



Belarus 2018 Polling Memo: Public Patterns of Transition

Introduction

This memo presents key findings from a national public opinion poll conducted by MIA Research in September 2018. The survey was commissioned by Pact under the USAID/BRAMA Activity, the main goal of which is to support greater engagement of civically-literate and objectively informed citizens in driving positive social change in Belarus.

The memo also incorporates relevant data available from the sociological surveys commissioned by the Budzma campaign in partnership with the School of Young Managers in Public Administration (SYMPA)¹, and by the Research Center of the Institute for Privatization and Management (IPM)².

The main purpose of the memo is to portray public attitudes and patterns of Belarusians towards the social contract, the government and reforms, civil society, information space and geopolitical orientation. These attitudes will shape the context for a potential political transition in Belarus - a timely topic given the recently announced plans to change the Constitution by President Lukashenka.

Methodology and Quality Control

Fieldwork was conducted during September 3-27, 2018. The national poll had a sample size of 1519 respondents from 54 settlements across Belarus. The sample was proportional, representative for the entire population of Belarus by type of the settlement, gender and age. The margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.

The survey was conducted by Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) method: face-to-face structured interviews on a tablet or smart phone. The received data came through visual (for 100% of questionnaires) and phone (for 30% of questionnaires) controls to ensure appropriate quality and reliability of the poll.

Pact conducted data quality control on the premises of MIA Research and through access to a password-protected digital cabinet to check quotas (set and received) by type of the settlement, gender and age; list of settlements where people were interviewed as well as detailed routes of interviewers. Data from the digital cabinet was verified against the SPSS file where possible.

Summary Findings

Government and society appear to co-exist in two separate worlds, less so as equal and engaging partners.

An overwhelming majority of Belarusians rely only on themselves for wellbeing and do not believe the government is actually taking responsibility for those in need. Furthermore, 80% of respondents do not believe they can influence government decisions on any level. While entitlement-based expectations from

¹ Nation-wide representative public opinion poll was conducted in December 2017 with a sample size of 1,063 respondents. Available at http://sympa-by.eu/sites/default/files/library/civil_society_research_2018.pdf

² Nation-wide representative public opinion poll was conducted in April-May 2018 with a sample size of 1,016 respondents. Available at <http://kef.by/publications/research/opros-izuchenie-tsennostey-belorusskogo-obshchestva/>

the state (healthcare, pension and employment) are high, for the first time in many years public expectation that the state should create conditions for people to make money is a top-two priority.

Despite the finding that **the number of Belarusians supporting market economy has more than doubled over the last 10 years**, the **issue of reforms is a difficult one for Belarusians**. One third of respondents could not decide whether they wanted to see any kind of change at all, and another 19% said reforms were not needed. 32% of Belarusians would like to see liberal reforms, while 17% want to see an even stronger state. Economy and healthcare are the most important areas of reforms for respondents personally, while social protection, healthcare, education and pension system are viewed as key reform priorities for the country. The discrepancy between personal needs and needs of the country supports an earlier finding about self-reliance of Belarusians and dissatisfaction³ with the current social welfare state system.

The government has been aiming to tame public dissatisfaction by implementing cautious reforms. The state and the society are in agreement as to the pace of change. Out of those who are in favor of reforms, 19% think that change should be implemented under a shock therapy, while 48% prefer gradual transformation. 33% of change proponents are not willing to suffer any negative consequences of reforms.

Civil society's outreach and communication remains one of key challenges. 68% of Belarusians know nothing about NGOs and only 18% trust civil society organizations. NGOs are perceived to be at the bottom of institutions, falling far behind government agencies, when it comes to public satisfaction with their openness and transparency. Findings above about self-reliance of Belarusians and their disbelief in institutional solutions are mirrored in relation to civil society: the level of trust in individual activists is nearly twice as high as the level of trust in NGOs as institutions.

Poor awareness of and trust in NGOs affected the level of civic participation. Only 3% of Belarusians took part in NGO activities in 2018. Half of those who did not participate in civic actions were either not asked to do so or did not know how to participate. At the same time, 54% of Belarusians are ready to personally participate in solving local community issues – a sizeable target audience for NGOs to work with on the grassroots level. On the other hand, 72% of those who participated in any kind of “publicly beneficial” activity did so because they followed direct orders from their employer or local authorities. This shows a gap between people saying they are ready to participate and actually participating when ordered to do so. Depending on how the questions were phrased, between 51% and 80% of Belarusians did not participate in public life in 2018.

Media literacy of Belarusians remains low. Whereas the majority of respondents indicate they face disinformation (70%) and propaganda (60%) in the media, only 9% is verifying the news. Almost half of Belarusians believe that the influence of Russian media in Belarus is weak or non-existent. Television remains simultaneously the most trusted and distrusted media.

The number one geopolitical choice of Belarusians is to live in an independent state (39%). Russia, China and Ukraine are viewed as the friendliest countries, while the US is considered the most unfriendly. Respondents ranked aggression on the part of Russia or NATO as the least imminent external threats to Belarus; global economic crisis tops the list.

Detailed findings

Social Contract: Locked in the Family

Belarusians' trust in institutional solutions is low and they are relying mostly on individual approach. According to 75% of respondents, their decisions, choices and behavior determine the quality of their and their family's life (Diagram 1). Government and society co-exist in two separate worlds, not as equal stakeholders or partners. Moreover, according to Budzma/SYMPA survey conducted in December 2017,

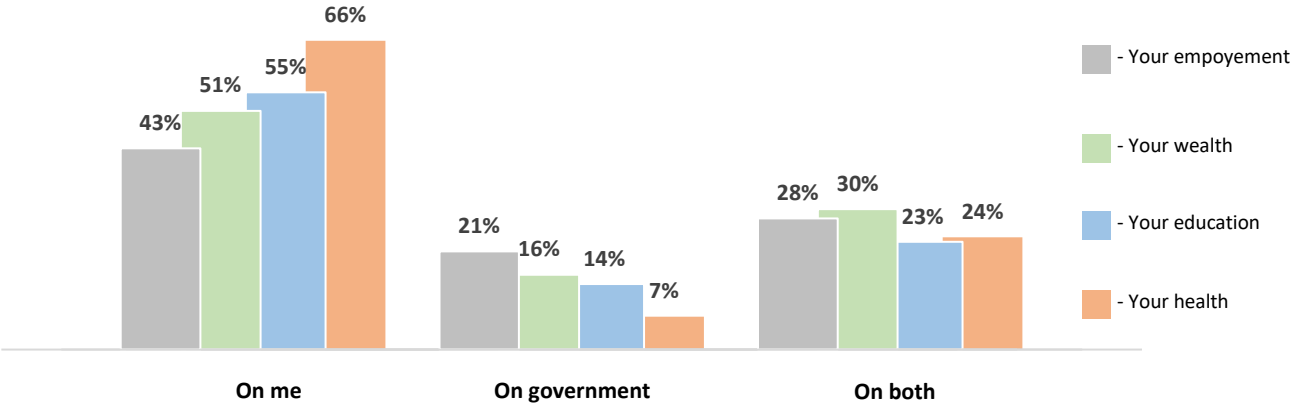
³https://news.tut.by/economics/612505.html?fbclid=IwAR1EF_AeatgRj20V8uOtukEi5m8EVUtDfQyxqGlavAVZKVBEPkjiO9xSE&crnd=65337

when asked to describe the-then current state of affairs, only 25% of Belarusians said the government was actually taking responsibility for their wellbeing and for helping those in need (63% said it was the people themselves).

Diagram #1: Influence of personal choice and citizen behavior (n=1519)

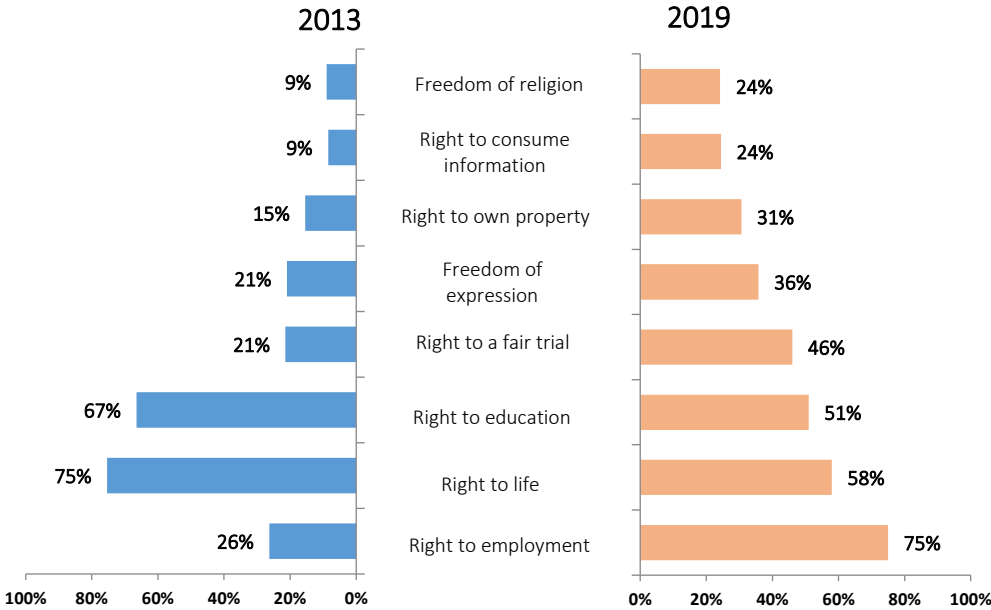


Diagram #2: Does the following depend on you or the government? (n=1519)



The evolution of citizens’ perception towards the importance of rights and freedoms⁴ from 2013 to 2019 shows the gradual, growing demand from the state to observe these rights (Diagram 3). This trend may be crucial toward consideration of political transition, i.e. change of the constitution after President Lukashenka’s following term.

Diagram #3: Evolution of citizens’ perception of the importance of human rights

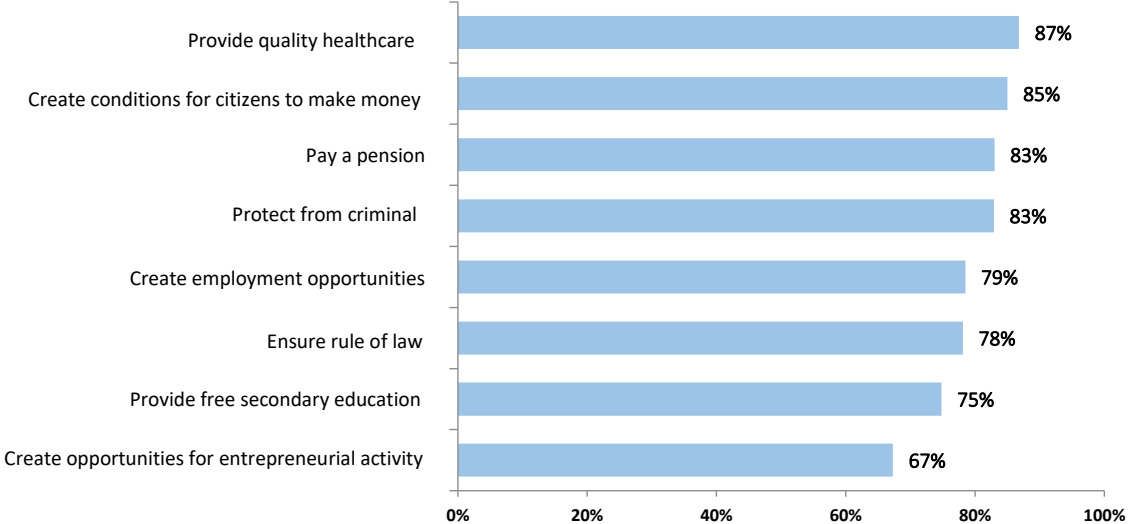


⁴ <https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/6792.html>

Expectations from the State: Let Live

Various surveys show that there is an overall demand for change. The recent IPM survey (Diagram 4) shows a shift in key public expectations from the state, which is now to “create conditions for citizens to make money” over dependence on the state (i.e. entitlement policies). This is followed by expectations of quality medical care, pensions, protection from crime and employment. This may be a sign of frustration and disillusionment with the current governance system.⁵ At the same time, Belarusians are not ready to pay the price and do not believe in their influence over policy choices of government at local and national level (see Diagram #1).

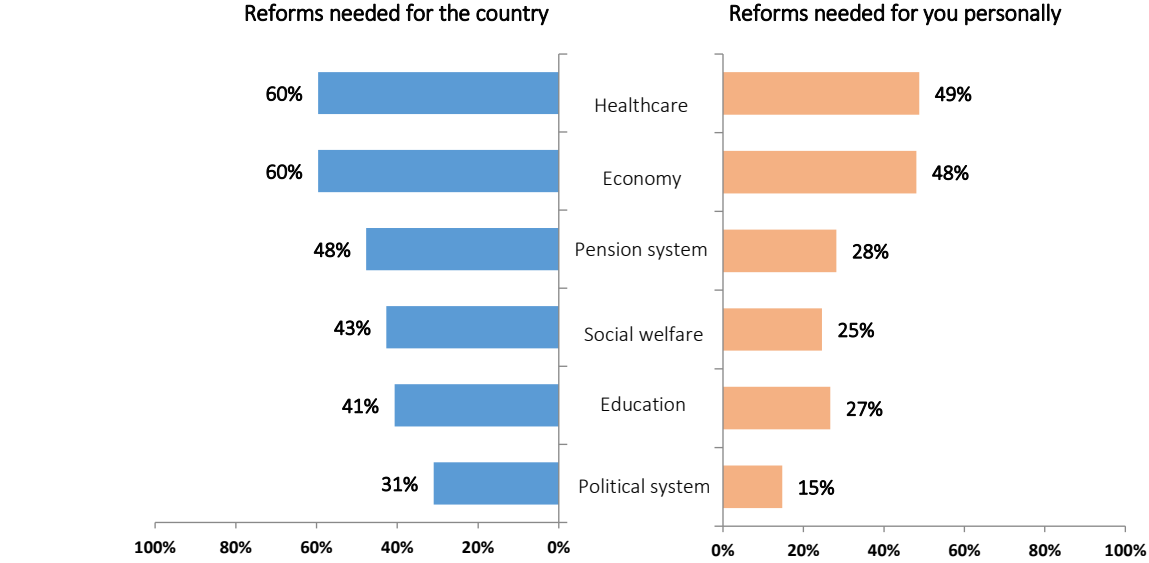
Diagram #4: Citizens’ most important expectations from the state (n=1016)



Just under half (47%) of Belarusians believe the country needs reforms. The majority of these (32%) believe that reforms are needed to decrease the role of the state, while 17% thinks the opposite.

The list of sectors in which Belarus needs reforms underlines disillusionment with the current governance. The same top three themes for reforms needed for the country are important for Belarusians personally: healthcare, economy and pension system (Diagram 5)

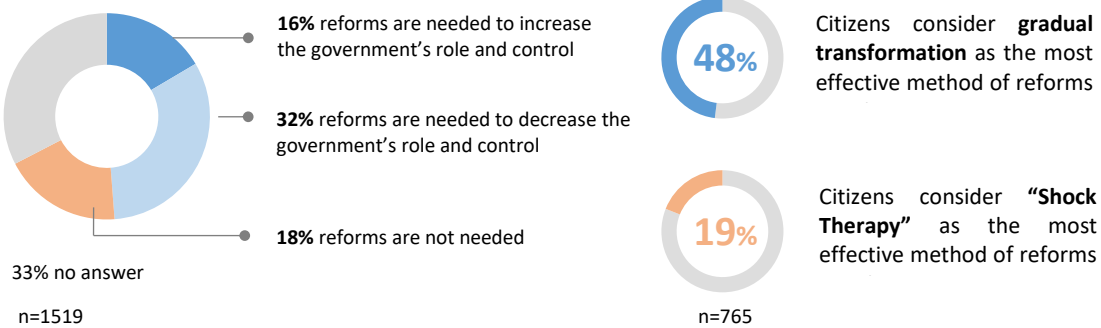
Diagram #5: Priority sectors for reforms (n=1519)



⁵https://news.tut.by/economics/612505.html?fbclid=IwAR1EF_AeatgRj20V8uOtukei5m8EVUtDfQyxqGlavAVZKVBEPkjiO9xSE&crnd=65337

However, there are two factors taming dissatisfaction. First, in absence of a credible opposition and due to threat of repressions, dissatisfaction is rarely manifested politically. Second, the government’s refusal to engage in shock therapy and slow pursuit of cautious reforms is in line with the majority wish (Diagram 6).

Diagram #6: Citizens’ demand for reforms



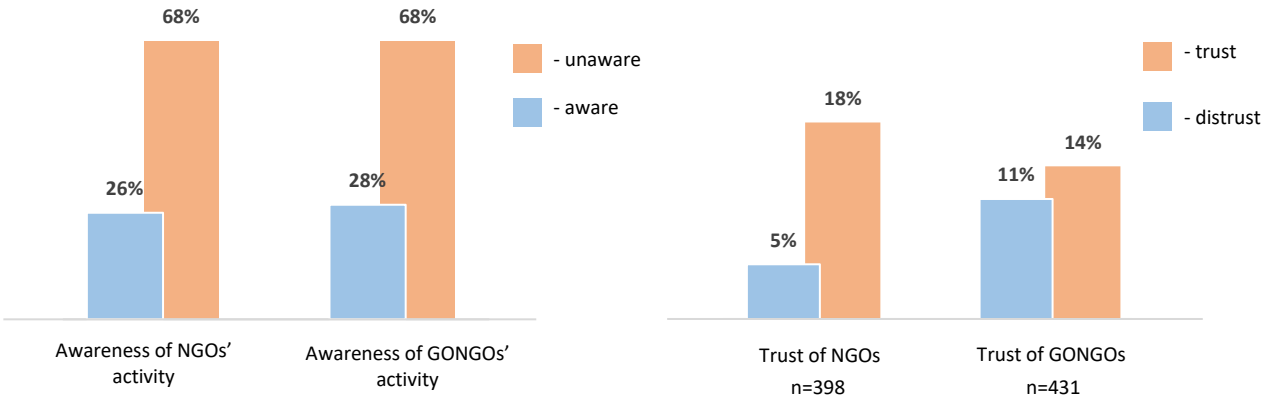
Civil Society: Awareness and Trust

Institutionalized civil society continues to be largely unknown and poorly trusted. At the same time independent NGOs are able to compete with GONGOs. As many as 18% of Belarusians trust NGOs, the same percentage as last year, and 14% of respondents trust GONGOs (Diagram 8). The level of distrust of GONGOs is more than twice as high as distrust in NGOs. According to Budzma/SYMPA survey 25% of Belarusians trusted NGOs and 29% trusted GONGOs, although levels of distrust were much higher – 48% and 50% respectively.

Citizens’ awareness of NGOs’ activity has seen virtually no change compared to last year. Slightly more Belarusians (within the margin of error) are aware of activities of GONGOs. 68% of Belarusians know nothing about NGOs’ or GONGOs’ work (Diagram 7).

Diagram #7: Citizens’ awareness of public associations’ activity
n=1519

Diagram #8: Citizens’ trust of public associations



In 2018 only 3% of Belarusians took part in activities of NGOs, while 9% participated in activities organized by GONGOs. 9% of Belarusians participated in publicly beneficial activity organized by citizens – almost five times less than in activities organized by authorities.

The majority (50%) did not participate because they were not asked or they did not know how to participate. This points to outreach and communication challenges as well as credibility issues of NGOs.

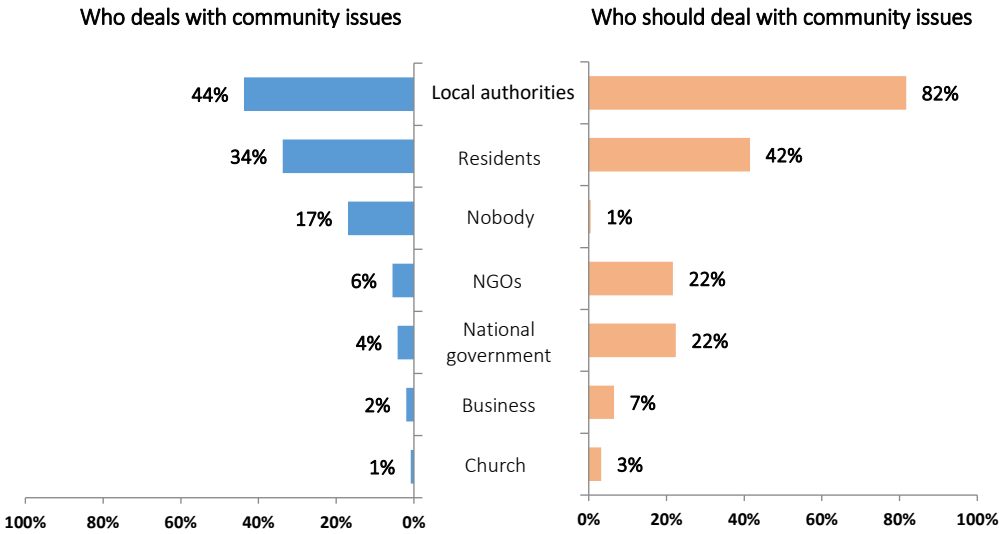
72% of those who participated in a “publicly beneficial” activity did so because they followed direct orders from their employer or local authorities.

Civic Participation: NGOs and Communities

Belarusians tend to participate in community-based activities organized by citizens, not by NGOs. Only 6% of Belarusians believe that NGOs are actually dealing with local issues, which correlates with the low level of citizens’ participation in NGOs’ activities (Diagram 9).

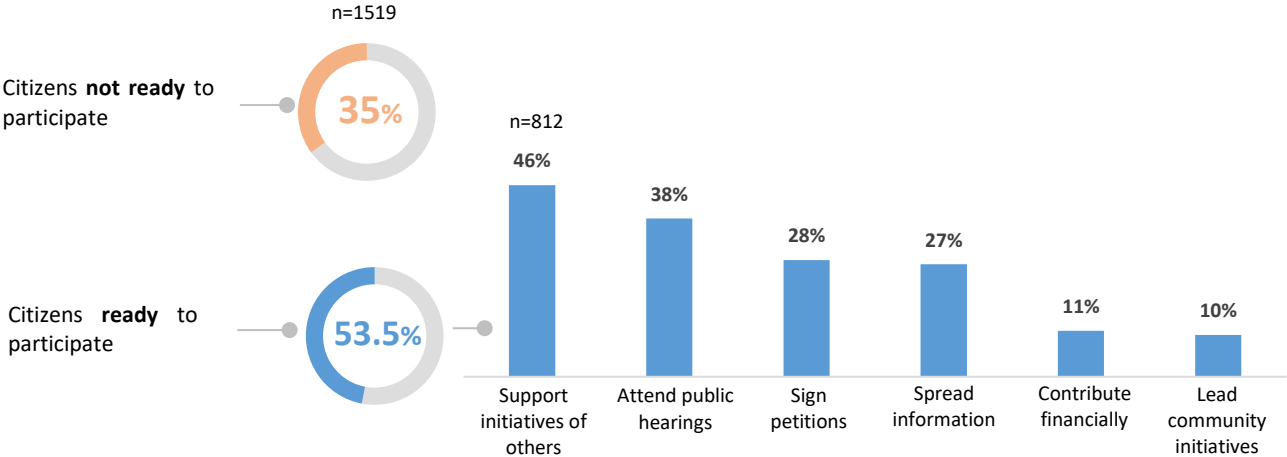
Correspondingly, 80% of respondents do not believe that their choices or behaviors influence policies on local or national levels. The overwhelming perception that authorities should be responsible for dealing with local issues may indicate a level of civic literacy of Belarusians but also that paternalistic attitudes remain strong in Belarus.

Diagram #9: Citizens’ perception of actors dealing with community issues (n=1519)



At the same time 54% of Belarusians are ready to personally participate in solving local community issues (Diagram 10). Thus, there is a solid potential for civic participation on local level, and grassroots should be considered as best point of entry. This corresponds with Pact experience with CMDF as well as the UNDP’s citizens centered local initiatives.

Diagram #10: Potential for participation in solving community issues



Levels of citizens’ non-participation and their perceptions of lack of influence over authorities help better understand the state of actual civic engagement in Belarus. Depending on how the questions were

formulated, in 2018 between 50% and 81% of Belarusians did not participate in civic life (Diagram 11). Importantly, the largest rate of non-participation is recorded vis-à-vis organized civic or government-backed groups. The level of non-participation in activities “organized by citizens” is less, which suggests that Belarusians are more actively engaged with informal civic groups and individual activists. This is supported by data from Budzma/SYMPA survey, according to which 48% of Belarusians trust NGO activists and only 25% trust NGOs.

Diagram #11: Citizens’ non-participation (n=1519)



Media Literacy: Low Trust, No Verification

Current data suggests that media literacy of Belarusians is low. Despite the fact that over 70% of respondents indicate they face disinformation in the media, almost 90% of Belarusians rarely or never verify the news they receive (Diagrams 12 and 13). The majority of respondents do not believe media literacy education in schools is necessary.

Diagram #12: Citizens’ perception of disinformation in mass media (n=1519)

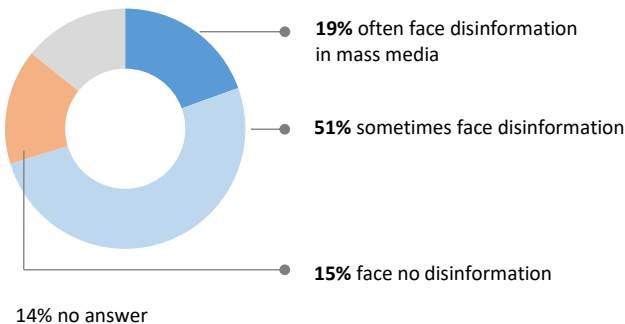
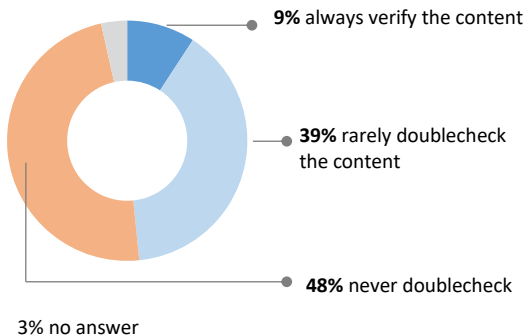
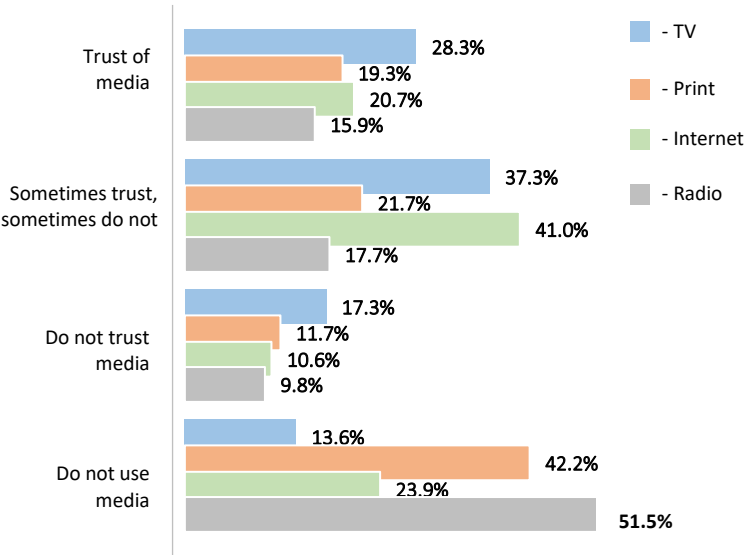


Diagram #13: Citizens’ critical attitude to content they receive (n=1519)



One quarter of Belarusians do not use Internet to receive news. Television remains simultaneously the most trusted and distrusted media (Diagram 14). Almost half of Belarusians believe that the influence of Russian media in Belarus is weak or non-existent. Western media is believed to have even less influence in Belarus.

Diagram #14: Citizens’ trust of media



Geopolitical Orientations: Go Independent

The majority of respondents would prefer living in a fully independent Belarus to being in a union with Russia or the EU (Diagram 15). Thus, the government’s current foreign policy is aligned with popular public perception.

Diagram #15: Geopolitical orientation of Belarusians (n=1519)

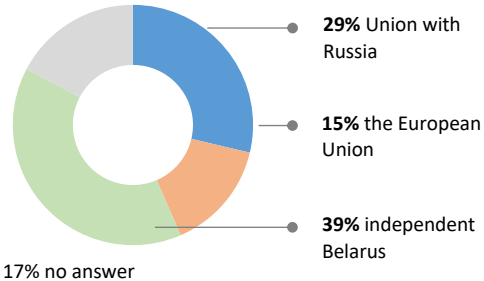
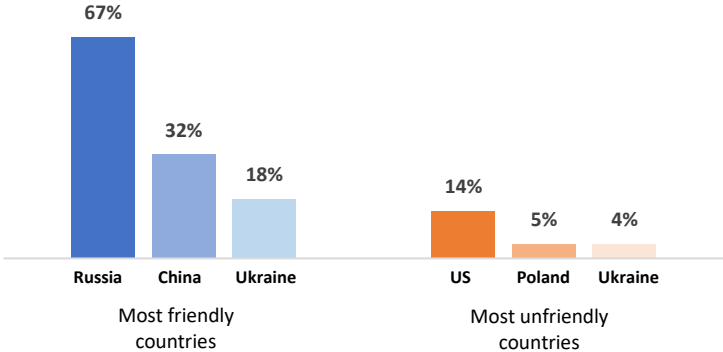
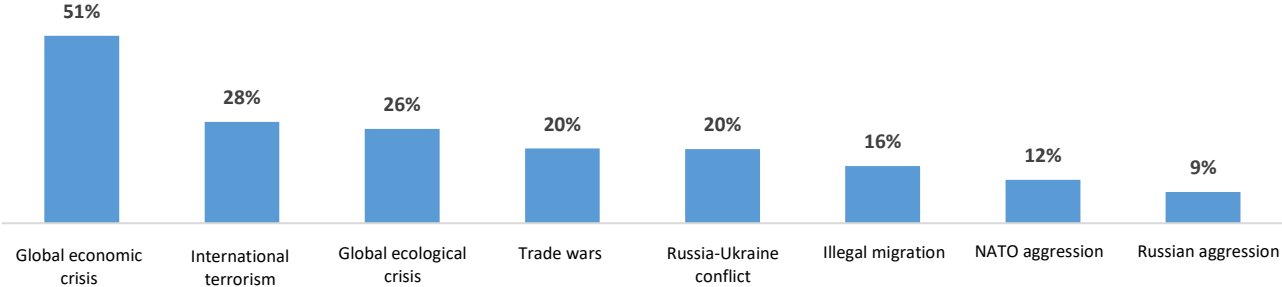


Diagram #16: Belarusians’ perception of friendly and unfriendly countries for Belarus (n=1519)



Almost 70% of respondents view Russia as the friendliest country to Belarus, while the United States of America is viewed as the most unfriendly nation (Diagram 16). Out of all external threats, Russian aggression is least pertinent to Belarusians – even less than a possible NATO aggression (Diagram 17).

Diagram #17: Belarusians perception of external threats (n=1519)



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