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INITIATIVES OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS IN THE UNITED NATIONS ON GLOBAL SECURITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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The article is devoted to the main initiatives of Belarus in the United Nations on global security and sustainable development. The reasons and content of these initiatives are analyzed. Two groups of proposals are outlined. The first of them tackle the social and economic challenges. Belarus comes from its position of a regional leader in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals. The second group of initiatives directly or indirectly connected with the issues of global security. The impact of 2022 Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict on Belarusian initiatives is also revealed.

Keywords: Republic of Belarus; United Nations; Helsinki-2; global security; integration of integrations; sustainable development.

The Republic of Belarus has been an active member of the United Nations since 1945, during the Soviet period and after gaining independence. Belarus has repeatedly come up with a number of initiatives in the UN main bodies and specialized agencies aimed to achieve global goals. These proposals stemmed both from the positive experience of the development of the Belarusian state, as well as from regional challenges.

Attention to the social matters in the Soviet period of history also affected the character of these initiatives. At the 2005 UN summit, the President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko put forward the initiative to form a broad international partnership to combat human trafficking. In 2010, the General Assembly adopted the United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons [1]. In line with it, the UN Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, was created. Belarus initiated the establishment of a Group of Friends United in Combating Trafficking and the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons. The proposals in this sphere have become a hallmark of Belarus' activities in the UN.

The aggravation of the political and military situation in Eastern Europe, which began after the change of government in Kyiv in 2014 as the results of protests, the beginning of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine and the establishment of Russian control over the Crimean Peninsula forced the government of the Republic of Belarus to put forward a number of important initiatives on confidence and security building measures. In addition to platform for peace negotiations between the conflicting parties in 2014–2015 and the Helsinki-2 initiative which was announced by Alexander Lukashenko at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly session in 2017, the Republic of Belarus took the initiative to link a wide range of integration associations – not only the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union, but also the Chinese initiative “One Belt, One Road”, as well as others. This idea was voiced in the speech of the head of the Belarusian state at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015. “If we manage to avoid unnecessary and dangerous confrontation between

integration models, to achieve their compatibility, complementarity, then eventually we will be able to create a global integration structure that would cover our entire planet, firmly connecting various regions and continents” [2], the President of the Republic of Belarus emphasized.

The government of the Republic of Belarus sought to create the image of a donor of regional and global security. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized several conferences on combating terrorism. The first of them, High Level International Conference “Preventing and Countering Terrorism in the Digital Age” was co-organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and took place in Minsk on October 9–10, 2018. Under-Secretary-General Vladimir Voronkov, the Head of the United Nations Office of Counterterrorism, as well as Under-Secretary-General Yury Fedotov, the Executive Director of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and Director-General of the UN Office in Vienna, both participated in this high-level meeting [3]. A year later, on September 3–4, 2019, the similar conference was held in Minsk once again. This time the event was co-organized by the United Nations Office of Counterterrorism under the label “Countering terrorism through innovative approaches and the use of new and emerging technologies”. An invitation to attend this conference was also sent to the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, but due to the tight schedule, the visit of the head of the organization did not take place.

The conference discussed innovative methods of combating the terrorist threat, including strengthening cooperation in the field of information security. President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko participated in the inaugural panel of the conference. He emphasized that successful preventing and combating terrorism can be implemented by concluding interstate and other agreements on ensuring information security. “From our point of view, the key elements of such agreements could be the ideas of digital sovereignty and neutrality, as well as countries’ non-interference in each other’s information resources”, he said [4]. The head of Belarus put forward an initiative to set up a “belt of digital good neighborhood”: “I would be glad if today we launch a “digital security wave” from Minsk, designed to strengthen ties between countries, increase the effectiveness of joint combating terrorism and other threats in cyberspace” [4].

Nevertheless, the Belarusian crisis of 2020 had a significant impact on character of further initiatives of the official Minsk in the global arena. The crisis became not only a milestone in the history of Belarus, but also a major regional event that marked the beginning of a sharp deterioration in the military-political situation in Eastern Europe. In such conditions the appropriateness of new initiatives in the field of regional and global security has decreased. For this reason, the subsequent initiatives of the Republic of Belarus in the United Nations have mainly focused on the challenges of a social and economic nature.

Using its experience as a regional leader in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the Republic of Belarus initiated the high-level online conference “Harnessing Inter-Regional Integration for the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals” as the UNCTAD15 pre-event. This forum was held on May 20, 2021. The event was attended by high-level representatives of the states – presidencies

of various regional integration associations from around the world (the Eurasian Economic Union, the European Free Trade Association, MERCOSUR, ASEAN, the Andean Community and CARICOM), as well as by heads of secretariats of international organizations (the World Trade Organization, the World Intellectual Property Organization, UNCTAD, UN Office in Geneva, all UN Regional Commissions). In his opening remarks, the Foreign Minister of Belarus V. Makei stated that “amid the complex geopolitical situation in the world and growing regional tensions as well as application of wider neo-protectionist and unilateral coercive measures, we urgently need a universal unifying agenda more than ever... Interdependency of integration entities will allow to avoid harmful competition of integrations and emergence of new dividing lines in the world” [5]. As a result of the conference, it was decided to create a platform for UNCTAD to give the opportunity for representatives of various regional integration projects to exchange experience in the best practices of institution building and external cooperation mechanisms. Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus Yury Ambrazevich believes that the Eurasian Economic Union can lead the UN in promoting the topic of “integration of integrations” [6].

Official representatives of Belarus started to draw additional attention to social and economic issues in the United Nations after the tightening of sanctions pressure from Western countries. In the summer of 2021, the European Union and the United States (together with the United Kingdom and Canada) for the first time have imposed sectoral economic sanctions against the Republic of Belarus. The sanctions packages were even more tightened at the beginning of the winter of 2021, after the escalation of the migration crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border. In early February 2022, Lithuania blocked the transit of Belarusian exports through its territory. Thus, the key Belarusian export product, mineral potash fertilizers, lost the main transportation channel. It has caused not only direct economic damage to the Republic of Belarus, but also affected the global market of fertilizers. During a meeting with the UNCTAD Secretary-General Rebeca Grynspan in mid-February 2022, then-Permanent Representative of the Republic of Belarus to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva Yury Ambrazevich drew attention to the unacceptability of the sanctions policy [7].

After the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict in February of 2022 and the tightening of the sanctions policy against Russia and Belarus, the imposition of an embargo on the import of Russian goods in the largest markets and the simultaneous blocking of Ukrainian products in ports, a number of the poorest countries faced the prospect of famine. On May 26, 2022, Deputy Permanent Representative of Belarus to the United Nations Pavel Yevseyenko said at the UN Commission on Population and Development session that “the use of food and supply chains as an instrument of political pressure and economic blackmail is the height of cynicism and deliberate provocation” [8]. Belarusian diplomat called upon Western countries to think about the economic consequences of the sanctions policy. At the beginning of May 2022, the problem of global food security was taken into account in the UN Secretariat. “A meaningful solution to global food insecurity requires reintegrating Ukraine’s agricultural production and the food and fertilizer production

of Russia and Belarus into world markets, despite the war”, stated UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the Security Council meeting on Ukraine [9].

On May 20, 2022, the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Belarus Valentin Rybakov participated at UN Security Council open debate on conflict and food security. Diplomat emphasized that the authors of the restrictions are busy looking for reasons to impose new sanctions, forgetting about the numerous conflicts in other regions of the world. “The authors of such sanctions were not ready to listen then and are not listening now to either international institutions, or experts, or representatives of countries where hunger and malnutrition threaten the survival of nations. ... Today, the UN Secretary-General noted a 30 percent increase in the price of staple foods, which poses a direct threat to people in Africa and the Middle East” [10]. The same day Valentin Rybakov also met with the UN Secretary-General. The sides discussed the issues of international food security in the context of geopolitical tensions and sanctions pressure [11].

A special personal message from the President of the Republic of Belarus to António Guterres was handed over by Valentin Rybakov. In this letter, Alexander Lukashenko emphasized that Belarus has always advocated strengthening global and regional security, as proved by the country’s numerous initiatives, including the Helsinki-2 on the need for a broad international dialogue on security. “Unfortunately, in a fundamental sense, we were not heard. The security architecture in Europe has failed. The unwillingness of Western countries to work on strengthening common and indivisible security, their disregard for legitimate interests and ignoring the concerns of other partners, primarily Russia, first resulted in trade, economic and information wars, and then provoked a hot conflict on the territory of Ukraine” [12]. The President of Belarus stressed that it is necessary to abandon the destruction of the UN and multilateral cooperation mechanisms, which is the result of the current policy of limiting the participation or even exclusion of individual countries from their work. “The time has come not even for Helsinki-2, but for a truly global and defining process involving all the leading international players in the spirit of San Francisco. The outcome of this process should be clear and transparent agreements on the rules of the new world order, which will provide security guarantees to all members of the international community for the foreseeable future” [12].

Thus, the initiatives of the Republic of Belarus in the UN can be divided into two groups. The first of them tackle the social and economic challenges. These proposals are aimed at raising the standards of well-being of people around the world. Belarus comes from its position of a regional leader in this area, shares its own experience in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals, and also coordinates its initiatives with other member states of the Eurasian Economic Union. The experience in social and economic matters accumulated in the Soviet period also plays significant role.

Another group of initiatives directly or indirectly affects the issues of global security. The trigger for such proposals was exacerbation of political and military tensions in the Eastern European region in the 2010s, which lead to the cooling of relations between Russia and Western countries. Success in the implementation of the initiatives of this group is ambiguous: it does not depend on the will of the Republic of

Belarus, but rather on the current balance of power and the willingness of the most powerful regional players to jointly solve security problems. In particular, the Belarusian initiatives of the 2010s were ignored due to the unfavorable climate of international relations in Eastern Europe. As of today, at the time of the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict, the problems of food security have become aggravated. The success of new peace initiatives will show up when direct and indirect parties to the conflict perceive that the rising costs of the conflict outweigh the benefits of its continuation.

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THE IMPACT OF MODERN FINANCIAL TECHNOLOGIES ON THE INTERNATIONAL BANKING MARKET

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The article examines the essence and features of modern financial technologies in the context of digital transformation of the financial market. The main results of the influence of financial technologies on the international banking services market are revealed. Digital banks (not traditional banks) are briefly described. The prospects for the development of the banking sector in the digital economy are analyzed.

Keywords: banking sector; financial technologies; digital transformation; digital services.

Like all branches of the economy, the financial sector is currently undergoing a digital transformation, one of the manifestations of which is the so-called financial and technological revolution, or fintech revolution. The digital transformation of the financial industry is a special case of the digital transformation of the world economy. In finance, the trends that are inherent in digitalization in general are being implemented.

In the digital transformation of the financial industry, two main trends can be distinguished: the first of them is associated with the entry of technology companies into the financial services market, and the second is with the digitalization of traditional financial organizations, their development of innovative digital technologies in order to increase the efficiency of their activities. Together, these two trends gave a synergistic effect, which allowed the introduction of innovative business organization models in the financial market.

Fintech. Let's first consider what innovative financial technologies are and, consequently, how its influence the transformation of the financial services market.

The concept of “financial technologies” or “fintech” is relatively new. The Basel Committee on Banking Supervision defines fintech as “technologically enabled financial innovation that could result in new business models, apps, processes or products with an appropriate significant effect on financial markets and institutions and the provision of financial services”.

The term “fintech” is also used in relation to startups which actively use breakthrough technologies in the provision of financial services. Traditional banks and insurance companies are also introducing new technologies, which also makes them players of the fintech market. Therefore, in a strict sense, fintech denotes innovative financial services provided by medium and small enterprises, and in a general sense – all financial innovations integrated in the market by both large banks and small firms.

The following trends contributed to the rapid development of fintech:

1. Changes in consumer behaviour, manifested through the growing penetration of smartphones, the desire to share experience with a wide range of people, increasing

requirements for the convenience of using services, the quality of information and the speed of its receipt.

2. The growing popularity of social networks, which enabled people to offer new types of financial services based on information exchange between users, for example, crowdfunding, peer-to-peer transfers, etc.

3. Development of data processing technologies, which led to the emergence of fundamentally new services: peer-to-peer lending, online scoring based on “big data” technology, algorithmic trading, etc.

4. The rising market competition. The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 caused tougher regulation of the banking sector, which arose consumers’ interest in the services offered by fintech start-ups.

5. Reduction in financial services value. ICT introduction has reduced client servicing costs due to elimination of a wide network of physical branches and transition to electronic interaction with both the consumer and the regulator.

6. The increased availability of financial services through introduction of remote service mechanisms and lowering the threshold level of entering the market.

7. The increased transparency of the economy and the enhanced efficiency of measures to combat money laundering and terrorism financing. New technologies, such as in-depth analysis of transactions and customer activity data collection allow more substantial and targeted counteraction against illegal activities.

8. The vigorous growth in the using of fintech services based on smartphones and electronic wallets, which occurred, first of all, in China and India with their low penetration levels of traditional banking services. The number of consumers of fintech services grew at the cost of those who were not covered by traditional banking services.

9. Generation Z increase. According to Facebook and MasterCard research, more than 90% of young people in the United States do not trust the traditional banking system and use new fintech services provided outright by bigtech and fintech companies (most often fintech startups).

10. Therapid growth of investment flows into the fintech sector: if in 2011 the volume of financing for fintech startups was \$6 billion, in 2019 investments reached a record \$213.8 billion. The results of 2020 are expected to be low, the total volume of investments has decreased to \$124.9 billion, but in 2021 there was a rapid recovery of financing to \$210.1 billion [1, p. 6].Turning to the situation in 2022, the market has seen a reduction in quarterly financing of fintech companies by 18% to \$ 28.8 billion, despite the fact the number of transactions reached a record level of 1,399 transactions – an increase of 7% compared to the 1st quarter of the previous 2021.

The authoritative German website Statista considers the fintech industry as consisting of five segments:

digital payments for goods and services by using credit cards or mobile e-wallets (f.i. PayPal, AliPay, ЯMoney, QIWI, ecoPayz, etc.);

neobanking;

alternative financing of business clients (crowd investing and crowdfunding);

alternative lending to businesses (crowdlending) and private borrowers (peer-to-peer lending);

digital investments and assets and wealth management [2].

Fintech adoption rates vary geographically depending on several factors: firstly, Internet penetration, especially mobile, plays a decisive role; in second place is the degree of trust in technology firms and the ability to access traditional financial services; and finally, it is necessary to take into account the volume of local investments in fintech, which, in turn, depends on many regional variables.

According to Statista, as of the end of 2021, there were 10755 fintech companies in North and South America, 9323 in the EMEA region (Europe, Middle East and Africa), and 6268 in the Asia-Pacific region [2].

Nevertheless, the United States is the leader in the number of fintech companies worldwide. Most of the well-known American fintech companies are located in California and New York, the most prominent of them are: Venmo, Stripe, OnDeck, Lending Club, Prosper, SoFi, Betterment and Wealthfront. The two most actively funded fintech startups in the US are Robinhood and SoFi (\$5.6 billion and \$3 billion respectively). Robinhood is supported by key investors – Frontier Tech Ventures, Index Ventures, Ribbit Capital and Social Leverage, while SoFi is supported by DCM Ventures and Discovery Capital. The leaders are followed by Kabbage and Stripe with funding of \$2.5 billion and \$2.2 billion accordingly.

Several American banks have invested in fintech, with Goldman Sachs leading with 20 projects, CapitalOne (13) and Citigroup (12). In addition, American banks have created innovation centers specializing in mobile banking, blockchain and cryptocurrencies, wearables, the Internet of things, next-generation trading, authentication, biometrics, augmented reality and big data [2].

The authoritative Forbes publication in June 2021 for the sixth time presented the Fintech 50 rating – a list of the most innovative fintech startups in 2021. Many got into it because of the pandemic, as users accelerated the transition to digital payments and online purchases over the past year, as well as actively engaged in trading shares and cryptocurrencies. To qualify for Fintech 50, startups must have a head office or conduct main operations in the US and be private on the publication date. The largest total amount of financing was attracted by the companies: Robinhood – \$5600 million, Klarna – \$2200 million, Stripe – \$2200 million, Chime – \$1500 million, Next Insurance – \$886 million, Brex – \$857 million, Plaid – \$745 million, Hippo Insurance – \$709 million, Carta – \$692 million, Blend – \$685 million [3].

Digital Banks (Neobanks). Fintech impact brought about a new generation of banks – neobanks; their popularity has grown rapidly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The term “neobank” was first used in 2017 to describe FinTech providers of financial services.

Rather often neobanks are also called digital banks, online banks or challenger banks. Digital banks are financial institutions which provide banking services exclusively online. They do not use branches for customer service and are only available through websites on computers or smartphone and tablet applications.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology describes three innovation waves in digital banking: “fundamentalists”, “digital hybrids” and “fully digital banks”.

Appeared in the 1970s, the “fundamentalists” imitated the digitization of their technological processes, limited themselves to an attractive website, SMS messages to

the clients' phones and personal electronic office. But the main financial processes stayed fairly traditional.

Appeared in 1996, "Digital hybrids" used a special ICT infrastructure with an electronic interface, which still relies on centralized information repositories with vulnerable data transfer protocols and a classic bank back-office.

"Fully digital banks" use modern ICTs and are closely integrated into the lives of modern people who constantly use mobile devices on the Internet [4].

MIT experts believe that a digital bank is a bank with a full set of modern facilities (to suit a consumer, an investor and the bank itself). Digital banks have the following advantages:

- the client gets access to banking services 24/7 from anywhere in the world;

- lack of physical branches cuts costs. Moreover, the reduction of operating costs lowers the charge for banking services;

- the clients' time is saved – they perform all operations online at any convenient time, thereby the territorial access of the clients expands;

- the bank is forming an image of a modern technologically advanced organization offering a suitable level of service [4].

A clear advantage of digital banks is their low tariffs, high speed and better security of service. Another characteristic feature is integration into social networks and digital marketing on their basis.

The first digital banks began to appear in Europe in 2015. The new fintech sphere was pioneered by financial companies in the UK, Germany, France, and Finland, from where the new trend spread worldwide. According to the Exton portal, in 2018 there were 60 digital banks in the world. And in August 2021, the Boston Consulting Group counted 249 digital banks (operations in which are carried out exclusively in digital format).

The top-5 countries with active digital banking markets include Great Britain, South Korea, Sweden, France and Brazil.

Among the most popular digital ones are: Atom Bank, Coconut, Countingup, OakNorth Bank and Wise (Transferwise) (UK), Chime, Current, Aspiration, Varo and MoneyLion (USA), CurrencyFair (Ireland), Vivid Money and N26 (Germany), Lunar (Denmark), Anytime, Qonto, Shine and Soshop (France), WeBank and MyBank (China), Tinkoff Bank, TouchBank (Russia).

According to the White Sight portal, the five most valuable digital banks in the world for 2021 included: Nubank (Brazil) with market cap of \$45 billion, Revolut (UK) – \$33 billion, Chime (USA) – \$25 billion, Tinkoff (Russia) – \$21 billion, SoFi (USA) – \$12 billion respectively. As, over the past three years, Latin American fintech Nubank has attracted about 50 million customers, where 72% of them are active users. Having conducted an IPO for \$2.6 billion. At the end of 2021, having launched an e-commerce platform, as well as entering the domestic and international markets thanks to the acquisitions of six large firms, such as the American consulting company Cognitect and the Brazilian instant payment platform Spin Pay, Nubank deservedly received the title of the most valuable bank in Brazil and the most valuable independent digital bank in the world [5].

Digitalization of traditional financial organizations. The second trend of the digital transformation of the financial industry is the digitalization of the traditional banking sector. To maintain competitive ability, banks should pay much more attention to digitizing their services in order to stay afloat, expand their business, develop closer interaction with the clients and understand their preferences, reduce operating costs and meet client needs at once, increase competitiveness by providing new digital services to solve the clients' problems.

Therefore, let us highlight the main directions of digital transformation of traditional banks:

- digital banking – rendering financial services through mobile and online platforms. This issue will be discussed in more detail in the following question;

- electronic payment systems which charge a percentage or commission from the goods seller (borrower) for using the platform of this payment system;

- instant online lending which provides payday loans to customers;

- remote identification of customers by fingerprints. Other biometric data are also used: voice sample, vessel pattern of a finger, identification by selfie. Remote identification facilitates launching a full-fledged electronic document circulation;

- processing of natural human speech, which includes speech recognition, understanding and speech generation;

- using the bank's AI. Basing on the bank's own data and the information from external sources the bank's AI system creates a detailed image of the company, its subsidiaries, owners, customers, and jurisdictions., the AI conducts a thorough client verification instead of the security department;

- roboadvising is an automatic service providing robot advisors which select investment assets and manage a portfolio [6, p. 52].

The Banking Sector Development Prospects in the Digital Economy. The development and spread of digital financial technologies in the market creates both new opportunities and new risks for banks.

Experience shows that the introduction of financial technologies into the key processes of a traditional bank enables their cost reduction by 40–60%. The customer service of the bank is improved by shortening the time of delivery of a product or service, reducing in the number of documents and contacts of the client with the bank. As a result, customer loyalty increases, and the customer base expands.

The digital banking market leaders are already applying new approaches to the organization of big data based on a single platform. The methods of in-depth analysis of large amounts of data allows the largest banks to improve the accuracy of credit scoring, form individual offers to customers and allocate resources effectively. Additionally, major banks are quickly re-formatting their branches, cutting down their number, installing equipment for clients to carry out most operations independently, and focus the efforts of the staff on consulting and sales.

Digital technological diffusion in the financial sector also accompanied by certain risks. According to the results of a PwC survey, 83% of respondents from traditional financial services organizations believe that they are at risk of losing part of their business. In the case of banks, the indicator is even more impressive – 95%. PwC analysts named the financial services sector segments which are most exposed to

revolutionary changes in 2020. They include up to 28% of the banking and payments market and up to 22% of the insurance, asset management and private capital management market.

According to Citigroup, in the next 10 years, about 800 thousand employees of the banking services sector will lose their jobs due to the introduction of new technologies. In addition to bank employees, the commercial real estate sector will also be affected when banks start an overall branch closing in different cities.

According to McKinsey, traditional depository and credit services are most vulnerable: by 2025, banks may lose from 40% to 60% of income in this sphere.

Mobile payments is a separate problem. Up to 35% of this sphere can be taken over by such big-tech companies as Apple and Google, because their payment services make paying for purchases in stores quick and easy.

According to a McKinsey study, in the context of further growth of fintech sector and digital technologies, traditional banks have several possible ways of development. The most universal option is to turn traditional banks into digital ones which provide a wide range of financial products and services. Another one is to switch from the classical bank format to building up partnership with other companies. Finally, the third option for banks is to focus on providing basic services, such as balance managing and transactions [7, p. 252].

Therefore, the banking sector is currently undergoing a digital transformation, within the framework of which two main trends can be distinguished: the entry of technology companies into the financial services market and the digitalization of traditional financial institutions, which are actively introducing new modern financial technologies into their work. There is a formation and development of a banking business model completely different from the traditional one, where the key aspect is flexibility and adaptation to rapidly changing market conditions of both traditional industry players and fintech companies.

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E-COMMERCE MARKET: DYNAMICS, MAIN TRENDS AND KEY PLAYERS

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The article defines the essence and types of e-commerce. The state of international electronic commerce is analyzed, its features are investigated. Trends are considered and prospects for the development of the global e-commerce market are evaluated.

Keywords: e-commerce; information and communication technologies; international trade; online stores.

One of the main components of the global spread of information and communication technologies is the penetration of the Internet into all spheres of the economy. In the last 20 years, the range of commercial relations through the global network has significantly expanded. It includes such components as goods and services sale and purchase, funds transfer, digital information trade, etc. All these operations are integrated in the concept of “e-commerce”.

The WTO interprets this term as follows: “E-commerce is sale or purchase of goods and services carried out through computer networks using methods specifically designed to receive or place orders. Despite the fact that goods or services are ordered electronically, payment and final delivery of goods or services do not necessarily have to be carried out online” [1].

The World Bank gives a broader interpretation of the concept “e-commerce”. It does not limit it to electronic purchase and sale transactions, as it includes any kind of using electronic means to increase the efficiency of economic activities of enterprises, i.e. manufacturing and promotion of products in the market, setting up contracts, delivery and final payment [2, p. 36].

The OECD document notes: in a broad sense, e-commerce covers all commercial activities carried out through electronic networks, including sale of goods and services, funds transfer, online marketing activities, data collection and processing. There is a narrower definition: e-commerce is providing consumer goods and services via online sales channels, i.e., retail e-commerce networks designed to sell products to end-consumers [3].

In fact, both the WTO and the OECD understand e-commerce in the narrow sense as e-trade.

E-commerce includes electronic information exchange, electronic capital movement, electronic trade, electronic money, electronic marketing, electronic banking, electronic insurance services.

The most important component of e-commerce is cross-border e-trade. Over the past few years, it has become an integral part of the global retail system. Currently,

there are 12 to 24 million e-commerce sites in the world. By 2040, about 95% of all purchases are expected to be made online.

The modern increase in competition forces companies to be in a constant search for new effective sales channels using digital technologies. The growth of the Internet's availability and its speed, as well as the number of smartphone users, the rapid development of digital financial technologies, the growing popularity of mobile wallets, the growing use of social media platforms, rapid urbanization, the high level of online shopping's preference among millennials, the rapid digitalization of logistics have contributed to the fact that traditional trade is rapidly being replaced by cross-border e-commerce, which is becoming increasingly important for maintaining and expanding the competitive positions of enterprises in the world market.

According to eMarketer's forecast, in 2021 e-commerce will make up 52.1% of retail sales in China, compared to 44.8% a year earlier. For the first time in the world, most of the country's retail sales will be carried out via the Internet. The next largest e-commerce share belongs to South Korea, where this year 28.9% of sales will occur via the Internet. In the United States, this figure will only be 15.0%, and the average for Western European countries is 12.8% [4].

It is expected that in 2021, more than 2.1 billion people worldwide will buy goods and services online, compared to 1.7 billion worldwide digital buyers in 2016.

Electronic trading platforms – Alibaba, Amazon, ASOS, eBay, Flipkart, JD and others – do not only allow buyers to purchase a product at the best price, but also to study its characteristics, including user reviews, and compare the choice with other options.

The coronavirus pandemic continues to exert significant influence on e-commerce and online consumer behavior worldwide. Since millions of people had to stay at home at the beginning of 2020 to restrain the spread of the virus, digital channels became the most popular alternative to temporarily closed stores and personal purchases. According to the IBM American Retail Index, the pandemic shortened the time for the transition from physical stores to digital purchases by about five years.

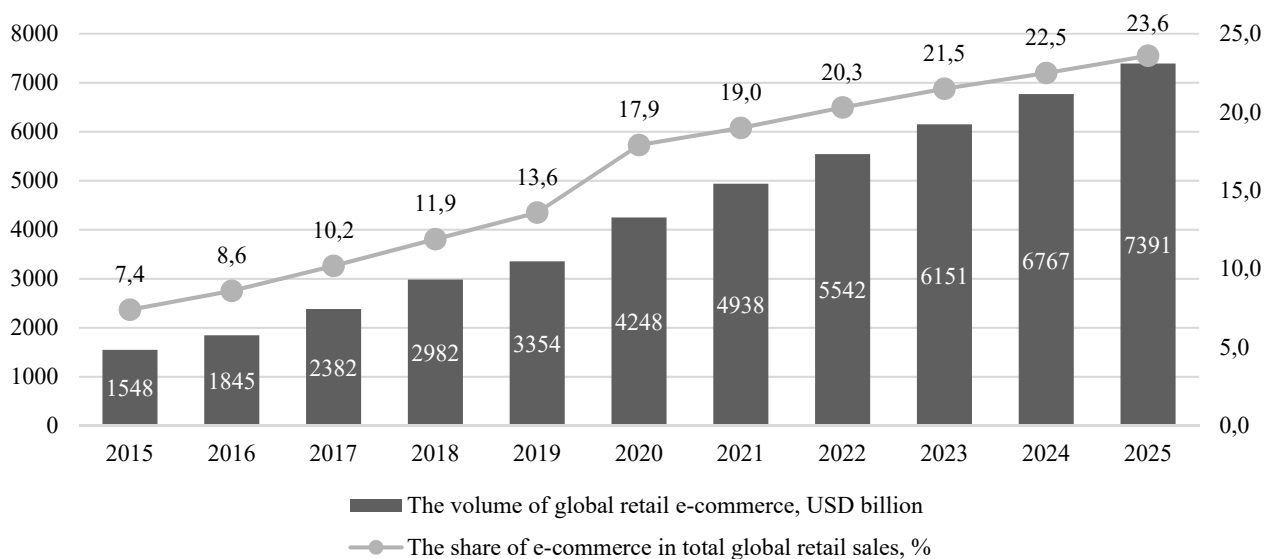


Fig. 1 – Dynamics of B2C e-commerce sales

Alibaba and Amazon companies increased sales volumes and received a significant acceleration of profit. These marketplaces allow consumers to get access directly to the world market, not the local one, which is limited to suppliers of local retail facilities.

eMarketer estimates that in 2021, consumers worldwide spent almost \$4 938 billion online, compared to almost \$3 354 billion in 2019 [5]. The 27.6% year-on-year leap in global online sales was greater than the 25.2% growth in 2018 (Fig. 1).

Global retail sales through all channels reached \$28.5 trillion in 2021. This means that the online trade share in total retail sales exceeded 17.0%, while e-commerce accounts for the entire growth of retail trade. The growth in the online sector fully compensated the decline in sales in traditional stores.

According to eMarketer forecasts, the global e-commerce market will increase to \$7 391 billion by 2025, and the online segment will account for about a quarter of the total global retail sales.

E-commerce trends are set by China, USA, Japan, UK, Germany, Republic of Korea, France, India, Indonesia and Canada. By the end of 2021, China is the largest market with a revenue of \$1 543 billion. The United States and Japan are next by a large margin (\$599 billion and \$128 billion respectively) [6] (Fig. 2).

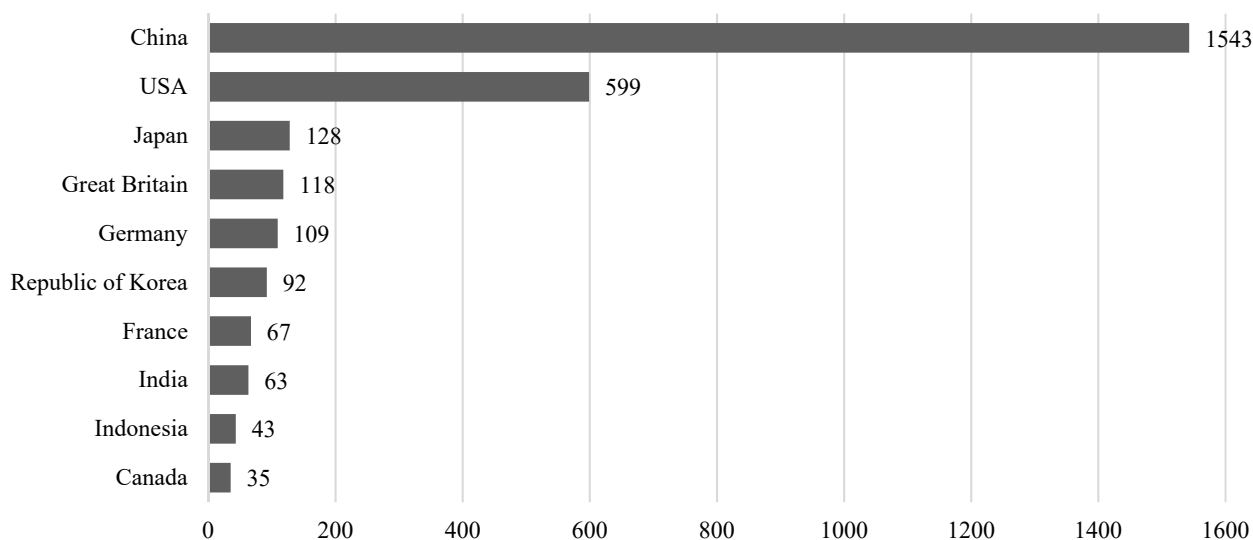


Fig. 2 – The largest e-commerce markets in 2021, USD billion

In the period from 2021 to 2025, Turkey (15%), Nigeria (12%), India, Indonesia and the UAE (10% each) are projected to demonstrate the highest level of average annual growth in B2C e-commerce. This impressive growth is due to a number of factors, such as cheaper smartphones and Internet subscription plans, improved infrastructure, increased purchasing power and the growing comfort of online payments.

Online stores have become one of the most popular online sales formats around the world. The sales volume of the five largest online stores in 2021 exceeded \$350 billion. The top five include Amazon (USA) – \$131.0 billion, jd.com (China) – \$96.6

billion, Apple (USA) – \$51.9 billion, Walmart (USA) – \$46.5 billion, suning.com (China) – \$22.8 billion [6].

Online markets are highly concentrated. In the USA, three stores account for 35% of revenue, in the UK – 30%, in Germany – 25%. In these countries, Amazon generates the largest revenue.

According to the UNCTAD E-Commerce Index for 2020, Europe remains by far the most prepared region for e-commerce. Switzerland boasts the highest willingness to participate in e-commerce and benefit from it. Then come the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. The only non-European economies in the top 10 are Singapore, which occupies the fourth place, and Hong Kong (China) on the 10th position. The two largest B2C e-commerce markets in the world – China and the US – occupy the 55th and 12th places in this index, respectively. Although both countries lead by some absolute indicators, they lag behind in relative comparisons. For example, Internet penetration in the United States is lower than in any of the top ten economies, while China ranks 87th in the world by this indicator. As for the penetration of online stores, the United States ranks 12th, and China ranks 33rd [7].

The company's market position depends not only on the product quality, but also on new technologies that make the customer experience more convenient. Technological innovations that establish high customer engagement and maintain customer satisfaction include: artificial intelligence, which provides a personalized customer experience to improve sales; cloud technologies to support operational processes; mobile commerce; electronic payment systems, including PayPal, Apple Pay, Google Wallet, NFC and many others.

Let's look at the trends in the online trading market which have become characteristic in recent years [8]:

full customization. More and more online stores will introduce analyzing user behavior with AI-related and machine learning technologies. Intelligent technologies make it possible to create an accurate profile of the client, study their buying habits and network behaviour. Thanks to this, stores understand each user better and make most attractive individual offers;

Photo Shopping. Thanks to the smart product search by image, one can find in online stores the thing they liked, even without knowing its name or brand;

voice search. Many people use Alexa, Google Assistant, Siri to make purchases, payments, and to check their balance;

use of video content. Video content placed right on the product page in the online store positively affects the purchasing power of customers, as well as enhances loyalty to the seller, increasing sales by 60-80%;

purchases via messengers. Young people are used to communicating through messengers, so they are increasingly making purchases through messengers, it is convenient and familiar to them;

online fitting. New solutions allow consumers to see immediately how a certain thing will look in the interior. This way one can choose household goods, clothing, household appliances and other categories of goods;

the growing role of marketplaces. Over the past 10 years, marketplaces have been winning positions from ordinary online stores. According to Forrester research,

in 2020–2021, consumers worldwide made more than 65% of online purchases through the largest national marketplaces (primarily Amazon, Ali Baba, JD.com and on eBay); the growth of online purchases using mobile devices. Mobile commerce or m-commerce is one of the types of electronic commerce, which includes the purchase and sale of goods using a mobile device – a smartphone or tablet. As smartphones have more and more features, and data plans are becoming more accessible, it is becoming easier than ever for people to make purchases using mobile devices. Mobile shopping got a huge boost in 2020–2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic-related blockages and restrictions, when people stayed at home for months. M-commerce sales reached \$3.56 trillion by the end of 2021. Statistics shows that since 2016, m-commerce has been growing by an average of 33.8% per year, and the share of m-commerce in the total volume of electronic commerce has increased over the past five years from 52.4% to 72.9%;

omnichannel today is not just a trend, but a necessity. Omnichannel purchases will be crucial for the growth of e-commerce in 2022. Transferring business to social media platforms, marketplaces and other retail sites will help the company attract new customers. The latest data shows that up to 73% of online customers use multiple channels when making purchases. According to Shopify, organizations that sell on websites, marketplaces, social and mobile generate 190% more revenue and increased brand awareness than merchants who only sell through a single channel;

instant delivery. 96% of customers want delivery within 24 hours. Now some online stores offer this opportunity by delivering goods on the day of the order to the house, office or a special pick-up point;

continuous communication with the client using artificial intelligence technologies. Artificial intelligence and machine learning are growing trends among e-commerce businesses since they allow providing customers with a personalized shopping experience and relevant product recommendations via predictive search. Previously, manual suggestions were prone to errors, but now, automatic intelligent AI analyzes information such as a buyer's gender, search history, purchasing history, and demographics to recommend products and services that are relevant to them. Besides, businesses can take advantage of predictive analytics tools such as behavioral analytics, image identification, inventory management, and automation. According to research, the global revenue from AI applications is expected to reach \$36.8 billion by 2025;

B2B transition to online. Nowadays already 89% of buyers look for the right B2B product online. According to Statista, in 2020, global online sales in the B2B sector amounted to \$14.9 trillion, more than 5 times higher than the B2C market. In 2021, the most popular online market in the world in the B2B segment was the Chinese platform Tmall (\$653 billion), another Chinese platform Taobao occupied the second place (\$635 billion), and the American Amazon occupied the third place with \$612 billion [9].

Thus, e-commerce is a key driver of growth in the dynamics and scale of world trade and the global economy as a whole. Changes in the field of e-commerce are extremely dynamic and force companies to monitor constantly organizational, economic and technological innovations.

The growth rate of the e-commerce market varies by country and region. This depends on many factors, such as the availability of the Internet, consumer confidence in the online environment, the vastness and quality of the logistics infrastructure, etc. Today, there are three leaders in the global e-commerce market – the United States, the European Union and the Asian region, which is developing rapidly and has great potential.

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THE WORLD IN SANCTIONS: CHALLENGES FOR PRIVATE INTERNATIONAL LAW ON THE EXAMPLE OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

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The article shows the normative and practical contradictions caused by sanctions from the standpoint of private international law. The author refers to the example of intellectual property relations and analyzes the features of the application of norms and mechanisms of conflict of law and material regulation in conditions of sanctions, taking into account the territoriality of intellectual property rights. Conclusions are drawn about the certain patterns as constantly reoccurring outcomes of sanctions affecting intellectual property. The preferred legal techniques for overcoming the corresponding consequences are outlined.

Keywords: sanctions; intellectual property; private international law; conflict of laws; territoriality of intellectual property rights.

Private law relations with a foreign element, including intellectual property, are very sensitive to strict public law regulations even in a period of stable and sustainable development of international economic relations. When deciding on the choice of applicable law, the court or other body, that considers cross-border relations, is always under the demand of a balanced and cautious decision in order not to violate the primary principle of protecting the interests of its own state. A positive answer when examining the possibility of applying the law of another state within the framework of domestic jurisdiction is framed by restricting constrictions of private international law: evasion of law, public policy clause, imperative norms, retorsions. The relevant norms are enshrined in the Chapter 74, Section VII of the Civil Code of the Republic of Belarus: Articles 1097, 1099, 1100, 1109 [1].

Private law relations with a foreign element, including intellectual property, are very sensitive to strict public law regulation even in a period of stable and sustainable development of international economic relations. When deciding on the choice of applicable law, a court or other body considering cross-border relations is always under the requirement of a balanced and balanced decision so as not to violate the paramount principle of protecting the interests of one's own state. A positive answer when considering the possibility of applying the law of another state within the framework of domestic jurisdiction is framed by the restrictive restrictions of private international law: evasion of law, public policy clause, peremptory norms, retorsions. The relevant norms are enshrined in Chapter 74, Section VII of the Civil Code of the Republic of Belarus: Articles 1097, 1099, 1100, 1109 [1].

In a period of worsening of international political relations and escalation of interstate conflicts, the already difficult work on choosing the applicable law and resolving the essential merits of cross-border relations connected with several jurisdictions, becomes even more complicated. First, it is not so obvious on which legal norms to rely in order to follow an appropriate and decent way of ruling. Judgments

must meet the requirements of legality, validity, certainty, unconditionality, completeness, however the regime of sanctions as an extraordinary situation is often characterized by some level of uncertainty and a set of acts which can be used. Second, sanctions should allow derogations from the general regime only to the extent of their goal and limits since the application of sanctions is not a matter of a political decision, but of following the requirements of regulatory legal acts. The boundaries that determine the purpose and scope of sanctions (in particular individual, sectoral, aspects) must be taken into account. Restrictions should not close the prospects for settling the conflict and returning to a stable mode of existence of private relations, on which well-being, health and life, business, cultural and social ties in all affected countries are dependent. A certain clearance as a prospect of movement for the better should be left, or at least a profound explanation should be given. A complete and indefinite deprivation of private rights can be dangerous not only from the point of view of the liquidation of relations that are international in nature, but also because of the risk of instability and a bad example for national relations.

The purpose of the article is to show the normative and practical contradictions that may arise in the field of private international law in connection with sanctions on the example of intellectual property in the combination of the two abovementioned factors.

Intellectual property demands a specific solution in private international law in view of the problem of territoriality of intellectual property rights. Intellectual property rights are private in nature, but the basis of legal regulation in this field assumes the use of imperative prescriptions, especially regarding law-setting actions for industrial property rights. Dispositive variants of behavior are rarely allowed and the very existence of intellectual property of foreigners is mainly provided by the material norms on national treatment in a wide range of international conventions and treaties.

In comparison with other relations in private international law intellectual property is more vulnerable. In order to overcome the territorial character of intellectual property rights and foreign law regulating them a complex combination of material, conflict of law and jurisdictional norms must be considered and applied. Even in normal course of the development of the international society foreigners are at high risk of being deprived of their intellectual property rights or of placement on less favorable treatment of enforcement than national persons. The principle of territoriality of intellectual property significantly distinguishes it from material property. Property rights are much less susceptible to cross-border peculiarities of protection in different jurisdictions than intellectual property [2]. Thus, in any case, foreign intellectual property rights are questioned and rightsholders from abroad can be easily affected. So, when a specific situation of tension in interstate relations arises and national courts deal with a specific regime in relation to unfriendly states, the territoriality of intellectual property can turn from a cross-border threshold into a total ban on the essence of intellectual property.

In the situation of sanctions, it is necessary to take into account two completely different situations. First, sanctions are applied to meet special demand due to an emergency. For example, when it is necessary to fill the shortage of strategic goods: medicines, spare parts for sophisticated foreign equipment, etc., or to prevent activities

that weaken or threaten state security (military and dual-use inventions). Second, intellectual property concerns ordinary civil circulation. The first situation is out of discussion. Actually and legally, it goes beyond the domain of private international law. Private international law exists until a rigid rejection is encountered for the interaction between jurisdictions and legal systems of different states. It occurs by moving into the area of public prescriptions by special material (substantive) rules of law concerning precisely those type of relations which are specially distinguished and detailed for the regime of sanctions (in contrast to the general type of relationship, highlighted only by their territorial connection for sanctions). The second situation challenges precisely international private law and requires the search for flexible solutions and leaving a space for maneuvers with the help of private international law mechanisms (for example, through the mentioned provisions of the Civil Code of the Republic of Belarus). Whereas in the first situation there is no special need to resort to private international law, it generally ceases to operate due to special instructions, rather of administrative, than civil law.

This legal and technical distinction is necessary in order to understand the boundaries of sanctions and the inevitable task to prevent the negative (destructive) consequences of an extraordinary regime. Under the conditions of sanctions, the restrictive mechanisms of private international law to a certain extent change their traditional mode of operation and are able to provide scope for the judicial discretion regarding general instructions for sanctions. Appeal to these mechanisms allows taking into account the meaning and consequences of the impact of sanctions on the relations considered in the case. So, if within the framework of the first approach, the ban on issuing licenses in or from unfriendly countries is not subject to discussion, then in the second approach, namely, without a direct indication of the refusal to enforce the intellectual property rights of foreigners, the court may refer to conflict of laws rules that do not prevent taking into account the possible negative consequences. In a fairly well-known case on the demand of enforcement of the intellectual property rights to Peppa Pig, the issues of private law are not clearly indicated. However, this case is illustrative on risks of negative consequences for the state of the court [3]. By the decision of the Arbitration Court of the Kirov Region dated 03.03.2022 in case No. A28-11930/2021, the claim of a legal entity registered in the UK against a Russian individual entrepreneur was denied [3].

Quite a laconic judicial act does not contain a detailed assessment of the actual circumstances of the dispute, evidence, motives that guided the court not to enforce the intellectual property rights of a person from an unfriendly state (meanwhile without any special establishment of the affiliation of the plaintiff with the unfriendly state leading to sanctions). The court just relied on the construction of abuse of the right in civil law. At the same time, the danger that can be caused to the local consumers by the counterfeited goods is underestimated. In particular, goods for children were at stake, and the contested intellectual property objects (images of a cartoon character) are not of a high value for human necessities. Conversely, the goods themselves with which such violators are connected are notorious for poor quality and suspicious production conditions. As a result, the court gave dubious support to infringers.

Careless use of the possibility to restrict the intellectual property rights of foreigners in the sanctions regime should not undermine the foundations of own legal system, creating the illusion of waiving the rights themselves.

Another example of negative consequences for intellectual property is when the world in sanctions is gradually being formed. A very unfortunate outcome of the sanctions could result in the destruction of the institutional infrastructure providing services and support to intellectual property of creators and rightsholders. National system of that kind cannot function in an appropriate secure and transparently way without links with foreign and international counterparts.

Sanctions can undermine teamwork, mutual exchanges between patent offices, in particular affecting practical issues of patent cooperation. It is precious that World Intellectual property organization (WIPO) is making efforts to prevent the damaging impact of sanctions on the infrastructural aspects of patent systems, which, of course, negatively affect not only the state that is under sanction, but also jeopardize the whole structure of the international protection of intellectual property. Thus, WIPO substantiated that its technical assistance to the intellectual property infrastructure of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea did not contradict the UN sanctions [4].

The accumulation of historical background provides the necessary empirical basis for identifying certain patterns as constantly reoccurring outcomes. One of them is a pattern of mutual losses of the conflicting parties in the sanctions regime relating to intellectual property. Deprivation of intellectual property right or neglecting them do not necessarily help to achieve the goal of sanctions, but such an approach to intellectual property will definitely lead to a setback in building a world order for the legal use of intellectual property assets. The multiplication of channels and schemes for parallel imports, the use of intellectual property without remuneration, cannot affect the interests of only one country. Just as international protection of intellectual property is not possible by the efforts of only several countries or a region, the global coverage is still needed. So, sanctions against one country or in one country are reflected on a global scale.

It is not a coincidence that over time the policy of sanction is moving towards a very cautious and measured approach to intellectual property. The United States is an example of states actively applying the sanctions regime in interstate conflicts and extends them also on intellectual property. In the structure of state bodies, one of the key positions is occupied by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [5].

Experienced excesses and unwanted consequences of sanctions in the form of restricting intellectual property rights, including creation of obstacles to obtaining international protection, for example by restricting the transfer of fees and payments to organizations and individuals (patent attorneys) in unfriendly countries (as was the case in the US embargo against Yugoslavia) led to the understanding of OFAC and American rightsholders that intellectual property, like no other area of international relations, is under the threat of destructive influence by sanctions. The main conclusion is that sanctions in no case can give rise for counterfeiters and pirates, so called "counterfeit paradize" [6, p. 47].

Summarizing the analysis of the normative and practical contradictions that characterize the application of sanctions to the intellectual property relations with a foreign element, we note the main argument in favor of making every effort to preserve the legitimacy of these relations. It is the almost equal vulnerability of both parties, namely the state applying sanctions and the state being subjected to them. The example of Brexit shows that the achievements in overcoming the territorial character of intellectual property are so significant that the rejection of them not only deprives some of the benefits, but practically destroys the foundation on which the intellectual property right themselves and the corresponding intangible assets in commercial circulation, are based. Therefore, despite the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, the country is still making every effort to stay in the system of European intellectual property rights, adheres to the regional principle of exhaustion and lays down background to participate in the unitary patent system [7].

For an industry that is heavily dependent on intellectual property, the absence of a legal protection regime is much more detrimental than the absence of raw materials and fuel energy resources, because time in sanctions will easily result in loss of innovative skills, striving for the world level and the most up-to-date knowledge.

The current state of national and international law fully allows the establishment of sanctions in the form of derogations from the general regime for the protection and enforcement of intellectual property rights, including the suspension of the national and the most favored nation regimes. These actions are the sovereign right of the state, and the legal support of the corresponding political steps does not involve any particular difficulties and can be implemented through the adoption of new legislative acts. At the same time, commitment to the achievements of international protection of intellectual property is more difficult to discard. In this regard, conflict of law rules and mechanisms of private international law applied in conjunction with substantive rules on general sanction restrictions are preferable, than those acts with direct and detailed prohibitions. This differentiation of legal techniques presents flexible tools when considering cases by the court and providing the balanced assessment of the negative consequences of the sanctions regime by state officials.

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MULTILATERAL COOPERATION AS A NECESSARY CONDITION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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The article considers the forms of multilateral cooperation as a necessary condition for the sustainable development of states. The author singles out integration education as the most effective form of multilateral cooperation. It is proposed to use the 2030 Agenda as a framework for gaining benefits in the process of “mutual policy coordination”.

Keywords: multilateral cooperation; Republic of Belarus; UN Charter; integration; Agenda 2030; sustainable development goals.

It is impossible to ensure the sustainability of states, their socio-economic stability without building the capacity of countries to promote the implementation of national plans to achieve sustainable development goals, including international partnerships and multilateral cooperation.

In the process of international communication, which takes place in completely different ways of international interaction, such relations arise between actors and can be called multilateral cooperation. But is multilateral cooperation always international? Can integration interaction be considered a form of multilateral cooperation? What are the forms of multilateral cooperation? What is the role of multilateral cooperation in the implementation of the sustainable development goals? Answers to these questions should be given by referring to the terminology.

At first glance, such an understandable term as international cooperation raises no questions, but it is quite difficult to find it in explanatory dictionaries. There have been attempts to give a definition based on interpretations of the meanings of its constituent elements [4, p. 23]. Cooperation is always a joint activity of interested parties, which is aimed at achieving a certain result. The international nature of cooperation acquires when it is carried out between the subjects of international law. Krysanov proposes to consider the term “international cooperation” as a principle of international law [5, p. 182]. M. A. Muntyan notes that “international cooperation” excludes the usage of armed violence, but joint searches for opportunities to realize the common interests of actors dominate. Cooperation implies not the absence of conflict, but “getting rid of” its extreme, crisis forms [6, p. 176]. The actors can also be in a state of ceasefire, move on to the negotiation process, and it is also called international cooperation. A. G. Volevodz defines “international cooperation” as a joint activity of subjects of international law based on common goals and objectives in accordance with the norms and principles of international law [1, p. 11]. Issues of international cooperation related to the field of combating crime have been investigated by O. V. Emelyanovich [3] and other authors.

The idea of all-round cooperation lies in the foundation of the UN Charter when forming this organization to avoid conflicts like the Second World War. It is worth

noting that comprehensive cooperation was understood as the interaction of states, regardless of differences in their political, economic and social systems. Within the framework of such cooperation, peace and security should be maintained, any international problems of an economic, social, cultural and humanitarian nature should be resolved, and collective measures should be taken for these purposes. Countries are obliged to cooperate in establishing universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all and in the elimination of forms of racial discrimination, forms of religious intolerance, to conduct their international relations in the economic, social, cultural, technical and commercial fields in accordance with the principles of sovereign equality and non-intervention [2]. However, in the modern world, many terms acquire new meanings, and documents receive different interpretations, international organizations are created, aimed at certain leading positions in various fields. In the conditions of complex geopolitical relations, countries are trying to create associations, organizations that reflect the coalition ideology and other structures. Despite the increase in the number of such formations, actors are forced to interact with them. Such cooperation may be forced and regulated by sanctions and other instruments of influence, i.e., cooperation is not always beneficial for each of the parties. In this regard, it is worth talking about the transition from the principles of the concept of international cooperation, laid down by the UN Charter in the post war period, to the concept of multilateral cooperation. In this article, multilateral cooperation is understood as such interaction of actors with international partners, in which each of the participants pursues the promotion of their own interests in certain areas as the main goal.

At the same time, it is worth underlining the trend of modernity towards the complication of forms of international interaction. It is no longer just about establishing, for example, the supply of goods from one side to another, trade and economic relations between countries are formed on the basis of the organization of complex logistics chains, sometimes involving a corridor from several countries. Such chains no longer simply require an agreement between governments, but also the establishment of a transport infrastructure, information and communication support, the development of a scientific and technical base, ensuring the safety of cargo, etc. All this can be ensured only through properly built political interaction between partners, cooperation in the paradigm of seeking common agreement, in the process of “mutual coordination of policies” [7], which provides certain mutual benefits, up to the creation of the ideological foundations of multilateral cooperation. For these purposes, we propose to use the 2030 Agenda as such a framework. This is due to the fact that international multilateral cooperation intrudes not only into the field of customs rules and border settlements, but also covers the field of space exploration, the sharing of natural resources, the development of information and communication networks and new technologies, international sports and healthcare.

The 20th and 21st centuries posed many challenges in the form of revolutions, the cold war, new forms of confrontation were created due to the development of technology, new forms of weapons were created and used, etc. In the 21st century, the world is facing even more unpredictable crises. And in this regard, it becomes obvious that new alliances, coalitions cannot but be created, the usual forms of multilateral

cooperation between the actors of political relations are also evolving, striving to complicate and achieve stability of both their participants and the systems themselves. Speaking about the forms of multilateral cooperation, it is worth highlighting the following: individual, collective, integration.

With an individual form of multilateral cooperation, the country itself / another actor acts as a partner in the implementation of international agreements in various fields, takes part as an observer in an international organization (like Belarus in the SCO, for example). The collective form involves cooperation between many actors, this includes membership in associations, international organizations, participation as an observer of an international organization, an international observer at the invitation of an international organization (as an observer at presidential or parliamentary elections at the invitation of the OSCE, for example), the creation of coalition organizations (an agreement in the field of security between Australia, Great Britain and the United States, which received the abbreviated designation AUKUS).

The highest degree of multilateral cooperation is achieved by creating an integration association. This form of interaction implies universal mutually agreed cooperation between foreign partners in many areas, primarily in trade, economy and energy, in the legal sphere and security, and with the introduction of the 2030 Agenda, integration associations also acquire a good potential for implementing the tasks envisaged by the goals of sustainable development in the field of health, education, environment and climate, reduction of socio-economic inequality, ensuring a decent life, anti-terrorist activities and others.

Of course, integration is not just a multilateral cooperation in various areas. Speaking of integration, the main actors of this process are, after all, states, and no other subjects of international law. This is what distinguishes integration processes from the sphere of international multilateral cooperation. Integration is based on the idea of transferring a part of state sovereignty in certain areas to achieve the common goals of the uniting states. Thus, we are talking about the creation of independent joint coordinating structures, the activities of which are built and carried out on the principle “competence of competence”.

Thus, the complication of forms of multilateral cooperation is measured not by the number of concluded agreements or signed agreements, but by the transition from individual contacts between countries to collective ones, and then the creation of integrations with the coordinating centre.

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COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND BELARUS IN THE FIELD OF TOURISM DIPLOMACY (1992–2022)

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Based on a wide range of sources, the paper uses a systematic anthropological approach to analyze the development of cooperation between China and Belarus in the field of tourism since the establishment of diplomatic relations. The main stages of cooperation are highlighted and their contents are revealed. The paper follows the evolution of its contractual and legal framework, identifies the key institutions and forms, and discusses the outcomes, issues, and future prospects. The development of bilateral and multilateral tourism diplomacy between China and Belarus is considered in the context of Beijing and Minsk's political connections reaching the level of "comprehensive strategic partnership featuring mutual trust and win-win collaboration". The paper emphasizes tourism's positive function in increasing mutual understanding and boosting the two countries' quality of life, as well as its potential development.

Keywords: international cooperation; tourism diplomacy; PRC; Republic of Belarus; SCO; pandemic COVID-19.

Belarusian-Chinese diplomatic relations were established on January 20, 1992. A year later, a delegation of the Republic of Belarus to China was led by Chairman of the Supreme Soviet S. Shushkevich [1, p. 39]. It was the first government delegation from the Commonwealth of Independent States to visit the People's Republic of China after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the visit, on January 11, 1993, a joint declaration was signed noting that Beijing and Minsk would promote cooperation in the field of tourism and direct contacts between relevant organizations, groups and individuals [2, p. 72]. At the same time, the parties agreed to cooperate on visa-free group tourism visits [3]. The visit was the first step in the development of tourism cooperation between China and Belarus.

Diplomatic activities of the two heads of state played a leading role in the development of tourism diplomacy between China and Belarus. During the official visit of President A. G. Lukashenko to Beijing (January 1995), a declaration on further development and deepening of cooperation was signed [4, p. 55]. In July 2001, Chinese President Zemin Jiang undertook a follow-up visit, which resulted in a joint press Communique [5]. The statement emphasized the importance of strengthening ties between state officials and public organizations from both countries, as well as expanding tourism collaboration. It should be noted that this was the Chinese president's first visit to Belarus.

Presidents Jintao Hu of China and A. G. Lukashenko of Belarus met in Beijing in December 2005. Hu recommended expanding exchanges and cooperation in tourism to strengthen mutual understanding and traditional friendship between the two

countries. Following that, the two leaders signed the “Agreement on Tourism Cooperation”, that went into effect in February 2008.

The personnel decisions of the 18th Congress of the CPC (November 2012) indicated that the fifth generation, led by Jinping Xi, had assumed the leadership of the country. In July 2013, the relationship between Belarus and China reached a new level: President Jinping Xi and President A. G. Lukashenko of Belarus signed a joint declaration on the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership [6].

During the Chinese leadership’s second visit to Belarus after a 14-year hiatus (May 2015), President Jinping Xi met with President A. G. Lukashenko and Prime Minister A. V. Kabiakov. The Chinese leader suggested expanding cooperation in regional exchanges and invited 100 Belarusian students to China for studying. He emphasized that such mechanisms as the Intergovernmental Cooperation Committee and the China–Belarus Working Group on Regional Economic and Trade Cooperation should be fully employed to promote tourism and culture between two countries. For his part, A. G. Lukashenko stated his willingness to expand cooperation in the field of tourism. In September 2016, the President of Belarus had another official visit to China, during which a joint declaration was signed on the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership of mutual trust and mutually beneficial cooperation, including in the field of tourism [7]. The Belarusian government’s Action Plan for 2016–2020 emphasized the need of continuing to work with the China and other interested nations to build the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) together [8]. President of Belarus A. G. Lukashenko attended the One Belt, One Road International Cooperation Forum in Beijing in May 2017, where Chinese President Jinping Xi stated that Belarus is an important partner in the construction of the SREB and that the two countries are ready to strengthen cooperation in tourism. At a meeting with the Belarusian president during the Second Forum for International Cooperation “One Belt, One Road” (OPPO) (April 2019, Beijing), the Chinese president proposed to strengthen the alignment of the OPPO initiative with Belarus’ development strategy and jointly promote tourism cooperation to achieve greater results. In June of the same year, the presidents of the two countries met again in Bishkek as part of the SCO Summit, emphasizing the importance of tourism as a component of bilateral and multilateral collaboration.

Jinping Xin and A. G. Lukashenko exchanged greetings on the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Belarus and China on January 20, 2022. Politicians note that Minsk and Beijing are constantly expanding interstate dialogue, coordinating the goals and objectives of the global and regional agenda, including the implementation of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative within the framework of the SCO, the establishment of a “common destiny with mankind” and many other areas. In the speech to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly on the situation in Belarus on January 28, 2022, the President of Belarus A. G. Lukashenko noted that the most important factor of Belarusian cooperation in Asia is friendship with China [9].

Top-level design sets the tone for the development of tourism diplomacy on a bilateral basis. The People’s Republic of China was the first in the world to put forward a formal concept of “tourism diplomacy” at the National Working Conference on Tourism in January 2015 [10]. The President of Belarus issued a special order in July 2015 permitting Chinese citizens to enter Belarus without a visa for a temporary

stay of up to 72 hours [11]. This is the first case of reduced visa requirements since the signing of the Agreement on Mutual Visa-Free Group Tourism Travel in 1993.

The presidential order on the Establishment of Bilateral Relations between Belarus and China was enacted in August 2015, prioritizing the development of a comprehensive strategic partnership with China [12]. An important step in this direction was the approval of the State Program “Belarus Hospitable” for 2016–2020, aimed at increasing the tourist attractiveness of Belarus and increasing the number of inbound tourists [13]. In 2016, Belarus and Macao (China) signed an agreement on mutual visa exemption [1, p. 310].

The Year of Belarus’ Tourism in China has proven to be an efficient means of putting the initiative into action. In December 2017, Prime Minister of Belarus A. V. Kobyakov, having met with Premier of the State Council of China Keqiang Li, officially proposed to declare 2018 as the Year of Tourism [14]. The Belarusian government approved a plan with a list of more than 50 organizational, marketing activities, as well as measures to develop the tourist infrastructure and training system [1, p. 311]. The opening ceremony was held in Chongqing (China). A 14-day visa-free regime between the Republic of Belarus and Hong Kong, China, became effective during the Year of Belarus’ Tourism [1, p. 310]. Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the People’s Republic of China to the Republic of Belarus Qimin Cui held a meeting with Minister of Sports and Tourism of the Republic of Belarus S. V. Kovalchuk, who assured that Minsk attaches great importance to the Chinese tourism market and is ready to provide the best services to Chinese tourists. An intergovernmental agreement on reciprocal visa-free travel for holders of regular Belarusian and Chinese passports was signed in June 2018. Belarus was thus one of the first European countries to negotiate a reciprocal visa-free agreement with China.

Belarusian institutions in China, particularly the embassy, also took part in various Year of Tourism events, including arranging a photo exhibition showcasing Belarusian castle culture, a photo contest called “Belarus Forever”, and the Belarusian-Chinese Tourism Forum [1, p. 312]. The Government of the Republic of Belarus’ Department of Tourism participated in six international exhibitions to promote Belarusian tourist resources. In addition, this structure actively promoted the “China Friendly” project, creating a version of its website in Chinese with a culinary menu and audio guide services. Belarusian banks strengthened cooperation with the national payment system of the China to improve services for tourists. First Deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism V. Durnov stated at the Year of Tourism’s concluding ceremony (December 2018) that the number of Chinese visitors visiting Belarus in the first ten months of 2018 increased by 12% over the last year [15].

In January 2021, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus approved the State program “Belarus Hospitable” for 2021–2025 [16]. The development of inbound and domestic tourism, boosting the competitiveness of tourist services, and promoting national tourist brands in the global market were the top priorities. In December 2021, President of Belarus A. G. Lukashenko signed a directive “On the development of bilateral relations between Belarus and China” aimed at further deepening the strategic partnership between Belarus and China in a wide range of areas for five years, including in the field of health tourism [17].

The Intergovernmental Committee on China–Belarus Cooperation has become an important communication mechanism in the tourism sector. The Program for Development of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for 2014–2018 will be launched as a consequence of negotiations between Premier of the State Council of China Li Keqiang and Prime Minister of Belarus M. V. Myasnikovich. In September 2014, a new structure was established to improve the planning and management of cooperation activities. Trade and business, scientific and technical cooperation, education, culture, and security were the five commissioners that made up the Committee [18]. Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism of China Xuya Zhang, Minister of Culture of Belarus Yu. Bondar, and Deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism of Belarus M. Portny attended the third meeting of the Subcommittee on Cultural Cooperation in 2019. Representatives of the tourism sector of both countries discussed the development of cooperation within the framework of this structure for the first time. Xu Zhang, Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China, and V. Gromada, First Deputy Minister of Culture of the Republic of Belarus, were invited to the fourth meeting by video meeting (2021) [19]. The participants emphasized the importance of summarizing and developing the accumulated practical experience, as well as the importance of the Subcommittee as a platform for strengthening mutual cooperation in the field of culture and its component – tourism, as part of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

Regional cooperation is an important area of tourism diplomacy. In the year 2017, a group from Jiangsu Province, led by Vice-Governor Qiulin Ma, visited Mogilev and signed a Memorandum of Cooperation [1, p. 314], and a mission from Brest signed a similar contract during their visit to Anhui Province. In 2019, Minsk hosted a presentation of the tourist potential of the Chinese city of Weihai, and signed documents for cooperation in the tourism sector. The Belarus–China Friendship Society organized a series of holidays to promote the tourism resources of Weihai and other Chinese attractions. In the same year, the “Week of Tourism and Culture of China” was successfully held in Minsk and Borisov with a presentation of the tourist potential of Shandong Province. And a delegation from Minsk participated in the business forum “Minsk – Shanghai”, where the section “Tourism and Hospitality of Minsk and Shanghai” and the contact and cooperation exchange of Chinese and Belarusian travel companies functioned [1, p. 315]. In August 2021, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of China to Belarus Xiaoyun Xie, Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus N. Borisevich, and Deputy Economy Minister of Belarus A. Nikitina attended the inauguration ceremony of the “Year of Regions of Belarus with China” [20]. In the same year, a video meeting on the roadmap for cooperation development between Henan Province and Belarus’s Mogilev Region was held with the participation of ambassadors, at which intensive preparations for the expansion of tourist exchanges between the two sides after the epidemic were discussed.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has proven to be an efficient forum for the growth of China – Belarus tourism diplomacy. At the meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of State (2009), President Jintao Hu welcomed Belarus as the Organization’s dialogue partner and called for stronger cooperation in culture and tourism [21]. In 2015, the SCO Council of Heads of State meeting in Ufa, Russia,

decided to grant the Republic of Belarus observer status [22]. In order to develop good neighborly relations, mutual respect, and beneficial interaction in the SCO region, the heads of state advocated further strengthening cooperation in culture, tourism, and sports. The SCO Council of Heads of State agreed a program in 2016 to improve tourism cooperation, develop a shared tourism space, and strengthen tourism exchanges. The opening ceremony of the 14th session of the SCO Forum (April 2019) was attended by Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Hanhui Zhang, SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov, and Counselor Roman Sokol of the Belarusian Embassy in China, while more than 100 experts, scholars, and diplomats from China and other countries attended the conference to coincide with the meeting. The final document focused on the intensification of cooperation in tourism.

Since 2020, the Belarusian Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries started implementing the Memorandum of Cooperation with the SCO China Committee for Good Neighborhood and Friendship. The head of the Society, Nina Ivanova, noted that the agreement intends to develop mutual trust, establish collaborations between civil society organizations, promote cultural, sports, and tourist projects, and organize mutual dialogues on the aforementioned themes.

The role of the SCO Forum in addressing the pandemic's impacts, notably in the sphere of tourism, was considered at the 15th meeting of the SCO Forum (2020). According to SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov, the organization has great potential and will continue to work on combating the consequences of COVID-19. The purpose of the meeting of the heads of tourism administrations of SCO member states (2021, Dushanbe), which included Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism of China Xu Zhang and Head of Department of the Ministry of Sports and Tourism of the Republic of Belarus Brinkevich, was to develop a plan of joint actions in a new environment in order to implement the Program to develop cooperation of SCO member states in the field of tourism for 2022–2023, which will attract additional tourist flows, improve the economic situation, and create new jobs [23].

Cooperation in the “16+1” format plays an important role in expanding the platform of China–Belarus cooperation in the field of tourism. The 5th summit of the leaders of China and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was held in Riga (Latvia) in November 2016, with Belarus participating as an observer for the first time [24]. During his meeting with Belarus Prime Minister A.V. Kabiakov, China's Premier of the State Council Keqiang Li said that Beijing welcomed Belarus as an observer state, and the other side expressed its willingness to take advantage of new opportunities to develop bilateral relations and expand tourism cooperation. Belarus was present as an observer at the 9th Leaders' Summit of China and Central and Eastern Europe, which was held by video meeting (2021). The number of bilateral tourism exchanges between China and CEE countries has nearly quadrupled since 2012. Analyzing the results of the summit, Professor M. M. Kauvaliou of Belarusian State University expressed the opinion that the strengthening of cooperation between China and CEE countries provides new opportunities for Belarus to participate in joint multilateral projects [25].

The exchange of “friendship groups” is a prime example of tourist diplomacy. In 2014, 200 Belarusian youngsters from Chernobyl-affected districts traveled to China for recuperation [26]. A year later, the Belarusian government invited

46 young Chinese to Belarus for a 10-day tourist tour [27]. In 2016, a group of 150 youth leaders from 12 countries, including Belarus, visited Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Beijing for 10 days to “improve understanding of China” [28].

Three stages can be identified in the evolution of Chinese-Belarusian tourist diplomacy. 1992–2007 is the initial stage which content was signing of the agreement on mutual visa-free group tourist trips (January 1993) and joint declarations on expansion of tourist exchange. 2008–2014 is the stage of rapid development of Sino-Belarusian tourism cooperation: the “Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Tourism” entered into force (February 2008), Belarus became a SCO dialogue partner (2009), the two countries established comprehensive strategic partnership relations (July 2013), and the Sino-Belarusian Intergovernmental Committee on Cooperation was established (September 2014).

In 2015, the Belarusian vector of China’s tourism diplomacy began to develop rapidly. The People’s Republic of China was the first country in the world to put forward the official concept of “tourist diplomacy”, stating that tourist diplomacy should actively serve national diplomacy; the presidential directive aimed at strengthening tourism cooperation with China was put into effect. In 2016, the leaders of the two countries signed a joint declaration on the establishment of relations of trusting comprehensive strategic partnership and mutually beneficial cooperation. The Year of Belarus’ Tourism in China (2018) is an important milestone in the history of tourism diplomacy. Thanks to the implementation of the visa-free policy, regional cooperation, Chinese friendly projects, tourist forums and other forms of activity, the intensification of China-Belarus tourism diplomacy became evident.

Over the past 30 years, the number of high-level visits between the two countries has exceeded sixty. President Jinping Xi of China visited Belarus twice and met with President A. G. Lukashenko 13 times during his official visit to China. Cooperation in tourism was implemented within the framework of the “One Belt, One Road”, through such communication mechanisms as the bilateral intergovernmental cooperation committee, friendship societies and regional cooperation, as well as within the Shanghai Organization for Cooperation and Cooperation China – Central and Eastern European countries. Non-governmental interactions, on the other hand, are still limited, owing to issues such as long travel times and high costs; lack of tourist routes with comfortable conditions and national souvenirs; shortage of tour guides and interpreters. In 2018, 3,277 Chinese tourists visited Belarus, thus the republic ranked seventh after Russia, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, Ukraine, and Germany [29]. In 2019, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Belarus surpassed Ukraine and Germany in fifth place. In 2020, due of a pandemic. Only 189 Chinese tourists visited Belarus this year, down 96% from the previous year [29].

China holds the first place in the world in the number of outbound tourists who are waiting for an opportunity to travel abroad again after the pandemic is over. China and Belarus can make developing a mechanism for mutual recognition of vaccinations, increasing airline numbers, and forming tourist routes a top priority. Beijing and Minsk are concentrating diplomatic efforts on resuming and expanding tourist interactions, mitigating the effects of the disease, speeding up rehabilitation, and expanding the economy.

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DIPLOMATIC EXPERIENCE OF THE SETTLEMENT OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS BY THE UK

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The article is devoted to an urgent problem related to one of the most acute conflicts of our time, as well as related significant problems of regional and international level. Taking into account the research of foreign experts, based on the study of relevant sources, the position of the United Kingdom and the policy of the British government regarding the Syrian crisis are analyzed. Attention in the article is paid to the fact that the United Kingdom, following the position of the United States, treats the regime of Bashar al-Assad sharply negatively. According to international researchers, the current situation can be explained not only by the desire to support its transatlantic ally, but also by political, as well as socio-economic reasons, in particular the interests of British multinational corporations. In conclusion, it is concluded that the UK wants to strengthen its own position in the region more than its allies.

Keywords: Syrian crisis; UK; humanitarian crisis; Middle East; Syria; foreign policy, domestic policy; regime.

The Syrian crisis is a complex, contradictory global political process. On the one hand, at the regional level, the Syrian government stands together with Iran and the Hezbollah movement against the Arab alliance led by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. On the other hand, at the international level, the Syrian crisis is part of the “Arab Spring”, so the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom consider the Syrian government as “forces of evil”, as a result of which Syria has become an arena for confrontation between various participants in world politics [1].

The United Kingdom, being one of the world’s leading nuclear powers, could not “bypass” the Middle East crisis. In order to prevent the lowering of the authority of the Kingdom, the British, throughout the Syrian crisis since 2011, have been making “formal” attempts at a peaceful settlement of the conflict, along with the real military participation of the Kingdom’s Armed Forces in Syria [2].

The UK has repeatedly become a country hosting negotiating delegations on the Syrian issue from countries “interested” in resolving the conflict. However, mostly representatives of states that take a tough stance towards the actions of countries joining the side of President Bashar al-Assad (Iran, Russia) gathered in London.

To a greater extent, speaking in the British Parliament, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson called the actions of states providing military and financial assistance to the current leadership in Syria “barbaric” and called for exploring options for retaliatory military actions in a coalition with Western allies, which contradicts the declared UN resolution on the Syrian dossier [3, 4].

The British government’s diplomatic move to prevent a large influx of refugees from Syria to the island is interesting. Thus, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, according to preliminary UN estimates, about 1.3 million refugees have entered Jordan. In February 2016, a conference of international donors “Support for Syria and the

region” was held in London, the participants of which pledged to provide Damascus and neighboring countries, which bore the main burden of receiving internally displaced persons, with 12 billion dollars. Britain, together with the international community, made commitments under the Jordan Treaty to provide assistance to Syrian refugees, combining humanitarian aid and development assistance for Jordan (1.7 billion US dollars) [5].

London’s strategy was to help Syrians stay in the region and find jobs in neighboring Middle Eastern countries, rather than seek asylum in Europe. With the direct participation of Great Britain, the European Union formulated the main task of the Jordanian pact – to transform the migration crisis into economic growth.

At the same time, the United Kingdom, along with Germany, France and Italy are members of the so-called International Syria Support Group, whose task is to ensure conditions for regime change in Damascus. The British Government is systematically attempting to exert political pressure on the regime of the current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. For example, in March 2021, the UK imposed sanctions on six representatives of the Syrian authorities, including Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad. A press release published on the website of the Government of the United Kingdom states in plain text that the purpose of such sanctions is to convey a clear signal to the Syrian authorities that people from the sanctions list should be brought to justice for their “crimes”. It is also noted that London, through the UN Security Council, is working to “push the regime to participate constructively in the UN-led peace process and the negotiations of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva,” as well as to release “purposefully detained persons and provide unhindered access to assistance throughout Syria” [6].

It is also important that the official position of London, Paris and Washington is an attempt to overthrow the current government in the Syrian Republic. So, on March 15, 2022, the official website of the press service of the French Diplomacy (a state Internet resource) published a statement on behalf of France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and the United States stating that they do not support “efforts to normalize relations with the regime of Bashar al-Assad” and will not themselves carry out such normalization, lift sanctions or finance reconstruction until no irreversible progress will be made in reaching a political solution [7].

From the point of view of forming public opinion, the British authorities have made a considerable amount of effort to discredit the current Syrian government. After the start of the Syrian conflict, the British authorities created an extensive media infrastructure. Contractors represented by PR companies were engaged in information support for the Syrian opposition and terrorist groups, forming their positive image in the Western and Arab media. As part of a large-scale campaign to support such opposition, the UK authorities, including the country’s Foreign Ministry, have signed several contracts with companies such as Innovative Communication & Strategies, Albany, The Global Strategy Network and Analysis Research Knowledge [8]. The latter is actually a “private military company” with headquarters in Dubai (UAE). ARK in 2013–2016 was engaged in financing the organization “White Helmets” (a non-governmental volunteer organization operating in Syria in the territories controlled by opposition groups to the official government of Syria. Officially engaged in medical

care and rescue of civilians injured during the fighting. In fact, they are shooting numerous staged videos in order to discredit the regular army and the legitimate government of Syria), which is actively supported by other foreign sponsors, including the United Kingdom international development agencies.

In this way, local Western and some Middle Eastern media are supported, which actively discredit the government of Bashar al-Assad until now.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that from the point of view of a peaceful diplomatic settlement, British diplomacy has repeatedly made formal attempts to resolve the conflict, which did not lead to a real positive result for the Syrian people. However, it is obvious that the United Kingdom is interested in maintaining an unstable situation in the Middle East region, in order to draw in and weaken Russia and its allies on the next “front”.

Currently, there is a gradual return of the UK to the Middle East. The United Kingdom has extensive experience in the past in dominating the Middle East and subordinating regional countries to its interests. Using the example of the Syrian crisis, it becomes obvious that the instruments of influence are huge monetary investments in Syria to overcome the humanitarian crisis, training of opposition forces and competent diplomatic support for it in the international arena. But the UK is acting more cautiously, unlike the US. To a large extent, caution is explained by the loss of Britain’s role as a leading actor in world politics and a regional leader. Perhaps, in order to restore the former leading position, the British government should offer the world community its own concept for the development of the ATS, different from the one proposed by the United States, taking into account its shortcomings. This will help the UK strengthen its position in the Middle East and get out of the shadow of serious allies.

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CHINA'S IMPACT ON SECURITY ISSUES IN ASEAN COUNTRIES

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The growth of China's influence on the ASEAN countries, after the announcement of the "Expansion Abroad" initiative, is considered. The transformation of China's early foreign economic initiatives into the SREB – OBOR, their impact on the economic security of the ASEAN countries and the feasibility of creating the AIIB is substantiated. The relationship of economic influence with political pressure and the build-up of the military presence of the PRC in the region have been established.

Keywords: PRC; ASEAN; economic security; OBOR; AIIB.

The current century in the global development paradigm is characterized by the rapid growth of China's economy and influence. This was facilitated by the successful implementation of the state strategy formulated by Jiang Zemin at the 1st session of the 9th National People's Congress in February 1998 – "Expansion Abroad". The leader of the Chinese nation then proclaimed: "At the same time as the active expansion of exports, it is necessary to systematically, step by step, organize and support the expansion of state-owned enterprises with the necessary potential and advantages abroad, encourage them to invest and create enterprises abroad" [7, p. 11]. The full-scale implementation of the proclaimed policy became possible after China's accession to the WTO in 2001. This contributed to the encouragement of the export of capital and the implementation of the relevant tasks of the country's economic development. A legal framework has been developed; allowing a large number of participants and stimulates the activity of their activities abroad; as well as clearly defined parameters for the export of capital, including their scale and the main directions of investment flows, on the basis of which the BRI strategy was subsequently formulated.

The Expansion Abroad strategy included 5 priority areas. The first is to increase overseas investment by Chinese enterprises and individuals investing abroad. This solved three major tasks for the further development of the Chinese economy: the acquisition of modern technologies, unlimited access to minerals (most long-term transactions are concluded according to the scheme: minerals in exchange for swap credits), and the search for new markets for their exports.

The second direction was determined by the provision of freedom in the implementation of engineering and construction contracts and the provision of labor services abroad. The main partners were Asian countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Pakistan, etc. Traditionally, Chinese equipment and Chinese workers were used in the implementation of projects, which was fixed in the contract and made it possible to reduce the level of corruption and production costs. The export of Chinese labor reduces the burden on the domestic labor market; raises the professional and qualification level of workers; improves the welfare of the families of workers who are contracted abroad.

The third direction is the conclusion of agreements on the encouragement and mutual protection of investments with other states, providing guarantees to depositors

[7, p. 16]. The fourth is related to the creation of free trade zones. The most indicative and capable was the China–ASEAN free trade zone, which was launched on January 1, 2012. Already in 2013, trade between China and ASEAN reached \$443.6 billion and direct Chinese investment in the countries of the association amounted to \$29.3 billion. The fifth direction was purposefully formulated as the development of separate cooperation with Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan [7, p. 17].

By progressively implementing these five areas, the PRC has ensured the growth of its economy and strengthened its influence in Southeast Asia by developing trade, investing and providing assistance to the countries of the region. In addition, the concept of overcoming the Asian financial and economic crisis of 1997–1998 by Beijing, when the country refused to devalue the yuan, played a significant role in this strengthening. It can be argued that this was the starting point for the exponential growth of China’s global influence that is currently observed.

It makes sense to agree with Muniru Majid, a Malaysian researcher, that the growth of the Chinese economy is a key factor in the growth of the economies of the ASEAN countries. As an example, it is fashionable to turn to the crisis 2009, which mainly affected North American and European states. Asian countries, on the contrary, thanks to the accumulated experience of overcoming the crisis of 1997–1998 were able to increase production volumes by 2.9%. This figure is less than the average annual growth of 6.8% observed in the period 2001–2008, but the crisis only slowed down economic growth without stopping it [6, p. 2; 8].

A special role in China’s quest for comprehensive global leadership should be assigned to two initiatives of the Chinese leadership. In September and October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping, during his visits to the countries of Central and Southeast Asia, put forward an initiative to jointly create the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (hereinafter referred to as the SREB). Premier of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China Li Keqiang, in turn, stressed at the China-ASEAN exhibition that it is necessary to form a maritime Silk Road with the participation of ASEAN countries and create strategic strongholds for the development of inland regions. The Chinese leaders were very active in imposing the idea that the speedy creation of the SREB would contribute to the economic prosperity of the countries along the Great Silk Road and economic cooperation in the region. The creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was the second, but unique in its essence, initiative of the Chinese leadership. Taking into account the urgent need for the development and modernization of the infrastructure of the regions that were planned to be included in the program, the creation of this tool was necessary for the Chinese leadership to finance global projects. This institution has made it possible to strengthen the influence of China and its partners with great innovative potential on the system of global economic governance. The AIIB is now thought to be an alternative to the US-controlled IMF and the World Bank. These initiatives have really helped China become the largest trading partner for Asian actors and a serious competitor in the market, including industrial production and the possibility of obtaining foreign direct investment. Undoubtedly, the degree and nature of interaction with China differs for each of the Southeast Asian countries; undeniably, China ranks first in the trade statistics of all 10 ASEAN countries (second place is the EU). The Association

countries ranked third in China's trade statistics for 2013. At that time, China was the main export market for Malaysia and Singapore, and for Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, the largest source of foreign investment [8].

However, when analyzing the economic prospects for expanding cooperation with China, Southeast Asian countries should not forget to assess the risks directly associated with them. By expanding trade and economic ties and investing in the countries of the region, China gradually ousted other partners, which further increased the dependence of Asian countries on China. This aspect is a real challenge for the economic security system of the ASEAN countries. The source of danger is China's repeated use of economic leverage in relation to these countries in order to support its initiatives. For example, in the Philippines and Vietnam in 2012, China used economic ploys to weaken those countries' claims to islands in the South China Sea (SCS). China did not let hundreds of containers with fruits and vegetables produced by these countries into its market. Moreover, Chinese tourists have been asked to refrain from traveling to these countries due to security concerns. In the case of Cambodia, during its ASEAN Presidency, the Phnom Penh delegation withdrew from discussions of the Joint Communiqué due to strong pressure from Beijing to prevent any mention of territorial disputes in the SCS [8].

China is the most important trading partner of all ASEAN countries, including Vietnam, whose textile factories are dependent on Chinese supplies (more than 50% of textile material comes from China). In fact, the textile industry is one of the key sectors of the Vietnamese economy, so China is using economic pressure to promote its political initiatives, including pressure in the SCS territorial dispute. This situation is typical not only for Vietnam, but also for other countries in the region, where the economic impact is gradual, but persistently, it is transformed into a political one, and this already goes beyond the criteria of economic security.

ASEAN countries, concerned about the growing influence of China, seek to solve the problem of economic dependence on Beijing by transforming security systems both at the country and sub-regional levels, strengthening integration processes. The basis for the economic security of the countries of the region lies in integration on the one hand. And on the other hand, in strengthening economic ties with China and India, as well as in strengthening economic relations with the US, EU and Japan in order to maintain a balance in their economic interests. Southeast Asian countries are striving to strengthen the role of ASEAN in regional politics, following the concept of "ASEAN centrality". The strategic efforts of the ASEAN countries are concentrated on the formation of an effective Economic Community. The goal is to build by 2025 an economic entity with free movement of goods, services, investment, skilled workers, and other capital capable of maintaining competitiveness in the market with economically strong players such as China and India. This project is currently experiencing major challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, as well as climate issues affecting agriculture, financial regulation and non-tariff barriers. A specific aspect of the difficulties is represented by significant differences in the laws of the countries of the Association. In Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia there is one trading algorithm, in Laos and Cambodia it differs significantly and does not correlate with others. There are differences in the schemes for the provision of logistics services.

Singapore has a world-class transport and logistics system, while Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar have one of the world's lowest percentages of paved roads and railways. Of particular note is the desire of the ASEAN countries to diversify economic partners and export markets, in particular by attracting the United States to the region. So, the mechanism of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) before the withdrawal of the United States was a real alternative to the dominance of China. At present, the ASEAN countries and the United States are forced to support partnership agreements only on the basis of bilateral agreements.

In the current geopolitical situation in 2022, Beijing is increasing its military presence in the region, where special attention is paid to the navy, the increase in the scale of the military presence in the nearby seas, the need to defend its territorial claims in the South China Sea and the expansion of the possibility of conducting operations on the high seas. In fact, China has Asia's largest fleet of submarines, surface ships and amphibious assault ships. Moreover, formally remaining committed to the foreign policy principle of refusing to deploy military bases on the territory of other states, the PRC, through economic and technical assistance to some countries in the construction and modernization of airports, ports, military air, naval and radar bases, gets an unlimited opportunity to use them [1; 3; 4, p. 3].

Back in 2012, at the 18th Congress of the CPC, a course was announced for the establishment of China as a strong maritime power, which seriously worried the countries of the region, given the increased tension in the South China Sea. As part of this course, a large Chinese Yulin naval base was built on the Hainan Islands, the first Chinese aircraft carrier was launched, a military port in Qingdao was put into operation, and a program was launched to create an aircraft carrier fleet by national industry [3, p. 5; 5, p. 76–85]. China is also building up defense cooperation with neighboring countries. China's main partners in joint military maneuvers in the region are Russia, Thailand, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Mongolia. Sino-Russian and Sino-Indian naval exercises were held annually from 2012 to 2019, and there were also joint maneuvers with Australia and Thailand, which cannot but worry the United States and its strategic partners in the region. In particular, the attention of the Pentagon was attracted by Chinese naval exercises that demonstrated the ability to freely enter the Pacific Ocean, as well as exercises when Chinese ships sailed through the La Perouse Strait for the first time. With these maneuvers, China violated the principle of a total ban on the navigation of foreign warships in the exclusive economic zone of a coastal state by conducting military maneuvers within the US exclusive economic zone, namely in the areas of the islands of Guam and Hawaii. In response, the US further increased its military presence in the region [2; 3; 4, p. 9].

It becomes obvious that China is performing the function of the locomotive of economic growth and the US counterbalance in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, despite the obvious interest in economic and investment cooperation with China, the ASEAN countries are afraid of the global strategic intentions of the Chinese superpower. On the one hand, by ensuring the growth of its economy, China stimulates the growth of the economies of the countries of the region. But on the other hand, China maintains the status of a key trading partner of the countries of the region, ousting

others. This increases the dependence of Asian countries on China. The ASEAN countries see the prospects for strengthening economic security in strengthening regional cooperation, economic integration, building an effective Economic Community, implementing the principle of ASEAN “centrality” and developing economic ties with the growing world economies of the USA, EU, India and Japan.

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RECONCEPTUALIZING THE EURASIAN INTEGRATION: NEW LEGAL FRAME FOR A NEW REGIONAL TRENDS

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Strategic directions of the development of the Eurasian integration-2025 establishes new Eurasian agenda and concerns a lot of important issues. However, it is still based on the traditional approach to regional integration as economic convergence and four freedoms of movement. The article proposes a new ontological and methodological doctrine of nonlinear multifactored integration and the legal concept of a “single market of development resources”. The author drafts five directions of reconceptualizing of the Eurasian integration and stresses the importance of digitalization and academic argumentation of the inventory of the EAEU legal basis which is mentioned in the Strategy-2025.

Keywords: development resources; Eurasian Economic Union; integration; regionalization.

Re-conceptualization is explained by the fact that the idea of regional integration as such is clear and understandable, regionalization has become an alternative to the failed (so far) globalization. The concept of regional integration very clearly indicates the need to develop a single space – economic, socio-humanitarian, military and security, etc. – for a certain circle of countries with common historical, socio-cultural, economic and other interests [1, p. 23].

Analyzing the doctrine on this topic, one understands that integration is basically linked with trade and economy, with the creation of single markets and four freedoms – freedom of movement of goods, services, labor resources and capital. A simple classification of integration modalities begins with free trade area agreements and further develops to customs, economic, monetary unions, that is, a straight-line, linear movement is envisaged towards the convergence and unification of the economic sphere [1, p. 39–40]. Other spheres are institutionally separated or normative differentiated.

If one turns to the EU practice, the proof of the linearity of the processes is the initial division of the European project into several organizations: social and humanitarian issues fell within the Council of Europe, issues of military cooperation also were driven within other organizational blocs; and within the EU, development was based on three pillars with a very clear delineation of methods of interaction and the scope of powers. Nevertheless, awareness of the need to include all processes in the integration project wins. Thus, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union was accepted as a part of the EU founding instruments; the concept of three pillars ended up with the creation of the Union, which arose firstly as an idea, then as an institutional structure [2]. We see the same confirmation in the fact of “sagging” of certain areas in European integration and its consequences. Migration or refugees have not been regulated, and this is exactly what has brought Europe to huge losses, both economic and image [3, p. 121–122].

If one looks at the Eurasian region, there has initially been a tendency to lineate the integration: that is, the Eurasian Community (Union afterwards) has been covering the economic issues; whereby social and humanitarian idea of post-disintegration interaction (a role of “civilized divorce”) fell within the competence of the CIS; the idea of socio-cultural and socio-economic cooperation was in the Union State [1]. However, today there is an awareness of the complexity and interdependence of all these processes.

Ontologically, I see the re-conceptualization of the EAEU in several directions. Firstly, it’s not really about linear development. The ‘spill-over’ effect proves it in many integration projects. This is a systemic evolutionary approach. Now, the EAEU is at the stage of multifactor integration. The recent agenda, the adopted acts prove that this idea has already manifested itself in practice. Now we need to ‘translate’ it into legal reality. Strategic directions for the development of Eurasian economic integration adopted by decision no. 12 of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council of December 11, 2020, prescribe a lot [4]. However, many issues need doctrinal ‘pumping’. This act is still based on a linear approach to the integration of factors of production – here are goods, here are services, here is capital, etc. In addition, a digitalization has recently been included into the agenda of the EAEU [5]. There are programs for the development of information interaction based on the Protocol No. 3 to the Treaty [6], and the ‘space of trust’, and the electronic signature, and the exchange of information, etc. All these forms the fifth freedom – freedom of the movement of information and the creation of a single digital space. However, the integration is a single space of something more than factors of production, it is *a single space of development resources*.

This approach refers to lawmaking and implementation in regional integration unions taking into account their long-term and multifactor character, polysubjectivity and stability of integration. So, the first task of reconceptualization is to designate the idea that integration is the freedom of movement of development resources. *De jure* it should be reflected, first of all, in program documents as a norm on integration objective.

Then, it should have further evolvement in special regulations. This approach allows to perceive and to regulate integration areas – customs, investment, the labor market, education, etc. – from the point of view of ecosystems. Thus, e.g., a common labor market needs a single scientific and educational space. From the point of view of implementation in the acts, it means the creation of a legal basis for exchange programs, the promotion of double diploma projects, at least at the second stage of education, etc.

The second area of reconceptualization: competencies and institutional structure. Also, it is mentioned in the Strategic Directions. The need to strengthen the powers of the Commission to monitor compliance by Member States with Union law is very well emphasized, giving the Commission the right to apply to the Court of Justice of the Union in case of non-implementation of decisions of the Union bodies, to apply to the Supreme Council in case of non-execution of the decision. However, the Strategic directions reserve that it concerns the terms of fulfilling obligations within the framework of the internal market functioning. One can conclude, thereof, that a

systematic interpretation of what is the internal market will be crucial and narrowing approaches to the definition of the “internal market” concept will lead to a lack of competence of the Commission, which has been constantly criticized since the beginning of its activity [7].

The Court’s competence and related matters also need a new approach: there should be effective mechanisms for the execution of the Court’s decisions, a preliminary competence if necessary.

Another element in this direction is new approach to the composition of the Commission and the Court, the creation of a Eurasian civil service with the entire complex of legal regulation (the rules of admission, ethics, mechanisms for protecting their rights, and, of course, responsibility in case of failure to fulfil obligations).

The third direction: branding of the Union, its recognition within the Union and outside. It is indispensable for future of integration to disseminate knowledge on the project within population and professionals [8]. An example for higher education in law is the introduction of basic courses on the EAEU law in the state mandatory component of higher education at the 1st stage. That has already been done in Belarusian State University for specializations “Jurisprudence”, “Economic Law”, “International Law” in new plans and programs of 2021.

The fourth direction of reconceptualization, which the Union also obviously needs, is proximity to citizens and business. There are three pillars of legal regulation in this direction: 1. Transparency as an openness and communication. The system of presenting information from the Commission, from ministers has changed, there are now online broadcasts of meetings. The effect of increased interaction with the primary beneficiary of the norms created by the Commission, ‘integration from below’ is currently underestimated. 2. The citizenship of the Union. 3. The law-making initiative from citizens.

The fifth direction: coherence to external legal systems and inter-integration convergence. By and large, we are talking about the correlation of the EAEU law with other legal regimes – universal regimes of a sectoral nature – with international customs law, with WTO law [1, p. 174–184].

The Strategic Directions very correctly state that for the successful activities of the Union, it is necessary to improve the laws of the Union, to carry out its inventory and, if necessary, to bring them into line. Of course, such an inventory will be based on the directions enshrined in the Strategy of the Union, but it seems that such an inventory will be more successful if it will be widely theoretically based and reconceptualized. The given directions are only the draft circuit for this deep academic work on the new Eurasian legal doctrine.

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THE PROBLEM OF FUNDAMENTALISM IN ISLAM (CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS)

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The aim of the article is to identify the root causes of fundamentalism in Islam. The role of individual, Assassins in producing violence, jihad in Afghanistan and US support for the Mujahideen, despotism in the radicalization of Islamic society, and the connection between Wahhabism and the Islamic movements are analyzed. Also, in the article, the author comes up with a bunch of solutions that may help resolve the problem. The object of the article is the problem of fundamentalism in Islam. The practical significance lies in the fact that the content of the article can be used in teaching disciplines related to conflictology and international relations. It should be pointed out that this problem in question is of interest as one of the few studies on fundamentalism in Islam in Belarusian historiography. In addition, several sources in Arabic and English are included in bibliographic references.

Keywords: Islam; fundamentalism; Wahhabism; jihad; Assassins; despotism.

Islamic fundamentalism is an ideology that includes the teachings of Sharia (Religious Law) that Islamic fundamentalists seek to impose and apply literally without validating them and even understanding the correct context of the sources of Islamic law, i.e., the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the consensus of Muslim jurists. Islam from fundamentalists' perspective is the solution to all the problems of political, social, cultural and social life. However, not every Muslim is on board with this vision. The words of the Islamic preacher Sheikh Osama Ibrahim are quite telling. He emphasizes that the statement that the Quran is valid for any time and place is not entirely accurate, since the Holy Quran is valid only in certain conditions and times [1]. In this regard, it should be emphasized that the content of the Qur'an is multi-meaning. Based on this, the misinterpretation of certain verses of the Qur'an can lead the Muslim reader to fundamentalism.

Multiple causes have taken its toll on the emergence of fundamentalism. *The first one is the role of the individual.* There is a countless number of religious figures who played a considerable role in distorting the correct meaning of the Qur'an, such as Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780–855) and Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111), Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1791), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897) and Muhammad Abdu (1849–1905), Rashid Rida (1865–1935), Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), Abul A'la Maududi (1903–1979), Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966). All of them made clear that every Muslim should completely revert to the text of the Qur'an, build the Islamic society in Medina – the first capital of the Islamic state – and follow “al-salaf al-salih” – the pious predecessors – that is, the first three generations of Muslims. The first generation of Muslims is considered to be the companions of Muhammad (Sahabah). The second generation of Muslims are called the Tabi'un (the successors of Sahabah). The third generation of Muslims are called The Tabi'al-Tabi'in, the successors of the Tabi'un. Also, all these

religious figures attached great importance to jihad. For example, Ahmad ibn Hanbal maintained: be aware of the fact that jihad contains the best of this world and the hereafter, so abandoning jihad means losing this world and the hereafter. And whoever has committed sins, jihad is the greatest atonement [2]. In this connection, it is relevant to note that the meaning of jihad in the Arabic language signifies diligence or making great effort, and a mujahid is a person who does his best.

Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Iranian revolution, also had a great influence on fundamentalist movements. In his book “the Islamic Government”, he touches on the necessity of a political revolution to eliminate all kinds of injustice and deviations that led the Islamic nation to collapse and destruction. In this respect, he refers to the fact that Sharia and reason obligate us not to leave governments alone. The government’s continuation in making missteps destroys the Islamic system and its basic principles [3, p. 33].

It is worth mentioning that there is a plethora of individuals who have spearheaded efforts to radicalize the Islamic world, however, in author’s opinion, the Islamic figures mentioned above remain the most prominent ones who paved the way for the emergence of leaders of fundamentalist and jihadist Islamic movements in the Islamic world.

The second cause of the emergence of fundamentalism is attributed to the connection between Wahhabism and the Islamic organizations. Wahhabism is a Sunni Islamic movement that was founded in the Najd region in the center of the Arabian Peninsula at the hands of Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792). Abd al-Wahhab allied with the House of Saud to spread the Salafist call, which led to the establishment of the first Saudi state. Al-Wahhab made the focal point of his reform movement the principle that every idea added to Islam after the third century of the Islamic era (around 950 CE) was wrong and should be eliminated. Muslims, to be true Muslims, must adhere only and strictly to the original beliefs set forth by the Prophet Muhammad.

With the purpose of challenging Ottoman hegemony over Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Britain sought to appeal to the traditional-minded masses and dictators rather than the enlightened Muslim elite. From the standpoint of R. Dreyfus, an American journalist, the creation of Saudi Arabia with the help of Great Britain served the activation of Islamic extremism by creating a base on which extremists could operate for decades [4, p. 57].

But, despite the seizure of power in Saudi Arabia by the House of Saud and the transformation of Wahhabism into the creed of the state, Wahhabism was still a religious movement rather than political. At that time, political Islam did not crystallize because there was no mass base that could confront the attractive anti-colonial ideologies such as communism and nationalism. However, in 1928, an Islamic movement, represented by the organization of the Muslim Brotherhood, was founded in the city of Ismailia in Egypt, which focused mainly on the islamization of society and institutions in the face of waves of modernization of society [4, p. 59].

It is remarkable that the prestige of Arab regimes was tented after Arab losses in the 1948 and 1967 wars. The aftermath of that, the Muslim Brotherhood took advantage of it to portray itself as an alternative. They asserted that only by holding

tightly all together, by the rope that Allah extends to us, we could turn defeats into victories [5].

It goes without saying that Saudi Arabia, as the center of Islam and a counterweight to Gamal Abdel Nasser and Arab nationalism, played a prominent role in supporting the Islamic right forces throughout the Islamic world [4, p. 87]. With the increase in Saudi capabilities thanks to the oil revenues, Faisal bin Abdulaziz, King Saudi Arabia (1964–1975), saw “the Islamic call” as a way to combat pan-Arabism and Nasserism. From point of view of Faisal, Islam would be a successful means of countering Nasser.

In that spirit, the 1973 war between Arabs and Israelis was crucial to political Islam. With spike in oil prices, Saudi Arabia was able to pour money into Wahhabism and fundamentalist movements in the Islamic world and beyond.

Thus, in the 1970s, the Saudis used billions of dollars in oil revenues to establish dozens of Islamic banks and institutions in Islamic countries that allowed them to spread their Wahhabi beliefs.

The third cause of fundamentalism ascribes to jihad in Afghanistan and US involvement in the mobilization of Islamists. The war in Afghanistan was conducive to transforming the political Islam into a sword hanging over the necks of the Soviets. This was in line with National Security Adviser Brzezinski’s theory of “Arc of Crisis” stretching from northeast Africa to Central Asia, R. Dreyfus accentuates that the “Islamic Green Belt” theory is one of the brainchild of the American politician, Zbigniew Brzezinski. As per this theory, the emergence of Islamic regimes in the Middle East, backed by the United States and the Muslim masses, could create a real alternative to authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, on the one hand, and curb the left– movements that supported the Soviet Union, on the other [6].

In the same context, N. Chomsky notes that the Soviet invaders encountered a resistance that received massive support from the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia [7, p. 74].

US assistance went beyond financial aid. As of 1980, under the watch of Brzezinski, Afghan Mujahedeen were trained at various bases on the East Coast of the United States, where they received lessons on more than 60 secret methods of assassination including modern devices, timers and explosives, automatic weapons, remote control devices for detonating mines and bombs. The Mujahedeen were trained in the methods of strategic sabotage, destruction and arson as well [4, p. 308].

Furthermore, the USA allocated more than \$60 million in federal grants for study programs in Afghanistan and Pakistan during and after the Islamic Jihad in Afghanistan. These educational programs were full of Islamic propaganda, such as the printing of children’s books, in which Afghans were learning arithmetic by counting the numbers of dead Soviet soldiers and Kalashnikovs. This is consistent, as Dreyfus points out, with the hardline Islamic rhetoric [4, p. 362–363].

It should be stressed that Maktab al-Khidamat (Services Bureau), which was established by Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam in 1984, played a crucial role in raising funds and recruiting foreign mujahedeen for the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Subsequently, the Services Bureau became the core of al-Qaeda, which was founded in 1988 [4, p. 310].

With the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, the jihad in Afghanistan came to end, but the legacy of that war, including well-trained terrorists, would continue to be a thorn in the side of Western countries and the Muslim states.

The fourth cause of fundamentalism can be to some extent related to the role of Assassins in producing violence. The Assassins were a revolutionary sect of Ismaili Islam that split from Shia. They were viewed by the Ismailis as an elite force in the war against the Imam's foes. The Assassins were so loyal and obedient to their leaders that they would do whatever work they were asked to do as soon as their leader commanded them to do so.

Bernard Lewis mentions: After the Turks managed to consolidate their power and replace the Arab and Persian aristocracy and nobility, and the return to the Salafi schools of thought, the need for a "new call" came from the leader of the Assassins, Hasan al-Sabah (1050–1124). It started in Iran in 1081 [8, p. 65]. Since then, al-Sabah began to dispatch missionaries to the Seljuk Empire (1037–1194). In 1092, the Assassins achieved their first major victory in the "art" of assassination, which manifested itself in the murder of one of the most famous Seljuk ministers, Nizam al-Mulk. With this action, Hasan al-Sabah gained fame and laid the foundations of the commando.

It is important to highlight that the Assassins called themselves "Fedayeen" – sacrificers. And it is the same name, which was used by the Palestinian fighters. For this reason, the actions of the Palestinian guerrillas were linked to the Ismaili phenomenon [9, p. 163]. B. Lewis underlines that the Ismailis were the first terrorists. In addition, it was the Assassins who were the first to use organized terrorism as a weapon [8, p. 191–192].

The fifth cause of fundamentalism is associated with despotism. Since the Islamic countries gained independence, they have been at the mercy of tyranny. As a result, the political and social environment in the Islamic world, which has long suffered from the concentration of power, the monopolization of decisions by one person, the restriction of people's freedom and the absence of any opportunity for peaceful transfer of power or political pluralism, has paved the ground for the emergence of religious extremism in the Islamic region. In this regard, Rachid Ghannouchi, the leader of the Tunisian Ennahda movement, gave a speech in Berlin in December 2014 in which he underscored that whoever sows tyranny will reap ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) [10].

Also, some researchers, such as the Jordanian writer Muhammad Abu Rumman, believe that the violence emanating from these fundamentalist movements is due to the conditions of reality, and it is a direct or indirect result of the structural violence practiced by the Arab authorities and the political or economic marginalization of large segments of Arab societies [11].

Needless to say, that owing to constant fear of the repercussions of freedom, Islamic governments invoke security and stability considerations to use them as an excuse to hold up the process of political and economic reforms in their own countries. A good example of that is the Greater Middle East Project proposed by Washington at the G8 Summit in Virginia in 2004. It was presented as a vision for a better future for the region. However, a number of Islamic governments including Egypt, Sudan, Saudi

Arabia and Syria rejected it and articulated that they would not permit any country to interfere in the affairs of the region [12].

The difficult living reality of Muslims has been exploited by fundamentalist groups. Samuel Huntington has a point in describing how Islamic organizations had been functioning within certain Islamic states. As Egypt by the early 1990s Islamic organizations had developed an extensive network of organizations which, filling a vacuum left by the government, provided health, welfare, educational, and other services to a large number of Egypt's poor [13, p. 112].

Broadly speaking, it is an indisputable fact that despotism in the Islamic world is one of the main causes that have made Islamic countries politically paralyzed and socially and economically poor. As a result, the Islamic states have become reminiscent of the Thirty Years' War in Europe from 1618 to 1648, in which the struggle for power and religion overlapped.

Having said that, the question arises as to what needs to be done to eradicate this endemic fundamentalism. In fact, this problem in question requires multidirectional solutions, both at the external and internal levels. Thus, in order to address external factors, it is necessary to involve Islamic countries in the international decision-making process, especially when it comes to their own issues. More importantly, the West should get rid of its conscious and unconscious hatred of Islam resulting from the distorted image of Islam in some books or in the media.

Also, to wipe out fundamentalism, Western countries, at the helm of the United States of America, should stop the policy of double standards. The most prominent example of this is Palestine. Indeed, injustice and disregard for the rights of the Palestinians greatly fuel the hatred of Muslims towards the West. Therefore, the international community ought to find an acceptable solution and a peaceful settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians in accordance with the relevant United Nations resolutions that provide for the creation of a state for the Palestinians and the right of Israel to exist in the region. Moreover, Western states should refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of Islamic countries and using their shortcomings to impose Western values and principles that are incompatible with Islamic values, otherwise that will lead to the weakening of national states and turning them into a breeding ground for extremist fundamentalists.

Moreover, superpowers must abandon the policy of military intervention under the pretext of the right of humanitarian intervention and the fight against terrorism, let alone the policy of ignoring the actions of tyrannical rulers when it is in the interest of the West. It is worth noting that the policy of non-interference in the affairs of the Islamic region should not be limited only to the great powers, but it should also be applied to the regional players, namely Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. They must pull their forces out of Islamic countries and not turn them into a battleground to achieve their goals by exploiting religious differences between Shiites and Sunnis.

As for how to deal with the internal causes of fundamentalism, that should be done primarily through devising modern constitutions for the benefit of the state and the people, and not for the ruler and his clientele. Secondly, Islamic governments should critically and constructively review the foundations of Islamic culture with a view to introducing new laws compatible with modernity and the spirit of the times.

This is delivered by verifying and scrutinizing all the inherited rules of Islamic law that are deemed out of place in our time and reinterpreting them in a clear and rational understanding of the historical context in which the verses were revealed or hadiths were written, especially those that call for violence or jihad. Thirdly, Muslim countries are in dire need of reconsidering their educational policies to get rid of materials that encourage extremism and fundamentalism, as well as contradict the foundations of modern-day values. Furthermore, Muslims should abandon the conspiracy theories in which Muslims attribute their backwardness and misfortunes to the West. Muslims must realize that the West is the complement to the East, not the opposite. Another important point that must be taken into consideration is the introduction of books of Muslim philosophers into the educational curricula that call for reconciling religion and philosophy, and the separation of religion from the state.

In conclusion, the author argues that the role of the clergy and their books, the spread of Wahhabi thought, the repercussions of Islamic mobilization against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan with the help of the United States and the internal factors in Islamic societies are the main causes of fundamentalism in Islam.

Regarding Assassins' role in producing violence, it should be mentioned that in the context of a struggle for power, the Assassins phenomenon contributed to the re-use of violence as a political weapon, and religion as a tool of incitement against the ruler. However, caution must be exercised in attributing the actions of current terrorists to the Assassins, because there is a deep difference between the ideology of the Ismailis and the ideology of today's extremists.

In terms of solutions to address fundamentalism, the author asserts that they are elusive because of the interference of super and regional powers in the internal affairs of the region, Western support for Israel and its non-compliance with international law that provide for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied Arab territories, and because of the absence of real democracy in the Islamic region, as well as the rulers' attempts to cozy up with the clerics to legitimize their power or to use them against the opposition. Such policies put in danger national unity within Islamic societies by merging religion with politics, as happens in most Islamic countries.

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CHINA IN THE BALTIC STATES' FOREIGN POLICY BEFORE THE COVID PANDEMIC

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The article considers developments of relations between the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and the People's Republic of China over the last three decades before the COVID pandemic. The author analyzes historical dynamics of Baltic-Chinese official contacts, which preceded contemporary situation, highlights main interests and contradictions which formed the agenda of their relations during the period under review, and describes how the formats of their cooperation have changed over this time. On the basis of this analysis conclusions are made on the main characteristics of Baltic-Chinese relations and their role for Baltic foreign policies.

Keywords: Baltic states; Estonia; Latvia; Lithuania; foreign policy; China.

While speaking about foreign policy of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania most scholars usually focus only on their relations with the West and with Russia. Such a simplified “bipolar” scheme of analyzing Baltic foreign policies, with collective West as their main ally and Russia as the main threat, became very popular. But in XXI century this scheme certainly needs some adjustments. First, because, as recent developments have demonstrated, the West is not as consolidated now, as it used to be in the Cold War times and first years thereafter. Second, because following its unprecedented economic growth China aspires for a status of global power with its interests and ambitions in such distant parts of the world as Latin America, Africa and even Europe. In competition for global leadership China has already become main rival to American (and Western in general) dominance, successfully replacing Russia in this role. And the recent COVID pandemic only accelerated this rivalry between China and the West which indicates the creation of the AUKUS military block in 2021 admittedly aimed at deterrence of China in Indo-Pacific region.

Although Baltic states are situated far from Eastern Asia and Pacific region and have no global leadership aspirations, they have also been engaged in the ongoing Western-Chinese confrontation. Especially prominent here is the case of Lithuania, which left in 2021 the regional “17+1” format of cooperation with China and invited to open an official Taiwanese representation on its territory. This provoked a response from China in a form of lowering the level of Chinese diplomatic representation in Lithuania. But how these events correspond with overall long-term trends of Baltic relations with China? Do they represent a continuation of previous policy, or on the contrary, indicate radical change of it caused by the growing tension in international order since the beginning of the COVID pandemic? To answer these questions, we need to analyze dynamics of Baltic-Chinese relations over previous decades, that preceded these dramatic events. It is the aim of this article.

Historiography on the topic of Baltic-Chinese relations so far is limited. First there should be mentioned the article by V. Sveics on how the leadership of the People's Republic of China (PRC) perceived the fact of the Baltic states' annexation

by the Soviet Union and how they instrumentalized this topic for their criticism of the USSR in times of worsening of Soviet-Chinese relations [1]. Although his paper analyzes events that preceded establishment of diplomatic relations between Baltic states and the PRC, it explains how these three small states first appeared in focus of Chinese foreign policy. As for the works which directly address various aspects of Baltic-Chinese relations and their significance for each side, there should be highlighted articles by D. Scott [2] and J. Tucker and M. Veliste [3]. These authors mostly focus on security issues and consider possible impact of growing Chinese presence on balance of power in the Baltic Sea region. In Baltic states relations with China were investigated first of all by Latvian scholars A. Bērziņa-Čerenkova [4] and M. Andžāns [5]. They concentrated on economic aspects of relations with China and prospects of participation in Chinese “Belt and Road” initiative for Latvia and the rest Baltic states. Recent developments and changes in Lithuanian-Chinese relations were also analyzed by K. Andrijauskas [6]. Finally, there should be mentioned two articles published in Russian language. The first one by V. Vorotnikov gives a brief overview of historical developments of relations between Baltic countries and Eastern Asian states of Japan, China and Korea [7]. And the last one is the article by author of this paper, prepared in collaboration with Chinese author Xing Jie and focused on bilateral relations between Baltic states and China in 1992–2018 [8].

As Sveics pointed out in his work, first Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania appeared in focus of the PRC leadership yet in 1970s when in period of worsening Chinese-Soviet relations it used the case of annexation of Baltic republics in order to blame the USSR for expansionism and oppression of small nations. According to him in that time Chinese diplomats even tried to establish contacts with organizations of Baltic political emigrants in Western countries [1, pp. 151–159]. Nevertheless, China recognized independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania not before it was done by the USSR Supreme Council on 6 September 1991. In the middle of the same month the PRC established diplomatic relations with all the three states and in 1992 opened its embassies in their capitals. Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian embassies in Beijing have been opened in 1995–1997, but first ambassadors to China were appointed only in late 1990s – early 2000s.

Foreign policies of Baltic states are characterized by remarkable continuity based on stable consensus among their political elites on major goals of their foreign and security policies. Therefore, changes in Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian relations with foreign partners have resulted from actions of external actors (e.g., withdrawal of Russian troops from their territory, admission of Baltic states into the EU and NATO etc.) rather than from the outcomes of their electoral campaigns [9, p. 137]. And because of this reason it makes sense to build periodization of Baltic-Chinese relations on the changing of political leadership in the PRC, since each Chinese leader has brought his new vision of the PRC foreign policy.

From establishment of diplomatic relations between three Baltic states and the PRC in September 1991 and up to the end of Jiang Zemin term of office as President of China in November 2002 there occurred 15 official meetings of representatives of Chinese officials with their colleagues from each of these three states: 8 visits of Chinese officials to Estonia, 7 – to Latvia and the same number to Lithuania; 7 visits

of Estonian officials to China, 8 – of Latvian and 7 – of Lithuanian [8]. It's interesting to note that over this period China never conducted joint meetings with representatives of all the three Baltic states, as it often did US and EU leaders in 1990s, but on the contrary preferred to negotiate with each state separately.

First visits of Estonian and Lithuanian ministers to China took place yet in 1992. As for Chinese-Latvian relations they were put on hold by Beijing in 1992–1994 because of Latvian decision to establish official contacts with Chinese Republic on Taiwan and open Taiwanese trade representation in Latvia. That directly violated the principal of “one China” which plays a fundamental role for the PRC government in its relations with foreign partners. Having realized that missed opportunities of relations with China cannot be compensated by relations with Taiwan, Latvia changed its position and in 1994 broke official relations with Taiwan and resumed relations with the PRC.

First Baltic leader to visit China was Lithuanian President A. Brazauskas on 8 November 1993. He signed in Beijing agreements on economic, cultural and railway cooperation between the two states. In 1994 he was followed by Estonian President L. Meri (in March 2001 he paid his second visit to China) and Latvian President G. Ulmanis. But most intensive visits of Baltic officials to China were in the end of 1990s. In May 1998 foreign minister of Estonia (and future president of the country) T. H. Ilves visited China and signed the agreement for avoidance of double taxation and prevention of tax evasion. In June 1998 Estonian minister of defence and in July his Latvian colleague paid visits to China. Even the leader of Lithuanian conservatives, V. Landsbergis, who traditionally criticizes Beijing for human rights violations, visited China in February 1999 as a speaker of Lithuanian parliament. As for visits of Chinese officials to Baltic states, they culminated in early 2000s. In September 2000 Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Li Peng visited all the three Baltic capitals. With Lithuanian President V. Adamkus he met even twice – first time in Iceland on their way to the UN Millennium Summit in New York and in few days again in Vilnius. And in July 2001 the President of China Jiang Zemin visited Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius. As for agenda of Baltic-Chinese relations at this period, it was dominated by issues of economic cooperation in the fields of trade, investments and taxation regulating, while cooperation in the fields of sciences, technologies and culture could be defined as additional direction.

As Jiang Zemin was succeeded by Hu Jintao, who headed the PRC in 2002–2012 relations between China and Baltic states intensified greatly and the number of official meetings multiplied in this decade. There were 61 meetings between Estonian and Chinese officials (26 visits of Estonian officials to China, 32 visits of Chinese officials to Estonia and 3 meetings in third countries). Latvian and Chinese politicians met 96 times (40 visits of Latvian officials to China, 51 visits of Chinese officials to Latvia and 5 meetings in third countries). In Lithuanian-Chinese relations there were 88 meetings (32 visits from Lithuanian side, 51 from Chinese and 2 meetings in third countries). [8] Such statistics show that during this period China demonstrated more interest and initiative in developing relations with Baltic states. Besides we see some shift of priorities in these relations. If in 1990s Estonia slightly got ahead of the rest two Baltic countries in developing its relations with China, in 2000s this state obviously

lagged behind them in this respect. While Latvia demonstrated the highest interest in the region for developing cooperation with China – the tendency that preserved throughout 2010s as well.

But despite the increased number the level of visits, especially from the side of China, lowered – during this period neither Chinese head of state, nor head of government had ever visited Baltic states. As for Baltic leaders, in April 2004 there was a state visit to China by Latvian President V. Vīķe-Freiberga, in August 2005 – by Estonian President A. Rüütel and in September 2006 – by Lithuanian President V. Adamkus. But the record here holds Latvian President V. Zatlers, who visited China 3 times – in August 2008, September 2009 and October 2010 [8]. Some of the most important political meetings of this period took place during large international forums, exhibitions and ceremonies. First of all, there should be mentioned Olympic Games in Beijing in August 2008. Official delegations of Baltic states to these ceremonies included Latvian President V. Zatlers and prime ministers of three states: I. Godmanis (Latvia), A. Ansip (Estonia) and G. Kirkilas (Lithuania). All of them held meetings with their Chinese counterparts – President Hu Jintao and Prime-Minister Wen Jiabao respectively. Other formats for Baltic-Chinese political contacts in this period included the World Economic Forum in Dalian (2007), the Shanghai World Exhibition (2010), five annual forums “Europe – Asia” and most important the first summit “China – Central and Eastern Europe” that took place 26 April 2012 in Warsaw.

Agenda of Baltic-Chinese relations also widened substantially. Although economic cooperation still remained in the core, there added such foreign policy priorities of Hu Jintao, as cooperation in the field of culture and education. Another new direction became cooperation in the field of transport and infrastructure. For instance, in October 2009 during the “Europe – Asia” forum of transport ministers in Vilnius there was signed trilateral joint declaration on East-West transport corridor between China, Belarus and Lithuania. Besides Baltic states wished to capitalize on their new status as the EU most Eastern members and actively proposed their assistance in promoting cooperation between China and the EU. Such statements were made by Estonian Prime-Minister A. Ansip (2006) and President T. H. Ilves (2009) as well, as by Lithuanian Presidents V. Adamkus (2006) and D. Grybauskaitė (2010). But it would be wrong not to say also about political contradictions which occurred between Baltic states and China due to different views on the democracy and human rights. For instance, in 2011 Beijing cancelled a visit of Chinese minister of agriculture to Estonia after 16–18 August of that year Estonian President met in Tallinn with Dalai Lama whom the PRC views as the leader of Tibet separatists.

As Xi Jinping, the current leader of China, came to power in late 2012, both number and level of bilateral meetings with Baltic officials decreased dramatically. This happened due to advance of his ambitious New Silk Road initiative later renamed to “One Belt – One Road” (OBOR). This initiative gives clear preference to multilateral formats in Chinese diplomacy. Therefore, in 2013–2019 Chinese officials met with their Estonian colleagues 5 times in bilateral format and 6 times during multilateral forums, with Latvian – 7 and 4 times, with Lithuanian – 8 and 5 times respectively. Yet before the official announcement of the OBOR strategy Chinese government initiated in April 2012 first “China – Central and Eastern Europe” summit in Poland.

This summit gave start to the new multilateral format of cooperation between China and Eastern EU member states, including all the three Baltic countries, that is known now as “16+1” format. This format became the main platform for Baltic-Chinese negotiations in 2010s. Another important platform for their cooperation remained annual “Europe – Asia” forums and the Summer Asian Davos Forums in China.

Another reason for cooling of Baltic-Chinese relations were visits of Dalai Lama the 14th perceived in China as the leader of Tibet separatists to Tallinn and Vilnius. In August 2011 he was officially accepted by Estonian President A. Rüütel and in September 2013 – by Lithuanian President D. Grybauskaitė. Both meetings provoked official protests from China. Together with initially suspicious attitudes of Baltic political elites to the OBOR initiative this caused decrease in Baltic-Chinese relations in the first half of 2010s. Therefore, strategic partnership between Lithuania and China within the OBOR initiative was signed only in 2015. Latvia started its active engagement in this initiative only in 2017 but had to make serious concessions in the field of its railway tariffs. In second half of 2010s this country tried to get benefits from becoming a priority partner for China in the Baltic region. A series of high level Latvian-Chinese meetings in 2015–2018 indicate these attempts. Yet Chinese government didn’t wish to distinguish any of the three states as its priority partner in the region preferring to diversify its infrastructure investments. For instance, in 2018 instead of concentrating its investments in Latvia China signed agreement with Estonian logistics company “GTS Express” and showed interest in the project of Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel construction.

Finally, we shall take into account Baltic worries about the possible role that China could play in security architecture and balance of power in the Baltic Sea Region. According to D. Scott there are two main arguments on this point. First assumes that China will balance Russia as growing Chinese economic presence in the region will undermine Russian positions and its ability to exert pressure on Baltic states, thus strengthening their security. Second assumption suggests that China will act in the region as Russian ally, which greatly increases Baltic insecurities. This view is supported by increasing Russian-Chinese military cooperation and their joint naval exercises that took place in 2017 in Baltic Sea [3, p. 33].

To conclude we shall highlight the following positions. Throughout the period under review Baltic relations with China haven’t obtained such stable characteristics as “Western” or “Russian” vectors of their foreign policies. In Baltic foreign policy identity China is still not prescribed any specific permanent role – it is neither pure ally, nor pure enemy, but rather a factor in relations with actors that are more important for these states (the EU, the USA, Russia). Therefore, Baltic-Chinese relations mostly follow bargain strategy patterns where pragmatic calculations play more important role than any ideological considerations. Since Baltic states have not much to propose China, initiative in developing of Baltic-Chinese cooperation is clearly on the side of Beijing. But depending on evaluation of Chinese proposals Baltic states show more or less willingness to act in line with them. And direct gains sometimes can be sacrificed for benefits in some other directions (e.g., demonstrating commitment to unity with their Western allies in their policies towards China in order to get more of their support

vis-à-vis Russia, or, on the contrary distancing from the common EU approach to demonstrate their “special” role in promotion of relations between Europe and China).

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DIGITAL SILK ROAD: OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHINA–EAEUECONOMIC COOPERATION

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The purpose of the article is to determine the essence of the China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) and the opportunities for economic cooperation between China and the EAEU. The article analyzes the current state of the development of the digital economy (DE) in China and reveals the essence of its one of the main programs for the development of the DE – the Digital Silk Road initiative, the goals of which are to improve regional and international digital connectivity and modernizing traditional industries in participating countries. Moreover, the article also reveals the potential of the DE in the EAEU member states and identifies their opportunities and constraints for economic cooperation with China within the framework of the DSR. As a result, the main directions of orderly and mutually beneficial economic cooperation between China and the EAEU were determined in the face of increasing uncertainty.

Keywords: Digital Silk Road (DSR); Digital economy (DE); the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Digital Agenda; China; EAEU.

Currently, the digital economy (DE) has become the key driver of economic growth of various countries and regions. China as the world's largest developing country, in order to push forward the economy, since 2015, the Chinese government has unveiled a series of plans or measures to develop the digital economy. Among them, Digital Silk Road (DSR) as the digital dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) officially launched in 2015. It aims at improving the regional and international digital connectivity and modernizing traditional industries in participating countries, with China as the main driver of the process. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as a China's crucial BRI partner has become an arena for the development of the DSR, and meanwhile, the development of the DSR has the potential to provide major opportunities for China – EAEU economic cooperation.

In recent years, China's DE has expanded rapidly, and it has the highest number of internet users in the world. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of December 2021, the number of internet users and mobile phone users in China had reached 1.032 billion and 1.643 billion, respectively. The internet penetration rate reached 73%, and 1.425 million 5G base stations have been built [1]. That depends largely on COVID-19 pandemic, the Internet has become a vital necessity for working, learning, accessing basic services and keeping in touch, and it has laid a solid foundation for China to develop the DE. According to the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology (CAICT), the scale of DE value added expanded from 1.2 trillion yuan in 2002 to 39.2 trillion yuan in 2020, and the share of DE in China's GDP rise from 10.3 to 38.6% [2]. The growth rate of the DE exceeded the growth rate of the GDP by more than three times, indicating that the digital economy has gradually become one of the core growth poles in the national

economy [3]. In addition, China’s e-commerce market has been the largest in the world since 2013, and in 2021, its retail e-commerce sales value amounted to around \$2.49 trillion [4], which contributed to more than half of the world’s e-commerce retail sales, with the sales value surpassing the combined total of Europe and the United States [5]. JD, Alibaba and Pinduoduo as e-commerce giants in China in 2021 recorded a revenue of 951.5 billion yuan, 717.2 billion yuan and 93.9 billion yuan, respectively [6]. Among them, JD is the world’s second largest online retailer by revenue, while Amazon is the largest e-commerce marketplace, with a revenue of \$468.78 billion in 2021 [7].

The DSR first appeared in as early as 2014, within the document Basic Planning for Infrastructure Connectivity with Neighboring Countries, formulated by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) and presented as MIIT’s policy plan in support of the BRI agenda [8]. It was first introduced as the “Information Silk Road” in the white paper, which jointly issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China in March 2015 [9]. In 2016, the term “Online Silk Road” was used to highlight BRI in cyberspace, and since 2017, the term “Digital Silk Road” has adopted uniformly as the expression of the digital dimension of the BRI [10]. The DSR is linked to the “Made in China 2025” and “China Standards 2035” programmes, which aim at reducing China’s reliance on foreign technology imports and invest heavily in its own innovations in order to secure China’s position a global powerhouse in high-tech industries. Meanwhile, as an important component of the BRI, according to the Fudan University Digital Belt and Road Centre, the DSR, similar with the BRI, adopts the “five aspects of connectivity” framework (Fig. 1) and mainly includes: digital infrastructure construction, smart cities, cross-border e-commerce and digital healthcare, etc.

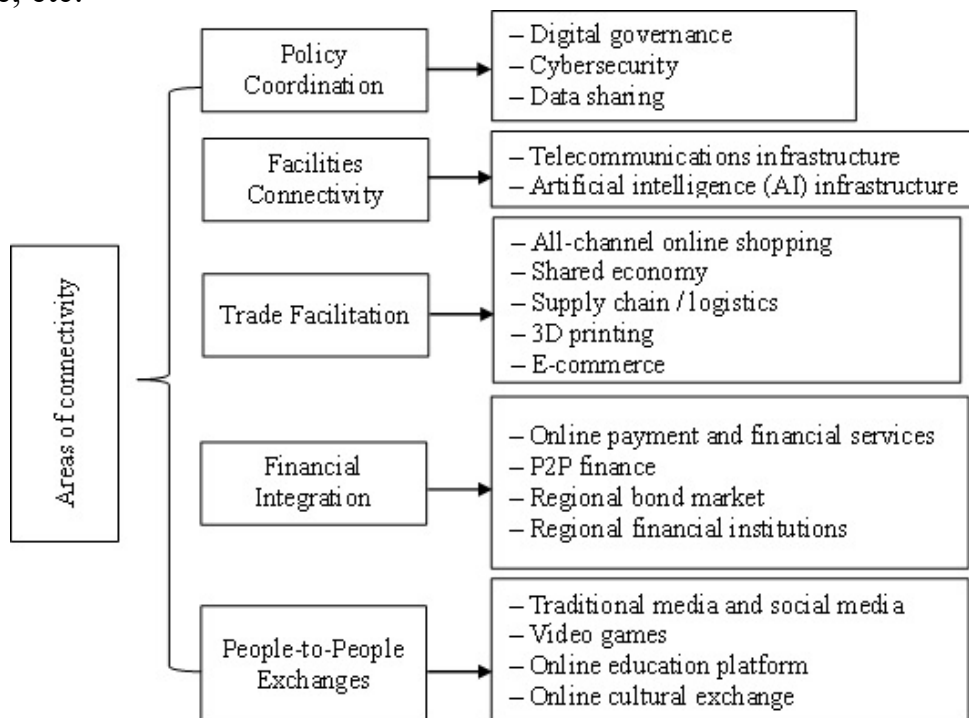


Fig. 1. Key aspects of the DSR. Source: [11].

The EAEU member states, being crucial partners for China in the implementation of the BRI, since 2016, also have adopted national strategies or

programs for development of digital economy and digital society (Table 1). Meanwhile, in order to create a single digital economy in the region and achieve associated dividends of the EAEU digital strategy, the EAEU Digital Agenda until 2025 (DA 2025) was signed on December 26, 2016. Then, in 2017, at the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council the Main Directions for the Implementation of the EAEU DA 2025 at the supranational level were identified, which are as follows: the transformation of common markets; sectoral and cross-sectoral transformation; the development of the digital infrastructure; and the digital transformation of the management of integration processes. According to the World Bank, it is expected that by 2025 the share of the DE will be at least 20 %, and it may lead to an increase in the services market by 2.2 % of the EAEU’s GDP [12].

Tab. 1. National digital strategies/programmes of the EAEU member states

Countries	National digital strategies/programmes	Main content
Armenia	Digital Agenda of Armenia 2030 Strategy (2017)	Main areas include creation of the digital government, enhancing cybersecurity, private sector development, institution-building and formation of digital skills and infrastructure.
Belarus	Information Development Strategy for 2016-2022 (2015) and Decree “On the Digital Economy Development” (2017)	They are aimed at creating conditions for attracting global IT companies, production of competitive IT products; investing in the future (IT-personnel and education); introduction of new financial instruments and technologies and removing barriers to the introduction of new technologies.
Kazakhstan	The Third Modernization Program and “Digital Kazakhstan” State Program for 2018-2022 (2017)	Based on the digitalization of the economy, transition to digital state, implementation of the DSR, developing human capital and establishment of the innovation ecosystem.
Kyrgyzstan	“Taza Koom” State Informatization Project (2017) and the Concept of the Digital Kyrgyzstan National Digital Transformation Program for 2019-2023 (2018)	It includes building a world-class digital infrastructure; creating an enabling environment for sustainable innovation development; creating digital opportunities for all segments of the population; involvement of citizens in the country management through digital technologies; formation of the open digital society; creation of a regional hub of the Digital Silk Road for IT-business and IT innovations.
Russian Federation	“Digital Economy” National Program up to 2024 (2017)	It aims at forming research competences and technical capacities, developing information infrastructure and securing information security.

Source: [15, p. 1026].

A comparison of the international indices shows that the EAEU member states have a huge potential for digital transformation, but there are significant differences in levels of DE development among the EAEU countries, which is due to their economic development levels. Kyrgyzstan is lagging far behind other member states (Fig. 2), but it can be seen as an underused market, which can attract more investors and entrepreneurs to establish a more favorable institutional environment.

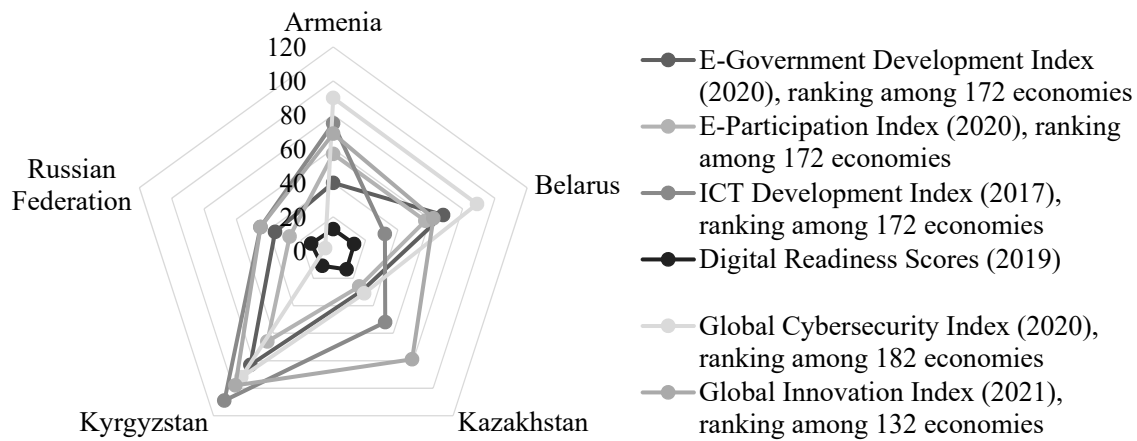


Fig. 2. Comparison of international indices measuring the development of the DE of the EAEU member states. Source: [16–20].

Since 2015, following the signature of the joint declaration with regard to integrating the development projects of the EAEU and China’s Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), trade and investment ties between China and the EAEU member states have been reinforced, resulting in the robust alignment of digital development strategies with the DSR in all the five member countries. Currently, China is not only the largest trading partner of the EAEU, but also the main creditor and investor for these countries [19]. According to the Eurasian Economic Commission, in 2021, China accounted for about 20% of the EAEU’s foreign trade turnover amounted to 166.54 billion U.S. dollars, followed by Germany (7.5%). In addition, considering the EAEU member states are at the early stages of digital transformation, and are therefore committed to ramping up their digital capabilities through cheap but effective solutions, while the digital products and services offered by Chinese companies cheaper than European and American companies, these countries and therefore are more likely to cooperate with China. Moreover, the shaping international order, a series of uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and economic sanctions on Russia and Belarus impose by many countries, enable the EAEU to increase cooperation with China, resulting in their realization of digitalization Transformation and sustainable economic and social development. However, it should be noted that due to the use of Chinese digital technical equipment, the local residents’ doubts about the storage and security of own data have increased, in particular, growing trends of nationalist and anti-Chinese sentiment are already being observed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the context of China’s dynamic economic activity [20]. That takes a roll on the implementation of the DSR in this region.

To sum up, it can be argued that the development of the DSR, which is a component of China’s vast vision for global connectivity, has the potential to provide opportunities for further China-EAEU economic cooperation and is also allowing these related countries to realize the digital transformation of their economies, especially given the socio-economic difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to promote the orderly and mutually beneficial development of China-EAEU economic cooperation and their projects linked the DSR in so-called uncertain conditions, should

be developed and improved: digital infrastructure and cross-border data flows; dispute resolution mechanisms; cybersecurity risk management systems; unified technical standards; and collaboration in digital technology and other spheres (e.g. healthcare) [21].

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