

The Geopolitical Orientation of Ordinary Belarusians: Survey Evidence from Early 2020

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Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge funding for this work from a joint US National Science Foundation/Research Council UK grant (NSF award #1759645; ESRC award # ES/S005919/1). Kristin Bakke (University College, London) collaborated on the survey instrument design and overall project management. Thanks are due to David Sichinava (Caucasus Research Resources Center, Tbilisi) who worked assiduously with a leading Belarusian survey company to program the questionnaire and implement the survey according to the comparative research design. We receive helpful comments from Olga Onuch, Gwendolyn Sasse and Fedor Popov on an earlier draft of the paper.

Abstract

Analysis of responses to a representative survey of Belarus residents in early 2020 sets the stage for examination of the changes in beliefs and attitudes that occurred as a result of the political crises that erupted later in the year. We adopt a critical geopolitical perspective that highlights geopolitical cultures as fields of contestation and debate over a state's identity and enduring interests that characterize its foreign policy. In a representative national survey, we examine support among 1200 Belarusians to four foreign policy options for the country – neutrality as the best foreign policy, joining the European Union, staying in the Eurasian Economic Union, or developing close relations with both these organizations. We also examine the reasons behind responses to where Belarus should be on an 11-point scale from aligned with the West to aligned with Russia. In early 2020, Belarusians indicated polarized preferences in the same way as majorities in other post-Communist societies along demographic, ideological and attitudinal cleavages. An expected divide between people leaning to the West and those leaning to Russia was becoming evident before the 2020 crisis. The evolving social and economic conditions that began to coalesce in Belarus over the past five years and the crises and resulting repression of 2020 continue to generate (geo)political polarization as seen in other post-Soviet countries. The survey findings balance the structural and the conjunctural as seen in the outcomes of long-term processes during Alexander Lukashenka's quarter-century dictatorship.

The year 2020 was Belarus's "year of living dangerously". Disease met dictatorship and a long brewing legitimacy crisis came to a crisis in the aftermath of brazenly rigged Presidential election results. Approaching twenty-six years in power, President Alexander Lukashenka's initial response to the global pandemic of SARS Covid-2 was to ignore it, and then pronounce the illness it caused as curable by folk remedies like drinking vodka and taking a sauna. But it was Lukashenka's determination to cling to power that plunged Belarusian society into a perilous and unprecedented crisis. Miscalculating that opposition to his rule was splintered and would never unite around an accidental female candidate, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the protests that followed the manifestly fraudulent presidential election results gained surprising strength and momentum across Belarus in the weeks after the August 9, 2020 poll. With support from President Vladimir Putin of Russia, however, Lukashenka's regime slowly recovered from the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of Belarusians against his rule. Through the application of brutal force, imprisonment and suppression, Lukashenka rebuilt the foundations of his rule around Russian subsidies for a coercive police state that was both more intensive in its operation and extensive in its ambition of control (Benedek 2020; Marin 2021). The year 2020 left Lukashenka's Belarus not as Europe's remaining dictatorship but as Europe's newest renewed dictatorship. It also left its state apparatus, society and economy in crisis, and more dependent upon Russia than ever.

This paper contributes to understanding both elite geopolitical maneuverings and views of ordinary people at a time of significant domestic change and external orientations in Belarus by providing timely data and analysis. We do so through the presentation of survey research findings on geopolitical attitudes among ordinary Belarusians *before* the electoral crisis that began in August 2020. Our findings are particularly valuable because of the timing of our nationwide representative survey at the start of 2020. Not only do they provide a baseline against which future research results on beliefs and attitudes within Belarus can be measured; just as importantly, they help shed light on the question of the relative significance of long term structural and demographic trends in Belarusian geopolitical culture and society, the backdrop that even a dictatorial regime must monitor.

BELARUS IN 2020

As Belarus was convulsed by multiple crises and generated front page news across Europe and the United States in mid to late 2020, two questions preoccupied the Euro-Atlantic strategic community, the epistemic community that interprets events in Belarus for policymakers in the West. The first concerned the evolving geopolitical position of Belarus between Russia, its longstanding patron, and Euro-Atlantic institutions (the European Union and NATO) interested in drawing the country westward. Lukashenka had distanced himself from Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014 and did not recognize the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia. He stressed Belarus's 'multidirectionality' in foreign policy. This Lukashenka positionings led many within the Euro-Atlantic strategic community to favor a policy of shoring up Belarus's sovereignty, notwithstanding the dictatorial nature of the regime. This prospect of geopolitical gain at the expense of Russia saw several US officials, and Washington think-tank figures, travel to Minsk for talks from 2016 onward. After a decade without ambassadors, the US and Belarus agreed to re-establish full diplomatic relations in January 2019 (Congressional Research Service 2019).

2019 also saw increased tensions with Russia alongside Western outreach to Lukashenka (Ioffe 2020). Many, though not all, US and EU sanctions against past repressive measures in Belarus were lifted. On August 29, 2019, US National Security Adviser John Bolton met with Lukashenka in Minsk to discuss improving relations. In February 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo traveled to Minsk to meet with Lukashenka, the most senior US government official to visit the country in more than two decades. Belarus's relations with Russia were especially strained at the time, with Russia suspending oil sales to Minsk which purchased oil from Norway for delivery through Lithuania (Belta 2020). Making his geopolitical gambit clear, Pompeo declared that the United States was willing and able to provide Belarus with 100% of its oil and gas needs (Shotter 2020). A 'moment of truth' meeting between Putin and Lukashenka after Pompeo's visit yielded little apparent change in their strained relationship (Higgins 2020). Further, just

before the August 2020 election, Belarus arrested a group of Russian mercenaries in the country. Lukashenka suggested they were part of a dark conspiracy against him, without naming Russia as the organizer (Lukashenka 2020). Going into the Presidential election, Euro-Atlantic/Belarus relations seemed on an upward trajectory whereas Russia-Belarus relations seemed in a downward spiral. The August election crisis changed these trends dramatically and forced Lukashenka into a public performance of fealty to Putin to obtain financing for his repressive state apparatus (Czerny 2020). With the strategy of engaging Lukashenka for geopolitical gain no longer viable, the US and EU quickly imposed new sanctions on the Minsk regime while condemning Lukashenka's brutal response to election protests. Lukashenka, for his part, returned to a conspiracist discourse that located all protests against his regime as colored revolution plots against Belarus hatched by scheming enemies in the West (Ioffe 2021a).

The second issue in early 2020 was whether Belarusian society was on a trajectory to becoming the 'next Ukraine' (Mankoff 2020). In 2014, protestors across Ukraine managed to overthrow the democratically elected government of President Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine, a ruler generally friendly to the Kremlin. The consequences are well known. Russia invaded Crimea and annexed the peninsula while it helped pro-Russian separatists in southeast Ukraine revolt against the new government in Kyiv. The dénouement was war in the Donbas, with Russian troops intervening to prevent a defeat of the separatists. Thousands have died from this conflict, which has left Ukraine polarized and socially divided (Toal, O'Loughlin, Bakke 2020a). With Lukashenka's hold on power weakening, and Russia moving to shore up his unpopular dictatorship, the consequences of the instability, polarization and division on Belarus's society remain deeply uncertain. Is societal fracture, pitting Lukashenka loyalists against regime opponents, probable? Could the legitimacy crisis in Belarus, the re-entrenchment of autocracy in a society evidently aspiring for change, have ripple effects on the geopolitical attitudes of ordinary Belarussians? Might Belarus be on a path to becoming a geopolitically-torn and divided country?

Expounding on preliminary data (Toal, O'Loughlin and Bakke 2020b), the results we present here are a time capsule of a Belarus before the 'shock' of the 2020 electoral crisis and subsequent state repression. While social science is drawn to dramatic events like mass protests as critical junctures, it must also be mindful of the significance of slower processes like economic precarity and demographic transition in accounting for shifting attitudes and practices. Our survey findings here help researchers balance the structural and the conjunctural, the attitudinal results of slow long-term processes, during Lukashenka's quarter-century dictatorship, before the advent of spectacular public scenes, including protests and their violent repression.

GEOPOLITICAL CULTURE AND SURVEY RESEARCH

In conducting research on the geopolitical attitudes of ordinary people in former Soviet states and territories, including our findings on Belarus, it is important to contextualize this research within the critical geopolitics literature. We do so here briefly through discussion of two larger critical geopolitical concepts -- geopolitical culture and geopolitical field -- which together shape the prevailing geopolitical orientation of a country's governing elite and its population. Since geopolitical field is the focus of this article, the positionality of Belarus in a regional geopolitical field defined by Russia's strategic imperatives and overwhelming economic and cultural power is not something we consider in depth here (Buranelli 2017). We also briefly note the Political Science debate over the structure of belief in public opinion research since it tackles the crucial question of the relative consistency and coherence of the attitudes of ordinary people.

Deepening the implicit constructivism in classical geopolitics that argues that geography is partly what states make of it, critical geopolitical scholars have developed the concept that state societies have geopolitical cultures, prevailing ways of seeing and situating themselves in a world of other states (Dijkink 1996; Ó Tuathail 2003). Geopolitical cultures are fields of contestation and debate over a state's identity and the friends, enemies and enduring interests that characterize its foreign policy (O'Loughlin, Toal and Kolossov 2005). They feature different

traditions of argument about the state's role in the world and about what orientation the state should have, given its relative location next to the distribution (horizontal space) and hierarchy (vertical space) of state power across the world political map (Toal 2017). Critical geopolitics has been extended further into the domain of everyday life and social reproduction (Dowler and Sharp 2001), research on the 'global war on terror' has shown how quotidian life experiences of minority groups are shaped (Pain and Smith 2008) and the power of cartographic images and border practices in producing lived everyday geopolitics have been identified (Culcasi 2016; Slesinger 2016; Toal and Merabishvili 2019).

Public opinion surveys have long been used to chart the foreign policy attitudes of ordinary people. Because foreign policy attitudes rather than geopolitical cultures are a privileged object of research in Political Science, there has been little discussion of public opinion survey as a tool to systematically measure the geopolitical culture of ordinary people, most especially in smaller states. Ostensibly, this would seem to be what public opinion survey research already does when it reports findings on attitudes toward neighboring and competitor states, alliance systems, international institutions, and topical world issues. It provides a sense of how ordinary people process foreign policy questions and challenges. Three difficulties, however, quickly present themselves. First, it is not clear how asking people in a survey about their attitudes toward certain foreign policy questions of the day necessarily pinpoints the underlying geopolitical culture within which they operate. Foreign policy attitude research faces this dilemma too as it probes for consistent structures of belief. This difficulty can be ameliorated by designing survey questions that are designed to systematically measure certain defining features of geopolitical cultures. We can, for example, examine how citizens position their state within the world by asking them about which countries are friends, enemies, close or far, or stand as exemplary models for their states (O'Loughlin and Talbot 2005). We can measure the geopolitical orientations that people hold by asking them to locate their state on a spectrum between two competing poles of power, like Russia and the West. To a certain extent, this exercise has an artificial quality to it in that the research is imposing a choice along a binary scale upon respondents. Yet, at the same time, this binary is not an invention of the research

but a reflection of the prevailing binaries within a society and the larger international system. The results, in other words, help measure a discursive distinction that already exists and provide evidence of the degree to which people align with one pole or another, or choose a more non-aligned option.

The second difficulty arises from the challenge of asking ordinary people about geopolitics. People in many states appear uninterested in geopolitics and foreign policy (Bennett et al, 1996; Holsti, 2009). It is seen as an elite activity, a speech act confined to experts, something far from everyday life. Yet, this is not true in all places, most especially in conflict zones and in the de facto states that have emerged from separatist struggles. There tends to be a greater interest in geopolitics here; because it is in the weave of everyday life, high politics is a salient issue such as whether the de facto state will achieve recognition by the international community (O'Loughlin, Kolossov and Toal 2014). In regions and states where great power competition actively structures political life, geopolitics is seen and felt to be pervasive. Irrespective of whether people are interested in geopolitics or not, and whether it is salient in the political life of their community or not, geopolitics inevitably shapes their lives. The relative location of their state within the international system, and the prevailing culture within their state about that position, conditions their life chances and everyday experiences. Survey research measures the expressed interest that people have in questions of politics and international affairs. But whether people are highly interested or not, the results reveal important insights about geopolitical cultures.

A third difficulty is that people have variable levels of knowledge about geopolitics. Few are well informed and even fewer have full command of the complexities of 'high geopolitics.' Furthermore, people may have attitudes that are logically inconsistent and at cross-purposes. We cannot assume that respondents will have views that cohere into a consistent geopolitical worldview. Various dilemmas in the study of structures of belief in public opinion were outlined by Converse (1964) decades ago. Populations vary greatly by their capacity to conceptualize issues, to recognize and to consistently apply binary sorting abstractions. They do not

necessarily organize their attitudes in ways similar to elites, so that domestic and foreign political attitudes show general consistency. Cognitive shortcuts, like group identity, political partisanship, gender, ideology, and loyalty/aversion to public figures, do not necessarily produce clear geopolitical orientations. Beyond giving us clues into the potential for inconsistencies in geopolitical orientation when disaggregated into a series of different measures, our research underscores how we should not assume that there is any necessary or logical connection between opposition to Lukashenka and a particular geopolitical orientation. We might expect that those viewing the collapse of the Soviet Union as a wrong step are more likely to be Lukashenka loyalists and to be favorably disposed to Putin and to Russia. However, attitudes on these separate questions may not be symmetrical. Lukashenka, after all, is a leader with a tendency to tilt sharply in one geopolitical direction or its opposite depending upon his immediate political needs. Those opposed to Lukashenka therefore may be strongly pro-Russia or strongly pro-Western, trustful or distrustful of Putin.

BELARUS'S GEOPOLITICAL FIELD POSITION

In studying the geopolitical orientations of ordinary people, we are studying only one expression of a geopolitical culture, a dimension that is often passive and demobilized in authoritarian states. The practice of geopolitics is normally an elite activity conducted by a few, but it is practice it is undertaken within fields of power that are beyond the control of individual states.

All states are shaped by their relative location within the international system of states. Neorealists tend to conceptualize this as a position within a hierarchy of states or a balance of power, two metaphors that tend to marginalize consideration of the spatial location of states relative to the earth's geography and state power centers. Political geographers generally, and some political scientists (Gleditsch and Ward, 2001; Starr 2013; Kelly 2016) underscore the significance of spatial location in the international system. It matters less which are the most powerful states in the world than how powerful one's neighboring states are, and how

territorial proximity is mediated by the affordances of physical geography and all that is built upon it. A geopolitical field is the relative power geometry of international relations, the socially produced space, players and rules of the practice of statecraft across the uneven surface of the planet (Toal 2017).

In this geopolitical respect, Belarus is an interesting case study of a state conditioned by multiple spatial field relations. First, it is a territory that is of vital strategic interest to the Russian state, irrespective of who is in power in the Kremlin. In organizing Russia's territorial defense, the geographical location and flat terrain of Belarus are such that Russian military planners are compelled to treat Belarus as a vital buffer state against invasion from the West. Besides guarding the approaches to Moscow, Belarus is also a vital transit route to the Russian exclave territory of Kaliningrad. From the outset, post-Soviet Belarus's relation to Russia was shaped by this geo-strategic reality. Only six months after the dissolution of the USSR, Russia and Belarus signed a set of military agreements that coordinated their defense activities and approved the stationing of Russian strategic forces on Belarusian territory (Deyermond 2004). Though it was not an original signatory, Belarus joined the Collective Security Treaty Organization CSTO in 1993. Subsequent agreements, especially concerning air defense, effectively integrated Belarus as a territorial unit into Russian techno-military defensive space. Regular joint combined force military exercises reaffirm this integration. With the surrounding Baltic States and Poland in NATO, and Ukraine aspiring to join, the strategic and symbolic significance of Belarus as an integral part of Russia's defensive space has only grown over the last three decades.

Second, Belarus is a territory with a long history of entanglement with state systems centered in Russia. Russia, Belarus and Ukraine are imagined as three branches of the same Slavic people by pan-Slavic nationalists (Wilson 2001). Belarus is the closest of the post-Soviet states to Russia in formal administrative terms. As is well known, both states drew up a Union Treaty in 1997 (Deyermond 2004). This project was moribund for some time but it is now on the agenda again as a consequence of Lukashenka's extreme dependence upon Russia. More broadly, the

idea of a Russian world *Russkii Mir* serves as a geopolitical imaginary for visions of the Russian state as an anchor of a separate civilizational realm in Europe and Eurasia (Laruelle 2015).

Third, despite its well-documented dependence on Russia, Belarus has established itself institutionally as an independent sovereign state over the last three decades. Its status as such is internationally recognized. Despite its obvious democratic shortcomings, the Lukashenka regime created a legitimization system for the state and a variable mythology to consolidate its distinctive place in the world. Lukashenka's regime privileged Belarus's Soviet history and experience. His regime, however, has also stressed Belarus's historical ties to earlier state systems not centered in Russia, like the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Wilson 2018). But his efforts at consolidating Belarus's independence have symbolically tied the country to its Soviet past, an orientation underscored by the adoption of a national flag in 1995 that closely resembled that used by Soviet Belarus. Those opposed to his rule have long rejected this flag in favor of one associated with the briefly independent Belarusian People's Republic after World War I (Marples 2014). The ubiquity of the red and white colors of this flag among protestors visually displayed a desire for a different form of independence for Belarus than that provided by Lukashenka.

Fourth, Belarus is part of a group of "in-between states" -- Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine -- that are locations of competition and rivalry between Russia and Euro-Atlantic institutions (White, Biletskaya and McAllister 2016; Charap et al 2018; Dembinska and Smith 2021). All six states are nominally part of the European Union's Eastern Partnership program which aspires to deepen and strengthen relations between the European Union EU, its member states and these eastern neighboring states. Along with Armenia, Belarus was generally considered the most pro-Russia of the six by the transatlantic strategic community (Charap et al 2019), with Azerbaijan and Moldova ostensibly neutral, and Georgia and Ukraine seeking to pursue a path of greater Euro-Atlantic integration (Charap et al 2018). Russian influence in the region, from energy exports to media to civil society networks, tends to be viewed as a security threat by NATO and many Western states that compromises the

independence of these in-between states. All six states are typically subject to zero-sum calculations of power and influence by Russian and Euro-Atlantic institutions.

These four field positionalities of Belarus significantly shape its geopolitical culture. Its strategic location creates relations of strategic necessity, its geo-cultural location relations of friendship and connection, its independence relations of differentiation, and its in-betweenness relations of competition, suspicion, and zero-sum logics. Before 2020, the transatlantic strategic community consensus on the geopolitical culture of Belarus was that it was overdetermined by its strategic location and dependence on Russia (Ioffe 2020b). Belarus thus was the 'nearest' of Russia's 'near abroad' countries, a point reflected in recent comparative survey data (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2021). The only question was the degree to which the Lukashenka regime could leverage Belarus's nominal independence of action in order to extract better terms of dependency with Russia for the regime. Some form of distancing was always to be expected and was necessary for the legitimation of Belarus as a state. But there are limits to how far any leader in Belarus can expect to shift the country from Russia's orbit. In expelling the Russian ambassador in 2019, seeking oil overseas, hosting the US Secretary of State, and publicly denouncing Russia, Lukashenka was testing those limits in early 2020. It was at this moment – prior to the Covid-19 and the August 2020 election crises -- that we conducted our survey.

EXPECTATIONS OF CHANGE IN BELARUS

Given the relative paucity of reliable survey data on Belarus (Belsat, 2020; Ioffe 2021d) and the significant shifts in the geopolitical positioning of the Lukashenka regime prior to August 2020, we envision this article as a broadly interpretative approach. We had the following expectations at the outset of our research about the geopolitical orientation of ordinary Belarusians based on extant work on Belarusian domestic politics and the regional post-Maidan context of Putin foreign policies (Torres-Adan 2021). Our expectations were also shaped by emergent trends in the broader literature about post-Soviet states. These expectations can be grouped into three different categories and can be checked for empirical support in the answers to a series of

questions in our survey about where Belarus should position itself on the Western-Russia scale and what international institutions Belarus should join or reject.

1. Expectations about Geopolitical Orientation

Because of the long history of connection of Belarus to Russia in cross-cutting cultural, geopolitical and economic spaces, we expected to see a strong pro-Russia geopolitical orientation across a series of questions. Within the Belarusian population, we anticipated finding consistent geopolitical attitudes aligning with either Russia or the West across a range of measures related to the demographic, ideological and social characteristics of respondents. People who share a higher trust level for President Vladimir Putin were also projected to show preferences for the Russian end of the geopolitical scale. We believed that Soviet nostalgia and conservative social views would be associated with a pro-Russia orientation as Soviet memory also has a central legitimization role for the Putin regime. Conversely, those more critical of the Soviet legacy and more supportive of post-Soviet developments, we expected, would have a weaker Russia orientation. In the same vein, we anticipated that age would be a crucial divide within Belarus's geopolitical attitudes; younger generation would be more open to membership in Western economic and security institutions, associating with powerful modernization influences through social media and the internet. People with more liberal social views as well as those less inclined to conspiracist views would be expected to be more Western oriented. Preliminary data that suggest these paths of analysis can be found in surveys conducted by the Belarusian sociologist, Andrei Vardamatski, before the 2020 crises (Belsat, 2020).

2. Expectations about Neutrality

Because Belarus is ostensibly an in-between state in post-Soviet space, we expected to see evidence of aspirations toward neutrality as well as for good relations with both Russia and the West. Certainly, this is the bi-directional vector that Lukashenka was pushing before the crises of 2020. While we were unsure whether it was possible to characterize 'in-betweenness' as

matched with shared geopolitical attitudes among the survey respondents, we were interested in this possibility. A desire to “get along with everyone”, for example, could be a factor explaining why there is a substantial portion of the public in in-between states, such as Belarus, who express the preference for their country in both the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union, effectively rejecting a zero-sum choice. We expected that younger respondents and people in urban areas would be more likely to support neutrality and to maintain the bi-directional approach of the Belarusian government.

3. Expectations about Trade Bloc Alignment Preference

Based on our research elsewhere in the post-Soviet space (O’Loughlin, Kolossov and Toal 2014), we expected that poorer and older respondents would be more oriented toward Russia. We also expected that those more trusting of government policies and of the national media would be more supportive of Russia and thus, more supportive of the Eurasian Economic Union given the crucial role of Russian subsidies and market access in the success of Belarusian enterprises. Conversely, we expected better educated respondents, respondents who report higher material wealth for their households, and people living in the west of the country (Grodno and Brest oblasts) as well as in the Minsk agglomeration to show higher levels of support for European Union membership. Belarus has been denoted as a “highly distinctive model of semi-peripheral capitalism ..in which economic and political power does not, fundamentally, lie with private capital but with a bureaucratic-paternalist state apparatus (Buzgalin and Kolgonov, 2021, 443) , an emphasis also in Frear (2019). Because of this unusual political-economic structure, we expected that the usual cleavages along class-income and ideological lines would be blurred when compared to other Central-Eastern European countries or even some post-Soviet states such as Georgia and Ukraine. The Lukashenka model began to fray as a younger generation started to chafe at the lack of economic and political reforms in the face of economic stagnation and accompanying social welfare pressures (Douglas 2020).

Though the models have many predictors, the collinearity between them is modest and all independent predictors are significant at the .001 level in all five models discussed below. Previewing some key results for social attitudes, we did not find significant correlations between liberal views and age, Western orientation (as indicated by preference for Western movies), support for democracy as the best political system, educational levels, or gender. The political cleavages that Kitschelt (1992) identified in post-Communist societies in the decade after the 1989-1991 transformations are not consistent in contemporary Belarus. The kind of dramatic societal upheavals that occurred in Central-Eastern Europe were not experienced in Lukashenka's Belarus where economic, political and social reforms were stopped by the regime. We can speculate that the outcome was a cross-cutting of attitudes and beliefs that sometimes lean towards Russia but in other dimensions, lean to the West.

Our survey was designed to provide a portrait of the geopolitical orientations of ordinary Belarussians in late 2019-early 2020. We choose five questions that display the range of geopolitical preferences in Belarus in early 2020 for analysis and identify the predictors associated with each through the answers on key demographic (nine variables), political (four variables), media preferences (four variables), social views (three variables) and conspiracy beliefs (two measures). We are not testing specific hypotheses but identifying the nature (for or against) and the strength of the relationship of each predictor to the geopolitical preference, while controlling for other factors in a regression approach. The five specific outcome variables are a) preference for European Union EU membership, b) preference for staying in the Eurasian Economic Union EAEU, c) preference for being close to both institutions, in effect an aspirational positioning of 'in-betweenness', d) support for a neutral Belarus between the West and Russia, and e) a preferred location for Belarus on an eleven-point scale from 0 West to 10 Russia. This last measure is a useful summary of a respondent's wishes for the placement of Belarus on a range that is conventionally downscaled to a pro-Russia or pro-Western scale, but the other four measures allow us to look beyond this bi-directional orientation as a singular state in order to understand the support for the different dimensions of its foreign policies.

DATA

The distribution of answers for all outcome and predictor variables are shown in Table 1. The geopolitical options show strong support for an affirmative answer at 79% to the prompt that “neutrality between the West and Russia is the best foreign policy option for Belarus.” This vague aspiration, however, is countered by answers to the other geopolitical questions which asked specifically about policies on joining international institutions. The strong endorsement of neutrality shows a general aspiration for an ‘in-between’ status at a time when relations between Russia and the West were deteriorating significantly after the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, the change in government in Kyiv, the annexation by Russia of the Crimean Peninsula, and the war in the Donbas. When the results on neutrality are compared to the distribution of responses on the 11 point scale of West (0) to Russia (10), there is no distinct bunching of preferences in the middle of the range for points 4 to 6; instead, a tendency towards the Russia end of the scale, points 7 to 10, is observed. Similarly, when faced with the three options of membership in an international grouping, either continued EAEU membership, joining the EU or close to both organizations, the latter option gets less than majority support, at 40%. (“Join no Union” got 9%). Preference for joining the EU is only about half the size of the preference for staying in the EAEU, but as will be seen in the modeling below, respondents who made the EU choice are most distinguishable across the predictors.

President Lukashenka had a very low trust rating at the time of the survey, at 26% from calculation by a list experiment that randomly assigning respondent to two groups. (The control group were asked how many of four groups/institutions respondents trusted (people who live locally, religious leaders, police and people of the respondent’s ethnic group; the treatment added Lukashenka to this list). It should be remembered that this low score was calculated before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic that was badly handled by the government and before the election crisis that erupted in summer 2020. The low 26% trust for Lukashenka is in line with the 22% of respondents who indicate that Belarus was “heading in the right direction.” (O’Loughlin, Toal and Bakke, 2020).

Our modeling includes key demographic measures such as age (median 45), education, family material status, religion and a regional distribution of respondents that matches recent population data (Table 1). For key attitudinal measures, Belarus is similar to other post-Soviet states with less than one-third thinking that the end of the Soviet Union was a 'right step.' Nearly half the sample are 'not interested' in politics and television is still the primary source of news, though people have relatively little trust in the Belarusian media. President Vladimir Putin of Russia had significant trust (higher than Luakshenka) in Belarus with 36% of respondents giving him 'a little' and 39% 'a lot'.

Belarusians remain quite conservative in their social attitudes with over 90% agreeing that 'marriage should only be between a man and a woman'; only 29% disagree with the proposition that 'husbands only should make the important decisions in a marriage'; and about 30% believing that a 'secret group controls events and rules the world together' with another 30% 'neither agreeing or disagreeing.' Only 21% disagree with the statement that 'NGOs are foreign agents', a particularly sensitive term in the post-Soviet space. Asked about the best political system, the answers are very splintered, with the Soviet system and the Western democratic system each receiving about 32% support, while the Belarusian one tied with the Russian one at about 14% each. This split also mirrors a similar one for preference in movies with about one-third of the sample each preferring contemporary Russian or Soviet-era films, and about one-quarter of respondents opting for Western movies (Hollywood or European).

What drives geopolitical preferences in Belarus?

Beyond the five geopolitical preferences that we examine in detail below, Belarusians display mixed and somewhat contradictory views regarding the nature of their country's relations with Russia on the one side and Western powers on the other. A strong and consistent majority across a number of questions want to maintain good relations with both poles. This can be seen in the 64% of Belarusians who agreed that their country should establish 'full diplomatic

relations” with the United States, a highly salient issue in 2019-20. But when asked about a model country for Belarus, no Western country got more than 5% with Russia clearly the leader in this open question at 28%. Just over 18% could not name any positive model. Further, worries about Russia’s historically pre-eminent role in Belarus appears to be low, with only 22% agreeing that Russia “controls many politicians in our country”.

We test out general expectations of how Belarusians express their geopolitical preferences via four logistic models and one linear regression model. In the logistic models, the binary outcome by an approach that defined agreement with a score of 1 and all other options as 0. To minimize the number of cases dropped from the analysis, most predictors are also recoded as binary variables. For example, the end of the Soviet Union predictor is recoded as 1 for ‘right step’ 1 and as 0 for ‘wrong step’, ‘don’t know’ and ‘refuse’. Age, education, mood and family material status are not recoded in this binary manner.

In the binary logistic models, a useful measure of model fit for geopolitical choices is the ability of the model to predict the answers of the respondents on the basis of their characteristics and attitudes. The default cutoff for such predictions is a 50-50 break so that, for example, a 55% probability would be classified as a correct prediction. In our models below in Table 2, we raised the threshold to a 67%-33% break to reduce the chances of a false positive. This more conservative approach means that we have a higher level of confidence in the models’ value and predictive qualities. The relationships for the logit models are presented as odds (Relative Risk) ratios, so that e.g. a value of 1.36 for women (compared to men) can be interpreted as a 36% greater odds of agreeing with the question’s positive outcome and a value of 0.72 can be interpreted as a 28% lesser odds of supporting the outcome.

“Neutrality is best for Belarus” models

Almost four-fifths of respondents in our survey supported neutrality for Belarus. The overall model fit is good with 77% of the binary outcomes correctly classified by the model (with the

67%-33%) threshold for a positive classification) and a Nagelkerke R² value of 0.31 (Table 2). Given Belarus' in-between status, and especially the timing of the survey when Lukashenka was pushing this model for the country – or a more independent policy with respect to Russia, we expected general support across many demographic groups and ideologies. Significant positive and negative effects are thus mixed with no clear alignments. Respondents who are Orthodox, who trust Belarusian media, who say that television or social media/internet is their main news source, and who hold traditional values “marriage should be only between a man and a woman” are significantly less likely to support neutrality than their counterparts. While it may seem self-evident that a rejection of neutrality would favor a pro-Russia foreign policy, other models (below) do not show such consistency. Among the significant positive predictors, residents of Minsk and those who prefer Western movies line up with expectations about support for neutrality but contrastingly, those who hold that “NGOs are foreign agents” and that “husbands only should make important decisions in a marriage” also show significant positive effects. As with other models (below), the consistency of effects on a gamut of Western liberal, reformist, younger and Minsk residents at one end of a scale to a pro-Russian, older, Eastern residents, conservative, and supportive of the Lukashenka regime at the other does not appear in the modeling.

Best foreign policy option for Belarus – Join the EU, Stay in the EAEU or Close to Both.

Surveys around foreign policy decisions tend to concentrate on support or opposition to specific governmental actions – such as joining a military alliance or economic bloc, reversing a long-standing position towards a particular country, or engaging in military actions. (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987). Surveys about general orientations and perceptions of individual states are comparatively rare (O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail and Kolossov, 2005, 2006), though many post-911 surveys asked Americans about the threat of international terrorism. We recognize that non-specific geopolitical views can be malleable, unstable and often ill-informed and therefore, we opted to include a question in the Belarus survey that directly posed a policy choice among four options: a) stay in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) dominated by Russia and in which

Belarus was a founding member in 2014; b) join the European Union like neighbors Poland, Latvia and Lithuania; and c) remain close to both the EAEU and EU, which can be seen as a restatement of a neutral position. We do not examine the fourth option here – that of staying out of all unions. By focusing separately on support for the three options of international membership, we can identify the characteristics of respondents supporting or opposing each one (Table 2). The coefficients (odds ratios) for the predictors can be compared within each model or they can be compared more generally across the three models. Thus, if an odds ratio was large for the model of EU membership, one would expect an opposite value for remaining in the EAEU. A quick glance across the rows for individual predictors shows that this expectation does not hold consistently, further evidence of the instability of opinion about direct foreign policy choices for Belarus.

Joining the EU as one of the foreign policy options has only small minority support (14.5%) in Belarus. Respondents whose preferences generally lean West would be expected to support this move. The model fit is good with a R^2 of 0.531 and a correctly classified score of 81.3%. Only the education predictor at 1.230 (those with a higher education more likely to support EU membership) fits this expectation. Other high odds ratios, all running counter to expectations, are seen for those trusting the Belarusian media (1.433), those who think that “NGOs are foreign agents” (1.657) and respondents with Russian nationality (2.774). Among those not supporting EU membership are an expected set of respondents – those preferring Western movies (0.743), better off families (0.672), those who think that “the end of the Soviet Union was a right step” (0.519) and those who think that “democracy is the best political system” (0.737). Not in line with expectations about who would support EU membership are residents of the East (0.794), those who say that their mood was poor (0.759), those who think that “marriage should only be between a man and a woman” (0.629) and those with an interest in politics (0.666).

This ostensible inconsistency in foreign policy preferences among Belarusians is repeated in the odds ratios for the model for remaining in the EAEU. The fit of the model is weakest among the

three options modeled with a R^2 of .148 and a percentage correctly classified of 61.8%. Predictors are inconsistent but generally, the views on this question do not seem as polarized as on other options. As expected, not staying in the EAEU is supported by respondents with higher educational attainment (0.859 odds ratio), by those who think “democracy is the best political system” (0.722), and by those who think that “the end of the Soviet Union was a right step” (0.711). Other high positive odds ratios for leaving the EAEU that are not in line with expectations for residents of the East, those who think “a secret group controls world affairs”, those of Russian nationality, and those who trust Belarusian media. Support for staying in the EAEU is more in line with expectations with high odds ratios for those whose main information source is television (1.338) and those whose family material status is lower (1.326).

Because opting for a policy that is “close to both the EU and the EAEU” is an expression of neutrality or at least, a preference for a non-aligned position for Belarus, we would expect that the predictors would be similar to the values (size and direction) for the neutrality model. This is generally the case and the overall model fit is good with a R^2 of .414 and a percentage correctly classified at 77.9%. Expected positive relationships for this ‘in-between’ position are seen for those who think that “the end of the Soviet Union was a right step” (1.623) and those who think that “democracy is the best political system” (1.459). Opposition to this position of remaining close to both organizations would be expected for those inclined to support Belarusian for EU membership as well as for staying in the EAEU. Values for Belarusians that generally agree with government positions – those who think the country is going in the right direction, those for whom social media/internet or television is the main news source, and those who believe that “NGOs are foreign agents” – are opposed to this more neutral geopolitical stance. Like other models, while the fit is good, the relationships are frequently opposite to expectations and reflect a society where strong and stable geopolitical preferences were not evident at the end of 2019 - beginning of 2020.

Where do Belarusians want to be? Geopolitical orientation preferences.

Our most general question about the geopolitical orientations of Belarusians asked where on an eleven-point scale from 0 (West) to 10 (Russia) they wished their country to be placed. All points on the scale got some support with both a greater concentration in the center – again reflecting the preferences of about one-quarter to one-third of the sample to sit between the two poles – and a definite greater leaning towards Russia than towards the West near the ends of the scale. We understand that the bi-directional prompt does not completely capture the possible wider range of choices but with the options arrayed on a scale in this way, respondents who wished to avoid a West-Russia choice could hypothetically place their preferences in the center. About 9% of respondents could not decide or 1% refused to answer this question. Since the outcome variable in this instance is an interval scale, we opted to use a linear regression model with the same predictors as the logit models of policy choices for the analysis. The results are presented graphically in Figure 1a and 1b.

We present both the unstandardized and standardized coefficients so that the effect in terms of changes on the West-Russia scale as well as the relative size effect of each predictor can be visualized. The graphs display both expected and unexpected patterns in line with the results in the logit models. The black bars on the right side of the zero line on the unstandardized graph (Figure 1a) show the factors that move the preferences towards Russia while the grey bars on the left show the opposite effect towards the West.

The biggest pro-Russia effect moving the scale five points is seen for those who watch television as their main information source (compared to those who use other information sources). A similar effect is also visible for the users of social media/internet (a four point shift). Other dramatic influences are residence in the East or in Minsk and gender; females lean more to Russia (by three points) compared to males. This gender effect is clearly related to age as women are disproportionately older in the sample and the joint effect can be seen in the standardized coefficient graph (Figure 1b) where age is the largest effect. This socialization of the Soviet generation is still reflected in the pro-Russian position. Trust in Vladimir Putin also shows up dramatically on the standardized coefficients graph.

Three of the greatest effects that move the needle towards the West are expected but others are not. Respondents who believe that “democracy is the best political system” are five points more like to aspire to the West than those who prefer other political systems. A shift of two points each is seen for those who prefer Western movies and for those who think that “the end of the Soviet Union was a right step.” But social conservatives (“marriage should only be between a man and a woman”) and individuals who believe in conspiracies (“NGOs are secret agents” and “a secret group controls global affairs”) also shift preferences to the West. Most surprising of the effects is that for those who say that ‘Belarus is moving in the right direction’ – their impact shifts more than three points to the West.

Since the units for the predictors of the West-Russia orientation are measured on very different scales, the standardized coefficients in Figure 1b shows their comparative importance. Here the effect of trust in Putin is important in promoting aspiration to Russia as well as the demographic predictors of age, gender, and residence in the East and in Minsk. The nature of the information source is also important for the pro-Russian view for both television and social media sources. The variables “Belarus is moving in the right direction”, the conservative view that “marriage should only be between a man and a woman” and the two conspiracies unexpectedly are correlated with pro-West positionality. Other variables shifting attitudes to the West are in line with expectations. Richer people, those with more education, those who think that “democracy is the best political system”, those who think “the end of the Soviet Union was a right step”, and those who prefer Western movies are all more likely to aspire to the West.

It is evident from these regressions of both foreign policy options and more latent preferences for Belarus’ orientation on a West-Russia scale that Belarusians have not yet cemented their preferences in the same way as majorities in other post-Communist societies along demographic, ideological and attitudinal cleavages. While we identified many expected correlates that reflect the evolving social and economic conditions that began to coalesce in

Belarus over the past five years. Whether these changes will result in (geo)political preferences that match expected placements as is the case in other post-Soviet states (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2021) is still an open question.

“GEOGRAPHY WILL NOT CHANGE”

It is a convention among strategic analysts to declare that Belarus's fate is determined by its location next to the Russian Federation and that its geography will not change (Higgins 2020). This commonplace comment, however, is deeply misleading. Geography is not solely a matter of absolute location on a map. It is always also a matter of relative location, in Belarus's case to shifting power centers and geoeconomic blocs. Further, it is a matter of perceived location, the prevailing cultural sense among a population of a region or state as to who they are and where they see themselves in the world. This is geopolitical culture, and it is never static. This is particularly so when a country is led by a wily dictator like Alexander Lukashenka who has proven extremely resourceful in tacking his geopolitical rhetoric to maneuver against whatever headwinds facing him.

This paper presents the results of a nationally representative survey in Belarus conducted at the outset of 2020. A global pandemic and the largest anti-government protests in Belarus's history followed later in the year before the repressive state apparatus imposed itself upon those aspiring for domestic political change in Belarus. In its acute moment of crisis, the Lukashenka dictatorship was rescued by Russian advisers, equipment and, most of all, massive financial support. The price for this support is unfolding. Belarus is currently being consolidated anew into a Russian sphere of influence. Economic integration is advancing apace while Belarusians abroad are being pressured to return to their homeland, or persecuted. An existing geopolitical divide between the European Union and Belarus has only hardened in the last year, with high profile airspace and land border conflicts (Dixon 2021, Katz, Olson et al. 2021). On the one-year anniversary of the 2020 election Lukashenka raged against West (Nechepurenko and Hopkins 2021). But Belarus looks a lot less sovereign as a state today than it did in 2019, with a potential

Union state with Russia once again in advanced planning (Kremlin 2021). On the other hand, no one is as practiced as Lukashenka in maneuvering against any Russian assimilation.

The question that interests the transatlantic epistemic community on Belarus is whether Russia has paid a reputational price for its rescue of Lukashenka among those ordinary Belarusians who aspired to see him depart. Other papers in this special issue take up that question and it will undoubtedly be a focus of future research efforts. What the results of our survey at the outset of Belarus's "year of living dangerously" underscore is that there was considerable fluidity and incoherence in the geopolitical attitudes of ordinary Belarusians. The consolidated anti-Russian and pro-West orientation that we see in other post-Soviet states, like Ukraine and Georgia, did not exist in Belarus to anything near the same extent. Unlike those other two states, which experienced traumatic invasions by the Russian military and the loss of sovereignty over certain parts of their state territory, Belarus did not have a salient traumatic negative event involving Russia. Is Russia's rescue of Lukashenka now such an event, a rupture that will generate a clear geopolitical divide that reaches deep into society? Or is this a question that reflects our own preoccupations and biases and not the concerns of ordinary Belarusians? This is a matter that requires research open to the empirical complexities of Belarus that we have identified. Belarus today under Lukashenka is an active frontline player in the confrontation between Euro-Atlantic institutions and the Russian Federation. Aspirations for 'in-betweenness' and 'multidirectionality' in foreign policy have been sacrificed to personal survival. Confrontation lines have spread further across European post-Soviet space and there is little prospect of them easing any time soon.

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Table 1- Distributions of the Responses to the Outcomes and Predictors

Variable	
"Neutrality is best for Belarus"	Yes 78.8%; No 18.0%; DK/refuse 3.2%
Best option for Belarus	EU 14.5%; Stay in EAEU 29.8%; Close relations with both 40.3%; Not join any Union 9.1%;
Where Belarus should be (scale)	0(West) 1.1%; 1 3.4%; 2 4.0%; 3 7.3%; 4 6.3%; 5 16.1%; 6 6.6%; 7 14.5%; 8 12.3%; 9 11.5%; 10 (Russia) 5.8%; DK/refuse 11.1%
Gender	Men 45.0%; Women 55.0%
Age	Mean age 45; Age 18-30 20.3% age 31-45 28.3%; age 46-60 25.3%; over 60 26.1%
Education	Below secondary 26.3%; Secondary 38.4%; Post secondary 36.3%
Nationality	Belarusian 87.5%; Russian 8.9%; Other 3.6%
Mood	Wonderful 18.8%; Average 66.6%; Stressful 12.6%; Fearful 2.0%
Family Material Status	Not enough for food 5.9%; Enough for food 22.1%; Enough for food/clothes 57.4%; Can buy some expensive goods 13.2%; Can buy anything 0.6%; DK/refuse 0.8%
Religion	Non-believer 31.4%; Orthodox 56.8%; Catholic 6.0%; Other/refuse 5.2%
Regional distribution	Minsk 21.7%; East 35.1%; West 28.0%; Center 15.2%
Interest in Politics	Very interested 6.7%; Sometimes 45.2%; Not interested 47.4%; DK/refuse 0.7%
Information Main Source	Television 51.3%; Social media/internet 43.3%; Other 4.0%; DK/refuse 0.2%
Trust Belarusian media	No trust 23.7%; A little 59.9%; A lot 13.5%; DK/refuse 2.8%
Trust Vladimir Putin	No trust 18.3%; A little 36.3%; A lot 39.3%; DK/refuse 6.1%
Preference in Movies	Western 26.6%; Russian 32.5%; Soviet 34.8%; Other 3.8%; DK/refuse 2.0%
Best Political System	Soviet 31.9%; Current Belarus 14.5%; Democratic 31.8%; Russian 13.9% DK/refuse 7.9%
Direction of Belarus	Right direction 21.6%; Wrong direction 51.8%; DK/refuse 19.6%
"NGOs are foreign agents"	Agree 18.5%; Neither agree nor disagree 29.6%; Disagree 21.4%; Dk/refuse 30.5%
"Secret group running the world"	Agree 29.5%; Neither agree nor disagree 30.0%; Disagree 21.9%; DK/refuse 18.6%
"Marriage should be only a man and woman"	Agree 94.5%; Neither agree nor disagree 2.8%; Disagree 2.4%; DK/refuse 0.3%
"Husbands should make the important decisions"	Agree 34.5%; Neither agree nor disagree 35.1%; Disagree 28.8% DK/refuse 1.5%
End of USSR -right or wrong step?	Right step 29.1%; Wrong step 56.7%; DK/refuse 14.2%

Table 2: Odds Ratios for Predictive Logistic Regression Models of Support for Foreign Policies

Predictor	Neutrality best	Stay in EAEU	Join EU	Close to both
Trust in Vladimir Putin	1.006	0.993	1.009	0.997
End of SU Right Move	1.057	0.711	0.519	1.623
Social Media Main Source	0.853	1.108	0.882	0.536
TV Main Source	0.787	1.338	1.117	0.426
Prefer Western Movies	1.239	1.128	0.743	0.713
Trust Belarus Media	0.879	0.722	1.433	0.935
Belarus in Right Direction	1.020	1.024	1.095	0.678
“Secret group in control”	1.055	0.840	0.723	1.349
“Marriage only between Man & Woman”	0.725	1.075	0.629	1.147
“Husband should make important decisions”	1.257	1.051	0.928	0.945
“NGOs are foreign agents”	1.285	1.109	1.657	0.825
Interest in Politics	0.972	0.988	0.666	1.267
Democracy is Best System	1.233	0.722	0.737	1.459
Russian Nationality	0.951	0.413	2.774	0.965
Age	0.991	0.992	1.023	0.988
Female	0.927	0.945	0.946	0.999
Education	1.007	0.859	1.230	0.903
Family Economic Situation	1.156	1.326	0.672	0.868
Mood	1.213	1.181	0.759	1.010
Orthodox religion	0.750	0.859	1.235	0.961
Minsk resident	1.413	1.024	0.951	0.972
East resident	1.459	1.227	0.764	0.937
% correctly classified (cut .667)	76.9	61.8	81.4	77.9
Nagelkerke R ²	.310	.148	.528	.414

Figure 1a: Unstandardized Coefficients (Odds Ratios) of Linear Model of West-Russia Preferences

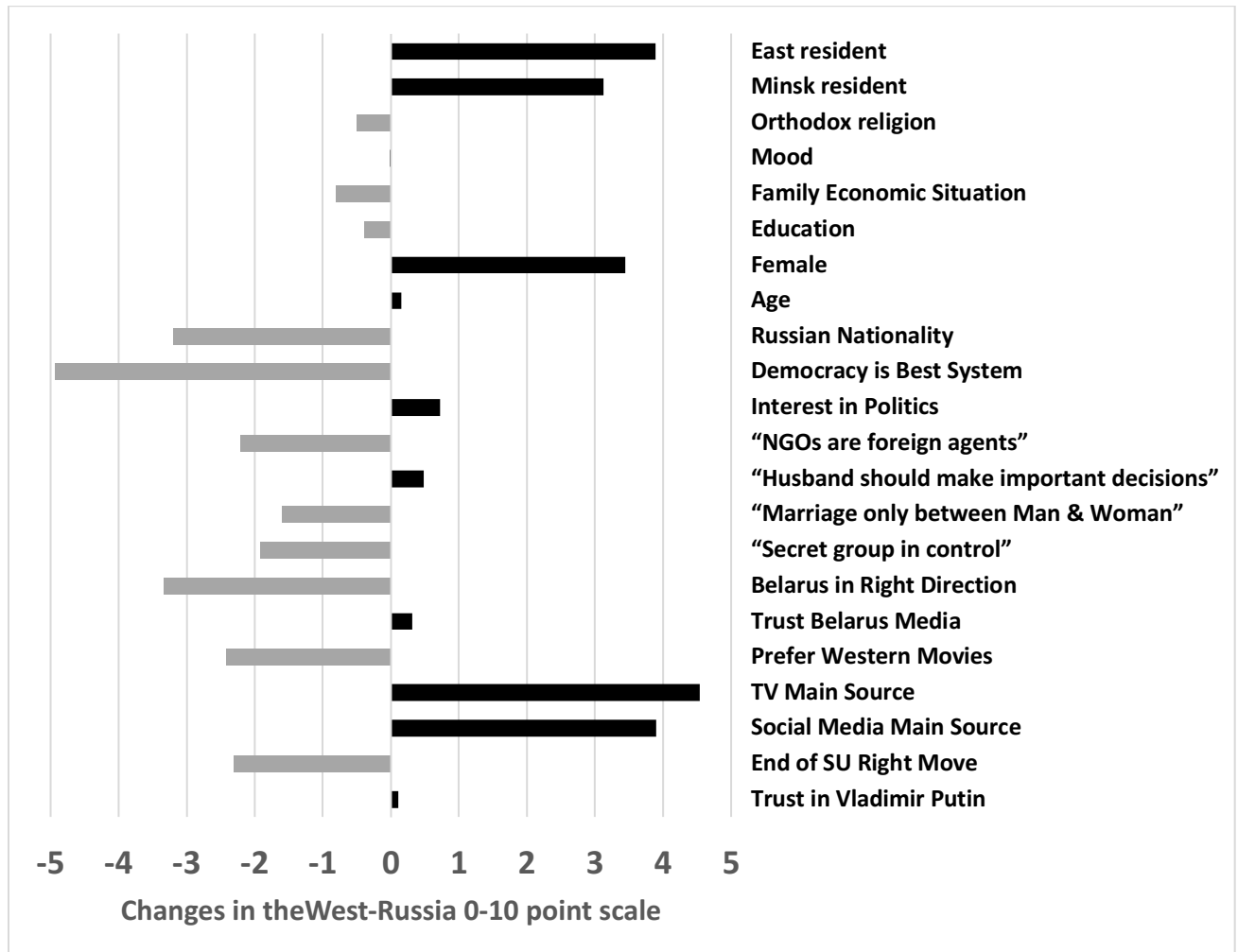


Figure 1b: Standardized Regression Coefficients for Linear Model of West-Russia preferences

