

Neighborhood with Russia: Implications for Regional Differentiation of Public Opinion in Belarus

Sociological and Spatial Analysis

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Abstract

The perception of neighboring states is one of the main focus areas in sociology and political science. However, the issue of regional differentiation of public opinion often remains outside of sociological and political research. This article aims to determine regional differences in the perception of Russia by Belarusians. The study uses the results of a survey conducted by the authors in Belarus following the November 2019 parliamentary election, and the data received from a spatial analysis of the last four electoral cycles in Belarus. The authors presumed that there were no consistent lines of regional differentiation in the public opinion in Belarus, with the exception of differences in residents' perception of the center (the capital) and peripheral regions. This main assumption was divided into ten working hypotheses, and the attitude of Belarusians towards Russia as its closest neighbor was chosen as a variable in order to determine the degree of Russia's influence on the Belarusian political agenda as perceived by Belarusians, their attitude towards different types of institutional relations between the two states, and to assess how strong social ties between people living in Belarus and Russia are. A comprehensive analysis of the obtained data has proven that there is no regional cleavage in Belarusian society concerning Russia, except for expected differences in the attitude of Minsk residents and those living in other regions. Belarusians' electoral behavior is influenced not by the region they live in but by their stable social practices such as trips to Russia, use of Russian media as a source of information, and of the "Russia" theme in the election campaign debates.

Keywords: Belarus, Russia, territorial differences, electoral process, social survey, spatial analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of territorial differentiation in public opinion often remain outside of sociological research. Moreover, if such conclusions are made, they do not use mathematical methods of spatial analysis, which makes it possible, in particular, to assess the effect of neighborhood with other states on the mood of a country's residents. In this work, we used methods of sociological and spatial analysis in parallel with an analysis of Belarusians' perception of Russia as a neighboring state,

which allowed us to make a comprehensive assessment of territorial differentiation in Belarus.

Belarus was chosen as one of the objects of research. Some hypotheses, often found in public space but unverified by surveys, claim that there are persistent regional patterns in the behavior of Belarusian residents: voting in the east of the country differs from behavior in western regions, etc. However, scarce electoral statistics and sociological data for Belarus do not make it possible to make a comprehensive assessment of whether such faults really exist in public opinion.

So the purpose of the study was to test the hypothesis that there is a stable territorial differentiation of public opinion in Belarus. The authors presumed that there were no consistent lines of regional differentiation in the public opinion in Belarus, with the exception of differences in residents' perception of the center (the capital) and peripheral regions. The attitude of Belarusians towards Russia as its closest neighbor was chosen as a variable in order to determine the degree of Russia's influence on the Belarusian political agenda, their attitude towards different types of institutional relations between the two states, and to assess how strong social ties between people living in Belarus and Russia are. To test the hypothesis, a sociological analysis of a mass telephone survey conducted by the authors and a spatial electoral analysis of the results of elections to the lower house of the country's parliament during the past four electoral cycles were used.

In Russia, at different times many scientists have investigated various aspects of Russian-Belarusian relations. A.P. Katrovsky has studied the development of border-lying Russian regions, transport connectivity of the states, the Russian-Belarusian cross-border region and its asymmetric development, and the inter-capital concept (Katrovsky, 2015, p.148-158; Katrovsky and Sergutina, 2010, pp. 124–129; Katrovsky and Ridevsky, 2013, pp.128-136). The Russian-Belarusian border area as well as economic cooperation and integration of neighboring regions have been explored by researchers from the Institute of Geography of the Russian Academy of Sciences, led by S.S. Artobolevsky (Artobolevsky et al., 2006, p.152-163) and Professor V.A. Kolosov (Kolosov et al., 2014, pp. 32-46). Experts from the Institute of Economics of

the Russian Academy of Sciences, under the supervision of Professor L.B. Vardomsky, have examined economic aspects of regionalization and integration (Vardomsky et.al., 2014, pp. 48-159).

Professor A.G. Manakov from Pskov State University (Manakov, 2015, p.36-49; Manakov, 2016, pp. 30-36) studies the transformation of ethnic processes and the population in the post-Soviet space and the post-Soviet border areas, as well as their peripheral status. Also worth noting are works by K.A. Morachevskaya from St. Petersburg University (institutional aspects of cross-border cooperation, peripheral status of border territories) (Morachevskaya, 2016, pr. 37-44) and researchers from the Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine Sector of the Center for Post-Soviet Studies of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO) named after Yevgeny Primakov.

Associate Professor K.E. Koktysh (MGIMO) focuses on Belarusian identity (Koktysh, 2006, p.105-115). Associate Professor A.I. Suzdaltsev (HSE) analyzes problems in Russian-Belarusian relations, rightfully observing that “no real and fruitful allied relations between the two countries have been built by the end of the second decade of the new century” (Suzdaltsev, 2020, p.56-67), and that “the Union Treaty... is not fulfilled and remains just a declaration” (Suzdaltsev, 2019, p.120). At the same time, one cannot but agree with V.A. Shamakhov and N.M. Mezhevich, who argue that “Russia and Belarus have created a model of integration interaction which is unique in both quality and duration” (Shamakhov and Mezhevich, 2019, p.12).

Among Belarusian scientists actively studying their fellow citizens' attitude towards Russia, we should name experts of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, headed by renowned sociologist and political scientist I.V. Kotlyarov, who is one of the founders of political sociology in Belarus. In particular, S.V. Khamutovskaya examines changes in the electoral behavior of Belarusians and electoral processes in the country (Khamutovskaya, 2012, pp. 22-27; Khamutovskaya, 2013, pp.154-161; Khamutovskaya, 2018, pp. 55-60), N.A. Sosnovskaya's main object of research is the socio-cultural aspects of people's life and how they perceive the state

(Sosnovskaya, 2013, p.241-247), and A.V. Gavrikova studies the sociological dimension of political processes in Belarus (Gavrikov, 2017, p.444-449).

The Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences has for many years (since 1991) been regularly conducting various studies, which monitor, among other things, the public opinion of Belarusians about relations between the two countries (Kotlyarov, 2012, pp. 6-11; Kotlyarov, 2013, p.107-119; Kotlyarov, 2017, pp.6-17).

V.V. Shimov (Department of Political Science, Belarusian State University) is interested in issues of Belarusian identity (Shimov, 2015, p.67-74), A.M. Belsky conducts sociological research studying various spheres of life in Belarusian society (Belsky, 2018, p.62-69), D.G. Rotman, A.V. Postavlovsky and several other experts from the same university are engaged in long-term research of information space in Belarus. Sociological surveys are also systematically carried out in the country by the Warsaw-based Belarusian Analytical Workshop under the leadership of A.P. Vardomatsky. In addition, comprehensive sociological research is conducted jointly by Belarusian State Economic University (Minsk) and the Center for the Study of Integration Prospects (Moscow) (Laptenok et al., 2018).

Despite the ample experience of sociological analysis in Belarus, issues of territorial differentiation have rarely been addressed by researchers. Let us note the most interesting works in this regard done by experts from Belarusian State Economic University. I.V. Lashuk has repeatedly addressed the issues of socio-cultural differentiation in Belarusian society, including the territorial aspect, as well as regional differences “regarding the significance... of instrumental value factors” (Lashuk, 2013, p.115). Her work emphasizes the following differences: “vocational and family values are most popular in the Brest region; moral and legal issues take priority in the Gomel region; self-serving beliefs prevail in the Grodno region; and personal qualities rank the highest in Minsk. Demand for all resources is quite low in the Mogilev and Minsk regions. It should be recalled that unlike other regions these ones have the lowest consumption level” (Lashuk, 2013, p.115). Her university colleague N.N. Sechko studies the public opinion

of Belarusian citizens in terms of their attitude towards Russian-Belarusian integration (Sechko, 2017, p.82-89).

G.V. Ridevsky from the Mogilev Regional Institute for the Development of Education delves into various types of center-periphery processes and their components: “processes of metropolization, regionopolization and locopolization” in Belarus (Ridevsky, 2013a, p.95) and territorial differentiation of various socio-economic phenomena (Ridevsky, 2013b, p.26-37), and fruitfully cooperates with Russian and Belarusian scientists (Katrovsky et al., 2016, pp.63-70). Specialists from Vitebsk State Technological University focus on the regional differentiation of the economic development of Belarus (Prokofyeva and Dombrovskaya, 2018, p.61-66).

A general review of sociological studies exploring the electoral behavior of Belarusians suggests that issues of territorial differentiation largely remain of peripheral importance for sociologists. Also, spatial electoral analysis methods have never been used for such tasks. However, statements about territorial differentiation can often be found in public space. This work aims to fill this research gap and check the reliability of assumptions put forward in the non-academic sphere.

SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY

In November 2019, Belarus elected its new House of Representatives. Within a week of the elections, a telephone sociological survey was conducted among Belarusians at the request of the Center for Spatial Analysis in International Relations of the MGIMO Institute of International Studies in order to find out their attitude towards Russia (in particular, Russia’s potential informal influence on their choice).

As part of the survey, more than 7,000 telephone calls were made and 500 completed questionnaires were obtained with a controlled equal sample for all regions of the country and the sex-age structure, which testifies to the high representativity of the obtained data.

For the purpose of the survey, the following control variables were selected: age, sex, nationality, and place of residence of respondents. Experts deliberately showed no interest in variables that could reflect the socio-economic status of interviewees, namely income, occupation,

marital status, etc. The reason was, firstly, the survey format itself: it is difficult to ask many questions in a telephone call; and secondly, the study focused on the attitude of respondents towards Russia, social and domestic ties with it, and its potential informal influence on the political life in Belarus. The survey used a simple random sampling method, and all questions were closed.

Since the researchers sought primarily to get equal sampling by region, and not by sex, age or ethnic background, the number of respondents in the above categories differed. So the obtained data were converted for uniform distribution. Further calculations were made by specific weight in each group. The study identified three standard age groups: the “younger” group (respondents under 35 years of age); the “middle” group (from 35 to 55 years old), and the “older” group (people over the age of 55, that is, retirement and pre-retirement age (as of January 1, 2020, the retirement age in Belarus was 57 years for women and 62 years for men)).

As for distribution by gender, as a whole the picture is more or less even: 275 women out of 500 (55%), which corresponds to the official Belarusian data regarding the men (46.5%) to women (53.49%, according to the 2009 census) ratio.¹ There is a slight imbalance in regions. Among the respondents, women made up 59.7% in the Brest region; 63.4% in the Vitebsk region; 46.5% in the Gomel region; 56.3% in the Grodno region; 41.7% in Minsk; 56.9% in the Minsk region; and 60.6% in the Mogilev region.

ANALYSIS OF SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY RESULTS

When analyzing the obtained data, the authors decided to test ten working hypotheses.

Hypothesis One (“age”—the relationship between pro-Russian sentiments and age): the older generation of Belarusians is more positive about the Russian Federation and advocates allied relations between the two states.

¹ 2009 census data released by the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus: <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/respondent/1.1-0.pdf> (July 5, 2020)

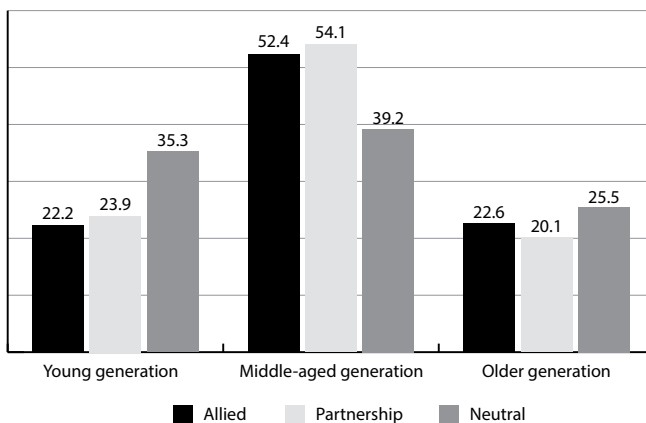
During the questioning, the respondents were asked to comment on the most acceptable format of relations with Russia: allied, partnership, neutral, and even hostile. One in ten respondents across the country spoke in favor of a neutral position of Belarus towards Russia. A quarter of those were people from the older age group, which is only 11.8% of all “elderly” respondents. Almost a third of those who want to have neutral relations with Russia are younger people, and they make up 15% of this age group.

Almost 32% of all respondents spoke in favor of a partnership and equal relations between the two states. Of these, one in five is over 55 years of age, which is 29.1% of the older age category. At the same time, 31.7% of all young people among respondents spoke for a partnership between Belarus and Russia.

More than half of all interviewees—288 people—(57.6%) advocated allied relations, which have been on the interstate political agenda for several years. The share of “elderly” respondents was 22.6%, which is more than half (59.1%) of all old age respondents. Persons under 35 years of age accounted for 53%, or 22.2% of all respondents in this age category.

Half of respondents who want to see Belarus and Russia as a single state are middle-aged people—52.4%, which is 58.3% of all people in the middle age group (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. The proportion of each age group in the answers of those who advocate various formats of relations with Russia.



So, the hypothesis that the older generation is more susceptible to nostalgia and that the older a person the more he/she is in favor of a single state has not proved correct. Moreover, the number of older and younger respondents who answered this question is almost identical. As for the sex composition, the votes are divided approximately equally on all counts: allied, partnership and neutral relations between Belarus and Russia (with slightly more women advocating allied relations).

Hypothesis Two (“national”): Belarusians are less pro-Russia-minded than Russians (they chose allied relations between the two states less often).

Of the 500 respondents asked about their nationality, 388 people identified themselves as Belarusians, 72 as Russians, 40 as representatives of other nationalities (primarily as Poles (mainly living in the Grodno region) and Ukrainians). In this opinion poll, Belarusians turned out to be a smaller group than official state statistical reports present. The study involved 77.6% of Belarusians (83.7% live in the country, according to the 2009 census), 14.4% of Russians (8.26% live in the country, according to the same census), 2.8% of Poles (3.1% in Belarus), and 2.4% of Ukrainians (1.7% in the country as a whole).²

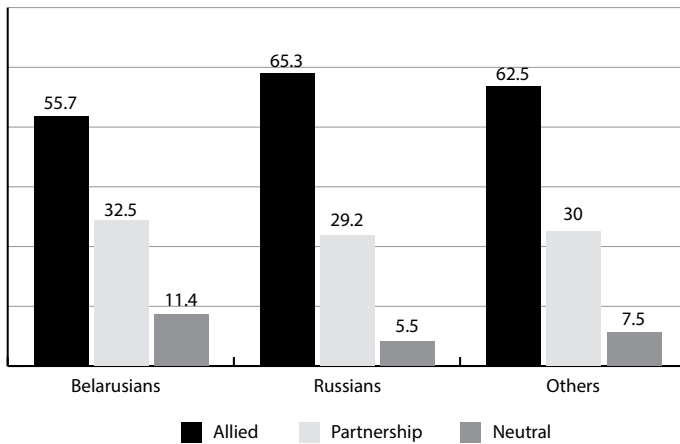
Allied relations appear to be attractive to 55.7% of respondents among those who identified themselves as Belarusians. The number of Russians who gave a positive answer to this question—65.3%—was expectedly high. The positive responses given by 57% of all Poles participating in the survey and two-thirds of Ukrainians appeared to be a little unexpected. Among representatives of all other nationalities, 62.5% spoke in favor of allied relations (Fig. 2).

The study did not confirm the hypothesis of the “nationality” issue in Belarus. Nationality does not affect the attitude towards the relationship between the two states. Naturally, the share of Russians favoring allied relations and a partnership turned out to be much bigger than that of Belarusians (94.5%), but at the same time the vast

² 2009 census data released by the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus: https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/perepis_2009/5.8-0.pdf (July 5, 2020)

majority of Belarusians (more than half) would also like to see a single state, and if those advocating a partnership are factored in, all together they will make up almost 90%.

Fig. 2. The proportion of citizens of different nationalities advocating various formats of relations with Russia.



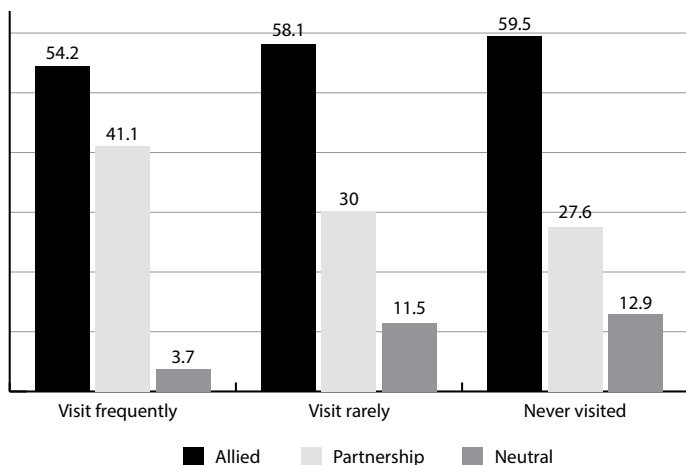
Hypothesis Three: Belarusian citizens who visit Russia oftener are more eager to support allied relations with it.

It is obvious that people who regularly visit the neighboring state, regardless of the purpose of the visit (personal, business, pendulum migration), are likely to be more positive about this state. At the same time, respondents were not asked to specify the purpose of their visits.

Considering the above, a hypothesis was proposed that respondents who visit Russia several times a year should more actively advocate allied relations between Russia and Belarus. However, as the survey showed, in all categories of respondents (from those who often visit Russia to those who have never been there), the share of those who would like to see the two countries having a union state exceeds one-half of the total, and, paradoxically, it is the highest among those who have never been to Russia (almost 60%). It is also true, though, that in the same category the share of those who are satisfied with neutral relations between the two countries is the highest (12.9% against 3.7% among frequent visitors). At the same time, the share of those who

advocate a partnership with Russia is high among people who visit it often—41.1% against 30% of those who visit it rarely, and 27.6% of those who have never been to Russia. If we add up the answers of respondents who support allied relations and those who favor a partnership, then, of course, the result for those who visit Russia often is close to unanimity—95.3%, and it goes down for those who visit Russia rarely and those who have never been to Russia—88.1% and 87.1%, respectively (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. The proportion of citizens advocating various formats of relations with Russia, depending on the frequency of trips



It should be noted that there is practically no clear territorial differentiation in Belarus itself. And yet this particular hypothesis appears to be correct in all regions and even more so in the Gomel region neighboring Russia (the highest proportion of respondents—68.8%), as well as in the Grodno and Brest regions (66.7% each). But we also see a clearly defined center—the capital of Minsk—where the share of those who advocate allied relations is quite small (33.3%, Fig. 4) among those who often visit Russia, as well as among all interviewees regardless of the frequency of their trips (see Fig. 5 and Fig. 6).

This can be explained by the fact that Minsk clearly does not want to play second fiddle to Moscow, and Minsk residents are more eager

to support a partnership rather than allied relations, which is quite natural. Another explanation may be that so many people visit Russia often not because of personal, family, domestic or social ties, as is the case in the regions neighboring Russia, but most likely for business purposes (people go on business trips, not to find a job), which, therefore, does not affect their likings and preferences.

Fig. 4. The proportion of respondents who advocate allied relations among those who visit Russia often

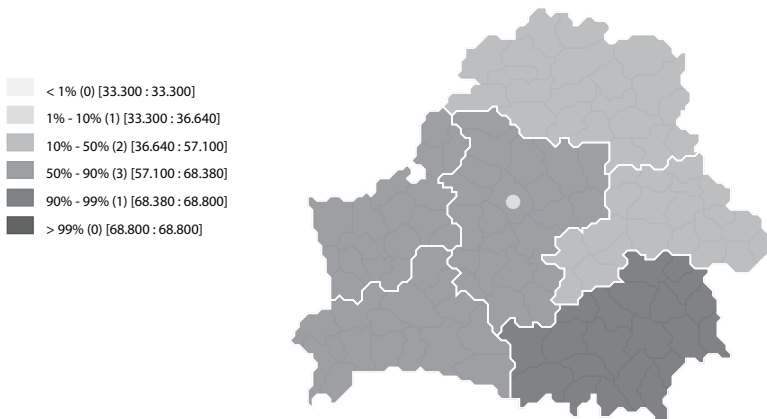


Fig. 5. The proportion of respondents who visit Russia often

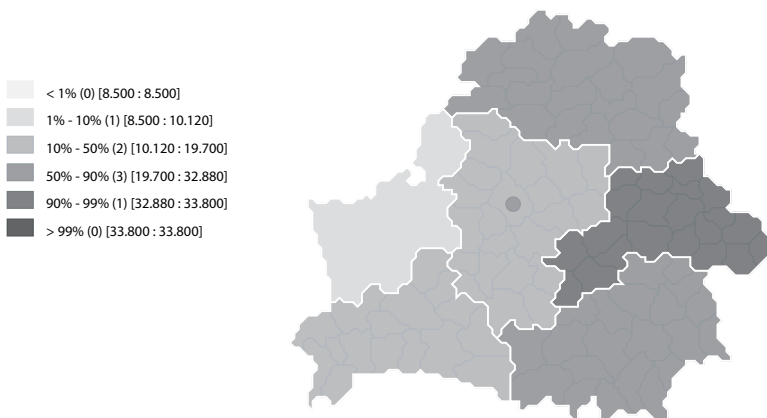
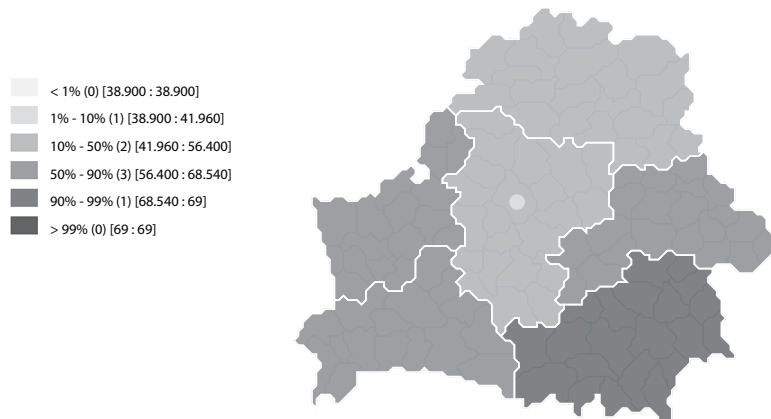


Fig. 6. The proportion of respondents who favor allied relations with Russia.



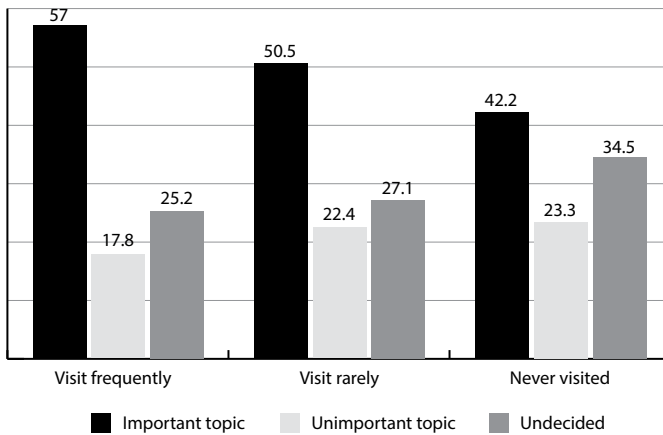
It is worth noting that the data obtained during the study concerning respondents' preference for allied relations are corroborated by earlier empirical observations by a group of Russian scientists led by S.S. Artobolevsky (Artobolevsky et al., 2006, p.162). N.N. Sechko comes to about the same conclusions, indicating that "in general, the results of the nationwide sociological monitoring by the Institute of Sociology of the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences show the fundamental support of the Belarusian population for the integration processes between Belarus and Russia," which is not at variance with the fact that the country's citizens overwhelmingly support the independence of Belarus (Sechko, 2017, p.89).

Hypothesis Four: residents of Belarus who often visit Russia believe that relations with it are an important topic on the political agenda.

Respondents were asked whether they thought that relations with Russia should be an important topic of the election campaign. It was assumed that people who repeatedly visited Russia (several times a year) should give a positive answer more often than citizens who rarely traveled to the Russian Federation or had never been there. This hypothesis proved correct: of those who visit Russia more than once a year, 57% believe that the topic of relations between the two countries is important; this percentage is slightly lower for those who rarely visit

Russia (nevertheless, they make up half of the total—50.5%) and even less, although it is still quite large (42.2%), for those who have never visited the neighboring state. In all three groups, the share of those who were undecided was quite big, but the share of those who are not personally familiar with Russia also goes up (from a quarter to one-third of respondents), as illustrated by Fig. 7.

Fig. 7. The proportion of citizens visiting/not visiting Russia for whom relations with it are an important/unimportant topic on the political agenda



Hypothesis Five: Belarusians who get news about Russia from the Russian media advocate allied relations.

The number of respondents who follow news delivered by traditional media, whether national or Russian, is much smaller than those who get news from the Internet (these segments were deliberately separated in the survey).

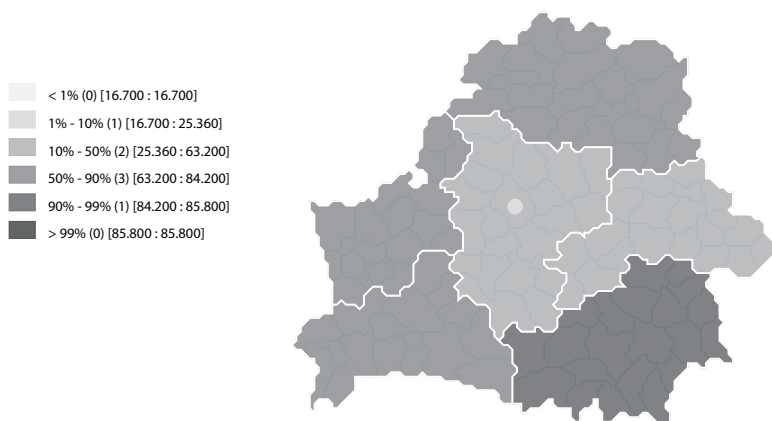
The combined share of citizens who receive news about Russia through traditional channels (newspapers, radio or television) is 33.6%, while the share of citizens who actively use the Internet is 20% bigger. These proportions are characteristic of the entire information field, and not only segments that are related to the news content from the neighboring country. A group of scientists who participated in the project “Specific Features of the Functioning of the Information Field in the Republic of Belarus (Sociological Monitoring),” conducted by

the Center for Sociological and Political Studies of Belarusian State University in 2003-2017, noted that “there is a clear tendency towards redistribution of information influence on the audience from traditional media to communication media” (Danilov et al., 2018, p.386).

Naturally, the percentage of those who use traditional Russian media to obtain information about Russia and who advocate allied relations between the two states is higher (65.1%) than that of those who follow the Belarusian media and the Internet or do not follow news at all (54.8%; 56.8% and 50%, respectively). It can also be noted that the proportion of citizens who advocate neutral relations is lower among those who watch the Russian media (7.5%), compared with those who receive information through Belarusian channels or the Internet, or do not follow news at all (9.7%; 10.1% and 16.7%, respectively).

As in the previous paragraph, it is obvious that Minsk stands out among all regions, with the lowest share of those who advocate allied relations and watch the Russian media (16.7%). The opposite is the Gomel region where the percentage of those who get news about Russia from the Russian media and advocate allied relations reaches 85.8%, which can be attributed to the region’s historically strong orientation towards Russia and traditionally close relations between the two countries (Fig. 8).

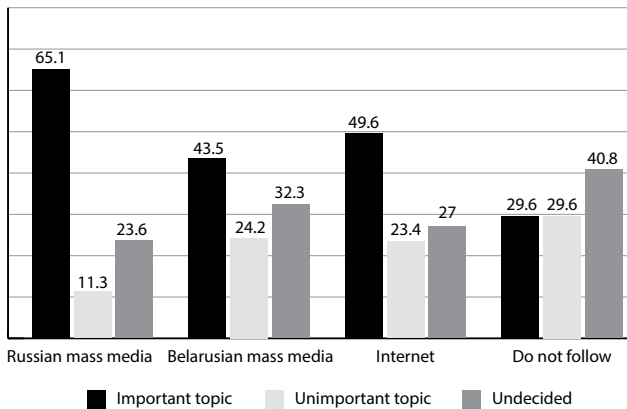
Fig. 8. The proportion of respondents getting news about Russia from the Russian media, among those who advocate allied relations



Hypothesis Six: Belarusians who get news from the Russian media believe that relations with Russia are an important topic on the political agenda.

It would be logical to assume that people who get news about Russia from the Russian media will believe that relations with Russia should be an important topic in the election process. This hypothesis proved correct. Respondents who receive information from Russian sources believe, more often than other groups, that relations with the neighboring country are important. They make up 65.1%, compared to groups that draw information from the Belarusian media and the Internet or do not follow news at all (43.5%; 49.6%, and 29.6%, respectively). The same applies to such answers as “This topic cannot be important” and “I find it difficult to answer.” It is no coincidence, therefore, that the number of survey participants who chose the latter option is significantly larger among those who do not follow news from Russia than in other categories—40.8% (compared to 23.6% of respondents who follow the Russian media) (Fig. 9).

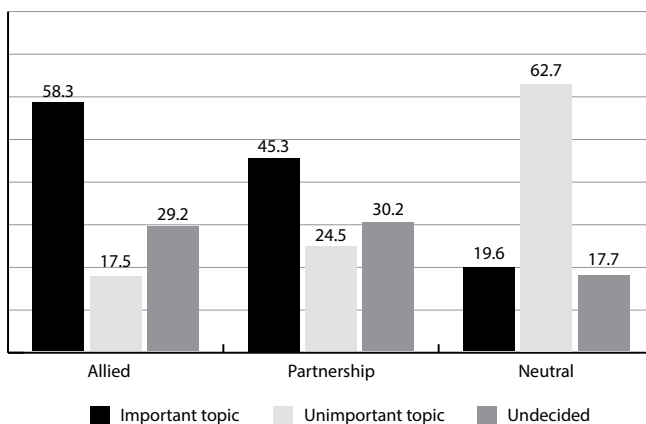
Fig. 9. The proportion of citizens learning about Russia from various sources, for whom the relationship with Russia is an important/unimportant topic on the political agenda



Hypothesis Seven: Belarusians who advocate an allied relationship with Russia believe that relations with it are an important topic on the political agenda.

It had been assumed that those who favor closer cooperation between Russia and Belarus should consider relations with Russia an important topic of the election campaign. This hypothesis proved correct: it was named important by 58.3% of respondents who prefer allied relations between the two countries, by 45.3% of those who favor a partnership, and by 19.6% of those who spoke for neutral relations. Accordingly, 62.7% of respondents in the group that advocated neutral relations do not consider issues related to Russia important, the same opinion is held by almost a quarter of respondents in the group that gravitated towards a partnership, and by only 12.5% of those who proposed allied relations, as illustrated by Fig. 10.

Fig. 10. The proportion of citizens advocating a different format of relations with Russia, for whom relations with Russia are an important/unimportant topic on the political agenda.



Hypothesis Eight: people who advocate allied relations between the two states appear to be more attracted towards “pro-Russian” candidates.

It was quite natural to assume that those who spoke in favor of allied relations during the survey should have shown greater support for “pro-Russian” candidates. In general, however, in all groups of respondents a candidate’s emphasis on relations with Russia by and large did not affect people’s attitude towards him (from 61.1% among those who advocated allied relations to 71.7% among those who would like a

partnership). If a candidate spoke about the importance of relations with Russia, this increased his support among those who advocated allied relations (37.9%). A mere 1% of respondents in this group disliked such a strategy. In the group that advocated a partnership between the two states, the election campaign of a candidate who stressed the importance of relations with Russia attracted only a quarter of respondents, and just 5.9% in the group that advocated neutral relations with Russia. Therefore this hypothesis proved correct.

Hypothesis Nine: people who believe that relations with the Russian Federation should be an important topic of the election campaign felt Russia's influence on the election campaign less than others.

An exactly half of all respondents believe that relations with Russia were one of the most important topics during the past election campaign; almost one in five (21.6%) did not think so, and 28.4% were undecided. It was assumed that the interviewees who believed that the topic of relations was important should not have felt Russia's possible deliberate influence on the election campaign in Belarus.

The hypothesis proved fully correct among those who positively assessed the importance of relations between Russia and Belarus, with only 2% feeling such influence. None of the groups of respondents saw the so-called "Russian trail" in the election campaign (those who consider relations with the Russian Federation unimportant made up 3.7% and those who were undecided accounted for 1.4%). The percentage of those who did not feel Russia's influence on the elections is big in all categories, but at the same time it decreases from 70.4% in the group for which relations are important and relevant to 59.2% in the group whose members do not have a clear opinion on this matter.

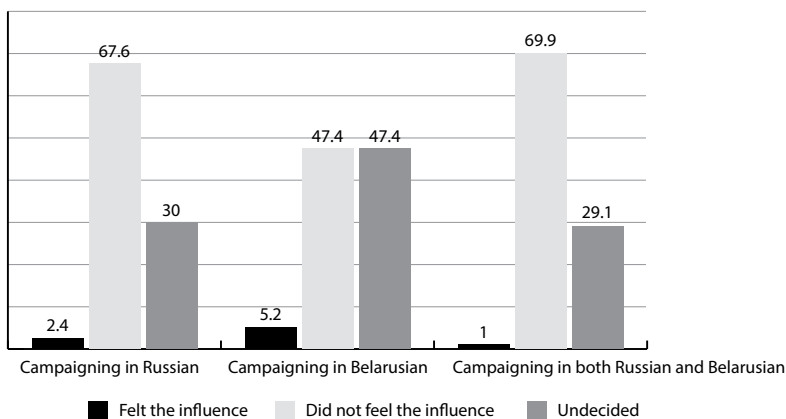
Hypothesis Ten: those who claim that campaigning in the country was in Russian felt Russia's influence on the election campaign less than others.

Three quarters of respondents claimed that campaigning during the fall elections in 2019 had been in Russian, one in five respondents said that the Russian and Belarusian languages had been used equally,

and less than 4% said it had been in Belarusian. At the same time, the vast majority of respondents in all groups did not see any purposeful influence of the neighboring state: 67.6% among those who claim that the campaigning was solely in Russian, 69.9% among those who believe that the campaigning was in both Russian and Belarusian, and 47.4% among those who insisted that the campaigning was solely in Belarusian.

In all groups, a large proportion of respondents found it difficult to answer the question of influence: about 30% among those who heard the election campaign only in Russian, as well as equally in Russian and Belarusian, and 47.4% among those who claimed that the campaigning was solely in Belarusian (Fig. 11). So we can say that the hypothesis proved correct.

Fig. 11. The relationship between the perception of Russia’s influence on the electoral process and the language of campaigning

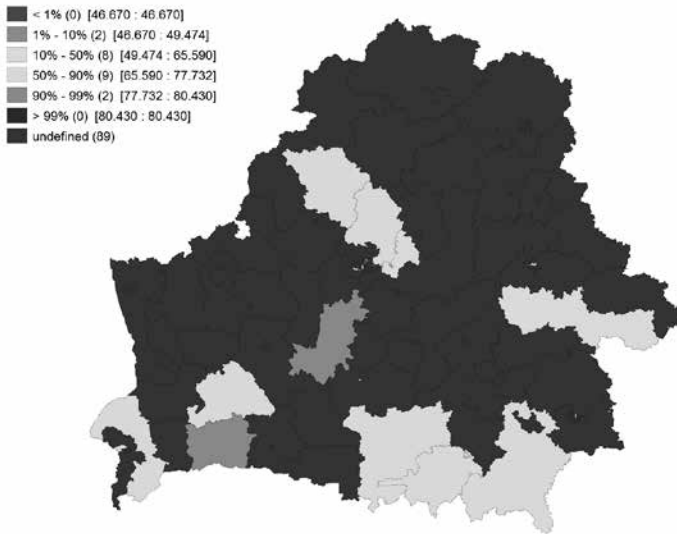


ELECTORAL SPATIAL ANALYSIS

It should be noted that a distinctive feature of the electoral and party system in Belarus is the dominant position of non-party candidates running for the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus. An analysis of the deputy corps shows that Belarusians generally prefer to vote for those non-party candidates who hold high positions in business or public administration or demonstrate

outstanding results in sports or culture. For analytical purposes, it seems advisable to consider non-party candidates and deputies in their entirety as a kind of “party of power,” which has the support of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who stated in 1996 that he is “neither with the right nor with the left,” but he is “with the people.” However, from 6% to 19% of the seats in each parliament are held by deputies elected from parties. The parties traditionally represented in parliament include the Communist Party of Belarus, the Belarusian Agrarian Party, the Republican Party of Labor and Justice, and the Belarusian Patriotic Party.

Fig. 12. Distribution of votes received by the winning party candidates during the election of the 7th House of Representatives



The researchers focused on the regional distribution of votes cast for opposition parties (primarily the United Civic Party, which opposes allied relations with Russia). It is worth noting that the results of voting in all of the 110 constituencies during the election of deputies of the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh Houses of Representatives show the absence of territorial division of the “north-south” or “west-east” type in the voting for “party and non-party candidates.” However, it is important to point

out that with each new election cycle more and more votes were cast for party candidates who eventually won. Fig. 12, showing the distribution of votes cast for party candidates in constituencies during the election of the seventh parliament, indicates that people living in the south of the country are more inclined to support parties (the black color indicates constituencies where non-party candidates won).

Nevertheless, the research team was able to identify one pattern and thereby prove the hypothesis. This pattern can be observed in the results of all elections to the lower house of parliament, namely the “capital-regions” division characteristic of many countries, which presupposes traditionally active pro-party voting in Minsk. Residents of the capital vote mainly for members of the pro-government Communist Party of Belarus, but at the same time Minsk is the only place where opposition parties get some support, small as it is. For example, in the election of the sixth House of Representatives, a member of the anti-government United Civic Party won in one of Minsk’s 20 constituencies, which was the first such precedent in the entire contemporary history of Belarus.

Fig. 13. Distribution by region of the average percentage of votes won by non-party candidates during the election of the 7th House of Representatives

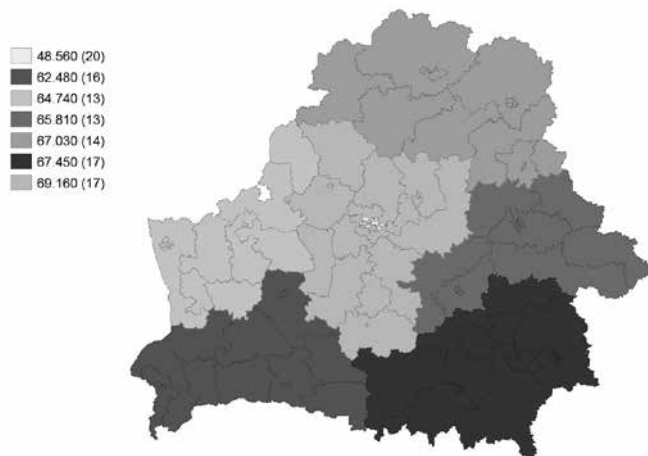


Fig. 13 clearly shows that non-party candidates enjoy much less support in Minsk than in other regions, as a result of which Minsk is

represented in parliament by the maximum number of party deputies. The absolute record was set during the election of the sixth House of Representatives, when eight members of different parties were voted in from Minsk.

CONCLUSIONS

As the authors suggested in the original hypothesis, a comprehensive analysis of sociological data and spatial electoral statistics does not reveal stable territorial divisions in Belarusian society, with the exception of differences between residents of the capital and regions. There is no scientific evidence to prove assumptions circulating in the public and near-expert community that such differences exist. By way of illustration, we will cite answers to some questions that were asked during the sociological study in the territorial context (Table 1).

Table 1. Responses to selected questions, proportion of total (%)

	Brest region	Vitebsk region	Gomel region	Grodno region	City of Minsk	Minsk region	Mogilev region	Country as a whole
Often go to Russia	16.6	19.7	22.5	8.5	29.2	19.4	33.8	21.4
Favor allied relations with Russia	66.7	56.3	69	62	38.9	54.2	56.4	57.6
Favor neutral relations with Russia	5.5	8.5	7	11.3	18	15.3	5.6	10.2
Think that relations with Russia should be an important topic of election campaign	47.2	59.2	53.5	40.8	47.2	52.8	49.3	50
Showed affection for candidate who considered relations with Russia important	36.1	40.8	32.4	18.3	34.7	18.1	32.4	30.4
Did not feel Russia's influence on the election campaign	63.9	70.4	66.2	70.4	62.3	69.4	63.4	67

As can be seen from the table, Minsk is clearly growing apart from the rest of the country on almost all issues, in particular, it is less optimistic about integration with Russia into a union. This long-standing characteristic of the Belarusian political space, acquired during the years of independence, should by all means be taken into account when assessing the behavior, and internal and foreign policy attitudes of Belarusians. The gap between the residents of Minsk and the rest of the country is definitely widening. Some Belarusian scientists studying the center-peripheral relations also note that “the ongoing active metropolization in the country slows down the development of regional centers in Belarus, and further hypertrophied growth of the metropolitan area can hardly be considered a rational model of the country’s territorial organization” (Ridevsky, 2013, p.33). Similar signs of metropolization can be seen in our study with regard to electoral aspects.

Otherwise, there are no significant differences between the regions of the country along the west-east line. If there is any territorial differentiation emerging in public opinion in Belarus at all, then at this point we can hypothesize that the division of the country is beginning to take shape not along the west-east line (which experts often talk about) but along the north-south line, or, more precisely, in the behavior of people living closer to Ukraine (especially in the Gomel region most closely linked with it). Moreover, proximity to the southern neighbor rather increases the region residents’ friendly feelings towards their eastern neighbor. However, this is just an emerging trend that needs to be studied further.

But otherwise, despite the well-known territorial differentiation of the country by natural zones, and historical and economic regions, assumptions that steady dividing lines are emerging in Belarus with regard to Russia or the nature of electoral behavior, expectedly are not supported by scientific evidence. Unlike neighboring Ukraine or Poland, where the split between the west and the east of the country has become a key feature of the domestic political process, no such division has so far developed in Belarus. At the same time, it should be noted that the existence of similar geopolitical (location between the EU and

Russia) and historical and geographical (different parts of the country at different times belonged to different states) conditions suggests that such electoral differentiation may occur in the future.

The general conclusion of the study can be formulated as follows: the perception of Russia and partly electoral behavior of Belarusians are strongly influenced not by some firm preset parameters (as experts often suggest: gender, age, nationality, residence in border regions, etc.), but social practices: traveling to Russia, viewing Russian media, using the topic of Russia for campaigning purposes, etc. In other words, the logic of Belarusians' electoral behavior is much more pliant and flexible than it is generally believed.

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