



European Union reflected in public opinion: how to improve the image of European policies in Belarus?

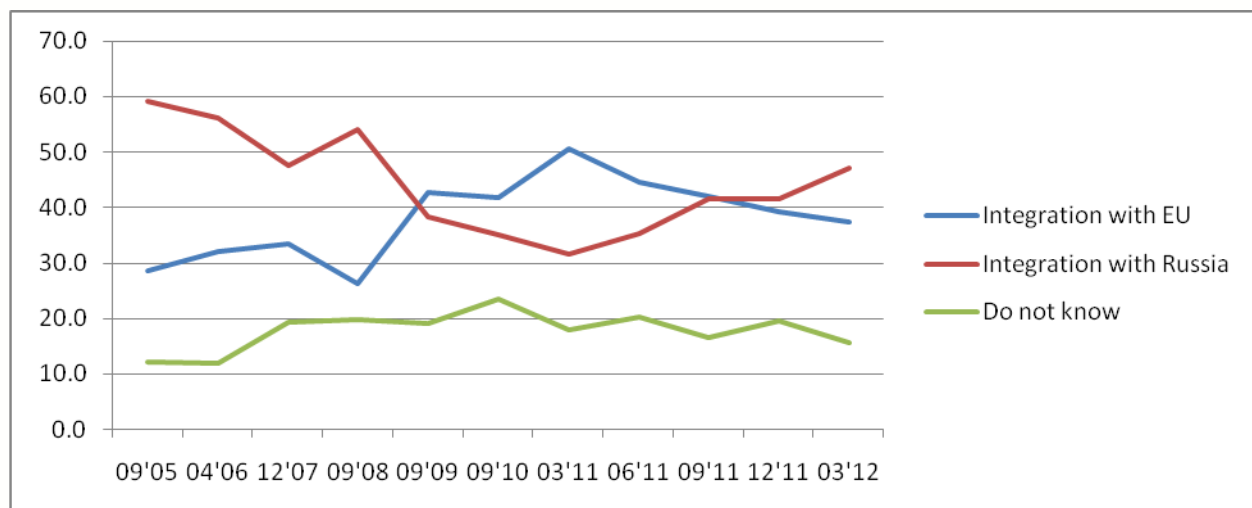
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EU political actions and initiatives towards Belarus provoke reaction not only of official authorities, of political opposition and civil society, but ordinary citizens react too. How does Belarusian population perceive and evaluate EU decisions on restrictive measures or calls of European politicians to cancel Ice Hockey Championship in 2014? Do Belarusian people think repressions against political opposition are justified? How has changed geopolitical orientation of Belarusians? Last mass public opinion poll performed by IISEPS answers these questions (national-wide poll, March 2-12, 2012, 1509 were interviewed, coverage error not more than 0.03)¹.

1. Geopolitical orientation

Dynamics of answer to question: “If you should choose between union with Russia and accession to the EU, what would you select?”

Respond option	09'05	04'06	12'07	09'08	09'09	09'10	03'11	06'11	09'11	12'11	03'12
Integration with EU	28,6	31,9	33,3	26,2	42,7	41,7	50,5	44,5	42,0	39,1	37,3
Integration with Russia	59,2	56,1	47,5	54,0	38,3	34,9	31,5	35,3	41,5	41,4	47,0
Do not know	12,2	12,0	19,2	19,8	19,0	23,4	18,0	20,2	16,5	19,5	15,7



¹ IISEPS: WIND FROM THE EAST: <http://www.iiseps.org/epress8.html>

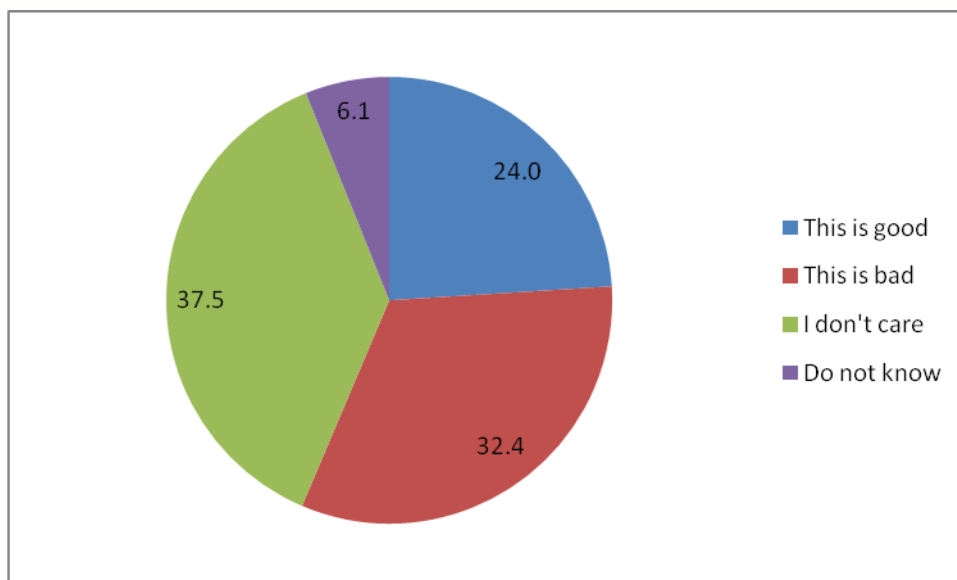


For long period of time geopolitical preferences of Belarusians has stayed undefined. General long-term trends are increasing pro-European mood and decreasing pro-Russian one. Significant “break-points” in September 2008 when pro-European mood started to grow and in March 2012 when it started to decline show the dependence of public opinion on dominating theme in mass-media. During the period from the re-establishment of cooperation between Belarus and EU in 2008 till December 2010 number of news about Belarus-EU relations was not only dominating compared to news about Russia, but they also had positive message. At the same time news about Russia had rather negative tone. Since the beginning of 2011 topic of Belarus-EU relations has been gradually leaving front pages, it has been losing dynamics and news have been mostly focused on negative aspects of these relations and on conflicts. Volume of news about Russia, inversely, has been increasing and stressing positive impact of Russia's help during economic crisis of 2011 and reestablishment of its friendly relations with Belarus.

2. Attitude towards current EU policy: restrictive measures

Answers to the question “EU and USA increase sanctions concerning Belarusian authorities, now visa-ban measures will be applied to more than 300 Belarusian civil servants, judges etc leded by A. Lukashenka, who are considered responsible for violations of democracy and human rights. Some think it is good, other that it is bad. What is your opinion?”

Respond option	%
This is good	24,0
This is bad	32,4
I don't care	37,5
Do not know	6,1



There are more Belarusians who have negative attitude towards EU policy of restrictive measured (32,4%) is higher than those who consider it as a positive step (24,0%). However majority of Belarusian do not care about EU sanctions (37,5%). It means the increase potential both for supporters and opponents of restrictions. Positive

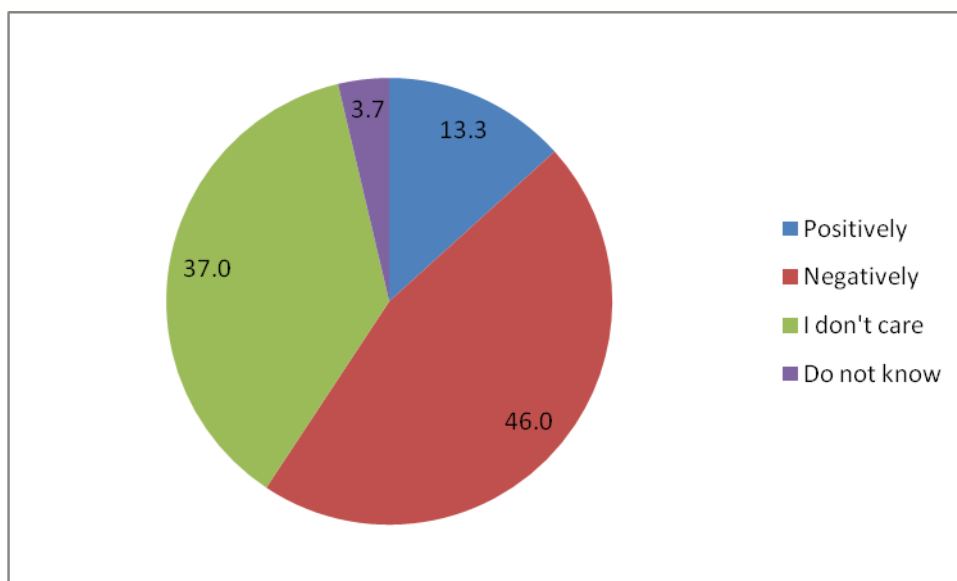


appreciation of EU policy towards Belarus can grow as far as 44,5% think that reasons for establishment of sanctions (illegal condemnations after manifestations of December 19, 2010) are justified, and 17,8% think that it is necessary to comply with EU conditions (ref. Point 4). Consequently it is possible to achieve more positive perception by Belarusian people of EU policy towards Belarus by performing clarification campaign in mass-media on the link between sanctions and illegal persecutions of political opponents to the authorities.

3. Attitude towards current EU policy: Ice Hockey Championship

Answers to question “Some politicians in Belarus and in the West call to cancel Ice Hockey Championship in Belarus in 2014, if violations of human rights would remain by this time. What is your attitude to this proposal?”

Respond option	%
Positively	13,3
Negatively	46,0
I don't care	37,0
Do not know	3,7



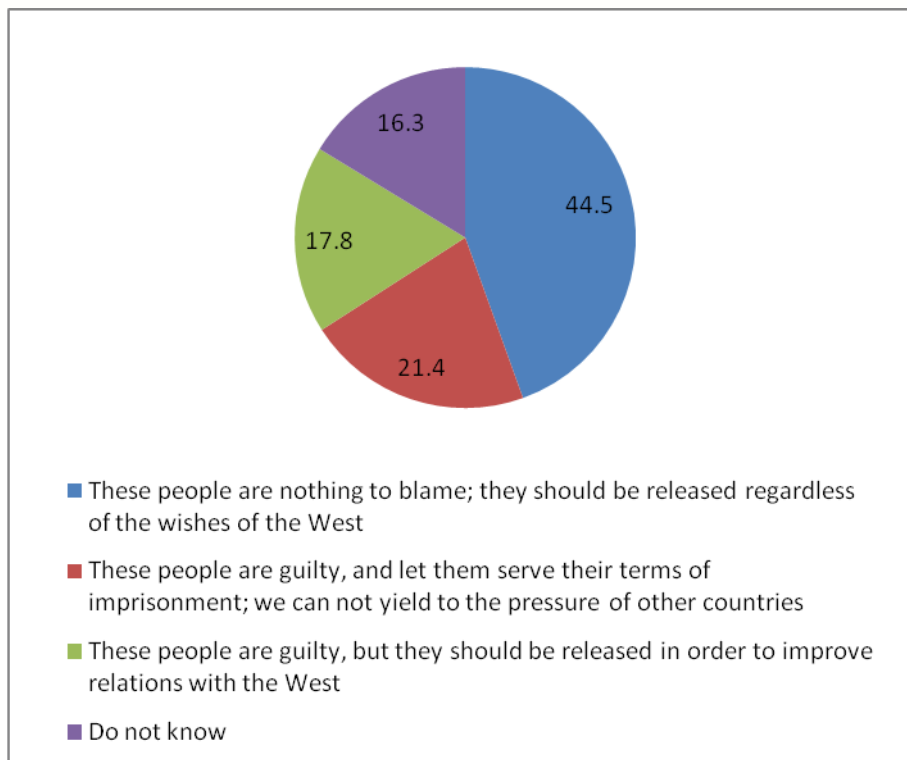
The proposal to not to hold Ice Hockey Championship in Belarus in 2014 meets quite negative attitude of majority of respondents (46,0%). This question is sensitive for sport fans who do not understand the sense of this step. It brings into focus the necessity of additional clarification of motivation on European politicians who claim for this measure. Support of cancellation of the Championship by political opposition and civil society will have negative impact on their image among population who do to not support this step. In this situation positive strategy for democratic and pro-European forced could be declaration of disagreement with the cancellation, but performance of active clarification of reasons and motivation of such European actions.



4. Attitude towards current EU policy: perception of justification of conditions to release political prisoners

Answers to the question: “Western countries strive for Belarusian authorities release people condemned for participation in manifestation after elections in 2010. There are different opinions about it. Which one do you support?”

Respond option	%
These people are nothing to blame; they should be released regardless of the wishes of the West	44,5
These people are guilty, and let them serve their terms of imprisonment; we cannot yield to the pressure of other countries	21,4
These people are guilty, but they should be released in order to improve relations with the West	17,8
Do not know	16,3



Majority of Belarusians share the EU position on necessity to release political prisoners (63,2%), for the reason both of their innocence (44,5%) and of the necessity to improve relations with the West (17,8%). It creates quite good conditions for informational campaign aiming at argument-based clarification of the sense of EU policy towards Belarus. Large-scale information campaign could contribute to increase of support by Belarusians for political steps of the EU, increase of pro-European mood and support pro-European civil society and political forces in Belarus.

Conclusions

1. **Support for current European policy towards Belarus among Belarusians is dramatically low, pro-European orientation is less present than pro-Russian one.**
2. **Civil society and political forces in Belarus cannot publicly express their support for restrictive measures of the EU by the risk of losing confidence of ordinary people and electors.**
3. **Quite high dependence of mass public opinion on mass-media creates the opportunity to perform information campaigns which fore-stall or/and accompany EU political decisions in the order to improve general image of the EU in public opinion.**
4. **There is big potential for increasing positive perception of EU policies, including policy of restrictive measures, because majority of Belarusians share general basis of this policy (necessity to release political prisoners).**
5. **Synchronization of strategies of information and clarification for Belarusian people of European policy meaning by democratic opposition, civil society and independent media with EU political strategies will foster increasing efficiency of European policies towards Belarus.**