

Polling Memo: Belarusians' Awareness about Civil Society Increased from 30% to 52%

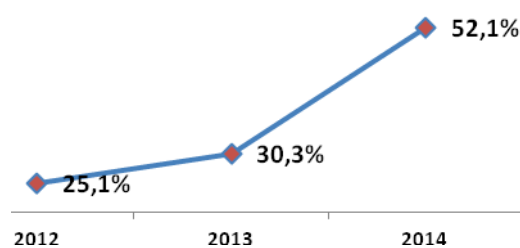
Since 2012 the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS)¹ has been polling Belarusians attitude in four categories in trust to public institutions; citizens' awareness of civil society organizations; the level of citizens' involvement in civil society activity; and the level of citizens overall public/social activism.

The survey is nationally representative, with a sample size of n=1,506 and margin of error ± 3%. Fieldwork took place in September each year from 2012 until 2014 and interviews were face-to-face, conducted in respondents' homes.

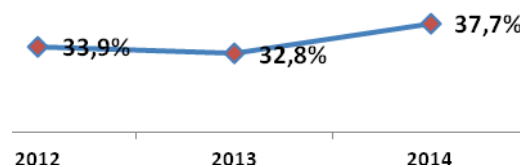
Main Trends

- The number of Belarusians, who are aware of CSO activities, either through participation in such activities or by receiving CSO services, is rapidly increasing. Between 2012 and 2014 it increased by 27% - from 25% in 2012 to 52% in 2014. Enabling factors that may have contributed to this increase include high internet penetration (around 70%²), reduced repressions, vivid increase of information/communication efforts of CSOs, their presence in the streets and media (especially on-line resources and social media); popularization of crowd-funding platforms, increased outreach of CSOs' advocacy, public awareness activities.
- Among all types of CSOs the citizens are most aware of official trade unions (62,1% in 2014; 53,7% in 2012 and 51,5% in 2013). The most significant growth in terms of level of awareness is demonstrated towards local CSOs (from 15% in 2013 to 29% in 2014) and independent research centers (from 16% in 2013 to 26% in 2014).
- A 5% increase (from 32,8% in 2013 to 37,8% in 2014) of the level of citizens' trust to civil society (Graph 2) may be a reason for a moderate optimism. This may be explained by a fact of growing visibility of CSOs in public space (as seen in Graph 1), but also by a growing number of client-oriented practices used by CSOs. The least level of trust among all public institutions are for political parties.
- At the same time neither increased public awareness of CSOs in Belarus, nor constantly high potential of citizens' public and social activism (74,5% reported they participated in social publicly useful activity in 2014 and 70,6% in 2012) (Graph 3) seems to have been utilized by CSOs for directly involving vividly more citizens in their activity or service delivery. The level of citizens' involvement remains more or less on the same level for all three years (2012 – 16,4%; 2013 – 17,2%; 2014 – 17,5%) (Graph 4).

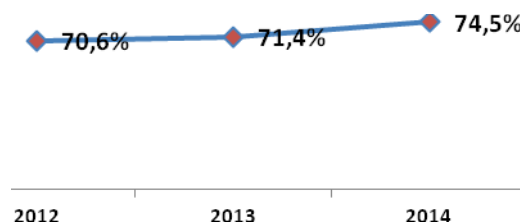
Graph 1: Respondents reported increased awareness of CSOs (n=1,506)



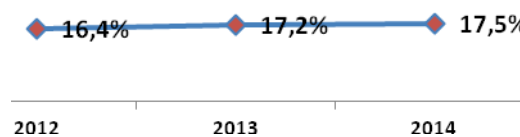
Graph 2: Respondents reported increased trust to CSOs (n=1,506)



Graph 3: Respondents reported they participated in social beneficial activities (n=1,506)



Graph 4: Respondents reported they were directly involved in CSO activity (n=1,506)



¹ <http://www.iiseps.org/lang/en>

² Data is from Gemius Belarus September 2014

- Among all forms of participation in social beneficial activities *participation in charity events* (39,7%) is the most popular while the least popular are *financial assistance to CSOs* (14.8%); *participation in an approved demonstration* (18%); *participation in un-approved demonstration/public protest* (4,1%).

Detailed Findings

According to the poll data the **level of citizens' awareness of civil society** has significantly increased for the last two years (27% increase between 2012 – 2014, from 25% to 52%). This is not only about general awareness, but the number of those who are aware about CSO activities because they either participated in such activities, or received services from CSOs. Because the level of citizens' involvement in civic activities is the same, the increase in awareness of CSO activities may be attributed to an increased number of citizens who receive services from CSOs and/or took part in charity activities. The charity aspect is likely explained by more people being involved in online charity and crowd-funding platforms.

High internet penetration (about 70%) in Belarus and CSOs are continuing to use the Internet for public relations extensively. While, CSOs websites are not fully informative, limiting public knowledge about CSOs' purposes and activities, CSOs' usage of traditional and social media have grown steadily. There are several examples of CSO-run public awareness and advocacy campaigns that reached huge numbers of people, such as *the Budzma Belarusians!* campaign³ that launched several new activities, including talk shows and cultural fairs, to promote Belarusian culture and the national language; *Minsk open-air Jazz Festival*⁴, *Accessibility Campaign*⁵.

In 2013, CSOs engaged in some vivid advocacy efforts, some of which led to legislative changes. Perspektiva⁶, a public association that promotes the interests of entrepreneurs, succeeded in getting the trilateral Customs Union, consisting of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, to postpone the implementation of a complicated certification procedure to confirm the quality and safety of products. This gave entrepreneurs more time to prepare for this new and elaborate procedure. Among CSOs overall the citizens are most aware of official trade unions (62,1% in 2014; 53,7% in 2012 and 51,5% in 2013). For the last year the most significant growth in terms of level of awareness is demonstrated towards local CSOs (from 15% in 2013 to 29% in 2014) and independent research centers (from 16% in 2013 to 26% in 2014).

The popularization of crowd-funding platforms (such as Social Weekend⁷ – more than 200 participating projects for the last year; Talaka.by⁸; StartIdea⁹) in Belarus where mostly local CSOs present project ideas that are being evaluated and supported via “public voting” and average citizens engagement into selection procedure also likely contributed to the improved visibility of CSOs and better public awareness.

Analyses and surveys conducted by think tanks and research organizations are becoming more oriented on practical use, more address country's urgent development issues and cover specifics of regions of Belarus.

The almost 30% increase in the level of awareness about CSOs' activities translated into just 4.9% higher **level of trust towards CSOs**. A legitimate conclusion can be made that CSOs have plenty of room to improve in terms of mission and values communication, transparency and accountability. Among CSOs overall the citizens trust more: i) official trade unions (44,3% in 2014; 38,1% in 2012 and 37,1% in 2013); and ii) organizations protecting the rights

³ <http://budzma.org/>

⁴ <http://isefi.by/?cat=35>

⁵ <http://www.disright.org/ru/accessibility-week>

⁶ <http://www.perspektyva.org/>

⁷ <http://www.socialweekend.by/about.html>

⁸ <http://www.talaka.by/>

⁹ <http://startidea.by/>

of people with disabilities (41,3% in 2014; 33,9% in 2012 and 32,1 in 2013). The fact citizens demonstrate more trust to Disabled Person's organizations might be connected with the Accessibility campaign¹⁰.

Least of all citizens of Belarus trust political parties and movements (20,8% in 2014) however the level of trust to this group has increased this year by 9% (15,4 in 2012 and 11,7 in 2013).

Despite a significant growth in public awareness of CSO activities through direct participation or receipt of services (from 32.8% in 2013 to 52.1% in 2014), according to the poll data the percentage of **citizens involved in civic activities** remains virtually unchanged (16,4% in 2012; 17,2% in 2013; 17,5% in 2014). Similarly, there is no change beyond the margin of error in citizens' responses when they were offered specific examples of civic activities and asked to indicate in which of they participated. The only exception here is a 8.2% increase in the number of Belarusians who participated in charity activities.

CSOs report that due to their limited resources, they cannot meet the growing public demand for their services. It is still rare for CSOs to engage large numbers of people in their activities. In 2013, ecological issues related to the construction of a nuclear power station and industrial misuse of peat lands motivated many Belarusians to join environmental movements, but CSOs were unable to engage all interested individuals in their activities. Only a few CSO activities, including the services of a group of organizations addressing domestic violence, a series of culture projects called Mova Nanova¹¹, Artist and the City initiative¹², educational services of the Flying University¹³ and of the Grodno-based Golden Age University¹⁴ reach large numbers of people.

According to the poll data the number of **citizens involved in socially beneficial activities** is considerably high (around 70%), but remains on more or less the same level for all three years (the slight increase is in framework of the error of representation). Among all forms *participation in charity events* (39,7%) is the most popular and the least popular are *financial assistance to CSOs* (18%); *participation in approved demonstration* (18%); *participation in (un-approved) public protest* (4,1%). While there is a growing number of examples when domestic funding is used to support CSOs' activity international donor funds continue to be the most important funding source for CSOs. Demonstrations, petitions and public protests are predictably not popular forms of civic activism in Belarus. However there are singular examples as public protests happened in December 2013 when drivers streamed into Minsk to protest a vehicle tax that both private persons and companies would have to pay during state technical inspections. The protest was organized on social media. Approximately 80,000 signatures were gathered within a couple of days demanding the cancellation of the tax.

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¹⁰ <http://www.disright.org/ru/accessibility-week>

¹¹ <http://www.movananova.by/>

¹² <http://isefi.by/?p=4622>

¹³ <http://fly-uni.org>

¹⁴ <http://uzv.by/>