

GEOPOLITICAL PREFERENCES OF THE BELARUSIANS: A TOO PRAGMATIC NATION?

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Since 2010, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) has conducted comprehensive research into the geopolitical preferences of Belarusian society. The series of relevant studies seeks to find answers to the key questions pertaining to the foreign political orientations of the Belarusians: what is the ratio of geopolitical preferences of the population of Belarus? to which degree is this geopolitical choice contingent upon economic and socio-cultural factors? how do these geopolitical preferences change in time and why? how effective is the outreach policy of the European Union in its relationship with Belarus?

In its new study of geopolitical priorities of the Belarusians BISS identified a marked increase in the number of the advocates of Belarus's independent development outside of integration projects. Meanwhile, the point about the alleged consensus over the independence of Belarus has not been verified—when choosing their allies, the Belarusians tend to be guided by pragmatic economic reasons, therefore, the majority of them believe that a union with Russia would be acceptable as long as it improved the economic situation in the country. However, integration with Russia is mostly perceived as an economic approximation without a complete loss of sovereignty. At the same time, a significant part of the population does not consider the EU and Russia to be mutually exclusive integration options; this choice is unstable and is subject to change depending on external influence. The Belarusians' knowledge about the European institutions and programs is still scarce, although almost half of the respondents said that they were interested in this information.

Main conclusions

1. BISS has recorded a **substantial increase in the number of advocates of Belarus's development outside of integration processes** (from 20.4% in 2010 to 30.9% in 2013) amid a reduction in the appeal of Russia as an integration center from 30.2% to 23.3%, respectively. The number of those supporting the European choice remains stable at 17%.
2. Nevertheless, 70% of the respondents believe that a single state with Russia would be an acceptable option for Belarus **on condition that the move contributes to the improvement of the economic situation in the country**. Therefore, **there is no saying that there is popular consensus over the independence of the Belarusian state**. However, three years ago, **82% of the respondents** said that a union with Russia was acceptable on certain terms.
3. The Belarusians perceive integration with Russia in a peculiar way—of those who opt for the eastern vector, **49.3% believe that the best possible integration form is just the creation of a free trade zone with Russia**, 30.4% would support a common economic space with Russia with no political union, and only **6.3% (or 2.7% of the total number of the respondents) would like to see Belarus as part of Russia as an autonomy**.
4. **Some of the pro-Russian respondents have no stable negative perception of the EU**, and they may support the European vector in a certain political and information context. The respondents who are oriented towards a simultaneous union with Russia and the EU do not consider these alternatives to be opposites. Of those who would prefer living in a union with Russia, 12.4% would vote for joining the EU if a referendum were held, and of those who would like living in a union with the EU and Russia simultaneously, the figure would be at 61.6%.
5. **When choosing allies, the Belarusians are mostly guided by pragmatic economic reasons**. Economic motives dominate among both pro-European citizens and those oriented towards a union with Russia. Over the three years between the surveys, the economic motivation became stronger, mentioned by 73%, an increase from 55%.
6. By their socio-cultural types and values, the **advocates of a simultaneous union with Russia and the EU are similar to the supporters of the 'pure' European choice, whereas the supporters of complete independence are closer to those who would opt for a union with Russia**. The former demonstrate mostly liberal ideas, while the latter are dominated by those with paternalist views who are inclined to rely on the state. The group of the advocates of a union with Russia has the largest number of supporters of a strong state.
7. The study confirms the conclusion that the **EU's communications policy on Belarusian society remains ineffective**. The Belarusians are still virtually unaware of the EU, its programs and objectives. Eighty-six percent of the respondents know nothing about the Eastern Partnership initiative (more than in 2010), and **95% of the respondents are unaware of the European Dialogue on Modernisation** with Belarusian society. However, the Belarusians show a considerable interest in the European Union, and the number of supporters of European integration remains stable.

The findings of the study are presented as a report on the survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,352 respondents.

1. Belarus and the integration processes

In order to identify the attitude of the Belarusians to the integration projects and integration as a process, BISS has formulated a series of questions envisioning both the choice of only one of the two possible unions and multiple choices. Quite interesting conclusions were made based on the correlation of answers to these questions.

In the 'one-answer choice' between the two alternatives (Russia and the European Union) Belarusian society gravitates more towards a union with Russia. Of the total number of the respondents, 46.1% spoke in favor of Russia, whereas the EU option was selected by only 28.1% of the respondents. Interestingly, in the group of answers to the question 'In your opinion, in which union of states would the people of Belarus have a better life?' those modified by the adverb 'rather' obviously dominate, which attests to the instability of both the pro-Russian and pro-European orientations. This instability may be a result of the fact that the respondents see both pros and cons in each option. It is also noteworthy that a quarter of the respondents remained undecided as to their choice. Such a large proportion of those who could not make up their mind may indicate that the list of scenarios for the country to develop is not limited to these two options, in the opinion of the respondents. The chart below confirms this conclusion.

Chart 1.
Answers to the question
'In which union of states would the people of Belarus have a better life?'

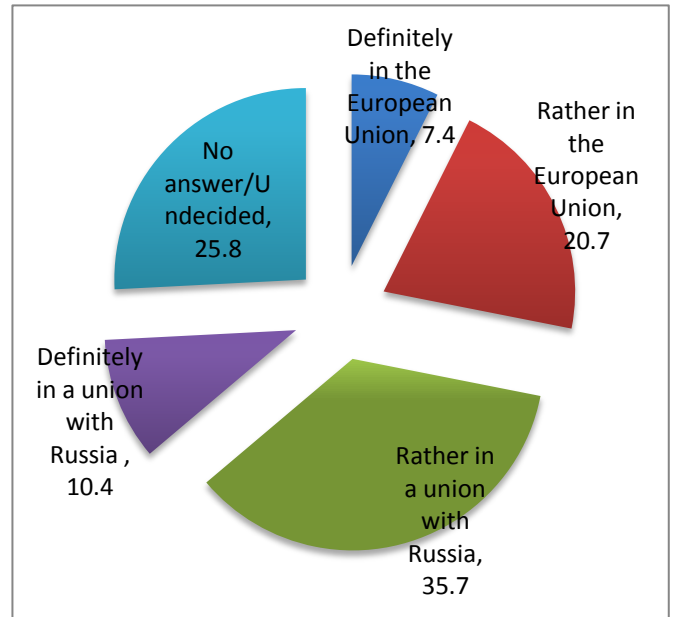
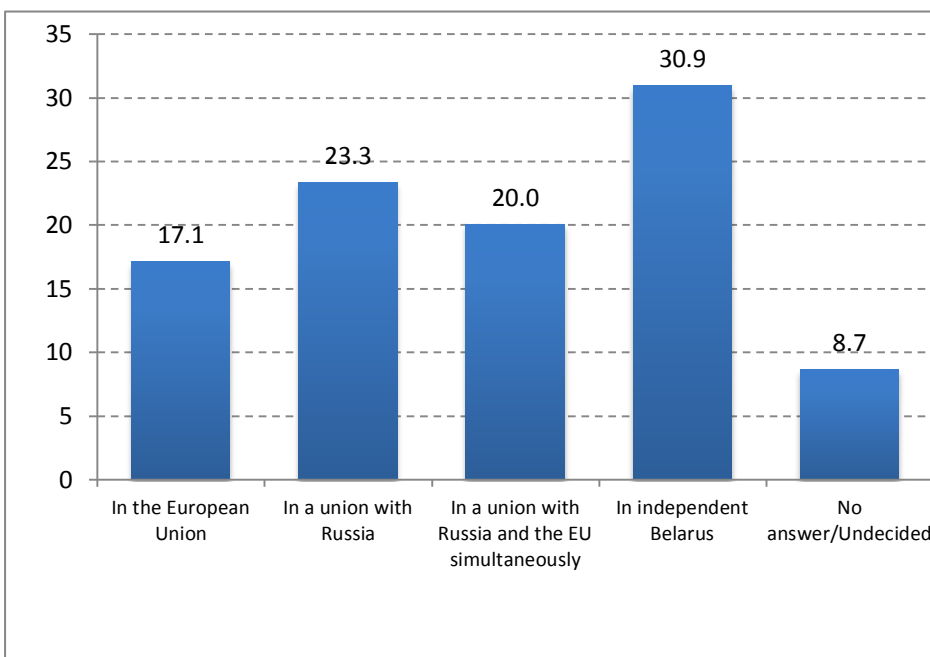


Chart 2.
Answers to the question 'Where would you prefer living?'



As soon as there appears the choice of development beyond integration projects and 'integration of integrations' (two unions simultaneously), half of the respondents who previously supported a union with the Russian Federation change their mind in favor of other options. The advocates of a union with the EU demonstrate more stable views, but their share decreases, too, from 28.1% to 17.1%. However, most of the respondents would prefer living in independent Belarus with no unions at all (30.9%). This is the most notable conclusion of this study.

Asked 'In which union of states would the people of Belarus have a better life?' the advocates of independence most often fail to respond (48%). This means that their position is quite clear, and they can prefer neither union. The second most popular answer is 'In a union with Russia' and only 15% of them would prefer the EU. Therefore, most of those with orientations towards independence have no pro-European preferences.

Of those choosing both unions simultaneously, only 18% remain undecided when faced with the 'one-answer choice.' Half of this group would prefer living in a union with Russia.

On the other hand, of those who are more inclined to make their choice in favor of the EU (have overall pro-European orientations), only 17% prefer living in independent Belarus (outside of any unions). Of those making the pro-Russian choice, 25% would prefer living in independent Belarus.

Chart 3.
Answers to the question 'Where would you prefer living?',
broken down by the union preference for Belarus

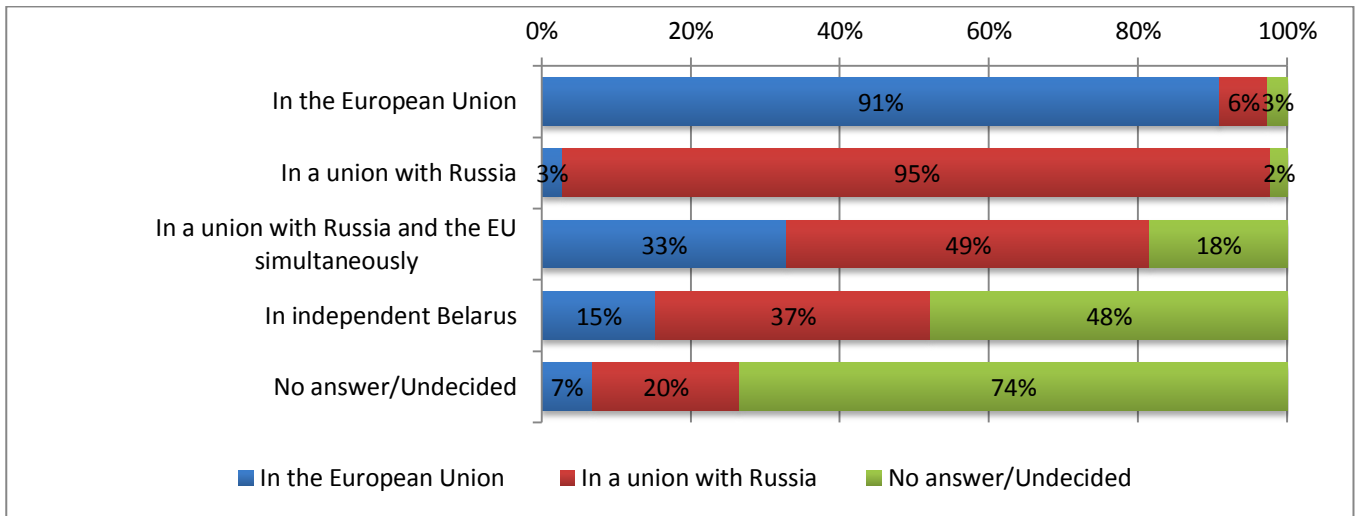
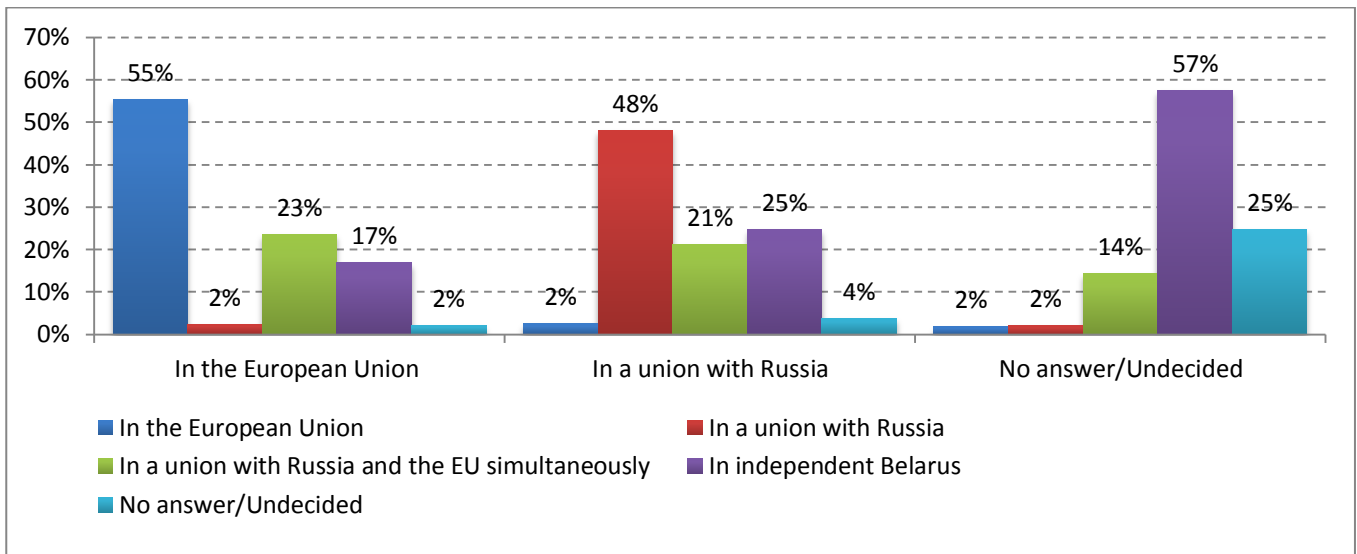


Chart 4.
Answers to the question 'In which union of states would the people of Belarus have a better life?',
broken down by the geopolitical preferences (question 'Where would you prefer living?')



At the same time, if a referendum were held tomorrow asking the Belarusians to vote for/against membership in the EU, the number of votes 'for' would be higher than the number of votes 'against.'

Chart 5.
Voting at the referendum on the membership in the EU

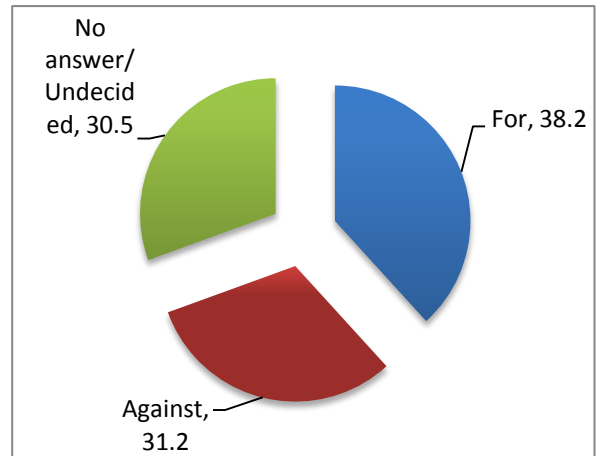
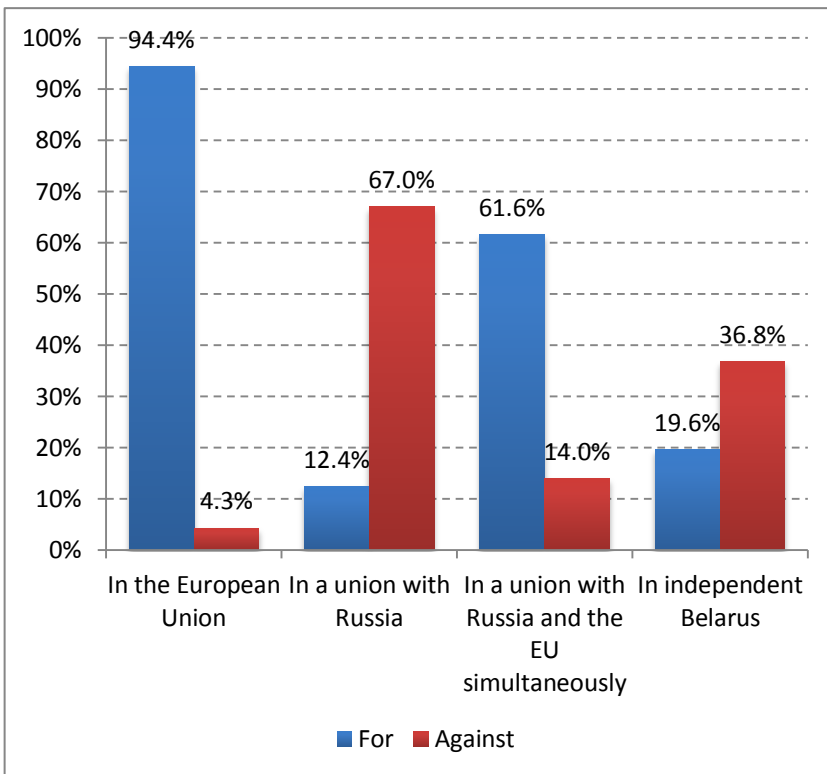


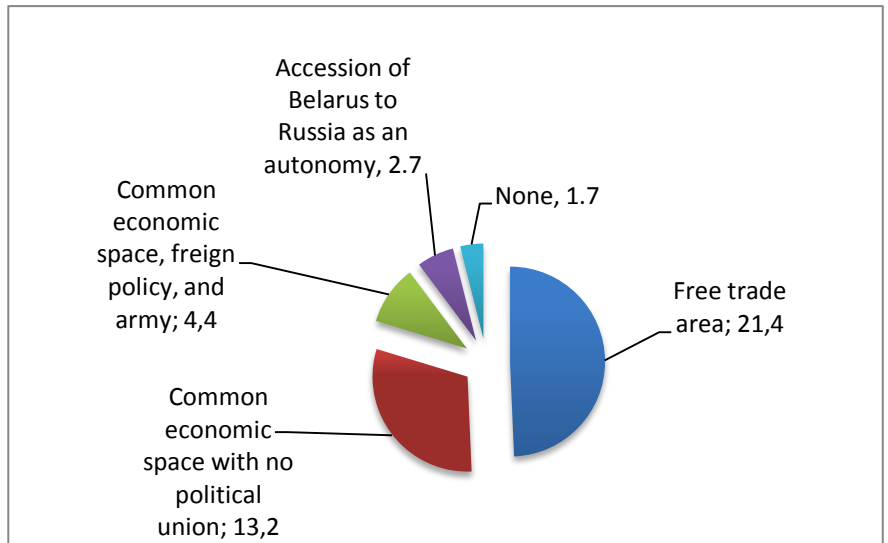
Chart 6.
Voting at a referendum on the membership in the EU, broken down by the political choice



We can draw the following picture based on the correlation of answers to the questions about the preferred union and voting at a hypothetical referendum on the membership in the EU: of those who would prefer living in a union with Russia, 12.4% would support EU membership at a referendum, and of those who would prefer a union with the EU and Russia, the share of supporters of EU membership would reach 61.6%. At the same time, in the group of those who would prefer living in the EU, only 4.3% would vote against European integration. We can draw the conclusion that the dominating group of Belarusian society inclined towards a union with Russia is unstable in its choice and may change its opinion depending on circumstances.

Chart 7.
Answers to the question 'Which type of union with Russia do you think is the most acceptable one for you?'

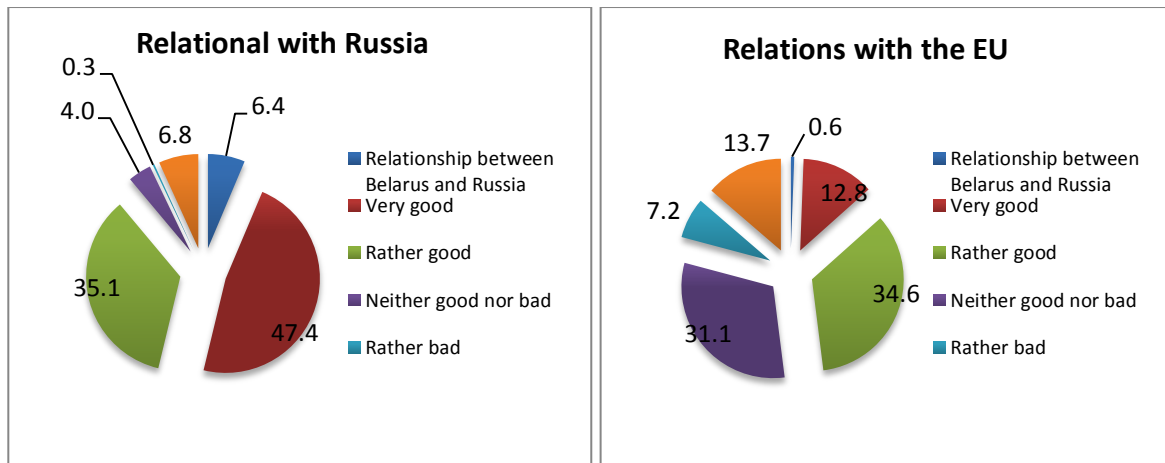
The understanding of the very essence of integration by the Belarusians is also worthy of note. Of the 43.3% of the respondents who supported a union with Russia in this way or other (see the previous bar graph), 49.3% believe that the most acceptable integration form is just a free trade area, while 30.4% spoke in favor of a common economic space with no political association, and only 6.3% (2.7% of the total number of the respondents) would like to see Belarus as a part of Russia incorporated as an autonomy.



Furthermore, 50.1% of the population has a favorable attitude to the still little-known Eurasian Union, while 15.3% of the respondents do not support this integration body. Those who do not care form a rather large group of 25.8% of all the respondents.

The assessment of Belarus’s relationships with Russia and the EU is quite realistic.

Charts 8-9.
Assessment of the relationships with Russia and the EU



It is also worthy of note that virtually equal numbers of the respondents believe that the relations are 'neither good nor bad' between Belarus and Russia and between Belarus and the EU (35% and 34%, respectively). It is obvious that the relationship with Russia is seen as much more positive.

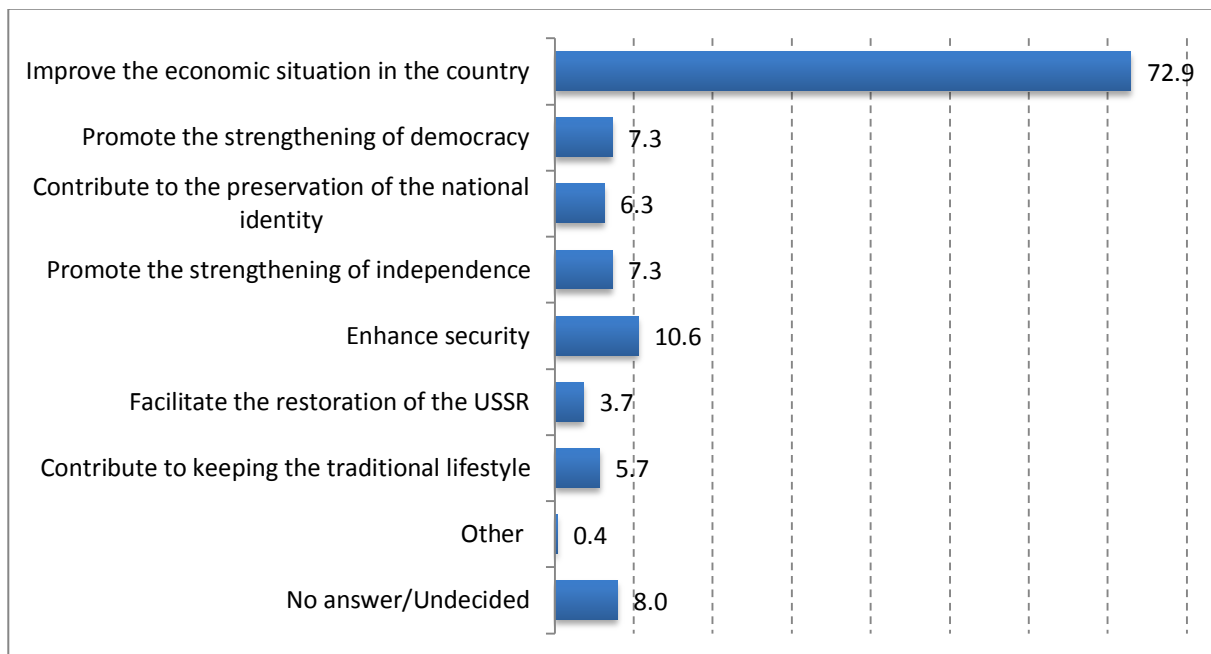
2. How do the Belarusians choose allies?

The determinants of the geopolitical choice have long been analyzed by Belarusian and foreign researchers. BISS asked the respondents a direct question: what should Belarus's motives be when it chooses allies?

Answers to this question confirmed that pragmatism prevails in the geopolitical choice of Belarusian society. Of the total number of the respondents, 72.9% said that when choosing allies, Belarus should be guided primarily by the potential improvement in the country's economic standing. The only other conspicuous factor is security, mentioned by 10.6%. 'Ideology' ideas (democracy and human rights, preservation of culture and the unique identity, preservation of habitual lifestyles, restoration of the USSR, etc.) appeared to have a marginal influence on the choice of allies. Since 2010, when the question was asked for the first time, the pragmatism of the Belarusian has grown even stronger.

Chart 10.

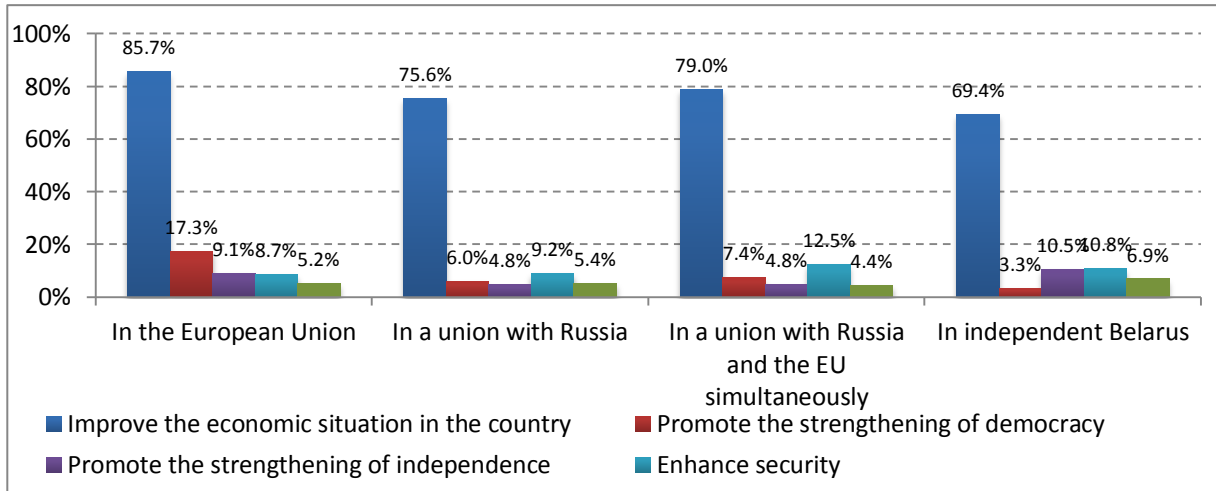
Answers to the question 'What, in your opinion, should be the main factor determining the choice of Belarus's allies? How will this...'



The group of 'Euro-optimists' has an even larger share of those choosing economic motives than the average for the sample (85.7% and 72.9%, respectively). Therefore, the assumption that the advocates of integration into the EU are primarily value-oriented citizens has not been confirmed.

Chart 11.

Answers to the question 'What, in your opinion, should be the main factor determining the choice of Belarus's allies? How will this...', broken down by the political choice

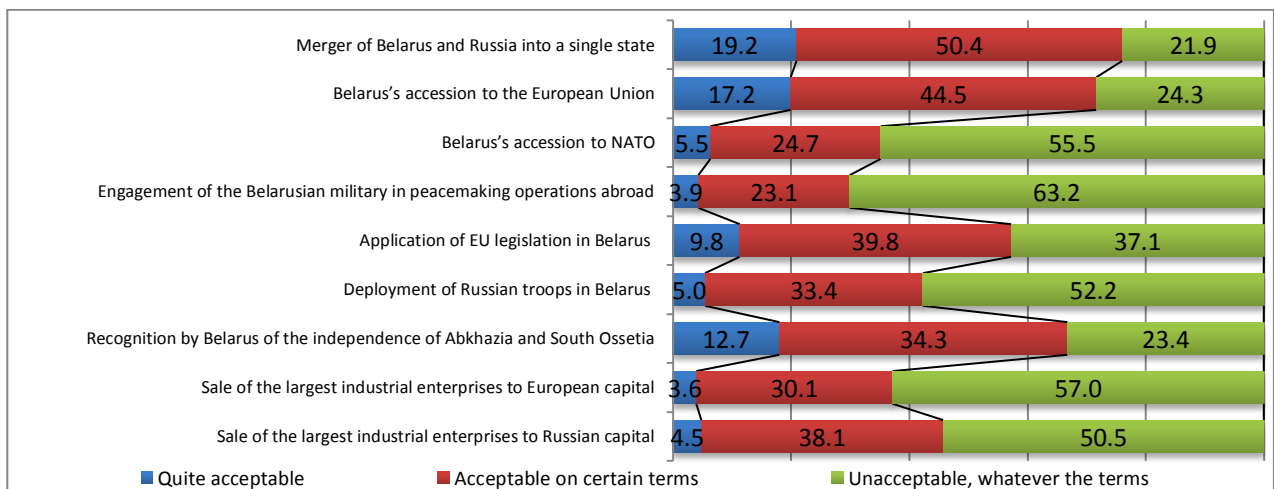


Overall, Belarusian society is capable of making an adequate assessment of the possible consequences of the accession to the EU. The cautious optimism about the possible increase in living standards is invariably accompanied by expectations of higher prices and utility fees, and 'brain drain.' However, society does not expect a collapse of the manufacturing sector or loss of the national identity as a result of Belarus's integration into the EU.

The findings of the survey confirm the previously voiced doubts that Belarusian society has achieved overwhelming consensus over the need to preserve the independence of the Belarusian state. Specifically, 19.2% of the respondents believe a single state with Russia to be 'quite acceptable' if it helps improve the economic situation in Belarus, and 50.4% think that it is acceptable on certain terms. Only 21.9% of the respondents said that a union with Russia was unacceptable whatever the terms. To compare: 17.2% of the respondents think the accession to the EU would be quite acceptable, and another 44.5% would support it on certain terms if it helped Belarus improve its economic standing, and only 24.3% of the respondents cannot tolerate this idea.

Chart 12.

Answers to the question 'Do you think the following measures are acceptable provided they are taken to improve the economic situation in the country?'



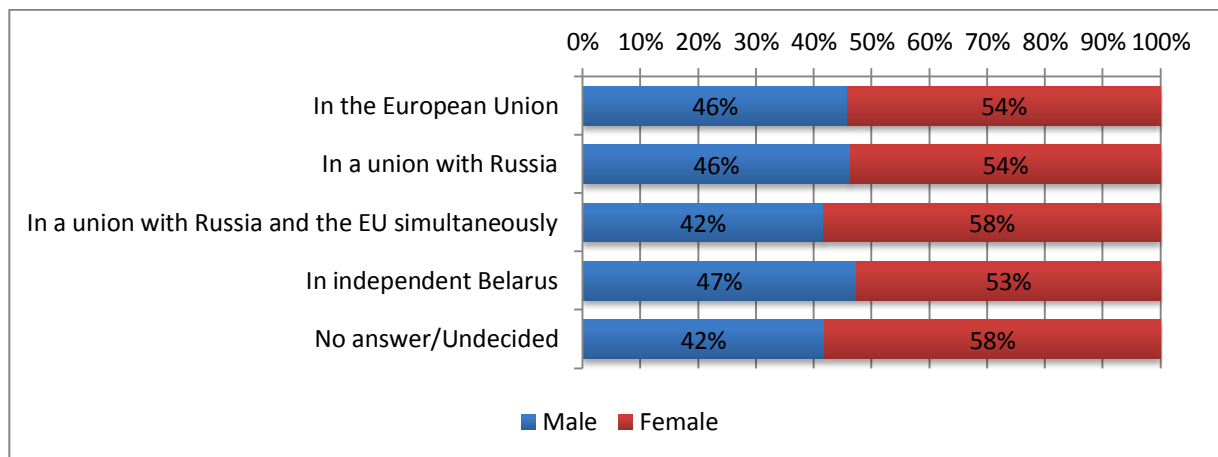
In the meantime, the majority of the Belarusians believe that the sale of the largest Belarusian enterprises to European or Russian capital is unacceptable (57% and 50.5%, respectively). Only 3.6% and 4.5%, respectively, believe that this sale is quite acceptable, and 30.1% and 38.1% think that it is acceptable on certain terms.

3. Who chooses what: social portraits of the advocates of various geopolitical alternatives

Some interesting trends can be observed if we focus on the social and demographic characteristics of those who prefer various formats of the state structure. There have been no significant differences in the geopolitical choices of males and females. However, a possible trend is the more pronounced inclination of women to enjoy benefits from both the unions simultaneously.

Chart 13.

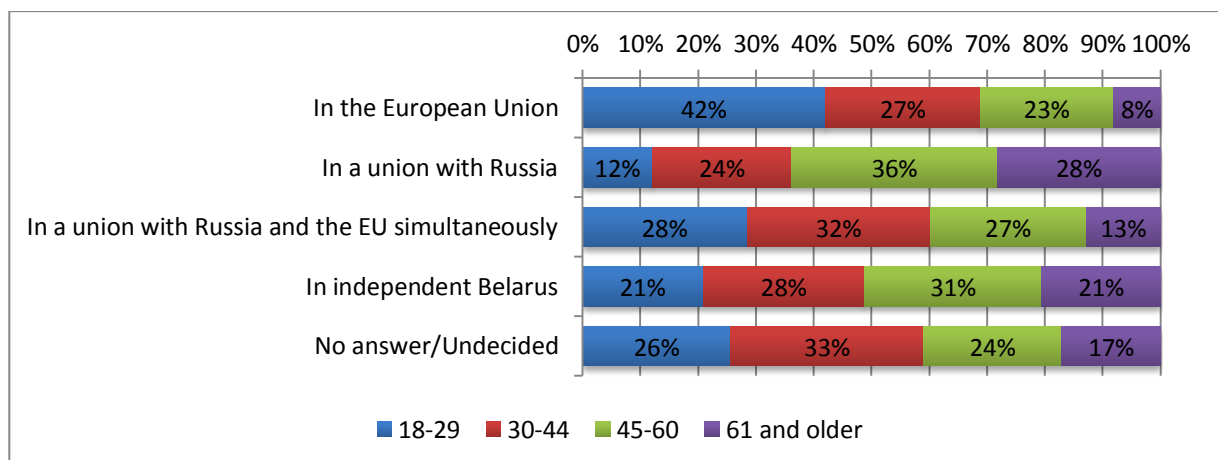
Gender-wise distribution of the respondents, broken down by the geopolitical choice



However, we can observe substantial differences in the age structure of the respondents—young people mostly support European integration, whereas older people tend to back a union with Russia. If this trend remains, the group advocating integration with the EU will be expanding, and the one oriented towards a union with Russia will be growing smaller. The general orientation of the Belarusian population will then largely depend on the sentiments of the younger generation. The share of people aged between 30 and 60 is about 60% in all groups, broken down by the orientations, except for the group advocating a union with the EU (where they account for only 50% of the group), which proves yet again that the wish to live in the EU is the choice of the young. At the same time, the supporters of independence are similar in their age structure with the advocates of a union with Russia.

Chart 14.

Age groups of the respondents, broken down by the political choice



The supporters of the European choice are mostly single young people with higher education, qualified specialists with advanced knowledge of information technologies. However, these characteristics are largely determined by their age, therefore, even distinct differences will not be enough to make valid conclusions. Nevertheless, the differences in occupations, which are subject to the age factor to a lower degree, should be analyzed separately.

Among the supporters of the European choice, there are more workers of the budget sector than in other groups (13% compared with the average 9%) and fewer public servants and officers (1% compared with 4%).

Table1.
Dependence of the geopolitical choice of the respondents on their occupation

	In the European Union	In a union with Russia	In a union with Russia and the EU simultaneously	In independent Belarus	No answer/Undecided	Average
Business owner	2%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%
Senior executive, director	1%	1%	1%	1%		1%
Mid-level executive, deputy director	2%	2%	4%	2%	3%	3%
Qualified specialist, manager	20%	10%	15%	13%	9%	13%
Worker, vendor, etc.	25%	22%	23%	26%	30%	25%
Public servant, officer	1%	3%	6%	5%	4%	4%
Military, police		2%	0%	0%	1%	1%
Budget sector employee	13%	7%	11%	8%	10%	9%
Individual entrepreneur, farmer	3%	2%	4%	2%		2%
Student	10%	3%	7%	7%	9%	7%
Homemaker	3%	4%	3%	6%	8%	5%
Pensioner, disabled	14%	42%	18%	27%	19%	26%
Unemployed	4%	2%	5%	3%	5%	3%

Residence is closely connected with geopolitical orientations. The share of Viciebsk region is quite high among those supporting a union with Russia (20% compared with the average 12%), and the share of Hrodna region residents is high in the group supporting the EU (15% and 11%, respectively). If this distribution of preferences is determined by the residence of the respondents, the orientations of Mahilioŭ region residents are of special interest. Their share in the group of supporters of independent Belarus is very low, at 8%, whereas in the group of advocates of a union with the EU, they account for 17%, more than those living in Hrodna region and almost the same number as in the city of Minsk. The capital city demonstrates an anomalously high share of those supporting a union with Russia and the EU simultaneously—of all the respondents from Minsk, 35.5% made this choice.

Also noteworthy is the distribution of groups depending on the type of settlements. There are more residents of small (10,000-50,000) and medium-sized (50,000-100,000) towns and cities in the group preferring independence than in other groups. They account for 13% and 11% of the population, respectively, and 20% and 15% of the group. These orientations may result from the relative simplicity and accessibility of the local self-government authorities and major influence of the state media.

Table 2.
Dependence of the geopolitical choice of the respondents on their residence

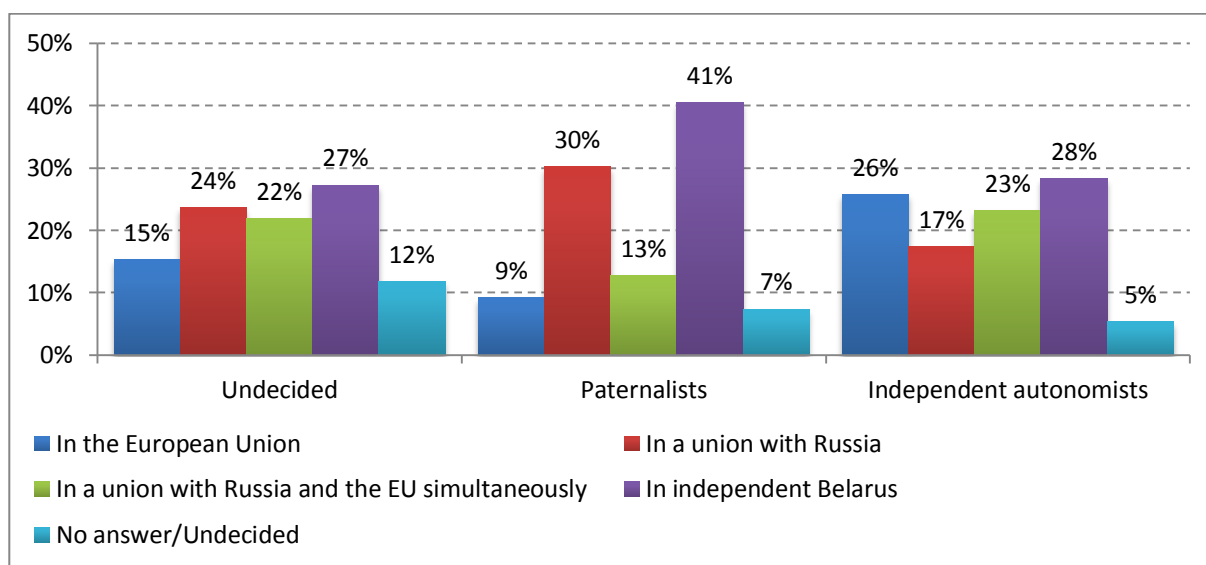
	In the European Union	In a union with Russia	In a union with Russia and the EU simultaneously	In independent Belarus	No answer/Undecided	Average
Minsk	18%	16%	35%	14%	21%	20%
Region center	23%	28%	15%	12%	26%	19%
100,000+	21%	14%	11%	11%	8%	13%
50,000 – 100,000	13%	6%	8%	15%	13%	11%
10,000 – 50,000	11%	9%	10%	20%	14%	13%
Village	14%	28%	20%	28%	20%	23%

We define economic values based on two groups of questions:

- 1) What people rely on in the matters of welfare, employment, healthcare and education—on themselves or the state;
- 2) What the respondents' attitude is to the state regulation of the economy.

Based on answers to these questions, three clusters, or groups, of people can be identified, provisionally called 'paternalists,' 'independent autonomists' and 'undecided.' These clusters are markedly different by their geopolitical orientations.

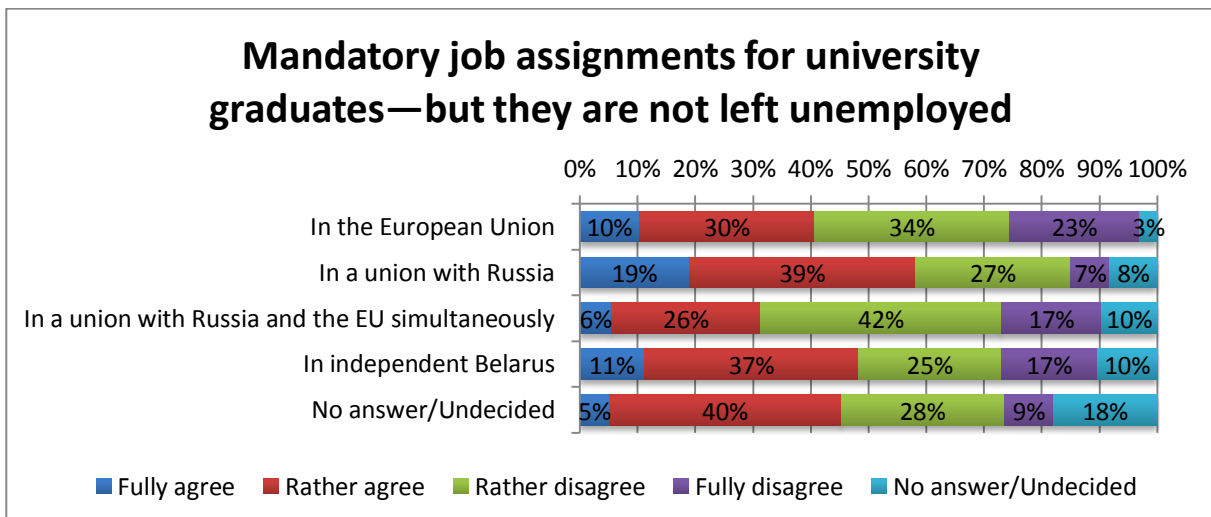
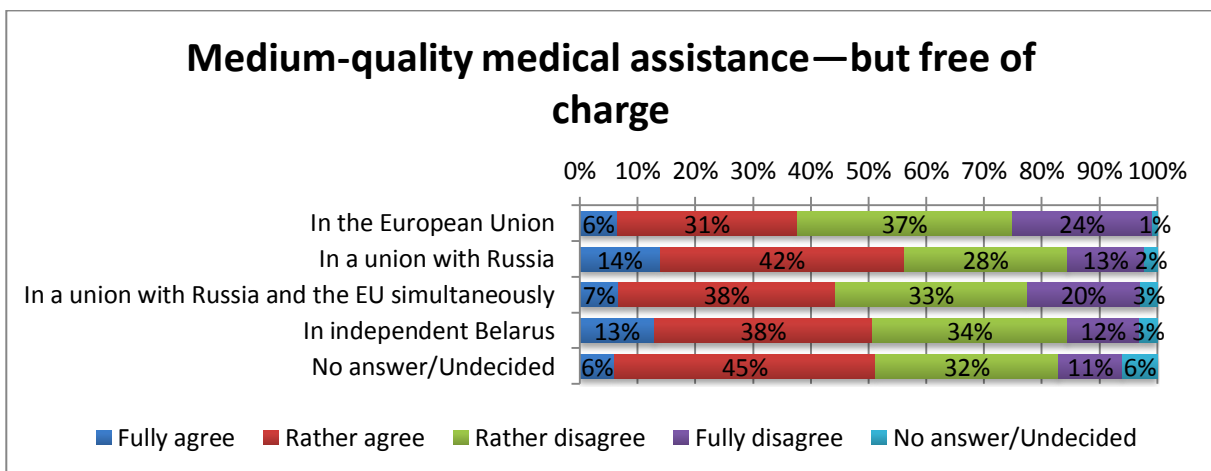
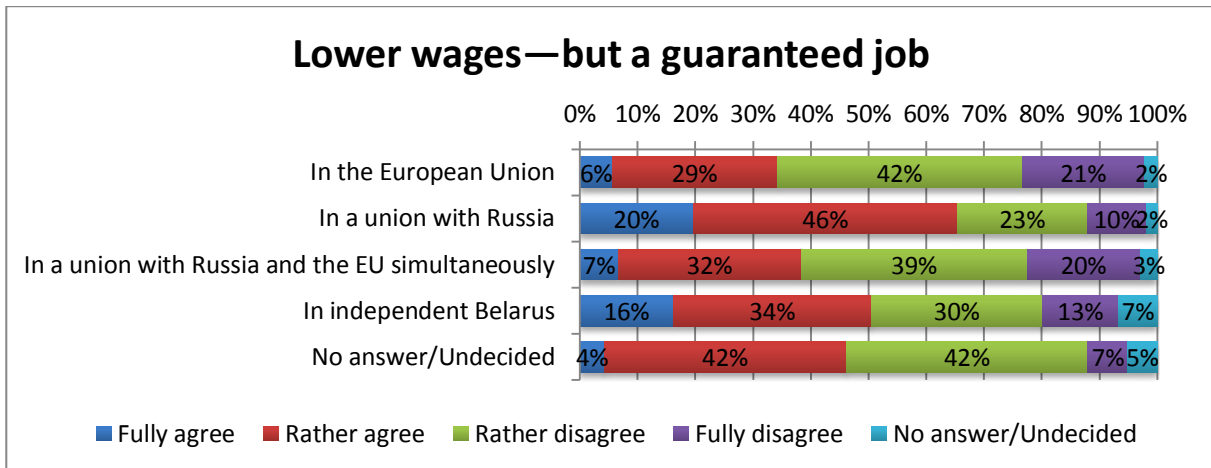
Chart 15.
Distribution of groups with various economic orientations, broken down by the political choice

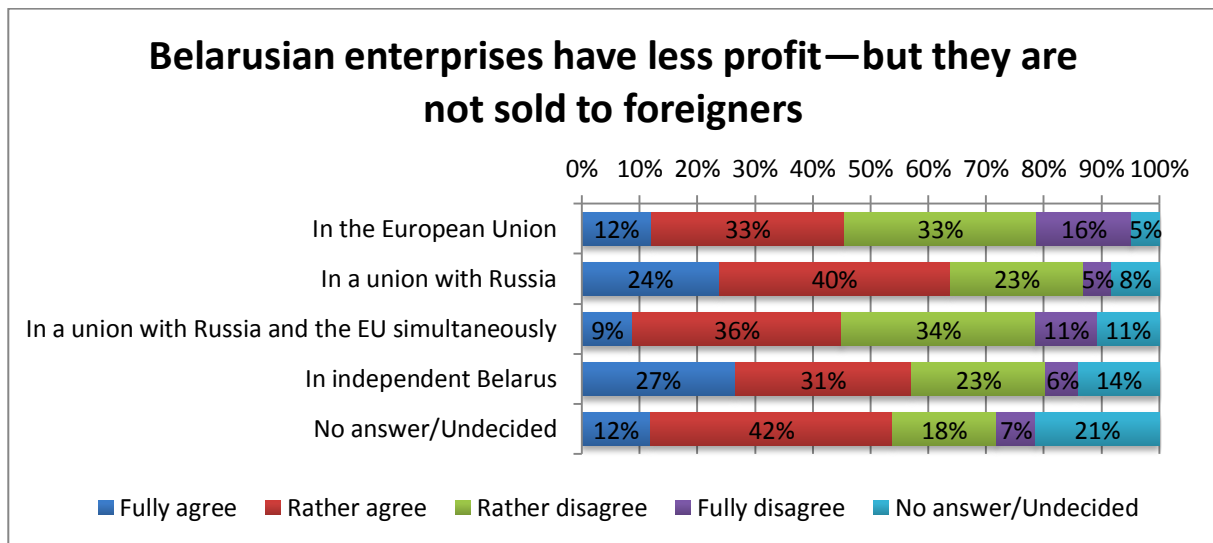
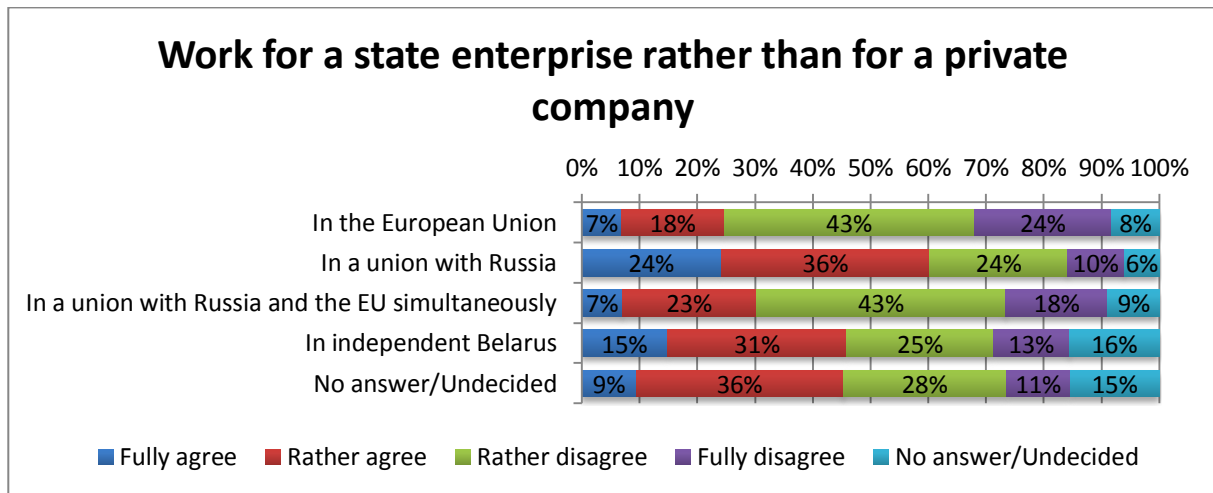


'Independent autonomists' tend to prefer the EU more than other groups; however, the share of those supporting independent Belarus is the largest one in this cluster. Independence is of great importance for 'paternalists' (the choice is supported by 41% of them), but pro-Russian orientations are not infrequent (30%).

Whereas answers to the question about who is responsible for healthcare, education, employment and welfare of the Belarusians are not significantly different among supporters of various geopolitical orientations, their attitudes to the state regulation of the economy are strikingly different.

Charts 16-20.
Economic values, broken down by the geopolitical choice





By their socio-cultural types, the advocates of a simultaneous union with Russia and the EU are similar to the supporters of the 'pure' European choice, whereas the supporters of independent Belarus are closer to those who definitely prefer a union with Russia. This is confirmed by the fact that most of the supporters of a simultaneous union with Russia and the EU would vote 'for' Belarus's accession to the EU if a referendum on the European membership were held in Belarus. Therefore, we can speak about a rough parity of 'liberal' (union with the EU together with Russia or without it) and 'traditional' (union with Russia or completely independent Belarus) options.

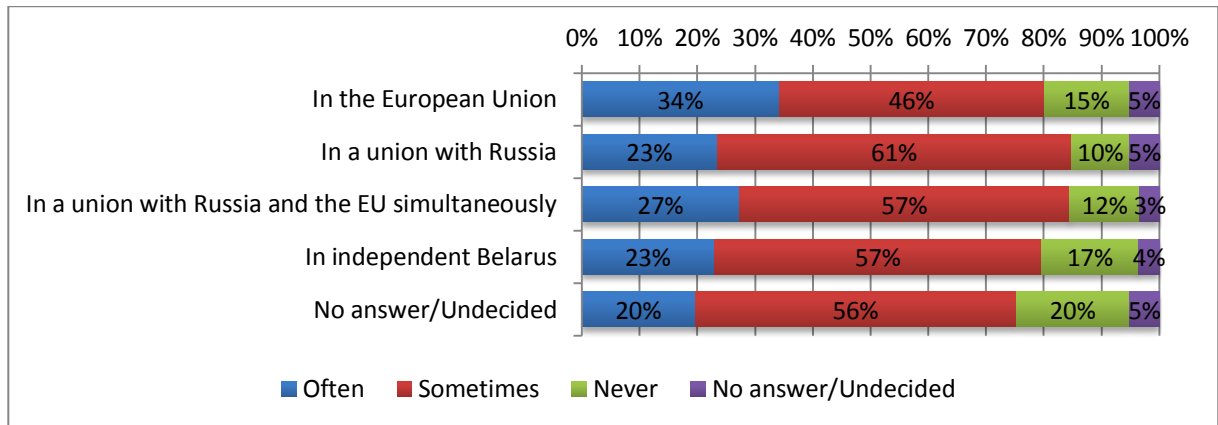
We should note, however, that the supporters of complete independence are not necessarily advocates of the policies pursued by the Belarusian authorities, contrary to what some may think based on this group's obvious paternalistic views. Only 40% of them agree with the statement that the endeavor of the state to ensure civil peace and political stability justifies certain restrictions on democracy and the freedom of speech. At the same time, the share of respondents, who find this idea acceptable, stands at 55% in the group of advocates of a union with Russia.

Interestingly, in the group of 'pure' supporters of the European choice the same 40% would agree to have their rights limited in exchange for stability, which confirms yet again the conclusion about pragmatic, rather than value-oriented, motives of the geopolitical choice made by the Belarusians.

We can make an indirect assumption about to what degree a geopolitical orientation is a conscientious choice based on the data indicating the awareness of the role of the state in the life of a person.

Chart 21.

Answers to the question 'Do you often think about the influence of the state on your life?'



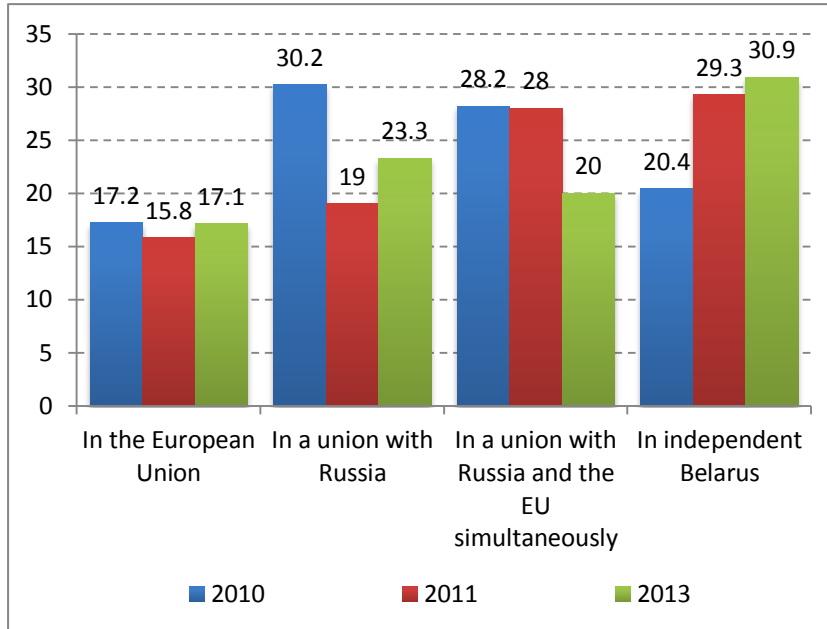
Those preferring the EU tend to think about the influence of the state more frequently than others ('often'—34%), whereas advocates of a union with Russia or independence think about it less often (only 23% said that they thought about the influence of the state on a regular basis).

4. Geopolitical priorities in a time perspective: The crisis changes it all?

The geopolitical preferences of the Belarusians have changed quite substantially during the three years since the previous BISS survey.

Chart 22.

Answers to the question 'Where would you prefer living?', broken down by years



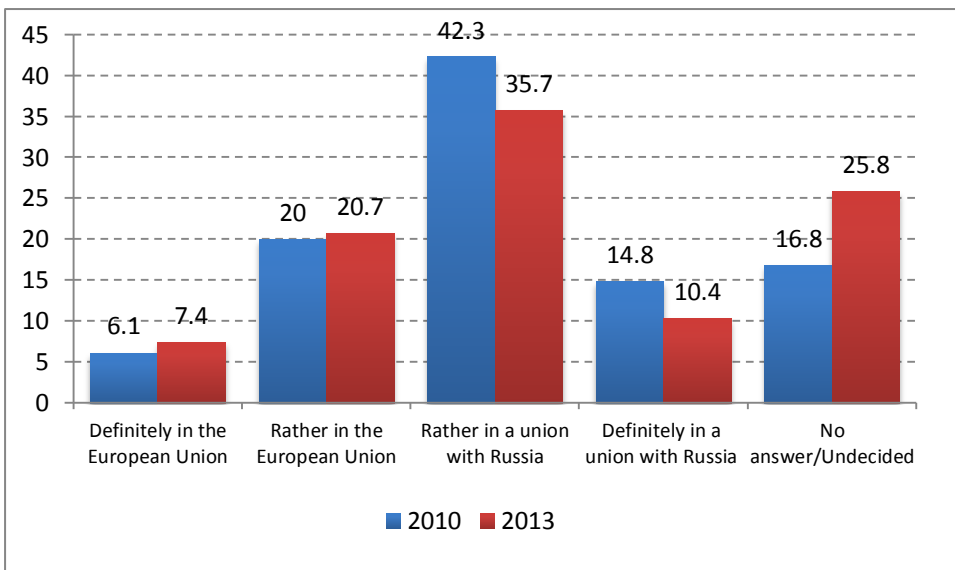
In 2011, the support for a union with Russia fell from 30.2% to 19%; however, in 2013, a slight increase was observed, to 23.3%. At the same time, there has been an obvious trend towards an increase in the proportion of those backing independent Belarus that is not part of any unions, from 20.4% in 2010 to 30.9% in 2013.

The population of Belarus seems to have become increasingly aware that you cannot be part of two unions simultaneously and it is necessary to choose one of the two options.

It is possible that the media and trade wars with Russia in 2010 and the economic crisis of 2011 played their part, eventually resulting in a marked growth in autarchic moods. Further, the ongoing efforts to establish the Customs Union and the Common Economic Area brought about a number of comments by western politicians and officials, who made it clear that there was no way the country could find itself in two unions simultaneously, and Belarus had to make its choice—this may also have influenced the geopolitical choice of the Belarusians. It is also worthy of note that in 2011, the Belarusian population for the first time encountered the unfavorable consequences of its membership in the Customs Union, as import duties on passenger cars soared. This might have been another factor contributing to the drop in the popularity of the eastern vector.

Chart 23.

Answers to the question 'In which union of states would the people of Belarus have a better life?', broken down by years

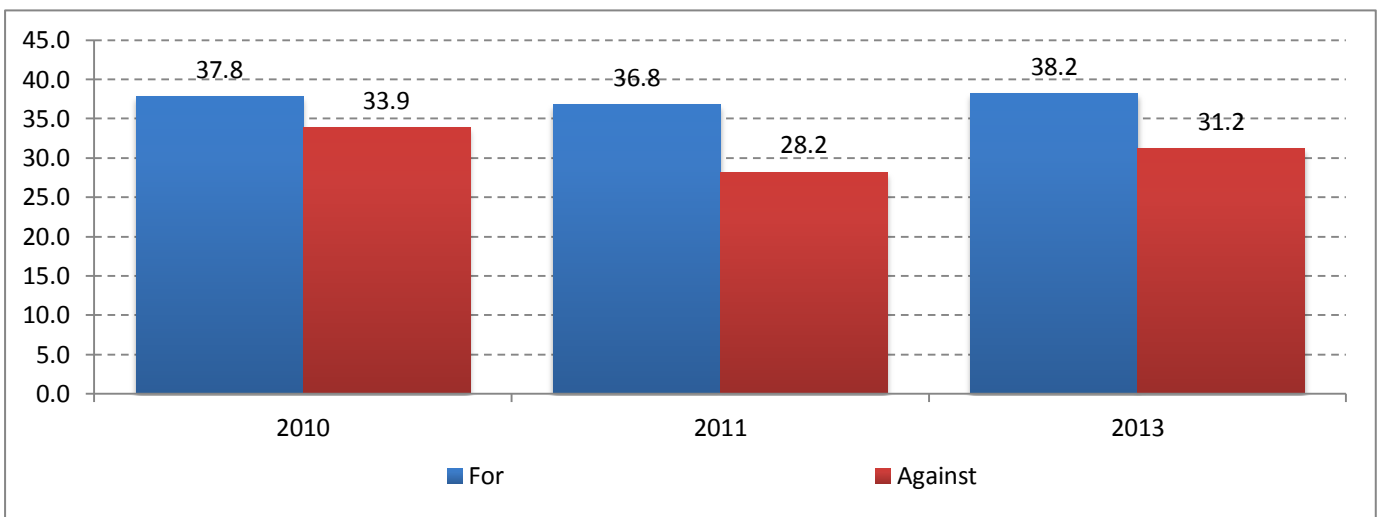


The answers to the question with limited options also show a reduction in the attractiveness of Russia as an integration center. However, this fall is due to the increasing share of undecided Belarusians, from 16.8% to 25.8%, who would probably have selected other options (independence or a union with Russia and the EU simultaneously), had they had this chance, rather than a stronger pro-European attitude (the European choice remains stable).

As we noted above, the attitude of the Belarusians towards the European Union is impressively stable. There could be minor quarterly fluctuations; however, on a larger timescale, the proportions of advocates and opponents of Belarus's accession to the EU remain virtually unchanged.

Chart 24.

Voting at the referendum on the membership in the EU, broken down by years

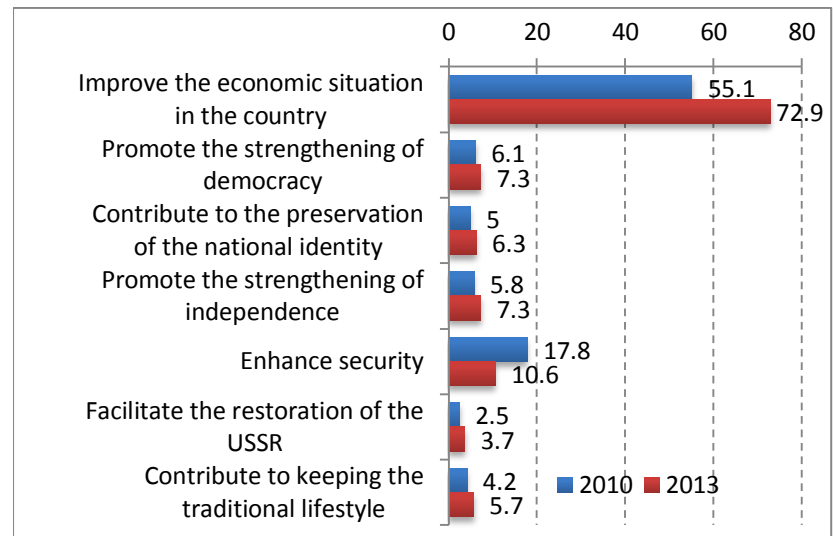


We observe a totally different picture in the change of motives behind the choice of allies, though. Compared with the 2010 survey findings, the share of those who believe that the improvement in Belarus's economic status should be the main factor to select allies significantly increased from 55.1% to 72.9%. Obviously, the economic meltdown of 2011 and the decrease in living standards that followed played their role in this change. Interestingly, the importance of security as a selection factor decreased by 7 points amid the growing importance of economic motives.

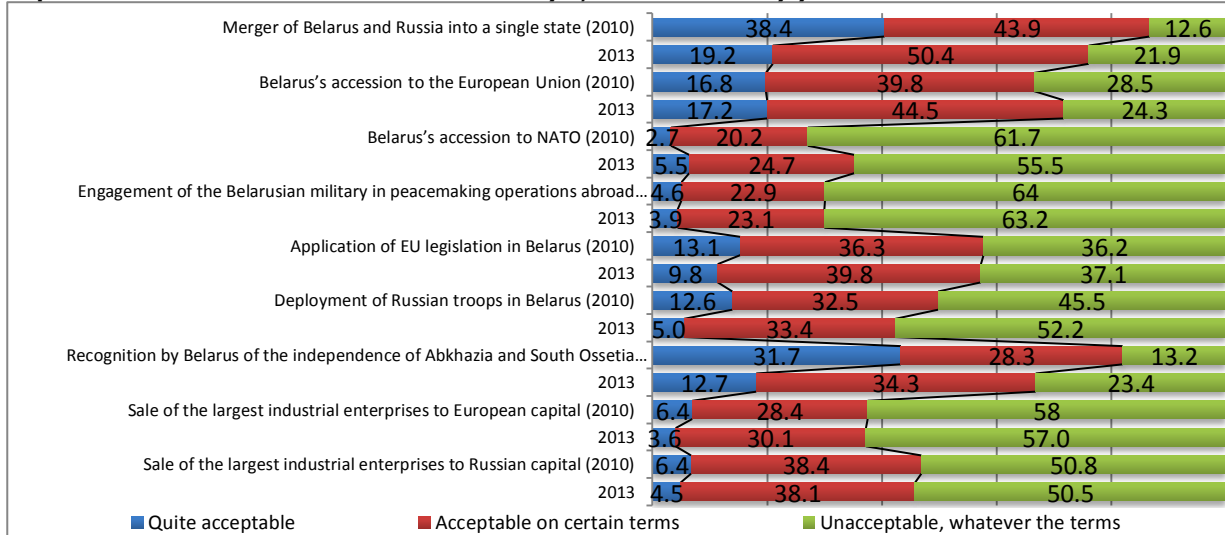
Also quite indicative is the change in the distribution of answers to the question about measures that can be taken to improve the economic situation in the country. Most conspicuous is the reduction in the share of those who said that a merger with Russia into a single state was 'quite acceptable'—it halved from 38.4% to 19.2%, whereas the number of those who would not tolerate this possibility, whatever the terms, almost doubled, from 12.6% to 21.9%. A similar trend can be observed as far as the deployment of Russian troops in Belarus is concerned, albeit on a smaller scale. A most interesting discovery is the sharp change in the attitude of the Belarusians to the possible recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Back in 2010, 31.7% of the respondents found such an option quite acceptable, while by 2013, the proportion fell to 12.7%. Meanwhile, the share of those who believe this move to be absolutely unacceptable rose by 10.2 points, from 13.2% to 23.4%.

Chart 25.

Answers to the question 'What, in your opinion, should be the main factor determining the choice of Belarus's allies? How will this...', broken down by years

**Chart 26.**

Answers to the question 'Do you think the following measures are acceptable provided they are taken to improve the economic situation in the country?', broken down by years



However, the attitude of the Belarusians to the sale of 'family jewels' to Russian capital remained virtually unchanged—in 2010, this possibility was quite acceptable for 6.4% of the respondents, 38.4% found it acceptable under certain terms, and 50.8% of the respondents said that it was unacceptable whatever the terms, whereas in 2013, the shares were at 4.5%, 38.1% and 50.5%, respectively. Therefore, the reduction in the attractiveness of Russia as an integration center did not influence the attitude of the Belarusians to privatization of state property by Russian capital (the same holds for European capital), which suggests that political integration and privatization are perceived as totally different phenomena that are not interconnected.

Nevertheless, the Belarusians appear to show a significant flexibility when it comes to their welfare.

5. The European Union as *aterra incognita*

The survey showed a rather low level of understanding of the institutional interrelation between Belarus and European institutions. While half of the respondents believe that Belarus is entitled to accede to the European Union, 15.7% responded in the affirmative when asked whether Belarus was a member of the Council of Europe. In answers to these questions, the share of those who could not answer or were undecided exceeds 40%. Only 13.7% of the respondents are aware of the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative. Of them, a quarter cannot say whether Belarus is part of EaP or not. Interestingly, during the three years since the previous survey, the share of those aware of the Eastern Partnership program shrank from 21% to 13.7%.

Chart 27.
Answers to the question 'Are you aware of the Eastern Partnership program?', broken down by years

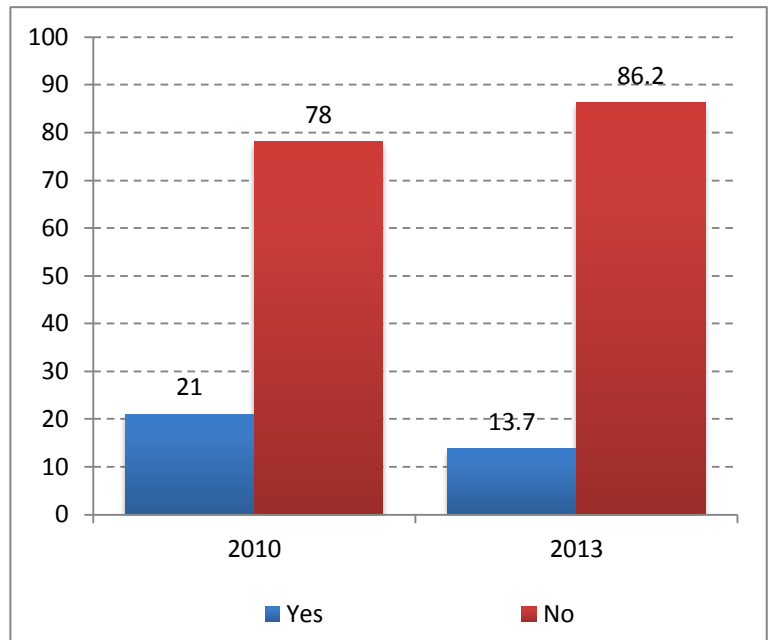


Chart 28.
Answers to the question 'Are you aware of the European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarusian society?'

The situation with the European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarusian society is even less inspiring—only **4.6%** of the respondents are aware of the program.

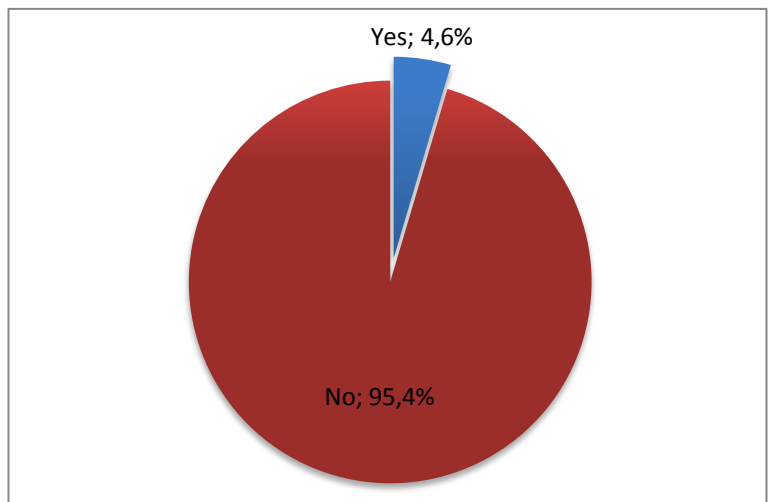
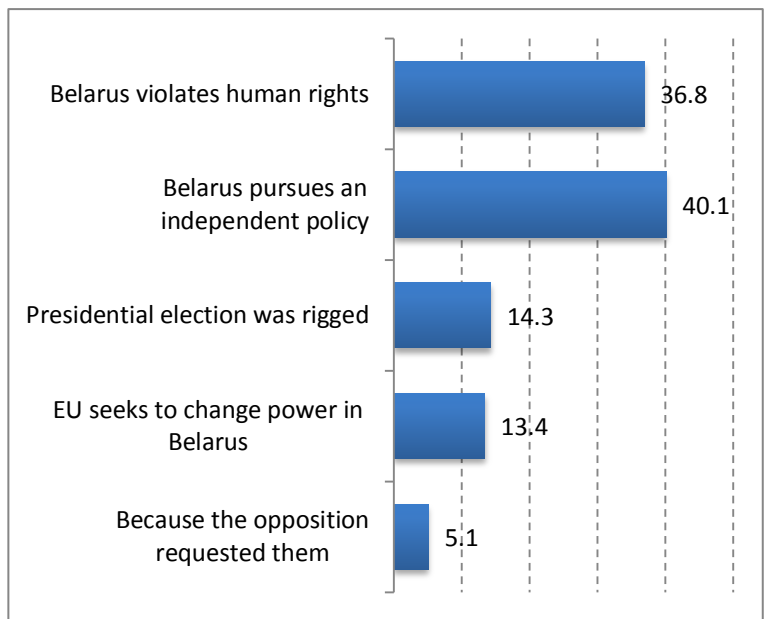


Chart 29.
Answers to the question 'Why do you think the sanctions were imposed?'

Half of the respondents are unaware of the sanctions that the EU slapped on the Belarusian authorities. Due to the lopsided interpretation of these measures, a large proportion of Belarusian society perceived the sanctions as an instrument to put Belarus under pressure. The survey showed that 40.1% of those who are aware of the sanctions tend to think that they were imposed because 'Belarus pursues an independent policy' or because 'the EU seeks a change of power in Belarus' (13.4%). Meanwhile, 36.8% and 14.3% of the respondents believe that the sanctions were imposed in response to violations of human rights and presidential election fraud, respectively. Also importantly, most of those aware of the EU sanctions (58.9%) are certain that they will not influence the policy of the Belarusian authorities.



Therefore, the study confirms the conclusion about the failure of the European Union's communications policy targeting Belarusian society. However, the Belarusians appear to be keenly interested in the EU — 45.6% of the respondents said that they would like to receive more information about the EU.