What Do Belarusians Think?

A neutral nation: what do Belarusians think about the world around them?

It has become common for organizations to track fluctuations in the geopolitical orientations of Belarusians – in particular, who supports a closer relationship with EU and who supports a closer relationship with Russia. Upon closer analysis however, this US-Russia dichotomy becomes obviously artificial, as people do not want to make such a binary choice. They rather prefer independence. At the same time, Belarusians do not travel much, and two-thirds of our fellow citizens do not speak foreign languages.

This piece continues the series of analytical articles based on the national representative survey on the attitude of Belarusians to reforms, social contract, foreign policy, gender-related issues, civil society, media and the role of the state. The poll was conducted in August-September 2019.

Summary findings:

- Most Belarusians do not want to choose between Russia and the European Union and support the independent path of development of the country.
- In Belarusians’ opinion, Russia leads the ranking of friendly countries, followed by Ukraine, China, Kazakhstan and Poland.
- In the ranking of external risks, global problems and threats come first, before the events of the region around Belarus. The vast majority of Belarusians do not fear attacks from either Russia or NATO.
- Only a minority of Belarusians travel outside the country more often than once a year. With rising incomes, people begin to travel more often and value this opportunity more.

Belarusians tend to be neutral

Pact’s survey was yet another proof that Belarusians prefer integration with Russia only if they are given one alternative – EU membership. If more neutral development paths are offered as options, then the majority chooses them, as detailed in the chart below.

![Diagram 1: In alliance with whom would the people of Belarus be better off? (%)](image)

The Belarusians’ preference for neutrality is not a new phenomenon; researchers have been noticing it for at least 10 years. In BISS surveys from 2010 to 2015, respondents, were given the opportunity to
choose such options as “alliance with Russia”, “alliance with the EU”, “alliance with Russia and the EU at the same time” and “independent Belarus, not participating in alliances”. The latter two scenarios may be utopian in reality, but one way or another, these two neutral options in total have always been selected by the majority of respondents: from 49% to 57%.

It is important to note that Pact’s survey was conducted in August 2019. And while serious changes in public opinion over six months are unlikely in such topics as civic activity and attitude towards NGOs or media consumption, the geopolitical orientations of Belarusians are much more volatile.

The BAW poll of December 2019 showed that given the rigid question “either Russia or the EU”, pro-Russian sentiment decreased significantly (from 55% to 40%) and pro-European increased (from 24% to 32%) over the last five months of 2019. Obviously, the conflict between Minsk and Moscow and the accompanying information background triggered these fluctuations.

However, it is important that based on Pact’s survey, unfortunately, we cannot assess the current state of Belarusians’ foreign policy preferences. We can however look deeper and see a demographic breakdown of these geopolitical attitudes.

In particular, sympathies for integration with Russia are increase with age. Among people over 45, there are almost three times more supporters of alliance with Russia than among young people (18-29 years old). Similarly, the orientation towards the EU decreases with age. Among people over 60, the number of supporters of alliance with Russia is five times higher than the number of supporters of European integration. Conversely, for each pro-Russian young person there are three pro-European supporters.

Interestingly, the group of supporters of the country’s independent path also grows slightly with age. Among the youngest group of respondents, the number is 37.5%, and among the oldest it exceeds 50%.

Gender differences are not so noticeable, but still exist. Women are 8 percentage points (p.p.) more likely to choose the “middle” path of independent Belarus. Men prefer integration scenarios more often. Among supporters of the alliance with Russia, there are 5 p.p. more men than women. The gender gap rises to 7% among supporters of joining the EU.

**Friends and Threats**

Respondents were also asked to name the friendliest countries towards Belarus. Here, despite the ambiguous attitude towards the alliance with Russia, it is among the unequivocal leaders. According to the Pact survey, the top five friends of Belarus are as follows:

1. Russia (80%)
2. Ukraine (45%)
3. China (40%)
4. Kazakhstan (26%)
5. Poland (19%).

Three more countries overcame the level of sampling error: Lithuania (9%), Venezuela (7%) and Georgia (4.5%).

All this is quite natural; Russia and Ukraine are the two culturally closest nations to Belarusians. However, while the geopolitical trajectories of Minsk and Kiev have diverged, Belarusians still see Russia as an ally and have a friendly perception of it. The high ranking of China is the result of the Belarusian state media and the authorities, who are creating a very positive image of this country in the eyes of their Belarusian audience.

As regards the external risks, Belarusians associate them primarily with global threats, such as various world crises and terrorism. In the ranking of Belarusians’ fears, none of the regional risks exceeded the
The leading fear is of global economic crisis; this is in part due to the government’s blaming of “world crisis” as the cause of economic problems inside Belarus in 2009, 2011 and 2015-2016. This connection has clearly been established in the minds of many Belarusians: if there is a crisis in the world, we will soon feel troubles ourselves.

Nonetheless, since 2018 Belarusians have become less afraid of the global economic crisis, trade wars, international terrorism and illegal migration. It is likely that these changes are the result of the media’s less alarmist tone on these topics over the year. Meanwhile, risks emanating from Russia concern only a minority of Belarusians, and potential military aggression of NATO worries twice as many people (14%) than similar actions by Russia.

As one might expect, fears about NATO grow with age. The older the respondents are, the more they watch TV and the more relevant for them is the Soviet perception of the world, where the external threat has always come from “the aggressive block of NATO”. The difference between the opinions of young people and pensioners here is almost twofold.

The risks of economic, informational and military pressure from Russia are perceived less and less with age. The reason for this is a difference in media consumption - older people mostly receive news from television, including Russian television, while young people get most of their news from the Internet, which includes a greater diversity of sources and viewpoints.

**Nation of homebirds**

There are two serious barriers in Belarusians’ way of understanding the outside world better – poor foreign language skills and rare contact with the world outside Belarus. Almost 63% of Belarusians do not know foreign languages, 28% know one foreign language, 6% know two foreign languages, and 1.5% said they know three or more foreign languages.

The percentage of those who do not speak foreign languages at all, except Russian and Belarusian, increases with age. But even among the youngest generation, almost 44% “cannot understand and speak” at least one foreign language. This result is surprising given that almost all young people learn at least one foreign language at school.

The second barrier is that most citizens either do not travel abroad at all, or do so less than once a year.

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### Diagram 2: What are the actual external threats facing Belarus today? (%)

- **Global economic crisis**
- **Global environmental crisis**
- **International terrorism**
- **Conflict between Ukraine and Russia**
- **Trade wars**
- **Economic pressure exerted by Russia**
- **Military aggression of NATO**
- **Illegal migration**
- **Information influence of Western world**
- **Information influence of Russia**
- **Military aggression of Russia**

**2019**

**2018**
The most obvious explanation is the lack of money, as people need to spend their incomes on more urgent needs. Since the previous Pact survey conducted in August 2018, the share of Belarusians who do not travel abroad has decreased by almost 6-8 p.p. in four out of five “purpose groups” in the diagram above. During the same period, the average salary in Belarus increased from $484 to $544, according to Belstat.

With increasing travel, the public starts to value this opportunity more. Thus, the number of respondents for whom it is “very important” to be able to travel outside Belarus increased from 46% in 2018 to 53% in 2019. The share of those for whom it is “not important at all” has decreased from 22% to 17% during the same period.

The age structure of the Belarusian “pool of tourists” is predictable – the older the group of respondents is, the less they travel and appreciate the opportunity to travel outside the country. For example, it is “very important” to have such opportunity for 74% of young people (18-29 years old) and only for 15% of people over 60.

The gender difference is not so noticeable, but it exists. Women and men in Belarus almost equally value the opportunity to travel, however, among men the number of those who travel abroad on business trips is 12 p.p. higher, and the number of those who travel for vacation purposes is also higher by 4 p.p.

The national public opinion survey referenced in this paper was commissioned by Pact from MIA Research and funded by USAID. The survey was conducted in the form of face-to-face interviews at the respondents’ place of residence. They survey sample of 1,507 people interviewed was fully representative with the permissible sampling error of 3%.

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