

The Myth of Belarusian Tolerance

If you ask a Belarusian about the most important national feature of Belarus, he will most probably mention tolerance.

This opinion seems to be deeply rooted in mass consciousness. Lukashenka's regime often uses it in ideological discourse to prove that Belarusians have been peaceful throughout their history and cannot stir up any conflicts, internal or external.

However, in 2012 the Institute for Economics and Peace ranked Belarus at the bottom of its Global Peace Index (109 among 158 countries), suggesting that Belarus actually belongs to the group of the least peaceful nations.

Belarusian think tanks researched public opinion to understand this issue. The research showed that the Belarusian people can, in fact, be quite hostile to "otherness" in terms of cultural and identity matters. At the same time they are much closer to European norms when it comes to political and civic values.

The Tolerance Narrative in Belarus

Many in Belarus like to refer to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) as an example when they speak about tolerance. Indeed, in the GDL many religions and ethnic groups coexisted peacefully for centuries. No religious wars ever occurred throughout its history. The local population tolerated other religions and ethnic groups. Plenty of [Jews and Muslims](#) lived in peace with their Christian neighbours.

Belarus had four official languages - Belarusian, Polish, Russian and Yiddish

After the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was proclaimed in 1919, Belarus had four official languages – Belarusian, Polish, Russian and Yiddish. But this multicultural society vanished after the Second World War, which dramatically changed not only state borders but also the ethnic composition of Belarus.

Today, Belarusian officials employ the history of tolerance to prove the good nature of the Belarusian people: these people have never attempted to occupy or destroy other cultures, all they want is to leave peacefully on their land, work hard and raise children. The problem, according to state ideologists, is that Belarus is surrounded by enemies, such as the EU member states and NATO. They pose threats to tolerant Belarusians, who need to unite around a strong leader and resist the aggressors.

Tolerance has already become an important element of Belarusian social consciousness. If you ask a Belarusian what national features seem typical for his countryman, he would most probably name tolerance amongst a few others. However, regular people hardly try to critically analyse this concept and how it actually plays out in Belarusian society.

Independent experts try to prove the opposite, but they rarely do empirical research to support their claims. However, one such research project was conducted a couple of years ago and yielded truly interesting results.

Belarusians have Strong Social and Cultural Phobias

The Novak laboratory and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies conducted research on this topic in 2010. The research aimed to compare current Belarusian political culture with European values. Contrary to widespread opinion, the results showed that Belarusians are more prone to accept the political standards of the EU rather than its cultural norms.

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Polls showed that Belarusians remain very homophobic. More than 60 per cent of Belarusians support criminal prosecution of homosexuals. Only 6 per cent said that gay people should exercise equal rights with the rest of society. No wonder that the Belarusian authorities [put pressure on gay activists](#).

The famous myth of religious tolerance was also completely debunked. According to 57 per cent of respondents, the state should restrict the spread of non-traditional religions, like Hare Krishnas or Buddhists.

Tolerance for other nationalities also received weak support. 46 per cent of Belarusians think that the state should restrict incoming immigrant labour. Moreover, 20 per cent are ready to do their best to prevent their children from marrying representatives of another race.

However, Belarusians Remain Politically Liberal

On the other hand, Belarusians demonstrated a more European approach to political freedom and citizens' relations with the state. 65 per cent of respondents believe that the state should promote international contacts between students and teachers to raise the quality of education, while only seven per cent spoke in favour of restricting such contacts.

40 per cent think that the state should respect rights and freedoms of citizens even when citizens abuse their rights. Only 25 per cent believe that the state's primary duty is to maintain order even where it involves the violation of citizens' rights.

60 per cent think that the state should provide business with more freedom

Economic freedom appeared to be of great value to Belarusians:

60 per cent think that the state should provide businesses with more freedom, while only about 20 per cent believe the state should control business.

Freedom of consciousness also appeared important: 50 per cent of Belarusians believe that disagreements on government actions should not be an obstacle to professional development and education, while less than 20 per cent gave an opposite answer.

Belarusians are slightly less liberal with regard to organised opposition to the government and censorship. The number of opponents and supporters of restricting organised opposition activities are almost equal – around 25 per cent. More than 40 per cent think that the media should be censored in order to prevent the spread of extremist and anti-government ideas, while the share of opponents of censorship is smaller – 27 per cent.

What Does it all Mean?

This shows that Belarusians are not who they think they are, and what the regime wants them to be.

In fact, they resemble their historical and geographical neighbours from the EU – Poland and Lithuania. These countries remain rather conservative in cultural and identity matters, be it gay rights, immigrant labour or religion. On the other hand, they share European political values of democracy, respect for human rights and the free market. Europeanisation of new member states, however, develops these values further, while the Belarusian regime hinders such development.

Indeed, how can real tolerance emerge in Belarus, when no public discussions ever appear in the mass media? It looks like such problems do not exist in Belarus, so it is not worth speaking about them. The Belarusian regime aims to conceal any controversies that contradict the official ideology. It often refers to other countries in this context, where there are

numerous ongoing conflicts and then points to Belarus; a model of total tranquillity with no social cleavages.

Such a policy only enhances conservativeness and prejudice amongst Belarusians. They can hardly formulate any pros and cons of a problem based on scientific facts or research, and usually employ narrow-minded phrases and myths in discussions. As a result, it is quite difficult to be “different” in Belarus.

The other part of the research, however, leaves some hope for a brighter future. Politically, Belarusians are ready for democratisation and change. This fact is most important, as it creates grounds for dialogue. Political pluralism and freedom of media will contribute to the emergence of public discussion, which will subsequently lead to the tolerance of other cultures and identities. No one knows, unfortunately, when this brighter future will come to Belarus.

Vadzim Smok

Belarus by World Standards

An overview of the position of Belarus in various international rankings suggests that the human potential of the country is relatively good, with high education standards.

Belarus is also business-friendly in some important respects.

However, political and personal freedoms are extremely constrained by international standards. Belarus ranks among some of the worst offenders in the world for non-respect freedom of expression in particular. Crucially, its ranking in these areas has only been in decline over the last few years.

Political Climate

[Freedom House's Freedom in the World](#) is an annual publication which includes a review of political and civil liberties in 193 countries. In 2012, Belarus is placed in the category of "not free" countries: that is, one where basic civil liberties and political freedoms are denied (the categories are free, partly free and not free). In the category of "political rights" Belarus receives the worst ranking of 7 points, and in the category "civil liberties" only 6 points.

Only 15 of 193 countries surveyed have such poor rankings, and Belarus' score puts it in the company of Burma, Chad, Cuba and South Ossetia. Other post-Soviet countries' scores include: Ukraine, 3.5 (partly free); Turkmenistan, 7 (not free); Moldova, 3 (partly free), Georgia, 3.5 (partly free) and Lithuania, 1 (free). Belarus' ranking has remained the same for several years.

[Transparency International's Corruption Index \(143 of 182\)](#) measures a population's perception of levels of corruption in their country's public sector. It draws on independent surveys about bribery, kickbacks, and embezzlement, among other factors. Belarus ranks 143 out of 182 countries in the 2011 review. Its ranking is tied with Russia, among others, while Ukraine and all of Central Asia (except Kazakhstan) score worse. Belarus' score in 2011 is down four places on its 2009 placing.

Freedom of Expression

According to [Freedom House's Press Freedom Index 2012 \(193 of 197\)](#), Belarus is one of the five worst press abusers out of those 197 surveyed, and comes just below Iran at #193 from the top. This is a decline of several places compared with its rating of 188 in 2009. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are the only post-Soviet nations with a worse ranking, while Russia takes place 172, Kyrgyzstan 155 and Ukraine 130. The ranking

covers print, broadcast and internet media, and examines the legal media environment, political influences on reporting, and economic pressures on dissemination of news.

[Reporters Without Borders' \(168 of 179\)](#) press freedom index 2011-2012 lists Belarus as one of the countries that have become "much more repressive", and it drops 14 places on the previous year (due largely to the post 2010 election crackdown).

[Freedom House's 2012 Freedom on the Net](#) ranking rate Belarus' internet as "not free". Only 12 other countries receive this lowest category rating. While acknowledging the government's encouragement of greater internet use among Belarusians for commercial purposes, Freedom House notes the increasing use of internet surveillance technologies. The ratings are based on examination of the following three broad categories: obstacles to access, limits on content, and violation of user rights. Georgia enjoys "free" internet status, while Azerbaijan and Russia are rated "partly free". Estonia, the USA and Germany take the top three places for freest internet environments.

Economic Climate

[Economic Freedom \(153 of 179\)](#) The Heritage Foundation and The Wall Street Journal have published an annual overview of economic freedoms across the world for over 10 years. For 2012, Belarus received an overall assessment of 49 points and occupies 153rd place from the top out of a total of 179 countries surveyed.

It comes second lowest out of all European countries, and is one of only two European countries to be labelled economically "repressed" by the index (the other is Ukraine, at #163). The ranking is based on measures such as labour freedom, corruption, and property rights and open markets. Russia comes 144th. Switzerland and Ireland are the only European countries to make it into the top ten freest.

Sovereign Credit Rating For the first time in its history, Belarus received its credit rating in 2007. Sovereign credit rating is considered by foreign investors as an assessment of investing in economy of a particular state. On 1 July 2009, international rating agency Standard & Poor's announced the sovereign credit rating of Belarus and the future outlook of the country was pronounced 'negative'. In April 2012, however, Belarus gained 'stable' outlook status.

Doing Business (69 of 183) According to the World Bank's Doing Business rankings, Belarus places 69th out of 183 countries. Notably, this is a jump of 22 places compared with Belarus's 2010 result. The ease of starting a business is rated particularly well (placing Belarus on a par with Singapore and Saudi Arabia). Although still very low scoring by international standards, Belarus' ranking when it comes to protecting investors and paying taxes has improved considerably on the previous year.

Holistic Measures

Human Development (68 of 182) The United Nations Development Program ranks countries according to a Human Development Index which measures such things as educational attainment, GDP life expectancy. In 2011, Belarus was ranked in the category of "High Human Development" and occupied 68th position out of 182. Norway has the highest Human Development Index and Niger the lowest.

Global Peace Index (109 of 158) The Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Peace Index 2012 rates Belarus 109 out of 158 countries. The analysis goes beyond a standard definition of peace, and uses 23 wide-ranging indicators to reach its scores, and these include such things as military expenditure, relationships with neighbours and respect for human rights. Ukraine ranks 71, Moldova – 66, and Poland – 24, while Russia comes behind Belarus at 153.

The Legatum Prosperity Index (50 of 110) measures eight categories of prosperity, which include health, the economy, personal freedom and security. In the 2011 rankings, Belarus falls in the medium range overall, alongside all other former Soviet states. It comes 50th out of 110 in total, but scores 'strongly' in the education and social capital categories.

While it has an average rating for most of the other categories, it receives the worst rating of 'weak' (100 points) in the governance category. Latvia and Lithuania have similar overall scores, with Russia and Ukraine coming in lower. Scandinavian countries top the table.

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