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PROBLEM ASPECTS OF INTEGRATION OF BELARUS INTO THE “BELT AND ROAD” INITIATIVE

Abstract. *The article examines the problematic aspects of integration of Belarus into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) proposed by China. Particular attention is paid to Belarus's participation in the initiative, where key projects are considered. Economic constraints are identified, existing infrastructure challenges and the need to modernize the transport network for effective participation in the initiative are discussed. Social aspects are considered in the context of possible consequences for the local population. The conclusion summarizes the results of the study, emphasizing the need for an integrated approach to solving the identified problems.*

Keywords: *integration; integration issues; Belt and Road; Belarusian-Chinese partnership.*

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ПРОБЛЕМНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ ИНТЕГРАЦИИ БЕЛАРУСИ В ИНИЦИАТИВУ «ОДИН ПОЯС И ОДИН ПУТЬ»

Аннотация. *В статье рассматриваются проблемные аспекты интеграции Беларуси в инициативу «Один пояс и один путь» (ОПОП), предложенную Китаем. Выявлены экономические ограничения, обсуждаются существующие инфраструктурные вызовы и необходимость модернизации транспортной сети для эффективного участия в инициативе. Социальные аспекты рассматриваются в контексте возможных последствий для местного населения. В заключении подведены итоги исследования*

и подчеркнута необходимость комплексного подхода к решению выявленных проблем.

Ключевые слова: интеграция; проблемы интеграции; Один пояс и один путь; белорусско-китайское партнерство.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by China in 2013, is a strategic project aimed at creating a global infrastructure network connecting Asia, Europe and Africa. BRI includes two main components: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The initiative is designed to promote economic cooperation, trade and investment among participating countries. This article discusses the key benefits of BRI for participating countries. One of the main benefits of BRI is the opportunity for significant economic growth for participating countries. The initiative involves the construction of new infrastructure, including roads, railways, ports and logistics hubs, which helps improve transportation links. This opens up new markets for goods and services, which is especially important for developing countries seeking to diversify their economies. According to experts, investments in infrastructure can lead to an increase in the gross domestic product (GDP) of participating countries by 1–3 % per year. BRI promotes an increase in trade volumes between countries. The creation of new transport corridors and simplification of customs procedures help reduce the time and cost of delivering goods. For example, new railway routes between China and Europe significantly reduce the delivery time of goods from several weeks to several days. This makes goods more accessible and competitive in international markets.

The BRI initiative also creates attractive conditions for foreign investors. China actively offers loans and financing for the implementation of infrastructure projects, which allows countries to attract the necessary resources without significant costs. In addition, the creation of special economic zones and industrial parks within the BRI helps attract investment in various sectors of the economy, including manufacturing, technology and agriculture. Moreover, BRI helps strengthen international cooperation and interaction between countries. The initiative creates a platform for dialogue and exchange of experience in various areas, such as economics, culture and ecology. This allows participating countries to jointly address pressing issues such as climate change, security, and sustainable development.

In addition to economic benefits, the BRI also brings social benefits. Infrastructure development creates new jobs and improves the quality of life of the population. Education and healthcare projects implemented within the framework of the initiative contribute to improving the level of education and health of citizens. This is especially relevant for developing countries, where access to basic services may be limited. Thus, the initiative is a promising project

that can significantly change the economic landscape of the participating countries.

Belarus, located at the intersection of key transport corridors, actively participates in this initiative, which opens up new opportunities for economic growth and integration into international trade. In 2023–2024, Belarus continued to deepen economic ties with China within the framework of the BRI. China has become one of Belarus' largest trading partners, and the volume of bilateral trade in 2023 reached record levels, increasing by 18 % compared to the previous year. Belarus's main exports to China are agricultural products, machinery, and equipment. In turn, Belarus imports electronics, textiles, and construction materials from China. Chinese investment in the Belarusian economy has also increased significantly. In 2023, the total volume of Chinese investment in Belarus amounted to about 4 billion US dollars, which made it possible to implement several large infrastructure projects, including the construction of logistics centers and industrial parks. One of the most significant projects was the Great Stone Industrial Park, which attracts foreign investors due to tax incentives and a convenient geographic location. Belarus is actively developing its transport infrastructure within the framework of the BRI, which helps improve logistics links between Europe and Asia. The construction of new railway routes connecting Belarus with China via Russia and other CIS countries has begun. This will reduce cargo delivery time and increase the competitiveness of Belarusian goods in international markets. In addition, Belarus is expanding its port capacities on the Western Dvina River and in Brest, which also contributes to an increase in cargo volumes. Because of these efforts, the country is becoming an important transit hub within the BRI, which opens up new opportunities for the development of logistics and trade. In 2023–2024, active cooperation between Belarus and China in the field of education and science is observed. Belarusian universities have begun to accept more foreign students, which promotes cultural exchange and deepens mutual understanding between peoples. In addition, joint scientific projects in the field of technology and innovation contribute to the development of high technologies in the Republic of Belarus. Deepening economic ties with China, developing transport infrastructure and social cooperation create favorable conditions for sustainable development, but in order to achieve maximum results, projects should be further implemented within the framework of the BRI initiative.

1. Economic constraints.

One of the main problems is the high degree of Belarus's dependence on Chinese investment. In 2023, the volume of Chinese investment in the Belarusian economy reached about 4 billion US dollars. Despite the positive impact on infrastructure development and job creation, such dependence creates risks for the country's economy. If the political or economic situation in China changes,

Belarus may face an investment deficit and a slowdown in economic growth. Although Belarus is actively developing transport infrastructure, the number of projects being implemented within the BRI initiative remains limited. In 2023–2024, only a few large projects were completed, such as the Great Stone Industrial Park. However, for full integration into the BRI, it is necessary to significantly increase the volume of investment in infrastructure, including roads, railways and logistics centers. The lack of such projects limits the opportunities for increasing cargo flows and economic benefits from participation in the initiative. At the same time, Belarus faces stiff competition from neighboring countries such as Poland and Lithuania, which are also seeking to attract Chinese investment and become key transit hubs within the BRI. In 2024, Poland increased the volume of Chinese investment in its infrastructure, which creates additional challenges for Belarus. In order to remain competitive, the country needs to improve the business environment and actively attract investors. Moreover, Western sanctions lead to the isolation of the Belarusian economy and limit access to international capital markets. This creates additional difficulties for the implementation of joint projects with China and may reduce the interest of Chinese investors in the Belarusian market.

2. Logistics problems.

One of the main problems is the insufficient development of logistics infrastructure. As of 2023, Belarus has a number of modern transport facilities, but many of them require modernization. For example, the condition of railways and roads does not always meet international standards. According to the Ministry of Transport and Communications of Belarus, about 30 % of public roads are in unsatisfactory condition. This creates difficulties in the transportation of goods and reduces the competitiveness of the country as a transit hub. In 2023–2024, the construction of several logistics complexes was planned in Belarus, but the implementation of these projects is slow, since there are not enough logistics centers in the country. Now, only a few large logistics complexes are operating, such as the “Logistics Center BELTEX”, which does not allow meeting the growing demand for logistics services. Lengthy customs procedures and tariff policy are also significant barriers to effective logistics. According to the World Bank, Belarus ranks 114th out of 190 countries in the ease of doing business index, which indicates the presence of administrative barriers. Simplifying customs procedures and reducing tariffs for cargo transportation can significantly improve the logistics situation and attract more investment in the sector. In addition, Belarus faces competition from other countries, such as Poland and Lithuania, which are seeking to become key transit hubs within the BRI.

3. Social issues.

One of the main social issues is the changing employment structure. BRI projects require significant labor costs, which may lead to an increase in labor

demand. However, in 2023–2024, there is a shortage of qualified specialists in logistics, construction and project management. As a result, Belarus may face the need to attract foreign workers, which will lead to an increase in labor migration. According to the National Statistical Committee, in 2024 there were over 33 thousand labor migrants in Belarus. This is 2.5 times more than in 2023, which creates additional challenges for social integration and adaptation of migrants. Integration into the BRI may exacerbate social inequality. While major cities like Minsk and Gomel may benefit from new investment and jobs, regions with less developed infrastructure may be left behind in economic growth. According to a World Bank study, differences in living standards between the central and peripheral areas of Belarus may increase, leading to social tensions. As of January 2024, unemployment in rural areas was 2.4 %, 0.9 % higher than in cities. Integration into the BRI may also affect the cultural and social aspects of the lives of Belarusians. Attracting foreign investors and workers may lead to cultural mixing, but this may also raise concerns about the loss of national identity. In 2025, an increase in cultural events and exchanges is expected, but there is a risk of conflicts between different cultural groups. A comprehensive approach to addressing these issues is needed, including developing strategies to improve employment, reduce social inequality, protect the environment, and preserve cultural identity. Only by considering these factors will Belarus be able to make the most of the BRI potential and ensure the sustainable development of its society.

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