

## **Belarus and Eastern Partnership: National and European Values**

### ***Polling Memo - Detailed Findings***

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*Contact: Olga Stuzhinskaya, [olga@democraticbelarus.eu](mailto:olga@democraticbelarus.eu), +32 2 709 8471*

The Office for Democratic Belarus (ODB) has commissioned a survey<sup>1</sup> about European and national values in Belarus in order to contribute to the debate on the relations between Belarus and the European Union (EU) from the public's perspective.

The nation-wide representative survey<sup>2</sup> was conducted in Belarus between 20 May and 4 June 2013 focusing on the country's relations with the EU and the (Eurasian) Customs Union (ECU); as well as public perceptions, values, and attitudes towards the afore-mentioned entities. Professor Elena Korosteleva from the Global Europe Centre at the University of Kent was commissioned as principal investigators to undertake the survey in Belarus.

### **Detailed Findings**

#### **Public perceptions of, and attitudes to, the EU:**

Trends compared to public surveys undertaken in 2008 and 2013 explicitly demonstrate a positive and substantive shift in public attitudes towards the EU. This is primarily reflected in higher levels of awareness, more discernible knowledge of EU structures and policies, more interest in EU affairs, more perceivable commonalities with the EU as a polity, more appreciation of EU support (especially in the areas of governance, democracy and education) and, most importantly, identity-based preferences developing in relation to the latter. In 2008, the population was largely uninterested and uninformed about the EU: every fifth respondent has difficulty in naming EU Member States, and every second fails to locate the EU headquarters. This has radically altered by 2013.

These findings may suggest that continued engagement and the increasing presence of the EU in Belarus have yielded positive implications on ideational and social preferences of the population, incrementally modifying public behaviour and legitimacy in favour of the EU as a regional political power.

In particular, the levels of public *awareness* of the EU as a polity have positively grown (97%, +3%), facilitating a more discernible understanding of EU structures, institutions, and activities. Respondents display higher *cognizance* in detailing EU functions, policies, and multi-level actors, in comparison with any other international organisations cited in the poll. This is further reinforced by *growing interest* in EU affairs (49%; +5%) and Belarus-EU relations in particular, against a similar drop in that of Belarus-Russia relations and the CIS.

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<sup>1</sup> This survey is commissioned by the Office for a Democratic Belarus (ODB) with the kind assistance of SIDA and Belarus Reforms and Media Assistance (BRAMA) program implemented by Pact with USAID support.

<sup>2</sup> The representative sample of 1000 respondents was multi-staged, stratified, and random, selection of the population aged 18+ (urban and rural) by nationality, sex, region, age and education. Field work was carried out by Centre for Political Research at the Belarus State University. The sample representation error was no more than  $\pm 3\%$ , the survey included 12% random quality control on completion. The findings are compared with a similar survey undertaken by the same survey team in December 2008, as well as other available data, including the EU Neighbourhood Barometer East (Autumn 2012) and the IISEPS polls.

Twice as many respondents are now familiar with the EaP initiative (39%) and correctly name countries and their progress under the Neighbourhood framework. Ukraine and Georgia are listed as the frontrunners, whereas a rising number of respondents (+4%) see Belarus as a laggard in this partnership.

Furthermore, EU support is now seen as closely corresponding to the interests of both government and the people (a two-fold rise since 2008), and there is a considerable overlap between what Belarusians perceive to be the 'most pressing issues' of the day and where the EU could adequately help. Notably, while living costs, working conditions, meagre pensions, and a decaying healthcare system are regarded as imminently failing; Belarus, it is believed, could learn more from the EU in the areas of economic reforms (81%), social protection (66%), effective governance (63%), and independent judiciary (61%). This is particularly striking when compared to a set of areas where the ECU's aid is believed to be most useful: trade (70%); economic reforms (51%), tourism (38%), and energy security (29%). This comparison indicates the EU's growing credibility with the general public and deeper understanding of Belarus' international relations, especially vis-à-vis its larger neighbours

– the EU and Russia.

Closer affinity and greater awareness concerning the EU policies are increasingly observable amongst the respondents. A third of the respondents assert that the EU is an *important strategic partner*, which is comparable with those pledging support for the ECU (39%). Furthermore, in public assessment of the EaP's relevance and effectiveness, twice as many respondents found that partnership now fully corresponds to *the interests* of Belarus's government and its people. On average, a 10% rise is observed amongst those who affirm that the EaP is premised on *common* values (43%), common economic and political interests (39%), common security interests (45%), and mutual trust (56%). These reflections are substantially different to those in 2008. In addition, they also witness a sharp two-fold decline in those who initially thought Belarus-EU cooperation was in EU interests and norms only.

An astonishing two-fold increase is observable in the positive image of the EU within the country (55%). Moreover, when asked to explicate 'why the EU might be interested in developing cooperation with Belarus', for the first time ever, an identity-based explanation is put forward - 'We are part of Europe' - in addition to geo-strategic reasons. The EU is increasingly associated with 'hope' (+5%) and 'enthusiasm' (+10%); replacing 'indifference' (-6%) and 'mistrust' (-3%) of the past.

### **EU-Belarus relations under the EaP: perceptions, values and ambitions:**

While the attitudes towards the EU are becoming more positive and affirmative, the same cannot be said about the EU-Belarus relations. A growing number of respondents more critically review levels of engagement between the two sides, and especially the *image of Belarus* abroad.

In particular, there is a 10% increase in those who believe that relations with the EU have considerably worsened (42%); while another third assert 'there are more talks than actions' between the two sides, and the EU-Belarus relations have clearly stagnated (+10%). More and more respondents disapprove of the course of Belarus's foreign policy (+6%), and critically assess Belarus's image abroad (31%, a two-fold rise since 2008). Fewer (-5%) now insist that the EU would be interested in cooperating with their country (29%), and many even believe that Belarus may no longer be important to their greater neighbour (52%,+5%). Some begin to view their country as a security threat to the neighbourhood (+4%), and even a 'foe' to the EU (+3%) thus displaying an increasingly *critical assessment of Belarus's international relations*.

Interestingly this progressively negative self-assessment coincides with the *rising credibility* of the EU in public eyes, and more so, with the *increasing mobility* of the population as a whole. A growing number of respondents now travel abroad (+5%), and have been to the EU more than once (+4%). This is against a considerable decline of those (-20%) who had never travelled outside the country. Fewer respondents

mentioned that they had any visa problems (-13%); on the contrary more people feel they are treated with respect and dignity by the EU missions in their country (+7%).

A tenth of the population have heard about the European Dialogue for Modernisation (EDM) initiated by the EU in March 2012. Many respondents noted a particular progress in the areas of trade, cross-border cooperation, student exchange, and economic opportunities. A fifth of the respondents also assert that this cooperation now also reflects Belarus's own interests (+7%) and should be further encouraged. In other words, attitudinal and behavioural changes are striking, especially given the limited levels of engagement between the EU and Belarus under the EaP, and the growing economic presence of the ECU in Belarus's domestic politics.

Although crucial modifications in behavioural patterns and preferences are observable, temporal comparison of **normative underpinnings** indicates **no change** in value patterns which respondents associate with the EU, Russia and their own country, and differences in social modelling continue to prevail. In particular, the EU determinedly associates with a **liberal democracy** model, premised on the values of market economy (48%), liberalism (43%), human rights (31%), personal freedoms (27%) and free media (25%). As a cross-comparison indicates, this model reveals an enduring pattern of association that the respondents applied to the case of the EU in 2008 and 2013. A set of values which respondents correlate with Belarus, remains uncompromisingly opposite, and in broad terms could be described as a **socialist democracy model**. It necessarily refers to the values of communal significance-- which is primarily linked to equalisation, solidarity, tolerance, and forbearance-- and has persisted unaltered since 2008 as registered by this research: peace/stability (50%); multiculturalism (34%); tolerance (33%); social security (32%) and cultural traditions/heritage (28%). Interestingly, the references do not refer to 'democracy' as a value, but rather prioritise stability, security, and protection. A model in which respondents associate with the ECU with a new entity offers a curious mix of qualities, a hybrid case, which in spatial presentation, would correlate more closely with Belarus's model, and could be described as a **social democratic model**:

#### **Liberal Democracy (EU)**

- Market economy
- Democracy
- Economic prosperity
- Human rights
- Personal freedoms

#### **Hybrid case (ECU)**

- peace/stability
- market economy
- multiculturalism
- economic prosperity
- social security

#### **Socialist Democracy (BY)**

- peace/stability
- multiculturalism
- tolerance
- social security
- cultural heritage

These differing associations triggered by the above-mentioned polities are profound in their implications, especially for policy design and the development of sustainable dialogue at the strategic level. They also require a full re-assessment of practical measures and instruments to assure assimilation of values and the development (rather than imposition) of new shared practices in EU-Belarus relations.

#### **Belarus-Russia Relations, including perceptions of/attitudes to the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU):**

Although the respondents display a growing proclivity towards the EU as a regional player, Russia and the ECU nevertheless continue to garner substantial public support in the country.

Despite being newly launched (2010), the ECU in particular commands unprecedentedly high levels of awareness (90%) and interest (57%) for a new polity. This is, however, being further reinforced by a 77% interest in Russia as well. The majority of the respondents see the ECU as a more effective and sustainable way of addressing some pressing issues in the economy, energy security, and trade. Although the EU is perceived as an important strategic partner by nearly a third of the respondents, a plurality of those (39%) nevertheless states that the ECU has more precedence.

In normative terms, the ECU is being prioritised as a policy that offers a hybrid model of 'social democracy', which boasts a mix of liberal and socialist (egalitarian) values, and presently garners more cultural affinity amongst the Belarusian respondents.

At the same time, some diverging trends also become apparent. In particular, when faced with the choice between the EU and Russia (ECU), the respondents no longer unquestionably support the latter, as it was in 2008. Only a third express their preference for the union with Russia (a drop of 24%) and another third is motivated to develop a closer affiliation with the EU (a rise by 15%). Only 23% see benefits by directly prioritising Russia (a drop by 27%), whereas a plurality (37%) is inclined to support partnership in both directions.

Finding the right direction for foreign policy is always a challenge. Many interviewees now note that balancing between the two regional powers may no longer be sustainable: a plurality (41%) state that Russia and the EU would struggle to work jointly in an attempt to modernise Belarus, whereas a quarter (26%) insist that cooperation would be impossible altogether, owing to their rivalry status in the region and differing visions of the future. These opinions explicitly underscore deeper public understanding and awareness of Belarus's complex politics and growing policy priorities for the future.