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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EURASIAN AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATIONS IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS (1991–2017)

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The article analyzes the position of the Republic of Belarus on the issue of participation in the processes of Eurasian and European integrations in 1991–2017. It is noted that the integration policy of Belarus was built on the basis of preserving the sovereignty of the Belarusian state, equality of the participants of the integration projects and real benefits for the Belarusian state and the Belarusian people. To a greater extent, the Eurasian integration projects met these requirements (Belarusian-Russian enterprises, EurAsEC, EAEU), which predetermined the active participation of Belarus in Eurasian integration. The European integration project did not meet the expectations of the Belarusian authorities and did not receive massive support from the Belarusian society. As a consequence, the cooperation with the EU became a subsidiary direction of the Belarusian foreign policy and integration activity.

Key words: Republic of Belarus; integration; the Union State of Belarus and Russia; the Eurasian Economic Union; the European Union; Eastern Partnership.

ЗНАЧЕНИЕ ЕВРАЗИЙСКОЙ И ЕВРОПЕЙСКОЙ ИНТЕГРАЦИЙ ВО ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ РЕСПУБЛИКИ БЕЛАРУСЬ (1991–2017)

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Анализируется позиция Республики Беларусь по вопросам участия в процессах евразийской и европейской интеграций в 1991–2017 гг. Отмечено, что интеграционная политика Беларуси выстраивалась на основе сохранения суверенитета белорусского государства, равноправия участников интеграционных проектов и реальной пользы для белорусского государства и белорусского народа. В большей мере этим требованиям соответствовали евразийские интеграционные проекты (белорусско-российские объединения, ЕвразЭС, ЕАЭС), что предопределило активное участие Республики Беларусь в евразийской интеграции. Европейский интеграционный проект не в полной мере соответствовал пожеланиям белорусских властей и не получил массовой поддержки белорусского общества. Вследствие этого сотрудничество с ЕС стало вспомогательным направлением белорусской внешнеполитической и интеграционной активности.

Ключевые слова: Республика Беларусь; интеграция; Союзное государство Беларуси и России; Евразийский экономический союз; Европейский союз; Восточное партнерство.

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Introduction

Integration is broadly defined as the combination of parts into a unitary whole. Usually, the process of integration covers the fields of politics and economics. Political integration involves the unification of political forces within the state or inter-state structures for the sake of achieving certain political goals (improving status on the world stage, securing sustainable socio-economic development). Economic integration presupposes the unification of the States on the basis of the formation of deep steady interrelations and the division of labour between the national economies.

Integration processes have become an integral component of international relations in the XX century. A striking example of integration was the appearance of the Soviet Union in 1922 by uniting several formally independent Soviet republics. Political decision on unification led to the emergence of a unified political, economic, cultural and other spaces and acquired a certain ideological slant, which allowed the USSR to survive over 60 years. In the second half of the XX century integration associations appeared in Western Europe (the European Communities), Eastern Europe (the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Latin America (the Andean Community). At the turn of the XX and XI centuries integration has become the dominant trend in international relations.

Global trends could not affect the Republic of Belarus. Active participation in integration processes was one of the basic priorities of its foreign policy since acquiring the status of an independent state in 1991. The purpose of this article is to assess the features and results of the participation of the Belarusian state in the integration processes in Europe and Eurasia in 1991–2017.

The objectives of the article are the following:

- to study the prerequisites for connection of the Republic of Belarus to the various integration projects;
- to determine the key priorities of the participation in the integration processes;
- to highlight the characteristics features of Belarus' connection to the integration projects and the degree of its involvement in these projects;
- to evaluate the significance of Belarus in various integration projects.

The issue of participation of Belarus in integration processes has received the coverage in scientific publications by A. Sharapo, V. Shadursky, V. Snapkovski,

A. Rusakovich, M. Chasnouski, A. Tihhomirov, A. Baychorov, E. Dostanko, V. Ulakhovich, S. Kizima, P. Brigidin, D. Rothman, N. Veremeeva, E. Semak, R. Turarbekova, E. Douhan, Yu. Shevtsov, I. Karbalevich, M. Myasnikovich [1–30]. A number of publications on the involvement of the independent Belarusian state in the European and Eurasian integration projects was prepared by the experts of the Center for strategic and foreign policy studies and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (in Vilnius) [31; 32]. Outside the Republic of Belarus the issues under discussion were covered by researchers from Russia, Poland, and Germany [33–46]. In the USA, some aspects of integration policy of independent Belarus were studied by G. Ioffe [47].

As a rule, the problems of Belarusian participation in integration processes were considered in the context of the implementation of its foreign policy. The researchers drew attention to the desire of Belarus to maneuver between various integration projects, and insufficient degree of involvement in them (that was a usual situation in the description of Belarus' interaction with the European Union, but it has recently become applicable to the Eurasian integration associations, primarily the Eurasian Economic Union).

The scientific novelty of this article lies in conducting a comparative analysis of the participation of the Republic of Belarus in the Eurasian and European integration projects, determining the significance of these projects for the development of the Belarusian state, and assessing their impact on the state-building process in Belarus.

This article is based on the documents from the collections of the foreign policy of Belarus, the materials from the sites of the bodies of state power and administration of the Republic of Belarus, official statistical data, current materials and the media of Belarus.

The general methodology of the conducted research is based on the principles of objectivity, historicism, systematic, value approach and the combination of logical and scientific methods, including induction and deduction, analysis and synthesis, analogy, comparison, identification, generalization, classification and typology.

Also, there were employed specific historical research methods: historical genetic method, historical comparative method, historical and typological method, historical-systemic method and structural-functional method.

Belarus and Eurasian integration

In the early 1990s, the Belarusian party was primarily interested in integration on the post-Soviet (Eurasian) space. The increasing interest in that particular direction was due to the fact that during the existence of the Soviet Union, Belarus played the role of the Soviet "factory". The severance of economic and techno-

logical ties with other republics (especially with Russia) was accompanied by growing political and social instability.

In December 1991, the leaders of the Republic of Belarus took an active part in the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Belarusian

capital became the seat of the permanent Executive and coordinating bodies of the CIS Advisory Committee and the Executive Secretariat. In 1993 Belarus signed the CIS Charter, and in January 1994 ratified it.

However, it soon became clear that the CIS did not preserve common political and economic, and other spaces. After a failed attempt to create the Economic Union within the CIS, the Belarusian leadership focused on strengthening political, military and economic ties with Russia. Explaining the necessity of that step, the Belarusian head of government V. Kebich stated in April 1994: “it is not only related by blood, the age-old unity of the Russian people. We are united economically. Almost all the energy, raw materials, the main components come from Russia, and two-thirds of our production comes back... And the only salvation is in integration” [48].

Having come to power in the summer of 1994, A. Lukashenko retained the idea of strengthening the alliance with Russia as the basis of the foreign policy of the Belarusian state. In March 1995 the President of Belarus stressed that the Belarusian and Russian peoples are fraternal Slavic peoples, and the economic cooperation with Russia is a fundamental factor in overcoming the crisis, and stabilizes many aspects of the inner life of Belarus [49].

In early 1995, Belarus formed a customs union with Russia and Kazakhstan. In the same year the intensified Belarusian-Russian political dialogue resulted in a more active cooperation between the two countries in the sphere of security and defense. In May 1995 the course for accelerating economic integration with Russia was supported by the Belarusian society (the corresponding question was put to a national referendum and received the approval of 82.4 percent of the citizens who took part in the vote) [50].

Between 1996 and 1999 Belarus and Russia established a number of associations facilitating integration (Community, Union, Union State). The result was the creation of a number of Federal structures, joint Ministerial boards, enhancement of coordination of Belarusian and Russian actions in the international arena.

In December 1999, the leaders of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation expressed their intention to create a single interstate education by 2006. However, in practice, these plans have not been materialized. Belarus and Russia have maintained the status of a sovereign and independent states and their own socio-economic and political development models.

The Alliance with Russia brought Belarus a number of dividends. According to the Belarusian political analyst Yu. Shevtsov, the Union would save the Belarusian industrial base, which in turn contributed to strengthening the independence of the Belarusian state [28, p. 215]. The existence of the Union facilitated the movement of citizens of two sovereign States, created favorable conditions for increasing the turnover of goods and services, convergence of social policies of

the two States, allowed Belarus to establish closer ties with Russian regions. Russia accounted for almost half of Belarusian foreign trade of goods. The importance of Russia as an energy partner and financial donor of Belarus was also crucial. In general, the Russian side was satisfied with the political model established in Belarus. Moreover, some Russian politicians considered the Belarusian model of development as a model for Russia.

Highlighting the integration with Russia as the main foreign policy priority, the Belarusian leadership did not support the initiative of the President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev on the Eurasian Union launched in 1994 [51]. The official Minsk also rejected proposals for the establishment of the Baltic-Black Sea Union of Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, which were put forward by the Belarusian opposition. The creation of the association of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (GUAM) in 1997 did not cause a positive reaction in Minsk.

The beginning of the XIX century was marked by changes on the Russian political scene. Vladimir Putin, who superseded Boris Yeltsin as the President of the Russian Federation in 2000, expressed the intention to make the integration processes in the CIS more pragmatic and beneficial for Russia. The Russian integration initiatives were accepted in Minsk without enthusiasm. In 2002, the Belarusian authorities emphasized that the deepening of integration with Russia was only possible provided that the sovereign status of the Belarusian state would be preserved and full equality of Belarus and Russia would be ensured [52]. Also, the official Minsk rejected the Russian proposal on the adoption of the Russian ruble as the currency of the Union State [53, p. 313–315].

Contradictions between the participants of the Belarusian-Russian integration associations, primarily due to their desire to preserve sovereignty, led to increased tensions. Formally, conflict situations arose between business entities regarding the conditions for admission of Belarusian agricultural products to the Russian market, transportation of Russian oil and natural gas on the Belarusian territory, prices of Russian natural gas supplied to Belarus, transfer of assets of Belarusian enterprises to Russian owners, but due to the specifics of the Belarusian and Russian economic systems they grew into interstate conflicts. However, the conflicts did not rise to antagonism in the Belarusian-Russian relations and their settlement was carried out on the basis of compromise.

After 2010 the Belarusian-Russian political dialogue maintained its high degree of activity and was not accompanied by the bursts of “information warfare”, which were characteristic of the first decade of the XXI century. Belarus was strengthening cooperation with Russia’s regions. Attempts were made to engage in dialogue with the representatives of the Belarusian and Russian society (including youth organizations). The

Belarusian-Russian cooperation in the sphere of defense and security remained active. In 2016–2017 Russia accounted for more than half of the foreign trade of the Belarusian goods (although trade between Belarus and Russia maintained a negative balance, and the value of trade declined after 2014). In 2016 the volume of trade turnover between Belarus and Russia amounted to 26.3 billion US dollars, for the first 9 months of 2017 – 23.2 billion US dollars [54, p. 51, 57; 55]. Russia was the main consumer of Belarusian technology-intensive and agricultural products and the only supplier of oil and natural gas to Belarus (attempts to find energy alternatives such as Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Venezuela in the first decade of the XXI century were not successful). Belarus developed its nuclear power industry exclusively with Russia. The relationship between the two countries in the fields of culture and information remained intense. The Union State's bodies continued to operate. The budget of the Union State was enacted annually, which enabled the financing of joint development programs. The Union State had the TV and radio, and print media.

The combination of the factors mentioned above predetermined the preservation of the Belarusian-Russian integration project. However, the problem was that Belarus and Russia remained sovereign states with their own specific and not always similar interests, goals and agendas in the international arena. The Union State lacked a unified economic, social, scientific and technological space, a common border, a common line of conduct in the international arena.

In the 2000s – 2010s in the framework of the CIS multilateral enterprises, focused on economic integration stepped forward. The beginning of this process started with the creation of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) in October 2000 (by 2014 the EurAsEC included Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan). In 2010 the Customs Union of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan was established creating the basis for the formation of the Common Economic Space (CES) in 2012.

In 2012, the preparations for the creation of a new integration association – the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) began. The Belarusian government basically supported the idea of creating a new interstate association, but identified several “red lines”. In autumn 2013, Alexander Lukashenko stressed that the new Union should not include a single currency and a “supranational add-ins” [56]. At the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian economic Council in Moscow on 29 April 2014, the Belarusian leader said that the EAEU should be based on the principle of non-exemptions and restrictions in foreign trade, including the oil trade [57]. In May 2014, the Belarusian government focused on the need to preserve the equality of all the States of the EAEU [58].

On 29 May 2014 A. Lukashenko, along with the leaders of Kazakhstan and Russia, signed the text of the

Treaty establishing the EAEU at the meeting in Astana. On 1 January 2015 a specified Treaty entered into force.

From the point of view of the Belarusian side, the Treaty, which established the EAEU, was a compromise. Minsk criticized the following issues:

a) a large number of exemptions and restrictions on trade in different products;

b) inconsistency of the macroeconomic policy (Minsk critically evaluated Kazakhstan's accession to the WTO and Russia's introduction of restrictions on the admission of European agricultural products);

c) the absence of a proper energy market, and the preservation of energy preferences by the Russian side for the manufacturers of products within the Russian Federation;

d) the imposition of restrictions on access to the Russian market for Belarusian agricultural products from the Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance (Rosselkhoz nadzor);

e) inconsistency of the industrial policy (primarily the Russian Federation);

f) the lack of common transport policy, high tariffs on transportation of Belarusian goods through Russian territory and the restrictions imposed by the Russian side on the admission of Belarusian carriers;

g) the lack of clear procedures of the protection of the markets of the EAEU Member States against products from the countries that are not members of this association;

h) the lack of clear rules of the movement of goods within the Eurasian Economic Union and their certification;

i) the denial of access for Belarusian enterprises to the Russian import substitution program.

The EAEU was established in difficult conditions. Steep depreciation of the Russian ruble and the complication of Russia's relations with the EU, the US and other Western countries adversely affected the Belarusian economy in 2014. In 2015–2016 the trade turnover between Belarus and Russia, Kazakhstan and other member States of the EAEU decreased. Disagreements on several issues of economic policy led to the refusal of the Belarusian authorities to sign the Customs code of the EAEU in December 2016. But in April, 2017 A. Lukashenko approved the package of documents regarding the development of Eurasian integration (including the Customs code), and in October 2017, the agreement on the Customs code of the EAEU was ratified by the Belarusian Parliament.

A number of reasons can explain this position:

1. For a number of reasons (language, mentality, consumer demand, lower requirements to the quality of production) activities in the markets of the CIS countries were more understandable for the Belarusian citizens and product producers.

2. Belarus had the ability to maintain previous development and established relations with the regions and other administrative units of the EAEU Member States.

3. Belarus had the right to vote in the structures of the EAEU (Eurasian economic Commission, etc.) and could influence the decisions of these structures.

4. The official structure of the EAEU was not able to exert enormous political and economic pressure on Belarus (disputes are generally resolved through compromise).

5. The presence of the EAEU allowed to solve the economic problems of Belarus by facilitating the access of the Belarusian goods, services, capital and labor to the markets of other countries of the Union (primarily to Russia and Kazakhstan), the preservation of preferential treatment for Russian energy re-

sources, and the provision of financial assistance from the Eurasian Development Bank and Eurasian Fund for Stabilization.

Thus, the EAEU was not considered by the official Minsk as an enterprise, significantly infringing the sovereign status of Belarus. The EAEU countries (primarily Russia) remained among the prior trade partners of the Belarusian state. In 2017, the volume of Belarusian trade in goods and services with these countries started to rise again. In 2016 the volume of trade turnover of Belarus with the countries of the EAEU amounted to 26.8 billion US dollars, for the first 9 months of 2017 – 23.8 billion US dollars [54, p. 30; 55].

Belarus and European Integration

An alternative to the Eurasian integration project was European integration, launched with the establishment in the 1950s of the three European Communities on the basis of the unification of 6 states in the continental Western Europe (Germany, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy). In 1992, at the meeting of the leaders of 12 member States of the European Community in Maastricht (Netherlands), the Treaty establishing the European Union (EU) was signed. At the turn of the XX and XXI centuries, the European Union was considered to be the most successful integration Union, having gone through 4 expansions. By the mid-2010s 28 European countries were parts of it.

A positive political image and a high level of accumulated economic wealth in the EU made it attractive for the CIS countries. The intention to join the EU was declared by Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which expressed a corresponding desire in their political doctrines. Armenia and Azerbaijan also positively regarded prospects for the development of relations with the EU. Up to 2014 the engagement in a constructive dialogue with the EU was one of the most important priorities of the Russian foreign policy.

The EU's successful development increased its ambitions on the international stage. Among other things, the attention of European politicians was drawn to the Eastern European region. It was assumed that the incorporation of the standards and values of European countries (mainly Western Europe) by the CIS countries will automatically lead to the emergence of a single integrated space "from Lisbon to Vladivostok".

In 2008, the EU, on the initiative of Poland and Sweden developed a program called Eastern partnership, aimed at creating a neighborhood belt on the Eastern borders of the European integration Association. However, instead of creating a zone of stability and prosperity, the initiative of the European Union led to the deepening of crisis phenomena in the post-Soviet space, associated with the creation of the situation of geopolitical choice for the CIS countries. The most serious one was the crisis in Ukraine in 2013–2014,

which formally marked a geopolitical victory for the EU (2014 Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia signed Association agreements with the EU), but led to tensions in relations between the EU and Russia, the inclusion of Crimea in the structure of Russia and the emergence of an armed conflict in the Donbass. However, in 2016, it became clear that the associate membership did not suggest a quick admission of the "post-Soviet Euro-optimists" to the EU.

The position of the Belarusian leadership towards European integration was based on the unwillingness to enter the EU. Accordingly, the official Minsk showed the desire to learn values and to adopt the standards proposed by the EU. From the point of view of the Belarusian authorities, it was more preferable to establish pragmatic cooperation with the EU in the spheres of economy, energy, environment, culture, health, the fight against cross-border crime and illegal migration.

Demonstrative unwillingness to follow the footsteps of the interests of the EU led to the conflict of values in the relations of Belarus with the European Union. In 1997–1998, the EU imposed a number of image and financial sanctions against Belarusian authorities and suspended the process of ratification of the Agreement on partnership and cooperation between Belarus and the EU, signed in March 1995.

The policy of sanctions by the EU against Belarus continued in the next years. Even after the appearance of a joint and a very long border between Belarus and the EU in May 2004, Brussels viewed Belarus as a neighbor of the EU only *de facto*. In 2007 Belarus was excluded from the general system of preferences. Additional problems were created by the tightening of the regime of crossing the state border of the Republic of Belarus with the neighboring countries in terms of accession of these States to the EU and joining the Schengen visa-free space, and the complexity and high cost of the procedures of obtaining entry visas in the EU countries.

In 1997–2006 the European Union and its member States tried to influence the situation in Belarus through cooperation with the representatives of the

Belarusian political opposition and NGOs. However, the attempts to finance the activities of such organizations in Belarus were suppressed by the Belarusian authorities, the opposition, and the arrangement of events (seminars, conferences, exhibitions, festivals, etc.) in the EU did not cause the desired response. The attempt of the EU to create an alternative system of television and radio broadcasting and education for Belarus was a complete failure. The propaganda of the ideas of European integration, which was carried out by the representatives of the opposition parties and movements, was not understood and supported in the Belarusian society.

However, the Belarusian leadership did not seek to completely terminate the dialogue with the EU. In July 2004, the President of the Republic of Belarus named the European Union a “strategic neighbor and strategic partner” of the Belarusian state, noting that the main interests of Belarus as a European country will center around Russia – EU [53, p. 431].

In 2007, the European Union retreated from the policy of rigid rejection of the Belarusian political realities, mandating the launch of the cross-border cooperation program *Lithuania – Latvia – Belarus, Poland – Belarus – Ukraine* and the *Baltic Sea Region* (the main effort within the framework programs was aimed at improving the efficiency of cross-border cooperation, ecology, transport and communications, local government, business, health), and in 2008 began to soften the sanctions policy. In December 2008 the government of Belarus and the European Commission signed the Agreement and the Protocol on the issue of explanation of the concepts, terminology and definitions used in it. These documents created the legal basis for the implementation of the projects in the framework of the European neighborhood policy and partnership.

At the end of 2008 in Brussels it was decided to include Belarus in the Eastern partnership program. In May 2009, on behalf of the Republic of Belarus, the Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Martynov and Deputy Prime Minister V. Semashko took part in the Constituent summit of Eastern partnership in Prague. Commenting on the joining of Belarus to the Eastern partnership, V. Semashko expressed the opinion that this would help to speed up the elimination of restrictions in Belarus’ trade with the EU, create new opportunities for the increase in the Belarusian export to European countries, attracting European investment in the Belarusian economy, and would contribute to a more effective use of the transit potential of Belarus and to the simplification of its visa regime with the EU countries [59].

In 2009–2010 Belarusian diplomats prepared and submitted to the EU institutions a number of specific proposals on the development of cooperation, which were agreed with Lithuania and Ukraine. However, the EU officials believed that the main goal of the “Eastern partnership” should become the transformation of the Belarusian political system. In turn, the President of

the Republic of Belarus said in June 2010: “We do not need Eastern partnership for the politics... We need an economic component” [60, p. 431]. The differences in interpretation determined the low efficiency of cooperation between Belarus and the EU in the framework of the “Eastern partnership”.

At the end of 2010 the tension in the relations of Belarus with the European Union mounted. In early 2011, the EU resumed its policy of sanctions against Belarus. In early 2012 the relations between Belarus and the EU were on the verge of a complete rupture, although the parties did not want to go over the line.

In 2013 the relations between Belarus and the EU became more constructive. On 29 November 2013 the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus V. Makei took part in the summit of Eastern partnership in Vilnius, and expressed readiness to continue the cooperation with the European States on conditions that they would comply with the principles of equality and mutual benefit for all participating countries [61]. The corresponding framework was confirmed at the next summit of Eastern partnership in Riga in May 2015 [62].

In 2014, Minsk and Brussels held two rounds of consultations between Belarus and the EU on the issue of modernization. The EU took the path of alleviating sanctions against Belarus, and in February 2016 lifted the sanction measures passed earlier. In April 2016, the 1st meeting of the Coordinating group of Belarus – European Union was held in Brussels. The parties discussed the possibilities of intensifying existing sectorial dialogues on economy, financial and environmental protection, and the prospects of the launch of new bilateral dialogues on the subject of trade, energy, customs, modernization and technical assistance, human rights issues, etc. The 2nd meeting of the Coordinating group was held in Minsk in November 2016. Earlier, in October 2016 a bilateral dialogue on trade was launched.

In 2007–2013, within the framework of the European instrument of neighborhood and partnership, Belarus received 71.6 million euros on the programs and projects in the field of energy efficiency, ecology, standardization, medicine and regional development. Through the EU programs *Poland – Ukraine – Belarus, Latvia – Lithuania – Belarus* and the *Baltic Sea Region* the projects with a total budget of about 55 million euros were implemented in Belarus [63]. Many projects were carried out at the expense of the EU: the development of the state border of Belarus, modernization of the national border and customs infrastructure, sharing best practices and implementing pilot projects in energy, transport, agro food, environmental, educational, and cultural, etc. Belarus took an active part in thematic EU programs, such as TEMPUS, ERASMUS MUNDUS, TAIEX and others. In 2014, the EU adopted a national Indicative program for Belarus for 2014–2017, which included further funding of the projects and activities in the field of social policy, environment and regional development.

In November 2017, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus V. Makei took part in the next summit of Eastern partnership in Brussels. Before the summit the Foreign Ministry of Belarus published the following statement: “Belarus is interested in continuing participation in the Eastern partnership of the EU, which should be obviously useful for the citizens of Belarus and the EU, easing the business environment, contacts between people, and communication in various fields, increasing the level of objective knowledge about each other. Currently, the Eastern partnership of the EU is more like a form of cooperation, in which partners seek recognition of the European perspective. Belarus did not set itself such a goal, however, it stands for the preservation and development of the Eastern partnership of the EU as a development of non-political cooperation tool, aimed not against anyone, but to address the common challenges and issues facing the peoples and States of our region” [64]. Commenting on the results of his visit to Brussels, V. Makei stressed that cooperation with the EU is necessary to strengthen the Belarusian economy and to attract advanced technologies and investment. The main positive result of the summit, from his point of view, was the signing of the agreement on the extension of TRANS-European transport network between the EU and countries of the Eastern partnership [65].

The European Union was ranked second in the foreign trade of the Republic of Belarus. In 2016–2017 it accounted for about a quarter of Belarus’ trade turnover with foreign counterparties (in 2016 the volume of trade amounted to 11.2 billion US dollars, for the first 9 months of 2017 – 10.3 billion US dollars) [54, p. 30; 66].

However, despite another thaw in relations between Belarus and the EU, problems still existed. In particu-

lar, there was no progress in the issue of simplifying the visa regime and readmission and the negotiations on signing a new agreement on partnership and cooperation had not started. The Belarusian side rejected the proposal by European politicians to abolish the death penalty and did not agree to enter into the agreement about the “small border traffic” with Lithuania and Poland, signed in 2010 (the exception was made only for Latvia, the agreement with which entered into force in March 2012). The problem of the construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant, which converted the level of the Belarusian-Lithuanian relations to the relations of Belarus with the EU, was a stumbling block. The desire of the Belarusian leadership to be involved in military cooperation with Russia was subject to criticism from the member countries of the EU (Lithuania, Latvia, Poland). Belarusian political scientist E. Preygerman explained the presence of problems in relations of Belarus with the EU as the lack of trust and normal communication between the Belarusian leadership and the European politicians and the activities of opponents of rapprochement between Belarus and the EU (both inside Belarus and inside the EU) and the presence of the geopolitical “gap” in the Eastern European region [67].

This view is acceptable, but we should pay attention to the fact that the existence of differences between the parties determined the desire of the Belarusian authorities to maintain the sovereignty of the Belarusian state, while the establishment of the EU in fact contradicted this desire. As a result, Belarus remained outside of the European integration process, and its interaction with the EU was doomed to remain occasional.

Conclusion

1. After the Republic of Belarus had gained independence, orientation towards active participation in integration processes became one of its most important foreign policy priorities. The basic components of the Belarusian integration policy were the desire to preserve the sovereignty of the Belarusian state, to build relationships with integration partners on an equal basis and to obtain specific positive results (especially in economics) from participation in integration projects. Due to the relevant attitudes, participation in integration projects did not lead to a fundamental transformation of the Belarusian political system.

2. The participation in the Eurasian integration processes was more attractive to Belarus. The applicable setting is reinforced by the desire to preserve economic ties, established during the Soviet Union, and to maintain the stability of the Belarusian society. Activities of Belarus in the Eurasian space facilitated cultural and civilizational affinity with the other States of this space.

3. The main partner of Belarus in the Eurasian integration projects was Russia, whose special relations

were supported with an active political dialogue, the significant amount of trade and investment ties, cooperation in security, cultural, linguistic and mental affinity. The peculiarity of the Belarusian-Russian relations determined the structure of the Union state while preserving the sovereignty of the States within the relevant Association. Not fully coinciding aims and objectives in foreign policy, the differences between socio-economic systems of Belarus and Russia engendered conflicts from time to time, but they did not antagonize Belarusian-Russian relations.

4. In the 2010s the Belarusian-Russian integration was extended with the entry of Belarus in the Eurasian integration associations of economic nature (Customs Union, CES, EAEU). Participation in relevant associations created favorable prerequisites for the expansion of economic cooperation of Belarus with such countries as Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, although Russia remained the main partner. As of 2017, the Belarusian authorities were not fully satisfied with the results of the cooperation within the EAEU, but considered the parti-

icipation in this integration project a promising direction towards improvement of the economic situation of the Belarusian state and not infringing its sovereignty.

5. The specifics of the approaches of the Republic of Belarus in the European integration process have determined the unwillingness of the Belarusian authorities and a significant part of Belarusian society to be a part of the European integration project. The interest in European integration was driven by the activity of the EU, granting membership to the countries geographically and historically close to Russia (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia) and the status of associate members to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. As in the case of the Eurasian integration associations, the activity of the Republic of Belarus in relation to the EU was predetermined by the desire to receive economic and tech-

nological support and to maintain the stability of the Belarusian social and political system.

6. The EU's desire to base its policy towards Belarus on values engendered the conflict between the two sides. The conflict was accompanied by the introduction of sanctions against the Belarusian leadership and the Belarusian state by the EU, but did not result in significant changes in the Belarusian domestic and foreign policy. The attempts by the EU to influence Belarusian politics through opposition parties and NGOs, and connecting Belarus to the Eastern partnership in 2009 was not successful. Belarus remained outside of the European integration process and carried out only "point-by-point" interaction with the EU on issues of its interests (economics, environment, energy, border cooperation, education, culture, etc.).

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