

REFORM: GEOPOLITICS AND REFORMS: WHO DO REFORMERS HAVE TO RELY ON?

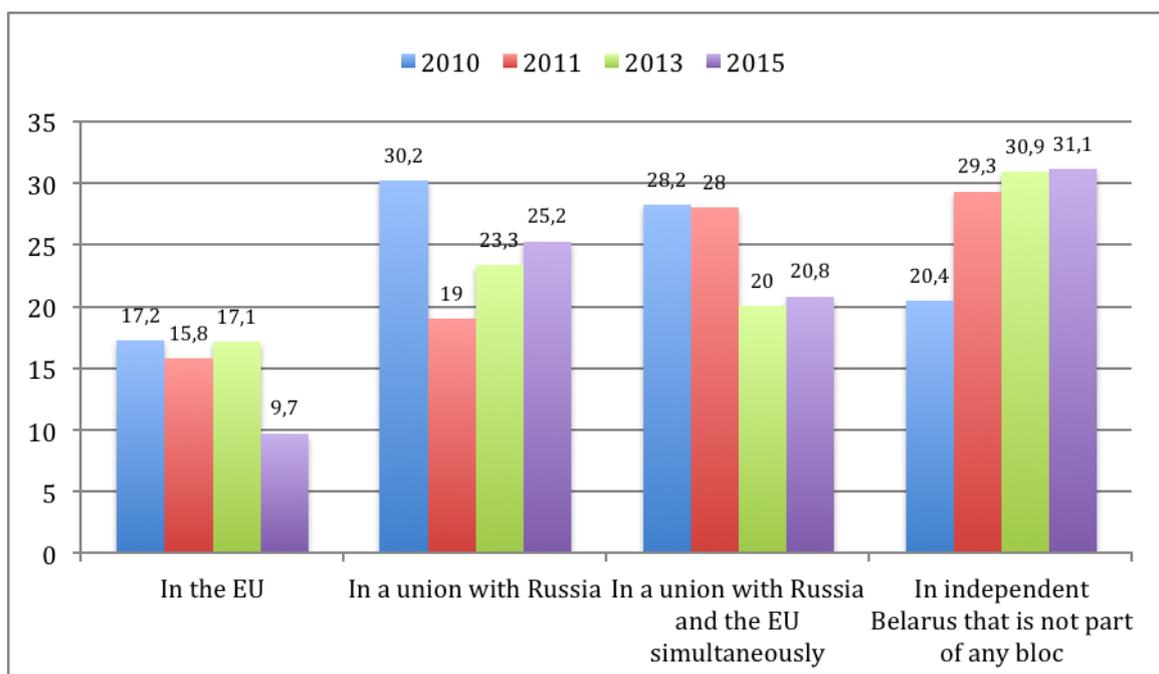
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Amid economic challenges and crisis in Ukraine, the Belarusians keep showing consistent isolationist sentiment.

Since 2010, BISS has been asking Belarusian citizens about their foreign policy preferences, offering them four options: EU membership, a union with Russia, simultaneous integration with the EU and Russia, and completely independent Belarus outside of any blocs. Whereas previous trends concerning Russia, independent Belarus and simultaneous membership in the two blocs have remained, the support for integration with the European Union has markedly decreased — from 17.1% in 2013 to 9.7% in 2015), which must be associated with the information campaign in the Russian media and lack of progress in the Belarus–EU relationship.

Interestingly, most of those who have been disappointed with the European choice have refrained from supporting the remaining alternatives, but joined the “no answer/undecided” group. This suggests that as soon as the pace of the information campaign slackens and the relationship with Brussels normalizes, the number of “pro-Europeans” will rebound to 15%–17%.

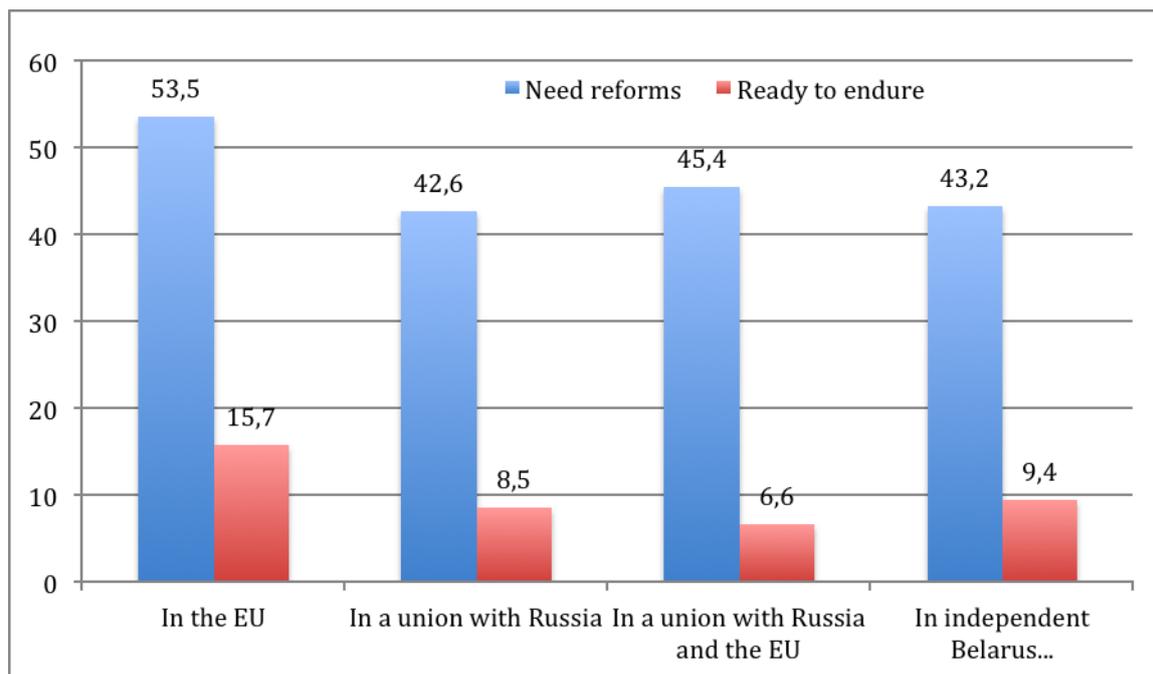
Diagram 1. In which union do the Belarusians wish to live?¹



¹ Changes in answers to the question “You would prefer living...” broken down by years.

In our [2013 survey](#) we drew the conclusion that complete independence is mostly the choice of “paternalists” (who primarily rely on the state and call for additional state regulation)—41% of them choose this option, whereas in the group of “independent autonomists” only 28% vote for “isolationism.” This pattern is confirmed by the findings of this year’s survey, but based upon the attitude to reforms in the country. The share of “isolationists” who unequivocally support reforms is 10% smaller than the proportion of reform-oriented “pro-Europeans.” “Isolationists” are also less willing to put up with the negative consequences of transformations—they appear to share this attitude with the group that supports a union with Russia.

Diagram 2. Who needs reforms and who is ready to endure their consequences?²



“Pro-Europeans,” for their part, appear to be more oriented towards reforms than the general population and are more willing to deal with the possible negative effects of reforms, meaning that they are more motivated and ready to bear responsibility for their choice. The higher motivation of this group can be attributed to the general reduction in pro-European sentiment, which bared the “core” of the most resilient and faithful supporters of the European choice and European values.

The response of the public opinion to economic challenges in the country demonstrates another curious phenomenon: when asked about reasons for the Belarusians to endure the negative effects of reforms, the significance of “prospects of high living standards for children in the future”, “high living standard for myself” and “strong, independent, and self-sufficient Belarus” has decreased, whereas the importance of “successful Eurasian integration” and “integration with the European Union” remains (and has even increased a bit). This is also evidence that there are consistent pro-Russian and pro-European groups in Belarusian society, whose choice does not depend on changes in the economic environment. Anyway, these groups are quite small.

² The graph is built upon the answers “yes” to the question “Do you think Belarus requires reforms?” and the answers “yes” to the question “Structural economic reforms often result in a reduction in living standards, growth of unemployment, inflation, and reduction in social support. Are you ready to endure the negative consequences of reforms for the sake of quality improvements in living standards five to seven years after the reforms?”

Another conclusion that we can draw is that although support for independent Belarus beyond any blocs remains, this support tends to decrease in adverse economic conditions. This is a result of the lack of an integral ideological concept of "independent Belarus," which encourages people to seek support in competing yet more clearly formulated geopolitical projects.

On 28–29 May, Minsk will play host to the international conference "Minsk after Riga: a Forum on Reforms, or How Can Belarus Adapt and Develop in the New Regional Contexts?" The organizers of the conference are BISS and the Embassy of the Latvian Republic in Belarus. The participants will discuss the regional economic crisis and threats to the Belarusian model; prospects of cooperation with the EU and international institutions, as well as the Eurasian Economic Union and Russia; development prospects of Belarus in the context of the conflict in Ukraine and new challenges to the country's security; and prospects of reforms in Belarus, including the presentation of BISS's study on reforms, as well as the findings of the expert groups of the REFORUM project.