



FOREIGN POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS: MILESTONES AND PRIORITIES

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The article dwells on the main stages and evolution of the priorities of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus in 1990/91–2020. The author analyses the milestones of the foreign policy activity of the Belarusian state, reveals the evolution of the priorities (thematic and geographical direction areas) of its foreign policy over the years of independence. The author shows the fundamental changes in the international situation and foreign policy of Belarus that have taken place in recent years.

Keywords: Republic of Belarus; foreign policy; diplomacy; stages of foreign policy activity; priorities of foreign policy.

ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА РЕСПУБЛИКИ БЕЛАРУСЬ: ЭТАПЫ И ПРИОРИТЕТЫ

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Рассматриваются основные этапы и эволюция приоритетов внешней политики Республики Беларусь в 1990/91–2020 гг. Дается характеристика этапов формирования и развития внешнеполитической деятельности белорусского государства, раскрывается эволюция приоритетов (первоочередных тематических и географических направлений) его внешней политики за годы независимости. Показаны фундаментальные изменения в международном положении и внешней политике Беларуси, которые произошли в последние годы.

Ключевые слова: Республика Беларусь; внешняя политика; дипломатия; этапы внешнеполитической деятельности; приоритеты внешней политики.

Introduction

The 30th anniversary of the existence of independent Belarus, which is celebrated in 2021, is a good occasion to sum up the country's development over the past years, to evaluate what its people and leadership have done both in the field of domestic and foreign policy. Throughout numerous research both in domestic and foreign schools a cardinal move was undertaken,

important for familiarising the international expert community with our vision of the achievements and omissions in this area of the new state's policy, committed itself to the transition to independence after the collapse of the USSR. Other Belarusian and foreign experts have similar experience in the summarising the results, and some of them have published in-

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teresting and comprehensive works on the formation and development of Belarusian foreign policy during the years of independence [1–7].

The aim of this article is to present the main stages and priorities of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus in 1990/91–2020. The research objectives were, firstly, to provide both brief and informative description of the stages of the formation and development of the Belarusian state's foreign policy (relatively short time periods), and, secondly, to reveal the evolution of the priorities (thematic and geographical fields) of its foreign policy. Based on his previous publications in this field [8–9], the author would like to show the fundamental changes in the international situation and foreign policy of Belarus that started in recent years.

On the main stages of Belarusian foreign policy

The issues of periodization in historical science and the science of international relations, although the latter has not yet developed in Belarus as an independent branch of scientific knowledge, are of great methodological importance. According to the Belarusian historian G. Saganovich, determination of historical periods is the highest stage of generalization in which “the highest form of a synthetic approach to history, so the most precise division of the historical process has always been an important task of classical historiography” [10, p. 4]. Historical periodisation is a form of quantitative and qualitative designation of historical development. The fundamental basis of any periodization is the criteria, the choice of which is determined both by the scientific qualification, and by the outlook of the researcher. As is well known, the idealization and absolutization of socio-economic criteria is limited and discredited the heuristic possibilities of Marxist formational periodization [11, p. 9–10]. The most common typological form of periodization is linear, which supposes dividing history into stages of equal scale and depth, each of which grows out of the previous one. The hierarchical form is expressed in the subordination of individual phenomena and stages of development, integral to a more general and complex process. Based on the above-mentioned methodological approaches to periodization, the author uses linear and hierarchical typological forms of periodization of this historical process in dividing the 30-year history of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus into shorter time periods.

Overall, the history of Belarus during the period of independence can be divided into two stages, depending on the type of political regime ruling the country. The first stage covers a short time period from 25 August 1991, when the independence of the Republic of Belarus was legally proclaimed, to 20 July 1994, when A. Lukashenko was elected as head of state in the first presidential election. It was the time of the existence

Regarding the research objectives, it should be noted that these changes are reflected in the fact that, first, we consider 2020 to be the beginning of a new phase in the history of Belarus' foreign policy and, secondly, the turbulence in the country and the reaction of the international community, especially the West, caused a reformatting of the foreign policy priorities of official Minsk. This is reflected in the fact that the Western vector, which includes relations with the European Union, the USA, the collective West in general which is heavily dependent on multilateral diplomacy, has been experiencing difficulties. The negative results of the exacerbation of relations with Western states are already visible, and it will take more than one year to “modernise” them. As for the second research task, we will try to outline the new configuration of foreign policy priorities.

of the parliamentary republic, when the country was led by the Supreme Council of the 12th convocation, convened in May 1990. Its legal powers came to an ended on 9 January 1996, when the Supreme Council of the 13th convocation commenced its work. During more than 5 years this Supreme Council, was chaired by three persons: N. Dementey (18 May 1990 – 25 August 1991), S. Shushkevich (9 September 1991 – 26 January 1994) and M. Grib (28 January 1994– 10 January 1996). S. Shushkevich, who became the head of the parliament and formally the head of state after the declaration of independence and served in office for 29 months, is the most personified representative of the parliamentary republic.

The second stage in the history of the Republic of Belarus began on 20 July 1994 with the inauguration of the president of the state A. Lukashenko and continues to this day. This is the 27-year period of a presidential republic or presidential rule. Due to the relatively long period of A. Lukashenko's power, there is a tendency in the Belarusian, especially official, and partly foreign, popular and even scientific literature to equate his presidency with the entire existence of the Republic of Belarus. Such statements, if keeping in mind the proposed periodisation, seem incorrect.

In accordance with the above-mentioned periodization of the history of the Republic of Belarus, the history of its foreign policy is also divided into two stages: the foreign policy of the parliamentary republic and the foreign policy of the presidential republic. Given its short-term nature and organic integrity, the parliamentary period is not divided into shorter time periods. The main content of this incomplete three-year period of time is the process of international recognition of the Republic of Belarus, its entry into the international arena as an independent state, and the expansion of Belarus activity in the international arena given its new state and political status. The absolute priority of this period was the concentration of efforts



on the development of relations with the CIS countries, primarily with Russia, and with the developed countries of the West. Belarus' contribution to the strengthening of international security in connection with its voluntary renunciation of its nuclear status and accession to other international agreements in the field of disarmament was extremely important and generally recognized [3, p. 30–34, 177; 4, p. 47; 5, s. 10–11; 7, s. 29–58].

The 27-year presidential period in the foreign policy history of the sovereign Belarus needs further temporal division, which we divide into four stages. *The first covers 1994–1999.* This is a five-year period (piatiletka) of an “active integration policy” with Russia. The stage begins with the coming to power of president A. Lukashenko, who proclaimed integration with Russia as one of the key elements of his election program, and ends with two major events: the signing of the Belarusian-Russian treaty on the creation of the Union State on 8 December 1999 and an even more important event that occurred on 31 December 1999, the change of the president of the Russian Federation, which meant the end of the previous integration policy pursued by president B. Yeltsin.

These years are also a time of strengthening the Eastern vector of the Belarusian state's foreign policy through the creation of closer integration associations with the Russian Federation and other CIS countries, while curtailing political dialogue with Western countries (at their initiative) and expanding cooperation with the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. During this period the Republic of Belarus disposed of nuclear weapons, compensating for its absence by expanding military and military-technical ties with Russia. At the same time, it became closer to the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, and in 1998 became a full-fledged member of this association. The new political realities required the definition of new foreign policy principles and priorities, which were done by adopting a multi-vector policy as the foreign policy strategy of the Belarusian state [3, p. 177–178; 5, p. 99–164].

The second stage of the Belarusian president's foreign policy activity covers 2000–2014, and it can be conditionally called the time of conducting a “multi-vector policy”. The term “multi-vector policy” was first mentioned in A. Lukashenko's speech at the First all-Belarusian congress on 19 October 1996, who said: “Taking into account our geopolitical situation, only a multi-vector, balanced foreign policy can be effective”¹ [12, p. 82]. Later on, the term “multi-vector policy” was interpreted in the speeches of the Belarusian president and other leading figures, and after them in the works of Belarusian and Polish researchers (A. Tikhomirov, E. Mironovich, R. Czachor) as one of the key principles of Belarusian foreign policy [3, p. 35–36, 178; 5, s. 165–172; 7, s. 147–151]. The author is more in-

clined to consider the multi-vector policy as a foreign policy strategy of official Minsk in 2000–2020 including the second and third stages of the foreign policy of the first president of the Republic of Belarus.

The second stage ended with the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, which marked the opening of a new period in the history of European and even more broadly international relations after the end of the Cold War. In the following years, the sovereign status of Belarus was consolidated and a multi-vector foreign policy began to be pursued, with understanding a unilateral foreign policy orientation does not correspond to the geopolitical situation and national interests of Belarus. The country has acquired the features of a geopolitical entity capable of independently determining and implementing its foreign policy. The characteristic features of Belarus' foreign policy during this period were balancing between the European and Eurasian political, economic and military space, the desire to create a “belt of neighborhood” in Europe, and active cooperation aimed at building relations of “strategic partnership” with the countries of the “world South” [13, p. 40–41].

From 2014 to August 2020, the third stage of the foreign policy activity of the first president of the Republic of Belarus continued, which is naturally difficult to define briefly and meaningfully based on the recent traces of historical events and processes. The author calls it a time of flexible, balanced and independent foreign policy. At the third stage, the multivector policy, understood as the desire to weaken excessive dependence on the Eastern vector (the Russian Federation), began to acquire more real and adequate features and come closer to its real meaning of this word, understood as a balanced development of relations with all geographical vectors of the state's foreign policy. The process of gaining national and international identity of Belarus was underway. The search for the country's own face on the international arena stretched and went very slowly, taking into account three decades of independent existence. The international team of authors of the book “Belarus at the crossroads”, edited by two well-known US political scientists R. Legvold and S. Garnett, wrote about the country's search for an international identity back in 1998 [14].

In his speeches and articles, foreign minister V. Ma-kei repeatedly addressed the issue of strengthening the national and international identity of Belarus and the need to conduct foreign policy in accordance with the national interests of the state. In an interview with “The Washington Post” (2015), he said that the Belarusian identity has not yet been fully formed and that in the past, Belarusians have lived in the shadow of large nations for too long, bearing in mind the common and not always the most rosy history with Poland and Russia. As a nation, Belarus is in search of



its identity and “sooner or later, Belarus will find its place, a worthy place in the European family, and will always be a source and donor of stability for all partners, and not a source of any conflicts”². In a speech to the staff, teachers and students of the Belarusian State University on 24 December 2019 V. Makei emphasized the priorities of the modern foreign policy of Belarus, identified the principle of multi-vector nature and the diversification of foreign policy and foreign economic relations as vital conditions for the development of Belarus³. In the development of relations with Russia, the need to reduce Belarusian trade and economic dependence and defend national and state interests in the process of integration and union building was emphasized⁴.

The third stage of Belarus foreign policy activity under the rule of the president A. Lukashenko differs from the previous one by its more consistent and successful multi-vector policy course. Whereas during the second stage the official Minsk had to go through two crisis vis-à-vis the West (2004–2006 and 2010–2012), then third 6 years stage characterized as the most successful period in the history of the presidential republic foreign policy. Western sanctions were lifted, Belarus offered a venue to discuss the settlement of conflict in the Eastern Ukraine, hosted a set of important international forums (the Normandy Four summit, annual session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly), skillfully balancing between Moscow and Brussels, built up the engagement with China and other key players and regions of “far arc”, implementing an active economic diplomacy.

In August 2020, relations between official Minsk and neighboring states (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine) and the collective West as a whole, became strained. Russia sided with the president of Belarus, providing political, diplomatic, economic and informational support [15; 16]. The events in and around Belarus have become an important international issue and are reflected on the agenda of international organizations (EU, OSCE, UN). The Belarusian leadership denounced these attempts of “external interference aimed at undermining the state order”. This is how V. Makei expressed himself in his speech at the

75th session of the UN General Assembly on 26 September 2020⁵.

Experts of the Minsk Dialogue Council on Foreign Relations believe that the situation in Belarus has affected the country’s achievements in the international arena and would have consequences for regional security⁶. In order to remedy the situation, scholars suggest resuming the political dialogue between Minsk and the West. In the Belarusian-Russian relations, Moscow and Minsk need to come to correct and adequate understanding of the two foreign policy concepts of Belarus – multi-vector and integration ones, which requires a better understanding between experts and officials⁷.

It can be assumed that the events of 2020 would lead to a change in the foreign policy strategy of Minsk.

The periodization of the history of the foreign policy of president A. Lukashenko uses a linear principle when one stage is chronologically replaced by the other. To study the development of relations between Belarus and the West, it is advisable to apply the linear and hierarchical principles, as the latter reflects subordination, i. e. subjection of a part to the whole.

Through the prism of Belarus-West relations, the history of the foreign policy of independent Belarus can be divided into two stages: *the first (1991–1996)*, characterized by the progressive and ascending development of relations with Western states; *the second, which began after the constitutional referendum of 24 November 1996*, which was not recognized by Western states and international organizations (OSCE, Council of Europe, European Union), is characterized by the lack of normal and stable relations with the Western community [17]. At this stage, which continues with ups and downs at the present time, the collective West (the EU member states, the United States, Canada, Japan and other countries close to them in terms of foreign policy orientation) conducts a policy towards Belarus, called “critical dialogue”, selective engagement and other expressions meaning various kinds of restrictions, sanctions and pressure measures. Minsk’s relations with the West after November 1996 had cyclical character with aggravation periods in 1996–2001, 2004–2006, and 2010–2012. Regular crises were associated with the reaction of the West to do-

²Стенограмма интервью министра иностранных дел Республики Беларусь Владимира Макея газете “The Washington Post” (19 мая 2015 г., Минск) [Электронный ресурс]. URL: http://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/f68c86282662364f.html (дата обращения: 10.01.2021).

³О встрече министра иностранных дел Беларуси В. Макея с профессорско-преподавательским составом и студентами Белорусского государственного университета 24 декабря 2019 г. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/ad69cc0356b8c1fe.html (дата обращения: 10.01.2021).

⁴According to author’s record of the V. Makei’s speech.

⁵Выступление министра иностранных дел Республики Беларусь В. Макея на общей дискуссии 75-й сессии ГА ООН 26 сентября 2020 г. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.by/press/statements/a5deed18005a9ef9.html> (дата обращения: 10.01.2021).

⁶Белорусский кризис: контуры неопределенности в региональной безопасности [Электронный ресурс]. URL: https://minskdialogue.by/Uploads/Files/research/non-papers/pdf/ФМД2020_Рабочий%20документ.pdf (дата обращения: 10.01.2021).

⁷Ibid.



mestic political events in the country (constitutional referendums and presidential elections), which were not recognized as legitimate and fair [3, p. 129–149; 7, 166–180, 208–214; 17].

Concluding the issue of periodization, we note that the allocation of the stages of the parliamentary and presidential republics in accordance with the foreign

policy content of the four stages in the development of Belarusian foreign policy allows us to draw a more meaningful picture of the country's foreign policy history during the period of independence. This generalization would help to better understand the peculiarities of the formation of the foreign policy of the Belarusian state.

Evolution of foreign policy priorities

Foreign minister P. Kravchenko first outlined Belarus' foreign policy priorities in detail in his address to the 46th session of the UN General Assembly on 26 September 1991. They were formulated in the form of the following eight provisions:

- 1) Belarus' achievement of real independence and sovereignty;
- 2) cooperation with other republics of the USSR and creation of a single economic space and a new union of sovereign states;
- 3) mobilization of international support in solving the Chernobyl problem;
- 4) making Belarus a nuclear-free zone and a neutral state;
- 5) inclusion of the Republic of Belarus in the pan-European process;
- 6) creation conditions for the establishment of a market economy in the republic;
- 7) ensuring environmental safety;
- 8) ensuring free interaction of cultures.

It was stated from the rostrum of the UN, that the basis of the state's foreign policy was the vital interests of the Belarusian people [18, p. 276–285]. P. Kravchenko's speech can be considered the first conceptual statement of the goals, objectives and priorities of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus at the stage of gaining independence. The minister himself later called his speech as the first foreign policy doctrine of independent Belarus [19].

During the years of the parliamentary republic (1991–1994), Minsk's foreign policy priorities were aimed at achieving a nuclear-free and neutral status of Belarus and “returning to Europe”. During the first two years of his rule, president A. Lukashenko repeatedly spoke in favor of a balanced and pragmatic approach to the conduct of foreign policy. After the constitutional and political crisis of 1996, two opposing, but at the same time interrelated and mutually dependent vectors developed in foreign policy: integration with Russia and confrontation with the West [3, p. 34–35; 7, p. 68–82].

In the late 1990s, seeking to balance the Russian vector, the Belarusian president proclaimed a course for a multi-vector foreign policy. This was reflected in the activation of relations with the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America and in the country's entering to the Non-Aligned Movement. In December 2000, foreign minister M. Khvostov named six foreign policy priorities for that year:

- 1) developing relations with Russia within the framework of building a Union State;
- 2) ensuring Belarusian interests in the Euro-Asian Economic Community;
- 3) targeted work in the CIS;
- 4) strengthening the “belt of good neighborliness” around Belarus;
- 5) restoration and developing relations with the EU and other European institutions;
- 6) restoration of trust in relations with the United States [9, p. 21].

It can be said that these priorities were relevant not only for 2001, but for the entire first decade of the new century. A number of them, especially in the Western direction, remain on the agenda of Belarusian foreign policy and diplomacy today.

Between 2014 and early 2020 there was a certain revival in relations with the West, but neither Minsk nor the Western capitals counted on a serious improvement, since this would have required a significant change in the internal policy of president A. Lukashenko, which seemed unlikely, including to the author. This was confirmed by the events that took place in and around Belarus after the 2020 presidential election.

At the beginning of 2020, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, the priority directions of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus focused on a number of the most important and promising vectors:

- 1) first and foremost, naturally, were the neighboring states, primarily, the Russian Federation, where strategic cooperation was built on the basis of the Treaty on the creation of the Union State. Belarus has taken an active and constructive stance in the uniting entities in the post-Soviet space (the EAEU, the CIS and the CSTO);
- 2) the European Union, based on trade, economic and investment cooperation, as well as its member countries;
- 3) despite the difficult relations with the United States of America, Belarus has consistently advocated the normalization of dialogue and the development of relations with this large and influential country in the world today;
- 4) comprehensive strategic partnership relations with the People's Republic of China are highlighted as a separate priority;
- 5) it was noted that cooperation with the countries of “far arc” of the Belarusian foreign policy (Asia, Afri-



ca and Latin America) are reaching a qualitatively new level;

6) multilateral diplomacy is an important area of Belarusian foreign policy.

As a donor of regional security, Belarus strives to contribute to solving global problems, countering modern challenges and threats, traditionally actively participates in the activities of the UN and other international organizations, generates approaches and initiatives that offer an agenda that unites all members of the international community, promotes dialogue and overcoming dividing lines⁸.

The priorities of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus have changed significantly over the years of independence, which was quite natural for a young European state. They have undergone a natural evolution from 8 directions in 1991 to 6 in 2020. In general, the priorities of the foreign policy adequately reflected the national interests and especially the foreign economic needs of the Belarusian state, its desire to develop balanced relations with the main actors in the international arena. Being a tightly integrated part of the Soviet national economic complex and subsequently integrated into the international system after the collapse of the USSR, Belarus was forced to focus more than other former Soviet republics on relations with post-Soviet states, especially and primarily with Russia. These reasons explain the priority development of Minsk relations with Russia, the countries of the EAEU, the CIS and the CSTO. In addition to economic, cultural and humanitarian considerations, geopolitical and military-strategic calculations were of great importance for Belarus and its main foreign policy partners in the East and West. They pointed to Minsk's strong dependence on Moscow including but not limited to security matters and the inclusion of Belarus in the sphere of vital interests of Russia. On the other hand, as the director of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences A. Gromyko points out that Russia also depended on Belarus in terms of geopolitics and military strategy, since Be-

larus remained virtually the only ally of Russia in the Western direction [15, p. 4].

The Belarusian establishment, both during the parliamentary republic and during the presidency of A. Lukashenko, could not ignore the role of the Western foreign policy vector, represented by Poland, the Baltic states, and other more distant EU and NATO states. This was also due to the "frontline" location of Belarus, its deep economic, cultural and civilizational ties with the West. After the breakthrough to Europe in the first half of the 1990s, relations with the Western world froze for a quarter of a century, interrupted only by short periods of warming. In the policy of Minsk, the Western vector was characterized by economic pragmatism, which prevailed over a full-blooded political and diplomatic dialogue. The domination of the integration policy with Moscow and the strained relations with the West led to the search for a third way in Belarusian foreign policy and diplomacy.

This path was found and was called a multi-vector foreign policy. In the 2010s, the concept of multi-vector nature was supplemented by the foreign economic thesis on the balanced development of foreign trade ("three-thirds"). This meant a strategic course for the balanced development of economic relations between the three main partners of Belarus – Russia, the EU and the countries of the "far arc" (Asia, Africa and Latin America). However, visible progress in this direction was not achieved due to the complexity of the issue, as well as unfavorable changes in world politics and the economy (the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, sanctions wars, trade protectionism, the coronavirus pandemic). In 2019, Russia and the EAEU countries counted for over 50 % in Belarusian foreign trade, the EU for about 23 and the "far arc" for 27 %⁹.

The political situation in the country in August 2020 highlighted the political and socio-economic system of Belarus over-dependence on Russia. The Belarusian president could count on V. Putin's support in his efforts to overcome the situation, which could not but increase Minsk's dependence on Moscow.

Conclusion

The 30-year experience of independent existence shows that the Republic of Belarus, like other post-Soviet states, remains its difficult, contradictory process of formation as a new independent European state. The process of formation of the Belarusian foreign policy following on as well. The country has made a significant and recognized contribution to the strengthening of international and European security and to the disarmament, becoming the first state in the world to voluntarily renounce nuclear weapons. The country

stepped forward in a good-neighborly relations building with the surrounding countries, integration ties with post-Soviet countries are developing, and strategic partnership with some large and influential states (Russia and China). The Republic of Belarus has secured the status of a sovereign state. Its foreign policy, focused on protecting security and ensuring freedom of action on the world stage, has become more pragmatic, and the activities of the Belarusian diplomacy made significant advances.

⁸Priorities of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus [Electronic resource]. URL: http://mfa.gov.by/foreign_policy/priorities/ce125a07988a666c.html (date of access: 15.01.2021).

⁹Calculated from general information: directions, tasks, results for the current period source [Electronic resource]. URL: https://mfa.gov.by/en/export/foreign_trade (date of access: 10.01.2021).



Along with the achievements, the shortcomings and omissions of the Belarusian foreign policy were identified, especially from the second half of the 1990s.

Opportunities of a multi-vector foreign policy have not been fully implemented. The CIS countries (primarily Russia) remained the main focus of its foreign policy, and the countries of the European Union remained on the other hand the main foreign policy areas. However, the political dialogue with the EU and the United States has been rather limited economical. Among the countries of the “world South”, the Belarusian side was able to significantly expand contacts only with China. Often, the absence of problems in re-

lations with these countries at the political level was not supported by a significant increase in economic cooperation.

The imperative remains the formation of the national and international identity of Belarus as a self-sufficient European state, as well as the weakening and in the future overcoming of harmful historical and political traditions that condemn Belarus to a dependent existence on its stronger neighbors. Such a path suggests the development and implementation of a real multi-vector strategy and the achievement of an optimal balance in foreign policy through the harmonious development of the Eastern and Western vectors.

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