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The Russian – Belarusian Integration: Political Puzzles of “31 Roadmaps”

In 2018 Russia initiated attempts to substantially revitalize the slow process of the Russian – Belarusian integration by implementing the fundamental obligations set out in the Union Treaty not only in the fields of economy or the military, but by also resolving the essential political and financial issues, thus building a strong foundation for further creation of the union state and a certain breakthrough. This article discusses the new phase in the creation of the Union State in order to identify the reasons behind the new initiative and the key factors having led to the slow-pace integration of the Union State and different rates in individual fields. It is argued that the creation process of the Union State does not gain the required momentum due to different interests of the states: Russia's aspirations for full control over Belarus and the efforts made by the President of Belarus seeking to maintain an integration format enabling unobstructed existence of the model of the political system established by him and allowing him to stay in power. This process could be described as a certain strategic partnership enabling flexible and non-binding actions (postponement of agreements for economic, security, and personal gain). The 2020 crisis in Belarus when President A. Lukashenko lost the legitimacy of his constituents and the Western States did not recognise the presidential election as democratic, the Union State project was “frozen” temporarily until the political situation in the country stabilizes. Under these conditions Russia's ambition to keep Belarus has remained unchanged and it is likely that cautious tactics would be implemented to achieve this goal at the same time to avoid stirring up opposition sentiment, to maintain sentiments of the Belarusian public favourable to the great power in their neighbourhood, and to activate economic actions directed at strengthening the positions of Russian capital in the neighbouring space.

Introduction

It is the anniversary of the process of the creation of the Union State of Russia and Belarus: it has been 20 years since signing of the Union State Treaty. As usual in such cases, the rhetoric of the political leaders of both states was laced with positive and neutral tones to reflect on the celebration of this occasion. It is interesting that the Presidents of both states did not use the words Union State: the Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko, as a signatory to the Treaty, mentioned strategic partnership, while the Russian President Vladimir Putin simply trivially

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hinted to “the long-time tradition of fraternal friendship” and expressed hope for continuing mutually beneficial integration processes on all axes¹. In fact, almost a decade could be added to this date, i.e., the Belovezha Accords, when the leaders of the Post-Soviet Republics of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, having just declared their independence following the collapse the USSR, declared their determination to move towards reintegration.

Thus the integration process of the two states has been going on for almost three decades. The partnership of Belarus and Russia has brought specific results and could serve as a role model for other states in the context of the Post-Soviet slow-paced, and controversial integration project for the Commonwealth of Independent States (hereinafter referred to as the CIS). On the other hand, it is evident that the process of the creation of the Union State was neither dynamic nor smooth to this date, when the biggest achievements are associated with the military and economic fields, while no specific work has been done in the political sphere. We may claim that the integration process has not become the priority axis of the policies of both states since the signing date of the Union State Treaty. In fact, in 2018 Russia initiated attempts to substantially revitalize the integration process, specifically, to implement the fundamental obligations set out in the Union Treaty not only in the fields of economy or the military, but by also resolving the essential political and financial issues, thus building a strong foundation for further creation of the Union State. More than one-year negotiation at the highest state levels gave no results in respect of the key areas of the integration.

We will look for answers to these key questions in this article. Why did Russia become the initiator for intensification of the integration process, despite showing no major signs of interest before? What reasons led to the fact that the leaders of both states have failed to reach an agreement in respect of their interests in the creation of the Union State over two decades?

1. The Union Treaty in conjuncture with political interests

We should discuss the key parameters of the course of the 20-year-long integration process before discussing the circumstances associated with the efforts, failures, and possible prospects involving the creation of the Union

¹ Лукашенко и Путин обменялись поздравлениями по случаю 20-летия Договора о Союзном государстве, <https://news.tut.by/economics/664290.html> [žiūrėta 2020-02-03]

State of Russia and Belarus. The dynamics of the integration were determined by the conjuncture of the states' political interests over the period of almost two decades. Polish political scientist Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga identified several strategic axes when discussing the prospects for the relations of Russia and Belarus in the 21st century in respect of Russia's state policy, security, and economy. First, close relations with the neighbouring state are beneficial to Russia in terms of strengthening its position as a regional power and a centre of attraction in the Post-Soviet space. Second, this serves as the best example of Russia's integration initiatives and as an exemplary model of potential integration including the states in the region. The third one is associated with the defence and security policy, because the geographical position of Belarus provides bridgehead towards the West and moves the security space further way from Russia and brings the Kaliningrad Region closer at the same time. The fourth one is that the Russian society sees these relations in the context of domestic policy in a positive light, as proofs of the imperial power, the idea of the brotherhood of the Slavic nations, and a shared Soviet experience². We should add that the key motives in favour of maintaining strategic partnership with Belarus are the political and military interests on Russia's side, meanwhile economic cooperation is not of a particular importance in terms of costs, various grants, and privileges allocated in support of the neighbouring state's economy.

In turn, the strategic and tactical approach of the state of Belarus in relations with Russia should be assessed through the prism of A. Lukashenko's personal interests, more precisely, the logic of the key political, socio-economic decisions made on the state level is based on the ambition to keep the established model of personal power tightly associated with the national ideology by all means necessary³. This would mean that the project of the Union State would be contrary to this statement, because it refers to a gradual loss of the state sovereignty, however, first and foremost, it should be evaluated as one of the vital sources allowing the post-communist political system of the state developed by A. Lukashenko to function. First of all, close ties with Russia make it possible to maintain economic sustainability in Belarus. This economic model is based on state dominance, rather than market principles, therefore its viability in this geopolitical space can only be maintained by taking advantage

² Wierzbowska-Miazga A., (2013), Support as a means of subordination. Russia's policy on Belarus, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2013-05-06/support-a-means-subordination-russias-policy-belarus> [žiūrėta 2020-04-13]

³ Leshchenko N., (2008) The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 60, Issue 8, p. 1419-1433, DOI:10.1080/09668130802292234 To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130802292234> [žiūrėta 2020-04-15]

of the factor of favourable opportunities provided by Russia. It probably suffices to identify two main axes: the use of energy resources at exceptionally favourable prices and export of Belarusian goods to the vast Russian market⁴.

Before delving into the political context of implementation of the Treaty, we should discuss the principal provisions discussed in the Union State Treaty in more detail first, especially because they have not been covered in literature in greater detail to this day. This is important in order to reveal the course of implementation of the Treaty and the practical results thereof. Article 1 of Section 1 of this document declares that “the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus shall create a Union State marking a new stage in unification of the nations of two states into a democratic legal state”⁵. Thus it states that the creation of a new supranational entity would be an initial intermediate stage and not the final product. On the other hand, it also indicates that this political entity would be created on democratic grounds. It is hard to imagine how it would be implemented keeping in mind the authoritative nature of the Belarusian regime and the characteristics of its political leaders (cunning, determined, confident, populist)⁶. We should take note that Section 3 of the document indicates a crucial provision to the developers of this process: “The Union State is based on equality of the partners under the Treaty”, because, as we would see later, the President of Belarus would refer to this provision as one of the main counter-arguments in the negotiations with Russia.

One of the most important elements in the creation of the Union State is the way how the two states form the mechanism of division of power or the so-called transfer of power. This document provides the following supranational institutions: the Supreme Council of State, the Parliament, the Council of Ministers, the Courts, the Audit Board. The position of the Chairperson of the Council of State shall be held by the head of the partner state on the rotating basis, unless a different procedure is agreed upon. The Parliament shall be formed out of two Chambers of the Union and the House of Representatives. 36 deputies of the Federal Assembly of Russia and the same number of deputies of the National Assembly of Belarus shall be delegated to the Upper House, while 78 Russian deputies and 36 Belarusian deputies shall be elected to the

⁴ Ibidem; Wilson A., Should the West be Wary of an Imminent ‘Union’ of Russia and Belarus? <https://jamestown.org/program/should-the-west-be-wary-of-an-imminent-union-of-russia-and-belarus/> [žiūrėta 2020-04-19]

⁵ Договор о создании Союзного государства, <http://soyuz.by/second.aspx?document=1775&uid=101&page=0> [žiūrėta 2020-04-20]

⁶ Margery A. McMahon, Aleksandr Lukashenka, president, Republic of Belarus, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Volume 13, 1997 - Issue 4, p. 129–137; Bennett B., (2011). *The last dictatorship in Europe: Belarus under Lukashenko*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Lower House within the course of the general elections. The Prime Minister of the partner state may be appointed to hold the position of the President of the Government on the rotating basis⁷. Thus the structure of the state administration institutions establishes that the state leaders would share the main responsibilities of the executive branch (of the President and the Prime Minister), naturally, without leaving their main positions.

The nature of the integration of the two states is reflected by the definitions of the priority axes. In this case it is referred to three of them: financial, economic, and military. The financial perspective provides disposal of a single currency and establishment of a single currency issuing centre, also implementation of a common policy on credit services, currencies, taxes, and prices as well as banking supervision. The tasks set on the economic level include establishment of a single economic space and the legal framework designed to guarantee free movement of goods, services, capital, and labour, equal rights of economic entities, uniform competition rules, and assurance of consumer rights, also the declared goal of joining the transport, energy, communications, and telecommunications system. Integration of the military dominant is envisaged in the following elements: unified defence policy, development of the military forces, functioning of a unified military infrastructure system, formation of joint orders for armaments and military equipment; joint technical support system as well as coordination of actions on armaments and border issues on the international level. It is important to note that the intended establishment of joint military forces is referred to as the Regional Military Group.

We may state that sufficiently specific actions have been envisaged, thus enabling implementation of the initial process of the integration, however, the implementation of the redundancy mechanism associated with the duties of the political institutions and the state leaders of the Union State has not been discussed clearer leaving much room for free interpretations. In addition to this, Article 6 of Section 1 states that the states “shall preserve their sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, political system, the Constitution, flag, coat of arms and other attributes of statehood”. This is more in line with a supranational entity constructed on the principles of a confederation rather than a united state, all the more so as it provides the possibility for admittance of other states (Article 18 of Section 2)⁸. The document provides the possibility of drafting the Constitution of the common state.

⁷ Договор о создании Союзного государства, <http://soyuz.by/second.aspx?document=1775&uid=101&page=0> [žiūrėta 2020-04- 22]

⁸ Ibidem.

The joint initial action plan drawn up right after the Treaty proved that the state leaders were determined to immediately engage in the implantation of the preparatory work in the financial, tax, trade, customs, energy, and transport as well as defence sectors, with a total of 19 axes of activities envisaged. Specific deadlines for implementation of each targeted activity were provided on the plan, for example, the key areas, such as the idea for a single currency and currency issuing centre as well as establishment of the Regional Military Group and other military plans, were set to be implemented by year 2005⁹.

The political conjuncture has notably changed after V. Putin became the President of Russia. In support of the idea of integration of Russia and Belarus, V. Putin outlined a more determined Russian strategy in respect to the partner referring to it as accession only. For example, during the meeting with V. Putin in September 2003 A. Lukashenko received a proposal to follow the German unification model for the purposes of the integration matters, i.e., when West Germany incorporated East Germany, rather than this being a unification of equal states, and to do so on the basis of the Russian Constitution. This decision was based on the estimates that the costs of integration with Belarus were too high, despite of the prevailing belief that Russia's support for its CIS partners would bring economic benefits despite of the economic difficulties experienced by Russia itself¹⁰. This argument was undoubtedly important, however, other significant circumstances associated with Russia's domestic problems piling up following Boris Yel'tin's rule and the context of consolidation of V. Putin's own personal power should also be kept in mind¹¹. We should assume that the issue of the creation of the Union State was not the top priority in the political agenda of the Russian leader.

A. Lukashenko saw the radical changes in the position assumed by Russia and the contemplations of its new political leader in a negative light and took this as a call for incorporation of Belarus on the level of Russia's regions, which led to a response step taken by the President of Belarus in October 2003 in the form of the decision to reject the idea of introducing the Russian rouble as a single currency. In the following year the partners also failed in resolving some of the key issues involving their mutual relations: on 16 February Bela-

⁹ Программа действий Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь по реализации положений Договора о создании Союзного государства, <http://soyuz.by/second.aspx?document=1770&uid=101&page=0> [žiūrėta 2020-05- 02]

¹⁰ Vieira A., A Tale of Two Unions: Russia–Belarus Integration Experience and its Lessons for the Eurasian Economic, *Union Journal of Borderlands Studies*. Volume 32, 2017 - Issue 1: Special Section: From post-Soviet to Eurasian: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2016.1211959> [žiūrėta 2020-05- 05]

¹¹ *Politics and Economics in Putin's Russia* (Enlarged Edition) by Stephen J. Blank, Carlisle Barracks, PA : Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013.

rus refused to sign an agreement on Russian gas transit, as a result of which “Gazprom” cut off gas supplies to Belarus due to disagreements on pricing. As incompatibility of the state leaders’ interests became evident, we may claim that the process of the creation of the Union State slowly gained some stable features in the following years, i.e., permanent trade disagreements, especially regarding gas and oil prices¹². The implementation of the Treaty in the light of the set short-time chronological timeframes became hardly possible, however, it was not completely deleted from the political agenda of the states.

The Draft Law on the Constitution of the Union State was prepared on 21 October 2005 as an interim document pending the preparation of the Constitution: the 43 articles thereof reiterated the key provisions of the Union State Treaty. The Russian central press published a report that the document was 90 percent ready and could come into effect in 2006. This initiative was not continued due to the position assumed by the President of Russia, according to A. Lukashenko, Belarus was offered two options: a structure similar to that of the European Union or unification under Russia. A. Lukashenko rejected the prospect of integration under the conditions imposed by Russia, however, he did not reject continuation thereof as a slow-moving process¹³.

This cooperation format emerged during the first decade following signing of the Treaty. According to political scientist Alena Vieira, the Belarusian and Russian integration gave results on its own, because it enabled to resolve some disagreements on sensitive issues, also to lay the foundation for integration in the fields of the military and security as well as to ensure substantial economic support to Belarus. The latter took advantage of the terms applicable to the trade in gas and oil with Russia as well as the received loans issued during the economic downturn. We can agree with her statement that the idea of the Russian and Belarusian integration was more important to Minsk and Moscow than the actual course of the integration: although the rhetoric favouring the integration was constantly supported, the leadership of both countries was not ready to deal with the essential problems of the Union State¹⁴.

The established axis of bilateral cooperation had not changed and re-

¹² Marples D. R., The prospect of union between Russia and Is the Russia-Belarus Union Obsolete? *Problems of Post-Communism*, Volume 55, 2008, Issue 1, 25-35, DOI: 10.2753/PPC1075-8216550103. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2753/PPC1075-8216550103> Section: From post-Soviet to Eurasian: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2016.1211959> [žiūrėta 2020-05-06]

¹³ Ibidem, p. 31; Проект Конституционного акта Союзного государства, <https://www.postkomsg.com/news/various/170103/> [žiūrėta 2020-05-06]; Мышковец М., Россия и Беларусь могут 3 ноября рассмотреть проект Конституции Союзного государства, <https://p.dw.com/p/FeOL>, <https://rg.ru/2005/10/27/soyuz-akt.html> [žiūrėta 2020-05-06]

¹⁴ Програма действий (Footnote 9)

mained stable over the next decade. The results of the creation of the Union State are most evident when comparing the declared and implemented goals. We can speak about specific achievements exclusively in the sectors of economic and military integration. The idea of creation of a single economic space and joining of individual systems of an infrastructural (transport, energy, communications) nature hardly has been making any progress, regardless of the resilient bilateral economic and trade relations. The dependence of the Belarusian economy on Russia remained and kept increasing gradually. In different periods up to 20 percent of the GDP of Belarus was directly driven by subsidies provided by Russia in various forms: soft loans and energy resources bought outside the market conditions. The dependence of multiple major sectors of the Belarusian economy on Russia correspond to 20 – 50 percent on the general level of imports from Russia, exports to Russia, direct investments from Russia as well as Russian banks and their branches within the scope of disposable assets. In turn, energy depends on Russian imports by more than 50 percent, while the exports of Belarusian agricultural and food products to Russia amounted to even 91 percent. Belarus opposes Russia's efforts to privatize the strategic companies of the neighbouring state due to a potential political threat. Some authors see this controversial process not as a part of the integration, but rather in the context of disintegration¹⁵. It is evident that the leader of Belarus seeks to maintain the dominant public sector economy as some surety for maintaining his power. Thus, the traditional axes of bilateral economic cooperation have not changed: the supply of energy resources to Belarus on preferential terms, loans, and the wide Russian market open to the Belarusian goods, however, the progress was minimum in respect of the creation of a single economic space as declared in the Treaty.

The military integration should be regarded as the biggest achievement, because all of the declared tasks have been implemented to some extent. What led to this success? The first attempts to strengthen the bilateral military cooperation of Russia and Belarus were noted in 1991 and eventually it was

¹⁵ Jasutis G., Kojala L. (2016), "Baltarusijos ir Rusijos tarpusavio priklausomybės klausimas" in Ivanauskas V., Janeliūnas T., Jasutis G., Jonavičius L., Kasčiūnas L., Keršanskas V., Kojala L., Rusijos raidos scenarijai: implikacijos Lietuvos ir regiono saugumui, Vilnius, p. 219-221.

Astapenia R., (2016), Белорусско-российские отношения с перспективы Минска: формальный союз и фактическая дезинтеграция, *Nova Polityka Wschodnia*, nr 2 (11), s. 47–51; Bohdan S., Belarus-Russia: History of Disintegration, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-russia-history-of-disintegration> [žiūrėta 2020-05-16]; Олег Борисович Неменский, Последний союзник: Российско-белорусские отношения на современном этапе, DOI: 10.23932/2542-0240-2016-9-5-24-40 <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/posledniy-soyuznik-rossiysko-belorusskie-otnosheniya-na-sovremennom-etape/viewer> [žiūrėta 2020-05-16]

shaped by signing the military cooperation documents (the most important of them are: the Contract between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Coordination of Activities in Military Area signed on 20 July 1992, the Contract of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on Military Cooperation of 17 December 1997), which provided the fields and forms of military cooperation¹⁶. The research conducted by political scientist Gražvydas Jasutis on the stability of the military alliance of Russia and Belarus revealed that the long-standing bilateral military relations have gone through all four integral phases of military integration starting with coordination of the activities: in the fields of legal – contractual, institutional, instrumental, and functional dependency and reached the top phase of military integration, while economic and political disagreements of Russia and Belarus have no decisive impact on the development of the military alliance¹⁷.

Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine have not hindered this process either, on the contrary, this period can surely be referred to as a new phase in strengthening the military alliance of Russia and Belarus notable for the intensified cooperation: the goals of military integration were recorded in new documents on a strategic level: military doctrines, completion of old projects (the air defence system) and implementation of new initiatives, attempts to finally implement the goals declared by both states in the strategic documents several decades ago.

The level of interaction of the military forces has increased significantly due to the rapid growth in the number of joint strategic exercises, therefore, their capability to carry out joint combat missions expeditiously has increased substantially, the processes of enhanced military – technical cooperation were less pronounced, however, notable shifts have been in progress in the field of development of the common military infrastructure. This provides the opportunities for the use and growth of the combat potential of the Joint Regional Military Forces. It is evident that Russia has significantly expanded the capabilities of the use of its military forces with the support of the Belarusian military forces and its territory as a bridgehead for potential military actions¹⁸. The question whether this evident enhancement of the military partnership has strengthened the process of the creation of the Union State is a complex one.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 201–202; Россия и Белоруссия подписали соглашение о создании единой системы ПВО, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1112870> [žiūrėta 2020-05-17]

¹⁷ Jasutis, G., (2011), *Karinio aljanso patvarumo tyrimas: Rusijos ir Baltarusijos atvejis*. Daktaro disertacija. Vilnius: Vilniaus universitetas. p. 33–48.

¹⁸ Pugačiauskas V., Military Cooperation between Russia and Belarus: Theoretical and Practical Perspectives, Lithuanian, *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 17 (2019), no. 1, p.p. 246-247, DOI 10.2478/lasr-2019-0010.

For instance, A. Golts claimed that the military alliance did not strengthen the integration of the two states, but it posed new challenges for Belarus, such as the increased threat of involvement in a direct military conflict with the West, while Russia could be encouraged to put additional pressure regarding establishment of military bases or deployment of troops. Actually we should express opposition to this approach, because the chances of a military conflict are mostly hypothetical, while the several-year-long practice has shown that Russia had not been strongly committed to take the opportunity to ensure direct presence of the military power in the neighbouring territory. On the other hand, we can see a certain result, i.e., the reached line of the integration where Belarus seems to be willing to stay at during the current phase¹⁹. Therefore, further actions in this field are only possible upon making decisions involving other essential political and integration issues.

2. A new attempt to implement the Union State project

In 2018 Russia decided to radically accelerate the integration process, although, as we have already mentioned, until then Belarus had been the political leader in terms of initiation of the integration. According to the opinion expressed by the analysts at the Polish Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), V. Putin's decision was driven by the desire to strengthen his declining popularity in the public as well as the goal to demonstrate to the West that Russia maintained a dominant position in the Post-Soviet space and was able to create its own effective integration structures as an alternative to the European Union²⁰. In fact, the latter statement is questionable, because a more appropriate alternative for this purpose would be a multilateral project of the Eurasian Economic Union, although it serves as a good example in terms of the domestic policy, especially following the use of military force in Ukraine. We should also keep in mind other factors, which probably are more important in terms of economy and politics and which are closely interrelated, because Russia constantly looks for ways to reinforce its positions in the Belarusian economy even more, which gives more power to limit the Belarusian leader's freedom in respect of making political decisions. Disagreements between the two countries involving the oil

¹⁹ Golts A., (2017), Belarus and Russia: Military Cooperation but with Different Goals, *Belarusian Foreign Policy*:360^o, Riga, p. 93.

²⁰ Kamil Kłysiński, Katarzyna Chawryło, Iwona Wiśniewska, The failure of the Russian-Belarusian summit, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2019-12-09/failure-russian-belarusian-summit> [žiūrėta 2020-06-01]

and gas prices alone have become a constant component of their relations, and in 2018 – 2019 Moscow took a very clear and principled position by stating that oil and gas prices required a different level of the state integration. On the other hand, we should not rule out the possibility that the Russian authorities simply decided to make some savings at the expense of this costly project while the sanctions imposed by the Western States and low oil prices prevailed²¹.

In 2018 Russia initiated efforts to reactivate the stagnant integration process of both states by preparing “The Programme of Belarus and the Russian Federation on the Implementation of the Union State Treaty” on the governmental level, the programme of an analogous nature as the one prepared 20 years ago, but this time it covered not 19, but 31 activity axes, the so-called “roadmap”. As a matter of fact, its content has not been made public, thus we have to rely on the press releases in both countries as well as public statements made by politicians. It turns out that the propositions made by the Russian negotiators to Belarus included establishment of 12 supranational institutions dealing with financial and economic activities, such as a single issuing centre, which would mean introduction of a single currency, establishment of the Court of Auditors and the Court of the Union State, single tax and antitrust institutions, also some “regulatory mechanisms” in the transport, industry, agriculture, communications as well as gas, oil, and energy sectors. The negotiation process focussed on further joint actions in the field of defence and law enforcement (law enforcement agencies and special services)²².

The issue of political institutions under Part 5 of the Union State Treaty was not declared publicly, however, judging by the interview given by A. Lukashenko to “ECHO Moskvу”, these subjects existed at the time of preparation of the project on the governmental level, however the Presidents agreed not to discuss them at this stage of the negotiations²³. Thus the list of the roadmap axes was shortened, however, signing of the new integration programme failed even following the negotiations of the two state leaders. According to the information available in the public domain, the usual disagreements involving oil and gas prices as well as positions regarding the Customs Code have led

²¹ Артем Шрайбман, Деньги или суверенитет. Чем закончится нефтяной спор Москвы и Минска, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77999> [žiūrēta 2020-06-02] idem, Братское поглощение. Может ли Россия присоединить Белоруссию, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78113> [žiūrēta 2020-06-14]

²² Россия предложила Белоруссии создать единую налоговую, таможенную и суд, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/18/03/2020/5e70c6779a794715ec9eee24?from=from_main [žiūrēta 2020-06-14]; СМИ рассказали о содержании 31-й дорожной карты по интеграции Беларуси и РФ, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/smirasskazali-o-soderzhanii-31-j-dorozhnoj-karty-po-integratsii-belarusi-i-rf> [žiūrēta 2020-06-15]

²³ Интервью. Александр Лукашенко Президент Республики Белоруссии, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fz82BzyO4c&t=4225s [žiūrēta 2020-06-17]

to the failure to achieve results within the course of the negotiations²⁴. It is self evident that the latter problematic objects of bilateral relations are nothing more than Russia's classic means for putting pressure on a weaker partner.

Nevertheless, A. Lukashenko can be regarded as the main culprit of the failed attempt to the integration, because this scenario of rapid integration is contrary to his personal interests, which do not fall in line with Russia's desire to secure unconditional control over Belarus. It is likely that one of the arguments during the negotiations with V. Putin could have been Lukashenko's argument regarding the upcoming presidential election in Belarus in summer 2020. A. Lukashenko's emotional contradictory public statements regarding "eternal friendship with Russia", "Russia's imperial ambitions", forced unequal partnership, the ambition to introduce a single currency on the condition that the issuing centre would be managed on the parity basis are merely tactical steps helping to navigate in a complex situation and to strive for the set goal²⁵. We could also claim that slow implementation of the integration process is very beneficial to A. Lukashenko's long-term strategic position to remain in power and to have the powers of an authoritarian leader. Putting Russia's propositions for expansion of the integration into practice, even in the event of the rejection of the political part thereof, would pose an actual threat to the Belarusian leader of losing a significant share of leverages associated with his power and the authoritarian leader is not ready for such a turn of events. On the other hand, as we have already mentioned, the principal source of the stability of A. Lukashenko's rule is Russia's support to Belarus and the state economy, while the existence of the latter is impossible without Russia, thus he is forced to navigate in this strictly defined field and has no chance of avoiding this dependence.

Thus implementation of the expansion of the integration process is most likely on the economic axis of the programme. In fact, according to experts, problems may be encountered within the course of the practical implementation of the goals and possibilities declared therein, because Russia's position would dominate during the unification process due to its greater economic potential, which would mean major radical adjustments in the economic model of Belarus. For instance, practical implementation in the tax system would

²⁴ Кто кого перехитрил? Все, что нужно знать о результатах года в интеграционных переговорах Беларуси и России, https://udf.by/news/main_news/204400-kto-kogo-perehitril-vse-chto-nuzhno-znat-o-rezultatah-peregovorov-putina-i-lukashenko.html [žiūrėta 2020-06-18]

²⁵ 31-я "дорожная карта" ударит по суверенитету Белоруссии Лукашенко против создания наднациональных органов в Союзном государстве, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2019-12-24/1_7760_belo-russia.html [žiūrėta 2020-06-18]; Лукашенко призывает Россию отказаться от имперских замыслов, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2020-04-03/100_ Belarus03042020.html [žiūrėta 2020-06-20]

encounter difficulties resulting from differences in the state systems: in Russia, as a federation, and in Belarus, as a unitary state; distribution of the local and state taxes as well as tax benefits. For example, according to experts, the unification of excise duty rates would pose major challenges to Belarusian alcohol, tobacco, and oil producers. On the other hand, it is not clear whether the tax system could function without a tax authority and a single budget. There are also more complex questions than easy answers in the field of energy, for example, the formation of gas and oil market would be particularly beneficial to Minsk, considering its pursuit for procurements at the prices applied to the Russian domestic market. As far as non-primary sources give grounds for making deductions, other action plans include abstract aspirations for harmonisation of laws rather than drawing up of common legal documents²⁶. Therefore, implementation of these plans would require a complex negotiation process on the technical level alone and, of course, considerable amount of time.

There are discussions of other topics of economic nature, which could turn into additional obstacles for acceleration of the integration process. The beginnings of new phenomena show up in the economic structure of Belarus as signs of the changing nature of the dependence on Russia. The Belarusian exports to Russia amount to almost 40 percent, and the biggest growth in trade volumes was in the field of services, in 2018 it increased by 20.6 percent up to 10.93 billion euros (12.19 billion US dollars). The field of information technologies alone accounted for more than 5 percent of the GDP by 2018, while Russia's share here accounts for 25 percent only. The official statistics in Belarus (we should bear in mind that the authorities tend to manipulate it) show that the private sector has been increasing its share in terms of employment and taxes paid to the budget on the state level²⁷. It is interesting that certain changes are reflected in the Index of Economic Freedom of Belarus when it was rated as moderately free for the first time in 2020 taking the 88th place and overtaking Russia (94th place). As a matter of fact, this probably resulted from other circumstances rather than the Government policy, because the decisions made still do not favour the market liberalization initiatives allowing speedier development of the private sector. In this regard Russia's energy subsidies amount to 10 percent of Belarus' GDP and enable funding the state energy sector on exceptional terms²⁸.

²⁶ Мираж конфедерации. Что реально в новом интеграционном проекте Минска и Москвы, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/79856> [žiūrėta 2020-06-20]

²⁷ Саморуков М., Поглощение, которого нет. Почему Кремль не может выбить уступки из Лукашенко, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80528> [žiūrėta 2020-06-22]

²⁸ „Country ranking“, 2010 Index of Economic Freedom, <https://www.heritage.org/index/country/belarus> [žiūrėta 2020-06-22]

Most importantly, A. Lukashenko is not interested in rapid expansion of Russia's economic role in his country, because this would limit his powers to a greater extent and in turn threaten his long-established image of the master and sovereign of the state.

In the context of this political project we could look into another additional circumstance, i.e., the public opinion in Russia and Belarus, despite of the obvious fact that the politicians seek to manipulate it and that it does not have a bigger weight influencing the decisions made by their state leaders, more precisely, the public positions are used selectively. Nevertheless, this shows the political background being formed in both states. We can discuss the public position based on the data of sociological surveys, regardless of their unreliability, because sociological services depend on the influence of politicians and the public is reluctant to express their positions even under the condition of anonymity applied to surveys.

The Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM) provides the following data: approximately 49 percent of the respondents were aware of the creation of the Union State of Russia and Belarus and 48 percent of them believed that friendly neighbourly mutual relations were sufficient, meanwhile 18 percent of them expressed support for the Union based on the status of equal entities, 17 percent of them supported accession of Belarus to Russia²⁹. The public survey conducted by Social Research Agency "Levada-Centre" founded by Yuri Levada provided different data: 13 percent of the Russians were in favour of the Union, 10 percent of them were in favour of accession of Belarus to Russia, 48 percent of them supported active economic cooperation, and 28 percent of them were in favour of the current status³⁰.

In 2019 the headlines in the Russian central press announced that 90 percent of the Belarusians were in favour of the "union (partnership)" with Russia based on the sociological survey conducted by Moscow State Institute of International Relations in Belarus, according to which 57.6 percent of the respondents were in favour of the union, 31.8 percent of them supported partnership, 10.2 percent of them expressed a neutral position, and only 0.2 percent said that the relations should be hostile in additions to the same number of the respondents who did not have their own opinion³¹.

²⁹ Россия и Белоруссия: новый формат интеграции? <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9634> [žiūrēta 2020-06-23]

³⁰ Почти четверть россиян поддержали объединение с Белоруссией, <https://www.levada.ru/2020/01/28/pochti-chetvert-rossiyan-podderzhali-obedinenie-s-belorussiej> [žiūrēta 2020-06-25]

³¹ 90 процентов белорусов выступили за союз с Россией, <https://rg.ru/2019/11/28/90-procentov-belorusov-vystupili-za-soiuz-s-rossiej.html> [žiūrēta 2020-06-24]

Belarus expressed a negative view in respect of this data referring to it as false. In turn, the position of the Belarusian authorities was reflected by the data provided by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences in 2019: 49.9 percent of the respondents saw Belarus as an independent state maintaining a close relationship with Russia, 36.1 percent of them were in favour of the equal Union, and 7.7 percent supported incorporation of Belarus into Russia. In addition to this, it was noted that since 2003 the number of people supporting independence of the state has increased by 14.9 percent, while the number of the supporters of the equal Union has decreased by 13.3 percent³².

The Centre for Belarusian Studies operating in Warsaw since 2010 conducted surveys in the same year, which produced different data. When asked which country it would be better to live in, the EU or Russia, 54.5 percent of the Belarusians spoke in favour of Russia, 29 percent of them preferred the EU, and 20 percent of them were undecided. In comparison to 2018, the number of the supporters of the union with Russia decreased by 9 percent, the number of those supporting the EU axis increased by 5 percent. When answering a slightly differently formulated question, i.e., what could be the relations between Belarus and Russia, 75.6 percent of the respondents said that the states could be independent, but friendly, without border control, visas and customs, meanwhile 15.6 percent of them were in favour of a common state³³.

Sociological data on the Belarusians' approval to the current close relations with Russia range from 31.8 to 75.6 percent. What could be said about such data equilibrium? It is evident that Russia engages in manipulations in order to influence the public opinion in both states. It can be said that the number of the supporters of the current format of the relations, as a partnership, in Russia is a predominant one and there is a potential for increase, provided that this cannot be denied by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre.

Thus, in case of the referendums on the Union State, it is unlikely that the supporters of the Union would get the required majority of votes in both states. On the other hand, the trends of society development in both states are not a favourable factor either, because the new generation, who grew up under conditions of independence, does not see the idea of living together as self-evi-

³²«90 процентов белорусов выступили за союз с Россией». Реальность или манипуляция? <https://news.tut.by/economics/663488.html> [žiūrėta 2020-06-24]; Половина белорусов выступает не за союзнические, а за партнерские отношения с Россией, <http://socio.bas-net.by/polovina-belorusov-vystupaet-ne-za-soyuznicheskie-a-za-partnerskie-otnosheniya-s-rossiej> [žiūrėta 2020-06-24]

³³ В Беларуси падает число сторонников союза с Россией — минус 9 пунктов за год; <https://news.tut.by/economics/655706.html><https://news.tut.by/economics/655706.html> [žiūrėta 2020-06-26]

dent, nor it is emotionally relevant to them, as opposed to their parents, who lived in the Soviet Union.

The 2020 crisis in Belarus when President A. Lukashenko lost the legitimacy of his constituents and the Western States did not recognise the presidential election as democratic, the Union State project was “frozen” temporarily until the political situation in the country stabilizes. We should support the opinion expressed by Carnegie expert Maxim Samorukov that Russia would try to implement its old goal of tying Belarus to itself, thus making sure that this state would eventually forget its orientation towards the West³⁴. Under these conditions Russia would implement measures which would prevent reinforcement of sentiments supported by the opposition, would help keeping the sentiments favourable to the big neighbour alive in the Belarusian society, and would take economic actions aimed at strengthening the positions of Russian capital in the neighbourhood. This would be in line with the objective specified in the Union Treaty, i.e., “to create a single economic space”, while the aforementioned forthcoming action plan describes specific measures in greater detail, such as the integration of the Belarusian gas transport systems into “Gazprom” or establishment of favourable conditions for transportation of “the goods reserved for foreign trade” (keeping in mind the Belarusian ones) by taking advantage of the capacity available at the port of Kaliningrad³⁵. These measures are planned to be implemented regardless of whether A. Lukashenko would remain in power in the near future or whether he would be forced to step down.

Concluding remarks

The integration of the Union State progresses slowly and at different rates on different axes, and different interests of the political leaders with accumulated exclusive powers have become one of the key factors preventing successful implementation of this project. This led to the formation of a particular model of bilateral relations, which is more beneficial specifically to the President of Belarus, because close cooperation with Russia in different sectors helps him maintain the model of the modern authoritarian rule developed by him and keep it stable. Thus we may claim that the signed Union State Treaty has gra-

³⁴ Максим Саморуков, Абхазия на стероидах. Какая стратегия у Кремля в Белоруссии, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82644> [žiūrėta 2020-07-05]

³⁵ Программа действий (Footnote 9)

dually lost its most important primary functional purpose over the course of two decades. Russia's attempt to resolve the creation of the Union State under the terms declared to Belarus has failed. The process of the creation of the Union State is not gaining the necessary momentum due to different interests of the states: Russia seeks full control over Belarus and the President of Belarus makes effort to maintain such a format of the integration, which would enable unobstructed prevalence of the political system model established by him and his ability to stay in power. This process could be described as a certain strategic partnership allowing flexible and non-binding actions (postponement of agreements for economic, security, and personal gain). It is evident that the principles of the state partnership are not based on the long-term interests of the states or even benefits to the public, but rather on the conjuncture of the state leaders seeking to keep the "status quo" of their powers by all means possible. Therefore, the prospects of the Union are extremely unclear and, probably, there are no possibilities for implementation thereof as long as these authoritarian leaders remain in power. Personal changes at the highest positions of power would mean a new revision of the integration process, not necessarily towards the creation of a united state.

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