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## POLLING MEMO

### Human rights in BELARUS

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This memo presents key results of a public opinion poll on Belarusians' perception of human rights, commissioned by Belarus Helsinki Committee (BHC) and implemented by SATIO. SATIO provided technical expertise to BHC in drafting this memo because it believes that the Belarusian human rights sector would benefit from evidence-based approach to addressing the priority needs of its constituency, while simultaneously creating demand for a wider range of human rights issues.

“Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”<sup>1</sup>. This is the very first sentence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which is ratified by all UN member countries, including Belarus.

Respect for human rights depends on the willingness of the state to ensure respect for human rights on one hand, and willingness of the people to defend their rights on the other hand. However, in the countries believed to be “not free” according to international measures, for instance Belarus,<sup>2</sup> one can't rely on political will to ensure human rights protection. In such countries readiness of people to stand for their rights and awareness of tools how to protect themselves are critically important.

In April-June 2013, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee commissioned a nation-wide representative survey<sup>3</sup> on human rights and human rights organizations in Belarus. Sociological company “SATIO” was commissioned as a principal investigator to undertake the survey. This polling memo is the first attempt to analyze and present the results of the survey.

The survey is particularly interesting in analyzing people's take on level of human rights protection in their countries. The analysis is conventionally divided into three blocks: a) Belarusians' value orientation, b) assessment of human rights protection in Belarus and abroad, and c) role of NGOs in protecting respect for human rights.

Based on a detailed analysis of the survey results, three particular trends might be outlined in:

1. Values related to physical security and social security dominate in Belarusians' world view
2. Belarusians assess the situation with respect for human rights in their country much more positively than world-wide rates
3. The level of awareness of human rights organizations is comparatively low. However, Belarusians consider the activities of such associations in Belarus as important.

#### Belarusians' value priorities

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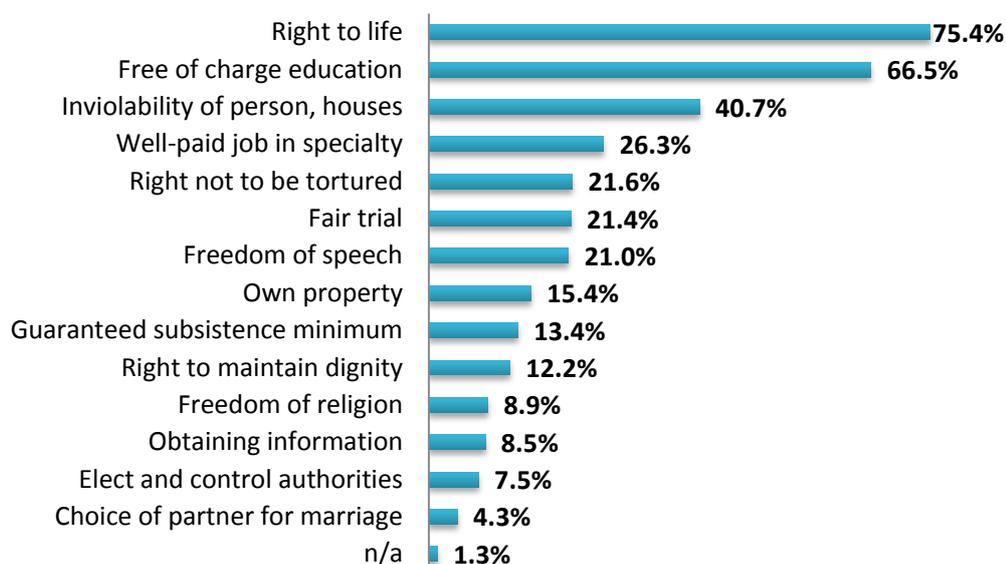
1 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

2 Freedom House. Report *Worst of the Worst 2011: The World's Most Repressive Societies*. Available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/WorstOfTheWorst2011.pdf>

3 The representative sample of 1100 respondents was multi-staged, stratified, and random, selection of the population aged 18-75 (urban and rural) by nationality, sex, region, age and education. Field work was carried out by “SATIO” in April-June, 2013. The sample representation error was no more than + 2,8%.

Analysis of the survey results proved that values and values related to physical security and state social security are dominant.

## Value priorities of Belarusians



On Belarusians' opinion, the most important values associated with the physical security of person include following: the right to life (75.4%), the right for inviolability of person and home (40.7%), the right not to be tortured (21.6%). As for the social security values, 66.5 % of respondents prioritize a right for free of charge education and 26.3% believe that a right for well-paid job related to their educational background is the most important.

Meanwhile, civic values such as a fair trial and freedom of speech are supported by about 21% of the population. And values like the right to retain dignity, freedom of religion, the right to obtain information, the right to elect and control authorities are in the bottom of the list. These values are significant for less than 12% of Belarusians.

This being said, the world view of neighboring Russians gives similar results: while the order in the priority list remains, the proportion are slightly different. For instance, in Russia the right to life also comes first, but it is almost as important as the right for free education (67% and 66 % respectively). And the importance of security of person and home, and well-paid professional work resonated in 56 % and 54 % of Russians respectively. The importance of other values was noted by less than 40 % of Russians.<sup>4</sup>

### Assessment of respect for human rights in Belarus

While assessing Human Rights in Belarus interviewed respondents were optimistic about situation in the country despite a number of high-profile cases of human rights violations in Belarus in recent years. Because of the mass and flagrant violations some journalists, civic and political figures in EU call it "last dictatorship in Europe". Abuse of freedom of speech, assembly, association, censorship in mass media, harassment of human rights groups, NGOs and political parties have become typical in Belarus. Finally, after

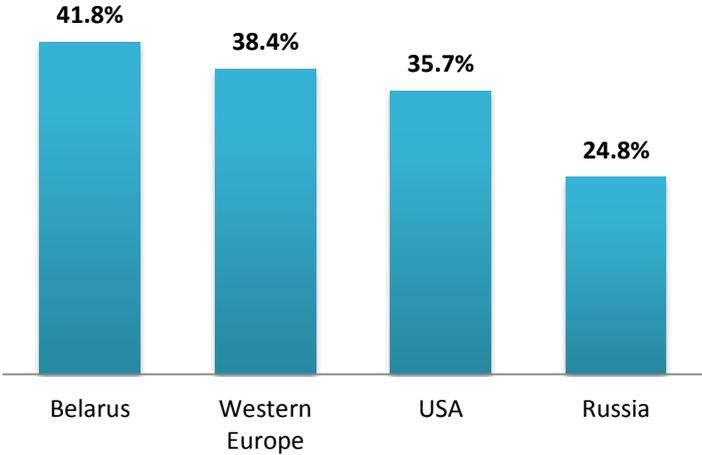
<sup>4</sup> Levada Center. *From Opinions to Understanding. Public Opinion in 2012*. Available at: <http://www.levada.ru/books/obshchestvennoe-mnenie-2012>

the post-election crackdown and the subsequent arrests of political leaders in December, 2010 USA and western countries apply sanctions against Lukashenko and scores of other officials related to human rights violations.<sup>5</sup>

However, Belarusians assess human rights protection in their country higher than in Western Europe, the USA and Russia. What is interesting, in respondents' opinion most deplorable situation in this area has developed in the neighboring Russia. Only one in four respondents believes that human rights are not violated or almost not violated in Russia.

Contrary to Belarusians' opinion international index of Rule of Law conducted by The World Justice Project depicts Belarus as a country with little respect for human rights. According to the factor "fundamental human rights", which is a part of the index, Belarus takes 84<sup>th</sup> place among the 97 countries. It is lagging one step behind Russia (83<sup>rd</sup> place). United States is 25<sup>th</sup> according to the factor "fundamental human rights" and the countries of Western Europe are in the very top of the rate.<sup>6</sup>

### There are Virtually no Human Rights Violations in the Following Countries:



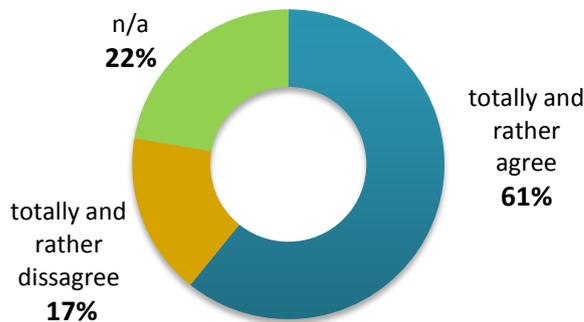
### Role of Human Rights organizations in Belarus

Out of the list of six statements, respondents picked three which they thought to be particularly factual in Belarus these days:

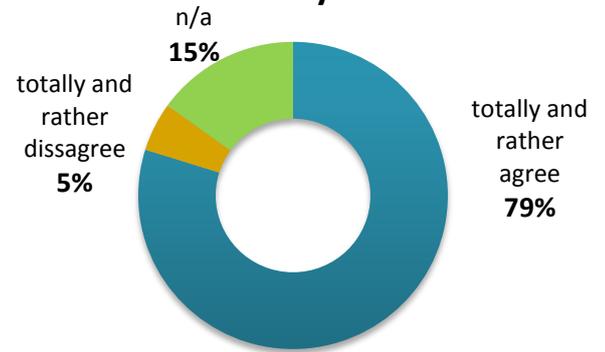
1. A person is especially defenseless in the conflicts with the state
2. Fewer rights are violated if the person is willing to defend them
3. Human Rights organizations should be able to work in any country

5 Embargoes and sanctions on Belarus. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/arms-embargo-on-belarus>  
6 Rule of Law Index Map. Available at: <http://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-law-index-map>

### Person is especially defenseless in the conflicts with the state



### Human Rights organizations should be able to work in any country



In this context it is important to note that over 80 % of the respondents (35.8% often, 46.6% sometimes) indicate that state and public interests in Belarus often do not match. Only 2.3% of respondents believe that the interests of the state and society always correlate. Therefore, anyone may suffer from the conflict with the state.

The level of awareness of NGOs engaged in human rights activity remains very low. More than half of respondents (61.5%) do not know who to contact in case of human rights violations, and two out of three respondents (68.3%) had never heard of the existence of independent HR organizations in Belarus. Partly this situation is caused because people do not feel the need to appeal to human rights representatives. Two of three Belarusians (67.1 %) who heard something about Human Rights organizations, have never used their assistance due to the lack of such a need.

Application of qualitative research methods (focus groups) allowed finding out other reasons for the lack of knowledge around human rights organizations. Respondents attributed this to several factors , including low awareness of the activities of human rights organizations, the stereotypical perception of such organizations as ones who focus on political prisoners and opposition. However, when discussing the need for presence of human rights organizations, respondents noted that the need for such organizations exists. Belarusians noted that they don't feel protected in legal terms and want to make sure that they human rights will be protected.

The results of the survey demonstrated what kind of values is paramount among Belarusians. Domination of values related to physical security and state social security do not encourage citizens to fight for their rights. At the same time, understanding of own helplessness in case of conflict with the state and approving the existence of Human Rights groups form a vital prerequisite for a changes value world view of Belarusians. Further educational work with the population might increase the demand for such values as fair trial, freedom of speech, protection of private property and so on.