

What Do Belarusians Think?

Belarusians have a strong potential to be more civically active, but they lack information and self-confidence

Why are Belarusians so passive? There is potential for Belarusians to become more involved in civic activism, however, they need more information about how to get involved. Belarusians also need to be convinced that their efforts matter. If you believe that the main obstacle to civic activism is Belarusians' fear of government repressions, the data that is presented below could change your mind.

This piece is a part of a series of analytical articles based on Pact's national representative survey of 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 are not involved in the work of NGOs or GONGOs¹.
- Activities organized by NGOs interest Belarusians noticeably less than public benefit initiatives organized by individual citizens and affecting their local community.
- In Belarusians' opinion, every actor – the government, business, civil society and even the church – underperform in addressing local community issues.
- Most respondents are not averse to civic activism, but they lack self-confidence and information regarding opportunities for participation. The fear of negative consequences associated with civic activism is at the bottom of the list of reasons why Belarusians do not participate more.

“Charity begins at home” or public good as a measure of civic participation

Most Belarusians do not participate in the activities of NGOs or government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). However, the government's use of public resources to assist GONGOs gives GONGOs a clear advantage in approaching the people to participate in their activities. Thus, only 3% of Belarusians are involved in NGOs' activity, while 11% are involved in the activities of GONGOs. These numbers have not changed since 2018.

Women are slightly more active in GONGOs than men are; the difference is almost 4 percentage points (p.p.). There are no gender differences in the small pool of people involved in the NGOs' activity.

Both types of organizations primarily attract young Belarusians. The level of social activity decreases with age, and among pensioners, it drops to almost zero for NGOs and to the level of sampling error for GONGOs. There is one exception to these rules: middle-aged women (45-60 years old), almost 19% of whom are involved in GONGOs' work.

Most likely this is due to the “social burden” that falls on education workers, who are mostly women, and who are obliged to organize the GONGO's work in schools and universities. The same factor may explain a slightly higher involvement of young people, who are strenuously encouraged to join the government-organized Belarusian Republican Youth Union.

¹ A government-organized non-governmental organization (GONGO) is a non-governmental organization that was set up or sponsored by a government in order to further its political interests and mimic civic groups.

Since only 3% of Belarusians are involved in NGOs' activities (47 of 1,507 respondents), it is impossible to draw sociologically significant conclusions about the specific forms of their participation. We can only note that financing and donations for the needs of NGOs took the first place: 21 of 47 respondents reported this form of involvement.

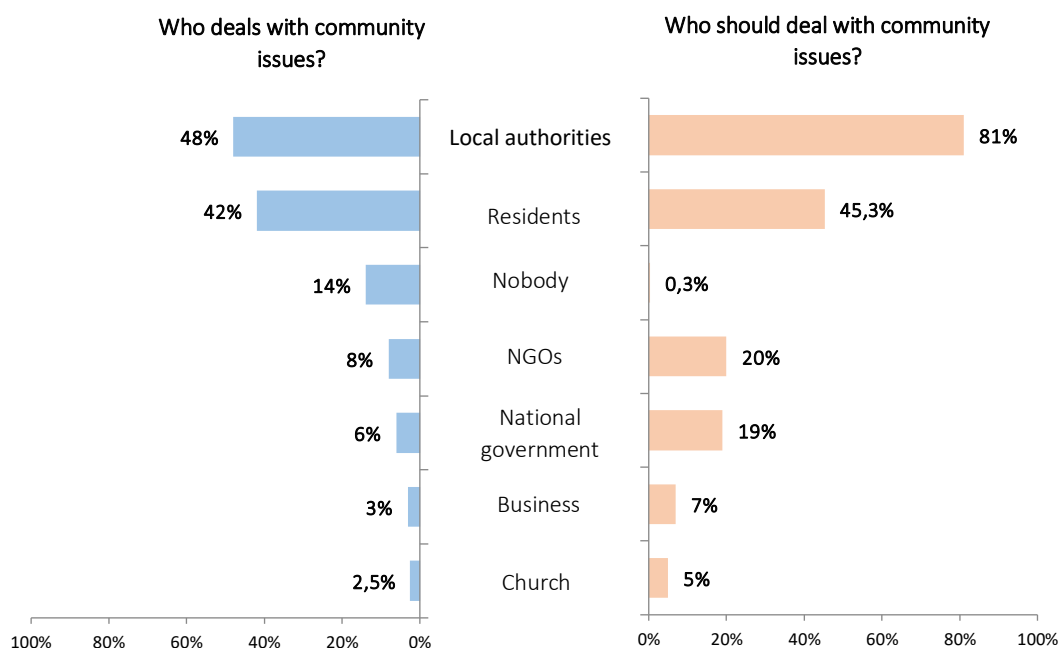
At the same time, we may not say that Belarusians avoid all forms of social activity outright. 10% of survey respondents reported that they were involved in activities organized by the initiative of citizens. 11% attended condominium meetings. 18% participated in residential landscaping and beautification of their neighborhood. Almost 7% of respondents participated in public hearings on local community issues.

The preponderance of participation in non-NGO social activities over participation in NGOs' activities (3-3.6% in various questions) should make the third sector reconsider its communication strategies and work harder to reach the target audience.

Belarusians don't think that authorities or NGOs are sufficiently engaged in dealing with resolving problems

Belarusians believe that both NGOs and government authorities are underperforming in their activities at the local level.

Diagram 1: Citizens' perception of the actors dealing with local community issues



Survey respondents report that only their own activity at the local level corresponds to how things should stand. Other actors – business and NGOs, as well as central and local authorities – are perceived to do far less than the public expects from them.

Since 2018, Belarusians have begun to evaluate their participation more highly. The share of those who noticed the involvement of local residents increased by a quarter – from 34% to 42%. The fluctuation of all other indicators is at the level of sampling error.

It is important to realize that these survey results do not reflect the true picture of the efforts of varying actors to solve local problems. We do not know who actually does their local job sufficiently or insufficiently. In the survey data, we are assessing the extent to which these efforts are visible to people.

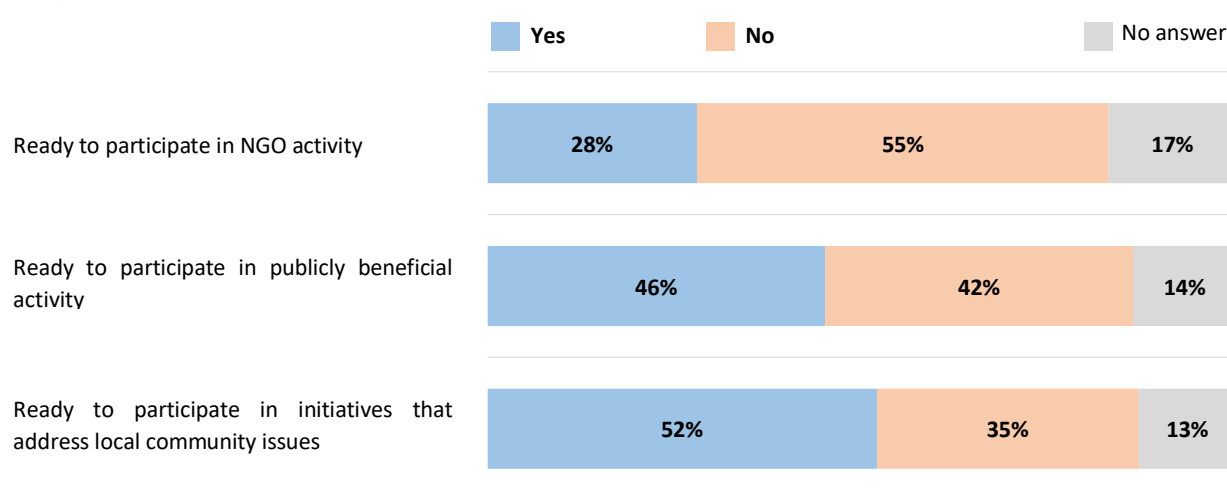
The clear request of society for more activities at the local level can and should be addressed - not only via activities, but also through effective communication about their results.

How to reach out to civically passive Belarusians?

The survey showed not only the actual involvement of Belarusians in the work of civil society, but also the potential for their involvement. The majority of respondents (55%) do not want to be involved in NGOs' work. Moreover, enthusiasm among men is 7 p.p. less than among women.

However, the situation changes depending on the wording of the question. When respondents understand that they are offered the opportunity to do something socially useful or to address the issues of the community they live in, the reported potential for involvement in NGO activity increases.

Diagram 2: Readiness of Belarusians for civic participation



As evident from these data, Belarusians do not reject participation in civil activity per se.

It is important for Belarusians to see the value and results of civic participation, as the abstract activity of NGOs is often unknown to the majority

Civil society organizations should consider this when developing their communication strategies and messages. There is no doubt that public relations and communication work is the key to the expansion of civic activism.

Respondents who found it hard to answer or were not ready to participate in any form of social activity were asked what was stopping them. With regards to NGOs' activities, the top three reasons for the non-participation are:

- “I don’t believe that my involvement can change anything or help anyone” (22.7%);
- “I have little knowledge about the activities of these organizations” (22.5%);
- “No one asked or invited me to get involved” (21.6%).

In addition, almost 14% of respondents said that they do not have competence to get involved in the activities of NGOs, 9% do not trust such organizations, 8% of respondents do not know who to ask. Only 6% of respondents consider civic activism risky.

Regarding non-participation in public benefit activities (not organized by NGOs), almost 36% of respondents said that no one asked or invited them, 21% do not believe that they can change anything, 14% do not believe in their own competence, and 11% do not know how to get involved. Distrust gained 9% and fear gained 6.5%.

The two main reasons for the low level of civic engagement of Belarusians are the lack of information about participation opportunities and citizens' belief that their actions will not result in any change

The first problem could be solved by education. The second - by focusing NGOs' communication on the real success stories of civic activism.

Fears about negative consequences of active citizenship are relevant only for 6-7% of respondents in this group (in terms of the entire sample, this is less than 5%).

The survey results reveal that the opinion that Belarusians are civically passive because they are intimidated by the government, is a myth

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

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