

Report for EEGA Fellows

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Project title: Self-Positioning of Belarus in the World Order of Global Competition: between Russia, China and European Ambition

Project summary

During my research stay at EEGA ScienceCampus in Leipzig, at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography (IfL) as EEGA Host Institution, I have started to work on my new research project to estimate the capability of China's Belt and Road Initiative to reshape the local system of orientation in Belarus.

Accompanied by the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the recent emergence of China as a new player in Eastern Europe challenges the previously established power relations in the region. This is well demonstrated by the case of Belarus – a country that, during the recent decade, in a historic first attempted to build a three-dimensional system of local orientation, with China imagined as the third major partner complementing Russia and the EU. Nevertheless, the multi-vectoral orientation of Belarus is currently undergoing transformation, which has to be monitored. On the other hand, since COVID pandemic has changed the conditions in which China intended to achieve the declared aims of BRI, China has started to grope for new approaches to promote the Initiative. The research of China-Belarus cooperation against the background of the current situation in Belarus could provide valuable insights into how China adapts BRI to the changing international environment and local turmoils.

My project examines the efficiency and limitations of cooperation between China and Belarus in the BRI framework, assessing the political and material transformations, and social mobilization, which BRI is driving in Belarus. Undertaking an empirically led study of the case of Belarus, I intend to contribute to the debates on the capability of China's BRI to reshape power relations in the region.

The project has an interdisciplinary research design, necessitated by the multifaceted structure of China's BRI, which links policy coordination, economic and trade aspects of interregional connections, and transcultural convergence. While a major method applied in the project is case study, several other methods and theoretical tools from the fields of international relations and political science, conflict studies and geography are combined to fulfill the research objective and related tasks.

In particular, to reveal the dynamics of the functional role of Belarus in the BRI

advancement, I explore the correlation between China's interests¹ and a range of factors influencing BRI implementation² in the country under study. The former are detected by the interpretivist content analysis of relevant Chinese primary sources and critical discourse analysis applied to explore relevant political and academic discourses in China. I also explore a number of influencing factors, both internal (such as regime transition, socio-economic situation, value orientations in Belarus) and external (such as the Russian factor, the EU factor, international and domestic impact of COVID pandemic). To evaluate the discrepancy in mutual perceptions of bilateral interaction and reveal its corresponding effects on the implementation of BRI in Belarus, I juxtapose the perceptions of China-Belarus cooperation by official sides of both countries, identified through employing critical discourse analysis and empirical research³. To assess the transformations driven by the advancement of BRI, I conduct several embedded case-studies, exploring the impact of the BRI-led projects (China-Belarus Industrial Park, the BRI-stimulated railroad transportation) on the country's economy. I also address the dynamics of the country's self-positioning to trace transformations induced by interaction with China. Furthermore, I explore the impact of the BRI-led projects on the processes of social mobilization in Belarus. In particular, I address local eco-movements emerging in the regions where China-Belarus joint industrial projects are carried out.

Initial idea of my research project

I came up with this project while critically reflecting on the most recent developments of China-Belarus interaction and doing preliminary research of the scholarship that addresses relations between Belarus and China.

Before 2020, Belarus was of particular significance to BRI owing to smooth long-terms relations between the Chinese and Belarusian regimes and China's expectations of continuing stability in the country. After that, against the background of political turmoil in Belarus and COVID pandemic, bilateral cooperation in the BRI framework has started to demonstrate less exemplary pace and scale, which raises the question of whether Belarus would still remain in its significance for China as a BRI 'flagship country' in Eastern Europe.

The review of the state of the field has revealed the following gaps to address. The examined scholarship has shown that the case of Belarus as one of the initial key supportive partners for China's BRI agenda has been generally overlooked. The majority of literature methodologically gravitates towards a neo-realistic tradition. In

¹ I operate with the category of interests as applied in international relations theory and political science.

² The notion of influencing factors is commonly used in political science and conflict studies.

³ E.g. structured and semi-structured interviews with Belarusian experts on foreign policy, affiliated with think tanks and state institutions, and Chinese experts in the field of international relations and political science, focusing on Eurasia and Belarus in particular.

particular, the relevant Chinese scholarship focuses mainly on geopolitical and geo-economic factors accompanying China-Belarus interaction, and generally duplicates official discourse on the implementation of BRI⁴. Belarusian scholarship tends to differentiate key dimensions of Belarus-China strategic partnership (political, economic, security dimension), either duplicating official discourse and thus drawing a successful picture of cooperation, or attempting to inquire more critically about bilateral economic cooperation⁵. Scholars from the EU have briefly described the Belarusian case as an example of BRI's influence on security and economic dynamics in Eurasia⁶. Cooperation during COVID pandemic has been paid yet a limited attention⁷, while the influence of China's BRI on the Belarusian foreign and domestic policymaking given the situation formed by the political crisis has been totally overlooked.

All in all, contemporary academic debates on Belarus-China interaction are still limited, requiring more aspects to be brought up to the discussion and new effective interdisciplinary approaches to be developed. The rationale behind my project's idea and its relevance is the need for: a) a critical study of BRI in the updating Belarusian and East European context; b) assessment of BRI's capability to drive internal transformations in Belarus and reshape power relations in Eastern Europe.

Getting to know EEGA ScienceCampus

I have initially learned about EEGA ScienceCampus from a former EEGA Postdoc Fellow whose stay at EEGA had brought a number of added values to her research, providing her with a unique opportunity to develop original methodology in a stimulating and inclusive international environment. Her positive feedback had made me consider EEGA ScienceCampus as a good opportunity for promoting my research and academic networking, and a desired option for a potential research stay.

⁴ E.g. 赵会荣 (Zhao Huirong). 白俄罗斯与‘一带一路’ (Belarus and ‘One Belt-One Road’). In *Eurasian Economics* 4 (2017). 李自国 (Li Zigo) (2018). 第十二章：白俄罗斯与“一带一路” (Ch. 12 “Belarus and One Belt — One Road”), in Li Zigo (ed.) “一带一路”与欧亚空间 (“One Belt — One Road and Eurasian Space”). 北京：世界知识出版社 (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Publ. House) 2018 年.

⁵ E.g. Tikhomirov, A. “China as the Priority of Belarusian Foreign Policy”. In *Actual Problems of International Relations and Global Development* 7 (2019). Rudy, K. “Belarus – China: Shifts in Economic Cooperation”. In *Belarusian Economic Journal* 2 (2019).

⁶ E.g. Hallgren, H. and Ghiasy, R. “Security and Economy on the Belt and Road: Three Country Case Studies”. SIPRI Insights of Peace and Security, 2017. Marin, A. Minsk – Beijing: What Kind of Strategic Partnership? Notes de L’Ifri: Russie Nei Visions 12 (2017).

⁷ Turarbekova, R. “Belarusian-Chinese Relations: Evolution and Factor of COVID-19”. In *Journal of International Law and International Relations* 1-2 (2020). Danilovich, M., Turarbekava, R. “Belarus-China Relations. Expert Views.” In Friedrich Ebert Policy Paper (2020).

Links between my research project and EEGA ScienceCampus

My research project brings an additional academic perspective on Eastern Europe's changing role in current processes of globalisation. Studying the case of Belarus, it contributes to the debates on the increase of China's global role and reshaping of the world order, in particular on the capacity of China's BRI to reconfigure scalar relations between nation-states and regions. Focusing on reshaping of the local system of orientation in Belarus, the project contributes to the expertise on changing geostrategical imaginations and spatial reconfigurations in Eastern Europe.

Moreover, my experience of working with Chinese-language sources, as well as of fieldwork in Belarus and China is of interest to my colleagues at EEGA Host Institution (IfL), who are already working on China's engagement with Eastern Europe. Additionally, productive collaborations with both Chinese and Belarusian academia and think tanks, which I have recently developed, could contribute to the further boosting of research and collaboration networks of IfL.

My experience at EEGA ScienceCampus

My experience at EEGA ScienceCampus is highly positive. During my research stay I have drafted an application for funding of an individual position as a principal investigator to conduct my research project. Studying theoretical works on power restructuring and scalar politics, and other relevant research papers available at EEGA Host Institution, as well as productive and stimulating opinion exchange with Dr. Lela Rekhviashvili, my contact person at IfL, allowed me strengthening my project's interdisciplinarity, developing conceptual part of my project and improving its research design.

As foreseen in my application, I also presented and discussed my preliminary research findings at the IfL colloquium. The colloquium talk was focused on the results of my study of the range of assessments of China-Belarus interaction which have been established in the Chinese academic discourse and are now being shaped in the current challenging cooperation context. The event was productive in terms of further networking with my colleagues at EEGA ScienceCampus. It also allowed me receiving useful comments and critical feedback from the scholars working at IfL and other EEGA fellows.

Moreover, I was invited by the Host Institution to write for the ifl.blog and disseminate my research output. My [blog article](#) addressed some of the problems of China-Belarus cooperation, explaining why joint projects in the technical-industrial sector at times find it difficult to get off the ground, or even fail in the end. It helped

communicating some of my research findings and scholar observations with public. It also strengthened the visibility and outreach of my research.

Apart from that, I took part in the international BASEES-EEGA conference ‘Globalising Eastern Europe – New Perspectives on Transregional Entanglements’ as a panel chair. The panel ‘Effects of ‘New Regionalisms’, Global Competition and Trade Liberalisation on Markets and Economies in Eastern Europe’, which I was invited to chair, has allowed me facilitating exchange on various relevant topics (such as China’s BRI in Eastern Europe, ongoing global powers competition in the region etc.) with the panelists and other conference participants.

Finally, I enjoyed working in the culture of open and free research and academic debate, actively promoted by EEGA. My research stay in Leipzig was stimulating, productive and eventful. I am grateful for the development and dissemination opportunities provided by EEGA, IfL, and my mentor and EEGA contact person Dr. Lela Rekhviashvili. I look forward to strengthening further research cooperation and contributing to the existing arrangements at IfL and EEGA ScienceCampus related to the study of China in Eastern Europe, Belarus in particular.

The benefit of EEGA ScienceCampus

My research stay at EEGA ScienceCampus contributed to the quality, effectiveness and relevance of my professional expertise by providing ideal conditions for preparing a proposal of a project that will result in my individual monograph and, at the same time, developing my academic network in Germany.

The research literature I had access to, networking meetings with the colleagues at the Host Institution and participation in internal colloquiums and seminars during the period of my research stay have assisted me in developing my research by adding theoretical tools of regional geography. This strengthened my project’s multidisciplinary.

The experience of academic debate at EEGA ScienceCampus will definitely have a long-lasting impact on my academic career. My short-term research stay in Leipzig has also helped to improve my academic involvement so as to acquire a new level of dissemination and visibility of my research findings.

I would highly recommend collaboration with EEGA ScienceCampus to my colleagues in the field, my students, and universities and research institutes in Belarus. It could further facilitate interdisciplinary knowledge exchange and contribute to raising academic and public awareness for Eastern Europe, Belarus in particular, and to understanding of societal developments in the region.