Commentary
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Belarusian Society Opts for Closer Relations with Russia and the People's Republic of China

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Summary

Today, an overwhelming majority of Belarusians believe Minsk should first prioritize economic relations with Russia followed by relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC), according to a national opinion poll on foreign policy priorities conducted in late 2024. The poll reflects the shifts that have taken place in Belarus's international realities in recent years and appears to be in line with the factors that traditionally shape foreign policy preferences in Belarusian society.

An overwhelming majority of Belarusians have indicated that Minsk should prioritize economic relations with Russia and the further development of the Belarusian-Russian Union State, according to a national opinion poll released in March. The Institute of Sociology at the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus conducted the national opinion poll in late 2024 to examine the foreign policy priorities of Belarusian society. According to the poll, 47 percent of the respondents named relations with Moscow the top foreign policy priority. In contrast, another 34 percent thought cooperation with the People's Republic of China (PRC) should take precedence. While Belarusians' preferences toward prioritizing relations with Russia are hardly surprising, these findings invite an important question about which factors shape foreign policy preferences in Belarusian society.

Public opinion polls have long been a matter of political contestation in Belarus. Opposition circles (as well as many Western diplomats and experts) question the validity of any sociological data presented by state institutions or organizations that hold official licenses to conduct political surveys inside Belarus. The Belarusian

government, however, tends to dismiss the results of public opinion polls undertaken by independent pollsters and foreign researchers, saying that they cannot conduct fully-fledged field studies inside the country.

Lately, the problem of validity has escalated. Government-affiliated research institutions have largely stopped publishing their survey results on open-access platforms, making them unavailable to the general public. Additionally, studies by foreign-funded research groups, which are not formally licensed in Belarus, can only take the form of so-called online panels, where pollsters recurrently send questions to a group of Belarusians via the Internet.

While polling Belarusians online can shed light on certain societal trends, considering several inherent flaws in this method is essential when analysing the state and dynamics of public opinion. For example, the online panels conducted in recent years have excluded those who do not use the Internet (because the polls are exclusively online) as well as dwellers in rural areas of Belarus due to organizational and methodological difficulties. Those who live in rural areas of Belarus make up nearly 21.4 percent of the population. Around 94 percent of the citizens in Belarus use the Internet (96.4 percent in the City of Minsk). This means that the online surveys exclude at least a quarter of the Belarusians. Even though the researchers adjust their online respondent samples to correspond to the structure and main characteristics of the urban population, not covering an entire category of rural residents clearly limits what their data can reveal about the entire country.

The lack of reliable, publicly available sociological data presents a serious problem when assessing the current state of popular opinion across the whole country. It, therefore, requires caution and scrutiny from those who refer to recent Belarusian polls for policy decisions or conducting academic research.

> Irrespective of these current challenges, however, the available past polls, where researchers conducted in-person studies in the country, can provide some insights into the patterns of change and continuity in Belarusian public opinion, especially on foreign policy matters.

Nearly all public opinion polls in Belarus before 2020, when sociological studies became completely politicized, revealed a pattern of societal views on foreign policy that reflected the country's complicated position in between geopolitical canters of gravity (see, for example, the studies by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies in 2010 and 2013 and regular national polls by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies in 1992–2016). The pattern consisted of several rather stable elements.

First, while Russia was mainly seen as Belarus's number one partner, popular views on foreign policy remained largely multi-vectoral. A sizable and often comparable portion of society perceived the European Union and the West in general as Belarus's most attractive partner. In this regard, the Belarusian government's policy of diversifying foreign trade, economic cooperation, and diplomatic engagement beyond Russia and the post-Soviet space resonated across society.

Second, most Belarusians preferred to avoid a binary, either-or geopolitical choice. The majority of society did not perceive Russia and the West as mutually exclusive cooperation partners and integration options.

> About half of the population or more favoured simultaneous integration with both Russia and the European Union, even if it would face numerous problems, or wanted to keep an equal distance from these two centres of geopolitical gravity.

Third, Belarusians tended to prioritize foreign partners on a situational basis, depending on tangible opportunities that cooperation with them could offer. As a result, the state of official relations with Russia and the European Union was normally a good predictor of where public preferences would be shifting in the following months. For instance, during periods of political tensions and diplomatic crises in relations with the West, Belarusian public opinion would grow increasingly critical of the West and less enthusiastic about advancing cooperation with Western countries and institutions (see regular national polls by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies in 1992–2016). On the other hand, when tensions with Russia surfaced, popular moods started to shift toward prioritizing ties with the West.

Economic rationale and overall pragmatism have generally driven the fluctuations of Belarusian public opinion regarding foreign policy preferences, while value-based geopolitical choices were typical of only a small fraction of society. According to researchers Dzianis Melyantsou and Alena Artsiomenka, Belarusians are "too pragmatic a nation". When identifying preferred foreign policy vectors, the majority of society tends to assess present and palpable, not hypothetical and future, economic benefits and opportunities that those vectors can offer. Therefore, even close integration with Russia amounts in the eyes of most Belarusians to an exclusively economic, not political, concept.

The other side of such geopolitical pragmatism appears to be the lack of widespread phobias vis-à-vis both Russia and the West. When either Russia or the West has the ability to offer lucrative cooperation and integration opportunities, the majority of

Belarusian society has traditionally been ready to grasp them without serious consideration of negative past relations. This also explains the recurrent fluctuations in geopolitical preferences observed over long periods of time (see regular national polls by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies in 1992–2016). In the Eastern European context, this looks quite unique and seems to distinguish Belarus from the rest of the region.

> Even as recent years have seen dramatic geopolitical shifts around Belarus, the pattern underpinning Belarusian public opinion on foreign policy in the past appears to remain intact.

After several years of massive Western economic sanctions and the logistical semi-blockade on Belarus's borders with the European Union, it is hardly surprising that today most Belarusians see Russia and the PRC as two key foreign policy partners and want to continue advancing integration and cooperation with them. These views simply reflect the existing reality on the ground where collaboration and even people-to-people contacts with the West are becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible. As a result, fewer and fewer Belarusians see any opportunities available to them in the West, whereas Russia and the PRC have become Belarus's main economic partners. Cooperation with them has significantly intensified in recent years as Minsk attempts to compensate for the damage by Western sanctions and, arguably, many Belarusians tend to associate their relatively stable wellbeing with this cooperation.

In line with the deeply engrained pattern of change and continuity in public opinion, the situation is unlikely to return to the *status quo ante* so long as the only messaging from the West is via sanctions and political pressure. The situation, however, may change if the Belarusian people recognize present and palpable benefits and opportunities to cooperate with Western counterparts not less so than with Russia and the PRC.

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