

Belarus and Customs Union: From Subject to Object of Integration

Beginning 1 July 2014, Belarusian authorities will forbid companies to produce, import or sell synthetic underwear.

New regulations came from the Customs Union and show how Russia forces its partners to adopt Russia's own rules of the game.

Belarus is stuck in the middle of the process of integration with Russia. If Belarus had previously been the subject of this process, it is now transforming into an object.

In the past, Lukashenka's regime showed more interest in the development of these projects, having seen long-term perspective for bolstering itself. Now the authorities are trying to stop as many of these integration projects from proceeding forward.

Belarus' lack of involvement into any other integration projects only deepens its dependence on Russia. However, the West still can help Belarus to emancipate it from its complicated relations with the Russian Federation.

Topics for Private Conversation

On 8 February, [Alexander Lukashenka](#) took a ski ride with Russian PM Dmitry Medvedev. The two leaders have plenty of subjects for private conversation, as the Kremlin is seeking the sale of Belarusian enterprises. Both of them looked cheerful, though the Belarusian leader had little reason to celebrate.

Two days earlier, on February 6, Dmitry Medvedev announced

that Russia could start its anti-dumping investigation against Belarusian dairy products. Belarus subsidises its own agriculture and guarantees its high quality and affordable price for all of its the dairy products. Over the past year [Belarus exported](#) dairy products to Russia for a total of about \$ 2bn. It might come to pass that the Russian authorities force Belarus to sell milk production.

Hitting dairy production can significantly damage Belarus' already deteriorating economy. The dependence Belarus' has on the market of the Customs Union with Russia and Kazakhstan, combined with the protectionist policies of the European Union, leave little chance for diversification.

It seems that the Belarusian authorities will soon put up for sale its domestic machine manufacturing. Last week, Prime Minister [Mikhail Miasnikovich](#) said that the level of consumer complaints towards Belarusian-produced tractors has grown by 25%, while the Belarusian Ambassador in France [Pavel Latushka](#) said that Belarusian equipment has often broke down, even during presentations abroad.

Self-criticism remains an unusual feat for the Belarusian authorities. Therefore, suspicions emerge that these statements must convince Belarusians about the necessity of the sale of the Minsk Automobile Plant and the Belarusian Automobile Plant to Russia.

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Such governmental regulations as the ban on the sale, importing and producing of synthetic underwear show that Belarus is stuck in its integration projects with Russia. The Kremlin, with increasing assertiveness, seeks retribution for the [financial assistance](#) that it provides to Lukashenka. The Belarusian authorities have few means at their disposal to resist the pressure. These problems are the result of Belarus'

off-balance foreign policy.

Belarus in the fold of Russian projects

Belarus remains Russia's main ally in its economic and political integration process, although the Belarusian role of as a partner is more of a lord-vassal relationship. The number of various integration initiatives in Russia may confuse even an experienced observer.

Belarus is one of the three founders of the [Commonwealth of Independent States](#). The leaders of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and Ukraine signed an agreement on 8 December 1991 in Belavezha Forest, in Western Belarus, that launched the CIS. Minsk hosts the headquarters of the organisation. This structure briefly pledged economic integration, but in the end it became little more than a discussion platform.

In 1993, Belarus joined the Russia-controlled Organisation of Collective Security Treaty. This military alliance unites Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Tajikistan and Belarus. In 2009, Belarus refused to sign the agreement on a joint rapid reaction force, as is “Russia undermining the economic security of Belarus.” Later on, the parties were able to resolve this conflict and Belarus signed the document with no further public protest.

Belarus has long promoted the idea of the Union State with Russia. The project began in 1997, has its own budget and built its own system of governing bodies. Lukashenka personally [became the leader](#) of the process and had even at one time planned to become the president of the Union State.

While Lukashenka saw great promise for himself, he was ready to integrate as much as possible. When Putin became president of Russia and Lukashenka lost his ambitions, the desire for the Belarusian authorities to get dissolve Belarusian independence similarly evaporated.

Politically, this project is more dead than alive, however it brings benefits to many ordinary Belarusians. For example, students from Belarus receive scholarships in Russian universities on the same terms as Russian citizens.

[The Eurasian Economic Community](#), established in 2001, includes Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The organisation became a preparatory structure to a common market of these countries. EEC gives Belarus stabilisation loans and requires the privatisation of enterprises in return. Formally, the international organisation gives loans for reforms, but de facto Russia gives credits and requires Belarusian companies to be sold off to Russia.

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The conversion from a partner to a vassal became most noticeable during the creation of the Customs Union between Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan, and the Common Economic Space consisting of the same countries. The first organisation originated in 2010, the second in 2012.

These structures lay the groundwork for the functioning of a common market. Belarusian officials have to make regulations, often harmful to Belarus and its national interests, which has become the main thrust of their criticism of Eurasian integration. However, there is nothing they can do except to adopt the laws that Russia requires of them.

Belarus looks like a wagon in a Russian train, one which is moving towards the full-fledged creation of the Eurasian Economic Union. The organisation will start its work in 2015.

Relations with Other Integration Processes

While the integration processes with Russia continue to evolve, Belarus lacks institutional linkages with other

structures. In 2009 Belarus became a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. However, Belarus has little say in it.

According to the European Integration Index 2013, Belarus has [the weakest relationship with the EU](#) among all the Eastern Partnership countries. To reconcile the EU, Belarus and other EP countries, Lukasz Byrski of Batory Foundation proposed to hold Eastern Partnership summits in Belarus and other EP countries.

Not only would European ministers or leaders come to visit with the leadership in Minsk, but also their large teams would follow. This way it would not only be [Lukashenka](#) or [Makei](#) who will have an opportunity to talk with Western leaders, but also the heads of the Belarusian ministries would be able to establish ties with their colleagues from the EU.

It is true that the middle-level officials have few, if any, meetings with their Western counterparts, but they meet with their colleagues from the East quite often. More contacts with EU partners could help Belarus emancipate in relations with Russia.