

Polling Memo: Stable Society? CSO Awareness has Risen, Participation Remains Low

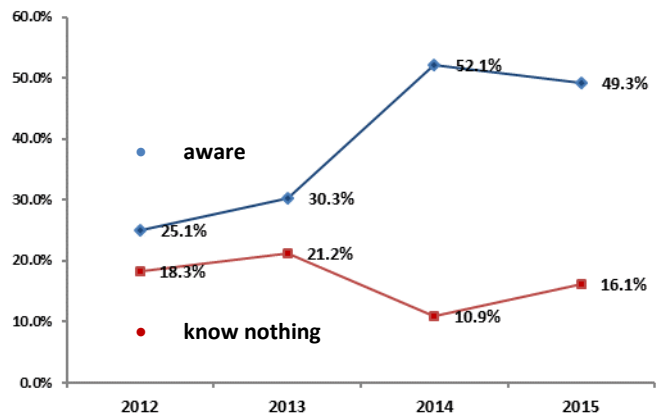
Since 2012, the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies ([IISEPS](#)) has been polling Belarusians' attitudes towards civil society under four categories, including trust in public institutions; citizens' awareness of civil society organizations (CSOs); the level of citizens' involvement in civil society activities; and the level of citizens overall public/social activism.

Pact commissioned the national survey with a sample size of n=1,502 and margin of error $\pm 3\%$. Fieldwork has taken place in September each year from 2012 until 2015, the sample size is the same for all four years, and interviews are face-to-face, conducted in respondents' homes. This is the second consecutive year Pact has released findings in an effort to contribute to the reflection of civil society and its further development.

Main Trends

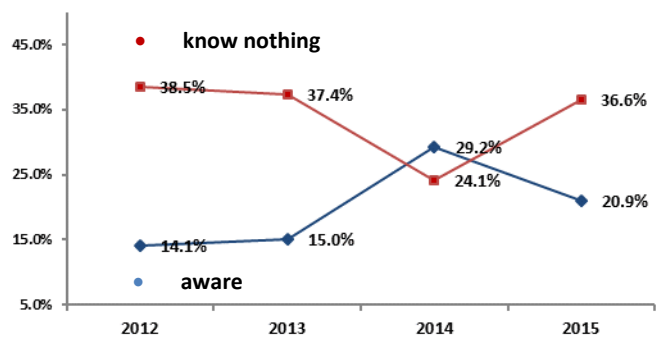
- In 2015 the number of Belarusians who are *aware* of the activities of CSOs—because they participated in such activities or because they received CSO services—remains within the margin of error compared to 2014 (**49,3%** in 2015 vs **52,1%** in 2014) (Graph 1). Whereas the level of public awareness of CSOs' activities has been rapidly increasing between 2012 and 2014 (the difference between 2012 and 2014 is **+27%**), it appears to have stabilized at around **50%** in 2015. At the same time, in 2015 the number of Belarusians who reported they *know nothing* about CSOs has increased by about **5%** from 11% in 2014 to 16% in 2015.

Graph 1: Respondents reported they are aware/ know nothing of CSOs (n=1,502)



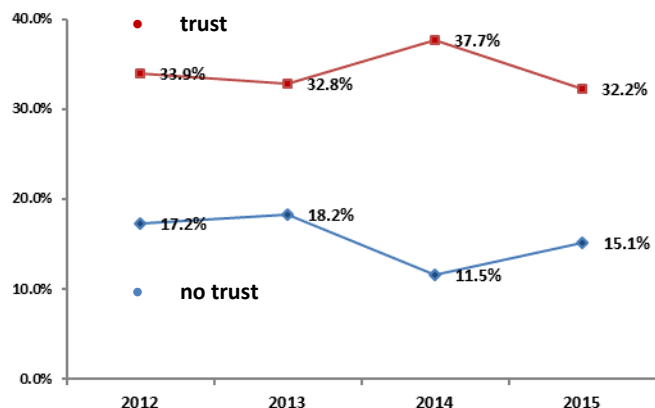
- The survey provides a breakdown of how much the respondents are *aware/unaware* of the different types of CSOs, including independent trade unions, official trade unions, independent research centers, human rights organizations, local CSOs (CBOs), organizations protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, and political parties and movements. While the level of awareness for most of these types of CSOs remains unchanged compared to 2014, changes are observed in relation to local CSOs and political parties. The number of respondents who reported they are *aware of local CSO* activities has dropped by almost **9%**, while the number of those who said they *know nothing about local CSO* activities has increased by almost **12%** from 24% in 2014 to 37% in 2015 (Graph 2). Despite the fact that 2015 is the year of Presidential elections in Belarus, the number of respondents who reported that they *know nothing about political parties* has increased by more than **11%** from 17,1% in 2014 to 28,5% in 2015.

Graph 2: Respondents' awareness of local CSOs (n=1,502)

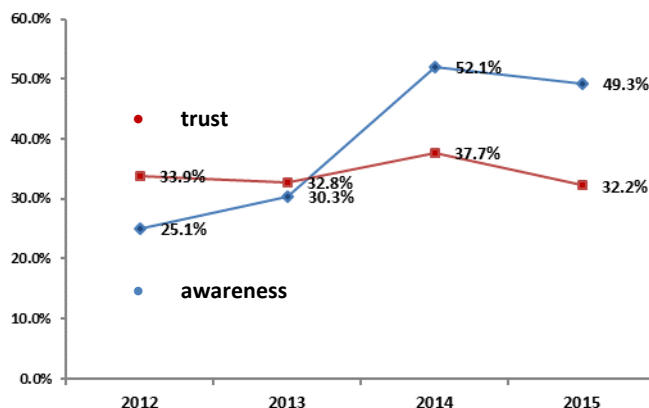


- Compared to last year, there is a **5,5%** drop in trust in CSOs. At the same time, the number of those who reported that they *do not trust* CSOs has increased by almost **4%** from 12% in 2014 to 15% in 2015 (Graph 3). Such $\pm 5\%$ fluctuations in those who do not trust CSOs have been observed throughout the 4-year period of polling, while the overall level of trust in CSOs remains roughly on the same level (Graph 3). A similar decrease in public awareness of CSOs and trust (Graph 4) has occurred between 2014 and 2015. The reason between the corresponding decrease in trust in CSOs and awareness is unclear from this data alone.

Graph 3: Respondents reported they trust/ do not trust CSOs (n=1,502)

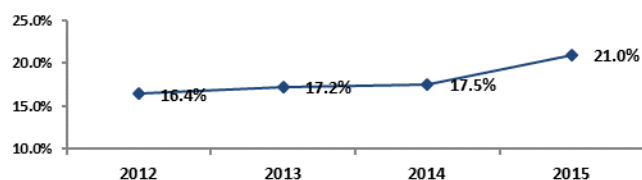


Graph 4: Respondents reported they trust/ aware of CSOs (n=1,502)

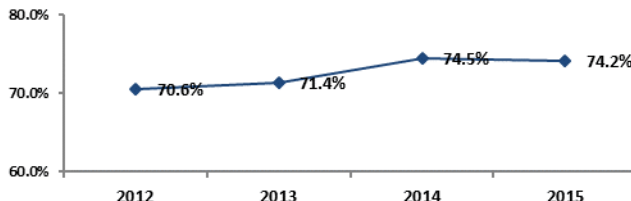


- Neither increased public awareness of CSOs' activities in Belarus, nor the immense potential of citizens' public and social activism (e.g. **74,2%** reported participation in public benefit activities in 2015) (Graph 6), has translated into direct citizen involvement in CSO activities. The level of citizens' involvement remains pretty much on the same level for all four years (2012 – 16,4%; 2013 – 17,2%; 2014 – 17,5%; 2015 – 21,0%) (Graph 5).

Graph 5: Respondents reported direct involvement in civil society activity in general (n=1,502)



Graph 6: Respondents reported participation in social publicly useful activity (n=1,502)



Detailed Findings

- The level of citizens' awareness of civil society was increasing noticeably from 2012 to 2014, but this growth leveled off in 2015. Citizens' awareness refers specifically to the awareness generated as a result of people's participation in CSOs' activities or services provided by CSOs. However, the growth in the number of people who reported they know nothing of CSOs' activities should not solely be explained by annual fluctuations or external factors, but should also be linked to the internal capacity of Belarusian CSOs to promote public awareness. For example, [the 2014 study of the Center for European Transformations](#) evaluating the presence of environmental themes in mass media revealed that CSOs' performance on outreach has been rather weak leading to a low mass media coverage of environmental themes what logically results in a lack of public awareness. Since the same observation might be plausible for other sectors of Belarusian civil society, the study suggestion, that CSOs should employ proactive communication strategies and to reach out to their audience with high quality information products delivered on a regular basis, should be applicable.

- Against the background of a stable level of public awareness of CSOs, the number of people aware of local-level CSOs (community-based organizations) has dropped by **9%** compared to the previous year and the number of those who know nothing about local CSOs has increased by **12%** in the same period. The following data could be helpful in understanding the drop in public awareness of grassroots civil society organizations. According to the recent national survey of community participation in Belarus, conducted by [SATIO](#) and commissioned by Pact: **a)** over **60%** of Belarusians are unaware of cases where local issues were resolved by activists or CSOs; **b)** over **64%** of Belarusians said they were never invited to participate in solving local issues and **c)** **54%** of Belarusians are not ready to participate in dealing with local issues. CSOs should improve outreach to citizens to encourage them to attend events and participate in activities, while at the same time working to understand why their constituents are not ready to participate in these issues. Understanding these drivers or deterrents from participation in local issues can assist CSOs in understanding how to better conduct outreach and engage with citizens.
- Compared to the previous year there is a slight change in the level of trust in CSOs, which is illustrated by the increase in the number of people who do not trust CSOs (increased by **4%**; 11,5% in 2014 and 15,1 % in 2015) and a simultaneous decrease in the number of those who trust CSOs (decreased by **5%**; 37,7% in 2014 and 32,2% in 2015). In the 4 years of monitoring public perception of CSOs, the number of people who trust civil society organizations fluctuates around **33-34%**, while the number of those who do not trust them fluctuates around **14-15%**. One explanation could be the numerous [speculations and propaganda](#) in mass media regarding the conflict in Ukraine and the role of civil society in catalyzing the conflict, contributing to fear of a possible similar scenario in Belarus and suspiciousness towards CSOs. In this respect, the growing rating of Lukashenko (from 38,6% in June to 45,7% in September) might be an indirect indicator of citizens' growing trust in the government of Belarus whose efforts in holding negotiations for [peace in Ukraine](#) and rhetoric on national security have helped to allay people's fears. It is plausible that the increased trust in the government and suspiciousness towards CSOs could be impetus for the decrease in the overall level of trust in civil society. The suspected link between increasing trust in government and decreasing trust in civil society could be explained by the fact that in the public mentality in Belarus as well as in the public discourse such terms as [government and civil society are at odds](#).
- The number of citizens involved in public benefit activities is high and has remained on the same level (around 71-74%) for all four years. Based on this, it looks like the potential of Belarusians' public and social activism is high. However, it should be pointed out that such a traditional form of public benefit activities as 'subbotnik' (from Russian: суббота) for Saturday is a day of volunteer work. Subbotniks are mostly organized for cleaning the streets of garbage, fixing public amenities, collecting recyclable material, and other community services) was used to explain the question to the respondents. For example, the fact that in April 2015 more than [3 000 000 people](#) took part in the nation-wide subbotnik could explain why the respondents rate their level of public and social activism that high. The **74%** who participate in the public benefit activities is not an accurate reflection of sustained or regular civic participation, rather, it is likely a reflection of one-off or isolated participation in certain types of 'benign' or apolitical events. Therefore, it is felt that the **21%** of citizens who constantly report on direct involvement in CSOs' activities is a more realistic number illustrating actual citizens' participation and engagement with civil society.
- A discrepancy in the number of people who are aware of CSOs because they *participated in a certain activity or received a service* (**49,3%** in 2015; Graph 1) and the number of those who reported they are *involved in civil society activities* (**21%** in 2015; Graph 5) may be explained by the fact that many Belarusians are formally members of government-affiliated organizations, but do not consider their roles in these organizations to be civil society activities. In fact, membership (as officially reported) in key Belarusian GONGOs is quite significant: the Federation of Trade Unions has more than [4 million members](#); more than 150,000 Belarusians are members of [Belaya Rus](#), and roughly 500,000 people belong to the Belarusian [Youth Union](#). Despite formally belonging to these groups and thus being aware of their activities through participation, Belarusians may not consider their affiliation with these organizations to be a civil society activity. Additionally, for average citizens the term 'involvement' may not be synonymous with taking part in the activities of a particular NGO (as a passive beneficiary or a member).