

Belarus and Armenia: pathways to multiple alignment

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Introduction

Small states situated between competing larger powers are in the classical literature of geopolitics supposed to align with one of these powers or are occasionally prompted to follow a balancing strategy, one which is hopefully supported by third parties. The resulting alignments divided between two competitors have often been called “spheres of influence.” In this exploratory study, we consider two small states attempting to align simultaneously with both sides of a competing couple, apparently for their own benefit or as a self-scripted enabler of more harmonious relations between the two competitors. How did they manage and how did others react? Can we compare and understand their different trajectories?

Belarus and Armenia are the only countries that are simultaneously a part of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the EU’s forum to discuss political association and economic relations with six post-Soviet states, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), an effort at political and economic integration of, at present, four states dominated by Russia¹. In the longer term, the EU and Russia certainly have quite a number of incentives to cooperate, but for the time being they also have a number of conflicting values, interests and points of view. These competing powers are aligned with a number of smaller states, two of them simultaneously aligned in both camps.

There are, nevertheless, some ambiguities concerning the EU’s status as a distinctive power and concerning the nature of the EAEU as defined and perceived. Russia is obviously aware of the EU’s recurrent initiatives to act in many areas of the field of international relations. But it is at the same time engaged with individual member states that are just as well recognised as actors in this field. Looking to the EU as just another intergovernmental organisation, the collection of Member States could also be seen as the sphere of influence of its most powerful member, Germany. In the end, from the Russian perspective, the EaP can as such be considered as an EU sphere of influence, notwithstanding the uncertain status of the EU as a stable power in international affairs; or as a further extension of the German sphere of influence. From the EU perspective, there is ambiguity to read the position of the EAEU. The EAEU has been formally modelled after the example of the EU. The institution has repeatedly expressed its wish to engage in dialogue with the European Commission. It would put the EAEU at the same footing as the EU and would open up the view of the EAEU as another possible geopolitical power, and not just as a Russian geopolitical ambition. But for all intents and purposes, Russia plays the domineering role in the organisation, much more unequivocally than Germany’s role in the EU.

¹ The EaP was inaugurated by the European Union on 7 May 2009. The Treaty for the establishment of the EAEU was signed on 29 May 2014 by the presidents of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and came into force on 1 January 2015.

Belarus and Armenia have apparently been able to achieve this position of double alignment. And they may well want to continue. What strategies have been pursued and are on offer? For both countries, I will consider the achievements accomplished so far and the projects designated for completion in the near future. I will separately consider the cases of Belarus and Armenia and then compare both countries, notably taking into account the regional context (mainly relations with neighbouring states) and the position of both countries in the history of relations between Russia and the EU as explaining factors for the differences among their attempted strategies.

‘Integration of integrations’ in Belarus

The President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, has been voicing the concept of the ‘integration of integrations’² for a number of years. In brief, he points to a potentially fruitful combination of memberships in two competing associations of political actors by at least one of these actors. According to two Belarusian scholars, the concept of ‘integration of integrations’ was originally coined in 2002 by the then Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Martynov³. But the Russian journalist Inozemtsev claims Russian researcher Sergei Karaganov as its originator in the mid-2000s. Russians, Western experts and senior Belarus officials have subsequently picked up the ‘integration of integrations’ concept.

Is this a concrete ambition? It seems to be primarily rhetoric. There is no concrete roadmap for implementation. Nonetheless, a more detailed view of its political application helps in exploring the political priorities that Belarus and Russia apparently entertain.

In October 2011, Vladimir Putin published an article in the Russian newspaper *Izvestia*. There, he argues that the last step of the Eurasian integration, after the establishment of the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Space and eventually the Eurasian Economic Union, should be a Eurasian Union that would “become one of the poles of the modern world and at the same time play the role of an effective ‘bundle’ between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region.”⁴ The end result of Eurasian integration would thus be a political entity. With this article, ideas about Russian-led Eurasian integration received new impetus. Later that month, Lukashenko wrote in the same newspaper in response to Putin: “I see the Eurasian Union as an integral part of the pan-European integration (...) It is from this perspective that the proposal of the ‘troika’ [Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan: the ‘founding fathers’ of the EAEU] about interaction of EAEU with the European Union comes. This

² Full text (in Russian) of President Lukashenko’s speech at the 70th UN General Assembly in 2015: <http://www.belta.by/president/view/vystuplenie-lukashenko-v-obschej-diskussii-70-j-sessii-generalnoj-assamblei-oon-164411-2015/>

³ Rusakovich, A.V. (2015) Otnosheniya s Germaniei vo vneshnepoliticheskom kurse Belarusi v kontekste globalnykh peremen na postsovetskom prostranstve (konets 2013-go - nachalo 2015 g.). In: Trudy Fakulteta Mezhdunarodnykh Otnosheniy BGU, Vypusk 6, 2015: 33: <http://www.elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/119627> ; Baichorov, A.M. (2014) Sozdanie Evrazijskogo Ekonomicheskogo Soyuza i problema “integratsii integratsiy”. In: Aktualnye problemy mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii i globalnogo razvitiya, Vypusk 2, 2014: 8: http://elib.bsu.by/bitstream/123456789/108303/1/baichorov_2014_Actual_prob IR_V2.pdf

⁴ Summary by RBC of Putin’s *Izvestia* article: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/10/2011/5703ecf29a79477633d3871b>

would ultimately result in the creation of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok”⁵. Putin reacted positively to the ideas of the Belarusian president⁶.

In 2015, Lukashenko and Putin both used the ‘integration of integrations’ concept in their respective UN General Assembly speeches⁷. But are they on the same page? Dragneva, Delcour, and Jonavicius bring us closer to an answer. In their view, Russia and Belarus are both pursuing an inter-bloc agreement between the EAEU and finally the EU (not merely the EaP), but for opposite reasons. Russia seeks to enhance its control over its close environment by asserting its role as a regional gatekeeper, whereas Belarus hopes to limit Russia’s control.⁸

Indeed, one can see this already in the 2011 articles. Putin wishes to pursue a Russia-led Eurasian integration. His desire is to merge the two unions, the EAEU and the EU, but only when the two unions are considered on equal footing. In contrast, Lukashenko wants to integrate the two unions as quickly as possible as Belarus would benefit both politically and economically from this ‘integration of integrations’. In this perspective the EaP is just a hidden stirrup to enter the EU. The final integration of the two associations is a major step further than the double alignment Belarus has so far achieved.

Any move toward the final ‘integration of integrations’ idea would also help to promote Belarus as a state that could serve as a platform to resolve disputes between major powers (expressed in the ‘Helsinki-2’ initiative). Serving in this mediator role, the ‘integration of integrations’ would support the image of Belarus as a neutral, multi-vector small state ‘in between.’ In addition, the current ‘integration’ of the EAEU and EaP would help Belarus as it would be able to extract benefits from both Russia and the EU (rents from Russia and technical assistance from the EU), keep the current political system running and preserve the sovereignty of the country. Finally, Belarus, as a transit country, would definitely benefit from further economic cooperation between the EU and EAEU.

According to EU sources, there has been progress in EU-Belarus relations in recent years. For many years, the EU has been calling its policy in relation to Belarus a policy of ‘critical engagement.’⁹ Examples of this progress include, but are not limited to, the active participation of Belarus in the multilateral platforms of the Eastern Partnership (Belarus is one of the most active participants in the Horizon 2020 program) and the concluded negotiations on a Mobility Partnership (which strengthens cooperation between the EU and Belarus in the area of migration, asylum and border management). Furthermore, the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue resumed its work in July 2015 and the EU-Belarus Coordination Group was established in 2016 to provide a forum for policy dialogue between senior officials¹⁰. This has been possible due to Belarus’ proactive role in the regulation of the Ukraine conflict in 2014 and 2015. This contribution led the EU to drop major sanctions against Belarus.

⁵ <https://news.tut.by/politics/254721.html>

⁶ <https://www.interfax.by/news/belarus/1100277>

⁷ <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/economy/integration-integrations-delusive-dream>

⁸ Dragneva, R., Delcour R., Jonavicius L. (2017) Assessing Legal and Political Compatibility between the European Union Engagement Strategies and Membership of the Eurasian Economic Union. In: EU-STRAT. ‘The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries - An Inside-Out Analysis and Strategic Assessment’, Working Paper No.7, November 2017: 21: http://www.diss.fu-berlin.de/docs/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/FUDOCS_derivate_000000009200/EU-STRAT-Working-Paper-No-7.pdf

⁹ http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/belarus/documents/news/council_conclusion_en.pdf

¹⁰ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/35606/eu-belarus-relations_en

Officially, Belarus seems to have sought a closer alliance with Russia: it is one of the ‘founding fathers’ of the EAEU that was launched in 2015 and it is still a part of the Union State project with Russia and a dedicated member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), an intergovernmental military alliance between six-post Soviet States (including Russia). However, in 2014, tensions between Russia and Belarus started to become noticeable. These increased tensions were the result of Russia imposing unilateral sanctions against Ukraine, thereby hurting the economic interests of fellow EAEU member Belarus, a major trading partner of Ukraine. Belarus strongly criticised Russia for these actions¹¹. Furthermore, when Belarus attended the EaP Summit in November 2017, Russia labeled it as a ‘traitor’¹².

Armenia and the CEPA

The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the EU and Armenia was signed on 24 November 2017. It proves that a country can successfully be simultaneously an active part of the EaP and EAEU. Even before the CEPA, some experts believed that Armenia could act as a possible bridge between the EU and Russia. After the agreement was signed, this idea became even more realistic¹³.

How can we interpret the signing of the CEPA? We have to look in the direction of both the EU and Russia. The CEPA seems to be a ‘light’ version of the agreement between Armenia and the EU from 2013. At the time, Armenia pulled out of signing the agreement with the EU as it decided to join the EAEU instead. The 2013 proposed EU agreement included free trade and access to the European Single Market in selected sectors. The CEPA does not include any free trade components between the EU and Armenia, because, as a member of the EAEU, Armenia is not in a position to negotiate independently on free trade agreements. Still, there are economic benefits for Armenia in the CEPA. Armenia remains a beneficiary of the GSP+ (Generalised Scheme of Preferences), a scheme supporting not only good governance but also sustainable development. The GSP+ allows fundamental economic freedoms for a participating country by allowing certain access to the European market, as a result of which it can sell a considerable amount of its goods to the European market for reduced or zero tariffs. Furthermore, a very important aspect of the CEPA is that it contains provisions for relatively far-reaching judicial reforms and the implementation of fundamental freedoms (this includes working more closely with civil society). Whether it will be effectively implemented remains to be seen. It is argued that the transition to a parliamentary system that is currently underway in Armenia may give an additional incentive to reform¹⁴. In light of the recent events in Armenia, the transition to a parliamentary system has indeed contributed to the incentive to reform, but for the wrong reasons: the transition itself has been criticised for being a democratically flawed process, which in turn sparked a public reaction that supported reforms.

¹¹ <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-tightens-trade-controls-amid-rising-tensions-with-belarus-57094>

¹² The November 28 episode of “Mesto Vstrechia” (“Meeting Place”), a popular political talk show on the Russian TV channel *NTV*, which broadcasts into Belarus, labelled Belarus as a “cheating wife” and a “prostitute,” and its president, Alexander Lukashenko, was accused of blackmail.

¹³ <http://www.tert.am/en/news/2017/06/14/richard-giragosian/2402298>

¹⁴ Kostanyan, H. and Giragosian, R. (2017) EU-Armenian Relations: Charting a fresh course. In: CEPS Research Report No. 2017/15, November 2017

Armenia's interests in EAEU membership and Russian-Armenian mutual interests are concentrated in the security and fossil energy sectors. Russian military personnel protect Armenia's border with Turkey, and Russia has a military base in the country. The Russian and Armenian governments recently signed a contract as a result of which Russia can use its Armenian military base until 2044. Armenia is overly dependent on Russian gas: 80% of its gas is imported from Russia. Gazprom recently signed a contract with the Armenian government as a result of which it has a monopoly to operate Armenian pipelines until 2043 with the guarantee that Armenia cannot annul or change their decision on this issue until 2043. Traditional energy and security are carefully excluded from the CEPA. In contrast, the EU is supporting Armenia in other areas: green energy, labour rights, and judicial reforms. Eventually fossil and green energy might well become rivals.¹⁵

The development of relations between Armenia and the EU goes back as far as 1999, when the EU signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Armenia. The CEPA is in essence an update of the 1999 PCA. Although there have been problems between the EU and Armenia in the past (with regards to human rights issues, for example), the EU has seen many improvements and already has some experience working together with Armenian civil society¹⁶. A major stumbling block for further development seems to be Armenia's excessive dependence on the Russian market; its products simply cannot compete on the European market¹⁷. Other issues are Armenia's dependence of Russia in the context of the Karabakh conflict and Armenian citizens attached to the Russian labour market.

Comparing Belarus and Armenia

At first sight, Belarus might seem better situated to gain a well-aligned position with the EAEU, as it is one of the 'founding fathers' of the organisation. However, its recent closer relationship with the EU has resulted in Russia's portrayal of Belarus as a 'traitor.' On the other hand, the EU's relationship with Belarus has not yet to become clear and stable. According to the EU, Belarus still has a long way to go with regards to human rights, democratic values, etc., until the EU can work with Belarus on a new level¹⁸.

Armenia seems perhaps to be in a less stable position in the EAEU than Belarus, since it joined the organisation a little later. Nevertheless, Armenia has aligned with Russia in accepting a number of long-term strategic agreements. Russia has also approved of Armenia's relation with the EU by means of the CEPA, a new positive step in relations between the EU and Armenia. Furthermore, Armenia's EU link is also backed up by its membership in the WTO.

This difference in relations with the EU between Belarus and Armenia can historically be brought back to the freezing of the PCA agreement with Belarus in 1996 (and its subsequent closer alliance

¹⁵ Kostanyan, H. and Giragosian, R. (2017) EU-Armenian Relations: Charting a fresh course. In: CEPS Research Report No. 2017/15, November 2017

¹⁶ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/armenia/>

¹⁷ Kostanyan, H. and Giragosian, R. (2017) EU-Armenian Relations: Charting a fresh course. In: CEPS Research Report No. 2017/15, November 2017

<http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/association-lite-armenian-take-on-integration-of-integrations/>

¹⁸ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/35606/eu-belarus-relations_en

with Russia) and the successful signing of the PCA with Armenia in 1999. Because of the 1999 PCA with Armenia, the CEPA could be signed in 2017. The new agreement of the EU with Belarus will be more like a PCA and not like a CEPA, because Belarus is not a member of the WTO. If the Belarus PCA had been signed in 1996, there could well have been something similar to a CEPA agreement with Belarus by 2017.

Still, why has Russia approved of the CEPA between Armenia and the EU and yet wholeheartedly disapproved of closer relations between Belarus and the EU? Another factor may, perhaps, be the amorphous Union State between Belarus and Russia as its number one priority (counting the number of times it is mentioned) in Russia's 2016 foreign policy doctrine. The EAEU is Russia's second priority. This is, according to some, because Russia thinks in concentric circles when it comes to foreign policy; it has a distinctly territorial approach¹⁹. While Russia has approved Armenia's CEPA, it refuses to support closer relations between the EU and Belarus, as Belarus is seen as too intimately connected to Russia's geopolitical objectives.

Nonetheless, other factors are also important here. The Minsk I and Minsk II agreements have given Belarus the opportunity to build on its new reputation as a reliable conflict negotiations platform. Good relations with its close neighbours, including mutually inimical Ukraine and Russia (notwithstanding the 'traitor' label), as well as the eastern members of the EU, Poland and the Baltic states, made this possible. This is not true for Armenia. Armenia has a longstanding complicated relationship with Turkey and Azerbaijan and because of this, it counts on the strategic support of Russia (arms deliveries). Thus, it is impossible for Armenia to be a conflict regulator in the region: Turkey and probably Azerbaijan just wouldn't come. In addition, it is important for the EU and Russia to have good relations with both Turkey and Azerbaijan. This is why, hypothetically, Armenia could never serve as the platform for mediating regional crises in the same way Minsk is at least rhetorically aspiring to this in its respective region²⁰.

Armenia has currently gained a better-aligned position in the EaP and EAEU simultaneously, partly due to the signing of the PCA with the EU in the 1990s. But Belarus is now more favoured to assist in improved cooperation between the EU and Russia, thanks to its newly acquired reputation as a negotiation site. For the time being, it doesn't have a roadmap for implementation or a clearly defined role for itself as a facilitator of dialogue. Both countries have current international policy profiles shaped more by circumstance than by strategy. Paradoxically, the only platform that has brought the EU and Russia together more or less constructively in recent years is the platform in Minsk in 2014 and 2015 that saw negotiations on the conflict in Ukraine, the current main stumbling block on the road to the free trade area 'from Lisbon to Vladivostok'. To say that Minsk as a result has acquired bargaining power in the region is too much of a contested statement. But that the ambition is there is a fact.

¹⁹ Meeting with a member of the academic of the Faculty of International Affairs of the Belarusian State University on 6 December 2017 in Minsk

²⁰ A comment made at the *Eastern Partnership Reflection Forum in the framework of the Belarusian Presidency of the CEI*, 10-12 December, Minsk

A meeting with a Belarusian foreign policy expert on 13 December 2017 in Minsk