

## TO THE BELARUSIAN – UKRAINIAN ACQUAINTANCE: DO NOT ASSUME WE KNOW EACH OTHER WELL

**Andrei Vazyanau**

Lecturer at the Department of Social Sciences,  
European Humanities University  
Savičiaus g. 17, 01126 Vilnius, Lithuania  
Email: andrei.vozianov@ehu.lt

ORCID: 0000-0002-5103-7298

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.24412/1815-0047-2022-2-37-41>

*Abstract.* The mini-essay suggests that the future of relations between Belarusian and Ukrainian academic communities, as well as public intellectuals, might depend a lot on their success in decolonial practice. The assumption of knowing each other is a colonial leftover of the time when Moscow served as the centre of scientific knowledge production in the region. It is important to reciprocally accept the difference between Belarusian and Ukrainian cases without locating them on an imaginary line closer to or further from Russia. Presenting own cases by Belarusians and Ukrainians has to be prioritized over comparisons or mutual commenting between the two sides. Furthermore, it is an important condition of decolonization that all three countries – without any pairing – have the opportunity not only to maintain their own space for discussion but also to collaborate with fourth countries independently from each other. From the decolonial perspective, there are reasons to believe that Belarusian-Ukrainian reconciliation will not be a part of Russian-Ukrainian reconciliation, but an independent process with its dynamics.

*Keywords:* Ukraine, Belarus, decolonization, Belarusian-Ukrainian relations, reconciliation.



The issue of the journal features a selection of texts dedicated to Ukraine in the context of the Russian military invasion in 2022. Interest in this topic needs no explanation, but *Topos* is in a somewhat special position to publish about Ukraine. Since the journal has a long history of being a space for Belarus-related discussions, the Ukrainian agenda has never been completely foreign here; several times it has been central to *Topos* issues. Today, *Topos* might be an appropriate venue to communicate a simple idea: the very least we can do together as intellectuals from Belarus and Ukraine is to stop assuming that we know each other well and to acknowledge that we have never known.

It is not to say that there has never been a study about Belarus done by a Ukrainian scholar or vice versa about Ukraine by a Belarusian; this is objectively not true. However, the quality of knowledge about each other between intellectuals, scholars, and civil society representatives of the two countries is crucially overestimated, which already has had its consequences in many spheres of public and political life.

There are many reasons why speaking about this topic is difficult. The main one, as of November 2022, is that Belarus as a state is involved in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which continues to lead to the humanitarian disaster in Ukrainian cities. In this situation, the more valuable are texts by Ukrainian authors calling for a more intensive cooperation between researchers from the two countries (Magda 2022).

Also, possibilities to obtain information about each other are severely limited: entering the territory of Belarus can hardly be perceived as safe by Ukrainian citizens; the Ukrainian state restricts entry of Belarusian citizens to Ukraine. Institutionally, politically, and legally the two countries are divided by multiple barriers with a few contact zones remaining predominantly in third countries.

It is also difficult to imagine a standpoint from which one can take the liberty to talk about the Belarusian – Ukrainian intellectual acquaintance. Talking about these two countries has long been a privilege of either Russian or Western observers and has almost inevitably been framed as a comparison. At the same time, a “native” observer would usually reduce their interest to their own country, Belarus or Ukraine, and, often, to its relations with Russia. In today’s circumstances, these standpoints fall short to provide insights that could be helpful to Belarusian-Ukrainian communication.

Below there are a few points that explicate the idea formulated in the title of this essay. Let me specify that here I am not basing my argumentation on popular sentiments circulating on the Web (which requires profound research). Instead, I distil it from my notes made as I collaborated with grassroots activists in Donetsk region, Ukraine (where I also spent my childhood), in the years 2011–2018; my background as a PhD student in Germany (2014–2018), a researcher at a Belarusian NGO (since 2017), a lecturer at European Humanities

University (since 2018), and, since March 2022, a participant and moderator of several roundtables about Belarus and Ukraine, as well as a Belarusian (by my only passport) volunteer in Ukraine (where I hold a permanent residence permit). All this makes my perspective very limited and subjective but also boundary and focused specifically on the social field where critical reflection is expected (and particularly vital).

1) Assuming that we know each other in post-Soviet space is a colonial leftover.

In the USSR, the centre of knowledge production was situated in Moscow, so that the peripheries would mostly have access to images of each other produced in Russia. Sergey Abashin wrote about this problem concerning the Central Asian region (Abashin & Jenks 2015), but it is clear today that it is relevant for European non-Russian territories of the former “socialist bloc” as well. As I wrote about Romania in Ukrainian, Ukraine in Belarusian, and Belarus in Lithuanian, my interaction with colleagues, otherwise smooth, revealed that the very basic knowledge about neighbouring countries was often missing, and that lack of knowledge was mutual. Now, as the discussion has started about the reasons for such a lack, we should explore new connections circumventing the centre that we aspire to see as a former one.

2) It is important to accept the uniqueness of both Belarusian and Ukrainian cases and to accept the difference between the neighbors without locating them on an imaginary line closer to or further from Russia.

Among Belarusians and Ukrainians today, examples of mutual stereotypes are numerous and cause strong negative emotions. Although some of these stereotypes are fundamentally different, others are partly mirroring each other. In particular, mutual assumptions of similarity with Russians (or absence of substantial differences from them) can be and are perceived as disrespectful, if not insulting, and they are used extensively to insult, or, not infrequently, to sincerely express an opinion.

The idea of similarity between Russians and Belarusians, or between Russians and Ukrainians, even beyond a family metaphor of “brotherly nations”, is neither Ukrainian nor Belarusian intellectual treasure (it is a question which remains beyond this text, what this idea does to Russian intellectual thought).

Comparison between Belarus and Ukraine will be often – and understandably – perceived as inappropriate logical operation in mutual efforts to understand each other. Instead of comparisons, we should shift towards the analysis of multiple forms of imperial oppression that both countries and societies go through.

3) In Belarus and Ukraine, different opinions and emotions about each other co-exist at the same time, in controversial assemblages. In other words, any given opinion should not mislead us to the point of generalization.

There is no difficulty in finding examples to describe the atmosphere of Belarusian-Ukrainian conversations on social media with the adjective “toxic”.

However, my own (as I admitted above, boundary) experience of the last months allowed me to regularly observe mutual support and cooperation between Belarusians and Ukrainians. These included some interactions that I have been part of (volunteering in a team of interpreters; moderating roundtables with participants from two countries; volunteering in Irpin, Kyiv, and Lviv, in July and September 2022, etc). And much more numerous are the examples that I have just observed – joint efforts by Belarusian and Ukrainian volunteers and non-governmental initiatives, especially those focused on LGBT refugees, victims of wartime violence, and integration in the host societies; but also projects in the sphere of literature, media, and arts from two countries (one example is a documentary movie festival – “1084. At the border” (Festival’ dokumental’nogo kino 2022)). Such initiatives today require a lot of effort – but they also have the potential of becoming a model for the future closer acquaintance of the two cultures.

For scholars, it remains to be studied how and why particular attitudes towards the neighbour gained more media visibility than others – and with dynamics different from the course of events proper.

4) Temporary withdrawal and abstaining from comments about each other could also be important for the future of relations between Belarusian and Ukrainian intellectuals.

Today, Western institutions still propose and even impose a trilateral format of cooperation between Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian activists and researchers, which results in boycotts, conflicts, and disruptions. The desire of both Belarusian and Ukrainian colleagues to withdraw from such projects, symbolically and organizationally uniting them with what they try to dissociate from, is understandable and should be respected. It is an important condition of decolonization that all three countries – without being united into pairs – have the opportunity not only to maintain their own space for discussion but also to collaborate with fourth countries independently from each other.

There are reasons to believe that Belarusian-Ukrainian reconciliation will not be a part of Russian-Ukrainian reconciliation but an independent process with its dynamics. Given the problem of not knowing each other well, this process will require not just speaking but also listening to a lot. It is high time to finally let Ukrainians tell about Ukraine, and Belarusians tell about Belarus – a basic opportunity that had been an unavailable privilege for both nations throughout a long historical period. Providing a space to speak for our neighbours now increases the chance of being listened to after the defeat of the Russian army.

## References:

- Abashin, Sergey & Jenks, Andrew (2015). Soviet Central Asia on the periphery. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16(2): 359–374.
- Festival' dokumental'nogo kino "1084. Na meži" (2022). [from Ukr.: Documentary Film Festival "1084. At the border"]. Vgorode, October, <https://lviv.vgorode.ua/event/festyvaly/a1223768-festival-dokumentalnoho-kino-1084-na-mezhi> (accessed 11 November 2022).
- Magda, Evgen (2022). Ukraïna ta Bilorus. Doroga u tisâču krokiv [from Ukr.: Ukraine and Belarus: The way of thousand steps]. *Zahidnyi front*, 6 September, <https://zahidfront.com.ua/news/Ukrayina-ta-Bilorus-Doroga-u-tisyachu-krokiv.html> (accessed 11 November 2022).