

What do Belarusians Think?

Belarusians do not believe that they can influence the government and rely less on it

According to stereotypes, Belarusians rely on the authorities in everything, and are reluctant to take the initiative into their own hands. It is believed that Belarusians are afraid of changes, but if anything, they want even more state presence in the economy. Data provided by [Pact](#) from the newest public opinion survey refutes these myths.

This piece opens a series of analytical articles based on a national representative public opinion survey on the attitude of Belarusians to reforms, social contract, foreign policy, gender-related issues, civil society, media and the role of the state. The poll was conducted in August-September 2019.

Summary findings

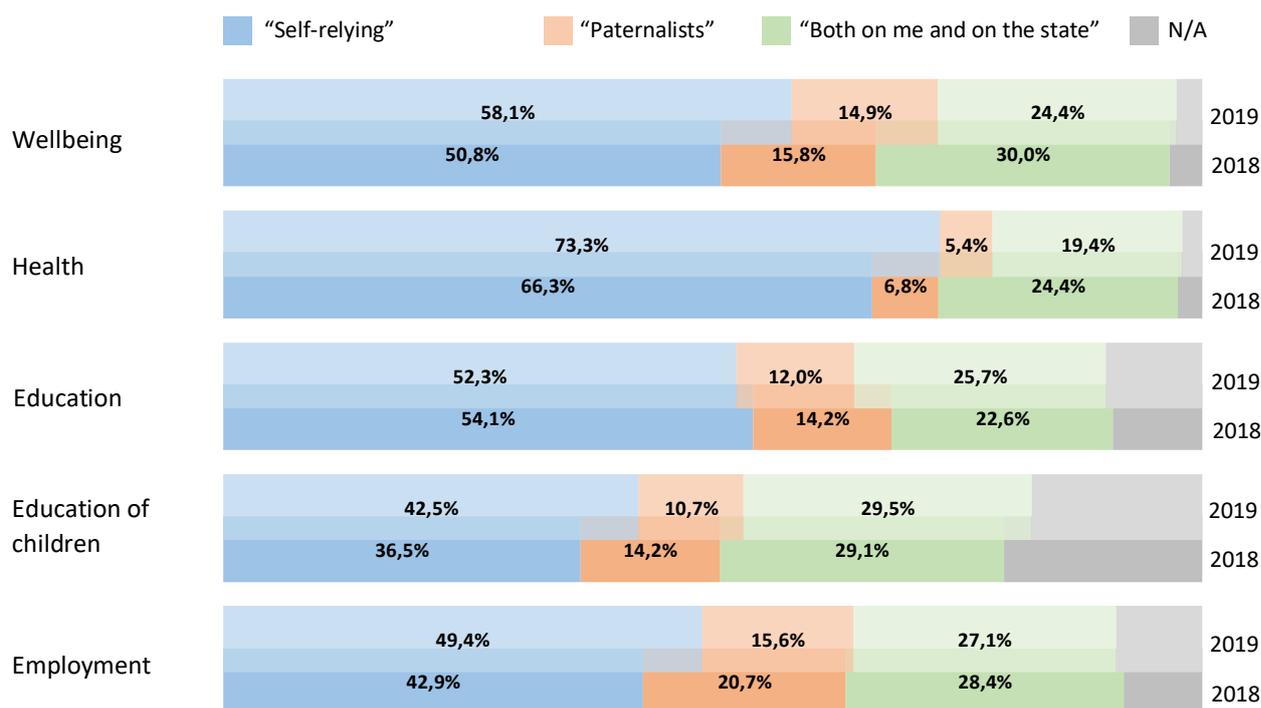
- Most Belarusians of all ages rely on themselves and not on the state in matters of wellbeing, education, health and employment.
- Three quarters of Belarusians believe that they cannot influence the decisions of local authorities. 80% do not feel that they can affect the policy of supreme government bodies.
- More than half of Belarusians want reforms, and only a little more than 20% oppose reforms. Two out of three supporters of reforms prefer the state to decrease its role in the economy. The share of these “pro-market” respondents has been growing steadily in recent years.
- Most Belarusians are ready to tolerate the potentially negative consequences of reforms within 5-7 years, especially if reforms create prospects for a better life for their children and for themselves. Political values (such as the European path of development or the independence of the country) motivate only a small part of society.
- Out of all potential negative consequences of reforms, most respondents fear price increases, unemployment, and declining living standard and income the most. Fears about inequality or political chaos in Belarusian society are not common.

Self-reliant nation

This may seem surprising, but Belarusians tend to rely on themselves rather than on the state in ensuring their health, education for themselves and their children, employment and wellbeing.

People were asked whether the particular aspects of their life depend more on the actions of the state or on their own efforts. It turned out that there are several times more Belarusians who “more likely” or “entirely” rely on themselves (“self-relying”) than those who “more likely” or “entirely” rely on the state (“paternalists”). “Self-relying” respondents are much more common than “paternalists” in all age groups on all five issues. There is no big difference in “self-reliability” between men and women and between respondents of different ages.

Diagram 1: “Self-relying” and “paternalists” among Belarusians



It is interesting to see these figures in dynamics. For most indicators, the number of Belarusians who rely on themselves has increased even compared to last year. A similar survey in September 2018 showed that there were 66% of “self-relying” respondents in the health issue (it became 73% in 2019), in the wellbeing issue – 55% (became 58%) and in the issue of employment – 43% (grew to 49%).

In addition to their growing economic self-sustainability, Belarusians for a long time have not believed that they can influence the decisions of state bodies – both of local and supreme level. These moods have not changed compared to last year.

Only 15% agree that their actions and choices influence the decisions and policies of local government. 76% have the opposite view. Regarding the decisions of the supreme state government, the share of “optimists” falls below 11%, and the share of “skeptics” grows to almost 80%. These figures are generally stable for all groups of respondents, regardless of gender and age. Fluctuations in different groups do not exceed 5%.

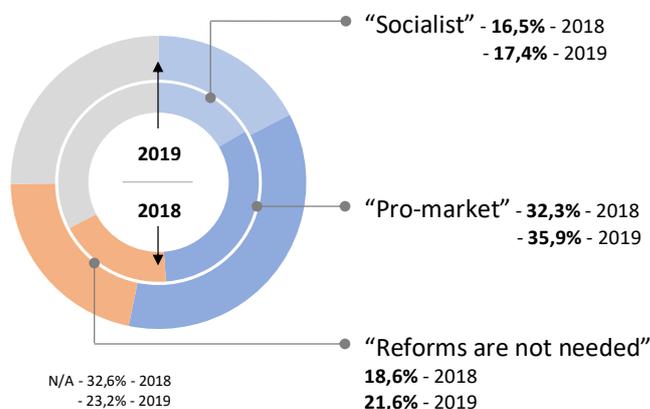
These two features of Belarusian mass consciousness are highly-interrelated: lack of faith in the ability to influence government, and decreased reliance on government.

People want reforms and want the state to leave the economy

The survey once again confirmed that the majority of Belarusians (53.3%) want reforms. In addition, an increasing percentage favors market transformation. Almost 36% want to reduce the influence of the state and state control, and half as many (17.4%) want to increase it. 21.6% of Belarusians do not want reforms.

Pact gained similar data in its 2018 poll, when 16% of respondents supported an increase of state government influence, 32% supported a decrease, and 18% were against reforms. As one can see, over the year, all these three groups of respondents have grown a bit. It has to do with a serious decrease in the number of those who did not answer the question. It means that more and more Belarusians understand what they think about reforms.

Diagram 2: "Socialist" and "pro-market" views of Belarusians



The share of pro-market views decreases with age. While almost 40% are "pro-market" among young people and middle-aged people (from 18 to 60 years old), this number drops to only a quarter among retired citizens. As age increases, the demand for stability, or the rejection of reforms, also increases. The proportion of "Socialist" respondents fluctuates around 20% of the economically active population and grows to 34% among respondents over 60 years of age.

The number of men and women among the opponents of reforms is equal. However, in the group of supporters of reforms an imbalance exists. The share of male "pro-market" respondents is almost 42%, and just 31% among women. The rest of the women surveyed are not necessarily supporters of a greater role for the state. Female respondents more often than men found it difficult to give a definitive answer to this question.

There is nothing new in the fact that Belarusians are increasingly supporting a smaller role for the state. This trend was noticed by the [IPM Research Center](#) in their survey about the values of Belarusians in [2018](#). According to them, the share of conditional "consistent market supporters" in Belarusian society over 10 years (from 2008 to 2018) increased from 12.4% to 27.5% due to a slight reduction in all other groups – "partial market supporters", "undecided" and "socialists".

Available data allow us to determine more accurately when the turning point in the views of Belarusians occurred. While the majority has been stably supporting reforms for many years, it is a relatively new phenomenon that twice as many respondents to the Pact survey hold "pro-market" views compared to those with "socialist" views. Opinions have changed between 2016 and 2018.

To demonstrate this, the data from the Pact's survey over the past two years must be compared to the answers to a similar question in the public opinion survey from the [BISS REFORUM](#) project in 2014-2015. At that time, the share of "socialists" exceeded "pro-market" respondents by about a quarter. Now, "pro-market" views are held by two times as many respondents.

It appears as though the crisis of 2015-2016 and the consistently low economic growth since then have caused deep disappointment among Belarusians in the model of the economy based on state dominance. It is likely that the rhetoric of the government, whose economic bloc has been dominated by pro-market officials since 2015, is also increasingly influencing people to support market-oriented views.

However, even among the supporters of the reforms in Belarus, it is difficult to find people who are ready to support the "shock therapy". Of those who support reforms, less than 12% support the "shock"

approach. In general, proponents of reforms either support gradual and systematic changes in all sectors (41%) or targeted changes in only certain areas (35%).

Moreover, it was the latter group – supporters of targeted reforms – that showed a significant, almost twofold increase since 2018, when they numbered just 19%. The shares of those who are ready to support “shock therapy” and gradual and systematic changes in all sectors both fell by 7 percentage points.

Being generally on the side of reforms, primarily market reforms, Belarusians still do not want drastic changes. Moreover, their attitude towards reforms is not static and changes under the influence of economic reality.

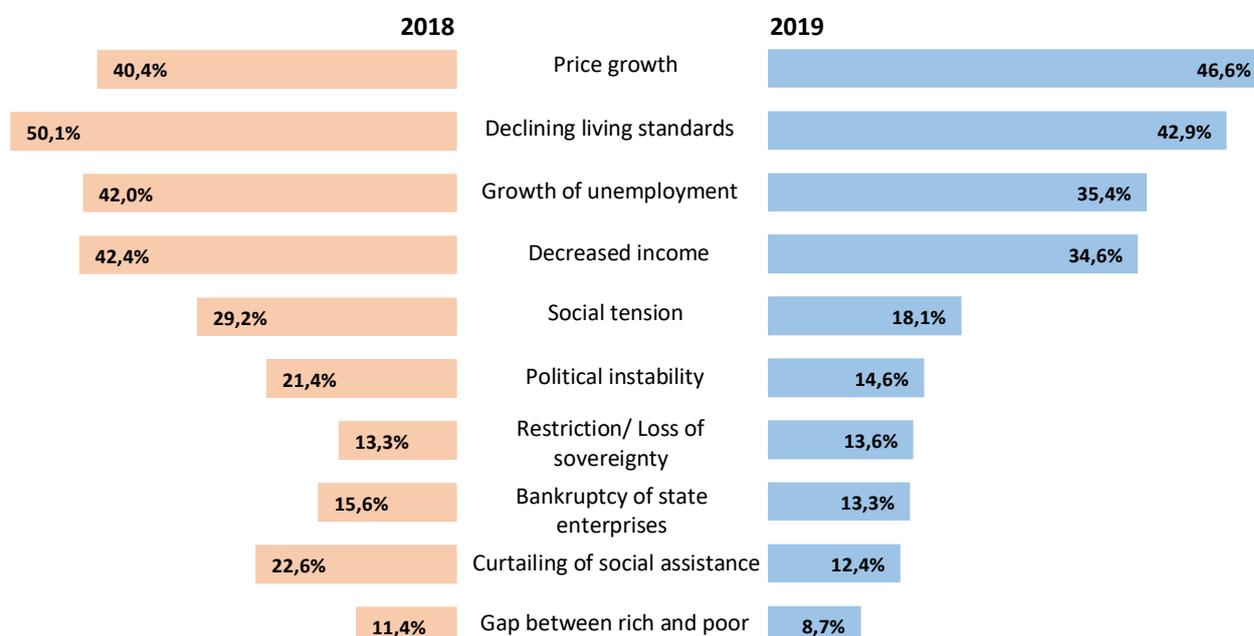
If Belarusians are to tolerate potential difficulties as a result of economic reforms, then for the sake of children

Most Belarusians are ready to tolerate potential negative consequences of reforms for 5-7 years. The number of those who are not ready to tolerate these difficulties is just over 30%. The prospects of a high standard of living and new opportunities for children are at the top of the list of future benefits for which Belarusians are ready to suffer (25%). Fewer respondents were willing to suffer for a higher standard of living for themselves in the future (18%). Only 13% are ready to tolerate the negative effects of reforms for the sake of “strong, independent and sovereign Belarus”. Belarusians were least likely to be willing to suffer for the European path of development of the country (6%).

The lofty goals of the country’s sovereignty or prospects of joining the European Union do not excite Belarusians. The prospects of a better life, especially for their children, are more appealing.

In connection with possible reforms, Belarusians primarily fear four potential negative consequences – price growth (47% of respondents), declining living standards (43%), growth of unemployment (35%) and decreased income (35%). Among pensioners the worries about price growth are more widespread (56%), while only one in five respondents of this age group is afraid of the increase in unemployment.

Diagram 3: Fears of Belarusians in respect to possible negative consequences of



Interestingly, compared with 2018, the percentage of respondents reporting fears decreased for all but one potential consequence: fears of price growth gained 7 percentage points.

Belarusians are more worried about their own well-being, employment and prices, than about the fate of state-owned enterprises or sovereignty.

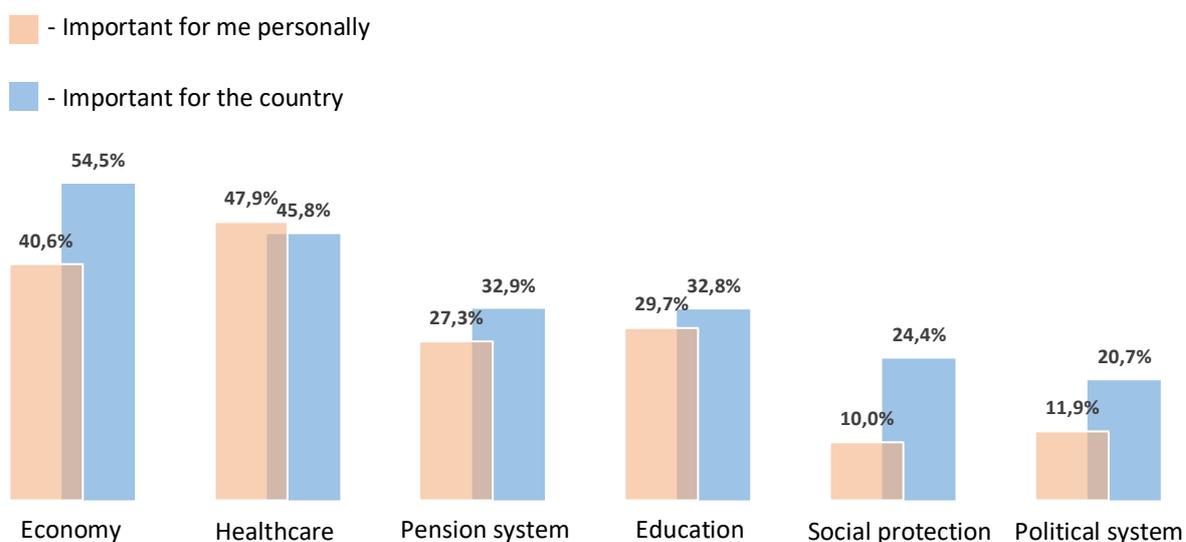
Socio-political risks or rising inequality worry only a small minority. This does not mean that Belarusians are indifferent to these potential consequences. The majority may simply consider that reforms do not threaten these issues.

The loss of social support from the government has become much less of a relevant concern. It is either because people do not believe reforms will result in decreased social support or because social support has already shrunk so much in the eyes of the majority that there is nothing left to lose.

Economy and health before politics

Traditionally, socio-economic topics dominate the list of Belarusians' reform priorities. Reforms of the political system, foreign policy and judiciary system concern only a minority of proponents of changes.

Diagram 4: Priority areas for reforms for Belarusians in 2019



When it comes to reforms that are **important for the country**, the highest priority areas are economy (55%) and healthcare (46%). In the middle of the list of priorities are education (33%), pension system (33%), social protection (24%), housing and utilities management (21%), and political system (20.7%). More specific political areas such as reform of the judicial system and foreign policy get only 10-11%.

The picture is a little bit different when Belarusians are asked what reforms are **important for them personally**. The leaders here are again economy (41%) and healthcare (48%), although they trade first and second places. In the middle of the list are education (30%) and pension system (27%). The rest of the areas tend to be less relevant for Belarusians personally than they are for the country – social protection is only 10%, political system only 12%, and housing and utilities management – 13%.

It is curious that on the issue of the importance of reforms, there are noticeable differences in views between men and women. On average, men report the economy, foreign policy, and judicial and political systems as the priority areas of reforms for the country by 7 percentage points more than women. Among women, healthcare (+17 percentage points) and education (+13.5 percentage points) tend to be higher priorities than for men. As expected, older people often name the pension system, social protection and health care among important issues for reforms, and young people focus more on education and economy.

The national public opinion survey referenced in this paper was commissioned by Pact from MIA Research and funded by USAID. The survey was conducted in the form of face-to-face interviews at the respondents' place of residence. The survey sample of 1,507 people interviewed was fully representative with the permissible sampling error of 3%.

Author: Artyom Shraibman, SENSE Analytics. Supported and based on the data provided by Pact.