

## Through Europe's Gate, Out of Russia's Net

HOW UKRAINIANS' VISA-FREE EU TRAVEL OFFSETS MOSCOW'S DISINFORMATION

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Public opinion surveys indicate that among Ukrainian citizens who used *beviz*, the EU-Ukraine visa-free travel arrangement, support for Ukraine's integration with the EU and NATO strengthened, while support for integration with Russia weakened. In effect, *beviz* has been counteracting the significant anti-EU/NATO influences coming out of the Russian media machines. Among respondents who received their news mainly from the Russian media, opponents of Ukraine joining the EU and NATO outnumbered the supporters. However, among the Russian news consumers who visited the EU visa-free in 2017-2018, the reverse was the case.

Analysis by region shows that *beviz* stands to increase support for EU/NATO membership, particularly in eastern Ukraine, including in the Donbas region. *Beviz* also indirectly enhances pro-Western attitudes through expectations of future travel—individuals planning to travel abroad for work in 2018 were more likely than others to support EU and NATO membership, which was not the case in 2017.

### ***Beviz* Scale and Impacts**

When Ukraine was granted *beviz* on June 11, 2017, it was an opportunity for its citizens to travel without visas to all EU member states (except Great Britain, Ireland, Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland). Ukraine's president at the time, Petro Poroshenko, [heralded](#) it as "a final exit of our country from the Russian Empire."

Looking at the extent of the *beviz* travel, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) program reported in May 2019 that the exact number of visa-free travelers from Ukraine to the EU is almost impossible to estimate given the different accounting methods and data collection practices. However, it is safe to conclude that millions of Ukrainians have

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used this opportunity. One indication of the scale, from the same ENP report, is that from June 2017 to May 2019, Ukrainians were issued over 12 million biometric passports, a necessity in order to use *bezvizi*, and thus a likely indication of intent to do so. Ukraine's State Border Guard Service reportedly recorded [40 million visits](#) of Ukrainian citizens to the EU over the same time period.

These indicators are, by and large, consistent with the findings of the November 2018 opinion survey of the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology ([UNASIS](#)) based on multistage probability sampling of Ukraine's adult population.<sup>2</sup> Of the survey's 1,800 respondents, 374 (18.7 percent) said they had used *bezvizi* since it took effect. Most of them went as tourists (44 percent) or to visit relatives and friends (30 percent). About 24 percent of the *bezvizi* users said they looked for work (based on a proprietary author's dataset delivered by UNASIS).<sup>3</sup>

The survey also indicated that Poroshenko's claim on *bezvizi* effects was on target:

- Multiple regression analysis of the UNASIS data showed that *bezvizi* users were about 13 percent more likely than non-users to support Ukraine joining the EU and 13 percent more likely to support Ukraine joining NATO—regardless of region, language preference, education, age, gender, family income or employment status (and with 99.9 percent probability, these results were not obtained by chance alone).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, given that most of the control variables have explained geopolitical orientations for many years while *bezvizi* was introduced barely a year and a half before the survey, the results indicate that self-selection was unlikely to be the principal driver of these findings.
- In the same tests, *bezvizi* users turned out to be 12 percent less likely than non-users to support Ukraine joining the Russia-Belarus Union.

### **Russia's Information Reach**

For the Poroshenko-promised "final exit from the Russian Empire" to occur, however, the *bezvizi* effects will probably need to extend for many years. In the meantime, the question arises how these effects stack up against the predominantly state-run Russian media that pulls in the opposite direction. In fact, multiple Russian media sources, including Kremlin-run television channels, [have been spreading](#) disinformation to undermine *bezvizi* attractiveness and sowing rumors about its impending cancellation. While reliance on Russian-based news sources somewhat decreased across Ukraine in the last four years, it remains sizeable. In the annual UNASIS surveys (N=1,800), the number of respondents

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<sup>2</sup> With the exception of Crimea and the Donbas territories occupied by Russia-backed separatists.

<sup>3</sup> Respondents could pick several options, so these categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>4</sup> Formally,  $p < .001$ .

saying that their primary news sources were located in Russia amounted to 13 percent of the sample in 2016, 11 percent in 2017, and 11 percent in 2018.<sup>5</sup> The geopolitical orientations of these respondents differ significantly from others:

- Based on the November 2018 UNASIS survey, they were 13 percent more likely to oppose EU membership and 13 percent more likely to oppose NATO membership for Ukraine – also regardless of region, language use, education, age, gender, family income or employment status (and with 99.9 percent probability these results were not obtained by chance alone).
- They were also 20 percent more likely to support Ukraine’s membership in the Russia-Belarus Union in the same survey tests.

### ***Bezviz* versus Russian News**

Regarding support for Ukraine’s membership in the EU and NATO in the general population, *beviz* use has about equal and opposite effects compared to the Russian news consumption. However, *beviz* still has a ways to go to offset the Russian media re-enforcement of support for Ukraine joining the Russia-Belarus Union. The statistical analysis of the 2018 UNASIS survey also shows that support for a European vs. Russian orientation has somewhat different social bases when controlling for *beviz* and Russian news use (see **Figures 1** and **2**).

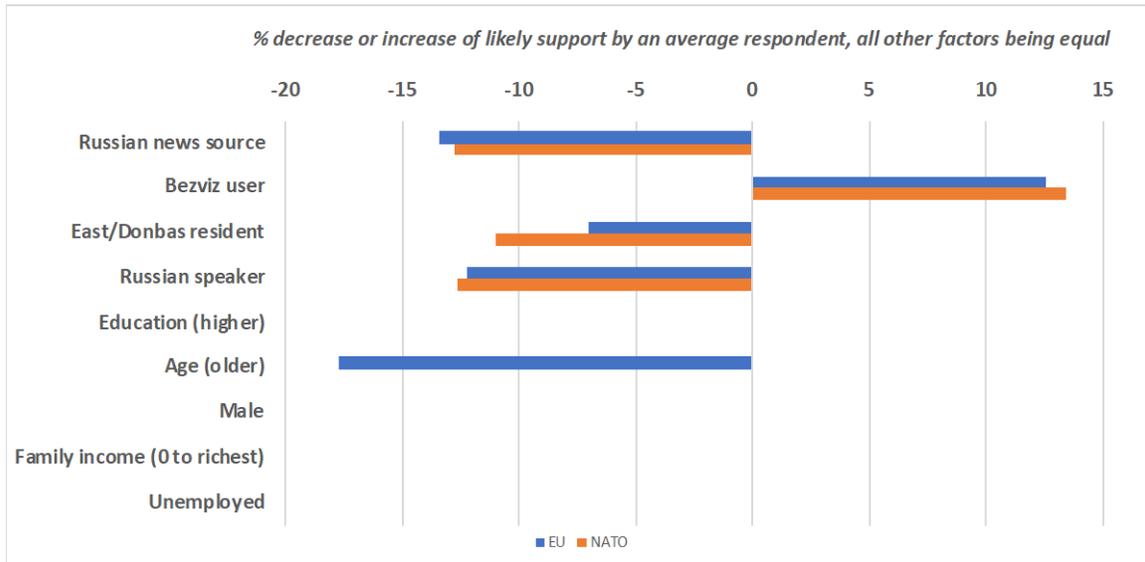
- Predictably, support for Ukraine joining the EU and NATO was lower and support for joining the Russia-Belarus Union was higher among Russian speakers,<sup>6</sup> eastern Ukraine residents (including government-controlled Donbas), and older people. Although, interestingly, age had a stronger effect than any other factor on views of EU membership – with older respondents about 18 percent less likely to support it – but no statistically significant effect on views of NATO membership.
- In addition to these factors, support for membership in the Russia-Belarus Union was 27 percent less likely among respondents with higher incomes and about 7 percent less likely among better-educated respondents. The noteworthy implication here is that the economically better-off and better-educated residents of Ukraine appear to be more averse to coming under the Kremlin’s influence, but they are not necessarily more inclined than others to push for EU and NATO membership when one controls for the *beviz* dynamic.

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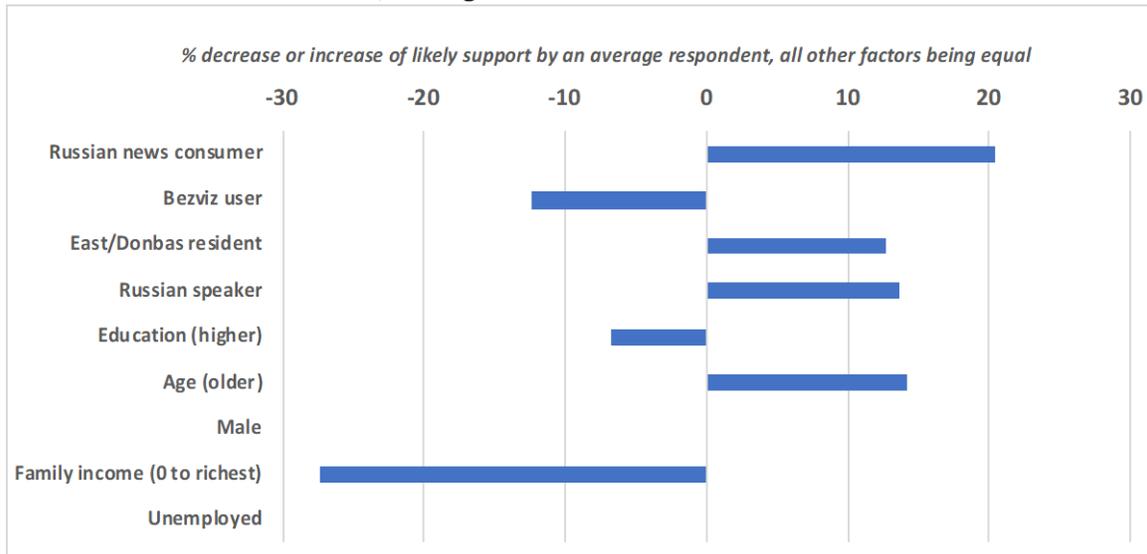
<sup>5</sup> Those numbers do not include respondents for whom Russia is not the main news source, but who still consume Russian news. So, the actual Russian news reach is likely to be substantially higher than those numbers indicate.

<sup>6</sup> Identified as those who opted for the survey questionnaire in Russian.

**Figure 1. Effect of Select Predictors on Ukrainians' Support for Joining NATO and the EU**



**Figure 2. Effect of Select Predictors on Ukrainians' Support for Joining the Russia-Belarus Union**



Figures are based on proprietary author's dataset delivered by UNASIS.

So, what happens if a Russian news consumer in Ukraine uses *bezviz*? The 2018 survey offers a quasi-experimental setting to address this question—after all, as noted above, Russian media usage has been rather consistent for several years, while *bezviz* was a new condition introduced in 2018. Out of 202 respondents who said their primary news sources were in Russian, 33 (18 percent) said they also used *bezviz*—a proportion sizeable enough to partly explain the absence of a statistically significant correlation between Russian media use and *bezviz* travel in the general population. A closer look at those 33

respondents – a proxy for what would be a “treatment group” in an experiment – strongly indicates that the *beviz* effects more than offset the Russian news consumption effects:

- The majority of Russian news consumers who did not use *beviz* opposed Ukraine’s NATO and EU membership. The majority of the Russian news consumers who used *beviz* supported the latter (see **Table 1**). In fact, those respondents were hardly any different from the ones who did not report having the Russian media as their primary news source.
- The majority of Russian news consumers who did not use *beviz* supported Ukraine’s membership in the Russia-Belarus Union. The majority of the Russian news consumers who used *beviz* opposed the latter by an even larger margin (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1. Geopolitical Orientation of Ukrainian Consumers of News from Sources Based in Russia**

	SUPPORT		OPPOSE	
	<u>No Beviz</u>	<u>Beviz</u>	<u>No Beviz</u>	<u>Beviz</u>
Russia-Belarus Union	51%(85)	25% (9)	25% (42)	58% (21)
EU	27%(44)	53% (19)	45% (75)	17% (6)
NATO	20%(33)	44% (16)	54% (89)	19% (7)

*Based on proprietary author’s dataset delivered by UNASIS.*

These differences are highly significant, with 99.9 percent confidence, based on statistical comparison of means (using an independent-samples T test). The test also shows that *beviz* likely matters in its own right, although it is not the only factor that makes a difference.

- One finds no significant difference on key socio-demographic characteristics between those Russian news consumers who used *beviz* and those who did not. Both were about equally likely to hail from among residents of eastern Ukraine and from predominantly Russian-language users in any region. They were about as likely to be male or female and had about the same education level. They scored about the same on the UNASIS index of social well-being that captures perceived material well-being, status, social stability, and life prospects at both national and individual level. They were about as likely to use social media (with the question specifying it as the use of Russian-based platforms, *Odnoklassniki* and *Vkontakte*) or news originating in Ukraine, the EU, or the United States and Canada.
- *Beviz* was more likely to make a difference among Russian news users who were younger and better-off economically. On average, Russian news and *beviz* users

were 41 years old and reported 5,843 hryvnias (about \$230) in per-capita monthly household income—compared to 49 years old and 3,347 hryvnias (about \$130) for the non-users of *bezziv*.

On the totality of these considerations, it looks like the strongest *bezziv* effects were interactive. *Bezziv* was more likely to offset or reverse Russian informational influences when used by individuals whose sociodemographic characteristics were associated with stronger pro-Western orientations more generally. It also looks like *bezziv* effects among the Russian news consumers were unlikely to be due mostly to self-selection. But even if this were the case, *bezziv* at the very least would strengthen the hand of EU and NATO supporters living in areas where opposition to these institutions is predominant—which points, given demographics and history, to Ukraine’s eastern regions. And given that the East is home to more Russian news consumers than other regions, this is where *bezziv* would contribute more than elsewhere to Ukraine’s breaking away from the Russian sphere of influence.

### **Indirect Effects: The Power of Travel Expectations**

My conversations in Ukraine over the last year indicate that *bezziv* has also strengthened pro-Western views among Ukrainians by making future travel abroad look more enticing and opportune. A comparison of the UNASIS survey data from June-July 2017 with that from November 2018 supports this argument. Both surveys asked respondents if they planned to travel abroad for temporary work. The analysis shows that after a year and a half of *bezziv*, these plans came to be associated non-randomly with support for Ukraine’s EU and NATO membership.

- In the June-July 2017 UNASIS survey, respondents who planned to travel abroad for work were statistically no more or no less likely to support Ukraine’s EU and NATO membership.
- In the November 2018 UNASIS survey, those who said they had plans to travel abroad for work were about 5 percent more likely than others to support Ukraine’s EU membership and about 8 percent more likely than others to support Ukraine’s NATO membership.
- The number of respondents reporting plans to travel abroad for work increased by about 29 percent, from 216 in the 2017 survey to 278 in the 2018 survey.

### **Conclusion**

These findings indicate that further practical steps increasing EU-Ukraine interactions at the individual level, particularly through travel, work, and business—even without formally admitting Ukraine into Western alliances—are important to continue developing

and implementing. This is particularly important given the Russian state’s hostile information campaigns that systematically emphasize the problems and costs of prospective European integration for ordinary Ukrainians, particularly those residing in the East. And it is also important given that complete isolation of Ukraine from hostile Russian news sources is unlikely to be feasible. The present analysis shows that personal experiences can counter information-consumption effects. With that in mind, Western and Ukrainian governments, media organizations, and NGOs could do more to help enhance Russian-language, pro-Ukraine information outreach to the East (including to the occupied Donbas areas)—with editors and journalists keeping an eye out for human/lifestyle stories to share, thus highlighting the practical steps Ukraine is taking toward Euro-Atlantic integration, including the benefits of *bezzviz*.

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