

Belarus and Eastern Partnership: National and European Values

Polling Memo - Key Findings

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The Office for Democratic Belarus (ODB) has commissioned a survey¹ 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.

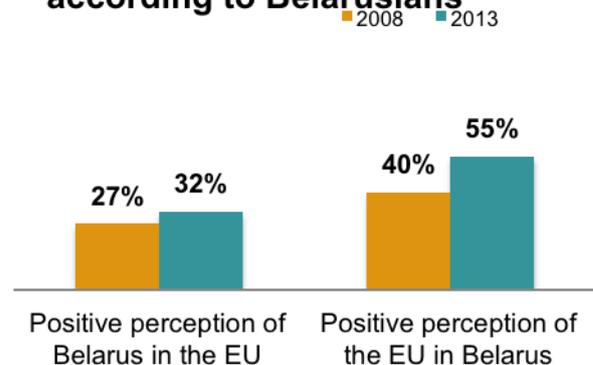
The nation-wide representative survey² was conducted in Belarus between 20 May and 4 June 2013 focusing on the country's relations with the EU and the (Eurasian) Customs Union (ECU); as well as public perceptions, values, and attitudes towards the afore-mentioned entities. Professor Elena Korosteleva from the Global Europe Centre at the University of Kent was commissioned as principal investigators to undertake the survey in Belarus.

Key Findings

Three particular trends are observable in Belarus' public relations:

- Comparative trends demonstrate a positive and substantive shift in public attitudes towards the EU; reflected in higher levels of awareness, more knowledge about EU structures and policies, more interest in EU affairs, more perceivable commonalities with the EU as a polity, more appreciation of EU support, and most importantly, identity-based preferences developing in relation to the latter.
- At the same time, normative underpinnings of public behaviour remain firmly rooted in cultural traditions and historical legacies of the past.
- Levels of awareness about the (Eurasian) Customs Union (ECU) are relatively high (90%). Importantly, the majority of respondents see the ECU as more relevant in addressing immediate economic and energy security concerns.

Assessment of EU perception in Belarus and Belarus' image in the EU, according to Belarusians



¹ 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.

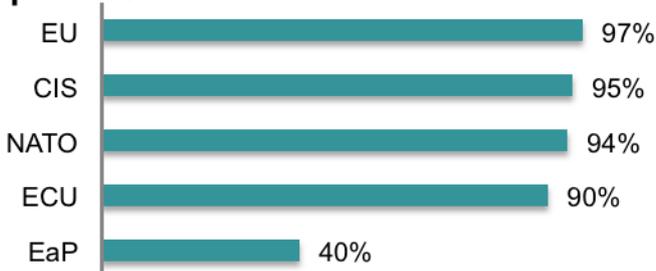
² The representative sample of 1000 respondents was multi-staged, stratified, and random, selection of the population aged 18+ (urban and rural) by nationality, sex, region, age and education. Field work was carried out by Centre for Political Research at the Belarus State University. The sample representation 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 ISEPS polls.

Continued engagement and the modestly increasing presence of the EU in Belarus may 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.

Level of **EU awareness** has grown by 2% since 2008 (96.7%). This is also reflected in the correct depiction of the EU as economic and political union of European states (76%, + 3% since 2008).

Five years on (2008; 2013) public legitimation of the EU is clearly on the rise reflecting positive changes in attitudinal preferences and behavioural patterns.

Level of awareness of international organizations and policies 2013



Public perceptions of the EU has positively increased from 40% in 2008 to 55% in 2013 which, when comparing to the actual level of relations, is more than surprising. However, many also believe that the EU is not interested in Belarus per se (a drop by 10% since 2008). Twice as many respondents are now familiar with the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy (39%), beliefs that EaP corresponds to the interests of Belarus increased on average by 13% since 2008 (27%). Furthermore, the EU is associated with feelings of

hope (24%) and indifference (21%) whereas in 2008 indifference (27%) prevailed. For the first time, the respondents substantiate the EU's reasons to engage with Belarus as identity-based (*'We are part of Europe'*) rather than geo-strategically conditioned. As shown below, the same, however, cannot be said about the perception of EU-Belarus relations.

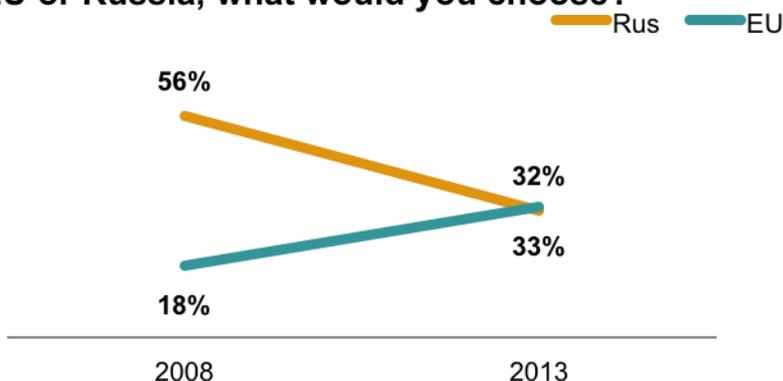
On the other hand, there is a **clear discrepancy in values** associated with the EU and Belarus, but importantly this is a decreasing tendency. The EU is associated with liberal values of market economy (48%), democracy (43%), economic prosperity (41%), human rights (31%), and freedoms/self-realisation (27%).

Conversely, Belarus is associated with peace and stability (50%), respect for cultures (34%), tolerance (33%), security (32%), and respect for religions (28%). Democracy and human rights are ranked rather low by the Belarusian respondents (16%), which is similar to the 2008 findings. Discrepancy in values associated with the EU and their own country persists: the EU is firmly associated with a 'liberal democracy model', while Belarus is perceived as adhering to a 'socialist democracy model'. The ECU's characteristics are similar to those associated with Belarus, therefore based on public opinion it is a more natural association for the Belarusians.

The most pressing issues for Belarusians at present are the cost of living (35%), work/pension provisions (17%), and health care (11%). In Belarusians' perception the EU could mainly help with economic reforms (32%) and improving trade/infrastructure (24%), thus there is no correlation with most pressing issues. ECU could help with trade/infrastructure (70%), economic reforms (51%), tourism (38%), energy security (29%), and education (21%).

Respondents believe that the **ECU is an important strategic partner**

If you had to choose between the union with EU or Russia, what would you choose?



(88%) with whom they **share common values** (84%). The majority (73%) believe that the ECU is more interested in the country's development than the EU (38%). At the same time respondents expressed far greater interest in news on Belarus-Russia relations (77%), than news on the ECU (57%) or Belarus-EU relations (57%).

Partnership with both the EU and ECU is seen as the most important (27%) when compared to exclusive partnerships with either Russia (23%), the ECU (13%), or the EU (12%). Although the favourability of a bilateral partnership with Russia is still high, there has been a **30 % drop for prioritising Russia** since 2008. If faced with the choice between the ECU or EU, 33% would choose either or, which is a drop of 24% in those would choose union with Russia in 2008. Many now believe that Belarus foreign policy is now a truly multi-vector one.

With more positive attitudes and perceptions of the EU reflecting its better visibility in the country, the default preference for Russia is no longer viable. Belarusian reflections are, now, more cautious and critical. While Russia is still seen as important for energy security and trade, the EU is perceived as stronger in promoting effective governance and specific sector cooperation.