Do Belarusians Want to Join the EU?

On 2 March, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies presented a report on geopolitical preferences of Belarusians. The media paid little attention to the document presented by an influential Belarusian think-tank, although the conclusions of this report could be important for Belarus.

Despite the crisis in Europe, the regime’s anti-European propaganda and the EU’s weak informational policy inside Belarus, the number of Belarusian euro-enthusiasts continues to grow, slowly, but still. At present moment, 17% Belarusians consistently support the idea of European integration. Moreover, if we held a referendum on Belarus’ joining the EU tomorrow, 38,2% Belarusians would have said “yes”.

The new thing about the research is that the biggest group of respondents – 30,9% – does not want to see Belarus involved in any integration processes at all. 23,3 % Belarusians stand for integration with Russia. This is more than for joining the EU. But despite state propaganda the level of pro-Russian orientation keeps going down. Primarily because the Russian integration supporters are the people who lived most of their lives in the Soviet Union, and their number in the society is gradually decreasing in a natural way. 20,0 % want integration with both Russia and the EU and see Belarus as a sort of a bridge between the East and the West.

Europe’s Casus

The European Union has an unbelievable Soft Power in Belarus, it stands steadily even under the influence of the external conditions.
On the one hand, the regime has been promoting the anti-European propaganda in the state media for many years, focusing on the crisis in the eurozone or economic problems of the “new Europe” countries. After the election-2010, Lukashenka accused the West in attempt at the state turnover in Belarus.

On the other hand, the European Union has a very weak communication strategy inside Belarus. The EU remains a key donor of Belarus. It has provided € 510 million of technical assistance during the years of independence. But according to BISS analysts only 4,6% Belarusians have any idea of the “European dialogue for modernization of Belarus”. The Belarusian authorities keep silence about the European projects while Brussels put little effort into conveying this information directly to Belarusians.

Despite all this, European integration has become the most stable geopolitical choice. Moreover, there appeared a trend of growth of the pro-European moods in Belarus. The data presented by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies in September 2003 shows that 23,4 % Belarusians are ready to vote for joining the EU in case of a referendum. This number increased by 15% in 10 years regardless of the unfavourable conditions. The trends when Belarusians should choose between joining the EU and integration with Russia look even more interesting.

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>06'06</th>
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<td>Joining the EU</td>
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<td>42,1</td>
<td>38</td>
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<td>42</td>
<td>37,3</td>
<td>44,1</td>
<td>42,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration with Russia</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>42,3</td>
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<td>31,5</td>
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<td>47</td>
<td>36,2</td>
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</table>

Data provided by the IISEPS

The data shows that the pro-European vector of the Belarusians’ preferences increases every year with regard to the integration with Russia. There are several factors that
facilitate growth of the pro-European moods in Belarus.

In Belarus, European goods, European living standards, the social model, and culture have high respect. Even Lukashenka, ordering to improve the functioning of a certain enterprise, says “make it work like in Europe”.

Success of the former Soviet block members – the new EU members – also plays a significant role in the pro-European moods of Belarusians. After independence resume, Poland and Belarus started from identical positions, but Poland had become an example of the economic development. The BISS research shows that residents of the Western Belarus, the region that has intensive connections with Poland, have more pro-European moods that others.

Belarusians often visit the European Union and notice the positive sides of the European life model. The more Belarusians have an opportunity to go to the EU, the more students study in the EU, the quicker the pro-European moods will grow inside the Belarusian society.

Other Geopolitical Choices of Belarusians

Despite the stable trend of pro-EU moods in Belarus, other geopolitical options presented in the BISS studies stay on the table.

There appeared a trend that no one noticed before – pro-independence moods in the Belarusian society. 30,9% Belarusians want neither European integration, nor integration with Russia. 20 years ago, in 1993, 55,1% Belarusians stood for the revival of the Soviet Union, so the views supporting total sovereignty surprise.

Russia is gradually losing its “Western Outpost”. Only 23,3% want to unite with Russia. Given that Kremlin used to see Belarus as a natural part of its empire, today’s results may seriously upset the Russian leaders.
The peculiarity of Belarus lies in the fact that 20,0% Belarusians want to be in a union with both the EU and Russia. On the one hand, it shows poor understanding of the integration processes by ordinary Belarusians. On the other hand, this confirms the Belarusian idea of a country as a bridge between the East and the West.

**So Where?**

The pro-European orientation of Belarusians has become a noticeable trend, but we cannot claim its stability.

The people of Belarus have few means of influence the authorities. The regime did not ask the people’s opinions when it took the decision to join the Customs Union. It looks highly possible that Belarusians become just passive observers of the process of further integration with Russia. Kremlin desires to adjoin Belarus to Russia more than the European Union wants to accept it as a EU member. Moreover, Russia has much more finance and means of influence inside Belarus.

The European choice of Belarusians will always be jeopardised by the opportunistic policy of the regime and Kremlin’s imperialistic approach. The only way to turn the pro-European orientation into reality is to let Belarusians vote in free and fair elections. This may take a long time but it appears Belarusians remain pro-European despite years of propaganda and authoritarian rule.