Commentary
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Belarus and EAEU: Calculated rationale amid geopolitical shifts

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Summary

Belarus saw the EAEU as a strategic tool for economic gains and geopolitical balance, but shifting dynamics have partially challenged this approach. Nonetheless, the EAEU remains attractive to Minsk.

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Since the early 1990s – even before Aliaksandr Lukashenka came to power – Belarus has participated in all Russia-centric integration initiatives, including the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Community (EvrAsEc). The latter served as the precursor of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which Belarus co-founded in May 2015. **Minsk joined the EAEU out of pragmatic calculations**, even though with reservations, **and aimed to instrumentalize it for strengthening bargaining positions vis-à-vis Moscow and scaling up its foreign policy hedging when geopolitical realities still allowed it.**

Belarusian rationale for the EAEU

Belarus’s consistent interest in all formats of post-Soviet integration stems from at least two key factors. *First*, **the collapse of the USSR left the Belarusian economy deeply dependent on Russia,** more so than other former Soviet republics. Within the USSR, Belarus functioned as an industrial “assembly shop” producing finished goods. Most of its massive industry sector (about 60% of the GDP in the 1990s) hinged on **imported energy resources and intermediary components**. It also required access to relatively

low-competitive export markets. Those needs and long-standing complementarities between Belarusian and Russian production structures explain the **lingering attractiveness of bilateral and multilateral integration with Russia for Minsk.**

Second, Belarusian ambitions to diversify its foreign economic relations and, thus, reduce its dependence on Russia, have been **restrained since the mid-1990s by recurring political tensions with the West.** Those tensions resulted in **lasting Western sanctions**, weak legal foundations for cooperation with the EU, and persistent **mutual distrust between Minsk and Western capitals**.

> Under such conditions, **Belarus prioritized the opportunities, rather than the risks, of enhanced partnership with Moscow**, betting on its **geostrategic leverage vis-à-vis Russia as a way of bargaining**.

The strategy required a stable statutory foundation of economic relations with Moscow, which the latter could not change unilaterally, and level business conditions (including equitable access to energy resources) for economic entities in both countries. In this aspect, the EAEU looked particularly appealing for Minsk as, unlike earlier post-Soviet integration formats, it promised advanced institutions and a sophisticated legal framework based on transparent rules and economic pragmatism.

Thus, Belarus saw a chance to create an **economic equal playing field and place institutional limits on Russian power by enmeshing it in binding multilateral agreements**, somewhat resembling the EU model. Minsk's expectations from the EAEU looked identical to what smaller states normally seek in integration with larger economies. Notably, when ratifying the EAEU Treaty on 9 October 2014, the Belarusian parliament adopted a special statement (reservation). It conditioned the future fulfilment of treaty obligations by Belarus by the need *"to remove barriers, restrictions and exemptions in the trade of certain types of goods and the provision of certain types of services, primarily in relation to energy sources, products of assembly plants, liberalization of road transport and other sensitive positions."* Furthermore, Minsk (and Kazakhstan) made clear its determination to keep the EAEU as an economic project, not a political one.

International context and "integration of integrations"

Crucially, the **EAEU was established in a geopolitical climate markedly different from today**. Although tensions between Russia and the West were rising, **they yet had not obstructed major economic cooperation**, allowing smaller in-between states to

benefit from it. The visionary idea of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok still sounded as a feasible "partnership of choice".

Additionally, Belarus and the EU were actively normalizing their own relations, opening new collaboration avenues for Minsk. In that international context, the **Belarusian government perceived the EAEU not only as valuable in its own right but also as a potential institutional bridge to broader pan-European economic integration**. Minsk initiated and promoted the "integration of integrations" concept believing that a direct EAEU-EU dialogue would be most conducive to a close relationship with the EU.

> Belarusian interest in an economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok seemed apparent. It rested on an expectation that "the integration of integrations" would cement the advantageous agreements within the EAEU and further multiply their economic effects.

Quantitative studies even showed that Belarus would become a primary beneficiary if the EU and EAEU reached a major trade deal. Moreover, the idea aligned with Minsk's broader hedging strategy, aimed at **minimizing its geopolitical vulnerabilities, while maximizing geostrategic opportunities**. Bridging the Russian-Western divide was a key component of the strategy.

2020/2022 watershed

The August 2020 presidential elections in Belarus opened a new chapter in Minsk's foreign policy and its relations with Moscow, including within the EAEU. **The sanctions that the EU** introduced **following the elections and Belarus's own countermeasures eliminated the geopolitical manoeuvrability that had underpinned Minsk's previous hedging strategy**. As a result, Moscow remained virtually Belarus's only viable partner. The situation further deteriorated after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, particularly as Russian forces initially launched their offensive from Belarusian territory. Not only is the idea of operationalizing the EAEU as a link to closer relations with the EU dead now, but the multiple packages of post-2022 Western sanctions against Moscow and Minsk are **seriously** challenging **the EAEU's foundations and cooperation between its individual member states.**

> Yet, even under these new circumstances, Belarus's original calculations regarding the EAEU have at least partially materialized, which explains the country's continued desire to advance integration.

Importantly, its institutional frameworks have equipped Minsk with additional leverage in negotiating **fairer energy prices and access to the vast Russian market for Belarusian goods**. Also, macroeconomic assessments point to benefits that Belarus has seen in trade with other EAEU member states.

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