

2. Is Belarus (as it is) part of Europe? May be it should strive for it? What Belarus should do to achieve that goal? (Do you consider Europe a community based on common values or a geographic location?)

Volha Abramava

It depends on what criteria we use. Geographically, it is surely part of Europe. From the point of view of history and the contribution Belarus has made to European culture, it is also surely part of Europe. From the point of view of European bureaucracy, it is not. From the point of view of dominating public opinion in European countries, it is surely not. I do not think the situation is so dramatic as claimed by one side. Nor do I think that it is so superb as claimed by the other. I always tell people (particularly when talking with Western partners) that Belarus is a country which is not that much good as state-run media writes but also not that much bad as private newspapers say. There is a dynamic movement here, not a static one or stagnation as many allege.

Try to look at Belarus from a different angle. This point of view also has the right to existence. There is no absolute truth. I have a diploma in philosophy and I am calmer about many things compared with other people who wish to get everything here and now in both politics and economy. I will accept installments!

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

Belarus is not yet part of Europe. This is a deformed post-Soviet space plagued by various problems. A small group of intellectuals have formulated ideas on what this place should be like, pro-European ideas, but they have not yet been fully embraced by the people. Belarus is a very fragmented nation. I am half-Ukrainian. When I go to a Ukrainian village, I feel that Ukraine is a wholesome, integral nation. In our country, Russian influence is strongly felt in the east and Polish influence is felt in the west.

Belarus has not yet started moving closer to Europe. The country is still in the old socialist time. May be it is not so bad, because we have avoided Russian-style savage capitalism.

Yauhen Babosau

Belarus is part of Europe both in terms of geography, civilization and culture. And it's not on the outskirts as some say. And it is neither a 'black hole' as some think. Belarus is Belarus. This is a normal country that has big traditions, that has its national culture and its basic Belarusian values, including tolerance, scrupulousness, well-wishing and hard work. These are the values of a people that has preserved its independence from various invasions and annexations to Poland, Lithuania and Russia. It is these traditional Belarusian values dating back to the times of Euphrosyne of Polatsk and Cyril of Turau that make Belarus what it is. Both Euphrosyne of Polatsk and Cyril of Turau are European-level personalities. I'm not saying about the Great Duchy of Lithuania⁵, the Lithuanian Statute written in Belarusian. This is what cemented Europe in spiritual sense. And Euphrosyne of Polatsk and Cyril of Turau, the Statute and the Polatsk Duchy is the level

⁵ The Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Lithuanian: Lietuvos Didžioji Kunigaikštystė, Belarusian: Вялікае Княства Літоўскае (ВКЛ), Ukrainian: Велике Князівство Литовське (ВКЛ), Polish: Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie) was an Eastern European state, which covered the territory of present-day Belarus, Lithuania and parts of Poland, Russia and Ukraine during the period of its greatest extent in the 15th century.

of the 10th–11st centuries when Belarus was Belarus and was in Europe and played a notable role. I don't think that it was much behind Germany, which was split in many pieces at that time, or France. Maybe, France had a bit different culture but everything was OK at that time.

At the same time, Belarus was first under Polish and then under Russian rule, and there was some neglect of the Belarusian language, Belarusian national culture, there were no universities here except for the one in Vilnius. Belarus did suffer in this sense. But not because it did not want, it simply had no social and economic conditions to create a university like Sorbonne or Cambridge in Britain. And what about Francišak Skaryna or Symon Budny⁶? These are European-level figures. Hence, Belarus was, remains and will be Europe. And it will never cease to be part of it. And it should not.

Some European Union members described the EU borders as the eastern frontiers of Europe. But the EU tends to develop. And if Russia joins the EU, Belarus also will sooner or later. How can it be other way? If, say, Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland are there, where will Belarus be? It also will be part of the European Union.

It is a normal European country, no worse than others. I've been to many countries, including almost to all European. Belarus is no worse than Slovenia, Slovakia or the Czech Republic... It may be behind such large countries like Germany and France but it looks no worse than other 10-million nations. It [looks] even better than some in certain aspects! It does not need to get into Europe, it is in Europe! Some European countries like Hungary, Bulgaria, especially like Romania, have much to learn from us. I know these countries as far as it concerns their culture, civilization, science, and routine behavior. They now broadcast flooding footage from Romania – how poorly they live! People in our country lived like this 20 or 15 years ago when there was chaos here.

What should Belarus do? It should remain as it is now, develop its national traditions, devote more attention to the Belarusian language (more than it does now) and national culture. More attention should be given to

⁶ Symon Budny (Belarusian: Сымон Будны, Polish: Szymon Budny; 1530–1593) – a humanist, educator, philosopher and historian.

such great figures like Bykau⁷, to whom people have different attitudes, like Ryhor Baradulin⁸, a good acquaintance of mine. Such people should be given every kind of support. And conditions should be created to discover young talents. Unfortunately, I don't see any young talents of the level so far. What should Belarus do? It should ensure that gifted young people stay here and serve their people instead of leaving for Western Europe.

Anzhalika Borys

In some sense the United States or Australia is also part of Europe. These are territories that were colonized by Europeans and adopted the European system of values. Belarus, a community of people who consider themselves ancestors of residents of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, is also part of Europe. To the one who considers the 1917 Bolshevik revolution the starting point of Belarus' history, Belarus does not look like a European nation, but a chunk left from an experiment to create a community of Soviet nations. To be part of Europe the Belarusians should realize that they have never left it. They should give up their Soviet identity.

Iryna Buhrova

It's a tough question. If we regard Europe as self-identification, as the realization of the fact that 'I belong to this territory', I cannot say that Belarusians have clear European identity, an awareness of being a European. Have you ever heard a Belarusian saying, 'I am a European'? It happens very rarely. And representatives of other nations do say this, they say, 'We are

⁷ Vasil Bykau (Belarusian: Васіль Быкаў; 1924–2003) – a prolific author of novels about World War II, is a monumental figure in Belarusian literature and civic thought. The writer's talent and the moral courage that permeates his writings earned him endorsements for the Nobel Prize nomination from, among others, Nobel Prize laureates Joseph Brodsky and Czesław Miłosz.

⁸ Ryhor Baradulin (Belarusian: Рыгор Барадулін; born in 1935) is a prominent Belarusian poet, essayist and translator. Baradulin was nominated for the Nobel Prize in 2006 for his poetry collection *Ksty*.

Europeans, and that is why...' There's a well-known survey by Eurobarometer that compares the strength of the sense of European identity in different countries. In particular, Italians were found to have a stronger sense of being a European than the French. Eurobarometer offers a very good tool for measuring the pace of a nation's movement toward a stronger European identity or a new wave of nationalism, or internal consolidation.

It seems to me Belarus is going through extremely rough times. On the whole, obtaining national identity is a difficult process for Belarusians. The process has been controversial and involved many negative aspects since 1995. There was a time when people just could not understand where they were living, there was a union of Belarus and Russia, they had the Soviet Union in the past and no Belarus in the future, but the latter still existed as people were compelled to obey certain laws. The European component of identity also was developing. In addition, there were plans for the Belarusian National Republic citizenship.

I remember a time when there was some chaos, because identity was somewhat 'twisted'. That prompted certain polarization in society, the appearance of different groups including people united by shared features.

It's hard to say to what extent these differences have been ironed out and whether there's much consolidation within the country on the level of the people. The process is going on. National identity is already taking some shape.

And here we witness the process of Belarus' identification as a state that will make up its mind on whether it is West-leaning or pro-Russian.

In this respect, I can say that today there's not a single phenomenon that we would have a strong sense of. Belarus, of course, does belong to Europe. But as far as it concerns its current shape, its belonging to Europe appears controversial, as Ericsson said, this is like a duel. We belong to Europe but we are not there. We want to be Europeans, but we are not let there. Some our rights or our readiness to assume responsibility for what is now... That's why I'd better divide the Belarusian population into two groups. Members of the first are more ready to regard themselves as Europeans and the

other is simply not ready, although it is not leaning toward a union with Russia either. It is not national, European identity that matters for them. These people describe themselves as being from Mogilyov, Vitebsk or even Polatsk. This is local-level identity. I've done much research on the subject: local identity is still very important for people.

We often see an economic element, a regional, advanced, globalist one, in present-day local-level identity. The globalist element is only beginning to take shape in Belarusians' identity. They remain patriarchal, with patriarchal origin, roots. Is it good or bad? I never rate anything as positive or negative. I simply say that this is a natural process. For me Belarus, as a country, is not ready to join the global world today.

Do we belong to Europe? I believe yes, we do. But the Belarusian perceives this not through the state policy but through routine life. This is what the situation is like.

Henadz Buraukin

It is part of Europe. However, deep processes should be distinguished from political, economic and cultural realities. But I do not doubt that Belarus is part of Europe and the Belarusians want to be and consider themselves part of Europe – the most educated and democratic environment. What culture and political history do Belarusians know better? American? No. Asian? No. They know better European culture and political history. We know better events connected with France, Italy, let alone Russia and Poland. Although our country is little known around the world (this is one of our biggest problems), it is better known in Europe. A deeper analysis of the current developments in our country suggests that the Belarusians meet with more understanding in Europe. Although politically sometimes it seems America is more willing to support Belarusian democracy advocates than some European countries, there is a sense of unity with Europe (probably hidden deep inside and unsupported by official agencies and bureaucrats). This is why Belarusian pro-democracy groups and political parties press for integration of their country into Europe.

Europe is not limited to the European Union borders. The EU is a political and international organization, whereas Europe means a civilization. Europe is a big community with a big potential and various internal trends. Recall European history. Rome took the upper hand first, later France took the lead, and afterward Russian culture gained much prominence. Therefore, Europe changes inside. Belarus, by far not the largest nation in Europe, can get closer or distance itself from the rest of the community.

Ales Byalyatski

I am absolutely certain Belarus is part of Europe. Even with its twisted system and ridiculous Soviet-style government Belarus is an absolutely harmonious part of Europe's culture and history. We were backward compared to other nations in some aspects, and more advanced in others. Belarus was more advanced in law, culture and translation (Skaryna's Bible). The Great Duchy of Lithuania played a key role in Europe's geopolitical processes. More glorious days lie ahead for Belarus. There is something to be proud of today, but it does not come to mind immediately. I just did not think about it. It is not my duty to sit about and reflect on what is good in Belarus. Our vodka may be better than in the rest of Europe, I do not know.

Despite certain deviations in the process of history, this territory has always been part of the European context. Even during the era of communism, during the Brezhnev's rule, the nation's basic evolution pattern did not differ much from that of the European community. After the sociopolitical situation changes in Belarus it will not take the country longer than 15 years to meet all European economic and other standards. It may take longer – two generations – to change the mentality and bring our mass culture to the European level. But two generations is a very short span in the history of a nation. Therefore, differences are negligible, but transparency is very powerful – many capillaries link Brest and the European Union, and Hrodna and the European Union. It is impossible to build a system in Belarus that would take a different path from the rest of Europe.

Geographically, Belarus is in a much better position than Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia – countries that are formally part of Europe. These nations' mentality differs a lot from the rest of Europe, especially that of Azerbaijan where Muslims account for 90 percent of the population. Geographically these countries are part of the European civilization, but in reality they are influenced by their southern neighbors – Turkey and Iran, as well as Iraq and Syria located farther south. It will take these nations one, two or three generations to choose a development path. Belarus is different. The most unbelievable fears and scenarios – the loss of independence and incorporation into Russia – can never materialize, because this would be inconsistent with history and the evolution logic. Belarus is in a more comfortable and better position than the above-mentioned countries, which will be in a state of confusion for quite a long time.

Belarus has an advantage over Russia. A few days ago I talked to prominent Russian human rights defender Sergei Kovalyov, whose father came from the Rahachow district in Belarus. Although Kovalyov grew up in Russian culture, he still has a Belarusian mentality. He said, 'I absolutely clearly understand the situation in Russia [he was talking about culture, and European orientation – the Russians often classify themselves as Westernizers and Slavophiles]. It will take 100 years to achieve the goal I strive for. I am absolutely sure'.

If we take a look at Belarus from the same perspective, it would take 20 years to achieve that goal. May be it would take the prodigal son 40 years to come back to the European community. The country can correct its course during this period.

Pavel Daneika

Of course, I consider this problem from civilization point of view. Belarus has all the three things I have just mentioned. It is a Christian country that bases its behavior on rationalism and is disposed to dialog.

Some time ago, Europe ended on the German-Polish border. Poland also was not part of Europe – it was not a member of the European Union. The question was about where Russia began. It is quite obvious that Europeans now think more globally – they started looking differently at Europe's borders after Russia's borders shifted. I would say that they see the Russian border as the end of Europe. As far as I understand, Europe now believes so. The idea of a common Europe is still strong. People are struggling to understand where this common Europe ends.

Andrey Dynko

Present-day Belarus is certainly part of Europe, although a very poor one. It is poor and, at the same time, is still under the influence of the Soviet ideology that questioned basic European values. But Belarusians remain Europeans in terms of their mode of thinking.

Valery Fralou

In my opinion, there is a civilization rift on the borders of Belarus, Russia caused by different modes of thinking in the two countries and the other part of Europe. We are in the center of Europe geographically. But it seems to me we are still far away from the principles that European countries are guided by.

On the other hand, we cannot be compared with the Asian countries that have Islam, etc. Asia has its own traditions, views, even its own religion which are pretty different from European approaches. We are European people. I think we are capable of going through this stage and reaching

all European standards. We are somewhere in the middle between Europe and Asia for the time being.

Svyatlana Kalinkina

From a geographic point of view, Belarus is certainly part of Europe. Speaking about Europe we say that Belarus is a European country, meaning geography.

If we talk about this in terms of civilization, it is clear that we currently have a sort of Asian government and Asian community in our country. In this sense, it is very hard to speak about a European Belarus. But I believe that this is just a historic accident and everything will fall into its right place in due course, maybe in ten, five or fifty years. It seems to me that our people, even those who now suggest that we need the formation of a union with Russia and even the restoration of the Soviet Union, think of themselves as residents of Europe.

In fact, Belarus lacks a lot of things to become a normal European country. In the first instance, Belarus does not have a proper government system. As is the case in any other country, Belarus has an elite, which accounts for 10 percent of the population at most, the rest is common people. But now we can see that this Belarusian elite, the leadership of Belarus, is quite not European. Moreover, this elite, this stratum of society is very small in Belarus unlike in developed European countries.

Syarhey Kalyakin

Yes and no. We are a part of Europe and we are not, as we are out of the general context: not only European, but also world one. Belarus is geographically part of Europe, but it stands alone in its refusal to accept European and international standards. Belarus is not part of Europe from the civilized development viewpoint. It isolates itself from the rest of the world, including Europe.

To get closer to Europe, the Belarusians need to carry out a political reform to meet political and social standards and commitments they undertook within the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Belarus should join the Council of Europe and meet all commitments associated with its membership. Paradoxically, Belarus is the only country in Europe outside the Council of Europe. All other European countries, including Russia which is a Eurasian country, are members of the Council of Europe. Belarus does not meet united Europe membership criteria.

Kasya Kamotskaya

It is beyond doubt that Belarus is part of Europe. I do not mean the European Union, but culturally it is part of Europe. The Soviet authorities or the Lukashenka regime cannot change the mentality that people had throughout their history. Belarus has always been part of Europe, even during the darkest years of the Tsarist or Soviet rule.

It would be enough to compare Belarusian, Russian and Polish villages to see that the architecture and structure of Belarusian villages is very similar to the Polish ones. For instance, Russian villagers consider it stupid to plant flowers in front of their houses.

Syarhey Kastsyan

Belarus does not need to move closer to Europe. It has always been a European nation. Belarus, when it was part of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, adopted a constitution as early as 16th century. Britain, or the United Kingdom, still does not have a constitution, while other Western European countries enacted constitutions in the late 19th or early 20th century. Therefore, Belarus does not need to learn anything from Western Europe, especially in terms of democracy and politics. What it needs to learn to develop and apply new technologies.

Belarus should not seek to become part of Europe. It should be as it is. However, it should prove with its economy and politics to be equal to other countries in Europe. Belarus' history and the education level of its people make them even more advanced than other Europeans in many respects.

Vyachaslau Kebich

Belarus is part of single and indivisible Europe. From the political point of view, Belarus is not yet part of Europe; it has yet to join it. But Europe is not limited by the EU borders. Imagine if Belarus were a member of the EU. Does this mean that it was not part of Europe before and became part of it as soon as it joined the EU? This is ridiculous. This is an incorrect interpretation of the notion of 'Europe'. When someone says 'North America', we understand it as the United States and Canada, although these are two different countries. 'South America' or 'Latin America' is associated with the continent, despite the presence of different political systems there.

There are so many nations in Europe that I cannot describe it as a single civilized community. Let us recall history. When we had tribes without religion in Belarus, there were other civilized countries, China for instance. Civilization implies a long historical period. Therefore, I would say that Europe is a geographical notion.

Zhanna Litsvina

Belarus has found itself in an absurd split-mentality situation. On the one hand, the Belarusians would like to use the benefits created by the European community, but on the other, forced sovietization makes them fond of the Russian way of life. I understand their nostalgia for the Soviet Union. Probably, they are nostalgic because they do not know how they can live better. The current regime has deprived people of spiritual freedom to dream of something else but the Soviet Union, for instance about spiritual values and some spiritual support. Belarusians often travel abroad, but

when they come back propaganda renews its grip. Our people are insincere as a result of brainwashing. There are many examples of that – when they say something (for instance at state ideology lectures) they do not mean it. They hide their views and ideas. But hidden deep inside, the views and feelings manifest themselves, for instance in the fact that as many as 64,000 Belarusians emigrated last year, according to official data cited by the *ONT* television network in late March. Despite the stereotype that no one needs us in the West, 64,000 people associate their future with the West and tried their luck abroad.

Anatol Lyabedzka

Geographically it is part of Europe. Part of its population advocates European values. These people create opportunities for the country's integration into Europe. It makes no sense to raise the issue of European values in Russia. Attempts were made to instill European values in Russians, but they rejected them.

Belarus can embrace these values and many people have already done so. Opinion polls prove that most Belarusians are pro-European. They have a positive attitude, probably even at the genetic level, to privatization, a free market and democracy, because the nation is close to Europe and has a European history.

Vasil Lyavonau

Belarus is now only a geographic part of Europe. It must and will be part of a singly European community, political, economic and cultural. For this purpose, we, the Belarusians should make Belarus a European country. Europe is a community based on common values, which have been developed and are implemented in practice. Europe reached them through numerous wars, bloody conflicts and discord that lasted for centuries. All political parties, non-governmental organizations, all residents of Belarus should

make a decision and reach an agreement on what Belarus should be now and in the future. This is a very complicated process. We, the Belarusians, our Belarus, are situated between two geo-political forces and two civilizations. This crossroads has evolved from geographic into mental. Very many people in Belarus hold a stereotype that the nation should be with either Europe or Russia. But above all Belarus should be itself. In this regard, we should take into consideration the interests of both the East and the West. The recent election farce – there was no proper presidential election in Belarus – dramatically revealed the existence of irrepressible differences in the views of the West and Russia about the future of Belarus. Lukashenka skillfully uses these differences.

Europe is a community based on common values, worked out and existing due to practice, to which Europe came after several long bloody conflicts, massacres and zonings.

Aleh Manayeu

From a cultural viewpoint, Belarus is part of Europe only partially now. Starting the 12th century, if we do not go back to more ancient times, i.e. since the times of the Polatsk Duchy and then the Great Duchy of Lithuania, this region was already part of the European cultural area. But, at the same time, it belonged to another world, the Eurasian one. This geopolitical and cultural duality lasted for centuries and was especially strong in the past three centuries, when Belarus was in fact part of Rzeczpospolita, and then of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. At present we have the same: Belarus is in fact a two-part cultural entity. There are many people who share European values. And from this point of view, our country belongs to the European cultural area. But there is another Belarus. There is a huge gap between them in terms of values.

A decade ago, the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) published data proving that the Belarusian public consists of, speaking roughly, three parts. One part is pro-European, of course, not

in the full sense of the word, but it shares many European values. It constitutes approximately one-third of the population. Since some 10 million people reside in Belarus, one-third is about three million people. If these Belarusian were transferred there, I think that they would smoothly blend in with the European politics, economy, management and lifestyles. Another part – also one-third of the population – does not understand and does not accept this system of values. This is so-called Soviet Belarus. But there is a third one-third. Economically, it is pro-European, but in other spheres, for instance the legal one, it is Eurasian. So in this context, we can say that Belarus was and remains a dual cultural formation.

What should be done in this regard? I am neither a political technologist nor a politician and am not going to give recommendations as to how the social and political process should be organized. Everyone should deal with his own subject. For our team, I mean the former IISEPS, and for me personally, the purpose is to strengthen the position of the pro-European Belarusians and work so that more hesitating people will join them, and that the Soviet Belarusians will live comfortably and not feel discriminated against but will not impede the development of the country. Guided by my experience, I can say that it is almost impossible to make 'EuroBelarusians' of them. But this is not very important. If the EuroBelarusians are a majority, the real integration of our country into Europe as a political, economic, legal, information and cultural community will be a technical matter.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

Certainly, Belarus, as it is now, drops out of the European context. We are an anomaly in the European family, something difficult to deal with. Belarus is a real dictatorship in Europe. But I would not exaggerate the problem. From a long-term perspective, Belarus is a little sick. It has a high temperature. Belarus will never disappear from the map of Europe. The country has its traditions and history. Foreigners often ask whether Belarus is more an Asian or a European country. In response, I recall the

Magdeburg law – more towns were granted Magdeburg rights in Belarus than in Germany. All fine art styles featured prominently in Belarus, whereas, for instance, Russia had baroque only. Belarusians wrote the prototype of Europe's first constitution in Belarusian. The Belarusians have a European mentality and cultural traditions. We are a bridge between East and West, but our traditions are more European.

Anatol Mikhailau

It is part of Europe in a geographic sense. But the question is not about the country's geographic position. To my regret, the Belarusians have succeeded in distancing themselves from Europe than identifying themselves with it. The country geographically located at the intersection of various paths, and at the meeting point of various cultural traditions, could be a place for a dialogue and a bridge for fruitful cooperation, but it engages in a confrontation with Europe and the rest of the civilized world. The absurdity of this is obvious. It results from its earlier lengthy isolation and the domination of the ideology of resistance to the unknown. But both we and our descendants will have to pay a high price for our mistakes.

Ales Mikhalevich

Today Belarus has one foot in Europe and the other somewhere outside it. To me, a European country is a country where people take responsibility for their lives. It is a civilization that has evolved through citizens' active participation in decision-making. There are some 30 percent of such active people in Belarus and I believe that it is this 30 percent that make up a European part of our country. In my opinion, it is a very good proportion – it is little away from a majority. As soon as it reaches 50 percent, we will be able to legitimately say that we are part of Europe.

Today we should bring up people who will not be afraid of taking responsibility for their future.

Tatsyana Protska

Geographically Belarus lies in the center of Europe. Belarus is not only a territory; it also includes people and the government. Each part of it should seek to have a better image to become part of Europe. The civic society has its tools to influence people, while the government has its tools. If representatives of civic society (people like me) feel themselves to be part of European civilization, they understand that they should promote the system of values inherent in this civilization.

But many Belarusians have not yet accepted the values that were developed in Europe and helped it achieve a high cultural and technological level. Belarusians have not accepted the values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The latter notion is limited to *charka i skvarka*⁹ in this country even in the government's perception. Social and economic rights take precedence over human liberties.

The government has more tools than civic society. Our state publicly accepted the European system of values, but in practice, it maneuvers between the so-called Slavism (which has a little bit different system of values) and Western Europe. It seems that officials currently in power have not yet chosen Western Europe. This is why we sit in two chairs at the same time. On the one hand, we declare that we are the center of Europe and advocate European values, while in practice we reject these values.

A new notion, Eurasia, has been often used lately to describe an allegedly new community combining West European values and the Eastern, or Slavic ones. We can accept that system of values, but we must realize that Belarus will never have cities that look like museums and adopt a European lifestyle. It will be a different society with different opportunities.

⁹ *Charka i skvarka* – a special expression in the Belarusian language to denote the condition of being happy with a glass of vodka and cracknels.

Andrey Sannikau

It is definitely part of Europe geographically. It even has similar lifestyles. Of course, we can now speak about united Europe where each country and even each region have found their own place. And in order to return to Europe (I'd like to call it 'the return' to Europe), we must first of all complete the path of democratization, however banal this may sound. I'm sure that only this will give us an opportunity to build a country that will be considered European. Without democratic political institutions (and our present-day situation is a vivid example of this), it is impossible to develop almost anything – be it economy, culture or history science.

Europe is above all a civilizational notion. I say 'united Europe' because it is already a fact of life. This is not a mechanical union between countries. This is a form that confirms that a country is part of the civilization in this historical period.

Stanislau Shushkevich

There are no stiff divisions between 'European' and 'not completely European'. In general, Belarus belongs to Europe, is a European entity. And the fact that we've had problems with the system of government for the last couple of centuries (although there were attempts to bring it back to normal) does not mean that Belarus is not part of Europe. I think that Belarus and the Belarusian people are Europeans.

I can tell you that even some places that are unquestionably considered to be Europe – Portugal, Greece, certain areas in Italy differ much from what we've learned from classical French and German literature. So, Belarus does belong to Europe and Belarusians are Europeans. I have no doubts about that.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

In any case, Belarus is part of Europe, which is very different, versatile and contradicting, which is encumbered with the burden of old misgivings and insults, as well by modern fears, and which has been painfully developing into something new in last decades.

In the former and latter instances both, Belarus is surely part of Europe. Unfortunately, there are a lot of European politicians and experts who are yet to be persuaded. But it is absolutely needless. Those who believe that Europe ends on Land Strasse in Vienna, the Oder or the Bug, or that Europe is solely a mentality concept, understand the word in a very narrow sense.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

On the one hand, Europe is a geographical term, but on the other it is a community of peoples sharing the same values. The community is largely associated with the European Union, a political and economic alliance based on common civilized values. It currently unites most European countries.

To my regret, Belarus is only geographically part of Europe. The current government isolates the country from civilized development with the only purpose to satisfy the dictator who wants to rule all his life. The authorities' policies are very dangerous and harmful for Belarus. They hamper the country's economic development and are fraught with instability and crises. I would draw parallels between Belarus and the Soviet Union or China of 'the cultural revolution' period.

Andrey Vardamatski

So far, Belarus is only geographically part of Europe, but it has a greater European integration potential than its neighbors, former republics of the Soviet Union. It has a greater potential than Ukraine or may be even a greater potential than the Baltic countries. I mean the infrastructure, size,

manageability, education and skills of the labor force. Belarus had the most educated population in the former Soviet Union after the Moscow and Leningrad administrative units. The Soviet Union's main final assembly lines were concentrated in Belarus, which required the presence of high-skilled labor force. Possible reform could be carried out rapidly because the country is small and manageable. As compared to Ukraine, Belarus is one nation, not a nation of split mentality.

Tolerance, one of the basic European values, is characteristic of the Belarusians. It is a different matter that their tolerance has turned into conformism. Conformism is a manifestation of tolerance, but it is different from European tolerance – openness to different views and values.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

Certainly, Belarus has been and will be part of Europe in both mentioned senses, just like Georgia, Malta, Portugal, Montenegro and Albania (I mention the countries located on the very edge of Europe). But it is necessary to prevent the current authorities from de-Europeanizing Belarus.

Usevalad Yancheuski

It is again about what we mean when talking about Europe. A formal reply to the first question is quite simple.

If we mean that Europe is Roman Catholic and Protestant countries then the reply is surely 'no'. If we use the word 'Europe' in a broader sense, implying also an Orthodox tradition, then the reply is surely 'yes'.

Belarus is certainly a part of a large Christian world.

But we are also part of a large Eurasian region that existed in the days of the Russian Empire. And what is more important is that we are part of a large post-Soviet region. We are one of the broken pieces of the giant Soviet empire that also was a civilization and a pretty unique one in the history of the humankind.

It has turned out that the Soviet era had had the heaviest impact on us. Soviet rule 'ploughed up' everything here and in Ukraine (excluding its western part) and also in Russia. Moreover, it had such a dramatic and sweeping effect that we had all links with our past traditions irrevocably broken as a result of it.

We may feel sorry, we may feel happy but that is a fact. Belarus' history is above all and most of all the history of the country during the Soviet era.

Western politicians who believe that Europe ends on the EU's eastern border are right to some extent. Perhaps, someone in Moscow or Kyiv will be offended, but a too broad interpretation of the word 'Europe' is wrong. And it becomes disastrous when it takes a specific political form.

Belarus, Ukraine and Russia are part of a different world.

It also shows in the language. We, for instance, often say on various occasions, 'They do it like that in Europe, while we do it like this here'. I would like to point out once again that we subconsciously do not associate ourselves with Europe.

There is nothing bad about that. On the contrary, attempts to portray yourself as someone you are not always look ridiculous. Those who are trying to show at any price that they are Europeans show actually their complexes and provinciality.

And Europe's attempts to 'drag inside' elements that are apparently non-European ones will not do it any good.

All talks about Turkey's accession look very strange to me. They may lead to a disaster for Europe. If they have practical consequences, it will be very bad. The concept of Europe will lose its value.

There is one more point. Those who are too willing to get into Europe turn a blind eye to one sad thing for unclear reasons.

Unfortunately, Europe is becoming increasingly less European. And with the passage of time, it is becoming increasingly more evident.

Europe is losing itself. It is turning into a secular, atheistic and consumer society. It has almost totally destroyed its cultural and historic foundations – Christian traditions.

Maybe, the process is natural. But anyway, it does not make things better for Europe. The process is underway and Europe is losing its cultural and historical roots. European tradition (in the broadest sense of the word) is under heavy pressure from modern technological developments. All historical, sustainable and traditional values that make Europe European are being swept away by the storm of globalization.

But after the European culture dies, it will be Europeans turn. The new Great Migration brings in strong Muslim traditions. When a majority in Europe will become Muslim, will they be ready to accept European values? Will they understand them in a way that Europeans do? Will they accept a European style of life and a European vision of life?

These are big questions and there are no definite answers to them.

Meanwhile, Europe does not mobilize. It retreats. The offensive of the new culture, the new aggressive mentality (let us provisionally call it Islam mentality), does not prompt Europeans to mobilize but agree, make concessions and misinterpret the concept of human rights in an absurd way.

A remarkable achievement of European civilization, the concept of human rights, is being turned into a mockery, with the public losing confidence in it. Drugs? You are welcome! Sexual perversion? You are welcome! Family breakup? You are welcome! Jeering at Christian values for the sake of a misinterpreted freedom of expression or commercial success? You are welcome!

Any thing can be reduced to absurdity, including such a nice thing as tolerance is. That is what is happening in Europe now.

Europe is very weak. Europe lacks will. Europeans look like a dying, ageing nation. They are not able to resist outside pressure.

After World War II, Europe surrendered to the winners. One of its parts came under Soviet rule and the other under the United States.

By the way, Italy and France could have become Communist states but for America's power. History has no subjunctive mood but still... The continental Europe could have been under Soviet rule!

Following WWII, Europe did not have its own resources. There were American ones there. Europeans lived and evolved under America's 'um-

brella', shutting themselves off from the remaining world with the help of the US. It is true that there was de Gaulle and there was France's independent policy, but still Europeans followed America's course at large.

Europe has a very weak political will. Europe is reach and it can decently compete with the US, but it does not want to do so! Europeans have a mentality of an ageing nation that is about to pass away.

Europe advocates overlook one more thing. It is absolutely incorrect to say that European values are about liberal democracy.

Actually, Europe has clouded relations with democracy.

Europe gave birth to the most monstrous tyranny – Nazism. Only arms helped put an end to the Italian and German dictatorships. Democracy was imposed in Germany forcefully and against the will of people. Meanwhile, Germany is a central European state.

France was tearing between despotism and democracy for two centuries surviving a series of bloody and cruel revolutions similar to those in Asia. And its blood flooded path toward democracy was over in the latter half of the 20th century only.

Spain and Greece are only some 30 years out of their dictatorships.

Liberal democracy is chiefly an Anglo-Saxon invention. Probably, the marine environment inspired the nation to such an invention. Historically, the first democracies were created by maritime nations. The Greeks are sailors, whereas the first European parliament was formed in Iceland, a country discovered by Vikings. The first European democracies were established by the British and Dutch sea powers. And finally there is the United States which was established by outcasts and migrants who set sail for America in search of a better life.

A sailor, traveler, colonist, outcast is above all an individualist. It is a strong person. It is a man who lives by the sea and counts on himself only. The sea is an alien element for a human being. Everything is against him there, including willful wind, salty water that is not suitable for drinking, an unsteady deck under feet and a scorching sun. There is no one you can count on in the sea.

The mentality of sailors, travelers and pioneers is the mentality of individualists. The mentality of maritime nations is the mentality of democracies.

Democracy starts with an individualist, with a man who relies on himself. Individualists established democracy in the United States. Most desperate and strong people came there. America attracted most active citizens of Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland and other European countries who failed to be of service in their homeland, who were at odds with the government and who did not want any longer to put up with their lives. They believed in themselves only, relied on themselves only and worked for themselves only. Only such strong and tough people can create democracy.

Democracy is the rule of individualists who are able to survive by their own without someone else's support and who do not want to have a firm grip on them. Historically, the mentality of a landowner or peasant differs from that of a sailor and colonist. The latter have an unsteady deck under their feet, while the former stand on firm ground. Sailors and colonists are looking to move to a new place, while peasants are tied to the land. A sailor is desperate and brave, while a peasant is slow and cautious. A sailor who is normally a man of no family relies on himself, while a peasant on his kinfolk and community. A sailor is in search of something new, while a peasant holds on to the past.

That is why the continental Europe of farmers had a difficult path toward democracy, which was marred by blood, revolutions, wars and millions of deaths as was the case in Germany.

In conclusion, I would like to say the most important thing.

A key problem in our attitude to Europe is that many do not understand the complexity of this body. We do not fully understand that Europe is not an ideal project and is far from being such. Moreover, many have the impression that if Europe is not at the beginning of its path then it is surely somewhere in the middle... But as a matter of fact, it is at its end.

The further Europe moves the more severe problems it faces. And its major problems will be growing acute. That is what the Belarusians should base their attitude to Europe on.

The old Europe is turning into a museum. A museum should be treated with respect. A museum does have some useful things that you can add to your arsenal in the future. But it is impossible to live in a museum!