarusian discipline of IR and its corresponding scholarly community. Similarly, the perception of Ukraine as an indicator of the characteristic of the Belarusian state is not merely a set of abstract policy imperatives wrapped in some sterile calculations of the national interest. Instead, Belarus's view of Ukraine is an emergent phenomenon stemming from the interactions and social imaginaries associated with its political class, policy circles, scholars and public opinion.

Scholarly communities play a particularly prominent role in shaping, communicating and legitimizing overarching political-historical frameworks of international politics.²⁵ Belarusian IR scholars are not only the educators of future policy-making elites but are also involved in the expert commentary addressed to governmental agencies. Given the status of the IR community and the specifics of Belarusian authoritarianism – which, while limiting the community's autonomy, still introduces “reversed” communicative dynamics into the policy-academia nexus – it becomes essential to examine Ukraine's image within Belarusian IR literature. This imperative underpins our general research question, which unfolds as an inquiry into the epistemic location of Ukraine within the disciplinary field of IR in Belarus.

Examining the Belarusian scholarly image of Ukraine therefore requires consideration of at least three interrelated issues: the conceptualization of Ukraine's identity in Belarusian IR discourse; the sources on which Belarusian scholars rely (particularly the extent of their reliance on Russian literature); and the degree to which these representations may be politically or ideologically shaped. Building on theoretical insights from constructivism, we seek to trace how academic narratives about Ukraine can reinforce particular foreign-policy choices and, ultimately,

²⁴ B.B. Allan, S. Vucetic, T. Hopf, *The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order: China's Hegemonic Prospects*, “International Organization”, 2018, Vol. 72, no. 4.

²⁵ A. Acharya, *Global international relations (IR) and regional worlds: A new agenda for international studies*, “International Studies Quarterly”, 2014, Vol. 58, No. 4; J. Gronau, H. Schmidtke, *The quest for legitimacy in world politics – international institutions' legitimization strategies*, “Review of International Studies”, 2016, Vol. 42, No. 3.

how they contribute to Belarus's overall perception of Ukraine as a neighbour undergoing significant upheaval – from the Orange Revolution to the ongoing military conflict and territorial annexation.

From these foundations, we derive several hypotheses regarding Belarusian scholarly engagement with Ukraine. Specifically, we posit that Ukraine occupies a conspicuous position in Belarusian IR analyses due to geographical proximity, shared historical and economic ties, Ukraine's trajectory of European and transatlantic integration and its recent political upheavals. Furthermore, given the pronounced security implications of the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine, we anticipate that Belarusian scholarship frames Ukraine predominantly through the lenses of security and trade. Finally, we expect that Belarusian IR scholars' reliance on Russian sources and the ideological environment within Belarus may influence how Ukraine is portrayed. In the following sections, we detail these hypotheses, contextualize them within data on Belarusian IR discourse, and present our assessment of the image of Ukraine in Belarusian IR literature.

Results of the Study

Ukraine is frequently mentioned in the Belarusian IR journals comprising our sample. In the *Journal of the Belarusian State University: International Relations* (JBSUIR), which contains 60 articles, Ukraine appears in 28 (46.7%), ranking second after Russia, which is mentioned in 48 articles (68.3%). It is followed by Poland, with 19 articles (31.7%), Lithuania, with 14 (23.3%), and Latvia, with 7 (11.7%). A similar pattern emerges in *Actual Problems of International Relations and Global Development* (APIRGB), which features 96 articles: Russia is mentioned in 65 (67.7%), Ukraine in 41 (42.7%), Poland in 31 (32.3%), Latvia in 18 (18.8%) and Lithuania in 17 (17.7%). Although Latvia and Lithuania swap positions compared with the first journal, they still occupy the lowest ranks. In the *Journal of International Law and International Relations* (JILIR), the largest of the three, with 1,105 articles, Russia again leads with 698 mentions (63.2%), followed by Ukraine, with 328 (29.7%), Poland with 290 (26.2%), Lithuania, with 217 (19.6%), and Latvia, with 144 (13%). Despite the varying sizes of these journals, the overall hierarchy remains consistent: Russia occupies the first place, Ukraine comes second, Poland third, and the Baltic states hold the lowest positions. These findings fulfil the first condition under which Ukraine can be considered sufficiently represented in Belarusian IR scholarship.

However, the number of the articles devoted primarily to Ukrainian themes presents a different picture. Across all three journals, only 16 such articles were identified: one in the *APIRGB*, two in the *JBSUIR*, and 13 in the *JILIR*. By comparison, there are 65 articles about Russia, 24 about Poland, 14 about Lithuania, and seven about Latvia. Thus, Ukraine ranks third rather than second when measured by the articles explicitly dedicated to a neighbouring country. Notably, most Ukraine-focused articles were published before 2014. In the *JILIR*, only one appeared after 2014 (in 2015). The remaining ones date from the mid-2000s (2004 to 2009), with a significant gap from 2009 to 2015 and no further articles thereafter. This gap is striking given the significance of the 2014 events in Ukraine – one might have expected an increase in publications, rather than a decline. Articles concerning other neighbours, however, continued to appear throughout this period.

Thematic Analysis

As regards time periods, the collected data show that Belarusian authors predominantly write about modern-day Ukraine. Of all the articles dedicated to Ukraine, three-quarters (12 out of 16) concern the post-independence period. By contrast, only one article examines Soviet-era Ukraine, another discusses 1917–1921 Ukraine, and one focuses on pre-1917 Ukraine. An additional article covers both the 1917–1921 and 1922–1991 periods together. Although Belarusian scholars show the greatest interest in contemporary Ukraine, they tend to avoid analysing ongoing events: out of the 12 articles on modern Ukraine, only 4 (one-third) address the issues occurring within two years of the publication.

As regards thematic categories, “international relations” accounts for the largest share of Ukraine-focused articles (9 out of 16). The categories “domestic politics” and “other” follow, with 3 articles each, while “international law” is represented by only 1. Notably, no articles discuss Ukraine from an international economic perspective. Within the “international relations” category, the most common topics are Ukrainian Euro-Atlantic integration (3 articles), German-Ukrainian relations (2 articles), and Belarusian-Ukrainian relations (2 articles). There is also a study on Ukrainian nuclear disarmament entitled *Nuclear Factor in the Foreign Policy of Ukraine (1991–1996)*.²⁶ The articles on Ukrainian

²⁶ D.K. Rafeenko, *Ядерный фактор во внешней политике Украины (1991–1996 гг.)* [Nuclear Factor in the Foreign Policy of Ukraine (1991–1996)], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2004, No. 3.

Euro-Atlantic integration include *EU Neighbourhood Policy: Cooperation Instruments for Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus*,²⁷ *European Vector as a Priority of Ukraine's Integration Strategy*,²⁸ and *Ukraine in the Context of Integration into Euro-Atlantic Security Structures*.²⁹ German-Ukrainian relations are explored in *Germany's Policy towards Ukraine in 1990–1994: Main Trends*³⁰ and *Germany's Policy towards Ukraine in 1994–1998: Main Trends*.³¹ In another publication, the author of the latter two articles compares the digital instruments of diplomacy implemented by Belarus, Russia and Ukraine.³² As for Belarusian-Ukrainian relations, one article³³ addresses the delimitation of the common border in the 1990s, while another³⁴ examines the diplomatic contacts between the Belarusian People's Republic and the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1918.

In the “domestic politics” category (comprising 3 articles), one article addresses Ukraine in German domestic politics (*Russia, Ukraine, Belarus in the Programme Documents of the Three Governments of Angela Merkel (2005–2017)*³⁵), another explores refugee policies (*Project*

²⁷ Е.А. Достанко, *Политика соседства ЕС: инструменты сотрудничества для Украины, Молдовы, Беларусь* [EU Neighbourhood Policy: Cooperation Instruments for Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2004, No. 3.

²⁸ Ю.К. Краснопольский, *Европейский вектор как приоритет интеграционной стратегии Украины* [The European vector as a priority of Ukraine's integration strategy], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2005, No. 2.

²⁹ *Idem*, *Украина в контексте интеграции в евроатлантические структуры безопасности* [Ukraine in the Context of Integration into Euro-Atlantic Security Structures], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2005, No. 4.

³⁰ В.В. Фрольцов, *Политика ФРГ в отношении Украины в 1990–1994 гг.: основные тенденции* [Germany's Policy towards Ukraine in 1990–1994: Main Trends], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2005, No. 3.

³¹ *Idem*, *Политика ФРГ в отношении Украины в 1994–1998 гг.: основные тенденции* [Germany's Policy towards Ukraine in 1994–1998: Main Trends], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2006, No. 1.

³² *Idem*, *Information coverage of the foreign policies of Belarus, Russia, Ukraine in the second half of the 2010s: new resources and instruments*, “Journal of the Belarusian State University. International Relations”, 2019, No. 1.

³³ Д.В. Юрчак, *Процесс делimitации белорусско-украинской государственной границы* [Delimitation process of Belarus-Ukrainian state borders], “Актуальные проблемы международных отношений и глобального развития” [“Current Problems of International Relations and Global Development”], 2013, Vol. 1.

³⁴ А.Н. Куksa, *Белорусско-украинские дипломатические контакты (январь–декабрь 1918 г.)* [Belarusian-Ukrainian Diplomatic Contacts (January–December of 1918)], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2006, No. 1.

³⁵ В.В. Фрольцов, *Russia, Ukraine, Belarus in the Program Documents of the Three Governments of Angela Merkel (2005–2017)*, “Journal of the Belarusian State University. International Relations”, 2018, No. 1.

*“Integration of Refugees in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine”³⁶), and the third analyses the emergence of the “oblast” administrative divisions (*Creation of the Oblast Administrative System in the Belarusian–Russian–Ukrainian Border Area (1917–1939)*³⁷). In the “international law” category, only 1 article – *Legal Regulation of Integration between Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine (On the Issue of the Relationship between the EurAsEC and the CES)*³⁸ – addresses Ukraine, focusing on the integration frameworks in the post-Soviet space.*

Notably, half of these 16 articles were authored by only three scholars, a factor that may limit thematic diversity. For instance, 4 were written by Vladislav Froltsov (including all 3 on German–Ukrainian relations), 2 by Yuriy Krasnopolsky (covering 2 of the 3 articles on Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic policy), and 2 by Mikhail Starovoitov (both dealing with the Belarusian-Russian-Ukrainian border area). As noted above, none of these journals contains articles covering Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity, Russia’s annexation of Crimea or the war in Donbas.

References Analysis

Across the 16 Ukraine-focused articles published in the three journals, we identified 153 references meeting our research criteria. The origins of 16 references could not be determined; the remaining ones are distributed as follows: Russia (32), Germany (31), Ukraine (29), Belarus (24), and “other” (21). Notably, all 31 German references appear in three articles on German foreign policy and perceptions of Ukraine, authored by Vladislav Froltsov.

As to Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian citations, Russian sources slightly outnumber Ukrainian ones, and both exceed Belarusian references. This pattern suggests that Belarusian scholars most frequently rely

³⁶ Т.М. Selivanova, *Проект “Интеграция беженцев в Беларусь, Молдове и Украине”* [Project “Integration of Refugees in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine”], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2009, No. 3.

³⁷ М.И. Starovoitov, *Создание областной системы управления в белорусско-российско-украинском пограничье (1917–1939 гг.)* [Creation of Oblast Administrative System in the Belarusian–Russian–Ukrainian Border Area (1917–1939)], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2009, No. 1.

³⁸ С.М. Bosovets, *Правовое регулирование интеграции между Беларусью, Казахстаном, Россией и Украиной (к вопросу о соотношении ЕврАзЭС и ЕЭП)* [Legal Regulation of Integration between Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine (On the Issue of the Relationship between the EurAsEC and the CES)], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2009, No. 2.

on Russian sources when researching Ukraine. However, as our discourse analysis indicates, citing Russian works does not necessarily imply that Belarusian IR scholars adopt a Russian point of view.

In terms of institutional affiliations, Belarusian scholars primarily cite authors from the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (9 references) and Belarusian State University (6 references). Among Ukrainian sources, the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine accounts for 12 references, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv for 4, the National University of Kyiv–Mohyla Academy for 3, and Lviv Polytechnic for 2. Russian citations predominantly feature members of the Russian Academy of Sciences (including its Soviet-era predecessor), with 12 references, while Lomonosov Moscow State University and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations each account for 2 references.

Discourse Analysis

The first area of discourse analysis concerns Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. Two articles by Yuriy Krasnopolksky focus on this topic: one addresses Ukraine's integration with NATO, and the other its integration with the EU. Additionally, the article *EU Neighbourhood Policy: Cooperation Instruments for Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus* also touches upon Ukraine's European trajectory, though it primarily examines its cooperation with the EU, rather than full integration.

In *European Vector as a Priority of Ukraine's Integration Strategy*, Krasnopolksky discusses Ukraine's integration process with the EU, adopting a neutral stance – neither openly endorsing nor opposing this policy. However, he views Ukraine's achievements as insufficient and expresses scepticism about its prospects:

“It can hardly be stated that Ukraine has achieved a significant success in the implementation of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU. The current weak European integration positions of Ukraine and its inconsistency with the political and economic criteria for joining the EU are a natural result of inconsistency and delay in the implementation of reforms. European integration strategic plans approved at the highest level are being implemented inefficiently. Years of treading water left Ukraine behind those countries of Central and Eastern Europe that persistently pursued complex market transformations.”³⁹

At the same time, he acknowledges that Ukraine's European integration could be beneficial:

³⁹ Y.K. Krasnopolksky, *Европейський вектор...*, p. 53.

"It would be a mistake to hush up or downplay the complexity of Ukraine's European integration process. It is clear that it will be long and difficult. At the same time, painful consequences for individual sectors, industries and even regions are inevitable. However, the potential benefits of European integration outweigh possible losses and risks [...]. The internationalisation of productive forces, the undoubtedly advantages of cooperation between national economies, the significant potential and unique geopolitical position of Ukraine objectively determine its integration into the pan-European economic structures."⁴⁰

In *Ukraine in the Context of Integration into Euro-Atlantic Security Structures*, Krasnopolksky examines Ukraine's interactions with NATO, mentioning several bilateral treaties, but refraining from overt praise or criticism. However, he questions the likelihood of Ukraine's NATO accession:

"In the Euro-Atlantic integration strategy of Ukraine, one can see both the desire to ensure their security and the intention to influence the processes in the field of European security. However, in politics, both great and small, it is not desires and intentions that are taken into account, but realities such as interests and power. Under the new conditions, the price of the decision of each 'undecided' state, including 'non-bloc' Ukraine, to continue or change its political course, is extremely increasing. The value of this price will be considered and determined not only by the interests of ensuring the security of Ukraine itself but also by the fact that a change in its 'non-bloc' course can disrupt the fragile, only emerging balance of power and thereby affect the state of security in the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe. It seems that both NATO and Russia have an interest in preventing such a balance from being disturbed."⁴¹

Thus, this Belarusian IR scholar treats Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations largely as a matter of fact. He neither condemns nor endorses them outright, yet considers them difficult to realize. Given the small sample size, one cannot generalize about the broader discipline's view of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic ambitions. Nor can one track changes over time, as all three articles on Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic policy were published in 2004 and 2005, with none appearing after 2014.

A similar situation arises concerning the Revolution of Dignity, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the Russian-Ukrainian war. While no articles focus exclusively on these events, they are mentioned in the works addressing other topics. For example, the Revolution of Dignity appears in 11 Belarusian articles. In seven, the authors refer to it as a "political crisis", and in one instance, the author labels it a "coup":

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Idem, Украина в контексте...*, p. 56.

“As the researcher A. Razny notes, ‘since the coup took place in Ukraine, all the actions of Warsaw in the international arena are subordinated to the struggle against Russia. Russophobia and Ukrainianism became signs of Polish patriotism.’ We believe that this thesis will still be in demand in the near future.”⁴²

Leonid Gaidukevich cites Razny’s view here and appears to share it. Other authors refer to the Revolution of Dignity more abstractly as the “situation in Ukraine”, and there is one case in which it is termed “riots” (*массовые беспорядки*).⁴³ Overall, neutral formulations prevail.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea is mentioned in 14 articles. The most frequent terms are “accession” (*присоединение, включение, вхождение*), used in 5 articles. Two articles employ the term “annexation” (*аннексия*), while none describe it as “regaining” (*возращение*). In half of these references, authors resort to neutral or vague expressions such as “the situation in Ukraine” (*ситуация в Украине*) or the “events in Ukraine” (*события в Украине*), with one instance of “Russian interference in Ukrainian affairs”. Thus, although a few scholars explicitly use the term “annexation”, most favour neutral phrasing.

The war in Donbas appears in 37 articles. In 26 articles, it is described as the “Ukrainian crisis” or “conflict in Ukraine” (*украинский кризис / конфликт в Украине*), both neutral expressions. Four authors call it a “Russian-Ukrainian conflict” (*российско-украинский конфликт*), indicating that they view it as an interstate, rather than an intra-state, clash. None refer to it as “Russian aggression” or “invasion” (*российская агрессия / вторжение*). One author calls it an “internal conflict” (*внутренний конфликт*): “The instability of the situation in Ukraine in the context of the crisis of the political system and internal conflict, which had a negative impact on the ability of the PRC to use the geo-economic potential of Ukraine.”⁴⁴ Another refers to it as a “civil war” (*гражданская война*):

⁴² L.M. Gaidukevich, *Геополитическая трансформация стран Центральной и Восточной Европы в конце XX – начале XXI в.: идеи, цели, реальность* [Geopolitical transformation of Central and Eastern European countries at the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century: Ideas, goals, reality], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2021, No. 1, p. 29.

⁴³ A.V. Rusakovich, *Политика Европейского союза в отношении постсоветских государств Восточной Европы в 2004–2014 гг.* [The policy of the European Union towards the post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe in 2004–2014], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2014, No. 4, p. 13.

⁴⁴ M. Danilovich, *Экономический пояс Шелкового пути: особенности реализации проекта на пространстве ЕАЭС* [The Economic Belt of the Silk Road: Features of the Project Implementation in the EAEU Space], “Актуальные проблемы

“At the same time, current changes in the military-political situation in Europe, which primarily include the build-up of NATO’s military potential in the Baltic countries and the civil war in Ukraine, require the Union State to constantly improve all areas of bilateral cooperation.”⁴⁵

As in the previous cases, neutral formulations such as the “situation” (*ситуация*) or “events in Ukraine” (события в Украине) also recur. Overall, the terms “Ukrainian crisis” and “conflict in Ukraine” are the most common descriptors, suggesting a general tendency towards neutral language when addressing these events.

Discussion

The findings from our analysis illustrate a paradoxical stance towards Ukraine within Belarusian IR scholarship. On the one hand, Ukraine consistently appears second only to Russia in the overall number of references – a high level of prominence that might imply significant attention to Ukraine within Belarus’s academic discourse. On the other hand, the number of the articles dedicated solely to Ukraine is small, placing it third after Poland, and most of these Ukraine-focused publications predate 2014. Such a discrepancy indicates that while Ukraine meets one condition for “sufficient representation” (high frequency of mentions), it does not meet the other (substantial dedicated coverage). In essence, Ukraine is widely recognized as relevant but remains under-represented in terms of in-depth scholarly focus.

This pattern is particularly striking given the landmark events in Ukraine’s recent history – the Revolution of Dignity, the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing conflict in Donbas – none of which prompted an apparent increase in the specialized research within Belarusian IR journals. Although Ukraine underwent transformative political and territorial changes, Belarusian scholars refrained from producing articles that directly addressed these developments, particularly after 2014. Meanwhile, the coverage of other emerging issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, appeared relatively quickly, hinting at an unspoken rule or implicit pressure not to engage in potentially sensitive analysis related to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Such reticence suggests that political or

международных отношений и глобального развития” [“Current Problems of International Relations and Global Development”], 2016, No. 4, p. 236.

⁴⁵ N. Dunets, *Развитие сотрудничества Беларуси и России в сфере обороны* [Development of the military defense cooperation between Belarus and Russia], “Journal of International Law and International Relations”, 2015, No. 3, p. 31.

ideological constraints may influence publishing decisions, discouraging overt critiques of Moscow or discussions of contentious security matters.

The discourse analysis sheds additional light on how Belarusian IR scholars approach Ukraine's most volatile issues. The Revolution of Dignity is primarily described in neutral terms such as "political crisis", with a small minority labelling it a "coup", echoing Russian-leaning interpretations. In their discussions of Crimea, authors more commonly use "accession" than "annexation" and rarely employ explicit terms such as "Russian aggression" or "invasion". Similarly, the war in Donbas is often framed as the "Ukrainian crisis" or "conflict in Ukraine", and only a few authors define it as a "Russian-Ukrainian conflict". These neutral formulations suggest that while Belarusian scholarship does not uniformly embrace Russian narratives, it also avoids overtly condemning or criticizing Russia's role.

This cautious approach correlates with the reference analysis, which indicates that Belarusian authors most frequently rely on Russian sources, followed by Ukrainian ones, and only then on Belarusian materials. Although citing Russian work does not necessarily align Belarusian scholars with Russian positions, reliance on Russian literature and terminology likely narrows the analytical scope. At the same time, the minimal direct engagement with Ukraine's major conflicts undermines the assumption that Belarusian IR would highlight security or economic issues. Indeed, the few articles about Ukraine do not focus on these recent high-profile crises. Consequently, our initial hypothesis that Ukraine's image would revolve around security or trade concerns is not corroborated.

These findings illustrate that Belarusian IR scholarship acknowledges Ukraine's significance yet addresses it with restraint. While Ukraine's proximity and turbulent political context could, in theory, lead to abundant and timely research, Belarusian scholars appear deterred from publishing in-depth or critical analyses of events that might challenge their country's foreign policy or Moscow's regional influence. Thus, Belarusian IR discourse on Ukraine reflects a tension between recognizing Ukraine's centrality and navigating the political and ideological boundaries that shape local scholarly output.

Conclusions

This study sheds preliminary light on the complex role that Belarusian IR scholarship plays in reflecting and shaping domestic perceptions of Ukraine. Although quantitative findings confirm Ukraine's substantial presence in Belarusian journals, the qualitative nuances reveal a marked-

ly restrained engagement with its most contentious events. Rather than simply echoing Russian narratives, Belarusian scholars tend to adopt neutral or cautious terminology. This attitude indicates a balancing act: the authors acknowledge Ukraine's significance yet sidestep overt critiques that might place them at odds with state-sanctioned perspectives or broader geopolitical alignments.

Looking ahead, several avenues warrant closer attention. Future research could examine other channels of expert output – policy briefs, conference proceedings, or university teaching materials – to determine whether similarly cautious discourse prevails therein. Comparative analyses across authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts might clarify whether these Belarusian patterns are unique or emblematic of a wider post-Soviet trend. Additionally, interviews with local IR scholars could deepen our understanding of self-censorship and tacit pressures. Such endeavours would enrich broader debates on how domestic political structures, epistemic communities, and regional alliances intertwine to shape scholarly engagement with international affairs.

To conclude, Belarusian IR discourse on Ukraine exemplifies how an ostensibly academic sphere can become a site where foreign policy, ideology and scholarly praxis converge. Recognizing these intersections underscores the importance of studying academic literature when seeking to interpret or predict a country's foreign-policy behaviour – especially in the contexts where alternative forms of open debate may be severely curtailed.

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Konstruowanie sąsiada: miejsce Ukrainy w dyscyplinie stosunków międzynarodowych na Białorusi

Streszczenie

W artykule przeanalizowano, w jaki sposób białoruska nauka o stosunkach międzynarodowych przedstawia Ukrainę. Opierając się na podejściu konstruktywistycznym i socjologicznym, argumentujemy, że lokalny dyskurs naukowy może naświetlić wzajemne oddziaływanie między krajowymi ograniczeniami politycznymi, regionalnymi lojalnościami i tworzeniem wiedzy. Przeanalizowaliśmy trzy recenzowane czasopisma IR uznane przez Wyższą Komisję Atestacyjną Białorusi, koncentrując się na artykułach, które wyraźnie odnoszą się do Ukrainy lub koncentrują się na niej. Chociaż Ukraina zajmuje drugie miejsce po Rosji w ogólnych wzmiankach, głębokość dedykowanego zasięgu pozostaje ograniczona. Białoruscy naukowcy są ostrożni w poruszaniu drażliwych kwestii, takich jak aneksja Krymu czy rosyjsko-ukraiński konflikt zbrojny w Donbasie. Analiza dyskursu pokazuje, że białoruscy naukowcy często przyjmują neutralną terminologię, unikając wyraźnej krytyki Rosji, a jednocześnie rzadko popierając jej perspektywę. Analiza źródeł wskazuje na poleganie na źródłach rosyjskich, choć niekiedy przekłada się to na narracje prorosyjskie. Śledząc te wzorce, artykuł pokazuje, w jaki sposób środowisko polityczne państwa kształtuje zaangażowanie naukowców w główne wydarzenia regionalne.

Slowa kluczowe: Białoruś, Ukraina, socjologia SM, dyskurs akademicki, wizerunek państwa