

1. What does Europe mean to you?

Volha Abramava

I cannot say that Europe is our everything. But it should be in a given context. Europe means cultural values, general values, something what is important to a majority of the population. A human life is short. Our citizens do want to have an average European income and strong social support, which is also common in many European countries. But it is important to preserve our authenticity, everything what is typical of Belarusian culture (I do not take into account the political aspects of opposition, as in today's life it is strongly interconnected, that watershed on which pretensions of both parties trespass.). I only wish Europeans understood better Belarus' peculiarities, its national character.

As a politician, I look beyond the boundaries of a human life. When I became a politician, I started thinking what our country should be in 50 years. I set a target. I believe that Belarus should become a normal European country with high living standards and highly comfortable life in 50 years. The only things that I do not want us to borrow from Europe are European bureaucracy and certain philistine values. Most Belarusians, particularly those who were to Europe many times, see European living standards as a target to achieve. But as for everyday life and beliefs, I wish people had a critical attitude to information they get. I wish they did not accept media

reports blindly and moved further after achieving something. I wish they lived a more interesting life than an average European. It is not something what a politician can offer to people. I just wish people had a big interest in life and not only material values were of a paramount importance to them. Obviously, in any country, people foremost think about their family. They think how to increase its consumption, how to protect their folk, how to provide a good education for their children and how to ensure a decent life for elders. But as an extravert person with choleric temperament, I wish people had an inexhaustible interest in life and continued looking for new goals to achieve and new peaks to conquer until growing very old.

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

The longer I live in Europe, the less I understand what it is. I have stayed there for five years already, in France, Germany and now in Sweden.

This is a more or less perfectly arranged place on Earth where a human life is of the highest value. In the East, state matters take precedence. A survival philosophy is currently dominant in the former Soviet republics. America is an empire. Europe has normal human dimensions; it is designed for human beings.

Yauhen Babosau

Europe is the most extraordinary continent in the world. Why? Because Christian culture on which modern knowledge and modern technologies, the present-day idea of what state, man and his love are based was made in Europe. That's why Europe is the core that gave birth to the entire Christianity-based modern civilization. In this sense, Europe is the mother of modern civilization, modern culture. Civilization is a broader notion than culture, as it embraces culture and science... Europe is the nucleus of modern civilization built on the basis of Christianity and its various interpretations, including Marxism and atheism.

Anzhalika Borys

Europe is a cultural and historic area where peoples coexist, share the same values and rules, and recognize the unique contribution of every nation to the European civilization.

Iryna Buhrova

As for me, I've been 'spoiled' by scientific knowledge, 'spoiled' by an endless stream of information from books that I read on the subject of how the notion 'Europe' and 'European mentality' appeared, whether it is more about geography or political functions. It includes the formation of Europe, the period when its territory took final shape, the creation and destruction of bloc systems, cultural, religious and ethnic aspects, i.e. virtually everything! Europe itself remains a quite vague notion so far. There's much discussion on the matter, and I can't stay away from this, I've been too deeply involved in this...

For me, Europe is connected with a certain area. Certainly, geographical identification plays an important role, but it is the mode of thinking that comes to the fore. Now when we speak about Europe and say 'European consciousness', 'European culture', 'European values', we, of course, refer to the cultural background, history and establish how Europe was formed, on what cultural codes this process was based. For me, above all, these cultural codes have the Christian origin plus some Moresque, Muslim and Balkan features. It also includes Slavic, Baltic and Scandinavian elements, and everything that is connected with the cultures of other tribes and peoples.

And the religious context also is important. It was the two powerful Christian branches that made Europe what it is now. And I cannot but say that Europe accepted and absorbed (especially in southern parts – in the Balkan region, Spain, Portugal) some elements of Muslim culture. And we cannot but notice this.

For me, as Bulgarian Maria Todorova, a professor at Paris University, said, Europe is a notion of variable geometry. That means, you draw your

own figure, make your own sculpture depending on from what point you see this. Maybe, that's why some still wish to regard Europe as a broader notion and add Russia, in particular its European part. But by adding Russia, we are losing Europe.

On the other hand, the European nucleus emerged in western and central parts of Europe – on the level of small states that, first, entered some alliances, were parts of a large empire but played their important roles. I'd like to avoid politics, but this is impossible because Europe, unlike Africa, for instance, is a very politicized structure.

That's why Europe for me is a sense of belonging to a certain culture in which I feel at ease, in which I like languages and like the value of the person. The value of the person is very important. It should not become absolute anthropocentrism, but the person should be respected as the highest level of divine creation.

That means Europe is a multi-level notion for me, but it is the cultural and mental aspects that are most important.

Henadz Buraukin

In short, I associate Europe with democracy and civilization, which is suitable for Belarus. Why? Due to historical reasons. The country was part of the European civilization, geographically and spiritually, although the Belarusians were not very lucky and did not have good opportunities to fulfill their spiritual potential. I must recall the great contribution of [Francišak] Skaryna¹ and Hussowski² to the European civilization.

¹ Francišak Skaryna (or Skoryna; the first name also spelled as Francis, Franciszak, Frantsizak, Francisk, Frantzisk, Francysk; Belarusian: Францішак (Францыск) Скарына) was a Belarusian famous for being the printer of the first book, the Psalter, in Belarusian in 1517 in Prague.

² Mikołaj Hussowski (Belarusian: Мікалай (Мікола) Гусоўскі; 1470–1533). Notable Renaissance poet and humanist, cultural and social activist.

Kalinowski³ and Wróblewski⁴ are notable for their role in the establishment of democracy in Europe. These figures were sons of that civilization in Belarus and were also physically involved in European processes. Skaryna was recognized as an outstanding figure in Italy, the Czech Republic and other European countries. Wróblewski is known for his role in the French revolution, without which democratic traditions that saw both tragic and glorious days would not exist. I mentioned just two figures. But when I look back at our history and recall all sons that Belarus gave to other nations, its presence in Europe is undisputable. I associate democracy laws with Belarus – this is something most interesting and unique that the European civilization gave to humanity.

Ales Byalyatski

Europe means a lot to me. Ninety percent of information that I have learnt to date – at school, from books, history etc – is linked to Europe. The information is about European culture, literature, history and other aspects of the great civilization. The younger cultures of settlers (American, Canadian and Australian), which have European roots, are more simplistic versions and copies of the real civilization, although we can comprehend them also. What is the difference between bread baked in a home oven and at a big bakery? There is roughly the same difference between European and American cultures.

³ Konstanty Kalinowski (also known under his Belarusian name of Кастусь Каліноўскі; 1838–1864) was a writer, journalist, lawyer and revolutionary. He was one of the leaders of the January Uprising (1863) in the territory of the present Belarus.

⁴ Walery Antoni Wróblewski (1836–1908) was an associate of Kalinowski. He took part and was wounded in the January Uprising and later fled to France. He was a Paris Commune general, commander of the southern front, in 1871.

Pavel Daneyka

To me, European means Christianity, rationalism and dialog.

Andrey Dynko

This means homeland for me. My father was born on the left bank of the River Bug which is now part of Poland and the European Union. And my mother was born on the right bank of the Bug. Both were born 10 kilometers away from Brest. However, I need a Polish visa to visit my fatherland today. The Stalin-set border along the Bug had existed almost never before. This Stalin-set border forced massive relocations. My grandfather and dad had to move from their birthplace as Orthodox Christians headed back to Belarus and Catholics moved to Poland. And it was not until the 1990s that we could get there and see the place where my father had grown up.

As I grew up I listened to my parents' and grandmother's stories about the River Bug. The Bug for me is some kind of a mystic river which I have never seen because it was surrounded by barbed wire on the Soviet border and one could not get near to it. I believe that one day all this barbed wire on the Stalin-set border between Belarus and Poland will be removed.

I come from the place where cultures were mixed, and that is why Europe is a spiritual rather than a geographic notion for me.

The European idea for me is above all the idea of solidarity. The idea of solidarity of various nations, various people who share common values. Not only common economic or political interests, but also values. That is why Europe means values for me.

Valery Fralou

Europe is part of a continent that is home to Western and Eastern European countries, which, having united into the European Union and expanded it, are guided by certain approaches (which are often adopted

by joint decisions) that help the countries live in affluence, considerably develop their economies and secure very high social standards thanks to it. In this part of Europe (I am speaking about Eastern and Western Europe) democracy and universal human values (which are often blasted and called differently in our country) have become a well-established standard thanks to people's multiyear struggle (including for their own rights).

But, unfortunately, in my view, Europe's pace of development has slowed down. Once Mayakovsky said, 'Capitalism had been a good guy until he was afraid that he may stain his clothes'. And now again a certain part of Europe is resting on its oars, while all dirty work is done by immigrants, non-Europeans. And this creates certain tensions in these countries. Although, if we compare the United States with Europe, the latter is more democratic, closer to us and has milder manifestations of democracy than the United States which is making much effort to help even those countries that do not want to become a democracy. In our country Communists also wanted to grab everyone by their ears and force them into Communism. If a person is not ready yet, why force him into something? And so they tore the ears off, and sometimes severed the heads together with ears, and so people disappeared. The United States, perhaps, is taking too harsh steps (Europe is acting more gently) to force everyone into democracy and freedom of speech, and create civil society.

Of course, I would like Asia to have democratic countries, but milder methods should be used for that. A pupil cannot be transferred from the first directly to the eighth grade and feel at ease there. What methods should be employed? Probably, a dialog is needed. Probably, certain assistance is needed. Probably, they can also display their strength to a certain extent, but this is a very sensitive and delicate matter. I guess it is a sense of delicacy that the United States lacks.

Svyatlana Kalinkina

I consider Belarus to be a European country both geographically and historically. That is why Europe is a greater motherland and Belarus is a smaller homeland to me.

Syarhey Kalyakin

Europe is a continent. Europe is one of the world's largest interstate alliances (I mean the European Union). Europe is a concentration of problems in human history. On the other hand, it is the top standard in many areas of society, politics and economy.

Kasya Kamotskaya

Europe is a cultural or socio-cultural notion. I was in England – the country is different from the rest of Europe. Europe is a sort of cultural community.

With open borders between all countries, Europe is no longer a geographic notion. I do not agree that Europe stretches as far as the Urals. To me, Belarus' eastern border is the end of Europe.

Syarhey Kasttsyan

Europe to me is a geographical notion because of diverse culture and history. Southern, Eastern, Northern and Eastern Europe have different cultures, histories, customs and traditions. Only an ignorant person would say that Europe is a single civilization. The representation of Europe as a common civilization insults European peoples. To me, Europe is a conglomerate of diverse cultures, histories, languages, customs and traditions.

Vyachaslau Kebich

Europe means my native country, Belarus. They are inseparable. When addressing politicians and businesspeople at a Crans Montana Forum in Switzerland, I said stop dividing Europe into eastern and western parts. There is just one Europe. No one divides Asia into East and West Asia. This is one continent that does not need to be divided into southern, eastern or northern parts. My proposals, in general, met with an understanding among politicians, including politicians from Western Europe.

Europe is a single economic space, a community of people having a long-established relationship with each other. It is an old community – it does not matter, are you French, Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian – between people having mutual contacts.

Zhanna Litsvina

Answering this question, I could have mentioned an absolutely different level of European politics, European values etc. But to me Europe is a society without the mad, insane, immoral propaganda and brainwashing. For me this is a distinctive feature of European civilization where no one imposes stereotypes, a way of life or thinking on others.

I am outraged by the presence of this unprincipled propaganda machine, which imposes its views on the people.

Anatol Lyabedzka

Opposition protesters in Belarus used to chant, 'Belarus to Europe!' I think time has come to change that slogan for 'Europe to Belarus!' It means that the first thing Belarus should do is to implant European values.

Europe is associated with European values in the first place. As for possible membership of the EU, my position slightly differs from the classic one. When we meet European politicians in Brussels and Strasbourg, we

are always trying to persuade them that Belarus is a European nation. This is right, but present-day realities require a different approach to the issue of EU membership. It is a weak position to ask the EU to admit Belarus. The Belarusians must make an effort to qualify for EU membership. The adoption of European values – an opportunity for the people to elect their government and the separation of powers – is the first step in integration into European Union.

The second step, which also depends on the Belarusians, not on European officials in Brussels, Strasbourg or some other city, is to adopt European standards in economy and daily life. When we will adopt these standards – I mean separation of authorities, presidential and deputies' elections, not nomination, and economical and everyday standards...

If Belarus made these two steps, politicians would not need to curry favor with Brussels. The country would assert its right to be a European nation. We will say: 'We are Europeans, we have European history, the first written constitution has been created here'.

There are many examples that prove that Belarus belongs to European civilization. The world's first constitution was written on this land. But these are things of the past. Our generation should make an effort to meet European standards. Then it would be much easier to negotiate with the EU. Then we would say, 'We meet the Copenhagen criteria adopted by the EU. We are a European nation with European roots and our place is within this alliance'.

That is how I see Europe and prospects of relations between Belarus and the EU. Europe means values, standards and common efforts to address all problems concerning politics, security, economy etc.

Vasil Lyavonau

This is my country, the land of my parents and grandparents, 'my sweet homeland' after Yakub Kolas.

Aleh Manayeu

I put both a geographic and cultural sense on this notion. Geographically, it is a continent on which we all live and at the center of which Belarus is situated. Many continental features, such as the landscape, climate and so on, are also important. But, of course, Europe is above all a cultural notion. In other words, this is a system of certain values that emerged and began developing in ancient times. This is the system of values that the entire Western world is based on.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

I have a small homeland, Belarus, but Europe is my big homeland. I consider myself a citizen of Europe, the cradle of culture, in which Belarus has been developing. Europe to me is a great civilization above all. Belarus is waiting for an opportunity to return where we belong.

Anatol Mikhailau

Apart from the fact that Europe is a geographic continent, Europe has vaguely formulated historic, cultural and intellectual distinctions from other civilizations. A European identity does not boil down to a set of certain features. European cultural values have passed from generation to generation for many centuries. The 20th century was marked by unprecedented radical reassessments of the notion of Europe, which shaped for more than 2000 years. As a result, what recently seemed to have a clear meaning and vital force has become much more complicated to grasp.

Ales Mikhalevich

To me, Europe means common cultural values that unite people living chiefly in the geographical space of Europe. To me, Europe is the concept of values and culture rather than of a geographical entity.

Tatsyana Protska

Europe is a museum that holds the best heritage that the humankind amassed throughout its civilized evolution. Europe is an excellent example of what humankind can achieve if it follows certain principles of the rule of law, democracy and human rights.

Europe is a place where a new system of human values has been formulated and implemented. This is the place where people live like I would like to live.

Andrey Sannikau

Europe for me is above all culture, history, traditions reflected in architecture, music, museums. While visiting the latter, one can realize that it is truly something expressive, peculiar, which differs from Asian, North and Latin Americas not only geographically but, what is more important, from the point of view of culture and civilization.

Stanislau Shushkevich

Europe is a certain type of civilization. It is not the same everywhere as it is composed of a number of cultures, so to say. But it has finally become common culture. I thought it is based on Christian values until recently, but now I know that it is a broader notion.

The Europe that I know from books differs significantly from the Europe I've seen with my own eyes. So, this is a type of civilization that imposed this civilization on the entire world to a great extent.

Uladimir Ulakhovich

It means part of common living space to me. It means a common European house to be more precise as to general intentions, desires and pros-

pects. Perhaps, the idea is trivial and does not sound that much romantic as it used to in 1989.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

Europe is the cradle of ancient Greek and Christian civilizations to which I and my ancestors belong. Modern Europe inherited human values from that common civilization.

Andrey Vardamatski

Europe is a world of wise mutual tolerance. Tolerance characteristic of Belarusians too. The rightists and leftists, conservatives and liberals, representatives of various movements peacefully coexist with each other philosophically and politically. They cross swords at discussions only. People do not get arrested or called 'thugs' for a different opinion.

This is an advantage, but this is also a disadvantage because the decision-making process in Europe does not keep pace with modern requirements. The process of obtaining approval for decisions from 25 countries does not meet effective management standards. All positive things have negative aspects. I would not elaborate on trivial things like Europe is an older culture than North America. Although, the latter has its advantages.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

First, I should point out what Europe does not mean to me. It does not mean that a European identity is an all-sufficient notion. The European identity is manifested through national identities. What Europe means to me? Europe is where we belong mentally and culturally (it is nothing exotic).

Usevalad Yancheuski

Europe is a word that has many meanings. There are words in our language that people use in various senses at their own discretion. They understand them as they want.

When saying 'Europe', many above all mean Western or Central Europe, countries with Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions.

The citizens of Russia however feel different. They like to call themselves Europeans and they often say exultantly that Russia is part of Europe. There are also many people in Belarus who will be offended if someone tells them that they are not Europeans. If you tell such a thing to a Ukrainian he will not do any business with you altogether.

I personally intend the narrower meaning when saying 'Europe'.

We may endlessly tell ourselves that we are Europeans and that everything should be European here.

But our own language betrays us. When we go to Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark or Spain we say that we go to Europe. A Frenchman, for instance, will never say that he goes to Europe when leaving for Germany. I can cite a lot more such 'slips of the tongue'.

Even at a linguistic level, we subconsciously DO NOT ASSOCIATE ourselves with Europe, while the language and linguistics are very precise and very sensitive things. It often reveals what we cannot or do not want to acknowledge.