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Russian-Belarus relations: further deep integration?

1. Russia and Belarus: traditionally strong relations

Russia and Belarus are two states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These two states, as well as Ukraine and the Transcaucasian Federation, announced the creation of the USSR in 1922. Then, together with Ukraine, in December 1991 announced the termination of its existence.

The peoples of these two states are ethnically related, and the Russian and Belarusian languages are very close. About 700 thousand Russians live in Belarus, which is about 7.5% of the total population. In turn, more than 600 thousand Belarusians live in Russia.

After gaining independence the process of rapprochement began, which gradually to acquire a legal form. The first agreement “Treaty on the creation of the community between Belarus and Russia” signed on April 2, 1996. However, the document was more of an interstate than an integration one. On the same day, next year, the “Treaty on the Union of Belarus and Russia” was signed. From that day on, a common holiday began to be celebrated - the Day of the Unity of the Peoples of Belarus and Russia. In 1998, the Treaty on the Creation of the Union State was signed, which entered into force on January 26, 2000.

There are various kinds of interstate and integration projects in the geography of the former Soviet Union proposed mainly by Russia. The broadest platform is the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) - designed to regulate cooperation relations between states that were previously part of the Soviet Union. The CIS is not a supranational entity and is very fragile in content. This prompted Russia to form other formats, including:

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-Organization of the Collective Security Treaty (CSTO), created in 1992, a military pact with the aim of ensuring the regional security of its members.

-Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 2001, the main tasks of which are various aspects of security problems.

-Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), created in 2015, providing for deeper economic integration between its members.

Belarus is a member of all these organizations, which is logical in principle since this country is in the process of forming a Union State with Russia. The Union itself is the pinnacle of these models of cooperation. Indeed, in its goal- a federal state with a common president, parliament, currency, and other sovereign attributes of any country.

2. Even more integration: What were the reasons and was it successful?

The idea of a Union State belongs to the President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenka, who first put forward it back in 1994. In the same year, he was first time elected as president. Since then, he has ruled Belarus without fail. In 1995, a referendum was held in Belarus at which among the questions presented were: giving the Russian language a state status and economic integration with Russia. As a result of the referendum, the Russian language becomes the official language on a par with the Belarusian language, and close economic integration with Russia begins.

At an early stage, Lukashenka was motivated by several factors to get closer to Russia:

First, during the period of the Soviet Union, the economies of both republics, like all the others, were closely integrated. In fact, in the field of production, they complemented each other. Not a single republic of the former Soviet Union had a bottom-up production cycle for any final product. A specialization was formed, distributed in different places. Without the participation of all the links in the chain, it was not possible to produce the final product. As a result, Lukashenka tried to preserve the production capacity of Belarus, and it would have been impossible to do this without Russia's help.

Second, Belarus does not have any significant own reserves of oil and natural gas and mainly imports them from Russia. Belarus has a big petrochemical industry and can earn from the export of their products. In 2019 Belarus exported 10.52 million tons of oil products. Therefore, the

country needs to purchase oil and gas at discounted prices from Russia to maintain its own production in industry and agriculture, as well as the production of petroleum products for its own use and their export. Belarus also exports oil products to the Russian market.

Third, Alexander Lukashenka also had a political motivation. After the final formation of the Union State, Lukashenka hoped to take the post of its president. The president of Russia Boris Yeltsin was seriously ill and it was clear that he would not apply for a new position. However, the situation changed after Yeltsin resigned on December 31, 1999, announcing in advance his successor Vladimir Putin, who became the second president of Russia in 2000. After that, it became clear that Lukashenka's plans would not be so easy to come true.

So, Lukashenka has ceased to act desperately on the final implementation of the formation of a Union State. After Russia increased prices for natural gas, in January 2007 Lukashenko openly declared that: “Belarus is required to join Russia... I don’t want to bury the sovereignty and independence of my Belarus...”. This statement is very significant, as it indicates how much the views of the President of Belarus have changed.

Considering the change in views and the unwillingness of the President of Belarus to further integration, the process of forming the Union State took on a very inert character and advanced only at those moments when Belarus needed new political and economic dividends from Russia. Moreover, in 2010 this relationship between Russia and Belarus became more complicated and the integration process was suspended.

Still, Russia continued to provide economic preferences to Belarus in exchange for its military-political loyalty to Moscow. In the best times, such assistance provided about 5-6% of Belarusian GDP, about two to three billion dollars a year. Over time, loyalty was not enough, and Russia began to reduce aid to Belarus.

Therefore, in 2019, Belarus returned to the topic of the Union State and considered the action program from this perspective. However, the main impetus for the actualization of this topic was the presidential elections in Belarus, which took place on August 9, 2020.

3. Current situation: What is motivation of Belarus?

In these elections, Lukashenka put forward his candidacy for the presidency for the sixth time. According to the Constitution of the country, same person can be elected an unlimited number of

times. It is believed that the only democratic elections were those that took place in 1994, at which Lukashenko was first elected. The rest of the elections, according to the OSCE, to put it mildly "did not meet the standards."

The opposition candidates, which is quite unusual for Belarus, blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky, businessman Vladimir Tsepka and banker Viktor Babariko also put forward their candidacy. However, the Central Election Committee (CEC) did not register Tsepka and Babariko, and Tikhanovsky was detained. As a result, Tikhanovsky's wife, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, nominated her candidacy from the opposition. Babariko and Tsepka supported her.

On August 9, 2020, according to the results of the CEC, Lukashenko received 80.10% of the votes cast, while Tikhanovskaya -10.12%. According to the OSCE report, countless violations and electoral fraud were committed by independent observers during the elections. Massive protest actions unprecedented for this country began. The protesters demanded a recount.

Despite protests, Lukashenko was inaugurated as president on September 23, 2020. The day of the inauguration was not announced in advance and was held in secrecy. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya was forced to leave the country and settled in Lithuania, where she was recognized as the legitimate president of Belarus. During her visits to Poland and Germany, Tikhanovskaya was received under the state protocol.

After Lukashenko assumed the presidency, the EU and other Western countries, imposed sanctions against him, his entourage and 15 large enterprises such as MAZ, BELAZ and the oil trader New Oil Company. The USA imposed sanctions on the world's largest producer of potash fertilizers "Belaruskali", which is the main income source for Belarus and the UK limited the purchase of oil products. The significance of these sanctions only for the machine-building sector can be determined in terms of Belarus' exports to the EU. So, in the first four months of 2021, the EU countries accounted for more than 22% of exports of internal combustion engines, over 75% of exports of chassis and 36% of gearboxes.

The fifth package of EU sanctions is on the way after the incident on May 23, 2021, when the Ryanair aircraft forced landing in Minsk on board of which was the Belarusian opposition leader Roman Protasevich, editor-in-chief of the popular telegram channel "NEXTA".

On October 7, 2021, the European Parliament adopted a decision, according to which it calls on the European Council to agree "a comprehensive and strategic approach to sanctions against the Belarusian regime".

The sanctions are expected to negatively affect the Belarusian economy. World Bank experts predicts the growth of Belarusian GDP this year by only 1.2%. Already in 2022, GDP will fall by 2.8%, and in 2023 -by 2.3%.

So, Belarus is looking for alternative markets to sell its products. In a word, potash fertilizers have entered the Chinese market, and the Russian market is being developed more intensively. In a word, more than 50% of Belarus' exports go to Russia. After these sanctions and mass protests in Belarus, Lukashenko's position significantly weakened, and he again began to look for ways of rapprochement with Russia. On September 10, 2021, the presidents of Russia and Belarus met in Crimea. During the meeting, 28 "road maps" for further integration were agreed. A transition was announced to a unified macroeconomic policy, to a unified industrial policy, common access to public procurement and government orders, integration of payment systems, deepening cooperation in information security, customs, tax, energy, and other areas. By December 1, 2023, the two countries are going to sign a document on the creation of a unified gas market within the Union State. Curiously, Lukashenka also spoke about a proposal to create a single currency between the two states. However, the heads of state agreed to discuss this topic later.

In exchange for loyalty, gas prices for Belarus will be \$ 128.5 per thousand cubic meters, while Russian gas is sold to European countries at \$ 1,500 per thousand cubic meters. The total volume of loans by the end of 2022 will be about \$ 630-640 million.

So, new developments forced Lukashenko to seek support from Russia, and a process of closer integration between the two countries began. But this does not mean that a federal state Russia-Belarus will appear soon. This process allows Russia to test in practice the developed integration mechanisms that can be used in relation to other countries. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, as well as partially recognized and supported by Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be next.

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