

BELARUS: EURASIAN PATH AND EUROPEAN PROSPECTS

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Abstract: The lack of integration between the EU and Russia as well as misunderstanding between them on how the states of the post-Soviet space need to build their future, transforms this ‘in between’ status into the challenge for political elites and businesses of the post-Soviet countries. This paper is focused on factors that brought about Belarus’ choice in favour of Eurasian integration as well as on the further prospects of its participation in the Eurasian Economic Union and cooperation with the European Union.

Keywords: Belarus, Russia, European Union, Eurasian Integration, Path-Dependence.

БЕЛАРУСЬ: ЕЎРАЗІЙСКІ ШЛЯХ І ЕЎРАПЕЙСКІЯ ПЕРСПЕКТЫВЫ

Анотацыя: Брак інтэграцыі паміж Расіяй і Еўрапейскім Звязам, а таксама непаразуменне паміж імі наконт таго, якім чынам постсавецкія дзяржавы маюць уладкаваць сваю будучыню, трансфармуюць іх статус “паміж” у праблему для палітычных элітаў і бізнэсу ў постсавецкім рэгіёне. Гэты артыкул абмяркоўвае фактары, якія вызначылі выбар Беларусі на карысць еўразійскай інтэграцыі, а таксама перспектывы ўдзелу Беларусі ў Еўразійскім эканамічным звязе і супрацоўніцтва з Еўрапейскім Звязам.

Ключавыя словы: Беларусь, еўразійская інтэграцыя, Еўрапейскі Звяз, залежнасць ад каляіны, Расія.

Unlike Ukraine, Belarus back in the 1990s opted for a profound economic, trade, and political cooperation with Russia. This includes both the Union State of Russia and Belarus, the Organization of the Collective Security Treaty, and other integration projects. After Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia formed the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space based on the EurAsEC, this choice, it would seem, was declared with an even greater clarity.

To a large extent, current participation of the Republic of Belarus in the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union was predetermined by a set of events and steps taken in the early 1990s. In effect, this situation can be described with a term 'path-dependence' (Haal & Taylor, 1996: 941). It explains why A. Lukashenka has no other options than to preserve his political regime in a fixed form; why Belarus has chosen Customs Union and why European project for Belarus is not closed but impossible in the nearest future.

The following circumstances appear fundamental in the formation of the stable Belarusian 'path-dependence'.

First of all, we must consider the specific role to play by the Belarusian economy in the Soviet economic system. Being an 'assembly shop' of the Soviet Union, after the collapse of the USSR Belarus found itself in a rather difficult situation. Disruption of economic ties with the former Soviet republics (especially with Russia) and deep reforms were fraught with serious social and economic consequences. At the same time, the economic security of the Republic of Belarus was being effectively ignored by those other actors who could provide the country with the necessary economic and technological assistance. It was, above all, the European Union and its member-states (Кацы, 1998: 17).

In this situation, the new Belarusian authorities in the face of A. Lukashenka chose the simplest solution: not to carry out any deep structural reforms and to retain trade and economic ties with Russia. Naturally enough, this decision found support in the paternalistic moods of the national electorate. Moreover, the preservation of what inherently was the Soviet-style economy, with its huge state sector, five-year plans, and high social expenditures, was in line with the objectives concentrating all of the country's economic and political resources in the same hands.

Secondly, the isolation policy pursued by the Western countries against the Republic of Belarus only strengthened the Belarusian political regime. For a long time, for the European Union Belarus was an example of the Union's serious attitude to democracy and human rights, and an instrument for strengthening the EU's identity as a 'community of values'.

European Union grasped a monopoly in speaking on behalf of the whole Europe and in delivering a verdict of what is European and what is not. But by launching policy of isolation in relations with Belarus the EU entrapped

itself in 'value pitfall'. Once having declared the seriousness of its approach to democracy and human rights in neighbouring countries, the European Union could not give way to the Belarusian regime without losing its face. For a long time such a situation suited many in Europe. Moreover, EU always opposed the US attempts to impose sanctions on Belarusian state-owned companies exporting oil products. Thus, the EU contributed to the stability of political regime it used to criticize (Трещенков, 2013: 337).

The Eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004-2007, as well as Russia's stepping up in the post-Soviet space gradually led EU to suspend its policy of isolation and include this country in the Eastern Partnership. Yet the precious moment was already lost. A. Lukashenka demonstrated his strong reluctance to accept the EU's demands on democracy and human rights. European Union has nothing to offer to Belarusian authorities in their efforts to preserve 'Belarusian socialism'. This socio-economic model is largely dependent on preferential access to Russian energy supplies, market and credit.

Later, the world financial and economic crisis coupled with the uncomfortable change in Russia's policy to Belarus showed all the vulnerability of Belarusian economy to the external factors. Belarus experienced serious difficulties provoked by Russia in the form of energy and trade pressure. That all forced A. Lukashenka after all his traditional wavering to give a green light to the country's participation in the Customs Union with Russia and Kazakhstan in 2010. Taking part in Eurasian integration, Belarusian leadership preserves the current political regime.

At the same time, such circumstances of Belarus accession to the Customs Union did not contribute to the stability of the whole Eurasian integration model. In situation when Russia's political and economic initiatives within the Customs Union pose a threat to Belarus leader's monopoly, A. Lukashenka is ready to escalate Russia-Belarus relations and to destabilize Eurasian project. First note of warning was sent to Kremlin in the case of Uralkaliy company.

European integration, as a process of political and economic transformation in accordance with the European practices, came to be incompatible with the interests of Belarusian leadership. In addition, despite the population's growing interest in the European model, the EU is hardly ready to offer Belarus any support that would be sufficient for rapid and successful economic transformation of the country.

Today Belarus seems to be deeply involved in the Eurasian integration project. Aliaksandr Lukashenka expresses confidence as to creation of the Eurasian Economic Union by the year 2015 (Лукашенко, 2012). In the next decades (and even after president Lukashenka) Belarus due to objective factors will remain strongly oriented to Russia. Among such factors is not only the level of normative and institutional involvement into the Eurasian

integration, but social and economic model that was conserved in Belarus in the 1990s. The realization of European project in Belarus will require costly (both in social and financial sense) reforms. Such reforms need a broad public support, consensus among elites and huge support from the European Union. The feasibility of all these conditions raises doubts. But regime change will provoke real discussions on the necessity to go closer to the European Union.

In this situation search for understanding and advanced cooperation between the EU and Russia is of principal importance for the future of Belarus. Could they form an integration space from Vladivostok to Lisbon, the 'in between' status of Belarus and other states of the region would disappear. At the same time, current trends in the EU-Russia relations and their policies on the post-Soviet space show that the prospects for understanding and rapprochement are minimal.

This paper presents some results of the study conducted with the support of the grant of the President of Russia.

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