

Chapter 10

Eurasian Integration of Belarus as Path–Dependence

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ABSTRACT

There is a tendency to explain all the problems and choices made by the Republic of Belarus as a result of the policy of its leadership. This text offers a take on choices made by Belarus in favor of preserving and strengthening relations with Russia through the prism of the concept of path-dependence. Simply said, economic, social, and political circumstances determine the vector of development of the country since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as they frame and transform president Lukashenka's intentions. Thus, country's participation in the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union is a predictable step in a chain of interconnected choices that the Belarusian political elite have been making since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Special attention in the text is paid to what the analysis of the Belarusian case can tell about the nature and prospects of integration in the region.

INTRODUCTION

Experts' opinion on the political system and socioeconomic model established in the Republic of Belarus after the collapse of the USSR are highly controversial. For some it is “Europe's last dictatorship” and “a splinter of the Soviet Union”, for others it is the best possible way of post-Soviet development called “Belarusian socialism” and “Belarusian economic miracle” (Treshchenkov, 2014, 125). Such opinions are highly dependent on political affiliations and values of the observers themselves, but no one can deny at least two facts: strong dependence of the Belarusian economy on Russia and more than significant role of the Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka in the processes that have been taking place in the republic since 1994.

Virtually from the beginning of the 1990s, Belarus, along with Russia, has been taking an active part in integration projects in the post-Soviet space. For a long time, the Union State of Russia and Belarus was the quintessence of the Belarus-Russia rapprochement. At the turn of the 2010s the so-called “ink on paper integration” of the past underwent qualitative changes. And today, Belarus, together with

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Russia and Kazakhstan, acts as the core of the Eurasian economic integration. The clear choice made by the republic occurred, to a large degree, against the will of its key political player. The desire to retain a certain degree of autonomy with regard to the decisions made in the Kremlin has always been characteristic of A. Lukashenka's policy. For a long time, one of the bargaining tools used against the Russian leaders was "the European dimension" of the Belarusian foreign policy. At the same time, such a rapprochement with the European Union (EU), which would involve political and economic reforms in Belarus, was excluded. The participation of the republic in the Eurasian Economic Union (as well as in Eurasian Economic Community's Customs Union) was an expected result of the processes that had taken place in the country before and after the collapse of the USSR.

In this study, the author suggests considering the participation of Belarus in the formation of the EAEU in terms of path-dependence. Such approach makes it possible not to focus exclusively on the role of an individual in history to the detriment of other objective factors and pre-conditions. First and foremost, it includes the definition of the term "path-dependence" and other related categories. In the following sections, the author makes an effort to determine the pre-conditions for the formation of the contemporary Belarusian path-dependence and to identify possible alternative ways and main juncture points where the dependence could have been broken. Then, the author describes the essence of the modern Eurasian integration model and its relevance to the Belarusian path-dependence.

BACKGROUND

Belarus occupies a special place in the history of post-Soviet economic integration, since it is a consistent participant in almost all Russia-led integration associations in the region. The participation of Belarus in the EAEU is often viewed by the media and experts as a result of a choice made by Belarusian leadership. In the academic literature, the analysis of the motives of Belarus's participation in the EAEU is rather scarce. There is a fair opinion that it should be viewed, first of all, as an attempt to preserve an access of the country's exports to the Russian market. It is based on a few studies of Russia-Belarus relations, revealing the reasons for the choice made by the president A. Lukashenka in favor of developing economic integration with Russia (Zaostrovtssev, 2007; Koktysh, 2000). At the same time, these studies as well as attempts to explain the current participation of Belarus in the EAEU lack a clear conceptual framework. As an example of such a framework, which allows analyzing empirical material in a systematic and more intrinsic way, this study suggests historical institutionalism and the notion of path-dependence. This is the first attempt to apply path-dependence to the Belarusian case. Up to the present, its application to the post-Soviet problematics has been limited to explaining the entanglements of political transformation in Russia (Hedlund, 2005; Gel'man, 2013).

Historical Institutionalism and Path-Dependence

The term "path-dependence" is an integral part of historical institutionalism. There, institutions are defined as "the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy" (Hall & Taylor, 1996, 938). As to Belarus, it would be appropriate to mean by institutions the ways of organizing economic activity and the socioeconomic practices, that have been established as early as in the Soviet period and continue to exist, having undergone certain transformations, up to now.

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