

Avoiding Misplaced Fatalism: What Explains Belarusian Skepticism of European Integration?

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Executive Summary

The Belarusian democratic forces in exile have embraced European integration as one of their strategic goals. This stands in stark contrast with the majority of Belarusians either wishing to see their country neutral or to remain in a union with Russia. While such a choice of a policy objective might indeed dissuade some potential supporters of the opposition, this current mismatch should not be dramatised. The history of public opinion in Belarus shows how volatile people's geopolitical orientations can be depending on the external political context, particularly the state of Minsk's relations with Moscow. The more feasible and realistic the distancing from Russia is for Belarusians in the future, the greater will be the public support for EU integration.

An Inevitable Pro-European Shift

In August 2023, the Belarusian democratic forces, at their conference in Warsaw, for the first time since 2020, proclaimed the integration of Belarus into the European Union as their long-term priority. As things stand now, this statement can be seen as symbolic. The democratic forces are in exile, and their ability to influence the situation in the country is minimal. Belarus is becoming increasingly isolated from the EU and integrated with Russia. The opposition faced criticism for this decision because, according to every available survey, only a minority of Belarusians support the European choice.

The Belarusian protests of 2020 were unprecedentedly massive, partly because they were ideologically inclusive. People of various political views, desiring fair elections and outraged by police violence, joined the movement. The underlying values of that protest were clearly European in the broad sense of the word, but the movement had no geopolitical component, unlike, for example, the 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine.

Belarusians did not take to the streets to exit integration unions with Moscow or seek closer ties with the European Union. It seems like a distant memory, but in 2020, many pro-democratic Belarusians harboured hopes of involving Russia in removing Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Opposition leaders, including such now distinctly anti-Kremlin figures as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Pavel Latushka, invited Moscow to mediate between the government and opposition, reassuring Russia that a democratic victory in Belarus would not harm the two countries' friendship.

Clearly, the people in the streets were, on average, more pro-European than the median Belarusian. Yet, even within the protest movement, there were many supporters of union with Russia or of geopolitical neutrality.

The democratic forces' evolution towards a clear pro-European stance began immediately after the opposition leaders were forced into exile in August–September 2020. Russia supported the Lukashenka regime and its repressive policies, while the West backed the democratic forces. Maintaining neutrality has become increasingly difficult in this context. The start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 made this choice not only politically inevitable for the opposition but also morally unambiguous.

However, it took them another year and a half to fully embrace EU integration as their strategic goal. During the years in exile, the opposition's focus shifted from representing the majority of Belarusians to working with the core of the pro-democratic electorate and Western partners. Declaring a European choice, albeit not shared by the majority of Belarusian society, was aimed at these two target groups.

The democratic forces' European choice was likely not too costly in terms of electoral support; those active Belarusians who still follow the opposition-related news represent a much more ideologically driven and pro-European segment of society than the average Tikhonouskaya voter in 2020. Still, it is also true that locking in European integration as a goal may make regaining the support of the more neutral groups of society more challenging for the opposition in the immediate future.

Before assessing the long-term ramifications of such a choice by the democratic opposition, it is important to understand what Belarusians actually think about the prospect of European integration and how these views have historically evolved.

Belarusians and the Prospect of European Integration

Independent public opinion research in Belarus today is conducted through online panels representative of the urban population with internet access (about 85% of the Belarusians), as well as through traditional telephone polls, which also reach rural areas. Telephone

polls conducted by the Belarusian Analytical Workshop (BAW) offer respondents a binary choice: in which union would it be better for Belarusians to live —EU or a union with Russia? According to June 2023 data, **25% preferred EU**, while twice as many chose a union with Russia, while the rest were undecided. Various online panel-based surveys (Chatham House, ISANS and Philipp Bikanau's study on Belarusian identity) conducted at the end of 2023 showed **10 to 16% of respondents choosing EU** (with 40 to 50% opting for union with Russia). The lower results compared to BAW's telephone survey owe to the fact that in the online surveys, pollsters added various "neutral" options, which were chosen by more than a third of the respondents.

Critics of these studies often mention the problem of the fear that respondents in authoritarian countries have in answering political questions honestly. This problem exists, but its impact on the results is often overestimated. First, a series of in-depth interviews on this topic in the fall of 2023 demonstrated that the effect of fear is much stronger on questions related to domestic politics compared to those on foreign policy. Even in the aforementioned surveys, significantly more respondents expressed no fear in admitting their condemnation of Russia's role in the war or their reading of independent of media (both of which Belarus designates as "extremist." However, Belarusian authorities tolerate these positions are far less than they do pro-European views.

Second, sociologists have been able to establish an approximate range of distortion in survey results due to respondents' fear of speaking on sensitive topics: in questions related to the Russo-Ukrainian war, the pro-Ukrainian answers "under-received" from 3 to 16 percentage points. Earlier research estimated this distortion at 9 percentage points. It is safe to assume that fear-related distortions about the issue of European choice do not significantly exceed these margins. In other words, the fear impact is significant, but it does not change the overall picture: **no more than a quarter of Belarusians currently support European integration**, especially if they are given more than two choices.

However, it's also important to remember that such questions have been posed to Belarusians for a long time, and the results used to be different. According to the IISEPS sociology centre, which conducted quarterly face-to-face polls in Belarus for many years until 2016, public opinion on geopolitical choice was extremely volatile from 2008 to 2014. Twice — from 2009 to mid-2011 and then from the autumn of 2012 to the end of 2013 — **more Belarusians chose European integration over the union with Russia**. After the IISEPS was shut down, other spikes in pro-European sentiments were recorded by BAW: in December 2019, the size of the pro-European segment nearly matched the pro-Russian one (32% and 40%, respectively), and, in the fall of 2020, supporters of the EU path again briefly outnumbered those wishing to remain in a union with Russia.

Therefore, the geopolitical orientation of Belarusians is not a destiny; it is highly sensitive to the informational and regional political context. For instance, the years 2009–2010 — the first recorded "victory" of pro-EU views — marked the first attempt to normalise relations between Minsk and the West amidst a series of economic disputes between Belarusian and Russian authorities. This thaw was brief and ended with a post-election crackdown in Belarus and EU sanctions against Minsk. Apparently, by the end of 2012, the negative effect of these developments on public opinion had exhausted itself, making the European vector more attractive again.

Notwithstanding that, from late 2013, Belarusians began to be bombarded with Russian anti-Western propaganda, primarily aimed against the Maidan movement in Ukraine, and it was immediately reflected in public opinion polls. This confrontation later turned into a full-fledged war in Donbas, accompanied by an information war. For many years, Russian TV's dominance in Belarus has been suppressing pro-European sentiments. Pro-Russian sympathies had cooled down only by the end of the 2010s, when Minsk and Moscow began intense bargaining on the depth of integration. At that time, Belarusian state and non-state media alike rang the alarm about the Russian threat to sovereignty.

Finally, the last recorded surge in the pro-EU stance in the autumn of 2020 coincided with the rise of the protest movement in Belarus. Since then, especially with the onset of the full-scale war, both Belarusian and Russian official media have been promoting a sharply anti-Western agenda, which has undoubtedly affected Belarusians' readiness to prefer EU over union with Russia.

Feasibility Increases Support

Many Belarusians are reluctant to make a European choice, not solely due to the aggressive anti-Western propaganda, but because supporting EU integration appears genuinely implausible and even dangerous to pursue in the foreseeable future.

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically changed the region's perception of the cost of the European choice. One can easily realise that the current Russian regime would thwart any attempts at Belarus-EU integration, using force if necessary. Many Belarusians view this reality as a prohibitive barrier to any thoughts of EU integration. The latest research confirms this. Analysis by the Center for New Ideas, based on dozens of in-depth interviews, showed that Belarusians often do not choose EU in surveys on geopolitical orientations because they do not see this option as realistic or safe, and they also do not see any interest from the EU itself in having closer ties with Belarus.

Certainly, a significant number of Belarusians ideologically favour an alliance with Russia, viewing European integration as fundamentally incompatible with their values. According to the mentioned surveys, up to a third of Belarusians welcome the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus, support the actions of Russian troops in Ukraine, and share other hawkish pro-Kremlin positions.

However, for many others, the EU would become a far more attractive alliance in a situation where regional confrontation was not so acute and Russia is no longer seen as the only neighbour willing to befriend Belarus, while also holding a veto over any of Minsk's foreign-policy manoeuvres.

It is possible, of course, that this historic window of opportunity will only open from a long-term perspective. Few experts expect Russia to suffer a quick defeat in the war, a result that would weaken it and lead to its diminished capacity to control Belarus.

In some ways, however, this is not only bad news for democratic forces and other supporters of a European path for Belarus. Public opinion survey results may seem pessimistic, but they will likely be significantly different in a situation where Minsk has a feasible opportunity to choose its geopolitical orientation. This opportunity is unlikely to present itself without reducing Russian influence on Belarusian politics in the first place. But when the Kremlin's influence finally weakens, it will, in turn, remove mental barriers for many cautious Belarusians,

enabling them to embrace pro-EU views. In other words, in that moment in the future, Belarusian democratic politicians will likely find the task of promoting EU integration among their fellow citizens easier than it is today.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Neither the current phase of Belarus-West confrontation, nor Russia's war against Ukraine are conducive to the growth of pro-EU sentiment in Belarusian society. There are several steps the EU and its member states can undertake to mitigate these negative tendencies.

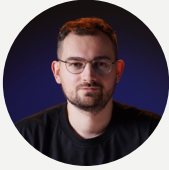
- **It is important to invest in Belarus public opinion research and take account of its results in shaping EU policy vis-à-vis Belarus. At the same time, it is essential to avoid fatalism and not over-dramatise the current data, including on geopolitical orientations.** Today, the relatively low popularity of the European choice in Belarus is a reality, and it makes little sense to deny it. However, these views have historically been volatile and dependent on external and informational contexts. Any significant change in Minsk-Moscow relations or Russia's regional role can open a window of opportunity for a relatively swift transformation of Belarusian attitudes towards integration with Russia and the European Union.
- **The EU and Belarus's immediate Western neighbours should promote, not curtail, the mobility of Belarusians. This can be achieved through a more accommodating visa policy, providing more opportunities for educational and professional exchanges, and expanding travel options, including by relaunching passenger-train connections between Minsk and neighbouring EU countries.** The perceived proximity of EU to ordinary Belarusians is a strong contributing factor to the growing "they don't welcome us" sentiment in Belarusian society, which partly explains current low pro-EU moods. The securitisation of mobility issues during the war in Ukraine is understandable; therefore, a balance between conflicting interests should be found. However, the temptation to view Belarusian society as an accomplice to the war, akin to the Belarusian regime, should be resisted. Available public opinion data clearly demonstrates the differences between most Belarusians and both the Putin and Lukashenka regimes.
- **In a future moment of greater volatility, the EU's adoption of a more open position towards Belarus's potential integration could also have a positive effect.** As those Belarusians who are cautious today become ready to consider different options for their geopolitical orientation, it is important that the EU at an official level keeps its doors open and clearly conveys this stance and its message to the Belarusian people and the political establishment.

It is crucial to support Belarusian independent media, which serve as an antidote to the aggressive propaganda of both Russian and pro-Russian Belarusian state media. This support should be viewed as an investment in the infrastructure of future democratisation and Europeanisation. Without this infrastructure, Belarus's democratic transformation will, at best, take many years to unfold or, at worst, be hard to imagine. The media should be incentivised to find new audiences through all

available distribution platforms (social media) instead of “preaching to the converted,” as well as to construct an unbiased narrative on European integration.

➤ **Straightforward promotion of “European values” or a “positive vision of the EU” may not be the best targets for media when allocating financial support.**

Currently, it is beyond the capacity of any media outlet or political or civil society group to “convince” sceptical Belarusians that they should want to join the EU. According to public opinion studies, Belarusians’ caution on this issue is determined by much deeper factors.



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