

GLOBAL EUROPE CENTRE SURVEY BRIEF

*Belarus and Eastern Partnership:
'A national values survey'*

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October 2013, GECSB1/13



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BELARUS' NATIONAL VALUES SURVEY: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two particular trends are observable in Belarus' public relations:

- Public support for the EU (and EaP) is positively changing which is reflected in the respondents' perceptions, levels of awareness, general interest and behavioural preferences
- At the same time, normative underpinnings of public behaviour remain firmly rooted in cultural traditions and historical legacies of the past

Thematic Block I: Public perceptions of and attitudes to the EU

- Levels of awareness about the EU have positively grown (+3%).
- High public cognizance is further reflected in the correct depiction of the EU and its institutional and political membership (+ 3%), as well as higher levels of interest in EU affairs (+5%)
- Twice as many respondents are now familiar with the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP)
- A third of the respondents believe that the EU is an important strategic partner, which is comparable with those pledging support for the ECU
- Twice as many respondents believe that the EaP now fully corresponds to the interests of Belarus' government and its people
- A 10% rise is observed in those who assert that the EaP is founded on common (rather than EU-owned) values, interests and mutual trust
- Twice as many respondents describe the EU's image in Belarus as extremely positive
- 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
- The EU is more associated with 'hope' (+5%) than 'indifference' (-5%)



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Thematic Block II: EU-Belarus relations under the EaP: perceptions, values and ambitions

- A majority of respondents correctly name partner countries involved in the EaP, and reflect their varied levels of success with EU policies.
- Perceptions of EU-Belarus relations have become more critical: there is a 10% increase in those who believe that relations with the EU have worsened; while over a third claim that EU-Belarus relations have stagnated (+10% reflect that 'there are more talks than actions')
- A plurality of respondents suggest that Belarus' image abroad is seen as increasingly negative (+8%), and fewer (-5%) now assert that the EU would be interested in cooperating with their country
- At the same time, there is a growing perception that EU-Belarus relations now fully reflect Belarusian interests (+7%), and that the EU could particularly help in addressing the most pressing issues of living costs, effective governance and health system
- 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'

Thematic Block III: Belarus-Russia Relations, including perceptions of/attitudes to the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU)

- Levels of awareness about the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) are unprecedentedly high (90%), and the majority of respondents see the ECU as more relevant in addressing immediate economic and energy security concerns
- ECU is also associated with a hybrid normative model of 'social democracy', which offers a mix of liberal and socialist (egalitarian) values, and is presently closer to the 'hearts and minds' of the Belarusians than the EU's 'liberal democracy' model
- There is an actualising sense of rivalry between the ECU and the EU, which may render future cooperation between the two entities in an effort to modernise Belarus as incompatible



BELARUS' NATIONAL VALUES SURVEY: MAIN FINDINGS

Thematic Block I: Public perceptions of and attitudes to the EU

A temporal analysis of public surveys undertaken by the PI in 2008-9 and 2013 explicitly demonstrates 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. 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 about the EU as a polity, have positively grown (97%, +3%) to facilitate 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 and the CIS.

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 more 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 'most pressing issues' of the day and where the EU could adequately help. Notably, while living costs, working conditions, meagre pensions and decaying health system are regarded as imminently failing; Belarus 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 (i) the EU's growing credibility with the general public; and (ii) deeper public understanding of Belarus' international relations, especially vis-à-vis its larger neighbours – the EU and Russia.



CONTINUED OVERLEAF

BELARUS' NATIONAL VALUES SURVEY: MAIN FINDINGS (CONT)

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 have found that partnership now fully corresponds to the interests of Belarus' 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 radically 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.



In summary, five years on (2008; 2013) public legitimation of the EU is clearly on the rise reflecting positive changes in attitudinal preferences and behavioural patterns. Particularly noticeable are the rising ideational affinity of the respondents with the EU, and their now comparable treatment of the EU as compared to that of the ECU and Russia (as will be shown further on). In 2008, as the survey showed, the population was largely uninterested and uninformed about the EU: every fifth respondent had difficulty in naming EU Member States, every second failed to locate the EU headquarters. This has radically altered by 2013, attesting to the efforts and benefits of EU continued engagement with the country, particularly associated with an expanding range of instruments (civil society) at the EU's disposal.

Thematic Block II: 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 the course of Belarus' foreign policy

(+6%), and critically assess Belarus' 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 increasingly critical assessment of Belarus' 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 mention that they had 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 programme for Modernisation 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' 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' domestic politics.

Although crucial modifications in behavioural patterns and preferences are observable, temporal comparison of normative underpinnings indicates no change in values 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 (Kurki 2010:372), premised on the values of market economy (48%), liberalism (43%), human rights (31%), personal freedoms (27%) and free media (25%). As 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 (Ibid:373). It necessarily refers to the values of communal significance, which primarily are linked to equalisation and solidarity, tolerance and forbearance, and which 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 which respondents associate with the ECU as a new entity offers a curious mix of qualities, a hybrid case, which in spatial presentation, would correlate more closely with Belarus' model, and could be described as a social democratic model (Ibid: 373):

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

BELARUS' NATIONAL VALUES SURVEY: MAIN FINDINGS (CONT)

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.

Thematic Block III: 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 an unprecedentedly high levels of awareness (90%) and

interest (57%) for a new polity, being further reinforced by 77% interest in Russia as well. The majority of the respondents see the ECU as more effective and sustainable way of addressing some pressing issues of 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 polity 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' complex politics and growing policy priorities for the future.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

In conclusion, the above temporal comparisons reveal some crucial changes in public perceptions of the EU, Russia (including the ECU) and the Self. More positive attitudes and perceptions of the EU now abound reflecting its better visibility in the country, although a more coherent and sustainable communication policy is still amiss. Default preferences for Russia and the CIS are no longer viable, and are now supplemented by more cautious and critical public reflections of government policies and priorities. Variations are particularly observable in relation to the differentiated impact that greater neighbours might individually exert on Belarus: Russia is seen as important for energy security and trade; whereas the weight of the EU is stronger in promoting effective governance and specific sector cooperation. The respondents also emphasise a perceptibly negative image of Belarus abroad, and also a rising discordance with the official foreign policy (+5%). In wider terms and especially normative preferences, public opinion may seem unwavering, but individual attitudes and behavioural patterns are doubtlessly changing.

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INFORMATION

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Global Europe Centre

The Global Europe Centre (GEC) is a new research centre at the University of Kent focusing on Europe, its member states, and its place in a changing world. The Centre brings together leading international academics from politics and international relations, economics, law, business, and European culture in order to explore the contemporary policy challenges to Europe and its nation states.

The GEC is based within the School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR) and at the Brussels School of International Studies (BSIS), University of Kent.

Office for a Democratic Belarus (ODB)

ODB is Brussels-based organisation aiming to promote relations between the EU and Belarus by way of specific programme activities, including:

- Ensuring presence of Belarusian and international expertise in Brussels and other European capitals which influence the decision-making process in relation to Belarus.
- Running information sessions, conferences, study visits and round table discussions with the participation of leading experts on Belarus and the region
- Facilitating dialogue between professionals from civil society and government, as well as the harmonisation of national programmes and legislative

norms in Belarus with the best EU/ Eastern Partnership standards and practices lies at the core of the "EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge" programme.

- Through The Clearing House project, strengthening the capacity of local Belarusian CSOs to increase their qualitative participation in European programmes and embed European values into their every-day practices.
- Being part of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), providing input on strategic development, assistance with the newly established Brussels-based Secretariat, communication with National Platforms of the Forum and coordination of its largest Working Group 1.

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BELARUS' NATIONAL VALUES SURVEY (NVS): A TECHNICAL REPORT¹

Nation-wide representative survey was conducted between 20 May and 4 June 2013 in Belarus, with the assistance of the Centre for Political Research, Belarusian State University.

94 interviewers were involved in undertaking the survey. They had 2-10 years of polling experience, and received relevant training in social research skills.

The sampling was multi-staged, stratified, and random, and included 1000 respondents. The surveyed selection was representative of the population aged 18+ (urban and rural) by nationality, sex, region, age and education. The interview lasted on average 40-50 minutes using local languages for interlocution. The sample representation error was no more than + 3%. The survey included 12% random quality control on completion, undertaken by the Principal Investigator.

The questionnaire included three thematic blocks addressing public perceptions, behavioural patterns and levels of awareness about

- i The European Union (EU) as a regional power
- ii EU-Belarus relations under the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP)
- iii Belarus-Russia relations including public perceptions of the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU)

The findings are compared with a similar survey undertaken by the Principal Investigator in December 2008-9,² as well as other available data, including the EU Neighbourhood Barometer East (Autumn 2012)³ and the IISEPS polls.⁴

Available documents for further inspection:

Completed questionnaires (1000 copies)

- Reports from regional headquarters (7 copies)
- Itinerary lists completed by interviewers (94 copies)
- Instructions for interviewers and regional leaders
- Technical report of the survey

¹ This survey is commissioned by the Office for a Democratic Belarus (ODB) and supported by Pact Inc. and SIDA. The findings are the copyright of the University of Kent: Please cite accordingly.

² A synopsis of the 2008 findings is available from <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-projects/europeanising-securing-outsiders/researchfindings/>

³ http://euneighbourhood.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ENPIreport_wave2_East.pdf

⁴ <http://www.iiseps.org/tag/31>

FURTHER INFORMATION

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